



RESEARCH ARTICLE

INNOVATION: A MEASURE FOR THE CONTROL OF CULTURAL CHANGES IN THE SURVIVAL FOR THE LUO THUM TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

Thum is amorphous because it has broadened its corpus to include not only the Luo lyre, but also the fiddle, accordion and guitar musics unlike what was before the coming of Europeans. The introduction of the acquired instruments became a threat to the well-being of *thum*. To counteract the threat, *thum* players adopted the trappings of the acquired instruments, reduced the size, painted the resonator, and tuned it to an octave higher than before. Further changes included the introduction of the toe-ring, ankle-bells, transfer of the sound hole from the membrane to the back of the resonator, change of costumes and the increased size of dance teams. The European way of life offered a challenge to those members of society who refused to identify themselves with their traditional cultures. The Catholics were moderate than the Protestants and most of the young people attending Protestant schools had no respect for their traditional cultures. In areas where European influence was minimal, young people played and attended parties of *thum* performance. The structure and meanings of the genres in the context of Luo society and culture reveal the great influence of the Luo lyre on modern genres. However, the lyre has changed because of the innovation of individuals. Although the similarities of styles may be due to the influence of a common cultural tradition and music conventions, the peculiarities are partly determined by different instruments, the decisive factor in the distinctive style of the genres being the composers' own personality and individual creativity.

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INTRODUCTION

Thum as known today is amorphous in that its corpus has been broadened to include not only the Luo lyre, but also the fiddle, the accordion and the guitar musics unlike what it stood for before the coming of Europeans into the Luo territory. The art of *thum* tradition consists of solo vocal performance by *jathum*, the instrument player accompanied on his instrument most often with a chorus who may or may not be involved with other instrumental accompaniments. Whatever the case, the other instrumental accompaniments would be subordinate to that played by *jathum*. The traditional concept of *thum* performance includes *wer*, vocal sections which consists of *wach*, song texts that is either sung, recited or spoken; and *puch*, *oduong'o* and *gara*, instrumental accompaniments which include all the accompaniments used in performance. Although *thum* differ in the way they are made and played, the Luo have learnt to make them fit the social requirements by improving the physical conditions of the traditional *thum*, the Luo lyre and socially upgrading the acquired instruments such as *orutu* (the fiddle), *onanda* (the accordion) and *gita* (the guitar) to the same status. The players of the acquired instruments also increased their social status by becoming *jothum*, like the traditional *thum* players. As the acquired musical instruments became known as *thum*, it became necessary to prefix the original names to the instruments for

easy identification. The Luo lyre (see the plate attached). Therefore was referred to by its other names such as *Nyatiti*, *sidika*, or *Thum nyaluo*.

The Looming Threat and the Innovations

The introduction of the newly acquired musical instruments became a threat to the well being of the traditional *thum*. In order to counteract the looming threat, and assure traditional *thum* of its former position in society, the traditional *thum* players first increased their popularity by adopting some of the trappings of the accordion, guitar and fiddle players developed after the introduction of the genres. This was followed by the changes in the manufacture of the lyre, which involved the reduction of its size to what it is now, painting the resonator and parts of the yoke, and tuning it an octave higher than before, so that it is in level with the voice part, which used to sing an octave higher. Further changes included the introduction of *oduong'o* (toe-ring), the reduction (in number) and transfer of bell-rattles into ankle-bells, and the singing of songs, which are in line with the newly incorporated songs. The transfer of the sound hole from the membrane to the back of the resonator also improved the quality of the sounds, that is, *thum* would now be heard at a distance like the incorporated *thumbe*. The players also changed their costumes and increased the size of their dance teams. Among other

innovations, the composers introduced songs which were shared antiphonally between *jawer* (the main singer) and *simo* (his helper). With the spread and development of antiphonal style, performance of *thum* became more tied to the techniques and styles of particular individuals; and audiences were unable to join in as they had in the earlier responsorial songs which I knew in my youth. These changes were precipitated by the developments in accordion guitar and fiddle musics, in which the solos were composed and performed by the same person. Traditional *thum* composers decided to copy this. Once this was achieved, traditional *thum* composers felt that there was no way in which the performers of the newly acquired instruments could dwarf them. Through solo singing, they freely used their powerful voices to express and render with great feeling the praises of the subjects who gave great gifts. As Omondi (1980: 64) noted.

The solo song was the most suitable medium for praise, which is the leading theme for *thum* songs. Being un-repetitive, the composition and performance of these songs, no doubt, also became more intellectual. Their texts became more meaningful, thus making them more conducive to listening to than the responsorial and the antiphonal songs. In them, therefore, the musicians would pour their praises and eulogies without the limitation of having to share a song. The above changes and the admiration for the incorporated musical instruments were the result of Western civilization - through churches and schools. These were the two most powerful weapons that Europeans used to make the Luo hate and despise their traditional music and musical instruments. Some members of the Luo community who passed through these systems became so much alienated that they could not help viewing the Luo system of life as primitive and uncultured. The European way of life was full of promises and their music offered a challenge since it was for the intellectuals and the Godly. In other words, members of the society were running away from their traditional culture. Although Europeans succeeded in their mission of 'civilizing' the so-called primitives, the effect of their influence differed from one area to the other. From observation, it seemed that some Protestant sects were more destructive than the Roman Catholics. The areas influenced by the Catholics never suffered much, in fact, the Catholics encouraged their converts to practice their culture, but some Protestant missionaries referred to the Luo culture as devilish and appealed to converts to be born again or else be doomed to everlasting torment. According to Ogola (1987).

Thum was a musical instrument of youth. However, when most of the Luo young men and women became educated in the European way and started referring to *thum* as music of the primitive, *thum* became the music of the old and the illiterate youth, the most conservative members of the society. This was mainly in the areas where most young people attended school. It is important to note that in areas where European influence was minimal, young people still played and attended parties where the instruments were played. These young men joined in the war of preserving and maintaining the dignity of *thum*. Through their efforts, *thum* fought and recaptured its glory. The Luo who went to work in the European settlements also adopted European musical instruments. Their masters gave the instruments to them either because such masters recognized their musicality or as presents for their good service. Mkok

(1987) observes that the Luo quickly took to these instruments. Although some educated Luo youth looked down upon the Luo lyre and called it names, the performance occasions in the Luo territory remained the same for all the genres. During such occasions, there would be two or more parties, one for the traditionists and the other for the educated. Both parties were referred to in the same way, *budho thum*, at a music party. Such were occasions when these incorporated instruments also acquired the name *thum*, and a war of words ensued between the two groups. Ogola (1987: personal interview) notes that. If other foreign instruments were not there, the word *thum* referred only to the Luo lyre. During that time, there were no such names as *nyatiti*, *sidika*, or *adunglu*. *Nyatiti* was derived from the sounds of the first, the sixth and fifth strings. *Sidika* resulted from knocking the stave around which *gara*, the bell-rattles were tied, and *adunglu* is the repeated sound of the second and eighth strings of the lyre. Ogola (ibid.) further states that even the onomatopoeic phrases such as *thum nyaluo tiende tindo* (the Luo lyre has small legs) were part of the abuses that were hurled at those who respected the Luo lyre. The onomatopoeia resided at *tiende tindo* - which meant to sound like a tune played on the lyre strings. Those who respected *thum* also hurled insults at their opponents by referring to their adopted instruments with derogatory names. For example, *onanda* (accordion) became known as *rang'ede* (that which is full of ribs); *gita* (guitar) was referred to as *bad dhiang'* (the arm of cattle) and *orutu* (fiddle) was referred to as *ng'ech* (monitor lizard). As earlier noted, the patrons of the lyre had to modify both the instrument and its performing style. Dancers were added to *thum* performances as additional visual entertainment, inspired by the practice of the guitarists and other two (*onanda* and *orutu*) acquired instrumental genres. The *thum* sounds changed so that the intensity of song and instrumental accompaniments were at the same level. Other changes in the techniques of *thum* playing with variations included preludes or postludes to songs and/or interludes during performances.

Occasion for Performance

Occasions for *thum* performances were modified or dropped. These were: *nyombo* (marriages); *masira* (funerals); *guto* (cleansing after homicide); *nyasi* (ordinary celebrations); *omo thum* (private invitations to *jothum*), and *tugo* (community festivals) among others.

Nyombo (Marriages)

During marriages, *thum* was performed on *donjo oche pacho* (the first day the bridegroom entered the home of the bride's parents) and during *mako nyako* (when the bride was abducted). On these two occasions, the lyre entertained guests and the bride respectively. Traditionally, the lyre strings were believed to hasten pregnancy. Although *thum* continued to be used during marriages, some of the marriage styles such as abducting brides and the belief in the power of *thum* strings to hasten pregnancies were considered primitive and were soon discarded and replaced by Western wedding in which Western musical instruments are used to entertain the brides and the guests.

Masira (Funerals)

In funerals, the lyre played different roles at different stages. One of these was to dispel grief among the bereaved by

keeping them company and by expressing and sharing with them the feeling of loss of the departed, and giving them a platform on which to release their frustration and tension through the system of *pakruok*. The lyre was also used on special funeral occasions such as *chieng' romb oche* (the day of the affines); *chieng' uch* or *chieng' tuk ng'at motho* (the final funeral celebration or rites of deceased individual). There were occasions when *thum* could be performed at a funeral long after or before the above special occasions, for example, when a musician was a friend of the deceased or of the deceased's relatives, and the musician felt indebted to their families and therefore wished to pay his last respect by performing music at the funeral. The tradition of performing music at funerals survived among both the traditionists and the elite.

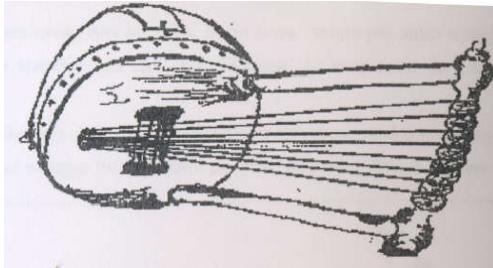


Fig. 1. Thum: The Luo lyre

Guto (Cleansing after Homicide)

If a Luo killed a human being, he/she had to be cleansed. This is because the slain's ghost was believed to hover around the killer, and unless purification was carried out, the ghost could lead the killer to do more damage. Therefore, if a Luo committed homicide, he/she was not allowed to enter a village until he/she was purified. Before the purification, a hut was built for the subject of homicide, somewhere in the bush or at the place of the homicide. During the purification, *jathum* had to be present to sing to the subject the history of those who had also committed homicide. All these were done to balance the psyche of the subject so that by the time the purification was over, his/her mind would be restored to its normal state. A similar occasion would involve those who had killed tabooed animals. Although these occasions were wholly for *thum*, during the final day of purification, that is, when the subject was taken home, different types of music were used to entertain the audience that came to witness the occasion. At first, the elite did not want to associate themselves with such occasions, but as time went by, they relaxed and started attending such occasions.

Nyasi (Ordinary Celebrations)

Apart from the special occasions above, there were occasions in the form of celebrations that required the presence of *jothum*. These celebrations varied from the inauguration of weapons (such as *tong'* [spear]; *kuodi* and *okumba* [big and small shields]) to preparations of games (such as *amen* [wrestling] and *adhula* [football]) where those involved were supposed to spend a night in one place, away from women before the event. On most of these celebratory occasions, traditional *thum* and *orutu* were used.

Omo Thum (Private Invitations to Jothum)

On these occasions, members of the village and the surrounding villages would gather to be entertained. They

would dance and participate in *pakruok*. They would also give and promise to *huwo jathum* (give the lyre player great gifts). Some of these promises would be honoured and others not. When one was specially moved by a particular performance and thus promised a gift, in either kind or money, which for one reason or another he or she could not pay at the time, he would invite *jathum* in question to his home. This was referred to as "reclaiming the token". The host would then give *jathum* the gift he/she had promised at the end of his visit. On such occasions, *jathum* would sing praises of heroes and the generous and ridicule those who never honoured their promises to *jothum* - thus reflecting on the past as a source of examples for the present.

Other Occasions

There were occasions when *jothum* performed during their inauguration. There were times when wealthy or important patrons without prior invitation ambushed *Jathum*. Those who went to seek employment outside the Luo territories also occasionally invited *jathum* to their work places.

Tugo (Sports and Festivals)

Sporting occasions such as *Migwena*, *Jokaba* and *jorinda* (social meetings) were some of the many festivals in which *thum* performance were night extensions of the day sporting activities in which those who participated during the day went to dance at night.

The Invitation and Preparation for Performance

Jathum is invited by a patron who requires the presence of *thum* at an occasion, such as, the funeral celebrations of one of his late relatives or during ceremonial rites. If *jathum* is free, that is, there are no early invitations coinciding with the date in question, then, *jathum* accepts part payment of the invitation and transport fee. Immediately after the invitation, *jathum* sets out to protect himself, so that if he encounters another *jathum* who uses charms, his charms will not affect him. When the *thum* has been protected, *jathum* will then summon his team. The time to begin the journey is controlled by the distance of the destination. *Jothum*, according to tradition, were supposed to arrive at their hosts' home by five in the evening. If the occasion is a funeral, then *jothum* announce their arrival by playing one or two songs of lament before they are taken to the place prepared for them. If not, they are shown where to sit by an appointed guide.

Siwandha (The Stage for Performance)

Jathum marahuma, famous musician performs in *siwandha*, a built enclosure. After the welcome, *jathum gi lange* (the musician and his team) take their position in *siwandha*. The musician and his co-players sit a step in front of the other members the team, who then form a protective arc behind the players. Members of the audience sit on either side of the arc leaving a space in the centre of the enclosure. The type of instrument used controls the size of the space in *siwandha*. If it were the lyre, then the space would not be as big as if it were the newly acquired instruments, because both sexes dance to their music, whereas only a small number of maidens dance to the music of the lyre. When everything is ready, *jathum*

begins by tuning his instrument and then plays introductory tunes to which his associates dance. However, if the occasion is a funeral, then after tuning his instrument, he would play one of his lament tunes before he plays for the dancers. The exact time for performances to begin varied from one occasion to another. On some occasions, *jothum* began their performances immediately after their arrival, with short breaks for meals. On others, the performances began at eight in the evening and continued until six or eight in the morning. The performances also resumed at two in the afternoon after the musicians and his teams had slept, washed and taken their midday meals. The two o'clock performance continued for an hour or up to six, depending on whether or not the *jathum* would be leaving for his home. If he were to leave for his home, then the two o'clock performance could only last for an hour, but if the performance was to go on for one or two more days, then the performance would go on up to six, before they break for the evening meals. After the break, the performance could resume at eight or nine to go on again until six or eight of the next day.

In addition to using the space in the centre of *siwandha* for dances, it was also used by those who liked to take part in *pakruok* (panegyritization). Unique to such occasion are the *difri* or *kapten*, both words coined from the two English words referee and captain respectively and performs the duty of the master of ceremony. The *difri* is usually a member of the village, appointed by the members of the village to preside on the occasion. He is chosen because of the respect he commands among the members of the community (within and outside the village). He is known to be physically strong, reasonable where reason prevails and unreasonable to those who are not reasonable. It is the work of the *kapten* to organize the occasion. Once performance starts of the Luo lyre, unless interrupted by *pakruok* participants from members of the audience, it becomes a continuous event. As for the acquired instruments, the *kapten* organizes the performance to suit the dance teams, which could be as numerous as the surrounding clans and sub-clans. According to tradition, the Luo lyre was only danced to by maidens and not the males. The male members of the community only took part in *pakruok*, and if specially moved, would join the maidens in the dancing space and do a bit of *yong'o*. This is the reason why the dance space in *siwandha* is not as big as it would be when the acquired musical instruments play.

Unlike the lyre dancers, those who participate during the performances of the acquired musical instruments do so in pairs of men and women. The pair may not hold each other depending on the style of the dance in question. The dance styles are modern and are the Luo adaptation of the foreign pop dances that accompanied the Western and other foreign pop music that invaded Luoland.

An examination of the structure and meanings of the music genres in the context of Luo society and culture reveals the great influence of traditional lyre music on modern styles. However, the lyre music itself has been changed because of the innovation of individual musicians. Thus, although the similarities of style may be due to the influence of a common cultural tradition and musical conventions, and the peculiarities are partly determined by the different instruments, the decisive factor in the distinctive style of the genres is the composers own personality and individual creativity.

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