

Introduction

It has been for more than half a century that musicians of the most different background in Malawi have had a liking for playing banjos, sometimes solo, sometimes in small groups. In 1946 James Kachamba, father of the renowned Kachamba Brothers, formed a musical group in Zomba involving himself on Dobro guitar and his friend Damiyano Chipala on a factory-made American banjo. James had just returned from Burma as a soldier in World War II (see photograph in Kubik et al. 1987:28). Soon during the post-war era, banjos were seen all over southern Africa, besides guitars. They were found in South Africa, Northern and Southern Rhodesia (now Zambia and Zimbabwe) and Nyasaland (Malawi). But from the 1960s on factory-made banjos became expensive and rare, and increasingly, youngsters began to make these instruments themselves in the villages and townships. In 1964 David Rycroft recorded a Zulu boy in South Africa playing *igqongwe* – name of a home-made banjo with an oil can-resonator (Rycroft 1982). This type of banjo was very common in southern Africa (cf. Kubik 1989) and it exists until now. The history of southern African banjos is also linked to the guitar, as I pointed out in my study of the Chileka guitar style of the 1950s (Malamusi 1994).

With banjos and acoustic guitars no longer available in stores, young adults and teenagers found ways to construct such instruments wherever they stayed, using a variety of materials. The result was a surge in technological invention; everyone was trying to experiment, and so we find in Malawi many different types of home-made banjos and also a great variety of playing styles and techniques. It all depends on the place where these youngsters come from and where they have learned their art.

Essentially, one may speak of three basic types on home-made banjos in Malawi, each with its own margin of individual variation:

- (a) Banjos with a skin cover. An old cooking pot serves as a resonator which is then covered with a single skin that is fastened to it (*kukunga chikopa*). The skin may be attached with wire hooks, or with leather thongs bound to the resonator. Then the fretboard (*nkonjo wake*), carved from wood, with the frets sometimes burned in, sometimes made of wire, is pierced through and thereby fixed to the resonator. Usually such banjos have three or four strings.
- (b) Banjos with resonator made from an old oil can, as available in petrol stations. This variety has no skin cover, and the resonator is shaped accordingly, with a rectangular soundboard, not a circular one as in type a.
- (c) There is a third type, that is found in the area of Nkhoma, near Lilongwe, capital of Malawi. It is a very small variety (*kabanjo kochepe*) which is manufactured using a metal resonator from the bottom of a paraffin lamp (*kamapangidwa kuchokela ku thako la nyali*). This last variety gives a very high sound (*ndikolila mau wokwela*). There is also no skin cover.

In all these home-made banjos the (wooden) tuning pegs are in vertical position. The bridge, placed on the sound-board can be moved, and on the fretboard one can sometimes find a capotasto from iron (e.g. a nail) or from wood attached with a rubber band. The frets may be marked by burning; otherwise raised frets may be found as on guitars and factory-made banjos, usually of hard wire.

The materials for constructing these instruments are partly obtained from what is called “industrial debris”. An old pot that is no longer of any use, a piece of goat skin, etc. serve as materials. Banjo strings are obtained from the wires that serve to pull the brakes of a bicycle.

In Malawi many of those who play banjos either as soloists or in a group are itinerant musicians. They wander from place to place, from district to district to play their music for whoever wants to watch them and hear them. These groups all have their peculiar styles, and are quite different from one another. The banjo groups one can meet even in the city centers all come from different places, sometimes from villages, sometimes they stay in townships and swarm out every day to play in public places to earn a little bit of money from bystanders who may ask for specific songs to be played. This is called *kubecha*. They carry their instruments to all those places. Common people who see these groups may become interested in hearing their songs; they may stop them in a street and demand that they play something. “How much money does it cost?” They come to an agreement and those boys start to play and sing the first song. Very soon, attracted by the sound, other people stream to the place and form an audience willing to pay money for more songs.

These days the fee for a song to be played by those itinerant groups is between Malawi Kwacha 20,- and 50,-. The current (2009) dollar exchange rate is 1\$ = 141.- MK. So the earnings for one song fluctuate between 14 and 35 Cents, according to the fame of the group. Occasionally, there are bystanders who are so delighted by the performance, that they are willing even to give MK 100.- (i.e. 70 Cents) for the song of their choice.

This is the pattern repeated in all those public places where the itinerant groups happen to arrive during their day-long excursions, until sunset. Their day’s earnings are sufficient to support them as concerns food, accommodation and some other things. In most cases those roaming musicians are youngsters, boys; they are unmarried, do not have to support a family. They do not need much; all they want is a place to sleep for all of them in their group and sufficient food for the day. What they earn is just enough to satisfy those needs. Very often the age span of those musical groups is from ca. 12 to 25. Elderly men with a banjo, by contrast, tend to be lone minstrels.

For us researchers it is not easy to locate those banjo groups, because they are here and there, travelling to many places and one cannot anticipate the appearance of one of these groups in a certain place, at a certain time. To handle this situation, the best strategy for us is always to be ready for an impromptu recording session. Many times we find such a group walking along the roadside, having never recorded anything. We then stop them, listen to one of their songs and make an appointment with them. If the place is not too far, they may be willing to come to our Center in Chileka, to be recorded at our Oral Literature Research Programme, for a good fee.

Sometimes it happens that one of these groups stays for a long time in one and the same place, perhaps even several months; people then get tired of their songs, and lose their interest to stop them in the street so that they perform. When those boys discover that, now walking for hours without anyone stopping them, they may decide to shift to another region, perhaps to another town, far away, in the hope that their songs would be appreciated there as a novelty. It is perhaps due to this shifting strategy that some banjo playing boys’ groups eventually become known in many different parts of the country where they get heard from time to time.

It also happens quite often that in some place they suddenly get invited to play in the home of an admirer of their music. Sometimes he is the owner of a certain bar or the organizer of an impromptu beer party, hoping that customers would come, attracted by the music, so that he would increase his profit. In such a case the musicians are “hired” and they are paid according to the agreement between them and the bar owner who makes a profit, but carries the risk. On other occasions some of these groups are called upon when a marriage ceremony takes place, especially between the months of August and October. This is high season for marriages, and such gigs may require them to play all night long. But such opportunities have decreased considerably in recent years, because people now prefer electrically amplified instruments (*zoimbila za magetsi*), or they organize what they call “disco”. In any case for live performances it is not just so that any guitar and banjo group is invited to play in a bar or at a wedding, it is only the most famous of the itinerant bands that are hired, either because of their style (*kaimbidwe kawoko*) or if they have songs that are really meaningful (*nyimbo za matanthauzo eni eni*).

Depending on expertise, but also on many other factors, the chances of success for each itinerant group are quite different. Some barely collect enough earnings for an evening meal; other groups happen to reside far from towns, and by walking enormous distances to play there in the streets, they are tired when they arrive at their destination. And then with little earnings they return to their home villages, lacking any place nearby to spend the night. While they play in the towns they often get worried about the return journey, and that they should return home as long as it is not yet dark. When these groups are successful with the public, they continue even under considerable hardship; but when they begin to arrive at their destinations so weakened from their long journey and then make little money, it is often a matter of time until the group dissolves; some of the members take up another occupation, or they marry giving up music, and start to work in the field so that they can support their wives. In this manner many of the bands end as the boys grow older.

Those former banjo groups whose members have dispersed find it difficult later to remember what they once played. This is why we at the Oral Literature Research Programme, Chileka, often follow up the fate of such groups; we interview former members to know how their bands started and what instrumentation they had used. Here at the Oral Literature Research Programme, we also preserve the music of groups that stopped to be active. It is a good thing that when those musicians later ask us about their songs recorded by one of our research team members, we can make a cassette copy for them, so that they can hear how they played long ago. It can be that some of them begin to think about restarting their music, which in most cases, however, is not feasible, because they are now adults of some age and can hardly resume the lifestyle of their youth. Some of them begin to think, if they had only continued, possibly they would have become famous, while still within the age span of 12 to 25.

Banjo-based groups of teenagers in Malawi often have a specific instrumentation. Besides the banjo whose manufacture I have described above, there are some groups which employ what they call “bass guitar”. For its construction they take an oil drum and cut it in the middle. In the same manner as in banjo construction, they then pierce the carved fretboard through the oil drum, but in contrast to that of a banjo, it is very long. The oil drum resonator is covered with cow skin which is fastened to both sides (*chimakungidwa mbali zonse ziwiri*). A sound-hole is cut out from the skin on the bottom side of the resonator. A strong single wire (*nsambo*) is used on this bass guitar for the sound. It is a one-stringed instrument. There are also banjo groups that make their bass guitar in a different way, using plywood for constructing a box which is then also covered with skin. Sometimes it is without skin cover.

The playing technique requires a small stick in the right hand for striking the string, while the left hand holds a bottle used as a slider.

Another instrument often used in such groups is a set of small drums (*ting'oma*), also home-made. Sometimes they are made of cans of various sizes, or old pots, to be covered with skin. Very often, three such drums are used like a “chime” or tuned drum-set. They are tuned to conform with the banjo tuning. Sometimes these little drums are supplemented by things like bells and various buzzing devices (*tidzingelengele*) sometimes constructed from a number of Coca Cola bottle tops. The percussionist using these instruments plays them all by himself. But it can also be that a separate person plays the rattling devices (*tidzikwechele khwecheleto*) and the other performer only plays the small drums. It depends on their internal arrangements within the band.

Many times, in these banjo groups, everyone constructs his own instrument according to his own expertise, and sees to it that its sound quality is in agreement with the instruments of his friends. But it can also be that all the instruments are made by one of the boys who is the manufacturing expert. Then he calls friends who are already musicians to found a band. It also happens that a boy who has an interest in music, enters a group as a novice. In such case an intensive teaching process begins in which they all exchange their experiences so that everyone learns to play the instrument he is assigned to use. This is necessary before they may think of setting out to play in public. If on the other hand all the instruments are constructed by one boy, and friends or relatives just join him without contributing anything, a hierarchy is established. The owner of the instruments will have special power over the others. He will determine what has to be done, and the others will have no voting rights. In such a case disagreements can erupt from time to time.

But problems can also arise if each of the boys has constructed his own instrument; there can also be disagreement and within a short time the band begins to dissolve, because everyone wants to dominate his friends. It can end up with everyone taking his instruments and go home, if there is no understanding in the band.

In many cases, however everything goes well and the band lasts for a long time. An example is the Madetsa band, as they call themselves, because they all come from Madetsa village (Nkhoma area near Lilongwe). Its members stick together, although some of them are married and have children, and yet they have played in this group for a long time.

Another group that has lasted for a long time is the Makambale Brothers Band, boys within an extended family who started to play a long time ago, but they still exist. This testifies to the fact that those people have really put their hearts into their music, even in times of trouble. They love their music and continue to find money every day for their needs.

Recordings

Manondo Band – Recorded at Machilika village, T.A. (traditional authority) Mazengela, Lilongwe District, on October 1, 2002. Original tape 2002/26
(Recorded by M.A.M.)

This group of players with home-made instruments is one of those that regularly entertain people around Nkhoma, a place in Lilongwe District, where a Presbyterian Mission was established. They and their instruments attract many people in the area, though the group is not very well known. The group leader is Nderson Bito, 31 years old. Altogether there are seven people in the band, perhaps best to be enumerated according to status: No. 2 in the band is Philipo Binala, 30 who also plays a home-made banjo; next is Chitsanzo Bito, 31. The name Bito suggests a relationship between him and the leader, in fact these two young men are twins! The next in the group is Faison Dalitso, 28, then Biliati Manondo, 30 years old, who plays the drums (*ng'oma*). The band has taken its name from that of the drummer. Then there is Yokonia Diveliasi, 28 years old, and finally Yohane Bito with 21 years the youngest member who plays a small “lead banjo” (*kabanjo kotsogolela*). They told me that they compose all their songs in cooperation with one another.

Track 1: “*Imfayi njowawa*” (This death hurts). The song complains about the situation nowadays, that so many people just die, as if human beings were trash. It can happen that some elderly people are left alone without any support in their villages, because all their children have died.

Track 2: “*Julia*” This is a song of complaints about a certain woman called Julia and the way she treated her step-children. The husband demands that his wife Julia should keep and bring up his children from the marriage with his former wife in the same manner she would keep her own.

Track 3: “*Siyawa siine*” (It is not them -- it is not me!) In this song they say that the song genre (*chamba*) in which they perform is something like *yelele*, that is a dance game performed by girls in the night. We researchers can note here that in the middle of the song they change the way they are playing their instruments (*kaimbidwe kawo kamabanjowo*). They now perform at a very fast speed. This style of performance is also found in other areas in southern Malawi, but there they call this style *magologodo*.



Manondo Band. Playing home-made banjos, at Machilika village, T.A. Mazengela, Lilongwe District. October 1, 2002. Photo: author



Manondo Band. Faison Dalitso playing a small home-made banjo, at Machilika village, T.A. Mazengela, Lilongwe District. October 1, 2002 Photo: author

Muonekela Band - Recorded at Oral Literature Research Programme, Chileka, August 3, 2007. Original tape no. 2007/12/I (recorded by M.A.M.)

Muonekela Band is a trio that often gives performances in the city of Blantyre. Like others they are an itinerant group, carrying their instruments to everywhere they go: they can be met in any place where they expect to find people who want to hear their songs. Naturally, they tend to visit places in town where people gather; there they start to play just one song, waiting for the response, so that people would pay them for more music. (To pay for the performance of a song is called *kubecha*). In that manner, on August 2, 2007 I bumped into this group near Blantyre Market; they were surrounded by a large audience at a certain corner.

After hearing some of their songs I thought the best would be to invite them to my research center in Chileka, for the next day, to be recorded without street noises from cars and other noises unrelated to their music. On August 3, they really arrived at a good time at our place, and we began to get to know each other before the recording started. The leader of the band is Tingo Makwinja, about 22 years old, who plays banjo, and there is his brother Vinicent Makwinja, 17 years old who plays the bass guitar. The little drums (*ting'oma*), indispensable for this style of playing, were operated by Mcnight Waliya, also about the same age of Vinicent. All of them come from the same place in Thyolo District: Mukula village, T.A. Chimaliro. Thyolo District in southern Malawi borders on Mulanje District, and the population is mixed of -Lomwe, -Nyanja and also -Mang'anja, and some Yao speakers.

Their instruments are very carefully constructed, and with much expertise. The banjo has four strings; the resonator is covered with goat skin. The resonator of the bass guitar is covered with cow skin, but in the case of this group, the bass guitar had three strings and only resembles a bit the instruments played by other groups. The three small drums also had cow skin covers, and they had some other percussive devices attached (*tidzikhwechele khwechele*).

Track 4: "*Kuli milandu*" (There are court cases). This song relates the story of what happens very often, according to people's opinion, to a person who died, if he died because he was bewitched by someone else. In such a case when the corpse is put into the grave, the spirit of the person does not go to heaven quickly, but it stands on a certain path on earth all the time, waiting for the person who had bewitched him or her, so that in heaven a court case would be made against the wizard or witch. They would have to exchange questions and answers there, until God would give his judgement.

Track 5: "*Umasiye ukuwawa*" (Orphanage hurts). This song is about orphan children. When both father and mother have died because of the AIDS disease, life becomes very hard for those who remain. The orphan complains in the words of their song about not finding any support, and even all the relatives with whom he or she stays speak harshly to him or her: "You are just an orphan!" So the victim complains: "Orphanage hurts. I have remained alone, without a mother to take care of me."

Track 6: "*Umbetawu sikufuna*" (To be unmarried is not recommended). A young woman complains in the song that she lacks a husband; but she also complains that sometimes a man can be found, but then he does not look good, or otherwise he is a chronic alcoholic (*chiledzelele*) who never stays at home. Those are the thoughts haunting unmarried women.

Dickson Malumbi - Recorded at the Oral Literature Research Programme, Singano village/Chileka, Blantyre District, on August 26, 2006. Original Tape no. 2006/3/1 (recorded by Y.M.)

Dickson Malumbi, about 20 years old, is a solo-playing banjoist. We found him on the way to Blantyre and invited him to our Center for recording. Dickson comes from a village in Mulanje District and has some Lomwe ethnic background. His style is comparable to Joe Gwaladi, a famous banjo player whom we recorded in 2005. Dickson is among those who tried to follow him in his style. Not by chance comes his model also from a Lomwe background.

Track 7: “Chimpwirikiti” (confusion, hodgepodge) The song criticizes the behaviour of many people, especially women, who wander about without any plan, everything getting mixed up. He refers especially to women with a loose sex life (*chiwelewele*).



Dickson Malumbi, 20 years old, sitting on top of his “drum” with the banjo in his hands, recorded at Singano village, T.A. Kuntaja, Blantyre District, Malawi. 26 August 2006. Photo: author



Dickson Malumbi. A close-up portrait at the same place, same date. Photo: author

Bvomera Band - Recorded at Kalanga village, Sub T.A. Govati, Mwanza District, August 30, 2006. Original tape no. 2006/10/II (recorded by Ch.G.)

The name of this band comes from the Chichewa verb *kubvomela* (to respond) apparently the members of this band want to say that they respond to each other in their music and perhaps in life. The leader is very young. He is Frank Moses, just fourteen years old. He plays the banjo, another one plays a drum set, and several girls respond to the song's lines. So they were singing in a responsorial style (*akuimba mobvomelezana*). The name of this band is descriptive. We found their way of singing attractive.

Track 8: "Tayenda" (We have gone) This song was picked by the boys and girls in Frank Moses' Bvomera Band from another group, the Makambale Brothers Band. It is an adaptation of their famous song "Nyamu" (see track 15 for comparison). The girls sing the responsorial part and demonstrate the dance pattern. Frank Moses asks the girls to demonstrate in their dance how they would lift up those elderly men.



Frank Moses and his Bvomera Band, playing a four stringed banjo, recorded at Kalanga village, Sub T.A. Govati, Mwanza District, August 30, 2006. Photo: author



Girls and boys, aged 9 to 13 dancing to banjo music by the Bvomera Band, at Kalanga village, Sub T.A. Govati, Mwanza District, August 30, 2006. Photo: author

Francisco Manuel - Recorded at the Chifunga Refugee Camp, Jonathani village, T.A. Mulauli, Mwanza District, September 15, 1990. Original tape no. 1990/33/I (recorded by M.A.M.)

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were over a million refugees from the Mozambiquan civil war in Malawi. Chifunga Refugee Camp, near the main road from Blantyre to Mwanza and on to Tete in Mozambique was one of the places where many of them lived. I found Francisco Manuel among several boys and young men hanging around near the market of the Chifunga Refugee Camp. They had one banjo, which they were exchanging between them, one of the boys singing a song, then the next one taking over. It looked as if they were one group that was regularly meeting to enjoy themselves with that banjo. Everyone among these boys and young men had his own individual style, different from the others.

All their songs were songs about what was happening in their homeland, Mozambique. A big war was going on there, and their thoughts were with their parents who had remained or run away in a different direction, while those who had come to Malawi had really saved their lives. At that time many of the refugees staying in this camp had no news whatsoever about the fate of their relatives.

The banjo which these boys operated had a very long neck (or fretboard) (*nkonjo wake wautali*), and the resonator was covered with a skin. It had four strings. The owner of this banjo was a fifteen year old boy called Samuel Chinchere, who also played a few songs. But I recorded Francisco Manuel, 28, who seemed to have great experience on the banjo.

Track 9: “*Ndiwala bwanji kumanda*” (How can I forget the graveyard?) In this song the singer says that he could never forget those who were now in the graveyard, including those who were killed in the war, because of troubles that were just too many.

Chilanjō Brothers Band - Recorded at Chitumbi village, T.A. Malengachanzi, Nkhotakota District, on November 11, 1995. Original tape no. 95/15/I (recorded by D.K.)

The group operating under this name was found by us in Nkhotakota District near Lake Malawi in a certain place known under the name Sani Trading Center. In the year 1995 this group was famous locally, because the year before there had been elections. Politicians of a certain party were hiring this band for meetings in connection with the census of voters. It was for this reason that this group became known everywhere in Nkhotakota District.

Josefe Nindi, 42 years old was the leader. He had founded this band together with some young brothers. The instruments used were one banjo and percussive devices (*tidzikhwechele khwechele*), as well as one drum. The banjo had a skin cover and in construction corresponded to one of the major types found all over the country.

Track 10: “*Galu wa Mfumu*” (The dog of the chief) The song expresses things in the form of a proverb (*mwambi*). Somewhere there was a chief not liked by his people, and he did not want anyone to stay near him, but he could not tell explicitly those people that they should go away. Instead he used to call his dog whom he had given the name: *Chokani pano!* (Get out of here!) A certain person, seeing what the chief was saying, understood very well that it meant he should leave this place. That man decided to reciprocate the insolence. So he also bought a dog and gave him the following name: *Sindidzachoka mpakana kale!* (I am not going to leave this place!)

Madetsa Band - Recorded at Madetsa village, T.A. Mazengela, Lilongwe District, on September 30, 2002. Original Tape no. 2002/24/II (recorded by M.A.M.)

This group come from the area of Nkhoma in Lilongwe District, central Malawi. The band is composed of seven boys. They operate three banjos, some small drums and a big bass guitar with one string (*nsambo imodzi*). Their performance style can be found only in this area of Nkhoma in Lilongwe District and the type of banjos which they use is very different from those used by groups in other regions. Two of them are very small banjos, and they make them using the metal bottom of a glass-covered kerosene lamp. These banjos are also short, in contrast to those seen in other places of the country. Accordingly, the way of playing also is different and it is concentrated in the Nkhoma area. From that place also came another group called Ndingo Brothers Band and it became famous in Malawi in the 1980s. Their styles seem to be related. Although they do not really resemble each other.

In the present case two small banjos were used and one of the type with oil can resonator, found in many parts of the country, seen in the center of the photograph.

The leader, we could perhaps say the owner of the band is Chiyembekezo Kalonga, 33 years old, and his second man is Leter Biziweki, 20 years old. These two together with the five other young men were responsible for composing and performing the songs recorded here. A favorite subject of their songs concerns the AIDS disease, because they have often been invited by social workers and others who try to teach people AIDS awareness. So they have many of these songs in their repertoire (*nyimbo za malangizo amatenda aedzi*). But the way they perform these songs shows that they are indeed musical experts with the instrumental part well integrated with the songs' lines. The expertise of the player of the bass guitar is particularly stunning, as concerns the manner the instrumental lines are combined.



Madetsa Band visited at Madetsa village, T.A. Mazengela, Lilongwe District, on July 24, 2007 on a joint trip with Dr. Giorgio Adamo. Photo: G. Adamo.

Track 11: “*Poyamba ndipemphela*” (First I will pray). This is the song with which they usually open up their performance, wherever they are invited. Since they choose prayers of the Roman Catholic Church, it gives the impression, even if some of them belong to other Christian congregations, that they are serious about the Roman Catholic faith which they follow with vigor.

Track 12: “*Ndayendayenda, edzi amadula moyo*” (I have been roaming about, but AIDS cuts one’s life). This is a song of instruction concerning the AIDS disease, and for this reason there are many warnings in this song. It is hoped that people should hear such songs every day, so that perhaps they will make an effort to change their behaviour, stopping to exchange sexual partners frequently.

A few years after the first series of recordings I recorded the Madetsa band again, in their village; this is the track that follows. (Madetsa village T.A. Mazengela, Lilongwe District, on August 9, 2007. Original tape no. 2007/8/II (recorded by M.A.M)

Track 13: “*Ndilila bwanji*” (How can I cry?) It is a song about a person who cried about the death of his mother very much, unable to accept the truth that his mother had died. In the song text he is asking himself: “Is it true that my mother has gone to the graveyard forever? in which way should I convince myself that she is really gone?”

Track 14: “*Usandinamize kuti ndine wabwino*” (Do not cheat me saying that I’m a good person). This song which is sung on many occasions concerns the behaviour of girls who always tell their boyfriends that they do not go to other men, but the boy should not believe that. (This track comes from the recordings I made on September 30, 2002. Tape no. 2002/24/II.)

Makambale Brothers Band - Recorded at the Oral Literature Research Programme, Chileka
On August 10, 2005. Original tape no. 2005/13/I
(recorded by Y.M.)

This group Makambale Brothers Band, comes from Chinsapo I, a township of Lilongwe, the Capital City of Malawi. They were located by my son and research assistant, Yohana Malamusi, at present musicology student at the University of Vienna, who also recorded them. He found them while they were performing their songs in the streets of the township of Blantyre, about 310 km further south, and he negotiated a date for them to be recorded in Chileka (12 km from Blantyre) at our Oral Literature Research Programme. It was on August 10 that the group arrived at Singano village, where our Center is located to be recorded by my assistant.

The band of Makambale Brothers is one among many itinerant groups of young people that can be found in the most different places in central and southern Malawi, where some sort of entertainment takes place, for example at drinking taverns, bars and also at markets in the towns. There they entertain anyone who likes to listen to their songs. From time to time, this particular group could also be found in Lilongwe, because that is the place where they normally stay, but at other times they are also seen here and there in the Cities of Blantyre and Limbe, in pursuit of some support they hope to get from playing their music.

The band is one of those that have become very popular among all the itinerant bands that can be found playing in city streets; because they have succeeded in composing songs whose lyrics many people instantly like, as they are moving in different towns from place to place. In particular, one song composed by them has made them quite famous; it is the one that runs under the title “Nyamu” (see my explanation below). It is because of their way of performing and how they coordinate the parts in their songs, that people like them as soon as they hear them. In this manner, little by little, this group began to be known in many different places.

The members of the group are all related and they cooperate well in their musical style and the way they respond to each other in the songs. The group leader is Sosten Mbalule, about 30, who plays banjo; Dyax Mbalule, 28, is also on banjo, Amosi Mbalule, 24, on drums and Save Mbalule playing bass guitar.

The lyrics of the songs touch on the subject of people’s behaviour; what happens to them and how people interact from time to time. But these musicians perform their songs like instructions for people that they should teach the children who are born nowadays, to develop purposeful characters, and not adopt bad manners imported from other countries. Some other songs are complaints about things that are very human.

Track 15: “*Nyamu*” This word, used as a song title, is an abbreviation deriving from the verb *kunyamula* (to carry, to lift up) It is the group’s most celebrated song that helped them to get a certain reputation as musical performers. This is so, because what they denounce in their song, makes people laugh. It concerns adolescent girls who make friends with elderly men, while those big men could even be lifted up by those young girls during sexual intercourse! The song ridicules the mores of nowadays, by which it is possible, that small girls would want a relationship with big, elderly men.

Track 16: “Ndadabwa mai” (I am wondering, mother) The song states that things are foul these days; one can find adolescent, uninitiated girls (*atsikana achichepele*) becoming pregnant. Thereafter they bother their mothers to take them to the maternity clinic for delivery. Someone becoming aware of these problems went to his maternal uncle seeking some scholarly opinion. He asked: “Was it so in the past, that young girls could become pregnant?” The uncle just replied that he was also wondering about things going in such a direction, but that he was thinking that this was how the world would end.

Track 17: “Migolo migolo” (Big oil drum) The song mocks rich people, especially those newly rich who, from the moment they have plenty of money, begin to be arrogant, saying “I have money like a row of oil drums filled up to the top; nobody can reach me up here!”.



Makambale Brothers Band. Recorded at Singano village, T.A Kuntaja Blantyre District, August 10, 2005. Photo: author

The instruments played by those young men include two banjos, a set of small drums (*ting'oma*), a big guitar (*chigitala chachikulu*) which they call “bass guitar”. All these instruments are home-made, manufactured by the performers themselves. The type of banjo which they play belongs to the type using an oil can resonator such as is available in petrol stations, with no skin cover.



The bass guitar playing technique. Makambale Brothers Band, at Singano village, T.A Kuntaja, Blantyre District, August 10, 2005. Photo: author

The little drums played by one of the musicians have goat skin stretched tight over the resonator; they are single-headed drums. Normally the young man plays three such drums of different size with different tunings.

The bass guitar played by the other young man in the picture has a large resonator covered with cow skin (*chikopa cha ng'ombe*) and it has just one string. In his right hand the performer holds a small playing stick to strike the string, while in his left hand he holds a small bottle to serve as a slider, gliding up and down the string. In Chichewa we say *amakhwekhweletsa pamwamba pa wayayo*. *Khwe* is an ideophone describing the action and the sound. It is a technique identical with that in *hauyani* (Hawaiian) slide guitar playing.

References

- Kubik, Gerhard (assisted by Moya Aliya Malamusi, Lidiya Malamusi and Donald Kachamba)
 1987 *Malawian Music. A Framework for Analysis*. Editor: Mitchel Strumpf. Jointly published by: The Center for Social Research, and The Department of Fine and Performing Arts, University of Malawi, Zomba // Limbe: Monfort Press
- Kubik, Gerhard
 1989 “The southern African periphery: Banjo traditions in Zambia and Malawi”, *The World of Music*, 31 (1): 3 – 30
- Malamusi, Moya Aliya
 1994 “Rise and development of a Chileka guitar style in the 1950s”, in: *For Gerhard Kubik Festschrift ...* Dietrich Schüller / August Schmidhofer, eds., Frankfurt a Main: P. Lang, pp. 7 – 72
- 1999 *From Lake Malawi to the Zambezi. Aspects of music and oral literature in southeast Africa in the 1990s*. CD record with pamphlet, pamap 602, LC 07203, Frankfurt a. Main: Popular African Music/African Music Archive
- Rycroft, David
 1982 “A Glimpse of the Musical Heritage of Black Africa” *The International Magazine of Arab Culture* (published by the Iraqi Cultural Center, London), 2/3: 24-27

Acknowledgements

Some of the recordings were made on joint field trips with members of our Oral Literature Research Programme, Chileka. I gratefully acknowledge the help of my companions in our division of work, one of us recording, another one taking photographs, another one writing the notes etc. At various stages the late Donald J. Kachamba, musician and composer (identified as D.K.), Christopher Gerald, guitarist and singer (Ch.G.) and my son Yohana Malamusi (Y.M.) were part of our joint endeavor. My own recordings are identified as M.A.M.

I also wish to thank all those who have assisted me while preparing the selection for this CD, notably Mag. Dr. August Schmidhofer, Institute of Musicology, University of Vienna, who provided equipment for transfers, Prof. Dr. Gerhard Kubik, who discussed with me my field documentation and the presentation of the materials. I also wish to thank Dr. Wolfgang Bender, Center for World Music, University of Hildesheim, for his long-standing support of my work. I thank Dr. Giorgio Adamo, Rome, for providing one photograph. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge that financial assistance for various research trips was obtained through stipends granted by the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany, through the Germany Embassy, Lilongwe.