

LEENA LAMPINEN

## Choral music and identities in Tanzania

Lectio praecursoria

*The public examination of Leena Lampinen's Research Study Programme doctoral dissertation Our songs and other people's songs. Music and identities in a Lutheran diocese in Tanzania was held on 10 May 2021 at the Black Box Hall of Helsinki Musiikkitalo. The opponent was Professor Jean Kidula (University of Georgia) and the chair DMus Jorma Hannikainen.*

### RESEARCH CONTEXT

What is “your music”? What are “your songs” like? What is the kind of music that definitely does not feel like yours, music that you consider someone else’s music? To what kinds of groups do you belong through the music you enjoy making or listening to? Perhaps you play in a band, sing karaoke, or attend concerts – or maybe you are a member of a choir.

*Mtu ni watu* – a person is people – states a Swahili proverb, and describes well the concept of communality that is central to the context of my research: we exist together with other people. Within this kind of framework, which emphasizes the importance of collectiveness and community, it is not surprising that an activity like choral singing has become such a popular activity in Tanzania. It plays an important role in Christian expression, and it is also a visible and audible element in society more broadly. Church choir singing in Tanzania, and in East Africa more generally, is a phenomenon whose extent and importance are rather difficult to explain to someone who has not experienced it; and, on the other hand, it is often taken for granted by those for whom it is an everyday practice.

My study focuses on one Christian denomination and its music. Borrowing the words of one of my interviewees, “I talk about the Lutheran church. [...] Our church is a singers’ church. It is a church of singing” (Interview 9). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania is one of the world’s largest Lutheran churches. According to the Lutheran World Federation (2020), it has approximately 7.9 million members throughout the country. The North Central Diocese – the geographical scope of my study – is one of its 26 dioceses, with approximately 300,000 members

(ELCT 2020; Mashauri, February 18, 2021). This church has a long history that is connected to several Lutheran missionary organisations and churches.

## CHORAL MUSIC IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN TANZANIA

Choral music in this Lutheran church can be seen as a continuum that started with the imported and translated Western hymns in the nineteenth century and has continued through different phases and processes to the present moment, consisting of various musical styles. Vocal music in congregational and choral forms is an integral part of church services and other church-related events.

The current postcolonial musical landscape in which the studied choirs operate consists of a variety of layers that exist simultaneously and intermingle with each other. The musical heritage of the church's mission era is intertwined with several other musical elements, both local and global. It is not always easy – or even necessary – to determine the origin of such musical influences. This is the reality in which choral music is now composed and performed, and it is a fertile ground for a wide range of creativity. There is no need to claim any musical style as better or worse than others – “God can be praised through many styles,” as one interviewee pointed out (Interview 9). The studied choirs exist in many forms and employ many kinds of music. Different repertoires provide people with a variety of possibilities of choice and identifications.

Roughly divided, choral music includes gospel music, classical or “Western” style church music and music that is based on or inspired by local ethnic music cultures. However, the boundaries are fluid. In addition to this genre-based classification of music, my interviewees also had a different approach to the music they sing. They used expressions such as “our songs and other people's songs”, “ordinary songs”, “notated songs”, or “songs of the church and songs of the world” to describe their choirs' repertoires.

## CHORAL REPERTOIRES AND IDENTITIES

The use of identity as an approach for this study was in a way an opportunity that my interviewees offered me. It was presented in the interviews, not in the form of the word “identity”, but as a way of viewing oneself in relation to the surrounding people and communities: Who am I? or, Who are we? in relation to or in the context of other people or other groups. Discussions about choral repertoires in the form of “our songs” and “other people's songs” pointed me toward examining how church

choirs and choir conductors – *walimu wa kwaya*<sup>1</sup> in Swahili – identify themselves through and in relation to the music they sing. “Our songs” can be our choir’s, our church’s, or our ethnic group’s songs. “Other people’s songs” can include songs from other choirs, other churches, other cultures, or other geographical locations. In the interviews, “our songs” often referred to the songs that somehow made the interviewee’s choir’s repertoire unique in comparison to others. This concept does not deal with a particular musical genre, or a particular choir type. It is about people’s experiences.

These choirs, seen through the lenses of their *walimu*, consider themselves active agents. It is an essential part of their being. In church services, choirs have practical, spiritual, and emotional functions. Their practical task is to lead the congregation and to raise awareness of the particular time period in the church year. From the spiritual point of view, the choirs’ task is to convey the biblical message in a way that the listeners can understand and be nourished by – choir songs “should be like the sermon of that day,” said one of my interviewees (Interview 8). Some participants explained that church choir songs should also touch people at the emotional level – “first, the choir should be touched by the songs they sing so that the listeners could be touched even more,” said another *mwalimu* (Interview 2). From a broader perspective, choirs are representatives of their parishes, localities, and even their denomination, among others. Choral identities consist of musical, religious, ethnic, and national elements, and aspects related to their everyday surroundings.

My interviewees identified themselves in several ways: I am a choir conductor, a music teacher, a composer, a player of a certain musical instrument. I am a choir member and a performer of a particular musical style. I am a self-taught *mwalimu* or I am a *mwalimu* with formal training in music, but a volunteer in any case. I am a Christian, a Lutheran, and a member of our local parish. I am a member of my ethnic group, I am Tanzanian, I am African.

The work of *walimu* consists of a variety of tasks that are connected to both individual and social identities. A *mwalimu* is an individual musician with certain individual talents and abilities that differentiate him or her from others. At the same time, he or she is also part of several groups, such as his or her choir, the wider community of choir conductors, or the local parish. For the participants in this research, being a member of a church choir is a combination of self-expression through singing, communality, and performance of one’s faith. It is a means of formation, transformation, and preservation of identities.

In my study, the diversity of identities did not cause problems to *walimu* themselves; there is a place for each of them to be active and emphasized. Different situations call for different identities – they are unlike but not unequal. Challenges usually appear in relation to the environment, since the self-understanding of a *mwalimu*

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<sup>1</sup> *Mwalimu* = a teacher, *walimu* = teachers, *kwaya* = choir(s) in Swahili.

as a musician may not always fit the church's understanding of what a musician or a *mwalimu wa kwaya* in the church context should be like.

The *walimu* need to be creative and able to adapt themselves to various needs and wishes on the listeners' part, since, as one interviewee pointed out:

“In the church, each person has her taste. When someone hears a song of praise, she wants to cry. Meaning that for her this is now a true service. When we sing and dance someone else says that now this is a proper service. When we sing a traditional song, yet another one says that now you brought me home.” (Interview 10)

I believe that church musicians from many locations can agree with this interviewee. It is a challenge to find a combination of music that suits everyone. Many of my interviewees appeared as promoters of musical variety in church services. Different musical styles complement each other, and they are seen as a response to the needs of the congregation present. I see this as a fruitful approach to the planning of music for worship services. The message of a particular Sunday can become meaningful to a larger group of people if it is transmitted through different forms of musical expression.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION

Collaboration is an important theme of my study, and was brought up in the interviews in various forms, such as “When you collaborate with other people, they will teach you things that you don't have” (Interview 4). One important aspect was musical collaboration: choirs meet with other choirs, and *walimu* meet with each other or are invited to teach their colleagues' choirs, also beyond denominational boundaries. It is a source of the feeling of belonging and collegiality, and a visible sign of ecumenism. This was also some *walimu*'s solution to the need of pleasing or reaching as many people as possible – If I want my choir to sing a song representing a certain musical style, but I am not able to do it myself, I will ask someone else to do it.

During the years I spent in Tanzania, I learned a lot about musical collaboration between *walimu wa kwaya*. As a *mwalimu* myself, I saw and experienced how a single choir rehearsal can be realized by sharing the tasks among several people, and how each *mwalimu* within a choir is responsible for organizing an entire rehearsal in his or her turn. That was new to me.

In the new strategy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland (2020), collaboration is highlighted, and people working in the church are encouraged to build networks in many directions. I see crossing various boundaries as a necessity. From the music's point of view, combining different abilities and knowledge on a regular basis is a valuable resource and a way of learning for everyone involved – it is a communal way of working. No one is able to do everything by him- or herself, but uniting resources produces more opportunities and broadens the perspective.

Another form of collaboration that was discussed in many interviews was collaboration in parishes with regard to planning worship services – again a theme that may sound familiar in other contexts as well. According to some of my interviewees, those are situations that often challenge *walimu*'s musical identities as experts in their field. This applies especially to the trained *walimu* who during the interviews often expressed a feeling that they are not acknowledged as much as they would like to be, and that their knowledge and skills were underused.

In the church-related events, music and musicians are assumed to be present, but often without much recognition – and this is not unique to Tanzania. After the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral a few weeks ago, composer and conductor John Rutter (2021) wrote in his blog: "Amid all the torrents of expert or would-be expert verbiage about the service and those attending it, I heard not one word of comment about the music which had formed such a crucial part of the funeral service, much less any commendation of the musicians who had planned and executed it with such flawless professionalism and unstinting commitment." Sounds familiar, I would say.

## THE ROLE OF MUSIC AND MUSICIANS

When I worked as a music teacher in Tanzania, some of my students told me that "Our parents don't understand why we study music." Music was not considered a proper profession. Here in Finland, the pandemic has brought into the spotlight the question of the appreciation of musicians, artists in general, and other people working in the cultural sector. The Finnish journalist Laura Hallamaa (2021) wrote some weeks ago that "Find a real job" is a sentence that many of these people have heard during this past year. Many of them – musicians among others – largely lost their source of livelihood due to the restrictions caused by the pandemic. However, although the cultural sector did not seem to be among the priority areas when it came to governmental economic support, these exceptional times have nevertheless proven the importance of a variety of cultural forms. Many people are eagerly and impatiently waiting for the possibility to attend concerts, festivals, and many other kinds of cultural activities. Like so many other things, you realize their significance when they are taken away from you.

I wrote in my dissertation that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania should not take its rich choral music for granted, as something that just appears when needed. There are always people behind it; these people, their knowledge, and their hard work should be appreciated. But would not this apply to other situations and other contexts as well? Music, theatre, literature, or visual arts do not just appear. There are always people behind them.

With my work I join other scholars, such as Imani Sanga and Gregory Barz, who have studied Tanzanian Lutheran church choirs and their music. I have broadened

the view by moving the scope from the city of Dar es Salaam to another geographical location in the country, including both urban and rural areas. I have also explored the topic through the lens of a church musician. Working on this research has been a journey across various boundaries, a negotiation between different disciplines, different research methods and traditions.

My goal throughout this project has been to give the *walimu* the possibility to express their thoughts about the work they do and the music they create, localize, and perform. This study shows how deeply my interviewees think about music and about its meaning to themselves and to others. Music is an essential part of them and their lives, and a natural form of self-expression. As one interviewee said: “Music is in my blood” (Interview 8).

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## AUDIO EXAMPLES:

- Loruvani Choir: *Mikononi mwa mitume*  
Loruvani Choir: *Sauti ya mtu*  
Magugu Choir: *Wapendwa Wakristo wenzetu*

