

An Embodied Culture of Optimism and Struggle: The Sungura Music of Tongai Moyo

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Abstract

This paper is lyrical and philosophical examination on hope and optimistic struggle in the sungura music of Tongai Moyo (1968-2011), a Zimbabwean singer-song writer and musician (guitarist) who produced 14 albums in a career spanning over two decades and thus demonstrated the indispensability of optimistic thriving and victory-centered African consciousness. The argument maintained in the article is that a trajectory of thought that is marked by the necessity of possibility and purposeful human agency is discernible in the music of Tongai Moyo. It is emphasized that Tongai Moyo's vision as embedded and reflected in his music is rewarding for the people of Africa, and around the world. It is further argued that Tongai Moyo takes sungura music to greater heights because his art celebrates victorious thought, while castigating pessimism as impoverishing. Last, the article contends that Tongai Moyo was an Afrocentric musician who breaks the seemingly developing trend in sungura music circles where utter pessimism and victimhood are projected as the only condition of life.

Key Words: Sungura music, victorious consciousness, Afrocentric, hope, Tongai Moyo.

Introduction

Contrary to the pessimism that marks the music of sungura greats, particularly John Chibadura (1957-1999) and Leonard Zhakata, and others, commitment to struggle and victorious thought is striking and fascinating in the music of Tongai Moyo (1968-2011). And retrospectively, the history of sungura music is briefly described by jivezimbabwe.com as:

In 1948, Mura Nyakura travelled to Zaire and was influenced by the kanindo-rumba beat there which he then introduced to Zimbabwe. It developed to be called sungura music, mainly influenced by the late Ephraim Joe and his band the Sungura Boys etc. The sungura or museve, a genre has taken over, gaining its status as the most popular music genre and easily identifiable with Zimbabwe. Almost three quarters of the musicians in Zimbabwe play this genre and it is a highly contested terrain. It is a genre which has come of age, so unique and classic, heavily influenced by the kanindo and rumba genres which originated from East and Central Africa.

Contrastingly, while the music of sungura musicians such as John Chibadura and Leonard Zhakata is largely marked by pessimistic existentialism, the music of Tongai Moyo demonstrates transcendental attitudes towards life. It is therefore argued here that Tongai Moyo was an active member in actively struggling for more humane life conditions, because his art is rooted in purposeful agency, unity in struggle, and in repudiating defeatist attitudes. Hence, he held that life is only fruitful and enjoyable on the basis of active involvement in order to overcome life challenges.

In this paper, it is also argued that Moyo was not a proponent of dread, but an advocate of change; his art is life-affirming and transcendental as he envisions victory and struggle so critically central to an African philosophical existence., and in short, Moyo seems to hold the view that “humans have the most important role in the alteration of their own condition. No matter what dire circumstances we may be trapped in, if we do not make the right efforts in the right amounts, we never shall escape them” Chinweizu (1987:351).

Beyond Lachrymal or Tear-washed Art

In this exercise, we learn that the hallmark of Tongai Moyo's music is profound optimism; contrary to the hopelessness, entrapment and despair which marks the music of Leonard Zhakata and John Chibadura and others who project a world marked by "absurdity, meaninglessness, facticity and transience of life" Mthwatiwa (2010:53), Moyo "launches an audacious victory seeking voice" Gray (2001:138). Thus, the article pursues commitment to victory through struggle in Tongai Moyo's music contrary to the lachrymal (tear-washed or weeping) music of others (particularly Chibadura and Zhakata) whose music is marked by "a defeatist attitude to life, emasculating the will to act in socially meaningful activities" Muponde (2000:74). In fact, Moyo demonstrates "the consciousness of victory, the optimistic consciousness of the attainability of victory..." Gray (2001:139).

And clearly, Tongai Moyo's music is decorated by profound hope as he emphasizes the attainability of victory and therefore transcendence is projected as both a necessity and possibility in his push to push pessimism to the margins. For example, in many of his songs, the necessity of hope and the breaking of the pessimistic tradition are discernible. Songs such as *Tariro* (Hope), *Satani Unonyepa* (Satan You are a Liar), *Musiki Wangu* (My Lord) and *Vimbo* (Hope) reveal the embedded necessity of human possibility in all life-situations by offering a "bold voice about the certainty of African victory" Gray (2001:161). In *Tariro* (Hope) the singer's message is very clear that everyone is born with profound hope, and he holds that all disadvantaged people (the poor, touts, dull and prostitutes) are born with hope to achieve the best out of any life-situation. The song is rooted in the idea that poverty or any other difficult life-situation must not turn a person into a mere object, but the person must envision positive change. For example:

Tariro ndine tariro munhu wese ane tariro yekuita zvakanaka asi pamwe zvinoramba
Hapana akazvarwa ari murombo nekuda nyangwe murombo aive netariro yekuvawo
mupfumi asi pamwe zvinoramba.

I am hopeful of doing good in life and everyone is hopeful of doing good but at times it is just impossible. None was born poor by choice, even the poor had hope of being rich but at times it just fails.

What is seemingly coming out above is that pain and poverty must not be accepted as natural and unchangeable, but that Africans and all the impoverished peoples of the world must envision the possibility of progressive change. The dominant idea in the song is that defeat is not an option and must never be an option. In the process, the poet challenges African people to rise above defeatist attitudes to life and begin to envision a changed world. Here he unrelentlessly and unapologetically underlines the importance of optimistic perceptions of the world, regardless of the challenges.

Accordingly, Moyo seems to react to pessimistic notions of life on the African condition which border on suffering by viewing the plight of the suffering masses not as a choice, but as a condition that must be rested on the basis of hope for progressive change. Unlike Zhakata, who sees life as a load in a song titled *Upenyu Mutoro* (Life is a Burden) in which the singer erroneously creates the impression that there is nothing to enjoy or celebrate in life, in contrast, Moyo views life as something that must be enjoyed not endured, and instead of struggling to improve life situations, hence, the singer (Zhakata) ends at lamenting on the difficulties in life. For Zhakata to view life as a burden is probably his greatest failure, and like the South African reggae singer Lucky Dube (1964-2007) who composed a song titled 'Born to Suffer', Zhakata contends that suffering is the prime objective of life, and therefore he seems to be a proponent of dread, because he ends at decrying the problems of society; he simply fails to go beyond suffering. On the contrary, Moyo breaks the 'tradition' of tear-washed music and restores hope as well as attempting to re-energize the people in viewing the world with an air of optimism.

Certainly, Moyo's voice via music is a "mouth of those calamities that have no mouth, [his is the] voice the freedom of those who break down in the solitary confinement of despair" to use Césaire's (1983:45) words. In the song *Raramo* (Survival) Moyo presents an individual who is in great pain and suffering crying to God to replace the pain and suffering with good health. Rather than wallow in helpless victimhood, as is the case with musicians such like Chibadura and Zhakata, Moyo advocates for struggle for change, regardless of the seemingly insurmountable challenges to survival as he acknowledges that life is characterized by different challenges, he conversely does not submit to the ontology of defeat, but turns to the high God for energy to change the scheme of things. Hence, the underlying meaning of the song is that the indispensable reality of the Afrocentric human agency is how African people can be and become masters of their destiny. Alongside this agency, Moyo also argues that failure to be agents in the life processes "is a condition which locks our will and freezes our spirit force" Ani (1994). He therefore reiterates that degeneration into passivity is a definite way to doom, while conscious optimistic envisioning and struggle to achieve victory is life-giving. In *Raramo* (Survival), he emphasizes the necessity of overcoming hard times, stating:

Raramo yangu yaoma ndauya kwamuri senzira yekupona Ishe ndipeiwo simba ndirarame.

My survival has been hit by hard times and therefore I come to you as a survival strategy, my Lord give me power to survive.

In the above, Moyo reiterates the fact that victorious (consciousness) existence is possible on the basis of utilizing one's power, not only for mere existence, but also for human survival, which echo his victorious thought pattern as evident in *Temberi Yashe* (God's Temple). In this song, Moyo is against defeatist attitudes to life and thus a clarion call to the inevitability of hope for social transformation, revealing a certainty of transcendence of life problems, crises and challenges, hence:

*Kana ndikaringa kure kumusoro kwegomo ndinoona ndine vimbo yokuti ndichasvika
Kana ndikaringa kure kumusoro kwegomo ndinoona mambo Jesu vachiti ndichasvika*

If I look far beyond the mountain I am optimistic that I will achieve
If I look far beyond the mountain I see Jesus Christ assuring me I will achieve

The same is true of 'Ndinokumbira' in which Moyo reveals profound possibility in the midst of dire straits:

*Hukarema upenyu ndinokumbira, kumbirai, kumbiraiwo tikakumbira kunaishe upenyu
hwedu hunosungurwa. Satani unonyepa, unonyepa Satani kuti ndikundikane ndati
unonyepa*

When life is difficult seek guidance, if we seek guidance from God life can be enjoyable
Satan you are a liar, I will not accept failure

Also in 'Ndinokumbira' (I Request) and in 'Temberi Yashe' (God's Temple), he again emphasizes that African people and any other suffering people must believe in themselves because their self-conscious belief in themselves will ultimately change their condition. In this regard Henry in Gordon (1997:15) holds that:

The human capacity for self-consciousness points to our existence as ego-centred subjects who are capable of experiencing ourselves as finite sites of agency in relation to the surrounding world. It is the fate of this capacity for agency that is crucial for our attitude toward existence.

Above Moyo seems to observe that no matter how oppression can threaten survival, there is always a need to struggle to overcome it and other life challenges. And as a result, Moyo's voice is part of an anti-defeatist crusade and hence satisfies *Njia* (the path, way, passage or road) as an Afrocentric theme and principle in Zimbabwe and elsewhere to emphasize the inevitability of optimism. Likewise, *Vimbo* (Hope) is a transcript of hope because he was a voice of hope evident in his certain that national development is built on and sustained by unity of purpose of all the productive forces, regardless of skin color, ethnic group, rich or poor. The singer says:

Tikabatana nyika inokura iyi
Tikawirirana chete nyika inofamba iyi
Tikabatana Zimbabwe inokura
Hazvina mhosva urimuShona, ini ndiri muNdebele
Hongu ndinoziva, hongu ndine vimbo

If we unite Zimbabwe will prosper
If we cooperate Zimbabwe will move forward
If we unite Zimbabwe will prosper
It is not important that you are Shona and I am Ndebele
Yes I know, yes I am hopeful

In the song, Moyo is not doubtful but confident that national development and liberation are possibilities in the context of unity of purpose and cooperation. In this regard, he satisfies the way of the ancient Egyptian deity-principle of *Heru*, reflective in Afrocentricity, which revolves around restoring self-confidence in humankind. Unlike the proponents of dread like Zhakata and Chibadura, among others, Tongai Moyo's vision is antithetical to the helpless victimhood, and in fact, his music was part and parcel of the struggle for national development and prosperity in Zimbabwe, because he crafted his music with the best interest of the masses in mind. Tongai Moyo also satisfies *Njia* (the path, way, passage or road) as a theme because he emphasized a state of hope which promoted the desire for positive outcomes for people related to events and circumstances in life and in the world at large, in his understanding of music. And in this context, *Njia* as theme must not be misconstrued to represent a naïve or one-dimensional conceptual modality, but in fact, an realization that failure or failing is never set forth as a central, crowning or culminating idea and therefore 'pessimism has no esteemed or honoured place in [this] Afrocentric thought and praxis,' Gray (2001:96).

African Agency and the Necessity of Struggle

Concerning the necessity of struggle to improve life situations, Moyo indeed ‘marches right in front’ Achebe (1989). Shutte in Jochtek (2004) reminds us that “humanity’s struggle for the improvement of one’s lot is a tide that ebbs and flows through history”. Hence, it is argued here that against this background, Moyo taps from African history, the struggle and resistance to music to the extent that he can be characterized as a musician singing about the struggle for human rights and dignity.

Moyo seems to underline the non-negotiable or indispensable necessity of optimistic struggle unto victory, and the idea that African history and culture has no room for passivity but space to celebrate a rewarding and responsible aggressiveness. In the songs discussed here, Moyo presents “Africa as being maker of history rather than incident of history” Mazrui (2002:21) while in the process repudiating passivity as a recipe for the demise of African progress and liberation. Hence, an aggressive posture is projected as the way (the path, the passage, road, etc.) while submission to life challenges is dismissed with all the impunity it deserves. Moyo beats the anti-defeatist drum by urging African people to live and celebrate a culture of struggle.

The song ‘Maths’ in Moyo’s catalogue revolves around agency in social process, thus the title of the song suggests the necessity of creating strategies necessary for survival in different life situations with the underlying meaning that in order to survive in the best of life conditions all peoples must seize the initiative and create strategies that are life-giving. Here aggressiveness (victorious thought) in life situations is projected, not only as an option, but the only option. Moyo therefore challenged people to be purposeful agents in a struggle to bring value and meaning to life. And central to the song ‘Maths’ is its Afrocentric perspective wherein according to Mazrui (2002:21) it is positioned so we can see “Africa as being subject rather than object and Africa as active rather than passive”.

Moyo was also aware that life is only enjoyable on the basis of it being a creative struggle. He held that to achieve the best out of life African people as Fanon (1968) wrote, “must first decide to wake up, use their brains and energy to transform their condition”, and underlined that freedom and enjoyment are not donated or given on a silver platter, but are products of creativity and struggle. Hence, Moyo says:

*Zvawawana imba mwana wangu ndafara kwazvo
Maths dzako chete mukurarama
Ukatamba Maths iyi ikabuda unorarama
Maths dzako chete mukurarama*

*Now that you are married I am happy
Your creativity is important in life
If you create a strategy and succeed you survive
Creativity is crucial for survival*

Via Moyo, creative power is viewed as the deep humus which sustains humane life and also an opportunity for him to challenge Africans to avoid submitting to nature and threats to their survival posed by human manipulation of thought and resources. Here he posits an axiom of Sankara (1990:6) who stated that “humankind does not submit passively to the power of nature. It takes control over this power” and that there is a necessity of struggle to create a change in human life conditions which is a virtue, because it is rewarding.

Continuing in his progressive stance, in ‘Kukanda Nekuvhika’ (Hand to Hand Struggle), Moyo beams forth the idea that purposeful aggression is necessary to improving life conditions wherein he implores those in power that they should never view the people as passive objects but rather as people who can resist and struggle against any attempt to relegate them to poverty and pain. In fact, he outlined an aspect of struggle reminiscing of Fanon’s (1968) concept of “a hand to hand struggle” as a central concern of the song, stating that:

*Shamwari mukushanda basa iri totosvika mukukavana iwe uchikanda ini ndichivhika
kana kuti iwe uchivhika maiwe ini ndichikanda
Shamwari usapike naMwari uchidaro, mangwana zvinhu zvinoshanduka
Kuti iwe ndiwe wemberi isu tichitevera maiwe zvinhu zvinoshanduka
Zvinhu zvikaoma zvikaomesesa tinokakata kusvika tisvike*

*My friend in performing the task before us we can clash, you throw and I block
Or else you block while I throw
My friend, do not swear by Godlike that because things can change
That you must lead and we follow, alas things can change
When things get tough, really tough we struggle until we achieve the best*

As Muponde (2000:105) observes in the lines cited above “you feel that there is hope surging in the brutal social conditions, asserting itself saying this too shall come to an end through the struggle of real oppressed people.” Hence Moyo demonstrates and exemplifies the importance of seizing the initiative to face life challenges head-on as he challenges people to understand that no matter how threatening the situation may be, the only option is struggle in an effort to awaken the people to a liberating action as emphasized in the assertion “*tinokakata kusvika tisvike*” (we struggle until we achieve the best). Defiant in tone, Moyo’s song compliments Fanon’s (1968:220) words, in that the song “...expresses above all, a hand to hand struggle and reveals the need that man has to liberate himself from a part of his being which already contained the seeds of decay. Whether the fight is painful, quick or inevitable muscular action must substitute itself for concepts.” Thus, in the song, Moyo presents people not as mere spectators, but as subjects in their own liberation, engaging their enemies in a ‘hand to hand struggle’.

Next, in the same way, ‘Rugare’ (Freedom) off the album ‘Samanyemba’ is a song in search of freedom. Here Moyo presents a life which borders on excruciating poverty and intense suffering, yet he reiterates the idea that no one is born to suffer as the late South African reggae singer Lucky Dube would want us to believe in a song by the same title. In this song, Moyo envisions victory and reiterates the necessity of enjoying life contrary to the oppressive challenges of life. The song is marked by “...forward relentless, optimistic thriving unto victory” to use Gray’s (2001:97) words. In the song, Moyo challenges the suffering to know the root of their condition:

Rugare iwe uri wangu kana neni ini ndiri wako
Tarira baba wangu wasuruwara
Chembere kumusha dzinochemba
Majaya nemhandara idzo vapera zano shungu havachina
Tarirai muone vakapfeka marengenyanya
Huya undisunungure munhamo
Ndianiko aviga rugare?
Ndianiko atora rugare?
Ndianiko atipa kutambura?

Freedom belongs to me and I am of freedom
Look my father is sad
The elderly are wallowing in the rural areas
The youth are disillusioned
Look they are in tatters
Come and liberate me
The nation has deteriorated
Who has taken away our freedom?
Who is responsible for our suffering?
Who has hidden our freedom?

Moyo recognizes and exposes the enemy in 'Rugare' (Freedom), and holds that in order for people to achieve freedom they need first to "know the enemy" to respectfully paraphrase the late Pan African patriot Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), and thus on the basis of a full knowledge of their enemy struggle, the struggle can bear fruit. Moreover, as Gordon (1997:3) maintains, Moyo raises philosophical questions premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality and liberation as he depicts a life-world which is marked by strife and grief such that it usurps the energy of the inhabitants [hence]. It is an environment which is anti-life ...; "*vapera zano shungu havachina*" (they are disillusioned). Be that as it may, Moyo underlines the necessity of protracted struggle, and of knowing the enemy. And herein, he concurs with Achebe (2009:56) in that "oppression renames its victims, brands them as a farmer brands his cattle with a common signature. It always aims to subvert the individual spirit and the humanity of the victim; and the victim will more or less struggle to remove oppression and be free."

Conclusion

Moyo's music is a spring of hope as opposed to such musicians like Zhakata and Chibadura, music which can be described as "a cemetery of hope" Muponde (2000). It has been stressed that Moyo was also a musician of hope and with hope that wanted something to happen in a positive way for the masses or to become true, hence a therapeutic music that 'sets afoot a new man.' Moyo subsequently went beyond the stultifying pessimistic tradition that marked the music of earlier musicians in sungura music to introduce a developmental, progressive and Afrocentric contribution to sungura music absent of a pessimistic Euro-centric tradition developed by earlier musicians. And in short, Moyo reiterates the idea that "dire times are not to be accepted or bowed to, rather such difficult seasons are to be challenged and infiltrated with profound hope and indomitable determination" Gray (2001:76).

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