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Traditions in Transition: Gendered Cultural Dynamics in Contemporary Performances by Obabes Bembube

Fungai Zivengwa Wonder Maguraushe*

Abstract

The paper discusses female musicians involved in imbube music performance. It traces imbube music's origin in South Africa and its spread to Zimbabwe. It traces the further history and performance of imbube paying special attention to the participation by females. The current characteristics of imbube in Zimbabwe are compared with the past. Interviews were conducted with members of the Nobuntu all-female imbube group based in Bulawayo to explore the challenges that female musicians encounter as imbube artists. Observations were also made on this group's performances. Using liberal feminist theory, the paper looks at how scholars have analyzed the transformation of imbube leading to the involvement of female musicians and the formation of a female group performing imbube. The paper concludes that female musicians are claiming their place in imbube music performance which has been a preserve of male artists for a very long time. Imbube has been a male dominated genre and time is nigh to welcome Nobuntu queens on board. Indigenous culture is going through continuous transformations and transitions in which the only permanent quality is change itself. One major recent change has been the venturing of women into this genre as manifested by the formation of the Nobuntu all-female group in Bulawayo. However, female musicians continue to face gender-related dynamics in imbube music performance despite numerous calls for gender equality.

Keywords: Imbube, Isicathamiya, Lion King, Gender dynamics, Feminism

1 Introduction

Imbube is one of the *isicathamiya* music genres. The word isicathamiya comes from a Zulu verb '*chatama*' which means to walk softly like a cat (Turino, 2000). Ballantine (1996, p. 3) says prominent earlier names or versions of the isicathamiya style were *isikhunzi*, *imbube*, *isikhwela Jo*, *isikambula*, *ingoma ebusuku*, *'mbombing*, and *cothoza mfana*. Few females are represented in the genre. In Zimbabwe, the Sunduza imbube group has some female in addition to male performers. However, one group made up of female musicians only, called Nobuntu, has ventured into this genre and is currently active in Zimbabwe. Nobuntu (like ubuntu) is an African concept that values humility, love, unity and family from a woman's perspective. Their repertoire is a fusion of indigenous music with percussion, indigenous instruments and dance movements. Their songs celebrate their identity as African women. This implies that the group upholds culture as females through their music. They represent the indigenous societies in their performances.

Imbube used to be performed by male artists only. However, this has changed in Zimbabwe with the formation of the all-female group by the name Nobuntu. This group, formed in 2011, comprises five female musicians who tour the world performing traditional Zimbabwean music styles and genres. Here we focus particularly on their imbube performance because the band members identify themselves as Obabes Bembube. They perform locally and also at international destinations such as Italy, Austria, Germany, Belgium, the Czech Republic, and some African countries. Nobuntu sings soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. These females perform imbube just like the male artists do. They play indigenous musical instruments like mbira, traditional drums and percussion instruments such as shakers. They perform dance patterns just like the males do. Because of changes of time and place, imbube has changed from being a male-only genre to include also female artists.

*Correspondence Email: wondermaguraushe@gmail.com