

# ORAL SONGS AND WEDLOCK: TRADITIONAL SONGS AS CEMENT OF CONNUBIAL UNION IN THE BEMBA TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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## **Abstract**

*The article sheds light on the role that traditional oral songs played in fortifying matrimony in the Bemba traditional society. It problematises the idea that orality has relatively been abandoned in modern Zambian society particularly the singing of traditional songs. This neglect of orality, particularly, that of traditional songs has led to major weaknesses in connubial union resulting into numerous divorces. The article argues that there was relative stability of traditional marriages over modern ones in terms of duration of marriage while admitting the few challenges that characterised the former. It argues that traditional marriages were very stable largely because the songs inculcated certain essential values into the subject's mind that rendered most marriages successful. Moreover, many people enjoyed these songs partly because of the songs melody, musicality, repetition, brevity, and duality of meaning. Ultimately, the article strongly recommends that modern Zambian society should embrace traditional songs and revert to the practice of singing these songs in modern times in order to salvage marriages. The article is grounded in theories in oral literature as propounded by scholars such as Ruth Finnegan and Isidore Okpewho, among others.*

**Keywords:** Traditional, Bemba, Musicality, Connubial, Brevity, Repetition, Surface Meaning, Deep Meaning

## **Introduction**

The article aims at demonstrating the instrumentality of oral forms with regard to wedlock. The oral forms identified are traditional songs. The article will shed light on how traditional songs helped in cementing marriage in typical traditional societies. The songs that concern marriages are those that are sung during initiation and wedding ceremonies. The songs that will be discussed are Bemba songs; accordingly, it will focus on the traditional Bemba society. Given that Bemba as a language belongs to the Bantu language group, the applicability of various aspects that will be discussed can comfortably be said to apply to other ethnic groups that boast of Bantu ethnic affiliations as Bantu languages and cultures are similar. Certain practices typical of a traditional Bemba society are shared with other ethnic groups because of similar roots (Chondoka, 1988; and Lisimba, 1999).

Artefacts associated with marriage will not be discussed as those are outside the scope of this article albeit their proximity with the topic at hand. Similarly, the various dances that accompany the songs will also not be covered. The article will focus on songs exclusively. Most of these songs were obtained and adapted from various sources, which include: Kapwepwe (1994); Makashi (1971); Rasing (2001); and Kapyela (2012).

It is hoped that after the presentation of the fabric of traditional society with regard to the role that traditional songs played in fortifying matrimony, the article will ignite a deliberation about the relevance of the songs under discussion to modern marriages. Is it possible that traditional songs can be instrumental in strengthening modern marriages? This article is based on the assumption that traditional marriages were more stable than modern ones (Chondoka, 1988; and Kapwepwe, 1994). Further, the article assumes that marriages, especially good marriages, are instrumental in the development of the community and the nation at large. However, it does not justify gender inequalities (if at all there are any) but merely attempts to shed light on the instrumentality of traditional songs in cementing marriage in a traditional society.

It will be observed shortly that the article leans more on women than men; that many songs that will be discussed are expected to be sung by women. This is chiefly because most wedding and initiation songs focus on women. Moreover, it is pertinent to state that most traditional societies across the world are patriarchal. The Bemba traditional society is not an exception. In these societies, men emphasise that women be prepared before marriage (Kapwepwe, 1994). Simply put, men are the ones who marry in most traditional cultures. The man (or his family) initiates the proposal, while the woman usually positions herself well so that she responds to the former's proposal. Men are the ones who choose and marry *abanakashi basuma* 'good' women and leave *bacitongo* 'bad' ones. The question as to whether their choice is fair or not, however, will not be explored in this study. Nonetheless, to be chosen, women should portray themselves in an attractive and decent manner in tandem with traditions and customs of a particular society. Any particular woman who is despised in the spectacles of the society would rarely be considered for marriage once she is labeled as 'bad' or 'uninitiated'. Granted, preparation for marriage in a traditional society does happen in both men and women albeit differences in the duration of their training. Periods are comparatively longer for women than it happens with men.

## **Marriage**

Marriage is a crucial establishment, and its definitions abound. Gondwe (2005: iv) defines it as, '... a transaction between two interested parties determined by the jural or moral ordinances which bind it in the social setting'. It is also '... a legal union of man and woman in partnership with respect to homemaking, bearing and rearing of children, and general interdependence and mutual comfort and support' (Holy Bible, 2010). According to Mapoma (2015: 113), 'Marriage is perceived to be a family and societal stabiliser and generally, a source of happiness.' As earlier alluded to, the fact that marriage facilitates a family unit, and the benefits of a stable family cannot be over-emphasised. Stable families afford numerous advantages to both adults and school-going children. As a matter of fact, stable families have a positive influence towards pupils' academic

performance. In most cases, stable families facilitate the tranquillity in pupils' lives as it eliminates emotional difficulties that other pupils from broken homes (in the case of separation and divorce) seem to encounter, (Kasoma, 2012: 8). Kapwepwe (1994) also asserts that marriage is vital, and he goes further by linking it to national development.

However, the challenge is that not all marriages remain stable permanently. A number of them disintegrate with the passage of time and eventually end up in divorce. Obviously, divorce existed in traditional society a long time ago and it still does presently, depending on circumstances. Thus, one has a firm conviction that whatever will be discussed is relevant to present times. Caution is probably timely at this juncture: although the article touches on marriage which is a crucial subject in sociological and anthropological disciplines, it should be borne in mind that the subject of marriage and culture cuts across disciplines.

Currently, it is a widely acknowledged fact that divorces and separations are rampant. Gondwe (2005: 1) attributes modern divorces to lack of adherence to traditional culture. He (Ibid: 4) asserts that 'Marriage is unstable these days because young men and women no longer know literary forms.' Youths often venture into the marriage union without adequate preparation. The situation is critical in urban and peri-urban areas where most people have almost completely discarded traditional culture, ethics and guidance. To lengthen the odds, villages are not an exception because there is radical dilution of traditional practices there also. Gondwe (ibid: 6) proposes that youths should be taught traditional menu to strengthen marriage. It is not only Gondwe who laments the instability of marriages. Chondoka (1988:166) also affirms that 'It is a well-known fact that comparatively marriages in traditional society are stronger than our modern marriages. He (ibid: 162) laments that people have forgotten the real meaning of marriage as it existed during pre-independence era. Chondoka might have observed this 35 years ago but there are sufficient reasons to believe that this has worsened presently.'

A few statistics can be appropriate at this point so as to vivify the extent of divorce in modern society. According to the online news source Lusakatimes (13 May 2012 at 0853 am), divorce rates in Zambia have risen and this trend is worrisome. Specialists attribute this to the following reasons: unfaithfulness, drunkenness, lack of communication, violence, finances, parental interference and early marriages as core causes of divorce. A certain Magistrate Mwansa who handles divorces cases in Lusaka also echoes Gondwe's argument idea that most divorces emanate from the couple's lack of preparation. Divorce statistics in Lusaka district alone are overwhelming. For instance, 207 divorces were granted at Lusaka local court between April and May 2013 (Lusakastar 23/04/2014). And most recently there were 22,000 divorce cases in 2021 and 31,000 divorce cases in 2022 ('Divorce cases alarming' Post published in Daily mail January 11, 2023 retrieved on 18 February 2023 <http://www.daily-mail.co.zm/divorce-cases-alarming/>).

Marital dislocation does not only lead to divorce but also to what Ngulube (1989: 13) calls **New Polygamy**. This is where married men tend to keep concubines besides their wives. Some of such concubinages last a long time such that they even bear many children. It should be mentioned, however, that while it is true that divorce is caused by multiple factors, the article will not explore

these but will focus on traditional songs since these seem to be core determinants in the success or failure of connubial union.

### **Marriage in Traditional Societies**

It should be pointed out that the understanding of the concept of marriage in traditional circles is different from the modern one. In that in the former marriage is a wider relationship that embraces the families of husband and wife whereas in the latter it is an exclusive relationship between husband and wife (Chondoka, 1988:16). He (ibid) further highlights that traditional marriage looked at marriage as a union of man and woman forever and that it was characterised by extremely few divorces and these were based on genuine reasons (in the traditional context) such as barrenness, lack of respect for relatives or laziness, among others. The extended family was vital in the traditional society. The connubial union between spouses included the kin of the woman as well as that of the man. Siakavuba (1989: 20) highlights that in traditional societies' parents were handy at every stage of connubial union namely, choice of child's spouse, bridal expenses and counselling, among others.

Perhaps traditional marriages were more stable because of the approval and support of the extended family. The couple tried to avoid disappointing relatives in the extended family who had tirelessly worked to ensure that marriage was successful.

Assuredly, many traditional societies were patriarchal; men were in charge. Mostly, women particularly married women were not actively involved in decision making and they were relatively submissive and voiceless in the public spaces. However, there were many subtle loopholes that women utilised to air out their views and complaints. Traditional songs and other oral genres were handy in this case. Through such measures, women could indirectly and subtly make their voices heard. Even patriarchal establishment acknowledged it though not very overtly. Through songs, a woman could complain or rebuke a man indirectly during events such as traditional ceremonies and wedding ceremonies (Sumaili, 1994). These married women also utilised work songs at their respective households to achieve the same effect. In this case, songs are akin to proverbs in as much as they are charged with ancestral authority and their messages are not easily discarded. Moreover, the songs were appreciated for their melody and musicality. Everyone in society particularly married men respected and appreciated these songs as music but also as media through which their wives could express themselves. Therefore, wives delivered their subtle messages, views and complaints uninterruptedly especially to their husbands. Here a proverb can be useful to illustrate what has been stated above: *'Ifilanda abanakashi fyabuwelewele leelo uushumfwako ciipuba.'* Literally translated as: 'things that women talk about are silly but whoever does not listen is a fool,' (Mpashi, 1963). This proverb can be said by a man to advise a fellow man in an attempt to massage the latter's patriarchal egotism but subtly implying that there is sense in women's utterances thus he should pay attention to what women say.

## Traditional Songs

Traditional songs are typical oral forms; they are cultural songs. These songs have been transmitted from generation to the next for many years. They serve dual functions namely, didactic and entertainment and they contain society's mores. No individual can claim authorship of these songs. As such, they embody a particular people's collective wisdom as will be evidenced below.

## Significance of Traditional Songs

Indeed, traditional songs strengthen marriage and their usefulness cannot be overemphasised. Aforesaid, usually traditional songs are sung during marriage ceremonies and do not only serve the purpose of entertainment but also didacticism (Nkwilimba, 1992). They are designed to prepare the woman for marriage seeing that marriage is not an easy encounter just as it also has numerous other advantages. These songs carry with them certain morals that have the potential to make marriage a success. Their lessons vary from crucial ingredients necessary for family such as generosity, humility, fidelity, initiative, obedience, submission, housekeeping, thriftiness, diligence, tolerance, perseverance, peace, prudence, contentment, personal hygiene, hospitality, respect, social duties and domestic duties, among others, that are very much attributed to the idea of *umwanakashi musuma* (good woman).

Traditionally, a man is expected to marry *umwanakashi musuma*. A good woman is one who is initiated; one who is prepared. The man also has to be prepared so that he will be in the position to correctly interpret gestures that are advanced by his spouse. He should not find them peculiar but should be familiar with them. The man must be mature. Maturity entailed that the man should be a paterfamilias; he should be able to provide for his family as well as protect and defend them from harm.

As mentioned above, songs pertaining to marriage albeit varying in a marginal sense come in two forms: those that are sung during initiation ceremonies and those that are sung during wedding ceremonies. They are designed to be transmitted from one generation to another. The functional usefulness of these songs lies in **brevity** and **repetition**. Okpewho (2005:71) explains that repetition as it is used in oral literature has both aesthetic and utilitarian value. Besides serving a certain practical purpose in the overall organisation of an oral performance, repetition bestows touch or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression. It also facilitates emphasis of certain mores in a song. Similarly, brevity of verses is crucial as it promotes the internalisation of the message by the subject. The lines are very few, but they are repeated to ensure that the message sinks in the subject's mind. Despite the fact that the songs are characterised by brevity and repetition, melody, musicality, and rhythm are still not sacrificed. They are sweet to the ear and women sing and dance to them. Through dance, women express their inner feelings physically and symbolically.

The songs are characterised by double meanings. There is a **surface meaning** as well as the **deep or intended meaning(s)**. Actually, some songs can afford more than one deep meaning. Some of these meanings border on genitalia and the act of love-making which are central in wedlock. The surface meaning refers to the literal meaning of the song. This is the meaning that anyone who understands a language, Bemba in this case, can grasp. The deep meaning on the other

hand is esoteric. This is the intended meaning. Only the initiated can understand this meaning. This duality of meaning allows songs to be sung even in public or during work. And in these instances, the uninitiated would be able to understand the surface meaning only and not the deep meaning.

Granted, conflict is inevitable as long as people live together; as Bemba wisdom teaches: *'Imiti ipalamene taibula kukwesana,'* literally translated as: 'Trees that are close by cannot avoid rubbing against each other.' Married people in the traditional society were not exempted. They differed. However, most of their marriages were saved by good conflict resolution skills. Their differences did not necessarily lead to divorce or separation (Chondoka, 1988). Certainly, traditional songs were invaluable in facilitating the success of many marriages, as will be seen below.

Of course, certain songs would be criticised especially in the realms of Christendom, gender activism and feminism. Some of the criticisms are concerned with how and when they are performed. However, this article will not dwell on the weaknesses but strengths while acknowledging the idea that perfection is difficult to attain. Everything on the face of the earth has got its weaknesses depending on one's vantage point. However, the weaknesses will not be allowed to undermine the benefits of traditional songs.

Having discussed traditional songs, it would be appropriate to outline some and discuss their meanings below.

	<b>Song</b>	<b>Surface Meaning</b>	<b>Intended meaning</b>	<b>Value</b>
1	<i>Mwana wandi leka nkwebe Lamba inshila Icaalo caaba na bene Lamba inshila Nakubakulu, lamba inshila</i>	My child let me tell you Avoid the way. The world has its owners Avoid the way To elders, avoid the way	The woman is advised to humble herself in life so as to live well with others in society especially the elderly. Excessive pride should be avoided	HUMILITY
2	<i>Bampombo uku mwaya ee Tabatunsha mutima Nga mwatunsha umutima bampombo mukabwela</i>	You duiker where you are going They do not make the heart bump If you make the heart bump You duiker you will come back	The woman is advised to avoid being very talkative so that she can live peacefully with relatives in her home. (Bear in mind that traditional life was communal)	PEACE
3	<i>Caanga na mwele Caanga na mwele mukashi wandi Caanga na mwele Caanga na mwele ukanjipaya</i>	You who plays with a knife You who play with a knife, my wife You who play with a knife You who play with a knife, you will kill me	The woman is advised never to go for sharp instruments each time they quarrel with her husband as this can result in the death of the husband. It encourages people to desist from gender-based violence (GBV) and adopt dialogue as a solution when differences arise	PEACE
4	<i>Umuko muko Nangu acepe ninokofyala</i>	Your in-law is your in-law No matter how small, she is your mother-in-law	The woman is advised to respect her mother-in-law regardless of her status in life. She could be poor, mentally retarded, or physically challenged but she deserves respect because she bore a son – her husband It cautions those women who think that their mother-in-law do not matter and hence despise them. Such women, according to traditional beliefs, do not receive blessings in life	RESPECT

5	<i>Munang'ani enda nakabale Mukupula enda nakabale</i>	She is lazy who moves with a small plate When she is begging she moves with a small plate	Advises the woman to be hardworking. She should contribute to the production of food in the house, that is, cultivating and do house chores in the house including cooking for the husband. The woman who fails to cook and goes begging is deemed foolish. This can scare the husband and encourage him to look for a better wife	DELIGENCE
6	<i>Umweni bane ee Umweni bamuceba panda Pamense tepo bane Umweni bamuceba panda</i>	A visitor friends Is glanced at the stomach It is not on the face friends	Woman is advised to be hospitable to visitors and give them food when they come. Food should be prepared even before they sit down to chat	HOSPITALITY
7	<i>Wemulume ndikutemenwe Leka maombela kubili Leka maombela ee Leka maombela kubili</i>	My husband I love you Stop doing it two-fold Stop doing it ee Stop doing it two-fold	The song is sung by women to warn a man from having extramarital relationships. Instead of unnecessary confrontations, the woman only sings this and thereby communicates her feelings in a peaceful manner. In most cases, the man considers.	ADVICE
8	<i>Twafika kubweni Mwaice wandi Sunga inyambi twafika kubweni</i>	We have arrived as visitors My younger sibling Keep your reservoir We have arrived as visitors	Woman advised not to have sexual intercourse with her husband when they have gone to visit. She should be the one to control and she should refuse sex with her husband to avoid embarrassment arising from sensual cries and creaking of the bed. Moreover, it is believed that the host can use semen left on the bed sheets to bewitch them	SELF RESTRAINT
9	<i>Cincila ci mayo Efyo bafwaya Napakwipika ulecincila Efyo bafwaya</i>	Be a hard worker you woman That is what they want Even when cooking, you should be hard working That is what they want	The woman is encouraged to work hard and be proactive	DELIGENCE

10	<i>Balume bandi Nangu cipuba caandi Nangu lishilu lyandi</i>	He is my husband, he is my husband Whether a fool he is mine Whether a lunatic he is mine	Contentment in one's husband. No need to covet others	CONTENTMENT
11	<i>Ciminine ciminine bamayo Ciminine Napabakulu Caimininafye ubupuba ciminine</i>	She (derogatory) is standing anyhow mother Even among elders She stands foolishly	The woman is advised to have good manners and to behave decently in the presence of elders	RESPECT
12	<i>Kapapa kalubalala Mwikamona ukutuntumana Mukati emuli amaano Mukati emuli amaano</i>	Groundnut cover Do not just look at its round shape Wisdom is inside Wisdom is inside	Advises one not to pass judgment based on outward appearances because things may not be what they seem. (It is also used to warn spouse's family not to judge others)	JUDGMENT
13	<i>Naya mukutamba icipunsha ukucilele umwana cileti owe owe</i>	I am going to see a useless woman who is breast feeding a child, She says 'Oh, oh'	The woman should not forget other duties in the house even when she has a baby	CONSIDERATION
14	<i>Bikeni ibende na mailo mukatwa</i>	Put the motor down, you will pound tomorrow	Advises a woman to stop working when she receives a visitor but first to give him/her food	HOSPITALITY
15	<i>Naluba mpande kwisano</i>	I lost my necklace at the chief's palace	The warning for the husband that he should look after his wife otherwise she will leave him	ADVICE
16	<i>Ukulupili ukulupili naikala mumpatampata</i>	A mountain this side and a mountain that side, I stay in between	The woman is in the midst of problems with parents, parents-in-law and her husband. She should be able to handle them	ADVICE
17	<i>Buce buce we mwana wandi Malengenia abambile akaoma mukuteka mutima</i>	Slowly slowly my child that is how a lizard made his drum through patience	1. The woman is advised to be patient when even when she wants something	PATIENCE

			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. The woman should be cautious and patient with her man when he has extramarital affairs</li> <li>3. The woman should move her waist slowly when having sexual intercourse with her husband</li> </ol>	
18	<i>Utwana twankanga tulelila umusowa twafwa kunsala</i>	The young birds of a guinea fowl are crying from hunger	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Advises the woman to teach her children. She should care for them and feed them and should not let them cry for food or anything else</li> <li>2. When there is divorce, children suffer. Divorce is discouraged thus</li> </ol>	CHILD CARE
19	<i>Na mantenya mung'anda ushilala waikalila na mantenya na mantenya</i>	You cannot lie in a home where you don't sleep	Every woman should have a house and should keep the secrets of the house. She should not quarrel with the husband outside the house	SECRECY
20	<i>Ine ndi mwina Luwingu ulubuli talwabuka mumana mukobe nakobeka nakobeka mukobe</i>	I am from Luwingu, fighting does not go across the river, pulling the rope	Woman advised that when the husband shouts at her outside the house, she should just keep quiet and go inside	PEACE
21	<i>We mwaume wakusundila kuli lubanga ulubanga taumwene abanobe bashitako akakufimbana cinshela</i>	You, man, who sits all day at home, just urinating on green vegetable, don't you see others buying things and working hard	The man is lazy. During the day he does not do anything	DELIGENCE
22	<i>Kolokoto wakutweleko nangu wasanga icilifi nangu wasanga akalifi kolokoto wakutweleko</i>	Play with it whether it is a small one or it is a big one	The woman is advised to be contented with any size of her husband's genitalia	CONTENTMENT

23	<i>Cifutu malinga niwe wafutubele cifutu malinga nacitembo cifutu malinga</i>	It is you who is idle, like being caught in a trap	A song a woman sings to indirectly rebuke the man who sits idle and who waits for his wife to make food	DELIGENCE
24	<i>Nsengeleleko tumone mbale umulume tabanakutemwa</i>	Move that side the husband is not grateful	Advises a woman that men are difficult, and they are not easy to please	CAUTION
25	<i>Umulume anjebele cibongo teka mailo ukaya</i>	My husband you are lazy, tomorrow you will go	The woman is advised to work hard. She should be able to cook, make love and do other things for the husband	DELIGENCE
26	<i>Katembo kafinina kubili nakwa na mulume kalmia nakwa na mukashi kalemba katembo kafinina kubili</i>	The stick weighs on sides on the husband's side as well as on the wife's side	The woman is advised to be impartial. She has to give things equally to her husband's relatives and to her own	IMPARTIALITY
27	<i>Tente wandi nanukwile neka, tente anjalukila Bampokolola abanandi, tente tente</i>	My slippery mushroom I picked myself, but it has changed My friends have snatched it from me, it's theirs now	Cautions the woman to take care of her husband well otherwise other people (friends) could snatch her husband from her	CAUTION
28	<i>Kapelee mfundila mumutima kapelee</i>	Turtle dove I teach in the heart	Advises a woman to keep secrets of the house and not to quarrel outside	SECRECY

## Conclusion

Traditional songs (initiation and marriage songs) were instrumental in cementing connubial union in the Bemba traditional society. Their very essence in terms of form and the manner of performance facilitated this task. Through repetition and brevity, the subject could absorb the messages contained therein. Though few transgressed, perhaps they did so with some substantial baggage of guilt-conscience. As a consequence, divorce was very infrequent. Equipped with knowledge obtained from these songs, people could effectively fortify their marriages. Women in their traditional context knew how to safeguard their marriages from forces that usually destroy them inter alia: money issues, parental influence, sexual dissatisfaction, loose talk, relatives, spouse differences and infidelity. The songs equipped women with useful skills that enhanced their temperaments and the way they reacted to certain stimuli pertaining to marriage in the traditional society. Moreover, the songs facilitated a means to voice their grievances indirectly. These songs were invaluable in a traditional society. Clearly, the knowledge and practice of these songs can serve the purpose of fortifying many marriages even in modern times.

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