

Sukuma Labor Songs from Western Tanzania: “We Never Sleep, We Dream of Farming”. Frank Gunderson. 2010. Leiden and Boston: Brill. 535 pp. Illustrations. Figures. Appendices. Bibliography. Indices. ISBN 978-90-04-18468-8 pb.

For little more than two months just after the onset of the first rains that routinely fall from late November to early February, the everyday rural soundscape of the Sukuma region of northwest Tanzania is transformed from a state of tranquility, to one of cacophony. This is a result of the intense competing drums found in neighboring farms, and heard as far as the ear can hear, the rambunctious shouts and song of farmers, and the thud and clang of hoes striking the earth in rhythmic unison. Occasionally, the farmers act on cue, one by one or in groups of twos and threes to abandon their work altogether, and to throw their hoes into the air and catch them, or to twirl them to the beat at lightning speed, in choreographed and rehearsed unison over their heads, through their legs, and around their chests and waists (7-8).

As the above epigraph and the title of the book indicate, Frank Gunderson’s book, *Sukuma Labor Songs from Western Tanzania: “We Never Sleep, We Dream of Farming”*, concerns musical labor among the Wasukuma of northwestern Tanzania. Published in the book series *African Sources for African History*, it is an invaluable scholarly treatment of labor songs of the Wasukuma as a source of historical knowledge. This is acknowledged by the series editors, Dmitri van den Bersselaar, Michel Doortmont and Jan Jansen, who write: “Through these songs and this treatment, a reader gains intimate access not only to the historical events in the region, but can also come to a more intimate knowledge of the Sukuma people and their lives, their sense of humor, their struggles, their sense of competition, their desires and their dreams” (x).

The book gives analysis and interpretation of the musical and literary contents of 335 musical labor songs in relation to labor conditions and experiences of the Wasukuma during the 19th and 20th centuries. The songs were collected through interviews with Wasukuma musicians and other local commentators and through a review of archival documents and published texts. Gunderson’s interpretations of the songs are informed by the views and interpretations of the Wasukuma local commentators he interviewed.

Gunderson uses the concept of ‘musical labor’ instead of work song, occupational song or labor song, categories previously commonly used by anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard, Finnegan and Cohen. These labels were used to denote songs which accompanied various agricultural, pastoral and fishing activities and were associated with particular occupations. According to Gunderson, his concept of musical labor is more encompassing in that it draws “attention to the context and processes of those activities surrounding labor activity where music is present, which include composition, performance, transmission, as well as the song and song text itself” (10). With this broad concept in mind, he discusses not only songs that accompany farming activities, but also the post-harvest musical performances and competitions collectively known as *bugobogobo*. This includes songs performed by the *baja nyalaja* (Lake Eyasi salt caravanners) during their long-distance travels to and from Lake Eyasi

and also the pre and post journey musical performances to prepare and to celebrate the caravan. Likewise, he discusses not only songs sung during elephant, snake or porcupine hunting but also musical performances and celebrations done prior and after the hunting expeditions by the *bayeye* (snake hunters), *banuunguli* (porcupine hunters) and the *bayege* (elephant hunters).

Pointing out a number of benefits of musical performances at labor sites Gunderson says, "During the rainy season, farm labor goes on from dawn until afternoon, thus the time for art or recreation is found within the working hours ... Musical performance at labor sites lightens the workload and transforms work into something more playful" (10). These performances also create "an environment where everyday village discourse and political commentary are encouraged, enjoyed, and reflected upon" (10). Since musical labor is always a collaborative act it is not only "a technical means of finishing agricultural tasks; it plays a crucial role in establishing closeness, mutual support, and community solidarity" (10).

The book is organized into four main sections. The first section (Chapters 1–2) focuses on hunter songs. The second section (Chapters 3–6) discusses the songs of carriers (porters) and soldiers. The third section (Chapters 7–10) examines the songs of farmers. The fourth and final section (Chapters 11–15) documents songs of political discourse which are related to the first president of Tanzania (then Tanganyika), issues concerning independence, issues concerning ujamaa (socialist) policies as well as songs about the introduction of village vigilante associations (*basungusungu*) in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Some of the material making up the chapters in this volume has been previously published as journal articles (Gunderson 2001; 2008a; 2008b).

The focus of this book can be summarized in the following three related arguments. The first argument is that musical labor songs among the Wasukuma are useful sources of historical knowledge. The songs document and transmit information concerning past events and calamities such as diseases, drought, famine (300–331) and the Kagera war against Idi Amin (395–405). The songs document and describe various economic activities among the Wasukuma at different moments in history. These activities include hunting and long distant salt caravans. The songs document and address issues related to the political history of the country as exemplified by the songs concerning *uhuru* (independence), *ujamaa* (socialism) and the leadership of Nyerere (332–394 and 406–434).

The second argument is that changes in the areas of economy or political organization have had an impact on musical labor, including the organization of musical performances and song texts. To illustrate this claim Gunderson points out that the introduction of *bugobogobo* (songs of farmers associations) reflects the introduction of the labor intensive cotton farming among the Wasukuma which required a massive labor force because the earlier *kisumba* (small reciprocal village labor associations), practiced since the 19th century, could not meet the expanded demand for labor. The promotion of cotton farming by the British colonial administration after WWI and

the completion of the Mwanza-Tabora railway construction which led to the growing cotton market (226–230) put further demands on labor. Gunderson explains, “Once some farmers began acquiring larger areas of land, and individualistic cash cropping started, it no longer seemed suitable for the village organization, with its automatic membership, to perform its services for food only. ... One of those farmers’ groups who stepped in to meet the demand for cotton labor groups were the *bagaalu* – affiliated *bagobogobo*” (227).

The third argument is that musical labor songs, as is the case with other cultural tropes, are fluid like Pierre Bourdieu’s “transposable disposition” (1990: 52) or Arjun Appadurai’s “-scapes” (1996: 33-36). Gunderson illustrates, for example, that current farming associations borrow musical elements including lyrics and performance practice from the music of the hunting, medicinal and porter associations that were prominent in the 19th century. He points out that this process of borrowing is a process of re-contextualizing old songs. Hence a change in various aspects of the songs has been a common feature of musical labor. As he puts it, “In the Sukuma cultural and historical tableau, songs have been interchanged between multiple functional contexts, their tropes and images have been transmitted and re-embedded within multiple songs and they have been read and interpreted in multiple and creative ways” (454).

Gunderson has done a commendable task of making this book a useful reference work by providing a number of appendices. These include a glossary of Sukuma music-related terms, Sukuma aphorisms related to music and labor, a list of significant events in the Sukuma history, a list of interviews cited, and extended oral bibliographies of selected commentators. He also provides well classified indices of song titles, singers, teachers and composers, personal names, geographical areas, genres, time periods, regions where the songs were collected, names of collectors, recordings and authors. Gunderson’s *Sukuma Labor Songs from Western Tanzania* is an invaluable contribution to the study of the music of Tanzania, the cultural expressions of the Wasukuma, as well as African oral history and literature.

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