

# ‘Nsumwinu’: meaning and role in the structural composition of melodies in the urban music of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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**Abstract:** The examination of the inserted *nsumwinu* (singular - *Kasumwinu*), in the lyrics of popular songs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), reveals hidden roles that are both musical and linguistic. Musically, the compositional technique of the melodic contour is derived from the observation of the semantic level of the language represented by the sequential pattern of tones on words that compose the *kasumwinu*. Linguistically, this sequential pattern of tones that determines the meaning of the word, must be faithfully observed in the music’s compositional process of the basic melodic contour, i.e., the linguistic tones dictate the direction of musical intervals, leaving the decision of the size of the interval to the creative discretion of the composer.<sup>1</sup> This essay will reveal the linguistic significance and role of *nsumwinu*, in the urban music of the DRC, and to conclude that they provide the musical flexibility without altering the overall meaning of their intended message.

**Key words:** Communication traditional Luba; *Kasumwinu*; Ethnomusicology; *Nsumwinu*.

*Musique Congolaise Moderne*, also known as Congolese Modern Music, is the genre of urban music of the Democratic Republic of Congo – DRC (formerly Zaire). It embodies musical characteristics, for which it is recognized throughout the world as Africa’s most representative style of guitar-led urban music. Across the continent of Africa, this music is best referred to as *Congo music* or simply *guitar music*. The term *Soukous*, by which it is commonly known in Diaspora, is a “lingalization”<sup>2</sup> of the French verb *sécouer* (to shake),

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<sup>1</sup> Kazadi wa Mukuna. “Creative Practice in African Music: New Perspectives in the Scrutiny of Africanisms in Diaspora.” *Black Music Research Journal* 17(2): 239-250, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> To make a word sound in Lingala — the lingua franca of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

coined in the 1960s by a European chronicler, describing the *mutwashi*-dance movement of the Luba people, characterized by the circular motion of the dancer’s hip. As an artistic expression, *soukous* fulfills various functions in the detribalized centers of the Democratic Republic of Congo; satisfies in the urban centers and fulfills similar functions as those fulfilled by traditional music in rural areas. *Soukous* allows its makers, to entertain and educate the population, and allow this population to express its world-view, sing about its heroes (past and present), describe their cities and rivers, and to document the history and accomplishments of their nation in their lyrics.

Often, composers incorporate in the lyrics of their songs, what is known among the Luba as *kasumwinu* (pl. - *nsumwinu*), a two-part traditional expression often used by the elders as a didactic tool. It is commonly believed that this expression is inserted in popular songs to address members of the same linguistic group, who are able to understand their intended lessons. However, in this study, I raise several questions regarding the significance and the function of these sayings, when kept in their original languages, and when inserted in songs aimed to address and educate a wider population. For this reason, I have elected herein to, first present the cultural context of the *nsumwinu* among the Luba, and second, discuss the role of *nsumwinu* in the compositional technique of the genre of popular songs in DRC, commonly called in this country as “folklore”.<sup>3</sup> In this article, reference is given to songs, randomly selected, sung in their ethnic language of the Luba people called—Tshiluba.

Among the Luba people in the southern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there exists a genre of communication known in *tshiluba* (language of the Luba) as *nsumwinu* (sing. *lusumwinu*). Elders in the community also use this form of communication to convey cultural wisdom to members of the younger generation, in the community. According to Mr. Subayi Alexandre (80 years old), the meaning of this genre of abbreviated expression is derived from “*malu a k̄ale*”—past events and/or circumstances, which have occurred in the community/ethnic group.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, these circumstances are situations, in the lives of members in the community in general, and/or within the network of relations among members of the same age-bracket. Kwabena Nketia writes,

<sup>3</sup> Any traditional song or an original composition on traditional rhythm or genre performed in urban musical style.

<sup>4</sup> Interviewed in Germantown, Maryland, 2008.

Accordingly, the themes of songs tend to center around events and matters of common interest and concern to the members of a community of the social groups within it. They may deal with everyday life or with the traditions, beliefs and customs of the society.<sup>5</sup>

To date, there is a scarce written literature on this subject. Nsumwinu constitute a language frequently used between members of same age bracket to convey a specific *lunganyi* – thought, knowledge, and lesson.<sup>6</sup> This deep-seated body of knowledge is culturally defined and challenges the individual to be well versed in cultural affairs, in order to decipher its intended messages that are often conveyed in *mpinganyi* (metaphor).<sup>7</sup> In other words, the understanding of kasumwinu, does not require intellectual capability, but a profound knowledge of cultural and communal history and past events. The comparison of definitions of various terms, such as riddle, fable, metaphor, and proverb that are often confused with kasumwinu, as given in various dictionaries, reveals the erroneous perception denoted by their essence, in comparison with that of kasumwinu. Structurally, kasumwinu has two or more segments, expressed in call-and-response. Often, one need only articulate the first segment, for the entire kasumwinu to be remembered. This is especially true for the most familiar kasumwinu, such as “*nshimba wendenda pa monji. . . . .*,” for which the second segment “*muntu wa panu wenda amu pa wabu*”, automatically comes to mind.

According to *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, metaphor is a “figure of speech that implies comparison between two unlike entities, as distinguished from simile, an explicit comparison signaled by the words ‘like’ or ‘as’”.<sup>8</sup> David Noel Freedman, editor of the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* defines parable as “an extended metaphor or simile frequently becoming a brief narrative, generally used in biblical times for didactic purposes”.<sup>9</sup> *Merriam Webster* defines a riddle as “a mystifying, misleading, or puzzling question posed as a problem to be solved or guessed often as a game, requiring some ingenuity to answer”.<sup>10</sup> The

<sup>5</sup> Kabena Nketia. *The Music of Africa*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975, p. 189.

<sup>6</sup> Mr. Subayi Alexandre interviewed in Kent, Ohio 2005; see also field notes of Mr. Banbenga Leon interviewed in Matete, Democratic Republic of Congo, June, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Conversation with Ms. Mubombi Subayi in Kent, Ohio 2005, and Mwa Mukuna in Matete, Democratic Republic of Congo in June 2004.

<sup>8</sup> *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* vol. 8. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2002, p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> David Noel Freedman. “Parable,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 5, New York: Doubleday, 1992, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* Unabridged edited by Philip Babcock Gove. Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2002, p. 1952.

same source defines a fable as “a fictitious story, usually about animals, meant to teach a moral lesson”.<sup>11</sup> The definition of a proverb as given in the *Britannica* is “a succinct and pithy saying in general use, expressing commonly held ideas and beliefs. Proverbs are part of every spoken language and are related to such other forms of folk literature as riddles, and fables that have originated in oral tradition”.<sup>12</sup> Compared to proverbs, there may be a similarity with nsumwinu, in that proverbs are found in various parts of the world sustaining the same kernel of wisdom, gleaned under different cultural conditions and languages. Nsumwinu are often misinterpreted as being a form of oral poetry among the Luba people.<sup>13</sup>

Although nsumwinu are not proverbs or parables, they are, however, comparable to each of these terms by their nature and utilization. Nsumwinu are culturally defined and they require cultural wisdom to decipher their intended message. They also constitute the basic source of inspiration, exploited by master drummers in the formulation of messages in surrogate language transmitted at long distances, and interpreted by the receiver familiar with them.<sup>14</sup>

In Luba-land, nsumwinu are also accepted as an abbreviated expression. As a didactic tool, used by elders to teach members of the younger generation prophetically about the future, based on the experience from the past. Nsumwinu permit elders to carry on a conversation, with their age mates, without allowing the younger generation to capture the essence of their conversation. Often, it is very difficult, even for an insider to remember nsumwinu when outside of the circumstance which require them. When talking between age mates, only the first segment of the expression is said by one person for the entire expression to be understood by all involved. When addressing a younger person, it is not uncommon to hear an elder begin with the formula, “*k̄wetu batu bamba ne*” (in our village it is said that); or “*bank̄ambwa ba k̄amba ne*” (elders have said that), as a preamble to a kasumwinu.

I have provided samples nsumwinu, collected over the years among from Luba elders, in Kinshasa and in Diaspora. To help explain the context

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 228.

<sup>12</sup> The New Encyclopedia Britannica vol.9, 2002. 749.

<sup>13</sup> See Crispin Maalu-Bungi. *Mukanda: A New Form of Oral Luba Poetry*. Farmington Hills: Gate Group, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> See Kazadi wa Mukuna. “The function of Musical Instruments in the Surrogate Languages in Africa.” *África: Revista do Centro de Estudos Africano da Universidade de São Paulo* 10: 3-8, 1987. See also Kwabena Nketia.

in which they can be used, I have also provided the English translation of their essential concepts.

1. *Bingonga ne bijangalala bitu bya mupuya wa momumwa, kabiena bikengela kosha dingonga mu munya, bana ne balwa kudia bijangalala* – careful not to confuse the youth.
2. *Muyombu wa mputa mulengela mubi* – he is a good person, but don't make him angry.
3. *Nkolu mayi pa dikwake bijimina, bidi kunu pabi bijimina* – if you don't want to share.
4. *Kazadi wa mpunga wa mwanetu, mema mumanya ne udi mwanetu, pina pu kadilu kadila pa bilamba* – while I was taking you for a friend, you were nothing but a foe.
5. *Kanyunyi kadila kakupa mutu, bwalu mbukatonda* – when an elder is stressing a point, it is because there is a problem.
6. *Kanyunyi kakunza mwinu, ka tshidia bia Bantu* – he does not like to share
7. *Padi mukulumpa wenda mwinama, udi ne bwalu* – when an elder is walking with his head down, he is disturbed by something.
8. *Bwikala bwamba nansha bufwa Bantu ne bu di jungulula* – Let the truth be told, in spite of the consequence. The essence of this kasumwinu is similar to that in the Bible (The truth will set you free).
9. *Bela nshiba mwa matshi, mesu nee la kabidi mona* – This is has the same meaning as – *Ba bela mwana muntu, wa nshiya wa teleja panda* – When I explained to John, Joseph should have listened also. Do not request for a special explanation to the same question.
10. *Manyi mu nkunda, nkunda mu manyi -- ku bwejakaja kwa malu* – Gossip.
11. *Mayi mu kwambula wa Kayembe, tshena mukutwala, mona mudi udiela eku, udiela eju, pa witshikila ne udila ne ka bavu ba ntuala* – While I am teaching, you do not listen, but when something bad happens you will cry that you were not informed.

12. *Tshijangalala wa mutu tshipapu (Bela Belela wa Tshamala, bakupa peba wa pangana kwenji bulundu bu bwa mpasu)* – share, do not be greedy.
13. *Tshidi mu tshanza ki tsheba (tshiyaya munda ki tsheba)* – be happy with what you have.
14. *Mukulu mwindila malu ku ditapa nsesu* (chisel) – you were our hope, now you have deceived us.
15. *Udia bulunda ne Ndunga munena, bana ba Ndunga utapa* – you call yourself Ndunga’s friend, but you have taken his children.
16. *Kudia lukasa kupia mukana* – be patient.
17. *Lukanu lumwa ka lutu ludila mu nsapu* – no man is an island.
18. *Mukolu umwa wa mana manyi* – he is always at the receiving end.
19. *Ku tshinu kwa dianjila wenu wa kudia tshikanfu (ditama kayi wenu kena mwa ku pondela ngaji)* – if he were not your brother, he wouldn’t help you. This kasumwinu is often used to put an ingratitudes person in his place.
20. *Tshinamy nyunyi wa ka panga ‘ngonzo’ wa tshibota mwasa makiya ‘nsala’* (the heart of the banana stock) – know it all.
21. *Bidi mwetu tenta amu tsheba peba* – to discourage laziness.
22. *Kazolu kwenda mu musasa ku pepela bujitu* – keep your place, don’t forget who you are.
23. *Nshindi wa mpala wakalekela tshidi ku mwinu kwipatshila tshidi mu mayi* – grass is always greener on the other side of the mountain.
24. *Batshidi wa bia benda, biabu bidi amu bikesa* – egoist.
25. *Baya waya* (sauter sur les occasions) – go with the flow.
26. *Badiadia, badiadia, wa kafwisha bayenda mu tshisuku* – do not envy what your neighbor has.
27. *Ku nangidi mu vuala vualva Kabuta, wa dia ka vuala tsheba tshidimu* – be happy with what you have.

28. *Kwa kaya Nkola, Nkola wa ka shikila (muntu wa mpata)* – a doubtful person, he who refuses to believe.
29. *Bamba bapanga, balumbuludi mbanga ya sama* – a person who does not listen.
30. *Ku tumba kweyemenangana* (l’union fait la force) – no man is an island.
31. *Dikenga dishila penyi – Malu tupwa twa ku nshingu* – everyone has problem.
32. *Tubutama ndekela ndia bidia* – leave me alone; give me peace.  
Nsumwinu are also used when discussing unity:
33. *Mashi a ku menu umina amwa utwila makwabu* – patience.
34. *Nyoka umwa katsha kena mwanji kudikosa bitupa* – no man is an island.
35. *Bwa kwamba tudi nabu, tshitudi babenga bandayi pwekayi* – make up your mind.
36. *Badi mwa kwamba kabambi amu nska ya kwelela kazolu* – he who can say something worth hearing does not speak, but he with nothing to say.
37. *Dibemba* (snake) *mwena mwabi usangena bwina bwa mpanya bwimba, kuditanta kubwela momu* – he who uses others.
38. *Kandindi sama mapu muwa muswa* – be responsible of your own actions.
39. *Udi umanina mukela mu ka mpingididi* (small rat – snare) *kadi mu mpanga ne wela tshini?* – do not waste time with futilities.
40. *Kamanisha bu ka bena Mbombo, kalungu ka tshomba kamwa mu tshisa ka ne tetu ki badi badisha bena Miabi* – if it were not for me, (...); a showoff.
41. *Kulu kudi nyama batu benza bakutangila “tshishi tsha ngaji kabatu batshilekela kulu to”* – where your gold is, there will also be your heart.
42. *Kabutama katu osha mukela to* – he who is hiding avoids burning salt.

43. *Tsha dima umwa tsh dia bangi* – one for all.
44. *Nzolu wendenda ke udiadia muswaswa* – seek and you shall find.
45. *Munyinyi mukola batu ba udia ne kela* – though problems require tough solutions.
46. *Bajana dikoshi bamona mpala batshina* – talking behind someone’s back.
47. *Bu lala bufuka, ne tu bwaqula malaba* – let us talk about this tomorrow.
48. *Kabundi kafwila ku bakwa Mukunyi, tetu kunweku kulala ne biondo ka bila* – why should we be guilty for the act that we are unaware of its happening?
49. *Bia bena nkuba tudia, amu bieba?* – we challenge champions, imagine you.
50. *Tsha kamona kamama, mpofo wa dia ka tshimona penda* - someday it will happen to you.
51. *Tshikunyi tu tshikulula musenga,, mwena tshilema tu mubelela pa Bantu* – hard headed are counseled in public.
52. *Tshanza kiminyi nansha butuku upa* – hand is generous even in darkness.

#### PRESENCE OF NSUMWINU IN FOLKLORE

The insertion of nsumwinu in song lyrics is a common practice in traditional songs among the Luba ethnic group. In the urban music, when songs in traditional style and in traditional language or those original compositions that are written in the similar genre/style are performed in the urban music context, they are referred to as “folklore”. For the most part, the bulk of songs composed and interpreted by the female vocalist Tshala Mwana, and those of the group called Bayuda du Congo, are bound with nsumwinu that address various themes. In “Tshanza” (Hand) by Tshala Mwana, for example, several nsumwinu are incorporated, addressing different themes of generosity, gratitude, and honesty. In “Tshibola Mulumbayi” by the same artist, the theme of hard



times, patience, and relationship/kinship are stressed. “Shimba wendenda pa monji, muntu wa panu wenda amu pa wabu” (nonhuman primates swing from rope to rope, but human only visit their siblings”. In their song “Chute Katende”, the Bayuda group sings the same theme of relationship but expressed with a different *kasumwinu*: “tshilobu tshikale kwenu wamona mwa kwenda madiunda (You should be certain that there is a champion on your side before you walk tall), and in “Grand Charme”, the Bayuda du Congo group utilizes a different *kasumwinu*: “Nkashama kena munena bwa lonji lwenda” (lion’s size is not measured by the loudness of its roar}.

Tshala Mwana makes use of several *nsumwinu* in “Nyoka wa Bulanda,” to stress the lack of trust such as: “Dibenda mwena Mwabi, usangane bwina bwa mpanga bwimba, e kudibamba kubwela” (Debenda from Mwabi village found mpanga borough ready and forced himself into it), “nyoka a bulanda, nyoka a bulele, tshiswa kukusuma tshiswa kukudia, tshi kudiadia tshidi munda mweba” (The friendly snake, you don’t know if it is going to bite or swallow you; your possession is what goes in your stomach), “bweba bulanda bwa ku mesu, utshina mpala ukimina dikoshi” (his friendship is only with your presence, you are afraid of the confrontation but speak with courage behind the person), “nkashama mulengela dikoba, munda mwende mudi nvita” (lion’s cloak is beautiful but its inside is full of rage); “Bwa ku pa kazolo, upesha kalaje, kanyunyu ka kubuka ka kuya kwabo” (instead of feeding the domestic bird, you have fed the wild one capable of flying away).

## SUMMATIONS

Elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> I assert that in Africa, languages play a vital role in determining the nature of the music, from its rhythmic organization, and harmonic implication, and the selection of the main musical instrument, with which an ethnic group is identified. In the same source, I also conclude that in the compositional technique of traditional vocal music, the semantic level of the language (the tonal sequence pattern on each word) dictates the direction of the musical interval, while leaving the size of the interval to the artistic discretion of the composer. William Bright shares this concept and concludes, “there are some cultures in which features of spoken language have played a part in

<sup>15</sup> Kazadi wa Mukuna. “Creative Practice in African Music: New Perspectives in the Scrutiny o Africanisms in Diaspora.” *Black Music Research Journal* 17, 2: 239-250, Fall 1997.

conditioning the musical patterns of a song.”<sup>16</sup> This practice is also observed in the construction of melodies in the popular music of DRC.

In short, the popular music of the DRC is also compelled by the same linguistic ground rule and raises questions that challenge some of the seasoned students of the popular music in DRC. Questions such as, “Which aspect of the music is composed first – the lyrics or the melody,” often comes to mind when seeking to describe the compositional technique of popular songs in DRC. Herein, I argue that regardless of the order of their conception, in the mind of the composer, *nsumwinu* function linguistically in the folklore as in traditional songs, i.e., musically, *nsumwinu* provide the linguistic sequential tone patterns (the semantic level of the word), from which a basic melodic structure of a song is derived, regardless of their meaning or their intended message.

**Resumo:** O exame de *nsumwinu* (singular - *Kasumwinu*), inserido nas letras de canções populares na República Democrática do Congo (RDC), revela papéis ocultos tanto musicais quanto linguísticos. Musicalmente, a técnica de composição do contorno melódico é derivada da observação do nível semântico da linguagem representada pelo padrão seqüencial de sons em palavras que compõem o *kasumwinu*. Linguisticamente, este padrão seqüencial de tons que determina o significado da palavra deve ser fielmente observado no processo de composição da música do contorno melódico básico, ou seja, os tons linguísticos ditam os rumos dos intervalos musicais, deixando a decisão do tamanho do intervalo para a criatividade do compositor. Este ensaio irá revelar o significado e o papel da linguística *nsumwinu* na música urbana da RDC e concluir que eles fornecem flexibilidade musical sem alterar o sentido global da sua mensagem.

**Palavras chaves:** Comunicação tradicional Luba; *Kasumwinu*; Etnomusicologia; *Nsumwinu*.

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*“Nsumwinu”: meaning and role in the structural composition of melodies in the urban music of...*

## INTERVIEWS

Interview with Mr. Babenga Leon Mukuna (71) in Matete, Democratic Republic of Congo in May-June, 2004, and in May-June, 2010.

Interview with Mr. Subayi Alexandre Kabambi (82) in Kent, Ohio 2005 and in Germantown, Maryland in April, 2008.

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