



# Hegemony and Music in The Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial Zimbabwe

Perminus Matiure\*

## Abstract

The article is an expose' of how hegemony and music belonging to the Shona communities of Zimbabwe have transcended the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. The discussion is premised on some ontological comprehension that supremacy, socio-economic and political dominance by members of a community are aspects of power dynamics and hegemony. As such the world communities are characterized by class struggle in which the 'haves', who enjoy hegemony superimpose on the 'have-nots'. Communities are in a dilemma of trying to reduce the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. In this study, a qualitative ethnographic methodology was carried out among some Shona communities of Zimbabwe. The findings were that music portrays socio-economic and political hegemonies during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe. It was also established that there is a strong relationship between music and hegemony. Music, especially song and dance were used to achieve socio-economic and political dominance during the three eras.

**Key words:** hegemony, Shona, pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial

## Introduction

The paper focuses on the mutual relationship between music and hegemony and the two transcends socio-economic and political systems of most of the Shona communities during pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Like many African countries belonging to the Sub-Saharan region, the history of Zimbabwe can be clearly articulated by making reference to these three important landmarks. The first is the pre-colonial period ranging from the time immemorial up to around 1914 when most of Black Africa kingdoms were under the rule of one or another European power (Agawu 2003).

The second period is referred to as the Colonial period, which is from

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\* Lecturer, Midlands State University Department of Music and Musicology,  
matiurep@staff.msu.ac.zw

1914 to 1980. The article will extrapolate how the Shona socio-economic, religious and political hegemony and music experienced a paradigm shift and how the same weakened by the European system. Support will be sought from Agawu (2003:2) who postulates that, "Colonialism had a profound effect on practically every aspect of African life: economic, political, social and religious." Special focus will be on how music was used to sustain political hegemony and how hegemony was used to colonize and oppress the blacks by the whites. The article will unpack the positive and negative impact of rural to urban migration, music and Shona hegemony.

The third and last phase to be discussed will be the post-colonial period which is from 1980 to date. In this period the Shona regained their socio-economic, political and religious hegemony. Aspects that have emerged as benchmarks to the revitalization of the Shona hegemony will also be touched in this period. The evolution of new popular music, invention of traditional music and new genres like Zim Dancehall, contemporary *mbira* and also promotion and re-contextualization of traditional music and contexts in which they are performed will be part of the discussions. Of particular interest will be the influence of technology and institutionalization of learning of music as a trajectory for enhancing a new emergence of art hegemony among the Zimbabwean societies.

### Methodology

Most of the information presented in this article was collected through qualitative ethnographic methodology employed in juxtaposition with document analysis of Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political history and about the relationship between music and hegemony. Some face-to-face interviews were also carried out to augment historical findings. Among the participants who were interviewed were five culture bearers, ten politicians, ten music artists, ten freedom fighters and two historians. These were sampled purposively employed together with snow ball sampling technique from a population of all members of the Shona communities living in both rural and urban settlements of Mashonaland East and Harare Central provinces.

The other research methodology adopted was historicism in which the research employed document analysis in reflecting on how music and hegemony are reflected in the three important phases in the development of the Shona community from pre-colonial to post-colonial period. Several written histories were consulted. Particular attention was directed towards historical events because they are effective indicators of indigenous knowledge especially those that resemble antiquity. Ancient information may not be effectively extracted from history but events enshrined in the historical narratives. Agawu (2003) concurs when he maintains that "...history is made not by time but by events..." Ethnographers hold the same philosophy when studying the

musical events, which a social group partakes in order to solicit information concerning their holistic life.

### **Hegemony Conceptualized**

Hegemony is synonymous to supremacy, dominance, ascendancy, leadership, control, dominion, power, authority and superiority. In general, the term implies dominance of one entity over others. Individuals or communities embrace hegemony in a number of ways. These may be on political, social, economic or religious grounds. In other words, hegemony is a concept which is characterized by the superimposition of one social group over the other such that the more powerful group will dominate and look down upon the less powerful. The writer considers hegemony to be the state of maximum control by a powerful group or individual over weaker groups. Usually this happens when the less powerful group happens to be within the proximity of a more powerful group which owns the means of production. In the context of this article the term hegemony will be taken to refer to the ability for a social group to remain supreme on political, socio-economic or religious basis. The supreme group monopolizes the means of production and decision making powers.

### **Relationship between Hegemony and Music**

It is a general belief that music is as old as humanity. For Africa, evidence of pre-colonial existence of music is shown in ancient paintings and pre-historic excavated from primitive tombs. Agawu (2003:3) contains that the earliest records concerning the music in the pre-colonial Africa are available on archeological findings in which dance movements and musical instruments are shown. With the passage of time, music has undergone redefinition and reconstruction as it moved from period to period, in this case through pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial.

Music has been defined in several ways by different authors. Kaemmer (1993:59) provided several definitions of music as perceived by different writers. Terms that come out of these definitions are, 'form of speech', 'subdivision of entertainment', 'fine arts', 'subcategory of ritual', 'verbal art', 'natural sound', and 'sound of nature'. However, the definition that seems to embrace all the given dimension is the one given by Blacking (1973) which is "humanly organized sound."

Considering Blacking's definition and picking some of the definition provided by Kaemmer, it is evident that music is a common trait in any given social group although perceived differently. Social groups are what they are because of their culture. However, culture, the sum total of all what makes up the whole life of a people is better articulated through the music belonging

that particular community. In other words, music transcends all the life activities of a social group. Music is the most powerful tool used by the social group to exult its hegemony. Music is used to instill fear in the perpetrated by the perpetrator. Music is also used to enhance the dominant group's supremacy. It is used to strengthen tendencies that empower the colonizers to remain powerful. It is used a weapon of destruction through propagandistic shenanigans by unscrupulous super powers in a community.

There is indeed a very stronger relationship between hegemony and music. Music is the vehicle for achieving hegemony. Hegemony is achieved when the dominant group superimposes on the weaker group as previously said. In so doing, music is used to pave the way perceived victorious goals. Even African chiefs sustained their hegemony by using music which was usually performed by specialists during important social and sacred events. Even the great spiritual mediums (*makombwe*) who were in charge of territorial socio-economic issues, which include rain making and healing, could only achieve their mandates if music was part of their operations. Even warriors used music before, during and after war as source of inspirations and courage. The same goes for hunters who would use music to instill gallantry and for celebrating their catch.

Political struggles, meant for liberation from the bondage of colonialism were a common phenomenon in many African countries. In their endeavor to emancipate themselves from colonial supremacy, most of the African states engaged in massive political maneuvers, which culminated in wars of struggle against the colonizers. One motivating factor during these wars and even after was music. Music was used to instill courage, hope and endurance. Music was also used to entertain and to advance propagandist principles. The fighter capitalized on the sonic hegemony of music. From this explanation it can be concluded that there a strong relationship between music and hegemony. The fact that music supersedes all other social amenities of any given social group, is a sign that hegemony is shown in music and transversely music is an impetus to hegemony. During most of the social events in Africa, in which people belonging to a particular social group congregate, music takes the lead, hence its hegemonic state. Currently there are many churches that mushroomed as a result of Christianization of the blacks. What makes these churches successful is music.

### **Pre-colonial Music and Shona Spiritual and Social Supremacy**

The Shona people comprise about five major dialects and several minority dialects. The major dialects are the Zezuru, which occupy the bulk of the central parts of Zimbabwe, the Ndaou who are in the eastern region, the Karanga who are in the southern part of Zimbabwe, and the Korekore found in the north. The minority dialects are the Tonga, the Nambia, the Chewa and

the Remba. These are mostly found along the borders of Zimbabwe.

The Shona are a people whose ontology of life is informed by the belief that there is a very strong bond between them and their ancestral spirits. Well social life informed by communality. This was eminent especially during the pre-colonial. Their socio-economic and spiritual system during the pre-colonial period was highly made possible by music usually accompanied by traditional drums (*ngoma*). Music was spread all over their daily activities. According to Agawu (2003) data concerning music in the pre-colonial Africa [let alone Zimbabwe] is scanty. However, researchers and excavators have done a lot to unveil information that indicates the existence of music in the pre-historic period. As indicated by rock paintings, archeological findings and old legends are a clear testimony of the pre-colonial Africa. From a broad perspective, the pre-colonial music was efficacious from historic time up to about 1914 when European occupied Africa.

The pre-colonial period was characterized by communities whose life style was free from the influence of exogenous life styles. Communities were highly homogenous and egalitarian. Hegemony lied in the hands of the chiefs (*madzimambo*) and territorial spirit medium (*mbondoro*). For Zimbabwe, the era was characterized by the indigenes whose life was informed by the philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu* which stipulated the core values of African ontologies of respect of human dignity, humility, cooperation, solidarity, selflessness and collective sharedness. Their supremacy was drawn from their strong connection with their ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*) which they referred as *chivanhu*. These *vadzimu* were believed to be the intermediaries between the Shona and their ancestors (Matiure, 2009). In line with this philosophy, Gelfand asserts that "One of the fundamental tenets of Shona religion is the belief in real communication with the world of spirit through the medium or host of the particular spirit whose help is sought" (1962:37).

Occasionally, the Shona conducted secular and sacred functions in which music was performed. The music they performed during these ceremonies was meant to create a devotional framework (*gokoro*) in which the spirit mediums (*masvikiro*) would get possessed by the ancestral spirits and then talk directly to the people on issues affecting them. In this case music acted as the key that unlocks the doors of the spiritual world there by creating a virtual time where the self is lost and the living and the spiritual essences find coexist. The songs sung were accompanied by traditional musical instruments. The commonest instrument was the traditional drum (*ngoma*), which was made from cow skin stretched on a hollow wooden body. The embodiment of the skin of the traditional drum may not be taken for granted as observed by Nzewi when he says:

Such a skin carries spirituality energy because of the presence of dry, fresh blood in the skin... In the African philosophy of life, the drum, although simple in appearance, is deeply evocative in action, inspiring creativity as

well as producing a profoundly beneficial effect on humans, the human society and other living things... There is symbolic connection between the drum as a sonic force and blood as a life force (2007: 58).

Nzewi emphasizes the importance of a traditional drum, not only as an instrument, but also a symbol that is efficacious in the entire cosmos of the black African people. The same is true for the Shona who treat the sound of the drum as a source of power and inspiration.

The Shona hegemony supported, by traditional music enabled them to access natural provisions from God (*Mwari*). Legends have it that during the pre-colonial period (*pasi pasati parohwa ne nyundo*) the Shona were able to talk to God himself at Matonjeni near Bulawayo. According to culture bearers interviewed during the author's fieldwork, people from all over the land between Limpopo and Zambezi travelled to this rocky place next to where Rhodes the former Prime Minister of Rhodesia (Now Zimbabwe) is buried to ask for rains from God during drought times. They went on to say that they could talk directly to God and his voice was heard from the rocks (*Rutsate*). Two of the culture bearers as well as one historian indicated that during the pre-historical times (*pasichigare*) hungry people were able to get food from God after praying while under a *muchakata* tree. This is indeed a sign that there was spiritual hegemony among the Shona.

The Shona music was highly polyphonic and polyrhythmic. It comprised multipart structures. 'Musicking' was characterized by communal composition and improvisation. Singing was usually of lead and follow style. Singing was accompanied by percussive instruments played by experts. Performance skills were acquired orally or inherited from ancestors. In fact, hegemony was sustained through inheritance. Tangible and intangible heritage like wealth, musical instruments, traditional materials and costumes were handed over from parent to child as part of inheritance.

During the pre-colonial Zimbabwe, all the families were patriarchal in nature. Men were heads of families and usually had the responsibility of providing the basic needs for the family by hunting and tilling land. They also offered protection to family. Women gathered fruits and roots and looked after children when men were out in the forests hunting or in pastures looking after cattle. Each family's economic strength was drawn from the heads of cattle it possessed. The power dynamics hinged on the traditional hierarchy which cascaded from God (*Mwari*) down to Ancestors, to Spirit medium, down to chiefs, to headmen and to the father of the house.

### Music as Source of Inspiration During the War of Liberation in Zimbabwe

The arrival of the missionaries in what is now called Zimbabwe on one hand culminated in the Christianization of many Zimbabweans and on the

other in the emergence of the white supremacy better referred to as colonization. Agawu (2003:1) defined colonization as "...the usurpation of Africa's political sovereignty and independence." Colonization entails an unfair and deliberate subjugation of a social group's freedom of autonomy and independence. In Zimbabwe colonization was made effective by the abolishment of traditional practices like venerating God through ancestors. The blacks were made to believe that African Traditional Religious practices were demonic and unholy. Maxwell affirms when he says, "Christian exorcism and demonization provided a new means of contesting the authority of patriarchal ancestor religion" (1995:310). Banana cites Joshua Nkomo, a politician who was instrumental in liberating Zimbabwe as saying:

It is a pity that some of the virtues of African life and culture, molded and developed before the coming of the missionaries, were ignored, treated with contempt and sometimes totally dismissed and brushed aside as repugnant and savage by some zealous missionaries who were captives of their religious and cultural prejudice (1991:1)

The colonial system employed by the whites was such that the bible colonizes the mind and then the gun colonizes the land. In other words, the white settlers' aim was to change the mindset of the blacks by shunning their religion and forcing them to abandon it. The missionaries were quite aware of the power endowed in a religion, which is defined by Wallace (1966:5) as "belief and ritual concerned with supernatural beings, powers, and forces".

The banning of the traditional practices of worship weakened the Shona hegemony in a big way. The bond between the ancestor and the progenies was weakened rendering the Shona to be vulnerable, of no identity, unprotected, directionless and highly colonizable. Most of the spiritual powers also weakened. Great Spirit mediums (*mbondoro*) like Kagubi and Nehanda were assassinated leaving the Shona unprotected. Other important key figure like chiefs was baptized. They ceased to perform their traditional duties of maintaining the Shona hegemony.

The other notable change was the discouragement of traditional ceremonies (*mapira*) like those of escorting the spirit (*kurova guva*), rainmaking (*mukwerera*) and many more. The Shona religious hegemony was hinged on the efficacy of music performed on a special sacred instrument called *mbira*. *Mbira* is a Shona instrument with metal keys mounted on a wooden soundboard (*gwariva*). It is played by plucking the keys with both thumbs and index finger. The instrument is highly spiritual and is believed to have the power to evoke the ancestral spirits in spirit mediums (Matiure, 2009).

In line with this issue Jones asserts that "Demonization of *mbira* music in Zimbabwe dates from the mid-1800s with the arrival of Christian missionaries, who discouraged the music associated with traditional religion and the 'pagan' practices of spirit possession" (2008:133). The negative attitude of the

church towards *kurova gwva* and *mbira dzaVadzimu* is noted by Gundani who underscores that “with the advent of Christianity in the 1890s, churches discouraged *kurova gwva* practices and playing of *mbira dzaVadzimu* as the ritual and the *mbira* instruments were perceived as evil and heathen” (1994:127).

Either the whites or the blacks themselves destroyed traditional shrines and sacred places (*nzvimbo dzinoyera*). Traditional materials symbolic in African religious practices were also burnt or thrown away since the missionaries regarded them as unholy and demonic. Some important symbols, which authenticated and contextualized the Shona spiritual events were also discouraged by the missionaries. Bourdillon (1990) who by virtue of being a priest in the Shona areas for a long time gave a very detailed description of what symbols are and how they are an important part of religion when he said:

Firstly, religion involves beliefs, which are systematically worked out. Normally these beliefs involve gods, or a High God, and spirit...religion involves way of thinking, way of understanding the world and life therein. Secondly religion involves symbols, and particular symbolic actions. Ritual is the most important part of religion (1990:6).

In addition, colonization introduced urban settlements in towns, mines and farms. The first settlements were meant to accommodate bachelors who were taken from rural areas to offer cheap or lowly paid labor. The move resulted in massive migration of men from rural homes to cities, mines or farms. The move somehow weakens the Shona hegemony and music in the men who were looking after family and participating in traditional events and music had left the homes leaving women in charge. Music performers and instruments maker were not left out. The implications were that the performance and the production of instruments like traditional drums (*ngoma*), hand shakers (*hosho*), mouth bows (*zhipendani*) and *mbira* were no longer being produced in quantities enough to sustain musical hegemony.

As previously indicated that the wealth of the Shona was embedded in the cattle they possessed. A rich man was judged by the number of heads cattle he had and also to some extent the number of wives. Cattle were used for farming, for marriage, for food, for manure and for nearly everything. During colonialism the settlers weakened the Shona's economic base by confiscating their cattle. In short, colonial period weakened the Shona hegemony and music. However, there was a resurgence of church music. More and more blacks started to adopt western music taste and styles. The multiparty singing style was converted to four-part harmony sing with a conductor leading. This type of singing, though beautiful to the western ear was a barrier to innovation and improvisation. The idea of ownership was also introduced and blacks were disentangling from the communal spirit.

Of particular interest was the invention of traditional music, which was



political. This music was called songs of *chimurenga*. The songs were sung during all night political meetings (*pungwe*) held by the freedom fighters and community members (*povo*). The songs were in many categories, those that mocked the colonialists, those for propaganda, songs for entertainment, song for motivation, songs for victory and songs for ideology setting. In other words, the freedom fighters capitalized on the hegemonic tendency of music to fight the settlers.

The advent of Christianity followed by colonization was a big blow to the Shona's socio-economic, political and religious hegemony. Upon noticing that their hegemony and traditional music have been jeopardized, the Shona fought the war of liberation, which they won in 1980 giving birth to a new era, post-colonialism discussed in the next section.

### **Song and Dance as an Impetus for the Revival of Shona Socio-Economic Hegemony**

After independence, the Shona's main aim was to revive their identity, economy, religious prowess and sustain the political will. The overarching ideology adopted for Russia was socialism. Some of the notable achievements were free education for all, free health and freedom to vote and own land and cattle. This saw Zimbabwe becoming the breadbasket of Zimbabwe as indicated by one freedom fighter interviewed by the writer. People resuscitated their relationship with ancestors. They were free to conduct traditional ceremonies and appease their ancestors. Traditional dance genres like *mhande* and *mbakumba* for the Karanga, *mbira* and *mbende* for the Zezuru, *muchongoyo* for the Ndau, *dinhe* for the Korekore, and Hosana for the Kalanga just to mention a few were revived not only in traditional sacred contexts, but also in contemporary scenes like urban beer halls and night clubs. In order to fast track, the revival of traditional dances styles the government, through the works of the ministry of Education and Culture founded a traditional group called the Zimbabwe National Dance Company. The group could perform all dances from the different ethnic groups of Zimbabwe. It toured many countries with the aim of raising awareness of the presence of a new nation, Zimbabwe.

The blacks in Zimbabwe, Shona and Ndebele slowly repossessed their hegemony. Several cooperatives were formed in communities. Music once again was at the center of every event contacted. The national anthem was changed from Ishe Komborera Africa to Ngaikomborerwe Nyika ye Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean children had a chance to learn music in schools, Colleges and Universities. More and more recording studios were open. This created room for many artists to record their music and market themselves.

The new era created space for the invention of new genres and revitalization of already existing genres. Popular music, "gospel" music and rebranded traditional music were some of the offspring of post-colonialism. There was

a lot of hybridization, copying and imitation in the music industry. In fact, the concept of music industry began to take precedence in some of the artists. There was also the use of technology to allow traditional and contemporary music to reach greater heights. Mbira groups like Mbira DzeNharira, Zvirimudeze, Mawungira Enharira, Dzimbabwe, Mhuri yekwa Rwizi, Mhuri yekwa Zambuko, Mhuri yekwa Magaya, Mhuri yekwa Mujuru and many mushroomed all over the country with Mbira Dze Nharira on the fore front. Mbiras were amplified by attaching microphone pickups on them and connecting them to Public Address System. This became a hegira of the instrument from the private to public domain.

To date Zimbabwean communities have regained their socio-economic, political and religious hegemony. People are free to worship God through Christianity or traditional practices. New genres like Zim Dancehall have been invented. Traditional music has been commercialized and made accessible to many people locally and internationally. Zimbabweans have also repossessed their land through land reform program. Many are now far mining extensively and keeping many cattle.

However, the rebirth has come up with a slight deviation in that the life style in Zimbabwe is a hybrid of the colonialist of that of the black men. The food, the dress, the accommodation, language and music is no longer the same as what was in the pre-colonial period. Under these odd circumstances, the Shona continue to enjoy profound hegemony and music in their lives.

### Conclusion

The article has discussed the interplay between hegemony and music in the journey travelled by the Shona from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. It has been concluded that during the pre-colonial period, the Shona, like any other African social group enjoyed maximum hegemony over socio-economic, political and religious affairs. Their life was dominated by communalism and the spirit of *ubuntu*. Music was highly efficacious in both social and religious events. Their economic was enshrined in the number of cattle possessed. Their religious philosophy was informed by a strong relationship with ancestors. Their life was unpolluted by exogenous communities. Land was in abundance and belonged to them.

The coming of the white culminated in colonialism, which reversed all what has been gained by the blacks. Colonization was made easy by the introduction of Christian churches, which superimposed traditional beliefs and veneration systems. The hegemony and music possessed by the black Shona people was weakened. Education became yet another tool of suppression and brain washing. The black was meant to believe that to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor. They became hewers of wood and drawers of water for the white men. What was called good music had to be of the

white origin? Being intelligent was judged by one's ability not to speak their mother tongue but the white men, language.

The last part of the paper presents a brief outline of the position of hegemony and music soon after independent in Zimbabwe. It was established that the black majority made a move to repossess their music and hegemony through the introduction of music schools, recording studios, formation of traditional groups and bands, fusion of African and Western instruments and re-invention of new music genres. They also repossessed their religious practices to which music is an influential entity. The blacks also repossessed their land and improved their herds of cattle. All this is an indication of the revival of the Shona hegemony and music. Concisely, the article has traced the Shona hegemony and music for the pre-colonial to the post-colonial via the colonial periods.

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