CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SONGS CONCERNING THE WAR AGAINST IDI AMIN

This section contains songs about the ‘Kagera’ war against Idi Amin. In 1978, Idi Amin, ‘president for life’ of Uganda, claimed that Tanzanian President Nyerere, his perennial enemy, was at the root of all his troubles. Amin accused Nyerere of waging war against Uganda by way of multiple border skirmishes, and, hoping to divert attention from his internal troubles and rally Uganda against the foreign adversary, Amin invaded Tanzanian territory and formally annexed a section across the Kagera River boundary on 1 November 1978. Declaring a formal state of war against Uganda, Nyerere mobilized his citizen army reserves and counterattacked, joined by Ugandan exiles united as the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA). The Ugandan army retreated steadily. Tanzania and the UNLA took Kampala in April 1979, and Amin fled by air, first to Libya and later, to a permanent exile at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Songs concerning the war against Idi Amin were extremely popular, and were most associated with the *bakomyaluume* and *bagobogobo* groups and their militarized *magembe* drama routines, in many cases commissioned by the government. Elias Songoyi had this first hand testimony of a *magembe* performance in the early 1980s:

> The soldier-dancers kept the rhythms of the drums, and entered the arena in a single file, carrying guns on their shoulders. They were in combat khaki dress with jungle hats and rubber boots. The commander marked time with “Left-right left-right”! In the arena, the soldiers went through parade inspection, then they started to prepare for battle, with battle drills. The soldiers stood at attention while the leaders sang a song depicting Amin as a foul smelling snake. Then the soldiers went into battle. (1988: 55)

These songs praise the Tanzanian soldiers, denounce Amin, and ask the citizens to be bold in their sacrifices in this trying time.
(294) *Mpigaga ache!* (‘Hit so he should die!’)

*Mpigaga ache!*  
Hit so he should die!

*Mutizunekela akapuluguka*  
Do not let him slip away

*Idi Amin (2×)*  
Idi Amin (2×)

*Watwinhile mawazo*  
He has given us thoughts

*Wapungugije na lubigili*  
He has reduced [us to] the cowshed

*Lwa hang’wa Shitobelo*  
That [one] at Shitobelo’s

*Ba ng’wana Makongolo bajile*  
That of ng’wana Makongolo is gone

*Bali ku manamba (2×)*  
They have gone to *manamba* (2×)

*Niyulu niganika*  
Then, when I think about it

*Sheniki, Nzugamawe*  
I, Nzugamawe

*Ize naje kujeshi*  
I should go into the army

*oNg’wa Shitobelo*  
Ng’wana Shitobelo

*Tukagukube (2×)*  
We should go to crawl (2×)

Interpretation: This song text, composed by the well-known *wigaashe* composer Kiduha Shitobelo and transcribed by Gibbe (n.d.), personalizes the war. The singer comments on his neighbor’s children going off to the war, and mentions that he has been axed heavily, but willingly. He had to ‘reduce the cowshed’, or give up cattle for the war effort. He jokes that his beloved ng’wana Makongolo, a prize bull, has gone off to *manamba*, a term usually used to refer to conscripted labor, but in this case, referring to the compulsory war draft (see also song #103). This was understood by listeners as an important sacrifice, both economically and symbolically. In the end, the singer contemplates joining the army himself (though he is too old), and learn how to crawl in the trenches.

Retired Makoko Language School instructor Willliam Lubimbi* had this extended commentary about the conflict, as well as thoughts about this composer’s perspective about the war: *Wananchi wa mkoa wa Mwanza, sawa na wananchi wote Tanzania, hawakupenda uvamizi uliofanywa na ‘nduli’* 1 Idi Amin. Katika mchango wao wa kugana na nduli huyu, wengi walitoo sehemu ya mali yao kama alama ya kuunga mkono juhudi za kuyang’oa majeshi ya uvamizi. Wafugaji wengi walitoo ng’ombe, malenga; mmoja wapo wa wafugaji, alitoa ng’ombe wake aitwae ng’wana Makongolo. Ni kawaida ya wafugaji

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1 A common Kiswahili epithet leveled at Amin, meaning ‘murderer, savage, thug’.