CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SONGS OF THE BASUNGUSUNGU
(VILLAGE VIGILANTE ASSOCIATIONS)

Since the late 1970s, and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Tanzanian government suffered one major economic crisis after another. As a result, government-sponsored education campaigns and funding for celebrating holidays like Eighth of August have been lacking. The lack of money for basic civil amenities like law enforcement in rural and peripheral areas has fueled the proliferation of organized cattle theft. Rising cynicism and public outrage over this has led to the organization of associations in the Sukuma region known as sungusungu, vigilante groups who track down thieves and administer quick justice.¹ The idea has caught on nationwide in Tanzania since the mid-1980s, to the point where even urban areas are now patrolled at night by armed citizens. Thieves, once caught, are fined, ostracized, or even in some extreme cases, executed.

This section contains songs associated with these village groups. These are songs that ridicule and debase all types of criminals, especially cattle rustlers. Bare-foot and bare-chested, carrying poisoned arrows and spears, the sungusungu dance and sing in a circle around the apprehended thief until the early hours of the morning. The sungusungu use songs when they are tracking down thieves, and they also have songs that they use to taunt the thieves once they have been captured. These songs are also used in presidential welcomes, government-sponsored parades, and touring choir competitions to which the sungusungu find themselves increasingly invited (Kibali cha Kufanya Ziara 1987; Ratiba ya Vikundi 1989). In the 1980s and early 1990s, sungusungu songs received considerable airplay on the official government radio station, Radio Tanzania. The songs are sung on farms, and they make good drinking songs. Their song repertoire praises local leaders and vigilante heroes, and like the millet-beating song genre

¹ Depending on the source, the term means either ‘those who cooperate in doing jobs’, ‘the fire ants’, ‘the people with poison arrows’, or ‘the people from Busungu’.
known as *itula*, their songs berate those who would live off the labor of others and turn to thievery.

(316) **Mbiling’ili** (‘Mbiling’ili’)

Mbiling’ili, carry
Twaja mataa (2×)
Hugishi baba hule (2×)
Wabulagwa na biye, kabule (2×)
iNg’ombe jitijabo, kabule (2×)
Gishi ng’wana Longoye, kabule (2×)
Akulamilija kuja (2×)
Gukabapandikila mzila (2×)
Na ba Buselele
Nya idale lya bukubile (2×)
Kukinena balugulu (2×)

Interpretation: The song *Mbiling’ili*, from the cattle-herding *budimi* genre that predates *busungusungu*, was recollected by Kang’wiina ng’wana Mihumo, and was attributed by the singer to the female composer ng’wana Sato. The song came to be appropriated by the *sun-gusungu* as a song to accompany the hunt for criminals, and it stands as evidence that cattle-rustling has been a problem in this region for some time. Kang’wiina relates that the protagonists in the song had their cattle stolen by neighboring Maasai or Nyaturu people, and that they are now seeking retribution. Skirmishes between the Sukuma and Maasai over cattle are a well-documented occurrence in Sukuma historical narratives (Shetler 2007: 149; Tanner and Wijsen 2002: 69).

The singer entreats the listener, Mbiling’ili, to gather lamps for the night journey, to track down the thieves. One of their associates was

---

2 Recorded by author, Bujora centre, 20 September 1995, IUATM song #570.
3 Following in the spirit of forming *luganda* in order to get tasks accomplished, thieves in the Sukuma region also form themselves into voluntary associations, and give themselves names such as *baja na ngombe* (‘those who get away with cattle’), *bamalwa mbeshi* (‘those who are devoured by vultures, not buried when they die’), or *batula giti* (‘those who walk in darkness’).