

**MSARAGAMBO: THE LIVING LEGEND OF COMMUNITY
PARTICIPATION FROM THE ANCIENT UGWENO STATE TO MODERN
DEVELOPMENT PRAXIS**

Mark Lever

Outreach Care International. Dodoma Tanzania

semkito@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a critical examination of *Msaragambo*, the traditional system of compulsory communal labor originating from the ancient Ugweno state in the North Pare Mountains of Tanzania. Framed within the theoretical lens of Ubuntu philosophy and the decolonization of social work, the analysis employs an integrative, decolonial methodology combining historical analysis, ethnography, and participatory action research. It traces *Msaragambo*'s evolution from a foundational socio-political institution of the pre-colonial Gweno civilization to its contemporary adaptation as a hybrid model of community-driven development. The article argues that *Msaragambo* represents a resilient indigenous knowledge system that has successfully syncretized with modern governance structures. It now facilitates significant infrastructure projects through a novel partnership between resident communities, a financially contributing diaspora (*Wacharo*), and local government. However, this adaptation faces critical challenges, including generational shifts in attitudes toward voluntarism among youth. This study illuminates *Msaragambo* not as a static cultural relic, but as a dynamic "living legend" that offers vital insights for participatory development, social cohesion, and the indigenization of social work practice in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: *Msaragambo, Ugweno, Ubuntu, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Community Development, Diaspora Financing, Decolonizing Social Work, Tanzania, Participatory Action Research.*

1. Introduction: Situating an Indigenous Paradigm

In the highlands of North-eastern Tanzania, the enduring practice of *Msaragambo* stands as a profound testament to sophisticated, homegrown models of social organization and collective action. While commonly referenced in the broader ethnography of the Pare people, its deepest institutional roots are archaeologically and orally traced to the Gweno civilization of the pre-colonial Ugweno state, a centralized polity in the North Pare Mountains (Kimambo, 1969). This article moves beyond a mere historical or ethnographic description to position *Msaragambo* as a dynamic socio-economic paradigm. It interrogates its journey from a mechanism of statecraft and ecological survival in the ancient Ugweno kingdom to its modern reincarnation as a vehicle for community development in present-day Mwangi District.

The core argument posits that *Msaragambo's* resilience lies in its inherent flexibility and its foundational alignment with the African humanist philosophy of Ubuntu, making it a prime subject for decolonized social work theory (Twikirize et al., 2024). Today, the practice is not a mere shadow of tradition; it is a hybridized system. It mobilizes local labor under modified customary norms, channels financial remittances from a global diaspora (*Wacharo*), and operates in formal partnership with government authorities to deliver concrete public goods—from the Mriti-Kambiyasimba road to secondary schools in Kighare and Ngolea (Mwangi District Council, 2021). Yet, this very adaptation surfaces contemporary dilemmas, notably a growing tension between communal obligation and individual choice, particularly among the youth (Kamando, 2009). This study, therefore, aims to provide a holistic, scholarly analysis that honors the historical specificity of *Msaragambo's* Gweno origins, critically assesses its modern operational framework, and evaluates its sustainability amidst changing socio-economic currents. By doing so, it contributes to broader academic conversations on indigenous knowledge, community participation, and sustainable development.

2. Theoretical Framework: Ubuntu, Decolonization, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

To fully apprehend *Msaragambo's* significance, it must be theorized beyond Western, individual-centric models of development and social work. This analysis is grounded in two interrelated conceptual frameworks: Ubuntu philosophy and the decolonization of social work praxis.

2.1 Ubuntu as the Ethical Bedrock

Ubuntu, a Nguni Bantu term encapsulating the concept of shared humanity, is articulated in the axiom "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (a person is a person through other persons). This philosophy is increasingly recognized not as a mere cultural artifact but as a coherent epistemological and ethical foundation for re-imagining social organization in African contexts (Twikirize et al., 2024). Its core tenets—communalism, collective responsibility, reciprocity, and consensus-based participation—provide the ethical blueprint for systems like *Msaragambo*. The practice institutionalizes these tenets, transforming abstract philosophy into a structured social technology for survival and prosperity. It operationalizes the principle that community well-being is a prerequisite for individual security, a concept directly counter to neoliberal individualism (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020).

2.2 Decolonizing Social Work through Indigenous Praxis

Mainstream social work, often critiqued for its residual, individualistic, and Eurocentric biases, faces a legitimacy crisis in many African contexts. Scholars argue for a decolonized practice that centers local worldviews, knowledge systems, and coping mechanisms (Twikirize et al., 2024). Indigenous systems like *Msaragambo* are not alternative targets for social work intervention but vital sources for theory and method. They represent what Gray, Coates, and Yellow Bird (2008) term "indigenous social work," derived from local cultures and environments. Analyzing *Msaragambo* through this lens does not romanticize it but takes it seriously as a valid, context-derived model for fostering social cohesion, mobilizing resources, and driving participatory development. It answers the call for social work to "look inward and outward" to indigenous knowledge to become more relevant and effective (Mugumbate, 2020).

3. Study Methodology: An Integrative, Decolonial Approach

This study employs an integrative, multi-method research design grounded in a decolonial and participatory paradigm. Recognizing that *Msaragambo* is simultaneously a historical institution, a living socio-cultural practice, and a contemporary development mechanism, the methodology triangulates data from documentary, ethnographic, and participatory action research (PAR) sources. This approach aligns with the principles of Ubuntu and indigenous research

methodologies, which prioritize community voice, contextual understanding, and the co-creation of knowledge (Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2012).

3.1 Research Philosophy and Positionality

The research is guided by a constructivist-interpretivist philosophy, seeking to understand the complex meanings, adaptations, and challenges of *Msaragambo* from the perspectives of those who enact and experience it. It is further informed by a decolonial lens, consciously working to center Gweno and Pare worldviews and to frame *Msaragambo* as a valid source of theory, not merely a subject of study (Twikirize et al., 2024). As researchers, our positionality is that of engaged scholars seeking to document, analyze, and amplify an indigenous system. We acknowledge the power dynamics inherent in research and commit to a process of reflexive dialogue, ensuring the research questions and outcomes are relevant and beneficial to the communities involved (Sultana, 2007).

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection Methods

A sequential exploratory mixed-methods design was adopted, with qualitative data providing primary depth and contextual understanding, supported by quantitative data from surveys to identify broader patterns.

Phase 1: Historical and Documentary Analysis

Objective: To establish the historical origins, evolution, and formal structure of *Msaragambo* within the Ugweno state.

Sources and Procedure: Academic Historiography: Critical analysis of existing scholarly works on Pare and Gweno history, notably Kimambo (1969).

Colonial Archives: Review of German and British colonial administrative records, missionary reports, and early ethnographic accounts for external observations on the practice.

Oral History Collection: Semi-structured life-history interviews with 15 recognized community elders, traditional leaders, and local historians in Ugweno and Usangi.

Phase 2: Qualitative Ethnographic Enquiry

Objective: To understand the contemporary lived experience, social meanings, and operational mechanics of *Msaragambo*.

Methods and Procedure:

Participant Observation: Over 12 months, researchers engaged in immersive fieldwork in four purposefully selected villages in Mwanga District, attending village assemblies and communal work events.

In-Depth Interviews: Conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with a stratified sample of resident household heads, local officials, and youth.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Held 8 FGDs segregated by age and gender to elicit group norms and debates.

Phase 3: Participatory Action Research (PAR) Component

Objective: To collaboratively investigate and develop strategies for the specific challenge of youth engagement.

Procedure: A series of workshops with community stakeholders to co-design and pilot interventions, such as a "Skills-Based *Msaragambo*" day, followed by reflective cycles (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007).

3.3 Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

All qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The study received institutional review board approval, with informed consent obtained orally and in writing. The PAR component adhered to the principle of "community consent" from village councils.

4. Historical Foundations: *Msaragambo* as Statecraft in Ugweno

The findings from Phase 1 of the research corroborate that the Ugweno state (Vughonu) emerged as a centralized, stratified society, with *Msaragambo* serving as its socio-political engine. Historical scholarship posits that by the 16th century, Ugweno had developed a sophisticated political administration under the Wasuya clan (Kimambo, 1969). This state formation occurred in

direct response to the environmental pressures of the montane ecology. The need for intensive terrace farming, complex irrigation systems (*mfereji*), and collective defense necessitated a political authority capable of coordinating labor and resources on a large scale. *Msaragambo* evolved as the primary instrument of this coordination, transforming from a kin-based reciprocal labor practice into a state-sanctioned, obligatory institution (Kamando, 2009). It became the socio-economic engine of the kingdom, embedding the ruler's authority in the daily life and productive labor of the subjects.

In its classical form, *Msaragambo* was a formalized, obligatory system. Each household owed labor and occasional in-kind contributions to projects mandated by the chief (*mangi*) and his council of elders (*chila* and *wanjama*). Its efficacy was demonstrated in critical domains central to state power and communal survival, such as agricultural intensification, public works, and social redistribution. This system was de facto governance, translating the polity's collective needs into action and cementing a Gweno collective identity. The compulsory nature was balanced by a deep-seated cultural sanction—it was an obligation born of belonging, a "voluntary compulsion" (Kamando, 2009, p. 45) rooted in shared destiny.

5. Contemporary Adaptation: Findings from Ethnographic and Participatory Enquiry

Data from Phases 2 and 3 reveal how *Msaragambo* has undergone a significant yet logical transformation in present-day Mwanga District, adapting to a cash economy and a formal state structure.

5.1 The Modified Practice: Synergy with Formal Governance

The practice persists but within a hybrid governance framework. Village assemblies, often led by elected local government officials in consultation with elders, now identify projects that align with both community needs and the Mwanga District Council's development plans (Mwanga District Council, 2021). As observed, labor is mobilized through a blend of traditional authority and modern civic duty. The "compulsory" aspect, while still a strong social expectation, is often codified in village bylaws, and exemptions may be granted for a monetary fee, illustrating its monetization.

5.2 The Wacharo (Diaspora) Dimension: Financial *Msaragambo*

The most innovative contemporary adaptation, frequently cited in interviews and FGDs, is the systematic incorporation of the diaspora, or Wacharo. This represents a spatial and financial extension of the communal obligation. Remittances for community projects are a recognized form of "collective remittance" (Plaza & Ratha, 2011). In the Gweno context, these funds are mobilized through digital platforms, diaspora associations, and direct appeals.

- Impact on Project Scale: This capital infusion has radically altered project scope. Communities now co-finance capital-intensive infrastructure previously dependent on distant government budgets.
- Example Projects: This model is directly responsible for the construction and upgrading of feeder roads (e.g., Mangio-Kivisini) and classroom blocks at schools like Ngolea, Kighare, Kishengweni and Simbomu (Author Field Notes, 2023).

5.3 The Tripartite Partnership Model

Modern *Msaragambo* crystallizes as a tripartite development model, a synergy of local community labor, diaspora capital, and local government technical oversight. This model exemplifies a successful, bottom-up indigenization of the development process.

6. Critical Challenges: The Voluntarism Dilemma and Other Pressures

Data from all methodological phases, particularly the PAR workshops and youth interviews, highlight persistent challenges.

6.1 The Voluntarism Dilemma Among Youth

The most acute challenge is an intergenerational value shift. For many youths, the compulsory communal labor can feel anachronistic or exploitative (Kamando, 2009).

- Perception Gap: They may perceive it as an unfair tax on their time, which could be spent on wage-earning activities or further education.
- Weakening Social Sanction: Urban migration weakens the community's grip on social enforcement.

· The "Diaspora Solution" as a Double-Edged Sword: While Wacharo contributions enable projects, they can also inadvertently fuel a narrative that financial contribution absolves one of physical participation, potentially deepening the local labor shortage.

6.2 Logistical and Equity Challenges

Additional challenges observed include project complexity straining voluntary management structures, diaspora dependence creating volatility, and intra-community tensions over project selection and contribution equity.

7. Discussion: *Msaragambo* as a Living Legend in Development Discourse

Msaragambo's journey offers profound lessons for development theory and practice. Its resilience contradicts narratives of traditional systems as obstacles to modernity.

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

This case strongly supports the argument for "endogenous development" and the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into development planning (Dei, 2002). It provides a concrete African case study for discourses on "social capital," showing how pre-existing networks of trust can be activated for development (Putnam, 2000).

7.2 Practical Implications for Policy and Practice

For policymakers and development practitioners:

1. Formal Recognition and Support: Local governments should formally recognize systems like *Msaragambo* and provide targeted support like technical training for project committees.
2. Engaging Youth Innovatively: To bridge the voluntarism gap, *Msaragambo* could be integrated with youth skills development or digital contribution models.
3. Structuring Diaspora Engagement: Governments can facilitate diaspora investment by creating transparent channels for collective remittances.

8. Conclusion

Msaragambo, born from the political ingenuity of the ancient Ugweno state and nourished by the Ubuntu ethic, has proven to be a remarkably resilient social technology. Its evolution into a

modern, tripartite partnership is a powerful narrative of African agency and institutional syncretism. However, this "living legend" is at a crossroads. Its future hinges on navigating the central dilemma of modern communalism: reconciling the legitimate individual aspirations of the young with the enduring need for collective action. The solution lies in innovating its present—ensuring the practice is perceived as fair, relevant, and empowering for all generations. Continued scholarly engagement and supportive policy are essential to ensure this indigenous fountain of social capital continues to flow.

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