

**RESILIENCE AND REVIVAL: EXPLORING THE  
PRACTICES AND SUSTAINABILITY OF ANCESTRAL  
MUSIC AMONG THE MARIMBA CULTURAL DANCERS OF  
MERU, KENYA**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose of the Study:** This study examined the practices of the Marimba Cultural Dancers (MCD) from Meru, Kenya, as a means of investigating the resilience and revival of *Amiiru* (the people of Meru) ancestral music. The study further assessed their contribution to the sustainability of Indigenous music by examining their practices and methods of learning. It examined how the group's learning approaches ensure that their ancestral music survives the risks of diffusion and disappearance due to globalization.

**Research Methodology:** This case study involved 20 male MCD members, aged between 18 and 45 years. Data was collected through interviews conducted in four focus groups and video analyses of rehearsals and performances.

**Results:** The MCD group fosters more than musical learning—it emphasizes discipline, peer collaboration, and cultural preservation. Discipline is foundational, guiding behavior and recruitment, while structured learning processes ensure mastery of ancestral songs and dances through physical training and mentorship. Peer interaction and performance opportunities further strengthen group cohesion and motivation, sustaining their commitment to reviving and showcasing *Amiiru*'s traditional music.

**Conclusion:** The formation of MCD to revive *Amiiru* ancestral music shows how discipline, motivation, and indigenous oral learning methods can sustain cultural traditions while adapting to modern contexts. Though authenticity may be debated, their collaborative approach highlights the value of communal music-making in preserving heritage and calls for broader, inclusive research.

**Keywords:** *Ancestral music, learning, globalization, performance*

## INTRODUCTION

Music plays a vital role in Kenya's daily life and culture, serving various functions and themes in different contexts. It is a key part of everyday activities and major life events, such as childbirth, naming ceremonies, coming of age, marriage, and death. Different themes in music address children, teenagers, men, and women, reflecting the diversity within Kenyan society. Additionally, specific themes, moods, dances, and instruments accompany activities like planting and harvesting, rainy and dry seasons, beer parties, funerals, and religious or sacred rituals, all tailored to each community (Orawo, 2011; Akuno, 2018). Across African communities, music has always been a significant aspect of cultural heritage, making its preservation and survival essential.

Traditionally, songs and dances were shared orally and aurally, relying on memory and intergenerational teaching. For example, ancestral music among the Amiiru people in Eastern Kenya continues to depend on these oral traditions. Likewise, among the Xhosa people in South Africa, traditional dances have long been used to transmit knowledge and identity, ensuring that future generations learn and preserve cultural significance (Izu & de Villiers, 2021). Over time, however, the methods of teaching music have evolved alongside technological advancements that enable recording, storage, reproduction, and widespread accessibility. Today, music is even regarded as a form of social technology with the potential to transform communities (Frishkopf et al., 2017).

Despite these opportunities, ancestral music faces increasing threats of decline. Technological innovations and globalization have altered Kenyan music-making, moving it further away from communal traditions. While the recording, preservation, and distribution of music have benefits, they have also led younger generations to see ancestral music as outdated (Jayeola, 2015). Social media has further personalized music-sharing practices (Abdi & Osanjo, 2022), and Western musical influences and formal education have transformed how contemporary music is created and classified (Edwards, 2019). As a result, modern music often replaces indigenous songs and dances in cultural events (Isabirye, 2021). Historically, colonization also sped up this process, as African communities faced censorship laws, displacement, bans on indigenous languages, and restrictions on local instruments (Gwervevende & Mthombeni, 2023). Overall, these factors threaten the continuation of indigenous musical traditions.

In response, African communities have worked to revive communal music-making and preserve their cultural identity. For example, in South Africa, the Venda, Pedi, and Tsonga

groups have organized cultural performances to heal divisions caused by apartheid (Netshivhambe, 2023). Similarly, competitions and community projects in Kenya have offered platforms for revitalizing ancestral music. Among the Amiiiru people of Meru, these efforts have included initiatives to protect and pass down their indigenous heritage to younger generations. Such examples show that reintroducing and revitalizing indigenous music can sustain culture while strengthening social bonds.

A central aspect of this sustainability is the use of apprenticeship and peer learning as tools for transmitting musical knowledge. One example is the work of the Marimba Cultural Dancers (MCD), a group of young men from Marimba sub-location in Meru County, Kenya. Dedicated to practicing and preserving Amiiiru ancestral music, MCD offers a compelling case study of how indigenous practices persist despite globalization.

This study examined the practices of the Marimba Cultural Dancers to explore the resilience and revival of Amiiiru ancestral music. Specifically, it evaluated their role in maintaining indigenous music by analyzing their methods of learning and transmission. In doing so, the study looked at how their approaches help protect ancestral music from fading away or being lost. The following questions guided the study:

1. What motivates the MCD group to keep practicing ancestral music despite global music changes?
2. What learning methods do the Marimba Cultural Dancers use to ensure they perform ancestral music?
3. What influences the adoption of such learning approaches?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study employed purposive sampling to recruit 20 participants from the Marimba Cultural Dancers (MCD) in Meru County, Kenya—18 singers/dancers and two directors, aged 18–45—restricted to active members with at least three months' tenure and recruited via email invitations disseminated through MCD leadership, consistent with established guidance on qualitative sampling and access (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical compliance was secured through Institutional Review Board approval (University of Florida) and a NACOSTI research licence, with informed consent procedures that included prior notification of audio-visual recording and strict confidentiality assurances. Data were generated through four semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom for logistical feasibility—three focus groups of six dancers and a separate interview with the two directors—

each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes and guided by a protocol developed from the literature, peer-reviewed, and vetted by a music-education expert to ensure content relevance and alignment to objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Supplementary materials comprised rehearsal and performance recordings and structured observation notes. Verbatim transcripts were produced and returned for participant validation (member checking) to enhance confirmability (Creswell, 2007).

Analysis followed an iterative inductive workflow: repeated readings, open coding to generate descriptive labels, consolidation of overlapping codes, and development of emergent themes; codes derived from interviews, rehearsals, performances, and observations were compared and integrated to construct higher-order themes and cross-source regularities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researcher positionality as an insider to the Meru context was systematically managed through continuous reflexive journaling and scheduled peer debriefing with colleagues external to the community to surface, examine, and mitigate potential bias, thereby strengthening credibility and dependability (Ademolu, 2024; McLeod, 2024). Trustworthiness was reinforced through methodological triangulation across data types and sources, expert and peer review of the interview protocol prior to fieldwork, and post-interview member checking, collectively supporting coherence, transparency, and analytic rigour.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

From the data analysis, several themes emerged regarding the group dynamics beyond teaching and learning cultural music. These themes are interconnected and essentially inform the primary purpose of this study by their contribution to the group's smooth operation, supporting its continuity in learning and practicing ancestral music. Therefore, the findings are presented according to the following themes: a) General discipline, b) Learning processes, c) Peer learning and interactions, and d) Performance & traveling opportunities.

### General Discipline

MCD values discipline. Oxford English Dictionary defines discipline as 'the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience.' In their explanation, Aron and Kamotho, the group's founders, had the welfare of the boy-child in mind. They founded MCD with two intentions. First, to revive by practicing and performing the ancestral music of the *Amiiru*, and second, to ensure that the young men in their community were well-behaved to complete their studies (in case they were still students). The founders thought that discipline was key to success. For instance, Kamotho said,

The main aim is to raise the boy child's state of life, and so far, we are progressing well because we can see that there is no one...like in our area; you cannot come to dance in the Marimba group if you are not in school or if you are a drug abuser. So, it is a group that has disciplined members.

The directors also reported that the group consisted of other members who were already out of school. MCD ensured that they were responsible members of society. According to Aron, Marimba Cultural Dancers is a group that aims beyond singing so that the students can lead an exceptional lifestyle in the community. They need to be people who can sustain themselves and provide for their own needs. They also need to be able to cope with the current life in society so that, in case they are left in charge, they can continue their work in the community. Additionally, they are taught to apply the same discipline that is practiced within the group to their families. Some of them have families, and thus, they can emulate and instill the learned aspects in their families. They can socialize with society well.

The founders explained their displeasure, particularly in behaviors like alcohol and substance abuse, lateness, and other forms of irresponsibility. Although members of MCD did not clearly define the nature and the severity of some of the punishments they served to the disobedient singers and dancers, expulsion seemed to be the ultimate punishment if ill behaviors persisted. Aron gave an example of a scenario in a disciplinary case by saying,

Some can stop the ill behaviors they previously engaged in and take a different track. For example, suppose we expel a member who indulges in alcoholism and exclude them from attending a competition in Mombasa [a capital city in Kenya] because of the same behaviors. In that case, other members who are tempted to do the same will be completely averted.

Recruitment into the group is a process. Some members reported being attracted to joining the group due to its value for discipline. "... the first thing was the discipline the group had. Once you are in the group, you need to be a disciplined member. You need to be someone that society can emulate," a member explained. The latter was one of the reasons that drew him to join the group. Kamotho emphasized this in a different interview by saying, "First, we start by talking, we emphasize what we are going to do, their discipline and their way of life in the community, and from there, we start rehearsing."

Additionally, one of the senior members explained their willingness to follow instructions from trainers or peers. This is viewed through the lens of discipline and must be satisfying before

one is entirely accepted. Before joining, a potential member is observed in an interview-like setting to assess their ability to follow instructions. One of the members (M2G3) explained.

First, you must eliminate jokers and make sure the new member is determined to sing. So, to eliminate the jokers, we give them time to access and audition them using the written verse my colleague talked about. They are given a certain period to see if they have mastered it. If they aren't determined, they won't learn and may fail to commit and come again. We do so to avoid jokers and having dead weight in the group (M2G3).

The founders noted that discipline must form the foundation for such a group of young men to learn and perform ancestral songs and dances, which would counter common popular music trends, and remain in practice for over 13 years.

### **Choice of Songs and Dances: The Learning Processes**

Marimba Cultural Dancers perform songs and dances inspired by Meru traditional music styles, rooted in the culture of the *Amiiru* people. They choose the tunes that have existed for years and have been passed on to generations orally. That helps them maintain the style. However, the directors alluded that they sometimes compose new texts to match the occasions at hand and remain aware of current affairs. Before writing, they consult with older people and experienced traditional singers to maintain the ancestral style of music-making. Aron explains, So, we have to sit and compose the song, and we also consult male veterans who used to sing the same songs way before, so that we do not lose track a lot. Once we collect various verses from them, we sit down and try to incorporate modern aspects so that the current generation doesn't deem the music of the old. We bring them to the current life, but have based the song on the Meru culture.

Ancestral music is characterized by vigorous dance styles that require a specific technique to perform. These dances are attractive, which is why most community members enjoy participating in the music. The process of learning these songs and dances is systematic. First, assuming that the members are new to the group, the directors spend the first 15 minutes determining if they can dance. Therefore, directors critically observe members as they dance to the choreographed steps. Those who cannot dance are given more time to learn. If one cannot dance properly but can sing, they are often given other roles in the group, such as playing an instrument while singing.

Second, members learn the lyrics as they explore their vocal range. According to Kamotho, vocal projection during the performance is critical to Meru's ancestral music style.

"Members stand in a line and loudly sing along to what the trainer is teaching in bits. They do not sit and listen; they do it practically", Kamotho added. After viewing the rehearsal videos acquired from the group, I noticed that Energy and vocal projection were evident. The directors equally noted that they sometimes preferred training both the song and the dance simultaneously, thus minimizing learning time.

Sometimes, we teach them while seated, but in this case, we only train the lyrics and vocals. However, when they are standing and moving to the rhythm, we train both the lyrics, vocals, and dances simultaneously, as Aron mentioned earlier. When they are standing, we achieve the two factors, unlike when they are seated (Aron).

Combining singing and dancing posed challenges to some of the members. Most of the time, the text carries a meaning that requires certain physical expressions. These expressions are embedded in the dance choreography and may be challenging to execute while singing. In that case, the directors reported using the extra time to teach coordination of various body movements to match the lyrics.

Endurance is required to participate in Meru ancestral music; therefore, physical fitness is a key aspect that members value and often struggle to achieve. Physical fitness helps the participants sing while vigorously dancing without experiencing extreme panting situations. One of the directors explained that physical exercise was critical from the beginning stage of the training. The dancers stretch their bodies and run around the field for 10 minutes without stopping as part of warming up. Sometimes, they do it while chanting or singing some of the songs to ensure that they master the art of breathing well in such situations.

We have physical exercises to avoid the gasping aspect, and then after that, we engage in training that incorporates the dance moves. So, we ensure to do rigorous physical exercises to avoid extreme panting. You know, rapid breathing inhibits vocal projection when one is panting. That is why training is essential (M3G4).

### **Peer Learning and Interactions**

Members of MCD seemed to operate like a family. Since most of them are from Marimba village in Meru County, they interact freely, having known each other for years. During the focus group interviews, they reported forming their leadership structure and assigning responsibilities within the group. The above happened with the approval of their directors. The leadership structure manages everyday music practices and the welfare of the group. A member (M1G1) said, "We have our chairman, secretary, and treasurer. Those are our little bosses, and



we listen to them". He also reported that they consulted with their directors to ensure that their stay was enjoyable.

Each group member is assigned a role at some point to ensure efficiency in learning and performing the music. Members expressed their pleasure in being part of the team that helped the group in various capacities. Some are tasked to concentrate on choreography movement, others the vocals, while someone else is tasked to manage time and instill discipline. "So, it is convenient when criteria are put in place and when everyone has their role among the members. It makes us happy and trains us to be responsible (M4G2).

New members are always welcome. Apart from the directors' role in ensuring that new members meet the criteria for joining the group, existing members collaborate to ensure the comfort of new members in terms of learning music. Each new member is assigned two to three experienced peers to train and help them catch up with the rest. One of the participants explained the process they use to help new members learn and fit within the group as soon as possible.

What we do is you have the song written for the members, and they are tasked to learn the words/lyrics and the tune, and from there, they are trained in the choreography by the two or three members. Within a few days, two to three days after joining, they become familiar with the songs and dances. From there, they begin to learn on their own, slowly, since they now have a little knowledge of what they are doing. If they are passionate, it will not take long. They just catch up with others (M3G1).

During focus group interviews, I realized that it wasn't all work, every day. Members reported that they spared some time within the training sessions to have fun and bond. The break sessions help them relax and unwind after vigorous singing and dancing. During those short breaks, they play games like poker and snooker as they get to know each other better. "I am sure that no one would attempt to miss any rehearsal session because they cannot stand the thought of missing the fun. I cannot imagine not being part of this group,"(M5G4).

### **Performances and Traveling Opportunities**

The goal of the MCD group is to showcase the ancestral music of the *Amiiru* people of Kenya. Through their 13 years of existence (2009 to the day of writing this report), they have gained influence as one of the revivers of Meru's ancestral music. To show how famous the group is, one of the directors said, "...*And it is a big group because we are sometimes invited to entertain*



*the president at the statehouse, among other significant occasions. We are currently the group that upholds the Meru musical culture in society".*

MCD takes pride in participating in various cultural music competitions in the country. They are also reported to have participated in many social and political functions in Meru County and beyond, which motivates them to keep learning ancestral music.

We attend cultural events; for example, we participated in Kenyatta University's Culture Week Festivals in Nairobi. We also hold cultural music competitions and entertainment during political occasions. At times, we entertain in wedding and initiation ceremonies, Thanksgiving ceremonies—when something good is happening in the community—and entertain our people. We also perform at fundraising occasions. All that makes us happy (M2G4).

Members of MCD love traveling. Before joining the group, most members had limited opportunities to travel to different places in the country. Invitations to perform in different places offered opportunities to travel around the country. Their expressions showed that traveling was among their primary motivators. In 2009, when the group made its first tour to the capital, Nairobi, and other cities, new members joined the group with lots of expectations. Below are some of their sentiments when asked what they expected to achieve apart from singing and dancing.

**M1G2:** *Obviously, you must expect something. Once you do something good, you will have a good result. Personally, my expectation is met because this music has taken me to places I wouldn't have gone.*

**M2G4:** *I second him since the last time we were in Kakamega [a city in Western Kenya], and I don't think I would have gone to such a place if it weren't for this group.*

**M4G1:** *Adding on the same, I have toured the country a lot. For example, at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Mombasa, the group has fulfilled my expectations, and I am motivated to do more.*

**M4G3:** *I will be honest with you: I love traveling. This group has made me visit countless places and interact with powerful people, including the president. I am glad he appreciates our music.*

**M5G3:** *I couldn't agree more with what my friends have said. We get so motivated when we have an upcoming trip outside Meru County. We rehearse like crazy just to make our directors and the community proud.*

## DISCUSSION

Forming a group of singers and dancers to revive the ancestral music of the Amiiiru people is an idea that arose when the traditional and folk music of the Amiiiru was on the brink of fading away. This music is an essential part of their culture. Because cultures are dynamic, Amiiiru songs and dances have changed over time, influenced by various factors. Orawo (2011) mentioned an example of technological progress that drives the liveliness seen in music production and practice, not only in Meru but across all communities in Kenya. It requires focus and dedication to establish and sustain operations in such a group.

Discipline is a virtue that boosts commitment and ensures smooth operation among members of any successful group. Before the MCD was formed, the founders envisioned a tradition where well-behaved young men performed ancestral music. Good behavior reduced distractions and helped learners focus better on their tasks. It's also worth noting that some potential members were attracted to the group because of its structured dedication to its vision.

Commitment requires motivation and self-regulation, which are essential for completing tasks that support the visions of many musical ensembles (Miksza, 2006; Rolandson, 2020). MCD members appeared to be motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically. Their intrinsic motivation stemmed from the satisfaction of singing and dancing to ancestral music. It was clear in their expressions when they gathered to rehearse. Their social interactions, performances, and opportunities to travel motivated them to keep practicing ancestral music. As Orawo (2011) argued, ancestral music is practiced and performed communally, and therefore, cohesion is achieved when members of MCD participate on various occasions.

Learning and performing the ancestral music of the Amiiiru presents challenges that require perseverance. These challenges lessen when learning materials and activities match learners' interests, fostering a passion for learning (Isabirye, 2021). The Amiiiru music culture bearers used indigenous oral methods for learning and teaching. I agree with Isabirye (2021), who argues that culturally rooted indigenous learning models promote social, collective, participatory, and interactive ways of building and recreating musical knowledge and skills. Collaborative learning added value for members through peer-to-peer learning, helping them develop new skills and improve performance, which led members to rethink their goals for musical and personal success (Bonshor, 2020; Forbes, 2020). Although the authenticity of the Amiiiru people's ancestral music, as practiced by MCD, might be questionable, their learning

strategies (aural, peer, imitation, apprenticeship) clearly align with indigenous oral learning methods that encourage community involvement.

The MCD group's emphasis on observational learning, modeling, and reinforcement aligns closely with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which posits that individuals learn behaviors by watching others and experiencing the consequences of those actions (Bandura, 1977). New members of MCD are integrated into the group through structured peer mentorship, where they observe and imitate experienced dancers and singers, gradually mastering complex cultural performances. Additionally, the group's disciplinary measures and performance incentives serve as reinforcement mechanisms, shaping members' behavior and encouraging adherence to the group's cultural and social values.

Overall, the findings of this study spark a discussion on the importance of communal music-making, while also highlighting the imbalance between ancestral music and contemporary music practices. Although the methods of MCD in preserving ancestral music might not be universally applicable, they offer a starting point for individuals or organizations interested in forming groups to revive these musical traditions. Further research, using additional data sources and involving participants over a longer period, is recommended. This should include diverse cultural backgrounds and involve mixed-gender and different age groups. Such efforts would help balance the practice and production of music and dance in Kenyan societies and beyond.

## **CONCLUSION**

The formation of MCD to revive the ancestral music of the Amiiru people highlights the crucial role of discipline, commitment, and motivation in preserving cultural traditions. While ancestral songs and dances have evolved over time due to social and technological influences, MCD's organized approach and shared dedication have created a space for young people to reconnect with their heritage. The group's use of indigenous oral learning methods—such as imitation, apprenticeship, and communal participation—shows the ongoing importance of traditional teaching methods in passing down cultural knowledge. Although questions of authenticity may arise, the strategies employed by MCD highlight the potential of collaborative learning and genuine passion in preserving and adapting ancestral music today. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the importance of community music-making as a means to revive culture and foster identity, while also highlighting the need for broader, more inclusive research that considers diverse voices and practices. These ongoing efforts will help ensure that ancestral

traditions, such as those of the *Amiiru*, remain lively, meaningful, and accessible for future generations.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest

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