

Original Research Article

Echoes of the Past: Exploring the Kamba History through Traditional Songs

Faith Mbithe Kathukya^{1*}, Dr. John Khaisie Wanyama (PhD)¹

¹Department of Humanities, School of Education and Social Sciences, University of Embu, 6-60100 Embu, Kenya

Article History
Received: 07.04.2026
Accepted: 14.04.2026
Published: 24.04.2026

Journal homepage:
<https://www.easpublisher.com>

Quick Response Code



Abstract: Ancient songs have their own place in the cultural memory and historical consciousness of a community. They do not only serve as a form of art, but also as source of knowledge, values and shared experiences. Songs have been used as a powerful tool to pass and transmit history from one generation to another amongst the Akamba of Kenya and therefore serve as a living archive. This paper examines the Akamba traditional songs and how they help preserve the history of the community. The study employed a qualitative approach, where Akamba traditional songs were carefully selected from memory, YouTube and interviews with the elderly. Thereafter, the obtained data was analyzed thematically. The findings prove that the Akamba community has traditional songs which play a very significant role in preserving its history. Performance elements such as rhythm, repetition and symbolism strengthen memories and protect historical information. As a result, the songs cannot be considered solely as the tools of entertainment but rather of great historical value, as they criticize, narrate and maintain community culture. These songs emphasize the inseparable connection between the oral literature and the collective memory of the communities that have limited written accounts of their history.

Keywords: Traditional Songs, Akamba, Oral History, Social Identity, Collective Cultural Memory.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a basic tool of maintaining and perpetrating culture. Communities produce their beliefs, values, customs and diverse traditions through linguistic modalities to ensure that they are passed across generations (Nosirova 2026). Language influences how people view and understand the world, as well as how they communicate and interact with others within their social and cultural environments. Cultural narratives, songs, rituals, proverbs, and social histories are conveyed and preserved through the use of language. As a result, language is an inseparable medium of sustaining and developing cultural identity in a particular society (Gwervevde *et al.*, 2023). Without linguistic ability, much of the historical and cultural heritage of a given community would decline and possibly become irreversibly lost and language is therefore a very important tool of oral preservation and transmission of culture. Such oral traditions include folktales, songs, proverbs, legends, fictional tales, and historical tales. Furthermore, the concept of language cannot be discussed without being intertwined with culture because the meaning of language and its application depends upon on cultures surrounding language users.

Banks (2014) affirm that every community has its unique culture that defines communicative practices and social activities. Similar to other communities, the Akamba community has its own culture which is passed down through generations via traditional songs, sayings and stories (Kitunda 2024). Such oral expressions are what is generally defined as oral literature. Regarding stories, there are narrations that define the origin of the Akamba people. They refer to a Bantu-speaking group mainly residing in the Eastern region of Kenya, including the counties of Kitui, Machakos and Makueni (Hobley 1938). In the traditional Akamba beliefs, the tribe settled in regions near the Mount Kilimanjaro in the sixteenth century. At the end of the century, the Kamba started to scatter (Zezeza 1995). Later, they settled at Kibwezi, the Kyulu Hills and the Kibwezi plains and here they faced the challenges such as drought.

The Akamba people have another oral tradition which purports that the earliest human couple was created by Mulungu (God) and were placed on a rock of Mount Nzau (Madu 2022). Due to heavy rains, another couple emerged from a nearby anthill. The family that came from the sky gave birth to sons while the one that

*Corresponding Author: Faith Mbithe Kathukya

Department of Humanities, School of Education and Social Sciences, University of Embu, 6-60100 Embu, Kenya

emerged from the anthill gave birth to daughters. These male and female offsprings later married and their children became Kamba ancestors. This story goes further to explain that Mulungu blessed them with plenty livestock, food, rain, and family but they failed to show appreciation. As a result, famine and drought struck them and the Akamba people had to move to other parts to seek food.

Traditional songs have served as a central means through which communal culture is passed on. This statement is supported by a number of previous scholarly studies including the following.

A study by Lawrence-Hart and Tamunoiyalla (2023) considered music as a major store of oral literature and its use in expressing the African culture. The authors argue that, traditional songs are sung orally and they include rhythmical patterns that spread narrative, moral teaching and societal memory between generations. As a result, these songs affirm social identity and protect indigenous knowledge systems especially in the non-literacy settings. Although the previous research considers the African communities in a more general sense, the current study explores traditional songs of the Akamba community within a more specific context, thus contributing to the impact of the meaning of specificity to culture.

Mataruse (2017) examined the role of the traditional songs in Zimbabwean schools and how they help in conveying cultural identity and values to the youth. The study findings proved that their implementation in the curricula not only contribute to better understanding of cultural heritage by the students but also strengthens the social cohesion. This curbs erosion of culture caused by western influence. Mataruse's study is relevant to the current study as it explains how songs teach young people about their cultures. However, the current research is different since it focuses on a specific community (the Akamba community) in Kenya which creates a better room for deeper understanding.

Also, Rono (2022) explored on Kalenjin's traditional songs and explained how they been adapted to maintain cultural values. Rono found that the shift in musical styles and instrumentation, influenced by circumcision rituals and modern technological advancements, has not undermined the main cultural messaging, ethical lessons, historical accounts and a sense of community. In this regard, these songs remain to be vital tools of perpetuation of the culture among the Kalenjin. These findings can be used to support the current investigation, as they emphasize the ability of traditional songs to pass on cultural heritage. Nevertheless, whereas the work of Rono deals with the Kalenjin tribe, the present paper deals with the Akamba.

In another study, Musau (2012) focused on the Akamba of the Kitui County, Kenya. Her study explored on traditional song-dance known as *Kilumi*. Musau found that, *Kilumi* performs various social and cultural roles. He also discovered that it is used in many rituals and carries cultural meanings as well as healing emotional distress besides preserving traditions. Musau's work is pertinent to the present research because it explores Akamba songs. The difference is that she focused on one type of Kamba dance (*Kilumi*) as opposed to the current study that focuses traditional songs.

Though there are some few studies that focused on traditional songs, very little attention has been paid on traditional songs of the Akamba community. This research was therefore conducted to fill the scholarly gap by determining the role of traditional songs in the maintenance of the Akamba cultural heritage.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by Oral Tradition Theory which examines how information, history, culture and value systems are passed on through oral narratives such as songs, folktales, proverbs and rituals among generations. The proponent of this theory is commonly known as Vansina (1985), who emphasized more on the historical credibility and value of oral traditions in creating African History. Also, Ong (1982) clarified on cognitive and cultural differences between oral and written communications. Based on the essential principles of this theory, oral tradition is dynamic, community based, performative and is often expressed in culturally symbolic forms in which multiple meanings are embedded. The theory also argues that oral narrative is a valid source of historical knowledge. These traditions therefore cannot be said to be informal narrations but rather they are organized systems of historical memory and social identity.

The applicability of the Oral Tradition Theory to this paper is based on the fact that it recognizes traditional songs as a valid source of history particularly in societies where written documents have not been the major source of historical preservation. The major tenets of this theory include:

- a) Oral narratives as a form of historical evidence - oral narratives are recognized as valid source of historical knowledge that can be used to maintain the experience and societal changes. They store historical meaning in organized forms, symbolism and performance, therefore acting as stores of memory and as a way of interpreting the past.
- b) Intergenerational transmission - the transmission of oral traditions is done across generations through cultural custodians like the elders and performers. This transmission maintains continuity and makes contextual adaptation. These traditions are made relevant

and sustainable through repetition and communal engagement.

- c) Collective memory - oral tradition has its root in communal group memory and not individual memory. Communities strategically choose to maintain stories that support their identity, values and social cohesion. This is maintained through public performance to ensure continuity.
- d) Social and cultural roles – some important function of oral traditions include distribution of moral principles and social norms. They define social organization, such as power and gender roles while allowing members of the society to reflect.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research method which is which involves the use of non-numerical data as explained by Creswell (2014) and explored the traditional songs of the Wakamba community. Purposive sampling was used to select research participants and the songs that represent a significant cultural and historical value of the Wakamba society. The reason for adopting purposive sampling was to acquire data relevant to this study. Data was collected based on memory and interviews with the aged members of the Kamba community who gave voluntary verbal informed consent. Aged respondents were given priority as they have the ability to uncover deeper cultural meaning of the songs hence contributing immensely to the achievement of this research objective. The interview required the participants to sing traditional songs and explain their meaning. Their contributions were recorded using sound recorder to ensure that no information was lost. Moreover, relevant audiovisual content that was found on the YouTube platform were downloaded to obtain data for this research. The collected data (songs) were listened to, transcribed, translated and coded for analysis. To ensure that the meaning of the original language (Kikamba) was maintained, free translation technique was used to achieve this as it safeguards the original meaning. Thereafter, the data was thematic analyzed and the findings obtained were presented in descriptive and interpretative way. Atlas.ti24 aided in categorizing and analyzing the data. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the study. Those who took part in interviews were not coerced, they deliberately gave their verbal consent. Verbal consent resolved to be very practical as majority of those involve did not know how to read and write.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings show that the Akamba community have traditional songs that play a pivotal role in transmitting and preserving culture. These songs are experienced in a range of environments, with a very high prevalence in social ceremonies. They comprise themes such as love, harvest, war, praise, circumcision and culture among others. According to the empirical studies,

this genre is characterized by a certain rhythmic pattern, a particular theme and a specific functionality. These songs helps to protect and spread the historical heritage of a community, to provide moral guidance, to spread the cultural awareness and to eliminate the social anxieties. Traditionally, these songs were accompanied by instrumentals such as drums, kayamba, flutes and rhythmic clapping of hands. These songs are fundamental to both cementing the cohesiveness and preserving cultural identity of the Kamba people, hence facilitating the intergenerational transmission of moral and cultural beliefs. Traditional songs of the Kamba people are discussed in the following section:

4.1 Oral Narratives as a Form of Historical Evidence

Oral narratives exist in different forms to serve an important role in the society. They include; folktales, legends, myths, fables, trickster tales and epic narratives. These narratives can be presented to the audience through dramatization, traditional oral performance, narration through music or song and written transcriptions. This paper is examining the Kamba traditional songs and how they serve a great value in preserving the history of a people. Some of the Kamba traditional songs serve as a form of historical evidence because they match with written records and real life accounts. They represents actual things that happened in the past. These songs include:

4.1.1 Burma

Burma was the former name of the country now known as Myanmar. The country is located in Southeast Asia. In this context, it represents a song title which narrates the experience of the Kamba warriors who travelled to that country to participate in world war. It explains the hardships they faced, the panic they had and the pain they experienced to separate with their families. The intention of the song was to inculcate boldness, unity and perseverance among those involved. This is illustrated by the following song:

*Mundu ndakusaa Ngai atanenda
Naendaa nyie tukiinga Burma
Meli yaendaa ta nzeve suosu
Syana tiwai na ngethi Ngai enda akatutunga
twonane ingi*

No one dies unless God has planned it
When we crossed heading to Burma
The ship moved like the wind
Children, goodbye. If God wills, He will bring
us back together so we may see each other
again.

Based on this song, Many Kamba people participated in the Second World War as soldiers of the Kenyan army. They were deployed to fight in various war zones, including Burma. In that war, the Kamba were selected to be part of the military forces because of their bravery, resilience and ability to endure harsh conditions (Parsons 1999). In the song mentioned above,

it begins with the line, “A person does not die unless God has planned it.” These words were meant to give courage to those who were placed on the front lines of the war. It encouraged them not to fear anything by recognizing the presence of God, while emphasizing that if God had not decreed a person’s death, it could not occur. This is further reinforced by another line in the song which states, “Farewell, children; if God wills, He will bring us back so that we may see each other again.” This line clearly shows that those who went to fight in Burma went through many hardships and therefore relied on God for protection and mercy during the war. These words are a respectful and loving farewell, expressing the close relationship between those who were leaving and those who remained behind. Although they sang to strengthen and encourage themselves, the phrase “if God wills” reflected humility and faith, acknowledging that their plans depended on God’s will. Likewise, saying “He will bring us back so that we may see each other again” affirms their hope that God would protect them and allow them to return safely. As explained by Vansina (1985), this is a form of collective memory preserved by the Kamba community to inform future generations about what happened during the Second World War. Moreover, the narrative is supported by written historical records that confirm its authenticity. Through this, the history of the Kamba community is preserved and transmitted from one generation to another.

4.1.2 *Kithio kya Mukamba (The Kamba Tradition)*

This song describes the way of life of the Kamba people before westernization and the arrival of the colonialists. It makes people conscious of their culture and encourages them to safeguard it. The example below depicts that.

Mulwa ningwina, nikulye ikulyo, Kithio kya Mukamba kyaendie naku? Iia ithuke, mauta ma ngombe, usuu wi ikie, uki wa nzuki, ngima ya nzenga, kiteke kya manga, ngima ya uimbi na kinaa kya mwee (Maliu ala matene maisawa ni Mukamba akekala miaka maana atatu (300) ta nguu.)

Mulwa, I sing as I inquire: where has the Kamba’s traditional food gone? Sour milk, cow’s ghee, porridge, honey, ugali, cassava meals, finger-millet ugali and sorghum porridge. (The traditional foods consumed by the Kamba in the past that enabled a person to live for three hundred years like a tortoise.)

This traditional song provides education to young people about the indigenous foods that were consumed by the Akamba community. The singer emphasizes that these foods are very important to health of every human being, as they contribute to increasing their lifespan. To convey this message, the singer uses a simile by stating that they enabled people to live for three hundred (300) years like a tortoise, which lives for a long time. These foods include: milk, finger-millet porridge,

honey, ugali and cassava. This song is very important because through language, it transmits the culture of the Akamba community from one generation to another and serves as an historical evidence as explained in the theory. This paragraph has been presented using pauses to give listeners an opportunity to interpret the message. This study supports the view that every society has its own type of clothing and even its own foods (Tharmabalan *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, this song educates present and future generations about the traditional foods of the Akamba and their health benefits.

In the following excerpt, the belief system of the Akamba community is described. Besides God, who was called Mulungu, they believed in prophets who foretold various events to them and even healed them. The following example illustrates this:

Musungu atanoka kwai Mathembo, kwai athani Syokimau na Mwatu wa Ngoma...ngima ya mwee, kiteke cha mwanga, miti ya Kithekani dawa ya Mukamba (Dawa ila syathiawa ni usuu)

Before the coming of the Europeans, there were places of sacrifice, prophets such as Syokimau and Mwatu wa Ngoma... finger-millet ugali and cassava, and herbs from the forest were medicine for the Akamba (medicine prescribed by our grandmothers)

This song explains the history of the Akamba. The explanations conveyed through the song serve as historical evidence as stated in the theory of Oral Tradition (Vansina 1985). Before the coming of the Europeans, who were involved in the spread of Christianity, the Akamba had places of worship known as *Mathembo* (places of sacrifice). They also had prophets such as Syokimau and Mwatu wa Ngoma. These figures greatly contributed to Akamba history, especially through prophecy and leadership. Syokimau was a famous prophetess who foresaw future events such as the coming of the Europeans and the railway, and she was able to prepare the Akamba for those transitions. Mwatu wa Ngoma on the other hand, was a renowned social and spiritual leader who stressed on community unity and safeguarded Akamba customs and traditions. Both played a significant role in preserving the identity and culture of the Akamba community. In this song, the technique of repetition has been used to emphasize the message about the traditional foods of the Akamba community and to reinforce memory. Therefore, this song is an important source of historical knowledge, as it has been used to preserve these cultural events, especially during a period of transition.

In another stanza the song captures events that took place during the colonial period. Imagery is used to describe actions carried out by the British colonizers that negatively affected the Akamba community. The following example emphasizes this:

Musungu avivisye Mathembo nayo mbua yaeka kuwa (Mbua ya Mukamba yathembawa Mathemboni nikenda liu ukethiwa na kukethiwa na mumo.)

When the Europeans burned the sacred shrines, the rains ceased. The Akamba offered sacrifices at the shrines so that there would be abundant harvests and blessings.

According to the song, it is evident that in the past, the Akamba community performed rituals to please God. When these rituals were conducted at the sacred shrines (*Mathembo*), rain would fall. However, when the Europeans arrived, they burned these traditional places of worship, causing the rain to cease. As a result, many parts of Ukambani experience drought and food shortages, as highlighted in the song. The song conveys an important historical message about the Akamba community, one that serves a crucial role of making them understand their identity and make sense of the nature of their environment.

Finally the song concludes by urging the Kenyans in Diaspora to take part in preserving their culture as follows:

Ngakulwa nasya tusisye nesa tuikese utwika ngombo ya Musungu. Kuthi Ulaya kuituma witwa Musungu

If asked, I would say that we should be careful not to become European's slaves. Going to Europe cannot make someone become a European.

The song firmly criticized colonial influences, highlighting that some Akamba who travel to Europe adopt European ways of life. Through this song, the Akamba are reminded of their cultural heritage by stressing that going abroad cannot alter their true identity. Consequently, songs like this are valuable as they educate the community about their traditions while evoking emotions by linking them to historical experiences.

4.1.3 *Ndeto sya Itheka (Land Disputes)*

This song creatively represents what is believed to be cause of migration of the Kamba people. Various sources trace the origin of this Bantu community as Mt. Nzau. In the following part of the song, the history of the migration of the Akamba community is affirmed.

Ninguma nthi ya Nzau nithi ngatuile Kambu, kitumi nundu kuya kwitu kwina mathina ma kimusyi, kwitu andu ma musyi metindia utetani'a

I will leave the land of Nzau and go to live in Kambu because back home there are family

problems; the people at home are always quarrelling.

This song is constructed within a setting believed to be the original homeland of the Akamba, thus aligning with written historical records as explained by the theory. According to Akamba history, one narrative states that after God created the first couple, He placed them on Mount Nzau (Madu 2022). God blessed them and they multiplied greatly in that region. In this song, the singer acknowledges Nzau as his place of origin, which is believed to be where the Akamba first lived. He also introduces the idea of family conflicts, attributing it to population growth and the ensuing competition for land. This depiction aligns with historical accounts of the Akamba community, which indicate that as the population expanded, famine emerged, compelling groups to migrate to other regions in search of sustenance.

This traditional song plays a significant role in preserving and transmitting the culture of the Kamba community, as it serves as a repository of the community's knowledge and history (Vansina 1985). Through songs, the community preserves historical memories and passes them down to children and youth. Moreover, they help promote the Kikamba language and strengthen social cohesion, since they are performed during various social gatherings. Therefore, such songs function as a medium of communication and as a tool for sustaining the community's identity. The findings of this study affirm that Kamba songs are not merely a form of entertainment, but also a means of conveying their history, philosophy and worldview to future generations.

4.2 Collective Memory

Collective memory refers to the socially constructed body of shared knowledge and representations of the past that a community preserves and transmits across generations. It transcends individual recollection, functioning instead as a communal framework through which historical experiences, values and identities are remembered and interpreted within a social group. This memory is sustained and transmitted through oral forms such as songs, myths, legends, and narratives. Vansina contends that oral traditions constitute legitimate historical sources because they convey inherited messages from the past, even though their content may undergo adaptation over time. These traditions encapsulate communal understandings of origins, migrations, conflicts, leadership and cultural norms, thereby serving as repositories of a society's historical consciousness.

4.2.1 *Ngulu*

Ngulu is a song title used to represent a person's name. This song is sung by children or by adults to children and is used to teach good behavior and provide life guidance within the community. Community members are educated concerning respect, courage,

responsibility, honesty, humanity and how to live peacefully with others (Ngungi and Mwihiya 2022). These songs promote discipline and transmit community values from one generation to the next. For example, the following song teaches children and all community members to be disciplined and to avoid actions that harm others:

*Ngulu eee Ngulu Mwa iwaa
Ngulu eee Ngulu wa Kasembele
Ewe nguluu, malenge meene mwatemangie
No mukaiva, nguluue Ngulu mwa iwa*

Ngulu eeh Listen Ngulu
Ngulu eeh, Kasembele's child
Please Ngulu, the pumpkins you destroyed are people's property
Listen Ngulu, you will pay for them

This song is very important in guiding the community. It advises members of the society to respect other people's property in order to maintain peace among themselves. In the song, the character Ngulu is identified as the son of Kasembele. According to the song, Ngulu and his unnamed companions destroyed pumpkins which are among the valued foods in the Kamba community. Ngulu and his companions are reminded that their action carries a penalty of compensating the rightful owner of the pumpkins. The song teaches that every choice made in life has consequences. Through it, lessons emphasized during major initiation rites, such as hard work, honesty and responsibility, are reinforced. As a result, the song has been selected by the community as a shared cultural memory to be passed down from one generation to another. It stresses that one should not steal or destroy others' property, as those who do so bear the cost. To ensure that it is not forgotten, anaphora is used in its delivery to emphasize the message, add rhythm and strengthen memory. Even today, community members learn through this song to demonstrate discipline by respecting other's property. They learn to be contented with what they have, without grudgingly desiring other people's possessions. These findings align with that of Treacy and Westerlund (2019), who found that songs are used to teach values as part of moral development. The song also encourages community members to take responsibility in caring for both their own property and that of others.

4.2.2 Kuthamba (Bathing)

Furthermore, the following is sung by children in the Kamba community to promote cleanliness among them. The song is commonly referred to as bathing song. The lyrics are as follows:

*Ngamukaa ngathambaa maau
Nzanue nzwi, na ndyela mbwaa
Nzwakaa maeo, nikana nithiwe ni mutheu yvu
Mundu utesi kuthamba, ni ndia yi kithingo
Suania kuthamba, kuthamba ni kuseo*

I wake up and wash my feet
I comb my hair and cut my nails

Then I brush my teeth to be completely clean
A person who does not know how to bathe is a dirty fool

Think about bathing; bathing is good

In Kamba cultural practice, this song is sung by children to portray the lifestyle of a responsible person. It shows that children should ensure body cleanliness by bathing, brushing their teeth, cutting their nails, and combing their hair. The song demonstrates that bathing is an act of responsibility as it reflects a person who cares about their health, their dignity and that of others. Bathing is a fundamental act that plays an important role in maintaining physical health and social well-being. Although it may seem like an ordinary activity, bathing daily is a sign of personal responsibility for one's health and the surrounding environment. When a person fulfills this duty, they protect themselves from diseases caused by dirt (Friis *et al.*, 2024). They also show consideration for others by preventing the spread of bad odors and harmful germs to those nearby. This confirms that bodily cleanliness should be regarded as an essential part of values and social-cultural well-being. Therefore, this song is preserved and passed down by the community to safeguard health and protect the environment.

4.3 Intergenerational Transmission

This refers to the process of passing cultural knowledge, values, and social norms from elders to young generations. These knowledge and values are mostly carried in songs for retention. The following songs illustrates this.

4.3.1 Nzaiko (Circumcision)

This is a Kamba circumcision song sung to help young men develop courage to endure pain and to give them confidence as they move from childhood into another social group (adulthood). These songs are repeated throughout the preparation and circumcision period to ensure that the cultural messages are deeply internalized and that the boys understand their new social roles. The act of instilling courage is clearly reflected in the following song that was sung during the circumcision period:

*Uka Mbola wathi wa nzaiko niwaambia
Uka utena wia
Mwana weene, ngasya wi mundu yu*

Come slowly, the circumcision song has begun
Come without fear
Young boy, you have now become a man

In the Akamba community, this song is sung to prepare young boys who are about to undergo circumcision. It is a song performed to mark the official commencement of the circumcision ceremony. The lyrics were intended to strengthen the initiate's courage, especially by encouraging them to walk forward without fear. These words aim at giving them renewed strength to endure pain or suffering, which symbolizes the transition into adulthood. After circumcision, the

initiates are celebrated and officially informed that they have become men, meaning that they have crossed from one social group into another. This explanation agrees with Vansina (1985) who stated that oral traditions are passed down from one generation to another. The song clearly highlights an important cultural practice of the Kamba community which is circumcision. During circumcision, as explained by Kobia (2013), the initiates received various teachings after the ritual and later returned home with courage and a better understanding of how to live with others in society.

4.3.2 *Kavuli (Sturdy)*

In the Kamba community, *kavuli* means a piece of wood which is used to pound or thresh seeds from pods of crop harvest. Therefore, this is a title of song done during and after harvest period. The song goes as follows:

Kavuli vula mwee witu
Kavuli vula mwee witu
Ngatia nekalila kivalo ngivulavula mwee witu
Ngatia nekalila kivalo ngivulavula mwee witu

Sturdy, thresh our barley
 Study, thresh our barley
 I will sit on a stool and thresh our barley
 I will sit on a stool and thresh our barley

In the Akamba community, it is known as a harvest song. It encourages and strengthens those pounding or threshing harvest. The phrase “*mwee witu*” (Our barley) is used to signify that these crops were planted and harvested by the Akamba community. The song preserves cultural knowledge by passing it down from one generation to the next, depicting how the Akamba threshed their harvests to obtain food and seeds for planting. However, this traditional method of processing barley like threshing and manual pounding, has been increasingly affected by technological advancements. Modern machinery now allows for faster, more efficient and less labor-intensive harvesting and processing. To some extent this has also affected the frequent use of this song especially in areas using this technologies hence making some members of the society not to picture the traditional methods reinforced through songs and practice. Moreover, this song demonstrates that the Akamba relied on agriculture to meet their dietary needs. These observations align with Po and Hickey (2018) who found that the people living in Makeni are predominantly Akamba and depend on rain-fed agriculture.

4.3.3 *Vaaya Muingo ve Kindu Kyenyu Ngwenda (Over there, there is something I desire)*

This is sung in wedding celebrations and serve both social and cultural purposes. It brings the community together, enabling everyone to participate fully not just as spectators but as active participants in the ceremony. Moreover, the song mark transitions from one stage of life to another, particularly for the bride and groom moving from youth to adulthood within the

marital life. Sometimes, before the wedding, songs of courtship were sung. For example:

Vaaya muingo, vaaya muingo
Ve kindu kyenyu ngwenda
Vee kelitu, vee kelitu kombe nesa
Nako keitwa Nthambi niko ngwenda
Nikeenukye, niikeenukye Itumbi kuya kwitu
Tukeesanie tukesanie wendo usu witu

Over there, over there
 There is something I desire
 There is a girl, there is a girl, a beautiful girl
 Her name is Nthambi, and she is the one I desire
 I will take her home, I will take her home to our place, Itumbi
 So that we celebrate and enjoy our love

This traditional song is sung by men to express that they have interest in a particular girl. It is used to officially announce the intentions of courtship. The song begins with the line “Over there, there is something I desire,” where the word “something” is used euphemistically to refer to the girl being admired. In this song, the singer specifically refers to Nthambi. These songs often praise the person being courted. For example, the singer highlights that the girl is beautiful and expresses a desire to take her home. Pragmatically, “taking her home” signifies marriage and the freedom to enjoy their love. Thus, singing is a powerful way to celebrate and honor the beginning of a new phase in life, with the participants formally declaring their courtship and marital status. These songs are passed down from one generation to another as a collective memory that preserves the history of important social activities of the Kamba community. The song is also very instrumental in passing societal values upheld in marriage.

4.3.4 *Somethya Mwana (Educate a Child)*

Education is a fundamental human right recognized internationally and is regarded as a key foundation for social, economic and political development in any society. As Alagbela (2016) explains, education is a basic issue, and when it is undermined, the entire society is affected. In the Akamba community, this issue is emphasized through “*somethya mwana*” song which highlights the importance of education. The following song illustrates this:

Somethya mwana akauive
Mwana nasome kithungu
Wona wakwata silingi semba wongelanyie nengi
Mwana nasome kithungu “Good morning”
Mung’eng’e ukatiwa uingethya
Maendeleo Kenya, yai lazima mundu akinyiwe nthi avenwe kila kyake

Educate a child so that he or she becomes knowledgeable
 Let the child learn English
 When you get a shilling, go and add it to another
 Let the child learn English, “Good morning”

Otherwise, you will be left speechless
There is development in Kenya; in the past, it
was common for a person to be abducted and
dispossessed of their property.

In the Akamba community, education is a fundamental and highly valued matter. For this reason, there are traditional songs that encourage community members to take education seriously. According to Oral Tradition Theory, such songs are passed down from one generation to another to preserve important messages (Vansina 1985). Parents are encouraged to take their children to school and to finance their education. The song even provides a practical strategy for funding education by advising parents to gradually save and pay their children school fees. Special emphasis is placed on the English language, which is deliberately used to symbolize an educated and civilized person. According to the song, certain social problems, such as abduction, are associated with a lack of education. Thus, education is portrayed as a solution to other societal challenges including poverty. The technique of repetition is used in the song to reinforce the message. These findings are consistent with that of Machin and Sandi (2024), who demonstrated that education helps reduce crime, thereby addressing social problems.

4.4 Social and Cultural Roles

According to Vansina (1985), oral traditions are central to the explanation of the social and cultural roles in a community as well as consolidating them. By use of songs, stories and proverbs, society elucidates systems of power, expectations that are assigned to each gender as well as the roles that are expected to be played by various people in the society. Such performances authorize leadership patterns, kinship and social ranks and instruct people on the proper behavior. Oral traditions also maintain social order by continuously being passed down the generations. This ensures that the cultural roles are clearly explained and social roles are maintained. The following songs illustrates this.

4.4.1 Mwaitu (Mother)

This song is presented to clearly define gender roles and emphasize the importance of being responsible to meet the societal expectation. Responsibility essentially refers to the human capacity to carry out duties wisely. In the following song, the act of praising mothers for their role in child upbringing is clearly evident.

*Wanzaie ni munini mother Susana, wanda
nginya neana*

Liu, ngua na kisomo, wandeie nesa

Mauwau mathuku ta mukambi kana polio

Wandwaie nanzoni na mayangata

Ta keka ti asyai we Mwangela uma va?

Twi Ilovi tulilikane asyai

My mother Susana, you gave birth to me and
raised me from childhood.

Food, clothing and education you provided.
Serious diseases such as measles and polio.
You took me for vaccination, and they did not
affect me.

Mwangela, if it were not for parents, where
would you have come from?

While at Nairobi, let us remember our parents.

This song is sung to praise mothers for their roles in raising children and to depict family life within the Kamba community. It targets parents while also educating children. First, it praises Susana “the mother” and reminds her of the responsibility to care for her child, ensuring that the child receives quality education and good health care (Li and Guo 2023). This is because she is expected to ensure that a child receives all the necessary vaccinations for protection against various childhood diseases. Thus, in Kamba society, the responsibility of raising children is primarily carried out by the mother. According to the theory of oral tradition, the song explains societal expectation by highlighting gender roles in the family within the Kamba community, thereby preserving the community’s history. The song also shows that responsibilities change as a person grows older. It makes it clear that once a child matures, power changes and society expects them to take care of their parents. Logically, as children grow up, their parents grow older and may no longer be able to perform physically demanding tasks. This further elevates and praises the parent for her dedication in upbringing. Therefore, the song praises the mother and reminds children that when they succeed in life, they should not forget their duty to care of their parents. It encourages the virtue of respecting parents from childhood through old age. The song portrays the parent as the foundation of any child’s success.

4.4.2 Cheki kya Mbesa (A Cheque of Money)

This is sung to encourage perseverance among members of the community. Perseverance is a person’s ability to endure or tolerate difficult situations, challenges, pain, or hardship without complaining or giving up quickly. The society expects its members to have that inner quality that enables someone to remain strong despite the problems they encounter in life. The following song illustrates this:

Kyeki kya ambesa

Kyonekaa na vinya, wikoma utaita

Uimantha mbesa, wiivuwa ni mikola

Uimantha mbesa, uikwatwa ni polisi

Ukwate cheki kila kya silingi ila noti nene

Sitindae muvuko, uume thinani

Ula wa ndunia, ula wa maisha

A cheque of money

It is not easily obtained; you may even sleep
hungry

While looking for money, you are attacked by
thugs

While looking for money, you are arrested by
the police

While trying to get a cheque of money, the big note
 To have it in your pocket and escape from hardship
 Hardships of the world and of this of life

This song shows how difficult it is to obtain money. According to Vansina's (1985) theory, the stanza highlights social responsibilities that shape community members. It explains that in the process of seeking ways to survive, people face various challenges, including arrest by the police, attacks by thugs and sometimes even lack of food. The song encourages community members to work hard without losing hope as expected by the society in order to achieve their goals. The word "money" in this context is used metaphorically to emphasize its importance in addressing human needs. Money is given great value and portrayed as a solution to all problems that affect human beings. According to Henchoz *et al.*, (2019), money is regarded as a source of freedom, a remedy for poverty and a contributor to social identity. Therefore, this song urges the Akamba people to remain patient and persevering in carrying out their activities.

This song also demonstrates the importance of hope and resilience in life is as follows:

Usia wa ndei, ndwosawa itinani
Ndwosawa nziani, uyosawa thome
Wosawa mutini, ula muasa vyu
Ukwikya metho, ngingo ikaoa iii

A bird's feather is not found on the ground
 It is not found on a path nor near homestead
 Rather, it is found on a very tall tree
 Such that when you look up at it, your neck experiences fatigue

This song is sung artistically to convey a hidden message. The singer explains that a bird's feather is not found on the ground or along the path but high up on a very tall tree. The "feather" represents valuable things and makes it clear that they are not obtained carelessly or easily. According to the theory of Oral Tradition, this song teaches moral values and is passed down from one generation to another. It motivates community members to carry out their responsibilities. This finding aligns with the study of Celniker which shows that good things are not obtained easily without effort (Celniker *et al.*, 2022). The line "ukwikya metho, ngingo ikaoa iii" (Such that when you look up at it, your neck experiences fatigue) means that success is achieved through struggle and hard work in life. Therefore, even in today's society, this song remains important because it encourages people to work hard in everything they do. Therefore, serving a cultural role of discouraging people from being lazy.

CONCLUSION

The results have revealed that the Kamba community has a rich heritage of indigenous songs that summarize historical events and important moments that help young generations to comprehend their roots and recognize their culture. They also promote cultural awareness and the feeling of belonging as the members of the community. As a result, the traditional songs are not to be seen as instruments of entertainment, but they should be preserved as important sources of historical information and national identity. In the modern world, the songs are of value in rebuilding the history as a supplement to documentary and anthropological sources of evidence and present unique indigenous visions. They also have deep emotional meaning that connects the Kamba people with the past and the current realities as well as maintaining cultural continuity. They also serve as cultural resources as well as historical archives by depicting how art, history and identity are intertwined. Future research can examine how modern technology can be used to preserve and spread these songs so they can continue and to increase engagement, understanding and appreciation in the communities.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Alagbela, Alaric Awingura. 2016. "Non-Governmental Organizations Toward the Promotion of Basic Education in the Bongo District of Ghana." *International Journal of Education and Research* 4 (2): 163–78. www.ijern.com.
- Banks, James A. 2014. *An Introduction to Multicultural Education*. Edited by Linda Bishop and Mason Karen. 5th Editio. United States of America: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Celniker, Jared B, Andrew Gregory, Hyunjin J Koo, Paul K Piff, Peter H Ditto, and Azim F Shariff. 2022. "The Moralization Effort." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 1–64. <https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xge0001259>.
- Creswell, John W. 2014. *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publication
- Friis, Cynthia M, Jay Lardizabal, and Stephanie Prischak. 2024. "Standards of Infection Prevention in the Gastroenterology Setting." *SGNA Position Statement* 47 (5): 383–97. <https://doi.org/10.1097/SGA.0000000000000842>.
- Gwerevende, Solomon, Zama M Mthombeni, and Solomon Gwerevende. 2023. "Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage: Exploring the Synergies in the Transmission of Indigenous Languages, Dance and Music Practices in Southern Africa." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 29 (5):

- 398–412.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2193902>.
- Henchoz, Caroline, Tristan Coste, and Boris Wernli. 2019. "Culture , Money Attitudes and Economic Outcomes." *Swiss Journal of Economics and Statistics* 155 (2): 1–13.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1186/s41937-019-0028-4>.
 - Hopley, Charlse William. 1938. *Bantu Beliefs and Magic*. London, United Kingdom.
 - Kitunda, Jeremiah. 2024. *Kamba Proverbs from Eastern Kenya: Sources, Origins and History*. Boydell & Brewer.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781800102682>.
 - Kobia, John M. 2013. "Gender Roles in African Oral Literature: A Case Study of Initiation Songs Among the Igembe People of Meru of Kenya." *Matatu* 41: 289.
 - Lawrence-Hart, Grace, and Somiari Tamunoiyalla. 2023. "ISSN : 2281 - 2478 Innovative Journal of Social Policy , Management and Administration." *Innovative Journal of Social Policy, Management and Administration* 11 (4): 1–11.
 - Li, Dongxu, and Xi Guo. 2023. "The e Ect of the Time Parents Spend with Children on Children ' Well-Being." *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (1096128).
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1096128>
COPYRIGHT.
 - Machin, Stephen, and Matteo Sandi. 2024. "Crime and Education." *CESifo Working Papers*, no. 11450: 1–56.
 - Madu. 2022, November 27. *The creation story of the Akamba people of Kenya*.
<https://talkafricana.com/the-creation-story-of-the-akamba-people-of-kenya/>
 - Mataruse, Shadreck. 2017. "Transmitting Cultural Identity in Schools through Traditional Music : A Case Study of Three Districts In." *Global Journal of Educational Studies* 3 (1): 61–70.
<https://doi.org/10.5296/gjes.v3i1.10638>.
 - Musau, Josephine Ndanu. 2012. "The Religious Significance of Kilumi Rituals, Songs and Dances among the Akamba of Kitui District." Kenyatta University.
 - Ngungi, Damaris Temea, and Margaret Njoki Mwihi. 2022. "A Critical Analysis of Stylo-Thematic and Perfomance of Kamba Traditional and Modern Secular Songs." *International Research Journal of Social Sciences, Education and Humanities* 3 (3): 93–107. www.irjp.org.
 - Nosirova, Arofat Erkinovna. 2026. "Language As A Means of Cultural Transmission." *Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy, and Culture* 7 (1): 244–47.
<https://doi.org/https://cajlp.casjournal.org/index.php/CAJLPC>.
 - Ong, Walter J. 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World. Reprint 2002*. New York, NY: Routledge.
 - Parsons, Timothy. 1999. "Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen": The Evolution of the Kamba as a Martial Race, 1890-1970." *Ethnohistory* 46 (4): 671–701.
<https://doi.org/https://muse.jhu.edu/article/11616>.
 - Po, June, and Gordon M Hickey. 2018. "Local Institutions and Smallholder Women's Access to Land Resources in Semi-Arid Kenya." *Land Use Policy* 76: 253–83.
 - Rono, Kipng'eno Charles. 2022. "Evolutions , Transformations and Trends in Kalenjin Traditional Songs Evolutions, Transformations and Trends in Kalenjin." *Journal of African Cultural Studies ISSN: 34* (4): 422–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2022.2106949>.
 - Tharmabalan, Rachel Thomas, Siti Atikah Rusli, Rita Lo, Nur Fadillah, Binti Saidin, and Zulfikry Basar. 2025. "From Tradition to Table: An Introduction to the Culture and Nutritional Significance of Malaysian Fermented Foods Products." *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 12: 1–16.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-025-00278-2>.
 - Treacy, Danielle Shannon, and Heidi Westerlund. 2019. "Shaping Imagined Communities through Music : Lessons from the School Song Practice in Nepal." *International Journal of Music Education* 37 (4): 512–23.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761419850251>.
 - Vansina, Jan. 1985. *Oral Tradition as History*. Botley Road Oxford: James Currey.
 - Zeleza, Paul Tiyambe. 1995. *Kamba*. New York: New York : Rosen Pub. Group.

Cite This Article: Faith Mbithe Kathukya and John Khaisie Wanyama (2026). Echoes of the Past: Exploring the Kamba History through Traditional Songs. *East African Scholars J Edu Humanit Lit*, 9(4), 173-182.
