

What is all this song and dance about?

by Charles Ng'atigwa

"Mbina ya Mabala (Dance of the environment) is doing the right thing. They sing in the language we know and they act out the issues that really touch us....This makes it possible to not just understand but also to follow what they are talking about..."

Hifadhi Ardhi Shinyanga (HASHI) is a Tanzanian Government project that started in 1986 under the Forestry Department and supported by NORAD. The Project's goal is to improve the extent and quality of vegetation-cover in Shinyanga region which has never recovered from the mass clearing policies of the tsetse eradication campaign in 1930s.

HASHI is basically an extension project that communicates both local and 'imported' agroforestry and natural resource conservation technologies to and among villagers. The Project does this both through extension workers and through developing extension material such as radio, newspapers, posters, calendars and flyers. Not satisfied with just these methods the Project has also been experimenting with traditional dance groups and video as means of communicating with villagers.

Traditional dance groups - Mbina ya Mabala

Traditionally, the Wasukuma (the local people of Shinyanga) are very fond of traditional dances. Dances start soon after the harvests in May and are held right up until the first rains in September/October. The Wasukuma have many types of traditional dances for a whole range of occasions; births, deaths, initiation ceremonies etc. Most dances take the form of

singing matches between two dance groups, Wagika and Wagalu. During a dance the two groups sing at each other - making fun of the other group - playing to the audience.

When HASHI started *Mbina ya Mabala* in 1993, we based the group on this tradition. The approach the group has worked with has changed a great deal since it was started. To begin with the Project had messages to send to the villagers. Looking back it was like propaganda; about the advantages of having forests and trees, how good soil conservation is, different soil conservation measures and different tree species. This was done through dances, role-plays and choir. We would go to the village and perform, leaving villagers to digest the messages; assuming that people would talk to the HASHI staff in their own or neighbouring village if they wanted more information. Fairly soon we found that this was not so helpful and that it was really difficult to monitor the impact of *Mbina ya Mabala*.

We then decided that we needed to see if villagers understood the Project's messages. So, we started to give space for the villagers to say what they understood, to tell us whether it was similar to the situation in their village, and, to ask them what they would be prepared to commit themselves to in order to mitigate the problems discussed.

The approach developed further. We asked villagers to request the dance group, and say why they wanted the group, how they thought it would help them and what the group should talk about. Now when we go to the village we walk around and have informal discussions with the villagers to confirm what the Village Environmental Committees (VEC) have asked for. If there is any doubt then the dance group poses a question in their role-play or during discussion time in order to reconcile what the VEC claim with what the villagers say.

The content of songs has also changed considerably. Villagers tend to ask about and be interested in practical aspects. In response *Mbina ya Mabala* has moved away from raising awareness to singing about how things can be done; how to plant trees instead of just encouraging people to plant trees; how to make a good soil mixer, how to make contour bands, how to improve *ngitiris* (grazing reserves) etc.

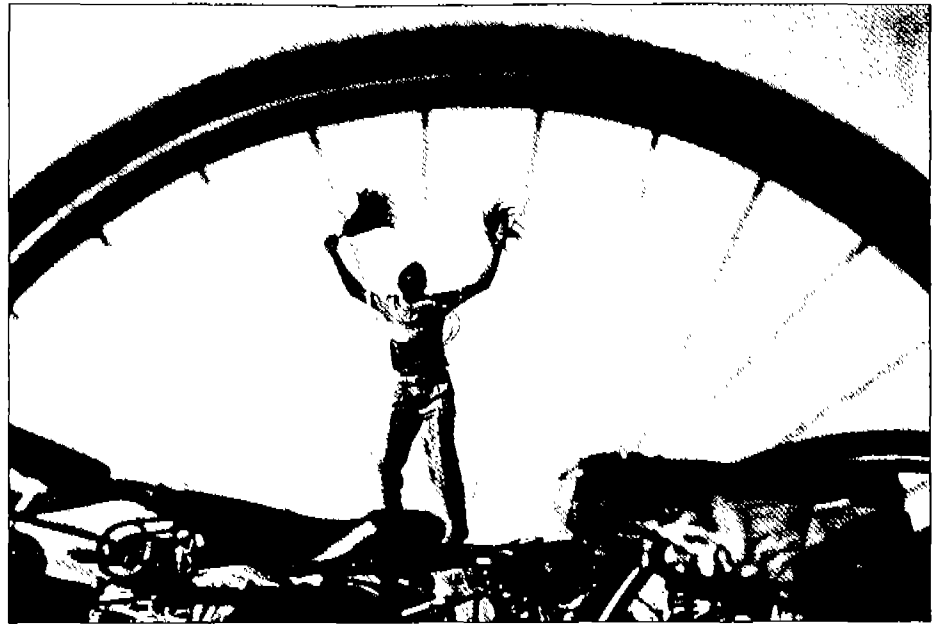
The drawback with this process is time! It needs lots of time to the extent that we now begin performances in the morning and run right through to late afternoon. Sometimes we need more than a day for the process so the dance group stays over night in the village. However, it is important not to put too much burden on the poor villagers.

Interactive video

Video as an extension tool and medium of communication has been used quite widely in developing countries including Tanzania. However, the way in which it is used varies greatly. HASHI has developed its own brand of 'Interactive Video'.

Interactive video is all process documentation, where villagers' meetings, activities and individual opinions are recorded. Villagers' innovative ideas on both indigenous and non-indigenous land management technologies are documented, shown in and shared between villages. Traditions and history of Sukuma resource management institutions have been documented. In one case video was used as a tool for reviving an indigenous institution called *Dagashida* (FTP Newsletter 22, November 1993).

Interactive video catalyses local democratic processes. The villagers through their Village Environmental Committees (VEC), as with *Mbina ya Mabala*, request the video van from the HASHI Project specifying how they want to make use of it. On the night of the video-show both library and new pictures taken earlier that day in the village are shown. The VEC introduces the evening's programme, and the village government chair the occasion. Turnouts for these shows are usually between 50-70% of the village population. After showing the chosen library video material and the material recorded that day people begin to discuss the issues at hand. Children (school and pre-school) start by giving their opinions, as in the Sukuma society, the youngest speak first. They are followed by the youth (girls and boys), then by women and men by age set. Finally the eldest man speaks and sums up all the opinions expressed before him. The village government is then asked to give its position. Discussion continues until villagers and village government resolve their differences and agree on strategies for dealing with the issue. Everybody then has contributed to and knows what has been agreed upon and is expected to follow the agreement. Those who don't, face the set traditional penalties. These discussions are occasionally so long that they may continue the following day.



The Wasukuma are famous for their dancing skills.

Photo: Lars Johansson

What does the project think ?

In Kituli village, Shinyanga Rural District, a video show and one *Mbina ya Mabala* performance were organised in response to a request by the Village Environment Committee (VEC). The committee wanted to celebrate its first anniversary - 'it had been one year since their formation. As a result of this one video show and *Mbina ya Mabala* performance the number of soil conservation groups in Kitili increased from 1 to 3, the number of members in the first group increased from 5 villagers to 12, of which 7 were women. And, the seedlings' target was raised by the groups from 8,500 seedlings 1998/99 season to 20,000 seedlings 1999/2000 season.

In other villages much seems to have been learnt from *Mbina ya Mabala* and video shows. Three water harvesting systems called *charcos* (small dams) have been constructed including inlet and outlet channels from these *charcos* to vegetable gardens.

Video has also been very useful as a tool for monitoring and evaluation of both village and HASHI activities.

What do villagers think ?

When villagers were asked to compare the effectiveness of *Mbina ya Mabala* performances with video shows as a communication

medium they said: "...these two must go hand in hand! *Mbina ya Mabala* is a very good teacher, and we can discuss issues right there at the meeting; we can even pick somebody who does not do his job properly and summon him to clarify issues. However, video is a very good practical teacher, because what *Mbina ya Mabala* tells us about we then get to see... which helps us understand and believe these things can be done; and that is something which *Mbina ya Mabala* can not do..."

Villagers also see these two media as good entertainers. "...we laugh, (*tunacheka*) we dance (*tunacheza*) and it makes us happy (*tunafurahi*)..."

They also said the two media are "...very good at attracting people, which is an issue these days as people are tired of meetings, especially political meetings ..." □

Charles Ng'atigwa has been working with the HASHI project for nine years. His special interest are the links between the rich cultural traditions in this area - music, dance, theatre, etc. - and natural resource management and how HASHI can work in a way that strengthens both. For more information contact him at: **HASHI, P O Box 797, Shinyanga, Tanzania** (Email: hashi@mwanza.com)