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Mchakamchaka Run and Sing

I was in my office not long ago, talking with Anywhere Sikochi, a first year student at Middlebury College from Zimbabwe. Like so many of the international students at Middlebury, "Siko" takes a challenging course load, and works ten to 20 hours a week in a number of jobs. He is one of the 175 international students from 66 countries at Middlebury.

"Are you having any fun," I asked him, concerned that his life at Middlebury allows for little or no leisure time.

"Oh yes," he said. "I belong to a singing and running group," and he went on to describe Mchakamchaka (pronounced the way it looks – "mm-chaka. . . mm-chaka"), an organization of students who gather twice a week at night to, well, sing while they run.

What do they sing? They sing African choral music, running songs from Tanzania and other parts of southern Africa, songs of the Nguni and Bantu people and regions, in the languages of Zulu, Xhosa ("Ko-sa"), Shona, and Kiswahili. If you have listened to Ladysmith Black Mambazo or Miriam Makeba, you know the sound.

"I try never to miss a night," Siko told me. "In the fall, I stopped because I was too busy, but I missed it a lot. Mchakamchaka is part of my life now. Even if I have an exam the next day I will run and sing at night."

"We sing everyday at home in Zimbabwe," Siko says. "It's part of daily living." He attended the International Student Organization's Talent Show in February, and Middlebury Mchakamchaka sang the Pan-African National Anthem, "Nkosi Sikeleli." "They sang it so well; I was very touched."

That very night after my conversation with Siko, I came into campus for a meeting. At the meeting's end, about 10:15 pm, I was walking to my car when I

heard the captivating cadences of Mchakamchaka for myself. A group of shadowy figures, 15 or 20 in all, were coming toward me on Proctor Road running at a fairly good clip, singing out, loud and strong, a rhythmic song.

Their song, their activity, was a celebration, an unmistakably joyous sound, cutting through the darkness and chill of a late February night in Vermont. The moment took up just that, about a moment, but I was transfixed, thrilled. It was so cool. I raced home and called my son, also a first-year student at Middlebury, and left him a message on his voice-mail, telling him of my discovery of Mchakamchaka.

I came to work the next morning to find a message on my machine from my son: "Too late, Dad," he said. "You missed me last night because I was out running . . . and singing. I do it every week. It's great."

The origin of Middlebury Mchakamchaka is an inspired story, the result of a serendipitous encounter of a student from Appleton, Maine with another from Mwanza, Tanzania, who arrived at Middlebury at the same time to start college in February, 2001.

Bennett Konesni is the Maine boy, who fell in love with African choral music in high school. "In my senior year in high school, we spent the whole year in chorus singing African music, in preparation for a three week trip to South Africa. I developed a passion for African choral music and came to Middlebury with a library of African music."

The student from Tanzania is Kiddo ("Kee-do") Kidolezi, who chose to defer his fall admission until February. They were assigned a room together ("perhaps they stuck us together because I indicated on my roommate questionnaire that I liked African music," Bennett says). They also found themselves in the same First-Year Seminar, Art and Chemistry, with Professor SunHee Choi.

At one point in the class that spring, Prof. Choi hiked the students to the top of Snake Mountain. As they descended, Kiddo started to run - and sing. "Running downhill, "Kiddo recalls, "I felt so much like I was back home. It woke up something in me, so I started to sing."

It awoke something in Bennett too. "What's that!" he exclaimed and fell in with Kiddo, running down Snake Mountain. Kiddo sang a line and Bennett repeated it, all the way down the hill, and Middlebury Mchakamchaka was born. Both students cite the Snake Mountain run as the group's "defining moment."

In elementary school in his small town in rural Tanzania, Kiddo ran mchakamchaka every day. "For an hour," he explains, "the entire school, by grades, runs and sings. They go wherever they want to go. Anyone can lead. The older students run with the younger students and teach them the songs. You

don't write anything down. You just do it. I have a library of songs in my head. Here at Middlebury, I run from the library to my room, then I write it all down."

On Monday and Thursday nights, Middlebury Mchakamchaka gathers at Gifford Hall at 10:00 pm, and runs and sings for about 45 minutes. Anybody can join in. The repertoire now for the group is nine or ten songs. Nearly 40 students, men and women alike, are members, with a core group of 12-18. Three of the students are from Africa.

"We're trying to maintain a balance between formality and spontaneity," Bennett says. We're open to everyone. On Mondays and Thursdays, anybody who wants to run with us is welcome. Every week, there's someone new. Part of the fun is the spontaneity."

At the end of every nocturnal run, the group sings a parting song. They circle around a maple tree between Mead Chapel and Gifford Hall and sing "Shosholozza." "It's everyone's favorite song," says Bennett. "It's beautiful. No one wants to leave."

For those who are more committed, there is also a Wednesday afternoon rehearsal, when the group sings "non-running" songs, "mostly songs of protest and freedom," Kiddo explains, "from the apartheid period." They have learned the Pan-African National Anthem and are working on "Homeless" by Ladysmith Black Mambazo from the Paul Simon album, "Graceland."

The original group included Bennett, Kiddo, and a few of their male friends. A women's group was begun this past fall, under the leadership of Agnes Mwakingwe, from Tanzania, and Nikki Holland, from Fayetteville, Arkansas. Men's and women's Mchakamchaka do some things together and others separately.

The spring has seen two special public events for Mchakamchaka. On Earth Day in April, the group organized a "fun run" and about 70 students showed up in the worst possible Vermont spring weather, snow and freezing rain, to carry an enormous globe made from recycled materials around the campus while singing African songs. "Everybody had such a great time," observes Bennett, "showing that celebrating the earth is important."

During final exams, after the midnight breakfast in Proctor Hall, Mchakamchaka performed before a packed house in the Hepburn Zoo. "We had been practicing our indoor songs and started by singing 'Nkosi Sikeleli,' guys and girls together," Bennett explains. "Then we sang 'Wonfa Nyem,' a song from Ghana about the importance of the community. It's a really cool song."

Bennett's dream is to get Middlebury Mchakamchaka to Tanzania. "We believe we have an underlying social mission. It would be eye-opening for us, but it would also help to show Kiddo's hometown that their culture is valuable."

Mchakamchaka is an officially recognized college club with a constitution and all the trappings. Bennett, Kiddo, Nikki, Siko and other stalwarts are committed to maintaining the momentum of this year without losing any of the passion.

"We want to spread the joy of singing and running and being alive," says Bennett. "We want to be all-inclusive and serious at the same time, honest to the music. We love the music."