Leopold Sédar Senghor, one of the leading lights of the Negritude Movement, once proclaimed that Reason was Hellenic but Rythm was indisputably African. Senghor, quintessential poet and first president of Senegal, penned innumerable poems that celebrated the hybridism and syncretism that characterize the African experience. Colonized, humiliated, dehumanized on one hand, but also elevated through education, international exposure and modernity.

Music and dance as external manifestations of the human soul cannot be divorced from politics. Negro spirituals coming down from the depths of the 18th century were an expression of profound political disenchantment of black slaves toiling and moling under white American rule. It was not lost on the African Americans that Thomas Jefferson when declaring that equality of all Americans was “self-evident” in 1774 actually was referring to White Americans. Black Slavery continued unabated for a long while after.

The jazz generation of the mid-twentieth century introduced the intoxicating notes of the saxophone not to mention the rich, husky and sonorous voices of Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis and other luminaries. But the musical notes also resonate with the political issues of the day as the “Negroes” (now taboo word, say African Americans) demand more racial justice through the likes of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Junior.

The new book, Songs and Politics in Eastern Africa, provides a convincing account of the role of songs in expressing the political vicissitudes of a people. The narratives echo the African American experience where songs became crucial in the fight against racial injustices.

The book presents 16 well-researched articles that offer a kaleidoscopic view of songs in Eastern Africa. In the case of Kenya, for instance, the authors flesh out the role played by Mau Mau songs in the resistance movement against British colonial rule in Kenya. But predictably, the songs also underscore the voracity and rapacity of the nascent African leadership shortly after independence. The new African leadership stepped into the shoes of erstwhile colonizers and unleashed untold suffering onto their peoples.

Away from the colonial and neo-colonial issues, the songs can also express conflicts of another nature, namely social issues, identity crises, generational stress, etc. The Hip-Hop artistic expression has found a home in Eastern Africa since the youth in this locale find themselves in not-so-dissimilar situations to the young African Americans in the United States. The African American youngsters of the late 1970s found themselves in an identity crisis following
Music as an expression of the soul can endear or imperil the life of the artist with respect to the powers that be. Writers suffer the same fate. As a result, there is a tendency for musicians to kow-tow to the wishes of powerful politicians in pursuit of personal aggrandizement or glory. This is captured succinctly by the introduction of mass choirs in Tanzania and Kenya to sing to the glory of former presidents Julius Nyerere and Daniel arap Moi.

Nyerere and Moi understood the potency of music in spreading political propaganda and put it to great use. Children and adults were marshalled into choirs that espoused pure propaganda on the merits of the Chief Executive and his (the only) political party. Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) and Kenya African National Union (KANU) were touted as the only political options for Tanzanians and Kenyans respectively. This balderdash was entrenched through song and dance.

At the end of Moi's reign in 2002, the new coalition party, National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), is re-energized by the enchanting song unbwogable (fearless) by the group Gidi Gidi Maji Maji. The song characterizes the buoyant and ecstatic mood that had seized the psyche of Kenyans. Kenyans wanted a fresh breath of air, and for this they were absolutely without any fear. The end of an epoch of oppression and terror was finally over.

The book is great in providing a genesis for the various musical genres in the Eastern African region. For instance, D.O. Misiani is credited with the mugithi style that pervades almost all Dholuo, Gikuyu, Kamba and Kalenjin basic music motifs. We also learn that by the 1920s was a Gikuyu dance to ridicule the White colonial masters and their African stooges. Further, the busungusungu in Tanzania address thorny juridical issues such as witchcraft that modern jurisprudence would find intractable. The mugithi, a song and dance that sounds like a national anthem among Gikuyu revellers, it is explained, was an expression of Moi's tyranny.

The repertoire is very impressive and useful reference on East African music. The authors have presented students, lecturers and researchers with a very reasonable price. The book is extremely invaluable in appreciating the political as well as the socio-economic tensions that characterize East Africa. Finally, music, like literature, expresses the genius of a people just as it lampoons and ridicules their foibles and proclivities.

In sum, Songs and Politics in Eastern Africa tell our history as well as our becoming. Senghor was probably right. The African represents a syncretism of traditional and modern value systems.

The two editors have also included songs that address major issues such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, ethnic strife and gender tensions in Eastern Africa. Traditional songs such as mwomboko as well modern songs like D unia M baya by Princess Jully point to the dangers of sexual promiscuity and warn the people, especially the youth, to be on the look-out. Similarly, ethnic bigotry, the hallmark of Kenya's political fabric, is interwoven in the songs since art can barely escape the tensions of a time. Songsters are therefore wont to extol the virtues of persons their ethnic community considers heroes and heroines, to the extent of pouring scorn and derision on other communities.

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Review written by Frederick Iraki
April 2008