

MAMBO !

The newsletter of the French Institute for Research in Africa

Volume VII, n° 3; 2008

Songs and Politics in Eastern Africa

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Mkuki na Nyota Publishers , Tanzania; Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA), Kenya
Year: 2007; 402 pages

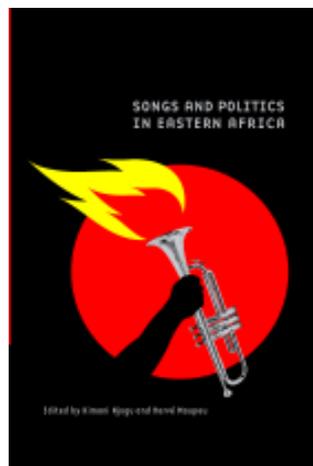
Leopold Sédar Senghor, one of the leading lights of the Negritude Movement, once proclaimed that Reason was Hellenic but Rythm was indisputably African. Senghor, quintessential poet and first president of Senegal, penned innumerable poems that celebrated the hybridism and syncretism that characterize 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 moiling 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 Malcom 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

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extreme socio-economic problems. The crisis gave rise to the Hip-Hop musical style. Thirty years later, East African youth adopted the style as it gave them a sense of belonging to an ignored group of society. Their music encapsulates socio-economic problems such as unemployment, extreme class differences, drugs, etc.

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 *umbwogable* (fearless) by the group Gidi-Gidi Maji Maji. The song emblemizes 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 song sung the praises of Kenya's heroes, past and present, as a

preparation to put in the last nail in the coffin of oppressors.

The two editors have also included songs that address *hic et nunc* 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 *Dunia Mbaya* 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.

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 *Benga* style that pervades almost all Dholuo, Gikuyu, Kamba and Kalenjin basic music motifs. We also learn that *muthirigu* in 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 songs chronicle the East African experience through the ages, from traditional Africa to Colonial Africa; and from the First Liberation to subsequent political dispensations. They symbolize and express the ethos and pathos that have pervaded the people and reflect the ever-changing topography of African way of life. The songs of David Kamaru, D.O. Misiani,

Gidi Gidi Maji Maji, Princess Jully, Eric Wainaina, etc lace aesthetic elegance with intellectual genius.

An in-depth analysis of the songs thus reveals that contrary to Senghor's dichotomy, reason and rhythm are not antithetical. The African songs and dance are an expression of both artistic elegance and intellectual genius. There is no doubt that the Greeks suffused the Hellenic period with incredible geniuses like Socrates, Aristotle, Plato and Diogenes the Cynic. Similarly, there is no second-guessing the African rhythmic genius. But to dissociate reason from rhythm is to engage in unnecessary Manichaeism. The African songs express both reason and rhythm, and Africans sway to the rhythm as they reflect on the content.

The authors have presented students, lecturers and researchers with a very useful reference on East African music. The repertoire is very impressive and the analyses accurate and convincing. 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 a people's 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.

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April 2008

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