

SONGS AND POLITICS IN
EASTERN AFRICA

Songs and Politics in Eastern Africa

Edited by

**Kimani Njogu
Hervé Maupeu**



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Foreword

This book brings together important essays on songs and politics in eastern Africa and beyond. Through an analysis of the voices from the margins, the authors enter into the debate on cultural productions and political change. The theme that cuts across the contributions in this book is that songs are, in addition to their aesthetic appeal, vital tools with which to explore how political and social events are shaped and understood by citizens. Although the discussions focus on Africa, the issues raised are, in fact, global. In the Philippines, for instance, during the Spaniard occupation revolutionary songs mobilized the *indios* and in the late 19th century *kundiman* (love song) was a precursor to subversive and revolutionary lyrics. As Caparas (2004) observes, “*Being courted was not a woman, but freedom for the Motherland, most famously embodied as ‘Jocelynang Baliwag’.* The songs of lament would continue even after the Spaniards left and through the American and Japanese occupation.”

In the United States of America, around the 1700s, there were elegies on the painful birth of a New Nation and on issues of injustice, identity and oppression. The election song ‘*God Save George Washington*’ was sung to the rhythm and melody of ‘*God Save the Queen*.’ For centuries, election jingles in the USA have been recreated in the melody of existing compositions. Indeed, around the world, during political contests, politicians use the jingle and theme songs to penetrate the mind and emotions of voters. The jingle is a mnemonic which compresses the name and political platform of the contender in a memorable fashion. President Franklin Roosevelt used the theme ‘*Happy Days are Here Again*’ to lift the diminishing morale of Americans after the Depression and World War II.

Urbanization, commercialization and globalization have contributed to the vibrancy of East African popular music of the 1990s which is marked by hybridity, syncretism and innovativeness. It is a product of social processes and not separable from society, politics, and critical issues of the day. The lyrics explore social cosmology, worldviews, class and gender relations, interpretations of value systems,

and other political, social and cultural practices, even as they entertain and provide momentary escape for audience members. Frustrations, disenchantment, and emotional fatigue resulting from corrupt and dictatorial political systems that stifle the potential of citizens have driven popular music in most of Africa. Musicians have sought to de-ethnicize politics and economic activities and global themes such as HIV/AIDS, drugs, migrations, religious, exploitation and greed have found a place in contemporary African music.

Songs reflect and shape social life. Among the Maasai, for example, the ceremonial song *Engilakinoto* is sung after a victorious lion hunt. *Engilakinoto* follows a deep rhythmic chant and powerful vertical leaps by warriors in a display of strength, courage and prowess. Whether in the accompaniment of the *Sikuti* drums, among the Luhya, the Nyatiti stringed instrument among the Luo, or the Ngoma drums in *taarab* music among the Waswahili, songs speak to composers and audiences in fundamental ways and in the process shape perspectives, change attitudes, question authority, challenge human weakness, cajole and rebuke. Contemporary popular music in Kenya manifests itself as a merging of the local and the foreign; a creative modification of what is received from the past as well as other cultures, including the rumba beat from the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Kenya when one listens to D.O. Misiani, Eric Wainaina, Daudi Kabaka, Joseph Kamaru, Isaiah Mwinamo, David Amunga, John Nzenze, Them Mushrooms, Joseph Kariuki, Susan Owiyo, Mighty King Kong, Albert Gacheru, Achieng' Abura, Lovi and Christian Longomba, David Mathenge (Nameless), Esther Wahome, Poxi Presha, Wahu Mathenge, Queen Jane and many other contemporary musicians, one gets a sense of the intense contradictions in our society. Eric Wainaina, blends African guitar riffs with Western rhythms, and in *Sawa Sawa* and *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo* on corruption in Kenya, he voices the concerns of ordinary people about lack of accountability and transparency. Equally, through the use of *sheng* youth slang, rap and reggae beats, songs by Kalamashaka, Necessary Noize led by the female vocalist Nazizi, including those by the late E-Sir (Issa Omari) of *Boomba Train* fame, are statements about the challenges facing African youth in a globalising world. They explore a wide range of individual, local and global concerns, contradictions, and desires.

The national desire for change in Kenya was brought to the fore by artists during the run-up to the 2002 General Elections, in which the then ruling party KANU was removed from power. Two musicians, Joseph Ogidi and Jahd Adonijah, under the name GidiGidi MajiMaji, performed *Ting Badi Malo* and *Unbwogable* to the great delight of voters. *Unbwogable* became the song with which to mobilise voters in support of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). Since then, members of the political class have consistently mobilised and hired artistes to sing their praises and to support their political platforms. We witnessed this during the November 2005 National Referendum on the Draft Constitution of Kenya. The government and the opposition hired the imagination of artistes so that they could generate support for their political position. Unfortunately, this affinity with the political class is exploitative and does not lead to concrete steps in the promotion of culture and the arts.

Like the *Chimurenga* resistance songs in Zimbabwe, the Mau Mau songs in Kenya were key in creating solidarity among the people in order to deal with the colonial onslaught. Christian songs were rewritten in order to deal with secular themes. This tendency is discussed in Chapter One on religious versification in this collection of essays. The author shows that evangelising hymns were turned upside-down during the struggle for independence in order to speak about earthly relations between the rulers and the ruled. If the role of Christianity in the colonial project was to pacify African souls, that did not happen in its entirety. In post-independent Kenya, side by side with the resistance songs, were praise songs by established bands and the Christian-dominated *Muungano* Choir which sought to perpetuate a hegemonic relation between the rulers and the ruled, to valorize national leadership, as well as give their interpretation of patriotism. The post-colonial government sponsored choirs which composed music to perpetuate hegemonic normalcy and maintain the socio-political status quo. This interpretation of patriotism was naturally questioned by other musicians who aligned themselves with the needs of ordinary people, such as Joseph Kamaru and D.O. Misiani.

In his discussion of Kamaru's music, Hervé Maupeu shows that the singer blends with audience members due to the relevance and aptness of his lyrics in the socio-political terrain and his sensitivity to language.

Maupeu's *L'intellectuel populaire et l'imaginaire politique* is an engaging reflection of the political thought of Joseph Kamaru within the context of Gikuyu nationalism. An immensely creative artist, Kamaru uses rich metaphoric language and is admired by his audience for his mastery of Gikuyu proverbs and idioms, and his ability to weave in and out of complex social and political issues. During the Moi regime, Kamaru often had to operate through double edged meanings and ambiguities to capture the ambivalences of society and to keep the fangs of the state away. His music brings to the fore issues of gender relations, identity, power, and socio-economic tensions in East Africa. This musician, who for three decades sung powerful secular music, started singing religious songs in 1993 and is the Chairman of the Kenya Association of Phonographic Industries (KAPI) which aims at defending the rights of musicians and coordinating musical activity. His vision is "to bring all musicians together...to go out there and expose talent." (*Daily Nation*, 7 July, 2006). In his heyday, Kamaru oscillated between praising and criticising the regimes of both Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi. His music was immensely enriched by the benga beats, created by Daniel Owino Misiani, a Tanzanian based in Kenya, who passed away in a road accident on 17 May, 2006. Gikuyu popular music is a window through which gender politics and the discourse of masculinity could be understood. In 'Artistic Discourse and Gender Politics' Michael Wainaina traces aspects of the narrative in popular songs in patriarchy as embedded in orature. Significantly, because women have limited access to social circuits and instruments of production of the popular song, males dominate the genre. But the female voice is not muted—it finds expression in Jane Nyambura *a.k.a.* Queen Jane who takes the male gender head-on showing it as unreliable, selfish and greedy. The 'singing back' by Queen Jane serves to unmask patriarchy and to show gender inequalities in African societies.

An important global theme is HIV and AIDS, the pandemic that is destroying families throughout the continent. In 'The Poetics of Gikuyu *Mwomboko*' Mwangi Muhoro discusses the crafting of narrative threads to address the scourge. The *Mwomboko* genre, a consequence of the colonial experience and consolidated in the 1930s with the Independent Schools Movement in Central Kenya, was used as a mobilising tool during the Mau Mau liberation struggle, discussed by Bantu Mwaura

in 'Orature of Combat.' Indeed, as Musambayi Katumanga shows us in an analysis of the folk poetry of the National Resistance Movement Chaka Mchaka resistance songs in Uganda, artistic productions can be used to develop a culture of resistance and to challenge oppressive authority. In southern Africa the *ingoma* songs have for centuries played a socio-political role, as Lupenga Mphande argues, and in Tanzania the *busungusungu* vigilante songs, discussed by Herbert Makoye and the *Nyota-wa-cigogo* troupe analysed by Frowin Nyoni, draw on cultural symbols in making political commentaries. Nyoni shows that changes in the social and political arena can lead to changes in the creative world. Political events could ignite creativity as Rayya Timammy articulates in her discourse on election politics and poetic rendition at the Kenyan coast. In the midst of political and social chaos, oral poetry could bring peace as Chantal Logan argues with reference to Somali oral poetry.

In Nairobi and Central Kenya, Friday night life in urban centres is incomplete without an experience of '*mugithi*' (the train dance) which was generated by the depressing socio-economic circumstances in the 1990s. By singing *mugithi* the Gikuyu middle-class at the time sought to consolidate Gikuyu nationalism, a reaction to over two decades of Moi's reign in which that community felt politically and economically excluded by the government. Thus, the genre is a space for the mobilisation and consolidation of ethnic interests; not in a socially disruptive sense but as a historicising and contextualising reference point for the community. It is both a celebration of the city and sex as well as a site for negotiation, contestation and realignment of identities. In the carnivalesque spirit of *Mugithi*, all caution and reticence is suspended and patrons unknown to each other, link up in the Train Dance, touching each other's body and making sexually suggestive movements with the parts of the lower body. It occupies a liminal place between the past and the present. Creatively extracted from the evangelical churches and the music about the need to join the 'train to heaven', the genre has been appropriated by the night spots and has spread out to the secular world. This music, made possible through the one-man guitar, does in a sense contest technology and digitalization of cultural productions. It has also made the bar a site for popular performance capable of blending mimicry, parody and social commentary. *Mugithi* brings newness to the old and suspends social prohibitions. On Friday nights, all music—from the DRC to

Jamaica—is modified to suit the predominantly Gikuyu patrons, so that ‘Murder She Wrote’ becomes ‘*Mama Ciru*’. The intertextual blending is also a statement on the fluidity of identities. This is the subject of Maina Mutonya’s chapter.

While drawing from the oral tradition, Gikuyu musicians have been immensely influenced by the *benga* beat, originally sung by D.O. Misiyani, discussed by Adams Oloo. D.O. Misiyani was an incisive and fearless artist who composed satirical lyrics critical of the political class and was arrested on many occasions. In the early 1970s song *Kalamindi*, he criticises Kenyatta’s development policy which perpetuated class and regional inequalities. During the struggle for multiparty democracy in Kenya and after the death of the then Foreign Minister Robert Ouko, he was extradited by Moi’s government for ‘fueling discontent’ in his music. After the December 2002 elections in Kenya, Misiyani was arrested after releasing *Bim en Bim* (A baboon will remain a baboon) on political betrayal. He took an interest in pan-African issues including coups, assassinations, ethnic conflicts and traversed the continent in his imagination. In *Wayuak ni Piny* (We Cry for the World) Misiyani sings about the Iraq War and criticises George Bush for ruining the lives of Iraqis.

But the *benga* beat does not resonate well with the urban youth who have significant access to global media. Instead it is hip-hop, a trans-cultural genre encapsulated in rap music and expressed through speech, clothing, video, attitude, disposition, activism, graffiti, and body movement, which holds sway. Hip-hop has its origins in Brooklyn, New York, and its power was quite evident on 13 September, 1996 at the burial of twenty-five year old Tupac Shakur and in March 1997 after the death of Christopher Wallace, *a.k.a.* Notorious B.I.G. Through hip-hop, Black youth have become visible and their images, significantly manipulated by multinational corporations, is attached to advertisements. Additionally, the youth feel segregated and excluded from the economic arena and they use hip-hop to speak back at authority. Hip-hop is unlocking the public sphere so that voices from the youth can be heard. In the United States, the hip-hop culture was a consequence of alienation, police brutality and the criminal justice system, segregation and exclusion, information technology and globalisation as well as the media representation of Black youth (Bakari Kitwana 2002: 18). Aurélie

Ferrari, Mwenda Ntarangwi and Alice Bancet discuss hip-hop in East Africa and show that it is a global culture which crosses borders and embraces socio-economic realities.

Songs and Politics in Eastern Africa is an extremely important addition to the study of popular culture and its role in shaping society. Songs are a window into the life of society and an illuminator of socio-political reality. They are worth serious study.

Kimani Njogu, Nairobi
July 2006

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