

Guitar Music and Cultural Identity in Kenya: Benga and Luo Identity, c. 1955 to c.1980*

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the relationship between popular music and cultural identity through a reading of the story of the early career of the Kenyan guitar-based dance music called benga. Genre theory guides the reading. Bringing into interplay basic elements of the early story of benga (on which there is a general consensus) and historical facts of the context in which it emerged, I show that the genre was at the moment of its origination a musical articulation of the cultural identity of a generation of Kenyan Africans of the Luo ethnic group who lived through the late colonial Kenya and into the early years of the country's Uhuru, Independence. At the heart of the reading is an exploration of the origins and deployments of the practices and technologies that came together at a particular time and place and in specific social and political conditions to constitute benga.

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Introduction

In this paper I discuss the relationship between popular music and cultural identity through a reading of the story of the early career of the Kenyan guitar-based dance music called benga.¹ My interest is not in what the verbal texts in popular music say about cultural identity. Several authors have explored this in relation to benga (see, for example, Amuka 1992, Ogude 2007, Okumu 2005). My interest is in the connection that popular music, as music, has with cultural identity. Previous studies on benga broach this area though the interest usually is in establishing the musical ideas that the originators of benga drew from already existing, usually pre-colonial Luo music forms (Low 1982, Barz 2001, Osusa et al 2008, Mboya 2019, etc.). My argument is that benga was produced at the same time as, and as part of, a Luo identity that emerged in the wake of colonialism. I illustrate my argument by carrying out a contextualized examination of the musical elements, instrumentalisation and performance of benga in the first two and a half decades of the genre's existence.

The basic elements of the story of the early career of benga that I read are uncontested, and they are as follows: benga was invented sometime in the 1950s; it was invented by youth of the Luo ethnic group; it originated from Luo villages in western Kenya; and by the late 1960s it was the dominant music genre in Kenya. The finer details of the story of benga, like which particular individual(s) played what specific role(s) in the creation of the genre, and what particular song(s) moved the genre to the Kenyan national music space, are not agreed on – and neither are they important to my reading. I have settled on the dates that bracket the story, 1955 and 1980, because the genre came into existence in the middle of the 1950s and ran into (state-backed) headwinds that posed a mortal threat to it once the presidency of Daniel Arap Moi that started in 1978 settled. In the name of fighting tribalism and building the nation, the Moi state discouraged music genres like benga whose lyrics were in Kenyan African languages other than the lingua franca and national language, Kiswahili. Writing in 1998, John Kamau recorded:

The state-run Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) [– at the time the only broadcaster in the country –] bans songs in any of the country's 40-plus vernacular languages from its two national services. The blacklist was imposed 12 years ago when then radio boss Cornelius Nyamboki insisted musicians sing in either Swahili or English to curb the rise of 'ethnic nationalism'. It didn't affect languages used beyond Kenya's borders: 75

¹ This reading of the story of benga is an elaboration of the one I summarize in the early part of "A brief history of benga" in the third chapter of *Popular Music, Ethnicity and Politics in the Kenya of the 1990s: Okatch Biggy Live at "The Junction"*. (Mboya 2019: 32-45)

percent of the national playlist are in the Lingala of former Zaire, while Swahili lyrics now chip in a mere 20 percent. (Kamau 1998: 145)

Benga barely survived the 1980s. It had changed a lot when it re-emerged in the Kenyan national entertainment scene in a revival that happened in the second half of the 1990s (Mboya 2019: 44-61). This particular period is outside the scope of the present paper though.

Genre theory guides my reading of the story of the early career of benga. I start out from the point that “[t]he essential principle of the sociology of genres is the link between genre form and genre function or purpose. It investigates the connection between what a kind of discourse is (its parts and their relations), and what it does (its uses and effects)” (Sinding 2014: 40, emphasis in the original). My gaze is on what can be considered to be part of the “uses and effects” of benga from about 1955 to around 1980. I explore the implied relationship between this genre of popular music and society from a perspective modulated by the insight in the conceptualization of the relationship between literature and society by Tony Bennett – which I extrapolate into that between a popular music genre and the society whose members invented it. According to Bennett:

[L]iterature is [...] itself directly a field of social relationships in its own right and one which interacts with other fields in which social relationships are organized and constituted in the same way as they interact with it and on the same level. Thus viewed, it emerges not as a mediated reflection or refraction of society, nor as a distinctive semiotic production of ideology – as if society or ideology had clearly defined existences which could be described independently of the operations of the literary sphere – but as a distinctive sphere of social action that is centrally implicated in and imbricated with the constitution and functioning of political and ideological relations of power and its contestation. (Bennett 1990: 108, emphasis in the original.)

Following Bennett, I contend that benga developed at the same time as, and as part of, a Luo cultural identity that emerged as a consequence to colonialism. The notion of the development of cultural identity that is crucial to this discussion is anchored on this statement on cultural identity by Stuart Hall:

[I]dentity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always

constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall 1996: 222)

Bringing into interplay the details of the early story of benga on which there is a consensus and historical facts of the context in which the genre emerged, I show that benga was at the moment of its origination a musical articulation of an emerging cultural identity of a generation of Kenyan Africans of the Luo ethnic group. The demonstration is done by mainly unpacking the practices and technologies that came together as benga, locating in their origins, transformations and deployments at a particular time and place ideas that together I read to constitute the articulation of a Luo cultural identity.

The building blocks of postcolonial² African identities

The late nineteenth century found the Luo long settled on the eastern shores of the water body that is today known as Lake Victoria. They were organized in several independent social and political units that collaborated and occasionally contended with one another. As B.A. Ogot explains:

The story of the Luo invasion and settlement of the lake region was not that of a united invasion, planned and executed consciously and deliberately by the twelve Luo sub-nationalities, as is sometimes depicted. The whole operation was diversified, irregular and unorganized. Each of the sub-nationalities, or groups that later evolved into sub-nationalities, acted independently and often against one another. The conquest was therefore not the result of a united invasion with conclusive campaigns under a single leader. And in spite of formidable enemies such as Nandi, Kipsigis and Iteso against whom they later had to fight, the Luo never produced a Saul under whom they could unite in order to repel their attackers. (Ogot 2009: 496-497)

Even though the Luo groups – sub-nationalities in Ogot’s description – “each had a political leader [...] [and] each had its own particular understanding of history and claims to a particular territory” (Ogot 2009: 498), they spoke one language, Dholuo, and recognized that they subscribed to a belief in common origins, and had broadly shared values and cultural practices:

The Luo [...] had [...] an ethnic nomenclature: JoLuo; territorial identity (piny); political loyalties, Oganda [...]; and clan associations, Dhoudi [...]. The various Luo groups also had a pretty clear sense of place, and referred to a homeland (thurwa), primogeniture (Kothwa), folk (jowa), descent

² I use the term postcolonial to refer to „cultures significantly impacted by colonialism“ as explained by Ato Quayson (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIKeutz0zxU>)

(yawa) and culture (timbewa). (Odhiambo 1992: 12).

In the course of the last decade of the nineteenth century, most of the territory of the Luo was grabbed by the British who proceeded to lump it together with the lands grabbed from tens of other communities to create what would evolve into a colony, and later an independent “nation–state”, called Kenya. By colonizing the geographical area, the British firmly pulled it and the peoples inhabiting it into the international capitalist system (Rodney 1989 [1972]: vii). The land grab left out a small portion of the land of the Luo, which was similarly seized and inserted into the same system by the German Empire, and is today part of Tanzania.

The integration of (most of) Africa and her reluctant peoples into a world economic order that was dominated by the colonizing European states took the form of attempts to transform the continent and the peoples inhabiting it into a source of cheap raw materials and labor, and an assured profitable market for manufactured goods from Europe.³ The endeavors constituted a complex, mostly brutal, process that involved several related actions. The subjection of Africans to new governments that were alien to them started with the “pacification” of the peoples of the territory, the imposition of “law and order” by armed force and by “civilizing” actions – like the encouragement of the uptake of Christianity, “modern” lifestyles and literacy – that socialized the “natives” into their roles in the new dispensation. There was, in various parts of the continent, the alienation of portions of African peoples’ lands which were put in the hands of the colonial state and settlers from the colonizing state. There was the transplanting of technologies and the bringing into being of a different organization of work in a newly introduced monetary economy. And there was a reorganization of the ethnic groups that lived within the boundaries of the new “nation–states” into “tribes” that were suspicious of and antagonistic towards one another (Freund 1984: 154; Masolo 2002: 27-29). In the case of the Luo in Kenya, colonialism insidiously destroyed the independent political units that they previously had (Odhiambo 1992; Ogot 2009). The territories of these sub–nationalities were transformed, roughly, into the administrative units in the colony that were named locations. And the Luo peoples were now classified as a single community, one “native tribe” among the forty or so that lived in a Kenya whose politics was engineered to be “tribal” in order to secure colonial rule.

³ The understanding of colonialism adopted here is that of Walter Rodney: “Colonialism was not merely a system of exploitation, but one whose essential purpose was to repatriate the profits to the so–called mother country. From an African perspective, that amounted to consistent repatriation of surplus produced by African labor out of African resources.” (Rodney 1989 [1972]: 149)

Commenting on the politicization of ethnicity, what I prefer to call the tribalization of ethnicity, by colonialism Mahmood Mamdani observes:

The political project called [colonial] indirect rule aimed to unpack native tradition, to disentangle its different strands, to separate the authoritarian from the emancipatory, thereby to repack tradition, as authoritarian and ethnic, and to harness it to the colonial project. By repacking native passions and cultures selectively, it aimed to pit these very passions and cultures against one another. (Mamdani 2004: 9)

Colonialism also triggered a new and more widespread urbanization in contexts where the rural and thus “tribal” orientation of the continent’s cultures was promoted by the state. Given that “[u]rban and rural contexts were linked by numerous personal journeys between them, including the final passage home for burial” (Berman et al. 2004: 6), colonial urbanization entrenched tribalism.⁴ Colonial development – including the building of infrastructure – was, after all, geared towards enabling and/or supporting efficient domination, exploitation and production.

In the six–seven decades that (most of) Africa was colonized, the continent, as a cog in the international capitalist system it had been coerced into becoming part of, experienced two major wars.⁵ The second of these major wars, World War II, ushered in a change of guard in the state leadership of the international capitalist system, the process involving the unleashing of forces that helped prise the grip of the imperial European powers on their colonies (Maloba 1989). In Kenya, these forces interacted with the ever–expanding African resistance to the repressive and unapologetically racist colonial state, resistance that was in the years after World War II taking on an ever more nationalistic character. And so,

⁴ Berman et al. explain the point: “The diverse, polyglot cities built on internal migrations from various regions of a colony provided a cockpit for encountering the ethnic ‘other’ and conceptualizing the ethnic ‘self’ for both the educated and literate intelligentsia and the illiterate laborer. [...] Urban and rural contexts were linked by numerous personal journeys between them, including the final passage home for burial.” (Berman et al. 2004: 6)

⁵ About the Kenyan African experience of World War I Keith Kyle notes: “[T]he extent to which a white man’s war was to involve the Africans. Fighting men were already enlisted in the King’s African Rifles (KAR), but tens of thousands of others were recruited from both the British protectorates [that is, Uganda and East Africa – Kenya –] into the Carrier Corps as porters. The Kikuyu and the Luo, who did not join up in significant numbers in the KAR, were large contributors to the Carrier Corps, whose heavy casualties were almost all due to disease and the failure to maintain proper logistical support. Though technically volunteers, these porters were recruited by very heavy pressure exercised through the government chiefs. According to official figures 42,318 porters from the two Protectorates died on active duties during the war, compared with 7,281 African troops of the 22 battalions of the KAR.” (Kyle 1999: 14)

The Kenyan African involvement in World War II was greater and its consequences on the ways that the Kenyan Africans perceived the colonial state was profound.

the 1950s, just slightly over a generation since the country was colonized, was also the decade of decolonization in Kenya.

The Luo – and, generally, African – people’s experiences of all these momentous changes to the ways they lived, how their societies were organized, and who they interacted with, and how, as unwilling subjects of European states, were impacting their understandings of themselves and their worlds. The collective actions they took to be in this changed world necessarily entailed the production of new cultural identities.

The emergence of guitar music in Kenya

Benga was invented in the late colonial Kenya, in the 1950s. “Benga’s most distinctive feature”, the authors of *Shades of Benga* (2017) correctly point out:

[I]s its fast-paced rhythmic beat and the staccato technique of playing the guitar. Indeed, the core instrument of benga is the lead guitar, which essentially follows the track of the vocals. The vocals always drop at the climax, leaving an instrumental expanse that combines three or four guitars with the percussions [...].

The peculiarity of the benga beat comes from the combination of a sharp lead guitar overriding the rhythm and bass. Together with the arrangement and sectioning, the pace of the guitars, with their steady rise to a climax or crescendo and an equally quick refrain, clearly set benga apart from other forms of music. (Ketebul 2017: 65, *my italics*)

Also significant to the definition of benga is the space in which it is regularly performed – the small beer bar in (usually the lower income neighborhoods of) Kenyan towns and in rural market centers.

The chief and definitive instrument of benga, then, is the guitar. The key instruments used in benga are the lead (solo) guitar, the rhythm guitar, the bass guitar and the drum-kit. The guitar is European in origin, as is the drum-kit. Based on reports of the instrument being played at the Kenyan coast by freed slaves in the late nineteenth century (Patterson n. d.), it would seem that the guitar first found its way to Kenya at the onset of colonialism, and that it was brought by Christian missionaries. Its spread upcountry appears to have been slow but steady, and to have largely moved from church to church and from one church-influenced community to the next. The observation by Atieno Odhiambo that “[t]he box guitar has been the most ubiquitous musical instrument in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1920s” (Odhiambo 2001: 257) is largely true for Kenya as well. More accurate is the point that the colonial experience, especially the

increased mobility of individuals and ideas that became possible after the “pacification” of the peoples of Africa and the building of transport and communication infrastructure across the continent, definitely made possible the spread of the guitar.

And then came World War II and something so significant happened that Kenyan African memory would always link the beginning of guitar playing in the country to the period. In the words of John Low:

It is not known exactly when guitars arrived in Kenya; almost certainly they were played by Kenyans well before the 2nd World War. However, the ‘collective recall’ of today’s guitarists seem to start in about 1945, which may be when recordings and broadcasts of Kenyan guitar music were first made. (Low 1982: 17)

Gerhard Kubik gives the reasons behind the ‘collective recall’:

Why was 1945 such a decisive date? The new [guitar] musical forms of East Africa actually began much earlier, certainly by the thirties. However, the economic boom following the second world war led to increased investment by the colonial powers, who at that time thought their positions safe, and it was only thus that the expansion of the mass media became possible. Numerous radio stations were erected and in East Africa a record industry also was built up after 1945. Transistor radios suddenly came within reach of the factory– or land–worker. (Kubik 1981: 87).

Stapleton and May underscore the point as they add an important detail to the explanation: “[T]he real beginnings of modern Kenyan pop date from the end of the Second World War, when Kenyan soldiers, returning from the front, brought back disposable cash, guitars and accordions. [...] After the war, gramophones became popular, and so did GV records” (Stapleton/ May 1990: 226).

In summary, the guitar became the dominant music instrument in Kenya after World War II. That was the logical outcome of there being more guitarists, more ways of circulating and consuming music, and a much larger guitar music appreciating public. The army had a lot to do with this development. The guitar was an important instrument in the entertainment of soldiers in the war. As part of the multinational King’s African Rifles (KAR) that saw action in Ceylon, India and Burma, there was a 13th East African Entertainment Unit that played guitar music and which “not only entertained African troops but also toured British and Indian divisions, performing up to 350 shows by the end of the War.” (Ketebul 2017: 5) The soldiers did not lose their love for the music of the guitar upon being demobilized. Back in their communities, these men who had

traveled the world and “had not only seen the perils of war but [...] had also been exposed to a new lifestyle, and had had a steady income and developed new habits” (Owaahh 2019) were influencers whose preferences spread with relative ease. To have an idea of the influence the soldiers had one needs to keep in mind that they had formed the vast majority of the 98,240 men who served in the KAR during the war (Killingray with Plaut 2010: 44). This number constituted a very visible 2% of the population of a country that was mostly rural and peasant. The percentage was possibly higher in Luoland as, on the back of their earlier classification by their British colonizers as one of the “martial races” in Africa (Killingray with Plaut 2010: 41), the community was viewed as an attractive source of soldiers.

A number of the demobilized soldiers who had been active as part of the Entertainment Unit and others who had learnt to play the guitar without being part of the unit formed bands that they based in the urban areas of the country. Most of them ultimately found their way to Nairobi as they sought employment and spaces where they could live out their recently acquired lifestyle. There, they sung in the regional lingua franca, which was also the language of the army, Kiswahili, and fomented a lively music scene that was remarkable for its cosmopolitan character (Low 1982: 18-24; Ketebul 2017: 1-14; Odhiambo 2001: 257-258). Their music was recorded in studios that sprung up in Kenya, mostly in Nairobi, starting 1947 and broadcast to all Kenya by radio through the African Broadcasting Service which was established in 1952.

The increased broadcasting of music through the radio and circulation of music through gramophone records was, for the African peoples of Kenya, an intensification of a process of the freeing of the consumption of music from the occasions that it had been tied to previously. It was part of the modernization that was happening in the country under colonialism. The process was further extended after World War II with the institution of spaces for live music performance in most of the country, especially in the towns, and the state’s encouragement of colonized Africans to spend their leisure by participating in what Owen has cheekily described as “‘morally uplifting’ forms of entertainment” (Owen 2016: 143) – like attending dances.⁶ “During the late

⁶ Owen gives the real reasons behind this enlightened decision of the colonial state: “The 1940s and 1950s were decades of extensive expansion of recreational space within Nairobi and Mombasa, as the state sought to coopt its African urban population into a vision of imperial stability, defined by a spirit of development and modernity. By providing moral recreational outlets, the state believed it could promote the conditions conducive for establishing a stable and respectable urban middle class. State and local authorities accorded new playing fields, stadiums, and social centers that would provide Africans’ with legible and ‘morally uplifting,’ forms of entertainment. Boredom, on the other hand, signified disorder and insecurity. If young, African men were not working, officials concluded, then they best be playing;

1940s," Owen notes, "state and municipal leaders [in Kenya] planned for the provision of playing fields and social centers for residents. The state also sought to formalize various athletic and football activities into organized leagues and matches" (Owen 2016: 145).

Different reasons have been advanced for this development. There has been a suggestion that it was instigated by the newly installed leader of the international capitalist system, the United States of America (Maloba 1989). It has been proposed that a change of heart by the colonial master motivated it (Frost 1978). This last argument has been complicated by those who see the supposed change of heart as more accurately a discovery of a more effective way of managing the subjects through the encouragement of ways of spending leisure time (Owen 2016). There are also those who see the contribution by the emerging new African who was creating new institutions to house the practices he had recently invented (Odhiambo 2001; Owen 2016). What is clear is that the organization of work that had come with/as colonialism had necessitated the invention and/or embrace of new ideas of leisure. The state also sought to formalize various athletic and football activities into organized leagues and matches" (Owen 2016: 145). The organization of work that had come with/as colonialism had necessitated the invention and/or embrace of new ideas of leisure.

The Kiswahili-language music on the radio airwaves, records and as part of the occasional road shows by the Nairobi-based artists who sang it was not the only guitar music to be heard in Luoland, those eastern shores of Lake Victoria that would in a few short years become the birthplace of benga. There was already some guitar music being played in the area. This was the fruit of the rather cursory introduction of the instrument that came through the playing of the guitar in church and church-influenced community. It was a minor practice but it is worth noting that some of the music that was performed to the accompaniment of the guitar in church and church-influenced community was in Dholuo. That simple fact was a big first step in the domestication of the instrument in the Luo universe. A handful of gita players, including the blind Olima Anditi, became widely known in the community. They got into the role of itinerant performers as defined for the players of what was at the time the Luo people's most important music instrument, the eight-stringed lyre that they called thum – and performed in the same occasions and spaces. Several got their music recorded.

time spent playing football, attending dances, or watching film showings, was time away from the bottle, plotting hijinks, or stirring unrest." (Owen 2016: 143-144)

Tie dero, “At the foot of the granary.”

Among the Luo ex-soldiers who went home to the villages at the end of World War II were several who owned and played the guitar. Most of these had picked up the guitar without necessarily being part of the 13th East African Entertainment Unit. They had bought the rather expensive instrument for their own entertainment using their salaries. Others had bought gramophones. These recently unemployed men got into a practice of playing the guitar to amuse themselves and entertain friends as they whiled away the time. The guitarist-singer performed as a solo act, although there could be a second man providing rhythmic accompaniment by beating on a wooden box called a conductor. The preferred location for the performances, which frequently included naughty lyrics, was near the granaries that were found in all homesteads. That location gave the practice, and consequently the genre, its name: Tie dero - “At the foot of the granary” (Ketebul 2017: 73).

The war veterans’ bringing of the guitar to these lands and their fabrication of tie dero increased Luo involvement with the instrument. Indicative of the point is the fact that tie dero became the Luo label for Dholuo language guitar music. Like the earlier gita players, the tie dero guitarists played the instrument in the European style. They also kept up the practice of singing in Dholuo. By doing the latter they were also submitting to the cultural imperatives of living and performing in the “native reserve”,⁷ which in the cultural politics of colonialism was a factory for the “invention of tradition” (Ranger 1983), the construction and consolidation of so-called tribal cultures. The regular performance time of tie dero, in the afternoons, also, possibly inadvertently, consolidated ideas of leisure time and space that modified those that had previously held sway among the Luo. In the period immediately preceding colonialism, Luo music performances were firmly tied to occasion. Even the performance of the genre that had the loosest connection with ritual, and which was therefore the most widespread among the peoples, the thum, was tied to occasion:

Ka ng’ato omako miaha kata ka ng’ato otho, wuoi okelo kuot manyien, nyiri biro obudha, kata oche obiro sero, gikelo thum; kendo ka ng’ato onego dhano kata ondiek, kwach gi sibuo, bende kamano. Gigi e ma ng’ato nyalo omonigi thum, mondo obi omiye mor kod jobudho mobiro budho. (Mboya 1997: 176)

⁷ Introduced in 1904, the “native reserves” were lands – the most unattractive to the colonial state and British settlers – set aside for Africans. These formed the basis of Kenya colony’s ethnically defined administrative units. (Veit n.d.)

[When a man took a bride or a person died, when a young man acquired a new shield, when girls came visiting or men went to their (prospective) in-laws on courtship, the thum player was tagged along; also, if a man killed an enemy in war or killed fierce beasts like the hyena, leopard or lion, a thum player was invited. These are the occasions for celebration for which a thum player is invited, his performance bringing joy to the host and his guests.]

With tie dero, entertainment, the enjoyment of music performance was sufficient motivation and reason to hold one.

A few tie dero guitarists managed to get their music recorded. One of them, the World War II veteran Tobias Oyugi, whose songs, in keeping with tie dero conventions, “are about riotous behavior, drunkenness, and arrests” (Low 1982: 26), achieved some level of success. Seven–eight decades later, the significance of tie dero seems to be as the forerunner of benga, which was created by youth for whom tie dero was their first encounter with the guitar. Even the greatest popularizer of benga, D.O. Misiani, started out by accompanying and learning from his tie dero playing war veteran brother (Mwaura 2006).

There was a third front in the Luo encounter with the guitar, and this also happened after World War II. Starting in the early 1950s there was a minor exodus of Luo men to the Congo “in search of work and adventure” (Ketebul 2017: 79). By that time, the guitar had already been domesticated in Congo.⁸ Those who interacted with it there saw how sound could be coaxed out of the instrument differently from how it was done by people whose basic training was in church or in the army. The Congolese did not play the guitar in the European “vamping and plectrum styles” (Low 1982: 18) but in the “finger-style” (Low 1982: 18). The Luo adventurers came back home with this know-how. This Congo connection was further solidified by the tours and short stays (that gradually grew longer until they became permanent settlement) in Kenya of Congolese musicians that started in 1952 with the guitarists Mwenda Jean Bosco, Losta Abelo and Edouard Masengo from the eastern part of that vast country.

The guitar, then, was no longer a strange object to the Luo in the mid-1950s, the seminal time for the genre that would come to be known as benga. The music instrument had already found its place in the group’s rich music repertoire that had the music of the thum as the most prominent genre. Even so, the guitar had

⁸ This is an interesting point as the guitar puzzlingly (given the long interaction of the Congo with Europe) seems to have been introduced into Congo later than it was in Kenya. According to Gerhard Kubik, “It is thought that guitars first came to Matadi and Kinshasa (then Léopoldville) in the 1930s, brought by Kru sailors from West Africa.” (Kubik 2008: 81)

an aura of cosmopolitanism and Europe-defined modernity that came from its associations with experiences that were part of Luo life after the community's incorporation into the international capitalist system – church, school, World War II, sojourns in urban spaces, travels to distant lands. The simple act of choosing the guitar as the key instrument for the music they were playing then became for Luo musicians a claiming of belonging to a world larger than the village, a world, moreover, that was modern. In the words of Stapleton and May, the guitarists were “playing an instrument whose appeal, like those of cars, records, films depended on modernity.” (Stapleton/ May 1990: 16)

Introducing benga

To some of the creators of benga the decisive move in the creation of the genre was the adoption of a pulsating rhythm. (Osusa et al. 2008) This was music for vigorous village dance. Benga was different from tie dero, gita in another significant way. Benga was the first Luo music genre where several chordophones were played together. Taking after developments in Kiswahili-language guitar music, the genre was guitar ensemble music. Two guitars – the lead and the bass – and the percussion that sustained the tempo. The number of guitars very soon increased with the inclusion of the rhythm guitar. In the beginning, the guitars played in benga were “dry,” acoustic. The rhythm came from a wood block, later the traditional drum or the tumba. A cow bell was frequently used to intensify the rhythm. In the nineteen sixties, electric guitars and the drum kit were adopted, without much change to the structure of the genre.

It is important to emphasize the point that, even though its creation was a continuation of the Luo involvement with Europe-defined modernity, benga was not a rejection of the village. Neither was it a rejection of pre-colonial Luo musical traditions. Benga only came to be after – to borrow from the language of the World Health Organization's description of the phases of disease spread until it becomes a pandemic – the transmission of the guitar at “the community-level” (WHO 2009: 25). The genre was wrought following the slipping of the guitar out of the hands of Luo men who had been taught, directly or indirectly, to play it by people from other communities (“European and black American musicians” – Low, 1982: 18 – and Congolese guitarists). There were also instances of Luo guitarists who had been mentored to play the instrument by people from other communities but who upon going back to the village found that they had to also learn the styles favored by the locals. The first two benga guitarists of note, Samuel Aketch Jabuya (Aketch Oyosi) and Nelson Ochieng' Orwa (Ochieng' Nelly) of the seminal benga band Ogara Boys, fall in this latter group. They learnt from Congolese guitarists. Aketch Oyosi served a year-long

apprenticeship with Mwenda Jean Bosco while Ochieng' Nelly had Adolph Banyora for a tutor (Osusa et al 2008).

The creators of benga intensified the domestication of the guitar that had been started by the earlier generations of Luo guitar players. These creators of benga were village youth immersed in the musical traditions and philosophies of their people. They played the instrument as they would have done the thum. They “cultivated a unique technique of playing the guitar [...]. Commonly, they do not massage or strum the strings as do their Congolese counterparts, rather, they rapidly pluck and pick single strings in a fashion akin to playing a nyatiti, their traditional lyre.” (Ketebul 2017: 65). It was not only about technique. The guitarists “attempted to reproduce on guitar the plucked rhythmic patterns of [...] the Luo nyatiti” (Low 1982: 18). This they did by making “[t]he bass and lead guitars [...] weave melodic patterns together, asserting strong individual yet interdependent roles” (Barz 2004: 113–114). The resultant “playful and omnipresent interaction of bass and lead” (Barz 2004: 111) mirrored “the interdependence of the bass and the treble lines, the lower and higher pitched melodies” (Barz 2004: 111) in the thum. The guitarists also attempted to reproduce the sounds of the single-string Luo fiddle, orutu. Also definitive of benga in a foundational sense, right from its beginnings, was its rhythm which is characterized by the vertical stress on its beat. This is the rhythm of the ohangla drum.

The singing that was attached to the genre was also in pre-colonial Luo styles (Okumu 2005). As, perhaps more importantly, was the song making. Eagleson elaborates the latter point:

Continuity [between benga and Luo music genres that predate it] has occurred most crucially in the rhythmic structuring of melodic phrases [...] rooted in the primacy of monophonic song. An essential quality of Luo song phrasing is in the way that the speech rhythms of Dholuo (the Luo language) are reconciled with the constancy of a strong regulative beat. The singular rhythmic flow created in the way strong and weak syllables in Dholuo are melodically constructed in relation to this beat (creating contrast between on- and off-beat accents) has provided a unifying link in different Luo song genres, and was codified in the development of benga with the establishment of a standard rhythmic motif. (Eagleson 2014: 91–92)

Even the very structure of the benga song was that of pre-colonial Luo music. Patterson has vividly described the structure:

[T]he trade marks of Luo benga: a catchy guitar riff to start off the song,

followed by flowing verses sung in unison or simple two part harmonies and played over gentle guitar fingerings with a very active bass line while the percussion steadily pulses. As the verse finishes, the lead guitar follows approximating the melody just sung. In the second half of the song, the verses fade away and the song moves into elaborate guitar soloing, rhythmic jams, occasionally interspersed with a vocal chorus. (Patterson 2010: 6)

The call–response relationship between the high–pitched lead guitar and the verses, the lead guitar falling off to allow the vocal phrase space and, therefore separating – this is the essential structure of orutu music. The second part, the guitar chorus that is called the climax, is based on an idea one finds in several Luo dance music genres – the need to accord the revelers relatively uninterrupted dance time.

Thus immersed within the Luo musical universe, benga, unlike the Kiswahili guitar music that dominated radio the airwaves, came to be regarded not only as Luo but village and “tribal” music. (Patterson et al. 2006) In the words of the writers at Ketebul Music, “early benga was known as [the] music of the ‘rural and uncultured.’” (2017: 91)⁹ These “rural and uncultured” were by far the majority in the Luo community.

At this juncture it is worth reiterating the point that although it was a Luo music form, benga was not “traditional.” “[B]eing Luo is not itself uniform”, D.O. Masolo has noted. “It is constantly negotiated, in legal and cultural forums.” (2002: 27) Colonialism had wrought a not so subtle change in relation to what it meant to be Luo. The change was indicated in the name of the music genre that was becoming dominant in the community. “Benga” is not a proper word in Dholuo. The most convincing theory of its origins is that it was formed as a play by young men on the proper Dholuo adjective “obengore” (“it is slack”), the reference being to the whirling to naughty effect of a loose skirt that girls wore as they danced to the new music. The word quickly came to signify the skirt itself (Osusa et al 2008), the dance step (Odanga 1999) and the music. All these were part of the new ideas, objects and practices that were coming together in the production of a new Luo cultural identity. As was the neologism that came to label the genre.

The novelty of benga was also reflected in the point that the genre was, as has

⁹ Recalling the positive reception of the benga song “Celestina Juma” by Ogara Boys, Atieno Odhiambo writes: “Far to the West lived the as yet undifferentiated Luo peasantry [...]. At independence the Luo were reputed to have no emergent proletariat [...]. These “reluctant” and benighted Luo of 1965 were dancing to the tune of ‘Celestina Juma’ by the guitarist Ojwang’ Ogara of K’Auma in Karachuonyo.” (Odhiambo 2007: 162)

been noted, guitar ensemble music. This was markedly different from the thum. There are no records of chordophone bands in pre-colonial Luo cultures. There was also the space for the regular performance of benga, which also became a definitive constituent of the genre: the small beer bar in the village market center and in (usually the poorer neighborhoods of) town. This was a new leisure space in the Luo universe. It was an extension of the government built social hall that was only found in towns, and of the state-encouraged ideas of proper entertainment.

The practitioners of benga, tie dero and gita, and their supporters insisted on the difference of their music genres from those older genres that inspired them – and which had dominated in the old dispensation. As reported by Washington Omondi:

As western influences started to be felt among the Luo, those who were influenced by Christian practices condemned the [thum] lyre as an object of the devil while those who were influenced by western secular practices were attracted to the modern ‘civilized’ instruments such as the guitar and the accordion. The latter group further invented new names of derision for the lyre such as thum atielo (literally ‘foot instrument’), thum aring’o (literally ‘meat instrument’), thum nyatiti (a derogatory reference to the onomatopoeic naming of the F and G strings). Even descriptive reference such as the latinised aboro et puch marandius dhi ser meru [‘the primitive eight stringed instrument that is only fit for the mother’s wedding’ – Omondi] were occasionally come across. The traditionalists, on the other hand, hit back by similarly referring to the ‘civilized’ instruments knanda rang’ede (literally ‘the accordion consists of visible ribs’) and gita bad dhiang’ (literally ‘the guitar is an arm of the cow’ implying that it looked like it. (Omondi 1973(?): 5)

The differentiation at the heart of this exchange also played out in the lyrics of benga. Early benga lyricists deliberately developed texts that were distinct from those of the older genres, especially the thum. The benga song is usually about romantic love. Besides love, benga musicians sing in praise of their (invariably male) patrons and friends. Benga largely steers clear of the directly ‘social significance’ subjects and ‘for community cohesion’ didactic impulses of the thum. These benga lyrics were part of the proclamation that the genre and its inventors belonged to an historical dispensation that was distinct from the old, pre-colonial one. Benga was of a modern age, the one that was ushered in by the coming of the white man’s rule.

The superseding of the thum by the guitar, generally, and benga specifically, can be seen in the fact that starting from the early 1960s benga became the dominant

Luo music genre while the thum became more or less consigned to the status of “traditional music.” In Kenya, serious limitations attend to the classification of music genres as “traditional music.” Works placed in the category are defined as essentially survivals from a fast disappearing age. The past that it is understood to have a relationship with is pre-colonial, pre-industrial and pre-modern. The work is perceived to be tied to the “tribal” rituals of particular communities, which are seen as probably only taken seriously by the wizened elders in the villages. It is not expected that such “specialized” music will be found entertaining by the general populace. It is therefore shunted out of mainstream fora that circulate, promote and sell music. The derogatory name given thum by the players and supporters of the guitar, nyatiti, became the official name of the instrument and its music.

The triumph of benga in the Luo universe was part of the victory of postcolonial Luo cultural identity over that which preceded it. That victory came after a contest that Atieno Odhiambo (1992) humorously recounts in a story that centers the Luo people’s adoption of European-style clothes. The following statement by Lara Allen puts in perspective the link I make between popular music and cultural identity using the wide acceptance of benga:

[W]hen a song becomes a hit (whether or not this actually translates into sales), something in the song must have appealed widely to individual people.

One of the constitutive elements of this appeal may be the recognition of some personal truth expressed by the song; specifically that it articulates feelings or experiences that resonate directly with those of an individual. Identification with a certain kind of music creates a space in which the individual experience can be articulated while simultaneously receiving information from a group. Such acknowledgement and validation is profoundly empowering for individuals, and, if the sentiments are shared with enough people, a powerful political force can be generated. (Allen 2004: 5)

Subsequently, benga helped consolidate the emergent postcolonial Luo identity, for genres construct audiences. (Chandler 1997: 9) This is the point that Simon Frith makes when, in the course of explaining the relationship between popular music and identity, he advises: “the question we should be asking is not what does popular music reveal about the people who play and use it but how does it create them as a people, as a web of identities?” (Frith 1996: 121)

Benga has never shaken off its associations with the Luo ethnic group. The fact

has, time and again, affected its fortunes in Kenya. The enduring importance of the recognition of benga by Luo and non-Luo alike as a Luo music form is clear when the place of ethnicity in Kenya's politics is recalled (Ajulu 2001; Orvis 2001, etc.) In an important sense, tribalism is a playing out of notions of difference by groups that recognize their belonging to a common state. (Lonsdale 2004) The recognition of benga as Luo is therefore also a recognition that it is Kenyan. In the case of the Luo, the acceptance of a Kenyan aspect to the group identity is also a recognition of the difference of that cultural identity from the one that preceded it. In the decolonizing, African nationalistic 1960s, the identification also made of benga a "more authentically" Kenyan African genre. This might partially account for its becoming the dominant music genre in the country over the decade. It did so at the expense of "the lighter 'easy-listening' [Kiswahili] music of Fadhili [William] and his cohorts" (Patterson 2001) with its links to European and central and southern African musics. Benga's dominance lasted into the early 1980s.

Conclusion

Colonial Kenya was not only the world in which the popular music genre called benga emerged. Colonial Kenya was a set of circumstances and relationships that made possible the production of a new cultural identity by the colonized Luo, and benga was created as part of that emergent cultural identity. Like the postcolonial identity that it was part of, benga emerged when already existing Luo cultural practices interacted with the cultural practices of other peoples, new technologies and ideas in a specific historical context, under the conditions of colonialism.

Even though this paper meets the assumptions of the sociology of genres by being, for the most part, an "[a]nalysis ... [that] focuses on the common social conditions obtaining whenever and wherever genres make their first and subsequent appearances, seeking in these their real foundations and supports" (Bennett 1990: 78), it is important that I re-state that the point I make is not that at its origination the music genre benga reflected, refracted or represented postcolonial Luo identity but, rather, that it was "itself directly a field of social relationships in its own right and one which interact[ed] with other fields in which social relationships [were] organized and constituted in the same way as they interact with it and on the same level." (Bennett 1990: 108, emphasis in the original)

Grasped, the point inflects our understanding of the oft quoted statement by J. Baily on the relationship between popular music and cultural identity:

[M]usic is itself a potent symbol of identity. Like language (and attributes of language such as accent and dialect), it is one of those aspects of culture, which can, when the need to assert 'ethnic identity' arises, most readily serve this purpose. Its effectiveness may be two-fold; not only does it act as a ready means for the identification of different ethnic or social groups, but it has potent emotional connotations and can be used to negotiate identity in a particularly powerful manner. (Baily 1994: 47)

There is, then, a sense in which early benga can be understood to have been a symbol of postcolonial Luo cultural identity. That is despite the point that its lyrics did not necessarily represent and promote or in other ways participate in discourses of that identity. Benga was part of the practices that constituted the culture that formed the identity. It was a musical articulation, and therefore an essential part, of that identity.

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