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# A HISTORY OF KENYAN GUITAR MUSIC: 1945—1980

by

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## A. Introduction

Between November 1979 and April 1980, as part of a trip including several other African countries, I spent 5 months in Kenya. One of the musical projects that I planned to carry out during my stay was to study the guitar finger-styles that were common during the '50s and '60s. I did this by contacting Kenyan guitarists who used to play in this style, and by learning to play and sing their songs, as well as by making tape-recordings.

In the course of this work I talked a lot with these artists and learned a great deal about their lives and the development of guitar music in Kenya. Although it had not been my original plan to do so, I eventually collected enough information to form the basis of an article on this subject. This information was provided by Joshua Ombima; William Umbima; William Osale; Johnson Ouko; David Jairo; George Agade; Jim Lasco Mugodo; Henry Viduyu; Tobias Oyugi; Daudi Kabaka; David Amunga; Ben Obolla; Fundi Konde; Peter Colmore; Silas Muiruri and Mtonga Wanganangu, without whose generous help this article could never have been written. I should add that, with the exception of the last four named, all my informants belong to either the Luhya or Luo people of Western Kenya. The article therefore has a definite bias towards Western Kenya, the home of so much fine Kenyan guitar music.

The following history is therefore not so much my story as that of the musicians and enthusiasts who played a central part in these developments. On the other hand, what I have written has gained some extra depth through background reading, through my studies of guitar music in other African countries, and through my interest, dating back many years, in African popular music.

Finally, I should point out that the biggest omission of the article has been the insufficient attention it pays to guitarists from the coastal region of Kenya, about whom I know very little. I only met Fundi Konde very briefly, and my attempts to contact Paul Machupa were unsuccessful. Had I spent more time at the coast I might have met several others. Also, I decided not to include Swahili *ta'arab* music, which sometimes uses guitars, in this history. For one thing, I know very little about it; for another Kenyan *ta'arab* does not appear to have influenced Kenyan guitar music as much as *ta'arab* music in Tanzania has been able to influence guitar music there.

## B. A History of Kenyan Guitar Styles

### I. Early vamping styles (late '40s, early '50s)

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. So my history starts in the late

'forties, when the most famous Kenyan guitarists were men like Fundi Konde, Paul Machupa, Jumbe, and Kataka. Army service during the war, and contact with European and American musicians, provided some Kenyans with an opportunity to learn the acoustic guitar. Returning, men like these composed Swahili guitar songs for town dwellers. The songs were heavily influenced by Western guitar music, and vamping styles were normally used.

Fundi Konde is still alive and musically active: he works now in a Nairobi recording studio and still composes. During the 'thirties, at home on the coast, he attended a Catholic school and learnt many instruments, for example the flute, and brass instruments. Later, in Voi, a friend of his had a guitar, which Fundi Konde borrowed: "I took a week to learn it". During the war he was posted to Burma, where he met European and black American musicians. One of the latter gave him a guitar manual. On returning home, Fundi Konde was, he claims, the very first Kenyan to play electric guitar. (Electric guitar bands were not common at this time.) He played in night clubs in Nairobi, possibly Mombasa, and later in Kampala. I heard a few of his early songs; they reminded me a bit of guitar playing in contemporary European dance bands, particularly in their chord sequences. Only Fundi Konde's very rhythmic playing, which gave his European-sounding songs a slightly 'Latin' tinge, betrayed his African background. Nevertheless, he still has a reputation today as a pioneer of Kenyan guitar music.

At the same time, acoustic (or 'dry' guitars as they are known in Africa) were being brought into rural areas, particularly to Western Kenya, the home of the Luo and Abaluhya peoples. Here, vamping styles were also developed, although without the harmonic sophistication displayed by Fundi Konde.<sup>1</sup> The rhythms employed were probably influenced by town playing, although they also probably drew on local music. It is also possible that some guitarists attempted to reproduce on guitar the plucked rhythmic patterns of such lyres as the Luo *nyatiti* and the Luhya *litungu*, a feat made difficult by the guitar's very different construction and playing technique.



1. A Luhya *litungu* lyre and *esimuka* shaker from Bunyore, Western Kenya. Note that the player, Mr. Amulioto, only uses thumb and index.

## 2. Finger-styles (early '50s until early '60s)

The most distinctive Kenyan guitar music of this period was played on 'dry' guitars using finger-styles. The term 'finger-style' is used to distinguish the playing from vamping and plectrum styles. With very few exceptions, the African finger-stylist

picks the strings with only the thumb and index finger, resting the other three fingers for support on the guitar's sound box. Finger-styles were (and sometimes still are) used in several African countries, both to accompany singing with complex rhythm lines, and to provide instrumental variations between sung passages. These styles are often very melodic; they are also strongly rhythmic.

Typically, this music would be played by one or two capo'd guitars, while an accompanying rhythm, to orient the musicians and the dancers, would be provided on a bottle or wooden clappers. The singing was either solo, or, more often, in two parts; and this two-voice singing has remained a hall-mark of Kenyan popular music.

Kenyan finger-stylists, who were dominated by Abaluhya players, developed their own distinctive styles, easily recognisable from those of other countries. At the same time, players from this period recognise that theirs was a hybrid music which had assimilated many different influences, both local and foreign. Below I sketch out the main musical influences acknowledged by these players.

i) George Sibanda

George Sibanda was a guitarist from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, whose songs were famous all over East and Central Africa in the '50s. He used finger-styles, and produced a melodic, strumming sound that was influenced by South African *'kwela'* music, but nevertheless very individual. The Kenyan Ben Blastus Obulawayo (Ben Obolla) learnt to play many of his songs from records, while developing his own guitar style, and even incorporated 'Bulawayo' into his 'stage name' as a tribute to Sibanda.

ii) The 'Nyasa' sound

This is how Kenyan guitarists refer to the Malawian guitar bands of the '50s. From the one or two old recordings of this music that I heard in Kenya, I would judge it to be 'twist', 'jive' or 'sinjonjo': in other words, the Malawian popular music of the time that was also heavily influenced by *kwela*.<sup>2</sup> The music that I heard had no penny whistles in it, unlike much contemporary Malawian music, but consisted just of singing and guitars, using mainly vamping styles. The music seems to have been popular in Kenya, where it was imitated to some extent, and led both to a renewed interest in vamping, but also, as we shall see, to finger-styles.

iii) The influence of Kenyan traditional music

Traditional music in Kenya influenced guitar music at a number of levels. The singing of Silas Muiruri and Mtonga Wanganangu, two Kikuyu musicians, closely reflects the traditional modalities of Kikuyu singing: their tunes have a mesmerising quality, and little melodic variety. In the playing and singing of other guitarists, one also finds melodic or modal features that are particular to one ethnic group. Luo two-part singing, for example, often has a texture that distinguishes it from the singing of other ethnic groups. Certain chord sequences preferred by Luhya guitarists, particularly those influenced by the *'sukuti'* guitar style, are also particular to them. Both Daudi Kabaka and Jim Lasco Mugodo told me that they were influenced by the melodies of traditional Luhya instrumentalists.



2. Mtonga Wanganangu (holding shaker) and Silas Muiruri (with guitar), two Kikuyu musicians with relatives at Muchatha near Nairobi. Mr. Muiruri's right hand position, with thumb and index only, is favoured by most African finger-stylists.

Daudi and Jim also claimed that they were influenced by the rhythms and playing techniques of the Luhya litungu lyre and other Luhya instruments. Although in a generalised sense this may be true, the litungu music that I heard did not offer many points of *direct* comparison with the playing of Luhya guitarists. However, it is true that the players of litungu and other lyres like the Luo nyatiti play repeated and varied rhythm lines as accompaniments to their songs. Kenyan guitarists do the same, although using different techniques and modalities.

The rhythms and metre used by Kenyan finger-stylists can also reflect very local influences. The songs of Kenyan finger-stylists were often accompanied by a bottle rhythm found all over East Africa:

8 : • • x x • x x • : (x = a stroke, • = a silent pulse)


On the other hand, the following bottle rhythm used to accompany a song of William Osale that I recorded, may be a specifically Luhya one:

12 : x • • x • • x • x • • • :



3. A Luo *nyatiti* lyre played by Mr. Ogwang from Ng'iya, Western Kenya. Again, only thumb and index are used.

Sometimes, traditional dance rhythms were borrowed for guitar songs: the 'sukuma' and 'umotibo' dance rhythms of the Abaluhya were much favoured by Luhya guitarists.

The most spectacular example of how ethnic music influenced Kenyan finger-styles is the 'sukuti' guitar style. Sukuti is the name of a type of Luhya drum. The Sugha and Idacho people, who live near Kakamega in Western Kenya and belong to the Abaluhya, are reputed to be masters of these drums, which are played with other types of drum, in groups of two or three. Graham Hyslop<sup>3</sup> recorded an 'isuguti' drum further west in the Manyisi district of Mt. Elgon. In his transcriptions of this playing, this configuration of notes:  is very common, as it is in the 'sukuti' guitar style itself, which is said to imitate the rhythms of the sukuti drums. This guitar style is also sometimes called the 'Kakamega' style.

The inventor of this style, in the early '50s, is reported to be the rural musician George Mukabi, a Kissa man from Mulunya near Kakamega (the Kissa are also a Luhya people). It is said that he was first influenced by the 'Nyasa sound' that he heard on record, and that he tried to find a way to play this music using a finger-style. In doing so, he was consciously or unconsciously influenced by the Kakamega rhythms, and this gave birth to the famous 'sukuti' guitar style. The style spread fast amongst local ethnic groups: Sugha, Idacho, Kissa, Maragoli and others. The famous Luhya musicians of the day – John Mwale, George Agade, Jim Lasco, Daudi Kabaka and others, were strongly influenced by this music and helped to popularise it. The Swahili songs of George Mukabi himself were immensely popular in the towns.

In most respects, a 'sukuti' guitar group is not unlike any other guitar group of the period: one or two guitars, two singers. However, there are often two bottles. One is struck to produce a normal bottle rhythm. The second bottle is a ribbed Fanta bottle, otherwise known as 'maracas', and this bottle is scraped with a knife or nail to provide a complementary bottle rhythm.

The originality of 'sukuti' guitar styles lies both in their modalities and their rhythms. While some Kenyan finger-stylists were perhaps over-slavish in their adherence to the 'three chords' (tonic, sub-dominant, dominant in Western terms), 'sukuti' guitarists, in their choice of chords and harmonies, as well as in the pitch of the guitar's bass notes, developed a distinctive modality that may have its roots in Luhya music. The rhythm is fast, bouncy and vibrant. Melody tends to be found in the vigorous vocal part, rather than in the guitar part, which has much stronger rhythmic interest. The interest lies in a very strong, syncopated bass line which weaves patterns with an equally syncopated treble line. The guitar's rhythm can be varied quite a lot within the song's metre. Additional rhythmic interest is provided by the bottle parts and the vocal parts. In this way the rhythmic speed and vitality of Luhya drumming is carried over into guitar music. It is not difficult to understand the attraction of this music for dancers.

Although played on a non-traditional instrument, and incorporating various foreign elements, the 'sukuti' style is fundamentally an extension of the musical traditions of certain Luhya peoples. Despite the ever-present influences of urban guitar styles, this style has survived to this day, with few changes, in rural areas near Kakamega.



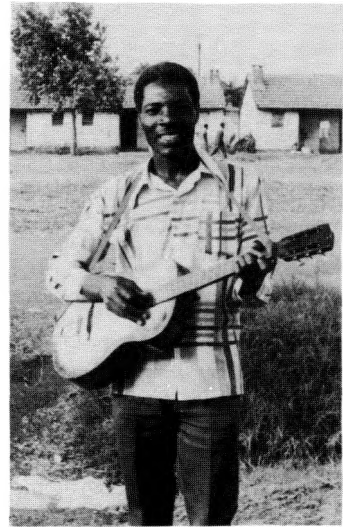
## iv) Finger styles from Shaba

During the late '40s and '50s, there was a parallel development of guitar styles in the Shaba (then Katanga) province of Zaire. There was a similar *mélange* of musical influences, from which there emerged guitar styles characteristic of the region, both rurally-based styles and more varied urban styles.<sup>4</sup> Most of these styles were finger-styles. The most famous town players were Jean-Bosco Mwenda,<sup>5</sup> Losta Abelo, and Edouard Masengo, whose songs, mostly in Kiswahili, were sold far and wide throughout East and Central Africa. In fact, they dominated the African recording industry during the '50s, and early '60s. Because they were in Kiswahili, their guitar songs did particularly well in East Africa. The words were often witty and interesting; the rhythms were good to dance to; and the guitar styles were original, sophisticated, varied and very melodic. For years, the Katangan guitarists, especially Bosco, were kings.

Few Kenyan town guitarists escaped this influence. Guitarists began to copy the Katangan style from records. John Mwale became an expert imitator of Bosco; Jim Lasco preferred Losta Abelo. Later, both Masengo and Bosco came to work and record in Nairobi, and their influence in Kenya became even stronger. David Amunga, George Agade, Ben Blastus Obulawayo – these, and many others, all had a touch of Katanga in their guitar playing and songs. Only rural players, for example 'sukuti' guitarists like George Mukabi and William Osale, seem to have stayed virtually untouched by the invasion from further south.

At first, Kenyan guitarists were overawed by the superior techniques of Bosco and company. However, they wouldn't have picked up the new styles so quickly had it not been for a strong existing Kenyan tradition of guitar playing. This tradition reasserted itself and soon Bosco's and Abelo's songs were being challenged on the Kenya market by songs and finger-styles with a distinctly Kenyan flavour. Kenyan guitarists still remember this come-back with satisfaction.

The differences that emerged between urban finger-stylists in Kenya and their Katangan counterparts were subtle rather than radical. On the whole, the Kenyan guitar playing was technically simpler and less rhythmically complex. Neither could the Kenyans claim to have mastered such a wide variety of finger-styles, and guitar tunings, as the Katangans. On the other hand, an interesting Western Kenyan lightness and bounce found its way into the playing of many guitarists, for instance that of George Agade and Ben Blastus Obulawayo. Vocal melodies in two parts were also common in Shaba, but Kenyans especially favoured this two-voice singing; their songs were light and flowing, while the Katangan singing had more intensity and drive.



4. The Luhya guitarist George Agade at Mbotela Estate, Nairobi. George started out as a finger-stylist, but now plays in electric guitar bands.

v) Latin American music

In the early '50s, possibly even earlier, Latin American records became available in many parts of Africa. In Kenya, music from Cuba and other Latin American countries were available on the 'GV' Label: rumbas, cha-cha-chas, sambas and other dances, became enormously popular with African people. 'Frankie and Sisters' an extremely successful pre-electric band from Tanzania, played Swahili songs with a heavy Latin influence, that sold all over East Africa. In smaller groups, guitarists and bottle players were also soon incorporating Latin rhythms. Kenyan solo finger-stylists to some extent followed this trend, though much less so than Bosco and Losta Abelo.

5. The old and the new. David Amunga (2nd from left) and Daudi Kabaka (right), with two young guitarists from Western Kenya at Jericho Estate, Nairobi.



On the other hand, the 'GV' sound was captured more successfully when two Kenyan guitarists played together. This style was probably first developed, on acoustic guitars, by guitarists from Zaire like Léon Boukassa. Many Kenyan guitarists followed suit: Isaya Mwinamo, Jim Lasco, John Mwale, Abusi, David Amunga, Daudi Kabaka. There were several variations of this style: most commonly, one guitar would provide a bass line or a repeated rhythm line, while the second, usually high on the keyboard, would provide a melody or a solo run. Both finger-styles, vamping, and plectrum picking were used in these two-guitar arrangements. As they developed, the Latin American and 'Congo' influences lost their early strength, and a Kenyan musical idiom began to take their place.

Here and elsewhere, two-guitar playing provided a transition between the finger-styles of the 1950's, and the electric guitar styles of the 1960's.

vi) American and European music

Although some would argue that Kenyan finger-styles have a 'Western' sound, in my opinion Western popular music and guitar playing had little influence on Kenyan guitarists of this period. American Country and Western guitarists had long been popular in Africa and this may have affected the compositions of Kenyans to some extent. Just occasionally, quite slavish imitations can be found. Silas Muiruri, the Kikuyu guitarist who learnt to play in the late '50s, and Mtonga Wanganangu, sing a

Kikuyu song in the style of Jimmy Rodgers, complete with cowboy yodelling.

Such imitations are the exception rather than the rule. Unlike the earlier exponents of vamping styles, who often learnt their chords and techniques from Western musicians, the finger-stylists drew their inspiration almost exclusively from Africa and Latin America.

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From this melting-pot of influences gradually emerged distinctively Kenyan finger-styles. In the towns, the influence of 'Katangan' styles, Latin American music, and two-guitar styles from Zaire was strongest. The rural finger-styles developed in parallel with the town styles, to some extent both feeding off, and feeding, the town music. The rural styles were less varied, less sophisticated, and less open to outside influences, being more strongly rooted in local traditions. The rural 'Sukuti' style, on the other hand, was more vigorous and more rhythmic than the town playing.

Town-based guitarists tried their luck with the young but expanding record industry. They composed Swahili songs which were sold as singles to the urban working class. Many were straight love-songs, no different from those in any other type of popular music. Others commented on the changes that town life brings, warning for example against prostitutes. Themes such as the lack of work in Nairobi also began to be common, although political songs didn't really emerge until the 1960's. Some rural finger-stylists like George Mukabi and William Osale also had success in the towns, providing Swahili versions of songs that they might sing in local languages back home. The appeal of their songs lay in the fact that many town dwellers had (and still have) strong links with the land, and the themes of these songs, often conservative and sometimes nostalgic, reminded them of the old values.

Only a handful of urban finger-stylists 'made it to the top'. The rest made a bit of money from records (although a perennial complaint, from this period on, was that they were rarely paid royalties), played sometimes at dances and concerts, and entertained drinkers and dancers in bars and hotels. In other words, they were part-time musicians. Those who 'made it', if only for a short period, were musicians like John Mwale, Jim Lasco, Ben Blastus Obulawayo, and a few others. Bosco and Masengo, while in Nairobi, were also part of this finger-stylist elite. These men found work advertising products, at large open-air concerts as well as on the radio, for such companies as: Aspro (Bosco), a Kenyan tobacco company (Mwale), Coca-Cola (Masengo) and Kenya Breweries (Lasco). Such promotional work gave these musicians extra coverage, and boosted their record sales. During this heyday of finger-styles, which lasted roughly from 1958 to 1962, these men earned good money, and did not need to supplement their earnings with other work.

In the country, although not without resistance, guitarists began to occupy positions that had hitherto been held only by more traditional musicians: entertainers; story tellers; praise singers; satirists; players at weddings, funerals, and other important events. A few of these might make records, but mostly they would rely on small amounts of money from appreciative listeners and dancers in rather the same way that buskers collect their money in Europe. Sometimes they received much larger amounts, or payment in kind, from rich patrons: Tobias Oyugi, a Luo country guitarist, relates in one song how a cousin named Okello rewarded him with a cow. Few country finger-stylists could make a full-time living out of their music: many

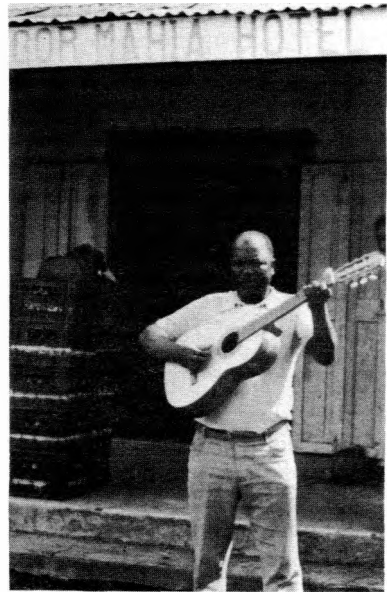


had *shambas* (small farms) which they worked with their families. William Osale would divide his time between Nairobi, where he would find work such as night-watchman, and his shamba near Kakamega. Generally, like other musicians, these guitarists were poor and had a low status.

In addition, there were some young players who composed songs for their own amusement and to entertain their friends, who would provide a second voice or play a bottle part. I met one of these players, Henry Viduyu, in Nairobi. He used to have a guitar which he played at home near Kakamega. He stopped playing when radios and records became widespread, feeling that he couldn't compete, and got rid of his guitar. Nevertheless, many other such players still persevered, particularly amongst the Luhya peoples.

The songs composed by rural guitarists tended to be in the local languages and highly topical. For example, Henry Viduyu composed a song to ridicule a woman called Dorika, who had the habit of urinating in the river at the spot where people collected their water. Tobias Oyugi's Luo songs contain racy narrative about his adventures in the locality; they are full of fun and satire, and also contain praise, of himself and of his patrons. Players of the Luo *nyatiti* lyre compose very similar songs. George Mukabi sang a song (in Kiswahili) praising Jarret Onyango, a local man who held an important position in the railways. The Kikuyu songs of Mtonga Wanganangu can also be topical in this way (for example, a lament for the death of his mother), while others of his songs are less topical, but full of Kikuyu proverbs and traditional wisdom. Themes like these would not be at all out of place in the repertoire of any musician playing the Kenyan instruments that predate the guitar.

Nevertheless, new ideas did creep into the songs of country guitarists, especially those who had spent some time in the towns. There were songs about visits to Nairobi; the drink and the women that the guitarist can buy with his money; the advantages of education (even for women); and love songs. Some guitarists told me that the love songs were the most controversial. In the old days, according to Ben Obolla, love songs directly addressed by a musician to a woman were frowned upon amongst the Luo people. Worried fathers and husbands had some control, via the elders and the chief, over the behaviour of musicians, who apparently were only allowed to praise a woman indirectly: in other words, as the wife or the daughter of the man that the praise was really directed to. Guitarists ignored these conventions, and composed love songs about whom they liked. The songs could be passionate, cheeky or outrageous. Guitarists also developed a habit of talking during songs, while an instrumental passage was being played. In this way



6. The Luo rural finger-stylist Tobias Oyugi, at Akala in Gem, Western Kenya.

they threw in extra comments, engaged in repartee with the audience, or made sexual jokes. These embellishments were a delight to the listeners.

During the 1950's, guitarists in the country were often viewed by the authorities as trouble-makers, debauchees, and rebels. This view was shared by chiefs, the church, and the colonial administration alike: by everyone, in fact, except the ordinary people who liked the new music. To some extent this criticism could be applied to any musician who got mixed up with drink and trouble: and it was not difficult to find guitarists with exotic, dangerous life-styles. Many of Tobias Oyugi's songs are about riotous behaviour, drunkenness, and arrests. George Mukabi met a violent end as the result of a quarrel with his wife's family. However, it went further than this: the guitarists also represented a threatening kind of change.

Guitarists were part of a new order of things. As we have seen, some of the earliest Kenyan guitarists learned guitar from foreigners while fighting in the 2nd world war. Travel, meeting men from other countries, new ideas: these things broadened the minds of Kenyan soldiers – and politicised them. Despite his education, Tobias Oyugi failed to get a government job after the war: his ideas were too political. Jobless, he returned home to Gem in Western Kenya, and took up the guitar, which he'd learned during his army service.

In addition, country guitarists, with thousands of others, went to the towns as migrant labourers, factory workers and house servants. This was another politicising experience. Not only could they live without certain restrictive customs that had to be observed at home, they were also exposed to the possibility of a radically different style of life: records, new clothes, radios, motorbikes, education, jobs, houses. On the other hand, they also knew overcrowding, unemployment, violence, poverty, hunger and squalor. Not surprisingly, the urban unemployed were a threat to the colonial administration, and whenever possible they were packed off home again, where it was hoped that they would settle into the calmer, more conservative, traditional ways of life. Of course, the Kikuyu uprising in 1952 made the administration doubly touchy about unrest both in the town and in the country.

Guitarists were amongst those who, returning to the country, had tasted, however briefly, a different style of life. While others bore suffering and poverty stoically, and respected customs, these young people were often disrespectful, impatient for change and better things. Not surprisingly, they often clashed with their families, the chiefs, the church, and the administration. Many guitarists told me that life had been very difficult for them. Tobias Oyugi was ostracised by the church and the administration for his guitar playing. Jim Lasco Mugodo, although a town guitarist, started playing at home near Kakamega. But his father, who played a traditional instrument, was fiercely opposed to guitar playing, convinced that it would lead to bad ways. Jim had to play secretly, and borrowed his friend's guitar when his father went out drinking. Much later, when Jim became a recording star, his father was delighted to hear it, claiming that Jim's musical talents were inherited from himself. Ben Obolla, a Luo man, also clashed with his father, at home near Kendu Bay, about playing guitar. He went even further than Lasco to conceal his musical activities, not just from his father, but from the whole family. He assumed a 'stage name': Ben Blastus Obulawayo. Blastus is a biblical name, given him by his father (Blastus conspired with the people of Tyre and Sidon to arrange Herod's destruction).

'Obulawayo' is a tribute to George Sibanda, who lived in Bulawayo; it also bears some resemblance to Ben's real surname. All his records were produced under this pseudonym and at first his family had no idea who the guitarist was. Ben's father only found out the truth when he was already famous, and was delighted. It was one thing to be a national recording star, and have songs broadcast on the radio; another to be a country guitarist, like Tobias Oyugi, often at odds with the established order.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to stress only the differences between town and country guitarists. Most guitarists, whether favouring the urban or rural finger-styles, had their origins in the country. Only a very few Kenyan town-based guitarists of this period were well-off and famous; these were the ones promoted in a big way by recording companies or advertising agencies. The remainder, whether living in the town, staying in the country, or commuting between the two, had little real status or earning power. They earned what they could, which was often coins rather than notes. In this respect, urban guitarists working in bars and hotels, were not dissimilar to their rural counterparts.

All the contemporary finger-stylists were at the centre of a musical revolution that was sweeping across not just Kenya, but the whole of Africa. The authorities might dislike them, but young people loved these guitarists and were developing an insatiable taste for their new rhythms, sounds and words. Unfortunately, their allegiance was soon to be transferred to electric guitar bands who would steal the limelight, for once and for all, from these virtuosos of the 'dry' guitar.

### 3. Electric Guitar Bands: The Swahili Songs of the 1960's

The electric guitar styles that began to develop in Kenya during the early 1960's took off from the musical ferment that had produced finger-styles during the 1950's. Many finger-stylists never adapted to playing in an electric band. Some, like Tobias Oyugi, tried it but preferred to play solo; others, like William Osale, never learnt plectrum techniques, and continued as finger-stylists. However, many other finger-stylists, especially those who had already experimented with two-guitar arrangements, had no trouble in learning the techniques of electric bands: these included George Agade, Daudi Kabaka, Isaya Mwinamo, David Amunga and Jim Lasco. In fact, while most electric guitarists used a plectrum, some, like Daudi Kabaka and George Agade, also found ways of using finger styles in electric groups.

The upsurge of electric guitar bands occurred simultaneously in many African countries. The advantages of these bands over the earlier guitar music may be obvious but they are worth stating. Firstly they were louder, and their music could not be drowned by audience noise: they were therefore better to dance to. Secondly, the amplification of guitars meant that they could not be swamped by singing and other instruments. Not only could more guitars now play together but a greater number of other instruments (trumpets, saxophones, conga drums) could also be added without destroying the interest of the guitar parts. From this it followed, thirdly, that greater rhythmic interest was possible than in the 'dry' guitar groups, simply because a greater number of rhythmic layers could be added. The African guitar is just as much a rhythmic as a melodic instrument (as for example we have seen in 'sukuti' guitar styles): and this potential is realised even more fully in electric guitar bands. Finally, because the solo guitar player was freed from holding

down chords, his playing could be more melodic. Few of the finger-stylists (except those who used two-guitar styles) developed techniques that took them beyond first position on the keyboard.

Kenyan electric guitar music in the '60s was, like the preceding town-based finger-styles, a hybrid musical form in a state of constant flux. Apart from absorbing the various elements that made up finger-styles, electric guitarists were also exposed to certain new foreign influences:

i) The contemporary music of Zairean bands

Zaire was and is the power-house of modern guitar bands, and its influence has extended to many African countries, but particularly to Central and Eastern Africa. In Kenya Zairean records have always been available and later in the '60s Zairean bands came to work in Kenyan hotels and night-clubs. Developing from local musical traditions and from a history of dry guitar playing which if anything was more interesting and varied than Kenya's, the Zairean band music of the '60s was developed in the night clubs and recording studios of Zaire's large towns: Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Kisangani, and others. Kinshasa, with greater resources, dominated the national and the international market. The band music of each region had its own flavour<sup>6</sup> but a strong common influence in the '60s was that of Cuban music. Sometimes imitations were fairly direct, even to the point of being sung in Spanish. But more fundamentally, Zairean guitarists copied on guitar the rhythm lines that Cubans played on brass or sax.<sup>7</sup> Such a pattern might be picked on the rhythm guitar, which would vary it several times in the course of a song; the bass guitarist would pick a different rhythm, also varied, but usually with fewer notes; while the solo guitar would fill in with riffs between sung lines, as well as providing longer, very attractive solo runs between sung passages. Occasionally solos were also provided on trumpet or sax.

Rhythm lines were not of course a new idea in Africa, and it has already been shown that they were an important part of dry guitar music; before guitars, many purely African instruments had been played according to this principle for centuries. Zairean guitarists, in imitating Cuban bands, were responding to an essentially African idea, and, almost immediately re-developed it along African lines. Soon, this rapidly developing music was heard all over the continent, on the discs of such famous groups as OK Jazz and African Fiesta.

I do not know precisely how Kenyan bands reacted to this new invasion of Zairean music. Obviously, the general impact was strong, but I suspect that to some extent the Zairean music demanded techniques that were beyond Kenyan guitarists, although the 3-guitar line-up was often adopted. Certain simpler Zairean arrangements (for example bass rhythm line; *vamped* rhythm guitar; solo guitar) were adopted without difficulty, although generally the Kenyan bands could seldom rival the sustained drive and inventiveness of the best Zairean music. I suspect that Kenyan guitarists tended to favour those elements that suited their own guitar traditions, such as playing parallel thirds in the solo guitar part. The 'Latin' strain already

present in Kenyan guitar music was probably also reinforced by the Zairean influence. From the rather few Kenyan records of this period that I have heard, it seems to me that Kenyan musicians were fairly selective in what they absorbed from the Zairean bands and otherwise continued to develop along their own lines: guitar music was strongly enough established to avoid the necessity of slavish imitations.

There was another good reason why Kenyan Swahili bands perhaps avoided too close an imitation of Zairean bands. The songs of the Kenyan groups were aimed at the urban working class, whose lingua franca was Kiswahili. Richer Kenyans, with higher aspirations, tended already to be snobbish about Swahili songs, and bought Zairean or Western records. There was no point in the Swahili bands trying to compete directly on this market: rather, they concentrated on the music that their public preferred<sup>8</sup>, and took considerable pride in developing their own music.

ii) A new wave of kwela music

At this time there was also a revival of interest in South African 'kwela' music, often referred to locally as 'twist'. Kwela groups were beginning to go electric in South Africa and their records may have been available in Nairobi.

In a Kenyan group, the 'twist' vamping would usually be given to the rhythm guitar, and a bass or a solo guitar part, or both, would be added. Singing would be in the normal two parts. 'Twist' styles could of course be mixed up with other styles: a Zairean or more likely Western tune might be taken and remoulded in a 'twist' style.

iii) European and American popular music

Anglo/American pop was another form of music favoured during the '60s by Kenya's urban elite, and to some extent influenced players in guitar bands. The strongly rhythmic guitar playing of American and English rock 'n roll groups appealed to some Kenyan guitarists. Sometimes this admiration resulted in the direct imitation of a particular Western group, but more usually it was the general guitar idiom of Anglo-American groups that had a certain influence on local musicians, especially perhaps if they wanted to be 'up-market'.

A national style or 'sound' for Kenyan bands of the '60s was not long in emerging. The style centred around Swahili songs and has already been documented by John Storm Roberts.<sup>9</sup> The famous musicians of the day included: Daudi Kabaka, David Amunga, George Agade, Nashil Pichen, Peter Tsotsi, and Isaya Mwinamo. Abaluhya players were still in a commanding position, although the Luo and to a lesser extent the Taita, played a significant part. A typical line-up for a guitar band was either two or three guitars; two singers, who might also be guitarists; and a rhythm section consisting of maracas, clappers, or sometimes drums, or a mixture of these rhythm instruments.

The typical Kenyan sound of this time is rather difficult to define. It was an attractive, clean sound, both in the guitar playing and the singing. There was plenty of variety in the solo guitar playing whether in the form of repeated set instrumental passages, or improvised riffs and variations. Compared to the heavier intensity of contemporary Zairean groups, the Kenyan sound had a lighter 'country' feel. Nevertheless, this was a time of vigorous exploration and development for Kenyan music.



Kenyan musicians were consciously struggling to develop a truly national music and at their best produced dynamic, original and very exciting dance tunes. One of the best examples is 'Western Shilo' by Daudi Kabaka, playing and singing with George Agade, and, incidentally, using finger-styles. Both these men are Luhya and 'shilo' is a Luhya dance rhythm. 'Western Shilo' therefore incorporates a traditional rhythm, in triple time, into a modern guitar idiom: the song, with wonderful melody, tension and drive, was a great hit, and very popular with dancers. Kabaka made a point of telling me how proud he was that he was able to draw on the musical traditions of his people in developing a music with national appeal: the 'Western' of the song title refers of course to Western Kenya, his home.

This sense of national pride, boosted of course by Kenya's independence, was also reflected in the subject matter of contemporary songs. In Kenya this was not a government inspired phenomenon which musicians were required to follow slavishly. A tradition of topical Swahili guitar songs had already been established during the pre-independence, dry guitar era. It was natural that this vigorous tradition should be continued by electric guitar bands and that, at independence, themes such as pride in President Kenyatta, and national progress, should add new dimensions to song content. The songs that were not directly related to politics or independence, as John Storm Roberts has shown, contained social comment or satire covering a wide variety of everyday subjects: education, unemployment, marital or other love troubles, money troubles and housing problems. Songs like these were of course aimed primarily at an urban audience.

John Storm Roberts clearly regarded this as a boom period for Kenyan popular music. Speaking to me in 1979 David Amunga and Daudi Kabaka also looked back on this time as a golden era. They stressed the fact that they had been able to create a national, de-tribalised form of music. They were proud to have been singing in Kiswahili, and proud to have been reaching out to all Kenyan people, not just to their own. Quite a lot of the credit for the successes of the '60s was attributed to Equator Records and to its producer Charles Worrod in particular, who was felt to have given a strong lead to local musicians.

However, although there was money to be made, the position of these electric guitar bands was rather precarious. As far as record sales were concerned, local groups constantly faced competition from re-pressings, sold locally, of Zairean hits. Night clubs were in short supply, and the few that there were tended to hire Zairean groups or groups playing Western pop, to satisfy the needs of their sophisticated customers. In addition, a constant complaint was that recording companies failed to pay out royalties on record sales, and furthermore certain companies would issue re-pressings of Kenyan songs in other countries (like Nigeria) without asking permission, or rewarding the artists. The general picture emerging from what Kenyan guitarists told me was of a rather anarchic recording trade, of disorganised musicians, and of a limited market for Kenyan Swahili songs.

Outside the dominant trend of this period, (that of electric bands playing Swahili songs), there was a small amount of commercially produced music in local languages. Finger-styles lingered on of course, especially in country areas, but were hardly recorded or featured in the media, unless the artist, like George Mukabi for example, was particularly famous.



#### 4. Electric bands in the late 1970's: songs in local languages

African electric guitar bands continued to change and develop during the 1970's. In East/Central Africa, the biggest developments probably took place in Zaire and Tanzania. (It is interesting that in both these countries there is considerable patronage of electric guitar bands by the ruling political parties. Correspondingly, many songs are on political themes.) During this period new musical influences such as American soul music and reggae were absorbed; and new instruments, like the electric organ, were incorporated into some bands. There were also some attempts to incorporate traditional instruments into guitar bands: on Zairean television I saw traditional drummers playing with electric guitarists.

From the recordings that I heard during 1979/80, I noticed three other significant changes. Firstly, sung passages, particularly in Zairean and Tanzanian songs, seem to have become longer and more ornate. It is very common now for bands to have 3 or 4 singers who play no instrument, and have developed a wide range of vocal techniques: call and response; three-part singing, often very beautiful; and even vocal improvisation, of a limited kind. These are not new techniques, but they have been given increasing importance in guitar bands, and in this context have developed in original ways. One has the impression that the voice is regarded as a musical instrument in its own right, having equal status with other instruments in the band. Secondly, with the advent of LPs and cassette tapes on the African market, the length of each song tends to have increased. It is now common for an LP or a cassette to have only two or three tracks per side. Thirdly, solo guitar playing seems to have become more rhythmic, especially in Zairean bands. A line-up of 3 guitars is still common, although I notice that the bass or rhythm guitar is sometimes left out. The main difference is that the very melodic solo guitar playing of the 60's has now often given way to long guitar solos which consist largely of repeated and varied rhythm lines, in which melody plays a very minor role. I find this playing less attractive and imaginative than the earlier solo styles, for all that these intense rhythm lines can be exciting. In these songs, the main melodic interest is often in the vocal parts.

In Kenya, the direction taken by electric bands has been an unusual and not altogether positive one. When I visited the country in 1979/80, I was amazed to find that the mainstream Kenyan band styles, based on Swahili songs, had vanished without trace. This development was in marked contrast to the situation in Tanzania and Zaire, where, in the main urban centres vigorous national styles, based on songs in Kiswahili and Lingala, have continued to assimilate new influences and to develop. Today in Kenya (apart from the coastal region) there only seem to be songs in local languages (like Kikamba, Kikuyu, Luhya languages and Dholuo) in a great diversity of guitar styles. Swahili songs are a great rarity: one such exception is 'Malaika' by Fadhali William who had been active since the early 60's and achieved an international reputation with this song.

A variety of reasons can be advanced for the downfall of Kenya's 'national style'. Some of the musicians pointed to the demise of Equator Records and the departure of Charles Worrod: but this seems a rather partial explanation. Others stressed tribalism in Kenya, and the dominance of foreign music. It is likely that as richer, more educated Kenyans continued to buy Zairean and Anglo/American music, the sales of

Swahili songs were increasingly eroded. At the same time, that section of the public which was not interested in foreign music gradually transferred allegiance from Swahili songs to songs in local languages. Kenya has never been as successful as its neighbour Tanzania in building a national culture based on use of Kiswahili, and its free-enterprise economy has stimulated a considerable degree of inter-tribal competition. In such a climate, tending to encourage narrow loyalties, it is perhaps not surprising that Kenya's Swahili songs, which expressed national optimism, as well as common hopes, problems and frustrations, should disappear.

The result of this situation, much to the disgust of the 'old guard' who developed the guitar styles of the 60's, is that guitar music in Kenya has lost its 'top league', where in the past rivalry between the best bands, as well as the high demands of producers, led to important advances in technique and to the consolidation of what was best in Kenyan guitar music. The present diversification of Kenyan music may have produced some benefits; it could be argued for example that a re-generation is taking place while musicians 'go back to their roots'. On the other hand, a lot of music now being produced is simply mediocre. To some extent the general changes affecting African bands have percolated through to Kenyan bands, particularly to the Luhya and Luo bands, where corresponding changes in singing and guitar playing styles are detectable. On the other hand, the modern music generally seems much less able to assimilate new influences and to develop, often relying instead on very unoriginal guitar techniques. A 3-guitar line-up, and 2-part vocal singing still appear to be virtually universal features of Kenyan bands; accompanying rhythm is provided on maracas, clappers or cymbals.

While I was in Nairobi, the dominant popular dance rhythm was known as *Benga*, although I found that the term was applied rather loosely, while amongst the musicians who were active in the 60's, the term is used as an expression of outright contempt. *Benga* also sounds different depending on what ethnic group is playing it. Kikuyu *Benga* can sound reasonable in the guitar playing (in fact, Kikuyu groups often hire Luhya guitarists), but the singing, following Kikuyu tradition, is literally monotonous. A very popular Kamba group is the Kilimambogo Brothers Band who play not *Benga* but *Kavacha*, presumably a Kamba rhythm, although again the term seems to cover a variety of rhythms. Although some of their tunes are attractive and good to dance to ('*Ivinda ya Kinze*' is a favourite of mine), the guitar playing is far below the best that Kenya can offer: for one thing, there is not enough variation of rhythm and pitch between the three guitar parts. One of their songs, 'Dr. Kalau', has only two guitar parts: a bass guitar part and a solo guitar part which unmistakably is played using an old-fashioned finger-style! One advantage of the new diversification may be that musicians from ethnic groups previously excluded, because of the Luhya domination, have been allowed into the market to experiment and develop musical skills. However, judging by the abilities of the Kilimambogo Brothers, the modern music is contributing nothing original to Kenyan guitar playing.

Luhya *Benga*, on the other hand, is characterised by very bright guitar playing, in which the 3 parts are more skillfully differentiated. In the bouncy rhythms the old 'sukuti' influence can be clearly detected, while the robust 2-part singing also has an unmistakable Luhya quality. However, perhaps the most attractive music coming out of Kenya today is from Luo groups. The guitar playing is well balanced and even

brighter than the Luhya playing. As in the Luhya groups, the solo guitar is played very high on the keyboard but to my ear the Luo groups have the edge in the inventiveness of their instrumental passages which, as in many of the modern songs, come in the second half of any track. The Luo bands also have their own characteristic, very high-pitched, 2-part singing style. Modern Luo songs export well; I know for example that they are extremely popular in The Gambia. In my opinion, the strengths of Kenya guitar playing are preserved, if anywhere, in the playing of the Luo and Luhya bands. Their skills are built on the styles of the 60's and they have the ability to assimilate new musical techniques, such as those of Zairean music; I think they also trade off each other to some extent. Their playing would however gain extra edge and polish if they were able to perform regularly in a national rather than a parochial context: in my opinion, these bands have some way to go before they can produce really first-class songs.

Because of the language difficulty, I can't say much about the subject matter of these modern songs. Love still features prominently, of course. Although the music caters for both town and country people, it is safe to assume that the subject matter has become much more localised; some bands, especially in country areas, cater for an extremely localised public, and in these cases one can expect the song content to be as topical as it was in the days of the rural finger-stylists. The beautiful woman or important person being praised will probably be known to all the local listeners.

The economic position of Kenyan musicians today is as bad as ever it was. In Nairobi the big hotels, casinos and expensive night clubs, catering to an elite clientele, hire a few Zairean bands, European bands or local groups who only play Anglo/American pop music. Businessmen sponsor one or two Kenyan groups who play at major dances and political events, and may occasionally sing in Kiswahili. This top end of the market is said to be controlled by Kikuyu businessmen, which caused disaffection amongst musicians from Western Kenya, who would like to be at the centre of the musical stage. They say that this is only now possible if they are hired to play in Kikuyu bands, whose music they dislike.

At the bottom end of the market, there is a plethora of recording labels, disappearing as fast as they appear, catering for various ethnic groups. In this sphere I am sure that no musician can earn more than a part-time living. In addition, electric guitar bands from this end of the market will play at small hotels, at cheap night clubs, and at dances, in various towns around the country.

The non-payment of fees and royalties by recording companies continues to provide grounds for complaint amongst some musicians that I talked to. One group, from Western Kenya, have formed a Performing Rights Company in Nairobi to protect musicians from exploitation. However, they are in a very weak position since their policies can always be undermined by out-of-town or foreign bands who will accept any deal in order to find a way into the market.

Although in many respects recent developments in Kenyan guitar music have been negative ones, the situation is far from lost. Kenya is still bursting with guitar talent, and most of those who started the ball rolling in the late 40's are still around. The old finger-stylists can still, on the whole, play their songs. Tobias Oyugi still plays in bars, both in Akala, Western Kenya, and in Nairobi. Mtonga Wanganangu and Silas Muiruri are also very much a going concern, and, as Kikuyu men, can get work

virtually all the time; they are much in demand at big political gatherings and travel a lot to sing for Kikuyu patrons in many parts of the country.

'Sukuti' guitar styles are, I was told, flourishing near Kakamega. In early 1980 I was staying with Jim Lasco Mugodo at Shinyalu Market near Kakamega. During the three or four nights that I was there, a funeral took place at a home nearby, and several times I heard a guitar being played in the 'sukuti' style, accompanied by metal clappers. Several young men joined in the singing. Also at Shinyalu I met Barnabas, a young man who had made his own guitar and knew how to play finger and 'sukuti' styles, though he was really just a beginner.

Earlier, in Nairobi, while recording William Osale, who also plays 'sukuti' guitar, I met his relative Johnson Ouko, and his friend David Jairo who are both unemployed. Johnson, the son of George Mukabi, was about 20 years old and an expert 'sukuti' guitar player who could play and sing his late father's old songs at a tremendous speed. He had also learnt a more modern style of rhythm guitar playing, suitable for an electric band: for this style he would pick rhythm lines with thumb and index. David Jairo played solo guitar, and to me it seemed that his plectrum playing was based on the Kenyan solo styles of the 60's and early 70's. Often, while I recorded William Osale's 'sukuti' guitar songs, these two would provide an accompaniment in their more modern styles, although of course they respected the 'sukuti' rhythm. At other times, they played and sang me more modern compositions of their own. Although their compositions could do with some refinement, as other Kenyan musicians pointed out to me, it struck me that David and Johnson could draw on a tremendous depth of guitar-playing experience, spanning the developments of 25 years in one of the richest traditions of Kenyan guitar music. It remains to be seen whether Kenya's recording industry will allow their talents to surface.

Meanwhile David Amunga is determined to recreate a 'truly Kenyan' national style of guitar playing. While I was in Nairobi, he had begun to rehearse a new group of young musicians in a new Swahili song. He was using Tanzanian guitarists and a Zairean saxophone player. His ultimate aim is to stimulate in Kenya the growth of a progressive national style, like that of Tanzania, which draws on the best local traditions, besides including new ideas from abroad. He would also like to see traditional drums included in guitar bands, and hopes that the subject matter of their new songs will include political themes of a progressive nature. David Amunga sees a connection between the problems of the Kenyan recording industry and those of the country as a whole: he believes that both sets of problems would best be solved within a framework of socialist policies. In the meantime, when I met him at the end of 1979, he was hoping that his new song 'Hamjambo kote Kenya' ('Greetings to you in all parts of Kenya') would be a great success and start the hoped-for process of revival. Unfortunately, I don't think he had a backer, and he was producing the song on a shoe-string budget.

### C. Guitar Music in Kenya: The Future

On the face of it, there seems little hope that the present tribalisation of Kenya's guitar music can be reversed in the short term. This is because the economic conditions that led to this tribalisation do not show immediate signs of changing. However, on the optimistic side, Kenya now has a new administration under President

Daniel arap Moi, pledged to stamp out corruption. Some musicians are hopeful that this new mood of optimism may provide a stimulus for change in the recording industry, as well as in other aspects of Kenyan life.

The Kenyan public is said to be tiring of music that only caters for the tastes of individual ethnic groups. If so, the time may be ripe for the establishment of a new recording company that can promote the re-emergence both of the Swahili song and of guitar playing on a national rather than a local scale. The successful promotion of a revived national style presupposes a degree of financial backing as well as a good record producer who can encourage high standards and deal fairly with the musicians. Alternatively, a successful company already involved in foreign and ethnic guitar music might consider taking this new direction, on the grounds that, if successful, it might be more profitable. Unfortunately, no-one is likely to rush into financing such a project while the better-off Kenyans who are the main buyers of records and tapes continue to think of Kiswahili as a 'second-class' language.

On a more limited scale, it is a matter of urgency to study and document Kenya finger-styles more fully than I have been able to. Although this statement could be seen as little more than a reflection of my personal preference, I believe there is more to it than just that. Firstly, finger-styles are likely to fade from memory faster than plectrum styles and they must therefore be studied now, while the finger-stylists are still alive. Secondly, guitar finger-styles can be learned much more directly and easily than the two or three guitar parts that go into any song by an electric band, and as such can be passed on without trouble to any guitarist with a reasonable sense of rhythm. Learning African finger-styles is an excellent introduction to principles which underly many types of African music, and as such is of value to both Africans and non Africans. Viewed in a world context, I regard African finger-styles as an element of the world's guitar heritage every bit as important as American country blues styles, which in their turn have provided a means for thousands of guitarists all over the world to learn the principles of Afro-American music.

Kenyan finger-styles need to be recorded, filmed, classified, and transcribed as comprehensively as possible. Whenever it is feasible, the skills of the finger-stylist should be passed on to others by the artist himself – at workshops, for example, or in educational establishments. Where finger-styles, like the 'sukuti' guitar style, form part of a living tradition, field recording trips should be made, both to preserve what there is and to increase its status by attempting to boost record sales and broadcasts of this music. It has already been shown that young Kenyans naturally learn these styles, provided they have guitars and access to the right people. It would be an imaginative and welcome step to extend this educational opportunity to many other young Kenyans and even to people of other races.



## NOTES

- 1 Examples of these early rural styles can be heard on Hugh Tracey: Music of Africa Series, Musical Instruments 7, Guitars 2, (GALP 1503, repr. on Kaleidophone KMA 7), tracks by J.P. Odera and Lang Obiero.
- 2 This music has been extensively documented by G. Kubik. See 'Donald Kachamba's montage recordings', *African Urban Studies*, Michigan State University, Winter 1979-80.
- 3 Graham Hyslop: *Musical Instruments of East Africa: 1 Kenya*: Nelson: 1975.
- 4 See John Low: Shaba Diary - A Trip to Rediscover the 'Katanga' Guitar Styles of the 1950's and 60's: *Acta Linguistica et Ethnologica*, Vienna (to appear shortly)
- 5 David Rycroft transcribed some of Jean-Bosco Mwenda's songs for two articles in *African Music*. See 'The Guitar Improvisations of Mwenda Jean-Bosco': *African Music* Vol. 2, No. 4, 1961; and Vol. 3, No. 1, 1962.
- 6 See Kazadi wa Mukuna: 'The origin of modern Zairean music; a socio-economic aspect', *African Urban Studies*, No. 6, Winter 1979-80, Michigan State University.
- 7 This idea was developed by John Storm Roberts in Chapter 9, *The black music of two worlds*, Allen Lane, 1972. By 'rhythm line' I mean a repeated pattern, corresponding to the song's metre, in which rhythm is a more important feature than melody.
- 8 See John Storm Roberts, 'Popular music in Kenya', *African Music*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1968.
- 9 John Storm Roberts, *ibid.*

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