

CONTINUITIES AND INNOVATION IN LUO SONG STYLE: CREATING THE BENGA BEAT IN KENYA 1960 TO 1995

by

IAN EAGLESON

Introduction

Benga is a genre of guitar-band dance music in Kenya that first emerged within the Luo community during the late 1960s. Throughout its initial development among Luo bands and subsequent adaptation to several ethnic languages,¹ benga provided many Kenyans with a malleable platform for enjoying a novel, emergent style that connected with the poetic and musical sensibilities of ethnic tradition that have been resilient in both rural and urban life. Each variant of benga expresses markers of its ethnic orientation, not only in the obvious sense of its language, but in concepts of rhythmic structure and melodic phrasing, tempo, form, and vocal timbre. They also present distinct developments in compositional identity initiated by various leading musicians. While these distinctions are obvious to benga musicians and fans, in scholarly and journalistic discussions of benga they are seldom discussed in a substantive way, and benga is often generalized as either a reflection of latent ethnic identities that persist in modern music, or a local derivative of Congolese music.

Through a closer examination of the emerging style of Luo benga in the context of its larger milieu, I substantiate the claim that there are continuities linking this pioneering movement to indigenous folk song, as many have suggested.² Previous observations have often posited that benga emerged out of an adaptation of the practice of the traditional Luo lyre, the *nyatiti*. While links to *nyatiti* music can be established, I argue that there is a more fundamental structural connection across various other genres of Luo music, including “*nyatie dero*” acoustic guitar songs, *orutu* (fiddle), *onanda* (accordion), *wend kong’o* (beer-drinking songs), and *dodo* (women’s vocal group songs). Continuity has occurred most crucially in the rhythmic structuring of melodic phrases in all of these practices, 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

¹ Including Kamba, Kikuyu, Kipsigis, Kisii, and Luhya.

² See Barz (2001, 2013), Paterson (1999), Roberts (1988), Stapleton and May (1987), and Umbima (2013).

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. As Luo musicians have worked with the possibilities offered by novel instruments and musical paradigms, they have experimented with this basic relationship, creating new formal arrangements and textures. While monophonic song remained at its heart, the development of benga saw the use of guitars to fill in the textural spectrum, shifting between approaches of heterophony, homophony, and polyphony. Yet, an essential rhythmic character and phrasing style has persisted into the most recent incarnations of Luo practices.

In contrast to the scholarly tendency to focus on the *nyatiti* as a primordial, redeeming aspect of benga's practice, journalists in Kenya have often considered benga's roots in ethnic traditions as its weakness. Benga emerged in the midst of what some journalists called the "Congo flood," an influx of talented Congolese musicians and ensuing success for them and their Tanzanian counterparts in record sales and promotion. For much of benga's history, it was either ignored by Kenyan critics or criticized for what it was not: a style of music that could be universally appreciated across ethnic and class lines and compete in the international market. Although when taken as a whole, vernacular³ records accounted for roughly 75% percent of local record sales during the heyday of Kenya's recording industry during 1970s and 1980s, this was a fractured market, and a single benga musician/band could not compete with stars like Franco, Simba Wanyika, or Les Mangelepa.⁴ In addition to being less exclusive in terms of their language use,⁵ these groups were also seen by many Kenyans to produce superior music compared to benga. A 1985 article in the *Daily Nation* sarcastically referred to benga musicians as "the dynamic River Road crowd of musicians,"⁶ and that:

Their shortcomings are fairly obvious. They have been playing the same benga tunes for too many years. The same old bass guitar, rhythm guitar, a sharp lead guitar and solid benga drumming and hastily penned lyrics. The singing is rarely special. And more and more of these artists seem to believe that they can only cater for their little districts. How sad. (Anon. 1986)

The argument that some benga records lacked distinction has merits: the high output of local Kenyan producers, especially during the 1970s record boom, enabled a proliferation of like-sounding material, with many bands rushing to the studio hoping to cash in (Stapleton and May 1987:270, Andere 1984a). Unfortunately, this theme in

³ Vernacular is the term used by journalists and broadcasters to describe music sung in Kenya's non-Kiswahili indigenous languages.

⁴ For discussions of the Kenyan record market during this time see Mwangi (1976) and Gachamba (1985).

⁵ While Lingala is not widely understood by Kenyans, its neutral lyrical content enabled it to be more widely appreciated across ethnic boundaries. Many Congolese bands resident in Kenya also composed songs in Kenya's *lingua franca*, Kiswahili, while benga bands tended to avoid its use.

⁶ River Road refers to Nairobi's downtown merchant district where benga musicians produced their work, much of it with small independent shopkeepers/distributors.

music criticism has fostered an under-appreciation of the history of musicianship and composition of one of Kenya's most significant musical genres.

Through an analysis of examples of Luo benga representing three different phases in its development, along with an examination of predecessors to the benga style in Luo song, I illustrate that (1) the rhythmic structure of melodies and accompaniment cycles in benga show continuity with a variety of Dholuo music practices, including but not limited to the *nyatiti* lyre; and (2) that despite claims by critics that it was unpolished and parochial, benga's development shows a clear movement towards sophistication and compositional experimentation, and that ultimately benga musicians had succeeded in putting Kenya "on the map" by creating a style distinct from its regional counterparts. The analysis is based on ten transcriptions produced by the author of excerpts from recordings of Dholuo songs from various genres and eras.⁷ By looking closer at how Luo musicians created intricacy in their songs in the context of trends in the Kenyan music business, a foundation can be established for understanding the integrity of benga as a practice and for making arguments about its alleged quality or the nature of its indigenous identity.

Included are investigations of antecedents of benga in Luo music: *wend kong'o* vocal music and *nyatiti* from 1950 from recordings of Osito Adie and Otuoma Ogolo; single-guitar songs of the 1960s by Olima Anditi, Adero Onani and Dick Ngoye; and two-guitar music that directly preceded benga in the late 1960s from the Ogara Boys Band. Following these predecessors the analysis moves to the early Luo benga style of 1970-1976 in the work of Ochieng Nelly Mengo and Tausi Jazz; the more intricate Luo benga of the late 1970s and 1980s epitomized by Collela Mazee and the Victoria 'B' Kings; and finally an example of a new sound that emerged in the 1990s championed by Okatch Biggy and Orchestra Super Heka Heka.

The roots of benga in traditional Luo song

The relationship of benga and other Luo guitar music to the *nyatiti* lyre has loomed large in writing about Kenyan popular music, yet it has not been examined substantially. One of the first to weigh in, John Storm Roberts, wrote of 1960s guitarist Dick Ngoye's music that this relationship was "mysterious," yet "the melodies are recognizably Luo, and Dick Ngoye's confidence and panache surely stem from long experience with strings" (1988). The position is reiterated in the most recent edition of the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, with both Barz (2013) and Umbima (2013) highlighting the *nyatiti* as an influential source. Based on his work with *nyatiti* player Andericus Apondi, Barz suggests that "the interaction of bass and treble lines in traditional *nyatiti* are mirrored in the playful and omnipresent interaction of bass and lead guitars in benga" (2001:113). While the grafting of indigenous instrumental practices onto the guitar has many clear demonstrations throughout African music,⁸ the case of the *nyatiti* deserves further

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the song text transcriptions were produced by the author with the assistance of Fredrick Anindo, Steven Omari, and Ooko Ndolo.

⁸ In many cases the adaptation of indigenous African musical techniques and structural

scrutiny. Luo benga musicians I interviewed in 2004 on this subject, including some of its founding luminaries, unanimously expressed doubts about the connection, and none had any experience performing *nyatiti* music.⁹ Instead, they commonly suggested that their foundational experience in music happened in school and church choral groups, through the influence of a relative or neighbor who played the guitar, listening to records, and in a few cases, from the singing of folk songs by female relatives. This incongruence with the assumption of the *nyatiti*'s primacy suggests that the source of benga's "recognizably Luo" sound could be clarified.

A useful starting point for querying the assumption is found in existing research on Luo music, including the work of A.M. Jones (1974), Washington Omondi (1980), Charles Nyakiti (1988) and Patricia Opondo (1996). All have brought attention to the prevalence of a characteristic style of cross-rhythm in vocal melodies, more specifically the tendency for syllables to be accented athwart the regulative beat in a conventional manner. As Jones notes, polyrhythmic complexity is rare in Luo percussion practices, but is pronounced in singing (1974:43). This phrasing is often employed at the beginning of vocal melodies, which frequently start in an off-beat relation to the beat. This is illustrated in Figure 1, an example of *wend kong'o* (drinking song), and Figure 2, a *nyatiti* praise song. In both of these examples, the quarter-note beat is demarcated by *gara* (a string of small steel rattles worn around the ankle).

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system is for the 'Leader' and the second for the 'Chorus'. Both systems feature a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. The vocal lines are accompanied by 'Gara (rattles)' in bass clef, which consists of a steady quarter-note rhythm. The lyrics are written above the vocal lines.

Leader
 O - mo - lo Ma - de - ka ma chal gi bwa - na o -

Chorus
 ro - mo re - go Ma - de - ka ma chal gi bwa - na o - ro - mo re - go

Figure 1. "Piny ka Piny." Osito Adie and vocal group, 1950 [DVD track 1].
 English translation: "Omolo Madeka, who is like a Master, he is satisfactory. Madeka, who is like a Master, he is satisfactory."

conventions to the guitar has been rather clear and homologous, as in the case of the Mande *jeli* (Charry 1994, 2000), the adaptation of Zulu bow music in *maskanda* (Rycroft 1977, Davies 1994), and the development of Shona *mbira*-guitar music of Zimbabwe (Brown 1994, Turino 2000).

⁹ Including D.O. Misiani, Osumba Rateng, Paul Orwa Jasolo, Osito Kale, Otieno Jagwasi, Aluoch Jamaranda, Otieno Pon Kagola, and Opiyo Bilongo

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Voice, Nyatiti, and Gara. The score is in 2/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line with lyrics "A - go - lo wer ni ya wa (o)ndie - gi lie ka - ke - lo" and the Nyatiti accompaniment. The second system starts at measure 4 with lyrics "A - go - lo wer ni ya wa" and continues with the Nyatiti accompaniment. The Gara part consists of a simple drum pattern.

Figure 2. "Chief Gideon Magak." Daudi Otuoma Ogolo, vocal and *nyatiti*, 1950 [DVD track 2]. English translation: "I've taken out a song for my people, Ondiegi the elephant of the Kakelo clan, I've taken out a song for my people."¹⁰

Looking beyond the starts of phrases, off-beat accenting of syllables of an eighth-note in duration is prevalent, as illustrated in Figure 1 (mm. 1, 2, and 4, third and fourth beats) and Figure 2 (mm. 2 and 4, first and second beats). Washington Omondi has suggested that this off-beat phrasing is not peculiar to the songs of the *nyatiti*, but is "a constant feature of Luo music which may therefore be regarded as the 'rhythmic fingerprint' of the music" (1980: 365). The pervasiveness of such a fingerprint is no doubt reflective of the morphology of the Luo language, in which structures of emphasis and duration (short versus long syllables) create a syntax of rhythmic flow. While an analysis of this morphology is outside the scope of this discussion, it is clear through an examination of Dholuo songs that they share a conventional approach to reconciling speech rhythm with a constant beat, evident in all the songs in this analysis.¹¹

On a broad level, this convention can be seen as consistent tendency to avoid the beat in accents of melodic phrasing, instead, placing the emphasis of long syllables (an eighth note or more) in the position of either a sixteenth-note before or after the sounding of the beat. This is exemplified below in Figure 3, which notates the rhythm of a melodic fragment found at the entrance to both of the examples above.

¹⁰ Text and translation from Omondi (1980: 74).

¹¹ For further discussion of syllabic duration and structure in speech see Lucia Omondi (1982: 21); in song, see Washington Omondi (1980: 303-311).



Figure 3. Entrance phrase for “Piny ka Piny” and “Gideon Magak.”

In both of these excerpts, these two-beat syncopated fragments are coupled with parts that are relatively more coincident with the beat, stressing a symmetrical subdivision of the beat in eighth notes. Repeated in a four-beat cycle,¹² this alternation between syncopation and relative coincidence with the beat is indicative of an isorhythm that pervades many Luo songs. The most explicit use of the motif is in the style of early Luo benga (1970-1976), which featured it in the foreground, played on cowbells and cymbals. In Figure 4, this benga “timeline” is compared to the phrasing in the examples of *wend kong’o* and *nyatiti* songs:

Figure 4. Comparison of vocal phrasing with the benga timeline.

While there are minor divergences, the rhythms in the vocal melodies conform to the fluctuation between syncopation and evenness that is created in the benga timeline. Accents are produced in each four-beat cycle preceding and following the second beat by a sixteenth note, and in beats three and four a more symmetric subdivision of the beat prevails. As notated in Figure 2, this same contrast is created in the ostinato played on the *nyatiti* lyre by Otuoma Ogolo. Omondi has noted that a binary fluctuation of “rhythmic density” is a common feature of lyre ostinatos (1980:365). The presence of this patterned rhythmic emphasis in unaccompanied vocal music¹³ suggests that it is tied to a pervasive development in conventions of creating melodies in Dholuo song style in relation to a rigidly metered beat, and not simply an outgrowth of *nyatiti* instrumental technique.

¹² In Luo practice, the notion of a four-beat cycle is not defined by the counting out of the meter or a finite division of bar lines, but rather on how musicians are oriented to the accents in a repeated cycle. Thus, this four-beat pattern of emphasis can be initiated at any beat in the measure depending on the composition.

¹³ In Hugh Tracey’s Luo field recordings of 1950, there are numerous examples from different regions of Luo land in which this isorhythm is prevalent, including “Alego tat yien matingo tek” by Muruka Ndai Fula.

The two recordings cited here, made by Hugh Tracey in 1950,¹⁴ are representative of a period in which the well-established traditions of the *nyatiti* and *wend kong'o* were competing with novel instruments such as the guitar, accordion, and *orutu* fiddle in rural music performance (Nyakiti 1988). The numerous examples of guitar playing in Tracey's collection of field recordings show a variety of stylistic approaches, including triple-metered waltz-like rhythms and Afro-Cuban inspired rumba songs, as well as a basic accompaniment technique favoring strummed chords.¹⁵ These examples of emergent musical trends are notable for how they differ from their folk song counterparts, favoring evenly articulated eight-notes in their melodies and accompaniments, a clear deviation from existing Luo musical practices, where anacrusis entries and straddling of regulative beats are in abundance. In the decade following these recordings, guitarists performing as solo singer-players developed styles that would come closer to grafting the rhythmic essence of Luo traditional song into a new skin, and in the process giving it a new harmonic framework.

Solo guitarists of the 1950s and early 1960s

In the years following the Second World War, inexpensive acoustic guitars became available throughout Kenya.¹⁶ Returning servicemen and migrant laborers helped to spread the guitar's use into rural areas of Luoland, and it quickly caught on among young itinerant musicians as a solo instrument to accompany singing. While the earliest guitar band music suggested a break with established indigenous conventions, the works of solo guitarists in the 1950s¹⁷ showed a clear move to incorporate the unique rhythmic tendencies of Dholuo song style, and they show a greater flexibility in form, accommodating irregular phrase lengths and breaking outside the periodic structures favored by their predecessors.

Olima Anditi is remembered by Luo music aficionados as one of the greatest guitarists of this era. Kanam in South Nyanza, Anditi was active performing and recording from 1952-1963 (Nyakiti 1988:329). Anditi helped popularize a finger-picking style on the guitar, an innovation from the strumming technique used by earlier Luo guitar bands. Finger-style solo guitar music had been gaining in popularity in Kenya at this time, with records by Jean Bosco Mwenda, Losta Abelo, and George Sibanda being distributed by Gallotone starting in 1952 (Harrev 1989).

Anditi's style is notable for its focus on the vocal melody, with the guitar being used to double the vocal in unison or an octave below. This tendency suggests the importance of monophonic song style as a significant feature of continuity in Luo

¹⁴ Tracey recorded in Kendu Bay, Alego and Yala.

¹⁵ Representative examples include "Nyiri To Richo" by Lang' Obiero (rumba), and "Dhi Dalau" by Lake Victoria Band (waltz).

¹⁶ These were typically South-African made Gallotone instruments. This was noted by both Samuel Obel and D.O. Misiani to me in interviews, and by Olima Onditi (Nyakiti 1988: 330).

¹⁷ Notable guitarists of this period include Olima Anditi, Ojwang Jakambare, Tobias Oyugi, Adero Onani, and Were Arong'a.

music as it was adapted to the guitar. Anditi's 1957 recording "Sabina Ogola" illustrates the salient rhythmic characteristics found in the phrasing of *wend kong'ò* and *nyatiti*: the off-beat entrances, the fluctuation in rhythmic density over the course of four beat cycles, and the syncopated two-beat phrase notated in Figure 3, which features in all the phrases notated below on the third and fourth beats.

The musical score for "Sabina Ogola" is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a voice line and a guitar accompaniment line. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 2/4. Roman numerals (I, IV, V) are placed above the voice lines to indicate chord changes. The lyrics are in Luo and English translation.

System 1:
 Voice: I Manenda dhi - yo V Tan-ga Ran-dit' o- ke-gi IV Sam A - dhi-am-bo I Nena - cho - po
 Guitar: Accompaniment line

System 2 (starts at measure 4):
 Voice: V Ta-ri - me IV Ma-ri - wa (a)dhi-a - nin - do I kan - yo IV Kondit - o V nyi-ran - wang' - o
 Guitar: Accompaniment line

System 3 (starts at measure 6):
 Voice: I Ta-ri - me IV A-ringo (a)nin-do V Ta-ri-me I Kondit-o IV poda - ka - la V ka - la
 Guitar: Accompaniment line

Figure 5: "Sabina Ogola." Olima Anditi, 1957 [DVD track 3].

English translation: "I went to Tanga, Randiti the son of the sister of Sam Adhiambo. When I reached Tarime, Mariwa, I Kondito spent a night there, I met girls at Tarime. I Kondito ran and spent a night at Tarime, and continued the journey."¹⁸

While the rhythmic emphasis of this song resembles other Luo practices (*nyatiti*, *wend kong'ò*), it diverges in its sense of harmony and accompaniment. As established in Omondi (1980), Nyakiti (1988) and Opondo's (1996) work, *nyatiti*, and *wend kong'ò* (along with its contemporary successor, *dodo*) composition is based in different modal configurations of a diatonic scale, with tonal centers being established through progressive downward movement to and undulation around a final tone. "Sabina Ogola" displays some of the same tendencies, yet it asserts a triadic sensibility, with tonic, subdominant, and dominant harmonies established as illustrated above by roman numerals.

Harmony as an accompaniment device had existed in the *nyatiti* practice of *puch* (ostinatos), but had an open-ended quality stressing fluctuation between the tonic and

¹⁸ Text and translation from Nyakiti (1988:342).

dominant poles of the harmonic spectrum. With the added harmony of the subdominant chord, guitar music like that of Olima Anditi's broke from this harmonically open, modal framework to set up periodic chord progressions based on I-IV-V.

Anditi's guitar playing, having a monophonic tendency, differed from the type of tonal embellishment created in the ostinatos of the *nyatiti*. The *nyatiti* technique of accompaniment establishes skeletal melodic themes that underscore the vocal melody, filled out by a rhythmically dense "embroidery" of these themes with companion tones created by the alternate plucking of strings by the right and left hands (Omondi 1980:385). In the early 1960s, Luo singer/guitarists Adero Onani, Jose Kokeyo, and Dick Ngoye used a style of solo guitar accompaniment that represents what is perhaps the closest structural analogy to the *nyatiti* approach in Luo guitar playing: a finger-picking technique that used alternate-bass played by the thumb, interwoven with melodic chord voicings played by the index finger. While this technique captured the essence of the *nyatiti*'s plucked-out, harmonic embroidery provided by a solo stringed instrument, it must also be seen as a Luo adaptation of a more widespread trend that transcended ethnic traditions, evident in the music of popular Luhya guitarists George Mukabi and John Mwale. John Low, who in 1979-80 interviewed several guitarists who took part in this movement, has cited a variety of inspirational sources that were acknowledged by them, including Zimbabwean solo guitarist George Sibanda, American country and western recordings such as Jim Reeves, and the Congolese finger-stylists Jean Bosco Mwenda, Losta Abelo, and Eduoard Masengo (1982: 19-23).

A common feature in the recordings of Kenyan guitarists playing in this style is the use of cyclic rhythmic motifs provided by a small percussion group of one to three instruments, including claves, shakers, wood block, and the *guiro*-like sound of a scraped empty Fanta soda bottle.¹⁹ In Adero Onani's "Yawuoyi Moa Nairobi," the wood block and shakers are used to establish emphasis on the quarter-note beat, while the claves contrast this beat, accenting just before and after beats two and four (Figure 7). The resulting pattern created by the wood block and claves (found on many 1960s Kenyan guitar recordings) is equivalent to the *cinquillo* rhythm that pervades much Afro-Cuban *son* music (see Figure 6, which notates both the *cinquillo* and another Afro-Caribbean isorhythm integral to the development of twentieth-century African music, the *tresillo*²⁰). Along with the *clave* rhythm itself, the use of these patterns is evidence of the influence of Latin American dance music created by the success of EMI's GV series of reissued recordings, as well as the growing popularity of Congolese rumba.²¹

¹⁹ The Fanta soda bottles produced in Kenya lent themselves to this use, with their "ribbed" shape similar to the *guiro*.

²⁰ For a discussion of the usage of these rhythmic motifs in Caribbean dance music, see Manuel (1985) and Floyd (1999).

²¹ For a general discussion of the history and impact of the GV series see Topp-Fargion (2004); on Latin American dance music in East Africa see Kubik (1981) and Low (1982).

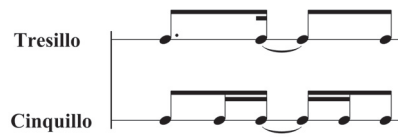


Figure 6. *Tresillo* and *cinquillo* rhythms.

Figure 7: “Yawuoyi Moa Nairobi.” Adero Onani, ca. 1963 [DVD track 4].

English translation: “When going home for vacation, men from Nairobi disturb peoples’ hearts.”

A notable aspect of the adaptation of these Afro-Cuban rhythms is that they show a clear structural affinity with the isorhythmic tendencies noted above in Figure 4, and in the phrasing of various Luo songs. In the case of the *cinquillo*, the accents anticipating and following the second beat of the figure fit with the Luo phrasing style, displayed by Adero Onani’s vocal melody and guitar part on the third and fourth beats of each measure. With the *clave*, again the second beat is anticipated by an accent a sixteenth note before. Furthermore, the “two” half of the 3-2 *clave* pattern has the same type of even articulation of the beat that is found in isorhythms of many Luo songs and in the benga timeline that would emerge in the 1970s. One of the clearest illustrations of this similarity in emphasis is found in another solo finger-style guitar piece of the same era, “Robinson Olago,” recorded by Dick Ngoye around 1965. In Figure 8, we can see the use of the *clave* in alignment with characteristic Luo melodic phrasing in the guitar part (which is itself a refrain echoing the vocal melody), creating the cyclic fluctuation between syncopation and symmetry with the beat:

Figure 8. “Robinson Olago.” Dick Ngoye, ca. 1965 [DVD track 5].

The coordinated use of these two motifs in this song offers a useful illustration of how East African musicians had, to quote Gerhard Kubik, “recognized something in a new garment” in the rhythms spread throughout Africa by the popularization of Afro-Cuban music (1981:93). This process of integration suggests that early Luo guitarists were more interested in exploiting the potential of their instrument as a medium for singing in Dholuo in a novel way than they were in using it to transfer the practice of the *nyatiti* to a more modern analog.

Two guitar bands of the 1960s

By the early 1960s, Kenyan guitarists, particularly among the western Kenya communities of the Luo and Luhya, were embracing a new approach to guitar songs that used two guitars in the ensemble roles of lead and bass, and began to settle into a more programmatic arrangement style that featured alternation between short, harmonized vocal stanzas and a lead guitar refrain. This contrasted to the earlier material of Olima Anditi and Adero Onani, in which a solo performer had the freedom to work with variations and elongations of vocal phrases. The most popular performer using this new ensemble arrangement was John Mwale, who had great success releasing records for the African Gramophone Stores label, composing in Kiswahili. Onani would also embrace the style, along with other emerging Luo musicians, including John Ogara, George Ramogi, Daniel Owino Misiani, and Owino Rachar. Figure 9 provides an example of one such stanza/refrain arrangement, performed by John Ogara and the Ogara Boys Band²² in the mid-1960s. This group is argued by some to have originated the term “benga” and first popularized a sound that would take shape as a genre in the coming years (Osusa et al 2008).

This piece, along with similar works created by Ogara’s peers, represented a breakthrough towards establishing a unique, “recognizably Luo” (as J.S. Roberts put it) popular song style. Standing out in this respect is the rhythm used in the entrance of the vocal melody, which corresponds to that notated in Figure 3 that is found in the above-mentioned *wend kong’ò* and *nyatiti* songs. Throughout the stanza and guitar refrain, the four-beat isorhythm alternating between syncopation and even subdivision

²² This band featured Ogara (vocals and guitar), Ochieng Nelly Orwa (guitar), and Akech Oyosi Jabuya (vocals).

of the beat is seen, most clearly in the singing (mm. 2 and 4) and the bass guitar (mm. 3, 5, and 7).

What also makes this piece significant is how it contrasts to other popular song styles being used by Ogara. Like his counterparts in other small Kenyan guitar groups, Ogara was recording rumba songs that, while lacking in the more sophisticated ensemble arrangements of their Congolese and Tanzanian counterparts, featured similar musical elements (such as the *tresillo* bass line [see Figure 6], and a steady stream of sixteenth notes played on a shaker). During the 1960s the *twisti* (“twist”) style had also gained favor, which showed influences from South African *kwela* (using swing eighth notes and quarter-note walking bass line) and rock and roll. In the case of a song like “Ochot ma Lolwe,” the same ensemble, vocal harmonies, and similar guitar techniques were being utilized, yet made to articulate the style of melodic phrasing that could be heard in rural performances of Luo drinking songs and *nyatiti*.

Indications of the direction Luo guitarists would take in establishing the benga sound are seen in the development of textural interplay between electric guitars. The “bass” guitar (a six string electric played in the low register) articulates the chord progression and provides a counter melody to the vocal line, while the solo guitarist²³ accompanies the vocals with subtle voicings of major thirds. In the instrumental refrain, the solo guitar reiterates the vocal melody with slight variations, played in a high register with parallel thirds, one of the hallmarks of the benga sound.

The move towards diatonic harmony and emphasis on melody in the guitar playing of this song show distinguish it from the practice of “embroidered” four-beat ostinatos that define *nyatiti* playing. The structural similarities it does share with the *nyatiti* practice are found in its use of the patterned rhythmic prevalent in Luo song melodies. This focus on song melodies as determinant of the texture and arrangement of Luo songs would only increase as the benga style took hold in the 1970s and 1980s.

Early benga: 1970-1976

A number of factors coalesced at the beginning of the 1970s that would set the stage for the emergence of Luo benga as a cohesive style. The period was a boom time for the music business world-wide, and the situation in Kenya was no exception.²⁴ Being well established as a hub for regional and international commerce, Nairobi had the investment capital from multinational record companies and local entrepreneurs that could propagate this boom locally. Since 1966, Phonogram had been operating East African Records, the sole pressing plant in East Africa (Wallis and Malm 1984:354). Phonogram and EMI Had concentrated on promoting Congolese, Tanzanian, and

²³ The lead, typically high-register melodic guitar part in Kenya is referred to as “solo,” while lower register accompaniments are referred to as “rhythm.” In the case of two rhythm guitars, each part is designated by its register, “first rhythm” (high) “second rhythm” (low).

²⁴ During this period worldwide sales of records and cassettes were expanding by more than 20 percent annually (Wallis and Malm 1984:5).

The musical score consists of three systems, each with four staves: Voice, Solo guitar, Bass guitar, and Clave Shaker. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. Roman numerals (I, IV, V) are placed above the voice line to indicate chord changes.

System 1 (Measures 1-3):

- Chord progression: I, IV, V, IV
- Lyrics: Mae an a - dhi-yo Ta - ri - me bay(o)ed o - chot

System 2 (Measures 4-6):

- Chord progression: I, IV, V, IV, I, IV
- Lyrics: Mae an a - dhi-yo Ta - ri - me bay(o)ed o - chot Tanzan - ni - a

System 3 (Measures 7-9):

- Chord progression: I, IV, I, IV, V, IV
- Lyrics: (None)

Figure 9. “Ochot Ma Lolwe.” John Ogara and the Ogara Boys Band, circa 1965 [DVD track 6]. English translation: “I used to go to Tarime to visit a girlfriend’s house. I used to go to Tarime to visit a girlfriend’s house, in Tanzania.”

international pop music, investing on a more limited scale in local Kenyan musicians.²⁵ A more significant force behind the establishment of benga as a recorded genre was the efforts of three locally owned labels: AIT, Chandarana, and Melodica. All three of these labels began earnestly recording and marketing electric guitar-band music sung in Kenya's indigenous languages at this time, with the majority of releases coming from Luo musicians. AIT²⁶ was particularly prolific, and through its relationship with the producer/impresario Oluoch Kanindo, it had a key role in bringing musicians from rural Luo land (particularly South Nyanza) to Nairobi to record. Many of these bands splintered to take advantage of opportunities to make records under different names, and in the process helped to establish shared conventions in style.

Another factor that helped to spark benga's rise was the regional trend of the "jazz" band format,²⁷ and an emphasis on creating new stylistic identities. At the time, record stores, jukeboxes, and radio broadcasting were awash with many such new styles, or "beats" as they are often described by musicians and fans. While the Afro-Cuban-inspired rumba had been a dominant regional trend for two decades (propelled by the success of Congolese stars like African Jazz and O.K. Jazz), this period saw an effort by groups using electrified ensembles to break new musical ground. Just as the international rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and soul movements of the 1960s had propagated new dance fads like "the twist," and "the jerk," contemporary African bands of the time sought to diverge from the musical status quo to produce new styles that were meant to be distinctive, innovative and offered their listeners an original beat to dance to. In the Congo, this movement resulted in *soukous* (popularized by Orch. Négro Succès and Orch. Bantous de la Capitale), and *kiri kiri*, a soul-inspired style created in 1968 by Nicolas Kasanda of African Fiesta Sukisa. Congolese expatriates Orchestre Hi-Fives popularized the *kibushi* beat in Nairobi, while Tanzanian groups distinguished themselves by identifying their sound with a particular *mtindo*, or "style," such as the *Msondo* of NUTA Jazz, which referenced an indigenous dance tradition (Graebner 1989: 248, Perullo 2011:273), and the *Apollo* and *Dondora* beats of Jamhuri Jazz (Mwangi 1973a).

A unifying factor in these new approaches (benga included) was that the relatively staid, slow-dance tempo of the rumba and its consistent accompaniment gave way to rhythmic structures with higher tempos and more emphasis on repetitive patterns of syncopation. This trend resonated well with the emerging style of musicians like John Ogara, D.O. Misiani, George Ramogi, and Ochieng Nelly Mengo,²⁸ who had been

²⁵ A notable success being Gabriel Omolo's "Lunch Time" from 1971 distributed by Phonogram.

²⁶ AIT (Andrews International and Teal) was run the Andrews family, who had been involved with the music business in Kenya going back to 1957 (<http://www.airecords-africa.com/docs/about.htm>). The company was a subsidiary of Lonrho, an international conglomerate that connected it to Teal Records of South Africa, and gave it a widespread network of distribution in southern Africa.

²⁷ Exemplified in names like Morogoro Jazz, Jamhuri Jazz (Tanzania), OK Jazz (Zaire), Victoria Jazz, Tausi Jazz, and Shirati Jazz (Kenya), and featuring a common ensemble style.

²⁸ Nelson Ochieng Mengo (1950-2001), known as Ochieng Nelly, is not to be confused with another guitarist who used the same name, Nelson Ochieng Orwa (1943-2014), of the Ogara Boys Band.

experimenting with breaking from the rumba to create music that incorporated the more strident, syncopated rhythmic flow of Dholuo singing. While the Cuban *clave* timeline had presented an affinity to the rhythmic conventions of Dholuo song in its cyclic alternation between syncopation and equal subdivision, the higher-tempo beats gaining popularity in the early 1970s on regionally-popular African records were even more sympathetic to this core feature of Luo melodic phrasing.²⁹ In such a stylistic milieu, the aesthetics of Luo song became a timely foundation for these musicians to produce contemporary compositions that followed trends but were distinct, and Kenyan record producers were eager to promote this novel sound.

The songs created by the first Luo benga bands showed the continued resilience of Dholuo melodic phrasing and an increased emphasis on the marking of the regulative beat. One of the most identifiable sonic markers of this new style was a rhythmic pattern commonly played by percussionists, notated in Figure 4 as the “benga timeline,” and illustrated below in “Sabina Ya Neli” by Ochieng Nelly Mengo (Figure 10), played on the high-hat cymbal atop of the knocking sound of the regulative beat played by a side-stick on a snare drum.

Where earlier recordings of Luo songs had shown traces of this rhythmic motif as a latent organizing principle, in benga songs of this era it came to the forefront. The motif is conspicuous in many of the recordings of benga’s early luminaries, including D.O. Misiani and Shirati Luo Voice, Collela Mazee and Ochieng Nelly Mengo with Victoria Jazz, and George Ramogi’s Continental Kilo Jazz. By the mid-1970s the beat was also taken up by Kenyan bands performing in other ethnic languages, such as the Kilimambogo Brothers Band (Kamba) and the Nyamwari Band (Kisii).³⁰ With its rudimentary, hard-driving sound, this percussion accompaniment provided a signature beat to the guitar-band music of 1970s Kenya.

The formal arrangement of “Sabina ya Neli” shares much with the songs of Kenyan two-guitar groups of the 1960s, in that it features a two measure stanza based on a simple chord progression (in this case, alternating between the tonic and dominant) that is answered by a guitar refrain that closely follows the melodic profile of the vocal melody. While the vocal melody is modified according to changes in the text in successive stanzas, the guitar refrain remains constant. Following a repetition of this call-and-response, early benga recordings reliably transition to a more animated, instrumental section in the vicinity of the three-minute mark of the song.³¹ Known as the “climax” by Kenyan musicians, this section is similar to the Congolese *sebene*: the guitarists settle into eight-beat, two-measure ostinatos based on alternations between

²⁹ Examples of non-benga recordings popular in Kenya in the early 1970s that featured rhythmic schemes in this vein include “Chawa,” by Jamhuri Jazz, “Msondo No. 3” by NUTA Jazz, and “Maseke ya Meme” by Bavon Marie-Marie and L’Orchestre Negro Success.

³⁰ Examples include “Getiro Bus” by the Nyamwari Band (1974), and “Nondo Nene” by the Kilimambogo Brothers Band (1976).

³¹ As these songs were being pressed on seven-inch 45rpm discs, their maximum recording time per side is typically between four and a half and five and a half minutes.

I Sa - bi nang' o ma - chandi ma ma V mo miyo(i)sik(o) i - lal wo - ko

Figure 10 shows a musical score for the song "Sabina Ya Neli" by Ochieng Nelly Mengo and Tausi Jazz, 1973. The score is arranged for a vocal line and five instrumental parts: Solo guitar, Rhythm guitar, Bass guitar, Shaker, and Side stick. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line is in the upper staff, with lyrics "I Sa - bi nang' o ma - chandi ma ma V mo miyo(i)sik(o) i - lal wo - ko". The guitar parts include a lead guitar line with melodic phrases and a rhythm guitar line with a steady eighth-note pattern. The bass line provides a strong rhythmic foundation. The percussion part consists of a shaker and side stick playing a consistent pattern of eighth notes.

Figure 10. "Sabina Ya Neli." Ochieng Nelly Mengo and Tausi Jazz, 1973 [DVD track 7].
English translation: "Sabina what is bothering you mama, why do you keep disappearing out there?"

the tonic, subdominant, and dominant chords, with the percussion section increasing its loudness and accentuating the benga timeline with a cymbal or cowbell. The lead guitar player often ceases playing melodic material in certain sections of the climax, opting to strike muted, percussive sounds fretted high on the neck or behind the bridge of the guitar, that complement the percussion parts. In these sections the parts of rhythm guitarist and bass guitarist may be highlighted in solo passages.

With the addition of a proper bass guitar, a rhythm guitar, and a more clearly defined motif in the percussion, the benga songs of the 1970s showed increased intricacy in the coalescence of guitar parts. As illustrated in Ochieng Nelly Mengo's "Sabina ya Neli," the bass works in concert with the snare drum to emphasize the regulative beat and the harmonic shift; the rhythm guitarist plays a contrasting ostinato, anticipating the bass by a sixteenth note on beats one and three; while the lead guitarist, echoing the vocal melody in a line based on parallel thirds, binds the ensemble to the syncopated accents

of the benga timeline in his rhythmic emphasis, conspicuously avoiding the beat. This simple, yet precisely composed multi-part texture is something benga bands would continue to polish as the style progressed.

With its basic repeated chord progression and short stanzas. “Sabina ya Neli” is representative of the dominant form of benga songs of the early 1970s. A different strain, epitomized in recordings like “Pesa Orumo” by Continental Kilo Jazz and “Odawo Rabet” by Victoria Jazz showed more of a melody-dominated, heterophonic approach to ways melodic textures were organized. In “Odawo Rabet” (Figure 11, 1973), the melodic theme begins with a phrase having an identical rhythmic structure and melodic profile to that of “Sabina ya Neli,” yet in this case, the resolution of the stanza is elongated over four measures and the arrangement precludes a clear definition of chord progressions, to the point where there are no decisively defined tonal shifts (with the exception of a move to the dominant and cadence back to the tonic at the end of each stanza, see measures 4 and 8). During the vocal stanza, perhaps as a result of this static, almost modal tonality, the lead guitar and bass simply provide pedal points on the fifth, an interval well suited to this ambiguous tonality in that it is a crucial tone defining both the tonic and dominant chords. The rhythm guitar, playing in the same register as the lead, provides a loosely heterophonic melody in support of the vocal part. While the rhythm guitar at times reinforces the rhythmic movement and tonal materials of the vocal melody (for example in beats 3 and 4 of measures 2 and 3), it is more effusive, providing melodic ornamentation to the primary melodic theme. In the instrumental refrain, the rhythm guitar part repeats while the lead guitar and bass provide heterophonic variations of the vocal melody in octaves. “Odawo Rabet” is an illustration of the way that benga, while using diatonic harmonic functions (such as parallel thirds) at times subverts the decisive power of well-defined chord progressions to allow melodies to be stated untethered, often in different ways simultaneously by separate voices in the ensemble.

This tendency is a unique facet of the Luo benga style and is one way that it can be distinguished from its contemporaries in the popular guitar music of East and Central Africa during the 1970s, in which block chord progressions can be heard underpinning melodies in an unambiguous manner. As Luo benga evolved through the 1970s and into the 1980s it continued to be overshadowed on the national stage by its Congolese and Tanzanian counterparts. Yet, despite cries from producers and journalists that they should strive to create more nationally marketable music in Kiswahili, benga musicians continued to develop their distinct compositional approach to creating textured arrangements around melodies rooted in the distinctive rhythmic flow of Dholuo song.

Benga’s mature phase: 1977-1995

By 1976, Kenya’s music business had hit a stride. Kenya’s growing economy had helped to drive consumption of records, and as a result multinational labels Polygram (formerly Phonogram) and EMI, along with the locally run AIT label had reached a

I
A - je ni kod O piyo Emma e - ro mako gi - ta wa - pa ro go do (O)jimo O da -

Voice

Solo guitar

Rhythm guitar

Bass guitar

High hat
Side stick

4 V
wo wuodi Mi - ge - I le

7

Figure 11. "Odawo Rabet." Victoria Jazz Band, 1973 [DVD track 8].

English translation: "Ajeni and Opiyo Emma, we are playing guitar, remembering Ojimo Odawo, son of Migele."

peak in production.³² This was a fruitful period for expatriate bands working in Kenya, including Les Wanyika (Tanzania) and Les Mangelepa (Zaire). Performing in Swahili and Lingala, these groups enjoyed a following among a cross-section of Kenya's public, and were favored by the promotional efforts of Kenya's major record labels and the state-run broadcasting service, the Voice of Kenya (VoK). The dominance of these musicians in the pan-ethnic market would in some ways marginalize Kenyan musicians, but also helped to solidify the development of music that carried distinct indigenous Kenyan traditions into the contemporary, national arena.

Journalist Amboka Andere has suggested that, as a result of a public with buying power "local bands were able to sell many copies of every single they released in those days. All they needed was a strong benga beat" and that "during the coffee boom in the mid-Seventies there were so many benga songs recorded in Kenya that it was sometimes difficult to tell them apart" (Andere 1984a, 1984b). However in the 1980s, with dwindling profits resulting from the impact of a global recession and increased cassette piracy, the major labels largely withdrew from the vernacular music business, and in the ensuing vacuum, several local independent labels emerged to continue meeting the demand for benga sung in various ethnic languages.³³

In the field of Luo benga, the 1980s saw the rise to prominence of several bands based in the South Nyanza region including Collela Maze's Victoria 'B' Kings, D.O. Misiani's Shirati Jazz, the Jolly Boys Band (Ouma Omoro and Julius "Prince Jully" Okumu), John Otonde's Kiwiro Boys, and Musa Olwet's Migori Super Stars. Supported by regional, independent record producers, as well as a vibrant performance culture centered in the rural towns of Migori and Kendu Bay, these bands were able to thrive without the support of the larger record labels, continuing the proliferation and refinement of benga.

Developments in the Luo benga sound of this era occurred in part as a result of changes in ensemble. The addition of another rhythm guitar (known as "first rhythm") to the standard ensemble brought an additional voice to the textural interplay. Songs began to take on a more intricately composed nature in which the heterophonic tendency in early benga was enhanced and at times superseded by a polyphonic style, with the guitars performing carefully orchestrated, independent melodic phrases.³⁴ Additionally, the strident sound of the percussion accompaniment with its benga motif was replaced by sound of a bass drum and closed high-hat cymbals that were used to

³² From the period of 1965-1980, Kenya had an average annual GDP growth rate of 6.9 percent, reaching its height in 1977 with a rate of 8.9 percent (Maxon and Ndege 1995:153). By 1980, the East African Records plant had reached a peak production of 2.9 million seven-inch singles a year (Gachamba 1985).

³³ These included Luo labels like Oula, Victoria Music Stores, and Wamenyo, and labels specializing in Kikuyu and Kamba songs, including the various labels of Joseph Kamaru (City Sounds), Joe Mwangi (Matunda), and Lee Kanyotu (Studio Sawa).

³⁴ D.O. Misiani suggested that the move to incorporate a second rhythm guitar came from the desire to introduce a contrasting sound into the ensemble in the manner of a keyboard (D.O. Misiani interview 14 Nov. 2004).

create a more subtle flow of sixteenth notes that was not as prescriptive, giving melodic phrasing a platform for greater flexibility.

The arrangements of benga songs of this time generally adhered to the vocal stanza/guitar refrain call-and-response form, followed by an instrumental climax. Yet, the subtle refinements that were made to this framework brought new levels of inner complexity. The 1979 recording “Kwe Eber Budho” by Collela Mazee and the Victoria ‘B’ Kings illustrates several of these developments. One change concerns the organization of vocal phrases into stanzas and the recapitulation of melodic themes by the guitars. The basic formal cell of this song is a repeated two-measure progression, starting with the tonic in the first measure, progressing from the dominant to the subdominant in the second. Where earlier benga songs would tie melodic phrases clearly to one such cycle (as in the case of “Sabina ya Neli”), in “Kwe Eber Budho” we find modifications of melodic themes over a longer form, giving the song more dynamic movement. The stanza consists of five phrases (marked A through E in Figure 12). The elongated phrases A and B contain the same melodic material as phrases C through E, but introduce this statement with an antecedent phrase. With a brief guitar interlude between phrases A and B, the beginning of the stanza has a more spacious arrangement, while as it moves along phrases C through E the form is compressed with a short repeated cadential phrase, leading to the guitar refrain. The guitar refrain itself is a recapitulation of phrase B repeated three times, before the whole cycle repeats again. With these subtle developments in form, benga songs took on a new found sense of sophistication.

Another signature of the mature benga style of the 1980s was a more deliberate arrangement of the textural relationships between the parts of the ensemble. In many of the recordings of this era, guitar accompaniment is conspicuously absent during vocal stanzas, with the bass providing a mix of harmonic support (Figure 12, phrases A and B) and heterophonic doubling of the vocal melody (phrases C-E). When guitars do enter into the mix during the stanza, it is often to produce small fragments of melody between vocal phrases, as in measures four and five. This sparse texture contrasts to the guitar refrain, in which the three guitars spring to action with precisely composed parts. While the lead guitar plays an ornamented version of the vocal theme, the two rhythm guitars create a simplified statement of the same theme in parallel thirds. The refrain concludes with all three of the guitars playing contrasting parts, before concluding in rhythmic unison at the end of measure 18.

While this piece does not explicitly use the benga timeline that was so pronounced in benga songs of the early 1970s, the same “rhythmic fingerprint” is at the foundation of the rhythmic structure (seen most explicitly in measure 10), and the phrasing in all parts is consistent in how the fourth beat of each measure has accents a sixteenth note before and after it. Therefore while there was a clear development towards sophistication in terms of arrangement in these songs, the foundation of Dholuo rhythmic phrasing remained preeminent.

The musical score is presented in two systems, A and B. System A (measures 1-3) features a voice line with the lyrics "O-dhil Kowenga wuodi gi Si - ju to(O)dongoga - i pen - jo". System B (measures 4-6) features a voice line with the lyrics "Nang'o o - kwinyo(O)mo- re ka-lu - ka kich". The instrumental parts include a solo guitar, two rhythm guitars, a bass guitar, a high-hat, and a bass drum. The score is marked with Roman numerals (I, V, IV) indicating chord changes. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Figure 12. “Kwe Eber Budho.” Victoria ‘B’ Kings, 1979 [DVD track 9].

English translation: “Odhil Kowenga, brother of Siju, I am wondering. Why are you upsetting me, Omore the son of Luka, the dangerous bee. People are avoiding me as if I had lice. Ogwela, my hoe is digging. You know I have always given the assistance that Dida wants.”

The solidification around 1980 of a conventional sound among South Nyanza groups like the Victoria ‘B’Kings sound is significant in the history of Luo music, in that it was a dominant style for the next fifteen years. It also represents Luo music in its most meticulously arranged state: the styles that came before and after it allowed for a looser relationship between accompaniment and melody, while in this style, each instrumental part was carefully composed to play a part in a deliberately crafted multi-part texture. The prescriptive nature of this approach had limitations however, and would come to define an identity of benga that younger generations of musicians would react to in experimenting with new trends at the end of the twentieth century.

The rise of the star vocalist and emergence of “benga international”: 1992-present

By the beginning of the 1990s, Kenyan popular music was undergoing a period of

7 I kom - be I - ja - ra kagi - ma(a)tim o nyuo - go O -

10 V gwe - la kwe ya don - ge pu - ro Dong(e)

Figure 12. Continued

transition. After a decade and a half in which benga had been recorded prolifically in several ethnic languages it had become the most significant local music genre in Kenya; yet, it continued to be overshadowed by Zairean popular music in terms of its airplay on the national radio service and in its recognition by critics and the public. This environment would help to encourage developments in its style. The full transition to cassettes as the standard recording medium also helped to engender change. In the age of 45-rpm singles, recorded music was tightly wound, squeezing concisely arranged vocal stanzas and instrumental arrangements into the confines of a four and-a-half minute side. With this time constraint gone, looser, more expansive arrangements began to emerge.

The primary catalyst in this transition was vocalist Okatch Biggy (1954-1997) and his group *Orchestre Super Heka Heka*, whose rise to popularity between 1994 and 1997

12 E IV I F

a - chi wo - ga kony ma-di - a dwa - ro

14 V IV I V IV

17 I V IV

The musical score is presented in a system of five staves. The top staff is the vocal line with lyrics. The second staff is the guitar treble clef, and the third and fourth staves are the guitar bass clef. The fifth staff shows the guitar fretboard with 'x' marks indicating finger positions. Chord diagrams are placed above the staff at the beginning of measures 12, 14, and 17. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Figure 12. Continued

has been described as “meteoric” (Kariuki 2000). Part of the novelty of Okatch’s songs were his lyrics: his candid stories about love and lust set him apart from his peers and brought a novel, ribald nature to the music that was appealing to Luo music fans, and as Tom Michael Mboya has argued, its celebration of a culture of leisure had a defiant tone that resonated with the ethnic politics of the times (2009a). While his message was important to his appeal, his mode of delivery also stood out. A key marker of his style was the use of extended sections of solo singing, lasting several minutes, in which he sang variations on a short melodic phrase based in the eight-beat chord progressions common to benga. An example of one such phrase is notated in Figure 13, an excerpt from “Adhiambo Nyar Kobura,” Okatch’s longest recording at thirty minutes, taking up one side of a sixty minute cassette. The song begins as a rumba, transitions into a benga beat featuring repeated stanzas by a chorus, before leading to a seven minute section

The musical score is presented in a standard staff format with five parts: Voice, Lead guitar, Rhythm guitar, Bass guitar, and High-hat/Bass drum. The time signature is 4/4. The first system covers the first two lines of the score, with lyrics "O-ro-mo ne-no duk nyathi ma-ler ka-ta (a)to-ti on-ge" and chord markers I, IV, V, IV above the voice line. The second system covers the next two lines, with lyrics "gi an-da" and chord markers I, IV, V, I above the voice line. The bass drum part shows a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with 'x' marks indicating high-hat accents.

Figure 13. “Adhiambo Nyar Kobura.” Okatch Biggy and Orch. Super Heka Heka, 1995 [DVD track 10]. English translation: “She’s beautiful enough to be seen naked, clean lady, even without underwear.”

featuring Okatch singing solo variations on a single phrase. The song is then concluded by a 16-minute instrumental climax.

Mboya (2009b:22) and others have suggested that this solo mode of singing is rooted in the traditional Luo practice of *dengo*, or the personal melodic motifs sung by funeral mourners to express bereavement and praise deceased persons, also known as *giyo*.³⁵ It can be argued that this mode also has much in common with the singing style and formal arrangement of other rural genres like *nyatiti* and *onanda*, in that an extended string of subtle variations on a short phrase is used over a static cycle of accompaniment. Thus, in championing this style of vocal performance, Okatch was incorporating markers of Luo tradition into benga that had been largely neglected in the tightly arranged, multi-part vocal stanzas of 1980s. This approach also put Okatch in league with other local vocalists outside of the benga field who had gained success through their distinctive styles of singing extended solo passages, including Tanzanian Issa Juma, Zairean Moreno Batamba, and Ochieng Kabaselleh.³⁶ Okatch's voice, a raspy baritone, also makes him comparable to Juma and Batamba, and was a stark contrast to the high tenor voices favored in earlier benga and championed by D.O. Misiani and the Victoria 'B' Kings. Seen in longer historical perspective, Okatch was an important catalyst in transforming benga in that he was able to give it an updated cosmopolitan touch in introducing a vocal style that had previously won over many Kenyan fans in Lingala music and Kiswahili *dansi*, and had simultaneously tapped into an important feature of Luo tradition. Thus through his music, benga fans were able to lay claim to the idea that one of their own had mastered some of the artistic flair that had made benga's regional competitors so popular in Kenya, while doing it in a way that was rooted in the unique musical heritage of the Luo.

Beyond Okatch's singing style and stage persona, there was a marked difference in the ensemble sound of Super Heka Heka and the way they interpreted the benga beat. Their songs are slightly slower than the high-tempo benga of the 1980s. The use of the drum kit and the bass guitar is basically in line with the benga of the past, and as shown in Figure 13, the benga timeline is marked by the drums and provides a basis for the rhythmic organization of the singing and accompaniment. However, the approach to guitar-playing and the roles each guitar plays are novel, again pointing to the influence of Lingala and Kiswahili rumba music. The paradigm of a lead guitar providing melodic refrains and rhythm guitar supporting this melody remains, yet it is put to a different use in this context. In the vocal stanzas of 1980s benga, guitar parts were sparse or even omitted during the singing, and when they did enter as instrumental refrains, they were concisely orchestrated. In Okatch's songs, this arrangement is loosened considerably, with guitar parts constantly present. The second rhythm guitar, which had become a staple of benga during the 1980s, is notably absent. Heka Heka's

³⁵ This interpretation of Okatch's style is offered by Akumu (2004), and was also suggested to me by Matthews Anyumba (pers. comm. 21 Jul. 2006) and Donald Odotte (pers. comm. 8 Feb. 2010).

³⁶ As Mboya notes, in the song "Okello Jabondo," Okatch extends his acknowledgements to these musicians (2009b 21).

rhythm guitarist Ouma Jasuba helped popularize the *composé* technique³⁷ or “double-string,” which allegedly was borrowed from Congolese guitarists (O. Jagwasi interview 18 Feb. 2004). This reentrant tuning of the guitar replaces the fourth, “D” string of the instrument with a lighter gauge, unwound string (normally intended for the first, high “E” string), tuning it to D an octave up from where it sounds on a standard guitar tuning. Jasuba’s finger-picking style with this modified guitar created a constant stream of sound, freely juxtaposing upper-register melodic fragments with rapidly plucked, arpeggiated chords in various inversions.

The lead guitar style is also less tightly constricted in its role. While it comes out decisively in the stanza sections of songs to play melodic refrains, in between these passages it is used to provide a subtle melodic dialog with the vocalists, playing variations on short melodic figures. Above all this new style of playing lead demanded flexibility rather than an adherence to an orchestrated program, which, generally speaking, can be seen as the major distinguishing facet of Okatch’s music when compared to his benga predecessors. In moving toward an arrangement strategy that allowed for the vocalist to expound freely, the ensemble also loosened its polyphonic coordination, settling into a more relaxed interpretation of the benga beat. This more fluid presentation was conducive to verbal expression and extended performance and dancing than earlier benga recordings (no doubt aided by the emergence of the cassette format), and Okatch’s “meteoric” rise is testament to the idea that this fresh take on benga was appreciated by benga fans.

In the immediate aftermath of Okatch Biggy’s rise to fame and sudden death in 1997, Luo music fans were clamoring for more from this novel style, and the offshoots of Super Heka Heka that emerged would be major players in the benga field in the years following. With the passing of many of benga’s founding pioneers in the same period,³⁸ the time was ripe for a new paradigm of the style to solidify. The music that emerged from this changing of the guard is notable for how it carried on the modifications that Super Heka Heka initiated, including the emphasis on a charismatic solo vocalist with a singular voice, and the more relaxed textural interplay between the voices in the ensemble. Between 2002 and 2004 this new approach was being described by its practitioners as “benga international,” as opposed to the “original benga” that preceded it. While the approach sought to align itself with Congolese music (hence, the tag “international”) by taking on this less tightly wound arrangement style, it did not so much recreate its sound as it altered structural characteristics of benga, which, while subtle, allowed the music to take on a new image.

³⁷ According to Stewart, this method of stringing the guitar was first popularized in the 1950s by Zacharie Elenka “Jimmy” of Brazzaville, and was favored by Dechaud of African Fiesta (2000: 34, 115).

³⁸ The list of musicians who died between 1993 and 2001 reads like a “hall of fame” of Luo benga: Opiyo Bwana Emma (January 1993), Ouma Omore (January 1994), George Ramogi (1997), Prince Jully (1997), George Ojijo (April 1998), Ochieng Kabaselleh (December 1998, Apiyo Kapela (April 1999), Collela Mazee (March 2000), and Ochieng Nelly Mengo (April 2001). D.O. Misiani outlived his peers and was in good health, but died in a car accident in 2006.

The emergence of the idea of benga international, while novel, also shows how continuity of indigenous tradition has been a consistent element in how stylistic changes are negotiated and eventually solidified in Kenyan popular music. The hallmark of the benga international style, the dominance of a solo vocalist, can also be seen as speaking directly to core Luo tradition. While a singer like Okatch Biggy may have represented an entirely new presence in benga, at the same time he was performing more in line with the traditions of musicians like lyricist Ogola Opot and accordionist Oguta Bobo with his lengthy, humorous vocal expositions. This contrasts to a band like the Victoria 'B' Kings with their programmatic, precise vocal stanzas. Thus, ironically, while making benga more Congolese, Okatch simultaneously reinvigorated its Luo identity. This constant negotiation over how cosmopolitan elements can successfully interact with the conventions of indigenous tradition in a way that has currency in the social environment of the time has been the defining theme of Luo music during the twentieth century.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to illustrate that while there are indeed continuities linking the musical style of the *nyatiti* tradition and Luo benga, the connection is by no means transparent and warrants more detailed analysis. By suggesting that Luo musicians have created guitar music as an adaptation of lyre practice, some observers have diverted attention from the complex history of benga's development. While benga was indeed firmly rooted in the aesthetics of Luo traditions, analysis suggests that it was the singular approach to reconciling the rhythm of Dholuo singing with a regular forward-moving beat that established this continuity, and not an adaptation of lyre playing techniques to the guitar. The social role of Luo musicians did show a definitive link with practices like the *nyatiti* (in its focus on praise and the constitution of kin and social networks in its song texts), and this was a crucial inspiration for the resilience of Dholuo song styles in emerging practices like benga.³⁹

Kenyan journalism has often taken a contrasting approach to evaluating benga, suggesting that it was either too parochial or lacked the polish of other supposedly more sophisticated regional styles like Congolese rumba that it attempted to emulate.

A problem with both of these perspectives is that in wrestling with the issue of cultural autonomy in music, they risk evading the depth of artistic and social calculations that go into the processes of composing, performing, and consuming a hybrid music like benga. By asserting that benga gains its integrity from the idea that it has modernized the music of the *nyatiti*, observers downplay the fact that benga musicians were innovating a practice that decisively broke from conventions, and that its diatonic chord progressions and innovative guitar techniques may have offered them and their audiences just as much, if not more, aesthetic worth to their music than the vestiges of traditional Luo song that they carried on. In suggesting that benga

³⁹ For further discussion of this aspect of benga's development, see Eagleson (2012).

lacked a culturally autonomous, national identity because it was under the influence of Congolese music or the parochial concerns of the village, journalists also did it a disservice. They ignored the fact that the ethnic framework of benga was what gave it its vitality and relevance, and that musicians in Kenya had been honing their music for decades as one part of a greater regional movement to develop a popular music industry. Notions of authenticity, whether they are framed in terms of a primordial, indigenous essence or in the idea of a national cultural identity, have been detrimental to giving benga the thorough contemplation that it warrants and can potentially lead to the reification of misleading concepts, for example that the *nyatiti* is the essence of benga's musical style. While this article has in some ways carried on the process of reification of benga's indigenous roots, I have attempted to balance this argument with a consideration of how experimentation with structures of diatonic harmony and cosmopolitan music trends can be considered just as integral, even indigenous to Luo musical sensibilities as supposedly more authentic conventions like rhythmic structure and melodic phrasing of folk song.

By questioning these persistent assumptions about the origins and identity of African music through analysis and investigation of its history for its true complexity and ambiguity, as well as the ways it has in itself had to contend with these processes of reification, we may move towards a scholarly approach that can better represent the artistry and ingenuity of contemporary African music practices.

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