

POPULAR MUSIC IN KENYA

by

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After a period in which it was musically rather limited — in the sense that songs and singers tended to resemble each other, as well as that there was little development within a single song — Kenyan pop music has recently begun a remarkable burst of development and diversification. This is particularly important for the future in a country whose traditional music is for a number of reasons a good deal less flourishing than elsewhere.

In the 1950's and especially the 1960's there emerged a number of styles which can recognisably be grouped together and called "pop"; moreover there is an indigenous record industry which puts out or has put out examples of all these styles.

While recognising that traditional music is also "popular", and while agreeing that there is a zone in which "pop" and a form of "modern traditional" meet, there is in Kenyan music an area broadly definable as guitar-based in which the various styles share the vague but indisputable relationship recognisable in — for example — Blues, Gospel singing, Anglo-American pop music, the various Anglo-American sub-folk-musics, and so on.

The various styles of Kenyan pop music differ of course, but there is — apart from the guitar — one very important common factor. This is a style of two-voice singing which is as typical of this country's music as Rochereau's is of modern Congo music. The examples of this style in the commercial record lists are legion. A good one, chosen more or less at random, is Daudi Kabaka's *M Sokoto Shilo*, made in 1967. An instance from about 1963 is *Kufika Nairobi*, by Nashil Pichen and Peter Tsotsi.

Kenya's Swahili-language pop music stems from a number of sources. On the one hand, it is clearly significant that most of the players of what is still almost entirely a guitar-based sound come from tribes which have always had a string-playing tradition: principally the Abaluhya, to a lesser extent the Taita, and also the Luo (though there is a certain amount of modern Luo-language music on commercial records which siphons off some Luo talent).

Another powerful source of influence is Anglo-American music. This falls into two parts. There is the usual peripheral influence of whatever international pop style happens to catch the fancy of Kenya's more "sophisticated" — or more eclectic — musicians. This is cumulative, and its effect is rather that of a new technical vocabulary on an established language: new words, new phrases, new modes of expression are at hand; but no single influence is strong enough to affect the basic structure.

A more basic European influence is that of what seems best described as the international folk-strum-cum-barbershop-harmony complex. Early examples like *O Mama Lady*, by Fundi Konde or *Mtoto Analia* by the Nairobi Shoeshine Boys, show this very clearly; almost comically. I do not know the exact date of these records, which I have only heard as B.B.C. dubbings, but they appear to be of the early fifties.

These records, bad as they are, show the beginnings of what is really a process of Africanisation. Such two-voice singing is almost universal in both the most urban, electric-guitarred Kenyan pop song, and also the more rural styles accompanied by acoustic guitars and a Fanta bottle tapped or scraped with a knife.

The barber-shop influence is not, of course, the whole story. There are plenty of examples of Baluhya traditional singing for more than one voice. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that the bulk of traditional music of most Kenyan tribes is either choral, or solo, or call-and-response for solo leader and a large or small group. The

preponderance of the two-voice style at all stages of Kenyan music except the strictly traditional (I am aware of the questions this phrase begs, but I think it meaningful in context) is striking.

It was present in the early vernacular period when tribal differences were strong. It persisted throughout the waves of other influences — the early Congo-Latin American influence of the mid-50's; the rise of the so-called "African Twist", a local blend of *kwela* and Twist influences, in the early 60's; the second, wave of Congo influence through the records of groups like the African Fiesta, OK Jazz and so on from around 1965 until the present time; even the recent hints of a new *kwela* vogue.

All these fashions have left their mark but still this two-voice singing persists — by now so thoroughly Africanised that it is the hallmark of Kenyan modern song.

This is certainly not to say that Kenyan urban music has not undergone great changes. The effects of the later Congo influence alone have been very great, and largely beneficial. They include a far greater and subtler use of the rhythm section (and the introduction of drums, which were until recently very rare in Kenyan popular music); an awareness of the solo capabilities of the instruments of the band, and less concrete factors like the notion that it is better to play an instrument well than badly.

I am personally convinced that the earlier styles, for all their charm, were dangerously limited. Neither traditional nor quite "pop" they formed a sort of semi-rural semi-folk music. This music had and has its place, and along with more traditional music will no doubt continue to do so. For one thing, it is well suited to the amateur musician, and provides a valuable infrastructure for the more strictly urban (and more rapidly changing) styles.

But it is too firmly associated in the minds of Kenyans themselves with the past (however recent) to survive on its own. It is one source of the "Nairobi" music of people like Isaya Mwinamo, even of nightclub groups like the Ashantis or the Hodi Boys, but these groups also form part of a more pan-African scene, in which musicians feel at liberty to use West African, Congolese, or South African elements as they please.

A special problem of Kenya's popular music is language. Apart from the usual difficulty (faced to an even greater extent by traditional music) that vernacular music is *in the eyes of Kenyans* "purely" tribal (so that Luo music is "foreign" to Kikuyu), even the Swahili-language music — which one might think privileged, since its language is non-tribal — is threatened by social factors. For in Kenya, except on the Coast, Swahili is largely a working-class *lingua franca*. Virtually everybody subconsciously contrasts the impoverished past and present with Swahili, and the hopes for a richer future with English.

Thus though there is a mass audience for Swahili songs, not only are the more literate classes — whose money largely supports urban music — snobbish about them, better musicians themselves are subject to *embourgeoisement* and Anglicisation. As a result, the more literate (not just the elite, but more important the young clerks, students, indeed almost anybody who speaks English) tend to buy Congolese records on the one hand, and Anglo-American on the other.

It is true that a few years ago a record by the rural musician George Mukabi is claimed to have sold 40,000 copies; but nowadays, the sales of re-pressings of Congo hits tend to subsidise the local Kenyan records. Of course, this may well be a fad phenomenon. But it presents one real danger to urban Kenyan music.*

Kenya is short of outlets for musical talent and particularly of night clubs. Many even of the better-known singers only exist, so to speak, on record. Kenyans lack the opportunity presented by playing night-in, night-out, from the early evening until around 4 a.m., for a critical audience, which seems to me to be one element in the pre-

* It is interesting to note that the same phenomenon of the intrusion of Congo music is being experienced in Zambia.—EDITOR.

eminence of the Congolese dance bands (who certainly did not acquire their remarkable professionalism in a vacuum).

But not only are the night-clubs few in Kenya: those which exist, tend to hire Congolese bands because that is what the clientele wants. The result is that Kenyan musicians face a possible widening of the gap between themselves and an already dominating foreign rival though it is true that this danger remains only a danger. The shortage of night-clubs means that records are still a major outlet, and the Kenyan public will not buy records of a Nairobi-based Congo band, since it has the chance of buying the best. This leaves the Kenyans the lion's share of the recording sessions initiated in Nairobi.

An aspect of Kenya's Swahili music which it would be a great pity to lose (and which might be threatened by either a greater leaning towards instrumentals, or the less likely contingency of a switch to English) is the lyrics. The words of Kenyan, like virtually all African songs, are intimately connected with daily life: they reflect pretty accurately the attitudes (and especially the problems) of the man in the street.

There are hundreds of examples of this. Unemployment is a subject touched on more than once, as in the lyric which runs:

"O mama, niambie, kazi nitapata wapi? Nilienda Moshi kupata kazi, kazi ikani-kosa . . ." O mama, where will I find work? I went as far as Moshi (in Tanzania) looking for a job and I didn't get one . . .

Education is very important, and one singer put his finger on a real problem when he sang:

"Hata ninyi mliona kazi ya polisi na militari ilikuwa ikifanywa na watu wasiokuwa na elimu. Na sasa mnaona wanaotakiwa ni waelimu, na wale wasiosoma watafanya kazi gani Kenya?" You yourselves saw police and Army work done by people without education. Now you see the ones who are wanted are those with education — and what work will there be in Kenya for those who can't read?

There is any amount of social comment of all sorts in Kenya's Swahili songs, much of it satirical, like:

"Hapa Nairobi makarani tapata taabu. Wananunua sikuta kubeba malaya, kisha tarehe nane nyumba zinazofumba, chakula kinakwisha, mrembo anamtoroka" — Here in Nairobi the clerks run into a lot of trouble. They buy motor-scooters to carry tarts around on, then by the eighth of the month they're locked out of their rooms, their food is finished and their girl runs off.

There is in theory no reason why this width of subject matter, this flowering of lyrics in the everyday, should not continue even if Kenya's pop music goes over to English. The Blues have made poetry of this sort of material. But the signs are not very promising. For one thing, Kenyan musicians are very much less at ease in English than in Swahili. For another, the tendency to imitate foreign models seems, on the evidence of current recordings to be stronger in a foreign language (naturally enough).

So far, English does not seem to be catching on. On the contrary, it seems more possible that with the increasing importance of instrumental work, the lyrics of Kenyan songs will become less central. If, at the same time, Kenyan becomes (like Tanzanian, Congo, or Highlife), a more specifically dance music, a "plain man" vehicle of social comment, satire and snook-cocking at Fate, may be lost. Though since there remains a large audience in Kenya, for whom the lyrics of a song are its essence, the likely direction of development of the most "city" music may in fact give a new lease of life to the more semi-folk styles which I mentioned earlier. And the city music itself — under pressure from its Kinshasan rival — is showing at least the promise of development into something as significant as High Life or Congo music itself, with their implications for the future of African music as a whole.