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Political Influence on Music Performance in Kenya Between 1963-2002

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ABSTRACT

This historical study attempts to relate how politics has influenced music performance and education in Kenya between 1963 – 2002. The study is based on the historical literature of the period studied, Educational Syllabuses, Commission Reports, National Day Programs and our experience and recollection as music teachers and educators who took part in some of the musical activities during this period. Missionary/colonial governments propagated a western hymnal singing tradition in schools but did not allow performance of indigenous music. After independence, the government reintroduced traditional music and dance performances for state functions and festivals but not for academic purposes. Music was made an academic subject to be examined like any other school subject with the establishment of the 8.4.4 System of education during the Nyayo era. Because the president popularized music performance nationwide, there arose numerous school, Christian and parastatal choirs and traditional dance groups.

INTRODUCTION

While there is literature on the history of School Music in Kenya (Agak, 1998, 1999, 2003), no study has considered political influences on music performance and education in the Kenyan history of education and music development. Our study is on political influences on music education and performances before and after independence. We have documented trends of past occurrences that may help explain the present practice, and provide useful information to scholars and students on the history of music and music education in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies techniques of historical research that are based on the following sources of information.

- Historical literature on the period studied
- Governmental documents such as education music syllabuses for schools and presidential appointed Commission reports
- Programs for music festivals, National celebrations and presidential garden parties
- Interviews with fellow musicians
- Documentation of events that have been experienced by us as music teachers and performers

This study is presented in three phases: The period before independence, 1963 - 1978 and 1978-2002.

BEFORE INDEPENDENCE

Music making and performance form an important aspect of Kenyan Cultural activities. However, at different times music has had different phases of growth and decline. The introduction of the formal school system by the missionaries in the mid-19th century established a western hymnal singing tradition in schools (Weman, 1960) and discouraged the learning and playing of indigenous musical instruments and music because it conflicted with Christian values. In schools, music lessons consisted of singing of European hymns as reflected in the following quotation.

The music you hear will not be a native song but the parody of a familiar European hymn [...] The chorus of unintelligible sound is the sing-song of the syllables as they follow one another in a meaningless succession. (King, 1971, p. 150)

According to the view expressed in Weman (1960), music was taught in Africa for religious purposes and it was transmitted through rote learning.

The colonial government feared the use of traditional music by natives, because it might foster political solidarity against the colonial leadership. Informally, the colonial government encouraged the learning and playing of band instruments, which were used to entertain them, and other instruments, such as accordion and acoustic guitar, particularly in Western Kenya, the home of the *Luo* and *Abaluhya* people (Low, 1982). In schools however, the colonial government set out to make some educational reforms, due to the problems of the curriculum of village schools. They did this by using the Jeanes experimental school that had hoped to reform the bush school curriculum and methods of teaching by reintroducing African culture. According to Sifuna (1980), this failed to be the center for the production of progressive teaching aids for African (Kenyan) village schools as intended, yet it revived the Kenyan past and prepared its students to reintroduce the old games, folk tales and Kenyan music as a central part of early schooling.

Even though attempts were made to set songs and hymns to Kenyan tunes, the reform only verified the nature of the songs by adding the Kenyan ones. School music remained as mere singing. This is reflected in one of the speech day programs at Jeanes school as found in Kings (1971, appendix iii) presented below.

Jeanes School Speech Day programme

Tuesday Aug. 6, 1929, 4:45 p.m. in the School Hall

1. African Tribal Songs.

a) Kikuyu Rattle song.

The song centers around the rattle (Gicandi) and its ornaments. The singers ask riddles in turn. A full explanation would fill a book.

b) Luo Wedding song. The bridegroom's age-equals gather together and sing in praise of him, his work, his skill, his shield etc. The musical instrument of 8 strings (Thum) [sic] is of ancient origin. The man mentioned at the end, Gor, was a famous old Chief of South Kavirondo.

c) Abananda (Bantu Kavirondo)

i. Karimiwa. According to a tradition of the tribe a weakly hunch-back saved people from the cannibals by cunning. They now sing in praise of him.

ii. Mishere ulule. The singer recites the names of people; and tribes and says what they each do, making puns on their names.

iii. Lubenzu. The song of the bird and the beautiful maiden. She begs the feathers and is enticed far away from her own home. The bird represents the young man who will one day come and woo her.

iv. The War Horn sounds and all rush to the call.

2. Presentation of Permanent and Provincial Jeanes Certificates by the Hon'ble the Director of Education.

3. Jeanes School Hymns (Swahili).

1. God of our Fathers. African Tune

2. Praise the Lord. African Tune

3. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Negro Spiritual.

Speech: Chief Koinange.

4. Recreational Games and Drill

5. Show of Handwork.

1. Men's carpentry.

2. Women's

At the secondary level of education, there existed few expatriate schools such as Prince of Wales (Nairobi School) and Alliance School that offered coaching in music theory for students who were interested in taking music examinations with the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) London (Hyslop, 1964).

THE PERIOD FROM 1963 TO 1978

This period covers the reign of Kenya's first president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. The president, loved music and dance as quoted by Zake (1986):

African music, dance and songs as embodied in the entire concept of African culture, were a cherished treasure and source of pride for African source of pride for African peoples everywhere which could help to identify the African and champion his dignity. Our songs are most meaningful and they carry inspiring message that convey the true picture and personality of the African. Any nation, which did not have such a culture, was not a nation. (p.11)

To achieve this philosophy, Kenyatta encouraged the performances of traditional music at the state functions; however, in 1971 the first lady Mama Ngina Kenyatta at Gatundu, outlawed the performance by female dancers without covering their breasts irrespective of age; a thing, which was contrary to the cultural practice.

In formal education, Ominde and Ndegwa commissions, in 1964, and 1971 respectively, emphasized respect for cultural values and that the education system must respect, foster and develop Kenya's rich and varied cultures. Despite the reports, little was done in schools during this time apart from organizing music and drama festivals, where some African traditional songs and some African plays were staged (Sifuna, 1986). This is what Chepkwong (1987) refers to as cultural revival in the field of arts, especially in the mid 1970s, that manifested itself in local music, high school drama festivals, school choir competitions, church choirs and works by individual writers.

Until 1972, when the Bessay report on curriculum development in Kenya was released, school music was basically singing and was undertaken for music festivals. Overall, the commission reported that schools were doing well in singing despite the limitations of the syllabus. A countrywide network of music festival at district, provincial and national levels stimulated the good singing according to the commission. At the secondary level, the commission appreciated the efforts made by schools to encourage art and music, but stated that the work of schools in these subjects often took place outside regular teaching time (caption 5.43).

Primary teacher training colleges had a compulsory common music curriculum for all trainees. Kenyatta University College, had a Music Department that also offered music for secondary school teachers.

THE NYAYO ERA (1978-2002)

This period is popularly known as the *Nyayo* (following the footsteps of the first president) era, and covers president Daniel Toroitich arap Moi's reign. During the *Nyayo* era, music performances in Kenya flourished. This can be seen from the following state function entertainment programs: Madaraka Day Celebration programs for choirs and traditional dancers at the Nyayo Stadium (June 1st 2001) and State House Gardens in

Nairobi (June 1st, 2000); Moi Day Celebrations at Nyayo National Stadium (October 10th, 2000); New Year Eve Dance at State House in Nakuru (December, 2000); Kenyatta Day Celebration Programs for choirs and traditional Dancers at State House Gardens Nairobi (October, 1999, 2000, 2002); Jamuhuri Day Celebration Programs for choirs and Traditional Dancers at State House, Nairobi (December, 2000, 2002).

Other presidential functions were equally colored with various performances: programs for the Agricultural Show of Kenya at Jamuhuri Park Nairobi (October 1st 1997), Mombasa, (August, 31st 2000), Nakuru, (July 6th, 2000), Kakamega, (December 5th 2001), Kisumu (August 3rd, 2002); Fund Raising at Kapsowar (September 2000), Kaiti Constituency Bursary Fund (November 2000) and at Litein High School (May, 2001), and the official opening of Gede Museum Complex, Malindi (August 29, 2000). Traditional dancers and choirs performed during the official launching ceremony of the Kisumu Centenary celebrations presided over by the president (December, 2001)

Entertainment at public presidential functions included the performance of traditional folksongs, dances and religious songs besides patriotic ones. PPMC Officials and Mr. Wasonga, the Officer in-charge of Presidential Music Entertainment, had to vet songs and dances that would be presented during such occasions (personal interview, Mr. Lugalia, Mr. Mathenge of PPMC, and Mr. Wasonga, 2003). Patriotic songs in particular were vetted to ensure the inclusion of only those songs propagating the *Nyayo Philosophy* (love, peace and unity). Vetting of music and dances influenced composers and choirs, which had conform to the requirements in order to be selected for state or presidential garden party performances. Patriotic song compositions had to incorporate song texts that conveyed the *Nyayo Philosophy*.

The government facilitated performing groups as follows: transport to the venue and back, subsistence, accommodation, and payment of honoraria to the participants. (Personal interview: *Pana* Women Dancers, Rift Valley *Mwomboko* Dancers, Kenya *Utamaduni Ngomas*, Borana Dancers, *Paracivic* Choir, *Chelepe* Dancers, *Amani* Dancers of *Kibera* during Moi Day Celebrations (October 10, 2001), *Thika* Women Dancers, Homa-Bay Women Dancers, *Kaiyaba* Muslim Women Dancers during Kenyatta Day Celebration at State House Gardens (October 20, 2002), University Students Mass Choir (October 20, 2003)).

Being the Chancellor of all public universities, the president presided over all graduation ceremonies for all universities. Entertainment during these ceremonies always consisted of Hymns, and patriotic songs. While these appear in all university graduation programs, (Maseno, Kenyatta, Moi, Ergeton, Nairobi, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology), the authors, participated in preparing the Maseno University choir for similar performances for the three graduations which have so far been held at Maseno University (1st & 2nd graduations March and November 2001; 3rd graduation Oct 4th 2002)

Music that perpetuated the *Nyayo* philosophy was aired as signal tunes for Radio News. For instance, at the every beginning of Radio News, “Kenya African National Union (*KANU*) *Yajenja Nchi*” – literally means KANU as a ruling party is the backbone of national building.

The present National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government, which came to power through election in 2002, has done away with this signal tune and all other songs propagating *Nyayo* philosophy, such as *Fimbo ya Nyayo* by Arther Kimoli, *Moi Astabili Heshima* by Zalo Okuku, *Tawala Kenya* by Wasonga, *Rais Moi Ndiye Nanga* by Kimoli, and *Heko Baba Moi* by Mwiruki. Instead, they play tunes with general national feelings.

Entertainment in all functions presided over by President Moi consisted of folk-songs, traditional cultural dances, newly composed pieces or adaptations and arrangements of old tunes. Choirs and dance troupes from across section of the diversified Kenyan 42 cultures participated. The authors observed that these performances served as a means of cultural integration, for example *Kayamba* and *Marimba* percussion instruments of the *Mizdikenda* of Coast Province have currently spread across other Kenyan communities. Participating groups learned songs and dances from one another. Songs learned during the training of university student mass choir, which normally lasted for a week or so in preparation for the events, were selected from different Kenya communities. This enabled both the trainers and trainees to learn songs and dances from different Kenyan communities.

The formation of the Permanent Presidential Music Commission (PPMC) in April 1982, under the patronage of The President, was yet another contribution to the development of music in Kenya. The president appointed six Kenyan musicians to this Commission, “to undertake a detailed study and make recommendations on the preservation and development of the rich music and varied dance traditions of our people” (Omondi 1984, p. v). The primary aim of this commission was to conduct research and disseminate knowledge about Kenyan music and dance and according to Floyd (1996), to strengthen the role of traditional music in all sectors of society and particularly through formal educational system.

The PPMC was set up to consider the following:

1. The effecting of music and dance education at all levels.
2. A systematic collection, preservation and dissemination of traditional music and dance of Kenyan peoples.
3. The increase and popularization of occasions of music performance, both in rural and urban areas.
4. Ensuring that music which is made available to the public either through radio and television or public places such as festivals, public gatherings and churches is of content and quality that is compatible with the cultural values of our nation.
5. Catering for and safeguarding the interest of our musicians. (Omondi, 1984, p. vi, 211)

The members of the commission consulted nearly 2,000 musicians, educators, and other interested parties (Floyd, 1996). The Commission's proposals that were designed to enhance traditional music through educational policy include:

- 75(d) That music syllabi should emphasize the theory and practice of traditional African music which is relevant to the child's environment. This, however, should be done with the full awareness that there is a great deal of cross-cultural interaction in the present age. (p. 147).
- 80(b) That music teachers of noteworthy talents should be commissioned immediately by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to write for Music teaching. (p. 147).
- 80(e) That traditional musicians should be made use of in schools either as subordinate staff or simply as tutors. In the latter case, they could be rotated so as to serve several schools. (p. 148).
- 85(b) That music and other cultural subjects in schools must be examinable in the same way as any other subject. These should be included in the General Paper in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE). (p. 149).

There were a number of developments based on these proposals. For example, musicians and music educators were commissioned by the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) to write books for teaching music in schools. Some primary music teachers were promoted to teach at secondary level. Some of the promoted teachers took advantage of their promotions and have since then furthered their education in music.

Proposal 85(b) was incorporated to music in the 8-4-4 system of education. Despite this move, music remained an elective subject at the secondary level, but as an academic subject and not just singing.

The new 8-4-4 Music curriculum integrated Western and African Music (Republic of Kenya, 1992, 75d). Although KIE had commissioned some people to write books for teaching music, individual efforts to produce some were not lacking. KIE in turn started collecting and archiving folk songs and dances, which later were used by schools for teaching purposes. To boost music further, the government introduced a special salary scale for graduate music teachers.

Music composition on topical issues such as government policies, epidemics, social experiences, good nutrition, a forestation, poaching of animals, and patriotism, gave rise to a new style of songs characterized by short repeated vocal melodies. These include *Tawala Kenya*, *Wakulima Ongezeni Kilimo* both by Thomas Wasonga; *Fimbo ya Nyayo* by Kemoli. A compilation of some of these compositions is found at the PPMC in two volumes entitled, "The National Song Book".

To increase and popularize occasions of music performance, in 1990, President Moi spearheaded the separation of Kenya Music Festival (KMF) from Kenya Cultural and Music festivals (KCMF). The KMF is now for educational Institutions and KCMF, for noneducational institutions. This act led to the rise of *parastatal*, church, school, university and mass choirs. At the end of every festival, the president hosted state concerts for the winners who were given monetary rewards. This encouraged other trainers to strive to have their choirs perform at the state house.

In a speech made at Nakuru state house (1984), the president discouraged the use of dirty old skins as a representation of the cultural dress for men and women of Kenya. He recommended alternative costumes using modern materials like *lesos*, t-shirts or sheets. Kenyans no longer have dirty old *tartus* as a representation of Kenyan culture. The ban on poaching and a forestation has controlled the use of animal skins. Instrument makers must now use alternatives such as tins for resonators, nylon strings for tendons and skin from domesticated animals.

The work of the Permanent Presidential Music Commission was further reflected in the symposia on music held twice at Egerton University in 2001 and 2002, which brought together music scholars, teachers, church musicians and pop musicians to discuss the development of church music through the ages and music as perceived by various Christian bodies in Kenya. The PPMC, under Frederick Ngala, spearheaded the formation of the University Lecturers Choir which participated in many state functions, but is currently nonfunctional since the NARC government took over.

CONCLUSION

We have discussed political influence on music education and performance in the pre- and post-independent Kenya up to 2002. The colonial government promoted singing through the missionaries, because education then was linked to religion. The singing tradition persisted in schools during 1963-1978 with music regarded as an extra-curricular activity. The *Nyayo* era recognized Music as an academic subject though treated as an elective in secondary schools. This era promoted both traditional and art music in schools as part of the curriculum and also promoted the performance of the same in all state functions giving rise to mass choirs (primary, Secondary and University), church choirs, choirs organized by *parastatals* and governmental groups.

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END NOTES

¹ Gatundu is the residential home of the first and late President of Kenya, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta.

² Kenya National days of celebration: Kenyatta Day, Moi Day, Madaraka Day, Jamuhuri. Kenyatta Day is celebrated every 20th of October. It is the day the first president of Kenya, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta was arrested because of fight for freedom. Moi Day used to be celebrated on the 10th of October every year to mark President Moi's achievements. However, it is no longer celebrated nationally because president Moi himself called of any national celebrations on this day just before his term as head of state was about over. Madaraka Day is celebrated on the 1st of June and is the day Kenya got self internal self-governing powers. Jamuhuri Day is celebrated every December 12th and is the day Kenya got independence from the colonial rule.

³ Leso is a printed piece of cloth used as clothing by coastal women but its use is spreading all over Kenya and is now used as a costume for traditional dance performances.