Since the fifties, Kenya and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have exchanged cultural practices, particularly music and dance styles and dress fashions. This has mainly been through the artistes who have been crisscrossing between the two countries. So, when the Benga musical style developed in the sixties hitting the roof in the seventies and the eighties, contestations began over whether its source was Kenya or DRC. Indeed, it often happens that after a musical style is established in a primary source, it finds accommodation in other secondary places, which may compete with the originators in appropriating the style, sometimes even becoming more committed to it than the actual primary originators. This then begins to raise debates on the actual origin and/or ownership of the form. In situations where music artistes keep shuttling between the countries or regions like the Kenya and DRC case, the actual origin and/or ownership of a given musical practice can be quite blurred. This is perhaps what could be said about the Benga musical style. This paper attempts to trace the origins of the Benga music to the present in an effort to gain clarity on a debate that has for a long time engaged music pundits and scholars. Research for the paper involved interviews with some of the Kenyan musicians who have performed since the sixties and extensive revisit of recordings by both Kenyan and DRC musicians from the sixties to the late eighties. My conclusion is that the primary origin of Benga is Kenya and not DRC as some sources have suggested.

Keywords: Benga, Evolutionism, Dance Styles, Musical Idioms, New-Historicism, Origins of Music.

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1. Introduction

Music styles and movements, though sometimes practiced over wide areas and across countries once established, are often always associated with specific places, regions or countries as points of origin. The opera, for instance, is accredited to Italy, pioneered by the late sixteenth century Florentine musicians and poets. Similarly, the Rococo music style known as 'style galant' is believed to

1 From simple traditional village entertainment to a national and regional music genre (Ketebul Music).
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have developed in France by the French composers, who, reacting against the earlier complex and formal music structures of the Baroque, preferred light and charming sounds with graceful melodies. Indeed, there are dance styles which are, without any contention, attributed to specific countries: the German Allamande; the French Courante; the Spanish Sarabande; the English Gigue, from the British jig; or the West Indian Calypso. Actually, the list cannot be exhausted.

Like the Classical musical styles, pop musical movements can also be traced to specific places of origin. The story of Reggae music, for example, is easily drawn back to Bob Marley of Jamaica in the Caribbean. Many other music or dance types can be traced back to their points of origin. One, for example, can talk of the Samba in connection with Brazil, or the 1950s Rock and Roll with American roots, or even the Jazz, characterized by improvisation, syncopation and usually a regular and forceful rhythm, whose origin goes to the African-Americans. It is perhaps for the interest to establish the actual source of the Benga musical idiom in East Africa that music pundits in the region have been engaging endlessly as to whether the form originated in Kenya or in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

2. **The form and structure of Benga music**

Benga can easily be described as dance music in which the dancers often dance without holding hands, unlike the common practice in some well-known dance styles such as ballet. It is, however, common for dancing partners to sometimes hold hands at the slower opening sections of the song. The most distinctive feature of Benga music is its pulsating beat, characterized by a regular, recurrent pulse, anchored on a high energy bass that supports interlocking guitar riffs upon which vocal lyrics are juxtaposed. Its complex, fast-paced and rhythmic beats incorporate indigenous and imported rhythms, notably from the equally popular Congolese idiom.

The rendition of Benga music employs two distinct but mutually inclusive components: the vocals and the accompaniment. The often highly pitched voice of the artist usually renders the lyrics of the song through which the messages of the song are conveyed. The vocalist, more often than not, carries the melody, who’s melodious and lyrical tunes are easy to remember, or even sing back. Where the singing is done in parts, there is usually a voice or voices accompanying the tune at intervals of a third, a fifth, or an octave. In major cases, the intervals once established tend to proceed in parallel motion to the melody without exception.

The accompaniment on the other hand commonly features guitars, (many times three or four in number) and the percussions: a set of drums, shakers and other percussive instruments that may add colour to the accompaniment. A bottle, for example, has sometimes been used by some Benga bands, whereby a coin or any other metallic garget is rubbed against the grooves of the bottle to provide a ‘jingly’ at times ‘rusty’ sound.

The most inescapable component of the Benga accompaniment is the lead guitar that plays in consort with other guitars and percussions. The sharp lead guitar will often be found overriding the bass and rhythm guitars in a way that makes it really stand out. Because the lead guitar often complements the voice in playing the melody, or sometimes supplementing the deficiencies of the voice in rendering the melody, it sometimes remains as memorable as the song itself.

A conventional Benga performance runs for about five minutes and has an identifiable structure. There is the first part, pastoral, expressive and much slower compared to the second part. In majority cases this first part is the section during which the vocalist renders the lyrics of the song, thus, communicating the message to be passed across. This is followed by the second part, faster, livelier, more rhythmically marked and, so to say, encouraging total abandon on the part of the dancers. This part appears to answer, or, in a way, liberate the first part in what clearly stands out as the climax of the song. The relationship between the first and second parts creates an impression of some kind of AB structure – perhaps to be analogously referred to as binary form. However, sometime in the eighties, some Benga performances would run up to more than ten minutes, perhaps a tradition borrowed from the contemporaries in the DR Congo, who had developed the tendency of stretching their rumba performances to even as long as twenty minutes. When this was the case, the performance would sometimes go to part two and back to part one, in what would be described as an ABA structure, or ternary form.
3. The origins of Benga

The cradle of what we can call African pop music in Eastern and Central Africa is Kenya, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), with Uganda playing a rather minimal role. By the fifties, pop music in DRC was already boasting musicians that could be singled out in the names of Bokelo, Jean Bosco and a score of others, including the budding and later grand master Luambo Luanzo Makiadi aka Franco. Kenya and Tanzania were to follow suit with great names such as Fundi Konde, George Mukabi, John Nzenze, Fadhili Williams, Daudi Kabaka and David Amunga in Kenya and the likes of Mbarak Mishkekhe Mwaruka in the then Tanganyika, maturing in the early sixties.

However, a common question has been about the actual origin of the Benga music style. The debate on the origin of Benga has seemed to favour two sources: the DRC and Kenya. This paper argues that the origin of this music style is in fact Kenya. Indeed, that DRC boasts great names on the pop music scene cannot be gainsaid. In fact, many prominent pioneer pop musicians in Kenya owe their influence and training to those early musicians from the DRC. One such Kenyan musician is John Ogara, actually reputed as the ‘father’ of the Benga style, but his music features a score of Lingala words – Lingala being a language spoken in DRC. This confirms DRC influences on him. Similarly, Samuel Aketch Oyosi aka ‘Jabuya’, Ogara’s colleague, in Ogara Boys Band – perhaps the band that sows the first roots of Benga – trained and performed with the famous Congolese musician, Jean Bosco Mwenda before joining Ogara. However, as always happens with any art the influence of DRC on Kenyan musicians was to lead to adoptions, adaptations and innovations. They are these adaptations and innovations that appear to have metamorphosed to give birth to a novel music style that came to be known as Benga.

4. The roots of Benga

A retrospective journey in the world of Benga seems to bring one to the Luo nyatiti instrument, more than any other instrument played either in Kenya or the DRC. The Luo, a Nilotic community that lives on the shores of Lake Victoria, in what was once known as Nyanza Province, have played the nyatiti for decades. Nyatiti also known as kamba nane is an eight stringed instrument in the lyre family, which is played to the accompaniment of gara (angle rattles) and nyaduong or oduong (a ring worn on the big toe, which, when hit against the frame of the nyatiti, marks the time while setting the rattles to jingle freely). The combination of the strings of the nyatiti, the beat of nyaduong, the rattle of gara and the singing of the performer, all done simultaneously by the same person, in effect make the nyatiti player a one-man band.

When some of the soldiers to the Second World War who had been conscripted from Luoland, on having been demobilized came home with the acoustic Spanish guitar, the instrument immediately took the fancy of the nyatiti players. There were many reasons why the nyatiti player would adopt the foreign acoustic guitar with such ease. Unlike in some lyre playing communities of Kenya such the Bukusu with litungu and the Kalenjin with bukanidit where the instrument is held in front of the player and played horizontally, the nyatiti player plays seated with the instrument on its side and the fingers of the player moving up and down – vertically. This is indeed the style of the guitar, meaning that the nyatiti player did not need to teach different finger movement to learn playing the guitar.

Similarly, since the nyatiti player usually sang to his own playing, moving to the guitar posed no major difficulties. The learners of the new instrument would be seen picking the strings as they sung the lyrics in what at first started as one-man performances, before the more experienced learners developed the practice of banding up with consorts of instruments. But the more important feature in adopting the new instrument was in fingerling. Nyatiti players, who normally picked the strings of their instrument, would henceforth pick the strings of the guitar whose more conventional method of playing was strumming. With time, single-note picking rather than strumming became the standard way of playing the guitar in the Luo community. This was then the practice that was adopted by the musicians from other parts of Kenya who came to take up the now growing style of Benga.

Another feature in Benga that confirms the roots of nyatiti lies in accompaniment. Where a nyatiti performance is enlisted for a complete performance – perhaps in an elaborate traditional Luo ceremony like tero buru (funeral dance), the lyre is accompanied by other instruments such as ohangla (a set of drums), tung’ the horn, gourds, shakers, sticks, sanduku (a wooden box, very prominent for maintaining the rhythm) and occasionally orutu the fiddle. Also, improvised accompaniment like
clapping, whistling, feet-stamping and others are common. In fact, some of these nyatiti accompaniments found their way into guitar performances. The pioneer Benga artists would normally be supported by sanduku to maintain the rhythm, shakers (manyanga) and the rhythmic strumming of the grooves of the Fanta bottle. Improvised accompaniment such as clapping and whistling were also quite popular.

However, many have argued that perhaps the most crucial link between nyatiti and the Benga is the tempo of playing the nyatiti, along with the sound from the rhythmic thumping of nyaduong against the arm of the nyatiti. Taking after nyatiti, the pace of Benga is normally quite fast, but if the dancer would have found it difficult to keep the rhythm of the music, a consistent and strong drum-beat is provided – perhaps the drum having taken the role of nyaduong, the metal on the toe of the nyatiti player.

These observations above suggest Kenya as the country of origin for Benga. Besides, the fact that Benga music was the preferred idiom by Kenyan musicians of the 60s, 70s and 80s at a time their counterparts in the DRC engaged in the slower Rumba. At the time, the musicians from DRC were experts in Rumba – a music style which these visiting musicians to Kenya appeared to be marketing, and which was the obvious competitor to Benga, confirms that the latter was actually a Kenyan music style.

5. Etymology of Benga

An etymological discussion on the term Benga could further confirm the roots of the genre as truly Kenyan. The word Benga is not traceable in any known dialect. My guess, therefore, is that it could be a kind of derivation if not a misspelling of some word. In an interview, Ochieng Nelly, one of the best-known names in the Benga world suggested that the name could have originated from the DRC. Ochieng’s guess, however, raises doubts. DRC could not have named a genre that was not practiced in their world, and indeed if it was, it was through infiltration. So, the possibility of giving it a name was minimal, as the name could not have worked backwards to where the style had originated. As I have already pointed out, the style in vogue in the DRC, in the formative years of Benga, was Rumba.

Other Benga enthusiasts maintain that the word benga came from dholuo, the language of the Luo people. In particular the word obeng’ore is estimated to be the etymological ancestor of the word Benga. Obeng’ore is a Luo word referring to a state of looseness, or a lack of seriousness. This hypothesis seems to make sense in view of the fact that at first guitar music was not a serious venture – one just put away the more serious nyatiti to only have some curious fun on this new instrument. This even seems to be confirmed by the local term tie dero, as guitar music was referred to, dero meaning granary, so tie dero (around the granary, i.e. music around the granary). The association with the granary was because those who wanted to practice playing the guitar would move away from the main house and do it near the granary where no one would hear the naughty lyrics of the music. However, the interpretation of tie dero could be that the music was not serious after all – just playable around the granary, away from serious venues where people would partake of the music. And, because the pioneer players of guitar were at first experimenting on the instrument with every music style, before Benga was eventually established, guitar may have been seen as an instrument without a fixed music idiom – loose or not rigid, thus, obeng’ore.

However, there are those who associate the term Benga with the fashionable and very popular skirts of the 60s. The fad of the time for women was dresses or skirts that were loose, starting just slightly below the waist. The looseness of the skirt from below the waist had the effect of enhancing the dancing. A dancer in this skirt appeared to dance beautifully as the skirt whirled around the dancer as though it was propelled by some kind of whirlwind. The skirt would also appear to fly off away from the person wearing it – of course enabled by the generous space that had been allowed around the waist. Actually, the image of a dancer at the time was drawn of one in this particular skirt which came to be called benga. One growing up in the 60s and early 70s, in Kenya, may have seen pictures of ladies in benga dresses drawn on the fronts of the shops of music distributors, and could also have known people named Benga. Such was the popularity of the benga skirt, particularly as a dancing costume, that one could guess that the dance style of the time would easily have been called Benga, in tandem with
the popularity of the benga skirt. Of course, the looseness of the said skirt also takes us back to the Luo Obeng’ore referred to in the previous paragraph.

Well, the debate about the origin of the term Benga has continued to rage with the most controversial suggestion coming from Daniel Owino Misiani – regarded by many as the King of Benga. In interviews with Misiani, he maintained that the term Benga was derived from his mother’s name – Obengo. Of course, his rivals have strongly refuted this. In any case, who ever really knew Misiani’s mother, who in fact was left in Tanzania when the musician migrated to Kenya as a young man? Naming the music after Misiani’s mother – a nondescript as some would want to describe her – was most improbable.

Nevertheless, the origin of the term Benga, though controversial in itself, confirms the genre as Kenyan. This is because the controversies are all around Kenyan references and in particular, Luo names.

6. The personalities behind Benga

The list of names behind Benga seems to read like ‘who is who’ in the music arena in Luoland. This is not to say that Benga is just a Luo affair. Benga is in all corners of Kenya as we shall see. However, as already mentioned the early years of Benga cannot be mentioned in isolation from John Ogara Odondi aka ‘Kaisa’, a renowned Luo musician. Ogara is reputed as having initiated the practice of putting a consort of acoustic guitars to play together, thus changing what otherwise had been the normal practice of experimentation with one-man guitarists. He founded Ogara Boys Band in 1960 with a fellow Luo musician, Aketch Oyosi, recruiting Nelson Ochieng’ Orwa, another Luo, two years later. Ochieng’ was to become another prominent Benga maestro under the stage name Ochieng’ Nelly. The trio was to literally rule the 60s, recruiting and influencing other artists and unwittingly shaping a distinct genre that came to dominate the Kenyan music scene. The word Benga is mentioned at the point of animation in the track ‘Samuel Oketch’, recorded in 1965 – actually the peak of the Benga skirt.

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In 1966, Samuel Oketch Oyosi and Ochieng’ Nelly left Ogara and went to perform elsewhere, so in a way starting to spread the budding Benga ideas of Ogara Boys Band. Nelly ended up linking up with George Ramogi, who was to become another Benga maestro. Throughout the 60s, the infant Benga was to face off with established non-Benga names such as Fadhili Williams, Fundi Konde and a galaxy of highly talented musicians from Luhyaland (the land of Omutibo music style). These included George Mukabi, John Mwale, Isaiah Mwinamo, John Nzenze, Shem Tube, Peter Akwabi, Peter Tsotsi, the evergreen Daudi Kabaka and David Amunga, who also doubled up as a producer with Kassanga Records. These Luhyah musicians were to rule the Kenyan music scene of the 60s – through the eras of ‘Twist, Shake, Pachanga’ to ‘Sukusu’. However, their prominence began to diminish under the Congolese bands such as Hi Fives, TP. OK Jazz Band under Luambo Luanzo Makiadi aka Franco and others that had infiltrated the Kenyan scene in the late 60s and early 70s, including Tanzania’s Mbarak Mishekhe Mwaruka with his Morogoro Jazz Band. Meanwhile, Benga was slowly but surely budding in the midst of this competition.

It was D.O. Misiani who in the early 70s, with his D.O 7 Shirati Jazz Band began to wrest the Kenyan music scene from the dominance of these foreign bands when he seemed to mature the Benga idiom which Ogara had set in motion earlier on. Misiani’s tracks ‘Harusi ya MK’, ‘Lala Salama’ and ‘Amka Salama’, made a wide appeal and in a way seemed to graduate the artiste to the national and international scene. Benga was now fully born and was a distinguishable genre. The 70s were to see a proliferation of bands and artistes that went ahead to position Benga as a big industry.

Encouraged by the astute producing mogul Phares Olouch Kanindo of the monumental P.O.K Records, many Benga bands were formed, which churned out tracks by the day. Kanindo is said to have pitied bands against one another, abruptly dropping this band and promoting the other in a manner that created cut-throat competition and with it growing Benga even more. He, for instance, engineered
the formation of Victoria Kings Band under Nelson Ochieng’ Mengo and Collela Mazee, his own brother-in-law. This was the band that Kaningo later facilitated to break into Victoria A Kings, Victoria B Kings and Victoria C Kings – bands that came to give the Benga legend D.O. Misiani a run for his money, but all the better for the growth of Benga. Consequently, it was Collela Mazee who became the undisputed Benga co-ruler with Misiani – Collela himself composing over three hundred Benga hits. Other distinguishable Benga names from the Luo community at the time were George Ojijo of Continental Revolution Band, Nelson Ochieng’ Mengo of Victoria Jazz Band, Musa Olwete of Migori Boys, Osumba Rateng’ of Sega Sega Boys, among others.

On his part as a producer, Kanindo created greater recording opportunities by using several labels which included ‘Lolwe, Sungura, Duol, Oyundi and many others. Oluoch became such a name in his promotion of Benga that Congolese giants such as Franco, Tabu Ley, Verkys, Mbilia Bel and Nyboma each paid him homage at his home in Awendo. Other labels such as ‘Hundhwe’ managed by Chandarana in Kericho also contributed to the growth of Benga in the 70s.

Come the 80s, Benga was in all corners of Kenya, with the artistes literally uncountable.

7. Emotional attachments to Benga

While discussions on literature often tend to emphasize its role in reflecting a people’s culture and ideals, music as a subgenre of literature goes beyond this position and is then best considered in terms of its power to elicit emotions geared towards the aspirations of a people. A people’s music could, thus, be said to be futuristic rather than advocating the now. Suffice to say that even when music, for example, seems to be praising the dead in a funeral situation; the objective is not to please or even to resurrect the deceased, but to appeal to the living to emulate the good deeds of the former for the better future of the community.

One may want to contest the futuristic nature of music. However, an attempt at such contestation may need to perhaps reflect on, for example, the way music has been used by the Blacks in America. The lively, aggressive and often combative Negro spirituals came at a time the Blacks were living in morbid, discriminative conditions that kept them in all time low spirits. But instead of singing solemn and sorrowful songs that were in tandem with the prevailing sad mood, they sang highly spirited and optimistic ones – songs that brought ‘the promised land’ into prospect. One then concludes that music for the Blacks in these circumstances was futuristic, i.e. representing their aspirations and the better future they hoped for. This is to say that the lively rhythms of the spirituals were to be a kind of forecasting of the happy future that was hoped to come. Indeed, and here I stand to be corrected, the music came to inspire, to an appreciable degree, the violence the Blacks came to engage in, perhaps as a way of fulfilling the aspirations their music had projected.

Indeed, the history of the Blacks in America is common knowledge. Their violence was to be countered with greater violence from the establishment, resulting in the type of situation as that of Bigger Thomas in Native Son – violence followed with more violence. The tune had to change. Alternative voices came up with alternative approaches to the struggle – peaceful protests. The music to serve this new purpose was the type that would slow down the pace of things a little, bring down the tempers and lower the heat. American ‘blues’ would then play this role. With its tranquil, near mystical nature, the ‘blues’ would easily set the pace for the peace and calm that the Blacks now longed for. Besides longing for peace and calm, the Blacks may also have wanted to hide their inner thoughts and intentions from their enemies, which perhaps explains the mystical nature of the ‘blues’. Again music here was setting pace for an aspired future, thus, the reason of calm tending music in the heat of violent protests by the Blacks.

At this point, the question one may want to ask is whether Benga music could also be said to represent the aspirations of the people who originated it. Having established its close relationship with the nyatiti music, the community we may want to refer to would be the nyatiti community – the Luo. For instance, what would the fast paced and lively rhythms of the nyatiti and consequently Benga tell us about the character the Luo people aspire to be? Could the emphatic pulse and strongly marked rhythm of Benga have something to contribute to the very character and disposition of the Luo as a people? Of course, I would not claim to place a tag on the Luo as aggressive people. Yet most observers have commented that the Luo are a lively, aggressive people, of an assertive disposition, with an
unmistakable presence wherever they are. Is it this that has influenced their lively nyatiti music, or is it the music that has inspired their character? If the position of this paper on the futurist role of music is something to go by, then it would be logical to argue that the music – nyatiti then Benga have perhaps over the years provided the blueprint to what true Luo character ought to be. Whichever way the argument goes, what is sure is that Benga in this case is being considered to the credit of a Kenyan people, thus, planting it firmly in Kenya.

8. The spread and mainstreaming of Benga

It is typical of music forms to spread beyond their original borders, whether by processes of diffusion, direct copying, adaptation, or any other means. For instance, the Opera which started in Italy was able to cross the borders of Italy itself to other countries of Europe and the rest of the world. The same could be said of other forms such as Ballet, originating in Italy, taken up by France and spreading to other parts of the world; same to Reggae in Jamaica to other places, among others. Benga like every other emerging musical idiom, became so popular that by mid seventies most ethnic groups in Kenya had taken to it, or adapted it to their own style and flavor, intertwining it with their complex traditional rhythms, while retaining the pulsating beat, high energy bass, interlocking guitar riffs and recurrent voice solos that characterize the Benga genre. Benga was now virtually the pop beat for Kenya.

Starting in the Nyanza region, the Kisii – a Bantu community sharing the region with the Luo became ardent consumers as well as players of Benga. The Kisii Benga star was Christopher Monyoncho. Even though he passed on in 2013, his influence on Kisii musicians will take time to fade away. To date, the mainstream pop beat in Kisii is Benga, though apparently setting it a shade faster than what one gets from their Luo counterparts.

The populous Luhyas of Western Kenya were rather slow in adopting Benga, perhaps because even before the Luo musicians, Luhya musicians were already established, controlling the music trends of the late 50s and early 60s. Indeed, even the Benga legend D.O. Misiani admitted to partly owing his great skill to one of the Luhya musicians – David Amunga. The Luhya omutibo had already gained root even as Benga was being born. However, Benga still managed to infiltrate the land of omutibo through musicians such as Fanuel Amimo and Sukuma bin Ongaro – perhaps the most articulate Luhya musician, who remains active to date. Other prominent Luhya musicians like Jacob Luseno continued to play omutibo, as Nyongesa wa Mugaana in Bungoma played a different beat. It is, however, worth noting that even when a big number of Luhya musicians continued with omutibo and other styles, the dancing Luhya in the 70s, 80s and after, preferred Benga, perhaps why Sukuma bin Ongaro has remained popular.

The Rift Valley, more known for athletics than music, has also been dancing to Benga. Its musicians, though the immediate neighbours of the Luo, did not come out strongly on the performance platform until 1989 when the two Benga ‘sisters’, Anjelica Chepkoech and her stage sister Elizabeth Chepkorir were produced in Nairobi by one Kikuyu producer, Peter Kiggia, himself an established Benga artiste. To date, the ‘sisters’ continue to thrill fans in Eldoret town, as new Benga players inspired by the ‘sisters’ come up.

The former Nairobi Province, now Nairobi County, and hosting the country’s capital city, was itself the melting pot for Benga. This was the point of collection – most artistes coming to record here; the point of distribution, as majority of the producers put camp here and to a large extent, the point of consumption, as it was home (even just briefly) to almost all Kenyan communities. The residents of Nairobi formed a sizeable consumer block since many had some income and they could also easily access the record discs. Besides, the artistes who already lived in Nairobi found it easy and convenient, as they would simply walk into the numerous competing studios and record. They had several options: AIT, EMI, P.O.K., Kassanga, Colmore, Equator Sounds, Assanands, Bonanza then Melodica, Polygram, CBS and others. Some of these studios are operational to date, though many closed shop in the 80s as music piracy rose, thereby diminishing the sales of original producers.

Central Kenya, the land of the populous Kikuyu, adopted Benga early, perhaps due to their proximity to Nairobi, thus, exposure to and interaction with the Benga pioneers from Luoland who trooped to Nairobi seeking recording opportunities. Indeed, D.K. Kamau (Mwai), the man considered as the father of Kikuyu Benga, says he was inspired by one single by Oketch Ombassa, a Luo artiste. D.K.
made a breakthrough onto the Benga scene as early as 1968. He released the popular hit ‘My Jenny’ in 1969 and the all time best ‘Murata/ I Love you’, which made him a household name in Kenyan music industry. Alongside D.K. was another Kikuyu music guru, Joseph Kamaru, who also partly contributed to Kikuyu Benga, though he now performs gospel music. Kariuki wa Kiarutara has also been an important contributor to Kikuyu Benga.

In the Eastern region, the enthusiasm for Benga by Kamba musicians can only be compared to that of the Luo. The Kamba people live to the south and east of Nairobi. They too took advantage of their close proximity to the capital city with its producers. Their preferred pop music is Benga. However, their performances often include another guitar that plays a melodiouse counterpoint to the primary guitar. The most popular Kamba pop bands emerged in the mid 1970s and included Les Kilimambogo Brothers Band led by Kakai Kilonz – the foremost recording group in Ukambani, Kalamba Boys & Kalamba Sisters led by Onesmus Musyoki and Joseph Mutaiti and Kyanganga Boys led by Peter Mwambi. Other groups also include Lower Mbooni Boys Band, Muthetheni Boys Band and Ukia Boys Band. When Kakai Kilonz died in 1987, Kilimambogo Band remained in the hands of Francis Danger, but he was later to form Dangerous Boys Band.

Other Kamba Pop Bands were formed in the 1980s and they included Kakuku Boys Band led by John Mutua Muteti whose lyrics consist religious text, domestic, and court humour. Also Ngoleni Brothers formed by Dick Mutuku Mulwa after he left Kalamba Boys & Kalamba Sisters. Today, Kamba Benga bands could perhaps be estimated to be more than those in Luoland.

Apart from impacting all parts of Kenya, Benga has gone beyond the country’s borders. The countries of Eastern and Central Africa: Tanzania, Uganda and DRC have at one time or another heavily consumed Benga music either by accessing the vinyl records or through the visiting musicians. Aketch Ososi, for example, says that he and his colleagues frequently travelled to play in Uganda, while D.O. Misiani often travelled to play in Tanzania. The artistes from these countries also visited Kenya and engaged in joint performances with Kenyan musicians.

However, to really get a clue to how far Benga has spread, one needs to be told that the music also became quite popular in Southern Africa, in the 70s and 80s. It is said that during this period, the most popular dance music in Zimbabwe became Benga, sold there on vinyl records produced in Kenya. In fact the name Kanindo (the most vigilant Benga producer in Kenya), was said to have been a household name in the country. Some people referred to Benga music as ‘Kanindo music’ thinking that it was called Kanindo, or that the latter was perhaps a music performer. What they didn’t know was that in fact Kanindo was just the producer whose name appeared on the records.

9. **Benga today**

It would be quite accurate to observe that Benga is the one single music idiom that managed to bring the Kenyan communities together as a nation. The multiethnic appeal of Benga is unrivalled. But D.K. Kamau opines that this was so until the Nyayo (Moi) years of the 90s that badly divided communities on tribal lines. "There was no tribal music in the 60s and 70s. Kikuyus bought Luo music and Luos bought Kikuyu music.

Tribal music was created under former Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi." D.K. laments that musicians then went tribal. People now only bought tribal music. This was the era according to D.K. that the Suba were reminded that they were not Luos, the Tharaka were different from the Nithil and different from the Meru and so on. Of course, this ended up in each group being given a separate district as if they had to tell them: “You are different, thus, independent”. Apparently, the divide was intensified under the Kibaki government and more or less concluded under the Uhuru government, both leaders being from the Kikuyu ethnic group, during whose regimes other ethnic groups in the country felt sidelined. Luo music would, for instance, now become some kind of taboo among the Kikuyu and vice versa. Kamba music was only for the Kamba, and so on. However, D.K. still promises to do more music, and hopes to make a visit to Luoland to market his music, which actually remains Benga in its idiom, though sung in Kikuyu language.

Apparently, ‘tribalization’ of music notwithstanding, Benga still thrives. One reason for this is perhaps because of the way the idiom is adaptable. It is, thus, easy to localize it, which the communities have been doing. This way one can talk of Kikuyu Benga, Kamba Benga, Luo Benga, Luhya Benga, Kisii...
Benga Kalenjin Benga, and so on. Indeed, the way, for example, the Kamba musicians have taken to and expanded the genre has made it so identical with the community that even before one hears the lyrics, one will have correctly guessed that that is Kamba Benga – just from the sounds alone.

It is encouraging to note that even though most pioneer Benga musicians have now passed on, new generation Benga artistes are emerging by the day. Some of these new artistes are perhaps inspired by the older artistes still alive such as D.K Kamau, Ochieng’ Nelly, Francis Danger, Sukuma bin Ongaro and many others. On the other hand Benga is being passed on by those who have taken over the mantle when their mentors passed on. For example, Queen Babito has continued to drive on O.K. Shirati Band, after the death of her husband, D.O. Misiani; Princess Jully (the strongest Benga female artiste at the moment) continues the band her husband, Prince Jully left, and so on.

Other younger musicians also continue in the steps of Benga. These include Queen Jane in Central Kenya, having been nurtured by Musaimo, another innovative artiste, not to mention the galaxy of young and upcoming Kamba Benga musicians. Other young artistes try to survive the genre by infusing other styles, thereby producing hybrids. Eric Wainaina, Suzanna Owiyo and Iddi Achieng’ are, for instance, known for their fusions that borrow heavily from Benga. Indeed, if Benga appeared to waver in the 90s, it can be said to be up again.

However, as Suzanna Owiyo points out, despite its vibrant creativity and boom in production, the Kenyan music industry is nowhere near realizing its potential. “Nobody knows about Kenyan music, and that is because we lack proper networking in terms of distribution.” This challenge is of course made worse by the problem of piracy. Music pirates have made it difficult for the artistes to benefit from their work. This is because, as soon as a work is produced, and before the artiste has sold a couple of original copies, the pirate has produced thousands of cheap copies and is already selling.

It is also paradoxical that the very diversity of Kenya’s musical scene represents a key challenge to developing a sustainable industry. In particular, its linguistic diversity has fragmented the market and made it more difficult for artistes to develop unique and recognizable sounds that can serve as currency for access to mainstream global markets.

10. Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to trace 50 years of what can be said to be a Kenyan ‘born and bred’ musical style – Benga. Through this paper, one gets a clue on how simply music forms start, develop and spread. The paper starts by laying bare the very standpoints that root Benga in Kenya and not DRC as some enthusiasts of the genre have argued. The genre’s relationship with the nyatiti music of Luo, backed by the personalities involved and the roles they played leave no doubt that the genre is Kenyan, though it has spread beyond Kenyan borders. Indeed, even the very etymological indicators rest the term Benga within the Kenyan context. This is further lent credence by the fact that the style in vogue in the DRC, during the formative years of Benga, was Rumba. It is in fact this latter form that the artistes from DRC were trying to popularize such that by the seventies, it was the main competitor of Benga.

Whether Benga has a future is a question that is answered by looking at the current trends in the music industry. This paper points out that there is renewed interest in the genre with more young people enlisting to perform it while others are infusing in other idioms, thereby, so to say, ‘renovating’ it. The genre has also been localized by the various ethnic communities of Kenya; therefore, each is able to appropriate it without the ethnic prejudices that are typical of the Kenyan demographic landscape.

The future of the genre is, however, threatened by the problem of piracy that denies the artistes their benefits; ethnic and linguistic fragmentation which hinders universal distribution and lack of resources to invest in the industry. This latter problem has impeded quality as, for example, music mastering can only be done abroad, while even marketing the music out there is difficult. However, these limitations notwithstanding, Benga is still likely to remain on the airwaves and in dancing halls.

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