The Beat Goes On: Performing Postcolonial Disillusionment in Kenya

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Abstract

Several decades after independence, most African countries have continually performed dismally in actualising the dreams and aspirations of their citizenry. The post-independence disillusionment has been expressed in various forms in these postcolonial African states. Music is one of the cultural forms, like literature and theatre, which artists in Kenya have employed as a force that continually constructs an alternative political and social reality, away from officialdom, in a way to respond to the postcolonial challenges. This paper is an exposé on the fundamental role that popular music has played in postcolonial Kenya as one of the salient sites of the struggle between the rulers and the ruled. The paper draws on songs from two artists, Joseph Kamaru and Eric Wainaina.

Keywords: Kenya, popular music, postcolonial disillusionment, Joseph Kamaru, Eric Wainaina, Kenyan history, Mau Mau.

El ritmo sigue: Desilusión funcional postcolonial en Kenya

Resumen

Varias décadas luego de la independencia, el desempeño de la mayoría de los países africanos en sus intentos por materializar los sueños y aspiraciones de sus ciudadanos ha sido desconsolador. En estos Estados africanos postcoloniales la desilusión post independentista se ha expresado de distintas formas. La música, junto a la literatura y el teatro, ha sido una de las formas culturales a través de las cuales los artistas en Kenia han logrado construir continuamente una realidad política y social alternativa, alejada de la oficialidad, a fin de responder a los desafíos post coloniales. Este artículo es una disertación sobre el rol fundamental que ha tenido la música popular en la Kenia postcolonial, como uno de los lugares más connotados de la lucha entre gobernantes y gobernados. Este artículo toma como base las canciones de dos artistas: Joseph Kamaru y Eric Wainana.

Palabra clave: Kenia, música popular, desilusión postcolonial, Joseph Kamaru, Eric Wainana, historia Keniana, Mau Mau.

> *Art is not a mirror held up to reality,*
> *but a hammer with which to shape it.*
> Bertold Brecht in Askew2003:633

This article locates the power relations between the ruling elite and the citizenry in Kenya, as expressed in the popular music of Joseph Kamaru and Eric Wainaina. However, this relationship should not be seen in absolute binary opposition between the rulers and the subjects. As Achille Mbembe (1992) has argued, this is a relationship that is laden with ambivalences, because of the very nature of the postcolony. Describing this situation as mutual zombification between rulers and subjects, Mbembe asserts:

> [T]he postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can be best characterized as illicit cohabitation, a relationship made fraught by the very fact of the *commandment* and its 'subjects' having to share the same living space. (1992: 4)

Additionally, in the context of this paper, power relations don't necessarily remain a relationship between the ruler and the ruled only. Every other facet of our lives derives or has a bearing towards the politics of the day. I appropriate the term 'politics of everyday life' to refer to the 'actualities of individual interaction within the society' as Terence Ranger (1991:149) aptly puts it. Therefore, politics should not be seen as simply occurring through coercion, consciousness or formal political mechanisms, but in 'informal processes of socialisation. In the words of Balliger (1999: 68-9), domination, therefore, can also be resisted through informal means including cultural practices like music. Thus, music does not reside in music texts themselves but in their articulation with society. The articulation then encapsulates the politics of everyday life.

As James Scott (1990:37-8) argues, popular culture, in this case, popular music, 'provides a "hidden transcript" in which is written 'the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination'. This hidden transcript, he argues, is found in 'rumours, folktales, gossip, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemism' (1990: 19).

The interaction between popular culture and politics, or in finer terms between music and society involves a struggle over subject-producing practices which gain meaning in specific contents and moments, rhythms, sounds, and collective spaces may affirm ways of being and produce embo-

diment in opposition to dominant society. Popular culture then becomes, not always a site of resistance, but also of asserting authority, depending on the moment of production and the meaning attached to the song.

In situations where the interface of popular culture and politics is investigated, then I view the idea of the popular as a political moral category: 'the definition of the popular being that which functions in the interests of the masses (the farmers, workers, unemployed) by opening up their eyes to their own objective, historical situation, the actual conditions of their existence and thus enabling them to empower themselves' (Barber, 1997: 5). Masses are not always unaware of their predicaments. Popular culture just accentuates their feeling of hopelessness, but at the same time coalescing their misery as an arsenal against assumed prejudices. Street (1997:10) reflecting on the interconnectedness between popular culture and politics agrees that 'popular culture's ability to produce and articulate feelings can become the basis of an identity, and that identity can be the source of political thought and action'.

It is in trying to articulate emotions that popular culture links us to the outside world. The popular music investigated in this paper does not just reflect emotions, but plays out 'everyday moral dilemmas, posing questions and suggesting answers to our worries, about what we should do' (Street, 1997: 9)

1.- Popular Music and the Quest for Independence

A sound understanding of the politics of the Kenyan postcolony, and the role of popular culture therein must be situated from the colonial period. A number of cultural practitioners in Africa seem to believe that the present situation is just a continuation of colonialism under the guise of independence. Writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and musicians like Fela Kuti and Eric Wainaina have been critics of their respective postcolonial states arguing that much as colonialism is to be blamed, current leadership is also responsible for the disillusionment. In particular, Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993:91), in his seminal study on the struggle for cultural freedoms, *Moving the Centre* argues that, just like the colonial regimes, the postcolonial governments have resorted to repressing democracy. This repressive nature has, however, spawned a proliferation of cultural activities to respond to these challenges, as well as providing a space for alternative regimes of history and truth. It is in this view that this paper investigates the fundamental role that popular music played in the years during and after colonialism, in this case, in Kenya.

In the years between the 1930s and the late 1950s, during the Kenyan struggle for independence from colonial rule, and also during the Mau Mau war in the 1950s, a genre of music evolved that functioned to articulate a vision of a postcolonial Kenya and to affirm a sense of pride, identity and community amongst black Kenyan peasants and workers. Song and dance functioned in an emancipatory manner because it enabled people to share their burdens, triumphs and gladness of heart by singing about the common oppressor and exploiter; the colonialist. It drew people together and united them in one common aim, goal or purpose. As the South African black consciousness leader Steve Biko (1978: 60) asserted, song and dance is able to 'promote a culture of defiance, group pride, self-assertion and solidarity that emanates from a situation of common experience of oppression and is responsible for the restoration of our faith in ourselves'.

During the Kenyan struggle for independence and through the following decades, music served to unite and mobilize the masses of ordinary Kenyans at times when the welfare and stability of the community was in jeopardy. Though varied in modes of expression, the peoples' reaction to communal crisis is strikingly similar throughout the years under colonialism and after. During the Mau Mau, for instance, song was used consistently to nag, cajole, and implore the *Gĩkũyũ* community to fight for their dignity and identity. Ngugi wa Thiong'o shows that during the colonial period, *Mũthĩrĩgũ* and *Kanyegenyũri* dances were utilised by anti-colonial forces to express resistance. He goes on to demonstrate that culture in Kenya has long been an important theatre of political confrontation, enumerating a number of colonial and postcolonial cultural productions that arose in response to political repression (1993: 88).

Talking of the impact of the song-narrative in creating bonds among a community, Ruth Finnegan (1970: 285) in her seminal study of oral literature in Africa argues:

> One of the best examples of the use of songs for secret propaganda is the hymns [that were] used by the Mau Mau in Kenya in the early 1950s. This movement, part political, part religious was banned by government, and yet largely by means of these songs, was able to carry out active and widespread propaganda among the masses in Kenya.

Maina wa Kinyatti's work on songs sang during the Mau Mau period demonstrates the saliency of Barber's argument regarding the use of popular culture as a mobilising tool. Wa Kinyatti shows that within a

span of five years, Mau Mau produced a most formidable body of political songs,[1] which was used by the movement as a weapon to politicise and educate Kenyan workers and peasants. He argues that 'this helped heighten the people's consciousness against the forces of the foreign occupiers and in the process prepared them for armed struggle' (1980: xii). He argues that the role played by these songs in educating workers and peasants and mobilising them against dictatorship of the colonialists was a vital catalyst in the development and success of the movement.

Although wa Kinyatti's perspective is anchored in a Marxist interpretative paradigm, his approach to the study of music as a form of cultural and political expression is relevant to my inquiry. His argument is, however, flawed in a number of ways. First, wa Kinyatti formulates a 'powerful vision of confraternity in suffering' (Barber 1997: 5). This entails a generic assumption that peasants and workers are one homogenous group. Secondly, the assumption that this category of people is in need of education and politicisation far more than other social classes is arguable. Such a claim does not acknowledge the peasants' agency. I argue that these songs during the Mau Mau resonated with and articulated the peasants' grievances, the latter were not educated and politicised through song from above. After all, it was the nature of their political awareness that created the impulse to compose these songs in the first instance. Writing on nationalism and peasant consciousness in India, Partha Chatterje argues that the peasant consciousness has its own paradigmatic form which is in fact the antithesis of the bourgeoisie consciousness. The peasant consciousness, he argues, 'cannot be understood in its own constitutive aspects if it is reduced to the bourgeoisie rationality' (1993: 163-4). To deny them the agency as wa Kinyatti posits above would condemn the peasants to the conception that they are 'poor, ignorant, unthinking and subject to unreasonable excitements', cautions Chatterjee (1986: 149). What I am arguing here is that the peasants too had their own knowledge of their sufferings and interests, and that the songs only reiterated and re-emphasised their plight, and not necessarily heightened their consciousness against the colonial forces. Wa Kinyatti also portrays stark binaries between colonizers and colonized when the situation was more complex.

2.- Popular Music and the Coming of Independence

In 1963, Kenya attained independence from Britain and Jomo Kenyatta became the country's first president. The resistance songs of the

Mau Mau era became songs of celebration that were commonly performed by formal ensembles at official functions and events. Making reference to two songs[2] which highlighted Kenyatta's tribulations at the same time valorising his suffering, Ogude (2003: 277) argues that Kenyatta turned his praise songs into a daily ritual that all 'patriotic Kenyans were expected to defer to without deviation. Almost every news bulletin was preceded by one or the other praise song to Kenyatta'. Kenyatta cashed in on his popularity at the moment immediately after independence, but which later waned in the years that followed. Kenyatta also had a retinue of traditional Nyakinyua women dancers as well as mass choirs to entertain him wherever he was addressing rallies or even at the State House. It is in the period immediately after independence that the first praise songs composed by pop musicians began to emerge. One of the most famous of these was CDM Kiratu's *Mugathe Jomo Kenyatta* (His Excellency Jomo Kenyatta), which was recorded in the early 1970s.

When Daniel arap Moi took power in 1978 one of his primary strategies was to emphasise and gain the most benefit possible from the praise side of the praise poet tradition. In 1979, Moi instigated the formation of his premiere propaganda ensemble, the Muungano Choir, a mass choir whose membership represented the diversity of Kenyan society. The President's enthusiasm for, and support of, this kind of music stimulated many state corporations to form their own choirs – all of which sang the praises of the ruling KANU party and President Moi.

In 2002, opposition leader, Mwai Kibaki, and currently the third president of Kenya was propelled to power by *Unbwogable* song, which was his campaign anthem against the incumbent party, KANU in which he handed a resounding defeat. The song, by the group GidiGidi MajiMaji became the anthem with which to mobilise votes for the opposition outfit, NARC (National Rainbow Coalition).[3] All this stresses the importance of music in the political life of Kenya, right from the war for independence to present moments.

Since independence, Kenya has witnessed major political upheavals in Kenya: political assassinations of politicians Tom Mboya in 1969, J.M Kariuki in 1975; the 1982 attempted coup and the murders of Robert Ouko and Bishop Muge among others in the 1990s; the ethnic clashes of 1991-1998 and 2007/8; from the stigmatisation of intellectuals and perceived dissidents to the introduction of political pluralism as opposed to the one-party state system. Throughout this period, music has consistently functioned as one of the most salient sites of struggle between rulers and ordinary people. One of the reasons for this is that music is one of most

important modes through which ordinary Kenyans express their wishes, identities and aspirations. It is arguably the most important aspect of the country's popular culture.

According to Lara Allen (2004:1)), music functions as a trenchant political site in Africa, primarily because it is the most widely appreciated art and cultural form on the continent. In this view, music gives voice to voiceless especially during moments of political disillusionment in Africa. Consequently, as Barber (1987:4) puts it, it is under conditions of pervasive political and economic change that music continues to play a crucial role as a medium of symbolic transaction and a means of forging and defending communities.

3.- Kenyatta's Regime: The Music of Joseph Kamaru

Joseph Kamaru, is one of the most celebrated Kenyan musicians who offers clear examples of the instances where serious political issues are contested through music in Kenya. For more than half a century, music has functioned as a fundamental mode of the expression and enactment of politics. From the colonial period through to 1963, when Kenya became independent with Jomo Kenyatta as its first president, to the second republic, during Daniel arap Moi's reign (1978-2002), to the present moment under Mwai Kibaki, this musician has played a significant role in providing a commentary on contemporary politics.

His most critical songs were composed during times of political crisis. In 1969, for instance, he composed a song defending President Kenyatta regarding allegations that he was involved in the assassination of trade unionist MP and Minister, Tom Mboya. The Mboya murder created serious ethnic tensions between the *Gĩkũyũ* and the Luo, Kenya's two major ethnic groups.[4] But Kamaru was to make a turn-around six years later when populist MP Josiah Mwangi Kariuki's (popularly known as JM) mutilated body was found in Ngong Forest in the outskirts of Nairobi. Many accusing fingers were again pointed at the government. When Kamaru released his song, *J.M Mwendo nĩ Irĩ* (J.M, The People's Hero) it was banned by the government. Kamaru had called for the arrest and prosecution of the killers (although, not confirmed hitherto, the hand of Jomo Kenyatta's government is very clear in the murder).

Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president reigned from 1963 when Kenya attained independence till his death in 1978. During these years, I probe how Kamaru's music goes hand in hand with historical events in

Kenya. As seen above, Kamaru's song in 1969 after the assassination of Tom Joseph Mboya was in clear support of the government of the day. Though the colonial legacy is apportioned much of the blame in most political crisis in Africa, Kenya's political problems and cracks in the nation, really intensified in 1969. Several events happened then. This was the year that the second general elections in Kenya were held. The only opposition party then, KPU (Kenya's People Union) was banned and its *de facto* leader Jaramogi Oginga Odinga sent into incarceration. Ethnic tensions between the *Gĩkũyũ* and the Luo flared up,[5] and Kenyatta's visit in Kisumu (which was seen then as bedrock of opposition to Kenyatta's rule) was marred with violence. This is the context that shaped Kamaru's song, *Arooma Ka* (May he be stiff dead). In the song, Kamaru's rebuffs at those people who were claiming that Kenyatta was too old to rule. He duly warns those that were against Kenyatta's rule:

> *Arooma ka- May he be stiff dead*
> *Aroitĩka - may he wither*
> *na mahũri make makarĩrwo Kĩrĩnyaga - and his lungs will be eaten on Mount Kenya*
> *nĩ tũihũ twa mĩrũngarũ- by mongooses.*
> *Jogoo ya Kanu[6] –KANU's cockerel (meaning KANU's flag)*
> *Nĩyo ĩkwambata igũrũ- will forever be hoisted high!*

Kamaru, in his song tries to show Kenyatta's popularity from Mombasa to Kisumu, from Ngong to Karimatura.

Despite commenting on the politics of the day and voicing his support for the ruling party, Kamaru also points out to the predator-prey relationship that characterised the tensions between the ruling elite. Drawing on the metaphor of the mongoose, the ambiguity comes out clear given that the cockerel was and still is the symbol of the party KANU. Mongooses are the greatest threat of a poultry farmer. They are known to feed on a large number of chicken when they strike. The implication here though is that Kenyatta is the main cockerel, those opposing him are either hens, or young chicken that are more prone to mongoose attacks. The mongoose metaphor also implies that all Kenyans were chicken, under one rule of the cockerel, and the ideal punishment was to throw them to mongooses, the most common threat to chicken The mention of Mount Kenya, the mythical abode of Ngai, the god of the *Gĩkũyũ* community gives ethnic connotations to the song.

Kenyatta's statement in a speech made in 1975 more or less reiterated the same. Faced with dissent and opposition from his government after the grisly murder of populist MP, J.M Kariuki as seen in the next example, and the attempted cover-up, he sternly warned: 'the hawk is in the sky. It is ready to descend on chickens who stray from the pathway', (Miller, 1984: 53). Within a few days, opposition waned but the crisis of Kariuki's death haunted him until his death in 1978.

1972 marked yet another suspicious death of a prominent politician, Ronald Ngala, under mysterious circumstances, which have not been unravelled up to this moment. However, Kamaru didn't release a song in 1972 until much later in 1975 when another famous politician died. In this year, a former Mau Mau detainee and a populist Member of Parliament, Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, popularly known as JM was found murdered in Ngong Forest with his body mutilated. He is said to have been one of the prominent politicians who fronted the case of the landless and squatters in Kenya. He was critical of the government's policy to resell land to the colonial settlers whereas most Kenyans remained landless. Kenyatta was not amused by his vocal criticism. His death was seen by many as a sign to silence him forever. The question most people would have raised would be what Kamaru would release next. He never repeated the mistake he made in 1969. This time, he released a song that was quite critical of the government:

> *Thirikari tondũ Kariũki nĩakua-* authorities, now that Kariuki is dead
> *Arutĩtwo magego na maitho-* with his teeth removed, his eyes gouged out
> *Na ti kũĩya kana kũragana-* and he wasn't a thief or a murderer
> *Thakame ndĩgaitĩke nĩũndũ wake-* let's not shed more blood
> *Rekei Ngai arute wĩra wake -* let God do His work

The song not only describes the grisly murder, but also questions the government to provide the answers to the death of an innocent man. The song somehow contradicts his earlier song, where he prophesies doom to whoever was critical to Kenyatta's rule. Whereas mongooses on Mount Kenya did not eat Kariuki's body, it was mutilated and left to the hyenas in Ngong forest! Ngong is earlier mentioned in the 1969 song.

The irritating verse that was critical and might have led to the banning of the song predicted doom again to whoever was involved in the murder:

> *Mũmũtinia cĩga ciothe cia mwĩrĩ-*whoever mutilated his body
> *Mũmũtwari mũhara-inĩ wa nyamũ-*whoever took him to the wild animals

No nginya akagagario na mwatũ -will be rolled in a beehive
Mũingi wothe wa Kenya wĩroreire - with the Kenyan public watching.

Kamaru invokes *Gĩkũyũ* customs to send home a message. Criminals in pre-colonial *Gĩkũyũ* society would be rolled downhill in a beehive as a means of punishment, Wanjohi, (1997: 216). Though the government denied responsibility, all indications pointed to a heavy hand in government involvement. In parliament, when asked to explain the whereabouts of the MP, the then VP, Daniel arap Moi (who was later to become president) blatantly lied to the House that Hon Kariuki was on a business trip to Zambia. Later on, a parliamentary select committee also implicated the government. Kamaru's song was banned on the only national broadcaster; Voice of Kenya (VOK). [7]

The death of Kariuki led to an internal split among the ruling elite, mainly composed of leaders from the *Gĩkũyũ* ethnic group,[8] alongside a revolt against the government in parliament, Miller (1984: 52). Kamaru's turn-around from the 1969 political crisis after Tom Mboya's murder could be interpreted thus. Having heavily castigated the government and by extension the president for Kariuki's murder, two important events happened in 1978, in relation to Kamaru's music.

On the morning of August 22nd 1978, Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta died in Mombasa State House. A high profile delegation alongside thousands of mourning Kenyans witnessed his state funeral. His casket draped in the national flag of Kenya was paraded along the streets of Nairobi on horse carriage. Kamaru's prophecy had come to pass: the murderer of JM Kariuki was finally being rolled in a bee-hive[9] to the full glare of not only Kenyans, but the world at large. It is at this point that Kamaru's songs were taken seriously, and the prophet tag attached to him.

Ironically, at the time of mourning, Kamaru was at it again. This time, he released a song praising the late president, christening him the Moses of the Black People in his song, *Musa wa Andũ Airũ*, a reference to Biblical Moses' efforts to rescue the Israelites from Egyptian's slavery. Within the *Gĩkũyũ* traditions, one does not quarrel with the dead. The *Gĩkũyũ* people 'believe that the spirits of the dead, like living human beings, can be pleased or displeased by the behaviour of an individual or family group, or an age group' (Kenyatta, 1938: 266)

The vacillating nature of Kamaru is what this paper points at. As Bogumil Jewsiewicki (1997: 440), argues:

> Often of populist inspiration, research on popular culture emphasises the political critique, the subversive character of the text. Yet it must be admitted that at least as often, songs praise the incumbent regime, conveying its values and transmitting its structure.

That Kamaru both praised and criticised the incumbent and his regime places the artist fully within a role commonly expected of musicians all over the African continent – that of the praise poet (South African) or *griot* (West Africa). Tradition has it that a musician recognised as fulfilling this function is duty bound to publicly highlight both the positive attributes and failings of a leader.

In view of the understanding that relationships in a postcolony are based on mutual zombification, as Mbembe argues, one can argue here, in case of Kamaru, that popular arts, in this instance, popular music, not only are affected by the socio-political realities of the day, but they do affect them as well. The futuristic predictions of Kamaru, as in the song on JM, clearly point this out. It is Karin Barber's (1997: 441) point that buttresses this argument:

> Popular arts penetrate and are penetrated by political, economic and religious institutions in ways that may not always be predictable from our own experiences.

Suffice it to say that most of Kamaru's songs, outlive the event, and have been or can be appreciated, not because of their aesthetic value, but on their relevance to the Kenyan history. This is what gives them an independent life. Among the oral interviews I conducted, mostly among elderly people, there is always a reference to Kamaru's songs when responding to issues around politics in Kenya.

The overview of Kamaru the musician in this paper tends to point at the role of the artist in narrating the history of the nation as well as providing political commentaries. Couching his music however in the extra-textual (the real happenings in the country) leads one to a conclusion in line with David Harker's (1985:76) position, that, 'unless we locate cultural products in history, we cannot hope to understand culture'. In dwelling on key political happenings in the history of Kenya, Kamaru's music here serves as a repository of memory and history as well.

4.- Music during the Regime of Daniel Arap Moi (1978-2002): The Case of Eric Wainaina

Kenya under President Daniel Moi was regularly ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world by anti-graft agencies like the Transparency International.[10] Also, the IMF and World Bank held back millions of dollars of aid until specific, concrete steps were taken to fight corruption. Transparency International has argued that graft contributes to the high levels of poverty in most developing countries, as Peter Eigen, Chairman of the organization observed during the launch of the Corruption Perceptions Index 2002:

> Political elites and their cronies continue to take kickbacks at every opportunity. Hand in glove with corrupt business people, they are trapping whole nations in poverty and hampering sustainable development. Corruption is perceived to be dangerously high in poor parts of the world, but also in many countries whose firms invest in developing nations.

One of the most salient critiques of the state of the Kenyan nation during the regime of Daniel Moi was Eric Wainaina's song 'Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo', in the album *Sawa Sawa* (Kiswahili: All is Fine). The first track, in the album, which became a hit throughout the country, laments the level of corruption in Kenya. This song, *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo* (Kiswahili: The Country of Something Small), is commonly translated as "The Land of Corruption". This song not only appealed to the Kenyan public, it also shot the artist into the limelight making him the co-winner of the best song, East African category, in the annual South African-based KORA Awards in 2002. Within a couple of months of its release *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo* had come to epitomize the desire of Kenyans to live in a corruption-free society.[11]

Corruption permeates all levels of Kenyan public life. *Kitu Kidogo*, which literally means "Something Small", is what ordinary people pay, on a daily basis, to grease the palms of minor bureaucrats. To be admitted to hospital, to attain a driving license, or if you get stopped by the police, you have to bribe the relevant official. Wainaina's song asserts that the problem exists absolutely everywhere:

> *Huko Kenyatta madawa zimeisha*
> *Masheet zauzwa marikiti mia kwa mia ah*
> *Wafanyi kazi waenda miezi bila pesa*
> *Ni bahati ukitibiwa*

(In Kenyatta National Hospital, there are no drugs
Bed sheets for hospital beds are being sold for throw away prices
Hospital staff goes for months without pay
You are lucky when you get treated)

Towards the end of KANU's reign, Kenyans were becoming increasingly exasperated with corruption, especially as the economy was flagging and poverty levels were reaching insurmountable heights. Ordinary citizens blamed this predicament solely on the country's leaders, who - they said - had plundered the nation's resources. However, as citizens are not exempt from corrupt practices, the blame does not rest solely on the leaders.

Kenyan people detest the inconveniences that corruption introduces into their lives but, as individuals, very few people are averse to making money through a deal, as long as nobody exposes them.

Acknowledgement of this contradiction is part of what the public appreciates in Wainaina's humorous indictment of the situation in Kenya. Another part of the song's appeal is that it makes people laugh through its witty use of different slang-words for corruption. During one concert, Wainaina threw out handfuls of tea bags, much to the delight of the crowd. "Chai", or tea, is slang for a bribe. He sings:

> *Ukitaka chai ewe ndugu nenda Limuru*
> (If you want tea [bribe], brother, go to Limuru).[12]

In another lyric, he advises:

> *Ukitaka soda ewe Inspekta burudika na Fanta*
> (If you need a soda [bribe], Police Inspector refresh yourself with a Fanta).

The song's message annoyed the government and, although the independent radio stations continued playing the number regularly, it was denied airtime on state-run broadcasters. At a music festival, attended by the then Kenyan Vice-President, George Saitoti, the organisers tried to stop Wainaina from performing *Kitu Kidogo*. Only after an outcry from the audience, did the band perform the song. Wainaina says, 'My thought process was: I'm not going to stop because a couple of people are going to be angered by this. I had the vice-president in front of me, and it's important that this message gets across'.[13]

On a positive note, however, although ending corruption still has a long way to go, *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo* would have struggled to get radio airtime, or be sold publicly in shops a decade before. But, as multi-party politics and related democratic practices have begun to take hold, the culture of fear and suppression in Kenya has receded. Young Kenyans like Eric Wainaina are using their newfound freedom, to try to change the bad, old ways of their leaders and the citizenry.

5.- Popular Music and Ethnicity

In addition to political assassinations and corruption as hallmarks of the Kenyan postcolony, another major challenge that the country has faced has been the problem of politicised ethnicity which has led to tribalism. Towards this phenomenon, music has addressed the issue from different perspectives.

Ideas about the special link between music and identity are frequently offered to explain why a particular social group –a community, a population, a nation– cultivates outmoded and seemingly irrelevant musical practice. In this case, ethnic identity is therefore invoked by individuals or social groups in particular circumstances, when it suits their purposes and helps them attain their goals. *Ngũgĩ* wa Thiong'o in his novels has consistently used music as a means of both recognizing and reifying identity in the Kenyan situation. In novels such as *The River Between*, music is used to indicate polarities between groups with traditional *Gĩkũyũ* values and the Christian converts. In his other novel, *Petals of Blood*, contemporary popular culture is constructed partly through the discussion of musical and peri-musical phenomenon. *Devil on the Cross* looks at music as an agent for change within the postcolonial situation with Gatuiria, the music researcher developing a symphony drawing the various elements of Kenyan musical cultures together in an affirmation of an African national identity in the face of a rapacious colonial past.

Talking of ethnic identities, Barth, (1969: 14) argues:

> Ethnic categories provide an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural systems. They may be of great relevance to behavior but they need not be; they may pervade all social life, or they may be relevant only in limited sectors of activity.

This approach by Barth, suggests then that music may be used in a more active manner. As Baily (1994) argues, 'music is itself a potent symbol of identity. Like language (and attributes of language such as accent and dialect), it is one of those aspects of culture, which can, when the need to assert 'ethnic identity' arises, most readily serve this purpose. Its effectiveness may be two-fold, as he continues; not only does it act as a ready means for the identification of different ethnic or social groups, but it has potent emotional connotations and can be used to negotiate identity in a particularly powerful manner'.

At the dawn of the 21st century, Kenya is ethnically divided more than ever before.[14] Ethnic chauvinism has particularly risen over the past 45 years mainly due to postcolonial leadership's style of handling political challenges. The situation is more or less the same in most African countries, probably stemming from the nature of the ethnic diversity and the colonial legacy. Jewsiewicki and Buleli (2004:240) analyse the situation in subtle terms:

> The nation-state, while setting itself the task of merging ethnicities within the nation, institutionalises and perpetuates ethnicity. This ethnicity becomes a form of unfulfilled nationalism, a nationalism without a state, or even an initial element of the nation, necessary but insufficient in the absence of the state.

In Kenya, the situation has been clearly manifested in the formation of the various opposition parties, especially after the advent of multi party politics in 1991. The major political parties were seen as vehicles of the various communities to ascend to national leadership. The fragmented opposition in the 1992 enhanced the ruling party's under Daniel Moi, chances of winning the election, which they did. It is important to note from the above that ethnicity arose in opposition to the state, which Schatzberg (1988:22) argues is a consequence 'when a group feels excluded from the benefits the state has to offer and thus relatively disadvantaged'. However, while those in power find it prudent to manipulate ethnicity in ways that affect both themselves and the masses, the contradiction is normally manifest when 'national leaders regard any sub national identity, including ethnicity as a threat to nation-building and thus illegitimate' Schatzberg, (1988:25).

Politicians have worsened the situation by consciously mobilizing ethnic symbols and support to further their competition with others in the era of political pluralism. This is most evident in daily stereotypes and popular comedies, songs and newspaper cartoons, amongst other popular art

forms. As seen above, especially with the case of Joseph Kamaru, sometimes musicians work at the whims of the political dispensation. In the same light however, the role of popular music as a commentary of the post-independence situation and in the collective world view and consciousness cannot be gainsaid. As Kimani Gecau (1991: 84-5) asserts, 'popular songs have been a chronicle of the changing social situations and the relations thereof'.

Conclusion

The two examples of the musicians above have demonstrated ways in which the intersection between politics and music 'foregrounds the ever present negotiation between the individual and the group, and the contradictions that arise because group actions entail the self-styling of many individuals' (Allen, 2004:8). Music in Kenya, as this paper has argued has provided alternative sites for contesting and subverting some of the repressions put in place by the ruling elite. The article has endeavoured to show how music and musicians operate within the framework of specific social, economic and political circumstances. I have shown how this music has helped define these very circumstances by providing the metaphors and idioms with which to better articulate these experiences. My argument has been that the study of the music clearly articulates the complex and contradictory impulses that define the nation called by the contribution of popular culture as a major site of political and social negotiation in postcolonial Kenya. As Haugerud contends, popular music as a form of a cultural production elucidates 'competition for moral authority in Kenya in contemporary political struggles over who is to control the state and with what political practices and ideals' (1995: 29).

This overview of the relationship between music and politics in Kenya through the past half century reveals that music has indeed, functioned as a primary site of contestation of power. In reaction to state oppression, including censorship and overt propaganda, musicians have over and again played a privileged role in offering alternative narratives because of their access to a political platform. Counter-cultures have arisen, that thrived in spite of the occasional if sometimes repressive censorship measures that were used to silence them. Popular songs produced away from the eyes of officialdom have provided spaces within which people could not only experience moments of freedom, but could also construct their own regimes of truth and meaning in the music.

Notes

1   These songs were genres of music that predated the Mau Mau but were customized to the revolutionary era during the struggle for independence. To call them Mau Mau songs as wa Kinyatti does, denies them their roots, since there were songs of resistance even before the Mau Mau. I view them in this article as songs sang in support of the Mau Mau, during the period.

2   Ogude quotes *Pole Pole Mzee* (Deepest Sympathy, Grand Old Man), by Isaya Mwinamo (1963) and *Kenyatta Aliteswa Sana* (Kenyatta was Tortured so Much), by John Mwale in the same year.

3   Hofmeyr, Ogude and Nyairo 'Who Can Bwogo Me?': Popular Culture in Kenya', in *Social Identities*, 9(3). 2003

4   After the assassination of Tom Mboya in 1969, there was growing discontent as an accusing finger was pointed to the executive. With the instability looming, Kenyatta and his advisers started administering oaths to the *Gĩkũyũ* to cement tribal and political solidarity against their adversaries, mostly perceived to be the Luo community. At the oathing ceremonies, they swore that 'the flag of Kenya shall not leave the 'House of Mumbi'.(Ochieng and Ogot, 1995: 102 and Andrew Morton. 1998:160). The *Gĩkũyũ* people invoke the name of their mythical ancestors when the community feels threatened. Mumbi is revered as the mother of the tribe.

5   The political differences between the *Gĩkũyũ* and the Luo communities in Kenya have over the years shaped the politics of the day in Kenya. Worth noting though is that KANU, the ruling party immediately after independence, and the loose coalition NARC, the opposition party which wrenched power from KANU after over four decades were both hinged on some unity between these two major ethnic communities in Kenya.

6   KANU (Kenya African National Union) was the ruling party under Mzee Jomo Kenyatta.

7   Another musician, D.K. Kamau produced a song about the brutal murder of J.M.Kariuki. Some of the lyrics pointed to the popular belief that the murder was state-engineered. 'It is rumoured that the musician was summoned to Gatundu [Kenyatta's home] and thoroughly caned by the President, Jomo Kenyatta, which was the late President's preferred punishment for dissent even among his fellow politicians'. See www.enchanted-landscapes.com

8   A popular saying after Kariuki's murder was that 'the hyena's had eaten one of their own', meaning that the legislator suffered in the hands of his own people, the *Gĩkũyũ*. Again, worth noting is that Kariuki at one time served as Kenyatta's private secretary.

9   The beehive here metaphorically constitutes Kenyatta's casket, and the parading of the casket along Nairobi streets could be read as the rolling of the bee-hive downhill.

[10] The anti-graft watchdog Transparency International put Kenya in the top five most corrupt countries in the world in 2000 and was rated 84th out of 90 countries in the body's 2001 Corruption Perceptions Index. The launch was held in Berlin on the 28 August 2002 where Kenya again dominated in the top ten ranks of the most corrupt nations in the world**.** www.transparency.org.

[11] The State run media found itself in a dilemma when the same song they denied airtime was nominated for the annual KORA Awards. This left them with no option but to air the song as it now had an international recognition.

[12] Limuru is a major tea growing area in Kenya

[13] Eric Wainaina in an interview with Ishbel Matheson. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1550448.stm

[14] Ethnicity in Kenya, just like most former colonies in Africa can be attributed to the colonial legacy where the colonial powers had the ability to leave colonies whose people were divided along ethnic lines for them to continue having strong holdings on their former colonies. 'in the colonial state, they had struggled to have the colonial subjects united in the service of colonialism and yet remain divided when it came to promoting the political and economical interests of the colonized' argues Macharia Munene (2004). However, the consequent governments of Kenyatta and Moi, and more recently Kibaki cannot be absolved of the same blame of perpetuating ethnicity for political survival in the postcolonial Kenya. See also Carol Sicherman in *Race and Class* 37.4 (1996: 63).

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