



Transcending Space, Time and Culture through Intercultural Musical Dialogue

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Abstract

In recent years, the creative industry in Kenya has seen a rise in consumption of art from other countries. This is due to the influence of global and modern trends on local media and the Kenyan audience. Consequently, various stakeholders in the artistic domain have taken personal initiatives to advocate for the production, performance and airing of local art to promote Kenyan content. They strive to appeal to the public's taste, create demand for Kenyan art, and influence the media as well as government broadcasting policies. Musicians in Nairobi (Kenya's capital city) for instance, elevate Kenyan music by collaborating with local and foreign bars, restaurants, government and non-governmental organisations which sponsor musical events and provide platforms for them to exhibit their music, and that of other artists. They also redefine the country's urban sound by localising genres from other countries, incorporating indigenous styles from Kenyan ethnic groups, and reworking Kenyan oldies. By doing that, they interact with individuals from different generations, cultures, and geographical spaces, traversing musical and cultural boundaries, and acquiring new audiences. Using in-depth interviews, I explore how these musicians and other stakeholders in Nairobi's music scene, manage to promote and create demand for Kenyan styles both locally and internationally. Additionally, observing performances, and interacting with some of the audience members aid in interrogating urban genres that transcend time and space, linking and appealing to various cultures while gaining new audiences.

Introduction

On 9th of February 2022, Eric Omondi, a Kenyan comedian, surprised the nation by pitching camp outside the Kenyan parliamentary buildings in Nairobi, where he set up a glass booth and declared a hunger strike¹. Using this incident, Omondi requested the government to give Kenyan content 75 per cent airplay to promote local artists and their works. Currently, the media policy calls for 40 % local content broadcast. It was expected to rise to 60 per cent by 2018 (Kenya ICT Action Network, 2019) as

¹ Eric Omondi camping outside the parliament building:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FP_dhF5TgdQ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGKzmuFpKOl>



per the 2013 Kenya Information and Communication Act (KICA) amendment. However, the 60% policy has yet to be implemented. I presume this is one of the factors that led Omondi to demonstrate. Before this event, he had attempted to enter the premises of the legislature to pursue the members of parliament (MPs) to push the 75 per cent airtime, an attempt that led to his arrest on November 16, 2021². After his release, Omondi presented a draft law to some MPs hoping that the proposal would be tabled in Parliament³. However, there was little progress made in discussing his submission. This also led to the 9th February incident. Omondi's public display captured the attention of several MPs, who assured that they would support motions that protect local artistes and their content. They also promised to approve proposals that spur the growth of the creative industry in Kenya.

The event sparked several debates on the influence of foreign art in Kenya and the responsibilities of various players within the country's creative scene, particularly in the music arena. The Kenyan music scene, for instance, has always experienced foreign influences since it flourished in Nairobi in the early 20th century. Western, Asian, and African cultures inspired the creation of early Kenyan popular styles (Kavyu, 1995). Musicians structured their works on Congolese, South African, Zimbabwean, and Malawian styles among other African nations (Wanjala & Kebaya, 2016). They also created music based on European, Anglo-American, and Latin cultures, Arabic and Indian music, as well as their indigenous styles (Roberts, 1968; Low, 1982; Kavyu, 1995). Thus, diversity characterised Kenya's music industry with the musics coexisting.

However, with the advent of FM radio and various political sanctions on ethnic music, foreign music dominated the music scene. Kenyan audiences gained first access to foreign music. Musicians from different African countries, especially the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), flooded the recording studios, bars, restaurants and other public spaces in Nairobi, the hub for the production of commercial music in the country (Ogude, 2012; Eisenberg, 2015; Eisenberg, 2022).

The situation changed for a moment with the emergence of political pluralism in 1992 and the experience of freedom and democracy in 2002 when Daniel Moi's 24-year reign ended (Ogude, 2012). The political transitions encouraged the establishment of vernacular stations, which popularised ethnic styles (Simatei, 2010), as an alternative to mainstream media, ethnic radios provided new spaces for expression. Artistes were inspired to create music based on ethnic and traditional resources. This led to the popularisation of ethnic and indigenous music and the localisation of Euro-American styles, such as Hip-hop, among other genres (Simatei, 2010; Ogude, 2012; Kidula, 2012). There was also an increase in live music performances with various venues, such as bars, country houses and so on, offering platforms for musicians to perform (Ogude, 2012). As a result, there was an increase in consumption of Kenyan music.

Considering how political aspects influenced the growth or decline of Kenyan music performance, Omondi's perception that effecting specific government policies promotes local content may not be far-fetched. However, the contemporary world is a global space where human beings borrow various beliefs, customs and traditions as they interact through mass media, migration and travelling (Masasabi & Kusienya, 2022). Thus, implementing the proposed content quota should also ensure that the content produced can compete in the global market. Taking the global space into account establishes an intercultural dialogue between the local and the global, provides ground for the art to acquire new audiences outside the nation, and avoids further exclusion of resident productions on domestic and international platforms. Recognising the different factors that impact the elevation of

² Eric Omondi's arrest: <https://www.citizen.digital/entertainment/eric-omondi-arrested-after-attempting-to-storm-parliament-buildings-n287097>

³ Omondi presenting a bill to the MPs: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmX3_nDgteY



music within and outside the country, I explore Kenyan music's promotion by various industry stakeholders. I consider that individual creators and governmental and non-governmental institutions take part in elevating the performance of local styles. Considering that Nairobi has been the centre of popular music in Kenya, I interrogate the phenomena in the city space. I also consider how musicians create styles that speak to various audiences as a way of establishing demand for their products. Thus, I explore how artistes create works that blur temporal and spatial boundaries, connect to individuals of different cultures and obtain new audiences.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by Giles's Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). CAT was first developed in 1971 to interrogate manners of speech in communication (Panocová, 2020). Since then, it has been conceptualised in non-linguistic contexts (Giles & Ogay, 2007). CAT explores ways in which individuals accommodate others as they interact. It considers the adjustments made to form, maintain, or reduce social distance, the motivations behind them, and the consequences of such actions. These adjustments are presented through convergence, divergence, and maintenance. Through convergence, individuals align their communicative behaviours to resemble the other person's. For example, anyone may learn a different language to communicate with people who speak that language.

On the other hand, Divergence explains how individuals adjust by developing patterns that differ from the other speaker. For instance, one may integrate with other society members by developing their accents and vocabulary to amplify their recognised identity rather than changing their character. Lastly, maintenance involves sustaining one's established communicative actions, without adjusting for the other person. For instance, bilingual or multilingual speakers may speak their native language instead of adapting to the other speaker's language since both parties understand each other's languages. A French and an English person conversing in both languages may communicate in their native languages and understand each other (Dragojevic et al., 2015).

Adjustments can also be conceptualised as upward or downward, full or partial, symmetrical or asymmetrical, and short-term or long-term. Upward adjustments involve shifting towards a prestigious way of speaking, while the contrary signifies adapting to a less prestigious, stigmatised, or different speech. Full adjustment includes completely modifying behaviours while partial adjustment involves adapting specific communicative patterns to match the other party's behaviour. When the adjustment is symmetrical, a person may change only one behavioural pattern, such as accent. At the same time, in an asymmetrical one, multiple dimensions may shift, including posture, accent, and movements. Short-term and long-term adjustments vary in duration, with short-term modifications only occurring during one or few interactions and long-term alterations being more sustained and recurring over several interactions.

This work explores the methods and techniques that the players in the music industry employ to create demand and promote Kenyan music in the urban space. These are the communicative actions stakeholders take as they engage with their audience to promote urban music, which Fill and Jamieson (2014) refer to as 'market communication'. By utilising CAT, the study also explores how industry players, especially musicians, speak to people of different backgrounds through their music. Such interactions explain how intercultural musical dialogue takes place in Nairobi and how it propels the elevation of Kenyan art on the local and international music scene. Intercultural dialogue, in this case, refers to the open and respectful interaction between individuals with different understandings and cultures (Kochoska, 2015).



Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative, multiple-case study design. Considering that musicians, non-profit organisations, government establishments, and public spots promote Kenyan music, I included them in the study's population. In each group, apart from the musicians, one individual who would provide comprehensive information on the promotion of Kenyan music in Nairobi was purposively sampled. The musicians were sampled according to their involvement with the public spot and the governmental and non-governmental establishments selected. Therefore, three artistes who have worked with the sampled organisations were included in the study. The artistes were selected to corroborate the data presented by the previous sample and provide additional information on how creatives appeal to various audiences through their works.

I also attended a musical performance organised by one of the study's participants and another concert that displayed the diverse urban sound since it had performances by several musicians who work with different Kenyan genres. While the first show only took place in the evening, the latter ran all afternoon till late at night. Due to the extended duration of the second concert, I had the opportunity to engage with the audience. I randomly selected two attendees who provided their reactions to the performances and opinions on the urban sound as experienced in the show. Even though two audience members participated despite the large attendance, they comprehensively communicated their knowledge and experiences with respect to the phenomena (Creswell, 2003 & Baškarada, 2014, as cited in Asiamah et al., 2017). Despite not being part of the target population, the selected sample enhanced the study by substantiating information on the diversity of urban music and its reception. As Rotham et al. (2013) and Richiardi et al. (2013) note, such samples provide significant insights that may not be available within strict representative populations.

Information was acquired through interviews and observations (Yin, 2018). Additionally, online data, archived footage, and relevant literature were used to probe into the phenomena comprehensively.

Results and discussion

The discussion starts by exploring the communicative strategies musicians and other stakeholders use to promote and create demand for urban music in Kenya. A conversation on intercultural musical dialogue follows it. Here, artistes link the past and present narratives and blur various spatial-temporal and cultural boundaries as they compose and perform works that connect with listeners from diverse social and musical cultures, ages and geographical backgrounds.

Communicative marketing

In this study, communicative marketing represents the interaction between various stakeholders and their target audience to promote their products, services, ideas, or philosophies. The two parties dialogue and negotiate to accommodate each other's goals and preferences and reach an amicable understanding. Eric Omondi's February event of 2022 exhibits this. Following that incident, it is evident that various players in the industry are responsible for promoting music in Kenya. Omondi's performative act of locking himself inside a glass booth until the MPs unlock the 'cage' communicates that the government can 'release' local artistes and their content from the marginalisation experienced over foreign art. His communication style can be perceived as divergent (Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010), since he affirms his identity as a performer and comedian as he speaks out his grievances to the Members of Parliament (MPs) within a formal setting, the legislature. His several acts outside the parliament buildings increase contact with the government and accentuate Omondi's different style of communication where his informal methods are applied within the legislature's official environment. The MPs adjust to Omondi's language by agreeing to unlock the glass cubicle door and address the presented issue. Omondi's acceptance to leave the booth displays trust and approval, which is crucial for two speakers to converse (Giles & Ogay, 2007). A downward convergence is



displayed as the individuals with authority (MPs) adjust, leading to a successful dialogue. The accomplishment later manifests in parliament when Omondi's draft law is tabled for discussion (Ajon, 2022).

Omondi's effort to influence government policies presents one method that creatives use to promote local content. His act also creates demand for local content since it sparks curiosity about the artistes' works. Apart from marketing his career as a comedian, Omondi promoted his musical profession and that of other artistes by organising a concert outside parliament. Accompanied by a female vocalist, a drummer and a keyboard player, He performed songs by Kenyan musicians to exhibit the nation's talent⁴. Omondi's different and effective communication style is emphasised through acting and singing. Not only did he appeal to the Kenyan leaders and audience, but he also marketed himself, the original creators of the music he played, and the musicians he collaborated with.

To some extent, musicians in Nairobi employ similar strategies as they attempt to elevate their music. The approach in reference is the inclusion of works by other creators in an artistes' performance set. Aspiring singers and musicians who perform 'alternative' music employ this strategy to draw the listeners' attention and gradually introduce the audience to their unique work. The two consider themselves outgroup members in the music scene (Panocová, 2020) since mainstream audiences do not widely recognise their works.

Compared to established musicians, the upcoming artistes are not provided with enough opportunities to perform and promote their work in Nairobi (Oyugi, 2012). They have to initiate strategies to introduce themselves and their work to the audience. Some of the strategies that Oyugi (2012) mentions are collaborating with famous musicians in their work or curtain raising for them. Where this approach is inapplicable, the artistes perform their music and covers to attract listeners. Ajo, an aspiring artist based in Nairobi's South B region, has applied that strategy in his performance. I attended one of his concerts, which was organised by Keep It Kenyan (KiKe)⁵. In this show, Ajo included a song by Okello Max, a famous Afro-pop musician in Kenya. The two backup vocalists began singing 'Nakufa,' which introduced Ajo's 'Ye!'. When I interviewed Ajo, he mentioned that the two songs harmonised well since they are both in the Kenyan rumba style derived from Congolese rumba (Ondieki et al., 2014).

Okello Max's song blended well with mine. I think it's because Nakufa and Aye have the same rumba vibe. If I had introduced my song immediately, I don't think the audience would have liked it. So, when Lydia (one of the backup vocalists) sang 'Nakufa', I came in with 'Ye', and the audience enjoyed and continued vibing to my music (Ajo, personal communication, 2023).

To accommodate the audience's tastes, Ajo applied convergent strategies by using a well-known song in his set. This adjustment enabled him to conciliate the known and unknown, gain the listeners' attention, and communicate with them. The result was that the audience was entertained, and he managed to attract new followers. According to Ajo, two listeners who heard his music for the first in that concert sought him after the performance, congratulated him, expressed their support for his music, and promised to listen to his other works online and his future creations.

⁴ A clip of Eric Omondi's show outside parliament: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRwQaj4MIRE>

⁵ KiKe is a non-profit organisation that supports and promotes Kenyan music by offering artistes a platform to showcase their work.



As mentioned earlier, ‘alternative’ musicians utilise similar approaches to please the audience and advance their musical careers. Compared to mainstream music⁶, other styles have a small audience. Oyugi (2012) notes that musicians who develop original styles have a small following, considering they are the minority in the industry. Such artistes always hope that the future will accommodate their music and appreciate their style. One such artiste is Juma Tutu. His style, which he refers to as Swahili jazz, is an amalgam of American jazz, traditional music such as “mwanzele” and “chakacha” from the Mijikenda communities, popular styles from the Kenyan coastal region as ‘taarab’, and ‘zilizopendwa’ (Kenyan oldies) genres like bango. To attract a wide audience and acquire capital to continue his career, Juma and his band play covers of famous songs within and outside the country in various hotels and restaurants. They consider the client’s demands, the audience’s musical taste, and the settings. One of my conversations with Juma revealed that most public spots in Nairobi prefer mainstream music to other ‘alternative’ styles due to the audiences’ inclinations. Hence, Juma covers famous songs and performs specific genres favoured by a wider audience and requested by restaurant proprietors (Juma, personal communication, 2023). This allows him to generate income to sustain his music career and support himself and his family.

The settings or contexts also influence Juma’s performance of cover songs. According to Juma (2023), each performance space calls for specific genres considering the restaurant’s location, which often determines the audience’s music preferences. For instance, restaurants in the city centre and those in Nairobi’s outskirts may have different musical inclinations considering the residents and the clients who visit. To provide suitable live entertainment, Juma adjusts to these establishments and the audience present by centring his set list around their preferred musical styles. By doing that, he markets himself as an artiste and maintains his musical profession. Even so, he occasionally integrates some of his songs into the show, giving the audience a unique experience, which excites them since it differs from what they are accustomed to. For instance, in a jazz event, he performs original compositions that incorporate a lot of improvisations based on the blues scale, among other atonal elements that characterise jazz. If the event is Sahili-themed, he foregrounds the bango, ‘chakacha’ and ‘mwanzele’ elements more than jazz to accommodate the audience’s tastes. By partially adapting to their preferences, Juma connects with the audience and in turn, they acknowledge his different style (Juma, personal communication, 2023). The audience, therefore, appreciates the ‘alternative’ creation when it is included in between sets rather than having an entire performance of new sounds that are foreign to them.

Apart from artistes who market their works, other stakeholders promote Kenyan music by corresponding with the target audience and the entire music market. I previously mentioned Keep it Kenyan (KiKe), the establishment that organised Ajo’s show. KiKe, as its name suggests, advocates for the creation and performance of Kenyan music. It is a space where talent is identified, nurtured, and packed for commercialisation (Amanya-Kike’s director, personal communication, 2023). To do so, KiKe collects data on the music industry since having a socio-historical context on the music scene enables it to find a basis to communicate with the target audience (Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010).

According to Amanya (2023), KiKe’s main director, the organisation has data about how the industry has been functioning, the current situation in the music scene, the available performance venues, the number of female and male artistes, the concerts that stage Kenyan music, and the frequency of shows

⁶ In this context, mainstream music refers to genres or styles that are frequently aired on conventional mass media outlets while alternative regards music that is independent of common, recognisable or traditionally established genres. The latter is more eclectic and obscure since it involves experimentation with musics, among other traditions from diverse regions and cultures.



by different musicians. This provides ground for KiKe to self-evaluate and self-orient to identify the appropriate accommodative strategy for dialoguing with various stakeholders in the music market. For instance, KiKe's coordinators decided to provide a space for female artistes and other upcoming musicians when they realised that there are insufficient platforms that do so. However, since the establishment doesn't own a physical space nor has sponsors, it collaborates with cafes, clubs, and restaurants in Nairobi to provide a venue for the artistes. Usually, KiKe requests the joints to offer their slowest days for them to organise performances for the artistes. Doing that benefits the artistes and the restaurants, since the audience doubles as clients. The shows are advertised online through various social media platforms.

Apart from marketing their concerts, KiKe organisers also advertise other gigs as long as they are aligned towards promoting Kenyan musicians and their works. Most of these shows, especially those organised by KiKe, are commercialised by selling online tickets. KiKe monetises its shows to remunerate artistes and sustain their operations. The ticket sales are used to acquire instruments and sound equipment; however, the larger quota of the proceeds goes to the musicians. KiKe receives thirty per cent of the profits, and the rest is disbursed to the artiste (Amanya, personal communication, 2023; Ajo, personal communication, 2023). KiKe offers affordable tickets to improve accessibility and attract a larger audience; the shows are currently priced at 500 Kenyan shillings. People are, therefore, encouraged to attend the shows, appreciate music by emerging artistes, and contribute to their career advancement. Even though KiKe considers the attendees' financial status, it tries to avoid over-accommodation by creating a balance between the artistes' needs and the listeners' interests (Giles & Ogay, 2007). By regularly updating and engaging with the cumulative data they have on Kenya's music scene, KiKe understands the musicians and audience's desires vis a vis the requirements in the music industry. Thus, they create appropriate strategies that favour both the artistes and the listeners and subsequently advance Kenya's music scene. For example, Amanya stated that through research, they discovered that female musicians are deprived of performance opportunities and exploited in the industry. Therefore, they ensured that KiKe provides a safe space for female artistes to perform their work and earn from it without discrimination. Currently, 45 per cent of KiKe members are female musicians who organise their shows with assistance from the establishment⁷.

Balance is also ensured through regular discussions with the entertainers who offer their views and grievances. For example, if more than one artiste performs in a show, they may feel exploited since the percentage is not favourable. Other times, the leased equipment may not be the best quality, considering the organisation is not sponsored and survives on concert returns. Therefore, KiKe's budget and the purchases made within that plan may deviate from the musicians' arrangements and expectations. In such situations, musicians correspond with the organisation via email and in KiKe's WhatsApp group, among other social media platforms. Other artistes who may or may not have experienced such scenarios also contribute to the discussion, making the organisation liable for the inconvenience.

On the other hand, musicians in the wrong are held accountable for their actions. Through dialogue, such issues resolve where KiKe may refund the artistes and consult them when hiring affordable but quality equipment. In extreme occasions, communication is non-accommodative (Giles & Ogay, 2007). Here, the organisers may feel that their efforts to promote artistes are unappreciated; thus, the grieved musician is considered too demanding or aggressive. The artiste may also feel mistreated and perceive that the organisation neglects them. As a result, the two parties do not converge. Some musicians

⁷ The information was sourced from KiKe's WhatsApp group. I joined after Amanya accepted my request to interact with the musicians as I research.



essentially leave the group and pursue their careers independently or look for a different establishment.

KiKe's partnership with restaurants draws attention to public spots as stakeholders in the industry. These players have been promoting local talent since the advent of Kenyan popular music in the 20th century when they gave musicians spaces to present their music and entertain clients (Low, 1982). Currently, there is an increased demand for entertainment music in public joints since business owners realise that it attracts revellers, which translates to generating profit for their enterprise (Oyugi, 2012). Due to such trends, most resorts are compelled to offer live music and provide unique experiences for their clientèle so as to increase patronage, gain new customers, and boost their returns. Therefore, these spots collaborate with musicians and other institutions that offer entertainment services, as Juma Tutu and Amanyanya highlighted.

Apart from entertaining clients and expanding their business, establishments like Geco Café in Nairobi actively promote music since they appreciate it. Geco café is known for supporting Kenyan musicians by giving them a performance space and remunerating them. The joint is within a collective enterprise known as Geco Tribe, which comprises the café, an exhibition, prowrap, wash, and a garage. The combined venture can be interpreted as a communicative business marketing strategy since it accommodates most customers by delivering different services, thus converging to their needs. Since each enterprise is advertised individually and collectively, Geco attracts a diverse clientele. The marketing is supplemented by the concerts organised by the café since most attendees end up being clients. Apart from profiting the business, the shows benefit Kenyan artistes. The concerts are completely free, and the musicians are unrestricted; they can perform their music regardless of whether it is mainstream or 'alternative'.

When I talked to Mateus Finato, Geco's owner, he mentioned that the artistes who play at the café perform their original works. Usually, musicians book a spot, and the organisers designate a date and time for their performance according to the type of music and the theme of that day. For instance, every first Wednesday of the month is curated around hip-hop music, and Geco teams up with the Fanisi Experiment⁸ to provide this experience. The café also has urbane Tuesdays, which are grounded on jazz music. Jazz, in this scenario, is considered for its diverse styles. This includes Afro-jazz, American jazz, and jazz styles from various countries and regions. These Tuesdays are prepared in collaboration with Mackinlay, a jazz musician. Mateus (personal communication, 2023) also notes that one may find performances of rumba, RnB, traditional music from various parts of the country, and Euro-American styles, among other genres, are at the café.

Another benefit that musicians acquire is, as I mentioned before, remuneration. Mateus states that all artistes who perform at the café are paid, from the upcoming to the established, those within Nairobi and other regions in the country, as well as artistes from America, Europe, and other places outside Kenya. The clientele is also diverse, including individuals from within and outside the Kenyan region. Therefore, the possibility of musicians acquiring a new following locally and internationally is high. Most artistes, therefore, prefer performing at Geco café since it is cost-effective, they can attract a diverse audience, and they are free to perform their music however unique it may sound compared to mainstream acts. Some even launch their music albums at that venue because they can present their 'alternative' creations to new listeners who do not pay entrance fees. I presume it is easier to introduce unique, unfamiliar sounds to an audience that has possibly saved money that would have been used to pay for a show. In these scenarios, Geco balances the audience's and artistes' interests through the

⁸ The Fanisi Experiment is a Kenyan platform dedicated to showcasing hip-hop music and culture in Kenya through various hip-hop artistes.



collective enterprise strategy, paying the musician and offering free shows to the listeners. The accommodation is divergent because the joint maintains its system of supporting artistes even with the clientele's diverse tastes. As Mateus observes:

Once you have 200, 300, or 350 people, the type of music will not be ideal for everyone. I have never really gotten any bad feedback, but I'm sure that in some evenings, the type of music that is being performed is not what everyone can enjoy. So, that is normal. And you see I have never charged anyone to come and enjoy the music. So, if anybody gives a negative comment... that means they have an option to attend or not to attend. For everyone who performs over here, we make it public; we advertise on our social media pages. So, the identity of who will be performing is not a secret.

Since Geco advertises their concerts, clients may choose when to attend and listen to a particular genre. Such marketing is divergent since the café continuously upholds its system of incorporating diverse styles and genres as part of its live entertainment, regardless of the audience's inclinations. However, this strategy accommodates diverse musical tastes, thus adjusting to the audience's preferences, since one may choose to visit the café and attend a concert in their preferred style and by their favourite artistes. Communication between the Geco and their clients is, therefore, confirmed through the listeners' approval of the music being presented, as Mateus observed. The accommodation also rewards the artistes who succeed in dialoguing with their fans who appreciate their musical style. They also acquire new listeners who will ultimately continue supporting them.

Apart from the creatives, profit, and non-profit organizations, the government also elevates Kenyan music. I previously mentioned how creating government policies may promote local talent. Aside from that, the Kenyan government, through the Permanent Presidential Music Commission (PPMC), offers platforms for singers to record and perform their music. During the recording period, artistes are given transport and food allowances for sustenance and are remunerated after their performance; this majorly applies when the artistes are invited to perform at various events organised by the government. PPMC advertises these performances and recordings online, thereby attracting listeners in the country, and externally. The institution also nurtures talent by organising camps for young upcoming artistes to learn performance, song writing, collaborative, and marketing skills, among others. To ensure musicians are empowered, the camps are usually free, and those who graduate from that are allowed to record their first songs without charges. The camps are publicised on PPMC's website and social media.

As a government establishment, PPMC has a divergent style of communication since they have to work within certain decrees. Obilla, a music officer at PPMC, mentions that musicians perform patriotic songs or gospel songs which they perform during public holidays and presidential events. The artistes have to adjust their music to the establishment's preference so as to perform (Obilla, personal communication, 2023). This, sometimes, leads to over-accommodation (Giles & Ogay, 2007). This owes to the fact that there are censorship, laws, and requirements that government institutions must follow. Artistes also need income and exposure to sustain and advance their musical careers. Therefore, musicians often over-accommodate government needs. For instance, government restrictions censor artistic freedom (Muchunku, 2023). Musicians may not criticise the régime's debauchery. Instead, they must praise the administration regardless of its ineptness. In addition, songs deemed immoral or violent are banned without prior and proper communication with the artistes. They are also subject to discrimination since foreign songs with similar messages are considered tolerant. To survive, musicians adjust to the administration, eventually destroying their expressive creativity and losing support from their audience who identify with their unabashed content.



When producing with PPMC, secular artistes change their style to fit gospel music. The same happens to gospel musicians who alter their style to fit a patriotic secular genre. Despite the differences, PPMC tries to converge with the artistes so that their music is not very foreign to their fans and to other listeners. The organisation does so by gathering information about the music scene, the current music and the preferred genres, listening to most of the artistes' songs to understand their identity, or finding any other style that can fit them. Having such context offers ground for the speakers to converse (Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010). Consequently, the conversation leads to new, unique creations that portray Kenya's diverse music; thus, attaining new audiences for the artistes' music. Musicians also develop new skills as they learn to create and perform in diverse styles that they are introduced to. The dialogue's success is displayed in the performance venue, where citizens either dance to the music or sing along as it is being presented, particularly during public holiday celebrations. It is also exhibited on various social media platforms, where the recorded music is uploaded, and local and international viewers show their appreciation through comments.

Intercultural Musical dialogue

Nairobi is a site for numerous social contacts with various rhythms, histories, movements, and people from diverse societal backgrounds (Ogude, 2012). As recognised in Geco's discussion, the city accommodates individuals from outside Kenya, and other rural and urban spaces in the country. Thus, it provides resources and a space for intercultural interactions, including musical dialogues. Musicians in Nairobi, therefore, try to create and perform works that connect to all these rhythms present in the city. As presented earlier, artistes like Ajo and Juma incorporate cover songs in their performance set to interact with the audience. Aside from that, the two have unique styles that attract certain listeners. Ajo's style, for instance, is an amalgam of various genres from Africa and outside the continent. He refers to his style as Afro music since every element incorporated in his songs is always grounded by genres from the continent. These aspects are also localised to accommodate the Kenyan audience. So far, he has songs based on Congolese rumba, zouk, reggae and afro-beats. He localises them by singing in English and Swahili, Kenya's official languages. He also incorporates Lingala from Congo, Luganda from Uganda and Luhya, his native language. By integrating the styles and languages, he interlinks different cultures, as well as the past and the present. The latter is achieved by utilising Congolese rumba, which is considered Zilizopendwa since it was popularised in the 1960s and '70s, along with other early genres in Kenya (Masasabi, 2018; Eisenberg, 2022). The genre gained from the other styles, and it also influenced them.

Juma Tutu's style, as previously cited, is influenced by jazz and indigenous and popular styles from the coastal region, his native home. In one of my conversations with Juma in 2022, he stated that apart from American jazz, he has Afro-jazz influences, particularly from the likes of Hugh Masekela, among other musicians. He borrows chord progressions from jazz, with melodies from Swahili traditional and popular styles. He, therefore, dialogues between the rural, the urban, the former, and the current. Juma's recontextualisation of bango⁹, jazz, indigenous 'mwanzele'¹⁰, and 'chakacha'¹¹ styles for the Nairobi audience exhibits how the spatial-temporal boundaries are negotiated and blurred through music. For instance, indigenous 'mwanzele' and 'chakacha' rhythms and instrumentation are fused with poetic Swahili lyrics and melodies, Zilizopendwa-bango timbre or structure, jazz chords that are

⁹ Bango is a popular style from the coast that was developed by Mzee Ngala. The genre has influences from Portuguese music, Latin and Congolese rumba, jazz, brasso or beni (brass band music) music, 'mwanzele' and 'chakacha' among other styles (Ondieki, 2010; Tinga, 2013).

¹⁰ Traditional 'mwanzele' is a dance from the Giriama community. It is mainly performed during funerals (Tinga, 2013).

¹¹ 'chakacha' is an indigenous wedding dance from the Mijikenda communities that is performed at weddings by female members (Igobwa, 2007).



based on the western blues scale, the saxophone, and contemporary band instruments (Juma, personal communication, 2022).

Musical boundaries are also blurred through ‘chakacha’ and ‘mwanzele’ as the two have double meanings depending on the contexts. They are recognised as indigenous when performed in their traditional settings and as popular Zilizopendwa styles when translated on contemporary instruments and structures (Igobwa, 2007; Tinga, 2013). The two are viewed as Zilizopendwa since they were popularised in the ‘70s when their rhythms, melodies and instrumentation were adopted by musicians and recorded for commercialisation purposes. Additionally, they were played on band instruments, and elements from other cultures were added (Ogude, 2012). By blending the traditional and popular ‘mwanzele’ and ‘chakacha’ musics, Juma converses with listeners from his native rural Kenyan coastal region, the diverse Nairobi audience, and people from Swahili-speaking countries in Africa. The additional elements from African countries, and other parts of the world also allow him to dialogue with an international audience. A similar approach is utilised by Micko Migra, a mid-career artiste and an environmental activist who fuses Luo traditions with rap, ragga, and other musics in and outside the African continent.

Micko tries to connect the rural and the urban localities through his music. Growing up in Nairobi, Micko adopted the city’s musical culture comprising Kenyan popular styles, localised genres from outside the country, and Sheng¹². He also learnt Kikuyu, a language that was within the environment he found himself in. Later, he experienced the Luo culture when his parents moved to the countryside. Micko (2023) says, “When we shifted to the countryside, I had a chance to learn my native language, which is Luo. I fell in love with that particular language”. These two backgrounds inspire his style, which he calls Afro-Luo. The Afro signifies his African life in Nairobi, an African city, and the Luo represents his native culture. Micko sings and raps in Sheng, English, Kiswahili and Luo languages. He sometimes performs with a band and plays the Nyatiti, a traditional Luo lyre. By fusing these elements, Micko evokes nostalgia in the city audience by reconnecting them to their roots. He also gives those who have not experienced their indigenous cultures a space to do so and links the rural audience to the city music. For the latter, Micko says he tries to create a comfortable space for those migrating into the city through his music, where they experience familiar traditional elements. The constant movement and flow of cultural products between the rural and the urban as displayed by Micko, expresses the city’s openness since geographical lines are blurred. Such fluidity is also presented in the performance spaces in Nairobi.

On January 15, 2023, I attended a concert at Alliance Française (French cultural centre) in Nairobi. The show started at 2.30 pm and ended around 10 pm. I attended the event due to the line-up I saw in the online poster. It included solo musicians, bands that have been in the industry since the late 1990s, and recently established artistes. All these creatives are known for their unique styles. Therefore, I thought that having all of them on one platform was a rare experience, a chance I would not miss, considering that I was researching urban sound.

¹² Sheng is a hybrid street language that is fuses English, Kiswahili and native dialects from Kenya (Kidula, 2012). The dialects depend on where the language comes from.

Photo 1: Online posters



The show was prepared by Mathew Rabala, a drummer and an event organiser, who was celebrating his birthday. He had invited musicians that he had worked with in his musical career. The tickets were affordable, considering all the artistes graced the stage. They included Frasha and Wyre, some of the precursors of current urban styles in Kenya. Frasha, for instance, contributed to Kenyan rap, particularly 'genge' music, which has inspired contemporary styles like 'genge'tone, and Wyre has impacted the Kenyan reggae and RnB music scene since the late 1990s. The two performed a few of their famous songs. They managed to trigger the listener's memories and induce nostalgia (Barrett et al., 2010), since these works had been released in the early 2000s, a period when the current urban sound was being established. The styles developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s are popularly known as 'old skul' in Kenya.

Contemporary benga musicians also performed in the show. They included Dan Aceda and Chris Adwar who played modern Swahili 'benga'; Brian Sigu, and Papi Odeq who performed contemporary luu benga. These artistes also incorporated Zilizopendwa rumba from the 1970s, which blended well with their set and was well-received by the audience who had grown up listening to rumba. For instance, Chris Adwar in collaboration with Dan Aceda, and Brian Sigu with Papi Odeq performed Afro by Les Wanyika, a famous band that has been active since the late 1970s. The two performances were different. Chris Adwar performance followed the fast rhythms of luu benga which corresponded with his songs and Dan Aceda's songs that are grounded on luu benga. Papi Odeq's singing was guided by slow rumba beats that leaned towards the original song by Les Wanyika. Additionally, the groove harmonised with his rumba composition. Both performances, however, had similar dance movements inspired by salsa dance. The audience and the artistes incorporated the forward-backwards and the side-to-side leg movements that followed the benga or rumba grooves. When performing his rumba-inspired creations, Papi Odeq included 'isukuti' rhythms from the Luhya community to replace the 'seben' beats that are usually played at the climax of rumba songs. Therefore, apart from salsa dances, the audience and the performers added shimmies representing the Luhya ethnic group, whose most indigenous dances have shoulder choreography.

Zilizopendwa styles were also performed by Kayamba Afrika, a vocal group known for performing ethnic genres from several Kenyan communities. In this show, they performed gospel 'mugithi' (translates to train) songs from the Kikuyu community. The audience danced in a circle to imitate a train and show their appreciation for the music; imitating the train is one of the major dance



movements in 'mugithi' music. The band would occasionally give instructions to the audience for them to move a certain way. Though the songs were in Kikuyu, Kayamba spoke in Swahili for dancers to understand. Most people followed the directions, enjoying the performance regardless of their race or ethnic background. As Audience 1 mentioned, "I didn't understand what they were singing but I enjoyed the performance. They killed it."

Other musicians who have recontextualised past genres like Makadem, Lulu Abdalla, Fadhilee Itulya, Kwame Rigii, Iddi Achieng, and Judith Bwire were present. They translated their indigenous culture to the city's audience by fusing it with popular styles from Kenya and other African countries. The cultures incorporated were Luo, Luhya, Giriama, and Kikuyu. In line with the adaptation of indigenous traditions, Motra Music performed rhythms from Mijikenda and Baganda on the traditional drums as they ululated, shouted, and sang popular 'chakacha' melodies. The instruments were played alongside a modern drum set. Through drumming, Motra conversed with the audience, who appreciated the 'return' to their indigenous roots. Audience 2 noted, "The drumming was good. It was unexpected, though it was good. I think it's coz it shows our culture." I also observed some attendees moving towards the stage and dancing with the music. The drum patterns thereby represent speech and totality, which interlocutors employ as they communicate (Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010).

The artistes cited, and other musicians who performed in the show, had a successful dialogue with the audience through their works. Other styles performed were Kenyan and American RnB, Kenyan gospel reggae, choral arrangement of a Luhya traditional song, and Kenyan twist. A disk jockey also performed in between the sets, where he played common gospel and secular songs from Africa, Europe, and America. Considering that the audience appreciated all these styles, despite their race, ethnic group or age, communication between the two speakers, artistes and listeners was achieved. The show, therefore, promoted and created demand for Kenyan music, particularly the urban sound, by presenting its diversity.

As Audience 2 observed:

Nairobi's sound is vibrant and electric. It's like going for a family cook-out where you get to know different relatives you've never met. You're learning new skills, and new sounds basically.

Audience 1, who was apparently a musician, added:

These artistes came together on one stage, speaking one language-music, but speaking it in a different way. The way they were bringing in the Kenyan culture in one stage, it was so rich; waswahili, wajaluo, reggae; but Swahili reggae, kiluhya... It is a show by legends. We as upcoming artistes should learn. As much as we're borrowing from the west and other African countries, at the end of the day we're Kenyan, and these artistes; they were speaking the Kenyan language.

The two observations highlight that the artistes who performed at the concert triggered the listeners' interest by introducing them to new musical experiences and reawakening past memories. Additionally, they managed to create intercultural interactions that resonated with the audience and made them anticipate for more of such encounters in future. Hence, they created a demand for Kenyan urban music styles by negotiating various musical, cultural, geographical and temporal boundaries to converse and appeal to a diverse audience.

Conclusion

The Kenyan music industry has several players who advocate for the creation, performance and promotion of local talent. They employ numerous strategies to negotiate with the wider audience



locally and globally to appeal to them and create demand for Kenyan music. Nairobi musicians compose and perform intercultural music to resonate with a diversified audience. They blur temporal and spatial boundaries to conciliate different cultures as they converse with national and international listeners who identify with the music. In addition, they collaborate with each other, with profit and non-profit organisations and the government to secure performance platforms, income, and attract new listeners. By doing that, they create a space for people to enjoy numerous musical styles and genres and develop new musical interests as they support the artistes. They also establish grounds for negotiating with various entertainment establishments to acquire performance spaces and with the government to create policies that give precedence to local music and empower musicians. Artistes, therefore, bring all these stakeholders together to elevate Kenya music and ensure that the local music scene can compete globally as it sustains itself.

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