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Historicising through Song: A Semiotic Analysis of Selected Luhya Popular Songs

Historicising through Song: A Semiotic Analysis of Selected Luhya Popular Songs

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Abstract
This paper explores the construction and negotiation of Bukusu identity through popular songs, examining how these musical narratives historicise the community, represent particular localities, and portray political figures. The selected popular Bukusu songs analysed are Wanyonyi Omukoyi's *Mayi Muro*, the Webuye Jua Kali's *Mama Mzazi*, and Wanjala Okumu's *Likumba*. By employing a Peircean semiotic framework, the study attends to signifiers and signifieds in textual (lyrical) analysis of how Bukusu popular songs encode and transmit historical narratives related to geography, community formation, and political authority. The analysis reveals that these songs function as 'living archives'; for instance, Likumba recounts the colonial community leaders like the paramount chief, Nabongo Mumia; and foregrounds local leaders like the late Wamalwa Kijana, the vice president from the community while at the same time critiques (the then) contemporary political leaders like Musikari Kombo, preserving collective memories that complement official records and illuminate lived experiences of the Luhya of Western Kenya. The findings indicate that popular music constitutes a valuable, though presently under-exploited, archive for reconstructing local histories. Scholars have traditionally privileged written documents and oral testimonies, overlooking songs because they are often dismissed as entertainment rather than systematic records of communal experience. This omission is especially salient today, as rapid sociopolitical change threatens the survival of everyday narratives that music routinely preserves. Furthermore, the songs' lyrics contain explicit references to political figures, portraying leaders' rhetoric in the pre-electoral period and reflecting public response in the post-electoral phase; in doing so, the songs dramatise and critique these leaders, thereby revealing how authority is imagined, contested, and reaffirmed within particular locales and communities. Consequently, a focused investigation of popular music is essential for a fuller understanding of local historiography and leadership dynamics.

Introduction
The dominant model of African historiography has privileged written documents, colonial archives, and official statements as the primary sources for reconstructing the past (Vansina, 1995). While

indispensable, these records omit the lived experiences and collective memories that circulate outside formal institutions. In many African societies, oral tradition, ritual performance, and popular cultural production constitute parallel "archives" that preserve, reinterpret, and transmit histories across generations (Turino, 2008). Among these, popular songs—especially those created and performed within specific ethnic communities—offer a rich yet under examined corpus of vernacular historiography. This article borrows the term historicisation from popular culture. Historicisation in popular culture refers to the process by which artistic texts re-present past events, identities or social relations for present audiences (Hall, 1997). In other words, historicising, in the sense used in this article, denotes the process by which cultural products render past events and actors intelligible to present audiences (Baker, 2018). Popular songs, in their oral-textual form, wield particular power because they are performed and re-performed across generations, thereby solidifying particular narratives as 'self-evident' components of communal identity (Stokes, 1994). To tease apart how these ostensibly obvious narratives function, semiotics offers a systematic framework for analysing the sign-structures that underlie musical discourse. Accordingly, the article treats linguistic signs - words, names, refrains - as carriers of both literal (denotative) and associative (connotative) meaning (Barthes 1972). By weaving personal names, placenames, and idiomatic expressions into lyrical narratives, songs become semiotic artefacts that encode histories of ethnicity, leadership, and urbanisation (Nixon 2012). The analysis foregrounds the denotative and connotative dimensions of proper names and demonstrates how the songs map continuities between urban and rural spaces while simultaneously invoking political figures, thereby revealing the layered ways in which popular music constructs and sustains collective memory.

Existing scholarship highlights the significant role of music in shaping identity and historical consciousness in Africa. Such scholarship underscores its significance as a tool for social commentary, political mobilisation, and cultural preservation. Manuel (1988) argues for the importance of understanding the social and cultural contexts in which popular music emerges, emphasising its capacity to reflect and influence societal values. While Coplan (1985) demonstrates how popular music in South Africa served as a powerful tool of resistance during the apartheid era, articulating the experiences of marginalised communities and promoting social change, Veit Erlmann's work on South African music highlights how songs were instrumental in resisting apartheid and expressing the aspirations of the oppressed majority (Erlmann, 1991). Similarly, studies on Congolese rumba demonstrate its capacity to reflect and shape urban experiences and political realities (Stewart, 2000). These studies emphasise the agency of musicians in articulating social concerns and challenging dominant narratives.

Ethnomusicologists have treated song lyrics, rhythmic patterns, and performance contexts as texts that convey sociocultural meaning (Nettl, 2005). In oral societies, where literacy is not the primary mode of historical transmission, music assumes a historiographic function (Vansina, 1985). The concept of 'musical semiotics' (Tagg, 2012) underscores that sounds can operate as signs pointing to particular social values, power structures, or historical events.

The importance of oral and musical expression in reconstructing African histories documented in written records is well established (Vansina, 1985; Ong'oma, 2010). Music, in particular, functions as a 'memory device' by embedding chronological markers within rhythm, lyric, and performance practice (Stokes, 1994). By recognising the potential of popular music as a historical source, we can gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Luhya people and their place in Kenyan history. This is particularly crucial in a context where oral traditions and cultural expressions

are often marginalised in mainstream historical narratives. The popular songs of the community, in other words, can provide vital clues to understanding its history.

This article foregrounds the popular music of the Bukusu, one of the nineteen sub-tribes that compose the Luhya nation in western Kenya. The Bukusu have sustained a vibrant oral culture in which lyrical composition, rhythmic accompaniment, and dance serve simultaneously as entertainment, pedagogy, and historical record (Kram, 2018; Ochieng, 2017). In many African societies, popular music functions as a 'people's history', offering everyday actors a medium to articulate collective memory, negotiate identity, and critique power (Drewett, 2002; Erlmann, 1996). Political representation also permeates Bukusu musical discourse. The subgroup has produced prominent figures, most notably the late Deputy President Michael Wamalwa Kijana, whose portrayals in popular culture oscillate between reverence and critique (Ndegwa, 2018).

This article, therefore, foregrounds Bukusu popular songs as textual sites through which historical consciousness is produced, contested, and re-imagined. In doing so, the article challenges the notion that 'history' resides exclusively in printed or bureaucratic sources and demonstrates that popular music functions as a dynamic repository of social, political, and spatial meaning. Although a growing body of literature addresses Bukusu music, for example, Wechuli, Omuteche, and Wasike (2022) on gendered representations, and Wanjala's (2016, 2024) examinations of performance spaces and nation-imaging, few studies have applied a semiotic lens to disentangle how songs simultaneously negotiate place, community, and leadership.

The article interrogates three popular Bukusu songs, namely Wanyonyi Omukoyi's *Mayi Muro*, Webuye Jua Kali's *Mama Mzazi*, and Wanjala Okumu's *Likumba*. These songs were selected because they foreground distinct thematic axes of spatial naming and urbanisation, and the celebration, critique, and mobilisation surrounding regional political leaders. This article focuses on the three songs to illustrate how popular songs of Bukusu can historicise belonging and the spatial politics of the contemporary Bukusu community.

The significance of this article extends beyond the Bukusu. By documenting the historiographic potential of popular songs, the article contributes to broader debates on identity formation, cultural representation, and the politics of memory in marginalised African societies (Miller, 2016). It also engages with recent scholarship that calls for 'sound-studies' approaches to African historiography, arguing that auditory media should be treated with the same methodological rigour as textual sources (Turino, 2008). Ultimately, the article demonstrates that the Bukusu's musical repertoire offers an alternative, nuanced perspective on Kenyan history—one that foregrounds community agency and the everyday experiences often omitted from official narratives.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the semiotic analytical model employed in this study. Section 3 details the methodology, describing the song corpus, the selection criteria, and the step-by-step procedures used for lyrical analysis. Section 4 reports the results for each song, highlighting its denotative content, connotative resonances, and wider sociopolitical implications. The conclusion reflects on the value of popular music as a resource for reconstructing sub-national histories.

Theoretical Framework: Semiotics and the Construction of Meaning

The present study adopts a semiotic perspective to show how popular songs function as historical texts that construct, negotiate, and transmit collective memory. Employing a Peircean semiotic framework (Peirce 1931, 1958; Chandler, 2007), the analysis examines the links between signifiers -

lyrics - and their signifieds, namely the cultural concepts, values, and narratives that construct Bukusu identity and historical consciousness. Semiotics - the study of how signs are produced and interpreted - offers a flexible toolkit for unpacking the multiple layers of meaning embedded in musical performances (Chandler, 2007). In this view, a song is not merely a carrier of lyrics; it is a complex sign system in which lyrics function as a signifier pointing to culturally specific signifieds such as geographic locales, kinship structures, political events, and mythic pasts salient to the Bukusu community.

The theoretical grounding rests on Saussure's classic dyadic model of the sign, which stresses the arbitrary link between the perceptible signifier and the mental signified (Saussure, 1975). Building on this structural insight, Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation allows the analysis to separate the literal referential content of a lyric from the affective and ideological resonances that accompany it (Barthes, 1964; 1972). A line that denotatively names a particular place may, for example, connotatively evoke communal solidarity, resistance to external pressure, or nostalgia for a past life. This dual reading reveals how songs simultaneously document historical facts and endow them with symbolic weight.

Finally, Barthes' concept of myth is employed to trace how recurring musical motifs and refrains stabilise and disseminate collective narratives about Bukusu geography, leadership, and ritual practice. When a melody repeatedly celebrates a legendary leader or a celebrated rite, the melody itself contributes to the mythic construction of that figure or practice, rendering it appear as a timeless, self-evident component of Bukusu identity. By treating each musical and linguistic element as a sign, the study maps how Bukusu popular songs encode and transmit historical narratives of geography, community formation, and political authority.

By employing these tools, the study uncovers how specific lyrical phrases reinforce particular historical understandings and shape the community's shared memory (Barthes, 1972).

In sum, a semiotic framework reveals that Bukusu popular songs are not merely entertainment but constitute complex sign systems that encode, negotiate, and transmit historical meaning. This approach allows the researcher to move beyond superficial textual analysis toward a deeper appreciation of how music actively participates in the construction of cultural history and identity among the Bukusu people.

Methodology

This study employs an interpretive, qualitative case-study design to examine how contemporary Bukusu musicians encode cultural and political meanings in their lyrics. By integrating semiotic textual analysis with ethnographic observation, the research follows a hermeneutic cycle that moves from close reading of the texts to contextual triangulation with interview data and performance observations, and back again to reinterpret the emergent meanings (Gadamer, 1975).

Research Design

The analytic case study approach centres on three popular Bukusu songs. The songs were selected on the criteria of lyrical richness, defined by the presence of explicit references to Bukusu places, cultural practices, and political figures. This purposive sampling enables a focused investigation of the subgroup while allowing comparative insight across different musical forms (Yin, 2018).

Data collection

The primary data-collection step involved systematic listening to recordings identified through digital platforms such as YouTube and regional radio stations that broadcast in the luBukusu dialect. A

purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify a corpus of Bukusu popular songs that contain explicit or implicit references to place, community, and political leadership. To ensure that the selected repertoire reflects the breadth of Bukusu musical expression, the researcher consulted with informants, whose recommendations were instrumental in narrowing the selection to three songs. To ensure that the selected repertoire captured the diversity of Bukusu musical expression, the researcher consulted local informants, whose recommendations narrowed the list to three representative songs. The lyrics were transcribed directly from the recordings and, with the assistance of native speakers skilled in both linguistic nuance and cultural context, translated from luBukusu into English. These translations were intended to broaden scholarly access while preserving idiomatic meanings.

To situate the lyrical content within its performance milieu, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 informants, including cultural historians and community elders. The interview protocol, designed in accordance with Kvale's (1996) guidelines for qualitative inquiry, probed participants' perceptions of the socio-political contexts that inspired each song, the intended messages of the artists, and the ways in which listeners interpret lyrical content. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and, where necessary, translated from Bukusu into English by a native-speaking research assistant to preserve semantic nuance. The interview protocol explored the artists' intentions, audience reception, and the sociopolitical climate surrounding each song's release.

In addition to the interview data, a close reading of the English translations was performed to analyse thematic patterns and rhetorical strategies. This combined approach - systematic listening, transcription and translation of the songs, followed by ethnographic interviews and textual analysis - provided a triangulated foundation for understanding the interplay between Bukusu popular music, place, community, and political leadership.

Analytical framework

Data analysis proceeded in three interlocking phases. First, a semiotic coding scheme was applied to the transcribed lyrics to identify signifiers associated with geographic markers, historical events, and political figures. Each signifier was then interrogated for its denotative and connotative dimensions, drawing on Chandler's (2007) semiotic triangulation model. Second, the coded material was situated within a historical timeline constructed from secondary sources on Bukusu history and politics (Ochieng, 2015; Makokha, 2018), enabling a comparative analysis of how symbolic content aligns with or diverges from established narratives. Third, findings from the textual semiotics were cross-validated with interview data and extant scholarly literature, thereby achieving methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978). This triangulation not only bolsters internal validity but also mitigates researcher bias by integrating multiple perspectives on the same phenomena.

Analysis and Discussion

This analysis situates itself at the intersection of African ethnomusicology, semiotics, and postcolonial historiography, focusing on three deliberately selected Bukusu popular songs – namely, Wanyonyi Omukoyi's *Mayi Muro*, Webuye Jua Kali band's *Mama Mzazi*, and Wanjala Okumu's *Likumba*. By applying a semiotic lens, this analysis interrogates the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in phonological choices, revealing how the texts function as living documents that negotiate historical continuity and rupture. The investigation proceeds in three stages: first, a genealogical mapping of histories and sociopolitical backdrops; second, a detailed sign-system breakdown that isolates lexical codes; and third, an interpretive synthesis that situates lexical codes within broader discourses of Bukusu history. The paper contends that these popular compositions are

not marginal cultural artefacts but central epistemic tools that voice alternative historiographies, amplifying perspectives often omitted from official archives. The ensuing discussion, therefore, contributes to a growing corpus of scholarship that re-imagines music as a methodological conduit for historicisation, offering new insights into how selected Bukusu popular songs encode, contest, and re-produce the past for diverse Kenyan communities. We begin by analysing Jua Kali's *Mama Mzazi*.

Historicising Place and Belonging in Webuye Jua Kali's *Mama Mzazi*

Webuye Jua Kali's *Mama Mzazi* narrates the plight of a mother who, driven by economic desperation, turns to prostitution. The story is filtered through the perspective of her second-born son, while each child - except the second-born - is given a name that references an ethnic group distinct from the mother's Bukusu heritage. Consequently, the song operates on two intertwined registers. First, an ethno-onomastic register: the children's names simultaneously identify the individuals and evoke their fathers' ethnic communities, thereby foregrounding Kenya's plural identities. Second, a spatial register: the lyrics move from major Kenyan towns to specific Bukusu locales, charting a pattern of urban migration and its moral consequences. The first-born, Mwangi (predominantly Kikuyu), anchors the narrative in a contemporary Kenyan context as the earliest paternal link. The second-born, Chebet (Kalenjin, chiefly Nandi), is the sole female voice and later appears in the refrain that parallels her conduct with that of her mother. The third-born, Wanyonyi (Bukusu), serves as the children's spokesperson, switching to luBukusu when condemning the mother. Finally, Otieno (Luo) completes the ethnic mosaic, underscoring the mother's cross-community relationships. This purposeful naming functions as a micro-historical map of Kenya's ethnic landscape (Kanyinga 2015), prompting listeners to recall the cultural identities attached to each group - especially concerning masculinity, patrilineality, and socioeconomic status - and thereby intensifying the song's moral critique.

Wanyonyi shifts between Swahili (Kenya's national language and lingua franca) and luBukusu as he critiques moral decay in urban centres. This code-switching functions on two levels: affective intimacy - his use of the mother-tongue signals personal grievance - and political positioning - the Bukusu term Makunda refers to ancestral land, the uncultivated fields that once sustained the community. By invoking Makunda, Wanyonyi does more than name a place; he summons a return to pre-urban, subsistence-based values, offering a nostalgic appeal to a vanished mode of belonging (Mesthrie, 2013).

The deployment of the term *ling'ang'ule* - literally 'prostitute' - situates the song within the Bukusu cultural discourse. Throughout the song, the word is repeatedly applied to a mother and her daughter, serving as a linguistic device that both censures an alleged breach of communal morality and safeguards the community's ethical code. In the following analysis, we disentangle the two interwoven layers of meaning that *ling'ang'ule* carries in the Bukusu cultural sphere and demonstrate how the term in the song functions as a "moral archive" that preserves Bukusu values.

In luBukusu, the term *ling'ang'ule* functions far beyond a simple synonym for 'sex worker'. Historically, it has operated as a loaded epithet denoting a complete repudiation of socially sanctioned conduct and the normative way of life (Ochieng J., 2010). The label is applied to anyone - most often women - who deviates from the culturally prescribed expectations of fidelity, modesty, and familial responsibility. The song's most provocative moment occurs when a child addresses his own mother as *ling'ang'ule*. In Bukusu society, children are taught to embody respect by using honorifics when speaking to elders (Kiprotich, 2015). By reversing this hierarchy and employing a derogatory term toward a mother, the lyric transgresses the deepest taboo surrounding the sacred mother-child bond. This reversal of the customary respectful address hierarchy (Kiprotich 2015) transgresses the deepest

taboo surrounding the mother-- child bond, compelling listeners to confront the gravity of the alleged moral violation. Because the song foregrounds *ling'ang'ule* as the pinnacle of ethical failure, it inadvertently establishes a hierarchy of transgressions in which sexual immorality occupies the apex. By branding both mother and daughter as *ling'ang'ule*, the song intertwines luBukusu condemnation with moral commentary, thereby preserving community ethics and castigating the moral decay of urban areas. The term, rooted in linguistic practice, serves as a tool for social regulation and collective memory.

Having examined *ling'ang'ule* as a historiography of moral values, the analysis proceeds to the place names invoked in the lyrics, treating them as a form of geographical historiography that foregrounds the broader connotation of urban decay.

In the song's lyric catalogue, the sequence of place-names moves from Kenya's major urban centres - Bungoma, Mumias, Kakamega, Busia, Kitale, Eldoret, Nakuru, Nairobi, Mombasa - to a cluster of smaller Bukusu locations - Kimilili, Malaba, Kamukuywa, Misikhu. This ordering mirrors the historical arc of Kenyan urbanisation described by Miller (2008). Each town is named immediately before the refrain, thereby coupling the diffusion of *ling'ang'ule* with the geographic spread of market economies and, by implication, the arrival of 'foreign morals' such as sex work.

The spatial pattern can be read in three distinct ways. First, the macro-urban centres such as Nairobi and Mombasa function as national economic hubs that draw migrant labourers, many of whom are forced to work under insecure conditions. Second, smaller regional towns - Kakamega, Kitale, for example - serve as transit zones where informal economies, including prostitution, become established. Third, the rural Bukusu location of Makunda symbolises the family's point of origin, a nostalgic anchor that the song urges listeners to remember.

Consequently, the song's spatial narrative does more than describe a landscape; it historicises the pathway from countryside to city and the moral decay that accompanies it. The line '*tunaishi nyumba za kukodisha, tunakunywa bia katika klabu za Keroro*' (we live in rented houses and drink beer in the clubs of Keroro) juxtaposes the ancestral Makunda with the transient, commodified habitat of contemporary migrants. Rental housing signals insecure tenure, while the club setting foregrounds exposure to nightlife economies where prostitution thrives. This contrast illustrates how urbanisation reshapes family structures, pushing the populace into a marginalised labour market that, in turn, contaminates the moral horizon.

Through toponyms, language switches, refrains, and place references, *Mama Mzazi* turns a personal tragedy into a broader commentary on Kenya's ethno-political landscape and the moral decay of urban growth. The song invites listeners to decode multiple layers of meaning: from the denotative identification of ethnic groups to the connotative critique. As a portable archive, the composition demonstrates how popular music can historicise lived experience, offering a rich site for inquiry into language, identity, and space.

In this section, we have shown that popular songs serve as historical documents that record a community's moral values in urban settings, thereby constituting a historiography of the Bukusu people in this context. The following section investigates how the selected Bukusu popular songs serve as archives of the community's identity and its leaders through an exegesis of *Likumba* and *Mayi Muro*. By foregrounding gender-specific performance requirements and an explicit list of named politicians, the song demonstrates how artistic practice simultaneously constructs Bukusu identity and preserves a historiography of regional political leadership. Through a similar lens on leadership, *Mayi Muro*

summons ancestral lineage, past champions of Luhya unity, and the decline of local industries to articulate contemporary political patronage. Drawing on Turino's (2008) conception of popular music as myth-making, this analysis shows how the repeated celebration of rituals and leaders confers upon them an apparently timeless, self-evident status, thereby situating present-day grievances within a broader cultural narrative. The central argument follows Turino's (2008) analytical strand: when a popular melody repeatedly lauds a legendary figure or ritual, the melody itself participates in the mythic construction of that entity, rendering it a seemingly permanent component of Bukusu identity (Baker, 2018).

Construction of Bukusu Identity and Political Memory in Wanjala Okumu's *Likumba*

Social identity theory posits that individuals derive self-esteem from group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Music contributes to this process by providing ritualised representations of "the self" and "the other" (Frith, 1996). Within African contexts, scholars have highlighted how popular songs reinforce ethnic pride, delineate gender roles, and preserve indigenous knowledge (Turino, 2008; Kagwe, 2022). Songs can serve as counter-histories that challenge official narratives (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). They memorialise resistance movements, commemorate national milestones, and encode political critique within metaphor and allegory (Miller, 2012). In Kenya, protest and liberation songs of the 1960s–70s have been extensively studied (Meyer, 2014); however, contemporary popular music continues to negotiate political memory, especially around land rights, devolution, and diaspora politics (Mwangi, 2021).

The examination of the three selected popular songs demonstrates that musical texts operate both as repositories of communal identity and as conduits for political historiography.

We begin by interrogating the Bukusu identity portrayed in the song's opening remarks, which reference the dance. The Bukusu subgroup maintains a robust cultural repertoire in which communal dance occupies a central socio-political role. We explore how these symbolic practices can be systematically archived to preserve Bukusu identity. Communal dance constitutes a vital expressive medium through which many African societies negotiate identity, social hierarchy, and collective values (Schmidt, 2018). Among the Bukusu, the dance arena is not merely a festive space but a semiotic platform where material assets, gendered obligations, and moral ideals converge (Kagwe, 2022). The song *Likumba* opens with explicit stipulations that a man must own a bull, a male goat, and a male sheep, whereas a woman must have milked at least three cows before she may join the dance and 'ululate' (cry) in celebration. The binary conditions articulate distinct routes to legitimacy: men must possess, while women must produce. This mirrors Mutua's (2015) observation that Bukusu masculinity is associated with ownership, whereas femininity is linked to nurturing labour. The lyrical phrasing 'may step into the circle' for men versus 'may raise her voice' for women underscores differing performative expectations—physical movement versus vocal contribution.

The lyrics state:
MuBukusu nikenyokha mumuse ari ali khakhina
Akhiniranga bindu bitaru, sie bweni akhiniranga eunwa, eyeyi nende limiku
...
Nomukhasi naye nikenyokha nakhina nikapa lukalakala akhoira abe nikakhama
bibuli bitaru khuchia ebweni

Translation
When a Bukusu stands to dance in the arena, he dances for three things
The first thing is a bull, a buck and a ram.

....

And for a woman, if she stands to dance as she ululates, she is required to have milked at least three cows

Gendered criteria for participation in cultural performances are not unique to the Bukusu. Studies of the Maasai (Omondi, 2016) and the Yoruba (Adesina, 2018) reveal that rites of passage and communal events often embed material prerequisites that reinforce patriarchal structures while simultaneously granting women specific agency through labour contributions such as milking or weaving. In the Bukusu context, the requirement that women have milked three cows before they may 'ululate' highlights the cultural value placed on female productive labour (Mutua, 2015). The lyric thereby creates a gendered symbolic economy in which male dance is linked to ownership of valuable livestock, while female dance is contingent upon productive labour (milking). Livestock, a historically salient marker of wealth among the Luhya (Munyua, 2003), thus becomes a signifier of Bukusu cultural authenticity. The requirement that a woman first "milk three cows" foregrounds the community's valuation of female contribution to household subsistence, reinforcing a complementary gender paradigm rather than a hierarchical one.

By embedding these criteria within a performance context, the song demarcates cultural boundaries and affirms a collective identity that is simultaneously gendered and economically oriented. The reference to the dance floor as a "public arena" (*mumuse*) situates the performance space as a semiotic field where identity is both displayed and negotiated. The repeated melodic refrain that follows each verse ritualises the listed requirements, turning them into a "timeless" cultural script. In this way, the song itself participates in the mythic construction of Bukusu identity, buttressing Baker's (2018) assertion that a popular melody's repeated celebration of a legendary leader or ritual contributes to the mythic construction of that figure or practice, rendering it an apparent, self-evident component of Bukusu identity (Baker, 2018).

The gendered prerequisites delineate a performative grammar that prescribes who may *dance* and who may *ululate*. The *Likumba* case illustrates how performative texts can serve as living documents that both preserve and adapt cultural identity. The opening verse of *Likumba* functions as a semiotic conduit through which Bukusu identity is negotiated, validated, and displayed. Livestock - bulls, male goats, male sheep, and cows - serve as material signifiers that articulate wealth, status, and gendered labour, while the dance space translates these symbols into legitimate cultural participation.

These gender-specific conditions not only delineate the roles of men and women within the performance arena but also embed material markers of wealth and pastoral livelihood that are characteristic of Bukusu identity (Mutua, 2015). Consequently, the dance space functions as a semiotic field in which livestock—symbols of economic stability and social status—signify legitimate membership in the Bukusu community. By foregrounding these symbolic requirements, the song enacts a performative affirmation of ethnic distinctiveness that resonates with the broader Luhya emphasis on peace and collective harmony (Kagwe, 2022).

Having rooted itself within a distinctly Bukusu cultural setting, the song shifts into a political discourse that reads like a living ledger of the region's representatives. The narrator, who introduces himself as a son of Nandecha and Namulanda, directs his question toward the then members of parliament, challenging them to bring to the electorate the promised 'bone' - a metaphor for a concrete, essential benefit that the community expects. Using the refrain 'Where is the bone, the song lists names of its political leadership. By addressing politicians as "siblings" and invoking the refrain, the song

constructs a genealogical framework that re-positions political authority within communal kinship. The song rearticulates Bukusu identity through the symbolic bone and serves as an oral archive that records, contests, and preserves the community's political memory. By naming a succession of Bukusu politicians - Musikari Kombo, Mukhisa Kituyi, Moses Wetangula (Sirisia), Wafula Wamunyinyi (Kanduyi), Newton Kulundu, Wakoli Bifwoli (Bumula), (Moody) Awori, Wycliff Osundwa, Moses Akaranga, Khamasi, Nakitare (Kitale), Noah Wekesa, and Bonny Khalwale – (the then members of parliament) the song constructs a chronological map of local political representation (Omondi, 2018). This cataloguing does more than list names; it preserves a collective memory of the political leaders for the Bukusu people.

In this way, the song operates on two interwoven levels. First, it affirms cultural identity by outlining gender-specific requirements for participation in a central communal activity—dance. Second, it functions as a vehicle for political historiography, enumerating the region's MPs and asking them to perform in order to fulfil the community's developmental aspirations. The song thus illustrates how popular music can simultaneously safeguard cultural heritage and provide a platform for civic critique, offering a textual source for examining the intersection of identity formation and political discourse in East African societies.

The paper, therefore, posits that *Likumba* intertwines gendered cultural performance with a tangible political ledger, thereby functioning as an ethnographic archive that records lived experience while critiquing the sociopolitical structures that shape it (Berman, 2010; Mutua, 2015). We proceed to discuss the historicisation of Bukusu leadership in Wanyonyi Omukoyi's *Mayi Muro*.

Broadly, Wanjala Okumu's *Likumba* shares affinities with Omukoyi's *Mayi Muro*. Each of the two songs by different artistes employs indigenous idioms, metaphorical language, and explicit naming to articulate identity and historical memory. Through this function of popular songs, *Mayi Muro* exemplifies music's dual capacity to historicise ethnic identity and to serve as a counter-historical register of leadership. By embedding material symbols of wealth, gendered ritual practices of dance, and explicit references to political leaders, the song offers insight into how popular music negotiates memory, power, and belonging in contemporary Kenya. We focus now on the following lyrics to examine the naming of leaders:

... khurobole omuruki, sikhulabora mwanasiasa

Robolakho omuruki abe nga Mumia wa Nabongo, , abe nga Wamalwa wa Kijana, abe nga Masinde wa Muliro, abe nga George Captain

Translation:

Let us choose leaders, not politicians

Elect a leader to be like Nabongo of Mumia, to be like Wamalwa Kijana, to be like Masinde Muliro, to be like George Captain

The song *Mayi Muro* constructs a temporal bridge linking contemporary grievances to a celebrated lineage of Luyia leadership, thereby framing present demands for political redress within a mythic-historical framework. By repeatedly evoking the names of iconic figures in Luhya history- Nabongo Mumia, the pre-colonial paramount chief of the Wanga Kingdom, summons a symbolic epoch of indigenous authority and Luyia self-governance (Were, 1967); Kijana Wamalwa, a former Vice President of Kenya and a prominent opposition figure, represents a moment when Luyia influence penetrated the national political arena, suggesting the community's capacity to occupy high office;

Masinde Muliro, celebrated for his advocacy of Luyia unity and his pro-democracy activism, functions as a moral compass for the community (Ndeda, 2011); and although less renowned nationally, George Captain is invoked as a locally resonant champion of regional interests and George Captain. The song transforms these individuals into archetypes that embody what Baker (2018) describes as 'the timeless and self-evident component of identity'. A semiotic reading of the lyrics reveals that such melodic repetition does more than memorialise the past; it actively produces a mythic version of communal identity that is both timeless and mobilising (Baker, 2018). This strategy mirrors the broader function of oral popular culture in Kenya, where songs serve as living historiographies that encode collective memory and political critique (Turino, 2008).

Mayi Muro extends this myth-making function by invoking the memory of the once-prosperous enterprises: Mumias Sugar Company, Webuye Panpaper Mills, and Kitinda. These failures are attributed to mismanagement, corruption, and the marginalisation of the region within national development strategies (Kanyinga & Okello, 2010; Kimutai & M'mbone, 2019; Ong'ayo, 2012). By linking industrial decline directly to mismanagement and political choices, *Mayi Muro* frames economic stagnation as a symptom of fractured political representation. The lyricist's lament, '*...ari Panpaper yenyokha*… Mumias *siyakwa*… *ati Kitinda siyakwa*', literally translated as 'were it so, (a step mother is the same as a biological mother) then Webuye Panpaper would have been operational, Mumias Sugar Company and Kitinda would not have crumbled' underscores the belief that these enterprises would have survived had political alignment been different. Through its lyrical enumeration, spatial mapping, and strategic evocation of historic personalities, *Mayi Muro* operates as a conduit for communal memory and political imagination. The repeated performance of the song reinforces the mythic status of the invoked leaders and the narrative of economic loss, embedding these elements within the Bukusu collective consciousness. As Turino (2008) observes, such musical practices render past events and personalities 'self-evident components of identity', thereby converting historical grievance into a potent mobilising myth. Recognising popular songs like *Mayi Muro* as legitimate historical sources enriches our understanding of how oral culture participates in the ongoing process of 'historicising' communal identity and political agency in Kenya. In doing so, the song not only preserves cultural practices—dance, ululation, and oral storytelling—but also articulates a sustained critique of contemporary political structures, urging a reclaiming of leadership that reflects the historic aspirations of the Luyia people.

Together, the two songs, *Mayi Muro* and *Likumba*, illustrate how popular music operates as a living archive: it records material conditions, and critiques political actors while simultaneously reinforcing a collective self-understanding. The lyrical emphasis on enumerating political names and evoking ancestral heroes intertwines present concerns with historicised symbols, thereby ensuring that contemporary dissent is framed as part of an enduring cultural continuum. This dual function - documenting and myth-making - confirms the argument that popular melodies are not merely reflective but constitutive of Bukusu identity, shaping how the community perceives its past, negotiates its present, and imagines its future (Turino, 2008). Through spatial mapping and strategic invocation of historic personalities, Bukusu popular songs function as living historiographies. They not only preserve cultural practices such as dance and ululation but also construct a mythic narrative of leadership that frames political critique. Recognising these songs as historical sources enriches our understanding of how oral popular culture contributes to the ongoing historicisation of communal identity and political agency in Kenya.

In sum, the two songs weave cultural affirmation, historical documentation, and political critique into a single narrative thread. They preserve Bukusu identity through detailed references to communal

practices, record the chronology of political representation, and leverage collective memory to demand accountable governance. As such, it exemplifies popular music's capacity to serve as both a cultural archive and a catalyst for civic engagement, offering valuable insights for writers and scholars interested in the dynamics of identity and politics in East Africa.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the critical role of Luhya popular songs in historicising the community's experiences and shaping its collective memory. The songs serve as vital archives of Luhya identity, preserving narratives, values, and experiences across generations. They also function as dynamic and contested spaces where history is not merely recorded but actively constructed, negotiated, and transmitted.

The semiotic reading of Omukoyi's *Mayi Muro*, the Webuye Jua Kali band's *Mama Mzazi*, and Wanjala Okumu's *Likumba* demonstrates that Bukusu popular songs function far beyond entertainment; they operate as living archives that simultaneously record and construct communal identity. By repeatedly invoking legendary leaders and historic chiefs, the melodies embed a mythic framework that presents particular cultural norms and political expectations as timeless facts of communal life, thereby weaving past aspirations into present consciousness (Barthes, 1972). At the same time, references to defunct industries such as Webuye Pan Paper foreground economic grievances within a broader narrative of political neglect, thereby reinforcing the claim that effective representation is essential for material well-being (Mwangi,2020). Consequently, these recordings exemplify how popular music can serve as a semiotic conduit for communal memory, identity formation, and political critique. This analysis underscores the value of preserving and archiving such musical artefacts because they convey alternative perspectives on official histories, amplify marginalised voices, and sustain oral traditions that transmit historical knowledge across generations (Njoroge, 2018). In sum, the three songs reveal the dynamic, contested arenas in which Bukusu history is not merely documented but continuously negotiated, illustrating popular culture's capacity to historicise experience, reinforce collective memory, and enable communities to assert agency within the political sphere.

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