

Popular Music,  
Ethnicity and Politics  
in the Kenya  
of the 1990s



# Popular Music, Ethnicity and Politics in the Kenya of the 1990s:

*Okatch Biggy Live  
at "The Junction"*

By

T. Michael Mboya

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To Margaret “Malim Amagi nya Japuonj, nyak’Ochieng” Disiye (Mboya) and Michael “Mikey” Nyunyo Mboya, my people;

To the memories of my parents: Major John Ouma “Mark” McOduor, who valued education, and Selestina Adipo Ouma “Mama Safi NyaDolo”, who loved song;

To Prof. James Ogude and all who are helping us and the world understand who and what we are;

And to you, Oganda Luo:

*Imoso Okatch wuod Otieno ja Ujimbe*

Please greet Okatch son of Otieno, the man from Ujimbe

*Dola mayienga*

Dola, the earth-shaker

*Mano Biggy ja Ujimbe*

That is Biggy of Ujimbe

*Osiep Adwera Okello wuod gi Ogungo*

The friend of Adwera Okello who is the brother of Ogungo

*Osiepna idwoko jodongo e miel!*

My friend you have brought back the elders (or the leaders) to dancing!

—Praise for Okatch Biggy shouted by one of his musicians in “Okello Jabondo”



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kind. As is known, this sort of work benefits from numerous people, most of who cannot be acknowledged because their contributions, however significant, are made as part of the social interactions that make us human – and which are never documented. To you, Invisibles: accept my gratitude. I take responsibility for the work, especially for its shortcomings.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

For the lover of Luo guitar music in the mid-1990s, the Junction Inn, Kisumu, western Kenya, “was the place to be for a weekend of music” (Juma 2007). Crowds from Kisumu and far beyond flocked to the rather ordinary dance club located on the Kisumu–Miwani road about a kilometre and a half after the turn off from the Kisumu–Vihiga road at the Mamboleo Junction. They came from all directions to dance to the music of the resident band at the club that was commonly and fondly simply referred to as Junction. The band: Okatch Biggy and Orchestra Super Heka Heka. Okatch Biggy – band leader, chief composer, lead vocalist and frontman – had a cult following. John Oywa captured something of the group’s pull in a newspaper article published in the *Sunday Nation* of June 8, 1997: “In Western Kenya, Biggy’s shows are the only occasions when the rich and poor, the bold and the beautiful rub shoulders as they pack every available space to dance, sing with him or just stare at him.”

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to appreciate the appropriateness of the name of the dance club where the shows of Okatch Biggy and Orchestra Super Heka Heka were the regular weekend fare. Roads are generally not uni-directional. So, whereas a junction is defined as where roads meet it is equally valid to see it as where roads part. Junctions are sites of simultaneous centrifugal and centripetal movements. It is shown in this book that the meeting of social classes and genders that Oywa picks out were only two aspects of the manifold meetings and partings that happened when Okatch Biggy and Orchestra Super Heka Heka performed at the Junction Inn. These meetings and partings found their way into the band’s music. There was an overarching junction of play (leisure) and work under which there was a direct political junction, unsurprising given that the 1990s was the decade of the revival of multi-party democracy in Kenya: forces of change interacted with forces of continuity in complex ways. In the 1990s, also, and only partly as a result of political developments in Kenya, there was a general feeling among the Luo – Okatch Biggy’s immediate audience – that the ethnic group was “in crisis” (Ogotu 1995:1), and *there* was a cultural junction where old ideas

interacted with new ideas. At the centre of the Junction, dominant and *live*, receiving and transmitting messages that convened meetings and triggered partings, that prompted continuations and breaks, beginnings and endings, in a code that was itself a junction of different styles and traditions, was Okatch Biggy – the artist whose popularity this book attempts to account for.

Okatch Biggy was easily the single most significant *benga* artist of the 1990s (Oywa 1997), and *benga* was at the time the most important music form in Kenya. What is it about Okatch Biggy’s music that made it so attractive to so many? Can it be that there was something about the targeted consumers of Okatch Biggy’s music that predisposed them to it? Was it a combination of the two? Or was it something else?

This book attempts to answer these questions. It does so by giving a contextualized comprehensive explanation of Okatch Biggy’s *benga*. The *benga* of Okatch Biggy is described and analyzed in ways that make clear *what* the music “said” to its primary audience and *how* it “said” what it “said” – in other words, how Okatch Biggy’s *benga* “recorded” or “expressed” whatever it “recorded” or “expressed” about the historical context of its production, and what the *benga* spoke to the historical context. Enhancing the description of the *benga* of Okatch Biggy is the situating of the music in its artistic context by looking at it in relation to the *benga* tradition preceding it, on which it was founded and which it built. In the course of doing this some of the voices of the main *benga* artists that competed with Okatch Biggy in the 1990s are brought into view and their preoccupations and their areas of convergence and divergence with Okatch Biggy are explored. In this way, the recognition of Okatch Biggy as a “*benga* guru” (Osusa *et al* 2008:10) is explicated.

Okatch Biggy’s success and the meaning of that success are in this book accounted for from an essentially literary studies approach. For this reason, semiotics, generally defined as the science of signs, undergirds the attempt to answer the questions at the heart of the book. Semiotics most significantly provides the root understanding that enables the adequate handling of both the verbal and musical elements of song, separately and together, as and when necessary. Since, in semiotics *anything* that can be perceived as representing something else by a number of people is a sign, the verbal and the musical elements of song are, therefore, because they signify “things” outside themselves, (configurations of) signs. There is here agreement with Koffi Agawu and so many others who recognize that “music and language are ... semiotic systems” (2001:16). Now, even though Agawu insists that “music and language are *finally independent* semiotic systems” (my emphasis), he also, most convincingly, goes on to

suggest that “exploring them in tandem [in the study of the complex assemblages of verbal and musical signs – or text – that is “song”] may yet deepen our understanding of African creativity” (2001:16). Semiotics, therefore, supplies that theoretical insight necessary for the sufficient grasping of the said texts. To reiterate, Okatch Biggy’s “songs” – in the sense of “tracks”, that is the units comprising the lyrics and the music – are considered as texts. Consequently, the definition of text deployed in this book is the now frequently used explanation by Hanks as “any configuration of signs that is coherently interpretable by some community of users” (1989:95).

This understanding paves the way for a literary studies approach to the study of Okatch Biggy’s music by making possible the use of tools developed in literary studies to analyze and explain complex texts. The literary studies approach adopted to study the work of Okatch Biggy in this book takes the forms of both – to use terms popularized by Wellek and Warren (1949) – “intrinsic” criticism, the scrutiny of the signifiers, the equivalent of the words on the page, and “extrinsic criticism”, the mobilization of contextual information like author biography and the historical setting of the time of the production of the text, the worlds of the text so to say, that helps illuminate the work under study.

An important distinguishing factor between the approach taken in this book and most versions of extrinsic criticism is that the object in this book is not only to shed light on the text but also to recoup the economic, political and social world of the work. For this reason, New Historicism is turned to to supply the theoretical tools used in the more detailed engagement with Okatch Biggy’s music.

New Historicism starts from the insistence that texts should be understood in the contexts of their production and reception. One using this theory seeks to discover the influence of the time of production on a text. This influence can take several forms. For example, it can be in the form of the artistic resources it makes available to the author. It can also be in the form of the ideas and attitudes that are available to the author. The understanding is that economic, political and social forces propel texts. Seeking to be “transparent” in its history writing project, New Historicism also demands of the critic that s/he bring to the fore the history of the time of reception of the text. The critic’s ideas, attitudes, etc. – just like the author’s – impact on the understanding of a text. And so they must be made apparent. There are two objectives behind New Historicist reading. The first is to understand a work through its context. The second is to understand that context through the work. With a caveat:

the attempt at recovery of meaning is shot through by the forces of history obtaining at the time that the attempt at recovery is made.

Jerome J. McGann articulates the New Historicist ideas which are taken for the main frame for understanding the *benga* of Okatch Biggy in this book in the essay “The Text, the Poem and the Problem of Historical Method” (2002, first published 1985). Starting from an important distinction among the concepts “text” (the verbal object divorced from the historical contexts and conditions of its production and receptions), “poem” (the verbal object – perceived as a work of art – plus the historical contexts and conditions of its production and receptions) and “poetical work” (work of art in mixed medium, like the “tracks” at the heart of the present study, together with the historical contexts and conditions of its production and receptions), McGann then comes to the explanation that is used to direct the analysis of Okatch Biggy’s *benga* in this book:

Facing the poem and its texts, then, historical criticism tries to define what is most peculiar and distinctive in specific poetical works. Moreover, in specifying these unique features and sets of relationships, it transcends the concept of the-poem-as-verbal-object to reveal the poem as a special sort of communication event. This new understanding of poems takes place precisely because the critical act, occurring in a self-conscious present, can turn to look upon poems created in the past not as fixed objects but as the locus of certain past human experiences. Some of these are dramatized *in* the poems, while others are presented *through* the poetical works, which embody various human experiences *with* the poems, beginning with the author’s own experiences. In this way does a historical criticism define poetry not as a formal structure but as a continuing human process. The *act* of definition is the fundamental *fact* of literary criticism (302, emphases in the original).

A point that needs amplifying at this juncture is that Okatch Biggy’s songs are in this book taken to be central to communication events that happened in a particular time and place, in specific circumstances. What is underscored here is the place of context in the understanding of the *benga* of Okatch Biggy. By “context” reference is made to both the common sense usage of the word (the circumstances in which a communication event takes place) and the Jakobsonian (1960) sense of the word (what the words and – by extension – the musical sounds used in the communication event refer to, other than to themselves, the “reality” they signify). An understanding of context will explain the significant silences in an utterance, for example. A reality can be referred to so obliquely that a consideration of the words that constitute the utterance must perforce miss the reference. Additionally, as is well known, the definition of context determines judgment of text. To say that text A is ironical, the context has

to be apprehended in a particular manner. Hence, a taking into consideration or weighting of any element of the context - addressee, circumstance, "text" being responded to, etc. - leads to a particular understanding of the meaning(s) of the text. This is why it is possible to understand a text in a different light. A review of the composition and/or importance of the elements of context effects a shift in the understanding of the meaning(s) of the text. It comes to the old understanding of meaning-construction: This is what the addresser is saying (the text) to this addressee, and on one level his words signify this reality, but what does his saying what he is saying in these circumstances mean? What is the "message"? And so: beyond the language, one who would comprehend why Okatch Biggy's songs were received as they were by their primary audience must also grasp the context in which the songs were composed and first performed. Hence, there is need to situate the songs in the world in which they were produced, the (in the words of Tagg, writing in a different context) "reality that they referred to, dealt with, interpreted and thereafter affectively and ideologically recreated and communicated" (1987:96). Equally importantly, the restorative contextualization undertaken enables a distantiating that makes it possible to track Okatch Biggy's blindspots, for the artist is perceived in relation to his messages and in a context that allows for responses other than those that he makes.

Even as Okatch Biggy's songs are situated in the historical context of their production the distance between that context and the immediate context of the study that led to the writing of this book, which was undertaken just over a decade after the musician's death, is acknowledged. In this vein, it is possible that, on the general, an earlier interview-based study, carried out at the time of Biggy's success, would have given a more direct, "objective" explanation for this artist's acceptance. As it is, we only have snatches of the musician's fans' articulations of their reasons for liking the music of Okatch Biggy. On the whole, the study on which this book is based has been an elaboration and a complication of some of these "snatches", which are recorded as newspaper articles from the time. The idea of interviews with people who became Okatch Biggy's fans when the musician was alive and performing to determine their reasons for loving the artist was ruled out on the basis that the information that would be gathered, being the content of memory, was likely to be so highly mediated as to be of doubtful value as accurate record. In the decade between Okatch Biggy's death and the time that the research for this book was undertaken a lot had happened. Okatch Biggy's stature had grown tremendously. The *benga* revival that he had played a crucial part in ushering in was on the wane but the major practitioners of the Luo music

genre that was on the ascendance, *ohangla*, invariably paid respectful tribute to Okatch Biggy's influence in their art. In such circumstances it would have been difficult to retrieve the fans' earlier responses. Even so, several interviews were carried out with people who knew Okatch Biggy and who have closely followed his career that had as their object the establishing of the facts of his life that the study deemed relevant.

In keeping with New Historicism's demand for transparency, the writer's identity as a male Kenyan Luo and a university professor is announced at the outset of the book, since the facts have implications on this study of Okatch Biggy's music. This is especially given that the politics of the historical context that Okatch Biggy engages with in his music has not changed fundamentally at the moment of writing. Kenya is still "a country heavily mapped along ethnic lines, which in a very real sense determine the distribution networks for most (national) resources – including justice and sympathy" (Musila, 2015:89). For what it is worth, the writer also provides the information that he voted for Raila Odinga in the 2007 presidential elections in Kenya. As is made clear in Chapter Five, Okatch Biggy was a keen supporter of Raila Odinga.

Several theoretical insights gleaned from literary, language and popular culture studies are applied inside the frame of New Historicism in order to best explicate the diverse issues that the scrutiny of the *benga* of Okatch Biggy raises. Of these the most important, given their application across the entire book, are, one, the notion that the central character in the autobiography, the one who narrates his life story, is constructed in much the same way that the characters in fiction are, two, the idea that ethnicity is socially constructed, three, the concepts of interpellation and hailing as expounded by Louis Althusser (1971), and four, the notion of the political unconscious as elaborated by Fredric Jameson (1981).

It is impossible to properly apprehend the narratives in Okatch Biggy's *benga* without recourse to theorizations of narrative that distinguish between author, implied author and narrator such as found in Herman *et al* 2012: 29–56 and the problematization of the narrating subject in the autobiography as discussed by Lay (1982). This is chiefly because the central character in Okatch Biggy's songs is a persona identified as Okatch Biggy who shares many characteristics with the musician. (He is a musician, he hails from Gem, his friends share the names of the musician's friends, etc.) The theories of narrative referred to enable a sensible analysis of the songs that does not confuse them with simple journalistic report or transparent historical record. The character is then understood as a device whose deployment assists in the construction of messages.



At the base of the argument pursued in this book is the point that Okatch Biggy forged a view of Luo ethnicity and nationhood, which he promoted and used as the foundation for his impressive musical edifice. The linking point gestures towards the idea that ethnicity is socially constructed. In this view, ethnicity and ethnic identity are not givens – whether natural or God–ordained – but are socially produced, enacted and used. According to Joane Nagel, “[t]hrough the actions and designations of ethnic groups, their antagonists, political authorities, and economic interest groups, ethnic boundaries are erected dividing some populations and unifying others” (1994:152). The examination of Okatch Biggy’s work at producing Luo ethnic identity, which involves the bringing together of old and new ideas in response to the circumstances of his time, is an important component of this book. It is shown that in his *benga*, Okatch Biggy articulates the cultural identity of the Luo of the 1990s, showing that it is constructed out of elements of pre-colonial Luo culture, which constitute its foundation, but also borrowing foreign, especially Western elements. The articulation is not an act of reportage but, since it promotes certain practices, ideas and attitudes even as it suppresses others, is more significantly an aspect of identity construction.

This last point leads to a thread that runs through this book, which is that through his *benga* Okatch Biggy both called to and constituted the Luo nation. To elucidate how this happened, the concepts of interpellation and hailing as defined by Louis Althusser (1971) – whereby via the assumption and promotion of particular attitudes, prejudices and (generally) world views texts identify with and thereby constitute or consolidate the identities of their consumers – are mobilized to explain the effects of Okatch Biggy’s *benga*. Fiske (1990) gives a graphic explanation of the concept that helps clarify it:

All communication addresses someone, and in addressing them it places them in a social relationship. In recognizing oneself as the addressee and in responding to the communication, we participate in our own social, and therefore ideological, construction. If you hear in the street a shout ‘Heyyou!’, you can ignore it because you know that ‘nobody, but *nobody*’ speaks to you like that: you thus reject the relationship implicit in the call (175, italics in the original).

Finally, it is argued in this book that Okatch Biggy’s *benga* was most valued by its primary audience for its political messages. The unmasking of the politics in the apparently apolitical *benga* of Okatch Biggy is made possible by the deployment of Jameson’s notion of the political unconscious as instrument. Subscribing to the Marxist understanding that “[t]he history of all ... society is the history of class struggles” (Marx and

Engels 1971:81), where conflicting classes wage “an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight” (Marx and Engels 1971:81), Jameson urges “the recognition that there is nothing [in human interactions] that is not social and historical - indeed, that everything is ‘in the last analysis ’political’” (1981:20). In other words, politics totally permeates human life; it is embedded even in the most “individual, personal and private” of experiences. The reading of all texts, including the songs of Okatch Biggy, therefore demands an investment in the “detecting [of] the traces of that uninterrupted narrative [of class struggle – that makes up history], in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history” (Jameson 1981:20). Even in the most superficially apolitical of texts, then, according to Jameson, there is politics. The view taken in this book is that in the context of post-colonial Kenya, the time of the production of Okatch Biggy’s songs, that politics was significantly ethnic. Working within Jameson’s notion the ethnic struggles that are very important in African (and specifically Kenyan) post-colonial history, and which are generally part of the class struggles in the continent, are amplified.

The social world of Okatch Biggy’s music is in this book explored with conviction in the knowledge that, like a majority of African musics Luo *benga* has, despite the fact that the music type was consciously apolitical at inception and largely remains so, a strong strand of what is referred to as social commitment. A rehearsal of the argument of the centrality of popular music to African politics and of politics to African popular music, past and present, is captured by Stephen H. Martin’s assertion that in modern East Africa “music continues to be the main medium for the communication of values and political ideology. Musical events continue to be important opportunities for social interaction” (1991:52). The central idea in the historian Peter Wafula Wekesa’s paper “The Politics of Marginal Forms: Popular Music, Cultural Identity and Political Opposition in Kenya” (2004) is in the same vein. Proceeding from the ground that “[i]n most Kenyan communities ... music is markedly utilitarian and is nowhere limited to situations of leisure”, this paper looks at the deployment of popular music for political mobilization in Kenya in the heady years between 1990 and 2002 which started with the reintroduction of competitive multi-party politics and ended with the voting out of the party that had been in power from the year of the country’s independence.

The relationship between popular music and politics that these studies explore remind us that a lot happens in what Lara Allen calls “the privileged space of leisure”, which

[S]pace is protected from excessive interference by those who wish to control the lives of others by the myth that leisure choices are marginal to functionality in the world, and are therefore not important enough to be contested. However, the choice to patronise a particular song is a 'practice of everyday life' ... that is quietly but firmly defended by people in their daily lives. (2004:6)

The choice exercised by a significant number of Luos to patronize the music of Okatch Biggy is the motivation behind this book. That choice points both to the artistic skills of Okatch Biggy and to what his primary audience valued.

As the first sustained critical study of Okatch Biggy's *benga* this book expands on, sometimes explodes, the claims and hints on the music that have been made in several scholarly articles, newspaper reports and commentaries (and like material from several websites and compact disc sleeves). These mainly light celebratory reviews of Okatch Biggy's music and performance therefore constitute a metaphorical door for the present study. This book is interested in the social commentary in Biggy's music that is only vaguely referred to in these journalists' and marketers' reports (e.g. in Gichuru and Ogodu 1997; Juma 2007), and also in how that commentary is constructed (again, this is hinted at in these reports – an instance being the same review by Gichuru and Ogodu 1997), and finally in what gives the commentary its peculiar power. The reports themselves, several of which are published as long reviews in Kenya's two main national newspapers at the time – attention is here being drawn to the significance of the music as implied by the mode of publication of comment on it – are records of the popular acceptance of the music of Okatch Biggy and thereby of its cultural importance.

By exploring the work of Okatch Biggy, this book continues the writing of the history of *benga* – a genre of music that a number of commentators (Ketebul Music 2017; Barz 2004; Kariuki 2000; Okumu 2005; Patterson 2001; Stapleton and May 1990) acknowledge is very important. The history of this music form has mostly been recorded in snatches, usually embedded in works of larger scope, but also in encyclopedia and dictionary entries. Useful information on *benga* is therefore scattered. One finds bits and pieces on the myths/narratives of the origins of *benga* (for example in Ketebul Music 2017; Ogude 2007; Stapleton and May 1990; Barz 2004; *The Microsoft Encarta*, etc.) and attempts at defining the form (Ketebul Music 2017; Okumu 2005) unhelpfully scattered in hard to find documents.

So far, only the popular multi-media presentation *Retracing the Benga Rhythm: Narrative, Music CD and Documentary DVD* by Osusa *et al* (2008) constitutes an introduction to *benga* that comes closest to the now

very obviously long overdue comprehensive single definitive study ((ethno)musicological, anthropological, historical or literary) that describes the music form *benga*, explains its emergence and subsequent fortunes, places it in its historical milieu(x), elaborates the uses to which it has been put. A major weakness of *Retracing the Benga Rhythm* – which the present book seeks to correct – is its unfortunate non-recognition of post-1980s developments in the genre. The result of the omission is the creation of the impression that *benga* is dated, dead, a thing of the past that is valuable today for the fond memories it evokes in some particular generations and for its being an example or illustration, if such is needed, that modern Kenyans have *created* and thereby made history. This impression is in spite of the token statements on the way forward for *benga* that come at the end of the DVD documentary, and is boosted both by the packaging of the presentation (the CD and DVD are designed to remind one of the 45rpm vinyl records of the 1970s and 1980s and there is a distinct 1970s feel about the cartoon on the cover of the presentation, with the characters in the fashion of the era) and the stated purpose of the presentation, which is “the ... building [of] an archive of a people’s past” (2008:2). Little wonder, then, that Okatch Biggy, who rose to prominence in the 1990s and powerfully impacted the *benga* as a genre, is only mentioned in passing in this work.

The authors of *Retracing the Benga Rhythm*, writing as a collective going by the name of Ketebul Music, partially redress the non-recognition of post-1980s developments in *benga* in the coffee table book *Shades of Benga* (2017). The book’s content is captured more accurately by its subtitle, *The Story of Popular Music in Kenya: 1946–2016*, for *benga* is among the several musical genres and practices in Kenya – acoustic guitar of the 1940s–1950s, *rumba*, *ohangla*, *mwomboko*, *taarab*, funk, gospel, afro-fusion, jazz, hip-hop – that the authors survey. Given the sweep of the terrain it covers, it does not surprise that the book frequently reads like a roster of modern – that is, post colonial conquest – age Kenyan musicians, music producers and broadcasters who have played key roles in the promotion of Kenyan music. It is relatively light on individual musicians’ contributions to the genres they worked in – although, and this is a major strength, it surfaces the work of musicians it describes as “the forgotten legends of Nairobi’s River Road” (Ketebul Music 2017:iii): “the session musicians ... who recorded hits in the 1970s and 80s for *benga* music stars from the various regions and communities across Kenya” (Ketebul Music 2017:iii). In keeping with this focus on the “ordinarily unseen” *Shades of Benga* offers useful insight, albeit in flashes, into the workings of the music industries in relation to *benga*. The reader is introduced to what

happens in the studio, who the producers are and get an inkling of the business side of *benga*. *Shades of Benga* makes for a useful general background to the present book, describing the scene in general terms. The explication of Okatch Biggy's *benga* that is the burden of this book is a zooming in that, of necessity, brings to view details that must be missed when a long view of the kind that is taken in *Shades of Benga* is adopted.

There have been the occasional critical studies of a (set of) *benga* song(s) perceived to be of importance to a particular scholar's aims in a particular study. Of these two are especially deserving of mention in this book: James Ogude's "'The Cat that Ended Up Eating the Homestead Chicken': Murder, Memory and Fabulization in D.O. Misiani's Dissident Music" (2007) and "Song and Politics: The Case of D. Owino Misiani" (2007) by Adams Oloo. Ogude's study focuses on the manner the most famous of all Luo *benga* musicians D.O. Misiani engages the social and political realities of his time in his lyrics. He explicates Misiani's "poetic" style in the lyrics, and relates that style to the thematic concerns and to the political context that, Ogude argues, has a great influence on the choice of style in the first instance. In the process, Ogude shows that D.O. Misiani ascended to the privileged position he occupied for so long, as "King of *Benga*", in large part because of his practice of socially committed music.

D.O. Misiani's practice of *benga* is also the subject of the political scientist Adams Oloo's study. As is perhaps to be expected, given the researcher's disciplinary background, this paper dwells on the political themes of Misiani's music and does not explore in depth how those themes are produced. The study is important particularly for its tracing of the "contradictions" in Misiani's political positions over time – now praising the Ugandan dictator Amin, now condemning him; now condemning the Kenyan dictator Moi, now praising him, etc. – as this points to the topicality of Misiani's songs, even as it also paradoxically underlines Misiani's unchanging Luo-centred politics. Misiani's Luo-centrism underpins his support for politicians when he deems them to be Luo-friendly and his hostility towards them when he deems them hostile to his people's aspirations.

In a sense, this book furthers work on ground already worked by the studies by Ogude and Oloo, to show, among other things, the complexity of Luo *benga* of social commitment – a complexity in this case signaled by the diversity in style. All this with the awareness that the studies work on two extremely different artists, major figures in their field, the fact that at one point in his career Okatch Biggy played the drums for Misiani notwithstanding. Right at the outset it can be confidently stated that the

cryptic indirectness of Misiani's political discourse – the use of fabulization – works very differently from Biggy's integrating of social comment into narratives of romantic love and friendship.

The entries on and analyses of *benga* as are in existence are, therefore, important to this book as entry points and also as indicators of the diversity and complexity (especially thematic) of *benga*. The focus in this book is at one and the same time a narrowing in to a so-far neglected but important single *benga* artist's work and an expanding out in the terms of analysis – an explication of the style and themes of the said artist's work, and a situating of the texts in the political context in which they were constructed and which they spoke to.

The importance of factoring in the context of production in the understanding of popular music, for popular music is by definition first and foremost situational, speaking to its immediate circumstances, is an idea that this book shares with the work of E.S. Atieno Odhiambo. Odhiambo's "*Kula Raha: Gendered Discourses and the Contours of Leisure in Nairobi, 1946-63*", which relates the rise of an urbanizing African working and middle classes that had some disposable income with the emergence of recorded guitar music in the Kenyan capital. Odhiambo persuasively shows that:

The stable wage labor needed some leisure in the evenings and at weekends. They created various forms of entertainment for themselves both indoors and out of doors. A significant component of this entertainment space was occupied by recorded music, purchased with earned money. The cumulative impact of the changes ... was to put some money in the pockets of the emerging working and middle classes that could be set aside for entertainment (n.d.:8).

And again:

Resonating to the lifestyles and fears of this nascent elite, the songs [of this emerging music] are about their vanities and their love lives. The gendered discourses reflect the anxieties of a predominantly male working cohort seeking control over the bodies and choices of urban women during the late colonial period (n.d.:1).

The relationship between political economy and popular culture – popular culture emerging from and simultaneously 'recording' and speaking to the circumstances of its time – is also at the heart of a second and equally insightful paper by Atieno Odhiambo, "From the 'English Country Garden' to 'Makambo Mibale': Popular Culture in Kenya in the Mid Nineteen Sixties" (2007). In this paper Odhiambo reads the musical preferences of different Kenyan social classes, complicated by the question of ethnicity, as indicators of the group's relationships with state

power and economic resources, and among themselves. The paper's conclusion aptly summarizes Odhiambo's argument:

The relationship between class formation and the construction of culture cannot be gainsaid. Indeed, the cultural directions that the different classes in the new Kenyan nation were taking were in equal part determined by their proximity to the state. For the governing elite with access to state largess the English country garden, in its embodiment of the newly spurn modernity, crystallized into their desired outlook and, in their minds, the ultimate in cultural sophistication.

At the same time, political fragmentation constantly undermined the formation of a monolithic culture, instead inviting a bricolage of cultural allegiances and influences and thereby effectively challenging the sanctity of *thei dea*(l) of one nation (in Ogude and Nyairo 2007:167).

That it is important to factor in the context of production in the understanding of popular music does not mean that popular songs cannot find sympathetic audiences in places and times removed from those of its production. The point being amplified is that the maker of popular music intends to impact his or her immediate context, and to earn a livelihood in that context. A notable difference between Odhiambo's studies and the present book is the privileging of different elements of the context. Odhiambo trains his eyes on the economics. In this book the eyes are trained on the politics. Perhaps due to his focus on Nairobi, Odhiambo in the first of the two articles totally misses the *benga* that was in formation at the time he situates his study – and which obviously spoke to large parts of the public he identifies as participating in the consumption of urban leisure. In the second article Odhiambo mentions the seminal *benga* song “Celestina Juma” by Ogara without identifying the genre, choosing instead to point out the song as one that was, as it were, produced by the rustic Luo for other rustic Luos, and contrasting it with the foreign songs that the emergent Luo elite were listening to.

In all, then, this book both attempts to make Okatch Biggy's music more enjoyable by increasing the comprehension of its aesthetics and semantic significance and, very importantly, also uses Okatch Biggy's *benga* as a resource for the understanding of the society that so appreciated his music. A point needs to be made clear at the outset. This book is not a hagiography of Okatch Biggy. Even if respectful, it is too fascinated with the subject to be that. The book is not even a biography of the musician. Although it shares many similarities with a musician's biography – like the interest in the engagement of music with the social, cultural and political contexts of its production – the determined focus on the messages in Okatch Biggy's *benga* and *how* they are constructed in

this book minimizes the space that is allowed for the exploration of the personal in the musician's biographies. The book is fairly light on the musician's personal life, only bringing in the odd detail here and there that helps explain the lyrics and music style, and does not touch on the life of his band, Orchestra Super Heka Heka – the roles that other musicians played, the personnel changes over the years, etc.

The arrangement of chapters in the book reflects the approach that is taken to answer the questions at the heart of this study. Thus the four chapters that come after this Introduction – which besides spelling out the necessary contexts for the study, among other things identifies and explains the study's subject, sets out the aims and objectives the study purposes to achieve and how it goes about trying to achieve them – construct in steps, chapter by chapter, the thesis argument of the value of the music of Okatch Biggy. Chapter Two introduces Okatch Biggy by giving some key events in his life that inform his music. It also sketches a political portrait of his primary audience, the Luo of the 1990s. Chapter Three is a discussion of Okatch Biggy's practice of *benga*. The chapter opens with a comprehensive definition of the music form called *benga*, tracing its development from its beginnings to the time Okatch Biggy started recording his music. On that foundation, the chapter proceeds to describe Okatch Biggy's style, highlighting the innovations that the artist brought to *benga*. It is argued in this chapter that the innovations that Okatch Biggy brought to *benga* enabled him both to communicate effectively with and constitute his primary audience, the Luo of the 1990s. Chapter Four explores the meaning of "be(com)ing Luo in the 1990s" as it emerges from Okatch Biggy's *benga*. Focusing on the lyrics of Okatch Biggy's songs the chapter shows that the musician understood (and fabricated the notion of) Luo ethnic identity in the 1990s to comprise elements of pre-colonial Luo culture and elements borrowed from elsewhere. Chapter Five discusses the politics of Okatch Biggy as articulated in his *benga*. The chapter explicates Okatch Biggy's ethnic, Luo-centered politics and its subtle expression in the music. The chapter argues that Okatch Biggy seems to have been acutely aware of the political undertones of the projects of Luo ethnic identity construction in the multi-ethnic post-colonial state of Kenya. Okatch Biggy is also shown to be an agent of the forces that fostered the oppositional, anti-Moi, sentiment that took such deep roots among the Luo that it became integral to the community's definition in the 1990s. A significant part of the chapter shows how Okatch Biggy's ethnicized politics prevents his developing a class consciousness. Chapter Six examines the complex relationship that Okatch Biggy had with HIV/AIDS. The Luo were very



hard hit by this disease in the 1990s. Focusing on the lyrics of Okatch Biggy's songs that engage with the disease but also bringing in some contextual information in support, the argument is made that sentiments of Luo nationalism complicated by psychological denial, together with elements of ignorance of the disease impacted on Okatch Biggy's response to HIV/AIDS. Crucially, this chapter argues that Okatch Biggy's response to the HIV/AIDS crisis demonstrated his commitment to Luo-centred politics. The last chapter is the Conclusion, where the findings of the study on which this book is based are brought together and the book's thesis argument – that Okatch Biggy was “big” in the 1990s mainly on account of the fact that he expressed ideas that were closest to the heart of his primary audience and in their language – is summarized and thereby amplified.



## CHAPTER II

### INTRODUCING OKATCH BIGGY

The immersion of African popular music in the politics of its time has been much commented on. In the words of Lara Allen, “African musicians are ... the continent’s investigative journalists, talk–show hosts, and editorial writers” (2004:2). This being so, the socio–political context and cultural milieu in which individual songs are produced must be understood if the meanings of these songs for the audiences they are sung to are to be apprehended. In the case of the *benga* of Okatch Biggy, the world of the music was the Kenya of the 1990s with its highly ethnicised politics. The primary audience for the music were the Luo, an ethnic group that collectively felt hard done by in the country. This chapter outlines a political history of the Luo that floats to view the group attitudes and ideas that in the 1990s would have predisposed members of the ethnic group to the *benga* of Okatch Biggy. The history provides the context in which Okatch Biggy’s career flourished and suggests possible reasons for the trajectory it took. But first a biography of Okatch Biggy is sketched that shows that the main ideas in the musician’s work were informed by events in his life.

#### **Okatch Biggy (1954-1997)**

Okatch Biggy was born Otieno Okatch Dola in October 1954 in Ujimbe village, Dudi Location, Gem, in what is today Siaya County, Kenya (Juma 2007). His father, Mathayo, was from the Kakwany clan of the Gem people of the Luo nation. Mathayo was a peasant of advanced age by the time Okatch was born. Indeed, Mathayo’s six children by his senior wife – a son and five daughters – were already married before the birth of Okatch. Okatch’s mother, Meresia Airo from the K’Owak clan of Sakwa Bondo, was much younger than Mathayo. She was married to a man from Kandaria in Asembo with whom she had a son, Apollo. When she met Mathayo, Meresia was separated from her husband after a misunderstanding. She lived with Mathayo for between a year and a year and a half. In that time Okatch was born. Not so long after the birth of

Okatch, Meresia reconciled with her husband and went back to Asembo. Mathayo held on to Okatch in spite of rumours that the boy was not really his son and of Meresia's determined attempts to get him. When Mathayo passed on Okatch was brought up by his half-brother Elias who worked with the Kenya Railways. He often visited with a half-sister who was married in Mbita in present day Homa Bay County. It appears that the values of social responsibility and support that would later be dear to Okatch have their roots in these early experiences where, to paraphrase a saying that often found its way into his music, "good are the people who bring up orphans." The visits to the sister in Mbita also seem to have encouraged the formation of Okatch's view that the Luo are one people regardless of whether they live in what formerly were known as central Nyanza, Kisumu or south Nyanza. Some of these regions were separated from one another by the great Nam Lolwe, Lake Victoria, and there were slight differences in the way Dholuo, the language of the group, was spoken. This understanding of Luo homogeneity would later inform Okatch's politics.

Okatch Biggy "drifted into music after his basic education" (Oywa 1997). This was not a remarkable development. The humble circumstances of his family together with the fact that performed music was so common in his environment – as indicated by the fact that Gem had spawned many important *benga* musicians at the time – it could be considered ordinary made the movement one of the few options open to the boy for whiling away the time, if not exactly eking out a living. And so even though he made contact with people who were already playing music professionally quite early in his life, becoming friends with Awino Lawi who was already a *benga* phenomenon, Okatch did not consider musicianship as a career option at first. Instead, he made the 70-something kilometer journey to Kisumu, of Kenya's big towns the one nearest Ujimbe, in a job search. Once there, and living in Nyalenda – one of the poorer neighborhoods of the lakeside town – with his carpenter nephew Odongo Dennis, Elias's eldest son, who was older than him, Okatch tried his hand at amateur boxing. In the 1970s and 1980s boxing was a prominent sport in Kenya. The country dominated in the continental – Africa – championships, and produced a number of medal-winning Olympians. Perhaps even more important, boxing, like football, was one of the ways young men with little schooling could get employment, especially in government parastatals. A big boy, Okatch boxed as a heavyweight for the Railways Club. It was his teammates at the Railways Boxing Club who gave Okatch the nick-name that he would be known by for the rest of his life: "Biggy."

Okatch Biggy's boxing career did not pan out (his brother and father-figure Elias seems to have been uncomfortable with the sport), and after less than two years of boxing the young man was back with the music crowds. Much later Okatch Biggy would frequently remind his family, especially when exhorting the (grand)nephews and nieces whose education and training he paid for to work hard at their books, that musicianship was forced on him because he lacked alternatives (Ken Okatch, personal communication 12 March 2016). This time more deliberate about trying to make a career out of music, and seeing it as business, Okatch Biggy started out as a trainee drummer in Juma Odundo's band, The People Success. Juma Odundo had in the 1960s recorded several hit songs, including "Milton Obote", which was very well received in Uganda, and the love song "Veronique", which became his signature song. By the mid-1970s when Okatch had his internship with him Juma Odundo's career was on the wane. That may explain why he gave Okatch Biggy that first opportunity. Juma Odundo was no longer in a position to attract experienced musicians. After the training stint with Juma Odundo, Okatch Biggy played at the Maendeleo Night Club in Mombasa as part of a nondescript band before joining his first group of note, John Otonde Kajonyo's Kiwiro Boys Jazz Band. That was in 1977. Kiwiro Boys Jazz Band was active in the recording and performing circuits at the time. Okatch Biggy was in the Kiwiro outfit that recorded the hit "Kerina Atieno." One also hears him being urged on as he works on the drums in what is arguably the biggest hit of Kiwiro Boys Jazz Band: "Dinnah Kalando". Generally, popular music has never been well-paying in Kenya. It was worse back then. Indeed, after marrying Awino Lawi's paternal first cousin Ruth Adhiambo in 1980, Okatch Biggy started a butchery to make ends meet. The butchery was run by his wife. Okatch and Ruth had known each other for a while, from the time Okatch struck up a friendship with Awino Lawi. Okatch would frequently visit Awino Lawi at home in Kambare, also a village in Gem Location but thirty kilometers from Ujimbe by the longest route. From all accounts, Okatch and Ruth seem to have had a happy marriage that made it possible for them to survive the poverty of the early years of their union.

Even though the success that Kiwiro Boys Jazz Band enjoyed when Okatch Biggy played with them did not translate into material benefit, the experience and visibility in the industry was another thing. It enabled Okatch Biggy to move to Daniel Owino "D.O.7" Misiani's Shirati Jazz, which was a more established group, still as a drummer. Misiani, the self-styled "King of *Benga*", was one of the great pioneer interpreters of *benga* music, and is a veritable legend of Kenyan popular music. Okatch Biggy's

circumstances did not change much after he joined Shirati Jazz. Never having lost sight of his reasons for going into music, Okatch Biggy was soon out and in search of opportunity. After parting ways with Misiani, Okatch Biggy spent several unremarkable years playing with George Were at the Nyanza Day and Night Club.

In 1984 Okatch Biggy gathered together a small set of largely unknown musicians he had worked with in different groups over the seven or so years he had been playing music and formed his own band. He called it Orchestra Super Heka Heka [Kiswahili: “Determined activity”], taking the name from the solo guitarist Owiti Ahuja who had started a band with the name. Owiti Ahuja’s band had floundered and the musician had now teamed up with Okatch Biggy. Success did not come quickly for Okatch Biggy after he started out on his own. For some time, he was based in Gusii Night Club in Kisii town. And then there was an extended sojourn in Homa Bay. This difficult period lasted for six years. It continued even after Okatch Biggy’s relocation to Kisumu, where he played at the Town Hotel, the Crescent Bar and the Kisumu Social Centre. The contradiction in the fact that Okatch Biggy was constantly working, performing in several venues, and not improving his circumstances is only apparent. *Benga* was typically performed in the small pubs, most of them in the poorer neighborhoods of Kenya’s urban centers. Usually, there were no gate charges for these performances. The musicians were paid a pittance by the bar owners. Sometimes this money was paid as an engagement fee. Most times the bar owners added some minimal amount on beer and soda prices, and this top-up constituted the musicians’ payment. That pittance would be augmented by patrons’ paying when requesting that specific songs be performed. (This practice is explained in greater detail in the next chapter.) Even so, these “wilderness” years also tell us something about the qualities of Okatch Biggy as a person and a leader, for through the tough times he managed to hold on to most of the musicians he started out with.

It was while he was based at the Kisumu Social Centre sometime in 1990 or thereabouts that Okatch Biggy caught the ear of a music-loving medical doctor, Dr. Caleb Oduol Oduor. Dr. Oduor was also the chairman of SIABAY, a welfare group that drew members from Siaya and Homa Bay districts. Okatch Biggy was an ordinary member of the group. These kinds of groupings, which were motivated by the desire to achieve and maintain some level of material comfort and security, and which assisted members to meet the costs of personal and family crises like funerals, were common place among – especially urban-based – Kenyans at the time. These groups were also sensible responses to the economic difficulties