



## Communication and Identity in Popular Music Videos in Kenya: Suggesting Value Addition For Archiving and Returns

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### Abstract

In this paper I first provide some reflections on three issues; communication as achieved through the music medium, cultural and artist's identity in popular music, and the realities of the medium as an archive material with possibilities of attracting markets for artists and national economies. Given, globalization has engendered efforts by artists to produce musical styles hitherto unknown in Africa. In addition, with exponential technological music production advancements of recent decades, music video as a means of music expression, dissemination, marketing and storage in all music genres has increased correspondingly. However, this paper suggests that issues of effectiveness in communication and "rightful" expression of individual cultural and artistic identities that can enhance relevance, market attraction and increase dividends need attention. While the paper does not purport to restrict music-for-music sake productions, or limiting the reach of musicians borrowing from other cultures and styles, a recommendation is made especially for music video productions that; (1) communicate to a multi-cultural audience; (2) project the style and identity of the individual artist and NOT styles secondary to them; and (3) productions that can be archived and marketed for sale because they boldly pronounced various aspects of Kenya's cultural diversity.

**Key words:** Music Production, Communication, African, Studio, Video, Societies, Ethnomusicologist

### Introduction

Before the era of globalization, there existed local, autonomous, distinct and well-defined, robust and culturally sustaining connections between geographical place and cultural experience. These connections constituted one's community and one's 'cultural identity'. This identity was something people simply 'had' as an undisturbed existential possession, an inheritance, a benefit of traditional long dwelling, of continuity with the past. Identity, then, like language, was not just a description of cultural belonging; it was a sort of collective treasure of local communities (Tomilson, 1999).

Various documentations have provided information on the existence of music and musical activities in Africa based on cultural prescriptive of societies (for example, see Aning, 1973; Nketia, 1974). The accounts by these and other authors on culture and music production, give a picture of communities that viewed music, not simply as another form of expression, but as a reality of cultural preservation and a mode of communication for its custodians. Consequently, music in most traditional African societies has remained a vocal ambassador of culturalism and identity of a people. For an outsider with initial knowledge, however elementary-coming in contact with this music, the question of its cultural or ethnic identity was a settled case. Of course new dynamics seem to be changing the situation and that is what Tomilson (1999) appears to be alluding to and which informs a discussion regarding change and its nature.

The debate on popular music in Kenya presents different dynamics. First, in its various sub-genres including reggae, *kapuka* and *Genge*-performed in secular and gospel- popular music does not necessarily exist in the rural traditional societies. Even though its proponents might not de-link roots



with their rural cradle, they have continued to practice in the urban areas where there is ready audience and therefore market and relevance. Second, popular music in Kenya seems to be inspired by many other factors secondary to traditional and indeed community cultural definitions. Of these factors, globalization, urbanization and commerce seem to bear the greatest responsibility. In the inevitable rush to assimilate styles brought by these external forces, there is grave danger of artistes sacrificing their artistic identity. This paper strongly argues that although society has a legitimate right to prosecute that change needs to be accepted, doing so in entirety complicates Africa's quest to have a strong voice among the world cultures. The postulate of the continent having fitted into other cultures in decades to come at the expense of its own is real.

According to Hebert and Campbell (Quoted in Gracyk, 2004), among all of the activities humans possess as means by which to create such a powerful sense of identity and community, music may be among the most personal and the most meaningful. It is within this context of change and a need for artistes to remain proponents of culture that the forgoing discussions are founded. The idea that even though it falls within the global definition of popular music-detached from the traditional or folk-it possesses immense potential of identifying artistes, their individual styles and their cultural inclinations.

### **Scope**

In this paper, I have relied on random samples of popular music video recordings covering; (1) urban popular music that though it appears to lately appeal to youth as well, it was initially associated with the older generation, (2) rap music popular with the youth and (3), popular gospel music video cutting across all generations. Since the 1990s, the Kenyan musical space has witnessed exponential shift of these three popular genres from a predominantly audio dissemination, to an audio-visual. This development provides more character for analysis of various factors. In that thought, an objective analysis of the Kenyan popular music video for and the question of communication, wider profitable outreach and identity becomes an urgent undertaking. It is also time to converge some thoughts for music producers, video directors and the artistes that can hopefully aide in the improvement of the video medium in terms of holistic communication and how artistes can proceed with assimilation of new styles while keeping a reserve for their own and their cultural identities.

### **Technology and music in Kenya**

Hargreaves (1986) states that music plays a greater part in the everyday lives of more people than at any time in the past. This is partly the result of the extremely rapid technological developments that have occurred in the last two decades or so, allied to the increasing commercialization and economic power of the music industry. In the developed countries of the world at least, the widespread availability and relative inexpensiveness of the Walkman, the Internet, the MIDI interface, the video recorder and more, means that a vast diversity of musical styles and genres is available to us as listeners. The ways in which people experience music, as 'consumers', fans, listeners, composers, arrangers, performers or critics, are far more diverse than at any time in the past, as are the range of contexts in which this takes place.

Technological advancement in Africa from the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century appears to have influenced music making, production and dissemination. Watching television (TV) or a visit to music stores bears evidence of the conquest video technology particularly, has had on the growth of music and musicians in both the urban and rural areas in Kenya.

Technology, as a tool for exploration of artistic possibilities has been multi-fold. For instance, an increased production of music that borrows from both the various folk traditions across Kenya's ethnic



diversity and foreign styles, many self-styled production studios, many camera ‘experts’ regardless of any academic and professional background in the field, and many aspiring artistes making locally produced video productions their launching pad into the music industry as performers. Consequently, there has been an overflow of these productions in the numerous music stores in urban centres, markets, streets hawkers, vendors and public transport vans. The situation has reached the extremes of the artistes hawking their own music to interested buyers on the streets and in social places.

It is not uncommon to find students in secondary schools to the University and other tertiary institutions actively recording music videos wherever they can find space. This paper commends this transformative approach to music development. However, it takes exception on the nature of the productions on a number of fronts.

### **Communication through Sound, Image and Place in the music videos**

Operationally, for this paper, ‘sound’ represents the music (harmonics, rhythm, pitch) and text. ‘Image’ refers to the pictures of characters who playing different roles in the video, while ‘place’ refers to locations at which the music videos are recorded. Inevitably, these three aspects form the axes around which an ideal music video revolves and hence scrutinizing and suggesting ways that each one of them can be enhanced or complemented with a view to achieving meaning is a matter of essence.

Norris (1989) rejected the view held by the school of formalist critics and aestheticians, for whom music is to be understood purely in terms of the laws of mathematical harmony and proportion, and who block any treatment of music in its social and political context. Musical texts are to be understood, as Hirschkop (1989, p. 284), borrowing from Bakhtin, suggests, as ongoing social dialogues made in particular social and historical situations, and reflecting those locations. How are these "social dialogues" to be understood? Who do they involve and what is the process of communication? In other words, how can music as a form of cultural communication be theorized? Here, we can draw ideas from the thoughts of cultural geographers working in other substantive areas. In discussing landscape meanings, Barnes and Duncan (1992) use the notions of discourse, text and metaphor, and in so doing, focus cultural geographers' attention on the producers and consumers of meanings and the contexts of such production and consumption. Burgess (1990) borrows from Johnson's (1986) theory of "circuits of culture" to explore the transformation of environmental meanings in the mass media. Likewise, Squire (1994) argues for the appropriateness of theorizing tourism within a framework of cultural transformations, using Jakobson's (1960) model of linguistics.

Carlson (1996) divides music video clips into two broad categories namely; performance clips and conceptual clips. The author states that when a music video mostly shows an artiste (or artistes) singing or dancing, it is a performance clip. When the clip shows something else during its duration, often with artistic ambitions, it is a conceptual clip.

The obvious distinction that is deducible from this categorization separates those artistes who prefer over projection of their image and duplicating a stage show into a video production. To them, the greatest achievement is actualizing what otherwise would simply be a live stage performance into a performance whose visual strengths are mediated through electronic aides. As long as they too can sit back and watch themselves perform, the satisfaction of having a video to their name is achieved. On the other hand, conceptual clips denote a concept that is fused into the music video. There is a creative effort to go beyond the music and introduce other artistic elements that enhance not only the visual perception, but also the meaning. These additives could be dramatization, communicative sceneries, costumes, dancers among others. It therefore becomes a multi-genre production.



As much as different schools of thought would argue that despite the categorization we have discussed so far, both groups should be commended for attempting to turn abstractions inherent in audio recordings (for that's what reaches more people than live audiences), it is important to critique the initial motive for this venture. Questions will be raised whether the artistes do it for fun, pride in seeing themselves on screen, excitement of the video technology suddenly ceasing to be an imagination and becoming accessible to them, peer pressure or just curiosity.

Emphasizing the aspect of what this paper considers music *as* communication and music *for* communication, Kong (1995) observes that music is a medium through which people convey their environmental experiences -both the everyday and the extraordinary. For example, many everyday taken-for-granted environmental experiences discussed theoretically and empirically via notions such as "sense of place", "space" and "place" (1974b) can be enriched through analyses of musical expressions. Similarly, moments of spectacle or historic import are often captured in song through the filters of music-makers. Indeed, as Reich (1970, p. 247) states, music gives us an understanding of the world, and of other people's feelings, incredibly far in advance of what other media have been able to express.

Gow (1999) helps us to understand what he terms as the rhetorical dimensions of this new type of media. The questions he poses hold the key to interrogating any music video for the purpose it intends to pass across to audiences wherever they will be. The critical questions touch on the dynamics of the communication process, the interaction of the video and aural components and how they assist the viewer to construct meaning. The fundamental question therefore is whether the music video (performance or conceptual clip), as a multidimensional language, does effectively elicit particular feelings and emotions within the spacious universe of affective possibilities. To achieve this, various factors aide in evaluating music videos in Kenyan popular music within the imperatives of art, meaning and realism already stated.

### **Language and expressions in musical communication**

Music is a fundamental channel of communication: it provides a means by which people can share emotions, intentions and meanings even though their spoken languages may be mutually incomprehensible. It can also provide a vital lifeline to human interaction for those whose special needs make other means of communication difficult. Music can exert powerful physical effects, can produce deep and profound emotions within us, and can be used to generate infinitely subtle variations of expressiveness by skilled composers and performers.

From interviews with artistes of popular music in Kenya, their music videos are not directed at themselves. Although a level of video-for-video sake and personal gratification does exist to an almost negligible extent, consideration for an extended audience informs most of the video production efforts. Actualization of this intention still appears distant though. As will be discussed in the foregoing, insistence on vernacular in some of the productions for instance, curtails a larger audience, which then need relevant images that fill up the communication gap.

### **Scenes, lyrics and their representations (Images)**

Most of the popular music videos of the gospel nature have an inclination to anything beautiful. Affiliation to backgrounds of waterfalls, lush gardens, pool sides and high-end hotel lobbies is evident. A closer examination reveals a disconnect between these images and lyrics. I submit that themes of grief ought not to be recorded with a radiant background. Themes of love should be accorded their imagerial relevance. Lyrics on war should not be given a background of swimming pools and affluence.



Yet, these kind of ironical pairing of images, scenes and lyrics are a common feature of the Kenyan popular music video.

According to Kong (1995) geographers have also engaged in thematic analysis of lyrics to explore environmental concerns expressed in music. For example, Jarvis (1985) has identified various themes in the lyrics of rock songs. These include the image of the city, the idea of being on the road and promised lands. Marcus (1975), in his exploration of images of America in rock and roll, discusses similar themes while Henderson (1974) focuses specifically on the attitudes towards and perceptions of New York City as portrayed in popular music from 1890 to 1970. It is therefore not far-fetched to suggest-not demand-that through the sounds and images of popular music video, the Kenyan popular music artiste can portray Kenya. They can portray the cultural diversity in the country. They can portray the Kenyan lifestyles if they are describable.

### **The projection of the artiste**

According to the Social Science Research Council, (1954, p. 974), “acculturative change may be the consequence of direct transmission. It may be derived from non-cultural causes, such as ecological or demographic modifications induced by an impinging culture; it may be delayed, as with internal adjustments following upon the acceptance of alien traits or patterns; or it may be a reactive adaptation of traditional modes of life. Its dynamics can be seen as the selective adaptation of value systems, the processes of integration and differentiation, the generation of developmental sequences, and the operation of role determinants and personality factors.” I wish to discuss my concept of the projection of the identity of the artiste in a popular music video in the light of some of the issues suggested by the council.

So far, attention has been directed to the role of music in contributing to the social construction of identities (national, race, gender, class ...) and of space and place. My feeling is that the media has played a significant role in the construction of the popular music icons around the world. Michael Jackson, Jay Z, 50 Cents, P-Diddy, Snoop Dog, Whitney Houston, Bob Marley, Koffi Olomide, Arlus Marbelle, Lady Smith Black Mambazo, Miriam Makeba-the list runs on from around the world. Most of these artistes might no longer be performing or even alive. However, their identities are daily being constructed and reinforced by local artistes through video representations. My analysis of the popular music video in Kenya reveals a disturbing trend. Artistes-whether gospel or secular-make very commendable effort in composing music for their target audiences. However, in terms of style, and especially with regard to rhythms and choreography, they fall victims of an overt influence from other foreign styles and established artistes. The Congolese *Soukous* and *Ndombolo* styles of dancing are the prominent dancing styles that accompany music in most of the music videos. Despite this style having emerged within the secular domain, gospel artistes use it in the extremes. The youth who venture into rap have adopted the style in its entirety with some simply using vernacular or Kiswahili as the differentiating factor. Apart from that, it is not possible to tell the difference between what they perform and how they perform from that initially originated in black states of United States of America.

May I re-state that in building this trajectory of argument, subjective as it may sound, I am cognizant of the fact that the forces of globalization readily provide these styles for borrowing. Artistes are free to borrow the styles without this kind of adjudication. However, ‘borrowing’ modification’ and ‘appropriation’ to me, would be terms that I can readily propose for use in the current musical developments. I am prosecuting for scenarios where the Kenyan artiste, though using other styles, projects their images beyond that of the originators of the styles. History has artistes who created or propagated music styles that have borne the artistes identity to date. I believe that the Kenyan popular





artiste too, has an opportunity to make music for music sake, venture into all styles available, but be cautious to avoid propagating music legacies of other people apart from his/her own.

I infer that when Seeger (1979) wrote the scholarly work *“What Can We Learn When They Sing? Vocal Genres Among the Suyu Indians of Central Brazil”*, the idea was not, in the stated context, to copy and paste what the vocal genres of the vocal genres among the Suyu Indians. The primary issue was to ‘what can be learnt.’ I believe we learn so much in the course of our cultural interactions across the world. However, what generates the difference is how we appropriate it to project our own new creations. It is the creation of differences from the source and the resultant productions. What we learnt need not be duplicated on ‘as it were’ basis. Our own additions, subtractions, modifications and innovativeness need to emerge. That is my closing argument on the projection debate of our popular music artistes in their musical compositions and performances.

### **Implication for the archive and ethnomusicologists**

Nettl (1964) devotes several pages to sound archives in his *Theory and Method in Ethno-Musicology*. He writes that “The idea of having archives for storing, processing, classifying, and cataloguing ethnomusicological recordings has become basic in the field and has led to the development of a special area of knowledge and skill within ethnomusicology. Archives are, in a sense, equivalent to libraries in other disciplines insofar as their importance in research is concerned.” The author not only notes the importance of archives for storing recordings, he also suggests they had an effect on the development (or lack of development) of ethnomusicological theory as a whole. “The fact that archives have, to a degree, neglected the cultural context of music is perhaps a factor in the relative neglect, until very recently, of this important phase of ethno-musicology” (1964, p. 19). Indeed, as Seeger (1979) observes, the overall profile of patrons at the Archives of Traditional Music has changed over the last decade. It is less limited to ethnomusicology students, and includes more members of the local community and non-specialists.

While the objectification of music together with the rise of mass media transcends geographical space and the locality of particular music traditions, media and technology play at the same time a crucial role in shaping local life worlds or the “production of locality” (Appadurai, 1996), in patterning social interaction (Giddens, 1990) and in constituting publics of various kinds (Warner, 2002). Thus, while sound archives first emerged as a means of the preservation of supposedly vanishing cultural traditions, they also gave way to the deterritorialization of musical cultures that could then reappear in completely different places at different points in time.

According to a report by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA, 1999), records that possess any characteristic or quality of intrinsic value should be retained in their original form if possible. The concept of intrinsic value, therefore, is not relative. However, application of the concept of intrinsic value is relative; opinions concerning whether records have intrinsic value may vary from archivist to archivist and from one generation of archivists to another. Professional archival judgment, therefore, must be exercised in all decisions concerning intrinsic value. Coordination between units holding records within an archival institution also may be necessary. For example, members of units holding similar records whose form may be the subject for study should consult one another to ensure that an adequate but not duplicative selection of records in that form is preserved. Although the concept of intrinsic value may be easier to apply to older records, decisions concerning intrinsic value can be made for all records determined to have sufficient value to warrant archival retention.

I argue that technology and mass media should, and have played a critical role in the creation and storage of sound media that can be accessed anywhere in the world. For the ethnomusicologist, this



development expands opportunities for interaction with various compositions and musical ideas for purposes of analysis. For the archivist, it is a development that expands the means through which music can be archived and retrieved. The only problem that arises when we begin-not necessarily-to think of the implications of the popular music discussed in this paper as archive material. Will the value of the music material simply be in the music itself and movements or will they identify any particular cultural frame of thought? Will this cultural frame be identifiable with anything Kenyan or will it simply be a duplication of what ethnomusicologists might have already studied elsewhere in the continent and beyond? Will the resultant writings by concerned ethnomusicologist be mere comparative efforts or will the writings generate any new knowledge from the popular music video beyond the known?

I submit that even as we theorize about freedom of individual or group artistic expression and choice of music representations, boundaries need to be marked between an artist's individual input and what has been obviously borrowed from elsewhere. The audience needs to be treated to the artist's borrowed or appropriated material, and at the same time, an educated audience needs to be able to separate what was borrowed from what is culturally or artistically the artist's. The question for the ethnomusicologist should not just stop at what did the popular music artist produce? The question should extend to what world did the artist represent? A completely borrowed world, a merger of cultural worlds, or a whole new cultural and stylistic platform capable of ethnomusicological investigation? Any answer to these questions will be useful. I believe in the credibility of ethnomusicologists and archivists, when in the fullness of time, they present popular music currently practiced in Kenya to global consumption.

## **Conclusion**

In Gracyk (2004) terms, the instinct guiding musical behaviour in infancy may be equally valuable in adolescence. But where an infant receives the benefits of the instinct by engaging in music making with others, the self-aware adolescent may receive benefits from the seemingly "passive" activity of recreational listening. The mere act of listening to music can be a model for finding extra-musical identity. I conclude by asserting that if listening can create a musical identity, then composing, performing and recording needs to be approached in such a way that it creates an even more powerful and long-lasting musical identity for popular music artists in Kenya. This paper argues that as a potential archival source, the popular music video productions need to be approached from the considerations of technological professionalism, realistic communicative representations of the performers and sceneries as well as considerations of a cross-cultural market that could want to interact with the videos in international archives. Although prospects of the archive might not be supreme to the artists as they compose global communication. Short-term musical goals should be discouraged. The music videos ought to endeavour to possess a self-ability of transcending ethnic/tribal or personal advocacy. They should, even in their ethnic-based language strategy, be able to speak to a wider audience while representing elements of respective cultures of Kenya in their diversity. The authoritative voice of ethnomusicologists and archivists should dissipate the obvious duplication of musical styles by popular artists in Africa. It is a trend that not only raises concern of re-configuration of piracy-semantically operationalized-but also of a definite irrelevance in a competitive environment of music composition and performance. Artists should borrow. However, their identity and a wider reach should be paramount in the popular music videos.

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