

Exploring the New *Ohangla* Music in the Context Of Urbanization: The Search for Relevance for Sustainability

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Abstract

Ohangla music can be traced to the Luo community of Kenya. Over the years, it has changed in form and texture with the rise of new generations and new demands on the artists. The initial intentions, which were basically socio-cultural, have been overwhelmed by emerging economic trends and needs. In the process, even both instrumental form and manner of performance have been affected by generation changes and the new economic trends. The older and renowned *Ohangla* artists (Jack Nyadundo, Tony Nyadundo, Osogo Winyo and Onyi Papa Jey) established themselves in the *Ohangla* industry with numerous musical compositions and styles which formed the benchmark for this genre of music. Earlier and much older artists performed mainly in social places for entertainment with little or no tangible monetary profits to count. However, many new artists driven by the need to meet the emerging needs of contemporary listenership and monetary motivations have since risen to popularity gaining a competitive edge with the older ones, establishing their styles, content and approaches which though borrow largely from the older tradition, have a unique twist that makes them stand out in their class. This paper examined some of the dynamics involved in balancing between indigenous styles and practice and the modern market-driven trends. The shift in generations has brought into picture interesting questions about content development, language use, instrumentation, and reliance on media for publicity by the artists. Relying on the Theory of Recontextualization in music by Hanninen (2003), the study examined the performances of two selected *Ohangla* artists in Nairobi (Emma Jalamo and Lady Maureen) to highlight how their musical performances reflect a transformation from the indigenous to modern *Ohangla* music. Observation method was used in this investigation. It is hoped that this paper will enlighten the scholarship on the dynamism of *Ohangla* music.

Key Words: *Ohangla*, Luo, Music, Dance, Artist

Introduction

Historically, *Ohangla* music was a Luo ritualistic music which was played during funerals and ceremonies such as the birth of twins or visits to in-laws. The name *Ohangla* remains contested to date. Some people argue that it traces its origins to the slender canonical drum whose membrane is made from the dried skin of the monitor lizard (Ketebul Music, 2017, p. 247). Joseph Oloo, an informant and a veteran *Ohangla* musician from Ugenya, argues that the name was first used in the 1940s to refer to an emerging dance style which was vigorous, but lacked dignity or propriety because it was marked by sexual overtones in its content or lyrics and dance movements. Hence the elders spoke thus about its style: “*Ma enmiel ma ohangoremanade?*” (What a weird and exaggerated dance!). The idea implied here was that the dance was too sexually explicit in both content and movements.

Another argument by Ochieng’ Onumo, an elderly musician from Alego, was that both the name and style of the music was brought in during the migration of the Luo from Busoga in Uganda. The position was supported by the fact that in Central and Eastern Uganda, they used similar drums like those used in *Ohangla*. These were called *omugaabe*, *engalabi* and



mudiri among the Baganda and Basoga. A *benga* pioneer, Ochieng' Nelly, separately argues that the music was influenced by that of the neighbouring Luhya community and was therefore not purely a Luo music.

In South Nyanza, the *Ohangla* drum was known as *kalapapla* because the word seemed to mimic the sound of the drum. *Kalapapla* was referred to as *sigudi*, the Luo articulation of the Luhya musical dance known as *isikuti*, in which drums similar to *Ohangla* were played. This, again, implies that the genre came from the Luhya who are neighbours to the Luo community. Other informants observed that it was possible that the *Ohangla* gained its own character as a Luo dance and later gave way to other Luo musical styles such as *bodi*, *dodo* and *ramogi*.

Generally, Rose A. Omolo-Ongati (2006, p. 144) has described it, the genre involves song and dance accompanied by an ensemble of four to eight tuned drums, distinguished by a long cylindrical drum (*ohangla*, or *kalapapla* in South Nyanza), from which it derives its name. These, together with the *ongeng'o* (a round metal ring struck with an iron rod) form the rhythmic base of the performance. Included are stringed instruments such as the *orutu* (a one-stringed fiddle), and sometimes a wind instrument, the mouth organ (*onanda mar dhok*).

This paper makes a case for music sustainability which is driven by both local and global processes “that act upon all music genres, from technological developments and environmental shifts to rural-to-urban migration and economic and political pressures” (Grant, 2013). These processes have in the recent past influenced the practice of *Ohangla* music in the Kenyan music scene with a host of performers drawing from all available resources to produce music that responds to economic and political pressures. The themes that they sing about are heavily influenced by prevailing topical issues and little that relates to the past and the issues that affected indigenous life. The pressures constitute some of the core factors responsible for the recontextualization process. According to Hanninen (2003), “Things change. Our perceptions of things change. Context changes our perceptions of things.” She adds that “Recontextualization indicates a (listener’s perception of) phenomenal trans-formation of something—a musical idea induced by a change in a musical context.” These two positions capture the reality of *ohangla* music as it is practised today. This genre of Luo music has adjusted itself to the contextual Spatio-temporal dynamics in such a way that like all other musical genres, it has lent itself to recontextualization in order to remain sustainable and relevant to its audience. In the theory of musical recontextualization, Hanninen (ibid.) argues that when we listen to music, we hear musical “things” *in contexts*. Context is both indigenous and modern depending on what needs the musical genre and practice serve. Each context is defined by specific musical features or a conglomeration of features, which Titon (2009) refers to as a product of the ‘ecosystem’ in which music is situated. In modern terms, this ‘ecosystem’ is a myriad of factors that make it possible for a genre of music to remain relevant and sustainable.

Aspects of Recontextualization

There is a difference between the new *Ohangla* music and the indigenous one because the latter was drum-driven, more vigorous and faster in tempo. It was also characteristically dominated by authentic traditional instruments drawn from the immediate locality of the music. However, the former is typically much slower in tempo, leans more towards a fusion of *rhumba* and *bengastyle* and uses Western instruments. The younger and modern *Ohangla* players have tamed the wild dance music, rebranded it and refocused its function to be able to

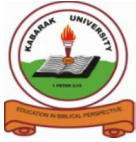


answer to the prevailing contextual needs. The new *Ohangla* has changed so much that it appears like a totally new genre except for the name. There is harmonious yet fortuitous synchrony of the different parts and ideas to remarkable effects as the performances unfold. For example, in many cases, the keyboard has replaced the traditional drums, the metal ring (*Ongeng'o*) and *ajawa* (shakers). During recordings, additional computerized sounds have been used to make the music more exotic while in the process drawing it further away from the indigenous components and function.

In Kenya, indigenous music has followed ethnic contours. The country has 42 tribes with unique values, beliefs and cultural practices. These components characterize the different musical styles of Kenya. With the emergence of new norms, which are either borrowed from the West or result from intercultural experiences, these musical styles have changed tremendously. The styles have undergone changes in the face of urbanization and emerging economic challenges and needs giving rise to new idioms known as *neo indigenous* styles (Ongati, 2008, p. 11). Such new styles defy the indigenous contexts of performance thereby changing the indigenous music into new styles, a process that Schippers (2005, p. 30) calls *recontextualization*. In indigenous contexts, such music was restricted to specific occasions, events and functions. Such ceremonies included funerals, weddings, marriage, child naming, initiations and general recreations. In addition, the audiences were homogenous and sometimes defined along gender and age lines. The performances were also typically participatory due to the communal nature of the communities. According to Barack Oduor's article in the Daily Nation of 13th November 2015 entitled *Kenya: How Technology Saved Ohangla Music*, *ohangla* is "a musical genre that is proving to be popular across the country, even among the modern young Kenyans." This implies the wide and mixed audience that the music now appeals to. The audience cuts across the ethnic divide, age and individual tastes. The message is therefore no longer as vulgar and obscene as it was in the indigenous context. Such depth of public vulgarity and obscenities limited the performance only to an adult audience.

These fundamental indigenous characteristics have significantly changed with time. *Ohangla* musical dance is now performed in totally different contexts and to an audience with no common cultural denominator (Omondi, 1992, p. 5). The venues include nightclubs, bars and restaurants in both rural and urban centres. The artists are now more concerned with producing music that fits the taste of the contemporary audience than aligning the music to its indigenous setting and purpose. This change of practice is influenced by time, money and the demands of the audience unlike it was in the indigenous settings. In essence, *ohangla* tends to live in two different worlds: the modern and the traditional. The current *ohangla* appears heavily influenced by *benga* and *rhumba* in the manner in which it parodies the two styles.

In addition, the new *ohangla* players go in search of a wider and less homogenous listenership through reliance on technological appliances. There is heavy use of social media, the television, Youtube and other potential sources of exposure for publicity. These platforms act as forms of connection with the perceived audience. The platforms fill up the space that exists today between the artist and his audience. In the indigenous settings, there was hardly a gap of this kind because everyone knew everyone else. As a matter of fact, the artist knew his audience by name and sometimes composed in their praises on an instance. This is no longer possible hence the need to use such platforms to connect with one's audience. Essentially, this approach reduces the space between the artist and his or her audience considerably and



transcends ethnic parameters. In the indigenous setting, the players were often sought for by the community and enticed by praises to perform in social events. This is no longer the case because of the diversity of the audience and the Spatio-temporal and economic realities.

Sustainability is a policy concern in the current world. Governments and non-governmental organisations have invested time and money to not only protect artists but also enhance the performance environments. Grant (2013) talks about “policy instruments” that ‘form tools of reference through which nation-states can take steps to protect and promote intangible cultural heritage, including music.’ The involvement of governments and other organisations in the sustenance of music (*ohangla* included) stems from the departure from the little developed indigenous performances in the villages to the wider and more dynamic economy where the artist must struggle to fit into the new dimensions. *Ohangla* music like all other genres requires a collaboration between the artists and such institutions in order to find exposure, protection and a structured system of operation. Besides, such policies acknowledge the importance of music to the local and national economy. Significantly, the “most influential of policy instruments at the international level are the conventions, declarations, and treaties developed over the past decades by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which form a foundation on which governments, policy-makers, non-government organizations and other stakeholders may develop practical approaches to strengthen cultural (including musical) sustainability” (Grant, *ibid.*). Today, there are instruments for safeguarding traditional cultural expressions and the protection and promotion of cultural diversity that are influential in governing the relationship between artists and governments (UNESCO 1989, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007). In Kenya, there are bodies such as Kenya Association of Music Producers (KAMP), Performers Rights Society of Kenya (PRISK), Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK), Music Publishers Association of Kenya (MPAKE), Music Associations Alliance of Kenya (MAAK), Permanent Presidential Music Commission (PPMC), among many others, that have different mandates to regulate operations of music in the country. The underlying principle is the management of music activities for the benefit of all stakeholders. This kind of engagement was non-existent in the indigenous contexts and is a significant step in the realignment of contexts for sustainability.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the historical flow of *Ohangla* music in Kenya and the dynamics in the management of the new business demands which treat the performance of *Ohangla* as work and the leisure-related aspects which border on entertainment both to the artist and the audience. These are considered in terms of content development, language use, instrumentations, media use and projections by the artists. Ethical issues are also an important segment in the performance process especially in a setting that is both work and leisure-oriented. *Ohangla* music has significantly transformed itself and, going by the flow of developments, will continue to do so. The emerging technological ideas will soon introduce substitutes for the indigenous instruments and there may not be a need any more to carry the triangle, the shaker, bottles, rattles, drums made from local materials and so on to the performance stage.

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