

Chapter 14

Lyrics of Protest: Music and Political Communication in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The history of Kenya is loaded with continuous moments when music played a key role in expressing various issues in the country. Music is one of the most important modes through which ordinary Kenyans express their wishes, identity, frustrations and aspirations. For a long time, freedom of speech in Kenya, especially on issues touching political injustice had been curtailed. However, musicians in Kenya offered an alternative means of challenging the political status quo in the country by use of musical lyrics which address injustices directly or metaphorically. What is the place of music in Kenya's political landscape? Has political music in Kenya made a difference in governance and in educating the masses on their political and social rights? Have political songs helped change the political and social climate in Kenya? These issues are examined in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The history of world's politics is marked by a close interplay between art, music and culture. Oftentimes, music does not only play the role of cultural identity, but also becomes a central element in the expression and description of the world's political processes. Almost all political events in most countries are marked by music - whether it is expressed in the form of a national anthem, a military march, a police band, dignitary's entertainment, cultural performance, protest songs among others. Music has also played a key role in various liberation movements in the world. According to Hirsch (2002), there has probably never been a revolution that did not use songs to give voice to its aspirations. Hirsch's assertion is evident in various historical political happenings such as the Civil Rights movements in the U.S., the Apartheid Struggle in South Africa and the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt, Tunisia and other parts of the Middle East, where music became the central tool for protests, demonstrations, and mobilization

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of masses against various ideologies and regimes. In line with the above observation, Street (2001) asserts that music and politics are inseparably linked, as each animates the other. Street also contends that wherever music inspires collective thought and action, it becomes a “political act”.

In Africa, music is a natural, vibrant heritage and an essential cultural expression of life. In fact, the life of a native African is often culturally sung and danced from the cradle to the grave (Magak et al, 2015). Song and dance have always been on the menu of nearly all important occasions in Africa, ranging from childbirth, harvesting, marriage and even onto political arenas. Odhiambo (2008) contends that Africa tells her history, proclaims her identity and creates her heritage through music. Unlike some parts of the world where music is used purely for entertainment purposes, music in Africa is used to communicate various issues, from petty village gossip to weighty social issues and problems.

This chapter investigates the connection between music and politics in Kenya. It examines the country’s history of democratic struggle through the lens of music, and takes the reader through different political epoch in the country and how the politics of a time frame informed the musical lyrics of the same era. Data for this study were based on library and ethnographic sources. Library data were collected from various journals and books that have been written on music and politics in Kenya, while ethnographic data include an assessment of audio-visual recording of protest songs at various political-historical moments in Kenya. Overall, this study is presented from the perspective of communication research on the interface between music and politics in Kenya.

In researching and articulating this chapter, the author adopted a humanistic approach to textual analysis, in contrast to the behavioral approach that would require the measurement of the impact of messages disseminated through music on the Kenyan audience. In this regard, what is crucial is the drawing of inference and meaning- making, not a quantitative analysis on impact.

In Kenya, like any other African country, people use music as a form of cultural and social expression. Consequently, the message in songs is key. Such messages may be couched as metaphors or euphemisms with the intention to describe, ridicule or out rightly protest against certain injustices or political processes. On the other hand, the messages may also be used to applaud praiseworthy actions, decisions and activities.

MUSIC AND POLITICS IN KENYA

Kenya gained its independence in 1963. Since then, its democratic space has evolved from the Mau Mau liberation movement that sought to expel the colonialist, Britain, to a modern fight for multipartism and democracy. Throughout this democratic continuum, the country has found itself in a continuous political struggle that is characterized by street demonstrations, civil strikes, and political activism among others. How did Kenyan musical artists respond to the political upheavals that faced the country at different stages of the political struggle? Each stage of the struggle had songs that were composed, incorporated and sung to resonate with its contemporary issues and events (Kariuki, 2014). The songs ranged from choruses that were sang by political prisoners to fully recorded songs by popular artists. It is as if the political history changed the way musicians composed songs in Kenya. Thus, Kenyan musicians went from composing songs on issues such as love, harvest, and religion, to addressing and driving the political agenda of the day.

The incorporation of protest songs in a struggle is viewed as a powerful pillar for that struggle. According to Kenya’s former Chief Justice Willy Mutunga, “Music is an essential tool for change” (The

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