Kalenjin Popular Music and the Contestation of the National Space in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The social and political re-arrangement that followed the radical shift to multi-party politics in Kenya in 1992 gave rise to diverse responses in the field of creative arts. Popular music especially was at the forefront in both the contestation of the status quo and in the configuration of emerging socio-political spaces and identities. By 2002, the year of the election that ended Daniel Arap Moi’s twenty-four year grip on power, numerous ethnic FM Radio Broadcasting stations had come into being, thanks to the waning state control of the media industry. One immediate consequence of this was the popularization of ethnic music and the consolidation of ethnic identities through such music and through live call-in programs. Ethnic popular music and the ethnic FM Radio stations relaying it became powerful sites for constituting new spaces of expression alternative to that authored by the nation-state.

This paper addresses how Kalenjin popular music, played mainly on the Kalenjin language KASS FM Radio based in Nairobi and also broadcasting on Internet, participates in the consolidation of Kalenjin identities by recasting the collective national space—as governed by the nation-state—as a sphere of influence potentially injurious to imagined Kalenjin cultural and economic interests. It becomes a music of identity that resorts to history, mythology and narration as a means of reshaping Kalenjin self-definition and culture. But while paying attention to these forms of ethnic self-definition and how they are used to counter the homogenizing and hegemonising logic of the national space, this paper also addresses the contradictions that circumscribe this music’s gesture towards the pure ethnic while operating from a space that is already hybrid and multicultural, shaped as it were by a confluence of non-Kalenjin ways of life, values and ideas. I conclude by showing how the emergence of such new sites of power brokering has challenged the nation-state’s governance of the public domain.
Introduction

One particularly salient feature of Kalenjin popular music since the late 1990s is its articulation and constitution of a “Kalenjin” consciousness. “Kalenjinness” is itself a fairly recent construct for, until at least 1940s, there were no people called Kalenjin. The sub-ethnic groups who were until then referred to by missionaries and colonial administrators merely as Nandi-speaking peoples, transformed themselves into the Kalenjin, “an imagined community which now included the Pokot, Tugen, Keiyo, Marakwet, Nandi, Kipsigis, and the Terik” (Ogot, 2003:15). As would follow any cultural construction of community traditions were invented and histories reconfigured to establish social cohesion and a sense of group membership. This “symbolic construction of community”, as Cohen (1985) would call it, by the Kalenjin elite in the twilight of British colonialism in Kenya was, like similar moves among the other Kenya ethnicities, necessitated not only by the need to address “local rural grievances and aspirations” (Ogot, 2003:12) but also by the inevitable strategic re-alignment and power brokering ahead of independence.

On the other hand, the resurgence of Kalenjin consciousness in the post-Moi era is given impetus by a confluence of factors that include; heightened ethnicisation of national politics by both the state and other political actors, the overriding sense of persecution in the post-Moi era and, ironical enough, independence from Moi’s patronage of Kalenjin culture and politics. It is not within the scope of this paper to delve into the details of these factors though. My interest, to which I now turn, is how Kalenjin popular music, as one of the sites for the production of ‘Kalenjinness’, responded to the challenges of this transitional moment, by reworking and repackaging cultural symbols, historical pasts and folkloric themes to enable a conception of a homogenous Kalenjin community with a common past, but also with an assumed common threat in the present: the nation-state, now resignified as the symbol of a Kikuyu hegemony.

Like in the term Kalenjin, the nomenclature “Kalenjin popular music” is similarly one of convenience. I use it here to designate that particular form of popular music—whether secular dance music or gospel music—that consciously projects, redefines and revalorizes the discourses of “Kalenjinness”. The production of such music began in earnest after the first multi-party elections of 2002 and the effect and proliferation of its acoustics was fortuitously guaranteed by the emergence of Kass FM radio station a year later. Indeed, there is an interesting symbiotic relationship between the identity politics of Kass FM and that of
Kalenjin popular music of the type described above, and I will now discuss this briefly before turning to the music texts.

Kass FM radio markets itself as ‘Tuget ab Bik ab Kalenjin’ (the voice of the Kalenjin people). This blatant identification by a radio station with the ethnic constituency of its listeners is, of course, not unique to Kass FM. The many vernacular stations owned by the Royal Media Services and which enjoyed a lot of goodwill from the newly installed Kibaki regime were already doing this before Kass FM hit the air waves. What was distinctive about the latter’s reconstitution of its intended audience is the way it turned such project into a fully-fledged reconstruction of the primordialness of Kalenjin ethnic identity. It was not just ‘imagining’ its community of listeners in order to boost advertising sales, it was in effect, giving form and meaning to a resurgent cultural formation, thus drawing the attention of the state which, although it had expanded democratic space to some extent, was still not comfortable with unpolic ed auditory spaces. One crucial radio chat show, Kakipta, particularly re-assembled the past in order to demonstrate the common origins and traditions of the Kalenjin and chart a common political future. It was in the Kakipta program that Kiipkoeech arap Sambu, a PhD in Egyptology, disseminated his compelling research into the religious and cultural connection between the Kalenjin and the ancient Egyptian civilization. Another program, hosted by the same Egyptologist reconstructed the history of the Orkoiiy, Kalenjin (especially Nandi and Kipsigis) political cum spiritual leaders. This program inspired efforts to iconize Koitalel Samoei, the leader of the Nandi war of resistance against imposition of British colonial rule, as a national hero. Whether it was out of political expedience or a genuine acknowledgement of Koitalel’s heroism, the Kibaki administration responded to this by funding a national mausoleum for Koitalel in the Rift Valley town of Nandi Hills, the site of his interment.

In the airing of these programs, music with relevant thematic content especially on Kalenjin unity, culture and history was played during the interludes and also as signature tunes at the start or at the end of the shows. Initially, such music was scarce but very soon composers took the cue and began writing music inspired by the discussions on the radio chat shows but which now responded more directly to the political scenario in the national space; a scenario that was itself marked by increasing organization of political access along ethnic lines.
Negotiating the Local and the National

Reading after Connel and Gibson, Michel Titlestad asserts that “... soundscapes are a compelling basis for the analysis of tactical practices that link space, history and identity in individuals’ attempts to make sense of their quotidian existence”. In Kalenjin popular music the homogenizing and hegemonising presence of the nation-state is answered through discursive re-territorialization of the ‘local’ space where a naturalized identity between people and place is established while its relationship with the public space is redefined. Jane Kotut of the Keiyo Stars band tries this feat in her track Rift Valley which she released in 2003 around the time of the controversial referendum on the new constitution. Here, the title “Rift Valley” refers not to the Kenyan section of the Great Rift Valley, the land formation stretching from the Red Sea to Mozambique in Southern Africa, but to the ethnic profile of one of Kenya’s most expansive administrative unit called Rift Valley Province and whose dominant inhabitants are the Kalenjin and the Maasai. In Kotut’s lyrics the territory and the people are imagined as one and the same; one derives its identity and sustenance from the other. The opening verse in the song declares Rift Valley ‘our homeland’ and proceeds to list the Kalenjin sub-ethnic groups as those that qualify to be tagged under the possessive plural ‘our’.

Rift Valley, eeh woe oliinyo, Rift Valley eeh, our homeland
Rift Valley, oliinyo achek Kalenjin, Rift Valley, our home, the Kalenjin
Rift Valley, Kipsigis, Tugen ak Nandi, Rift Valley, Kipsigis, Tugen and Nandi
Rift Valley, Keiyo, Marakwet ak Pokot Rift Valley, Keiyo, Marakwet and Pokot
Rift Valley, Sabiny ak Maasai ak Turkana Rift Valley, Sabiny ak Maasai, Turkana
Rift Valley, oliinyo eeh. Rift Valley, our homeland, oh

In her list of the inhabitants of this territory Kotut includes the Maasai and the Turkana, who though not belonging to the Kalenjin ethnic group are indigenous inhabitants of the Rift Valley. But her list is also tactically exclusionary and this is significant in the sense that by keeping silence about the multi-ethnic nature of the Rift Valley Province, which is, apart from the Coast Province, the only province settled by ethnicities from all over Kenya, Kotut contests the official position of the state—which declares that every Kenyan, regardless of his/her ethnic identity, has a right to settle and work anywhere in the country. By this very silence Kotut and her Keiyo Stars locates her lyrics in Kenya’s discourse of nation-building.

In Kenya, the state’s reiteration of the basic constitutional right of its citizens to settle in any
place in the country has always emerged in contexts where political mobilization along ethnic lines gives rise to reification of territory and ethnic boundaries, and which in certain cases, consequently threatens state hegemony and its policies of national homogeneity. The paradox, though, is that by claiming sole legitimacy in the formation of collective identity and national culture, through a dominant discourse that imagines national identities in homogenous and monolithic terms, the nation-state creates its own structures of exclusion and inclusion. As if in response to this discourse, Kalenjin popular music generates a counter (ethnic) nationalism which promises a more inclusionary form of belonging to its members than that provided by the nation-state. Yet, even in Kotut’s own lyrics, tension is not only evident in the relationship between the ethnic and the national, in which the former struggles against the hegemony of the latter; it also emerges when attempts to imagine Kalenjin identity in homogenous terms is haunted by the existence of contentious identities within the Kalenjin ethnicity. This is, perhaps, why in another track titled “Keiyo”, Kotut retreats from the idea of the pan-ethnic Kalenjin to articulate, instead, a Keiyo identity. Keiyo, as I have noted, is one of the sub-ethnicities of the Kalenjin and the fact that Kotut and her music band settles on this name for their identity points to the competing identities among the Kalenjin and the impossibility of a homogenous Kalenjin identity. The track “Keiyo” unlike “Rift Valley” which sees the national space as problematic relates the Keiyo to the wider Kalenjin and seeks to assert its difference from it. This anxiety is captured in the following verses of the track “Keiyo”.

Keiyo, oh, omete Keiyo kolenge
Keiyo ko komasta age ne matami ng’ala
Amechut tukukap Keiyo ngo mengen Keiyo
Keiyo you mi murenik che kigoger tai
Kiotarboch koywek che kiiboru
Iwatet nebo Goiin ak nebo Goi, eeh
Ara menyo sinenyo Keiyo nguno?

Keiyo, oh, leave Keiyo to prosper
Keiyo is a peaceful country
Do not interfere with Keiyo if you know nothing about Keiyo
Keiyo is found progressive men
You destroyed the stone-beacons that
Used to distinguish this house and that other house
So who are we as of now?

For sure, it is not quite obvious who the ‘you’ refers to in Kotut’s lyrics, but the use of the expression, ‘this house and that other house’ denote the popular reference, among the Kalenjin, to distinct clans and the sub-ethnic groups that constitute the Kalenjin. Kotut’s dilemma is that the desire for a pan-ethnic identity, the Kalenjin, with the expansive territory,
the rift valley, which rivals well the hegemonic nation-state called Kenya, marginalizes the specific Keiyo identity where she belongs most. Ethnic boundaries, Joan Nagel has noted, “determine who is a member and who is not and designate which ethnic categories are available for individual identification at a particular time and place.” Following this, one can state that the ethnic categories available for individual identification are not necessarily the sum total of the histories and cultures of the groups that constitute the ethnic block; they are, mostly always, categories provided by the majority culture within the group. A pan-ethnic Kalenjin identity, for example, shows-cases more of Kipsigis and Nandi histories and cultures than those of the others, the reason being that these two are not only the most populous but also because their early contact with colonial modernity gave them high visibility. Incidentally, the main dialects used in Kass FM, despite its claims to a Kalenjin ‘kutit’ (language), are Nandi and Kipsigis. This, however, is not to deny the fact that political mobilization of Kalenjin ethnicity was so effective that, in the 2008 general elections, they voted as a block in support of the Orange Democratic Party (ODM).

In Kalenjin popular music, the national is seen as anti-thetic to the local, but not always. In the songs of Geoffrey Koskei and the Makichei Boys Band, the national formation, rather than contradict the local space, inspires it and sets pace for it. In Koskei’s figuration, the nation is the “the rest of the country” but which also includes the Kalenjin, and it is upon the latter to figure out how best to embed herself in it without losing her identity. What goes on outside the Kalenjin space is as important as what goes within and can only be ignored by the Kalenjin to their peril. He asks the question, “Lene emet oh bororiet nyo?” (Our people, what do you make of the pulsations of the rest of the country? What do her beats tell us?). He then proceeds: “The rest of the country is matching ahead / what about us? Let us run too/ but let us support one another like pots”). The metaphor of the pots, which refers here to the need for intra-ethnic harmony and unity, is derived from the huge African traditional rounded pots of which one cannot stand on its own and will tumble and roll unless all are skillfully arranged to prop each other in perfect balance. To date, this song provides the signal tune for the Kass FM live call-in current affairs show which discusses Kalenjin affairs in the context of national politics.

One of the ways in which the nation is ‘othered’ in Kalenjin music is through articulation of a distinctive Kalenjin landscape which must be protected from exploitation by “outsiders”. If Mt. Kenya features in national consciousness as one of the symbolic markers of the imagined
Kenyan nation, in the Kalenjin ethnic consciousness “Tulwop Kony”, otherwise known as Mt. Elgon, generates a unifying myth of origin for the Kalenjin sub-ethnic groups, as it is remembered as the last place of sojourn before the splintering of the group into the eight sub-ethnic units. However, Mt. Elgon is not the place left behind, it is the ancestral home and the Sabaot, the other Kalenjin sub-ethnic group living here, are given a special place as Kap Gugo, i.e. those who remained to guard the ancestral land. In the music of Kipchamba Tabotuk and that of Geoffrey Koskei, the Hills of Tindiret (in the Southern tip of Nandi district) and the Nandi escarpment are represented as corridors of defence against the enemies, the latter always lurking somewhere within the nation. The symbolic status of Tindiret and Nandi escarpment derives from its role as natural fortifications during the eleven year Nandi war of resistance against the imposition of British rule. The Nandi fighters would attack from the hills and disappear back into what, to the colonial army, might have appeared hostile and ‘primitive terrain’, but which to the Nandi was a fortified, habitable world, whose caves acted as impenetrable bunkers. Koskei praises Tindiret thus,

\[
Tindiret nenyoe ne mahalokobunyo \\
Tindiret nenyoe ngoliel kegol bai \\
Ne kitabeniwareng netebess
\]

Our Tindiret, no enemy can encircle it or penetrate it
Our Tindiret, her flashes of lightening and rumbling of thunder is a signal for us to seize the moment
from its peak the whole land is surveyed and guarded

In a series of images, the Rift Valley landscape is at times represented as a tough country that no one can dare to lay siege, but at other times she is feminized and projected as a weak “mother” who must be protected from the marauding wild beasts from beyond. Kotut again does this repeatedly in her music:

\[
Rift Valley, Achaminaneeweliinyo \\
Rift Valley, oripkei motooyatikereri \\
Rift Valley, nga kass kechupinarire
\]

Rift Valley, I adore you my mother
Rift Valley, keep guard, fend off exploiters
When I hear you being bad-mouthed, I cry
Rift Valley, Sinendet ab Kugo ak Kogo
Rift Valley, the blessed land of our ancestors

Rift Valley, sou be kap kong ngeusin
I shed tears whenever you are oppressed

Rift Valley, arire kila eng inye
Rift Valley, I worry daily about you

Achame kamenyu, noto ko Rift Valley,
I adore my mother, that is Rift Valley

Ongemarar bett ak kemboi
Let us guard it, day and night

Sima ung’egi tiongik ap timin,
so that no wild beasts can take refuge here

The landscape in this sense provides the necessary imagery or symbolic resources for the idealization of the “homeland”, the definition of self, the marking of the contours of belonging, and also acts as the site for performing heroic histories. This landscape then, marked by unique histories, enables the enactment of difference from the nation and the possibilities of alternative identity formation.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, one would say of recent Kalenjin popular music that its sudden interest in the revalorization of Kalenjin ethnic identities and contestation of national space is a response to the increasing ambivalence of national politics which does not seem to guarantee affiliation and inclusion anymore. However, the desire for distance from the space of the nation creates its own anxieties when the local seems to reproduce similar ambivalences. The solution to these anxieties seems to lie in the Koskei’s music attacks the unitary logic of the nationalist discourses of the nation-state but without returning to the essentialisms of the local, Kalenjin cultures.
Notes

1. The term Kalenjin is derived from the Nandi word meaning “I tell you” and was coined by Kalenjin students in the elite Alliance High School in the late 1940s to refer to the Kalenjin as a collectivity.

2. The Nandi, were perhaps the most known of the Kalenjin sub-ethnic group probably due to their protracted resistance against the British colonial occupiers. Nandi resistance to colonial rule, under the leadership of Koitalel Samoei lasted for eleven years from 1895 to 1906. For a full account of this see Matson, A. T (1972). *Nandi Resistance to British Rule. 1895-1906.* Nairobi: East African Publishing House.

3. It also includes the Sabaot of Mt. Elgon which is excluded in Ogot’s list.

4. This is not to mean that such a thing as homogenous Kalenjin community exists. In fact Kalenjin ethnicity is as heterogeneous as any other in Kenya. Mutual linguistic incomprehensibility is evident and there is nothing really as Kalenjin language. However, a pan-ethnic Kalenjin consciousness does exist and is often articulated into broader Kalenjin projects.

5. The Kibaki government would on several occasions in consequent years attempt to withdraw the Kass FM’s broadcast license. Twice in a span of a year it was stopped from broadcasting for several days.

6. His research on the topic is published as *Was Isis Asis? The Kalenjin People’s Egypt Origins: A Study in Comparative Religion.*

7. One of the most contentious issues in the 2003 government sponsored version of the draft constitution was the proposal that touched on land tenure. The proposed land reform was perhaps misunderstood by the Kalenjin to mean redistribution of land. Land owners in Rift valley still boast of big agricultural farms.

8. Orange Democratic Movement, popularly known simply as ODM, is a national party whose presidential candidate was Raila Odinga. The party claims it won the 2008 presidential elections but was rigged out of victory by the Kibaki regime. The party has since entered into a 50-50 coalition government with Kibaki’s Party of National Unity (PNU).

9. It is worth noting here the fact that Mt. Elgon, as an administrative district is actually in Western Province and not in Rift Valley. The fact that in the Kalenjin imagination this locatedness does not alienate the Sabot shows ethnic affiliation as more ‘real’ than national identity.
Cited Works


