

Commentary on Communicating COVID-19 Prevention through Kenyan Music and Songs: An Emerging Public Health Discography

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Abstract

What are the cultural and policy roles of musicians in combating COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya? This commentary directly describes an emerging contribution of artists who, in a short time, produced various musical songs and recordings with the general purpose of educating Kenyans on how to protect themselves from COVID-19 infections. This essay demonstrates the importance of considering artists and community influencers in implementation of public health policies when developing tool kits to combat pandemics.

Keywords: Musicians, Artists, Kenyan Music, COVID-19, Communications

INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) is not the first outbreak of a contagious disease in Kenya. In fact, before independence, the 1918 influenza pandemic or the so-called Spanish Flu reached Kenya via Mombasa through veterans returning from the World War (Andayi, 2020). And, in recent memory, HIV/AIDS touched nearly all families in the country. From a historical and comparative angle, just how colonial and post-colonial administrations handled these outbreaks is a subject in which we hardly delve. And we won't do it here. However, if we were to do so in a detailed manner, we would certainly entertain the idea of exploring the role of community in joining efforts to prevent the spread of contagious diseases, especially in providing a sense of calmness, hope, and preventative information to curb the spread of death causing illness. Given the centrality of music and song in African cultures, there is certainly room to unearth just how musicians and song writers contribute to the national efforts to not only heal societies and also prevent the scourge from spreading.

When COVID-19 arrived in Kenya, initially through persons who had travelled to Europe and the United States of America, the government, following cues from the World Health Organization (WHO), employed a communication and messaging strategy that emphasized fairly simple public health mitigation "to do" things. In other words, the Ministry of Health, as lead agency, working in liaison with the Office of the President and other agencies called upon Kenyans to join in the war against this invisible virus. President Uhuru Kenyatta characterized it as a war and constituted a National Emergency Response Committee on the Coronavirus Pandemic charged to work with the National Security Council to slow down the epidemic (NTV, 2020a).

The government acknowledged, as did the WHO, the centrality of communications in management of pandemics. The need for concise, trustworthy and accurate information is considered key to combating the COVID-19 pandemic. WHO's guidelines outlined the communication road map for governments to embrace and tweak according to their specific cultural needs (WHO, 2008). These guidelines mirrored those that undergird policy frameworks

in the advanced countries, which were based on scientific understanding of epidemiology (see for example, Taylor, et al., 2009; Tumpey et al., 2018; Vaughn & Tinker, 2009).

For Kenya, the public guidelines proved unworkable without incorporation of the highly influential musicians into the communication and messaging efforts. Musicians on their own accord and also through informal and formal requests from various arms of governments swung into action to shape the narrative that COVID-19 presented an existential threat to society and, therefore, required cooperative efforts. Musicians rendered this type of service during the HIV/AIDS outbreak and were not, therefore, reinventing the wheel. For example, the late Ayub Ogada had collaborated with other artists on the album *Spirit of Africa* (2001), which was a part of an effort to create awareness of the HIV/AIDS scourge and also to raise money for the mitigation efforts. By all standards, therefore, the creativity and output of Kenyan musicians was remarkable.

Armed with the knowledge that Kenya's mobile telephony and internet infrastructure reached all corners of the country, there was also potential that musical messages on COVID-19 would receive maximum outreach. Music contributes to society in multiple ways and, at this time, we reflect on its role in broadcasting information about the dangers of COVID-19. We offer this commentary to supplement the important work captured in various anthropological studies on the place of music in African society.

The list of cutting-edge scholarship on this subject appears in numerous first-class journals that include *Practicing Anthropology*, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, *African Studies Review* and *African Music*, just to mention a few. Still, there is an expectation that more work is required for social scientists to research further on the richness of Kenyan music. Kenya's scholars should actively engage in scholarly activities that will address some of the emerging trends in the roles of the country's vibrant music and song in communication and wellness.

In this commentary, however, the objective is to stimulate the debate about modes of communication and messaging about the COVID-19 pandemic and to offer an early assessment and commentary on existing representations of the public health narratives. The guiding questions are, what messages were portrayed in musical forms indigenous or popular in Kenya during the periods the country experienced the coronavirus pandemic? These sorts of questions are motivational not only for scholarship, but also in terms of understanding the role of music and song in public policy.

In terms of scope, to our advantage, although it is important to consider the importance of theories of ethnomusicology, that is an assignment for scholars with deeper knowledge than myself. There is an advantage of not doing so. That is, we avoid the orderly and formal rigor associated with such perspectives. Instead, we recognize that there is a fair amount of digression and focus on Kenya's music and musicians as an area study enterprise. This realization allows us to navigate freely through the various genres and songs including informal styles devoid of inclinations of theoretical frameworks developed in ethnomusicological studies. With such freedom in mind, the next section responds to the question, just what do we mean by Kenyan music?

What is Kenyan music?

Is there such a thing as "thing or idea" as Kenyan music? From a scholarly perspective, this question had already been deliberated upon within the context of "African music." Agawu (2003), wondered if "African" music could be defined. It turns out that when one turns to the entertainment

and Showbiz pages of the *Daily Nation*, *Standard*, *The People Daily*, or any other weekly magazines on music in Kenya, they are bound to answer in the affirmative. This, they would do through covering local artists and assigning the label “Kenya” to their musical forms.

However, there are those who may want to debate and present a more nuanced or ambiguous answer. Perhaps, following Gerhard Kubik (2010, pp. 10-11), one may posit that it is not always possible to link stylistic traits in African music to ethnic groups or tribes, as we know it in Kenya. Observers of Kenya’s vast music scene, know, for example, that *Benga*, although a fusion of various styles is popular across many of the ethnic groups of Kenya and Africa at large (Osusa & Odidi, 2017). And Benga was frequently fused with Rumba, which has many affinities with Congolese, English Waltz, Caribbean and Afro-Cuban music thus making it difficult to draw musical boundaries. Kenya’s leading music producer, Tabu Osusa discloses that although Benga is the dominant musical form in the country, a vast majority of younger generations lack an identity and are good at imitations (Osusa, in Biko, 2017; Osusa, 2017). The list of those who have produced “cocktails and crossovers” musical forms is long, and it includes the likes of hip-hop crew Ukoo Fulani, Abbas Kubaff (hip-hop), Nyota Ndogo’s work rooted in modified taarab (Arabic), and rapper Cannibal. A similar argument holds for those who produce generic gospel music and have no theoretical form. These artists also collaborate and produce various music videos that defy formal identification.

One may offer many other examples of fusing different genres. For example, Taarab, may be associated with Swahili and other ethnic groups living in counties of the Coastal region but, there are various artists from “upcountry” who have at times infused it in their musical products. So, we must be aware that the concept of “Kenyan music” is probably undefined. And that is where we are most safe.

However, one may sketch a few contours of the musical forms produced within Kenya and by Kenyan musicians or artists or as the late gospel singer Lydia Abura remarked, musicians are scientists who present their work artistically (Abura, 2016). The musicians, however, one characterizes them are creative individuals or groups who have different styles, repertoire and genres. There are several genres that are distinctly peculiar to Kenya, as a geographic entity and that is, with advice, the focus here. This does not ignore the existence of numerous styles and sounds that have been fused into beautiful forms in the service of Kenyan audiences.

Musicians and their cultural roles in communication

Most musicians and song producers, regardless of styles or instruments cited, have a place in Kenya’s complex cultural system. They are visible during mourning—in dirges, weddings, worship services, witchcraft activities, cultural ceremonies, at entertainment and dance venues, and even during war and times of calamity. Music, therefore, is central to defining or capturing different moments of life, including at times of illness and pandemics such as was presented by COVID-19. Again, to quote Lydia Abura, musicians are the mouthpiece of society and have a role to play in changing the lives of members of society. Here is how she put it, “As long as two or three people listen to my music and change something about their lives, I will have achieved my goals” (Abura, in Odidi, 2016).

From a purely communication and messaging standpoint, music produced during the COVID-19 pandemic deserves our critical appraisal. This is our goal, for at least two reasons: to

answer the scholarly issues mentioned above and to provide historical context to presentations in music forms produced during the trying challenges of the COVID-19 times.

Communicating pandemic mitigation through music and songs; An emerging discography

In order to gain better understanding of the relative importance of music and song in the fight against COVID-19, we sample various musical and song presentations in record and archived on available music websites, social media and other digital file devices. The next section describes these art forms as produced by Kenyan nationals living mostly in Kenya. The broad theme of the songs and music is in promoting information about combating the disease in the country and community at large.

Among the earliest presentations on COVID-19 was a Nairobi-based Congolese group Bilenge Musica's du Congo's rumba style *CoronaVirus* which set the tone in calling upon Kenyans to wash their hands, social distance and take measures to prevent the disease from spreading. Written in Kiswahili, the recording also emphasized that the coronavirus does not choose anyone's social standing. Importantly, this record was also a lamentation, a speculation on the origins of the coronavirus (Bilenge Musica, 2020; Otenyo, 2020, p.13). A similar refrain is expressed in Boaz Jagingo's (2020) *Tuo Corona* which is a fusion of traditional Luo Orutu and modern instruments.

In addition, Onyi Jalamo's Luo *Ohangla* genre musical form *Corona Mbaya Sana*, was a reminder of the need to follow the hygiene practices required for combating the pandemic. Ohangla's beat is driven by several drum beats and traditional Nyatiti instruments. Similar messages were carried in Danny P Mboka's *Kolona* (Kamba lyrics), Salome Wairimu (in *Janga la Corona*), and Naftali Shitoka and Caro Ivelia's title on the same disease (Luhya lyrics). Naftali Shitoka's lyrics trace the origin of coronavirus to China. In musical conversations with singing partner Caro Ivelia, the two describe coronavirus as a form of deadly flu, *omuyeka kwa amarore* (Shitoka & Ivelia, 2020). Other Luhya artists like Joseph Shisia Wasira and Damso Mtsotso and Sammy Mang'ara (2020) also added their voice to the numerous compositions on coronavirus awareness. Wanyonyi Kakai's (2020) *Corona's* music video adapts the rhythm from the late Congolese superstar Franco Luambo Makiadi's 1984 folklore rumba beat in *12600 Lettres* to improvise with his message to Luhya imploring them to pray to God for protection against the Coronavirus.

Several gospel singers, including Pastor Anthony Musembi (2020) released a ballad with words, "Oh corona what shall we do? Sanitize." His musical video is a sensational prayer that depicts mass graves and urges Kenyans to pray and trust in God. Musembi also prays: "*pepo lishindwe katika jina la Yesu. Amen*" (In the name of Jesus, let the evil spirit be defeated). He also inserted the call from one of Health Cabinet Secretary, Mutahi Kagwe's press briefings, "This disease is not a joke. Kenyans must treat this matter with the seriousness it deserves by adjusting and changing their lifestyles. If we continue to behave normally, the disease will treat us abnormally. Behaving normal under these circumstances is akin to having a death wish." (Musembi, 2020).

Reiterating the role of religion in combating COVID-19, other church-based groups joined the fight through songs. They did so in different languages. In a prayerful tune, *Yesu Mak Corona*, Pauline Nyaimbo (2020) quotes bible verses, calling upon Jesus to "catch" corona. Adding to the more traditional *lipala*, beats, Pastor Timothy Kitui collaborated with Ben Mukabwa in their song,

Mulembe One Metre Away, to dramatize the idea of physical and social distancing as a necessary component in the tool kits to fight coronavirus.

Another form of old-style preaching is evident in Fenny Kerubo's admonition expressed in her musical video, *Coronavirus* (Kerubo, 2020). In it, she suggests that to end the coronavirus epidemic, Kenyans must follow the charge in 2 Chronicles 7: 13-14, in which God's people are called upon to pray and follow His commandments. If they don't, their land will not be healed. This admonition was popular at many church-related COVID-19 prayer meetings and assemblies, which were organized in nearly all corners of the nation.

In listening to other samples of the emerging coronavirus discography, one cannot escape the broad range of diverse genres and juxtaposition of coronavirus-related messages on tunes that are familiar with most Kenyan music enthusiasts. One example is the well-produced music video of Salome Wairimu, whose *Janga la Corona*, is a masterful narration of the epidemiological history of coronavirus in Kenya (Wairimi, 2020). It is also an exhortation of Kenyans to head to President Kenyatta's call to arms against coronavirus.

Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) band, Maroon Commandos, also added to the list of recordings on the coronavirus. The KDF production on single-track musical video *Corona Rumba* carried similar messages to those by other bands. In brief, the KDF message was that coronavirus is an invisible enemy and, therefore, it required all Kenyans to cooperate in the fight against it. Other lines note that the battle can be won though following recommendations from public health officials. These include washing hands with soap, using sanitizers, wearing masks, keeping social distancing and avoiding shaking hands. The lyrics also emphasize that there is no cure for COVID-19 and it does not respect people's wealth, gender, age, or social rank (Kenya News Media, 2020). Beyond this cautionary message, the track also called upon Kenyans to be united, if they have to defeat coronavirus.

The State House Choir also prepared and released a song, *Tumalize Korona Kenya*, on coronavirus signaling a long-cherished tradition of involving public officials in culturally relevant inspirational music and songs. Like Maroon Commandos, they too called upon Kenyans to join hands in the fight against coronavirus by echoing earlier messages for people to wash hands, sanitize, wear masks, and avoid gatherings and greeting each other by hand. Unlike KDF, the State House Choir went one step further by asking those who showed symptoms to seek treatment. In addition, the song reminds Kenyans to seek God's intervention in order to win the fight against the virus (State House Choir, 2020).

Although Mbaraka Mwinshehe was Tanzanian, his decades old *Mama Chakula Bora*, (first released in 1985 on Album *Ukumbusho* Volume 4, track 7) was rekindled as the soundtrack for reminding Kenyans to eat right foods and snack on a balanced diet. During the pandemic, his song was performed on most radio stations to remind Kenyans of the link between healthy living and eating a balanced diet to fighting diseases, including COVID-19. This idea was also expressed in official government policy documents toward managing the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, released widely publicized guidelines on health snacking during lockdowns and stay-at-home mandates issued as part of the effort to curb the spread of the disease (NTV, 2020b; Oketch, 2020; Republic of Kenya, 2020). The government's position was that regardless of one's culture, consuming nutritious food was key to boosting immunity and preventing and managing the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

Non-verbal celebrity signaling

Arguably, the death of prominent musicians can be viewed as a lesson and reminder that COVID-19 was a real threat to humanity. Since music transcends boundaries, events happening elsewhere on the African continent resonated with Kenya's situation. Within the African regions, perhaps the biggest story about COVID-19's devastation were the reported deaths of legendary musicians like the vulnerable Cameroonian Manu Dibangu, Congolese Aurlus Mabele (popularly known as King of Soukous), then based in France and Somali King of Oud, Ahmed Hussein (Hudeydi) who was domiciled in London. They were among the first great artists from the continent to succumb to the disease.

Similarly, some Kenyan musicians met the same fate. As reported by journalist Rushdie Oudia (2020), leading Benga and Ohangla musicians were among those who lost their lives to COVID-19. In early and mid-2020, Ohangla artists Bernard Onyango (alias Abenny Jachiga) and Erick Omondi Odit aka Omondi Long'lilo lost their lives to the virus (Oudia, 2020).

The painful experiences narrated by those who were in contact with these great musicians painted powerful policy images about the need to heed guidelines provided by health professionals. Likewise, the large crowds that gathered to grieve the losses of the music greats was a powerful reminder that no one was immune to the coronavirus attacks.

Can celebrity musicians promote public health?

The answer is yes. As celebrities, musicians, who often partnered with comedians, were recruited to make video tapes and clips demonstrating how to wash hands, social distance and wear masks. In theory, there are certain conditions for influencing members of a community to take collective actions and solve common problems. Influential members of society can, by power of modeling behavior, bring about change in behavior of those who follow or admire and trust them. One would assume, in theory that some celebrity figures are considered credible and may be counted on by their audiences. Further, one would argue that the magnitude and severity of the problem can be a key factor as well. In the case of COVID-19 pandemic, there was some degree of truth to this assumption. Some musicians brought their direct power to the frontline of those fighting the disease.

An example was the renowned Gospel singer and composer Reuben Kigame, whose video clip in Luhya language was circulated on many social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. He exhorted his audience to follow instructions from the Ministry of Health as a civic duty and responsibility in fighting COVID-19. Likewise, radio presenter, Ambrose Kimutai Molel, presented videos on social media giving tips on preventing coronavirus from spreading within the Kalenjin community. These public broadcasts are an important piece of the puzzle in community efforts to combat the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the productivity of musicians in the effort to fight COVID-19 points towards a rich array of genres and melodies, ranging from traditional to blended forms. Within six months, a discography of hundreds of musical pieces on COVID-19 is now available, thanks to Kenya's investments in mobile telephony. Although not addressed in this paper, many less known and basic

street artists have also produced hundreds of recordings on coronavirus on various social media platforms; these, too, are important for messaging purposes. Their work constitutes an emerging public health discography which also serves as a rich collection of important art forms.

We may tentatively note that the actual impact of messaging is difficult to measure. However, the signaling efforts are certainly an addition to the regular press briefings from the Ministry of Health and other public officials. The messages supplemented the government efforts to educate the population about the dangers of the disease and ways to prevent its spread. The partnership with musicians and other artists derives from the cultural significance of music and song in daily lives and, especially at times of calamities and grief.

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