



Artistic Engine in Creative Arts Industry in Kenya: Mugithi Genre in Contemporary Popular Performances

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Abstract

The paper attempts to explore the position of musical artistry and creative endeavours in the performance of Mugithi genre in the contemporary Kenyan society. The genre emerged in the 1990s in Nairobi and other urban centres in Mount Kenya region of the nation-state. The term Mugithi may have been coined by an anonymous performer of Christian Kigooco sub-genre. The premiere performers of Mugithi song were Christian pilgrims who used to stage night vigils (keshas) in promotion of evangelistic missions across Kenya. The growth and development of Mugithi as a musical and literary genre could be traced back to the 1990s decade. By then musical production centred in the production of vinyl records, compact cassette and later on in the 2000s and 2010s CDs, VCDs and DVDs emerged as musical gadgets in the Kenyan music industry. Today, in the 2020s you tube channels and skiza tunes are the commonest on-line outlets for marketing, distribution and consumption of musical products in Kenya and globally. The objectives are to: To examine the creative artists' popular performers' position in the innovation of new ideas and thematic concerns in the social front. To assess the drive and impact created by the emergent Mugithi performers in the Kenyan Music Industry. To assess the economic position gained by the premiere and emergent Mugithi performers in contemporary Kenyan music Industry. It is assumed that Mugithi is now an acceptable umbrella term for both the secular and Kigooco-gospel musical popular performances. From 1990s, 2000s, 2010s and now in the 2020s, this genre appears to have grown from strength to strength. From this end, it is a genre that has created jobs and economic advancements in the media and entertainment industries.

Keywords: Artistic Engine, Creative Arts, Mugithi Genre, Popular Performances, Mount Kenya region

INTRODUCTION

Creative artistry in contemporary time is emerging as a force to reckon with in the Kenyan music industry. New trends in the development of music and dance in the nation-state have signaled significant utilization of modern technology in advancing artists' careers in the contemporary world view. From this end, this paper attempts to address the emergency of popular *Mugithi* song and dance as a viable tool of communication in the social, political, economic and even to some extent religions fronts nationally. How was *Mugithi* coined as a suitable term that envisages the traditional cum modern musical artistic renditions in the Kenyan experiences?

According to encyclopedia of music; Mugithi music is a form of music that originated by the kikuyu people of Kenya but enjoyed by other ethnic groups within Kenya and even diaspora such as the United Kingdom. It is actually sung by single singer and accompanied by guitars, other acoustic or usually

quite highly pitched electric guitars. Songs are always sung in the Gikuyu language.

The above definition does not make an attempt to tell the reader the meaning of the word *Mugithi* in Gikuyu language. This paper spells that the coinage of *Mugithi* in linguistic stand points of pre-colonial and post-colonial era. The direct translation of the word *Mugithi* is “train” in Queens’ language.

In Ngugi’s (1965) *The River Between*, the arrival of the train to Gikuyu land was fulfillment of ancient prophesy by a seer called Mugo wa Kibiru. Some sources of information call the seer Chege wa Kibiru. The seer in question prophesied that an iron snake would once pass through the Agikuyu land meandering from coast to the Great Lake in the Western region of Kenya.

The term *Mugithi* appears to have been coined from the movement made by the train as it “wriggled” through terrains from coast to Nairobi upto Kisumu and finally to Kampala Uganda. From a literary perspective the term is onomatopoeic stylistic device that emanated from the sound githi....githi...githi and eventually *Mugithi* movement. Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1966) in *A Grain of Wheat* addresses the issues about the experience of the train phenomenon as a modern and quick means of transport used in colonial era. He narrates a central character named Gikonyo’s experience and his friends as youth of the time went to Kinenie forest to dance and play the guitar as they waited for the arrival of the *Mugithi*, that is, train on its way Uplands, Naivasha, Nakuru, Kericho, Kisumu, Busia, Malaba to Kampala in Uganda. The locals used to call it “*Mugithi wa Kambara*”, that is, the train that goes to Kampala.

Statement of the Problem

The paper seeks to explore position(s) of artists and artistry in popular contemporary performances. The realm of performance arts in Mount Kenya region which was formerly referred to as Central Province of Kenya and its diaspora has been examined in this work.

The paper dwelves in examining the social, economic, political and religious implications of *Mugithi* performances(s) as a poetic song-dance of contemporary secular and religious popular arts structures nationally.

According to Wikipendia;

the singers are distinctive for their adoption of the styling of country music, singers that has an influence on the development of the music in previous decades. Singers like Salim Junior have become household names. Others like Mike Rua are big Kenyan Benga artists. The *Mugithi* artist have in recent times redone and recorded old Kikuyu Benga music to accommodate newer audiences.

Justification and Significance: Artistic Engine

The role played by *Mugithi* artists in the contemporary times is of paramount importance. The question of artistic engine arises in the dialogue emanating from the centrality of the popular arts in social, political and economic building of the nation in the service industry. In Physics, simply put an engine and/or machine is an implement that makes work easier. As for *Mugithi* song and dance it has emerged as the form of implementing the economic endeavours of given contemporary artists. In literary language, it is the engine that pulls the coaches from one location to another in the field of performative arts.

The genre plays the role of modern entrepreneurship in creative arts industry. Music genre (read *Mugithi*) has emerged as an artistic engine for innovation and sustainable growth and development of art and artists in pursuance of careers in the entertainment and the media industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

William Shakespeare in his play “The Twelfth Night” opines. “If music is the food of love, then play on, play plenty of it”. The playwright, also known the “The Bard of Avon” used Blank verse and other forms of musicality to enrich his dramatic works. His poetry works dubbed as English Sonnets were written using musical elements like rhythm and meter featuring syllabic structures. In Shakespearean times Elizabethan Madrigals emerged as forms of musical expression that underlined the cultural experience of the British people as well as their social-political orientations not only in the island but in the rest of Europe and also in the world arena of poetry. On the same breath, Waltz dance and Scottish depict life and spirit of the people of Scotland in their social-cultural world view. In colonial Kenya, the Agikuyu community singers and dancers emerged with Mwomboko song and dance satirically to challenge the white man’s musical renditions and performances.

In the 18th Century, Thomas Hardy the great novelist who wrote the *Mayor of the Castorbridge* and *Tess of Urban Villes* applied music and poetry in his literary works. These echoed the English People’s Ballet Music.

In the African experience, the question of music and societal commentaries is best echoed in Soukous music. For instance, Prince Nico Barga a half cast from Nigerian father and a Cameroonian mother composed and performed the song “Sweet Mother” a classic international number. San Fan Thomas from the Cameroon also belongs to this school of thought.

This trend of modern music renditions is echoed by Soukous All Stars as seen in the numbers released by Lokassa ya Mbongo in “Lagos Night” and “Nairobi Night”. This experience is further envisaged in the works of Sam Mangwana and Shimita, some of legendary composers, singers and dancers from DRC Congo.

And now when we turn our attention to *Mugithi* S.K. Kimani from Kenya emerged as a legend when he sang the song” Hail Mother; Far away from Home-Location 18.The thematic concern on mothers and motherhood is confirmed by James Wahome Maingi in his numbers: Hail Mother What Price can I Pay You?” Equally PMB Ndece Kama Danger followed Wahome’s pathways and his composition:” Hail Mother Let me Explore the World”

THEORY AND METHOD

The study revolves around performance theory by Elizabeth Fine (1984) Text making this echoed by Stephen Kunyu in Bukusu circumcision songs (2023).The work is further propelled by the ideas of Richard Baumann(1992) “Cultural entertainments and performances”. Exploring the status of *Mugithi* performances was revamped in reading newspaper, magazines, pamphlets and texts books of schools who write on music, society and literature. The viewing of youtube channels, Skiza tunes channels, TikTok, TV channels, chechat, among other ICT Equipment enabled the researchers to carry out a descriptive qualitative design.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The use of you tube and Tik-Tok forms has emerged as an available means of carrying out research on popular secular music artists not only in Kenya but globally.

POPULAR ARTISTRY AND INNOVATION IN THE ART INDUSTRY

In early 1970s Benga beat was introduced in creative arts industry to compete with Rhumba from DRC Congo and Tanzania as well. John Bosco Mwenda's classic song: "Mpete wa Kimbush" emerged as blue print for up and coming Benga beat composers in the East African region.

Music artists from Nyanza Province of Kenya today referred as the lake region emerged as front runners: The like of D.O Mission (of Harusi ya MK fame) and Kaundha twins brothers (of the Jane Ochieng fame) just but to mention a few.

Composers from Mount Kenya region who had centered their musical work on Erithi dance and Rhumba dance joined the new train dubbed Benga. The front runner was Daniel Kamau Mwai (D.K) with his famous song."Z.K. Were". Benga became a very popular beat and it continues to be today.

It was performed in motels, hotels night clubs, pubs, bars as well as in wedding parties and political rallies. As Wikipendia further reveals:

When the song 'Mugithi' is sang, the people in the audience usually make a line and dance while walking around. Mugithi is a Common phenomenon in weddings, dowry events, local night clubs and other celebrations. The name mugithi means train hence the dancing style involving holding on to each others hips wriggling as they go in circles. The first mugithi song was a gospel song 'mugithi uyu wa matuini' translated from English song Glory train

In the growth and development of Mugithi genre the researcher notes that music as an artistic engine is a fulcrum for sustainable of small-scale industries as well as medium scale sustainable economies.

In the performance of Benga musical genre it emerged as an acceptable enterprise for up and coming enthusiasts in the creative arena. Through innovation secular popular artists made a viable economy venture which saw some rise to household names and become rich business men and women. The business entrepreneurs charged revelers some amount of money per session of several hours as a means of sustaining their service industry.

Then, recording and production of vinyl records boosted the Benga musical renditions which later has given a variety of hybrids of Mugithi songs and dances. In 1980s and 1990s the re-recording of Mwomboko, Erithi, Rhumba, Benga and Mwenyuru numbers among other under the umbrella term Mugithi changed financial fortunes of a number of creative artists.

Position of Popular Secular Artists-1980s

The secular musicians who started their careers between the late 1960s and early 1970s are referred to as the First Generation Gikuyu Premiere artists. These include; Daniel Kamau Mwai (D.K), Joseph Kananda, Samuel Kimani Mwangi (S.K), Joseph Mihingo, Peter Mwangi, Tom Munyonyi, Wanganangu, Christopher David Kiratu (CDM), Maranga Wagatonye, Mwalimu James Mbugua, Francis Rugwiti, Lawrence Nduru,

Joseph Gicheha, Joseph Mwangi, Mwangi Dedan(J.K), Tom Mwangi among other least known musisians.

Then, Vinyl record music production was the main mode of recording, packaging distribution and selling of musical products. The Second Generation musicians propped up between late 1970s to early 1980s. They include include: J.B Maina, James Wahome Maingi, Pius Kihingo, PMB Ndece Kama-Danger, Sammy Muraya, John Ndichu, Joseph Wamumbe, Waithaka Mboce, Timona Mburu, Ngone Mukulima, John Mwangi, Joseph Kiarutara, Simon Kihara (Musaimo), Karanja David, Njoroge Ngari, Queen Jane, Lady Wanja, Elizabeth Nyambere, etc.

These group of musicians recorded Vinyl records that were selling at KES 7 per copy. Vinyl records were not pirated as there was only one company known as Polygram that did the cutting of the records. Talented musicians with minimal skills were able to come up as small scale and mid-level business men and women.

Later, vinyl records were replaced by compact cassette in the music production units. A copy of cassette was selling at 50 shillings well upto 100 shillings per copy. The compact cassette music packaging era emerged as the most challenging and problematic time in the creative arts industry.

Compact Cassette was easy to dub and this signaled the end of moneymaking regimes in the music industry. Piracy of music products took the center stage and put the Kenyan music industry in a limbo.

From Vinyl Records, Compact Cassette Music Production oo CDs, CVD and Dvds Regime

The recording of music production in the mid1980s and early 1990s was slowly shifting from compact cassette to CDs and DVDs. When this mode was introduced in the market, music production was easily dubbed and the notorious piracy thrived. Things started falling apart and many secular musicians lost their income and started living in abject poverty mainly in the 1990s upto the new millennium in 2000s era.

In late 1990s and early 2000s a creative arts renaissance of performance of traditional cultural songs and dances emerged. There was clamour for the old types of musical products. The singing of love, marriage and circumcision songs became a popular phenomenon in the consumption of musical products. By and by the performance of full band set-ups began to dwindle and earning a living through this mode became a national waking nightmare. A number of musicians who hired music instruments found it hard to keep going and closed shop. A good number of session backup musicians and less endowed artists started migrating from this world of artistry.

Economic Factors and Emergency of One-Man Guitar Performance

Music enterprises of the 1990s dwindled all the way to 2000s and music entrepreneurs stopped smiling all the way to the bank. Along River Road, the most famous street where music business thrived once started seeing grinning faces of malnourished music stars now living in perpetual abject poverty. Economic hard times were a glaring eyesore on the streets of Nairobi and even beyond.

The Third Generation of musicians who belong to the late 1990s to 2000s music era: Makibi James, George wa Njaro, Joseph Kinuthia, Wangari wa Kabera, Kuruga wa Wanjiku, Maina wa Nyaguthii, Kamande Wa Kioi, Kajohnie Kariuki among others just

like their counter parts in First and Second generations failed to find a footing in creating firm roots in the creative arts industry.

Out of this, Third Generation, Mike Murimi, Mike Rua (1990s-2000s) once living by what he termed as from hand to mouth lifestyle emerged as the leading one-man-Guitar artists pace-setters in this new dispensation. Notoriously Mike Rua emerged as the undisputed "king of vulgar" in one-man-Guitar solo-manship as exemplified in his song entitled: "Kiarii!" which translates to: "The Wide-one."

The First and Second Generation musicians accused Rua for defiling their class music, which made their careers in the name of creating stale humour. In spite of this challenge, Rua has never looked back and he has no regrets in choosing a bawdy path in the creative arts industry, citing the fact that the ancient Agikuyu singers and dancers cherished circumcision songs laced with bawdy, vulgar lyrics for spicing the traditional rituals. After all, there is a great Gikuyu aphorism which spells out that: "Literature is utterings of bawdiness!" (Ngugi wa Thiongo while delivering a homecoming speech in 2004 at Kamirithu, Limuru, after living in exile for 22 years.) The in-thing is that Mike Rua and Mike Murimi have made a fortune in the One-man-Guitar dispensation amidst other suffering all generations secular music artists.

In the 2010s the Fourth Generation made up of Salim Junior, Mighty Salim, Salim Young and Samidoh (Samuel Muchoki), Joyce wa Mama, Sarafina Salim, Muraya Junior cropped up as undisputed superstars in the creative arts industry. In their new structure and arrangements of mixing the old songs by the likes of S.K Kimani and Paul M. Wanganangu's songs, they have created new spaces in the music industry. The millennials have emerged as formidable Fourth Generation successful actors in the music industry.

In the 2020s to the present the Fifth Generation of musical stars have seen the emergence of Jose Gatutura, "Kare "B"(Njeri Gioshe), Kamoko, 90K, Dj Faxzo, Gatheo wa Njeri, Gathenge, Kioi Junior, Wanganangu Junior, Waithaka wa Jane, Jane Brothers and Gachathi wa Thuo have made significant strides in the New creative arts industry.

Arts and Political Participation in Kenya

Over the years, it is notable that apart from participating in social matters in the society, secular and gospel artists have made great contributions. The upsurge of political competition in contemporary Kenya has seen popular secular artists being used as symbols of political campaigns in political rallies in the land.

In a nutshell, one would say that musical artists contribution has shaped Kenya political crisis that has thrived nationally. Cultural nationalism has been developed positively and negatively; a case whereby secular musicians have found themselves as a divided house. The great *Mugithi* March has been slowed down by the political nemesis and stalemate that have defined the Kenyan Political arena.

Take the cases of General elections held in 2007, 2013, 2017 and 2022. Oral artists and secular artists as well as Gospel music artists have been used by politicians to drum up support in harvesting votes in the Kenyan society. This has called for national healing as artists struggle to be organized.

New Wine in Old Wine Skins /Bottles-Use of Youtube, Tik-Tok, Skiza Tunes Era

The cyclic evolving scenario of up coming music stars endeavour to use the old music currently dubbed “Ngogoyo” (mashed sugar-cane juice) to manufacture “new” compositions for contemporary “New “audiences has changed the old face to a new face in the creative arts industry.

A new form of leadership and shaping of the music industry has revamped the ever-ailing industry. What has emerged is brewing of new wine in old skins/bottles in the entertainment and performance sector. A kind of cyclopoetics the theoretical orientation has given rise to practical recycling of old members to new formidable numbers that have set a blaze the creative arts industry.

S.K Kimani Versus Waithaka Wa Jane

Samuel Kimani Mwangi belong to the premiere and /or pioneer first Generation of Kenyan musicians from Mount Kenya Region. His first song “Kuraya na Guitu” 18” that is, Far Away from Home-location 18” is a classic mugithi march-style rendition that has remained ever –green for more than four decades. S.K is remembered for another Erithi-Rhumba number, titled;” Rugano rwa Naivasha, A Story about Naivasha.”

Nevertheless, it is another song; “Kwari Muthenya wa Juma”, that is “It was on a Saturday”, which was mixed and performed by Waithaka wa Jane thus, reviving his great name as a great *Mugithi* singer of all times. Waithaka wa Jane belongs to the Fifth Generation of Kenyan secular music artists.

He renamed the song “Kwari Muthenya wa Juma” to “Karaiku” which changed the face of this composition. S.K in the song utters: “A Great Tribulation belongs to people who do not smoke “Karaiku”. ”Kiraiku” actually means traditional tobacco, that was a cheap stuff used by smokers in colonial, post-colonial, post-independent eras.

It was cheap but very strong in taste.’Karaiku” is the word used for a small amount of “Kiraiku”. Waithaka’s revellers (audience) have always felt entertained and overjoyed by the lyrics of “Karaiku” that are laced with humour. Waithaka wa Jane as a new copycat artist has been performing and remixing old songs (referred to as *Ngogoyo* by Inoro FM radio and Tv stations) by S.K. Kimani and others by old generation musicians to define his shining star in the Kenyan music career.

These mixing of old numbers is now rendered through youtube channels, skiza tunes, Tik-Tok etc viewed and listened to using mobile phones, laptops, personal computers, Tv Channels and other assorted musical gadgets.

Nb: (“Karaiku” is a musical allusion of “Kiraiku”-It was on a Saturday, a classic song by S.K.Kimani).

Way Forward in The Creative Arts Industry

Traditionally, in colonial and post-independent Kenya, marketing of music products was done through the sole government sponsored radio station. At first it was referred to as voice of Kenya (VOK) and later the name changed to Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC).

Presently, the cropping up and mushrooming of F.M stations, youtube channels, T.V stations, electronic media outlets of all sorts, skiza tunes, and Tik-Tok, have shaped the creative arts industry to protect different players in the industry. Music Copyright of Kenya has of late has attempted to address impending infringements of individual

artists' rights. As well, Talented Musicians Composer Organisation (Tamco) has endeavoured to educate artists to safeguard their careers through investing in small time business practices and as well protect their artistic works.



Figure 1: S.K KIMANI, old guard Mugithi legend



Figure 2: Waithaka Wa Jane New Blood Mugithi copycat super star

CONCLUSION

Mugithi genre has evolved as an artistic engine for anchoring performing arts in the contemporary Kenyan Society. Artists have shown their creative potential in participatory leadership in the socio-economic sectors in the Kenyan economy. As such, their urge for demonstrating innovation in the creative production has enabled them to create space for earning a living through music ventures. Through knowledge

transfer from the old generation (old wine skin) rich compositions, the new wine (mixed old composition) has become tastier and a means of creating sustainable economies. The use of ICT knowledge as envisaged through new modes of music production released through youtube channels, skiza tunes, and TikTok, relayed through smart phones, media outlets, T.V Stations among others has laid a grand foundation in promoting genres like *Mugithi* as a means of self-sustainability in contemporary financial times.

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