

AFRICAN EXAMPLES

Uniting Africa through music

By Emmanuel Mwendwa

For more than four decades, African leaders have failed to unite the continent and achieve aspirations embodied in the Pan Africanism ideals of the 1960s.

Perhaps to atone for empty rhetoric, the continent's leaders who attended the African Union Summit in Ghana in July discussed possible formation of a Pan Africanist government.

A prominent indigenous music proponent, Mr Ayub Ogada, sees things differently. He says politicians are not keen on unifying the continent.

"Their lot is bent on pursuing personal, selfish interests rather than using Africa's resources to tackle its problems," he says.



Musician Ayub Ogada during the interview.

He says reawakening of Africa's rich cultural heritage, and not politics, is the only way to stoke up revival of Pan Africanism.

"If politics has failed, why not use the diversity inherent in our cultures and music?" poses Ogada.

Ogada is among African artistes advocating use of music as a platform to step up struggle for African liberation and unification.

A renowned entertainer and performer, Ogada takes on another mantle as a crusader for preservation of Africa's rich cultural heritage.

He was in 2005 among African artistes invited to perform at a concert in London ahead of the G8 Summit.

He is currently co-ordinating a project put together by Mr Tom Kenyatta, a grandson of the nation's founding father, who runs a recording studio in London.

He is collaborating with some local musicians to produce a song on democracy — how Africa can elevate itself. Together with other artistes from the continent, they are compiling an album to raise awareness and root for unification.

"We are saying let's wake up; it's our continent. Why are we not the leading nation on planet? If Africa is the cradle of creation then life will end here," says Ogada.

Africa should reject donor aid

Ogada says musicians can articulate Africa's problems better than experts who spend endless sessions in conference halls and boardrooms.

He says the powerful cultural and political awakening movement, which stirred Africans in the 1960s and 1970s, should be reignited to re-position pan-Africanism.

"Though economic integration is touted as a catalyst to spur infrastructural development and stability, equal distribution of Africa's natural resources is a step toward continental integration," he says.

He says we have to draw from our cultural heritage the foundation to bring Africans together as opposed to discordant ideals perpetrated by a self-driven political class.

"They say we were part of technology's development but no one admits it. We have been studied, analysed and archived. We now have to get out of the museum and move forward, take control of our own destiny," he says.



Ogada with producer, Mr Gido Kibukosya.

Ogada reiterates that Africa's youths are restless.

His message to Africa is "Koth biro, kel uru dhok e dala, literally means "the rain is coming, bring the cows home". Cows symbolise wealth.

"Our wealth is here. We need not get out of Africa thinking it lies out there. We have to look harder, tap our resources and make use of them," says the musician.

During the G8 Summit, the artist's message was concise: elite global leaders should institute policies to break off donor aid chains that still shackle Third World and African countries.

Ogada strutted on stage, armed with his traditional nyatiti, lyre, in London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, and Philadelphia alongside prominent African artistes. These included Senegalese star Youssou N'dour, Salif Keita of Mali, Beninese diva Angelique Kidjo, Somali-born crooner Maryam Mursal and Zimbabwe's Thomas Mapfumo.

"This was the first time most Kenyans heard of me but I consistently compose music," he says.

Currently on a break from overseas schedules, Ogada is focused on a new mission: to network like-minded continental patriots to uphold vestiges of fast diminishing African cultural roots. He is a firm believer, for instance, in being identified, first as an African then as proud son of Kenya.

In the mid 1980s, he switched his name from Job Seda to Ayub (Job).

Ogada left for the US in mid 1960s, aged six, with his parents. His father, Mr George Ouko Seda and mother Mrs Ruth Seda had enrolled to study medicine.

"My dad was in the first wave of young, ambitious Kenyans sent to study and bring back knowledge to build the fledgling independent nation," says Ogada.

After the family returned to Kenya in mid 1970s, Ogada set on a journey, which saw him don different hats: as a guitarist, percussionist, indigenous music exponent, film actor and later an accomplished composer of movie soundtracks.

In late 1970s, he was a founder of now defunct African Heritage band. Other members were Ali Magombeni, Jack Odongo, Francis Njoroge, Shaban Onyango, Gido Kibukosya, Tony Ndung'u, Wally Amalemba, Barrack Achieng, Noel Sanyanafua, Ugandans Samite Mulondo, Sammy Kasule and a Japanese percussionist Goro Kuni.

A multi-talented artiste, Ogada starred in *Out of Africa* with Robert Redford and Meryl Streep in mid 1980s. He also landed significant roles in *Colour Purple* (1985), *The Kitchen Toto* (1987) and *White Mischief* (1988) films.

His streak of success in movies took a new twist in the late 1990s; landing commissions to create soundtracks for *I Dreamed of Africa* (2000), starring Kim Bassinger. In 2005, he contributed two tracks for *Duma* – a South African adventure-drama film directed by Carroll Ballard.

In the same year, his songs *Dichol* and *Koth biro* cut off his debut 1993 album *En Mana Kuoyo*, which featured in award-winning John le Carre's adaptation film, *Constant Gardener* (2005). He also created the track *Share It With Me* for specific scenes in the film shot on Kenyan locations.

Ogada's plunge into Hollywood opened up a whole new world for the once fearful youngster. Born in Mombasa in the early 1960s, it did not take long before he was drawn and deeply immersed in the arts.

He started out in late 1970s as a percussionist and drummer for African Heritage band.

He had access to traditional instruments collected from across Africa by former Kenyan Vice-President, Joseph Murumbi, a devout Pan Africanist and Alan Donovan, co-founders of Pan African Gallery then situated along Kenyatta Avenue.

For several months, he experimented, creating melodies to fuse sounds from traditional African instruments such as balafon, also known as xylophone, the kalimba (thumb piano) or mbira common in Zimbabwe.

He recalls nostalgically the first time he handled a nyatiti. Previously, he played modern instruments.

The exposure to nyatiti ushered Ogada into self-discovery. "It was shocking, the instrument had for years wasted away in my backyard. No one taught me how to strum it or asked me to make music with our instruments."

Whenever he interacts with budding musicians, he advises them not to forget their roots.

"Cultural music is a sure ticket to break into global market. Whatever is out there is hardly better than what we can create," he says.

The Luo nyatiti lyre is estimated to be about 5,000 years old, and is said to have originated from the Nile Valley. "It found its way here after the Nubians' migration from upper Egypt into Kenya 2,000 years ago. Its pictures are evident on hieroglyphs," says Ogada.

Using the lyre, the artiste developed a unique playing style, to articulate his own musical sensibilities. "When you hook up a microphone, you modify its sound. I experiment with tuning mechanisms, alternate how it is held while playing to improve techniques of creating harmonies. In the process, I tend to break a few traditional rules and finger positions," he says.

In his view, much of "world music" has its roots in Africa yet many aspiring local musicians look outside the continent for inspiration.

"This is not creative. We should take our own. [Consumers](#) expect music from Africa to be authentic and indigenous —not imitational," he says.

He recalls how Nairobi's late 1970s to early 1980s live bands like Earthquake and Black Savage would struggle for long hours, performing "top of the pops" variants of rock and pop American/European hits cover versions.

"This is one reason why indigenous rhythms hardly thrived, owing to the era's incessant foreign music influence on radio. We played what we heard. Older generation musicians were around, but none stood up and said, 'what are you young people doing? Why are you not composing our own music?'"

Ogada reiterates time has come for young musicians to tap into traditional instruments reservoir to create songs with long-lasting shelf life.

The artiste takes issue with youths eager to leave Africa to pursue "greener" pastures "overflowing" in America.

"We need to realise Africa is endowed with everything. Living in the US or UK is not quite the proverbial bed of roses many are duped to believe," he says.

He says Africans should use the continent's vastly unexploited resources. Many foreigners, he says, have since post-independence minted millions in dollars, cashing in on Africans ignorance on actual worth of resources at their disposal.

"Why are majority of Africans among the world's poorest despite all the wealth the continent has? We supply the rest of the planet with food and varied raw materials yet somehow we perpetually extend begging bowls to the industrialised nations," says Ogada.

The artiste is disappointed with images of widespread. "Some regions have no

water. I saw school-going children on TV bare foot," he says.

Walking around Nairobi's streets, Ogada is confronted by imitations of designer outfits — a trend that is confounding yet Africa is endowed with variety of unique fabrics appropriate for making authentic outfits.

He is worried about gradual disappearance of traditional foods that are rich in natural health enhancing nutrients.

"What are our children eating? Chips, bhajias and sausages. Where are our arrowroots, yams, cassavas and legumes? We are almost accepting genetically modified (GM) foods," he says.

Ogada says in the long-term, farmers would have to buy seeds every planting season.

"Our traditional animals are becoming extinct. They are being replaced by exotic cattle that are taken for veterinary check up after every six months. What happened to our long horned animals that withstood myriad diseases?" he asks.

He blames African countries woes on blind embrace of foreign values peddled through the media.

"Maybe we need to ask ourselves what is wrong? Why have we rejected our cultural roots?"

However, he says although some aspects may be retrogressive, others are relevant.

"My mission is to rekindle the flame and agitate for preservation of our heritage. This is my fountain for inner strength as a creative artiste," he says.

Ogada is disturbed by news of African cultural artefacts being bought off by foreigners. "Who owns the patent for the kiondo or kikoi? I heard they want to steal the kamba nane (eight-stringed) nyatiti. Perhaps it is being sold off because we seemed uninterested in its use. Many consider it primitive," he says.

He draws parallels to a golden lyre in the UK, whose ownership claim is controversial. The instrument in question was dug up by archaeologists in Baghdad, Iraq, in the ancient city of Uruk — formerly in Mesopotamian empire.

"The lyre is a reconstruction of British engineer, Andy Lloyds. He recreated it as closely as possible to the original form, with a golden tint, the lapis lazuli and use of cedar wood. He called me, requesting I assist in stringing and tuning but when I saw it, I knew it was the nyatiti," says Ogada.

"By virtue of its excavation in Arab land, they now claim it and want to insist nyatiti is their own. But 5,000 years ago they did not live in the huge expanse known as Egypt. It did not exist as the little country it is presently. Back then, it had a different name — Kermite. In dholuo it translates to "a sweet place in the land of the black man."

"I believe the nyatiti is only found along the River Nile. It is our culture, it existed as part of a great African empire before separation of indigenous people, with scores of descendants relocating to different parts," he says.

In West Africa, Ogada adds, Kora instrument is still popular, while the nyatiti is found throughout parts of Central and East Africa. "What we see now are close reproductions. Much of our African heritage was destroyed. Our forefathers attempted to recreate the lost heritage, ancient cultural instruments and artefacts in vain."

Most traditional instruments are seen as rustic. Past generations did not have time to master or re-craft them with the ancient, unique finesse or sophistication exhibited by forebears.

"We lost that gift of creativity, but I believe we will be strong once again. We shall rise and reign in our rightful place. The 21st Century's [digital](#) age is driven by technology and electronics. The modern gadgets are good, but we cannot ignore our old instruments. What happens when there is no electricity? You can't play electric guitars or keyboards," he says.

He says all artistes, whether in theatre, music or visual arts, need feedback from audiences, who appreciate what they create or compose. "It is crucial that home grown performing arts industry be nurtured and developed to compete with established international arts. The dominance of African arts on global podiums is an excuse by foreigners driven by vested interests to manipulate the continent's rich cultural expressions," he says.

Since returning home, Ogada, who is still in search of a soul mate, has performed in numerous concerts. Last June he performed at Sawa Sawa Festival, where he set the pace for South African jazz maestro Hugh Masekela.

In July, he held his first solo gig at Alliance Française gardens. He was backed by ex-African Heritage band member, guitarist Gido Kibukosya, whom he describes as "a solid worker, skilled artiste and a great friend."

Source: Standard, 23/09/07