



Identity and Musical Score in Tosh Gitonga's *Nairobi Half Life*

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Journal of African Theatre,
Film and Media Discourse

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2017

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Article Information

Submitted: 9th January 2016

Accepted: 5th October 2016

Published: 2nd April 2017

Conflict of Interest: Co-author is a member of the editorial board

Funding: The co-author is a member of the editorial board

Additional information is available at the end of the article



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ISSN 2520-7210

ABSTRACT

This paper draws attention to the use of music as a narratological device and marker of identity with close reference to *Nairobi Half life* by Tosh Gitonga. With close analysis within cultural narratology the paper contests the loose usage of musical scores in Kenyan films and emphasizes that African film with an African score defines the cultural milieu of the setting and thus places itself noticeably and contextually on a world platform. Such composition is 'fresh' with an unmistakable identity and is a pedestal Kenyan films are yet to fully claim. The research also notes that Kenyan music like Ayub Ogada's *Koth Biro* has been used in several international films like *The Constant Gardener* to give the production a feel of an African context for the western audience. While pointing out the lack of musical direction in some Kenyan films and television programmes the paper states that the practice of film scoring can be learned but also demands a lot of intuition and a deep understanding of the people's love of music. It emphasizes that the practice demands not only practical experience but also learned observation/listening to perfect the art of making the viewer 'to see the sound and hear the picture'. The paper reflects conclusively that Kenya is devoid of musicians who specialise in film scoring and that film makers need to empower the musicians along the same by budgeting and involving them in the making of the films.



1.0 Introduction

Kenya has a relatively active film industry that is mapped in varied contexts ranging from independent film-makers with high-budget practice to indie-film makers working on shoe-string budgets. Some of the practitioners are defined by organisations for instance the Riverwood Ensemble, which is largely populated by filmmakers who operate within the confines of River-road in Nairobi. There is also the Association of Film Producing Educational Institutions of Kenya (AFPEIK), which is a union of educational institutions that participate in an annual film festival that has many films written, directed and shot by students. The television industry houses many filmmakers who eke out a living by producing dramas and local soap operas. In the varied contexts, the character of Kenyan film has generally been marked by challenges of financing, scripting, sound capture, musical scores, acting and lack of strong government support among other aspects. This paper draws attention to, especially, the use of music as a narratological device and marker of identity with close reference to *Nairobi Half life* by Tosh Gitonga. The film attracted interest in this research because it is the first film in Kenya to be submitted for the Best Foreign Language Oscar at the eighty fifth Academy Awards and therefore is more likely to have adhered to professional use of musical scoring within what would pass as international understanding of the practice. In 2014 the film had many awards at the Africa Magic Viewers Choice Awards. These awards demonstrate that Kenyan film is gaining confidence in parading itself alongside the practice in established global contexts and applying codes comprehensibly for that viewership. It is in the interest of this paper to examine the use of musical scores in *Nairobi Half Life* as an entry point into discussing the practice in Kenyan films in order to understand the domestication of this genre.

2.0 Methodology

I use the cultural narratology to study how *Nairobi Half Life* uses musical score. The film creatively uses the score by Xaver Von Traver in the narration of the journey by Mwas from the rural context to the 'wild city'. We shall identify the different channels and sources of information in order to assess their individual contribution to, and function in, the filmic composition as a whole with musical score as our main focus in *Nairobi Half Life*. This paper will assess the model against the modelled in its narratological pursuit for as Gerald Prince states in his essay titled 'Surveying Narratology':

Theory must engage reality; the description must meet the phenomenon; the model must correspond to the modelled. The elaboration of an explicit, complete, and empirically grounded model of narrative accounting for narrative competence...ultimately constitutes the most significant narratological endeavour.

The model will therefore be the yardstick for examining the modelled. Film as a cultural product must exhibit its original context even as it reaches out to the 'outer worlds'

within the mode of the model Prince states. It is important to study the musical score in *Nairobi Half Life* because it not only sets the stage for 'world standard' practice of musical scoring but is also a reflection of the application of music in Kenyan film practice as a device for identity in narratological accomplishment. Musical score in film plays a very important role. Some re-known film directors have been quoted to emphasize this role:

Academy Award winning writer-director George Lucas (*Star Wars*, *American Graffiti*) once told a reporter...“Sound is 50 percent of the movie going experience.” But in a recent video interview, *Trance* director Danny Boyle says that sound makes an even greater impact. “The truth is, for me, it’s obvious that 70, 80 percent of a movie is sound,” he says. “You don’t realize it because you can’t see it.”

Mark Alleyne notes that the academic analysis of the role of sound in cinema has traditionally been marginal at best in film scholarship and yet it is indispensable to the process. The said role justifies a look at *Nairobi Half Life* in the Kenyan context to invite debate into the subject and draw attention to the domestication of musical score in our context. Background or non-diegetical score is sometimes not noticeable because it supplements the action in a feature film and rarely fights for space and attention with the picture. Though rather 'mild' in its role in the film, musical score or even sound tracks bring 'colour' and taste to the picture by emphasizing the mood, intensifying the action or even heightening the perceived tension as the setting and action demand. Roy Prendergast in his text titled *Film Music: A Neglected Art* notes that there are variety of ways of achieving an atmosphere of time and place, or, musically speaking, “color.” He adds that despite viewers and many scholars not being keen on the role music in film:

In a broad sense, musical color may be taken to represent the exotic or sensuous aspects of music, as distinct from musical structure, or line, which might be considered the intellectual side...Film music is overwhelmingly coloristic in its intention and effect. This is always true when a composer is attempting to create an atmosphere of time and place. Finally, and probably the most important of all, color can be readily understood by a musically unsophisticated film audience.

The musical score renders itself to simple audience who will understand the role it plays depending on their ability to read and understand the intent of the director and/or the musician. Essentially, the source of music should be culturally identifiable or familiar to the viewers for an appreciation of the specific role. *Nairobi Half Life* introduces us to a 'Kenyan' musical idiom when Mwas is in a bus travelling to the city for the first time, which despite being worded in Kikuyu language possesses a rather western texture in instrumentation. It emphasizes the journey of Mwas but just falls short of a clear Kikuyu

idiom in its instrumentation texture. Robin Hoffman states that the function of music in the movies is a very wide field and music can serve several purposes that are either important on the emotional side of the movie or enhance the storytelling. Although the music at that point enhances the story, it would be difficult to term as an imprint of a strong identity from the Kikuyu culture upon which the story has been constructed. The cultural idiom becomes imperative as a tool of identity and narratology. It is important to emphasize that African films will have an African score that fully defines the cultural milieu of the setting. Walt Disney's *Lion King* for instance, the story of an African lion family, opens with an African song (although accenting specifically South African music idiom), which establishes the context of the narratology. To achieve the authentic African identity the film's score was composed by Hans Zimmer, who was hired based on his work in two films in African settings, *The Power of One* and *A World Apart*, and supplemented the score with traditional African music and choir elements arranged by Lebo M. Zimmer's partners Mark Mancina and Jay Rifkin who helped with arrangements and song production. In establishing the context through music we derive meaning in the purpose or objective of the score in the ultimate communication intended by the film. *Nairobi Half Life* imitates the Hollywood idiom in many instances in the film but more so within the urban context where the music takes on the hip-hop rap texture. Viewed as the world-standard, Hollywood trends hip-hop and rap to symbolize gangsters in Hollywood films and mark out action in the black American context. *Nairobi Half Life* carefully obeys the idiom in mapping out the gang of Mwas and Oti as they go out to steal, rob and kill. The plot develops to a climax as Mwas and his gang graduate from stealing lamps and mirrors to robbing state of the art cars. This would necessitate a gradual elevation of the music to depict the change and heightening of the tension and suspense. The musical score comes in handy in the fistfight at Grogon garage that prompts the special branch of the police to pick the gang of Mwas for the ultimate action of the film. We also feel the tension enhanced by the music when Mwas is the sole survivor of a massacre by the police as he runs to Phoenix theatre to play his role in the premier of the play he been auditioned for and casted. That *Nairobi Half Life* imbibes the Hollywood idiom in musical score may be expected for two reasons. For one, the target audience was well beyond the Kenyan or African audience and secondly the ability of Hollywood to influence world cinemas is unparalleled. It has been noted that:

Behind this enormous expansion of the concept of classical cinema lies the idea that Hollywood filmmaking has dominated our conception of what a "normal" movie is since the formation of the film studio apparatus between, roughly 1910 and the early 1920s. Thus the U.S. film industry can be treated not only as the most powerful economic force among national cinemas, but relatedly as the most influential model of filmmaking practice in history. The claim is that there are certain identifiable parameters of form and style which have for most of film history served as norms and limitations throughout the

world, and these norms are associated most closely with the kinds of films produced most successfully and extensively in the American narrative film industry.

This influence on *Nairobi Half Life* should therefore not be viewed as a weakness but as an attempt to comply with the 'world standard' for intelligibility with a wider global context. However it is important to analyse how the film domesticates the Hollywood practice to tell a Kenyan story. The paper starts with a general analysis of the story as told by the film composition device and then proceed to assess the role of the music in the same drawing examples from other films in Kenya and Africa at large.

3.0 The Story

Nairobi Half Life, is about a young man in the village of Murang'a, central Kenya, with ambitions of becoming a movie star but who is conned into travelling to Nairobi city with the hope of joining a theatre troupe at the Kenya National Theatre only to end up embroiled in crime. The title already establishes that Nairobi is the destination of the plot. Representative of a section of inhabitants of the city who live 'the half-life', Mwas comes from the rural areas to chase his dream of being a movie star. Quite unexpected Mwas ends up in the deadly cycle of crime that engulfs youths who are lured into the attractive city with the promise of money and fame only to end up as the source of a crime, of which they must partake or starve. The journey is eventful as narration. Wolf Schmid notes of the eventfulness of action in narratology that:

...eventfulness increases in proportion to the extent to which a change of state deviates from the doxa of the narrative (i.e. what is generally expected in the narrative world)...the essence of the event lies in the fact that it breaks with expectations. A highly eventful change is para-doxical in the literal sense of the word: it is not what we expect. "Doxa" refers to the narrative world and its protagonists and is not equivalent to the reader's script (what the reader expects in the action on the basis of certain patterns in literature or the real world).

On his first day in the city, Mwas is mugged and losses everything (including an expensive radio his uncle sent him to deliver to an Asian friend), ending up in one of the dreaded police cells in the city. The cell is full of people who view their illegal detention and the inhumane conditions in which they are held as normal. Furthermore Mwas ends being assigned to clean the dirty toilet with human waste all over the place. He falls as he washes the place and again cheats our expectation as he tries to accept his condition by singing as he mops the murk. This surprises everyone including the inmates who come to see 'the singer' in the dirty toilet. The fate of Mwas is sealed in this incident. He has ended up in murk and the best he can do is try to make the best of his condition. In the

filthy cells, he meets Oti, a petty criminal in the city, who introduces him to the criminal world. He is alone and has lost his uncle's radio. The only work available is washing dishes in a small dinghy eating joint in a slum. He is soon embroiled in a world of crime where, to eat well and enjoy the goodies of the city (roast meat, beer and women) he has to steal car parts from parked vehicles in the city. Despite this mode of survival, Mwas does not give up his ambition to be an actor. He attends an audition at the Phoenix theatre and gets a role in a play. The play is about robbers who break into a rich couple's house, not to steal, but to remind them of their (The poor's) existence. It replicates accurately the life Mwas is living in reality. As he graduates into stealing cars, Mwas gets held into a clandestine relationship with the special branch of the police where they rob and 'pay tax' to the officers. When the police officers realize they are in danger of being exposed by Mwas and his gang they decide to eliminate the entire gang. He luckily escapes the murder in which all his friends are killed to go and catch up with the premier performance of the play in which he was casted at the Phoenix theatre.

4.0 The Music There-in

When the film begins Mwas is selling music and film in Cds and DVDs and is excited to tell the story of the most exciting film in his stock to his prospective clients. He is speaking in Kikuyu language, which perfectly places the action well into the context. It is at this point that he hears about a theatre troupe, 'The Vultures', that is performing in his village shopping centre. He goes to the venue of performance and even interrupts the performance at one point 'stealing' the attention of the audience away from the performers when they take a break. The cue of the music at this point does not in any way reflect the setting of the story, which is a shopping center in Murang'a County. In terms of identity and the cultural set up the musical cue does not reflect or even hint at the setting. The dominant culture in Muranga is Kikuyu culture and hence the idiom of the music would be expected to reflect the same. Kikuyu culture has rich music, which would have not only defined and invited the viewer into the context but also allowed appreciation of its appeal. The context of the performance of 'The Vultures' troupe allows little room for contextualized music. The implication here is that the shopping centre is 'semi-urban' and so 'The Vultures' perform in Swahili, the urban language in Kenya. The performance is structured like theatre for development (TfD) that is supposed to sensitize the public about corruption among the political elite but which quite doesn't necessarily fulfil the tenets of TfD. This troupe does not have any songs to invite the target audience into the performance as is usually the case with theatre troupes in Kenya. In essence the theatre performance has been used to conveniently propel our protagonist, Mwas, into the world of his dreams and ambitions without seriously addressing its nature and presentation. In community theatre or theatre for development (as the one presented by 'The Vultures') music is important in motivating the participants (both actors and 'spect-actors') into the engagement of the theme. Michela E. Vershbow observes correctly that:

Music does not create political change as a solitary force...rather, it is a conduit for change that stirs a community into action, expresses and calls attention to oppression, and bridges the divide between people of different cultures.

In the performance of 'The Vultures', little or no emphasis was laid in the said use of music. This leaves the story bare. The musical score in *Nairobi Half Life* is not as ambitious as the story. The diegetic song by Mwas drunken father in Kikuyu sets the identity of the context with emphatic clarity. The shock in his mother when he reveals the decision he has made to travel to the city is however bare. When Mwas sets out the following morning, there is no accompanying music, which misses the emotion of 'leaving home'. Many people have left their rural homes to come to the city and this is many a time not an easy decision for any family. The score could easily have captured this based on the cultural context. The non-diegetic score catches up with the story when the bus ferrying Mwas is almost at the city. The sound track is in Kikuyu language but the instrumentation cannot be related to the culture. Graeme Harper asks very interesting questions on using music in film enquiring whether particular national media have culturally identifiable styles - say the cinemas of India, or whether the films of particular countries in a continent such as Europe, or in certain portions of a national population, such as those of the African-American population within the context of American cinema generally have an identity. Her further muses whether particular periods suggest different things in the evolution of the sound track and finally asks what the role of the listener is, in all these. It would be a mouthful to answer Harper in this paper but the point is made. The taste of the audience is paramount and that builds on an identifiable or familiar musicality. Identity in film defines its geographical and cultural source and despite the fact that *Nairobi Half Life* defies our parochial domain heading onto the global platform, it urgently needed to reach that pedestal with a Kenyan/Kikuyu/Nairobi 'rubberstamp'. Harper states of this identity in the music that it is in terms of a culture or cultural condition a system of cultural signs that are incorporated into the sound or, indeed, the music - that itself is often considerably culturally charged, often so much so that audiences can determine even the minor influence of particular local or distant styles. Particular film periods, film styles or even directors with the use of particular musical genre can be helpful in better recognizing a component of audience taste and response. Graeme notes that:

These questions come with historical as well as textual relevance. They relate likewise to notions of the use of sound and music: for example, they relate to questions of politics in the choice and positioning of music; or to questions of cultural hegemony in the favouring of a particular sound or set of sounds, or in the manipulation of the relationship between sound and image.

Language can have a metaphoric tint. So it is with the language of sound in film exhibited in *Nairobi Half Life*. We rarely pay attention to the sound of the music until one asks

questions about it. This is perhaps so because of the skillful nature the score composition and the intelligent placement of the same on the timeline. When Mwas is in River-road the musical cue adopts Kenyan hip-hop, which effectively gives the gangster feel. The hip-hop reveals the rebellion in the gang that Mwas joins justifying their action in the Sheng' words translated as 'I have arrived in the city and I am looking for work and money'. The song reveals a capitalistic quest that places the action of the gang after they have stolen and sold car headlamps and side mirrors to a 'client'. The 'social gap' between the rich and the poor is the implied pointer to the gang's action. This is further revealed in the play that Mwas is rehearsing at Phoenix Theatre; about 'robbers' who break into a wealthy neighbourhood just to remind the rich couple that they (the poor) exist. The story of the musical cue effectively begins here. The contextual musical 'story' ends after the hip-hop as the film gets into Hollywood 'mood creation' mode of musicality, which works in many respects for the fast-paced ending.

Whereas it is impossible to debate the actual composition that the score composer ought to explore, Harper notes that inevitably, the decisions that are made about how sound should sound are based on subjective technical perspectives which in turn help shape what the public perceives as accurate sound reproduction. At the end of the film we encounter a sound track in Swahili language, which was first featured when Mwas was in the slum. With a texture of music from the coastal culture the question that is raised concerns what is 'Swahili' in the context and the action. This presents a problem as the hip-hop used already calls home the urban context with its mix of cultures. Eddie Kalish notes that the majority of the background music albums come off only to the point of establishing a main theme. He notes that the rest of the disk is usually an assortment of fragments, which don't mean much musically or commercially in many films. F. H. Richardson in his essay titled "Plain Talk to Theater Managers and Operators: Seating/Music" acknowledges that music is a matter of greater importance than many moving picture theater managers seem to imagine. Hugo Riesenfeld in the essay "Music and Motion Pictures" notes that music in film ought to be controlled by the popular music of the day that may be changed in film according to the taste of the viewers. Although *Nairobi Half Life* may not be entirely guilty of 'cultural-neglect' in part, the emphasis of identity is a subject that needs to be taken seriously if Kenyan films are to make it to the world stage demanding its rightful place.

5.0 Conclusion

It is only fair to take note that the professional score composers are lacking in Kenya and therefore hiring one from outside the country would be very expensive. This may explain the reason for the Kenyan film director of *Nairobi Half Life* hiring the services of Xaver Von Traver. Although the said lapse may partly explain the gaps in identity, it is noticeable that this is a consistent practice in Kenyan films. *Malooned* by Bob Nyanja is another 'world standard' film featuring two characters, a Luo man and a Kikuyu lady, locked in a toilet for a long weekend. The musical score is not used to identify the two communities. The

director, Bob Nyanja, explains that he considered the two characters as urbanites and did not see the need for a score that would delve into their cultural identities. In the television programmes this has also been observed. The programme *Papa Shirandula* presents a Luhya man who has come to the city as a security officer. The score of the programme has no identity of Papa Shirandula and his roots. The programme titled *Inspector Mwala* also purports to present a Kamba policeman who rises to the rank of inspector but again the score demonstrates nothing of Kamba culture. It may not just be a culture of ignoring musicians. This demonstrates a lack of professional score composers in the country who understand the nuances of film and visual media. We could perhaps begin with the practice as Erno Rapee notes in the essay “Selections from Encyclopaedia of Music for Pictures” A great deal has been written on how to arrange music to feature pictures. Experience and observation have taught me that the simplest procedure is as follows: Firstly, determine the geographic and national atmosphere of your picture; secondly, embody every one of your important characters with a theme.

This experience could be an excellent starting point for our good musicians interested in starting a career in score compositions. An emphatic example is evident in a number of South African films. Although, among others, films like *Cry Freedom*, *Yesterday* and *Cry the Beloved Country* all exhibit well-thought-out score, *Sarafina* stands out as a film with a score that was carefully tailor-made to suit its thematic engagement. The musical cues fall into place in the narrative like a jigsaw puzzle. With a drive towards the freedom of Nelson Mandela, it exploits the South African musical idiom for the struggle against apartheid. Michela E. Vershbow in “The Sounds of Resistance: The Role of Music in South Africa's Anti-Apartheid Movement” observes about music in film that it would be better seen as an attempt to allow the viewer to hear and see (and perhaps feel) the power of music in forging political change, resisting oppression, strengthening community, and uniting people of different races and statuses. *Nairobi Half Life* may only boast of the hip hop as the music that was composed with the screen play in mind. In this way, the opportunity to link the viewer with the specific cultural setting is missed for as Schulkin notes; music and song are conduits for forging links across barriers, for making contact with others, and for being indoctrinated with the social milieu. Prendergast also states that ‘musical color’ in a film can be achieved through the use of musical material indigenous to the locale of the film. This is the most emphatic signature for engraving the contextual identity of a film. Sometimes it may be a shared already known musical cue like the ones in *Sarafina* or the use of a musical idiom of a people through the use of a musical instrument and/or the linguistic parole of the context like Ayub Ogada practices. Ogada’s *Koth Biro* is not a traditional song among the Luo. No one in Luo land ever heard of that song before but then how do we identify it with Luo culture? Apart from the language of the song, which is in Luo, he uses the famous *orutu*; a reknown Luo musical instrument. The composition is hence ‘fresh’ but with an unmistakable identity. It has been used in several international films like *The Constant Gardener* to give the production a feel of an African context for the western audience. The practice of film scoring can be learned but also

demands a lot of intuition and a deep understanding of the people's love of music. It is a practice that demands both practical experience but also learned observation/listening to perfect the art of making the viewer 'to see the sound and hear the picture'.

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