

Ayub Ogada: The Passing of a Nyatiti Evangelist

The underlying tone of several online comments in response to the magnificence of Ayub Ogada's music ruefully note that the man was a proverbial prophet who failed to gain acceptance at home. Home here stretches beyond his birthplace Kenya into the vast African continent. The various comments suggested that he did not receive the level of respect and star recognition and treatment accorded him in Europe where he spent a large part of his creative life.

When he passed away on 1st Feb 2019, messages of condolence, as well as newspaper articles, generally reiterated that Ayub, the nyatiti icon, had been neglected locally. Commentators lamented that his music did not receive sufficient airplay and that he was not featured regularly in the media. Some even suggested that the album he recently released, *Kodhi*, was all but successful. The narrative from another stream of commiseration minimised his musical genius and production to a single song, *Koth Biro*. The hauntingly melodious opening, "Aaayehaye aye aye...aye hayee aye aye" is easily recognised even by those who draw a blank when asked, "Do you know Ayub Ogada?"

Granted, *Koth Biro* is Ayub Ogada's most renowned song and signature tune, and has been rendered and re-rendered in countless versions by hundreds of artists all over the globe. However, to reduce him to the *Koth Biro* one-song wonder, displays a minimalist appreciation that obscures Ayub Ogada's real contribution to world music and his success in putting Kenya and his adopted instrument - the nyatiti - on the global pedestal. This re-framing of Ayub Ogada's quest, his narrative, his sojourn in Europe and eventual return to Kenya after almost two decades to settle in his rural home in Nyahera, Kisumu West, and his passion to work with the next generation of musicians paints a fuller picture of the man and his legacy.

I first met Job Ouko Seda in the early seventies. He was a teenager with a thick American drawl and along with his brothers, David and Eric, joined Our Lady of

Mercy Primary School in Nairobi. Eric, the youngest of the three Seda siblings, was my classmate and later became a good friend. They had just returned to Kenya from Chicago in America where their father had been pursuing his clinical medicine studies. While there, he was accompanied by his wife and the young Job as they gave performances of Luo music to Kenyan and American audiences in college campuses.

Job, who was 6-years-old when they relocated to America, was part of the travelling troupe and ended up getting exposed to multiple performance traditions early. He got immersed in the African American cultural and civil rights scene and recounts meeting and shaking the hand of Cassius Clay (Muhammed Ali) and experiencing the aftermath of American segregation. Job has described how going to America from Mombasa, where he was born, was a big culture shock comparable only to the counter-shock that hit him upon his return to Kenya.

Upon completing his primary schooling at Our Lady of Mercy Primary School, Job joined Lenana High School where he played various musical instruments. He has said in interviews that the legendary Fadhili Williams of *Malaika* fame taught him how to play the guitar. While still in school he played for a band, *Awengele*, made up mainly of school mates. They experimented with rock and soul music that was playing on radio then. When he graduated from high school he teamed up with the likes of Gordon Ominde, Jack Otieno (Jack Odongo) and Ali Nassir to form Black Savage Band. The band drew their influence from psych and folk rock, funk and R&B. They recorded their debut album, *Something for Someone*. The album is described as having all songs in English with politically and socially aware lyrics.

The band went on to release three more singles, *Do you really care/Save the savage* and *Grassland/Kothbiro* and *Fire/Rita* - a reggae sound. The eclecticism of the music genre they produced points to young men struggling to find a musical identity. This was the time that the famous *Koth Biro* was composed. There has been controversy in some circles about the composer of the song. In an interview with John Lawrence published in 2015, Ayub Ogada said:

“There was one afternoon when Mbarak Achieng’ and I were hungry, coming from rehearsals to buy some French fries in town. So, while walking along Waiyaki Way, the melody came, and we wrote Koth Biro.”

The song is a Luo folk song imploring a certain Auma to be cautious because a major downpour is imminent and to hurry home with the herd of cattle. Black Savages went ahead and recorded it, but it was Ayub Ogada who remade the nyatiti version that has assumed iconic status.

When Black Savages fell apart, Job was tasked to form a band by Alan Donovan of African Heritage fame. The band was to accompany Kenya's African Heritage Festival, which showcased Afrocentric fashion and design pieces. Alan Donovan's brief to the band was to compose and produce original music, not the inauthentic tunes that were in vogue in Nairobi. This was to mark a turning point in Job Seda's transformation as a musician, a transition to which he credits Alan Donovan. He has been quoted expressing gratitude saying, "I would be nothing without this man."

The song is a Luo folk song imploring a certain Auma to be cautious because a major downpour is imminent and to hurry home with the herd of cattle. Black Savages went ahead and recorded it, but it was Ayub Ogada who remade the nyatiti version that has assumed iconic status.

That was 1979. Job rounded up some of his former colleagues, Mbarak Achieng', Francis Njoroge Noel Sanyanafwa (Drury - an old school mate at Our Lady of Mercy and Lenena School) and Goro Kunii, and a unique musical journey began. Their repertoire included original compositions fusing traditional music with sounds of rock and soul. The band was later joined by Jack Odongo, Ali Mogobeni, Shabaan Onyango, Walter Amalemba, Sammy Eshikaty, Gido Kibukosya and Samite Mulondo from Uganda. They recorded *Niko Saikini* and *Handas*. Job's search for a real identity was still relentless. In between playing music, he was involved in film and is credited for work in *The Color Purple* and with acting roles in *Out of Africa* and *The Kitchen Toto*.

In an interview with Rupi Mangat, Job describes his epiphany, and conversion to the nyatiti. He recounts coming face to face with the musical instrument on display at the African Heritage showroom.

"It was an instrument from my rural home, but nobody was playing it there any longer. So I bought it for a sum of Kshs 3,000 paying for it in instalments of Kshs 100. Then I found a teacher at the Bomas of Kenya to teach me how to play it. One lesson cost Kshs100. After six lessons, I could not afford the

lessons anymore and taught myself. Since nobody played the instrument in Nairobi, I had to connect with the old people in Nyahera to learn more”.

Had Job Seda discovered the nyatiti, or had the nyatiti found him? Here he was, gravitating away from the mix of African Heritage’s afro rock and soul, and returning to learn at the feet of the elders. It was a truly remarkable rediscovery of his Nilotic roots.

In an interview, Job recalls the beginning of his relationship with the nyatiti:

“It was love at first sight for the nyatiti and Ogada. I often saw the instrument used by traditional groups or folk musicians. When I strummed the Kamba nane strings, I instantly felt so strongly reconnected with my cultural roots.”

There was a metamorphosis happening and Job was giving way to Ayub Ogada. The *juogi* (spirits) that had been bottled up in him were slowly welling up and consuming Job and giving birth to Ayub Ogada.

In his own words:

“Job Seda had done a certain type of music that wasn’t African and I was involved in film industry. So I thought deeply about my life in 1986 and decided that I wanted to turn over a new leaf. When I discovered nyatiti, I went fully African.”

The origin of the eight-stringed *nyatiti* or lyre is shrouded in mysticism. It is noted that communities along the Nile river valley play versions of the instrument all the way from Egypt to the East African lacustrine region. It is more common among the Nilotic Luo and Kalenjin ethnic groups. Among the Bantu-speaking people, only the Abagusii and Bukusu have equivalents: the *obokano* and *litungu*, respectively.

Had Job Seda discovered the nyatiti, or had the nyatiti found him? Here he was, gravitating away from the mix of African Heritage’s afro rock and soul, and returning to learn at the feet of the elders. It was a truly remarkable rediscovery of his Nilotic roots.

Speculation that the instrument originated in ancient Egypt, ancient Greece or Babylon is supported by images of the instrument on hieroglyphics in Egypt. The music scholars who have traced the *nyatiti* along the Nile valley assert that it is only found along the migration route of the Nilotic people. In Uganda, the Acoli – a Luo-speaking people – also have the *enanga* or *adungu* that is played by the Jo-Padhola and Ateso. According to Nyamungu Odindo, who was Ayub Ogada’s *nyatiti* teacher, the *nyatiti* came from Israel and passed through Libya, which is where Ramogi, the mystical progenitor of the Luo people, got the instrument.

The number of strings of the lyre in every community has symbolic significance. The *nyatiti* has eight and it is said that this number represents the four days of seclusion observed upon the birth of a male child before he is brought out. (A female child is brought out after three days.) The last four strings represent the four days of vigil observed upon the demise of a man. (It is three days for a woman.) The strings therefore represent the entire life of man, from birth to death.

In this patriarchal worldview, the *nyatiti* player strums the entire continuum of life and death, in a sense acting as a mediator between the present and the past. In a recent interview, Ayub Ogada paraphrased this philosophy. He said:

“Every time I play a song, I give you part of myself. So eventually, I must die because I have given you everything!”

There is more to the strings of the *nyatiti*. When it is tuned, the fourth and fifth chord from either up or down have the same tune. There is a Dholuo tongue-twister that says, *“Nyatiti madiere móchodo chuny Jathum chutho.”* This could roughly translate to, *“The middle cord of the nyatiti that completely breaks the heart of the lyre player.”* It suggests that the middle strings are the most important and if they break the musician and his music are as good as dead. It also suggests the spiritual bond or relationship between the musician and his instrument.

In this patriarchal worldview, the nyatiti player strums the entire continuum of life and death, in a sense acting as a mediator between the present and the past.

The *nyatiti*, unlike other string instruments, is very personal, and the tuning is

dependent on the vocal range of and individual player. Researchers who have studied nyatiti players have noted that some players duplicate the tone of the voice while others produce a harmonic structure within which the vocal melody progresses. Nyatiti melodies are distributed to both hands and are played in an interlocking fashion using seven out of the ten fingers. The instrument is sacred in many respects, and it is believed that those who play it are not just musicians, but are possessed by the spirit of the *thum nyatiti*. The instrument is considered feminine, the prefix *nya* suggesting daughter of *titi*, which is onomatopoeic of the sound the middle cords. *Nya* is also the diminutive and so combined with *titi* it means “a small *titi*”. This feminisation of the instrument could be the reason that the nyatiti was traditionally only played by males.

An ethnomusicologist researcher tells us that women were discouraged from playing the nyatiti and that there was a social rule that stated that if a woman as much as touched the instrument she would be compelled to marry the owner. This has recently changed and there are accomplished female players.

The nyatiti was also handed down from father to son and so not everyone could learn and play it; it had to be in your blood. Some studies have shown that the predecessor of the nyatiti - the *thum* - was slightly bigger, and the beat was maintained by a different player. The nyatiti was made smaller to accommodate the single player who had to combine all the accompaniments in competition with the one-man guitar.

Traditionally, the nyatiti was played while seated. The player would sit on a small stool (*orindi*) while wearing on his right big toe a wrought iron ring (*onduongó*) and a couple of small metallic bells. As he plucked his nyatiti, he kept time striking the neck of the nyatiti with the *onduongó* causing the bells to jingle as he did so. Thus the single nyatiti player was an entire ensemble, producing the percussive beat, the harmony through the singing, the melody through the nyatiti and the accompanying rattles.

It is fascinating and illustrative of the transformation that in interviews detailing how he took up the nyatiti, Job Seda begins to refer to Ogada in the third person. The new identity associated with the instrument was taking him over. He said:

“When you start to play the instrument, you practically get married. She won’t

like you to play another instrument. You play and you enter a contract, and you have to be serious. Suits me fine; I'm happily married."

From his experience at the African Heritage, he was completely sold to the idea of developing traditional music made from traditional instruments. His frustration is felt in in this 1993 quote: "I lived a lot in the city and found it very difficult to have access to traditional music."

The Kenyan music scene during this period was under the siege of Congolese rhumba, soul and R&B, jazz, Latin pop and even country and western. For groups like African Heritage that were trying to be original, there was a shortage of role models. Further afield, it was the period when African artistes like Fela Kuti released global hits such as *Lady* and *Shakara*. Osibisa, a British Afro-pop band, was releasing hit after hit - *Woyaya*, *We are Going*, *Happy Children*. Artistes like Manu Dibango had released *Soul Makosa*. There is no doubt that these musicians influenced Ayub Ogada's thinking and creative direction. Many parallels can be drawn to Ayub Ogada's transformation to artists like Fela Kuti who abandoned his birth name, Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, and the high life type of music and adopted Afro-beat. Ayub Ogada however, never became as overtly political as Fela was, though he was a social commentator.

Job's restlessness persisted, and after a highly creative stint with African Heritage, he parted ways with the other members, including Gido Kibukosya, Wally Amalemba, Sam Eshikaty, and Jack Odongo, due to aesthetic and ideological differences. He decided to take the band in a different direction. He is quoted saying:

"They wanted to get into more Afro-fusion (read Westernised) sounds while I wanted to stick with strengthening the indigenous African sounds of my music, so we had to go our separate ways."

He was conflicted because he felt that he was not growing musically. So in 1986 he set off to the UK in search of kindred spirits. He stated in an interview that he needed to meet and interact with musicians making similar music away from the copy-cat scene in Nairobi and Kenya. He was by then an accomplished nyatiti player. At this point, it would be apt to paraphrase the famous quote by Neil Armstrong when he walked on the moon and state that this was one small step for the man Ayub Ogada and one giant leap for the nyatiti.

Ayub Ogada's sojourn in Europe is only comparable to what Lamine Konte of Senegal and Foday Musa Suso of Gambia did for the kora. These artistes brought the kora to Europe to dialogue with musical trends alien to the Mandinka tradition that had produced it. Lamine Konte mixed the kora with Casamance traditional melodies and harmonised it with Afro Cuban rhythms while Foday Musa Suso crossed the kora with jazz instruments. Artist like Toumane Diabete improvised and infused the kora with other types of music and gave birth to a revival of the griot tradition and the contemporisation of the instrument and its performance.

No one before Ayub Ogada had done this for the nyatiti. His was a deliberate decision and sacrifice. In a 2016 interview after his *Koth Biro* was played in his absence at the opening of the Summer Olympics, he reminisced about the visa-obtaining shenanigans that had made it impossible for him to travel to Rio. He poignantly stated:

"I know most probably our traditional instruments such as nyatiti are not taken with the seriousness like others. I am sure if it were some people carrying pianos, guitars, and other contemporary instruments, the treatment would have been different."

The story of Ayub Ogada, roughing it out in the London Underground while playing his nyatiti, has been told and retold hundreds of times, but the point that is missing is the realisation of the nature of the sacrifice that led to the global recognition of the nyatiti and its distinct sound. Ayub Ogada and the nyatiti strode onto the global stage when he was invited to play at WOMAD in 1988. He was scheduled to play for ten minutes, but at the last minute a Mozambican band failed to turn up and he was asked if he could play. He describes that serendipitous moment in an interview with Francis Gooding in 2016:

"I said, no problem. I went into this great, big concert hall. The place was empty. I set myself up, plugged myself in, and did my concert. Normally, I close my eyes when I perform, and when I finished, the concert hall was packed, over capacity, and the applause just nearly blew me over. I nearly fell off my stool. As I came off stage, Peter Gabriel came and escorted me and that's really how I began with WOMAD and Real World."

As the saying goes, the rest is history. Peter Gabriel invited him to take part in

one of the recording weeks and the rise of Ayub Ogada and nyatiti had begun. He went on to record *En Mana Kuoyo (It is Just Sand)*.

Ayub Ogada's sojourn in Europe is only comparable to what Lamine Konte of Senegal and Foday Musa Suso of Gambia did for the kora. These artistes brought the kora to Europe to dialogue with musical trends alien to the Mandinka tradition that had produced it.

Ayub Ogada and his nyatiti have shared the stage with various types of musicians and choirs. *Koth Biro*, in particular, has been rendered in uncountable forms with different instrumentation and even vocalisation of the nyatiti riff. The Luo lyrics of *Koth Biro* have been sung by hundreds of artists, with some renditions sounding totally ridiculous to the Luo ear. I am prepared to lay a bet that there is no other Kenyan song that has been as globally rendered as *Koth Biro* has. When I watched a perfect cello remaking of the nyatiti, it spoke of the length that Ayub Ogada's sojourn had taken the nyatiti.

The nyatiti is not only inspiring new creations, but is getting incorporated into global beats, thanks to Ayub Ogada. He was by no means a traditional nyatiti player; he improvised and changed the playing position of the lyre. He cradled the nyatiti on his lap - a style that has now become more acceptable and probably allows the players more face-time with the audience. This playing position is also easier for female players of nyatiti to adopt. Working with varied instrumentalists, he created space for more and more instruments to accompany his nyatiti and he used the *gara* and *onduon'go* less and less. He incorporated djembe drums, thus adding a more powerful pulsating beat to his tunes, and welcomed the West African drums into the nyatiti's space.

Ayub Ogada might as well be credited with the upright nyatiti playing position that democratised the instrument by making it gender neutral.

In 2007 Ayub Ogada, the pilgrim and his nyatiti, returned home. He said:

"Many people have forgotten traditional music. I feel a responsibility to re-introduce it. I learnt from here and I want to give back."

Like an evangelist, Ayub Ogada had converted the world to appreciate this unique instrument that has a history of over 5,000 years. He had put Kenya on the map

with *Koth Biro*, the tune that had featured in sound tracks of international films, and more recently in Kanye West's music. The remaining task for the nyatiti proselyte was to re-ground traditional music and instruments back to the source.

Ayub Ogada returned home to set up a studio where he could work with younger artists and provide the direction that he felt he lacked as a young man. Returning to one's roots - *dala* - is an imploring message in *Koth Biro: Auma keluru dhok e dala* (*Auma, bring the cattle back home*). The family's wealth, the cattle, finally returned to the homestead.

Upon his death, there were many, like the singer Suzanne Owiyo, who eulogised him as the inspiration that led them to taking up the nyatiti. Ayub Ogada's prodigy, Martin Murimi, who goes by the name Papillion, is taking the nyatiti to the next level. He has designed an instrument called *Anywal-Abel*, a combination of a harp, percussion and thumb piano. Papillion attributes his success to his mentor, for whom he composed a song, *Ayubu*. In the song he praises Ayub Ogada as the quintessential teacher and mentor in whose debt he will forever be. He met Ayub Ogada in 2013 at a workshop and Ayub went ahead and invited him to the African Heritage and mentored him. He has since grown as an artist performer and designer of his own instruments. He is hailed as the only one in Africa. He said, "I felt the need to thank Ayub for the impact he has put in me and so I did it with my first song."

Ayub Ogada returned home to set up a studio where he could work with younger artists and provide the direction that he felt he lacked as a young man. Returning to one's roots - dala - is an imploring message in Koth Biro: Auma keluru dhok e dala (Auma, bring the cattle back home). The family's wealth, the cattle, finally returned to the homestead.

Unfortunately, Ayub Ogada remained largely unrecognised and unacknowledged at home - but he will be remembered globally for being a nyatiti prophet.