

## David Amunga – profile of a music maestro



By Shad Bulimo, May 25 2010

Some internet sites had written him off as long dead. But I discovered him not only alive but still kicking hard, very hard. I found him quite eloquent, informed and bulging with tonnes of energy. His looks belie his real age. He looks 50 but is actually 72. This is the story of David Amunga, he of the *America to Africa* fame, a tune that lit the music scene in the 1960s and spread like wildfire not only in Kenya but also in Tanzania and Uganda.

Unknown to most, Amunga did not compose the music because he felt lonely in the US. Yes there was loneliness involved but it was not his. The composition was a piece of artistic ingenuity prompted by a letter from his best friend George Blastus who had gone to the US as part of the 1960s airlift organised by Tom Mboya, the slain former minister for planning in the Kenyatta government. “This place is not like home,” Blastus wrote. “I feel lonely and I miss home.” Those words touched Amunga’s inner sanctum and he set out to compose a song that would become a signature tune for all East African students abroad and a favourite of the political class of the day.

Born to a Luo mother, Elita Manyasa from the Umira Kager clan in Alego (the combatively traditionalist clan that made headlines during the SM Otieno versus Wamboi burial saga in the 1987), his maternal grandfather, Analo Okusimba was a traditional music artist and it was from his genes that Amunga owes his interest in music. It was a talent that entertained both man and beast and brought fame if not fortune to young Amunga.

If the song was celebrated in Kenya, it was worshipped in Tanzania. When Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, the late Tanzanian first president, wanted a musician to perform at the opening of Mount Kilimanjaro Hotel in Dar es Salaam, the pre eminent landmark that dominates the skyline of the Tanzanian capital, it was to Amunga that he turned to except that he (Nyerere) was not happy with him. “*Kwa nini uliharibu*

*wimbo mzuri?*” Nyerere blurted out . “*Ungeimba kwa Kiswahili.*” (Why have you spoiled a good song like that? You should have sung it in Kiswahili).

It was during a time when Nyerere was doggedly fighting to steer his newly independent nation on a socialist path against fierce opposition from the West, especially the US. Therefore anything that depicted America as an unfriendly place was music to Nyerere’s ears. After the show, Sheikh Karume, then vice president asked Amunga what the Kenyan government had done for him. “When I told him nothing he said that I should migrate to Tanzania and they will give me *shamba* (farm),” he says. “But I refused. I told him that I loved Kenya so much I had no wish to move anywhere else.”

Although saints and heroes are never recognised in their own countries, for Amunga some measure of recognition came on 12 December 2004 when President Mwai Kibaki awarded him the Order of the Grand Warrior, the first Kenyan musician to receive a presidential commendation. It was a fitting birthday present for Amunga, then 66, born on a day that would later coincide with Jamhuri Day.

Descended from Muchisa, the tribal ancestor who led the Kisa people from Samia several generations ago into their present locale, Amunga of the Abakambuli clan started singing as a herd’s boy. While out with the cattle on pasturelands, he learnt to play the flute (*omulele*) and played it so well cows stopped to listen. His parents had warned him that his flutes were attracting snakes, monkeys and other beasts which were devouring their chickens.

“One day, I was sent to chase away monkeys which had made a habit of frequenting our farm. While looking out for them, I sat on a tree trunk and started playing my flute. Suddenly, I heard a strange noise. When I turned back, I saw this python looking at me; transfixed in a trance and instead of attacking me, it just sat there dazed. I believed it was enjoying the tunes because of the unique way in which I was making the musical sounds,” he says.

This incident confirmed to Amunga what his parents and other elders had been telling him. It was then that he realised he was talented and set out to learn more instruments. At that time, the Luhya had many traditional instruments like *litungu*, an eight-string instrument played primarily by older people while the youth preferred *isikuti* drum because it was accompanied by pulsating and rigorous sexy dance. Other instruments included *omutimbuli*, a string instrument made with a *debe* (square-shaped metallic drum) and a bent stick and buried in a hole about 5-6 inches deep. “Every time I played this instrument, dogs came round,” he boasts.

Hunger for music lead the young Amunga to learn another instrument known as *olukhuche*, a one string instrument made from *olusiola* tree. His sister, Erica was better at it than him, he says. Other instruments that he was exposed to included *esiriba* (wind instrument made from clay), *obukhana* (a four-string instrument), *eshilili* (African violin), *limuika* (made from a large gourd) and *ebikhuli* (rattles).

“These were the instruments with which we made music to entertain ourselves but the colonial government and especially the Christian schools outlawed our lifestyle as heathen. Colonialism, in that sense was tantamount to negative change. If you want to colonise people, start by killing their culture,”

laments Amunga whose fighting spirit is derived from his father, the late William Aseka, a traditional wrestling champion.

Amunga is quick to add that colonialism was not all musically negative. He says that the pre independence music scene was enriched by Western instruments like the accordion (introduced after the First World War) and guitar (introduced at the end of the Second World War). The soldiers who fought in the two World Wars as part of the Kenya Kings Rifles contingent learnt the instruments while in battlefields in Burma and brought them home.

Speaking to Amunga, you get the sense that the man is a rich repository of the history of music not only in Luhyaland but in Kenya as a whole. As far as composing lyrics is concerned, the first Luhya to do so was a man known as Akukha from Wanga in early 1940s while the first Luo was Olima and in Kikuyuland, there was one going by the name Sina Kikombe. Other early music legends from Luhyaland include Joshua Omwami and Bulimo both from Kisa. But it was a litungu player, Atieri who was the first Luhya to have a record cut in mid 1940s. Atieri from Ebbayi in Bunyore lives in relative obscurity, something that deeply troubles Amunga who is fighting for the rights of musicians like Atieri, Daudi Kabaka, John Mwale, John Nzenze, among others as a member of the advisory copyright board put together by the Attorney General, Amos Wako.

Amunga remembers days when playing guitar was judged as a social misdemeanour. Guitar players roamed from place to place entertaining people at beer parties and were paid in kind by alcohol. "My elder brother, Musa Omutere was one of them. He was a good guitarist and played in a band that included Joel Okello and Charles Rasto," he recalls.

"These are the people I learnt from. They couldn't allow you to use their guitars. I was only allowed to dust them but never play. They were folk heroes and seemed to have everything including beautiful women. They influenced me. If by accident they left one guitar behind, I started learning and with time, found myself playing very well. "

His chance came when one day during a tour of Ulumbi in Luoland, his brother's band took a break and was gone for a long time when the patron asked Amunga and his friends to try and hold the audience. "We took to the stage and played so well that when the main musicians returned, they were told that we were better," he says. "Although this caused a big clash with my brother's band, it gave me the confidence that I needed to play to an audience."

By now an expert at guitar, Amunga's fame spread quickly and because of that he found himself involved in an incident at Ebukambuli School that could potentially have ruined his life. As he puts it, a 'crazy' boy from Ekwanda in Bunyore known as Manase had heard that he played guitar so he brought one to school and approached him. Those days, if you were found with a guitar you risked summary expulsion. During the day, they would hide the instrument in a neighbour's house and sneak it into the dormitory in the evenings. This attracted crowds of students. One day a teacher disguised himself as a student and caught Amunga red handed.

Amunga panicked and knew straight away what the consequences were. The headmaster at the time was Enoch Mulembo from Emusire. "He looked at me fiercely and asked if I was aware that I was in a mission school. Timid and shaken I answered 'yes' expecting to be expelled. I was shocked when he told me that he was not going to punish me," he says. "Instead, I was to use my guitar to promote only Christian music." With this narrow escape, Amunga took to singing hymns and other Christian melodies using his guitar. One of those tunes *Nobusangali ne Milembe Po* became a big hit throughout Luhyaland.

The song made Amunga something of a folk hero and gave him the exposure and publicity any aspiring musician craved. It was around this time that young Amunga left Ebukambuli Intermediate School. His leaving was funereal. "It was as if somebody had died," he recalls. In memory of his exploits, a dormitory was named after him. He passed his Common Entrance Examinations very well and was admitted to Maseno School but due to lack of school fees he was forced to abandon higher education and travel to Nairobi to seek employment.

Besides music and sport Amunga was also good at English and got a job as a proof reader at the Standard newspapers (then known as East African Standard) at Town House, Nairobi. His salary was Sh180 per month which was reasonable those days. "But because with my guitar I could make Sh300 per month I opted to pursue a career in music," he says. That was in 1955.

Sometimes during 1952-3, the budding artist had composed a song called *Someni Vijana* (Study Hard, Young Men). He was discovered by the legendary Fundi Konde while playing at a club in Ziwani, Nairobi. Fundi Konde who was scouting for Equator Sounds Studios taught him new techniques and how to record in modern studios. Although he struggled initially, Amunga persisted and eventually mastered the studio techniques and did his first studio recording of *Someni Vijana*.

"I was told that to become a recording artist, I had to sell 50,000 copies before I got a contract. *Someni Vijana* was an instant hit and I sold more than that within a short time. The ministry of education made it into a signature tune to promote the virtues of education to the youth," he says. That time I was living at Shauri Moyo, Nairobi where you couldn't see a white man. But once I hit the target, a white man came to me in Shauri Moyo to sign me up as a professional artist."

Getting a professional contract did not mean that the artist continued to derive royalties from his intellectual endeavours. In those days, once you recorded, the rights remained with the recording company. So although *Someni Vijana* went gold, Amunga was not appropriately remunerated. In 1965 he left Equator to set up Mwangaza Music Stores, the first independent African music production company in Kenya.

Mwangaza's first recording "*America to Africa*" topped the music charts for six months and firmly established Amunga as an accomplished professional artist and entrepreneur. Although inspired by his friend's loneliness in the US, it was also a response to Daudi Kabaka's "*Safari ya Tanganyika*" which was such a big hit it created a new benchmark on the local music scene. "Because we liked to compete, I had to come up with something spectacular," Amunga says. The genesis of *America to Africa* started at a meeting in Kamukunji grounds at which Jomo Kenyatta, Tom Mboya and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga talked of airlifting people to go to America and Russia to study and return home to build the new independent

state. This airlift which had started just before independence included US president, Barack Obama's father.

Although Amunga went for an interview at ministry of labour, it was his friend Ben Blastus with whom he had recorded *Someni Vijana* who got the scholarship because he had opted for other subjects but music was not taken seriously. Within a short time, Ben wrote to Amunga complaining that America was so cold and boring he was missing home.

"That was the inspiration for *America to Africa*. I composed the song and sent him a copy. He told me once he listened to the tune, he invited his friends round and soon word went round and people were filling his room," recalls Amunga. Around this time, the first lady, Mama Ngina Kenyatta had gone to America and heard of the song. She summoned Dr Njoroge Mungai, then foreign affairs minister and decreed that there was no better gift to give to Kenyans in America than the song *America to Africa*, Amunga says.

It was the first African song to sell in big stores like Assanands, he recalls. Its fame spread beyond Kenyan borders to Tanzania and Uganda. Although in those, once you recorded, the rights remained with the recording company, Amunga was the first artist to qualify for royalties in countries where copyright laws exist like Tanzania, Zambia and South Africa.

Despite producing *America to Africa*, Mwangaza lasted only two years. Not one to give up easily, Amunga established another label, Kassanga Star Sounds in 1967 which produced two further hits – *Mama Mukoya* and *Jane is Pretty*. The new label also attracted other budding African stars of the early 1970s such as DO Misiani and Daniel Kamau (DK) but came crashing down in an industry dominated by well oiled foreign labels. The fighting spirit in Amunga saw him establish Artco, a cooperative society for artists in 1980 and in 1983 he became a founder member of Music Copyright Society of Kenya. Amunga has also served as a director of the Permanent Presidential Music Commission, renamed Music Commission of Kenya in 2005.

Luhya musicians at the time included John Mwale from Tiriki, George Mukabi from Kisa, Bunyore Band led by Atwoli. Others were John Ondolo from Kisa, Jimmy Lasko from Idakho, Edward Nandwa from Maragoli, Joseph Kakai from Bukusu, Daudi Kabaka, John Nzenze and John Mwale all from Tiriki and Simekha from Bunyore.

Although most musicians were singing in Luhya and still selling outside their tribe, Amunga says that they decided to start singing in Kiswahili as well to capture a wider audience. The Kikuyu musicians had *mwomboko* genre which appealed principally to Central Kenya audiences while the Luo played *Benga* in dholuo. "But with Kiswahili the Luhya artists like Daudi Kabaka, John Mwale (he of *Kenyatta Aliteswa Sana* fame) George Mukabi and me were able to sell our music across tribes," he says.

Amunga, who is something of a cultural warrior, laments the loss of cultural capital due to Western influence. He sees pop and rap songs that now permeate the music scene in Kenya as a cultural protest by young people who have lost their cultural value systems. He is not happy that gospel music has been secularised on disco dance floors rather than stay in cathedrals where it belongs.

Although he sits on a copyright advisory board, he says it is a struggle trying to change the mindset of government officials. Copyright, he says, is a new concept in Kenya and the government sent people overseas who see everything from the prism of foreign education. “I told them that copyright starts with our songs and not the other way round. These are the people who went to St Mary’s School and have little appreciation of indigenous originality,” he laments. “Look at bands like Kayamba. They took our songs and made money from them. If copyright laws are not enacted and musicians protected, Kenya will be a country without originality.”

Amunga, the last born in a family of four is a happily married man and takes great pride in his family. His first wife, Wanjiku Isabella is the daughter of the late Joseph Kangethe, the former chairman of Kikuyiu Central Association immortalised by a road in Nairobi bearing his name. With Wanjiku, Amunga begat Joseph Epiche, a senior manager with Kenya Power and Lighting in Eldoret, William Aseka, working in Tours and Safaris, Yuniah Amunga (a DJ with Capital FM and also a singer) and Alfred Amunga (businessman in Nairobi).

His second wife, Nancy Wanyutu, a sister to former minister and Githunguri MP, Arthur Magugu, passed on in 2001 but is survived by the following issues: Zack Amunga (musician in Holland), Japheth Amunga (driver in Eldoret). Her other son John Amunga who was also a musician perished in a car crash near Safari Park Hotel, Nairobi in 1994.

Music runs in the Amunga family. Besides his second born sister, Omwinde, the rest of his siblings were musicians. This includes his elder brother, Musa Omutere and the third born, Erica Aswani not to mention his offspring, the Capital FM DJ, Yuniah, Zack and the late John.

Does the maestro have any regrets? “Despite my poverty situation I am proud that no child of mine is begging,” he quips. He regrets that the Ministry of culture is killing culture. “It is staffed with officers who have no appreciation of our cultural resources. How do you put a lawyer in charge of culture?”

Amunga advises young budding musicians to go back to their roots if they want to succeed in the competitive music industry. He says our culture has rich aspects which aspiring artists can harvest to make compelling music. Harvesting, circumcision and wedding activities are some of the areas rich in lyrical fodder. “You cannot be a successful musician if you cannot relate to your culture. Artists from Nigeria, South Africa and Mali are successful because their music is a reflection of their culture,” he says. “If you do what the West is doing, no one can listen to you because you cannot do it better than them.”

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