

An Analysis of Traditional Instruments and Folk dance in Kenya

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Abstract

Folk Dance tradition has been an integral for of Kenyan cultural. Many of the traditional dance forms of Kenya are still intact. The fact that their ethnic diversity has a wide variation, the Traditional instruments plays a significant role as a cultural expression in their folk-dance tradition. This research analysis the different traditional instruments in Kenya and to understand how they represent the respective culture of different tribes of Kenya. The study aims to understand if these instruments had any symbolic meanings that were used as a way of communicating the culture, beliefs, social roles among the various ethnic groups of Kenya. The Qualitative research methods such as literature review, observations, visual analysis, are used in the research work . The main results obtained through the research include , the different types of traditional instruments used by the Kenyans, and how these are connected to the folk dance culture of Kenya. The study concludes that the traditional instruments of Kenya and their link to the Kenyan folk-dance traditions. The research further demonstrates that traditional instruments are not merely musical tools but also powerful symbols of cultural identity and historical continuity. Their continued use in folk dance performances reflects the resilience of Kenyan traditions and their importance in maintaining the cultural heritage of diverse communities.

Key Words: Folk dance traditions, Traditional musical instruments, Kenya, Ethnic Groups, Cultural identity

Introduction

Dance is a vital aspect of African cultural life and serves as a powerful medium of communication, celebration, worship, storytelling, and entertainment. It is deeply embedded in the social and cultural fabric of African communities, reflecting their values, beliefs, and collective identity. In Kenya, traditional

dances are performed by various ethnic communities during important ceremonies such as weddings, initiation rites, harvest celebrations, funerals, and religious rituals. These performances are not only artistic expressions but also important cultural practices that strengthen social cohesion and continuity of traditions.

A key feature of these folk dance traditions is ornamentation, which includes costumes, beads, body painting, feathers, anklets, bells, shields, and jewelry. These elements are carefully selected and worn to enhance the visual impact of the performance while also communicating deeper cultural meanings. Ornamentation varies significantly among Kenya's diverse ethnic groups, reflecting differences in environment, history, and social organization.

Rather than serving a purely decorative purpose, ornamentation in folk dance carries symbolic significance. It expresses cultural identity, social status, age groups, gender roles, spiritual beliefs, and artistic values. For example, certain colors, patterns, or materials may indicate initiation status, marital condition, leadership roles, or spiritual connection. Through these visual symbols, communities are able to communicate complex cultural messages without spoken language.

Furthermore, ornamentation plays an important role in preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge from one generation to another. It helps maintain continuity of cultural heritage, especially in a rapidly changing world influenced by modernization and globalization. Despite external influences, many Kenyan communities continue to uphold traditional dance practices and their associated ornamentation as a way of safeguarding their identity.

This study therefore investigates how ornamentation functions as a form of cultural expression in Kenyan folk dance traditions. It further examines its significance in communicating cultural meanings and in preserving Kenya's rich and diverse cultural heritage through performance.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

To examine the role of traditional musical instruments in Kenyan folk dance traditions and their cultural significance.

Research Questions

1. What types of traditional musical instruments are used in Kenyan folk dance traditions?
2. What cultural and symbolic meanings are attached to these instruments among different communities?
3. How do traditional instruments communicate cultural values, beliefs, and social roles?
4. In what ways are traditional instruments connected to folk dance performances in Kenya?

Literature Review

Previous studies on African dance indicate that costume and ornamentation are essential elements of performance. Scholars argue that ornamentation communicates identity, age, gender, and social status within communities.

Research on Kenyan traditional dances shows that communities such as the Maasai people use colorful beadwork to symbolize beauty, bravery, and social identity. The Luo people use ankle rattles and decorative costumes to enhance rhythm and movement during dance performances.

A number of studies on African cultural performance emphasize that traditional music and dance are deeply embedded in the social, spiritual, and historical life of communities. Scholars have consistently noted that African dance is not merely entertainment but a form of communication that reflects identity, values, and belief systems (Nketia, 1974; Kidula, 2013).

Previous research highlights that ornamentation and musical instruments are central to performance traditions across African societies. These elements communicate meaning beyond sound and movement, expressing social status, age, gender roles, and cultural identity. As argued by Nzewi (2007), African musical instruments function as “cultural artifacts” that embody the philosophy, worldview, and history of the communities that produce them.

In the Kenyan context, studies show that traditional instruments play a significant role in shaping folk dance traditions. For example, the nyatiti among the Luo community is widely recognized as a symbol of cultural heritage and storytelling. Scholars note that it is used not only for entertainment but also for preserving oral history and moral instruction (Omondi, 2010). Similarly, the orutu fiddle is associated with ceremonial and social performances that communicate community values and identity (Atieno, 2015).

Research further indicates that Kenyan communities use a wide variety of instruments, including drums, horns, rattles, and lyres, each carrying specific symbolic meanings. According to Kidula (2013), drums in many Kenyan societies serve both communicative and ceremonial purposes, such as announcing events, accompanying rituals, and reinforcing social cohesion. Horns among communities such as the Maasai and Kalenjin are also used to symbolize authority, unity, and communal organization (Mbiti, 1991).

Additionally, comparative studies on East African musical traditions reveal that instruments are often integrated with dance to enhance rhythm, storytelling, and participation. Chernoff (1979) argues that in African performance traditions, music and dance are inseparable, as rhythm guides movement and reinforces cultural expression.

Recent scholarship also highlights the impact of modernization and globalization on traditional music practices in Kenya. While Western instruments and musical styles have influenced local traditions, researchers emphasize that Kenyan communities continue to preserve indigenous instruments through cultural festivals, education, and fusion music genres such as benga (Ogot, 2018).

Overall, literature consistently shows that traditional musical instruments in Kenya are not only artistic tools but also cultural symbols that preserve identity, transmit knowledge, and sustain community cohesion across generations.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring cultural practices, meanings, and interpretations associated with traditional instruments in Kenyan folk dance traditions. This design allows for an in-depth understanding of how cultural symbols are expressed and interpreted within their natural contexts. It emphasizes descriptive and interpretive analysis rather than numerical measurement, making it suitable for examining performance-based cultural expressions.

Data Collection Methods

Data for the study was collected using multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and reliability of information. These included:

- **Observation of dance performances:** The researcher observed live and recorded traditional dance performances during cultural ceremonies, festivals, and community events. This helped in analyzing the use, placement, and significance of ornamentation in real performance settings.
- **Interviews with performers and cultural practitioners:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with dancers, elders, cultural custodians, and choreographers. These interviews provided first-hand insights into the meanings, symbolism, and cultural importance of various forms of ornamentation.
- **Review of literature:** Books, academic journals, articles, and documented cultural studies were reviewed to provide background information and theoretical understanding of Kenyan folk dance traditions and ornamentation practices.

Study Area

The study focuses on selected Kenyan communities known for their rich and diverse dance traditions. These include ethnic groups such as the Maasai, Luo, Kikuyu, Luhya, Kalenjin, and Turkana, among others. These communities were chosen due to their well-preserved cultural performances and the use of traditional instruments in dance. Studying these groups provides a broad representation of Kenya's cultural diversity and allows for comparative analysis of how different communities

Analysis, Results and Discussion:

Classification of Tribes in Kenya:

Kenyan tribes are classified as per the three ethnic languages which were migrated into the country. For the purpose of this study, the ornamentation classification has been classified based on this same ethnic groups.

The 3 language families are

1. Bantu- speaking tribes
2. Nilotic speaking tribes
3. Cushitic speaking tribes

The 3 language families:

Kenyan languages have been classified into three groups.

Bantu-speaking tribes: Kikuyu, Akamba, Meru, Embu, Tharaka, Mbere, Gussi, Kuria, Luhya, Mikikenda, Swahili, Pokomo, Segeju, Taveta, Taita

Nilotic-speaking tribes: Maasai, Samburu, Teso, Turkana, Elmolo, Njemps, Kalenjin, Marakwet, Tugen, Pokot, Elkony, Kipsigis, Luo

Cushitic-speaking tribes: Rendille, Somali, Boran, Gabbra, Orma, Boni.

In Kenya , one will find traditional instruments enhancing the performane by adding more rhythm and giving more pleasure than just dancing and singing alone.

The history of Kenyan musical instruments is a journey through centuries of cultural exchange, innovation, and resilience. These instruments are more than just tools for creating sound; they are markers of identity, reflections of heritage, and symbols of the social structures within Kenyan communities.

In ancient Kenya, music and instruments were deeply embedded in the social fabric of different ethnic communities. Music was central to communal life, helping to mark important milestones such as births, weddings, initiations, and funerals.

Instruments were crafted from locally available materials, like animal skins, wood, gourds, and reeds, tailored to suit the environmental resources of each region. For instance, the nyatiti, a traditional eight-string lyre from the Luo community, is made from fig tree wood and cowhide. The design and construction methods reflect the environmental landscape as well as the Luo people's ingenuity.

Drums, particularly the ngoma, hold a significant place in Kenya's history. This drum is found across different ethnic groups, each with its unique variations and symbolic meanings. Among the Kikuyu, the drum was often used in initiation ceremonies, signaling the transition from childhood to adulthood.

In coastal communities, the drum accompanied Swahili taarab music and dances, highlighting Kenya's long history of cultural exchange with Arabic and Persian traders who influenced the musical styles and instruments along the East African coast. These influences are evident in the construction of some coastal drums, which incorporate design elements similar to those found in Middle Eastern percussion.

During the 19th century, colonialism brought European music styles and instruments to Kenya, significantly impacting local music. The introduction of Western instruments like the guitar, accordion, and piano led to a blending of indigenous music with foreign elements, creating hybrid genres that continue to shape Kenya's musical landscape.

The colonial period also saw the suppression of traditional music in some areas, as missionaries discouraged certain indigenous practices. However, resilience among the Kenyan communities ensured that traditional instruments were preserved, often played in private or in remote villages to avoid colonial scrutiny.

The years following Kenya's independence in 1963 marked a cultural resurgence, with a renewed interest in traditional music and instruments. Musicians and cultural leaders sought to reclaim their heritage, fostering pride in indigenous sounds and encouraging their integration into mainstream music. This period saw the emergence of benga music, a genre that incorporated traditional instruments like the orutu fiddle and the nyatiti lyre alongside Western instruments, creating a distinctly Kenyan sound. Benga became a powerful symbol of national identity and pride, resonating deeply with people across ethnic and social lines.

Today, Kenyan musical instruments continue to evolve, with contemporary musicians blending traditional and modern styles to reach diverse audiences. Artists like Ayub Ogada, who gained international fame with the nyatiti, and bands like Sauti Sol, which combine traditional sounds with pop and Afrobeat, exemplify the adaptive and innovative spirit of Kenyan music. These musicians honor their roots while embracing new influences, ensuring that Kenyan instruments remain relevant in a globalized world.

The history of traditional musical instruments in Kenya reflects the resilience, adaptability, and creativity of its people. From indigenous traditions and colonial influence to modern innovation, these instruments tell stories of identity, connection, and cultural pride. They serve as bridges between Kenya's past, present, and future, preserving the nation's rich heritage while adapting to changing times.

The different classes under which Kenya traditional instruments fall:

- a) Chordophones: Vibrating the strings to produce sound
- b) Aerophones: Air is the main source of sound production and when air is blown inside to produce sound.
- c) Idiophones: produce sound with the vibration of the instrument.
- d) Membranophones: Instruments with membranes vibrate to form the sound.

Chordophones: these are string instruments where sound is produced by vibrating the strings. String musical instruments are instruments that produce sound through the vibration of strings. They come in different types, shapes, and sizes, and their design varies among different communities. Some instruments

have only one string, while others may have up to eight strings. Certain string instruments use animal skins as a membrane for the resonance box, while others do not.

These instruments can further be classified as

- Those in which strings are set in motion by the friction of a bow
- Those in which strings are set in vibration by plucking
- Those in which strings are set in vibration by striking

By friction of a bow:

Fiddles are one or two stringed instruments that produce sound when bowed. Examples are as mentioned in the table below.

Name of the Instrument	Ethnic group that uses	Number of strings
<i>Ageregeret</i>	Iteso	One
<i>Chemengeng</i>	Kipsigis	One
<i>Ekegogo</i>	Kuria	One
<i>Mbeve</i>	Kamba	One
<i>Mwazigizi</i>	Taita	One
<i>Eshilili</i>	Luhya	one
<i>Orutu</i>	Luo	One
<i>Ong'eng'o</i>	Kisii	One
<i>Wandindi</i>	Kikuyu	One

Some of the pictures of the above mentioned instruments:



The string fiddle is usually made of a hollowed tube of some wood or gourd, with one end covered with a membrane of a type of skin. The strings are made of sisal fiber or animal tendons and ligaments.

By plucking:

Lyres are the many stringed instruments that are plucked to produce sound.

Below are a few examples:

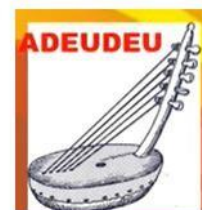
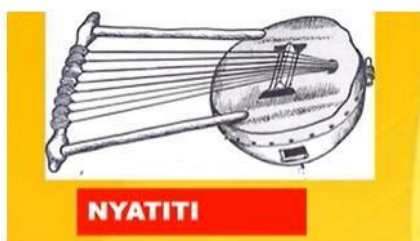
Name of the Instrument	Ethnic group that uses	Number of strings
<i>Adeudeu</i>	Iteso	five
<i>Bukandit</i>	Kalenjin	six
<i>Chemonge</i>	Kipsigis	Six
<i>Iritungu</i>	Kuria	Eight
<i>Ketuba</i>	Nandi	Eight
<i>Kipkandit</i>	Sabaot	Five
<i>Licheni</i>	Luhya	Eight
<i>Mahkana</i>	Luhya	Six
<i>Nyatiti</i>	Luo	Eight
<i>Obokano</i>	Kisii	Eight

<i>Pukan</i>	Pokot	Five
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The sound-box is made of wood and covered with cow-hide and the strings are usually made of cow tendons. Each of the above-mentioned instrument are played differently. And some of these instruments are accompanied with anklets, rattles, and a ring worn on the big toe.

Nyatiti: is played horizontally, with the bowl and the arm of the lyre resting on the ground. It is held in this position by the left hand. The player accompanies himself with ankle rattles called *gara* and a ring called *oduong*, which is worn on the big right toe. When the player hits the frame and makes the rattle jingle and the ring on the toe marks the time. The instrument is used to accompany dances like *otenga*, a vigorous dance where the dancers shake their shoulders rapidly

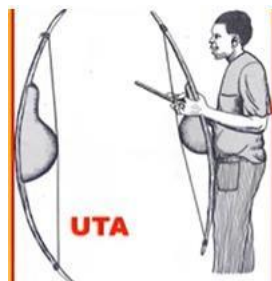
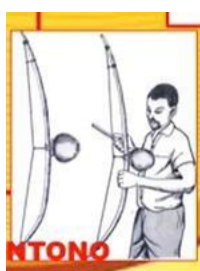
Some of the pictures of the above mentioned instruments:



Vibration by striking:

Name of the Instrument	Ethnic group that uses	Number of strings
<i>Indevedeve</i>	Luhya	One
<i>Idingidi</i>	Luhya	One
<i>Chagongo</i>	Luhya	One
<i>Ntono</i>	Kuria	One
<i>Uta</i>	Gunya	One
<i>Wathi wa Uta</i>	Kamba	one

Some of the pictures of the above mentioned instruments:



b. Aerophones: An aerophone is any musical instrument that produces sound primarily by causing a body of air to vibrate. It generates sound without the use of vibrating strings or stretched membranes. Commonly known as wind instruments.

Wind instruments are found in most communities in Kenya. Different communities have different names for these instruments. The instruments vary in shapes and sizes and materials used to make them.

Aerophones used in Kenya, can be further classified as

- Horns
- Conch shells
- Flute

Horns: Horns are made from animal horns or natural hollow or hollowed out wooden tubes. Horns are blown at the truncated end or at a hole in the side.

Ox, bushbuck, waterbuck and gazelle horns are very common. Some times an ox horn is joined to a smaller horn of the bushbuck which makes the instrument longer. A horn is used differently in different communities. For example in Maasai community, it is used to summon people for war. In other communities, it is used to call for meetings, call huntsmen to join the hunt. The names of horns in different communities

Name of the Horn	Name of the community	
Tung'	Luo	
Emouo	Maasai	
Adet	Turkana	
Atom	Turkana	Wooden Horn
Kondei	Pokot	
Sui	Lamu	
Arupepe	Iteso	Ox
Coro	Kikuyu	Bamboo
Esegere	Kuria	
Ngoli	Mijikenda	Goat
Esegere	Kuria	
Ikondit	Kipsigis	
Olwika	Luhya	
Lalet	Kalengin	
OPoro	Luo	

These are instruments

Idiophones:

Idiophones are instruments that produce sound through the vibration of their own body, without strings or membranes. They can be classified according to how the sound is produced:

idiophones organized by how they produce sound: striking, shaking, plucking/purring-like vibration, scraping, and clashing (common classification used in African music studies).

These can further be classified as below:

Category	How Sound is Made
Striking	Hit with stick/hand
Shaking	Rattled or shaken
Plucking (“purring”)	Vibrating tongues
Scraping	Rubbed surface
Clashing	Two objects hit together

Some names of the idiophones used in Kenya

Category	Name of the Instrument	Tribe
Plucked Idiophone	Dongo	Iteso
Struck Idiophones	Rimba	Coast Province
	Ngotho	
Hand Shaken Idiophones	Kayamba	Coast Province
	Uteo	Girima
Tin Rattles	Erisege	Kuria
	Gicandi	Kikuyu
Leg Rattles	Kiigamba	Kikuyu
	Ng’ichoroi	Turkana
	Olutuala	Maasi
	Njuga	Taita
Boards and logs	Kisiandit	Sabaot
	Chimbengele	Luhya
Cow-bells	Ing’imba	Maragoli
	Twonik	Sabaot
Purring Idiophone	Vidundu	Luhya

	Tuthanju	Kikuyu
Gongs	Upatu	
	Sanduku	

Plucked idiophones:

These are instruments usually made of wood on which flattened spokes are mounted and plucked by hunb nails at the free end.

Hand shaken rattles:

Layers of reeds, inside which dried seeds are put, and bound together. It is shaken from side to side so as to produce a percussive effect.

Leg rattles:

These are pea-pod like shells made of cast iron , inside which are the ball bearins made from metal. When the leg is shaken the bearins hit on the pea-pod body making a rhythmic accompaniment.

Membranophones:

These are percussion instruments which produce sound from a vibration skin. Classification of Membranophones by how it is played

Description	Hpos sound is produced	Example
Hand – beaten Drums	Struck with the hands	Ngoma
Stick- beaten Drums	Struck with sticks	
Single—Headed Drums	Membrane on only one side	
Double – headed Drums	Membrane on both sides	

Communities and their notable drums

- Luhya – Isukuti, Embolo
- Luo – Bunde, Bul
- Kamba – Kilumi drum
- Kikuyu – Mũtũrĩrũ and ceremonial ngoma • Mijikenda – Chivoti, Mbeni drums

- Swahili (Coast) – Musondo, Mbumbumbu
- Teso – atensu drum

Cultural and symbolic meanings:

In Kenya, musical instruments carry deep cultural, social, and spiritual meanings that vary across communities. They are not only used for entertainment but also for communication, rituals, storytelling, and preserving identity.

Some examples include:

The Nyatiti (Luo community): This eight-stringed lyre symbolizes wisdom, history, and social status. Traditionally, skilled players were respected as storytellers and custodians of community traditions. The instrument is often used to praise heroes, teach morals, and preserve oral history.

The Orutu (Luo community): A one-stringed fiddle associated with ceremonies, entertainment, and cultural expression. It often accompanies songs that communicate social messages and community values.

Drums among many Kenyan communities: Drums have spiritual and communal significance. They are used during weddings, initiation ceremonies, religious rituals, and celebrations. In some communities, drums historically served as a means of long-distance communication, announcing important events such as births, deaths, or gatherings.

The Litungu (Luhya community): This traditional lyre symbolizes cultural identity and heritage. It is used in storytelling, praise singing, and ceremonies, helping preserve the history and values of the community.

Horns and trumpets among communities such as the Kalenjin and Maasai: These instruments symbolize authority, bravery, and unity. They may be used during ceremonies, to signal warriors, or to call people together.

Rattles and bells: Often used in dances and rituals, they symbolize fertility, protection from evil spirits, and connection with ancestors in some communities.

Across Kenyan communities, traditional instruments commonly represent:

Cultural identity: They distinguish one community from another and preserve heritage.

Communication: Instruments convey messages and announcements.

Spiritual connection: Many are used in religious rituals and ancestor worship.

Social cohesion: Music brings communities together during ceremonies and celebrations.

Historical preservation: Instruments accompany oral traditions that pass knowledge from one generation to the next.

Communication:

Traditional musical instruments in Kenya play an important role in expressing the values, beliefs, and social structures of different communities. They serve as more than tools for making music; they are a means of preserving culture and educating society.

Communication of cultural values:

Traditional instruments are used during songs and dances that teach important values such as respect for elders, unity, courage, hard work, and honesty. For example, instruments like the nyatiti among the Luo accompany songs that pass down moral lessons and historical knowledge to younger generations.

Expression of beliefs:

Many Kenyan communities use instruments in religious and spiritual ceremonies. Drums, rattles, and horns are played during rituals to honor ancestors, seek blessings, or mark important life events. These practices reflect beliefs about spirituality, the relationship between humans and ancestors, and the sacred nature of community traditions.

Defining social roles:

Certain instruments are played only by specific members of society, such as elders, musicians, or ritual leaders. This highlights social roles and responsibilities within the community. For instance, skilled instrumentalists are often respected as custodians of history and culture.

Marking life events and ceremonies:

Traditional instruments accompany ceremonies such as births, initiation rites, marriages, and funerals. Their use emphasizes the importance of these stages of life and reinforces communal values and identity.

Promoting unity and social cohesion:

Music created by traditional instruments brings people together during celebrations and communal activities.

Group performances encourage cooperation, strengthen social bonds, and foster a sense of belonging.

Preserving history and oral traditions:

Through music and storytelling, instruments help transmit historical events, legends, and cultural knowledge from one generation to another, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage.

Connection to Folk dance performance

Traditional instruments are closely connected to folk dance performances in Kenya because they provide rhythm, accompany songs, and enhance cultural expression during ceremonies and celebrations.

Providing rhythm and tempo:

Instruments such as drums, rattles, and bells create the beat that guides dancers' movements. Different rhythms determine the speed, style, and pattern of the dance.

Supporting songs and storytelling:

Many Kenyan folk dances combine music, singing, and dance. Instruments like the nyatiti (Luo) and litungu (Luhya) accompany songs that tell stories, praise heroes, or teach moral lessons while dancers interpret these messages through movement.

Expressing cultural identity:

Each community has unique instruments and dance styles that reflect its traditions and heritage. For example, Maasai jumping dances are accompanied by chants and rhythmic sounds, while Luo dances often feature the nyatiti and drums. These performances preserve and showcase cultural identity.

Enhancing ceremonies and rituals:

Traditional instruments are played during weddings, initiation rites, harvest festivals, and religious ceremonies. The dances performed during these events celebrate important moments in community life and reinforce shared values.

Facilitating communication and participation:

Musicians use specific rhythms and melodies to signal dancers when to start, change movements, or end a performance. Audiences often join by singing, clapping, or dancing, making folk performances interactive and communal.

Preserving cultural heritage:

The use of traditional instruments in dance helps pass cultural knowledge, customs, and artistic skills from one generation to another, ensuring the continuity of Kenya's rich traditions.

Conclusion:

Traditional musical instruments in Kenya are very important for showing and preserving the culture of different communities. They are not only used for entertainment but also help express cultural identity and are closely connected to folk dances.

These instruments communicate important messages about social values, beliefs, history, and community roles. They are often used during ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations.

Kenyan instruments can be grouped into four main types: chordophones (string instruments), aerophones (wind instruments), membranophones (drums), and idiophones (instruments that produce sound when struck or shaken). Different communities such as the Luo, Luhya, Maasai, Kikuyu, and Kalenjin use instruments like the nyatiti, orutu, drums, and horns for storytelling, spiritual activities, and organizing social events.

In conclusion, traditional instruments are important carriers of cultural knowledge. Even with modernization and globalization, they continue to help preserve culture, strengthen community bonds, and pass knowledge from one generation to another in Kenya.

Future Scope:

- Digital preservation and archiving of Kenyan musical instruments and performances
- The impact of modernization and globalization on folk traditions
- Gender roles in traditional music performance practices
- Comparative studies between Kenyan and other African and Indian musical traditions

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