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Ochieng Kabaselle's Unequivocal Musical Messages: The Dominance of Benga Music and its Successive Growth in Kenya Against Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

Benga music occupies an important position in Kenya's popular cultural history as a medium of entertainment, cultural expression and social communication. Although scholarship has examined its evolution, limited attention has been devoted to individual Benga pioneers as cultural and intercultural communicators, particularly Ochieng Kabaselle. This study examined Kabaselle's musical communication and its continuity within contemporary Luo music. Specifically, it analyzed the social and cultural meanings communicated through selected Kabaselle songs; examined cultural hybridity and media circulation in their intercultural reach and explored the continuity of Kabaselle's musical communication in contemporary Luo music. The study was anchored in Media Ecology Theory and Cultural Hybridity Theory, which addressed objectives one, two, and three. A qualitative research approach employing textual and content analysis was used to examine four purposively selected songs: *Achi Maria*, *Sije*, *Zainabu* and *Wuora Ogolla Adoyo*. The findings indicated that Kabaselle's compositions communicated social and cultural meanings relating to love, family relations, responsibility, morality, identity and collective memory through storytelling, metaphor, symbolism and culturally embedded narratives. The study further established that the integration of Luo linguistic and narrative traditions with Congolese Rhumba influences produced a hybrid musical expression capable of circulating across cultural boundaries. Moreover, the transitions expanded opportunities for the preservation and recirculation of Benga music across generations. Communicative conventions associated with earlier Benga, remained discernible within contemporary Luo Benga, Ohangla and Afro-fusion. The study concluded that Kabaselle's music constituted an important cultural and communicative resource whose significance persists through adaptation, media circulation and intercultural exchange.

INTRODUCTION

Music is an important medium of communication, cultural transmission, identity and collective memory. Across African societies, musical traditions have historically combined entertainment with education, social regulation and the preservation of cultural knowledge. Contemporary cultural scholarship similarly treats music and other traditional expressions as forms of intangible cultural heritage through which communities transmit values and identities while adapting to changing social conditions (UNESCO, 2022, 2023). African popular music can therefore be understood as a communicative cultural resource rather than solely as entertainment.

In Kenya, Benga emerged from Luo musical traditions and became one of the country's influential indigenous popular genres. Its distinctive guitar patterns, vernacular storytelling and culturally situated narratives enabled musicians to articulate everyday social experiences while the genre travelled beyond its original cultural setting. Makali (2024) shows that Luo Benga was appropriated and adapted by Akamba musicians, illustrating its capacity for intercultural exchange. Related scholarship demonstrates that Luo musical traditions have continued to respond to urbanization, technological change and cross-genre interaction while retaining recognizable cultural elements (Ochieng, 2022; Wasonga, 2026). Benga is therefore

situated within a continuing communicative tradition that links earlier Luo popular music with contemporary Benga, Ohangla and Afro-fusion.

Ochieng Kabaselle, born Hajullas Nyapanji Ochieng Ogola in Asembo, Siaya County, around 1950, occupies an important place within this history. His artistic development combined Luo linguistic, narrative and cultural resources with influences from Congolese Rhumba, producing a hybrid musical expression grounded in Luo identity while participating in wider East and Central African musical currents (Ogama, 2017; Stewart, 2016). Through Orchestra Lunna Kidi and compositions such as *Achi Maria*, *Sije*, *Zainabu* and *Wuora Ogolla Adoyo*, Kabaselle addressed relationships, family responsibility, morality, remembrance and community expectations using storytelling, metaphor, praise and symbolism. His work therefore provides an appropriate case for examining Benga as social, cultural and intercultural communication. The relevance of this inquiry has increased within Kenya's changing media environment. Recording and broadcasting historically extended music beyond live performance, while contemporary digital platforms create additional opportunities for preservation, rediscovery and circulation. The Communications Authority of Kenya (2025) reported 58.5 million data and internet subscriptions by June 2025, with mobile broadband

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accounting for 78.2% of subscriptions; smartphone penetration subsequently reached 92.9% by December 2025 (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2026). These developments expand the technological conditions through which historical and contemporary indigenous music can circulate across generations and geographical boundaries. They also correspond with Kenya's policy emphasis on digitalization and the creative economy under the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (State Department for Economic Planning, 2025).

Despite Benga's cultural significance, scholarship has concentrated largely on its historical development, diffusion, performance and technological transformation. Makali (2024) examined the diffusion and reappropriation of Benga; Ochieng (2022) analyzed the transformation of Ohangla; and Wasonga (2026) addressed contemporary Luo Benga, popular culture and urban transformation. Comparatively less attention has been given to individual Benga pioneers as cultural communicators and to the meanings embedded in their compositions. This study addressed that gap by analysing selected Kabaselle songs as communicative texts, examining cultural hybridity and media circulation in their intercultural reach, and exploring continuity between Kabaselle-era communicative practices and contemporary Luo popular music.

Problem Statement

Benga music has historically communicated Luo language, identity, social values and collective memory, yet research has focused more strongly on the genre's history, diffusion and technological transformation than on individual pioneers as cultural and intercultural communicators. This gap is particularly evident in relation to Ochieng Kabaselle, whose music combined Luo linguistic and narrative traditions with Congolese Rumba influences. Although expanding digital infrastructure creates new possibilities for preserving and recirculating historical Benga, technological accessibility alone does not explain the meanings embedded in Kabaselle's compositions, the intercultural significance of their hybrid musical form, or the continuity of comparable communicative conventions in contemporary Luo music. The study therefore uses qualitative textual and content analysis to examine these dimensions in selected Kabaselle compositions.

Study Objectives

- To analyze the social and cultural meanings communicated through Ochieng Kabaselle's selected Benga songs.
- To examine cultural hybridity and media circulation in the intercultural reach of Kabaselle's Benga music.
- To examine the continuity of Kabaselle's musical communication in contemporary Luo music.

Significance of the Study

The study contributes to African media and communication scholarship by examining Benga as cultural and intercultural communication rather than

only as entertainment or musical performance. It demonstrates how storytelling, symbolism, cultural hybridity and changing media environments contribute to the preservation and circulation of indigenous musical meanings. The findings may be useful to broadcasters, musicians, cultural institutions and policymakers concerned with indigenous-language content, cultural heritage and the creative economy. The study also relates to the Digital Superhighway and Creative Industry priority under BETA pillars and to the cultural and social-development aspirations of Kenya Vision 2030 (Kenya Vision 2030, 2024; State Department for Economic Planning, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Media Ecology Theory and Cultural Hybridity Theory. Media Ecology explains the technological environments through which Benga is preserved and circulated, whereas Cultural Hybridity explains cultural interaction, negotiation and adaptation. Their application is tied directly to the study objectives.

Media Ecology Theory

Media Ecology Theory is principally associated with Marshall McLuhan and was later developed as a distinct field by scholars such as Neil Postman. McLuhan (1964) argued that media are extensions of human communicative capacities and that the characteristics of a medium shape communication beyond the content it carries. Contemporary media ecology retains this emphasis by examining relationships among media technologies, culture and social experience in changing communication environments (Islas-Carmona & Arribas-Urrutia, 2023; Myers, 2025).

Three tenets are central to this study. First, media constitute communication environments rather than neutral channels: live performance, recording, radio, television and digital platforms create different conditions for producing, preserving and encountering music. Second, the characteristics of each medium shape communication. Recording permits repeated listening; radio expands auditory reach; television adds visual signs such as dress, dance and gesture; and digital platforms enable on-demand access, sharing and archiving. Third, media extend communication across space and time while newer media often reorganize rather than simply eliminate older forms. Historical Benga can therefore move from live and recorded environments into broadcast and digital circulation, allowing older musical texts to be preserved and rediscovered (McLuhan, 1964; Myers, 2025).

Media Ecology Theory primarily addresses objectives two and three. For objective two, it explains how recording, radio, television and digital platforms create the conditions through which Kabaselle's culturally situated music can circulate beyond its original geographical environment. For objective three, it explains how changing media environments support preservation, recirculation and coexistence between historical Benga and contemporary

Benga, Ohangla and Afro-fusion. The theory is not used to determine the lyrical meanings of the songs; those meanings emerge from textual and content analysis.

Cultural Hybridity Theory

Cultural Hybridity Theory is principally associated with Homi K. Bhabha. Bhabha (1994) challenged conceptions of cultures as fixed and self-contained, arguing that cultural encounters create negotiated formations. His concept of the Third Space describes an interstitial arena in which cultural meanings and identities are reconstructed through interaction. The perspective is useful for analysing music that combines indigenous traditions with regional or transnational influences.

The theory contributes four closely related ideas to this study. First, cultural interaction can generate hybrid forms through borrowing and adaptation. Kabaselle's combination of Luo language, storytelling and cultural narratives with Congolese Rhumba illustrates this process. Second, the Third Space explains this music as a negotiated formation rather than either purely traditional Luo music or an imitation of Rhumba. Third, hybridity permits negotiated cultural identity: external musical resources may be incorporated while indigenous linguistic, symbolic and narrative elements remain recognizable. Fourth, cultural translation and recontextualization mean that cultural expressions moving into new environments may acquire new interpretations rather than carrying fixed meanings unchanged (Bhabha, 1994).

Cultural Hybridity Theory addresses all three objectives, but most directly objectives one and two. In objective one, it helps contextualize how Luo identity and culturally grounded narratives remain embedded within an interculturally influenced musical form, while the specific meanings are established through textual analysis. In objective two, it explains the interaction between Luo Benga and Congolese Rhumba as cultural negotiation. In objective three, it supports the idea of continuity through adaptation by explaining how contemporary Benga, Ohangla and Afro-fusion can incorporate new influences while retaining vernacular storytelling, symbolism and social commentary.

Alignment of the Theories with the Study objectives

Objective one is principally supported by Cultural Hybridity Theory together with textual and content analysis. Objective two is jointly addressed: Cultural Hybridity explains Luo-Congolese musical interaction, while Media Ecology explains circulation through recording, broadcasting and digital media. Objective three is also jointly addressed: Cultural Hybridity explains continuity through cultural adaptation, whereas Media Ecology explains technological preservation and recirculation. Together, the theories distinguish the study's cultural processes of interaction and identity from its media processes of preservation, accessibility and circulation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Music, Cultural Communication and the Development of Benga

Globally, traditional music is increasingly understood as a living form of intangible cultural heritage through which communities transmit knowledge, values, identities and collective memory. Cultural practices survive not by remaining unchanged but through intergenerational transmission and adaptation to new social environments (UNESCO, 2023; Wulf, 2024). This perspective positions music as both cultural expression and communication.

Across Africa, music has historically been intertwined with oral traditions, storytelling, dance, ceremony and social education. Contemporary African popular music consequently reflects both continuity and transformation as indigenous languages, narratives and rhythms interact with external genres, modern instrumentation and changing technologies. Cultural preservation therefore need not imply cultural immobility; locally meaningful resources can persist within adapted musical forms.

In Kenya, similar processes are evident in indigenous music and particularly Luo popular music. Ochieng (2022) shows that Ohangla has undergone technological and socioeconomic transformation while retaining links to Luo cultural traditions. Benga likewise emerged from an environment in which vernacular storytelling, musical performance and social communication overlapped. Makali (2024) demonstrated that Benga later travelled from Nyanza into Ukambani, where Akamba musicians reworked it within their own traditions. This diffusion positions Benga as both a Luo-rooted genre and a site of intercultural exchange. However, comparatively limited scholarship examines how specific pioneers such as Kabaselle used these communicative resources within individual compositions.

Media Circulation and the Intercultural Communication of Benga Music

Globally, recording, broadcasting and digital media have transformed the preservation and circulation of music. Recording separates musical performance from its original moment, broadcasting expands geographical reach, and digital platforms facilitate on-demand access, sharing and transnational distribution (Ivaldi *et al.*, 2024; Montoro-Pons *et al.*, 2023). These developments increase opportunities for culturally situated music to encounter audiences beyond its original linguistic and geographical setting. Such circulation, however, does not guarantee identical interpretation because intercultural meaning remains shaped by language, identity, history and cultural knowledge (Martin & Nakayama, 2024).

Across Africa, recording industries and radio historically enabled local genres to move beyond their communities of origin, while urban musical encounters encouraged interaction among indigenous traditions and regional genres such as Congolese Rhumba. Digital platforms have intensified these processes. Mutero (2025) demonstrated that independent Zimbabwean musicians use social media to promote music, interact with audiences and reduce

dependence on conventional gatekeepers, although unequal access and platform visibility continue to constrain participation. African musical communication therefore increasingly combines indigenous cultural continuity, hybridity and technologically mediated circulation.

In Kenya, the mobility of musicians, recording networks and broadcasting contributed to Benga's movement beyond western Kenya. Makali (2024) provides empirical evidence of its appropriation and adaptation in Ukambani. Kabaselle's own combination of Luo language and narrative conventions with Rhumba-influenced instrumentation similarly illustrates intercultural communication at the level of musical production. Media circulation then provided the technological conditions through which such hybrid expressions could move beyond immediate performance settings. Kabaselle is therefore significant not only stylistically but also as a cultural communicator whose work brought local narratives into interaction with wider regional musical influences.

Digital Transformation and Continuity in Contemporary Luo Music

Globally, contemporary popular music reflects continuing interaction among cultural heritage, technological change and transnational exchange. Digital environments allow older recordings to be archived and rediscovered while exposing musicians to wider repertoires and production practices. Cultural continuity is therefore increasingly understood as transmission through adaptation rather than exact reproduction (UNESCO, 2023).

Across Africa, digital production and platform distribution have become part of the environment in which music is created, circulated and assigned contemporary relevance. Mutero (2025) shows that platform-based communication can expand creative and entrepreneurial opportunities, while also drawing attention to inequalities created by commercial platforms and uneven digital access. Digitalization thus supports circulation and transformation without automatically democratizing musical industries.

In Kenya, contemporary Luo music demonstrates continuity alongside stylistic and technological change. Ochieng (2022) identified substantial transformation in Ohangla, while Wasonga (2026) finds that recent Luo Benga incorporates urban influences, cross-genre interaction and digital production while retaining recognizable Luo elements. Contemporary musicians such as Emma Jalamo, Prince Indah and Wuod Fibi operate within this broader environment of vernacular storytelling, symbolism and social commentary, although similarity should not be treated as proof of direct influence from Kabaselle. The more defensible interpretation is continuity in a shared communicative repertoire.

A clear research gap therefore remains. Existing scholarship explains Benga's diffusion and reappropriation (Makali, 2024), Ohangla's cultural and

technological transformation (Ochieng, 2022), and contemporary Luo Benga's urban and stylistic change (Wasonga, 2026), but gives less attention to individual Benga pioneers as communicators. This study addresses that gap by examining the meanings in selected Kabaselle compositions, the relationship between cultural hybridity and media circulation in their intercultural reach, and the continuity of Kabaselle-era communicative conventions within contemporary Luo popular music.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research design combining textual analysis and qualitative content analysis to examine Ochieng Kabaselle's musical communication, the cultural meanings embedded in selected compositions and the relationship between Benga music and intercultural communication. This design was appropriate because the study is concerned with how meaning is constructed through lyrics, narrative, metaphor, symbolism, musical hybridity and media circulation rather than with measuring audience effects statistically. Qualitative textual analysis enables researchers to examine both explicit and implicit meanings in cultural texts, while qualitative content analysis provides a systematic procedure for identifying recurring categories and themes within a defined body of material (Schreier, 2012; Tracy, 2022).

The study treated Kabaselle's music as a cultural and communicative text situated within Luo oral traditions, Kenyan Benga history and wider East African popular music. Purposive sampling was used to focus on compositions repeatedly identified in the article as representative of Kabaselle's communicative style, particularly *Achi Maria*, *Sije*, *Zainabu* and *Wuora Ogolla Adoyo*. These songs were selected because they illustrate recurring concerns with love, family relations, morality, leadership, social responsibility, remembrance and cultural identity. Particular analytical attention was given to *Wuora Ogolla Adoyo* because the composition provided a rich textual basis for examining how personal experience can be transformed into broader cultural meaning. Through close textual analysis, the song was examined for its representation of remembrance, family identity, responsibility and collective memory. These interpretations were derived from the textual evidence within the composition rather than presumed from existing scholarship. The interpretation was subsequently contextualized using documentary materials and scholarly literature on Benga music, African oral traditions, intercultural communication, media dissemination and intangible cultural heritage. This approach was consistent with scholarship that conceptualizes African popular music and oral traditions as important sites for the construction, preservation and intergenerational transmission of cultural meanings and identities (Makali, 2024; Refae, 2024). Literature on intercultural communication was further used to interpret how culturally embedded meanings may circulate beyond their original cultural contexts while remaining subject

to contextual and negotiated interpretation (Martin & Nakayama, 2024). The primary units of analysis were lyrical themes, narrative structures, metaphors, praise expressions, symbolic references, culturally embedded values and forms of indirect communication. A second level of analysis considered musical and contextual features already documented in the study, including the interaction between Luo musical traditions and Congolese Rhumba, the role of Orchestra Lunna Kidi, and the movement of Benga through recording, radio, television and digital platforms. Coding proceeded iteratively. The material was read repeatedly, initial meaning units were identified, related codes were grouped and broader interpretive categories were developed. The final analytical categories included social and moral communication; family and communal identity; symbolic and indirect expression; cultural hybridity; media-enabled circulation and continuity between classical Benga and contemporary Luo music. This iterative movement from textual segments to categories and themes is consistent with qualitative content analysis, in which coding is used to organize meaning without reducing interpretation to frequency counts alone (Schreier, 2012; Tracy, 2022).

Interpretation was guided by intercultural communication scholarship, particularly the proposition that meanings are shaped by language, identity, cultural knowledge and context (Martin & Nakayama, 2024; Samovar *et al.*, 2023). The analysis also drew on African oral-literature scholarship to interpret storytelling, praise, metaphor and indirect communication as culturally situated communicative practices rather than merely stylistic devices (Finnegan, 2012). Triangulation across songs, documentary sources and relevant scholarship was used to strengthen analytical credibility. Reflexivity was maintained by distinguishing textual evidence from claims about Kabaselle's intention or actual audience response. Because no interviews, focus groups or audience surveys were undertaken, observations about possible audience meanings are presented as interpretive possibilities rather than empirical claims about particular listeners. The study analyzed publicly available artistic and documentary material and recruited no human participants; nevertheless, it observed intellectual attribution, cultural sensitivity and contextual integrity in representing Kabaselle's work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The textual and qualitative content analysis generated findings corresponding to the three specific objectives of the study. The first objective revealed that Kabaselle's selected Benga songs communicate social and cultural meanings through moral narratives, symbolic expression and collective memory. The second established that cultural hybridity and changing media environments contributed to the wider circulation and intercultural reach of his music. The third showed continuity between communicative conventions evident in Kabaselle's Benga and those found within contemporary Luo popular music.

Social and Cultural Meanings Communicated through Kabaselle's Selected Benga Songs

The first objective sought to analyse the social and cultural meanings communicated through Ochieng Kabaselle's selected Benga songs. The findings indicate that the compositions function as vehicles of social and moral communication by linking individual experiences with broader concerns such as affection, loyalty, family responsibility, respect and socially valued behaviour. Songs such as *Achi Maria* and *Zainabu* extend beyond romantic narratives to provide interpretive possibilities concerning trust, commitment and appropriate interpersonal conduct. This finding supports the understanding of Benga as a culturally embedded communicative form through which Luo social experiences and identities are expressed (Wasonga, 2026).

The analysis further established that Kabaselle frequently communicated these meanings indirectly through metaphor, praise, symbolism and narrative suggestion. Such expression enables apparently personal narratives to accommodate broader cultural interpretations and reflects traditions of African oral communication in which figurative language and storytelling convey cultural knowledge and social values. The songs are therefore better understood as layered cultural texts rather than exclusively literal narratives. However, the existence of symbolic openness should not be interpreted as evidence of a single intended meaning, since textual analysis identifies interpretive possibilities rather than authorial intention or uniform audience interpretation.

This relationship between personal experience and collective cultural meaning is particularly evident in *Wuora Ogolla Adoyo*. Although centred on personal remembrance, the composition communicates wider meanings associated with filial respect, ancestry, family identity, responsibility and cultural continuity. Personal memory is consequently transformed into a broader cultural narrative through which values of kinship and communal belonging are articulated. Overall, the first objective establishes that Kabaselle's songs communicate social and cultural meanings through the interaction of personal narratives, culturally embedded symbolism and broader social values.

Cultural Hybridity, Media Circulation and the Intercultural reach of Kabaselle's Benga Music

The second objective examined how cultural hybridity and media circulation relate to the intercultural reach of Kabaselle's Benga music. The findings indicate that hybridity was a significant characteristic of his musical practice. Kabaselle combined Luo language, storytelling and culturally grounded narratives with influences associated with Congolese Rhumba, particularly in instrumentation, arrangement and performance. Rather than displacing the Luo foundations of Benga, this interaction produced a hybrid expression that remained locally identifiable while participating in a wider East

and Central African musical environment. This finding corresponds with Makali's (2024) argument that Benga developed through cultural mobility, adaptation and appropriation across communities.

Kabaselle's music can therefore be understood as intercultural communication occurring at the level of musical production itself. Cultural resources originating from different traditions interacted and were selectively recontextualized within Benga. This finding is consistent with Cultural Hybridity Theory, which explains cultural forms as outcomes of interaction, negotiation and adaptation rather than as completely bounded cultural products.

Media circulation further extended the conditions under which this hybrid musical expression could move beyond its original setting. The analysis identified a progression from live and communal performance to recording, radio and television and, subsequently, digital recirculation. Recording technologies enabled performances to survive beyond their original production moments, while broadcast media extended their potential geographical reach. Contemporary digital platforms further create opportunities for historical recordings to be archived, rediscovered and circulated among younger and geographically dispersed audiences. Similar patterns have been identified in recent studies showing that digital platforms increase the accessibility and transnational circulation of culturally situated music (Li, 2025; Mutero, 2025).

These findings support Media Ecology Theory by demonstrating that changing media environments alter the conditions through which music is preserved, accessed and circulated. Together, cultural hybridity and media circulation therefore provide complementary explanations for Kabaselle's intercultural reach: hybridity explains interaction within the musical form, while media technologies explain how that form can travel across temporal and geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, wider circulation should not be treated as evidence of identical interpretation among culturally different audiences because the study did not include audience reception research.

Continuity of Kabaselle's Musical Communication in Contemporary Luo Music

The third objective examined the continuity of communicative practices associated with Kabaselle's Benga within contemporary Luo popular music. The analysis identified persistence in storytelling, vernacular expression, cultural symbolism, social commentary and engagement with everyday social experiences despite substantial changes in instrumentation, genres, production technologies and distribution systems.

Contemporary Luo musical practices associated with artists such as Emma Jalamo, Prince Indah and Wuod Fibi demonstrate that technological and stylistic transformation has not necessarily eliminated culturally grounded forms of musical communication. Instead,

these communicative resources have been adapted to contemporary genres, audiences and production environments. Ochieng (2022) similarly found that Ohangla has undergone considerable technological and socioeconomic transformation while retaining important connections with Luo cultural traditions. Wasonga (2026) likewise established that contemporary Luo Benga incorporates urban influences, cross-genre interaction and digital production while preserving recognizable elements of Luo musical identity.

The findings therefore indicate continuity through adaptation rather than direct replication. Contemporary musicians do not simply reproduce Kabaselle's musical style; rather, they participate in a broader Luo communicative tradition in which storytelling, vernacular language, symbolism, social commentary and musical hybridity remain important cultural resources. This distinction avoids attributing direct influence to Kabaselle where the study has no interview or historical evidence establishing such causal relationships.

Cultural Hybridity Theory helps explain this continuity by showing how inherited cultural practices may incorporate new musical influences while retaining recognizable aspects of cultural identity. Media Ecology Theory complements this interpretation by explaining how changing production and distribution technologies reshape the environments in which Luo music is created, preserved and encountered. Digital platforms, in particular, allow historical Benga recordings and contemporary Luo musical forms to coexist within the same communication environment, strengthening possibilities for preservation, rediscovery and reinterpretation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Kabaselle's significance extends beyond his contribution to the historical development of Benga. His selected compositions exemplify a broader Luo musical tradition in which culturally grounded storytelling, social values, symbolic communication and intercultural musical interaction remain important. Although contemporary Luo music has undergone considerable stylistic and technological transformation, its communicative foundations have not necessarily disappeared; rather, they have been selectively retained and repositioned within evolving Benga, Ohangla and Afro-fusion environments. The results therefore establish continuity in communicative conventions while recognizing transformation in their musical, technological and cultural expression.

Discussion

The findings reposition Kabaselle's Benga not merely as a historical music genre but as a communication system through which cultural meanings were encoded, circulated and renegotiated. The prominence of love, family, morality, leadership and communal responsibility demonstrates that the social significance of the selected songs rests on their ability to translate everyday experience into culturally recognizable narratives. This reinforces

scholarship that understands African popular music as simultaneously aesthetic, social and communicative rather than as entertainment detached from community life (Finnegan, 2012; UNESCO, 2022).

The finding on indirect communication is especially important to the article's central argument. Kabaselle's use of metaphor, praise and narrative implication gives the songs interpretive depth while reducing dependence on literal exposition. In intercultural communication terms, such meanings are context-sensitive: audiences with greater familiarity with Luo language and cultural conventions may recognize particular symbolic associations, whereas culturally distant listeners may engage first with broader relational themes, melody or performance. Meaning should therefore not be assumed to travel unchanged across cultural boundaries. Martin and Nakayama (2024) and Samovar *et al.* (2023) emphasize that intercultural interpretation is conditioned by language, identity, worldview and contextual knowledge. Kabaselle's music illustrates this principle by combining culturally specific communicative resources with themes capable of being recognized beyond their original setting. The analysis of *Wuora Ogolla Adoyo* song further demonstrates how a personal musical narrative can become a repository of collective memory. The movement from remembrance of a father to themes of kinship, responsibility and continuity reflects the broader role of oral and musical traditions in preserving social knowledge. The song's continuing cultural relevance can therefore be understood not simply as nostalgia but as evidence of music's archival function: recorded performance allows personal memory to enter a shared cultural repertoire that can be revisited across generations (Finnegan, 2012; UNESCO, 2025).

Cultural hybridity provides another important explanation for Benga's regional resonance. Kabaselle's incorporation of Congolese Rumba demonstrates that intercultural exchange does not necessarily require the abandonment of local identity. Instead, hybrid musical production can become a site where cultural forms meet, are creatively adapted and acquire new communicative possibilities. Kabaselle's work retained Dholuo expression and Luo narrative traditions while drawing on transnational instrumentation and performance aesthetics. This complicates any simple distinction between 'traditional' and 'foreign' music and supports a more dynamic understanding of culture as continually produced through contact and adaptation (Martin & Nakayama, 2024).

The media finding similarly demonstrates that the dominance and longevity of Benga cannot be explained by musical composition alone. Recording technologies, radio, television and digital media successively altered the scale and conditions of circulation. Radio enabled vernacular music to move beyond face-to-face performance settings; recording industries facilitated reproduction and regional distribution; television added visual representation; and digital platforms now enable older recordings to be rediscovered and recirculated.

Media therefore operate as cultural intermediaries rather than neutral channels. They influence which musical texts remain visible, how audiences encounter them and how cultural heritage is preserved in changing technological environments (UNESCO, 2022; UNESCO, 2025).

The continuity observed in contemporary Luo music should, however, be interpreted cautiously. Similarities between Kabaselle and later artists do not by themselves demonstrate direct causal influence. What the textual and content analysis supports more securely is the persistence of a communicative repertoire: storytelling, vernacular language, symbolic expression, social commentary and negotiation between local identity and external musical influences remain important features of Luo popular music. Contemporary digital production therefore represents both change and continuity. Technologies, platforms and genre labels evolve, while core communicative practices continue to connect musical production with cultural identity and social experience (Osumba, 2023; Wasonga, 2026).

Taken together, the results show that Kabaselle's significance lies at the intersection of music, culture, media and intercultural communication. His compositions demonstrate how culturally grounded musical texts can communicate social values within a community while also travelling across linguistic and geographical boundaries. At the same time, the study underscores a methodological limitation: textual and content analysis can establish patterns in songs and documentary materials, but it cannot establish how specific audiences actually interpreted those meanings. Future research should therefore combine textual analysis with audience interviews, focus groups, archival radio research or systematic analysis of digital audience commentary to test how Kabaselle's music is interpreted across generations and cultural groups.

Knowledge Contribution

This study contributes to knowledge by reconceptualizing Benga music beyond entertainment and cultural performance as a form of cultural and intercultural communication. Through qualitative textual and content analysis of selected Ochieng Kabaselle compositions, it demonstrates how storytelling, metaphor, symbolism and culturally embedded narratives communicate social values, identities and collective experiences. This artist-centred communication perspective complements existing studies that have primarily emphasized the historical development, diffusion and technological transformation of Benga and related Luo musical genres (Makali, 2024; Ochieng, 2022; Wasonga, 2026).

The study further integrates cultural hybridity and media circulation to explain Benga's intercultural reach and continuity. It shows how Luo musical traditions interacted with Congolese Rumba while recording, radio, television and digital media expanded the circulation of this hybrid musical form. Importantly, the study advances continuity through adaptation as a way of understanding the relationship between classical Benga and contemporary

Benga, Ohangla and Afro-fusion. Rather than claiming direct influence, it identifies the persistence and adaptation of communicative conventions such as vernacular storytelling, cultural symbolism, social commentary and linguistic identity across generations and changing media environments (Ochieng, 2022; Wasonga, 2026).

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited by its reliance on qualitative textual and content analysis of selected compositions by Ochieng Kabaselle and documentary materials; consequently, it could not empirically establish the artist's intended meanings or determine how different audiences actually interpreted the songs. The purposive selection of a limited number of compositions also means that the findings cannot represent the entire Kabaselle musical repertoire or be generalized to all Benga music. Furthermore, although the study identifies similarities between Kabaselle-Era communicative conventions and contemporary Luo Benga, Ohangla and Afro-fusion, the absence of interviews with contemporary musicians and audiences' limits claims of direct artistic influence or reception. Similarly, the study examines media circulation conceptually and historically rather than measuring audience reach or engagement across radio, television and digital platforms. These limitations were mitigated through triangulation of textual evidence, documentary materials and relevant scholarly literature and by restricting interpretations to claims supported by the analyzed texts and their documented cultural contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that cultural institutions, media organizations, music producers and relevant government agencies strengthen the documentation, digitization and preservation of classical Benga recordings, including the works of Ochieng Kabaselle. This is to enhance their accessibility to contemporary and future generations. Radio, television and digital media practitioners should further promote culturally grounded music as a resource for preserving indigenous languages, cultural memory and intercultural understanding while providing greater visibility to contemporary musicians who creatively adapt Benga traditions. Policymakers should strengthen frameworks supporting indigenous musical heritage, intellectual property protection, local cultural content and the participation of traditional and contemporary musicians in Kenya's expanding creative economy. Future research should complement textual and content analysis with audience reception studies, interviews and focus group discussions involving musicians, producers and listeners to establish how Kabaselle's compositions are interpreted across generations and cultural groups and whether contemporary Luo musicians acknowledge direct artistic influence from earlier Benga pioneers. Comparative studies involving other Benga artists and contemporary Ohangla and Afro-fusion musicians are also recommended

to establish more comprehensively the continuity and transformation of Benga's communicative traditions within changing cultural and media environments.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Ochieng Kabaselle occupied a central position in the history of Kenyan popular music and the development of Benga as a dominant cultural genre. Through his mastery of unequivocal musical messaging, Kabaselle transformed music into a powerful medium of communication capable of conveying social, cultural, political and moral meanings simultaneously.

His contributions extended beyond artistic performance to include mentorship, cultural preservation and the institutional development of Benga music. Through Orchestra Lunna Kidi, he nurtured musicians, strengthened professional standards and contributed to the long-term sustainability of Kenya's music industry. The article further established that the growth of Benga music has been closely linked to developments in media technologies. Radio facilitated the initial diffusion of the genre; television enhanced visual engagement and social media has enabled contemporary revival and global accessibility.

The emergence of Afro-fusion and contemporary Ohangla demonstrates the adaptability of Luo musical traditions. Artists such as Austine Odhiambo (Emma Jalamo), Evance Ochieng Owino (Prince Indah) and John Erick Okumu (Wuod Fibi) continue to build upon foundations established by Kabaselle while responding to contemporary audience expectations and digital media environments.

Ultimately, Kabaselle's legacy remains visible in the communicative practices, musical structures and cultural values embedded within contemporary Luo music. His work represented an enduring example of how music can function simultaneously as entertainment, social commentary, cultural preservation and public communication. The continued popularity of Benga-derived musical forms confirms the lasting significance of his contribution to Kenya's cultural and musical heritage.

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