

## The Kawere Boys

Posted At : November 12, 2008 3:53 PM | Posted By : Matthew LaVoie

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Over the last two years- through the thousands of emails, phone calls and letters I have received from listeners throughout Africa- I have gained some insight into the many ways in which the presidential campaign of Senator Barack Obama inspired the continent. This enthusiasm blossomed into collective euphoria when, one week ago, Senator Obama was elected the 44th President of the United States of America. In phone calls from Algeria, Guinea, Cote D'Ivoire, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Somalia, and in emails from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Ethiopia, Zambia, Mali, Niger, Djibouti, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Tchad, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Senegal, Togo, Benin, Cameroun, and Zimbabwe listeners expressed their love for 'their' President-elect Obama, and for the United States.

Ibrahim Barry from the Cote D'Ivoire wrote, 'I have been up all night waiting for the election results and praying for Obama's victory. When the news broke in the early morning all of Abidjan was out in the streets celebrating.' From Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of the Congo, Romain Pierre Mienahata wrote, 'One man's ambition became the hope of an entire continent, of an entire generation. And now the day has arrived, a young black man dared and prevailed! Given the continent's paternalistic political systems, could what just happened in the United States have happened in Africa?' Mr. Sanya Aina from Festac Town, Lagos, Nigeria send this message, 'now that God has ordained Mr. Obama to be OUR president, we all have to support him.' Ms. Nima Hussein from Djibouti's message was short, 'I'm so happy', she wrote, and Mahamad Mansur from Niger sent this two-word message, 'I'm proud'.

The histories of the United States and Africa have been intertwined for centuries, but never, it seems, has this shared destiny been as celebrated as it was on the evening of November 4, 2008. And never have the hopes for a better future, of both the United States and Africa, the varied individual dreams of so many citizens, been so tied to the same individual. To kick-off this new American and African era I thought I'd feature a stack of singles from the land of President-elect Obama's roots, Western Kenya.



The Kawere Boys were formed by Cheplin Ngode Kotula in Kericho, Kenya in 1974, and over the next four years became one of the more popular Benga groups in Luo land. Cheplin Ngode Kotula (he is the gentleman sitting in the picture above) was born, in the late forties or early fifties, in the Kawere neighborhood of the town of Saye Konyango, which is located on the road (the C-26) between Oyugis and Kindu Bay, in Nyanza province, Western Kenya. Cheplin Kotula's first musical mentor was Joseph Lango, who recruited Cheplin to play acoustic guitar with his pick-up group at village ceremonies in Saye Konyango. (While I haven't been able to confirm this hunch, I imagine that Cheplin started his musical career playing the nyatiti lyre or orutu fiddle, like several of the other Kawere boys).

In 1971, after failing his Certificate of Primary Education exam, Cheplin decided to make a career of music. Sometime in 1972, he joined Daniel Owino Misiani and his Shirati Jazz, who were, at the time, the house-band at the Kanyangao bar in Mathare, one of Nairobi's largest slums. After two years, and one too many financial misunderstandings with Misiani, Cheplin decided to start his own group.

Cheplin, along with rhythm guitar player Juma Charlie, and bassist Otieno Ogor-who had both been with Misiani before Cheplin joined the Shirati Jazz- turned to A.P. Chandarana of Kericho for help. According to his younger brother Rasik, A.P. Chandarana started his music business back in 1958, and would eventually release several thousand 45-rpm singles (on at least 15 different labels) featuring a wide range of Kenyan (Luo, Luhya, Kipsigiis, Swahili) and Tanzanian groups. Cheplin Kotula and A.P. Chandarana had met when the Shirati Jazz traveled to Kericho to record for Chandarana (I haven't yet been able to identify which titles Shirati Jazz recorded for Chandarana between 1972-1974). When Cheplin, Juma Charlie and Otieno Ogor arrived in Kericho they had no musical instruments and no place to stay. Chandarana put them up in an apartment and lent them instruments to rehearse and record.



By the time the singer Herman Dinda joined the group in late 1974, the Kawere Boys had already released several singles, purchased their own instruments, and grown to include singers Juma Silas and Osumba John, Aloo Jossy 'Jarapethii', and Juma Charlie playing rhythm guitar, Otieno Ogor on bass, Sadok Otieno and Manase Aroko on drums, and Paul Dinda, Ouko McKenzie, and Cheplin Ngode Katula playing lead guitar. The Kawere Boys relationship with A.P. Chandarana lasted until August of 1975, when Oluoch Kanindo, a Luo music impresario who also served as a member of parliament, and became deputy secretary of education under President Moi, brought them to Nairobi. The Kawere Boys made several recordings for Kanindo at the High Fidelity studios in Nairobi, before heading back to their homes in Oyugis.

The success of the Kawere Boys led to disputes, and the group split in two in early 1978. One group of musicians-which included singers Herman Dinda, a new recruit named Elis Olela, and probably Otieno Ogor, Paul Dinda, Ouko McKenzie, and Manase Aroko-were brought to Kisumu by Oluoch Kanindo, where they performed as the Kalausi Band. The other splinter group, led by Cheplin Kotula, took the name of Kawere Jazz, and included at least Aloo Jossy, and Juma Charlie. After six months of struggle (and some say sabotage by Oluoch Kanindo, who had started to neglect the Kalausi Band to heavily promote Colella Mazee's group) the different Kawere factions regrouped, once again under the leadership of Cheplin Kotula.

This reformation lasted only until the end of 1978, when recently joined guitar player Paul Omari, and a faction of disgruntled band members, parted ways with Kotula and started the Kawere B band (they also recorded as the Kawere B Kings). And although different versions of the Kawere Boys kept performing at least into the early 1980s, the group stopped recording regularly in 1978. Cheplin Ngode Kotula passed away in 1994. Paul Omari's Kawere B band broke up in March 2007. Two of the original Kawere Boys, Herman Dinda and Aloo Jossy continue to perform in Oyugis with the Super K (Kawere) Rangers.

This group of Kawere Boys tracks were released on A.P. Chandarana's Hundhwe label, and recorded by Chandarana himself at his studio in Kericho. A.P. Chandarana ran the board, and recorded the Kawere Boys live to tape through three microphones. These recordings were not only popular throughout Luo land, but also sold well in Tanzania, Malawi, South Africa, Nigeria, Cameroun, and West Africa. Rasik Chandarana, A.P.'s younger brother, remembers traveling to Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Mali, Togo, Ghana, Zambia, and South Africa to sign distribution deals for Chandarana releases. (A colleague of mine from Northern Cameroun can still remember the lyrics to Kawere singles he listened to as a boy.) The Chandarana family has all of A.P.'s master tapes and until very recently continued to sell copies of their recordings at the Chandarana store in Kericho.

#### ↪ [The Kawere Boys 'Auma Sily'](#)

First up, 'Auma Sily', a love song that was recorded back in 1974. Herman Dinda sings, 'Sily from Kosa, let me sing for you. When I think about you I can't sleep.'

These next two tracks are the A and B-sides of a 45-rpm single that was also released in 1974. Most of the songs in the Kawere repertoire seem to be praise songs for patrons who had invited the group to perform. These songs can be thought of as pre-internet age social networking. The singer usually starts by introducing himself, goes on to introduce the object of his praise, as well as the patron's relatives, friends, and neighbors, before explaining the nature of his relationship to the patron in question. For example, in 'Muma Ben', the song starts with an introduction of 'Muma Ben from Saye Konyango', then introduces Muma Ben's family, and

ends with praise for the hospitality the singer received when he was invited to Muma Ben's house. If you were to map out all of the relationships outlined in the Kawere Boys singles in our collection, and if you had a deep understanding of Luo culture, you could get a good idea of the social networks the Kawere Boys relied upon for their livelihood.

↩ [The Kawere Boys 'Oranga Peter'](#)

↩ [The Kawere Boys 'Muma Ben'](#)

This next single, recorded in 1975, features two more praise songs. In 'Dr. Benson Omullo', the singer Sam Otieno praises the good doctor from Kawiti. He praises Dr. Omullo for his community service, and describes an afternoon that he spent at Dr. Omullo's home. All of the friends who he met at Dr. Omullo's are mentioned by name; for example, at one point he mentions a friend of Dr. Omullo's 'who is the brother-in-law of this guy who married a girl from Tanzania'. The B-Side, 'J. Ojuki Jakadem' is 'dedicated to Jossy, the brother of Oduo, with joy and happiness.' The singer explains, 'I went to Jossy's house and his wife was very hospitable to me. We went to Nairobi, I got into a taxi, and Jossy paid for the taxi'.

↩ [The Kawere Boys 'Dr. Benson Omullo'](#)

↩ [The Kawere Boys 'J. Ojuki Jakadem'](#)

In August of 1975 the Kawere Boys left Chandarana and started to record for Oluoch Kanendo.



I do not know if Kanendo produced this single on the Simba-Nyaima label, or when it was recorded in 1975. This track is a praise song for 'Roda Atieno'.

↩ [The Kawere Boys 'Roda Atieno'](#)

These two final tracks are the A and B-sides of a 1978 single by Cheplin Kotula's Kawere Jazz Band, released by Okoth Kodoni on his Awendo Rakido label.



Guitar player Paul Omari composed both of these songs, which have a faster almost Rumba feel.

↔ [Cheplin Kotula na Kawere Jazz 'Persila Adhiambo'](#)

↔ [Cheplin Kotula na Kawere Jazz 'Rose Atieno'](#)

This feature is based on interviews with Herman Dinda, Paul Omari, and Rasik Chandarana. Many thanks also to Matthews Juma, Douglas Paterson, Ian Eagleson, and Tim Clifford for their help with contacts and research (the picture of the Kawere Boys was graciously provided by Doug). Very special thanks to Mr. Patrick Deya for his help with the interviews, for his translations of song lyrics, and for sharing his insights into Luo culture with me.