



...the lives, the loves, the times and the
vibes of benga musicians in Kenya

EXCERPT

7.

One night at Olindas as we were winding up, a girl wandered in. No one paid much attention as Opija casually joined her, and they sat in one of the booths. Ten minutes later, Opija bade us farewell for the night and took the girl with him, and they disappeared in the abominable night of Kondele.

Freaked? To us, this had now become normal. This was Opija. Dr. Nico Pedhos *ja mach*, the sperm shooter, the incorrigible womaniser with small ass and shameless audacity—the horniest man in Kondele. He delighted in boasting about his conquests. You probably see many dirty men like him here in Kisumu. This guy was a chick “magnet”. He wasn’t particularly good-looking, remember. You are probably holding your breath thinking about his bad breath and saying *yak!* imagining him kissing some soft lips with that sewer mouth. Hard to tell how he did it without Listerine, but he had a chain of women. KSK said he had a very outgoing type ‘A’ personality. Maybe. Onyata opined he had a charm; that he carried *ther nyang* (female croc’s genitals) in his wallet, a chick-magnate charm given to him by a witch doctor from Obunga. According to the Kondele grapevine, Opija’s conquests were frequent (several times each week) and as diverse as the market women at Kibuye on a Sunday. From the Plain Jane of Manyata to the most exotic and sophisticated Atienos and Moraas and Nafulas and Mrs. So-and-sos. He was a kind of “hero” in a strange way. Don’t get me wrong, I always had girlfriends (and an occasional Mama Iva), but I just didn’t have that magic, charisma, (mojo?) or whatever it was he possessed. Did I mention access to large quantities of controlled substances like Mo? Well, he didn’t need any substances because I saw him first-hand in action numerous times at parties and gigs. Women would approach him and start conversing. They would have some laughs and he and the new conquest would get close, touching and fondling. It was freaking uncanny.

You want to sympathise with his wife, don’t you? I’ll think twice if I were you. He was married to this hot-headed Norwegian woman. It was said she was the source of his wealth. Kondele grapevine had it that he had gone to Norway as a student and took up music. Then

they started a band. Lotta, she was called. She was as smart as all the white women I had known. She probably knew of her husband's womanising and decided not to do anything about it. Not with the four kids he had given her and the beautiful home he had built for her in the Nandi Hills with a breathtaking view of Kisumu town and Lake Victoria and the distant Nyabondo Plateau. She was content with life here in this beautiful African town and with her work as a high school English teacher. And she loved Opija. She came to the bar occasionally to sit and get drunk as she watched us perform. I looked out for these moments as the bar got more crowded while we played, and at that moment, Opija and she would be in a standing ovation. They would be kissing and caressing. The band and the audience would be in shock. Lotta would often get drunk and sometimes act un-lady-like. She would want to dance with other men! One night she wanted to dance with me and Opija wouldn't have it. She got ruffled up and shouted, "Turn the fucking sound down!"

I looked at her in amazement. The band brought the volume down 50 per cent. She walked up, and stood at the front of the stage screaming at me! Said this was her band playing here and she could dance with whomever she desired, and right now she desired to dance with me! The audience realised what was happening and started booing her and chanting "*Misungu malaya.*" Opija got freaky scared and hoisted his ass and hustled off to hide in an inner room. Sam Olindas was wide-eyed; he stood looking tense, his large eyes rolling in terror.

I did dance with Lotta. People cheered and whistled. She held me so tight and ground her body on me. An array of colours blasted into my eyes. I couldn't breathe. It was like drowning. I heard what sounded like trumpets ascending in notes. The colours were like swatches, encircling here and swirling in so fast they all began to run together. Lotta grunted, and lost some lung air. When she recovered, the elaborate rainbow-light show was just diminishing from the pool of which it had come. KSK and Mo escorted her out of the bar to her car, and I apologised profusely to my boss!

A few nights later and we had a big VIP gig at Nyanza Exclusive

Club which was attended by Indians, VIPs, politicians, and some Kisumu top dogs and big shots. We had been hired to play from 9:00 pm to 1:00 am by the private club president. Beer was flowing by the time we got there; we wired things up and blasted the stereo with sound check. A few of the private club guys were beyond inebriated and acting like a bunch of drunken idiots, which was par for the course if you ever played any private clubs. Well, there were lots of good-looking young women who appeared to be dates or wives of the club members throwing the soiree. One hot mama (wearing a distinct cyan maxi outfit, long and fitting) caught my attention since she had walked by us several times checking things out as we were unloading and setting our gear up. I asked about her and was told (with a lot of sshhhs) that she was the wife of the club owner, and this was her party.

About thirty minutes into the set-up, I noticed Opija's red coat slung over a speaker, but he was nowhere to be seen. Since he was the MC, the party couldn't get started. So KSK got Benz to sit in my place and had the band play some instrumental sets while I moved around trying to find our boss. Not long after, out of nowhere, Opija came rustling in with a boyish grin, but he looked as flustered as a rooster. His Afro was ruffled and he was trying to palm it back in place. He proceeded with a quick sound check. Then KSK handed him the mic, and I hastily helped him put on his coat, and he got the party started. We played about ten songs, mostly OK Jazz rumba and the VIPs danced. During a brief interlude, I found my boss outside smoking a cigarette. I had noticed all along that his fly was open and now I told him about it. You can imagine his shock and embarrassment.

During the second half, the woman in blue (with her husband right behind her holding onto her hand) made her way through the drunken dancers right up to the front of the stage, and she started eyeing and grinning at you-know-who. This grin was different, though. It was not a flirtatious type but a more intimate barrack. I blew it off since Opija's reputation was now unbecoming. But to hit on such a glamorous woman in such a place. And the way her high society husband was so enamoured with her! The poor man had no clue what was going on. I surmised that Opija would get her number and link up with her

on a rainy day. After the set, I jokingly mentioned to Opija that he had an admirer and he said yeah. Said they had already “met” just after we had arrived. Evidently, they had “met” earlier when the rest of the band were too busy to notice the encounter. How fast?

He explained that she pulled off the whole thing. He was fixing his bow tie, and then, in the mirror, he saw the lady in blue motioning to him to come over to a secluded corner where she was standing by herself. They talked briefly then she grabbed him by the hand and pulled him into the restroom. There it happened: he serviced her with a quickie. Banged her against the wall while she clung to him. She then gave him her private line number and said she had to get back to her husband because if she didn't, he would come looking for her. Then it was clear to me like Sunday morning. It happened the time we were looking for him. It explained the boyish crap-eating grin and his ruffled Afro and his open superfly. I thought to myself with indignation: *this man is beyond redemption*. After he had finished his short graphic explanation of his latest sexual conquest, I didn't know whether to laugh or curse or cry or throw up! After all, it was no big surprise to me. Opportunity (once again) presented itself, and Opija the Don Juan of Kondele acted upon it.

During the third set, Opija opened the first song and sang a lovely ballad straight at the lady in blue. She stood so close, taken by it. Swept by it. We were transfixed as Opija sang his heart out, brought out a rare vocal distinction, and hit the highest notes I never knew he could do. It was a plain rhythm, bass, and drums rumba number where the words themselves were happy, which shared a narrative of sheer heartbreak. The lyrics charmed the woman to the bone. Mawazo and Onyata sang the next song. We performed for about an hour and a half then hit a break to have some food before the final set. I went out to get a much-needed beer. As I walked towards the keg, feeling a little high-flown and wondering if he even knew her name (fairly certain that he didn't), the little voice of caution inside my head said, “That lucky lady charmer with foul breath... someday he will get caught.”

Opija joined me, a beer in hand, sweat staining his armpits. He was

in a happy mood. I took advantage. “Watch it, boss, she’s going to be coming back at you,” I said. “You shagged her well with that song.”

He smiled. “You certainly have my attention, kid.”

“How’s she?”

He shrugged, wiped his sweaty face with his hand and slurped his bottle of White Cap, clicked his tongue. “Not good. Watery like River Nyando pouring into Lake Victoria. Doesn’t even know how to cry to power bolingo.” Bolingo was the new Kondele word for orgasm.

I thought of Mama Iva. I said, “Married women are becoming too bold. What happened to virtues, sensibility... marriage vows?”

Opija lit a cigarette, took a deep puff and discharged thick clouds of smoke out of his hairy nostrils. He sucked his teeth and said, “Women are made for men, Abonyo. To keep men young and focused. After you fire into one, you’re renewed, refreshed and energised. That’s how men are programmed. Not only musicians, but even politicians. Men.”

“Really? I didn’t know. Women destroy men.”

Opija toked on his cigarette, sharply. “Fools. Not men, fools.”

“Lwanda Magere was not a fool, was he? My father says that fish is sweet but when you eat too much of it without being careful, one day a bone will get stuck in your throat.”

He glared at me. “Why tell me all this rubbish, Abonyo?”

“Because, boss, I begin to think you take your life as a joke.”

“Because of women? I’m an artist, you know. It’s natural.”

“Yeah, I know. But that’s somebody’s wife.”

Opija laughed and took another drag on his Embassy. He threw the half-smoked cig down and stepped on it. “Do you know how many married women Franco has slept with? Well, do you know what killed Bavon Marie Marie? Woman. Her name is Lucy. She was Bavon’s girl. But Franco was shagging her. Now you know Franco was Bavon’s older bro.”

I glared at him. “Eh?” he beamed. “Do you know the real story behind ‘Bina Na Ngai Na Respect?’ ”

“No.”

“When you look at me, what do you see?”

I laughed and shifted on my feet.

“You see nothing. I have no feeling for anyone except what benefits me. But you, Abonyo, you’re a real artist and you’re sensitive. You care too much. Feel too much.” He raised his voice. “Why do you care too much, *omera?* Nobody cares about you *Kisumo ka*. Nobody cares a damn thing about you here in Kisumu.”

We jawed about it for a while then went back into the hall.

8.

The days of a thief are numbered, so they say. You know that absurd philosophy about a thief and his forty days. Truly those the gods choose to destroy they first make mad. Opija had been having an affair with more married women. I knew at least four. Mama Iva had been furious; he had tried to seduce her.

One night while we were blowing the roof off Olindas, Mo nudged me in the middle of a song and gave me the universal “check that out over there” wink and head-toss. There was the woman on the dance floor, very much unattractive, dancing by herself in a slowly widening hole in the crowd.

“Can you imagine Nico has stooped so low?” Mo asked.

“You mean he’s sleeping with that *gwangi?*” asked Mawazo.

At first, I thought, “Okay, what’s the big deal?” but as I watched, the deal became apparent. She was perhaps the worst dancer that had ever stepped in Olindas. I mean, we had seen people who couldn’t dance, but this was something special. Limbs just sort of flailed away at completely random intervals. She seemed completely on the verge of falling over at every beat, but her eyes were clear and she was enjoying herself big time.

During the break after the song, Mo said, “Well, she’s having fun... which is good. *We ocham thum.*”

Opija came for the second half and took over. Mawazo moved in to back him up as usual. As the night progressed, as Opija sang, she was out there for almost every single song just sort of thrashing away in her little circle with other dancers just trying to stay out of the range of her wildly flailing limbs. Of course, the whole band was entertained by

her, and we'd been laughing amongst ourselves all night.

At the end of maybe the third set, the rest of the band and I were a little slow getting off stage. Opija excused himself, saying he was going to see Sam Olindas in his office and went into one of the private rooms. I watched and, after ten minutes, saw the woman get up too and follow him. I kept myself busy changing my guitar string, which had broken. Onyata, Mawazo, and Mo had disappeared somewhere in the repugnant night of Kondele. KSK was changing the batteries in one of his pedals, and Para Para was struggling with a tune on his guitar. I think KSK was adjusting his control console for our rumba galore show, which he loved very much. As I was settling myself to tune my guitar after changing the string, I noticed what appeared to be the woman (who'd been dancing weirdly before) staggering towards my side of the stage. She looked highly intoxicated.

I pretended to be involved in guitar fixing and waved her over to Para Para who was on my left. I glanced over to see him glaring back at me with the look of death. The woman stumbled her way over to him, knocking over the mic stand in the process. She staggered in front of the drums as KSK was setting up the drummer's mic.

I continued to concentrate on tuning the Les Paul. Then I heard a splashing sound behind me. I turned to look, and my hair stood on end. The woman was throwing up on the drummer's floor toms, crash and ride cymbals. KSK, having pretty much set himself up in a corner, was trying to get away over his drum throne. He kind of succeeded, knocking over the hi-hat and a little crash cymbal, with the crash cymbal flying and spinning and almost chopping off Para Para's neck.

The woman was "rescued" by a barmaid and a bouncer and escorted out of the stage. She was frothing in the mouth and murmuring. The barmaid, laughing so hard she could barely speak straight, got some rags and went to clean up the drums while KSK (madder than a rained-on rooster) cursed and clicked his tongue and went to the changing room to clean himself up. I saw the bouncer struggling with the woman. He called for help. *Then I saw it: she had suddenly become heavy.* A bomb of panic exploded.

At that very moment, Opija appeared in his underwear sweating and

staggering badly. He had a devil-awful look on his face. "I'm dying," he managed to say, "I've been poisoned. She... she has poisoned me." He was pointing a shaking finger at the woman who was now lying on the floor twitching and convulsing. Then he too started frothing in the mouth. He sank to the floor in slow motion. We stood there speechless with our mouths open for ten seconds as we watched our Nicholas Opija jerking with his eyes all white. I jumped off the stage and dashed to where he lay. A sweaty bouncer appeared on the scene. Murmurs and movements of confusion started and wailing yanked in. Everyone shouted, made suggestions, and swarmed around us. They clenched, fretted, and watched as Para Para helped me lift Opija.

Alarm bells were ringing, and people were crowding into the bar. Sam Olindas bounded into the room and instantly summed up the situation. "My car!" he shouted. "Bring them to my car." He fought his massive weight to the entrance while shouting, "Clear the way, clear the way!" We gathered them up, battled our way through the crowd, and stuffed them into Olindas' 504.

The medics in Russia worked like ordinary civil servants who had seen many men and women die. I am sure I am right to blame them. I am sure they let Opija die slowly. We stood there watching as they asked us details of names and such while they should have been saving his life. Opija was still breathing silently, his heart beating weakly. A man in a long white coat, who would be a clinical officer but introduced himself as Dr. Olago, rudely asked us what happened. We said it was poisoning. He asked us how we knew it was poisoning. We told them to do anything to save his life, and they asked us to leave the room and let them do their work. So we stood outside waiting. Not a cessation. Not a breath. Waiting for our lovable Opija to die. Sam Olindas was weeping.

Half an hour later the man in white came out with that stony look that confirmed the worst. He asked about next of kin. We were looking at him with fear and expectation.

Then he pronounced the word of doom. "He is dead. The woman too. They are dead. Is he her husband?"

This, in itself, was like a punch in the gut. Air escaped out of

my lungs. I felt my tears fall. My tongue touched the mucous on my upper lip. I felt the world plop down around me. I had hoped that somehow Opija would pull through. I cried for my boss. He was my everything. I was finished. It confused me on some level; it filled me with a deep sense of loss and made me vulnerable. Death had always been a mysterious thing to me. An ugly monster that cut lives suddenly without warning. Even if it's a guy you hate, you will love them and feel sorrow for them when they are dead. Did you know it was heartbreaking to watch Sam Olindas weeping like a child, with snot streaming out of his nostrils, without my eyes and nose leaking? I had to hold him a few times to find words to console him, to stop him from passing out from grief. It made death even more terrifying to me. Has anyone dealt with death without being terribly upset or was I weird? I mean, why was I feeling so terrible about the death of the man I hated for taking his whole life as a joke? A man who messed up families by boning wives of men? A man who couldn't allow me to exercise my artistic freedom in his band. Death, as ugly as it is, has an uncanny way of uniting even the darndest of enemies. I marvelled, though, at the contrasting reactions... from the heart-rending grief of Sam Olindas to those of utter indifference from the nurses and medical workers who had little or no difficulty in dealing with a death. It all baffled me.

Nicholas Okoth Opija. 1948 – 1982. Husband, accountant, bandleader, singer, businessman. Survived by: first wife Gaudencia Awino and two daughters and two sons; second wife Lotta Maritta Fajnova and four daughters. And mother, father, eight brothers, four sisters, cousins, uncles... where does this end? Sleep the Big Sleep Dr. Nico Pedhos. *Ondiek marach. Ja mach piere tindol!*