Journal of Visual and Performing Arts
Vol. 4 No. 1 (2026): ISSN (Online): 2957-5990
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58721/n0kwq035
Constructing National Identity in Kenyan Film Music: Towards a Contextual Framework for Practice

Constructing National Identity in Kenyan Film Music: Towards a Contextual Framework for Practice

Jane Wahu Kiragu[1], Mellitus N. Wanyama[1] & Jacqueline Zinale Bullindah[2]
[1]*Kabarak University, Kenya*
[2]*Maseno University, Kenya*

Article History
Received: 2026-07-11
Revised: 2026-11-14
Accepted: 2026-11-19
Published: 2026-11-27

Keywords
Cinema
Film music
National identity
Socio-musicology

How to cite:
Kiragu, J. W., Wanyama, M. N., & Bullindah, J. Z. (2026). Constructing National Identity in Kenyan Film Music: Towards a Contextual Framework for Practice. *Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, 4*(1), 84-100.

Copyright © 2026

Abstract
Scholarship on film music and national identity has largely read identity from completed films, while Kenyan scholarship on music and identity has concentrated on popular music rather than on the making of film scores; comparatively little is therefore known about how composers, directors and producers reason about cultural representation while a score is being produced. This article brings a socio-musicological analysis of five Kenyan feature films released between 2020 and 2025 into dialogue with in-depth interviews with seven practitioners: three composers, three director-producers and one music scholar. Interview transcripts and film field notes were analysed thematically, beginning with seventeen codes derived from Social Identity Theory and socio-musicology and extending these with eleven codes that emerged from the data. Participants did not describe national identity as a fixed Kenyan sound, and they located the origin of their musical decisions in narrative and character rather than in an intention to display the nation; one participant, a music scholar, proposed a coalition model in which community musics keep their character under a national umbrella, whereas a director-producer argued that a recognisable Kenyan sound would have to be deliberately designed. The films corroborate this account in the placement of multilingual song and in the use of indigenous instruments beyond their communities of origin, but complicate it in their persistent reliance on Western harmonic language for grief and other forms of emotional interiority. From these patterns the article proposes a contextual framework of four recursive stages, namely narrative foundation, identity elements, musicological construction and creative negotiation, whose outcome is a film-specific articulation of Kenyan identities, together with role-differentiated questions for composers, directors and producers. The framework reports practitioners' accounts and is offered as a heuristic for practice; it has not been tested in production, and the study collected no audience data.

Introduction
Kenyan feature films now reach audiences beyond the country more often than before, although this circulation remains narrow and uneven. Netflix recorded approximately 7.4 million hours viewed for

Disconnect: The Wedding Planner in the first half of 2023 (Netflix, 2023b), yet it was then the only Kenyan title available on the platform globally (Nation, 2023), and the company's report on its investment across South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya between 2016 and 2022 discloses no figure for Kenya (Netflix, 2023a). Kenyan cinema is thus visible internationally but thinly represented, and for the few titles that travel, what they communicate about Kenya, through music as much as through image and dialogue, acquires particular weight.

Film music establishes place, characterises, shapes the reading of a scene and implies to whom a story belongs (Chion, 2019; Gorbman, 1987; Kalinak, 1992). This raises a question often asked by Kenyan practitioners and audiences: what makes a film sound Kenyan? To answer with a list of instruments, languages or genres would be to treat music as a static artefact, disregarding the fact that each song acquires meaning from its placement within a particular narrative (Small, 1998), and Agawu (2003, 2016) cautions against treating African musical practices as a fixed repertoire of signifiers of Africanness, a caution that applies with particular force to film.

Studies of film music and identity have mostly read completed scores retrospectively (Brownrigg, 2007; Jeffery, 2017; Kassabian, 2001; Sylvanus, 2018). In Kenya, scholarship on music and identity has focused on popular music (Njogu & Maupeu, 2007; Nyairo & Ogude, 2003, 2005; Simatei, 2010), while film music has largely been examined through single films, as in Otieno's (2020) study of *Nairobi Half Life*. Considerably less attention has been paid to how those who make Kenyan films reason about cultural representation while the music is still being conceived and produced.

This article therefore asks which elements of national identity Kenyan practitioners report working with and how these are audible in recent films; through which musicological features those elements are articulated; and how practitioners describe their creative decisions, and how those decisions might be organised into a framework usable during production.

Literature Review

Film music, meaning and place

Early film-music scholarship established that the score guides emotional response and interpretation, deriving its meaning from its relationship with the image (Gorbman, 1987). Kalinak (1992) showed that music helps construct character, place and ideology, Chion (2019) described the reciprocal transformation of sound and image, and Kassabian (2001) argued that viewers identify with films through their musical worlds. Brownrigg (2007) showed how film music produces a sense of place from idioms that audiences associate with particular peoples, while cautioning that such associations are learned rather than inherent.

Nation, identity and the problem of essentialism

National identity is widely understood as socially constructed rather than given. Anderson (1983) described nations as imagined communities, Hall (1996, 1997) argued that identities are produced through representation, and Ting (2008) characterised the nation as continually negotiated in everyday practice. Hjort (2000) defined national cinema by the ways in which filmmakers negotiate culture and belonging, and Frith (1996) proposed that music offers an experience through which identity is formed rather than reflecting one that already exists. In a state of more than forty ethnolinguistic communities, any claim that a single sound represents "the" nation risks privileging some communities over others, and the work of Agawu (2003, 2016), Diawara (1992) and Ukadike (1994) indicates that symbols which secure recognition may also simplify the cultures from which they are drawn.

Music and identity in Kenya and in African film

Kenyan scholarship has shown that musical practice is a principal site in which identities are negotiated: Nyairo and Ogude (2003, 2005) traced how popular music mediated urban identity and became an idiom of national consciousness, Simatei (2010) showed Kalenjin popular music contesting national space, and Njogu and Maupeu (2007) documented the entanglement of song and politics in Eastern Africa. In film, Diang'a (2013) examined Kenyan message films and Otieno (2020) read the score of *Nairobi Half Life* as a resource for constructing identity, while Sylvanus (2018) and Jeffery (2017) have shown how Nigerian and South African film music perform ethnic and national identities. This literature establishes that music carries identity in Kenyan and African contexts, but it is largely silent on how such identity work is decided during the production of film scores.

Existing frameworks and the gap this study addresses

The frameworks most commonly used to analyse music and identity in film are, in Seeger's (1958) terms, descriptive rather than prescriptive. Gorbman's (1987) principles classify the functions of music in completed films, Kassabian's (2001) distinction between assimilating and affiliating identifications explains how audiences relate to scores, and Brownrigg's (2007) account of place-coding identifies how scores signal geography and ethnicity, presupposing a stable correspondence between idiom and people of the kind that Agawu questions. Studies of completed scores, such as Luo's (2021) analysis of *Parasite*, show what music does for a film but say little about how scoring decisions are shared among composers, directors and producers. The gap is therefore twofold: there is little production-side evidence from Kenyan practitioners, and no framework that is prescriptive in Seeger's sense while remaining accountable to the anti-essentialist positions outlined above.

Theoretical framework

The study is anchored in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), read through a socio-musicological perspective that treats music as social practice (DeNora, 2000; Shepherd, 1991; Small, 1998). Each of the theory's three processes was translated into analytic codes (Appendix 3). Social categorisation was coded as references to music that marks Kenyan, regional, ethnic or foreign identities (A1, A5); social identification as practitioners' stated intentions to construct Kenyan identity and their positioning in relation to it (C1, C6); and social comparison as the use of foreign or Western elements to define Kenyan identity by difference (A3) and the blending of local and global genres (B5). Because national identity in Kenya is an intergroup question, the theory was used to examine how the same sound may mark an ethnic community within Kenya while standing for the nation beyond it. The socio-musicological perspective supplied the codes concerned with musical features and production (Family B; C2, C3, C5).

Key concepts

National identity denotes a socially constructed and contested sense of belonging to the Kenyan nation, layered with ethnic, regional, linguistic, generational and class identities rather than replacing them. *Identity elements* are the culturally specific materials of a film's narrative, namely its languages, history, social experiences, humour, values, symbols and characters, which can be recognised in the story before any musical decision is taken. *Culturally grounded* music is music whose materials, and their use, are informed by knowledge of the traditions from which they are drawn and connected to their narrative function. *Cultural appropriateness* is an accountable judgement of fit with narrative function, on which the creative team has standing, and with the tradition drawn upon, on which its practitioners have standing; *cultural sensitivity* is awareness of the risks of misrepresentation, such as the decontextualised use of sacred material, together with the measures taken to reduce them.

Method

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist design that brought the analysis of completed films into dialogue with in-depth, semi-structured interviews with practitioners. Phenomenology served as a tool for data collection rather than as theory or analytic method: following Seidman (2013), open questions invited participants to reconstruct particular creative decisions, and these accounts were analysed thematically. The five feature films, released between 2020 and 2025, were each set in Kenya, produced or co-produced by a Kenyan company, legally available in Kenya and credited with Kenyan music, and they vary in setting, language and scale of production (Appendix 1). Kenyan setting, production and music credit, rather than the nationality of the director, served as the test, because the research question concerns films made within the Kenyan industry. Seven Nairobi-based practitioners were recruited by snowball sampling from my professional contacts (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981): three composers, three director-producers and one music scholar (Appendix 2). Sample adequacy is argued on information power (Malterud et al., 2016): the aim is narrow, every participant composes, directs, produces or teaches film music in Kenya, and seventeen codes were supplied in advance. The sample is weaker, however, for the producer role, since no participant works solely as a producer, and for the single scholarly voice, and claims about these are limited accordingly.

Each film was viewed repeatedly and documented in scene-level field notes on genre, instrumentation, vocal practice, rhythm, melody, harmony, texture, dynamics, language, diegetic status and narrative function. Interviews of 45 to 60 minutes, guided by Patton (2015), were conducted online or in person in 2026 and audio-recorded; five were transcribed in full, while one survives as an automatic transcript with gaps and one, whose recording was lost, as an AI-generated summary, so these two serve only as corroboration. The data were coded through a hybrid deductive–inductive procedure (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), with seventeen codes derived from the theoretical framework and eleven emerging from the data (Appendix 3), and the two evidence streams were compared in a triangulation matrix. As a Kenyan musicologist trained in Western analysis who knew some participants professionally, I treated insider knowledge as provisional until corroborated; coding by a single researcher was supported by peer debriefing, an audit trail, a reflexive journal and member checking. The Kabarak University Research Ethics Committee approved the study on 19 March 2026 (KUREC-190326); with the supervisors' agreement, and given its low risk, interviews began while the application to the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation was processed, and licence NACOSTI/P/26/4189205 was issued on 25 May 2026. Participants gave written consent and are identified by pseudonyms. AI tools helped generate transcripts, which I checked; coding and interpretation remained my own.

Framework development

The framework was derived from the coded data at the final stage of analysis. Because the three code families were organised by research question, the stages were obtained by re-ordering coded segments according to the point in production at which participants located each decision. Family C material divided in this re-ordering, since participants placed narrative understanding before cultural identification but negotiation under constraint after musical translation, which is why three code families yielded four stages; Family A formed the identity-elements stage, Family B the musicological-construction stage, and the outcome was formulated from the film evidence and from codes A5 and C1.

Results

The evidence is presented stage by stage, and Appendix 4 summarises how each film demonstrates, partly demonstrates or fails to demonstrate each stage. Participants' statements are reported as their

accounts, and readings of the films as my analytical interpretations, not as evidence of audience reception, which the study did not examine.

Stage 1: Narrative foundation

I entered the field expecting that discussions of national identity would begin with instruments and sounds. Instead, four of the six practitioners, the three composers and Hamisi, located the beginning of musical decision-making in the story and its characters. Baraka, a composer, subordinated national identity to the story explicitly:

> "When I am creating the music, I am not really thinking 'Kenyan identity.' I am thinking: localise the sound so that we know it came from Kenya. But I am not looking to accurately represent Kenya — I am looking to help tell the story." (Baraka, composer)

Localisation, in this account, is a deliberate act, whereas national identity emerges as the cumulative effect of many such acts rather than as their aim (EM-08). Salim, a director-producer, provides a counter-case, since his first brief to every production team is to make the film "sound and look Kenyan", yet he too reports that this is "usually one of the last things resolved". Hamisi, a director-producer, extended the narrative function of music further:

> "Music can help to propel the story faster, faster, faster without wasting so much time on dialogue... by the time a short period of time is passing, just maybe two minutes of a song, they have told a whole lot of stories." (Hamisi, director-producer)

This conception of music as a narrative prosthetic was given its own code (EM-01). The films corroborate this narrative priority. In *Just in Time*, the montage in which Muthoni pursues the publication of her children's book while her career falters is carried by Mayonde's "I Rise", whose English verses turn to Kiswahili in the line "Sitawachwa nyuma" ("I will not be left behind"); the song voices an aspiration that the dialogue never states, so that the code-switch localises the voice while the cue's function is defined by character. *Uradi*'s score moves from Kikuyu-language Afropop through Afrobeats, smooth jazz and Sheng hip-hop to a closing instrumental for litungu and nyatiti, each change following Komu's social and moral position rather than displaying musical diversity for its own sake. *Disconnect: The Wedding Planner* is less conclusive, since songs such as Bien's "Inauma" (0:02) and "Nakulike" (1:07) appear to establish mood and urban register rather than serve a specific narrative moment.

Stage 2: Identity elements

Participants treated the identification of a story's cultural markers as a step preceding musical construction. All seven were coded to the negotiation between ethnic plurality and national unity (A5), and four named language specifically (B4). Hamisi presented code-switching as an element to be represented rather than corrected:

> "Language identifies a people... they say that many foreigners are complaining that a Kenyan cannot speak a full sentence without speaking Swahili. And I was like: yeah, that's not a problem. That's who we are." (Hamisi, director-producer)

Jabari, a Ugandan composer with about eight years' practice in the Kenyan industry, described improving his Kiswahili and searching for idiom as well as language when writing lyrics:

> "Sometimes when you lose your way, that's how you find your way. I went to Google and looked for different proverbs, then bought that proverb. I wrote the sentences, but then kept changing the words, looking for a word that would sound a bit more Kenyan." (Jabari, composer)

I found Jabari's position as an outsider particularly instructive, since it makes visible a level of everyday speech that local practitioners may take for granted, and it unsettles the assumption that Kenyan sonic identity is primarily inherited: here a non-Kenyan constructs it through research, language learning and cultural apprenticeship (EM-05). He also noted that music places a story in time, "taking the audience into the 50s in Kenya" in colonial films (EM-04). The music scholar, Rashidi, offered what the analysis came to term the coalition model:

> "We will not have a single identity, but multiple identities... A political analogy captures this well: in party mergers, people dissolve their separate parties and form one common entity. But in coalitions, people retain their parties and create an umbrella under which all operate." (Rashidi, music scholar)

In a coalition, community musics retain their character under a national umbrella, so that Kenyan identity is better understood as a federation of musical identities than as one identity standing above them (EM-06). Because no other participant repeated this view, it is presented as one participant's account and is qualified in the Discussion; it nonetheless contradicted my own expectation, formed from the literature, that Kenyan film music would display a relatively unified national sound.

The films render identity elements audible before the narrative confirms them. *Sayari* places only the Kiswahili section of Mutoriah's "Presha" under its opening, locating the story on the Swahili-speaking coast before the dialogue names Mombasa, and closes with an R&B ballad in Kikuyu, so that one score marks two communities. *Uradi* opens with Kikuyu-language Afropop and diegetic women's folk singing, establishing rural Central Kenya before the narrative names it. In *Disconnect: The Wedding Planner*, Afrobeats and Nigerian Pidgin mark the visiting Yoruba family, whereas the end credits (1:43) return to the Dholuo and Kiswahili song "My Jaber"; the same film treats cultural disposition as an identity element when Otis, drunk and humiliated after being conned, breaks into the rhumba refrain "Yelele, hasira za nini wewe bwana", converting private pain into public comedy in a register I read as recognisably Kenyan. *Just in Time* complicates the stage, since its score voices class, an aspirational, cosmopolitan Nairobi, more consistently than ethnicity, which is marked only by its closing song in Kamba.

Stage 3: Musicological construction

At this stage identity elements are translated into instruments, rhythms, vocal practices, languages, genres and harmonic idioms, and the evidence indicates that this translation is interpretive rather than a matter of fixed correspondences. Baraka identified the nyatiti as the sound he most associates with Kenya, while noting that its meaning depends on the listener:

> "The Nyatiti, when you hear it, is specifically a Kenyan sound to me... We Kenyans know it as a Luo instrument specifically, but anyone outside Kenya may not have that distinction." (Baraka, composer)

He also located identity less in the instrument than in "what the instrument sounds like" once processed, and my own listening supported this: despite formal musical training, I could not always distinguish a nyatiti from a litungu once they had been recorded, processed and placed beneath dialogue, which suggests that much of the identity work is carried by timbre rather than by recognition of a particular instrument. Jabari located identity instead in rhythm, approaching even the orchestral cello "from an African perspective".

In *Uradi*, the nyatiti, with Luo vocal practice, enters as Komu's romantic hopes collapse and as he is pursued by the police, although Komu is Kikuyu; I read the instrument as a carrier of moral and emotional weight rather than a marker of his ethnicity, while recognising that film music generates

meanings beyond those its makers intended (Kassabian, 2001). In *Otis Janam*, the Dholuo title theme names the protagonist's two failings, drink and women, and recurs in progressively thinner, slower and quieter arrangements as each failing plays out, so that the leitmotif restates, in diminishing form, a warning the community has already sung; the film also places Iddi Achieng's largely unaccompanied Dholuo chant "Arito Singo", drawn from the Ogweyo tradition, at an emotional climax.

The strongest evidence against a simple account of this stage concerns harmony. Across all five films, scenes of grief, fear, betrayal and introspection were scored predominantly in a Western harmonic idiom: rising orchestral strings at the death of Api's father in *Otis Janam*, a minor-key cue for pizzicato cello and clarinet for Muthoni's isolation in *Just in Time* (15:11), and increasingly jazz-based harmony for Komu's decline in *Uradi*. Indigenous materials were used to locate narratives, while emotional interiority was voiced through an inherited Western vocabulary. Rashidi traced this to missionary education:

> "When students today are asked to perform a religious folk song from their community, someone will come and sing 'Golden Bells' in their local language. That is what is regarded as the folk sacred song of the community. That is the work of the missionary." (Rashidi, music scholar)

Baraka observed that traditional Kenyan music does "celebration, dance, and love songs" well but lacks "a strong tradition of expressing emotions like fear, or anger, or unresolved grief in an instrumental, cinematic way", and Zuberi asked of his own work, "how can I express Kenyan sadness?" I regard this as one of the most revealing questions to emerge from the study: it does not imply that Kenyan traditions cannot express grief, but rather that musical education has shaped what composers instinctively hear as the sound of serious emotion. Three participants in different roles identified this gap independently (EM-09). Baraka described one response, layering a processed, "stretched out" nyatiti over meditative music for a documentary on the Mau Mau struggle, and Rashidi located the remedy in a curriculum that distinguishes "the elements that perpetuate neo-colonialism and those that perpetuate decolonisation" (EM-07), a single voice that opens the findings to a decolonial reading. Taken together, this evidence indicates that there is no fixed correspondence between a cultural identity and a sound, and that translation at this stage is shaped by histories of musical education that practitioners do not always choose.

Stage 4: Creative negotiation

Participants described musical intentions as negotiated against time, budget, available expertise and the views of collaborators, and regarded this negotiation as part of creative practice rather than an external limit upon it. All seven were coded to industry and budget constraints (C3), and five described the terms of collaboration (C5). Composers reported that scoring usually takes place at the end of production under compressed schedules, and that sample libraries often substitute for costly live recording with traditional instrumentalists:

> "If the budget is there, we can go and you write the music, then you source people to come and play. But if the budget is not there, then you write according to what you have available." (Jabari, composer)

Baraka described the opposite decision, taken at some cost, on one production:

> "With only two weeks left until the premiere, I went back and redid it. We hired musicians to play the Nyatiti riffs and parts... what we had before — which was not terrible, but felt like it could be more local, more rooted in Kenya." (Baraka, composer)

Salim traced the constraint to a structural feature of the Kenyan music economy:

> "Artists don't make money from streaming or radio play. They make money from gigs. And what songs get played at gigs? Hit songs. On the films we make, we are producing emotional, atmospheric, scene-specific music. That is not music you can go perform at a concert." (Salim, director-producer)

If the musicians best placed to bring indigenous sounds into film cannot earn from film music, the scarcity of culturally grounded scores reflects the way the music economy rewards musicians as well as limited budgets (EM-11). Hamisi described borrowing from Senegalese Baye Fall music and the kora with care, since "when this film reaches Senegal... there'll be something off if we mismatch the sonic grammar", a concern that reaches beyond the national frame towards a Pan-African register (EM-02). Amani's interview survives only as a summary, which reports that she balanced modern and traditional sounds with Afrofusion producers and commissioned original music for features when budgets allowed.

The films bear traces of such negotiation. In *Otis Janam*, piano and traditional percussion share the texture from the second half onwards, each retaining its own rhythm and line, which I read as deliberate dialogue rather than fusion; the triangulation matrix identified this as the most intentional score in the corpus. Elsewhere, indigenous timbres were often processed or blended into orchestral textures, consistent with substitution under budget constraints, and in *Disconnect: The Wedding Planner* a Nigerian-styled wedding song is performed by a Kenyan vocalist whose accent remains audible.

The evidence for the producer's role is narrower. No participant works solely as a producer, but two director-producers described bringing music in at the narrative stage: Salim brings "all heads of departments into the room" once there is a first draft, involving music "right from the scripting stage", and Hamisi now brings the composer in "at the very, very, very beginning" and has set aside pre-production time for archival research in the Singing Wells collection. Composers named schedule and budget, which producers control, as the conditions that most often limit cultural research. The evidence therefore supports a producer role at the narrative and negotiation stages; producer questions at other stages are proposals and are marked as such in Appendix 5.

The outcome: film-specific articulations of Kenyan identities

The process does not culminate in a single Kenyan sound. Each film articulated a different Kenya: an aspirational, cosmopolitan Nairobi in *Just in Time*; rural community, urban ambition and moral return in *Uradi*; a Luo lakeside community in which personal stories are also communal ones in *Otis Janam*; a Kenya defined through intercultural encounter in *Disconnect: The Wedding Planner*; and a coastal, Kiswahili-speaking Kenya that nevertheless closes in Kikuyu in *Sayari*. Baraka's account of the nyatiti, heard within Kenya as Luo and beyond it as Kenyan, illustrates the context-dependent group boundaries that Social Identity Theory predicts. Hamisi hoped that audiences would "discover more music or alternative music through film" (EM-03), and several participants believed that more intentional use of culturally grounded music would strengthen how Kenyan film music communicates Kenyan identity, a belief the study did not test against audience reception.

Figure 1 brings these findings together as a framework of four recursive stages whose outcome is their product rather than a further step, and Appendix 5 sets out role-differentiated questions, indicating the evidence for each and marking as proposals those that the interviews do not directly support.

Journal of Visual and Performing Arts
Vol. 4 No. 1 (2026): ISSN (Online): 2957-5990
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58721/n0kwq035
Constructing National Identity in Kenyan Film Music: Towards a Contextual Framework for Practice

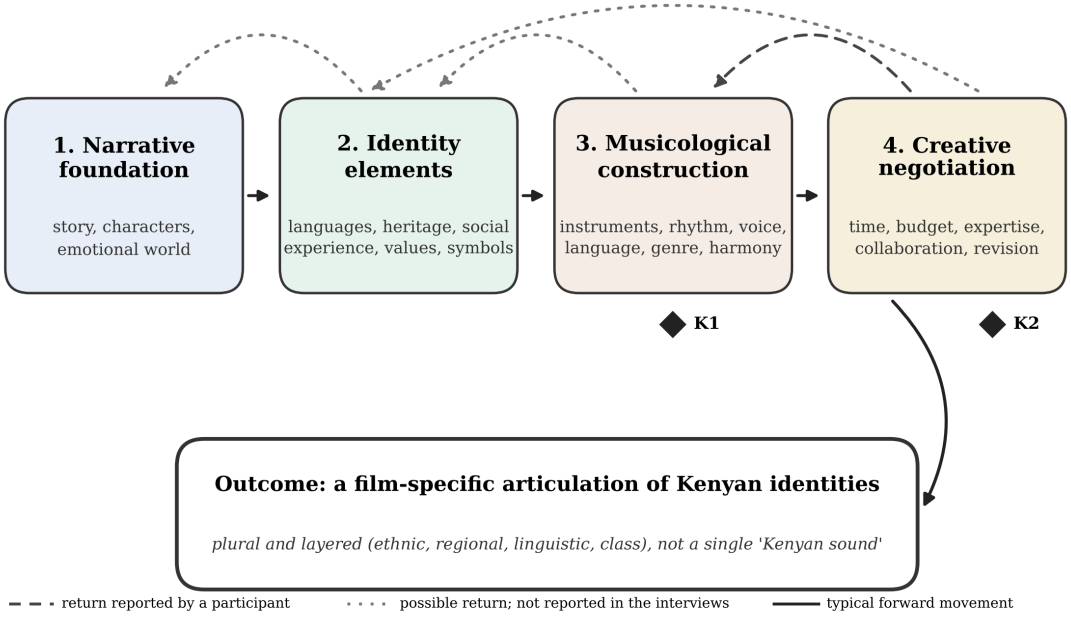


Figure 1: Contextual framework for constructing national identity in Kenyan film music

Legend. The numbers show the order in which participants typically first addressed each set of questions; they do not prescribe a sequence. Solid arrows show the typical forward movement of a decision; the dashed arrow shows the one return that participants reported, the rebuilding of part of a score shortly before release (Stage 4 to Stage 3); dotted arrows show returns that the framework treats as possible but that no participant described. Diamonds mark two checkpoints, K1 at the spotting session and K2 before the final mix, at which the outcome questions in Appendix 5 are asked while the music can still be changed.

Discussion

The framework beside existing approaches

Gorbman's (1987) principles, Kassabian's (2001) model of identification and Brownrigg's (2007) account of place-coding are descriptive in Seeger's (1958) sense: they explain what a completed score does or how audiences relate to it. The framework proposed here is prescriptive, posing questions to be asked before and during production, but its prescriptions are procedural rather than substantive; it indicates which questions a production team should ask and whom it should involve, not which sounds it should use. This matters in the Kenyan context for two reasons. Place-coding presupposes that a musical idiom can stand for a people, an assumption difficult to sustain when, as in *Uradi*, the nyatiti carries moral weight for a Kikuyu protagonist, and when the same instrument signifies differently within and beyond the country. And analytical frameworks treat the score as the work of a composer or a director–composer pair, whereas the Kenyan evidence locates some of the most decisive conditions, namely schedule, budget and access to tradition-bearers, in the producer's domain.

Identity elements as a distinct analytical category

The clearest theoretical implication, in my reading, concerns the separation of identity elements from musical materials. Treating the cultural substance of a story as a category in its own right shifts

attention from whether a film uses so-called national markers to whether the cultural meanings relevant to the story were worked out before being translated into sound. Read through Social Identity Theory, the films articulate Kenyan identity through specific communities, a Luo lakeside village, a Kikuyu homestead, a Kamba family, rather than through a generic national sound. The harmonic evidence qualifies this argument: even where identity elements were carefully identified, the vocabulary for emotional interiority remained largely inherited, so the framework's questions at Stage 3 must ask what a composer defaults to, and why, as well as what the composer chooses. Rashidi's decolonial framing (EM-07) suggests a further reading alongside Social Identity Theory, left to future work.

A designed identity or a coalition?

The data also contain a disagreement that is better kept open than resolved prematurely. Rashidi's coalition model leaves each community's music intact under a national umbrella, whereas Salim argued that Kenya will not have a recognisable sound until one is deliberately designed, as he believes Korea did:

> "Having a uniform sound and look — until the day we sit at a table and actually design a proper strategy and say: this is Kenya, these are the values of Kenyans, this is how we sound — we will not have one." (Salim, director-producer)

This was coded as designed national identity as state strategy (EM-10). The two positions need not cancel each other: a deliberate strategy could provide the umbrella, through support for training, commissioning and circulation, while the coalition of community musics supplies what lies beneath it. The framework stands closer to the second position, since it asks production teams to consult and choose rather than to follow a national template.

Shared agency and its limits

Responsibility for cultural representation is thus distributed across a production, although the evidence for the producer's role rests on three participants who both direct and produce, one represented only by an interview summary, and on composers' accounts of conditions that producers control. What the evidence does support is that decisions about scheduling, budgeting and access to cultural knowledge determine whether culturally informed choices are possible at all, which is why the framework specifies a minimum of consultation that does not depend on budget.

Implications as proposals

For practice, the framework offers production teams a structured set of questions for use during development and production, rather than leaving cultural representation to be assessed only after release. For education, it may offer a structure for teaching film scoring in which narrative, cultural context, musical translation and production conditions are treated as parts of one practice; since no pedagogical data were collected, this is a suggestion for future research rather than a finding.

Conclusion

This article has proposed a contextual framework for constructing national identity through Kenyan film music, derived from a qualitative study that combined the analysis of five Kenyan films released between 2020 and 2025 with interviews with seven practitioners. For these practitioners and in these films, national identity was articulated not through a fixed set of markers but through decisions that began with narrative and character, identified specific cultural elements, translated them into music through choices that were interpretive and historically constrained, and negotiated them within the material and economic conditions of production. The framework organises these decisions into four recursive stages whose outcome is a film-specific articulation of Kenyan identities, assigns questions

to composers, directors and producers, and specifies a minimum of cultural consultation. Because it rests on a small, Nairobi-based sample and has not been tested in production, it is offered as a heuristic for reflective practice and further research rather than as a validated model.

References

Agawu, K. (2003). *Representing African music: Postcolonial notes, queries, positions*. Routledge.

Agawu, K. (2016). *The African imagination in music*. Oxford University Press.

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.

Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research, 10*(2), 141–163.

Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage.

Brownrigg, M. (2007). Hearing place: Film music, geography and ethnicity. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics, 3*(3), 307–323. https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.3.3.307_1

Chion, M. (2019). *Audio-vision: Sound on screen* (C. Gorbman, Ed. & Trans.; 2nd ed.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1990)

DeNora, T. (2000). *Music in everyday life*. Cambridge University Press.

Diang'a, R. (2013). *Style and content in selected Kenyan message films, 1980 to 2009* [Doctoral dissertation, Kenyatta University].

Diawara, M. (1992). *African cinema: Politics and culture*. Indiana University Press.

Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*(1), 80–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107

Frith, S. (1996). Music and identity. In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 108–127). Sage.

Gorbman, C. (1987). *Unheard melodies: Narrative film music*. Indiana University Press.

Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs "identity"? In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1–17). Sage.

Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.

Hjort, M. (2000). Themes of nation. In M. Hjort & S. MacKenzie (Eds.), *Cinema and nation* (pp. 103–117). Routledge.

Jeffery, C. (2017). *South African film music: Representation of racial, cultural and national identities, 1931–1969* [Doctoral thesis, University of Cape Town].

Kalinak, K. (1992). *Settling the score: Music and the classical Hollywood film*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Kassabian, A. (2001). *Hearing film: Tracking identifications in contemporary Hollywood film music*. Routledge.

Luo, J. (2021). Analysis on the cultural transmission of film and TV music: Taking the film "Parasite" as an example. In *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Arts, Design and Contemporary Education (ICADCE 2021)* (pp. 285–290). Atlantis Press.

Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research, 26*(13), 1753–1760. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444

Nation. (2023, December 19). *Three Kenyan movies make it to Netflix's most-watched films globally*. Daily Nation.https://nation.africa/kenya/news/kenyan-movies-make-it-to-netflix-s-most-watched-films-globally—4469504

Netflix. (2023a). *Netflix's socio-economic impact: South Africa, Nigeria & Kenya (2016–2022)* [Report prepared with Africa Practice]. Netflix.

Netflix. (2023b, December 12). *What we watched: A Netflix engagement report*.

https://about.netflix.com/en/news/what-we-watched-a-netflix-engagement-report
Njogu, K., & Maupeu, H. (Eds.). (2007). *Songs and politics in Eastern Africa*. Mkuki na Nyota; IFRA.
Nyairo, J., & Ogude, J. (2003). Specificities: Popular music and the negotiation of contemporary Kenyan identity: The example of Nairobi City Ensemble. *Social Identities, 9*(3), 383–400. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000129993
Nyairo, J., & Ogude, J. (2005). Popular music, popular politics: *Unbwogable* and the idioms of freedom in Kenyan popular music. *African Affairs, 104*(415), 225–249.
Otieno, S. P. (2020). Identity and musical score in Tosh Gitonga's *Nairobi Half Life*. *Journal of African Theatre, Film and Media Discourse, 1*(1), 86–96.
Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage.
Seeger, C. (1958). Prescriptive and descriptive music-writing. *The Musical Quarterly, 44*(2), 184–195.
Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.
Shepherd, J. (1991). *Music as social text*. Polity Press.
Simatei, P. (2010). Kalenjin popular music and the contestation of national space in Kenya. *Journal of Eastern African Studies, 4*(3), 425–434. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2010.517409
Small, C. (1998). *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*. Wesleyan University Press.
Sylvanus, E. P. (2018). Performing ethnicity in Nollywood film music: The power of texted music. *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa, 15,* 93–109. https://doi.org/10.2989/18121004.2018.1534338
Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (2nd ed., pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.
Ting, H. (2008). Social construction of nation: A theoretical exploration. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, 14*(3), 453–482. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110802301418
Ukadike, N. F. (1994). *Black African cinema*. University of California Press.

Journal of Visual and Performing Arts
Vol. 4 No. 1 (2026): ISSN (Online): 2957-5990
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58721/n0kwq035
Constructing National Identity in Kenyan Film Music: Towards a Contextual Framework for Practice

Appendices

Appendix 1: Film corpus

Film (year)	Director; production	Music credits	Setting; languages in the music	Release, platform, runtime	Analytical reason for inclusion
Uradi (2020)	Kang'ethe Mungai; Kikwetu Productions	Ngalah Oreyo and Sidney Simila (music production); songs by Band Anima, Litembeko, Sidney Simila	Rural Central Kenya and Nairobi; Kikuyu, Sheng, English, Luo vocals	2020; Netflix; approx. 115–120 min	Widest genre arc in the corpus; rural–urban trajectory
Just in Time (2021)	Dolapo Adeleke; Alfajiri Productions and Lowlodee Signature Films	Kolade Morakinyo; closing song in Kamba	Upper-middle-class Nairobi; English, Kiswahili, Kamba	March 2021 (US listing); Netflix; 91 min	Contrast case: cosmopolitan, class-coded score with little indigenous instrumentation
Disconnect: The Wedding Planner (2023)	David 'Tosh' Gitonga; producer Iman Mueke	Composer not named (participant anonymity); songs by Bien, H_art the Band, Kagwe Mungai, Sara Mitaru-Kimanthi	Nairobi, Diani, a Yoruba wedding; Kiswahili, English, Nigerian Pidgin, Dholuo	13 January 2023; Netflix; 107 min	Widest international circulation; intercultural encounter
Otis Janam (2024)	Director not named (participant anonymity); produced by Vigilance Atieno and the director	Themes performed by Winyo Shipton; songs by Iddi Achieng, Okello Max	Homa Bay, Luo lakeside community; Dholuo, Kiswahili	27 March 2024 (Kenya); MyMovies.Africa	Most systematic use of indigenous material; leitmotif design
Sayari (2025)	Omar Hamza; Giza Visuals	Score composer not named (participant anonymity); songs by Mutoriah and others	Mombasa and the coast; Kiswahili, English, Dholuo, Kikuyu	11 April 2025 (Kenya); self-hosted platform	Coastal setting; Kiswahili as a placement device; composer interviewed

Note. All five titles are set in Kenya, were produced or co-produced by a Kenyan company and were legally available in Kenya. *Click Click Bang* (2022) met the criteria but could not be accessed and was excluded.

Appendix 2: Interview participants and the roles they hold

ID	Participant	Comp.	Dir.	Prod.	Scholar	Background	Link to corpus
P1	Baraka	✓				Composer and sound designer; postgraduate training in music for the moving image; about fifty productions	Yes

ID	Participant	Comp.	Dir.	Prod.	Scholar	Background	Link to corpus
P2	Jabari	✓				Ugandan; about eight years' practice in the Kenyan film industry	Yes
P3	Zuberi	✓				Composer, sound designer and mix engineer; about ten years in film scoring	No
P4	Salim		✓	✓		Director and executive producer, about twenty years in Kenyan film and television	No
P5	Hamisi		✓	✓		Director-producer	No
P6	Amani		✓	✓		Director and producer	Yes
P7	Rashidi				✓	Ethnomusicologist; no practice role	No
	Role-holders	3	3	3	1	Ten role-holdings across seven participants	

Note. Comp. = composer; Dir. = director; Prod. = film producer; Scholar = music scholar. Three participants hold two roles (director and producer), so role counts exceed the number of participants. Every statement about the film-producer role therefore comes from a participant who also directs; Appendix 5 names the participant and decision behind each producer question. 'Producer' denotes the film producer, who controls schedule and budget, not a music or record producer. Interviews with P1, P2, P4, P5 and P7 were transcribed in full; P3's survives as an automatic transcript with gaps and P6's, whose recording was lost, as an AI-generated summary, so both are used only as corroboration. Participants are identified by pseudonyms throughout; identifying details of their film work are generalised.

Appendix 3: Codebook and mapping of codes to framework stages

Code	Name	Theoretical anchor	Stage(s)
A1	Social categorisation via music	SIT: social categorisation	2
A2	In-group sonic markers	SIT: in-group differentiation	2, 3
A3	Out-group sonic contrast	SIT: out-group differentiation (comparison)	3
A4	Collective sonic memory	Socio-musicology: sonic memory	2
A5	Ethnic plurality and national unity	SIT: identity salience; socio-musicology	2; outcome
B1	Instrumentation as identity signifier	Socio-musicology: sonic nationalism	3
B2	Modal/harmonic encoding	Socio-musicology: musical symbolism	3
B3	Rhythmic identity	Socio-musicology: sonic nationalism	3
B4	Language and lyrical identity	SIT: identity salience; socio-musicology	2, 3
B5	Genre hybridity	Socio-musicology: cultural negotiation (SIT: comparison)	3, 4
B6	Score–image relationship	Socio-musicology: film-music semiotics	1, 3
C1	Intentional identity construction	SIT: self-categorisation, agency	1; outcome
C2	Research and indigenisation process	Socio-musicology: cultural production	2
C3	Industry and budget constraints	Creative economy: production context	4
C4	Audience and market orientation	SIT: social identity salience	4
C5	Collaboration and authorship	Socio-musicology: cultural production	4 (all roles)

Code	Name	Theoretical anchor	Stage(s)
C6	Identity tension and self-positioning	SIT: identity conflict, self-categorisation	4
EM-01	Music as narrative prosthetic (music carries story in place of dialogue)	Inductive	1, 3
EM-02	Pan-African sonic aspiration	Inductive	3, 4
EM-03	Audience-as-discoverers orientation	Inductive	Outcome
EM-04	Music as geographical and temporal placement device	Inductive	2, 3
EM-05	Outsider-constructor of national identity	Inductive	2
EM-06	Coalition model of national musical identity	Inductive	2; outcome
EM-07	Decolonisation as sonic praxis	Inductive	3
EM-08	Localisation as the operative goal, rather than national identity	Inductive	1, 2
EM-09	Cinematic emotional gap (reliance on Western harmony for interiority)	Inductive	3
EM-10	Designed national identity as state strategy	Inductive	Outcome (Discussion)
EM-11	Film music's economic incompatibility with musicians' gig-based earnings	Inductive	4

Note. Codes A1–C6 constitute the sensitising codebook (17 codes) derived before coding; EM codes were added inductively (11 codes). Family A corresponds to the first research question, Family B to the second and Family C to the third. Codes were applied to interview transcripts and to film field notes; the film notes were coded mainly with Families A and B. SIT = Social Identity Theory.

Appendix 4: Film evidence by framework stage

Stage	Uradi	Just in Time	Disconnect: The Wedding Planner	Otis Janam	Sayari
1 Narrative foundation	✓ Score follows Komu's social and moral arc	✓ "I Rise" voices Muthoni's unspoken aspiration	~ Several song placements set mood and register rather than narrative function	✓ Leitmotif tracks Otis's changing fortunes	✓ Cue types distinguish romance, comedy, family and coastal scenes
2 Identity elements	✓ Kikuyu Afropop and women's singing establish rural Central Kenya	~ Class ("Nairobi A") foregrounded; ethnicity marked only by Kamba closing song	✓ Pidgin and Afrobeats for the Nigerian family; Dholuo "My Jaber" at close; rhumba refrain	✓ Dholuo lyrics and Luo percussion locate Homa Bay	✓ Kiswahili opening locates Mombasa; Kikuyu closing ballad
3 Musicological construction	✓ Nyatiti and litungu used beyond the protagonist's ethnicity; ✗ jazz harmony for moral decline	✗ No indigenous instrument in core score; Western minor-key underscore (15:11)	~ Genre and language carry identity; Western orchestral builds for revelations	✓ Leitmotif transformation; Ogweyo chant; ✗ Western strings for Api's grief	~ Taarab-influenced cue for the coast (33:40); otherwise generic Western underscore
4 Creative negotiation	~ Uneven production quality; no	~ Well-resourced, polished score;	~ Kenyan vocalist performs	✓ Piano–percussion dialogue	~ Generic underscore suggests resource limits

Stage	Uradi	Just in Time	Disconnect: The Wedding Planner	Otis Janam	Sayari
	production-side account	no production-side account	Nigerian-styled song		
Outcome	Rural community, urban ambition, moral return	Aspirational, cosmopolitan Nairobi	Kenya defined through intercultural encounter	Communal Luo lakeside life	Coastal, Kiswahili-speaking Kenya closing in Kikuyu

Note. ✓ = demonstrates the stage; ~ = partly demonstrates or complicates; ✗ = fails to demonstrate. Timings appear for five scenes only: Just in Time 15:11 and Sayari 33:40 (minutes:seconds), and Disconnect: The Wedding Planner 0:02, 1:07 and 1:43 (hours:minutes); the remaining readings are identified by narrative situation and carry no timing. Readings are my analyses of the films, not claims about audience reception.

Appendix 5: Role-differentiated questions for the contextual framework

Stage	Composer	Director	Producer	Evidence basis
1 Narrative foundation	What does the story, and each principal character, require the music to do, and at which moments?	What is the film's narrative and emotional world, and which moments should the music carry rather than merely accompany?	Is the composer engaged early enough, at script or rough-cut stage, to work from the narrative rather than from a locked picture?	C1, B6, EM-08; P1, P2, P3, P5; counter-case P4. Producer question: P4, P5
2 Identity elements	Which languages, communities, histories, social registers and values does the story carry; which do I know from inside; and whom must I consult about the rest?	Which identity elements are central to the film, and how have they been briefed to the composer?	Which tradition-bearers or language consultants will be engaged, and has the minimum consultation (see note) been secured? (Partly proposed: only the allocation of research time is evidenced.)	A1–A5, B4, C2, EM-05, EM-06; P1, P2, P5, P7. Producer question: P5 (pre-production time for archival research) supports the resourcing of research only; the consultation element is proposed
3 Musicological construction	Which instruments, rhythms, vocal practices, languages, genres and harmonic idioms will carry these elements; on whose knowledge does each association rest; and what do I default to for emotional interiority, and why?	How does the proposed musical direction relate to the image, and where should music place, characterise or voice interiority?	Are live musicians, instruments and studio time available, or will samples stand in, and what is lost if they do? (Proposed.)	B1–B6, EM-07, EM-09; P1, P2, P7; P3 corroborative. Producer question: proposed; derived from composers' accounts (P1, P2) of conditions that producers control
4 Creative negotiation	Which choices have changed under time, budget or feedback, and do the changes still honour what was established at Stage 2?	Does the composer have enough latitude to revise while the film's narrative and cultural intentions remain coherent?	Has time been allocated for review by consultants and for at least one revision pass before the final mix?	C3–C6, EM-11; P1, P2, P4, P5; P3, P6 corroborative

Stage	Composer	Director	Producer	Evidence basis
Checkpoints K1 (spotting) and K2 (before final mix)	Which communities, places and experiences does the score voice, and which does it leave unheard?	Do image, narrative and music together articulate the identities the film set out to represent?	Have the commitments made at Stage 2 (consultation, credit, rights) been honoured?	Proposed; derived from A5, C1

Note. The questions are procedural: they specify what to ask and whom to involve, not which sounds to use. Minimum consultation: where a score draws on the musical tradition of a named community, at least one practitioner of that tradition is consulted before Stage 3 is closed, irrespective of budget. This minimum is my proposal, not a finding. Questions marked 'proposed' are not directly evidenced in the interviews.