

Jim Hickson is a DPhil student at the University of Oxford, where he is researching the role of the African one-string fiddle within the global music economy. He is also a freelance music journalist and has held various positions within the world music industry in both the United Kingdom and Germany.

Genre-Bending Explorations and Remediations: A Curated Dive into Nyege Nyege Tapes

Various Artists. 2017. *Sounds of Sisso*. Nyege Nyege Tapes NNT005. Compiled by Arlen Dilsizian. Mastered by Matt Colton. Cassette, vinyl, and digital, 14 tracks 73 minutes.

Otim Alpha. 2017. *Gulu City Anthems*. Nyege Nyege Tapes NNT003. Compiled by Arlen Dilsizian. Mastered by Matt Colton. Cassette, vinyl, and digital, 11 tracks 66 minutes.

DJ K. 2023. *PANICO NO SUBMUNDO*. Nyege Nyege Tapes NNT051. Compiled by Arlen Dilsizian. Mastered by Declared Sound. Cassette and digital, 15 tracks 43 minutes.

Nakibembe Embaire Group. 2023. *Nakibembe Embaire Group*. Nyege Nyege Tapes NNT045. Mastered at Angstrom Mastering. Vinyl and digital, 8 tracks 42 minutes.

Duma. 2020. *Duma*. Nyege Nyege Tapes NNT022. Mastered at Dubplates and Mastering. Cassette, Vinyl, and digital. 9 tracks 37 minutes.

In November 2023, the online electronic music magazine Beatportal hailed Hakuna Kulala as Label of the Month,¹ celebrating its artist-first ethos and the forward-thinking music from the African continent and its diaspora released since its foundation in 2018. One side of a multifaceted project, Hakuna Kulala is part of a larger artistic nebula called Nyege Nyege, which is powered by a Uganda-based artist collective that runs an internationally acclaimed music festival taking place annually on the banks of the river Nile,² an artist residency equipped with a recording studio, two labels (Nyege Nyege Tapes and Hakuna Kulala), and a booking agency managing more than thirty different acts touring regularly at major music events in Europe and beyond. Since they began releasing music, respectively in January 2017 and June 2018, Nyege Nyege Tapes and Hakuna Kulala have issued a vast array of projects and at a fast pace—almost one per month—with their catalogues at the time of writing

¹ <https://www.beatportal.com/features/label-of-the-month-hakuna-kulala/> (accessed 12 September 2023).

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/20/arts/music/nyege-nyege-music-festival.html> (accessed 12 September 2023).

consisting of fifty-four³ and fifty⁴ albums ranging from cutting-edge electronic music, archival releases, and genre-bending collaborations. As someone who has been connected with the collective since 2016, as both album producer and stage curator, I focus here on a selection of releases that illustrate the ethos driving the collective's namesake label: Nyege Nyege Tapes.

First issued on tape in June 2017 and later pressed on vinyl due to demand, *Sounds of Sisso* was the first album-length compilation dedicated to *singeli*, a frenetic music that emerged in the last two decades in working-class neighbourhoods of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's largest city. *Singeli* is a fast electronic take on previous local genres, such as *mchiriku* and *taarab*, sourcing its loops from their signature rhythms and cyclical melodies and then speeding them up to timer-crushing rates—often beyond 200 bpm—faster than the average heartbeat of marathon runners. On top of this, MCs relentlessly fire lyrics dealing with the day-to-day city life of disenfranchised youth, ranging from incendiary critiques of widespread unemployment to praises for loving someone despite the person's lack of social media presence. *Sounds of Sisso* was among Nyege Nyege Tapes' earliest releases and the first to garner significant attention from major international music forums, such as Resident Advisor or Boiler Room, leading to the coining of the genre as East Africa's New Wave.⁵ To date the label has released eight albums from this boiling scene—its most sustained attention to a particular genre—charting with three of them on the best electronic releases of 2019 selected by influential music review Pitchfork. Featuring a diversity of production styles from the scene, Nyege Nyege Tapes' catalogue also includes the international resonances of the genre, illustrated by the work of French producer Judgitzu who anchors distorted layers of bagpipe-like drones with *singeli* inspired rhythms on his latest album *Sator Arepo*, released in October 2023.

As well as giving an international impact to a localized scene, *Sounds of Sisso* illustrates another core aspect of Nyege Nyege Tapes' curation that resonates with what ethnomusicologist David Novak has called World Music 2.0, a development in the last twenty years of the world music phenomenon characterized by the “redistribution of existing recordings of regional popular music” (2016: 26), a remediation process that creates new sound products he coined as “new old media.” Apart from the works specifically recorded for the label, such as Nihiloxica's two albums combining rhythms from Uganda and spacy synth lines recorded at the Nyege Nyege studio, or Congolese producer Rey Sapienz's debut LP *Na Zala Zala* driven by powerful dull kicks and gravelly vocals mostly recorded in his bedroom at the Nyege Nyege residency, a good number of recordings released by Nyege Nyege Tapes were already circulating among local crowds before the label repackaged them into albums to reach international audiences. Whereas many other labels reissue recordings from the past—in tune with Analog Africa's slogan

³ <https://nyegenyegotapes.bandcamp.com/> (accessed 12 September 2023).

⁴ <https://hakunakulala.bandcamp.com/> (accessed 12 September 2023).

⁵ <https://boilerroom.tv/article/new-wave-east-africas-new-wave/> (accessed 12 September 2023).

“The Future of Music Happened Decades Ago”—Nyege Nyege Tapes is more akin to the work of labels such as Sahel Sounds, GQOM OH!, or Príncipe, which build releases from contemporary recordings sourced in thriving yet often localized scenes in Africa and its diaspora. But the label stands apart from many others by the wide array of genres represented through its releases, from the Dutch afro-diasporic sounds of *bubbling* embodied in the work of De Schuurman, the bass-heavy *gqom* tracks of South African trio Phelimuncasi, the leg-breaking patterns fingered live on a Boss DR-660 drum machine by Malian DJ Diaki, an important figure of the *balani show* genre, or the planned four-volume retrospective of Angolan DJ Znobia, one of the most influential producers from the continent who pioneered *kuduro* in the late 1990s. *Kuduro* has since gained widespread attention and influenced other music styles, such as *batida* developed among the African diaspora in Portugal, which is also featured in the label’s catalogue with Normal Nada the Krakmaxter’s gritty take on the genre.

And Uganda is well represented. Released in February 2017, *Gulu City Anthems* presents a retrospective of the pioneering work of singer Otim Alpha and producer Leo PaLayeng, who in the early 2000s were among the first musicians to use computer-based production to adapt the traditional courtship dances of the Acholi people of Northern Uganda and South Sudan. The opening track “Gang ber ki dako” illustrates well PaLayeng’s tweaks of generic hi-hat samples to emulate the crackling and steady pulse traditionally beaten on calabashes during wedding performances, a sound that became a signature of this electronic genre locally known as *lakubukubu*.⁶ Following the success of the release, which launched the duo on several European tours, Nyege Nyege Tapes two years later issued *Electro Acholi Kaboom from Northern Uganda*, a compilation featuring a wider range of influential producers and singers from the same area. As indicated by the album’s title, the genre was rebranded in its international packaging, oscillating between “electro acholi” and “acholitrnix,” two terms seldom used by audiences and artists in Northern Uganda. This difference in terms created a slight divergence between the local and international presence of the genre, a distance that can be felt online. If one wants to dig deeper and search the music on YouTube, the local term will surface a series of hour-long mixes posted by local DJs as well as music videos of the latest songs trending in the region, whereas searches for the international names will narrow down the content to the acts related to the Nyege Nyege Tapes releases, some of them embracing the rebranding as part of their artist profiles. Leo PaLayeng, for instance, combined “acholitrnix” with his own name in the title of his official YouTube channel.⁷

Another significant aspect of the label’s repackaging process lies in the release format primarily chosen to carry the sound. Whereas most of the music issued by the label was produced digitally, Nyege Nyege Tapes—as its name suggests—releases mainly on

⁶ Illustrating the regional recognition of *lakubukubu*, the Northern Uganda Music Award (NUMA) includes the genre among its awards and elected Oj Murugut’s “Kodi pa Lyeci” as best *lakubukubu* song of 2022. As I write these lines, I regularly hear the song played by music kiosks in the streets of Gulu, the region’s main urban centre.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/user/Layengz> (accessed 12 September 2023).

analog formats, firstly on tape and now mostly on vinyl. Such media are hardly the predominant formats used in most of the scenes promoted by the label, where mp3s remain the most common means of music production and consumption. In this regard, the label's products are not primarily packaged for local audiences but aimed toward the markets driving the international music industry, whereby external validation by world-renowned music platforms, such as major festivals or influential music reviews, is intended to benefit the artists and the scenes they come from. The best example to date hails from Brazil. In July 2023, Nyege Nyege Tapes released *PANICO NO SUBMUNDO*, a selection of tracks by Brazilian producer DJ K from Heliópolis, São Paulo's largest favela, who innovated a darker take on Brazilian *funk* driven by shrill squeaks, pounding basslines, and chopped vocals turned into human percussion. The same month, Pitchfork gave the work a positive 7.9/10 that harnessed media attention in Brazil, not only in local editions of international magazines like *Billboard* or *Rolling Stone* but also in major national newspapers like *O Estado do S. Paulo*,⁸ which dedicated an article to understanding the sudden international appeal of the 22 years old producer who, after a short tour in Europe, is now booked in many other—and usually richer—neighbourhoods of his native city.

Although marginal within the overall catalogue—comprising four out of fifty-four to date—Nyege Nyege Tapes has also released traditional music that is, according to the label's cofounder and main curator, Greek-Armenian Arlen Dilsizian, “in direct conversation with a lot of modernist strains of contemporary experimental electronic music.”⁹ Embodying this rationale, most of the albums dedicated to traditional music feature regular performances of the tradition alongside electronic productions by local and international producers. Hailing from the kingdom of Busoga in Eastern Uganda, Nakibembe Embaire Group's eponymous debut album alternates between field recordings of the group, which feature the cyclical and tightly intertwined melodies played on the large wooden keys of the *embaire* xylophone, and tracks born from their collaboration with Indonesian Gabber Modus Operandi and Wahono,¹⁰ who fitted the instrument with audio to MIDI triggers and used the collected data to drive its intricate patterns into subaquatic layers, often spiced up with hovering and breathy vocals. Eschewing fixed categories, the label also embraces contrasting approaches, challenging preconceptions that electronic music emerging from Africa necessarily has to be a reinterpretation of its traditional music. Released in August 2020, *Duma* is one of Nyege Nyege Tapes most successful albums—there have been four pressings on vinyl thus far due to demand—and features the caustic work of Martin Kanja and Sam

⁸ <https://www.estadao.com.br/cultura/musica/quem-e-o-dj-k-paulista-de-22-anos-que-esta-ganhando-elogios-nos-maiores-veiculos-de-musica-do-mundo/> (accessed 12 September 2023).

⁹ <https://mixmag.net/feature/nyege-nyege/> (accessed 12 September 2023).

¹⁰ These artists first performed alongside in 2020 at Berghain during the CTM festival, making Nakibembe Embaire Group the first traditional act on the lineup of this well-established Berlin venue dedicated to electronic music.

Karugu, a Kenyan duo hailing from the thriving metal scene of Nairobi, and who were in residency at the Nyege Nyege studio for three months to record their debut album. “Lionsblood”—one of the album’s leading tracks—is illustrative of their blend of mostly trash metal and industrial noise, sounding like a frenetic race driven by machine-gun drums fired on top of distorted textures and punctuated by throat-shredding vocals. Such releases illustrate the label’s choice to showcase work that cannot easily be boxed into habitual descriptions of particular kinds of music, questioning the use of terms such as “traditional,” “contemporary,” or “African.”

Nyege Nyege Tapes has thus become influential in shifting often Western-led preconceptions about the music stemming from Africa and its diaspora, especially those related to electronic music production where North America, Europe, or East Asia are often foregrounded as the leading centres for such kind of music-making. If the recent global success of *afrobeats* and *amapiano* has attracted much more international attention to the better established music industries of South Africa and Nigeria—the latter well-illustrated by the work of Mavin Records, a Lagos-based label managing world-renowned artists such as Rema and Ayra Starr—Nyege Nyege Tapes shines a significant spotlight on electronic scenes often operating outside both local and international mainstream circuits, producing a string of related and social media friendly content to boost their national and global presence. In this regard, when compared to other like-minded labels, the YouTube channel @NyegeNyegeMusic¹¹ is very active, featuring over a hundred videos supporting flagship tracks of most of the releases of Nyege Nyege Tapes and its offshoot label, Hakuna Kulala. Similarly, its main Instagram page—@nyegenyefest¹²—uploads on an almost daily basis short videos and pictures featuring touring artists sharing excerpts of their latest performances, as well as updates on the labels’ products, ranging from the latest reviews of their catalogues to record shops announcing new arrivals from the labels. With DJ K recently selected by Pitchfork among the best electronic music from 2023,¹³ the label’s schedule of releases already planned through 2025, and Congolese avant-garde street artist Bebson de la Rue currently building heavily layered soundscapes with self-made instruments at the collective’s residency, the next packages from Nyege Nyege Tapes will be worth paying attention to, especially for those interested in the ways the curation of recordings can participate in shifting preconceptions about certain kinds of music-making, and the opportunities it can create, both locally and internationally, for artists and audiences alike. In this regard, the particularity of Nyege Nyege Tapes is to run its products alongside an artist agency, residency, and festival that have not only widened the distribution of recordings and artists from a vast array of contemporary scenes from Africa and its diaspora, but also foregrounded the feedbacks created by this circulation.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/c/NyegeNyegeMusic/> (accessed 12 September 2023).

¹² <https://www.instagram.com/nyegenyefest/> (accessed 12 September 2023).

¹³ <https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/best-electronic-music-2023/> (accessed 12 September 2023).

Since their global exposure, *singeli* artists such as DJ Travella have added more bass in their productions, whereas musicians based in Europe or East Asia have integrated the genre as part of their creative process, like influential Japanese artist Yamantaka Eye who, at the 2022 edition of the Nyege Nyege Festival, blasted *singeli* tracks among layers of noisy textures in front of an international crowd.

Resource

Novak, David. 2016. "The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media." In *Punk Ethnography: Artists and Scholars Listen to Sublime Frequencies*, ed. Michael E. Veal and E. Tammy Kim, 24–54. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press

BASILE KOECHLIN

doi:[10.1017/ytm.2024.3](https://doi.org/10.1017/ytm.2024.3)

Basile Koechlin is a music scholar and curator, currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Virginia, USA, which combines academic, museum, and artistic approaches to explore the contemporary values of an archival collection of ethnographic recordings made in Uganda between 1949 and 1954.