

## **KENGE KENGE** **Kenya**

**Kenge Kenge, also known as Kenge Kenge Orutu Systems (KKOS)** comprises young Kenyan musicians vastly talented and skilled in traditional music of the JoLuo community from Western Kenya.

The group's thorough mastery of the traditional Luo *Orutu* fiddle and *Nyatiti* lyre has spearheaded a new way and approach to how these age-old instruments are played, much to the appreciation of contemporary audiences. Kenge Kenge's lyrical arrangement reflects lots of influence from the popular Eastern Africa's *Benga* pop-musical style. Characterized by often racy and compact instrumentation, Kenge Kenge's music infectiously invites one to the dance floor. Their instruments are drawn from a fine medley of various self-made traditional instruments - *Nyatiti* lyre, *Bul* drums, the *Nyangile* sound box, *Ongeng'o* metal rings, *Asili* flute, and the *Oporo* horn. All these instruments are arranged and played in a melodic format that mainly provides back up to a dominant interchange of lines between several *Orutu* fiddles tuned to different pitches.

**Kenge Kenge Orutu Systems (KKOS)** are widely known within the East African region and have undertaken performance tours outside Africa to Norway & Sri Lanka (2002), and Thailand (2006) Penang Malaysia (2008). Their acclaimed tour of Europe (summer 2008) was raptureously received by audiences at WOMAD and other major European Festivals. Their debut CD that has had a phenomenal reception from audiences throughout the East Africa region, the cd was released by World Music Network on their Introducing label in June 2007 to several accolades including being one of Froots cds of the month. The group's latest release (Sept 2008) Obama for Change audio and video (check on line) , a praise song to the Senator (whose father came from the same area as **KK**), is being appreciated by a wide international audience. The groups highly acclaimed European tour in the summer of 2008 thrilled audiences in WOMAD, Roskilde, Amsterdam roots, Oya, Africa Oye and many others. In 2009 they performed at Forde and showcased at WOMEX to great acclaim.

The group comprises a team of 11 artists including highly energetic and skilled dancers.

**Kenge Kenge** roughly translates as "a medley fusion of small exhilarating ecstatic instruments".

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Kenge Kenge

Music of Western Kenya

Nairobi, Kenya

BY DAVID M. FITZPATRICK

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Kenge Kenge comes to Bangor from Kenya, bringing with it a high-energy performance of infectious singing, lively dancing, and exciting drum-and-string tunes born from centuries of musical culture. And the performers don't just play; they engage in a full-throttle musical extravaganza. In colorful outfits born of their cultural traditions, they assail the audience with a fervor normally equated with a mob of rock stars playing to a fan-packed stadium.

They sing. They dance. They never stop moving. And they absolutely own the stage and the audience. They draw the crowd in with a contagious blend of music and energy that will leave you only wanting more. And during the American Folk Festival, they'll rock the banks of the Penobscot River as if they were the shores of their own Lake Victoria back home — and you might want to follow them back to Kenya just to hear it all again.

"Kenge Kenge" means "a medley fusion of small, exhilarating, ecstatic instruments," and that's just what the group provides with an intense performance that showcases the Kenyan popular music called *benga*, which developed between the 1940s and 1960s in Nairobi. But that music was based on older traditions, using ages-old types of instruments.

Nine of the 14 members will appear at the AFF. They'll play instruments such as the *nyatiti*, a three-foot-long, eight-string, plucked lyre of the Luo people of Western Kenya. Nyatiti music is accompanied with songs that praise people, and features rich solo performances. "This is the most traditional kind of music," said Isaac Gem, one of the group's performers and its tour manager.

Then there's the *orutu*, a single-string Luo fiddle; two of those create sweet harmonies while accompanied with song. The *orutu* is central to *benga* but also has a musical genre of its own.

The performances keep steady beats thanks to those playing the *ohangla* and *nyangile* drums, with "ohangla" also referring to a type of dance — and the group dances and moves constantly. Everyone does, including the women of the group, who dance nonstop (although only one woman will be with the group in Bangor). And it's not just traditional instruments; Gem will accompany them on an electric bass, and there's also an electric drum set.

The members of Kenge Kenge come from an impoverished region of Kenya. Twelve years ago, when the Kenyan government wanted to assemble a choir to sing traditional songs, officials discovered them. The group played traditional instruments, so it was just what the government was looking for. Kenge Kenge became a sensation and the beginning of a source of national pride.

The members of Kenge Kenge, who are of the Luo people, learned to play, sing, and dance as children. U.S. President Barack Obama's father was Luo, born in the village of Kanyadhiang on Lake Victoria just outside Kendu Bay and raised in the village of Nyang'oma Kogelo. Kenge Kenge proudly threw its energetic support behind Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential election, releasing a song praising Obama and his theme of change. The song, partly in English, became a YouTube hit.

In July, Kenge Kenge arrived in North America for the first time, embarking on a tour across the U.S. and Canada that ultimately brings them to Bangor, Maine. Everyone in the group was excited to tour the U.S. and Canada for the first time. It isn't the first time the group has toured outside of Kenya, having performed in Malaysia, Sweden, Denmark, Thailand, Norway, England, Israel and Spain. When they first toured outside Kenya five years ago, it was a very new experience, from the time they first flew in an airplane to the many different things they have seen in other lands.

"You get so thrown off balance — people, language and all sorts of culture shock," Gem said. "You see things you've never seen before. People kissing in the streets, people walking with their dogs, and [driving] their cars. So different."

But their experiences have all been positive, he says, and the North American tour has been a flying success. The group began its tour here at the Festival of Colors in Detroit and the Ethnic Arts Festival just outside Chicago. Then it was on to Vancouver, San Francisco, New York and other locations, before their visit to Bangor.

"It is great," Gem said of the tour. "So far, so good!"

Kenge Kenge's just-finished first album will be available at the AFF. Gem said the group brought 150 with them, seriously underestimating how popular they'd be on the American Folk Festival scene. After Chicago and Detroit, they were sold out and have had to order more to have available at other tour stops. The group just finished recording its second album, which will be out soon.

Gem says they're looking forward to the American Folk Festival, and he promises a show that will get the crowd moving.

"It will be an exhilarating and energetic show by nine guys on stage, and they will not tolerate people sitting down," he said. "We will bring them up to

Courtesy of AnnieReedMusic.com

their feet. It keeps people moving whether they like it or not. The spirit just gets into you that you just can't explain, and you do things you've never done before. It's just a wonderful feeling."