

# JAHAZI

Culture  
Arts  
Performance

Vol 10 issue 2 2022



# Pop Culture

Jahazi Has It!

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Published with the support of Lambert Foundation by Twaweza Communications  
P.O. Box 66872 - 00800 Westlands, Twaweza House, Parklands Road, Mpesi Lane, Nairobi Kenya  
Email: info@twawezacommunications.org • Twitter: @JahaziJournal1, @Creatives\_Kenya  
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The Journal is the result of an initiative by Twaweza Communications - Nairobi, and founding Editor, Bantu Mwaura, to encourage dialogue between academicians and art practitioners. The space is used to capture practical experiences in arts, culture and performance in Kenya and the East African region and suggest theoretical and policy directions.

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# From the Editor

*Caroline Mose*

This Issue on popular culture was conceived to begin the conversation around the question: whether popular culture today, in post-pandemic 2022 Kenya?

The study of the popular in Kenya is not new, and indeed, vibrant scholarship and reportage around popular culture in general has existed for about two decades now. Joyce Nyairo has, for instance, been writing about popular music and its connections to the city-scape and postcolonial identities from as early as 2003, including various collaborative works on these subjects with James Ogude. Mwenda Ntarangwi has similarly been writing about popular culture and the youth from 2003, as has Mbūgua wa Mūngai's work on the subject(s) of matatus as sites of popular culture.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to a halt most activities that spur, facilitate, and mediate popular culture, including the making of music, film, television, art, theatre, dance, and even transportation which, in Kenya, is a source of the artistic and the musical. This Issue therefore sought to act as a check on the current state of the popular.

We have done this through a number of ways.

First, is to revisit some older debates around the popular to see where we have come from. Second, is to explore where some debates are currently. What are some of the burning issues of the day? Doseline Kiguru starts us off with an interesting discussion around memes, which, as we all know, are now a vibrant site of the popular in Kenya, where joy, pain, and humour all meet with various "meme lords" giving us commentaries on the everyday using words in pictures. In many ways, the meme is now a new kind of popular text and popular art that gives us a glimpse of the everyday, and in many ways, takes on the embodiment of the origins of popular culture, that of speaking back to power. While Maina wa Mūtonya gives us a glimpse of linkages between here and "there", being the intricate narratives that have emerged in the recent past between Africa and South America as part of new South-South conversations, Joyce Nyairo gives us an account of the equally current debates around cultural heritage. The immediate previous issue of Jahazi Journal was one dedicated exclusively to cultural heritage debates, and Nyairo takes us further in this discourse. Other scholars of the popular also make interesting contributions to this Issue, including Lydia Muthuma's reading of Uhuru Gardens as part of Kenya's popular civic discourse(s), as well as Cécile Feza Bushidi's piece on dance culture. These scholarly articles form the first part of this Issue.

The second part of this issue includes artists that are actually on the ground within different spaces of art and culture give first-hand accounts of their work, which in turn gives us glimpses of how the popular continues to evolve in post-pandemic Kenya, and perhaps, this becomes a reflection of a post-pandemic world. Here, we have compelling pieces by, for instance, Wanjikū Mwawuganga on the production of "Brazen" edition of *Too Early For Birds*, as well as Joseph Obel's



account of staging a show themed around LGBTQI+. We also have a very interesting interview with the artist Meija, he who burst onto the popular music scene with his unforgettable hit *Jana Kuliendaje*. We have a piece on film and its new innovations via Docubox's work, as well as a spoken word piece by artist Chris Mutie aka Siso.

Overall, we have endeavoured to bring you, our dear readers, a diverse range of articles in this Issue that speak to both the wider debates around popular culture, as well as practical work being done by practitioners of art and culture on the ground. In these debates, we have tried to locate further arguments that reflect present realities. For instance, do we continue to see the matatu sector through the romanticism of its contributions towards our popular culture, or can we look at the matatu through a lens of a failed transport system, as well as its problematic (sub)cultures of violence, misogyny and lack of contextuality, without taking away from the narratives of the popular? Is it to suggest that popular culture also includes incidents of violence and misogyny, increasingly, or even through history? Is it to suggest that popular culture, conceived to speak back to power's discriminations, is by its nature now co-opted into these power structures, as Obel's piece suggests? These are the questions these articles suggest, taking the conversation around the popular forward into tackling what Nyairo calls 'bottlenecks'. It is to find Wa Mutonya's connections to the global south, creating spaces of solidarity and collaborations with other marginalized communities at a global scale, creating a critical mass that speaks back to power collectively, using our cultural heritage (even as we continue to demand that our cultural objects robbed via the colonial enterprise be returned to us without further ado). It is to seek and understand our erased histories and build upon them futures that seek to not only promote equity and equality, but to dismantle the very structures that create these inequalities and inequities in the first place. It is to seek Mwawuganga's 'brazen healing' at a wider, public level, since popular culture was conceived to provide a space for collective expressions of the self.

We end this Issue with excerpts of a conversation that emanated from the book *Nairobi in the Making* by Constance Smith, bringing it all back home – Nairobi as the "home" that is not - the tensions the big city espouses as a place for the hustle, but not as "home". In this conversation that was held at the Alliance Française in Nairobi, audience members stood to claim Nairobi as their home, where they and their kin were born, bred, live, and are buried, or will be buried. In these claims lies the heart of this Special Issue – the urban space as the catalyst of the popular.



# From the Publisher

*Kimani Njogu*

Popular culture is the ground on which social transformations are enabled through the labour of creativity and the imagination. It is characterized by the double movement and tension of containment and resistance. Through this delicate balancing, we witness the operations of social forces and cultural relations, lines of alliances and cleavage, transgression, commentary on abuse of power and authority, and the incessant clamor for space and voice by artists. During every general election in Kenya, artists add their voices, pens and brushes to comment on the trappings and excesses of power.

And the political elite know the power of popular culture. In the run-up to the August 9, 2022 general election political leaders drew on the imagination of the creative sector to present themselves as worthy of occupying leadership positions. Through music, fashion and accessories, photographs, language use, endorsements by cultural leaders, and a wide range of artistic and cultural images the political class has been on a pathway to win the hearts of voters.

At its best, popular culture is subversive of power and aligned to ordinary people. Through a language enriched with imagery and ironic twists, it presents and interrogates human relations. Artistic expression through the languages of film, fashion, visual arts, creative writing and other genres provide insights about the human condition through sharing the construction of life experiences. In magazines, music, theatre and so on we witness the convergences of the past, present and future; the global and the local; containment and resistance in the face of crises, weaknesses and opportunities. Spoken word artists such as the award winning Willie Oeba, Mufasa the Poet (Ken Kibet), Tear Drops (Mark Joshua Ouma), Dorphan (Mutuma Mutua) and other performing artists are inspiring change by crafting pieces that speak to human rights, unaccountability of leaders, abuse of public office, ethnic politics, gender inequality and justice. They are using art to speak truth to power. Drawing on the facility of multilingualism and urban slang, these artists are reclaiming public spaces and amplifying their voices.

Popular culture is a window to society through experimentation with ideas about the past, present and future, appealing to the emotion and the intellect in unison. But popular culture thrives best in an atmosphere of artistic freedom often curtailed by those who wield power in politics, religion, and economics. When it does so, its consumers get a glimpse of the experiences and aspirations of ordinary people over time; their history, culture, economies and politics.

In Kenya, popular culture continues to enhance the constitutional guarantees of artistic freedom through humor, satire, parody, social commentary and interrogation of power and public officials. The widely syndicated cartoonist Gado (Godfrey Mwampembwa) has demystified power by laying it bare for all to see its contradictory nature. Through the character of 'Wanjiku' – the ordinary citizen – he has consistently questioned those in authority.

Artists have systematically turned popular culture into a site of leisure, entertainment, social history, satirical representation of power relations. With strides in information technology, popular culture is gaining from online spaces and there are numerous opportunities for digital art including gaming and animation. Through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tiktok, YouTube, and Instagram Kenyans are building communities, solidarities and relationships. They are utilizing different formats to playfully suggest alternative ways of looking at an issue, mobilize for collective action, wage attacks, or set agenda. The social media space has also been used, sadly, to misinform, advance ethnic hate, perpetuate gender bigotry or bully users.

While certain expressions of popular culture present strong and principled women, others thrive on their sexuality, digging into their appeal to present publicly provocative images of a woman's body. The public circulation of women's sexualized images in popular culture makes women less safe and insecure in public spaces and is degrading and dehumanizing. It harms women.

There are many opportunities offered by popular culture to humanize the world and celebrate our diversity. Under COVID-19 we learnt about our vulnerability but also about our mutual interdependence. We can draw from that learning to craft a world in which we all feel at home. Popular culture can inspire us to see and experience that world.



# Part 1

## Meme Culture in Kenya and Overreliance on Images of the Political Elite

Doseline Kiguru



### Abstract

Popular culture is defined by its openness and malleability to accommodate many genres outside of the official categories. Indeed, Stephanie Newell in *Readings in African Popular Fiction* (2002) affirms that any efforts to define popular fiction “must account for the manner in which local practitioners constantly absorb new cultural currents, poach upon so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘elite’ discourses, adapt and innovate and operate outside of ‘official’ art forms”(4). This article seeks to expand the categories of popular culture to include memes, arguing that this is a genre that has been amplified by the increasing presence of social media and internet access. Memes rely mainly on a juxtaposition of the visual and literary arts to pass a message usually encoded in humour. The article explores the genre of memes with a particular focus on Kenya, exploring the foreground of images of political elites in the meme scene in Kenya. Using these images as the base for discussion, the article seeks to explore the contradictions that are made possible through popular culture in which the genre becomes a tool to speak back to power while simultaneously affirming that power.

**Key Words:** meme; power; visual art; literary art; popular culture; social media

One of the most significant changes in the information sector post-2000 has been the increased reliance on social media as a source of information. The social media space in Kenya has especially been vibrant mainly because of the easy accessibility to the internet, usually through the mobile phone. This space has gradually gained a significant place within the Kenyan society expanding from different economic and social backgrounds, age, and religion, among other social and economic groups. It has become a go-to place for news, and any other information irrespective of whether this information is verified or not. Within the global social media space, a new genre that straddles both the visual and literary arts has emerged – the meme.

In Kenya, as elsewhere, the meme culture is thriving as it acts as a quick, witty, and funny avenue to pass a message across many audiences. The meme works by relying on the relationship between a random image and a few descriptive words. Its interpretation is dependent on the relationship, or the lack thereof, between the image and the words. For this reason, the meme genre is mainly dependent on images that keep being used and reused in different contexts and by different persons on social media.

In this article, I analyse the concept of memes, as they circulate in social media spaces, as a literary genre. Further I classify memes under popular culture. Karin

Barber (1987) in *Popular Arts in Africa* and Stephanie Newell (2000) in *Readings in African Popular Fiction* both acknowledge that popular culture encompasses a wide range of creative output and that because of its open-ended nature of definition, it is able to accommodate many genres outside of the official categories. Indeed, the meme as an artistic genre relies mainly on popular arts' openness to borrowings and reinvention of more traditional arts. In this context, it borrows from the visual and literary media. Isabel Hofmeyr (2014) observes that 'much popular cultural production is about emergent genres in which a miscellany of cultural forms, from diverse social realms, are drawn together. Unconstrained by canonical ideas of what 'proper' literature is or should be, popular cultural texts construct a medley of forms, some of which may in 'elite' terms be considered mutually exclusive' (133).

Further, Dominic Strinati in his analysis of the place of popular culture in *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (2004) foregrounds the significance of mass culture for its circulation. He argues that the 'social significance of popular culture in the modern era can be charted by the way it has been identified with mass culture' (1). The meme as a popular culture genre therefore relies on the experimentation style, borrowing from older, traditional, and more established genres like photography and creative writing, and is circulated mainly through the mass media.

In Kenya there are a few selected 'meme artists' also known as "meme lords" whose narratives are usually quite popular and circulate easily and fast over many audiences and platforms because of their social media presence and followers. Usually, the memes are initially presented as Twitter threads or Facebook photo stories then through screenshots and direct downloads, they permeate to other social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp. Some of the relatively well-known meme artists in Kenya include Maina Ndegwa, Karis Memes, Nyamaterere Memes, among many others.



Meme by Maina Ndegwa (2022) on Facebook making a joke on postelection political party meeting.



While the threads and stories are usually short lived, the single memes usually tend to have a longer lifespan. The memes, which circulate as images, are mainly humorous and keep doing the rounds on social media, mostly without attribution to the original source. In fact, popular arts define originality differently; they are less interested in citational practices and acknowledgements, since they start from a point of acceptance that some narrative plots and character types are ubiquitous and are often refashioned by new artists. The originality then, lies in the flavour of new refashioning, rather than on claims to be the originator. In this way, a few images have become 'stock' photos and keep being used and reused in different memes, accompanied by different wordings.

This image below, for instance, became very popular as a 'stock' photo for many memes featuring former President Uhuru Kenyatta. The original photo was taken by Boniface Mwangi, a Kenyan photographer and political activist, during the height of the post-2007 General Elections that resulted in widespread violence and deaths. In the image, Kenyatta, then the opposition leader, was trying to address and calm an angry mob in Kikuyu Town. He was caught up in the chaos and teargassed by the police and the image captures this moment.



*Meme by Mean Philosopher (2020) on Twitter @Muheavy01*

In the Kenyan *memesphere*, images of political figures are common and because these individuals are already well known through the mainstream media, another layer of narrative is added to the interpretation, therefore allowing one meme to have three layers: the facial expression and body language portrayed in the image, the descriptive words accompanying the image, and the already established backstory of the known political figure. Indeed, as Barber notes about popular culture forms, 'the meaning cannot be extrapolated from the words alone but is conveyed by all the elements in combination [...] thus interpreting what popular art forms say is not straightforward. They require as careful and scrupulous a decoding as any other complex text' (2).

The most common political figures in these memes are perhaps the images of President Uhuru Kenyatta, his deputy William Ruto, and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga. Other figures that feature prominently are former Nairobi Governor Mike Mbuvi aka *Sonko*, and other political figures such as Rachel Shebesh, Millicent Omanga, Ann Waiguru, and first lady Margaret Kenyatta. The humour comes in when the artist paints these political figures as ordinary citizens going about a typical day. Most of the experiences paints them as young, middle class, and engaged with the daily 'hustle' of Nairobi life.

There are images that are quite popular and feature in many of these memes. These images have almost become like stock photos for any meme makers or meme artists. For instance, the image of Kenyatta launching the Kenya electrification project in a rural, poor household while dressed in a multicoloured shirt; being presented with a bottle of champagne, his eyes popping out in excitement; sitting on a church pew with Margaret Kenyatta who seems to have asked him a question he is trying to evade; or a close-up image of Vice President Ruto on the phone, smiling; Sonko distributing Covid-19 relief supplies, among others. The image with the launch of the electrification project, for instance, seeks to make visible the irony of a project that seeks to provide electricity to a people whose first priority should have been a house. The image has been replicated numerous times with different wordings but the irony of a state that is blind to this contradiction is the dominant message. Most of these images are also used in different narratives regarding partying and drinking aiming to present the political elite as ordinary citizens who sometimes need to escape the harsh political and economic realities of Kenya through partying and having a temporary good time, or presenting the president, or his deputy in a normal domestic quarrel with their spouses. These representations of the political class through normal ordinary citizen's lives serves to deconstruct the image of unreachable, inaccessible powerful figures with larger-than-life personalities and present them as ordinary folk who can therefore be ridiculed without any legal consequences. These images which may not necessarily be humorous, provide a base to speak about the daily experiences, or conversations among ordinary citizens which then become humorous when juxtaposed with these photos.

The defining thread that weaves through all these figures and their images as used in memes is humour. The meme artists are not only interested in telling a narrative but the narrative must be coded within a joke. Barber explains that '[s]ongs, jokes, and anecdotes may be the principal channel of communication for people who are denied access to the official media' (3). In this way, the meme has been used as a means to speak back to power, to question leaders and ask for accountability by presenting these political figures in the most ordinary situations and also managing to ridicule them at the same time. The article presents an attempt to read both the text and the image in a meme as two independent narratives that that operate side by side.



*the meme has been used as a means to speak back to power, to question leaders and ask for accountability by presenting these political figures in the most ordinary situations and also managing to ridicule them at the same time.*

Meme by Albert Wainarua (2020) on Twitter @wainarua, juxtaposing three unrelated images to make a comment on the state of the nation (taifa) through current leadership.

Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome (2014) observe that the reliance on the everyday life experiences in popular culture provides an avenue for marginalised voices to interrogate issues in ways that appear transgressive but which ultimately are life affirming and pleasurable. In the meme culture in Kenya, the political elite are almost always presented as caricatures, and the aim is to elicit laughter from the audience by presenting the politicians as ridiculous characters.

*In the meme culture in Kenya, the political elite are almost always presented as caricatures, and the aim is to elicit laughter from the audience by presenting the politicians as ridiculous characters.*

However, it is important to note that while popular culture becomes a useful tool for the marginalised or the voiceless to speak to power, there is often the danger of the genre acting as a double-edged sword. Hofmeyr argues that if 'popular culture makes social processes visible, then one particular project of popular culture is to make contradictions and all of their associated multivalent meanings, apparent' (131-132). She notes that popular textual production can therefore be characterised as 'the craft (and crafting) of ambiguity and contradiction; of the 'chaotic plurality' of life under the postcolonial state' (131).

Achille Mbembe writing in *On The Postcolony* (2001) discusses the violence of fantasy in 'the thing and its doubles' by analysing cartoons representing the autocrat in postcolonial Cameroon (142). He observes that "[t]he time when the state alone had the right to represent itself and publicly exhibit the

While analysing the meme culture in Kenya and the prevalence of major political figures and their images as the base narrative in the memes, the contradiction that arises is that while the meme may present the political elite as ridiculous and their power oppressive, their constant presence in the social media space also plays a role in promoting these politicians social and cultural capital.

autocrat (or to censor any representation not emanating from itself) is gone. The mechanism for representation and exhibition is now outside its control' (160). This is in regard to the artistic freedom to represent and exhibit the image of the political elite. However, he also notes that removing the power to exhibit and represent from the state has not necessarily meant that this loss of control has "put the 'thing' out of sight, by arranging that it cease to be 'in front of' people as 'something to see'" (160). In fact, Mbembe presents the contradiction that arises where "in seizing the power of public imagination, the artist amplifies the autocrat's pervasive presence" (160).

While analysing the meme culture in Kenya and the prevalence of major political figures and their images as the base narrative in the memes, the contradiction that arises is that while the meme may present the political elite as ridiculous and their power oppressive, their constant presence in the social media space also plays a role in promoting these politicians social and cultural capital. Later, the social and cultural capital that they acquire through their constant social media presence may be converted to political capital and in this way leading to no change in the political status quo initially challenged by the memes.

In conclusion, therefore, memes have occupied a central figure especially within social media. In Kenya particularly, the meme has been useful as a political tool to speak to power and challenge political status quo. However, as is the nature of popular culture, the meme culture is constantly fighting to create a balance as a genre that historically has been shown to resist the dominant narratives while simultaneously affirming the status quo.

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# El Nombre de Amor:<sup>1</sup> Representations in Cultural Productions between Kenya and Mexico

Maina wa Mũtonya



This paper seeks to explore the cultural exchanges between Kenya and Mexico, while interrogating the impact of cultural productions, such as music, literature and telenovelas. The influx of Mexican telenovelas on Kenyan media has had a great influence on the Kenyan popular cultural scene. Kimani wa Turacco's (Kenyan) song *Paloma*, which derives its name from a character in the Mexican telenovela, *El Nombre de Amor*, forms a stimulating conversation between the two cultures, as well as the two genres (music and telenovela). In the same vein, Mexican author, Diego Gómez Pickering, in his 2010 memoirs *Los Jueves en Nairobi* (Thursdays in Nairobi) enhances this dialogue in the author's representation of Kenya from a Mexican perspective. By considering these texts (the telenovela, the song and the novel), the paper attempts to reflect on the contemporary representations of global flows of culture between Kenya and Mexico, as well as exploring the cosmopolitanism in the Global South within certain historical contexts.

## Introduction

Although the main objective of this research revolves around the representations in popular culture between Mexico and Kenya, it would be important to point out the historical ties, whose importance has defined over time, relations between Mexico, in Latin America and Africa. In 1519, when Hernán Cortes, the precursor to the eventual conquest and Spanish colonisation of Mexico arrived in Vera Cruz, Mexico, he was in the company of one Juan Garrido, now registered as the first African in Mexico.

Talking about the history of the conquest in Mexico, one should also take into account the Afro-Mexican identity that emerged at the same time as the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico. After Juan, hundreds of thousands of other Africans, most of who were slaves arrived and were over time integrated with the people of Mexico. Through miscegenation the Afro-Mexican identity was born. In contemporary Mexico, this identity is fraught with much controversy not only in discussions but also in daily dialogues.<sup>2</sup> It is also an identity that has been marginalised for years especially in the national history of Mexico.

It is important to consider this identity in our discussion of Mexican telenovelas, because it is a community that is completely absent and invisibilised in the Mexican popular culture that is consumed in Kenya. Probably, this should point out to one of the problematics even in considering the dialogues in cultural productions that are envisaged in this paper. The presence of blonde, Caucasian-like characters in the telenovelas definitely obscure this reality in not only Mexico but in most of Latin America. The texts discussed herein also suffer from what Adichie calls the danger of a single story.<sup>3</sup>

## Kenya and Mexico in dialogue

Many of the slaves that were brought to New Spain came from West Africa and sometimes from the southern part of the continent. In other words, there is a great possibility that Kenyans never arrived in Latin America as slaves.

<sup>1</sup>Although the title derives from a Mexican Telenovela, the gist of the paper revolves around representations in the memoirs by Gomez and the song by Kimani. However, the importance of mentioning the telenovela is because Kimani's song is solely based on the characters and the plot of the telenovela. It thus forms a useful background in understanding the content of the song in question.

<sup>2</sup>See Chege Githiora (2008). Afro-Mexicans: Discourse of Race and Identity in the African Diaspora. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc. Chege argues that "... Afro-Mexicans are not only an objective historical reality, but also a subject of contemporary interest in so far as they constitute an integral part of the modern Mexican nation and are part and parcel of the global African Diaspora," p. 8

<sup>3</sup>In her TEDTalk titled "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Adichie cautions that a single story of a people, a country, a race creates stereotypes that contribute towards building an incomplete perspective or representation of a people and that they make the one story become the only story. Africa has always been seen from a viewpoint that emphasises conflicts, poverty and disease and African studies have a moral responsibility to revise this misrepresentation.

However, that does not imply that there has been no historical background in the relations between Mexico and Kenya. The two countries established diplomatic relations in 1977. The establishment of the Mexican Embassy in Kenya in 1981 has made it possible to strengthen ties mainly in the scientific, technical educational and cultural spheres. The late 70s and the 80s in Africa saw a wide broadcast on African screens “when the effects of global economic crisis and the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs obliged national television networks across the continent to purchase cheap content from international distributors.” (Jedlowski & Rego, 2018, p. 2).

The book, *Los Jueves in Nairobi* (Thursdays in Nairobi) and the song *Paloma* invite us to explore contemporary representations between Mexico and Kenya. Reading Gómez’s memoirs, one has the sense of how the cities of Africa have been represented outside the continent. On the one hand, this book remains a narrative of a Mexican and the memories of him in the city of Nairobi. On the other hand, the book acts as a guide for those who have never visited Kenya and who would like to have an adventure in this country. But more important, the book provokes one to think more about the informal interactions that have characterized relations between Kenya and Mexico. Kĩmani wa Turacco’s song *Paloma* also gives us a glimpse into how Mexico is imagined by Kenyans, through the prism of the telenovelas, and in this case, *El Nombre de Amor* (In the Name of Love).

Diego Gomez, a diplomat, writer and journalist wrote his memoirs while serving in the Mexican Embassy in Nairobi as the Cultural and Press Attaché in 2007. Between 2016 and 2018, he was the Mexican Ambassador to the United Kingdom. His travel writing has seen him publish a number of books, as well as journalistic pieces in international newspapers. However, his book, *Los Jueves en Nairobi* is the only one that specifically talks about Kenya.<sup>4</sup> All his books are written in the Spanish language.

On the other hand, the song by Kĩmani wa Turacco, *Paloma* is a Gĩkũyũ song that was produced in 2010 at the same time when the Mexican telenovela, *In the Name of Love* was running on Citizen TV Kenya from Monday to Friday, 8:00-9:00 pm. Though the Gĩkũyũ *benga* artist had produced other songs before, the intertextuality in *Paloma*, incorporating themes and characters from the popular telenovela on Kenyan television into a Gĩkũyũ song put him in the limelight. In 2018, Kimani collaborated with a Tanzanian *bongo* artist, Yahya Prince to do a remix of the same song, which uses both Kiswahili and Gĩkũyũ languages.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of popular memory, Mexico is important to many Kenyans because it was in the Mexico Olympics of 1968 where Kenya won her first ever gold medal through Naftali Temu in the 10,000m. Kenya won nine more medals and with this event, announced her entry into the world of athletics and boxing at the international level. During the soccer World Cup in Mexico in 1986, a sports shoe brand named Mexico 86 came out in Kenya. For a time, these shoes were fashionable among young people.

<sup>4</sup> In 1978, there was a similar memoir written by María Luis Puga, titled *Las Posibilidades de Odio* (Possibilities of Hate), based on her experiences in Kenya. It is not known if there has been any other memoirs of this nature.

<sup>5</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ph\\_QPlcv2M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ph_QPlcv2M)

I mention these events to show the place that the image and the name of Mexico occupy in the social imaginary of Kenyans. Today, there are social venues in Nairobi such as restaurants with Mexican names. It is not only the names, but there are restaurants and eateries that offer Mexican cuisine to their customers in Nairobi.

As Keenan (2019) notes, the overall number of Mexicans in Kenya cannot go beyond 200 but there is a huge presence of Mexican culture, especially in Nairobi. On the music scene, artist Edgar Manuel Vargas Gallegos, popularly known as *Romantico* has made a name for himself with his music that’s a mash up of Spanish and

Swahili, as well as in his collaborations with artists like Jua Cali and Samaki Mkuu (Jason Dunford) that add flavor to the local *genge* genre.

As Gómez notes in his memoirs, the *kachumbari* salad in Kenya has its equivalent in Mexico; *pico de gallo*. These connections between Kenya and Mexico allow us to understand well the background of his memoirs and the constant dialogues between both places.

This dialogue is literally represented in the song *Paloma* where the artist appears to be in a direct dialogue with Paloma, the protagonist in *El Nombre de Amor* acted by Allisson Lozz. More important is the dialogue between two genres in popular culture; the Mexican telenovela and the Kenyan song. To fully understand the background of the song, it would be important to understand the cultural connections.

The profound presence of Mexican telenovelas that have inundated television in Kenya has helped Kenyans have a glimpse of the supposed life of Mexicans. As mentioned above, there has been an influx of these telenovelas from the early 1980s such as *The Wild Rose (Rosa Salvaje)*, *The Rich also Cry (Los Ricos también Lloran)*, *No One But You (Tú o Nadie)*, *Storm over Paradise (Tormenta en el Paraíso)*, *When you will be Mine (Cuando Seas Mía)*, *I am your Owner (Soy tu Dueña)* and *In the Name of Love (El Nombre de Amor)* among many others.

According to a 2010 study in Kenya, women make up the majority of viewers for Mexican telenovelas that are aired during peak viewing hours, that is, between 8:00 pm and 9:00 pm. Odhiambo (2008, p. 137) affirms that Mexican telenovelas in Kenya have contributed to the construction of identity among followers, citing a case of Doryne Acol, an addict of the telenovela *Secreta de Amor* who “transferred the identity of the protagonist in the telenovela to her own baby, naming her María Clara Acol.”

According to Shauri (2010)<sup>6</sup>, the structure of Mexican telenovelas normally contains the story of a woman from a poor family who meets a rich boy. The two overcome betrayals and resistance and marry. For the followers, that is “the fantasy of many young women. Kenyan girls identify a lot with the poor woman in the telenovela who represents a source of hope for them.” As Waliaula (2019, p. 190) argues, “individual members of television-cinema audiences seem to have very personal relationships with certain televisual cinemas.” The identifying with characters in the telenovela and the consequent construction of identity as argued above by Odhiambo derives from the fact that the experiences of the fictional characters resonate well with the lived experiences of some members of the audience.

It is this fantasy in which the song *Paloma* by Kĩmani wa Turacco becomes useful in my analysis. The fact that the song derives its theme from a telenovela affirms two things. One, that the singer, as a man, has an interest in this particular telenovela, thus demystifying the popular conception that only women watch telenovelas. On the other hand, it would also be possible that Kimani took advantage of a very forceful theme among Kenyans to compose his song.

The song starts:

Wendo umaga kũraihi ĩndĩ ũhana ta kĩroto  
Ũngĩkũĩngĩra ngoro-ĩnĩ ũkahana ta wahũgũya  
Ũkambia kũ-admire mũndũ ũrĩ thĩ cia kũraihi  
Ũka-imagine e waku no ũmuonaga TV-ĩnĩ -

*Love comes from afar but it is also like a dream*

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Wahome, Ngeci (2010). “Kenyans Hooked on the Chic in Mexican Chick Flicks” in *Daily Nation* 10th April 2010.

*When it gets into your heart, you go crazy  
You start to admire someone who is so far away  
You imagine she were yours, even if you only see her on TV*

In this first verse, the song deals with the desires caused by Mexican telenovelas. In other words, the media not only have the ability to evoke fantasies among women, but also strong desires in men, as the song makes it clear. Looking at the images in the video of the song indicates that the theme of the song comes from the telenovela *El Nombre de Amor*. Today, in the popular language of Kenya, Paloma is a blonde girl who in the social imaginary of Kenyans is the representation of the image of Mexico and Mexicans. But as argued above, this is a misrepresentation of Mexican cultural identity that also includes the Afro-Mexicans, the indigenous communities and the *mestizos*. In this way, Kenyan viewers will always have this one-sided image of Mexico. On the other hand, although I am insisting on the dialogue between both cultures, their encounters, as noted, present an indication of the superficiality that defines the connections. This is evident in the two texts under study.

### Mythification of space

In the first verse of Paloma, the singer is talking about a faraway place referring to Mexico, the setting of the telenovela. He invites his listeners to imagine this almost mythical place according to his interpretation of the reality presented in the telenovela. In the lyrics and in the images in the video of the song, there is no single mention of Mexico. The only reference to Mexico is in the mention and visualization of the protagonists in *El Nombre de Amor*.

At the same time, in Diego Gómez's memoirs in Nairobi, the representation of the city is also vague, if not too generalized. The first chapter is titled "*Once Upon a Time*" and the memoirs begin with the words '*A long time ago...*' (p. 11). The opening words, just like the beginning of any story as is common in fictional narratives, indicate to the reader that this may be a work of fiction, although the book attempts to present the author's lived reality in Nairobi.

According to Gómez, Nairobi "*is the same city repeated in Kinshasa, in Dakar and in Maputo... in univocal Africa...*" (p. 16), a generalization despite the differences that characterize cities in the world. The ambiguity is captured in many sentences but I will mention only one, "*in Nairobi you find opposites, in Nairobi the halves meet*" (p. 16). Although the author presents the complexity and ambiguity of the city, he at the same deprives the city of any form of identity. As with the Kenyan singer Kĩmani in his relation to Mexico in the song, Nairobi remains only in the Mexican author's imagination as presented to his readers to interpret it through his eyes.

### A place to flee or seek refuge?

Related to the mythification of the different places, Kĩmani and Gómez engage in a discussion about violence. In 2007-2008, violence between ethnic groups broke out in Kenya following disputed elections. Gómez's book deals with this issue forcefully because for him, violence was '*a nightmare that left an indelible mark* (p. 88) '*among Kenyans and 'Nairobi changed forever... it was never the same again after December 2007'* (p. 89). For a country that has hosted thousands of refugees from neighboring countries, the violence made Kenya and Nairobi places to flee.

However, singer Kĩmani has other ideas about Kenya. In the song *Paloma*, Kĩmani laments Paloma's mistreatment by her aunt Carlota in the telenovela. The chorus of the song goes:



Paloma korwo wamenya urĩa njiguaga ũũru  
Rirĩa nguona ũkĩherithio nĩ tata wanyu Carlota  
Ngeyũria korwo wamenya tata guo nĩ mũragani  
ĩngĩhaica ndege ũtukũ ũũke tũikarage Rũai

*Paloma, if you know knew how bad I feel  
When I see your aunt Carlota mistreats you.  
If you had known that your aunt is a murderer  
You would have boarded a plane at night  
To come and stay with me in Rũai<sup>7</sup>*

Facing a different form of violence, Kĩmani sees Kenya as a place of refuge for Paloma, since her aunt Carlota is a threat to her life. In the telenovela, Carlota is responsible for the deaths of others. Kĩmani presents Kenya as a place to find peace for Paloma and not a place to flee from as per G3mez. Between the two works, this representation of violence offers us the opportunity to understand the connections that exist in popular culture between Mexico and Kenya.

### Arrogance or pure ignorance?

Something very remarkable in the two works is the level of the wrong information. In the video of the song *Paloma*, the singer uses images that do not correspond in any way to the reality of Mexico. It is true that there are many appropriate images of the Mexican telenovela but also others that have nothing to do with Mexico. For example, when the singer invites Paloma to leave her country and visit him in Nairobi, the corresponding image is that of Singapore Airlines (min 1.47). Those watching the video with no idea of the telenovela will end up misinformed if they take the visuals in the song seriously. There is no mention of Mexico for a nearly eight-minute song based on the Mexican telenovela. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the popular language in Kenya, Paloma is a blonde girl, whether Mexican or not. It may be that the singer has zero knowledge of Mexico despite the overwhelming presence of Mexican telenovelas.

G3mez, on his part, is also guilty of the misrepresentation of Kenya, a country where he lived for almost two years, and where he learned “*that Africa does not end or begin in the Atlas Mountains or the Namib Desert*” (p. 144). The author continually presents many stereotypes that characterize the representation of the African continent. He continually describes Kenyans as ‘tribes’ in the mode of colonial anthropologists.

G3mez is also wrong about the statistics on Kenyan ethnic groups. He talks of the Luo ethnic group, with Bantu origins (sic) and constitutes 30% (sic) of the Kenyan population (p. 21). In his chapter TIA (This is Africa), the author selects some newspaper articles that highlight tropical diseases, violence, and witchcraft to comply with the stereotypes of Africa. He talks about Grace, “*a girl from the Luo tribe, plump, healthy, with her hips supporting overgrown buttocks*” (p. 21).<sup>8</sup> As in many Kenyan-based films, for example *Out of Africa* (1985), *The White Maasai* (2005) or *The Constant Gardener* (2005), G3mez’s book only perpetuates the stereotypes that dominate any discussion about the African continent and its peoples.

His memoirs can also be read as part of the legacy of colonial romanticism and condescension that has continued to shape and reinforce the postcolonial constructions of the continent; where on the one hand Africa is “presented as a tourist paradise and on the other, the prototypical social-politically inept states of Africa that are marked by violence, inefficiency, corruption, poverty and disease.” (Musila, 2008, p. 149). *Los Jueves in Nairobi* seems to be ensnared in the sarcastic trap of Binyavanga Wainaina’s piece “How to Write about Africa” (2005).

<sup>7</sup>A neighborhood in the outskirts of the city of Nairobi, Kenya.

<sup>8</sup>This quote has historical echoes of the case of Sara Baartman, a South African woman, taken to Europe as a slave at the beginning of the 19th century to be exhibited as an attraction in circuses due to her anatomical features.

## Conclusion

The encounter between Mexico and Kenya from these texts is one that leaves much to be desired. Although my article has pointed out important points of the exchange between the two countries, it is clear that the knowledge that emanates from cultural productions is generalized if not wrong. It takes a lot of effort to establish relationships in a forceful way and to strengthen what already exists, even if it is little. There is an imbalance between the representations expressed in telenovelas, the media and in popular culture in general and the actual happenings as indicated from the various examples quoted. Although there is a dialogue between different genres of popular culture, it would be better if this dialogue reflected knowledge necessary to strengthen relations between the two countries and between Africa and Latin America at large.

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# Decolonisation and Cultural Heritage in Africa: Prospects and Bottlenecks

Joyce Nyairo



## What is in a Name?

First, let us underline an understanding of decolonisation as the work of unlearning and unpacking the rules and hierarchies erected by colonial order. Now, I have the pleasant duty of linking that work of unlearning to the idea of cultural heritage and to the increasingly urgent question of restitution and repatriation as it relates to that cultural heritage. It seems obvious that unlearning certain orders can help us recover that which we tend to think of as pure and frozen in time. *But is it?*

Allow me to start with a little family history to help me make a fine point about decolonisation and heritage.

In 1931 or 1932 when my father-in-law was born, he was a rather sickly infant. His mother, Kerubo, decided to mute the child's ethnic name and, instead, give him an English name. She called him Alex, after some white man in the vicinity. Not the full name Alexander, just Alex. Kerubo's reasoning was that whenever someone called out the child's foreign name to exclaim at how frail the baby looked, the local gods would walk past, disinterested in taking someone that belonged elsewhere. By situating the child outside the local culture, through this foreign name, the child would, ironically, be protected by the very norms of that local culture.

The ethnic culture found another creative way to cling onto the child. The people, in the ingenuity that is sometimes dismissed as 'mother-tongue interference', turned the name Alex into Arigisi. Kerubo's calculation worked. The child began to thrive. Arigisi, as he is still called by those from his birthplace where he hasn't lived for over 70 years, is 90 today. The local gods spared him. Perhaps they even looked on benignly and showered his uniqueness with an abundance of life.

There are several lessons in this story about heritage and decolonisation.

**One:** the things of Western culture were not always violently thrust upon the colonised. Occasionally, the colonised chose some of those things, calculated, edited and picked what would serve a local good.

**Two:** the root of Kerubo's gamble is faith in a deity who teaches us the value of fairness; of picking only that which belongs to you.

**Three:** and especially important for us, is the fine point that decolonisation has always been staged beyond the arena of our national politics of representation and governance. Put differently, in the quotidian politics of everyday life there are many acts of defiance, subversion and protest that have contributed to decolonization. Too often when we think of this work of freeing colonised nations, ideologically and otherwise, we wear the lens of nation-state. We focus on big moments and big names, and we forget the everyday cultural work done by the Kerubos of this country to guard their own and to subvert colonial order. The name Alex was not adopted because it marked a desire to abandon ethnic norms and embrace Western culture. Kerubo chose that Western name because it allowed her to placate her gods.

*the things of Western culture were not always violently thrust upon the colonised. Occasionally, the colonised chose some of those things, calculated, edited and picked what would serve a local good.*

*Stories like this one of Arigisi remind us of the value of indigenous knowledge and the fact that it may not be as remote as we often imagine it to be, in the face of the very dominant Western practices of knowledge building.*

What I also glean from this life story, about decolonisation, is that the work of unlearning, and unpacking is not limited to outright rejection and overthrowing. The local gods speak in that moment when they reject that which has come from elsewhere. But there is that other equally important moment when Kerubo and others in her midst repurpose “Alex” into “Arigisi”. They give it local flavour, if you like, so that it can continue serving their needs by fitting into their mores. This secondary act of submerging the alien name into the local environment – that dunking – is a moment of embrace that also envelops the child who ends up enjoying a long and rewarding life.

Stories like this one of Arigisi remind us of the value of indigenous knowledge and the fact that it may not be as remote as we often imagine it to be, in the face of the very dominant Western practices of knowledge building. What stories like these need is volume and visibility so that they can help us re-establish other ways of confronting our realities as a post-colonial nation that invariably draws a line between the old ways and the imposed ways without seeing the surreptitious ways in which the “alien” ways can, with all the power of our ingenuity, be buried in the old ones to create contemporary and still local regimes of knowledge.

### What else is in a story?

If the stories of cultural decolonisation in our midst need amplification for decolonisation to be fully effected, the story of colonialism itself needs volume and visibility in the so-called mother countries, the home of the colonisers. *What are these countries doing to make the stories of what they did in Africa, known in their own midst?* And not just known but most importantly, told also from the point of view of the colonised. In the Spring of 2005, I spent a semester at Centre for West African Studies at the University of Birmingham. As a research fellow, I attended postgraduate seminars to develop a publication and I had tutorial encounters with the undergraduates. The first time an undergraduate asked me why I, being from Kenya, spoke English, and I didn’t know what to do with that question. In the course of that Birmingham semester, that question popped up many times. Eventually, I framed an answer that was sufficiently enlightening and studiously polite but only because I had realised that the question was rooted in a deep ignorance of colonial history. I studied the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and the Cambridge and Edexcel International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) “O” Level History syllabuses, as well as the A-s and A-level ones and understood how a Humanities undergraduate could have arrived at the assumption that Britain had only colonised India. A few students knew about Nigeria from their encounters with international students, but most only knew about the colonisation of India.

*attendant language of masking and distracting, legitimise national policies of exclusion. If those in your midst don't know that you colonised others, if they don't know that you took their lands, their natural resources, their ideas, things, and people, and if they don't hear it from those you colonised, how will they join the conversation on returning what was taken, and support policies for restitution*

It is one thing to have occupied these lands, turned some into settler colonies where all local ways were denigrated and shunned as the extraction of numerous resources fed the coffers of Britain, it is quite another matter, 60 years since, to expunge that history of colonialism from the British school curriculum. I won’t even dwell on the fact that the ‘I’ in IGCSE stands for ‘International’ so that jaundiced History syllabus is learnt in that curated form in many developing nations, including ours.

My real focus is on England itself – you just can’t do that. You cannot keep your learners away from the work your ancestors did in Africa. Not only does such ellipsis and erasure run the danger of the whole imperial misadventure being re-enacted in the future, but equally important in the present, that erasure creates numerous uncomfortable conversations such as those I had in Birmingham in 2005 and other times since. Worse still, these calculated erasures, with their attendant language of masking and distracting, legitimise national policies of exclusion. If those in your midst don’t know that you colonised others, if they

don't know that you took their lands, their natural resources, their ideas, things, and people, and if they don't hear it from those you colonised, how will they join the conversation on returning what was taken, and support policies for restitution and repatriation? How will they participate in the wider project of inclusive growth?

Decolonisation in Africa means undoing a misguided adherence to Western regimes of knowledge and believing in the value of local knowledges, systems and things. For the coloniser, decolonisation means recognising the humanity of those who were colonised. Decolonisation is the framework through which what was taken must be returned. Part of what both the coloniser and the former colonies must unpack is a culture of scholarship that is blind and deaf to Africa's regimes of knowledge. What sustained the colonial project in Africa were universities and centres that focused on the study of Africa and erected "expertise" about Africa and Africans. This knowledge was taught to British administrators as they started their careers as colonial officers in Africa and they in turn generated monographs, reports, and life stories that have furthered Africanist discourse for decades.

Over the last few years, Britain has joined the decolonisation conversation and these old practices of knowledge production are still in place. I recall travelling to England in the winter of 2018 at the invitation of the Centre for African Studies at Cambridge University. I was to give two lectures at Cambridge and one at the London School of Oriental and Africa Studies (SOAS). Two of these lectures were cancelled because of a student-led movement to decolonise the university and the curriculum which faculty joined in what were known as "teach-outs."

I had the benefit of attending one of the seminars set up to debate the protocols of decolonisation at Cambridge. What struck me was not the call for more black and brown writers in the curriculum, it was the reluctance to look to elsewhere, to countries where concrete steps to decolonising the mind had long taken root. Think of the work that went into turning the English Department at the University of Nairobi into the Literature Department way back in 1969, a full 49 years before the decolonising higher education conversations in England. I saw at Cambridge a movement that was willing to align itself to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States of America and South African student movements, but which was wilfully ignorant of the intellectual production in its former colonies. There was no discussion on why a Department of English should properly be known as one of Literature, or Literatures and what that expansion means in terms of methods of inquiry, genres and so on.

Point of view is critical in storytelling. But it seems to me that there is also a lack of sincerity in this refusal to revise methodology. What makes it worse is Britain's avoidance of the need to return colonial records to their source. These records relate to the work of the coloniser in the colonies. They are about white men in Africa, if you like. But since the colonised are the ones who were worked on – in more ways than one – they deserve to have copies of those records. Retaining them in Britain is a power game that sustains the dubious field of Africanists and erects so-called experts on us over us. We must do away with all these colonial legacies in scholarship including the absence of the subjective "I" voice in research writing. Further, the sacrificing of storytelling in preference for theories and methodologies developed elsewhere and parachuted on the continent by eager young post-graduates who aid in erecting these methods as more coherent arguments than narrative entrenches notions of universality where difference should be accommodated.

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### Preparing for the Return

When we talk of restitution and repatriation, we steer away from the debate on what we will do with what is returned because we do not want it to drown out the original demand for returns. Fair enough, but I think it bears saying that for we who wait to receive these things taken from us and those about us, in all their tangible and intangible forms, we must prepare to elevate those things wherever possible and submerge them with what we now have wherever necessary because culture is not static. *Culture leans back to pick what is needed in the present not to bury itself in purity. When we retrieve, we have a thousand opportunities to sample, revise, and remix as we create anew.* This is how restitution will feed our creative sector, not merely by freezing material things in museums and inaccessible physical archives, but by opening them up for reinterpretation to fit into our current contexts in the same way that Alex became Arigisi. I am a tireless advocate for cultural hybridity.

Believing as I do in the force of cultural hybridity, apace Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), I see a pressing need for us postcolonials to constantly expand our definition of cultural heritage, beyond artefacts, trinkets, animal parts, human remains, pieces taken from our geological features. In discussing the scattering of our past that was occasioned by colonialism all too often, our staging of our past rests on the indigenous and overlooks the recent past that which evolved in the colonial years. As we celebrate the kind of creativity made possible by the Internet and its accompanying technologies and storing systems which provide opportunities for our records in the West to finally be shared with us, we must pay attention to our stake in what was made by the preceding technology. Beyond the scholarship that continues to document us and erect itself as superior over local regimes of knowledge, I am speaking about sound and visual technologies – the audio recordings and films made of us, in an era when we had neither the resources nor the skills to make these things about ourselves for ourselves.

Think of the numerous field recordings of Hugh Tracey and others, including songs like *Chemirocha* which celebrated and localised the American country singer Jimmie Rodgers. Think of the photographs taken and films shot all over this country, like the 1966 documentary film *Africa Addio/Africa Farewell* made by two Italian filmmakers. When do our governments ever advocate for the return of these recordings? If we don't see what is captured on audio and visual film as heritage that we need to revisit, we will remain with a big hole about our past. And if we recognise these cultural productions as part of our heritage then we must call for better storing of the material at public broadcasters like Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), and also demand access to what they hold. When the bulk of these images and recordings, just like official records from colonial offices, are held in places where local scholars cannot access them, enough to tell many histories covering the 1910s-1970s our national governments and our colonizers keep us from the work of knowledge building about our past. And equally important, they stand in the way of cultural production because that past is a resource for today's creativity.

Finally, in our preparation to receive that which was taken, we must erect ways of safeguarding against continued looting. What goes on under the guise of research and sometimes in the game of tourism is a steady depletion that undermines our cultural heritage and our production of knowledge. In 2021 I was horrified to see the way, at Namortunga, on the Lodwar-Kalokol road, tourists and researchers have steadily whittled down the incredible "people of stone": those basalt pillars in the shape of humans. And yet Namortunga is still a sacred site where some of the people of Turkana pray. If we can't contain this kind of disrespect for our cultural heritage within our own midst, what hope is there really that we can effectively advocate for and effect the restitution of what was taken 80 or 100 years ago? It starts with us.

We must do better in the work of defining and safeguarding cultural heritage. We sign UNESCO conventions on protecting and promoting our heritage and our arts, then we shuffle our feet with the policy. Work on national culture policy started in 1979 and I recall from my undergraduate years at the University of Nairobi, the dedication of Prof. Chris Wanjala to get it done. And yet, it is only on February 25, 2021 that Kenya's culture policy got cabinet approval. This pace is unacceptable. When we finally have the policy in place we must not fail ourselves in putting in mechanisms to ensure compliance.

Culture will not grow without investment. And it is an investment not just in keeping alive these conditions of neglect and erasure that give us the grief we sing and sigh about, it is a material investment in protection and production. Producing art, exhibiting it, distributing it, critiquing it and improving it takes money. That money must come from the government so that we the audiences for this art can then do our part in finding the means to consume that art.

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# “‘Ismarwa!’<sup>1</sup> It is ours”: Popular Music and Identity Politics in Kenyan Youth Culture

*Mbũgua wa-Mũngai*



## Introduction

*It is a cold Monday in August on Nairobi’s Uhuru Highway. A Government officer is weaving his way between moving cars, handing motorists a bumper-sticker: “I am proud to be Kenyan. Najivunia kuwa Mkenya.” Smiling to the cameras, he declares “Me too, I’m proud to be Kenyan.” From the expressions on the faces of motorists all around him it is clear that the concern with national pride is received in diverse ways, some of which the government man might not be proud of.<sup>2</sup>*

Intended to serve as a rallying point for patriotism, the import of the slogan cited above has always formed a subject of intense contestation in Kenya. A national debate emerged around two issues; first, what it means to be a Kenyan and, second, whether one can really be patriotic in a situation of perceived extreme socio-economic injustices. When it emerges, the debate tends to arouse two distinct sentiments—those indicative of fierce nationalism on the one hand and those that mark a profoundly felt pessimism on the other. The subversive word play “*Navumilia kuwa Mkenya*” [Kiswahili for ‘I merely tolerate being a Kenyan’] best exemplifies the latter attitude. Yet, for all the emotional outpouring occasioned by the government sticker, a number of important issues emerge that might illustrate well key considerations with regard to the twin issues of youth culture(s) and identities.

First, it is significant that the launch of the ‘patriotism’ campaign was done not in a government office but on a Nairobi street. It is unusual for bureaucracies to make accommodative gestures to ‘low’ spaces but here we see a rare reversal of hierarchies whereby officialdom literally steps out to warmly embrace the street. That the site of engagement is a street enables us to think about the cosmopolitanism of the city and all the tensions that such a phenomenon—as an index of modernity—might generate. Secondly, the choice of a bumper sticker as the medium of an official message might be taken to indicate recognition by mainstream culture of the power and agency of the mass media. Thirdly, ‘patriotic’ practices establish a crucial link between the idea of branding (the sticker’s iconic value) and the concept of identity.

Overall, we see here the use of popular expressive forms which are crucial sites upon which meanings might be formulated. Contemporary Kenyan youth music needs to be seen in a similar light since “popular music...as a social-cultural phenomenon...embodies and expresses [...] new social identities which emerge as products of urbanization and modernization throughout the world” (Manuel, 1988, p. v).

Arguably, one of the most conspicuous developments to have happened in Kenyan popular music over the last fifteen years is the marked ‘Americanization’ of its forms; the rubric ‘Kenyan Hip-hop’ is now a common place. While the claim that there is a marked Americanization of entertainment cultures globally is passé, it is also true to state that the rich discourse on local identities that this phenomenon fosters is hardly acknowledged. For instance, it is widely assumed that African

<sup>1</sup>The title of a track by the late Poxi Presha.

<sup>2</sup>While officially launching the bumper sticker in August 2006, the Kenya Government spokesman said that it was intended to serve as a strategy for arousing Kenyans’ patriotism. It has been suggested that other useful spaces for the patriotism sticker might include doors to residences and offices as well as T-shirts (see Gakuo, 2006)



American expressive culture—principally hip-hop fashion and décor—lends stylistic and rhetorical strategies to local youth music. However, the corollary question “in what ways is hip-hop modified to speak to its local practitioners?” has hardly been raised.

Indeed looking beneath the surface of Kenyan youth music reveals that the understanding upon which the foregoing assumption is founded is at best superficial, ignoring as it does the crucial aspects of agency and adaptation in cultural processes. Even as they remain quite versatile at making such appropriative gestures towards hip-hop, young people see, still, a clear demarcation between ‘foreign’ forms and “what is ours” [*Ismarwa!*]. Local rapper Delicious succinctly captures the issues in contention when he states:

I have changed the way I view my music. I’m trying to get my identity, first as a Kenyan, then as an international artist. Internationally [my influences are] 2-Pac Shakur, New Edition and Blackstreet (Nyanga, 2006).

Our argument is that youth rappers appropriate the surface representations of African American popular culture not to speak to American thematic interests *per se*, but more crucially to explore local social-cultural space. Differently put, youth culture trains its gaze outwards from the local to the global in order for them to look back into the local. Their practices evince a particular concern with anxieties of an identity especially in conflict with, firstly, the broader narrative of ‘the Kenyan identity’ and beyond this, secondly, to contending notions of modernity as we see, for instance, in the invocation of *black* rather than *white* super stars. Subversion and the reversal of hierarchies of meaning are critical tactics in this identity drama.

By focusing on the contemporary practices of popular rappers, we bear witness to the processes of appropriation and contestation at work in Kenyan youth music. This enables us to interrogate young people’s understanding of the dynamics of cultural and self-identity. To appreciate current identity politics amongst Kenyan youth, it is necessary to examine the background that has shaped the discourse on identity in the country.

### **“We must preserve our culture!” Post-independence Anxieties**

In Kenyan history, discussions of identity have taken place along a number ‘traditional’ axes. They are deemed traditional in the sense that mainstream society considers them to be the accepted institutions through which questions of culture ought to be settled and prescriptions on identity formulated in a manner similar to Bourdieu’s (1974) ‘tastes’. What strands of identity have Kenyans had to contend with over time?

Arguably, political definitions as to what constitutes a Kenyan identity have been predominant. One way in which the political class has attempted to set the standards especially immediately after independence, is through the creation of the one party state. The emphasis was on unity and ‘Africanness’ where the latter was often narrowly conceptualized to mean ‘black’ as seen in the ‘Africanisation’ programs that led to blacks replacing whites in businesses and managerial positions. Furthermore, registering as a member of Kenya African National Union (KANU), the main political party in the country, became the ultimate mark of patriotism. Expressing views outside of the party structure automatically earned one the label of an ‘enemy of the state’ as evinced by the suppression of ‘dissidents’ under the reigns of both Jomo Kenyatta (1964-1978) and Daniel Arap Moi (1978-2002). As Haugerud (1995) observed, there were many Kenyans who

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did not feel patriotic along the terms set out by the KANU elite. In other words, the identity prescribed by the single party state was too constrictive, even ideologically. Ultimately, it was not possible for everyone to feel Kenyan in the same way and the eventual agitation for political pluralism seen more markedly in the 1990s might thus be read as a clamour for an alternative paradigm of a 'political' identity.

At a different level there have been attempts by 'unorthodox' churches and sects to create substitute ideas of identity. Principally, here we could mention the Independent Churches especially in Central Kenya during the period of colonialism where a sect like Elijah Masinde's *Dini ya Msambwa* (Witter, 1971) centred on creating a sense of identity around an African (Luhya) 'gospel' to compete with the official Christian religion of the colonizer. The independent churches in Central Kenya sought to harness modernity's values to traditional Gĩkũyũ cultural practices. This blending strategy is seen for instance in the insistence by the Gĩkũyũ then on the practice of female 'circumcision' while at the same time pursuing western education, albeit at independent schools.<sup>3</sup> However, one again notices that the accent in the conception and practice of identity amongst these religious groups tends to lean heavily towards nationalist essentialisms. At other times however, religious personality cults such as John Juma Pesa's in Western Kenya have developed by taking on alien identities; he is a self-proclaimed 'Pope'. Ultimately, these types of establishments do not offer a clear-cut sense of identity, especially for Kenyan youth.

At a third level, the academy has attempted to offer a space within which debates on identity and culture might take place. Most notable here is the period of cultural nationalism witnessed at the University of Nairobi in the 1960s. Arguably, the best exemplification of this moment was the call to abolish the English Department at the university and instead replace it with an Afrocentric Department of Literature.<sup>4</sup> Okot p'Bitek, Owuor Anyumba, Taban Lo Liyong as well as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o played a key role in this debate. However, while not downplaying the need to pay attention to African forms of creativity, it must be acknowledged that the direction suggested by these scholars, if not pursued judiciously, runs the very real danger of instituting a nativistic project. This might be seen for instance in Wa Thiong'o's arguments in *Decolonising the Mind* about writing in mother tongue. Such an idea, rightly or wrongly, seems to entail a fixed idea of identity; culture and language's inbuilt appropriative capacity to negate the notion of unchanging entities—whether these are to be understood either as complete cultural systems or as elements within them such as language, music and dress forms which are central signifiers in contemporary youth culture.

Thus faced with the idea of a traditional identity resulting from the three key authorities—state, church and academy—outlined above, it becomes clear that young people in Kenya find themselves having to confront a mainstream society whose self-concept does not really entertain the notion of plural identities.

### Old School or New Skool? - The Politics of Expression

One of the significant differences between 'old' and 'new' popular music seems to lie at the rhetorical level especially in its invocation or otherwise of ethnic categories. In fact the strategy of using music to act as a vehicle for public debate and mobilisation is not new. This might be seen for instance in David Kamaarũ's *Nyĩmbo Cia Mau Mau* [Mau Mau Songs] through which an appeal is made for Gĩkũyũ communal unity in the face of colonial assault and at the same time, the oppressed are called upon to take up arms in defence of their land and freedom. Underpinning these calls is the assumption that people would heed these injunctions simply on account of their membership to an ethnic group. Indeed, in one of the songs the speaker states proudly; "If someone asked me, I'd raise my hands and declare 'I am Gĩkũyũ'". The link between one's occupancy of a particular social space and their identity is very clear in the artist's mind.

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<sup>3</sup>See Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* for a fictional representation of conflicts over female 'circumcision' between Gikuyu traditionalists who, incidentally, are all agreed on the need for formal schooling.

<sup>4</sup>See Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Homecoming* (1974).

A similar theme is observable generally in the music of the pioneer generation of Kenyan singers such as Daudi Kabaka and David Amunga. The former, known mainly for his appropriation of Chubby Checker's twist style, was preoccupied in his music with the ways of rural folk-turned-towns' people. In this regard, a key character that features in Kabaka's music is the Luhya 'greenhorn', pace Raban (1974). Usually a naïve young man, he would be puzzled and dazzled by the ways of urban dwellers and could only find redemption if he behaved according to the 'good' values of the Abaluhya. Eventually, he would have to go back 'home' to the village, marry a country girl and settle down to raise a family according to traditionally accepted values.

In Kabaka's work, the 'contaminating' city as the anti-thesis of the village represents a discontinuity with the old order and implies a severance of individuals from their 'true' identity and thus roots. In similar vein, Amunga's 'America to Africa' track evokes the same idea of a return from America to Kenya as a necessary reconnection with the persona's "people" and roots and contains the exhortation: "Dear countrymen, East or West, home will always be home". This 'return home' theme is amplified by succeeding generations of musicians; CDM Kĩratũ's 'Kaba Kũinũka' [I'd rather go home] and Kakai Kilonzo's 'Wakumbuke Wazazi' [Remember your parents] may be cited.

While escape from the city back to the village has been understood by older musicians as a viable social survival option, contemporary youth take the opposite view; the city is home and the rural village is not even contemplated. This understanding might be seen as rooted in two sociological facts. First, where some of the older people might still have connections to their rural villages, many of Nairobi's youth were born in the city. To them, the countryside is an alien space. Secondly, these young people have grown up in a cosmopolitan environment; it is more practical and easier for them to deal with cultural plurality just as it is unviable for them to think of life according to models of singularity. To many of these youth, the ethnic diversity of the city has brought forth an alternative mode of social survival. Against this awareness, Nairobi's new *Skool* musicians celebrate for instance, Dandora—in the City's Eastlands—as hip-Hop City, Nairobi West estate as a 'beer garden' (*Krupt's Tukawake*) and rappers as 'street philosophers'.

Quite clearly, the scheme of values has shifted radically from the days of Kabaka's greenhorns. Youth rappers now find meaning and validation by treading outside society's accepted norms. Thus understood, hip-hop, especially in its more transgressive modes (dress, register and attitude), becomes the preferred rhetorical style of youth culture just as a perceptible strand of traditional conservatism is favoured by the older generation of singers. At this level, the differences in the styles of these two groups might be understood if we consider that the older singers (Kamaarũ and his contemporaries) are closer to mainstream society in terms of values, while the younger musicians (*Ukoo Flani Mau Mau*, *Nonini*, *Necessary Noize* etc.) are part of a broader marginalized social category i.e. an urban subcultural group that is neither necessarily poor nor prosperous. In any case, the anxieties of the youth—rampant joblessness, the inability to raise families and a general lack of tangible social progress—are hardly understood by the older people. The youth have discovered that encoding their politics in a mode that transgresses mainstream tastes forces society to pay attention to their dilemmas.

It can also be argued that unwittingly or otherwise, mainstream society has handed Kenyan youth the weapons with which to contest and upset the authority of mainstream culture. As to whether this possibility has been considered is a different question. Nevertheless, youth culture in Nairobi enables us to grapple with the issue of whether or not popular music might be considered to be "a

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creation of corporate (or state) culture industries that exploit, manipulate, or even create taste rather than respond to it" (Manuel, 1988, p. 8).

On the one hand, it is true that without the infrastructure of popular culture such as FM radio and privately owned TV stations, youth culture would not have had effective fora of expression. Indeed, to the best of our knowledge, none of the numerous FM radio stations, which have a wider reach than TV, is owned by a youth. On the other hand, however, it is clear that these media supply the youth with material, as Faber (2004, p. 350) has argued, that is subsequently creatively rearranged in popular cultural practices and adapted to the local situation. In this way, the resulting hybrid cultural practices become the expressive space with which the youth address and perform the tensions between the mainstream's traditional worldview and their own sense of dissatisfaction with it. At this point the question that we need to grapple with is what ideas these 'new' forms and practices in youth culture encode about the world.

### Modernist Guises: Re-inventing the Past

The performance of youth culture mainly trades in its self-representation as the epitome of trendiness. As Charles Muia, an artist who decorates Matatu pointed, "if you want to do any business with the youth, you must know and appeal to their sense of being modern."<sup>5</sup> According to this logic, the more thoroughly the youth present themselves as modern, the larger the gap they create between themselves and mainstream Kenyan society which they perceive to be steeped in conservatism. This is seen for instance in their sharply Western fashion sense; the consumption of modernity's goods, in itself a culture (Bocock, 1995), becomes their strategy for the construction of a youth identity.

However, in a number of significant instances we notice nostalgic gazes and attempts to resuscitate the past in the practices of contemporary youth music and popular culture. This can be seen in performers' names. While the majority of practitioners go for hip-sounding, black culture tradition names such as *Kleptomaniacs*, *Necessary Noize*, *E-Sir*, *NIX*, *STL*, *Nameless*, *Chiwawa*, *JIMW@T*, *Poqpine* and *Boomba Clan* amongst others, a significant number of young performers use names that either have a distinct local flavor or that refer to well-known Kenyan happenings. In addition, décor is deployed to enhance the identities that particular musicians might choose to portray. Here we have a rap group like *Ukoo Flani Mau Mau* whose name calls to mind Kenya's 1950s independence struggle. Group members wear 'Mau Mau University' label T-Shirts to indicate their apprehension of the street as a site of legitimate knowledge. In turn, this awareness is rooted in the experience of struggle in Dandora's slum life.<sup>6</sup> Indeed group members' talk is rich with ideas of mental as well as political revolution; the walls of Mau Mau Camp are decorated with an array of icons— Haile Selassie, Malcom X and Bob Marley on the one hand and rappers 2Pac Shakur and Notorious BIG on the other—each of whom, bar the latter two rappers, seems to represent an ideological contradiction, if interpreted alongside the rest. But then this makes a statement about the workings of urban youth culture: they appropriate, based on a 'correct' or 'incorrect' reading, what works for them. Contradictions are not resolved but are ignored.

Another reference to local "ghetto" culture is seen in the name K-South which is fashioned out of Kariobangi South, one of Nairobi's poorer neighbourhoods. For these groups slum life is spoken of with pride not only as a uniquely enlightening experience but it is also seen as presenting an alternative modernity. Their music often raises the subject of class warfare. On the one hand the Kiswahili-Japanese compound rap name Risasi [Bullet] na *Suzuki* points to the phenomenon of violence not just as a mode of crime but also as a negative social ethic. This latter meaning comes out clearly especially in Mashifta's 2002 track '*Majambazi*' in which they observe that "*Hii system ni ya majambazi*" [This social system is based on robbery];

<sup>5</sup>Author's interview notes, July 2002, Nairobi.

<sup>6</sup>Author's interview notes, Mau Mau Camp Dandora, June 2005, Nairobi.

'*shifita*' is the local reference to bandits in Kenya's North Eastern province. On the other hand, the allusion to the Japanese car model might be read as an indicator of these youth's aspirations to material prosperity.

On their part, *Nyamuga Cultural Troupe* specializes in Gikuyu folksongs and the group is chiefly known for reworking other singers' music; they have rendered most of Joseph Kamaaru and H.M Maina's works in different tunes. To accent their identity, the performers put on distinctly Gikuyu attire; they are treading the path of Gikuyu culture as is suggested by the name *nyamuga*, which means sandals. The idea of following in one's cultural footsteps is also seen in the playfully reflexive stage name *Shoe Kiratu Jnr*; '*kiratu*' is Gikuyu for shoe.

In a related sense there exists in Nairobi, a large group of popular culture practitioners who consciously strive to replicate their childhood. These are mainly to be found amongst Mugithi artistes. Usually solo male performers, they operate by playing the guitar to the tune of an already recorded song and infusing into it their own lyrics in a process of creative corruption (Wa Mungai, 2004).<sup>7</sup> Incidentally the majority of these performers are Gikuyu, perhaps on account of the fact that there has been a more predominantly Gikuyu-driven recording infrastructure in River Road which might historically be considered as being the city's music nerve centre.

It is noteworthy that Gikuyu nursery rhymes and often-forgotten children's play songs are popular amongst Mugithi's patrons, not all of whom necessarily understand the language in which these compositions are rendered. To this end, these performances have been argued as being constituted by a cosmopolitan heterophony meaning that the genre moves from being a Gikuyu dance to a national project (Wa Mutoña, 2005). Three such popular rhymes are '*Mučēere ni mwega niuriagwo na giciko*', '*Wa tata wa tiriri*' and '*Ndathiire huti huuru*' to which patrons dance enthusiastically. In my view, in a situation of extreme social-economic anxieties spawned by modern urban existence, this moment is not merely one of carefree relief but it is, more crucially, an active reliving of patrons' childhood—wherever that might have been. After all people's childhood memories can be recalled regardless of one's particular ethnicity. Thus, memory is wrapped in performance, and the dancing becomes an enactment of a 'happy' past. For most of the older people in Nairobi who patronize Mugithi sessions, that past often happens to be a rural one whose idyllic goodness is being suggested.

Another element through which we see attempts at reusing the past to speak to the present involves the fusion of traditional and modern genres and dance forms. *Ohangla*, chiefly identified with Charles Ademson (*Makadem*), and which was initially performed in Western Kenya but whose popularity has quickly spread to other urban centres, is one such dance. Done in Afro-fusion style this initially-Luo dance is especially appealing to the youth because of its aggressive, sexually suggestive style that readily evokes American rap's body poses. Clearly, once *Ohangla* is appropriated within the urban youth discourse of the body, the dance becomes a forum for the exploration of anxieties about sexuality, one of the key elements within which identity is understood.

At the stylistic level, there have been attempts to fuse different musical genres. This might be seen, for instance, in the track *Adhiambo C* that blends Benga with rap. A collaboration, in itself a metaphor of coexistence, between Deux Vultures and Dola Kabarry, the song is a syncretic performance of two distinct traditions, i.e. a youth culture's expressive style on the one hand that is built upon Benga on the other hand which is hugely popular among older, more conservative

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<sup>7</sup>See also Mutoña (2005) in an analysis of Mugithi, popular stereotypes and ethnic identity.

Kenyans. This symbiotic relationship is arguably Kenyan youth's acknowledgement that their identity grows from and is rooted in the past. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the song valorises the full-bodied African woman, a perennial subject in Kenyan music. This testifies to male self-definition through the construction of the other i.e. femininity's desired attributes. Differently stated, urban youth music might at times evince an overt misogyny but, in this context, male identity cannot be conceived independent of the female body.

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The above point is well demonstrated in *Softonia's* fascinating Gikuyu Sheng rap, *Chocolate*. It narrates a 'crash' during which a rich man's daughter rams into the persona's car from behind. The ensuing negotiations about compensation, unexpectedly, lead onto a romance between the speaker and the lady figured as a chocolate brand thereby raising the possibility that the 'accident' is a planned encounter on the latter's part. However, the most significant thing about the song is its use of Bangra which is apparently adopted from Punjabi Cinema. This poses a critical question, where do we place Indians in the wider Kenyan debate about identity? Cultures, even when they 'crash' into each other can always be fruitfully tapped into. Urban youth, for instance, love *Bhajia* (*the samosa may be more popular and accessible?*), an Indian snack considered to be a marker of class but they hardly appropriate any cultural expression from India.<sup>8</sup> Also, rather than mainly looking towards Hollywood, Kenyan film could explore to see what engagements might obtain from Indian cinema. Thus, *Softonia* has redirected people's attention to India, a space that is often overlooked in Kenyan debates on global culture. This 'rediscovery' of India in Kenya might be seen as a countering of the dominance of Western expressive practices in youth culture.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to address itself to issues of self-definition among Kenya's urban youth. By examining contemporary youth pop music practices alongside those of older generation singers, we have sought to demonstrate that young people are continually contesting predominant concepts of identity while simultaneously repackaging some traditional ideas into 'new' performative modalities. Local experience, not Western or American values, form the real ground upon which contestation takes place; a Western pose is merely a consumer culture-driven tactical guise.

The youth have over recent years become increasingly aware of the potent agency of their subculture in Kenyan public affairs. The use of GidiGidi Majimaji's immensely successful song '*Unbwogable*' in the 2002 general elections forcefully brought this point home (see Nyairo & Ogude, 2005). In early 2006, the Government Spokesman... (name) launched a nation-wide competition for singers to compose patriotic songs. Again, the youth featured centrally in that contest. Similarly, in July 2006 the Institute for Education and Democracy (IED), through the *Red Korna* comedy performers, was involved in the *Vijana Tugutuke* [Youth awareness] campaign to get young people to register as voters. These three instances indicate that society, more than ever before, is paying keener attention to youth culture, especially its statements and modalities of performance in music. Whether this is going to result in formally recognized participation of the youth in public life is a different question altogether. What is clear though is that mainstream Kenyan society can no longer ignore or wish away young people's positions and claims in public discourses on identity, taste and belonging. A proposal by the Kenya Publisher's Association on publishing in Sheng (Ngare, 2006) quite correctly gestures to this kind of engagement; indeed, there has been a significant use of Sheng in mainstream society, with support from mainstream newspapers (see Githiora, 2019).

<sup>8</sup>Comic rapper Ndarlin' P's 'Gaceeri' track (1999) has a young man wooing a young girl with the promise of buying her a bhajia. Indians have been in Kenya since 1895, but there is remarkably little cultural contact between them and other Kenyans. The anxieties attendant to this phenomenon are aptly captured in a romance "Kama Sura" between a Luo bakery worker and his Indian employer's daughter featured in Kwani? 01.

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# Connected histories of dance in central colonial Kenya

Cécile Feza Bushidi



As I read my research notes and reflective journals, I realize how much the conceptual praxis of analysis for my study has changed. It has shifted, at times, from a rather inward-focused history of colonial-era dance among Agĩkũyũ communities to a wider connected history of dance and colonialism. The narrative's theoretical lens moved as I fully embraced my own positionality; which itself changed as I processed my own legacies of transformative mobility, of taking space in society as a 'knower' of embodied knowledge, of dancing in, at times, unfamiliar social environments.

Writing a history of dance among Agĩkũyũ people in colonial central Kenya bears witness to personal and communal reflections on how the dancing bodies of persons of African descent articulate visions, absorb life-changing experiences, and negotiate relationships. A historical imagining of dance, sheds light on the centrality of embodied subjectivities in expanding identities in heterogenous contexts of domination. The narrative speaks to lines of enquiry that have guided dance scholarship on Africa and the African Diaspora and furnished me with tools to understand the purpose and value of my own dancing journey. That the dancing body constructs multiple selves and presents an opportunity for theorizing various notions of blackness in motion that resist any fixed, narrow, and determined idea of "African" or "Black"—no matter how uncomfortable the experience *still* is for some—are concepts that connect colonial central Kenya's dance stories to an expansive history of dance (Banks, 2010; Neveu-Kringelbach, 2013; Borelli, 2016; Despres, 2016; Covington-Ward, 2016; Livermon, 2020; Cole, 2020). The ongoing process of writing this article, which is part of a wider book project, is one that mixes my own intellectual perspectives about dance and history with a plausible analysis of colonial-era Gĩkũyũ dance practice, history, belief systems and values.

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However, as the historian and public intellectual Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes in a thought-provoking essay: "Who has the right to study, the right to teach, to broach fraught subjects at a time when the temptation to police culture has never been higher?" (Gates, 2021). In times of complex, often contradictory desires to "police culture", my research stance remains open to criticism, not least because it dislocates local conceptions, categories, and experiences of dance. Such is the case, for in the times we live, even acknowledging one's positionality in relation to the Africa-based persons about whom one writes can swiftly invite contempt, no matter the researcher's life trajectory defined in relation to intersectional divergences in bodily training, intellectual focus, ethnicity, language, nationality, geographic place of "home", and sometimes, but by no means always, economic class. This is part of the process, because as Gates (2021) explains, "we must not exempt ourselves from scrutiny; whenever we treat an identity as something to be fenced off from those of another identity, we sell short the human imagination."

Myriad imaginative dance histories in the African context remain to be written. There exists an extensive anthropological literature on dance in Africa that addresses movement, spirituality, sexuality, gender and pedagogy. Historical research, on



the other hand, has yet to explore the possibilities and constraints of reading dancing bodies in texts, images, and objects to imagine, for instance, how dancing shaped interactions between historical actors and fashioned politics, social attitudes and sentiments of belonging. In this short concept essay, I'd like to introduce three ways in which I'm weaving a history of colonial-era dance among Agikūyū communities into: the making of early colonial biopower; the expression of rooted cosmopolitanism; and connected Africana dance aesthetics.

### Warrior dances in the making of early colonial biopower

For over two hundred years, European views of warrior dancing bodies from the Americas to Africa to Oceania rested on the idea that most young, non-white Indigenous men were "violent savages." For instance, dance historian Paul Scolieri noted that in 1519 Spanish conquistadors recorded an Aztec warrior re-enacting a violent ritual of human sacrifice at the Spanish court of King Charles V (Scolieri, 2013, 70-72). European paintings, engravings, and etchings of the dancing body of the Aztec warrior sought to instil terror. In eastern Ethiopia, the British explorer and writer Richard Burton's account of his 1854-1855 travel around Harar was replete with descriptions of "war dances" that filled him with anxiety (Burton, 1894). Nineteenth-century travel writing about AmaZulu warriors dancing with thrusting and stabbing weapons projected images of the Zulu Kingdom's warrior dances as a military and political force with which any army would have to contend (Firenzi, 2012). Hypermasculine West African male dancers executing ballistic movements over rapid drum rhythms with threatening faces drew thousands of viewers to see the phantasmic French music-hall show *Au Dahomey* at the Parisian Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin in 1892 (Chalaye, 2002). As theatrical fixations on Indigenous "war dances" glorified imperial violence, these staged representations appropriated the same dance practices that European agents were fighting on the colonial frontiers.

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Indeed, historians of dance have known for some time about the weight of the coding of warrior bodies during the making of imperial regimes in the Americas, Africa and beyond. The colonial codification of dancing warrior bodies as starkly unruly was used to justify the containment of dances and whole peoples through discipline and punishment to impose colonial power. A threat to federal politics by the early 1880s, the so-called scalp dances and war dances, perceived as unchristian, warlike, and unproductive, were outlawed in Canada and the United States. Under the command of zealous Protestant and Catholic missionary boards and Church groups, especially in the United States, the control of dance on mismanaged Indian reservations sought to assimilate Indigenous populations into a capitalist ideology of private property and wage labour. By 1883, dancing was counted among these "Indian offenses." Those caught were imprisoned. In many areas, such as British Columbia, First Nation people not only circumvented the laws, relocating dancing events to locations hidden from the gaze of government agents, but also had recourse to the law to protest and circumvent anti-dance laws (Murphy, 2007, 23-40, 45-46).

In central colonial Kenya, colonial written archives certainly portrayed Agikūyū dancing warrior bodies using the tropes that global colonial spectatorship created around the 1500s of non-white and Black male dancing bodies: as raw, subversive, and hypermasculine. However, these confrontational North American encounters with Indigenous "war-dancing" cultures invite us to think about the variations in colonial policy towards dancing in settler colonial projects. Warrior dances such as *ngurū* and *kibaata* have not only been the subject of eradication efforts. The case of colonial Kikuyuland invites us to think along new entangled lines of "war dances" and their reinvention as tools for colonial governance. By and large, by virtue of the complexity of the political

economy of *ngurū* and *kībaata*—as well the courtship dancing events *mūgoiyo* and *gīcukia*— and because of the nature of indirect rule, anti-dance policies applied through a regime of offenses, punishments and fines could scarcely escape the mediation of Gīkūyū Indigenous interests, in particular the interests of some chiefs and elders. For most of the first three decades following initial colonial penetration in the 1880s, colonial biopower and elders’ gerontocratic power sought to bring dancing warrior bodies under control. These colonial and reinvented gerontocratic authorities reframed the previously sanctioned warrior dance complex on the pretext that its youthful “violent” bodies had corrosive effects on inter-Gīkūyū societal relations and on colonial law and order, thereby justifying the legal punishment of these young men’s bodies and the domestication of the warrior dance complex. Colonial rhetoric about excessive male dancing bodies spoke to both British colonial anxieties about law and order and to precolonial Gīkūyū dynamics about intra-male struggles over political power, wealth, and access to marriageable women (Mūriūki, 1974).

Using the skewed language of “native law” so dear to the exercise of imperial power, Indigenous intermediaries coloured the customary sexual practices associated with the warrior dance tradition with alternative interpretations. Gīkūyū warrior-dancing cultures have been major contributors to the creation of colonial tools of governance, spawning divide-and-rule tactics, reinventions of institutions of warrior social organization, and an apparatus of punishment, fines, and “native laws”.

### Rooted cosmopolitanism

A history of colonial-era dance among Agīkūyū communities also speaks to an East African and interwar international history of military-inspired and close-partner dances. Much has been written about the East African-wide modern phenomenon of *beni ngoma* and *dansi*, and about the “European dances” that many East Africans observed among settlers in the 1920s, including improvisational versions of the fast-paced foxtrot (Ranger, 1975; Callaci, 2011). *Dansi* grew out of youth spatial mobility and created new consumption behaviours. Part of a wider post-WW1 enthusiasm for thrilling, fast-paced ballroom-style dances in East Africa and beyond, Africans’ interwar appropriation of Euro-American idioms like the foxtrot, fashion, and nightlife produced cosmopolitanism. As philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah might argue, post-war Africans conversed with embodied aesthetics ‘that [speak] from some place other than [their] own’ (Appiah, 2007, 85).



One could argue that interwar cosmopolitanism in rural colonial central Kenya emerged from the lifestyles of transregional and transnational individuals who were exposed to new aesthetic diversions that distinguished them from their local kin and communities. The post-war selves of *ex-askari* and Agikūyū migrant workers who commuted between the countryside and Nairobi transformed rural dance praxis and enhanced the dialogue between urban and rural dancing cultures. In addition, these dancing genres—some, but not all rooted into couple dances (Mūhoro, 2007)—enlarged their sense of identity, producing multiple selves that existed within fluid social gathering spaces. Indeed, new local expressions of *beni*, *ndaci* and *ndarama* shaped new cosmopolitan life-worlds ‘across boundaries of identity’ (Appiah, 2007, 85). It is also evident that some of these styles retained fragments from long-established social and aesthetic practices, and as such, they conveyed the dancers’ sense of rooted cosmopolitanism. For instance, *ndaci* may have drawn from the long-established *gīcukia*, during which enlaced young men and women held each other close in duet formation. Old and new dance numbers produced sentiments and bodily manifestations of cosmopolitanism rooted in local performance features – be they movement, social or political aesthetics – and in people’s explorations of living possibilities during colonialism. Moreover, colonial written archives such as Native Council Minutes, handwritten letters in Kiswahili produced by Agikūyū young men based in towns and the countryside, and oral interviews of contemporary cultural figures also suggest that both various genres of *ndaci* and iconic warrior dances were concomitantly mobilized as part of interwar socio-political movements and interactions within Agikūyū communities, and between Agikūyū and colonial agents. Dancing opened alternative dialogues with colonial structures and afforded many with independent arenas of belief within which they negotiated various modes of belonging, subjectivity, and domination. The rooted cosmopolitanism embodied in colonial central Kenya imagined polysemic communities of colonial enactment and dissent.

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### Distinct stories, connected aesthetics

Last, this discussion also resonates with a Black dance scholarship that has for a long time produced insightful studies on dance aesthetics from/in Africa. It is a field that has opened new ways to think about bodies in motion in relation to political power, crowds, and subversive performance in colonial domains (Covington-Ward, 2015). Historical imaginings of colonial-era dance, performance, and body cultures among persons who lived in central Kenya can be in dialogue with contemporary research agendas in Black Dance Studies. According to dance historian and theorist Thomas DeFrantz, “Black is the manifestation of Africanist aesthetics. The willingness to back-phrase, to move with percussive attack, to sing against the grain of the other instruments, and to include the voices of those gathered in the fabric of the event—these are elements of Black that endure and confirm.” (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014, 5). Memoirs written by Agikūyū individuals, colonial-era ethnographic records, postcards, and photographs provide insight into how aspects of local movement aesthetics, bodies in motion and sociability can be read as Black by virtue of shared Africanist aesthetics of percussive movement, syncopated rhythms, and orally integrative events. Because of their intentional quality, these dances express variations of blackness because they enlarge communal, individual, and subgroup action. As such, they can be what DeFrantz defines as “Black action: action engaged to enlarge capacity, confirm presence, to dare.” (DeFrantz & Gonzalez 2014, 5).

Consider, for instance, the following interpretation of *ituika* rituals in the early 1920s, found in Mzee Jomo Kenyatta’s 1938 writings:

It was considered that the effective way of proclaiming the new government was to call for war dances to be held in every district, in order to give the population

an opportunity of hearing the announcement of the new constitution. This suggestion was carried unanimously, for it was the only way through which the words, phrases and rhythmic movements of the new songs and dances, in which the laws and regulations of the new democratic government were embodied, could be introduced effectively into the life of the community. On the day appointed, war horns were sounded in all districts, calling the population to come out and hear the decision of the *njama ya ituika* (*Ituika* council). From early in the morning people, old and young, gathered at the appointed place in their particular district and started to dance joyously (Kenyatta, 1978, 193).

These rituals clearly entailed a sequential arrangement punctuated by verbal announcements, displays of joy, and warrior praxis that evoked what dance researcher Brenda Dixon-Gottschild calls “the essence of battle through codified, stylized, theatricalized war dance.” (Dixon-Gottschild, 2003, 261). Arriving at the ritual space, the warriors marched in single file around the large dance field. They then assembled to shape the inner contour of a large circle, surrounded by unmarried young women who sang the praises of the men’s strengths in high-pitched polyphonic fashion. By the mid-1920s, a few colonial officials and missionaries increasingly diversified the broader audience. After laying their shields on the ground, the young men divided themselves into at least four rows, and began to execute a vigorous, drill-like series of high jumps, leaps, aerial turns, and fast forward runs, exercises ‘exclusive to and ubiquitous in many African warrior languages’ (Desch-Obi, 2008; Fromont, 2011, 2013). Young men’s bodies in action may have been a bit less vigorous than two decades prior, when military raids and defence against their Maasai neighbours required an almost daily physical practice. Since that time, such inter-community raids had in part been crushed by so-called colonial “pacification” campaigns meant to assert military control over the region. Nevertheless, each muscular exertion, each step and legwork still sounded *kīgamba* fastened below the knees, which contained *ngaragari*. Young men had to interrupt their forceful moves as a ceremonial leader entered the circle to announce the new edicts and laws that would affect all present. They paused as material symbols of the transfer of power—such as a knife, symbol of the right to slaughter cattle as public sacrifices to Ngai (Karangi, 2005, 203, 380)—were transferred from the deposed generation of elders to the incoming one. The audience remained silent while listening to the orator. Women resumed chanting throughout the orator’s performance, answering in chorus and giving tangible form to the proclamations of new laws by ululating, swaying their bodies from side to side while softly stamping their feet and clapping their hands rhythmically (Wakaba, 2013). At the same time, placing a high value on technical dexterity to give body to a martial ethos—technique and intentional expressiveness being key components of Black dance identified by Dixon-Gottschild—the warriors proceeded to improvise a playful and aggressive series of mock attacks and dodges, displaying individual talents within a warrior communal spirit (Dixon-Gottschild, 2003, 261).

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Such readings of past stories of warrior corporeal values through the lens of Gikūyū institutions and internal dynamics rooted in the past and woven into the colonial era allows for the continued expansion of plural expressions of African agency. Thinking about the past of local bodily practices enlarges the range of colonial-era Indigenous subjectivities in aestheticized motion, emphasizing their contingency within various modes of social interaction and political action anchored into precolonial and contemporary politics.

## Conclusion

Writing a history of dance in colonial central Kenya calls for a humanistic

engagement with dance; one that explores movement, dancing bodies, social identities, choreography, ideology, art histories, ethnographies, memoir and letter writing, images, music, baraza, and oral histories. It allows for various kinds of historical imaginings that can be occupied, fashioned, described, and interrogated through a myriad of lenses and perspectives that maintain a plausible and sound analysis of colonial-era Gikūyū dance practice, history, belief systems and values. Writing new histories of this region—inclusive of local and Indigenous viewpoints anchored in precolonial pasts and connected to wider histories of dance and embodied political action via a more open route of inquiry - might foster a more fluid appraisal of dance stories in light of their relation to the lives of their historical actors and audiences.

## Acknowledgements

This project would not exist without the time I spent with the members of the **Kigera Cultural Group** of Nyeri. I am also very thankful to the late Richard Ambani, and Henry Nyabuto, both of the Kenya National Archives. I thank Thomas DeFrantz, Marie-Aude Fouéré, Chege Githiora, Maya Jasanoff, Paul Scolieri, and Joseph Njoroge wa Ngūgī for their erudition, advice, guidance, and patience.

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# Kenyan Matatu Art and Culture: Reading beyond the romanticism

Caroline Mose



Kenyan matatus, public transport vehicles plying virtually all routes across the country, have always been a fascinating subject for academics and journalists from both home and abroad. Conceptualized as part of 'urban culture', matatus have held the cultural imagination as they ferry passengers from place to place; unique in the sense of being, perhaps, the only transportation sector that has transformed itself into a cultural experience.

Categorized according to city routes and working under the auspices of relevant Matatu Saccos (Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies), especially in the larger metropolis of Nairobi as well as the city of Mombasa, matatus continue to compete in the style of the early to late 2000's MTV show "Pimp My Ride", which was hosted by the hip-hop artist and business mogul Xhibit. In that television show, ordinary cars were 'pimped' up by Xhibit and his garage team, turning them into iconic exhibits, complete with sound systems, television screens, luxury seats, modified engines, Wi-Fi, and graffiti, or other body-work visual art.

Similarly, matatus, especially those plying city routes, have created a pimp-my-ride culture that has now gone hi-tech. Matatus on Nairobi routes such as Rongai and Kiserian, or Kasarani and Githurai, or Umoja and Innercore, continue to flash city highways with colourful alterations. These include creative cross-cultural naming of individual matatus, with identities and designs derived from global cultural phenomenon such as sports, books, television shows, films, and comics. For instance, the matatu *Khaleesi* was so-named at the height of the popularity of the television show *Game of Thrones*, a derivative of the George R.R Martin novel series *Song of Ice and Fire*. In the series, Daenerys Targaryen, also known as the Khaleesi, is a dragon-wielding and fire-resistant character with dreams of empire, and she uses her dragons to try and gain control of the seven kingdoms. The matatu *Khaleesi* depicts this character.

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Pic courtesy of Matwana Matatu Culture Facebook Page

This is not peculiar in Nairobi matatu design culture. Many matatus plying different routes have names from the popular Marvel Cinematic Universe heroes, from Captain America to the Winter Soldier, to the Black Panther and his Dora Milaje army of women warriors. Hip-hop artists, film characters, and popular media usually emblazon the sides as well as insides of matatus. When the Korean hit television series *Squid Game* made its way across the world via Netflix in 2021, it fuelled the global imagination from its gruesome reconstitution of children's games into death games. The series quickly went viral, prompting numerous analytical pieces in world-wide media questioning the violent content, even while comparing it with real-life symbolic and actual violence unleashed by an unregulated and rabid capitalism that creates victims. Two matatus plying Nairobi routes naming themselves after this serial immediately emerged, complete with flashing night lights, graffiti portraying the television show, and interiors that evoked its dark and grim nature.



Pic courtesy of Netflix – Squid Game Series

*The overall experience of taking rides in this souped-up matatu that has flashing lights, loud music, and an interior that would rival that of an international flight in terms of in-flight entertainment, would perhaps be the foremost concern for the rider. In a country where the public transport sector lies in complete shambles, these matatu experiences overshadow the need for other nuances.*

Obviously, these graffiti artists confer their own interpretations of these global popular cultural moments, events, and subjects. The moment in time captured and plastered on *Khaleesi* (the matatu) is but a moment. It is not meant to give the problematic and complicated narratives present in the G.R.R Martin story. While *Squid Games* is an indictment of rabid capitalism that gives rise to exotic and dangerous tastes in billionaires seeking thrills in seeing human beings play fatalistic games against each other for the promise of huge pay-outs, those unfamiliar with this particular story will only see the aesthetic of the matatu art. The overall experience of taking rides in this souped-up matatu that has flashing lights, loud music, and an interior that would rival that of an international flight in terms of in-flight entertainment, would perhaps be the foremost concern for the rider. In a country where the public transport sector lies in complete shambles, these matatu experiences overshadow the need for other nuances. What riders need in the immediate sense is not just a safe ride home, but a comfortable one.

Other problematic characters in the entertainment industry will be represented on matatu interiors and exteriors without particular contexts, and this includes those convicted of murder, rape, and theft. This extends to religious subjects as well. Pastors, bishops and church 'dads' also emblazon matatu interiors and exteriors, with religious verses and epithets accompanying. These are usually preferred by the more religious traveller who may find the other matatus loud and cantankerous especially those that play explicit music and videos.



Still, one must question what Dina Ligaga (2020) has called public scripts within the Kenyan public sphere, where religious, political and cultural phenomena work to push certain narratives that are meant to contain and corral citizens into playing certain roles that are acceptable. In many ways, manufacturing of consent is done through these public spaces, and the matatu remains one of the foremost public spaces where consent is manufactured politically, socially, even religiously as Wa Mūngai (2013) has asserted.

This leads to the so-called 'matatu menace' phenomenon viewed by some as part of matatu culture where participants in this lifestyle are seen to have gone rogue. SACCOs are societies formed to create a savings and investment culture. They are a part of the Kenyan imaginary, a vehicle used to ensure upward mobility and prosperity. At the height of the matatu menace era in the 1990s and early 2000s, the then Interior Minister John Michuki spearheaded the development of public sector regulations that saw matatus forced into route SACCOs to ensure they only plied one route at a time, stripping of graffiti and matatu art, and the donning of uniforms for all matatu crew, with their identification details on full display. This was after matatus became the centre of crime that included kidnappings, rape, robberies and assault. Some of these crimes were the result of enforcing the public scripts. For instance, the periodic stripping of women deemed to be 'underdressed' in the streets of Nairobi by matatu crews has been, in many ways, the patriarchal disciplining of women for not being modest enough. In addition, it was considered punishment for deviating from the set script that demands 'modesty, decency and chaste behaviours' in the male-gaze standard of acceptability for women in public.

However, a continued reading of matatu within a lens of culture only fails to accept the failures of the Kenyan State to provide affordable, safe, and accountable public transportation. The matatu sector remains a private enterprise, driven by profit, and profit alone. This overarching fact is often erased in the romantic views of matatu, matatu art and graffiti in general analysis and scholarship of the sector. Is a matatu culture of graffiti and art, as well as the pimp-my-ride transformations possible within a public transport system? My answer to this is yes. It is possible to still empower young people to 'pimp' public transport to the degree that cultural studies enthusiasts have placed the sector in the culture debate. This is considering that the pimp-my-matatu sector is huge, and empowers a long chain of actors and entrepreneurs to earn a decent living. Rumour on the streets of Nairobi persists that a full pimp of a single matatu can cost upwards of one million shillings. The customization of public transport by these same enterprising young people is still possible under a well-managed public transport service.

The prevailing issues of lack of safety, especially for women and queer folk on public transport and rogue matatu SACCOs that continue to enjoy police protection, would perhaps be mitigated by a well-organized public transportation system. As it is, Police SACCO is itself said to have large numbers of matatus, as do politicians and well-placed business individuals. These matatus mostly operate with impunity, breaking traffic laws, manhandling passengers knowing that the law will not apply to them. This makes the sector difficult to rein in, especially when it comes to criminality and abusive behaviour – by and large, it is women and queer folk who bear the brunt of this abuse. The prevailing public script, which is informed by misogyny, homophobia and queerphobia in general, demands that women and queer folk be disciplined and realigned back to that script. These public scripts cannot and must not be divorced from the analysis of not just the matatu industry and its culture(s), but also at a holistic analysis of the public, popular cultures that must not be romanticized in the reading of African people as subjects. If popular culture is the means by which we come to

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understand the state of a people in time, space, and context, then it must be read in the entirety of those contexts and spaces as political enforcers and also erasers of the isms and phobias of our times.

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*The prevailing public script, which is informed by misogyny, homophobia and queerphobia in general, demands that women and queer folk be disciplined and realigned back to that script. These public scripts cannot and must not be divorced from the analysis of not just the matatu industry and its culture(s)*

# Uhuru Gardens: performing Kenya's civic narrative

Lydia Muthuma



## Abstract

A civic square can be used to manifest the oneness of a community. Pre-1963 Nairobi used City Square to bespeak the Kenya Colony. Fashioned by the coloniser, City Square expressed the values of its designers. It has since proved untenable to continue using this spatial language—this City Square—with its concomitant voice, to express values and concerns of post-colonial Kenya. This paper traces the gradual shifts in aligning and enlivening colonial Nairobi's symbolic space into a clear enunciation of the country's history and heritage, culminating in the newly (2022) commissioned Uhuru Gardens. Of interest is the historical process, spanning several generations, in a bid to cultivate resonance between citizens and their symbolic space. Seven decades into the post colony, Nairobi has eventually loosed itself from the one-acre City Square, to find its appropriate civic expression in the 65-acre Uhuru Gardens –today's civic district.

**Keywords:** civic space, materiality, colonial design, societal values, own voice and values

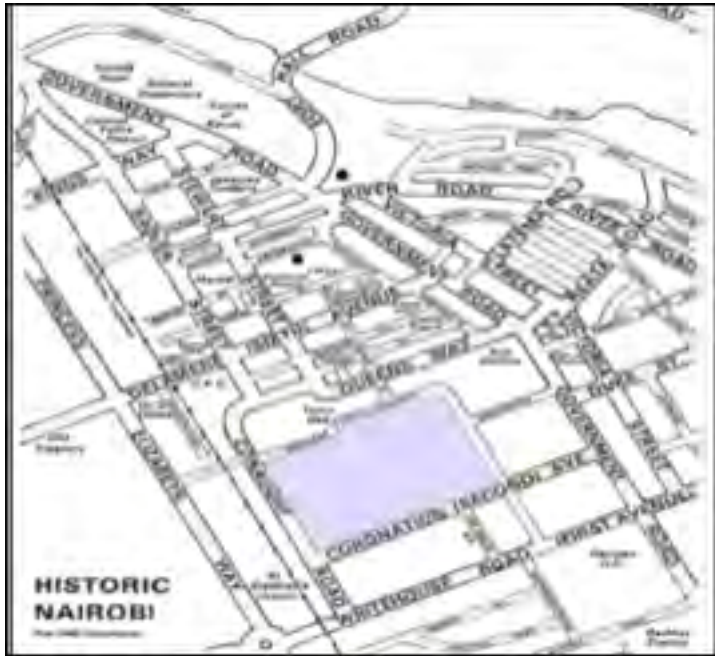
Wikipedia defines a town square (or plaza, public square, city square, urban square or piazza) as an open public space commonly found in the heart of a traditional town (...) that is used for community gathering. The definition goes further to give Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China as the largest. The use of a square –community gathering– makes it a tool for knitting people together, a space for bespeaking their oneness, for buttressing common culture. Nairobi has had a town square since the early 1930s.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>Nairobi's 1948 master plan acknowledges the town square as one more organising principle for urban planning. cf. White, L. W. T., Silberman, L., & Anderson, P. R. (1948). Nairobi, Master Plan for a Colonial Capital: A Report Prepared For the Municipal Council of Nairobi. HM Stationery Office.

New look of Uhuru Gardens the newly commissioned civic district.

Photograph source: nairobi.co.ke <https://www.nairobi.co.ke/news/5480/in-photos-new-look-uhuru-gardens-opens-for-jamhuri-day-celebrations>



*Map of Nairobi CBD in the late colonial times c. 1962*

*The shaded square was the town square*

*image source: pinterest <https://www.pinterest.es/pin/394909461070670395/>*

The town square housed the High Court as Muthuma narrates elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> It was the tangible expression of imperial ‘law and order’. The statue of the then head of the expansive British Empire, King George V was installed into this square to underline its political and civic role. Here, events like the 1945 Victory in Europe day (VE day) were celebrated.



<sup>2</sup>cf. Muthuma, L. W. (2013). *Nairobi in pictures: political icons 1899-2000*.

*Celebrating Victory in Europe (VE) day in 1945. The administration of Kenya Colony used the town square to bring together resident British nationals, reminding them of their social and political ties with far away Britain. photograph source: internet –it is in the public domain*

Viewed as a tool for drawing citizens together, into one nation or other collective, discussion about civic space (town squares) becomes significant. Kenya Colony used the materiality of the town square to bring together British nationals residing in the colony. As Larsen argues, referring to the statue of King George V mentioned above, public monuments stood in colonial Nairobi as visual links to the British Empire and as a means of asserting colonial and imperial power.<sup>3</sup>

Further, Nairobi's town square, when considered as the immediate context of George V's monument, acquires weightier meaning. It also provides a possible rationale for the removal of this monument in 1964, shortly after Kenya's political independence. The square does not seem to have taken root as an expression of the civic spirit of independent Kenya. Civic squares are perceptible forms that encapsulate value and meaning for a given community; their materiality mediates narratives within the social political dialogue. So, by holding the statue of the imperial monarch, colonial Nairobi's town square was a constant and poignant reminder, to the colonised, of their subjugated status. And like other heritage symbols, it delivered more than historical fact—it uncannily incorporated the attendant attitude. All public art, civic squares included, are replete with emotional messaging.



City Square: Dethroning the statue of King George V of Britain ca. 1964  
photograph source: East Africa Standard –in the public domain

Unsurprisingly, in 1963 when the country shifted from colonial to indigenous rule, the city square<sup>4</sup> and its statues registered this change. The statue within was substituted by another; the story of the two statues of Jomo Kenyatta, one erected in 1964 and the other in 1973, is captured in 'How public are public monuments?'<sup>5</sup> Of interest to this paper, is the 1973 statue because it replaced George V to become the visual focal point of city square.

Recipients' perspective of artefacts, city squares included, is often filtered through contemporaneous narratives –regardless of the artist's original intention. And the consequent discourse goes beyond the rational; it can be highly emotive, illustrating the rationale behind consuming public works of art. They are not consumed primarily for their logical rationality but for the direct connection they offer to the psyche through the emotional charge they generate. And, perhaps this accounts for the 10-year lapse in replacing George V's statue with Jomo Kenyatta's. The emotional discomfort of British nationals, still residing in Kenya at the time, may have been responsible for the delay.

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<sup>4</sup>Once Nairobi was promoted to city status, in 1950, the town square likewise became city square.

<sup>5</sup>cf. <https://www.explore-vc.org/en/objects/how-public-are-public-statues.html>

*Much has since been done to replace colonial monuments with local heroes. These embellish City Square and its environs.*



*Jomo Kenyatta's statue erected in city square in 1973. It occupies the same site as the statue of George V. To the extreme left is Kenyatta's 1964 statue while to the right is Dedan Kimathi's 2007 statue.  
image source: © Lydia Muthuma*

But replacing the statue of George V with Kenyatta's, regardless of the 10-year lapse, did not alter the meaning attached to the square. The human context, the immediate recipients, were no longer subjects of the empire but of independent Kenya. Their own civic meaning and connotations were yet to be distilled into this square. There was an apparent mismatch between Kenyan citizens and the civic space of colonial designs, for even after installing the statue of the founding father, Jomo Kenyatta, the square continued to be a civic space more in name than in reality.

It would be facile to interpret the above as a simple rejection of colonial civic design by the contemporary Kenyan. Collective or societal (re)action is influenced by myriad factors. More than rejection, it is a lack of resonance; the square means little to Kenyans. Besides what and who was a Kenyan during the colonial era? What unified cultural entity obtained, by 1963, that equated to an organic Kenyan nation? The people within the country's geographical boundary had not meshed into one –by 1963–through any historical process because in drawing up the country's boundaries, the imperial powers chose to model the peoples into a disparate collection of tribes.<sup>6</sup> As they bound the peoples into one territory, they simultaneously amplified the distinctness of each tribe—colonial Kenya was an amalgam of 42 warring tribes<sup>7</sup> according to Huxley, the foremost colonial literati. Subsequent Kenyan scholars therefore, lay significant responsibility for continued tribal disunity on the imperial template of divide-and-rule. And at the moment of decolonisation, the empire and the world at large harboured minimal expectations of a united post-colonial Kenya. Since there was little hope of a common cultural expression a ready-made colonial civic space could not cohere with the burgeoning nation.

Much has since been done to replace colonial monuments with local heroes. These embellish City Square and its environs.

As can be seen from these two maps below, national narratives, in the form of statues and other monuments, have been constructed over time and according to Larsen, it is by those who have the power and resources to shape the monumental landscape.<sup>8</sup> These encapsulate, in physical, tangible form, the nation's official narrative. Annie Coombes pointed out the inaccuracies in the story attached to Jomo Kenyatta's 1973 statue.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand Edwin Seda praises this same statue: it has the unmistakable character of an icon and can easily be the best-defined statue in the country (Kenya).<sup>10</sup> What the critiques are quiet about is the relationship between the monument at the centre of City Square, and its framing of ethos of the contemporary citizens. They question not if the square be civic in more than just words.

<sup>6</sup>it is no longer politically correct to use the term tribe; ethnicity has replaced it. Here it is referred to as was used in colonial times and with its attendant derogatory connotation.

<sup>7</sup>cf. Elspeth Huxley in a foreword to Colonel Richard Mainetzhagen's Kenya Diary (1902-1906)

<sup>8</sup>Larsen in op. cit.

<sup>9</sup>cf. Coombes, A. E. (2011). *Monumental histories: commemorating Mau Mau with the statue of Dedan Kimathi*. *African Studies*, 70(2), 202-223.

<sup>10</sup><http://www.archidatum.com/projects/jomo-kenyatta-statue-james-butler/>



Colonial monuments in Nairobi Central Business District (CBD) the dotted line shows the pre-1950 railway alignment image source: © Lydia Muthuma



Post-colonial monuments in Nairobi CBD. The railway was redirected in order to widen CBD and Uhuru Park was created to cater for the drainage from Upper Hill image source: © Lydia Muthuma

This article takes up the discourse from this juncture by investigating the action of the state towards modelling a coherent context for the obtaining political status; the what, where and how of fashioning urban materiality into a resonant context for the contemporary civics.

Nairobi's CBD as Kenya's symbolic space has and still is undergoing alterations in more ways than one. In 2022, for instance, the financial district has burst its earlier boundary to overrun the Upper Hill district. Physical headquarters of some significant financial operators in the sectors of banking, insurance and the multinational corporations, have been built into a new architecture. Towers like KCB, UAP, Rahimtulla, Old Mutual and the semi-circular Coca Cola building dominate the landscape of the Upper Hill district, compositing it into a solid financial tapestry.

A similar need to mend the mismatch between City Square's (including the larger CBD) architectural landscape and the civic intentionality is apparent. An alignment to civic functions, somewhat similar to the financial district's, has been wanting. Whereas the national narrative has acquired gravitas, it continues to be confined, in its physical expression, to the space between the Supreme Court and parliament buildings – the de jure civic space. The square is physically squashed into a one-acre field and has yielded to everyday mundane activities like car parking and marketing fairs for various merchandise. Only the Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC) and Kenyatta's 1973 statue lend a semblance of civic credence to activities therein. Meanwhile state functions addressing the nation at large, like commemorations of Madaraka or Jamhuri Day, take place elsewhere, not in the supposed civic space.

Given this anomaly the current head of state at the time of writing, Uhuru Kenyatta, designated a site for performing the histories of the nation, accompanied by exhibitions in the new Mashujaa (Heroes) Museum. The Uhuru Gardens has once again been appointed the national symbolic space; the colonial one-acre space is superseded by the 65-acre Uhuru Gardens. This action was deliberate and planned over a long time as explained in *The making of Uhuru Gardens*, a 17-minute documentary, produced by the national broadcaster, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The making of Uhuru Gardens <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ1wLZESFM>

To pin down the cultural expression-cum-heritage of a nation into a physical city square may appear constricting and a usurping of the role of the museum. Uhuru Gardens, the new civic district combines a Kenyan museum with its other civic responsibilities.

Previously Kenya's heritage was assembled into a colonial museum in the *lait motif* of divide-and-rule, consisting of a collection of material artefacts representing different and distinct tribes. And for many decades thereafter, independent Kenya continued to classify heritage into traditional versus modern categories; one premised upon (pristine) tribes as found by the coloniser, while the other is an amalgam of urban, western/modern style of life. This binary categorisation has underpinned scholarly approaches to the country's heritage.

However, culture, considered more as process and less of a collection of exhibits, has kept in tandem with the society in Kenya. The outstanding and on-going work in independent Kenya (for the last 60 years) has been, among others, to knit the peoples into one cultural group without overlooking their rich ethnic variety. Contemporary society has outrun the museum's approach to heritage representation: that assemblage, classification and exhibition of tribal artefacts. For apart from referencing a time that is long gone, the museological perspective is from without the country as is the expected decoding and appreciation of the said artefacts. Items that were perhaps curious to a European audience take precedence in curation while material that captures today's vibrant youth may be absent.

Besides, those formal categories of modernism are being replaced by the more dynamic post-modernism. This latter approach is more inclusive for it acknowledges styles of living that fall between traditional ethnic mores and what is considered modern/western. Is this what the Mashujaa Museum hoped to achieve?<sup>12</sup>

Monuments erected according to the reign of successive post independent presidents: Jomo Kenyatta with statues of himself in or near City Square; Daniel Moi with the abstract Nyayo mountain and the Peace, Love, Unity fountain in Uhuru Park and Mwai Kibaki with the Kimathi and Tom Mboya statues, have been mapped out.<sup>13</sup> They are seen as an effort to weave in a Kenyan narrative into space designed by a different social order. The contribution of Kenya's fourth president has been to move away from Nairobi CBD into larger grounds where the culture, nature and history of the country are symbolically assembled for the purpose of own appreciation i.e., they are told from a Kenyan perspective in order to be consumed by the Kenyan populace—a reflective narrative in a Kenyan voice.

Just as no two people speak in the same voice, no two cultures act in the same way. Civic space, as a territorial organising principle and for assembling citizens together both literally and metaphorically, has been adapted to be a more fitting context for the Kenyan narrative. It now remains to see the popular response.

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<sup>12</sup>The aims of Uhuru Gardens as site and national monument are listed in, *The making of Uhuru Gardens*, in *op. Cit.*

<sup>13</sup>cf. Larsen, in *op. cit.*, Muthuma in *op. cit.* and Coombes in *op. cit.*



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# Sheng: Youth Identity Marker

Nathan Ogechi



This article is an excerpt of a longer piece that was published under the title "Sheng as Youth Identity Marker: Reality or Misconception?" in Njogu, Kimani (Ed) *Culture, Performance and Identity; Paths of Communication in Kenya: Art, Culture and Society*, Vol 2. of 2008.

It appears here subjected to minor edits.

Sheng is a fluid code whose grammar is largely but not always based on Kiswahili with a highly lexicalized vocabulary that is sourced from various codes blended with several innovations (Ogechi, 2004; 2005). See an example of older Sheng construction from the early 1970s to mid 2000s,

*Msee mpandhree amenokii na manzi msapere.*  
'An Indian man has fallen in love with a Kikuyu girl'.

*Hanyee ilibamba vinoma sana.*  
'The night out was very exciting'.

The precise periodization of the advent of Sheng is not clear and different scholars give their different views. For instance, Mazrui (1995) claims that a Sheng-like code existed in the Nairobi underworld in the 1930s among pick-pockets. On her part, Spyropolous (1987) suggests that Sheng was in use in the 1950s but only assumed prominence in the 1970s. Osinde (1986) and Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) follow this position when they also assert that Sheng emerged as a peer youth code in the low socio-economic eastern suburbs of Nairobi in the 1970s.

Although the grammar of Sheng is based on another code, its lexicon is semantically unique. The words could (but not always) have surface morphemes that resemble those of a stable code but they are highly lexicalized in that their meaning is different. For instance, *pata doo poa* has *doo* (dough – money) and *poa* (cool) sourced from English and Kiswahili respectively. However, the meaning of the two words in the Sheng context is different from what each word means in the source language. I have stated elsewhere that once the lexemes leave their source language(s) to be used in Sheng, they assume a new meaning (sense) altogether (Ogechi, 2005). This tallies with another assertion, namely, "Sheng is a lexical issue and that the lexicon is the most productive area in the study of identity negotiation in Sheng" (Githinji, 2005 cited in Githinji, 2006, p. 447). Falling from this argument, Sheng is here treated as an identity marker in the sense that it is highly lexicalized and its lexicon is only intelligible to a few in-group members to whom it is a powerful identity marker while it powerfully excludes those that do not know it. Various groups will use different varieties of Sheng to mark themselves out from others.

## Sheng and youth identity

It cannot be gainsaid that a majority of inquiries perceive Sheng as a youth phenomenon (Osinde, 1986; Spyropolous, 1987; Mazrui and Mphande, 1990; Kembo-Sure, 1992). This however needs to be further qualified in the sense

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that various groups among this age-bracket use different unique varieties. The different groups among the youth include adolescents, college students and young working people (those of the low class and those in the higher classes). Nzunga (2002, p. 77) captured this categorization when he claimed that “*Sheng is spoken by young children who have not attained school age, adolescents and young working people of all social classes*” Given my conceptualization of the youth (age 18 to 35), I do assess Sheng as an identity marker among those not in the school age.

### Adolescents

The youth’s language is highly imaginative and innovative and is usually out of the mainstream language use. For instance, the adolescent group of the youth have unique distinctive traits. de Klerk and Antrobus (2007, p. 266) observe that they have

an intense preoccupation with clothing, other adornments, and general social behaviour, of which language is an important part... it is in adolescence where linguists discover the highest levels of linguistic innovation, because of the high density of their social networks.

One of the codes that adolescents use in Kenya is Sheng. My interview with the youth at Moi University seemed to concur with de Klerk and Antrobus. The students claimed that it is highly likely but not always true that the youth who sport studs on their earlobes, have a penchant for jeans, headbands, plaited hair, or locs, speak and identify each other through Sheng among other markers of identity. Some, not all, youth have these characteristics.

As already indicated, adolescents are a linguistic hothouse. Some among them, could use an imaginative and innovative ‘private language’ --Sheng-- often with the intention of being ambiguous and misunderstood in order to exclude outsiders from their group. Their choice of Sheng is not due to lack of a language of wide-communication but for the need to create an identity specific to that particular group. As de Klerk and Antrobus (2004, p. 266) emphasize it “*is a shared linguistic code, reinforcing group membership, and indicating shared knowledge and interests and the all-important sense of belonging.*” So, whereas Kiswahili is the language of wider communication in much of urban Kenya besides the existence of other indigenous languages, Sheng appears to be the preferred and default code choice. The adolescents are largely high school students and according to Nzunga (2002), the Sheng of adolescents is rich in gastronomic vocabulary. It also carries truncated names (of the Sheng variety) of the schools that they attend. This lexicon distinguishes them not just from the rest of society in general but also from the rest of the youth:

nyame, nyaki	‘meat’
chipo, chiba	‘french fries’
chapo	‘chapati – favourite Kenyan dish’
pango	‘Pangani Girls’ High School
Jamuu	Jamhuri High School

(Nzunga, 2002, pp. 90–1)

By using such vocabulary, the adolescents in the largely urban schools with *shengnised* place names are identified vis-à-vis society in general and the non-urbanised youth in particular.

### University level youth

There are indications that although a lot of the lower academic level Sheng vocabulary is carried over to the university institutions, it acquires an academic

*There are indications that although a lot of the lower academic level Sheng vocabulary is carried over to the university institutions, it acquires an academic tint or a delicate semantic value*



tint or a delicate semantic value (Nzungu, 2002, p. 90). Thus, whereas it is not possible to claim that university students do not share the Sheng vocabulary with what the rest of the society uses, some vocabulary is unique to them. Such a change is in itself negotiation of another identity *vide* a powerful code—Sheng. For instance, discussion about sex and HIV/AIDS vividly illustrates identity construction through Sheng. The HIV/AIDS pandemic afflicts Kenyan society in general and Sheng is one of the codes used to discuss it. However, the choice of code, particularly the diction for describing the pandemic will construct an identity that is unique to various categories of the youth. My study among university students (Ogechi, 2005, p. 130) indicates that the creation and lexicalization of Sheng words and expressions about sex and HIV/AIDS that I collected is largely restricted to the university students as its creation and use is logically associated with the youth's learning environment. For example, the main preoccupation of university students is reading and writing. Thus, the tools used in these tasks are associated with the human body organs and how they are used during sexual intercourse.

<i>Patia lekchas</i> ('give lectures')	> make love
<i>raaba</i> ('pencil rubber')	> condom
<i>kalamu</i> ('pen')	> penis

Indeed, some of these Sheng lexemes could be used by other youth but it is most likely that university students will easily understand them and therefore use them as a powerful tool to negotiate their identity. Furthermore, although the foregoing examples can be associated with the general university student fraternity activities, the following examples were most likely initially coined and identifiable with university students studying engineering courses.

<i>pima oil</i> ('measure oil')	> make love
<i>injin imenoki</i> ('engine has knocked')	> contract a sexually transmitted disease
<i>fungua buut</i> ('open a car boot')	> practise homosexuality

People who deal with vehicles know that they frequently have to ascertain the level of oil in their vehicles' engines using a dipstick. In Kiswahili, that act is called *kupima oili* ('ascertaining the oil level'). This is done by removing the dipstick from the oil aperture in the engine casing, wiping it, dipping it into the aperture again and removing it to read the oil level.

In addition, an engine that has 'knocked' ceases functioning. This failure to function is due to lack of oil or some other mechanical reason. In the context of love making, engine is associated with either the male or female genital organs. These organs could 'knock' if they are infected and therefore do not function normally—a situation that could be experienced if one is a HIV/AIDS case.

A *boot* is the rear part of a car. It can be opened and used to carry luggage while the front is where the driver and passenger sit. It is not normal for the driver to open the boot and drive from there. The youth associate this abnormal use of the car-boot with practising homosexuality. Thus, *kufungua buut* refers to anal sex, and in some cases, of a forced kind – sodomy – which has a role in the prevalence of HIV/AIDS cases.

These youth's level of education and training has empowered them to coin and use such terms that are largely intelligible among themselves and hence it is their 'we-code' for their 'we-' identity.

### Urban vis-à-vis rural youth

Another angle of identity is whether or not Sheng distinguishes the urban youth from the rural ones. I consider towns and cities especially those with multi-ethnic dwellers urban while other settlements without these attributes are rural. In most urban settlements with some modicum of industrialization, one finds the elite suburbs where the high-income earners live, on the one hand, and the other estates where the low-income earners reside, on the other hand. The main language of communication in Kenyan urban settlements is Kiswahili although English could be the default code choice among the dwellers of the elite estates. The vernaculars are usually the language of wider communication in rural areas although Kiswahili (being a national language) can also be used (Ogechi, 2003). Despite this language-use scenario, since the advent of Sheng, the code has been associated not only with the urban youth but specifically with the youth from the low-income estates (Abdulaziz and Osinde, 1997; Kembo-Sure, 1992; King'ei, 2001; Mkangi, 1984). That is why poverty and low levels of education were used as defining characteristics that gave birth to Sheng. Mkangi (1984 cited in Kingei, 2001, p. 6) asserts that

Sheng can be seen as a response to a dichotomized and discriminatory sociolinguistic environment. This situation was given rise to by the deliberately planned urban environment designed to reflect, perpetuate and stress the country's socio-economic class distinctions founded and perfected by the colonial government at the turn of the 19th century. This is illustrated by the fact that all manufacturing industries were located in the eastern part of the city of Nairobi where poor uneducated Africans were hired as cheap labour and forced to live in crowded estates with minimal social services such as schools or hospitals. Sheng was therefore, a reaction to the challenge of a life of deprivation and segregation in a stratified and hierarchical society with all the attendant class-based differentiations.

This skewed perception has been reinforced by Sheng's polar code, Engsh. According to Nzunga (2002, p. 88) Engsh is used by the children of the Kenyan elite and certainly by those in the western suburbs of Nairobi (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). However, there are no pointers that Sheng is only used by the poor and 'uneducated' urban youth. To begin with, Mazrui's (1995) inquiry proved that the youth from both the eastern and western suburbs of Nairobi used the code

for solidarity. Indeed, he argued that class differentiation in the western sense is not fully developed in Kenya. Secondly, the fact that university students, an elite group, presently also use Sheng illustrates that Sheng is not an identity marker for the poor urban youth. Furthermore, not all universities in Kenya are located in urban centres yet Sheng is prevalent in all universities.

What is interesting is that inasmuch as Sheng (as widely known) originated and is in wide currency in the cities, it has spread to the rural areas. The Sheng speaking youth in urban centres and those in boarding schools have a powerful influence on those in the rural areas. The former are seen as being trendy and 'better' than those who do not speak Sheng. They can rap and talk of an urban "heng" (disco) lifestyle that the rural folk hanker for. Thus the latter are easily attracted by the power of Sheng and learn it. The spread and acquisition of Sheng lexicon is enhanced by the rap music that is popular among the youth (urban and rural). They confront social issues, frankly discussing sex, relationships, and AIDS. As Samper (2004, p. 39) observed:

Locally produced rap music's popularity in Kenya has recently been on the rise. What started as simple imitation of American rap in local clubs and competitions has blossomed into a truly Kenyan cultural form. Part of this success has come from the use of Sheng, Kiswahili, and vernacular languages in the songs. The use of local languages, but especially Sheng, has helped.

The spread of Sheng first from urban areas to rural areas shows that it is very difficult presently for one to safely claim that Sheng is an identity marker of only the urban youth. Indeed, the rappers do not just address themselves to the urban youth but to all. The rappers themselves, popularly known as *Genge* fall in the category I have defined as youth. They are aged between 16 and 30 years and they include Nonini, Abbas Kubuff, Flex, Jua Cali, Kleptomaniacs. They rap on topics close to the youth, such as sex, drugs, alcohol, women and partying.

These songs are played and aired by radio and TV stations. Thus, the music reaches both rural and urban youth who sing along with musicians, identify with the song, and by extension the Sheng used therein. The songs are also played in discos where the presiding disco jockeys are mostly youthful and they also rap in Sheng.

### Sheng and gender among youth

It has been claimed that gender differences are manifest in code choice (Coates, 1989). The use of Sheng may not be an exception especially when one follows Mazrui's (1995) contention that Sheng has characteristics of slang. If this is true, then Sutton's (1995) claim that there is prevalent use of slang among more men than women could be assumed also on Sheng. However, other works such as Maurer (1976), Herzler (1965) and de Klerk and Antrobus (2004) have noted tendencies for women to encroach on this all-male precinct. Both sexes use Sheng especially to discuss or gossip about the 'other' sex, more so on matters of beauty, handsomeness and sex. For instance, the following words are in vogue on naming the 'other'.

#### Men talking about women

*Yule shore ana haga*  
*Yule demu ana gondo*  
*Lwagza/Michelin*  
*Anastua/hayuko mchezoni/Ni ong'ang'o*  
*Yule manzi ana matuzo/manyundos*

That girl has huge hips.  
 That lady is pregnant.  
 nice legs  
 She is ugly/not pretty.  
 That girl has a big bust.

#### Women talking about men

*Reptail/casper/oboho/ofwenya*  
*Denzel/Hector*

bad looking guy/not handsome  
 good looking guy (Women use names of celebrities especially movie stars and musicians whom they consider attractive)

It appears that both sexes use Sheng. The only notable difference is that they use different words to describe some characteristics that are the same. There can be no guarantee that these words are not known by the other group. What is certain is that as soon the opposite group learns the words used, particularly the pejorative ones, new words will be coined.

### Youth versus adults

Sheng, like other fluid codes in Africa (e.g. Tsotsitaal and Iscamto in South African, Indoubil in Ivory Coast, Camfranglais in Cameroun), originated and was first used by the youth. However, it is now obvious that it is used by adults (Githiora, 2002; Ogechi, 2005). It is notable, for example, that in Nairobi the street children are the main users of Sheng. Some of them are no longer children but adults who are raising street families through Sheng. Other notable adults who speak it include Ballack Muluka, a *Saturday Standard* columnist and managing director of Mvule Publishers. He particularly reminisces about the Sheng variety that he and others used in the 1970s. The variety, he avers, is quite distinct from the one that is presently in vogue.

My informants at Moi University also reported that the Sheng-speaking youth, especially in urban centres address adults, notably their parents, in Sheng. The parents will often respond in either Kiswahili, English, mother tongue or codeswitching although some do respond in Sheng. In such cases, an entire family uses Sheng. If using Sheng in such an interaction is to be deemed identity, then both youth and adults negotiate identity through Sheng. By the adults choosing to speak in Sheng, they are accommodating speech in order to enhance solidarity (Giles & Powelsland, 1975).

### Conclusion

This paper sought to find out whether or not Sheng is a youth identity marker in Kenya. The discussion showed that Sheng is indeed a powerful marker of identity. However, the identity appears not to be static; rather it is negotiated and keeps on changing. Various factors determine the identity that is negotiated. Thus, there are times when Sheng is an identity marker of the youth although not all youth know the code. It also came out that it is possible for some adults to identify themselves with the youth *vide* Sheng and at such times, some youth may be excluded since they do not know Sheng. On balance, the article shows that the perception that Sheng is a youth identity marker may have been overtaken by time.

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## E) Merging of the Old with The New: *Continuity of Children's Songs and Rhymes in Hip-hop Music* Godfrey Ikahu Kariuki



While the idea of recording music and disco is not very old in Africa, this does not mean that there was an absence of musical performances for public consumption. Hip-hop music, coming from the disco background where the Disc Jockey (DJ) would acknowledge the audience and introduce the singers, was never originally meant to be recorded. The DJs interrupted with rap commentaries to inject immediacy in an otherwise old recording, thus enlivening and cheering up the audience. The chorus in Hip-hop songs not only acted as an interlude but was also used by artists to create a specific atmosphere; either for excitement or to charge up the audience's emotions or summarise the theme of the song. This was an intentional move by the artist to induce memorability of the song in their audience. Hip-hop has created newer forms of popular music culture within Africa. The hip-hop artists, as African cultural practitioners, have innovatively harnessed these new forms of technology in a manner that not only serves to retain the old genres of African literature, but also blends them more effectively, bringing out new conventions and new genres that are specific to African popular culture. Notably, hip-hop's origin is in its reliance on beats and chorus of well-known and liked songs in the community. Amongst the popular beats and chorus are those that borrow from children's play songs. By doing so, today's hip-hop rappers rely and borrow renowned beats and choruses like those mentioned above and combine these with original rap composition sections. This paper thus interrogates the role of old genres of African literature and the contemporary interaction with hip-hop music, the creativity, the discourses of formations, re-formation and the transformations that go beyond entertainment, to the blending of the unfamiliar with the familiar. It also interrogates the insertion of the old into the new as a way of negotiation and instruction in all aspects of African Life.

**Words:** Hip-hop, Children Play songs and verses, African Cultural Practices,

The future of oral songs and specially that of children play songs and verses has been studied and analysed and noted to be in decline. Its threat is attributed to modern day schooling and ways of living. Aaron L. Rosenberg, 2008; Abu Abarry, 1989; Ruth Finnegan, 1970 point out that key factors contributing to this threat include rural-urban migrations, the difference in pedagogy and socializations between the past and contemporary times, with the young spending most of their formative years in school, and a home environment which offers newer mediums of recreational activities like the video games, Netflix, board games and others. Therefore, researchers recommend that for the future of songs, especially children play songs and verses, these need to be collected, analysed and preserved. In addition, more research should be carried out to inform policy making by education authorities to enable effective teaching in all sectors of educational institutions – from nursery school all the way to tertiary institutions (Abarry, 1989, p. 214).

Abu Abarry, 1989; Chesaina Ciarunji, 2007 among other scholars, have reaffirmed the importance of children's play songs and verses in the moral, social, emotional, psychological development and socialization within the African context. To

*Even though children play songs and verses are specifically performed by children, a different trend is taking shape in the contemporary orature.*

understand what children's verses consist of, Johan Huizinga (1949) gives us the actualization of this genre as one that "requires the interplay of text, music and dramatization with the playground as the stage". He further continues to state that children verses consist of four elements: a presence of children and their ability to perform; a space enough to accommodate them (be it in a ring, circle or line); the availability of light to aid in visibility and theatrical props which are clothes for disguise (1949, p. 10). It should be noted that not in all situations do the elements as subscribed by Huizinga need to exist. There are instances where children songs and verses do not entail theatrical props since to the children, the clothes they wear through their imagination and their ability to perform and envision the playground as a stage is enough.

Even though children play songs and verses are specifically performed by children, a different trend is taking shape in the contemporary orature. The performance of children songs and verses has transitioned not just from the traditional space to the modern, but also in the mode of production and consumption. Its transition is not only in the performers but also in the place of the performance. The transition in the performers involves that from school children to that of adults (in the case of trained school teachers) and the space being in the school compound (field or classroom). However, the main aim of this paper is not to look at it within the school space but to analyse the new space, production, performance and consumption within contemporary music genre of hip-hop.

*Hip-hop as a contemporary music genre has been tied to the African American history of struggle, survival and dream. As a music genre part of its journey and makeup is drawn from the African continent through the tread of spirituals.*

Hip-hop as a contemporary music genre has been tied to the African American history of struggle, survival and dream. As a music genre part of its journey and makeup is drawn from the African continent through the tread of spirituals. Hip-hop therefore draws historical dialogues for the African American by reminding them of the past, the present and the future.

In Kenya, rappers and hip-hop artists draw their inspiration and moves from their Western and United States counterparts. This is in the way they dress, the style of rapping, the culture, lifestyle and the Hip-hop ethos. Hip-hop as a music genre has four characteristics, break dancing, emceeing, graffiti and deejaying, as its four pillars. The inclusion of well-known children's songs and verses by Kenyan hip-hop artists and rappers thus creates a new space that is quite distinct from the other artists.

The position of history within hip-hop's tradition in the United States has been analysed by Dagbovie, Pero Gaglo (2005) analyses Hip-hop's relevance to the New hip-hop Generation through an array of questions and a search for answers on the relationship and position of black history interpretation, its representation, its place in historicizing the experiences of black people in America within hip-hop, while at the same time exploring and reinventing black history amongst the youth, who unlike their predecessors, are a cluster of performers of commercialized hip-hop.

In his analysis, Dagbovie asserts that the new hip-hop generation have abandoned positive cultural values held by their parents, elders and ancestors, and are focussed on "achieving wealth by any means necessary... hence the obsession with the materialistic and consumer trappings of financial success". It is in this relation to materialism that DJ Quik in his album *Safe+sound* (2005) says "if you don't make dollars, it don't make sense."

### **Hip-hop and Children Verse and Songs as a continuity of Orality**

As I had earlier attempted to look at hip-hop and the challenges facing oral literature, specifically that of children's verse and play songs, modernity and school have taken the centre stage of how children are socialized and understand

their worldview. Through modernization of education, emphasis is laid on the science and technical based education, while orality and the arts take a back seat. Subjects like literature or the arts are perceived as having outlived their usefulness in a technological world. This thus leads to the children's socialization being science oriented, and thus the understandings of the worldview of the child through children play songs and verses are minimized and diminishing. By incorporating hip-hop together with children play songs and verses in their songs, contemporary hip-hop artists affirm the continuity of oral culture of the Kenyan people. Through tech-media platforms such as Skiza tunes on Safaricom, through watching the music videos on YouTube and televisions. Not only does this act as a marketing strategy for Kenyan hip-hop produced songs, but also, through the audio and visual of the music, one is able to hear the oral genres of African literature acting as an archive. For instance, the single "Skamaress" by Madtraxx (George Mũigai) who used to be part of a DJ group known as Code Red Entertainment that performed hip-hop music in mainstream radio stations.

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The hip-hop video starts with children playing in the neighbourhood in a past era, without the supervision of adults, to project the idea of a forgotten time when children were able to enjoy playing in parking lot. This image is further upheld when amidst the chatters of children playing, the greying browning visuals of the video and an old man playing his guitar to the tune of the children play song "Skamaree". It foregrounds the artists as he reminisce of the past – present time and captures a space transitioning which brings in the nostalgic effect for the viewers, to relate and reflect on their past within the present time. The children's performance is twofold: one, their willingness to perform and enjoy the tune within their own space; and secondly, their performance as dancers "choreographed" in the production of the music video "Skamaress". The interweaving of the children's performances and the ability and willing to dance creates a continuity of a past where children enjoyed outdoor play games and songs in African Oral literature and culture. What is choreographed into the music video becomes a way of recapturing the past, archiving it, and an attempt to reconstruct in in the present which is time bound and problematic to performance theory.

J. H. Kwabena Nketia observations has made it clear in *The Music of Africa* that dance and its accompanying musical performance point us toward a more nuanced comprehension of the ways these forms of expression can be deployed within and integrated into multiple social situations. In the case of dance, he writes that it "[...] may be regarded not only as an avenue for bodily response to music or a means of communication, but also, as a serious art form" (1988, p. 230). He also makes clear the extent to which the "traditional," as a concept used in contradiction to the popular and the contemporary, is inadequate, at best and destructive to the very nature of artistic creativity in many African contexts. In his opinion, maintenance of the status quo in an expressive culture, especially that of music, is nearly impossible due to the fact that "[although in every generation performers are supposed to play what is passed on to them, each generation may reinterpret it, particularly with respect to those fluctuations arising out of subjective feeling" (p. 240). It is in this attempt of Madtraxx to use the children's play song and dance infused into Hip-hop, a contemporary and popular music genre form, which we can see and understand how the continuation of a tradition rather than merely a reinterpretation of the fluctuations of the oral genre within which hip-hop exists. There is not just preservation but also continuations of Orality not only in the dance moves but also in the genre of children play songs and verses.

This continuity of Orality is what in *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, John Chernoff observes that, in the case of African music, "the aesthetic point of this

exercise is not to reflect a reality which stands behind it but to ritualize a reality that is within it" (1979, p. 36). Chernoff's research supports my own contention that popular songs serve, among other functions, to create new forms of identity for individuals confronting what Veit Erlmann (1996) has called the "dialectic of social practice, identity, and power relations in a modernizing society" (*Nightsong. Performance, power and practise in South Africa*, 21).

The infusion of hip-hop and children play songs is not just a continuity of Orality alone, but rather it is also what Alice Dadirai Kwaramba likewise affirms as that core value of songs [i]n Africa especially, songs in their continuously playing of important role in shaping social relationships: "In early oral societies songs, dance and performance embodied the people's aspirations and expectations" (1997, p. 1). What she considers "early societies" songs, dance and performance is one of a problematic understanding within a postcolonial lens. Apart from the assumption and understanding of early societies as those that are "primitive" in nature, one is left to grapple with the idea that songs, performance and dance of the modern society stand apart from those of "early societies" because they do not encompass the same role of illuminating the societies' aspirations and expectations. This is far from the truth! Hip-hop as a music genre is one that has over a long period of time been associated with the ghetto and the gutter, drugs, sex, violence, murder, delinquency and so on. This view is one that portrays hip-hop in a ghastly light and not just it as a genre but also the community in which the music is predominant, thus the assumption of early societies denoting, simple, unsophisticated and uncivilised! Within the setting and context of what conscious rap artist rap about, Pero G. Bagbovie notes that the lyrics discuss issues of empowerment through politics and knowledge; social change and non-superficial aspects of black history and problems facing the black communities in critical areas (p. 304). It should thus be noted that where the MC or the artist talks about their struggles, aspirations, histories of resilience, "the back in the day", then this aspirations are not just about the individual alone but rather a mirroring of the community and space they occupied. This draws a complex history interwoven with those of the oppressors and the outside world forming a complex dialogic essence of performativity.

*Children as members of the larger communities are socialized to be future leaders of the community. Following this assumption alone, we can say that they are the storehouse of knowledge, where wisdom of the past is remembered and transmitted to them through the memorisation and socialization that is impacted within children's songs and verses.*

The understanding of childhood and children as an embodiment and imagery of early development in societies can be understood to be what Kwaramba sees as an embodiment of the people aspirations and expectations. Children as members of the larger communities are socialized to be future leaders of the community. Following this assumption alone, we can say that they are the storehouse of knowledge, where wisdom of the past is remembered and transmitted to them through the memorisation and socialization that is impacted within children's songs and verses. It is this aspect of contestations of early societies understood within the parameters of children in terms of developmental stages, that creates problem in analysis and understanding of the complexity of societies.

### **Hip-hop Gospel & Nursery Rhymes**

The song "Knees and Toes" by Sita, a gospel group, has its chorus similar to that taught in nursery school about the different parts of the body. This nursery goes as follows /head, shoulders, knees and toes/ ears, eyes, nose and mouth/. The performance of this nursery rhyme would be the children in a circle and following the cue of the teacher. As they sing the words, they are touching the said parts on their bodies. In the gospel group, Sita dedicates the song by saying, "this goes out to all the people who are living with no direction". It should be noted that the thematic concern of the song is the restoration and salvation. An interweaving of nursery rhyme, reggae and hip-hop thus creates an accommodating atmosphere of salvation as an aspect of inclusivity. Through

the gospel genre, they reiterate the message that salvation is for everybody, both children and adults.

Additionally, the nursery rhyme acts as the chorus and part of the choreography in the dance moves within the song, by both children and adults. Through the infusion of hip-hop, reggae and the nursery rhyme with a douse of local language – Gikūyū – in the phrase, *hutia mūdū* (touch someone), there is a reiteration of not just entertainment but also an immediacy in the audience on a deeper aesthetic and intellectual levels between the song writer and the audience in their respective communities (Aaron L. Rosenberg, 2008, p. 99). It is in this intermingling of languages, where Kikuyu as a vernacular language creates ambivalences within the space of the institution accentuated through the nursery rhyme and song and that of religion, through the gospel music. Even though schooling and the church seem to be distantly connected, they are rather interwoven. It is through missionaries and the church that formal education and English took root in Kenya and threatens to oust the survival of ethnic languages and oral literature as a mode of instruction. By thus infusing the vernacular side by side with English, the politics of language demands a new understanding of the relationship of languages as well as the need for the preservation and continuity of African languages into literacy and art.

The performance thus accentuates the areas of knowledge within the context of the community, through the mixing of languages and musical genres in the song, the creativity of children and that of adults, is a base for newer avenues of continuity of culture and forms of education. Not only is the music catchy to the children and adults, but offers social and psychological as well as spiritual development to the listeners' journey for direction and enlightenment. There is a satisfaction of their creative, educational, spiritual needs. This appeal thus provides a pleasurable experience on one hand, and social and moral lessons on the other which thus strikes a moral and religious chord in the world around them (Chesaina, 2007).

### Hip-hop, Therapy and Socialization

Hip-hop – apart from infusing consciousness of history, political statements and activism – it is also used for therapeutic and socialization essence. This is drawn from the history and development of hip-hop through other genres of music that are interconnected and interwoven. This therefore is not just within the African American history but also, that of African history. There exists intergenerational and transnational dialogues in Hip-hop which can be gleaned from the Orality of African essence, the use of African languages, to the history of slavery and the development hip-hop genres from spirituals, Blues, Soul, Jazz, Rhythm and Blues (RnB) to hip-hop and Rap and currently the infusion of African music with hip-hop (in this case children songs and hip-hop). Manning Marable views hip-hop as a matrix for the empowerment of blacks.

By incorporating Orality in hip-hop, the new hip-hop Generation stands a chance to be treated from the myopic view of African history, the understanding of orality in Africa and the monolithic view of African culture, music as well as future of literature. Not only do these offer agency, new voices of continuity and empowerment, but also a new face and lease of life into Black Orality, offering newer frontiers and space for understanding African Orality. By revisiting African Orality in hip-hop through children play songs and rhyme, the element of continuity is offered within a reiteration that exists in description of the social and historical values, enunciated within their composition, creativity, formulation and interpretation. This new way of rethinking of the familiar, that is, hip-hop as adult content and children play songs offers new interpretations. Chesaina

*By thus infusing the vernacular side by side with English, the politics of language demands a new understanding of the relationship of languages as well as the need for the preservation and continuity of African languages into literacy and art.*

(2007) is quick to note the relationship that exists between oral literature and the psycho social development which plays an important aspect to a child's development. The child's ability to exercise, play, learn about relationships in the world and where they live in can be used as a therapeutic tool for children to overcome grief, loss or trauma. The same ability is fostered within hip-hop. For instance in the coast of Kenya, there is a children play song entitled *Ukuti wa mnazi* and it goes like this,

The leader calls: *Ukuti ukuti* (a leaflet a leaflet)  
 Respondents (other children): *Wa mnazi wa mnazi* (of the coconut of the coconut)  
 The leader: *Olietetete*  
 (All) *Wamatetetete ua* (fall down)

Not only does this song account for the childish and innocence of children, but it is prudent to note that it creates a bond of togetherness, playfulness, freedom and abandonment, communal living and responsibility that exists within the community

Not only does this song account for the childish and innocence of children, but it is prudent to note that it creates a bond of togetherness, playfulness, freedom and abandonment, communal living and responsibility that exists within the community as well as learning about the parts of a coconut tree. A variation of the same song also exists with additions within the same song as others like Mr. Nice, a musician from Tanzania, would add - *Sasambua*:

Leader calls: *ukuti ukuti* (a leaflet, a leaflet)  
 Respondents: *Wa mnazi wa mnazi* (of a coconut. Of a coconut)  
 Leader: *Ukija upepo watetema* ( when the wind blows it shakes)  
 Respondents: *Mamamamamamamam*  
 Leader: *Haya mwenzetu kagongwa na nini* (What hit our friend)  
 Respondent: *Kagongwa na gari* ( he was hit by a car)  
 Leader: *Tumpeleke hospitalini asije akapigwa na baba yake* (let's take him to the hospital let he is punished by his father)  
*yeyeyeyeyeye.*

His style TAKEU, an acronym borrows from Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda sounds. In his sound and music one can get douses of Coastal sounds of Taarabu, Kenyan sounds specifically from Nairobi Kapuka, a version of hip-hop and rap; and the Kampala sound. It is worth noting that his dancing performance borrows from Lingala dance. The Kiswahili title *Sasambua* has three literal meanings; one is to carefully take out gifts packaged in the brides case; secondly, the act of undressing one piece of cloth after another, and lastly, to abuse someone or shame them in public. Mr. Nice in his song has male dancers stripping off their clothes. In the song he sings:

Mungu nijalie wengi wawe wangu...  
 Kina dada wa Dar es Salama,  
 Kina dada wa kule Uganda,  
 Kina dada wa Nairobi  
 sasambua...

(God, give me many of them...  
 Girls from Dar es Salaam,  
 Girls from Uganda,  
 Girls from Nairobi  
 Sasambua...).

In this song Mr. Nice depicts sexuality through the dancers gyrating their waists suggestively, and the lyrics talk about relationship and sex.

In the children's play song "Ukuti", the children's innocence is highlighted when they roll on the ground without care. This however, is not the case as used by Mr. Nice the singer, where not keen to analyse the metaphoric meaning of the song, he assumes the gyration as part of the play that children dance to in the *Ukuti*. Thus Mr. Nice's song is different from the one that children are involved in, consequently changing the message of the children's songs as part of the budding social flirtatious relationships.



Abarry (1989) notes that to some , children isolate themselves from adults in play activities, having activities, songs and rhymes of their own performed with interests and orientations categorically different from the adults in the society (p. 4). He continues to state that the games between boys and girls create an emotional situation that provokes innocent flirtation, an opportunity for good natured teasing and funny gyrations and improvisations (pp. 208-09). Such a continuity of role playing in hip-hop and children play song can be seen in a number of songs for instance, that of Rhaptaz featuring Jimw@t – “Paulina” whereby the chorus and children play song goes as follows

**Chorus**

*Paulina Paulina Paulina  
 hebu cheza kwa maringo tukuone - let's see you dance with pride  
 say bam chiki cha, chiki cha, chiki cha  
 hebu cheza kwa maringo tukuone dance  
 say Paulina Paulina Paulina  
 hebu cheza kwa maringo tukuone  
 say bam chiki cha, chiki cha, chiki cha'  
 hebu cheza kwa maringo tukuone*

In children’s play song, the chorus is repeated with the infusion of the child’s name at the beginning, “(name of child) *hebu cheza kwa maringo tu bam chikicha chikicha*. The aim of the song is to showcase one’s ability and prowess in dancing. Improvisations are a mark of a good dancer. They are a site of interweaving in dancing and playing, just like in the song by Rhaptaz ft Jimwat.

Divergencies do occur in these sites and the differences bring in a new epistemology and transcendence of performativity. In a different kind of song performed and sung by Mr. Nice entitled *Kidali Po!* derived from a children play tag game, we hear of a lover who has to go home and one hopes that they will see each other the following day:

*hana hana hanado kachani ka basto displine matido lalalalahhh. ×2  
 Mpenzi iihh u kidali po  
 Kalale nacho tutaonana kesho  
 Mpenzi iihh huunhh  
 ukidali po kalale nacho tutaonana kesho.*

He sings of longing, love, and the sacrifices that one can make to the one they love. Despite the love that they have for each other there are others who are not happy with their love and thus say that it is because of witchcraft and medicines (*si mizizi ziirizi kwako nimesizi*). The twist and divergence from the children play song to one that involves claims of love potions medicine and fidelity is one of ingenuity. The parallels of chasing are characteristic of the songs. The children's play song is innocent with the enticement of having fun, while Mr. Nice's song's incentive is courtship, chasing after your lover's attention.

In the second part of the song, the singer infuses another children's song from the coast of East Africa sang to children who are trying to learn how to stand, to encourage them. The progression of the song, from one point of flirtation to the above mention suggests the adult content in the song. He sings as follows

*jana nilipolala niliota ndoto eti* (yesterday while I slept, I dreamt)  
*kasimama kasimama kasimamaaaa dee dee (yelaaaa) x 3*(I stood, I stood, I stood firm)  
*kasimama pekee yake mbele ya mchumba* (you stood in front of your lover it stood firm in front of the lover\_  
*mpe mkate wake iwe zawadi yake*( gave him bread as a gift)  
*kasimama pekee yake mbele ya mchumba* (stood alone in front of her lover)  
*mpe mkate wake iwe ni zawadi yake* (gave him bread as a gift).

Food and eating in most contemporary societies is used as a metaphor for sex. The interposition of it however in "Kidali Po" by Mr. Nice is one that connotes the act of sex and procreation. The fact that the lover comes to stand in front of him in a dream thus tells of a longing; that he uses the image of bread which should be given to him as a gift so that he can eat. He creates an image where a man 'stands firm' before his lover, waiting to be fed bread as a gift.

## Conclusion

The futures of orature in Africa in the contemporary society can be said to be one of appropriation and improvisation, evolving with time and context. We can deduce that the ability of artists to be adventurous, courageous and malleable to change and mutate, is driven by a spirit encompassed not only in the content, form, medium or performers, but also in the times. Orature is creating as it sees fit to find a niche in contemporary society. Children play songs and oral verses are finding expression through contemporary rhythm and performance, spaces of socialization, education and collaboration between children and adults. The integration of the moral, and aesthetic value is imperative in hip-hop and children play songs and verses. Through infusion and interweaving of the two, new meanings are arrived at and presented. Furthermore, what comes about is a unique Africanized hip-hop sound. This depicts that the future of orature in the diversity of the African context shall continue to flourish even with industrialization and modernity changing the landscape of the continent.

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# Sheng: The Dynamic Lingua Franca of Resistance in Kenya

Atandi Anyona



*"If you want to get through to a man, you've got to learn to speak his language."*  
- Malcolm X

Language leads straight to the heart of a people. It is the train that transports a culture from one generation to another. It is the sacred space for self-expression. It represents the foundation from which an entire culture is carved out and its ideas preserved. Language creates the avenue through which ideas are formed, nurtured, and communicated. It is one of the means through which identity is asserted. Language has always been a form of daily performance of cultural uniqueness. This article will briefly look at *Sheng*, the lingua franca that has developed deep roots among Kenya's urban youth.

Like any other a typical African nation, Kenya continually finds itself in a linguistic dilemma where the language of education is different from the language of the local cultures; a dilemma for teachers struggling to balance the use of formal school language in academic settings and the informal and unacknowledged 'mother tongue' languages. It is a predicament for parents who then are unsure which language to pass on to their children, when one's fluency in English is still seen as a measure of educational intelligence hence overshadowing other native languages. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a prominent Kenyan writer and strong advocate of oral tradition, illuminates the alienation which occurs when the language of your education is different from the language of your culture.

*Sheng*, a creole offshoot of Swahili intermixed with local and foreign lingua, is one of the most underappreciated yet highly unique and fast evolving creoles in the African continent. It has been on the receiving end of severe scepticism due to its origin and the social status of its users. With its roots traced among young people from the lower strata of society, its legitimacy as a viable language of communication is constantly under debate. Some of the criticisms pitted against *Sheng* include its lack of constancy, its 'bastardizing' of English and Kiswahili and its instability for it changes rapidly, without warning, each day, every day. Consequently, according to some, the absence of stability qualifies it as a 'non-language'.

## A Unique Syncretic Formation

*"To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language; but above all, it means to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization."* - Frantz Fanon

Naturally, language instruction is passed down from a parent to a child. It is primarily a product of an older generation passed down to its progeny, but it is important to state that there now exists a sharp cultural and linguistic dislocation between the young generation and the older ones. The youth are continually crafting their own culture based on the current circumstances in which they find themselves. *Sheng* is one such creation. The proclamation that it is a non-language unsure of itself is the result of weighing *Sheng* based on western linguistic standards which

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would automatically disqualify it as a complete language consequently debasing it to the state of a mere dialect. Syncretic languages such as *Sheng* face the same treatment as indigenous languages. Since they are not based on an evolved script, they are regarded as inferior to other written languages such as Latin, Chinese, English, or Kiswahili. Despite the complexity that these indigenous and syncretic languages assume, characterized by the ingrained proverbs, sayings, riddles, and tonality, they are simply dismissed as dialects or poor versions of English, or in our case, Kiswahili. African standards are, on many occasions, diametrically opposed to western values. Consequently, there exists a grave danger in weighing our cultural products based on foreign scales.

*Sheng* is often dismissed as a dialect of the miscreants and ghetto youth; a bastard child of Kiswahili that lacks the core traits of a mainstream language. By degrading a person's language, you consequently affix insult to the essence that characterizes them as a human being. History chronicles that the value of human populations is based on the value allotted to the products of their culture, such as music, language, and religion.

We are living in a delusional age where our young minds continually fall victim to the seduction of foreign cultures and languages such as German, French, English, Spanish and Chinese, all at the expense of our own vernaculars. Such disposition is a consequence of the reality of colonisation where African culture has been continually and deliberately overshadowed by the totality of European culture, and in this case, through linguistic subordination. For this reason, a person of African descent automatically suffers from a form of internalized oppression, which becomes evident when he passionately seeks association with any heritage and culture purified from the stains of his so-called 'inferior' traditions.

In the quest for cultural integration, it is undeniable that a significant proportion of local traditions end up experiencing cultural absorption, assimilation, and degradation. Indigenous languages are lost, music forgotten and religious beliefs are replaced with foreign doctrines. Nonetheless, it also becomes difficult to deny the degree of creativity and resistance possessed by peoples of African descent, as expressed in the blending of their indigenous cultures with foreign traditions. *Sheng* exemplifies this creativity aspect perfectly.

*Sheng* stands as the buffer against continual linguistic assimilation. It cushions against the imminent linguistic catastrophe where wholesale importation of foreign languages permits suffocation of the indigenous ones. *Sheng* constitutes within itself languages, words and styles from all over the country. It popularizes words and phrases from a wide array of local languages. It is worth noting that a syncretic language such as *Sheng* is highly intricate as it also exhibits characteristics that are absent in the languages that create it. The degree of innovation and originality exhibited in *Sheng*, as is common in other syncretic languages such as Nigerian pidgin, Jamaican Patois, and Cameroonian Camtok, nullifies the 'bastard-ghetto language' label inaccurately attributed to it.

Any language, *Sheng* notwithstanding, is intrinsically reflective of those who speak it. If you take a look at our current era, you realize things are changing at an unbelievably swift pace; from technology, to fashion and even the government. Truth be told, the young are the most responsive to the change as they easily enticed by and adopt the cool, hype, radical, and dynamic. Young people exhibit freshness and flexibility, oozing with energy and abounding in creativity. Why then should we be critical of the vibrant fast changing nature of *Sheng*?

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## A Dynamic Creole of Resistance

*"A race of people is like an individual man; until it uses its own talent, takes pride in its own history, expresses its own culture, affirms its own selfhood, it can never fulfill itself." - Malcolm X*

Why is it that English and Kiswahili aren't the optimal languages of communication for the majority of young people in the urban areas of Kenya, yet they are the first languages taught in school? The answer revolves around flexibility of usage. A written language becomes very strict in its use. As a result, it offers little space for repurposing and manipulation. When it comes to English and Kiswahili, young people have to adjust themselves (and their tongues) to fit into the diction and pronunciation of these formal languages. *Sheng* makes it possible to adjust any language to fit into one's natural pronunciations and dictions which includes mixing words from different languages as well as harvesting words from nowhere in particular. It is a language that cannot be confined within the boundaries of static words and their conjugation.

*Anytime you are the one adjusting to fit into tiny crevices set aside, somehow you automatically put yourself at a disadvantage whereby you have no voice or influence and hence setting yourself up for the exploitation that sprouts from powerlessness.*

Manipulation produces agency. Anytime you are the one adjusting to fit into tiny crevices set aside, somehow you automatically put yourself at a disadvantage whereby you have no voice or influence and hence setting yourself up for the exploitation that sprouts from powerlessness.

Teaching people a foreign language without elaborating on the culture that produces that language is like teaching someone how to play a drum rhythm without showing them the dance routine that goes with it. It is thus not surprising that creoles and syncretic languages exist since when one speaks these foreign tongues, they may feel an emptiness in the words spoken; a loneliness in the consonants and syllables that do not fully make sense to them. To fully make sense of the nuances of the foreign language, one then tends to intertwine it with their own culture and produces a creole language like *Sheng*. Creolisation not only means the fusion of different cultures but also the unique way in which that fusion takes place, such that some aspects of the resulting culture are absent in the cultures that produce it.

*Sheng represents the vocal criticism of the youth against the rigid nature of mainstream culture and the languages that express it. It stands firm as the linguistic germination of a previously submerged youthful culture in the urban setting.*

It goes without saying that nothing softens the throat or sweetens the mouth better than one's native tongue. Few would contradict the fact that it takes significant effort to suppress your own culture, which unconsciously manifests itself through every aspect of your character. Even more tragic is the incompleteness that results in striving to be a replica of an alien culture.

*Sheng* represents the vocal criticism of the youth against the rigid nature of mainstream culture and the languages that express it. It stands firm as the linguistic germination of a previously submerged youthful culture in the urban setting. Although *Sheng* is widely spoken in the ghettos, that statistic is changing drastically, especially when you look at the music industry, media, urban areas, as well as high schools countrywide. *Sheng* has become even more widespread with the digital evolution.

## A Vibrant Thriving Sound

The discussion on language is a complex and sensitive issue since speech and identity are intricately connected. Moreover, the fact that our languages are less about how they are written and more about context, sounds, semantics and symbolism complicates the matter. We have been thrown into an enclave where every definition of innovation seems to have left us out of the equation.

Our eyes and ears have become blurred by foreign standards such that we continually lose the appreciation of that unique elegance which we produce and possess. We are thus left with the challenge of re-defining the value of our cultural products for ourselves. Our task therefore should revolve around keen examination of our cultural innovations and afford them the necessary appreciation, rather than a quick dismissal based on biased assumptions.

*Sheng* stands out as an incredibly unique linguistic innovation that defies mainstream language standards, yet continues to permeate as a lingua franca for the young generation in Kenya. It is a syncretic language with an unusually dynamic morphosyntax; a lingua where a single item can have half a dozen reference terms, where the letters in words can be rearranged or even read backwards and still make sense. What other language offers its speakers full agency to add or maneuver words and sentences to fit a prevailing situation? Is it not these unique attributes that enables its quick acceptance and spread among the young generation?

*Sheng* will continue to thrive, especially among the youth. It is no longer confined to the ghettos of Eastlands or reserved for the underprivileged. *Sheng* stands out as a product of a youthful culture. We know that culture is engraved in a people and if the conditions that incubated that culture are still in existence, that culture will continue to thrive.

Consequently, the most logical action is to nurture *Sheng* in all spheres where we encounter it. The best way to nurture a language is to speak it, sing it, spread it and embrace it continually. The result of such an embrace is self fulfilment.

***“Atandi Anyona is a Kenyan creative writer known for his afrocentric and naturalistic themed poetry and fiction prose. His poem ‘Tembi’ has featured recently in the Writers Space Africa Magazine published by Poetic Africa.***

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# Part 2

## Performing Faith: Spoken Word Performance of A 'Piece For Peace'

Chris Mutie aka Siso



Performed at the Performing Arts Conference at the Kenya National Theatre in March 2022. The piece is specially edited for the Jahazi Journal

I am ChriSisoPius, and I stand before you with a piece, for peace.

Since  $2+1$  is 3 and where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am - in between, I am Peace.

I salute you as the Prince of peace Christ Jesus taught us, "Peace be with you Kenya".

If I may ask, what is in this piece and what is peace?

Peace is a quiet and calm state of mind

where war, hate, crime and all other vices can't survive.

According to the scriptures,

it is not just the absence of conflict,

NO, it is also about taking action to restore a broken situation you know?

Today, I as a peaceful piece from God the master,

Deliver myself to you my fellow masterpieces,

As a piece, but for peace.

A piece for peace uniquely different in depth and in weight.

Wait!

For  $1+2$  is 3 and where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name I am in between I am - Peace.

Did you know, that the true numeric value for the word Peace is 21?

2 for duality, diplomacy, partnerships, trust and cooperation.

While 1 on the other hand,

is a sign of new beginnings, leadership and positive attitudes!

A number that is a cube of 7 and appears 7 times in the Holy Bible.

Could it be a coincidence

that the true numeric value for the Word Bible,

just like this peace, is 21?

This is a peaceful piece of peace,  
with wisdom just for peace.

True number values are 1 to 9,  
and 0 is not a number,

*Today, I as a peaceful piece  
from God the master,  
Deliver myself to you my  
fellow masterpieces,  
As a piece, but for peace.  
A piece for peace uniquely  
different in depth and in  
weight.*

but a sign of wholeness and completeness.  
Just like peace.  
And God is the source of all wholeness,  
all completeness,  
and all peace.

1 marks the beginning, 9 marks the end.  
Yet God the Alpha and Omega,  
is the beginning and the end of all that is.  
Was and what is yet to be.  
According to the Hebrew gematria,  
21 stands for the phrase "I am",  
and God says, "I am who I am".  
If then peace = 21,  
the word Bible = 21,  
and the phrase 'I am' according to the Hebrew gematria = 21,  
then you and I as absolute images of the great I am,  
are pieces of this Peace.  
I am Peace and you as I,  
another peaceful piece of this peace.

Since  $2+1$  is 3  
and where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name  
I am - in between,  
I am Peace.

21 is also the sum total of the first six numbers in the numeric sequence,  
 $1+2+3+4+5+6=21$ ,  
since God made everything perfect in 6 days and rested on the 7th,  
I believe that you and I,  
put together in a matching fit as pieces of peace from the master,  
can restore the peace we need  
in our individual lives  
and our nation Kenya as a whole.  
Since a peaceful piece for peace,  
added as a value to another peaceful piece for peace,  
simply means growth,

21 means that 2 are better than 1,  
and 1 better than none when it comes to the attributes of peace,  
therefore,  
none among us as pieces  
is excluded as a role player  
in establishing this peace in our nation.  
Each piece for,  
is beside another,  
for another,  
and all pieces for Peace.

Allow me to conclude this peaceful piece  
by deriving sense from nine words  
that bear the same numeric value as peace,  
to promote and encourage peace as a virtue  
among us as pieces of peace,  
that must make this nation peaceful.

*I believe that you and I,  
put together in a matching fit  
as pieces of peace from the  
master,  
can restore the peace we  
need  
in our individual lives  
and our nation Kenya as a  
whole.*

The word Live,  
The word Angel,  
The word Blessed,  
The word Woman,  
The word Mary,  
The word Bible,  
The word Ribs,  
The word Blood.  
and the phrase  
"Peace upon Him",  
All bear the same numeric value, 21.  
From these words, I derive this,  
Blessed is Mary the Woman,  
who lived to conceive through an angelic intervention  
as the rib of Joseph,  
to bear and deliver Christ Jesus to us as the Prince of Peace.  
And Peace upon Him,  
he/she who preaches peace in practice,  
as a master's peaceful piece for Peace in this nation.  
Sacrifice for peace,  
but never ever, ever,  
sacrifice your Peace.

2+1 is 3  
And the 3 things that God asks of us as peaceful pieces of peace,  
are to,  
Act justly,  
to Love tenderly  
and, to walk humbly with Him,  
for absolute peace.

Since 2+1 is 3  
and where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name  
I am - in between,  
I am Peace.

Peace, Love, and Unity my beloved peaceful masterpieces of peace.

God bless Kenya.

***Chris Mutie is a rapper and upcoming spoken word artist  
operating under PAL based at the Kenya National Theatre.***



# A Brazen Healing

Wanjiku Mwawuganga



When I started writing this, I wanted to summon the writers, Binyavanga Wainaina or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and their effortless ability to paint scenes with an amazing command of language and a kind of awareness that makes scene description seem nearly effortless – but I am not them. That, and my memory failed me. I honestly can't remember the day, the time or even the month that Aleya Kassam and I sat at the then Igiza Bar and Restaurant to discuss the possibility of my being hired to direct the "Brazen Edition" of *Too Early for Birds*. I had directed the previous three editions of the popular storytelling theatrical experience, but this fourth one was not a guarantee.

It was a new-ish team and fresh approach, an edition that focused on unearthing stories about women who had contributed to the history of our country but had been buried in the proverbial '*kaburi la sahu*' (direct translation - grave of forgetfulness??). The aim of the show was to 'Uninvisibilise invisibilised women.' As a then closeted feminist struggling with motherhood and postpartum depression, I was dying to get the chance to visibilise women, more than I even realised, at the time.

My life then revolved around common phrases. One, a common phrase tossed about in conversation when people talked about female actors who disappeared from the Kenyan Theatre scene. '*Nanii alikuwa mnoma! Alienda wapi?*' (So and so was a great actor! Where did she go?) and the response '*Alipata watoto.*' (She got kids). This answer was normally followed by a short silence and that was the last time said actor was spoken of again. I had been part of such conversations and in my very short stint in the industry had watched actors I admired disappear because 'they got kids'. The other phrase was '*It's only funny until it happens to you.*' In 2015, a year after university, driven and full of passion, my life in professional art just about to begin, I got pregnant. I lived each day haunted by the first phrase, trying with everything in me to fight it, finally understanding the nuance of the last phrase remembering the number of times I took it lightly. Two years later in 2017, I got my second child. My future in an industry that pays little if anything at all, seemed bleaker with each passing day.

Most of my 2015 to 2018 years are a blur. I was a zombie. I felt nothing. I just knew I needed to survive. *Too Early for Birds* remains the only production that hired me during both my pregnancies. I remember going to work with my second baby, only a month old, and everyone in the production would take care of her. *Too Early For Birds* gave me space to exist when I felt invisible, my perception mired by postpartum depression. "Brazen" was my resuscitation.

Back to my meeting with Aleya. On this day that I can't remember, in a restaurant above the Kenya National Theatre, Aleya and I talked about... something. I can't remember. I do remember mentioning Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In*. Back then it was my feminist manifesto. I remember mentioning her in an effort to at least sound put together. I remember feeling tired and spent. I remember looking for any excuse to quit after fighting for my art for what felt like an eternity. I remember confusion. But mostly I remember Aleya's warmth. All through the awkward conversation, I remember connection and warmth.

*The aim of the show was to 'Uninvisibilise invisibilised women.' As a then closeted feminist struggling with motherhood and postpartum depression, I was dying to get the chance to visibilise women, more than I even realised, at the time.*

*The first challenge for me was finding an all-female technical crew. Too Early for Birds had always been held up by a mostly female crew except from the technical and wardrobe department. So, this shouldn't have been such a big problem. Except it was.*

Somehow after that foggy meeting I eventually ended up directing “Brazen”. The months that followed involved me playing dramaturg to three remarkable women who would later form the LAM Sisterhood. We spent an eternity trying to develop a language and a rhythm, revision after revision. The biggest challenge for the writers was finding research material. What always disarmed me through the process was their intentionality. To be honest I didn’t fully understand why, at the time, but the three women insisted on using research sources from women of color. I was fighting my own internal wars which didn’t allow me to appreciate the magnitude of the work they put in. All I could do was trust. If you want to understand how extensively history is written from the perspective of man, try to write a historical show about women from the lens of women. You can imagine how long and tedious the process was. But eventually we had a script.

The first challenge for me was finding an all-female technical crew. *Too Early for Birds* had always been held up by a mostly female crew except from the technical and wardrobe department. So, this shouldn’t have been such a big problem. Except it was. As a director I know two things for sure, your crew can make or break you. As a young female director who likes to experiment, I know the latter happens more than the former. I had taken solace in working with a team I could trust and relationships that I had built over time. And this was about to change. Another lesson directing had taught me was to prioritise personal and intellectual connection over experience. I was a young director. My skill set was growing too. Why not invest in people I could grow with? But at the time, I couldn’t connect with anyone. My anxiety was slowly creeping in and running my life. I dreaded being in public spaces with anyone and could hardly be present during a conversation. I could barely maintain the friendships I had. I was a ticking time bomb and the idea of new team members was just unthinkable.

I remember the prep work before each interview. Having to lie at home that the interviews were an hour earlier (for no apparent reason except mum-guilt) just so I could give myself time to wander about the CBD and calm down. I remember the smiles I’d put on and the rehearsed questions that I would throw out the window in favor of old-fashioned instinct. Somehow, it worked out. I found my crew.

Inclusivity was a value we as the production team took very seriously, meaning auditions were non-negotiable. With a more old-school experience of theatre, I had no trust in the audition process, which to me just made for dark humor during drunken nights and contributed to a growing culture of humiliation. Further, if interacting with one person was hard at the time, how was I going to conduct a whole audition? But alas, the show must go on. Together with my stage manager and production assistant, Shelly Gitonga, we came up with an audition process we thought would work.

It started with a digital elimination round where we sifted through people we felt, at first glance, didn’t suit the roles based on a very well curated questionnaire. The next part was a call-back that had us audition each participant through playing a game of catch and talking about life and our views (or lack thereof) on feminism. In a more relaxed atmosphere, actors would then be asked to perform what they had prepared. The audition process did two things for me. One, it gave me an amazing cast who I wouldn’t have met hadn’t I stepped out of my comfort zone. Two, it allowed me to start breathing. By taking control and intentionally creating a space of comfort for others, I too gave myself comfort.

I don't remember how I started loosening up but I do remember always waking up excited over the 6.00am rehearsals. And just to put it out there, I am NOT a morning person. What made this whole experience iconic for me wasn't just the idea of 'uninvisibilising' female historical figures, it was also about 'uninvisibilising' the all-women cast and crew itself. We were already facing passive-aggressive comments by men about how *Too Early for Birds* 'had made a horrible decision to give out their platform to other performers. How could these women just come in and fill such shoes?' We could have easily found such comments either laughable or disconcerting, but we chose to let them fuel us. In one way or another each of us understood how it felt to be othered, whether professionally or personally. We shared an unspoken bond of being passed by, second-guessed or ignored, so this was not just 'another show'.

I watched women blossom in those six weeks (I finally remember a detail), intentionally showing up not just for those cold early morning work processes, but also for each other. We also surmounted the patriarchal 'women cannot work together' trope. I often mention this as the one production where I felt at home to be as vulnerable as I possibly could. When I felt overwhelmed, I was often wrapped up and comforted by feminine energy. I thrived for the first time as a young director, as I was allowed to share my knowledge and experiment. I was offered trust, an invaluable gift when it comes to directing.

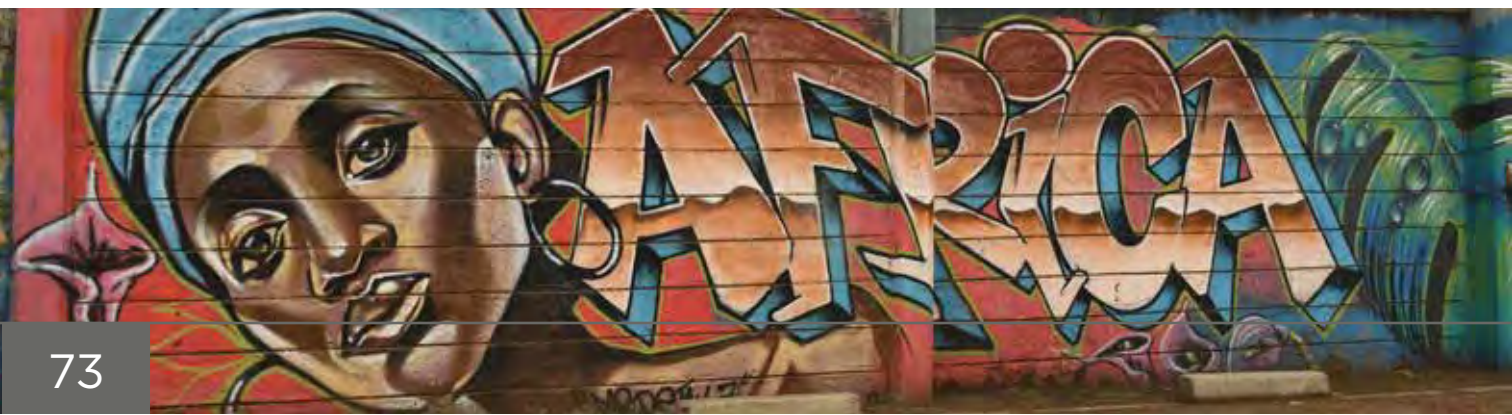
Eventually we had a remarkable show which was graced by women such as the late Lorna Irūngū, a great artist and activist, and Martha Karūa, a Deputy Presidential candidate in the 2022 general election. We had the privilege of performing to some of the women whose stories we told, such as the great Zarina Patel and Field Marshal Mūthoni wa Kīrīma, whose presence was powerful as it was vindicating.

*Brazen* was held up by these great actors; Nyokabi Macharia, Akinyi Alouch, Suki Wanza, Mercy Mutisya, and Sitawa Namwalie. The crew - Emma Nzioka, Shelly Gitonga, Claire Njoki Gīthīnji, Hellen Masido, Naddya Adhiambo and Gathoni Kimuyu. *Brazen* was created by Laura Ekumbo, Aleya Kassam and Anne Moraa. There are many others who assisted in the background by feeding us, opening their networks to us, and offering whatever support we needed. These are the people that saved me.

I remember another thing! After the run of the show, I got a number of requests from people to share my notes about the show. I didn't care much for the idea. I wasn't being hard-headed, I remember just thinking that the show had done what it needed to do. For me, the process had crowned it all. I had emerged a woman who had finally had a chance to breathe, and unknowingly, had taken her first step in her journey to recovery.

***Wanjiku Mwawuganga is a Kenyan multidisciplinary artist, mostly known for her work as a theatre director. Her solo performance "Roots" is currently on tour in Kenya.***

*In one way or another each of us understood how it felt to be othered, whether professionally or personally. We shared an unspoken bond of being passed by, second-guessed or ignored, so this was not just 'another show'.*



# Of Rainbow Coloured and Acronymed Shows: Did We Cancel Artistic Freedom of Expression?

Joseph Obel



*Queer-identifying artists thus additionally find themselves in an artistic conundrum, on whether to continually create shows based on hetero-normativity that do not reflect their lives nor resonate with that of their queer-identifying audiences.*

Living as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community in Kenya, you are already cancelled. So if as an artist, queer or not, you organise a theatrical performance or any event that targets queer folks and their allies, you risk being arrested and imprisoned for “promoting homosexuality which is illegal in Kenya.” Further, any artistic work that highlights the issues that affect the LGBTQIA+ community is perceived as politically incorrect and consequently gagged. Queer-identifying artists thus additionally find themselves in an artistic conundrum, on whether to continually create shows based on hetero-normativity that do not reflect their lives nor resonate with that of their queer-identifying audiences. The question thus remains, who has the moral responsibility to create and perform these inclusive artistic works. While on the one hand artistic works with queer-identifying themes are denied expression, on the other hand, it has been noted that foreign media outlets and content streaming platforms accessible to Kenyans, continue to air content that includes that which is predominantly queer-themed. No conversation is officially held about this contradiction

## **Producing the Play *Dark Hard Chocolate***

In January 2022, I mustered the courage to produce *Dark Hard Chocolate*, a theatrical performance celebrating gay love and highlighting healthy relationships among gay men. This was a leap of courage and faith. It was also a steep learning curve and an opportunity to grow my network. I worked with an established theatre director, sought-after actors, and an international playwright, Kwame Stephens, a Canadian-Ghanaian. My emotional intelligence was stretched beyond my comfort zone..

This is a breakdown of how the experience went.

First off, proscenium theatre performance spaces in Nairobi are limited and so getting a space to put up queer-themed (read politically incorrect) play is almost impossible. How do you explain the work? I write the first email and a request for more information about the show follows. At this point, I have to lay it out as it is. The first venue responds and apparently ‘they are under renovation.’ The second regrets to inform me that ‘they cannot hire the space out to this production’, while the third venue remains quiet, no response. I eventually get a referral through a friend to a private venue in the Nairobi suburbs. The response is positive, terms of engagement negotiated and finalised and the team starts rehearsals. We are advised to hold a fireside chat before the show to host the LGBTQIA+ audience and the turnout is enormous, contrary to venue owners expectations. As a result, we are advised to postpone the show indefinitely. The loss of audience and booked tickets is significant. The future of this production is now uncertain and the director and I increasingly angered by this subtle discrimination.

Fortunately, I manage to secure another venue, this time a restaurant slightly outside of the Nairobi CBD (Central Business District). However, the terms and

conditions for use of the space state that marketing should be discreet and the production not advertised as gay-love-themed, or else it would inevitably be cancelled and the whole production team put in mortal danger. I decide to rename the theatre event and the poster did not display rainbow colors or indicate the LGBTQIA+ acronym. Subtlety was key. But the whole situation raised fundamental questions – how does the artist monetize and participate in the creative industry when they are denied the right to market and show their work? How do they earn a livelihood from their chosen profession in the performing arts?

### **Mirror Arts and the play *Between Self and I***

I learned about Mirror Arts in mid-March 2022 while searching for a potential panelist for an upcoming event and was surprised to find a poster of their February 14th theatre production celebrating lesbian love that showed at the Kenya National Theatre. At this point Mirror Arts, who only produce queer-themed performances, were already planning for another show, *Between Self and I*. This piqued my interest as a producer and theatre reviewer and I started looking for the producer's contacts. The performance was scheduled to start in mid-April but a few days before the opening the producer was asked to vacate the premises since, being a public institution, the venue had to abide by government policy. Mirror Arts producer-director quickly sought an alternative venue and succeeded, but a few days later, they were asked to 'postpone indefinitely'.

*...how does the artist monetize and participate in the creative industry when they are denied the right to market and show their work? How do they earn a livelihood from their chosen profession in the performing arts?*



*Lack of freedom to express oneself,.... takes away their identity. This is the same for queer-identifying artists, whether they are producers, directors, actors, or technicians. This diversity should not be viewed as a threat to the system, but a need for inclusivity in society.*

## **Why Free Expression is intrinsic in the artistic creations**

It defies logic that in 2022, queer-identifying artists are still asking for freedom to express themselves in their works. Why would those 'cultural gatekeepers' think that if a heterosexual person watches an artistic performance celebrating or highlighting same-sex relationships will then be converted or start desiring same-sex relationships? Matters sexuality are biological and are hardly influenced by external stimuli. Therefore, the gatekeepers need to wake up to the reality that a society that is afraid of the arts is one that is scared of their reality since art mirrors life.

A famous African proverb says, 'until the lion learns how to write, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.' As much as there have been several attempts by producers, writers and directors living hetero-normative lives to create stories involving queer characters, these stories are usually biased, untrue and full of condescending stereotypes. The nuanced lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals, as of all persons, need truthful storytelling especially in Africa.

Lack of freedom to express oneself, to tell your story which in essence creates and validates a person, takes away their identity. This is the same for queer-identifying artists, whether they are producers, directors, actors, or technicians. This diversity should not be viewed as a threat to the system, but a need for inclusivity in society.

The instances of bias and exclusion highlighted here are but a few. The question remains, while Kenya has signed up for freedom of expression and artistic freedom in the constitution, how do we justify the cancellation culture in relation to queer-identifying artists in our societies? Further, how do we justify our acceptance of queer-identifying artistic work from other continents, some viewed at peak hours on our televisions when children are watching, while still using 'bad influence' as the key argument? ....Can't queer artists create, produce and share their artistic works without suppression? Stop cancelling our shows just because you already cancelled us!

***Joseph Obel is a theatre performer, contemporary dancer, artistic curator, and theatre critic who is passionate about stories that touch on African spirituality, climate action, and human sexuality. Joseph is the curator and artistic director at AfroIndaba.***

# Docubox's Shorts, Shorts & Shots: Film Screening Differently

Annie Gichuki & Mudamba Mudamba



The cinema scene in Kenya experienced a major lull with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, Shorts, Shorts & Shots (SSS) film screening event convened by Docubox, was gaining in popularity and had just had a record high attendance at the Prestige Plaza cinema. With the national restrictions coming into effect in 2020, the team had to go back to the drawing board, determined to stay connected to their audiences and filmmakers in those unprecedented times.

The Shorts, Shorts & Shots is arguably the fastest growing, most fun and compelling short film screening event to come out of Kenya. Created by Docubox in 2018, the premise is simple – 'YOU get to wear shorts, WE curate and screen award-winning short films from Kenya and other parts of Africa and WE ALL have shots - alcoholic and non-alcoholic.' They drew from the basic principle that few or no filmmakers create, develop and produce a film to have it gather dust on a shelf in some corner of their house. Most filmmakers' dream is to get as large an audience as possible to engage with their creation. As Docubox assisted selected filmmakers in their journey to create the films of their dreams, they soon realized that they had to go all the way and also be part of the artists' audience-building endeavours. And thus, SSS was born.

Offering a fresh and exciting viewing experience to its audiences every month at Prestige Plaza Cinema in Nairobi, the event grew steadily into its own phenomenon quite early in its formation. A major attraction was the assurance of not only watching – on the big screen - recently produced great short films from Kenya and Africa as a whole, but also sitting and chatting with some of the celebrated filmmakers. Back then, on one Friday evening each month, audiences would gather, pay a ticket fee and enjoy the masterfully curated short films from local filmmakers. Within a short time, audiences grew to fill out the entire cinema hall, with several opting to sit in the aisles rather than miss out on the SSS screening altogether.

In late 2018, the first short fiction film grant to come out of Docubox was offered under the Shorts, Shorts & Shots program. The grant was given on a quarterly basis and local filmmakers were asked to submit their short film scripts for consideration and competitive selection. The top two or three winning pitches would each receive a grant to turn their scripts into the short film of their dreams. The completed short film would then go on to premiere at a later edition of SSS to much fanfare, with the film directors and their crew in attendance. Since then, not only has Docubox continued to support short film production through grants but has found local partners such as the Kenya Film Commission and renowned Kenyan filmmaker, Njeri Karago, who have each funded a few of the brilliant scripts received. Docubox have also worked with great international partners and filmmaker organizations to produce great short films, some of which have found their way into our SSS screenings. At the time of writing of this article, Docubox had directly supported the production of over 13 short film scripts, with one picked by streaming giant, Netflix, for a January 2022 release. The film 'The Morning After' by Brian Munene is still available to watch on the streaming platform.

*The premise is simple - 'YOU get to wear shorts, WE curate and screen award-winning short films from Kenya and other parts of Africa and WE ALL have shots - alcoholic and non-alcoholic.'*



When in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the team's planned SSS calendar, they saw this as an opportunity to experiment with an online edition that would give audiences the freedom to tune in from any part of the world. This was launched in March 2021 and on that one Sunday afternoon, audiences tuned in from the comfort of their homes and were treated to a curation of brilliant Kenyan short films with live commentary from the hosts and conversations with the audience. Shorts, Shorts & Shots trended at number 1 countrywide on that day.

Barely a year after Docubox kicked off the SSS event, they started receiving offers from several global film festivals and institutions to host similar curated programs at their events. Potential partners included those hosting Global film festivals such as Tribeca Film Festival in New York, Sheffield Doc Fest in the UK and Afrinolly in Nigeria. These posed an exciting challenge to the team that manifested into a Zanzibar Edition of Shorts, Shorts & Shots in 2019 – a first international edition near home. The event was warmly received and coincided with the occurrence of the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) in July of that year. Docubox now plans to hold another SSS event at ZIFF, consequent to the success of this inaugural screening.



With the success of the event away from home came a few strategic changes in the regular event. The Shorts team shifted from a monthly to a quarterly screening experience. Now SSS hosts four events each year - a Valentine's Edition in February, a Mzalendo Edition in June which is a celebration of Africa's stories, culture and films by African filmmakers, a Halloween Edition in October and a Special Celebratory Edition that can be held anywhere in the world around any theme. The 2021 Celebratory Edition was held in November in Durban, South Africa in partnership with the KwaZulu Natal Film Commission (KZN).

In June 2021 Docubox was back with the first physical edition of the SSS at home since the start of the pandemic. It was then that they made the leap from screening at a cinema hall to an outdoor garden. With large tents and seating space, an outdoor screen and bar station, it transformed into a laid-back Sunday afternoon program, where the revamped SSS event made a triumphant reunion with its audiences at the Docubox office grounds at Shalom Guest House. Using the festival format, SSS explored several new entertainment activities including, working with a live DJ, incorporating live performances, use of the noise canceling headphones, creating a Director's Lounge for intimate Q&A sessions between audience members and filmmakers of screened films. The latest addition is a film students masterclass offered to University and College level students on the morning of the event.

Below is some feedback from audience members who attended SSS screenings:

*Shorts, Shorts & Shorts is not only an innovative social film event screening but also an immersive experience and movement that brings filmmakers and audiences to enjoy cinema and have fun."*

Saitabao Kaiyare (Filmmaker)

*"I love the idea of watching Kenyan films. There are some films here that I have never heard of, and I am happy that I can watch them at Shorts, Shorts & Shots"*

Shanice W (Audience Member)

*"Shorts is a guaranteed good time; an easy afternoon enjoying cinema with awesome people. It's also a great time to meet filmmakers and have unhurried conversations about their work."*

Mugambi Nthiga - (Actor, filmmaker)

**Annie Gichuki is the Screenings Manager and Mudamba  
Mudamba the Program Director at Docubox**

**Facebook: [facebook.com/DocuboxFilmFund](https://www.facebook.com/DocuboxFilmFund)**

**Twitter: @DOCUBOXFilmFund**

**Instagram: @mydocubox / @shortsshorts**

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# In Conversation with Hip-hop Artist Mejja

With Mary Kabui



## Tell us about yourself

My name is Mejja I'm a Kenyan artist. I have been singing for a little over sixteen years.

## What was your childhood like?

I am the last born of three. I grew up in Nairobi, but after my parents separated, we moved to Nyeri and lived partly in Nanyuki. I was brought up by a single mum. I went to Ndururi Primary school in Nanyuki – which is in the 'ghetto' part of Nanyuki – then I attended Narumoru Boys. I managed to join college in Nyeri but couldn't finish due to my mum's continuous health issues.

## What inspired you to get into music?

I never knew hip-hop existed until I stumbled on a mixtape by DJ Clue. I'll never forget the experience. It featured many artists but Snoop Dogg and Eminem stood out most for me because their music told a story. That really piqued my interest. Around that time, my brother started a musical group of three called "Ghetto clan" He started rapping way before me. I was a quiet kid, so I was not chased from their practice sessions. I was so intrigued by their language and style! *"Walikuwa wanadunga madurag na label za Fila joh!! Ilikuwa inanimaliza na matha hangeweza kunibuiya"*.

I would accompany them to jam sessions. And the screams were just something out of this world. I was keen to learn his verses, and the next day I would perform in school. By then I was in Form Two. In those days there were no music videos. So you had to go to KBC (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation), do your shoot while singing, and they would do those old effects like making one shot look hexagonal! That was the beginning of my music career. I taught myself to write verses, rhyme, and other nitty gritty things that go into making music. But I didn't know how to rhyme. Didn't know much about music, how to write a chorus. I didn't really know much, but I just started to write.

## Would you say your brother was your biggest influence?

For sure. My brother's name is Moha. He really inspired me to get into my music career. Till today, he is a great guy. He has had some few challenges here and there, but he remains the one that inspired me to get into music. He still does music, but sometimes he can be all over the place. Like now, he has a YouTube video doing Ragga music and no one even knows it is him. If you meet all of us, you wouldn't even know we are related. My brother and mum are light-skinned and quite slim. I don't know where I got this body!

*I never knew hip-hop existed until I stumbled on a mixtape by DJ Clue. I'll never forget the experience. It featured many artists but Snoop Dogg and Eminem stood out most for me because their music told a story. That really piqued my interest.*

## **How long have you been doing music, and how has your experience been?**

I started doing music in 2007, when I released 'Jana Kuliendaje'. There are many influences to my music but mainly it has been my upbringing. I was raised in the ghetto in Nyeri and a lot of those experiences are reflected in my music. My mum used Kiswahili a lot with me and I spoke it with peers so it was natural for me to use Swahili or Sheng.

## **Has the use of Sheng affected your audience? What is your target audience?**

When I make music, it's about what I am feeling or the vibes at the time of creating the music. So, what I am doing is just expressing myself through the music. I like to capture what I am feeling in my lyrics and express them through the music to the audience.

I sing for everyone and do not have a specific target audience. But you would be surprised how wide the reach of my music is. When I go to places, I am greeted by people of all ages and walks of life.

In terms of whether people will understand Sheng, I think it all boils down to the vibes. There's lots of music we listen to in other languages and you appreciate the music without knowing the language. If the music is good, you will enjoy the music. You just find yourself saying, 'I don't know what he is saying but the vibe is good'. Music has a way of transcending barriers of language and nationality. I travelled to perform in South Sudan and was surprised that Arabic is the language commonly used. I wondered if they would understand the music and the response was amazing and they enjoyed the concert. When I was travelling to Uganda, their immigration officials actually recognized me. They were calling me the 'Dancehall artiste'. In Arusha, one time I had a gig at this club. It happened that a popular Amapiano artiste was performing at a club in town at the same time, so I wondered if I would draw the crowd. They kept assuring me that they would be there because they like Genge. There are many other places outside Kenya and the crowd always enjoys the music. So, the music does have an audience that doesn't necessarily speak or understand Sheng.

## **Since you started sixteen years ago, how is your language changing if at all?**

Yes, the language has changed. Sheng itself is not the same everywhere. Sheng is different depending on where you are. Let's take a word like liquor. There are areas where it's called 'tei', in others 'makali' and in another area like Calif they call it 'machwaks'. But that's the fun of it because the differences in the Sheng used bring a sense of identity.

One of the things I have tried to do about content is to maintain my connection with the audience. The reality of the music industry is that as God blesses you and you grow, you may move house and lose the connection with the community who are your primary audience. Then that connection is lost and the artist makes music that does not reach his audience. What I continue to do to maintain authenticity is to keep connected to the ghetto. I keep connected to the community so that my music reflects the realities of life,

*When I make music, it's about what I am feeling or the vibes at the time of creating the music. So, what I am doing is just expressing myself through the music. I like to capture what I am feeling in my lyrics and express them through the music to the audience.*

### What is your creative process like?

I'm a vibe kind of person. I don't rush my creative process. I can't create energy with a timetable. It's like photography. We take photos because we want to freeze a moment; you want it to tell a certain story or give certain energy.

Before I write music, it must have all those aspects. Apart from that, I listen to beats and tracks given by my producer. I let them speak to me with no words, then I express what I feel in words.

### What are the responses you get from your music?

Well, I get Direct Messages from people telling me that my music helped them overcome depression. I also get requests for collaborations from very big artists. These are some indicators that show me that my music has impacted people. I know myself and I believe in what I put out there. Apart from one or two comments like "Mejja unaskiza hizi ngoma na mtoi wako?" which annoy me because my child is usually present when I write my music. People tend to judge me by my music, but my child will judge me as the father that I am to her. Another issue is language. Some people say to be international you should sing in English. I have made it to international mainstream media with my music, using only Kiswahili and Sheng. I don't see why I should change. My main goal is to maintain my identity and course.

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### What do you wish you knew earlier as an artiste?

I wish I had known that not everyone who approaches you in the industry is actually interested in your growth or in doing something that will benefit you. There are those who would work with you but not only say "call me later, I'm busy" when it was time to pay, and yet they claim to be your friends. I used to have a problem saying "No". But I no longer have that problem because I have learnt to also put my demands on the table right from the beginning

**Thank you so much for speaking with me.  
Highly appreciated.**

***Mary Kabui works in communications and creates content covering culture and creative sector issues.***



# Conversation about Nairobi in the Making



*Moderator:* Dr. Caroline Mose Writer & lecturer at Technical University of Kenya

*Panelists:* Dr. Constance Smith author of *Nairobi in the Making: Landscapes of Time & Urban Belonging*

Dr. Garnette Oluoch Olunya GoDown Arts Centre

Dr. George Gathigi University of Nairobi

**CM:** I would like to start from what the scholar Achille Mbembe said when writing about Johannesburg, (...) most African cities start off as a mimicry of a European City and through mimesis, over the years, they acquire this aura that is authentic and inherently African. So, I would like us to start off from that point; we'll start with you Garnette. What do you think has been that process for Nairobi? What was mimicry and what is mimetic, and what now is the aura of Nairobi? Are we still mimicking European cities? What, for you, has been the progression for Nairobi?

**GO:** I think that's a really loaded question because when I think about Nairobi, especially the African element, I think 'exclusion' because when Nairobi started as a city it had everything to do with the building of the Railway. Even though the Maasai, who are pastoralists, moved in and out of this space, that really did belong to their Community. Nairobi started as a railway depot (...) it was more of a European city; then African labour started coming in –as was needed. But on principle, Africans were not allowed to take 'root' in the city. So for me, when I think about Nairobi, I think of it as an unfriendly place for the African –historically. I was born in Maseno [a town about 365 km north west of Nairobi] but I grew up in Nairobi, in Lower Kabete –technically, the outskirts of Nairobi – but now one of its suburbs. And I remember growing up there, then coming to school in the City Centre, feeling "country" because Lower Kabete then was totally country. We used to come on a country bus, with the vegetables and the market women coming to supply the Parklands area. These market women would allow us to sit on their potatoes and we'd come in. I went to school in Ngara, which was an Indian part of the City. So, already even in my imagination, the city was highly segregated; you came in from the country; you came in to a specific area! To go into Parklands, back in the day, there was no direct transport, we'd stop off in Ngara and then walk across. I think, that even just as a young person, I walked the city a lot; to catch my transport; to walk across to lunch in the other zone. My perception, like I said, has been mixed from the get go. Bringing it back to the *Nai Ni Who* festivals held by the GoDown since 2013... this festival has helped me relook at Nairobi from a different perspective because what the GoDown Centre was doing... (arrangements for the festival) actually started in 2012 in a discussion with a Swedish partner, White Architects. The GoDown had just purchased its plot in industrial area and was beginning to think about locating itself within the City... our first conversation, which we held in town, at the Stanley Hotel, was attended by a lot of young Kenyans who expressed their varied sense of belonging... again

*Nairobi started as a railway depot (...) it was more of a European city; then African labour started coming in –as was needed. But on principle, Africans were not allowed to take 'root' in the city. So for me, when I think about Nairobi, I think of it as an unfriendly place for the African –historically.*

*'I was born in Nairobi but my parents came from elsewhere' or 'my parents were also born in Nairobi ... but when I retire or when I think of home, I think of Village A or Village B or Village C.'*

we all had these mixed stories about how we felt within the City. Invariably the young people would stand up and say, 'I was born in Nairobi but my parents came from elsewhere' or 'my parents were also born in Nairobi ... but when I retire or when I think of home, I think of Village A or Village B or Village C.'

We kept asking... so who belongs to Nairobi? Who actually lives here and thinks of Nairobi in terms of the building or the infrastructure... because that was what we were really thinking of doing... of taking care of the city, of investing in the city. At the end of the day everybody was like, 'I don't know, I don't really feel that sense of belonging'.

The Festival was all about getting people to really identify and develop a sense of belonging around their specific neighborhoods; we chose eleven zones from Mukuru to Muthaiga. And we decided to go everywhere (within the city) because all these people are Nairobians. We could examine and see where this sense of disquiet (about belonging to the city) came from. Whether you are African, of Asian origin or European... we decided to go into all areas and come up with something for (the festival) *Nai Ni Who?* That is actually where it all started.

**CM: Right. I'll come back to you on who owns Nairobi and what it means to identify in and own different spaces. Let me come to George. What would you say is your experience of Nairobi?**

**GG:** My experience of Nairobi has changed over time. When we were growing up, I think I spent fifteen years in the grazing fields, but even as kids, there was the whole socio economic difference. For example, the cool kids, or the kids who belong to the well to do families, actually came to school in Nairobi. At that time Nairobi was anywhere from Karen [a suburb to the extreme west of the city's circumscription] we had a lot of children going to Karen C Primary, St. Mary's, Ngong Forest, while other children would actually come up to City Centre. At some point my nephews and nieces were going to school at Moi Avenue [in City Centre]. So we grew up with that distinction and you could hear it with language distinction and all that.

But things became real for me when I was in college. I had an opportunity, to get to know Kibera [a neighbourhood occupied by low income families] because it is near the Showground. I would come to the City when visiting the showground. This time [while in college] I was in a team that was doing a household survey on health in Kibera. And I think for the first time I came in touch with the urban reality. You [and your team] would get into a house and ask,

'How many people live here?'

'Eight people,' they would say.

And that's a single 10x12 feet room at most.

We would again ask, 'How do you live?'

We started observing the answers; you would see a mattress on top, a sofa here... so that's the Nairobi I started knowing. But then there are other questions of, for example, distance. Growing up, Nairobi was a place that you could dash to and go back home. But as the population has grown, people have moved into the peri-urban areas so you have a lot of traffic making movement difficult as the city has expanded. Nowadays, Ngong [24 km from City Centre] is part of Nairobi. This was not always the case. But some of us got into Nairobi through popular culture, especially Sheng.

*Growing up, Nairobi was a place that you could dash to and go back home. But as the population has grown, people have moved into the peri-urban areas so you have a lot of traffic making movement difficult as the city has expanded.*

CM: Which brings me to you Connie. When I read your book there's a part where you actually went to Western Kenya or was it Nyanza to find out how the people who had lived in Kaloleni [a housing estate of colonial origins, 5 km to the east of City Centre] and had grown older... In your research what did you feel is the connection between Nairobi and the rural areas? Is it that we just come to Nairobi to hustle, and to get money and when we're spent we disappear back to the Village? How did you see that connection between Kaloleni, as the space where you had centered your research, and other places that are connected to Nairobi.

CS: It's a fascinating question and it's not one I originally intended to look at. Probably in some naivety, because as anyone who knows Nairobi, as we've been saying, you can be from Nairobi and not from Nairobi –at the same time. This interest in what happened to the people of Kaloleni who then retired, as they put it, to upcountry... I was interested in these early colonial histories and people kept saying, 'Oh no! The person you need to speak to is gone home; they've gone home.' If you want to get these stories you'll have to go to them because they are now in Nyanza or Western; Kaloleni has historically been a very Luo and Luhya neighbourhood. There's that connection. That was really the first impetus. But as Garnette has already alluded to... this is also a very important echo of earlier histories of the city because, in the early colonial years, Nairobi was really conceived of as a European space. African presence was very tightly controlled and there was a kind of British colonial idea that Africans could only be migrant labourers, in the City, but couldn't live in it. Of course, in practice this is not what happened. People [Africans] did settle; they did put down roots in the fringes of the city. Some of the older people –when they talked about retiring– didn't speak of going to shags (the village) or going upcountry. They said, 'We're going to the reserve'. So they were still using the colonial language, which to start with, I found very surprising. But I came to realize, as my research continued, that yes, on the one hand there was a legacy of colonial control, in that people were forced to maintain these rural connections in the past, but actually everyone was making those connections anew. So you couldn't just assume this connection was going to last. Actually, it required work. You had to travel upcountry; you had to send people money for school fees. You had to work to maintain those social connections. And people who did not work to maintain those connections often struggled when they became older because they didn't have that safety net. I could see also that people were making this anew, reconfiguring these kinds of connections in ways that were still very strong in the City. Although I think at the same time a lot of younger people were also saying, 'Belonging is not about back home or upcountry; belonging is about the future and where we want to be in the future'. That idea about who belongs to Nairobi, I think, shouldn't trace ancestry back to Nairobi but can be projected into the future; being the Nairobians of the future. I think to flip that around and think about belonging that way, helps us see belonging as something we can be working on, all the time.

CM: Which brings me back to you Garnette in the *Nai Ni Who?* project that I find fascinating. Do the younger generation have that deeper connection to the ancestral space?

GO: This morning, because I knew I was coming to the panel, I decided to speak to two young people and ask them that very question. I asked this young lady about her relationship with Nairobi: Was she born here and what does she think about retirement? She's really young and probably hasn't thought about retirement. She told me:

'I have bought three acres of land in my rural area, even though my mum died

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when I was young. My siblings and I were raised in an orphanage, in Nairobi, but the first thing I did, when I got my job was to invest in land. I want to practice agriculture.'

I looked at her and asked, 'What experience do you have in agriculture?'

She said, 'I know I'm going to do it. As soon as I have enough [earned sufficient money] I'm out of here. This hustle of Nairobi is killing me.'

'You haven't ever lived there!' I quipped

'No, but we have a vibrant relationship with my mum's other relatives from the village', she answered –this is the way she sees it.

The second one was a gentleman, also fairly young. He told me he was going home to bury his mum. I didn't ask him where home was. I just assumed I knew where it was because he comes from Western Kenya. He said:

'My mum was staying with me because she was unwell but I bought a plot of land in Uasin Gishu –from my friends, we have a club; a kind of a *chama*. We were looking at prospects... My dad has a plot in Nandi where he is buried. But my mum was staying with me; my home is in Uasin Gishu. Even though I live in Kajjado, my home, where my wife and kids are, is in Uasin Gishu.'

'Your family allowed you to bury your mum there [in Uasin Gishu] while your dad is buried in Nandi?' I asked.

'She was my responsibility. She lived with me and therefore... luckily we're only four siblings, so it is easy to negotiate', he acknowledged.

He's not even the older brother; he is the younger [it is customary that the elder male sibling shoulders such responsibilities] And he buried his mum in Uasin Gishu.

'You come from Western [Kenya] and you did all this?' I asked

'Yes, because it is my responsibility,' he retorted.

I was really surprised! Reading Constance's book, for me, was very personal. It partly describes my community –I'm Luo [from Western Kenya] not a first born, but married to a first born. And, I will tell you, right now I'm very present in Nairobi but my head is in the Village because we have to build a house (there). My husband, as a first born, has to build a house. If he does not, his younger brothers... he has to open up the way for them to be able to build in the Village too. So that, should they want to live in the Village, they have the option available. I'm very busy practicing architecture, building a house, as we speak. So that is the reality. There are all these competing tensions.

**CM: That's interesting that these two young people have lived and worked in Nairobi, but are not necessarily wanting to settle in Nairobi. So who owns Nairobi? What is Nairobi then, is it just a place to hustle and leave?**

**GG:** I think I remember the first time we had people coming to Ngong. It was immediately after the 1982 attempted coup. During that time, people were shaken, and I remember some family friends saying their kids asked them: 'What are we doing in Nairobi?' A similar moment happened two years ago with COVID 19. I think a lot of us, young parents, were shaken. You live in an apartment... and people felt imprisoned. One of my friends told me:

'I remember you were encouraging me to buy land in Ngong; I should have listened to you.' Some of us actually ran away. My family and I spent almost a year there (in Ngong). I had to construct an office in what is almost a farm. And I think it is these moments of tensions and challenges that usually make us think about our relationship with the City; the economic realities as well. For example, I have noticed people who have young families make certain –economic– decisions. If you ask them, they will tell you they prefer to live outside the city because they can access fresh products such as milk and eggs and can grow crops in their backyard. I don't think it is the space itself but what the City represents to us and its options... During COVID people were running away from town to peri-urban areas.

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CM: Connie, in your book, you talk about Vision 2030. What are some of your thoughts about Vision 2030, the Expressway and people resisting it?

CS: It's interesting to be thinking about these things in terms of the Expressway because I haven't seen any sign on the Expressway, or heard any discussions, that mention Vision 2030. If you go back to when Kibaki [former president] launched Vision 2030, in 2007, there were all these glossy publications, featuring an enormous highway, running through the middle of Nairobi. So it feels new on the one hand, having just been completed, but it's been there hovering in the digital space for much longer. One of the things that really struck me, about Vision 2030, was the blueprint for a sky scraper, glossy, technological city positioning Nairobi not to Kenyans but to the rest of the world. So this idea of a world class African metropolis was to recreate Nairobi in the image of places like Dubai or Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. These have recreated themselves into global cities. Vision 2030 did not seem, to me, to present the kind of urban regeneration or urban change that was to serve people in places like Kaloleni. But what do I know! When I was having conversations with people, I'd say 75% of them were incredibly positive about these images on billboards or on Twitter and Facebook. And they were saying: 'Yeah, look at the state of Nairobi! Of course we'd like to live in a city that's more organized; a city that has this kind of modern progressive aspects to it'. That really was surprising to me (...) when I went deeper, they were saying, 'Well except actually... probably we'll be excluded from it [the re-fashioned an Expressway Nairobi] because we know how Kenyan politics works, we know how change in Nairobi has happened in the past. Our voices are not loud enough to benefit from what's going to come next'. That was a real anxiety for people! When I was talking about turning back to the history of their neighbourhood, it was with a sense of: 'what are we going to do to secure our position in the future because this [new City] looks like it isn't going to be for us?'

But maybe I can say, just briefly, about the title of the book; about why I settled on *Nairobi in the Making*. I started to realize that these overarching aerial plans, for the city, make a whole new blueprint without considering people's lives on the ground, in a meaningful day-to-day way. Those plans have been there from the outset. Kaloleni was part of the projects that created 'Nairobi: the City in the Sun', as it was described. We made a huge blueprint to completely change the lay of the city. Then there was another one under Moi [an earlier president, preceding Kibaki] There have been so many, Vision 2030 is one, in a long history of these kind of aerial projects. As we know, most of those projects have only been partially built or not at all. They exist on paper. I realized it's the incremental processes of people's everyday lives that are the city's blueprint: how they make things; whether they are making history; whether they are making new historical narratives; whether they are making an extension to their house; whether they are making a new kind of hustle... all of these different ways that people live their lives –incrementally, slowly, in a cumulative way. That's actually how the city gets made. Yes, we have big plans and occasionally big investments of money but those happen alongside and intermingled with all these other ways that people make the City. I was struck by how people stopped talking about Vision 2030 and started calling it Vision 3020; it was like, it was never going to happen. So you know that these things [like Vision 2030] are somehow a pipe dream. The question is more like: 'How do we make our lives in the meantime?'

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CM: So how are people making their lives in the meantime with all this Big 4 Agenda? I think even the next government will come up with their own agenda. How are people making their lives in the meantime in terms of popular culture, arts and festivals?

*We are headed into interesting times; there are more conversations because of the social media. I think the next question is whether there is a digital city. The next city is going to be constructed physically, digitally and in other relations. That's something I look forward to seeing.*

GG: I see a lot of activities, especially online, in the digital space and a lot of conversations. We are having cross generational and intergenerational conversations. I think there is a generation (...) we all know Kalamashaka and how they shook the Art Scene. People in Dandora are finding their space. The idea of the City, that we had then, is no longer tenable today. People want to move, they want to be able to come to the City when it works for them. They want to rush to Naivasha [a town 90 km due south east from Nairobi, considered 'cool' by today's generation] Young people, since yesterday and till tomorrow, are in Naivasha for the Safari Rally. I've seen radio stations pitching tents there. We need to rethink the whole idea of the city as a temporal space; maybe as a place of coming and going at will. The Expressway works in that regard. People are trying to find their own space; I too struggle. We are headed into interesting times; there are more conversations because of the social media. I think the next question is whether there is a digital city. The next city is going to be constructed physically, digitally and in other relations. That's something I look forward to seeing.

CM: Should we think of the City not just as the physical space but as this place that transcends arbitrary borders? And now we even have Naksvegas and Vasha [a corruption of Las Vegas and abbreviation of Nai-Vasha]. So we are transporting Nairobi-ness –maybe through the digital space or through ease of movement– into other towns and cities. Is there something to be said about the making and remaking of Nairobi while connecting to other spaces?

*I just want to very quickly say, George, that you mentioned the Safari Rally in Naivasha but what's going down is the Koroga Festival, an Arts festival with wonderful musicians. So that's how I want to think of what's going on in Naivasha –in addition to the Rally.*

GO: I just want to very quickly say, George, that you mentioned the Safari Rally in Naivasha but what's going down is the Koroga Festival, an Arts festival with wonderful musicians. So that's how I want to think of what's going on in Naivasha –in addition to the Rally. Connecting back to what Connie said about 2013 and Vision 2030, one of the reasons *Nai Ni Who?* started in 2013, was the determination to be part of the National Plan, whatever that plan was. At that time it was Vision 2030. As stakeholders within the City, The GoDown Centre spends a lot of time poring over national plans, mid-term plans, or whatever the City does. Ownership of that space has broadened its desire to belong and to be actors. Of course before Governor Sonko, the GoDown was actually represented in the Technical Working groups of the Nairobi City County Integrated Master Plan and also on the County Committee on improvement of public spaces. Therefore, it worked with UN Habitat to improve public space in the City. We (The GoDown) felt invested in whichever way the City would move forward. Then, enter the County! [Nairobi metropolis is operated as a county under the dispensation of the 2010 Constitution of Kenya] one of the other things the GoDown has done is to help the Kisumu Governor think through the culture and art spaces in his county. The Kisumu Social Hall, like Kaloleni Social Hall, is being renamed Mama Grace Onyango Social Hall because Grace Onyango was the first woman mayor of Kisumu. Regarding gender sensitivity, The GoDown, was determined to re-focus on gender sensitivity during AfriCities. The Governor of Kisumu did rehabilitate the Social Hall, following the suggestion made by the GoDown, five years earlier. The GoDown however held an exhibition on the fringe of AfriCities because the global event was too expensive for local artists; this outside exhibition was free. It was an amazing! To hold a one day event within a space that was rehabilitated for artists. We've also done work with the Little Theatre in Mombasa and with Nakuru and Naivasha.

People are moving; they're doing things, wonderful things, out there. But they are also connecting back –especially digitally. Digital space has opened up the way artists interact. You can launch (artwork) here and everybody gets it, not just in Kenya but in Eastern Africa and the world.

But there's one thing I want to say; Connie mentioned 'the reserve'. As part of *Nai Ni Who?* I heard about ancestral land and that bothered me. I asked my father-in-law:

'How long have we lived here? We say it is ancestral (land) and we say it's ours we don't have to argue with anybody about it.'

He told me: 'Oh, actually we moved here at the turn of the 20th Century. We were warring with the neighbours who were from a place called Alego. The District Commissioner moved us out for our own safety'.

'What DC?' I said, 'You mean the colonial DC?'

'Yes,' he replied.

I had been thinking of a pristine ancestral African something... so when he mentioned the DC, over a hundred years ago, I thought,

'Really, so this is not like our natural...?'

'No', he said, 'we also moved here'.

It was a real eye-opener, for me. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o talks about decolonizing the mind; he talks about the reserve... saying that he went to school and when he came back, from school, the village had moved into this reserve. Gitogothi near Kamirithu, his current residence, is not his ancestral home. No. That was the piece of land that was reserved and could be monitored closely by the colonial power. So yes, we have a kind of ambivalent relationship to these kinds of origin-ary spaces. When I come back to *Nai Ni Who?* There is that uncertainty around Identity and Belonging of the Nairobiian. I think it's because we are constantly destabilized; ancestral has a question mark.

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**The full conversation can be found at**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EV7hTGq90oA>**





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ISBN 978-9966-128-11-9



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