

The De-Tribalized Generation: The East Africa Hip-Hop Artist

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Abstract

The East African urban setting has produced a generation that lives within cultural grey areas that have no clear ethnic leanings. The youth who inhabit these urban spaces are caught in a world with forces that pull them in different directions. Their domestic space consists of parents from an older generation with strong affiliation to their ethnic groups, yet they still live among neighbors with different ethnic affiliation. They also live in a country that calls for national unity but is daily bombarded with ethnic rhetoric from politicians. The artists of this new generation are thus confronted with problems unique to an environment faced with many ambiguities such as lack of clear ethnic affiliations. They therefore seek to give identity and meaning to their existence, and to define their world as urbanites against the background of their ethnic origins. This paper examines the cosmopolitan thinking that has extended beyond ethnic and national boundaries among Kenyan hip-hop musicians. It explores the artistic demolition of ethnic and national boundaries by these hip-hop musicians.

Key Words: Youth, Identity, Kenya, East Africa, Urban Space, Hip Hop

Introduction

In traditional societies, identity springs from a common ancestry. This identity configuration is often marked linguistically by a specific ethnic language. To forge the bonds of this ancestral union, shared customs and rituals are practiced. These rituals act as platforms that promote social cohesion and strengthen social ties and are often passed from one generation to another as oral traditions. Therefore, rituals particular to people who share common ancestry bring the whole community together with consistent affirmation and allegiance to their ethnic nation. However, with the passage of time traditional African societies have witnessed a cultural overhaul that has transformed how people from different communities conceptualize their identities and how oral performances offer spaces upon which identities are constructed. These performance spaces also serve as platforms for identity representation and negotiation.

The cultural transformation that traditional African societies have been subjected to has also called for a re-definition of African oral art to include the different waves of change that have hit the ever-changing African cultures. Urban centres, which have always brought together people from different ethnic communities practicing different cultures, become the contact zones where these different cultures converge and mix in ways that produce even more cultures. Foster (2018) defines the point of cultural

convergence as a grey zone, “[...] an opaque space that actors not only confront but through their daily social practice incrementally morph into a colourful city space” (13). He believes that how urban-dwellers mingle and interact determines how “they create colors that allow them to perceive the city as a life world of their own agency” (Foster 2018, 13). It is this agential capacity of cultural outputs from urban spaces that supports the argument in this paper, precisely that the cosmopolitan thinking that has extended beyond ethnic and national boundaries among the hip-hop musicians in urban spaces facilitates an artistic demolition of ethnic and national boundaries by hip-hop musicians. It is the fluidity of this cultural space, according to Rappo (2013) that makes possible an overturning of traditional structures.

Although many forces have contributed to the cultural change as argued in the preceding paragraph, the most prevalent influence arose from the European intrusion of Africa in the modern period. Today, every African city displays in many ways and varying degrees European influence. The most prominent influence of modernity in Africa, notes Kruger (2001), is that:

“Most African cities are redolent with post-colonial legacies of racial and/or ethnic tensions, economic challenges, underdevelopment, unemployment, loss of cultural memory, and experiences of displacement and migration. At the same time, African cities are characterised by the ‘global characteristics of transnational flows of capital and labour, and of cultural diversity’”(4).

Kruger’s observation above manifests in this paper in terms of how western influence impacted the African spaces on two levels. First is that the colonial experience threatened to wipe out African cultures out of existence so that post-colonial African oral artists found themselves with the task of re-affirming the essence of Africanism through song/oral poetry. This process of self-affirmation therefore took centrality in the arts such that themes of nation hood can be identified in most songs in the post-colonial era. Second, contact with western cultures dehumanize(d) the Black Africans so much so that they had to find alternative ways of asserting their humanity. This occurred in two ways; through both physical and psychological violence, which pushed Black Africans into rethinking their identity as people existing in grey areas and unable to classify themselves either as Africans or Europeans.

Subsequently, there have been efforts to reinvent African identities. For instance, the African Americans formed a joint initiative to celebrate their Africanness in what came to be known as the Harlem renaissance. The hip-hop culture is one of the revolutionary practices of this process to redeem African consciousness. In Botswana, Rappo argues, the African youths within urban spaces affirm their identities through modern innovations like:

“CDs and DVDs, as well as non-technological ‘traditional’ forms of knowledge preservation and use music and performance to preserve and circulate cultural heritage and to reinforce the value of collective cultural memory. They achieve this through technological modes of production and exchange circulation—street trading and performance, and equivocations of the cultural and national imaginaries of public demonstrations.”(68)

Emerging from the two examples detailed above, hip hop is a culture of resistance and protest and the components of hip hop including music and graffiti are a representation of the violence subjected to the Africans by western culture and its aftermath. This hip hop culture encompasses various aspects like rapping, Dj-ing, emceeing and graffiti among others.

One African oral form adversely affected by westernization is oral poetry. In the traditional African context, praising oneself was an integral part of oral poetry, and this praise culture was widely encouraged and highly appreciated. In addition there was praise poetry performed by specialized poets like the Senegambian griots who Finnegan (2012) notes “specialized in shouting praises and reciting genealogies and had some kind of attachment to the various freeborn lineages; others sang praises of chiefs and leading men at public functions and could gain great influence with local rulers” (98). This praise singing culture was wide spread among African communities and took various forms, including self-praise. The praises were accompanied by instruments or non-accompanied. Among the Luo, as Finnegan further illustrates citing Anyumba, the *Nyatiti* player was “called on to praise friends or relatives, to recount his personal experiences, to exalt kindness, hospitality, or courage, and to comment on current affairs. In all these he [was] judged by the degree to which he [could] unite the art of the musician/performer and that of the poet/composer; he [was] ‘judged as much by his skill on the instrument as by his ability to weave a story or meditate on human experience. In this lies the real fascination of the *Nyatiti* player” (101). African slaves in the Diaspora did not find such an atmosphere in the European poetic tradition and sought the praise element in oral poetry through the of Africanization of European art forms by providing room for self-expression through rap and graffiti.

This trend of hybridizing African art forms has been adopted by East African modern oral artists who have borrowed the concept of hip hop culture, while personalizing it. Thus the East African hip hop culture has seen the evolution of Bongo flava in Tanzania, Kapuka and Genge or Boomba in Kenya and a stylized hip hop in Uganda. This is the music that has replaced the traditional songs performed within the ritual space mentioned in the introduction to this paper. In the said rural communities, traditional songs act as a socializing agent, which also imbibe community values. In the current post-modern era, however, more-so in urban spaces, the cultural custodians, who are normally the elderly (both male and female), are not always available to oversee and enforce the traditional values. The youth fill this void through their own musical compositions and act as contemporary custodians of urban culture and values. This new role of hip hop artists has been noted by Rappo who says that:

The youth urban performer surrogates the elderly as a custodian of cultural and/or moral knowledge and experience. This scenario of surrogation—whereby the city takes the place of the rural as the site of moral guidance, and Hip-hop culture substitutes traditional and bodily forms of knowledge—gets trafficked through popular culture....Popular performance by the youth functions to construct identity, to reflect individual and collective experiences, and to perform African cultural memory.(70)

Thus the urban music by youth no matter the language or name allocated to this genre in the individual countries of the East African region or the hip hop version that exists

there, still acts as a 'voice' of the disenfranchised youth of low economic areas. Additionally, the music of these youths reflects the harsh realities of their lives in the ghetto.

Like poetry and music which have been transformed by western culture, the performance spaces and contexts have evolved and been revolutionized. Thus we see change from the ritual context as the main performance space in rural areas to discos, radio stations, and internet spaces as the mainstream spaces in urban areas. One therefore measures the popularity of a song by how often it is sang in a ceremony or event in traditional settings vis vis how often it played on radio/tv or number of likes on you tube in urban settings. There is therefore a shift in perception of what becomes popular culture in the urban space against the grain of what is considered popular culture in rural areas. The older generation pointedly keeps viewing hip hop music as that which goes against their cultural roots but as Barber notes, "Popular (*culture*) are also much more than constellation of social, political and economic relationship—they are expressive acts...; [a] sheer undeniable assertive presence as social facts. They are everywhere. They flourish without encouragement or recognition from official cultural bodies and sometimes in defiance of them"(1). Despite the lack of acceptance by the older generation, East African urban music has become part of the cultural facet of the East African landscape. Perhaps the most important aspect of the East African urban music, however, is that this music has created a unified East African identity. Further she intones, that "In terms of rapid social change, it seems likely that popular art forms, with their exceptional mobility (whether through technology...) will play a crucial role in formulating ways of looking at things" (Barber 1997, 4). The East African cultural experience is almost similar, with common factors associating the three countries such as the Lake Victoria and the languages they speak. However, there is no unifying term that refers to all their music.

Seeking New Identity Formation

Way back in the 1960s, Bennet (1969) argued that "the very names of the East African states indicate the contrast of tribal influence." As he illustrates; Uganda borrows the name of one ethnic community, the Baganda to name the whole country while Kenya uses the short form of the name of the sacred mountain, mount Kirinyaga, of one of the largest ethnic communities, the kikuyu. Colonialism as he notes "caused tribal sentiments to cohere", so that for one to appear a nationalist, the East African politics has demanded one to dissociate with the tribe. However, most politicians utilise the rhetoric of togetherness that thrived in traditional African communities to galvanize the tribes to vote as a block. The tribe, especially in Kenya and Uganda has been a double edged sword; it has been a springboard for politicians from large ethnic communities to win national seats but has equally been hypocritically sneered upon by the very politicians as a negation and impediment to achievement of national integration. The tribe as an identity is therefore problematic in national identity formation as much as it is a national identity marker for many citizens. In other words, one is a Kenyan by virtue of being Kikuyus, Luhyas, or any other ethnic identity. Many citizens from the two countries – Kenya and Uganda – seem to identify themselves first as belonging to a particular tribe before the nation.

The onset of the new millennium saw a rise in cultural events being organised around the ethnic groups in Kenya. Before the election debacle of 2007, these events were identified by names such as cultural nights. Thus we had Luhya night, Luo night, Kalenjin night, Kamba night, names that basically denote the ethnic communities around which these events are themed. These events are a cultural pot from which the participants can source and enjoy the cultural experiences of that community since time immemorial so that on the menu are the traditional music, dishes, dance, costumes and more often than not, language. However, in the wake of the 2007 tribal tensions, the organizers were compelled to find softer terminologies to coat the otherwise purely ethnic cultural events. This then saw the evolution of new names such as *Musyi Night*, *Ramogi Night*, *Mulembe Night*, *Kitwek Night*, and *Mugithi Night*, among others that grace the events that had otherwise not changed in manner or outlook. Most of their music promotes ethnic ideologies either through language or cultural values. The changing circumstance arising out of the 2007 ethnic tensions propelled the urban musician to transform. According to Forster, urban musicians transform the spaces they inhabit, as “African urbanites are actors and subjects of continuous social, political and economic transformations and actively situate themselves in their cities as economic, social and political actors”(14). In a similar manner, many Kenyan event organisers and musicians had to reinvent themselves in a political setting that was highly polarized along political lines but still living and occupying same social and economic spaces for survival.

The Kenyan urban setting brings together people from different ethnic backgrounds, making many settlements cultural grey areas. The most notable grey areas are low-income neighborhoods (ghettos). We consider them grey areas because people carry their ethnic identities within such areas, eg *Kijiji* (in...), and *Kisumu Ndogo* (in...), despite their location in the cosmopolitan urban centre of Nairobi. In these grey areas there are individuals from rural areas who carry aspects of their identity and transpose to the city. Since their children grow up in this diversity, they appreciate these cultural aspects. Two such musicians are Gidi Gidi and Maji Maji, who linguistically identify as belonging to the Luo community, a sub-group of the River Lake Nilotes. Although some urban musicians sing in specific ethnic languages, those who do not hail from these ethnicities but grew up in this linguistic diversity come to appreciate the music. These musicians and their followers do not see the negativity in use of vernacular but appreciate it as rich in diversity.

Gidi Gidi and Maji Maji, two Kenyan urban youth, who at one time were viewed as a flourishing duo and often sang in Dholuo, capture the imagination of the youth by blending languages and using the hip hop genre as their space of choice to communicate to their publics. Two of their songs that gained much popularity are “Atoti” and “Unbwogable”. The latter song, “unbwogable”, is a compounded lexeme of the Luo word *bwoga* has double meanings (meaning to inspire fear or to threaten) and the English affixes ‘-un’ and ‘-able’. When merged, they form a new word ‘unbwogable’, an adjective meaning unshakeable or unbeatable. Fighting against the dominance of the old homogenic structure that recognizes elders as owners of everything, the song continually rallies the youth by saying:

*Can't a young Luo make money?
 Who are you, what are you
 Get the hell out of my face
 Cause I am unbwogable
 I am unbeatable*

These lyrics echo the rebellious nature of urban youth and the recognition of their powers. With severed relationships from traditional structures, hip hop empowers them to dare and move away from ethnic-based authority. The rebellious nature of the youth is often embedded in the daring sheng phrase “*utado?*” (what can you do?). This assertive referent of ‘*utado?*’ is a dare and is often reminiscent in the discourse of many Genge musicians, one of them being Big Pin. Big Pin is popularly known as the Luo Rap King, a title that though self-acclaimed, takes up the title king reserved for the old and resituates it within the urban setting of the rap kingdom. He therefore re-imagines himself and is viewed by his audiences as the unchallenged King of the Luo rap kingdom, to secure his position from by his competitors.

The urban genres created by the youth fill up the lacuna left by artists moving away from the traditional context in which songs are usually sang. Some scholars have argued that hip hop represents the urban youth because the genre was created by and for them (George 1998; Rose 1994). Given that even in urban areas traditional genres like mugithi, ohangla, and tindikiti still flourish albeit under the control of the traditional hegemony and based on ethnic identities, the rise of the urban popular culture can be viewed as a rebellion against the dominance perpetuated by the power structure under ethnic umbrellas. There is rebellion both in what the urban youth sing and how they deploy language borrowing variously from ethnic languages yet asserting their youthfulness as the source of their identity alignment. In this way, they belong to ethnic communities and not belong to them simultaneously. Hip hop artists only utilize ethnic languages as a tool to communicate the sense of doubleness; that of being urbanite youth but also their ethnic affiliation. The tendency to emphasize one’s ethnic affiliation is a strategic move meant to highlight the generational divide and to claim a space for the urban youth in which they can celebrate their achievements and raise awareness about their struggles.

Other musicians claim some ethnic affinity such as Wakamba Wawili, although theirs is an affiliation only in names since they do not sing in Kamba language. Besides the aforementioned artists, there are still those who borrow from ethnic idioms, aesthetics, and myths around communities. Nonini and Sylvia who collaboratively sang the song “*Manzi wa Nairobi*”, borrow from such ethnic aesthetics. According to Nonini and Sylvia, a Nairobi woman has legs like a Luhya, and ass like a Luo, physical attributes that define beauty in ethnic terms. The mixing of physical attributes from different ethnic communities and amalgamating them in the body of a Nairobi woman, invents a revolutionarised identity concept, that of someone who is associated with an urban space rather than an ethnic community. Public discourse in Kenyan spaces is rife with ethnic stereotypes that tend to ear-mark certain ethnic communities as possessing specific markers. Each of the forty two ethnic communities in Kenya has been assigned certain attributes, whether physical, cultural, or both, and hip hop artists tap into such discourses in their artistic output.

Urbanites in Search of a New Identity

There is a shift in the identity formation processes among East African artists from tribal tags to spacio-temporal configurations, hence the cosmopolitan identities. East African hip hop artists have refocused their identification from ethnic-based tags to new forms of identities, for instance creating affinity with residential areas and regions. However, this transition has not been a smooth one or conducive for all involved. One of the probable incentives we attribute to this deliberate shift from ethnic affinity to space, is the desire for urban youths to demonstrate their place within the Kenyan political imaginary. The inability to embrace both facets of their identities; cosmopolitan and ethnic, might be on the surface portray an impression of an identity crisis. It should however be noted that the existence of urban youth in the grey zones that Foster (2018) mentioned earlier means a compulsion to simultaneously perform the alternate identities associated with ethnic communities and urban spaces.

The apparent identity crisis is reminiscent in the life of one of Kenya's popular genre rap artists Jua Cali. For a long time, Jua Cali had been identified by his stage name, which as we argue in the coming sections, bears affiliation with the urban spaces he inhabits. This identity marker had outshone and perhaps even suppressed his ethnic identity. Urban popular genres thrive on highlighting the cosmopolitan nature of its subjects, but we do not by any means suggest that ethnic identities are as inferior. Rather, our argument strongly suggests that the doubleness of urban youth identities is what makes them unique subjects and interesting to study. With Jua Cali detailed above, his existence within the grey zone of urban cosmopolitan space displaces one of his identities in order to valorize the other and vice versa. This situation is an indicator of the precarious nature of urban youth identities which present a doubleness that might be read as an indicator of the inability for these individuals to fit within Kenya's political imaginary, an issue that haunts most artists who constitute this paper. This declaration is made in view of Barber's (1997) argument that "Art forms do not merely reflect an already constituted consciousness, giving us a window into [an] already present. They are themselves important means through which consciousness is articulated and communicated"(4). In this paper, Barber's ideas facilitate a consideration of how over time, some facets of people's identities, cultures, and even art forms have had to be stifled for others to rise above them and occupy a dominant position that reflects the thinking of the time and the place. The onslaught of the post 2007 election skirmishes in Kenya is probably a turning point, as it confronted the Kenyan society with the dilemma of how to come up with politically correct tags that would identify songs, artists and other art forms to give them a universal face as opposed to a tribal indication.

The extent to which East African hip hop can adequately confront social realities is debatable, especially if considered within the context of oral art. Hip hop music differs greatly from the traditional oral poetry in that the informal education that exists in traditional societies through oral art is not existent in hip hop's modern context. The disparities that confront the two art forms might be explained due to the alienation of the oral artists of the traditional context, in this case rural settings, from the modern art of hip hop and its urban situatedness. Similarly, the ritual aspect which cements and unifies traditional African communities is absent in East African hip hop. As a result, identity formation in urban settings and hip hop by extension is majorly constructed

around the idea of ‘*mtaa*’ (residential area or neighbourhood). Unlike in the United States of America (hereafter USA) where artists either belong to the East or West Coast, in Kenya hip hop artists identify themselves with the estates in which they reside. The three estates commonly associated with hip hop music are California, Githurai, Dandora and South C. In the case of urban popular music in Kenya, the music industry can be viewed as a curated Kenyan urban landscape, particularly in terms of class. Our research has revealed that sometimes identifying oneself with the hood disadvantages some people. To be precise the Kenyan urban popular music genre draws affiliation with two geographical locations; South C, often associated with youths from fairly affluent homes, and Eastlands. A common myth that pervades Kenyan urban discourses is that Eastlands is home to low class people, thugs, hardened youths, among other urban social evils, an identification often reiterated in Genge music as social realities framing these youth identities. While the two geographical areas are not the only residential zones mentioned in urban popular music, they are the most dominant.

It is possible to think through the above postulation with tangible examples, and two individuals come to mind: the hip hop artist Juacali and Clemo, a music producer who jointly own a record company called Calif records. The word Calif is in actual sense a short form for California estate, a residential area in Eastleigh, within Nairobi’s Eastland’s region. The two artists, Clemo and Juacali, hail from this estate. These individuals continually, in their songs, refer to their place of residence, California. In the song “Bidii Yangu” (my effort) for example, Jua Cali starts off with the following lines:

*California vitu nzuri,
hakuna cha huzuni
tunaendelea mbele
hapa furaha ni tele*

Carlifornia has good things,
there is no sadness
we are moving forward
it is full of happiness

The song above highlights Barber’s (1997) idea that popular culture is a magnifier of social realities. The artists in urban areas, like those in traditional settings, see themselves as ambassadors of their communities. In a similar manner, Juacali takes it upon himself to popularize California estate and create awareness about their everyday struggles. On one hand, in traditional communities musicians constantly mentioned their community as a way of defining their target audience and to define their identities. Juacali too makes his affiliation known as he pushes the agenda of his residential area by casting it in good light and making it known to the rest of the world. Inscribed in his stage name is this mission, as his stage name Juacali literally means ‘know California’. Thus part of his self-proclaimed goal and role as a musician is to popularize California. But on the other hand, Genge music also creates awareness about the struggles and triumphs of this area. Therefore, in his role as a self-appointed ambassador of California, Juacali then both popularizes and raises awareness about the realities in California estate. It is therefore ironic that despite its popularity and richness in terms of artistry and agency to create awareness about the struggles of majority of Nairobi’s urban dwellers, Genge music seems to be dismissed in some quarters due to its association with the mythical Eastlands thugs, non-refined youths, and various forms of immorality.

Evidently, urban spaces are essential in the formation of youth urban identities. The shift in responsibilities of youths from mere consumers of the urban experience but to creators of these spaces and experiences has been acknowledged by Rappo. She notes that:

In contemporary African societies, the youth play an increasingly visible role in generating the urban experience, and continually extend the zones of creativity that popular culture provides. Through the processes of popular culture and urbanisation, youth performers navigate and reconfigure the African city in a variety of ways. (66) Connie rappo.

It is the technical deployment of artistry and invention of language by Kenyan urban popular music artists to adequately capture their realities that is at the core of this paper. In their own unique way, Kenyan hip hop artists are reminiscent of landscapers and architects who re-invent spaces in ways that vividly portray their urban realities. Besides California estate, Githurai, (a residential neighbourhood in Nairobi) which had for a long time been associated with crime, is another urban space that is central to the formation of youth urban identities. Hip-hop especially in America was associated with crime and the rating of musicians would go up if they were arrested and jailed. The mode of dressing like the sagging of trousers, emanated from lack of belts to tighten trousers in prison. If one survived crime and hardship, he would come out of prison and the hood as a toughened and hardened hip hop rapper. Rather than shying away from association with crime infested areas, the youthful hip hop musicians from Githurai view it as a source of pride and a signal of their strength and perseverance. The bold affirmation with this neighbourhood could therefore be viewed as an indicator of their strength and tenacity to survive the crimes in their area. The artists proudly declare:

*Na wasee tumetoka Githurai
... sisi ni mabeste Githurai*

we are the people from Githurai
we are friends from Githurai

Whereas the mention of the word Githurai always invokes a sense of fear or repulsion and association with crime, Mr Googz and Vinnie Banton take pride in coming from Githurai. Pride in their neighbourhood is expressed in the following lines by Vinnie Banton:

*I say something going wrong in our world
People take some things too it's a pressure ball
And the lost love's gone
... Lord, a look your man a man at me house
Bila pesa with no show dis a feel so sad*

Mr Lenny recognizes the importance of solidarity in combating their everyday struggles when he says:

*Come together we can do this together
Take your time we staying here forever*

Similarly, another poor neighborhood associated with crime is Kayole. Timmy Tdat and Khaligraph Jones a rap musician who recently (2021) won an award for the best rap musician has sang a song specifically dedicated to his neighborhoods. He says:

*Kayole ndio mahali mimi ninastay (kayole is where i stay)
 Oyole this is where you will find me everyday
 Oyole I gonna kill what you say
 Kayole till they put me on the grave*

Sheng, the Language of Hip Hop Music

The urban diverse/grey areas are characterized by multilingualism, and the unifying language is often Sheng. Tracing the origin of sheng, Githinji (2006) argues that “it is believed that sheng begun in the poor residential areas of Nairobi’s Eastlands, before gradually spreading to other poor residential areas of Nairobi and its environs. Today it has become a characteristic linguistic phenomenon of Nairobi and multi ethnic urban areas in Kenya, though the degree of competence and participation differs from individual to individual among different categories of speakers (444-445)

Sheng as the language of the youth enjoins Swahili, English Rinkanya (2011) notes that “socially, sheng has traditionally been the language of urban youth- and moreover, the youth belonging to the lower poorly educated group of Kenyan society”(297) Each part of the town injects the ethnic flavor that reflects the ethnic composition of its inhabitants. For instance, the sheng from Somali-dominated regions like Eastleigh incorporates Somali words and likewise that from Luo-dominated regions displays Luo bias. Ethnicity is therefore not viewed negatively but it is fashioned in a way acceptable within the youth circles. Equally, even those who sing in their ethnic languages use the words acceptable to the urban youth. Here, Hip hop is seen as an urban genre that best captures the pride, suffering and yearning of the youth.

Language is a very strong marker of identity in any community. It can unify or divide people based on those who speak a language or do not speak it. Many ethnic/cultural groups are formed around languages. Luhya and Kalenjin are notable ethnic groups and the different communities that form them are tied together by the similarities in language with diverse dialects. The language similarity within the sub-groups that comprise them is used as a political tool to unite the ethnic communities and equally serves as a tool to exclude others. Many will argue that despite the major differences in the dialects spoken, people from these sub-groups still belong together. Within Nairobi, sheng is the language of the youth and Githinji emphasizes its centrality in his assertion that “if we accept that the social construction of reality is negotiated in the course of human interaction, then it becomes possible to understand the centrality of this shared meaning . With respect to sheng, linguistic pluralism and the need for self-definition provide a fertile ground for mixing of languages by speakers who inhabit a different social world (450). Jua Cali, in recognition of the differences that arise out of the variants of sheng owing to various influences brought about by ethnic groups that dominated different Nairobi residential estates, seeks to allay these differences by asserting that despite the variants they all can understand each other. This message is ingrained in the song *Kuna Sheng*:

*Kuna sheng ya Cali,
 Lakini sisi wote tunaelewana
 Kuna sheng ya Buru,
 Lakini sisi wote tunaelewana*

there is Californian sheng
 but we all understand each other
 there is Buruburu estate sheng
 but we all understand each other

*Kuna sheng ya ongwaro,
Lakini sisi wote tunaelewana
Kuna sheng ya Kibich,
Lakini sisi wote tunaelewana*

there is Kawangware sheng
but we all understand each other
there is Kibera sheng
but we all understand each other

Here, Jua Cali explains the way different types of ‘Shengs’ coming from different estates in Nairobi. These Sheng variants do not all mean the same, but that they nevertheless understood all sheng speakers. To highlight these differences, he picks on the names of some popular residential areas in Nairobi, which he identifies by their Sheng reference in the different dialects in Sheng and explains them. In trying to justify that Sheng runs across the board in all the parts of Nairobi, Jua Cali also acts as a teacher by introducing his audience to different Sheng terminologies and explaining their meaning. Jua Cali therefore ties the language sheng to their style of music signifying that Genge musicians do not just look at themselves as singers but also teachers who must spread their language and culture through music.

The growth of sheng has been strongly linked to the growth of urban hip hop music-and the singers- and the general acceptance of both as representative of the Kenyan a urban music and by extension East African urban music. As Rinkanya has further argued, “the popularity of these songs and their authors has become so immense, that in a very short while sheng became a language of all social groups of urban youth in Kenya, from the highest to the lowest; nowadays sheng has become almost the official language of Kenya youth culture” (298). E-sir who such a musician who had propelled himself through performance of urban hip, echoes this sentiments on how powerful the new generation musicians (ambassadors of sheng) had become. Say in his song.

*e-sir there is no defiance
unavuta more crowds
than rainbow alliance
so ukiulizwa sema ni esir
ameshika na kuturoga kabisa*

E-sir is not defying anyone
but you find a bigger crowd
than the Rainbow Alliance
if they ask about ii, tell them it is Esir
he has captured and bewitched us

Referring to the then popular Rainbow Alliance (a political alliance that won election and brought in Kibaki’s presidency in 2002), E-sir claims in this song to pull crowd bigger than the political coalition could bring to a public rally. Though said in self-jest, it underscores how popular and confident the urban musician had become after many years of not having very Kenyan musician enjoying airplay.

East African hip hop artists recognize the role played by language in communicating their experiences. Against the background of language training especially Swahili in Kenya based on learning of ngeli (Noun-class(es)). Students are usually drilled into knowing different noun classes of Swahili language. It is therefore a running joke that for one to claim that they know Kiswahili well, one ought to know all the Ngeli (noun classes). There are those who extend the joke by claiming to have introduced a new noun class. Juacali as proponent of both Genge and the Sheng language proposes a new noun class known as Genge. This noun class allows them to play with words.

*Hapa tunacheza na maneno
Ngeli ni ya genge*

Here we are playing with words
the noun class is of genge

What Juacali is implying in the lyrics above is that Genge music is not restrictive and that the artists are afforded a wealth of space to communicate their message without fear of propriety. The traditional *ngeli* is restrictive by nature and one is forced to remember where every item belongs in the Kiswahili language structure. Genge is a protest genre thus the old restrictive structures do not allow new invention. The old structures operate within the minds of the *wahenga* (wise elders in the community), who possess wisdom and occupy a circle in which very few select members are allowed into. They do not give room to the rise of new wise members neither does it give provision for assenting into their level. However, the Genge community, through Sheng, is built on a new structure allows youths to artistically use language to communicate about a host of issues affecting urban youths.

Naming and the rise of Genge

The term Genge refers to either a gang or a crowd. The inventors of this term might have possibly wanted it to have both meanings, considering the message in Genge music. Reflecting on their lives in poor neighborhoods, they view themselves as a people toughened by hip hop life. Gangs are by nature a rebellious lot. Berber argues that every generation has its own way of convening an audience. As she notes:

There different ways of convening and of experiencing reception, whether collectively or in dispersal, which are deeply connected to the nature of social life of the age and place. How people come together; how they relate to each other, and to the spectacle or utterances they are attending to, what they consider themselves to be part of in doing so, how the spectacle or utterances addresses them; all these are historically and culturally specific and need to be empirically investigated(347)

Naming as a process of identity formation is a key concept in East African hip hop. The way in which the East African hip hop artists name themselves signifies a lack of tribal affiliation. For example, we meet Chameleone, Nonini, Jua Cali, Lady Jay Dee, Ay, Lady S, Prezzo, Bebe Cool, Bob Wine, Radio and Weasel, Diamond Platnumz, Alikiba, etc.

Juacali's name evokes three meanings: it can signal the Jua Kali or blue collar sector, or his estate California in Eastleigh, or the recording company Calif records. Due to the vagueness of his name insofar as his ethnicity is concerned, there have been speculations about his identity with many people dubbing him Kikuyu. It was not until the demise of his father that people discovered that his baptismal name is Paul Julius Nunda and that he is a Luo. He and other music legends like him are a representation of the heroes in the Kenyan urban context and he calls himself "baba yao", the godfather equivalent of mafia lords, heroes who did not wage physical wars, rather with the ability to negotiate violence and survive in the harsh reality of the ghetto/mtaa. This survival concept is usually captured in the phrase "tulitoka mbali." In the song Baba Yao he says:

*Hauezi nieka chini
mimi ni baba yao
me ni baba yao
Chini ya maji naona*

you can't pull me down
I am their father
I am their father
under the water I can see them

<i>wakinyemelea</i>	creeping on me
<i>Na roho zao mbaya na</i>	with their evil hurts they are
<i>zimezea</i>	Salivating
<i>Walichukua vako yangu</i>	they took mine and yours and
<i>wakapotea nayo</i>	disappeared
<i>Sa wanataka kuchukua jina</i>	and now they want to take my name
<i>yangu</i>	and disappear
<i>wapotee nayo</i>	

Most of the Kenyan Hip-hop musicians (who live in diverse areas of the city) take up names that de-ethnicise them and makes them identifiable only as urbanites. The names are therefore devoid of ethnic affiliations. There is nameless, as if echoing Malcolm x, a name that suggests he has no name. The stage name Nameless does not give away his ethnic background, rather a mystery of some unidentifiable individual that one cannot put a finger on. Similarly, Nonini famously introduces himself by saying:

<i>Jina langu ni nonini</i>	My name is nonini (not his real name but
<i>Ni nini</i>	stage name)
	what is it

Kenyan hip hop artistes whose names lack ethnic affiliation include: JuaCali, Nameless, Mr. Googz, Nonini, Nyashinski, K-rupt, Lady S, Redsan, Pili Pili, Bamboo, E-Sir, Size 8, Czars. These musicians are often called Wagenge, and their names bear no ethnic affiliation.

There are other musicians who fall under the group Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. The latter, though not linked with any ethnic group, associate with a key cultural moment in Kenya's history, the Mau Mau rebellion movement that was forefront in the independence struggle (are there sources needed here?). Contextualized within the history of Kenyan hip hop music, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau signify a different type of liberation struggle by the youth. They borrow the cultural capital of the Mau Mau liberation struggle, not confining themselves to the original 42+ ethnic communities, and not buying into the stipulated number of ethnic communities. Initially, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau was not one solid group. It was a coalition of different groups, including Kalamashaka. The group comprised diverse groups mirroring Kenya's diversity. Their main interest was to brew an identity outside the confines of coloniality. They are, therefore, a rebellion of such constructions. In analyzing this de-ethnicization, you cannot avoid contextualizing it within the city-scape, an analysis nevertheless ethno-centered. Therefore, this paper recognizes the prevalent urban discourses on ethnicity but departs from the problematics around such framing. It instead de-constructs such ideologies. We propose instead that perhaps, this artificial assigning of titles like Kikuyu, Kamba, etc. is ambiguous. This might explain why though unconsciously, some of the hip hop artists identified earlier assume a vague identity to separate from this identification, thus anchoring their agency on the liberation movement Mau Mau's political capital.

Despite class categories in this hip hop category, with many artists coming from the Eastlands' region of Nairobi in Kenya, we still meet others like the CMB brothers (Mustapha and Prezzo), who have come up to breach the divide between the rich and

poor. This class variation is also evident in Uganda and Tanzania. Considering the economic contexts that frame the agenda of individual musicians, it is only expected that different artistes will address different social and economic realities in their music. For instance, while Ukoo Flani Mau Mau talk about social consciousness, Jua Kali, Nonini and others talking about realism in the ghetto and the upper middle class like E-Sir, Prezzo, Redsan and Nameless sing about partying and Nairobi life. However, it is important to note that most sponsors do not like the artists who use strong sexual language like Prezzo, while their ghetto counterparts seem to rise in fame and wealth, they have to struggle for recognition. The fans don't seem to agree that artists like Prezzo "wakilisha" (represent) them or their interests.

According to Rappo, "Contemporary genres of music and performance forms such as Hip hop and Kwaito articulate the dynamics of appropriation and self-fashioning to create a distinct urban African landscape (66). Gangs are by nature a rebellious lot and while reflecting on their lives in poor neighborhoods, Genge musicians, who view themselves as a gang of people who have been toughened by hip hop life, project a tough personality that embodies their urban existence. These musicians use music and performance to preserve and circulate their cultural heritage while reinforcing the value of collective cultural memory. Like their counter parts in Botswana as Rapo notes:

They achieve this through technological modes of production and exchange like CDs and DVDs, as well as non-technological 'traditional' forms of knowledge preservation and circulation like street trading and performance, and equivocations of the cultural and national imaginaries of public demonstrations that recall Botswana's traditional judiciary and conciliatory principles. (68)

In their efforts to create one family, East African hip hop artists have adopted the system of collabos to combine their experiences, music and languages. However, there are no notable instances in which artists collabo to come up with a song in their distinct languages like Luo collaborating with Luhya except in the gospel industry. But then Jose Chameleone seems to fit in the three countries with his ability to sing in English, Swahili and Luganda. Only Poxi Presha attempted a collabo with a multi-lingual aspect in Kenya but even so it was not inter-tribal. In Tanzania, AY has been dubbed King of Collabos but we have seen the formation of hip hop families like TMK Wanaume family, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau and the East African Bashment Crew.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how urban youth popular musicians artistically demolish ethnic and national boundaries that inform their identities. Our discussion has highlighted that the shift from ethnic to cosmopolitan discourses, as influences that inform the construction of urban youth identities, is informed by the doubleness that haunts urban youth identities. This multiplicity of urban youth identities is further compounded by the greyness of the urban spaces, whose cosmopolitanism has resulted in the mixing of individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. The medley in terms of languages that comprises urban demographics, coupled with the different trends from the oral traditions that the urban dwellers bring to the cosmopole, realize a new popular urban genre of music that brings together old and new artistic influences. It is the cosmopolitan thinking behind this music, which extends beyond ethnic and national

boundaries among Kenyan hip-hop musicians, that highlights urban youths' agency in their new spaces. As our paper has outlined, these artists function as ambassadors who not only popularize their spaces, but also create awareness about their social realities. However, the new role of urban youths is often challenged by mainstream national discourses that marginalize the youth, their spaces and their artistic products. We, therefore, turn to popular theories of youth culture that highlight how popular forms by the youth counter-discursively challenge hegemonic discourses that misrepresent them and in the process foreground the mechanisms through which the agency of urban youth still flourishes despite the constraints that surround them. One of the artistic strategies adopted by urban youths is the appropriation of the hip-hop genre, a form that is by nature rebellious, as the vehicle through which their issues are vocalized. The version of hip-hop associated with East African urban youths is Africanised in order to historically contextualize their realities. Further, these artists use non-hegemonic languages like sheng to communicate their message, a language that is subversive. Last, but not least, these youths accentuate the flimsy boundaries in the East African region by embarking on collaborative efforts that result in music which foreground the similarities more than differences that characterize East African urban youth musicians.

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