



Muziki

Journal of Music Research in Africa

Popular music and identity formation among Kenyan youth

Henry Wanjala & Charles Kebaya

To cite this article: Henry Wanjala & Charles Kebaya (2016) Popular music and identity formation among Kenyan youth, *Muziki*, 13:2, 20-35, DOI: [10.1080/18125980.2016.1249159](https://doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2016.1249159)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2016.1249159>



Published online: 15 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 178



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

POPULAR MUSIC AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG KENYAN YOUTH

Henry Wanjala

Department of Music and Dance
Kenyatta University
Nairobi, Kenya
namsyule2001@yahoo.com

Charles Kebaya

Department of Theatre Arts and Film Technology
Kenyatta University
Nairobi, Kenya
kebayama6@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The role of music in the formation and shaping of identity cannot be gainsaid since music represents an important cultural sphere where identities are affirmed, challenged, torn apart and reconstructed. Many young people use music and musicians that they admire to distinguish themselves from their peers. Thus, the choice of music among the youth often serves as an important marker of the character and nature of identity under construction. Music is meant to be fun, to brighten life, but the development and expression of musical taste can also be a serious statement about one's identity. Pop music as a genre has had the greatest appeal and impact to the majority of the youth in Kenya. The influence of the medium and its artists on overall identity development is pervasive, complex, and far-reaching in its cultural significance. Grounded in both a historical analysis and a theoretical framework of identity, we interrogate how contemporary pop music shapes and influences identities among Kenyan youth. Using purposively selected contemporary popular music in Kenya, the article provides a textual exegesis of how music uses resources of history, language, and culture in the construction and performance of certain identities.



Muziki
Volume 13 | Number 2 | 2016
pp. 20–35

DOI: 10.1080/18125980.2016.1249159
Print ISSN 1812-5980 | Online ISSN 1753-593X
© The University of South Africa Press

To this end, the study analyses the strategic position of identity and the possibility of connecting it with conceptions of time, discourse, and history. This study provides new insights into how music – as a medium in which identities are constructed, performed, and contested – can be utilised meaningfully in shaping worldviews among Kenyan youth.

Key words: identity, popular music, youth, performance

CRITICAL FOUNDATIONS OF POPULAR MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP IN KENYA

Music has long been a key facet in the culture of many Kenyan communities. It facilitates interaction between community members, and represents an arena where the populace can voice their support or disapproval for leaders, air grievances, and join in a communal activity. It is on this basis that music is considered a viable vehicle to gain insight into the Kenyan people and their histories, traditions, and customs. However, to date, the majority of studies of Kenyan popular music have focused on its evolution from colonial times. Such studies document the entry of modern instruments such as the acoustic guitar and the accordion, and they demonstrate the growth of expertise with these instruments through contact with Christian music and military brass bands (Low 1982; Stapleton and May 1991; Stokes 1994). Notably, these studies point out the influence of traditional instruments on the technique and style of pioneer guitar players. Interestingly, these studies single out the use of *benga*¹ style as the highest point in the development of a modern and unique Kenyan urban music form. Within the purview of this paper, interest in music style is limited to analysing its function within the contemporary socio-cultural context and its contribution in fostering youth identities.

John Roberts' (1968) study of Kenyan popular music is a pioneering work that looks at the structure, composition, language, and audiences of emergent urban music. He contemplates the possibilities of a thriving commercial boom in music and outlines the factors that affect the popularity and development of emerging new forms in music. Roberts' ground-breaking work provides various openings for further investigations to tease out the directions that emergent forms of music are taking. Key to this is the manner in which these emergent music forms reflect and portray the fluidity of youth identity in society.

Low (1982) and Ewens (1991) detail the evolution of music trends in postcolonial Kenya. Low traces the history of guitar music, which has been present in the Kenyan music scene from as early as the 1940s in western Kenya, which also happens to be the 'home of so much fine Kenyan guitar music' (1982, 17). His assertion is buttressed by the fact that even before contact with foreign musical traditions, the Luhya and Luo communities in Western Kenya had elaborate string instruments in the form of

lyres, such as the Luo *nyatiti* and the Luhya's *litungu*.² Ewens traces the patterns of cross-cultural influence in music, stressing the impact of Zaire, DRC Congo, and western music on the local scene. For his part, Graebner (1987) examines so-called ethnic music and hybrid forms such as Taarab, often regarded as authentic Kenyan sounds. These music trends are cognate to this article as we seek to understand the motivations and influence of youth identities as embedded in their popular music.

Caleb Okumu (1998), like Low, examines the evolution of musical trends in Nairobi. Eventually, he focused on the analysis of guitar trends, structure, and composition of 12 selected *Zilizopendwa*³ songs. In his analysis, Okumu briefly describes the context of these songs. Context forms an important index in understanding the sensibilities and motivations behind forms of artistic expression such as music. As we seek to understand how music plays part in influencing of youth identities, context is an integral element. Studies by Paterson (1999) and Sobania (2003) that focus on contemporary music are important to this study because they provide us with insights on styles of music in a period relevant to this article.

With the appropriation of the guitar in Kenyan popular music, Mutonya (2014) points out that it is only suitable to assert that the interplay of guitars defines Kenyan music. In addition to the existence of the traditional lyres, the first contact with the guitar as it is known today was evident in Kenya 'even before 1900 when guitars were played among the freed slaves' (Patterson 1999, 509). In the 1950s and 1960s, guitar styles in Kenya benefitted greatly from contact with other parts of Africa such as Malawi, Zimbabwe, the former Zaire, and South Africa, as well as with Latin America, North America, and Europe. Today, Kenyan pop remains a *mélange* of musical styles that 'borrow[s] freely and cross fertilize each other' (ibid.). The electric guitar bands from the 1960s onwards have also thrived on this rich culture. At present, the youth use electric guitars and digital computer effects in their music, a continuation of the rich guitar tradition in Kenya.

In critical studies that engage with actual songs, such as Haugerud (1995), Gecau (1997), and Masolo (2000), the relationship between popular music and politics is clearly underlined. These studies affirm that in Kenya protest music provides an alternative space within which to explore political intrigues. For instance, Haugerud (1995) argues that subversive music plays a key part in exposing the political inconsistencies of the state's official discourse. While focusing on popular musicians such as D. O. Misiani, Masolo (2000) illustrates how popular music exists in opposition to the state's preferred version of national culture, thereby forcing popular musicians to resort to allegories and allusions to pass on their political messages. Gecau (1997) foregrounds the political history that is artistically embedded in Gikuyu protest songs. These studies are important to this article because they help us understand that through music, the youth are staging some form of protest, which translates to the identity that they assume.

Focusing on song as a textual narrative, Odhiambo (2002a) links the rise of the guitar system in the Kenyan music scene to surplus income among the urban workers in the country. The study emphasises the ways in which the music of the 1950s and 1960s reflected and shaped class formation and how some of its themes echoed nationalist politics. This article adopts Odhiambo's approach as it explores the influence of popular music on youth identities.

Nyairo and Ogude (2003), while focusing on *I am Unbwogable*,⁴ point out that the power of popular music to articulate the issues in society is bound up in the themes and concerns of the songs and through the events, sounds, and experiences woven into the songs. These scholars contend that the history of a community can, therefore, be told through that community's collection of popular songs. This article is grounded in Nyairo's and Ogude's observation as it explores how popular music functions as the voice of the youth, of how such music speaks to the youth. Of interest is the contribution of popular music towards understanding the identities that Kenyan youth assume in society. The notion of youth identity is explored with reference to contemporary Kenya, in particular that of its diverse and hybrid ethnic, linguistic, and cultural practices and the various youth cultures in the country.

David Samper (2004) and Evan Mwangi (2004) interrogate the practice of contemporary popular music from a socio-cultural perspective. These two scholars focus on the relationship between emergent music art forms and global cultural trends. A similar relationship is echoed and expounded by Wainaina (2008) and Wa Mungai (2014) in their examination of the influence of United States hip-hop culture on the local music scene. These scholars demonstrate the symbolic power and cultural links that characterise young people and their identity formations.

Koster (2013) argues that hip-hop music has created a new surge of revolutionary energy among the youth living in the urban slums of Nairobi and Mombasa. While focusing on the rise and impact of the music of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau,⁵ Koster shows the power of hip-hop in providing messages of healing, empowerment, and unity, thus planting the seeds for change. Koster's study is critical for understanding the kind of identities generated by the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, considering that many Kenyan youth have embraced hip-hop, dealing as it does with issues of unemployment, inequality, corruption, disease, housing conditions, and living life on the edge. The study seeks to show whether the group represents a particular identity among the youth and whether its music functions as a vocaliser of youth discourses.

In sum, the studies reviewed above show that much critical attention has been given to the aesthetics of popular music in Kenya. This study contributes to existing knowledge on popular music by interrogating popular music and youth identities, and exploring how popular music creates and weaves youth experience – a musical experience, an aesthetic experience – that we can only make sense of by taking on both a subjective and a collective identity. It is therefore framed as an inquiry into how contemporary Kenyan popular music helps us understand youth identities.

Our arguments here rest on two premises: first, that youth identity is mobile and beleaguered, and second, that our experience of popular music is best understood as an experience of a self-in-process. The arguments demand, then, that we discuss forms of identity as explored in popular music by and for Kenyan youth.

THEORISING YOUTH IDENTITIES THROUGH POPULAR MUSIC

Social theory suggests that the apparent certainties or ‘metanarratives’ of modernity are disintegrating and the social world today is now increasingly being described as characterised by difference and fragmentation (Featherstone 1991). Central to this argument are claims that social identity is more diverse, uncertain, and individualised than ever before (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Bauman 1998). Common to these perspectives is an understanding that youth identity is constituted through consumption practices, representation, and the transference of symbolic meaning. Giddens (1991) promotes ‘lifestyle’ as a descriptor for the reflexive relationship between the agency of the individual and the structures of society. This situation is echoed by Miles (2000, 26) who argues that young people’s lifestyles – ‘lived cultures in which individuals actively express their identities but do so in direct relation to their position as regards the dominant culture’ – are the social manifestations of specific identity positions.

Stuart Hall notes the discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of identity, at the same moment “as it has been subjected to a searching critique” (Hall 1996, 1). He analyses the strategic position of identity and the possibility of connecting it with conceptions of time, discourse, and history. Further, Hall explains that actual identities revolve around using the resources of history, language and culture, and he emphasises that identities are constructed within, not outside representation and discourse (Hall 1996, 4). Olsson (1999, 35) examines aspects and doubts, as if ‘established identities are cultural means that their stability and coherence can be challenged prefiguring the establishment of other identities’. He analyses Foucault’s work with regard to the notion ‘that “identities” are “representations” or “fixations” that are neither fixed nor stable’ (1999, 35). These ideas can also connect to multiple discourses and to questions involving the meaning of subjectivity and the construction of identity.

Different people interpret music differently and music can represent any number of meanings simultaneously. Thus, according to Frith (1996), music is not a mere monolithic reflection of a society at a given time, nor is it a static marker of identity. It is also an integral part of the daily activities that constitute individual subjectivity. On music identity, Frith (1996, 124–125) points out:

Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers to the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural

narratives This is, perhaps ironically, to come back to music via spatial metaphor. But what makes music special for identity – is that it defines space without boundaries (a game without frontiers).

Frith's concept of musical identity, that of shifting and sharing with many other ideas, definitions and voices, is important for the purposes of this discussion. According to Born (2000), the theorisation of music and the articulation of social identity is 'presently a major preoccupation' and describes a *new model* that has emerged from critiques of Frith, with the '[proposition] that music "reflects" nothing; rather, music has a formative role in the construction, negotiation, and transformation of sociocultural identities'. Born comments on the *aesthetic pleasure* of music and emphasises that music can construct new identities while reflecting simultaneously on existing ones, implying that any form of music, popular music included, can be used as a means by which we formulate and express our individual identities (MacDonald et al. 2002).

Music's relationship to the concept of identity is usually understood in terms of processes of reflection, symbolization, homology, and expression. MacDonald et al. (2002, 5) capture this situation more precisely in pointing out how '[i]n today's world, deciding what music to listen to is a significant part of deciding and announcing to people not just who you want to be but who you are'. Noteworthy is the notion that identity is always constructed from the cultural resources available at any given moment. Rather than durable and stable, identities are contingent, fragile, unstable, and changeable. The point has been made that the construction of identity as a form of self-understanding through music is brought into play when identities need to be or are being changed. Music helps that process by changing itself, or better by being changed by the musicians who want to participate in the construction of new identities (self-understandings) and the symbolic presentation or representation of these self-understandings to others so that others' understandings of the group can change as well. Therefore, music as a performance and as a context provides a particularly fruitful arena for the expression of multiple identities. Similarly, as Rice (2001) notes, music as a complex semiotic form with multiple features (melody, rhythm and meter, timbre, texture, and form) inherent in its very being provides an ideal sign for symbolising multiple aspects of identity simultaneously and temporally.

Connell and Gibson (2004) point out that music remains an important cultural sphere in which identities are affirmed, challenged, disassembled, and reconstructed. Examining popular music thus leads us to an understanding of group relations and individuality among Kenyan youth. This is because music forms an opportunity for making sense of ourselves and the world, and therefore contributes to the formation of a social identity. Importantly, youth is a highly mediated social construct of constantly shifting relations and definitions. Popular music not only offers the possibility of escaping one's circumstances and reinventing identities but also plays a role in articulating and reinforcing young people's identities. Therefore we argue that

the last two decades have increasingly seen music sung by Kenyan youth becoming a relevant and urgent mode of expression in the public sphere. As Mans (2003, 119) notes, ‘identities are not an indication of timeless and static qualities but are rooted in complex histories, discourse and interpretations of intergroup relations’. For this reason, the critical role that popular music plays in the construction of different social identities for the youth in Kenya cannot be overlooked.

METHODOLOGY

The scope and arguments of this paper hinge on Johannes Fabian’s (1997) methodology, which argues that in order for one to read any popular culture form with thoroughness, one must take cognisance of the key contexts in which the form is produced and re-enacted. As such, popular expressions must be read within the historico-political dimension of the national space. Most importantly again, popular texts must be understood for their multi-media capacities and interrogated for the social referents that they invoke. It is important to point out that while speaking of the contexts of the text, it does not necessarily mean that one is implying that texts offer a stable, inscrutable truth or factual vision of the societies in which they are made and about which they speak (Taussing 1994). It is for this reason that we adopt Fabian’s standpoints and insistence on understanding the socio-economic and political contexts of popular cultural forms. This is so because popular cultural forms are always inextricably linked to their contexts. They are not only products of these forms but they also echo and shape these contexts. Based on these criteria, we discuss selected Kenyan popular songs, each by a different young artist, analyse their thematic concerns, and draw conclusions about how the songs articulate various identity formations among the youth. Ultimately, the study highlights the significance of popular music as an effective way of understanding youth discourse.

Paterson (in Broughton et al. 2006) describes Kenya’s popular music as one of the most diverse in Africa. This diversity is partly attributed to the multiplicity of languages and cultures present in Kenya. Considering that there is no single identifiable genre of Kenyan popular music (Gitonga 2009), this article examines purposively selected popular music by young artists based on themes and styles that point to youth identity. In exploring these themes and styles, our concern is to suggest that if music is a metaphor for identity, and, to echo Marx, the self is always an imagined self but can only be imagined as a particular organisation of social, physical, and material forces.

YOUTH IDENTITIES PORTRAYED THROUGH KENYAN POPULAR MUSIC

To examine the portrayal of youth identities through popular music, it is imperative that we understand the meaning of the term ‘youth’. We start by defining the term at

least within the Kenyan context and show the analytical foundations upon which this paper is built. The term 'youth' is an increasingly contested concept in contemporary Kenya and it has been politically inflected to mean anyone between the ages of 18 and 65.⁶ This age spectrum privileges and benefits the political class since it justifies its continued stay in power and leadership positions. Considering that this definition has political inclinations, it should be viewed as a deliberate attempt by the political class to alienate and marginalise the youth. While the term 'youth' is used politically as a marker that enhances and justifies political activities in Kenya, the version of youth that we consider, in this paper, is that of anyone in the age bracket 15 to 30 years.⁷ We agree with Diouf (2003, 6) who develops this position by pointing out that youth is defined by daily life practices, self-identification, and social constructions enmeshed in localised socio-historical contexts. Systemic failures by previous regimes in Kenya, particularly during the Kenyatta and Moi eras,⁸ to involve the youth in government left them frustrated and disillusioned. Due to disillusionment, the majority of them resorted to music as an alternative form of expression. Musical discourse in Kenya in the late twentieth century provided a channel for political and social engagement by urban youth and enabled them to expand their crucial message. These conditions formed rich and diverse bedrocks for challenging hegemony through creative processes in popular cultural arts, music included.

The influence of the urban setting and the uncertain politics of Kenya during the late 1990s on youth identity are relevant to this discourse. The urban space is an important identity marker among Kenyan youth. From as early as the late 1990s, the youth of Nairobi engaged in various cultural discourses to give expression to ideas, messages, and group purposes. It is important to realise that the self-consciousness of urban identity arose historically from political disenchantment and is often legitimised in language use. This self-consciousness attempts to sustain the use of a language medium that reaches out to the majority. It represents a key moment in the configuration of an urban identity (Lukalo 2006). Alongside the rise of the urban youth identity was an upsurge in the use of Kiswahili and Sheng⁹ as badges¹⁰ of identity for youth music. The use of Kiswahili,¹¹ for example, made the music significantly more accessible to all social groups, and youth music became more reflective of subtle changes in society. With the solidification of urban identities, popular youth music spread to the rural areas, creating a sense of social identity. This is so because through music, the youth whether urban or rural see themselves as a group united by common issues such as unemployment.

The relationship between language and popular culture has enabled the youth to express defiance of and discontent about the regime, and to assert their exuberance for life from a base that was screened and that allowed content to be masked. In songs such as *nga'ng'ana* and *salari*,¹² the youth could (un)mask, perform, and locate their problems through language. These two songs, for example, resonate well with the

youth because they show that whether one resides in urban or rural areas, they are struggling for a ‘salari’(salary), which implicitly means struggling to earn a living. Here, popular music plays a pivotal role in not only framing but also popularising the hustler¹³ identity common among the Kenyan youth. Due to lack of jobs, the majority of Kenyan youth have to struggle in order to earn a living. This has become their daily routine as they hustle through the city and this struggle for existence has found its way into popular music as is evident in *ng’ang’ana* and *salari*. Since the youth view themselves as marginalised in Kenyan society, popular music inculcates a sense of identity among them. This observation concurs with Georgiou (2013, 67) who observes that for marginalised groups, ‘[e]xcluded from official urban and national history, creativity within popular culture has long provided a medium for the representation of diverse identities and a tool for making the city a place of belonging’. To Kenyan youth, therefore, the psychological benefits of being part of the ‘hustlers’ network’ are indispensable for the effective negotiation of life in Kenya. This is the case with Kenyan popular music, which displays the daily struggles of a frustrated yet optimistic hustler who belongs to the struggling youth community as is predicated in *ng’ang’ana* and *salari*.

The hustler identity is, however, depicted as fluid in popular music. This is in line with Gervais-Lambony’s (2006) sentiment that identity is never fixed and changes depending on the social group, among other factors. *Kigeugeu*,¹⁴ a popular song by Jaguar,¹⁵ effectively captures the hustler’s fluid identity. The lines ‘dereva, kigeugeu/conductor, kigeugeu’ (the driver is a turncoat / the conductor is a turncoat) depict the chaotic situation synonymous with the hustler’s everyday life in Kenya. Located at the very core of urbanite hustler discourse, *matatu* crews, who are largely youth, are an embodiment of hustling, foregrounding the many challenges that they have to surmount in their day-to-day operations (Ogone 2014; Wa Mungai 2014). The fluidity of the hustler identity is further conveyed by Juacali’s¹⁶ song, *Bongo La Biashara*,¹⁷ where the hustler assumes different identities predicated on the trade at hand at any one time. The song shows that he can become a hawker, a hotelier, a car washer, a painter, a mugger, a drug dealer, and a broker all wrapped in one. Ultimately, the hustler’s shifting identity is well captured in the lines: *Mimi ni vulture/ Natumia tu mabawa* (I am a vulture / I just use wings) as the song’s persona takes on the symbolic identity of a vulture. In this regard, the song demonstrates the extent to which the youth, as hustlers, are willing to go in order to earn a living. Evidently, popular music functions as a critical index in helping us understand the mannerisms, behaviours, and attitudes of Kenyan youth.

Whiteley (2004, 2) argues that music informs notions of collective identity because it emanates from ‘a common stock of understandings’ concerning its relationship to the local. This observation implies that music has both physical and imaginary spatial implications for identity. This is indeed the case with popular music in Kenya. With the rise of a number of groups and individuals in the urban areas

voicing the concerns of the youth, the concept of identity among the youth has taken multiple perspectives. On the one hand, ethnic identities have emerged as a number of popular musicians such as Gidigidi Majimaji in *I am unbwogable* and *Ting badi malo*¹⁸ appropriated the use of Kiswahili and vernacular in their songs. On the other, subjective forms of identity emerged through their music. Most importantly, popular music as a cultural domain remains a site for the re-inscription of subjectivities (Nyairo and Ogude 2003).

The re-inscription of subjectivities manifests itself in the interpretation of economic and political realities that characterise the Kenyan nation. This situation is best exemplified by Eric Wainaina's *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo*.¹⁹ Wainaina's *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo*, which jointly won the 7th Kora Africa musical awards with Mutuku's *Nakuhitaji* (I need you), relays the story of corruption in Kenya and deconstructs the myth of a collective national identity in exploring the daily experiences of corruption within specific geographical spaces in society. Through the song, Wainaina foregrounds a brand of youth identity that relates to the personal, social, and historical construction and understanding of the world around him. As a youth, Wainaina takes up agency and challenges inconsistencies in Kenyan society through song. It should be noted that *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo* deals with the immediate concerns of the people: education, health facilities, identification, and police and judicial corruption (Omolo 2003). Thus, the social identity created by Wainaina, a youthful musician, helps us understand the everyday dilemmas faced by Kenyan youth in their attempt to forge their own identities. Not only are urban youth shaped by the events of the time, but also disgusted by labels such as criminals, thugs, and conmen accorded to them from various quarters in the Kenyan society.

The youth and criminal identity are a recurrent theme in Kenyan popular music. In these circumstances, although society has interrogated itself and popular art critical of police culture was being generated, it remained visible only on the periphery, hidden in the few public spaces that were permitted to express dissent. As we have pointed out, youthful hustlers creatively exploit available opportunities in an effort to survive. In doing this, they hardly shy away from crime if it is their only means of survival. This situation is ably captured in Juacali's song, *Bongo La Biashara*, as the artist seems to glorify crime: '*Makarao wakikuja, gari inabemba*' ('When the police come, the vehicle is wobbling'). The line and its intonation capture the youth's anger at being considered a criminal by the police, an identity that they accordingly embrace and use against the same oppressors. The fact that the police's vehicle is depicted as wobbling indicates they cannot quickly respond to crime reports, hence giving the youth licence to do as they please. In turn, the song critiques the Kenyan police who never respond appropriately or move quickly to avert crime in society, but also suspect the youth of being criminals.

Creatively fashioned on historical consciousness, *Angalia Saa*²⁰ deploys the concept of time to explain the criminal label among the youth. A protest song,

Angalia Saa juxtaposes colonial times and the present as an index of understanding the frosty relationship between the youth and police. The implicit message is simple: the present-day Kenyan police serve the same function as that of the slave masters. This is made explicit when the artist sings ‘*Tushavumilia viboko mbele ya ma slave master*’ (‘We have already persevered flogging under the slave masters’). The song celebrates freedom fighters as heroes while depicting Kenyan police as enemies of social justice and human rights. Handcuffs, a tool of trade for the police, are juxtaposed against the vivid imagery of a woman in agony. The police are branded as an enemy of the youth because they are the source of the youth’s criminal identity. The image of the police as an ‘enemy’ of youth recurs in a number of youth music. For instance, Rufftone calls them ‘*hii pack ya mawolves*’ (‘this pack of wolves’); Ngare calls them ‘beasts’ in *Mashifta*; Big Mo in turns sees them as ‘terrorists’ ‘*Kumbe ni ma-terrorist*’, and *Wenyeji* calls them ‘bloodthirsty devils’ in *Tunavyoishi*.

Another good example of popular music’s role in articulating the youth’s criminal sense of identity in Kenya is in the song *Gunshots*.²¹ In the song, a warning text flashes on screen reading, ‘*Hatutaki na tumechoka na ma gun shots...maboys tuwache guns na macops tuwache kuwaua vijana wa mtaa*’ (‘We do not want, and we are tired of, gunshots ... boys let’s abandon guns and cops let’s stop killing the youth’). Through this message, the police are condemned for killing youth because they are considered criminals. The youth decry the wanton killings without trial by the police, hence referring to them as beasts. The song highlights the fact that in their line of duty, the police have killed a number of youth mistaken as criminals. The criminal identity makes the persona in the song wonder whether the country will be able to achieve vision 2030²² if the youth, that is the energetic groups, are mercilessly killed. However, it is worthy pointing out that Googs and Vinnie Banton²³ give the police a live line with the song, *wasee tumetoka Githurai*.²⁴ Although the chorus gives the impression of Githurai as a place for fun and recreation: ‘*hepi na mabeste kule chini Githurai*’ (‘Having fun with friends down there at Githurai’), the two artists paint a spectacle of crime and violence in the area. Githurai is shown as polluted by guns and idle youth who have taken up crime and violence in order to make ends meet. This situation would perhaps justify why police shoot and kill the youth on sight. The police could be suspecting that the youth are armed and, therefore, whoever reacts faster secures his life. This observation does not by any means legitimise the actions of the police but it shows that the police are responding to crime perpetuated by armed youth. Therefore, *wasee tumetoka Githurai* shows how endemic insecurity as a constant marker of life on the margins serves as an inspiration for music: a situation that shows how popular music opens up alternative sites for expression, free from the insecurity, crime, and violence synonymous with life in marginal areas such as Githurai.

Eric Wainaina’s song, *Usiku wa Manane*,²⁵ starkly paints the image of insecurity in Nairobi city with the youth and the police as key actors. Metaphors of fear and

insecurity punctuate the song as Wainaina graphically takes us through images of smartly dressed youth who are pickpockets in the streets and at bus stops, with the situation made easier by corrupt policemen who not only take bribes from the criminals but have themselves also turned to crime. One of the characteristics of the police in the eyes of the public is that of harbingers of corruption as captured in Jimwat's song, *Sitoi Kitu Kidogo*.²⁶ The song focuses on the persona's efforts to offer a bribe to a police officer. The song portrays the youth as tired of offering bribes, pushed into a corner, and even arrested for refusing to offer a bribe. The policeman makes an explicit request for the bribe, even negotiating the exact figure, depicting a heightened level of desperation on his part. The song takes a swipe at the police, stating that, even though they claim that corruption is a vice, they are still at the forefront advancing it. When the policeman makes good his threat of arresting the young man, charges are fabricated and the young man is offered a chance to buy his way out of this new-found trouble. This song clearly shows the youth's beleaguered identity in a corrupt society. The youth are unable to decipher what is right or wrong for them in the hands of the law enforcers.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that that popular music not only has a critical index in understanding but also plays a significant role in shaping, influencing, and negotiating identity formations among the youth. This explains why a vast majority of the Kenyan youth are active participants in the music because it offers more to them than mere entertainment. Of interest is the fact that through popular music, two facets of youth identity in Kenya emerge: foisted identity and referential identity. On the one hand, foisted identity refers to an identity imposed on the youth. The criminal identity discussed above best exemplifies foisted identity. Largely, the popular songs analysed herein have shown that the youth decry the criminal identity imposed on them by the law enforcers though, to some extent, the songs admit that there are some youth who are indeed criminals. Interestingly, while the police consider the youth as criminals, the youth view the police as terrorists because they not only terrorise but also break the very laws that they are meant to enforce. Referential identity, on the other hand, refers to the intrinsic and reflexive identity for the youth portrayed through popular music. The hustler identity best exemplifies this form of identity as it portrays what the youth actually think about themselves. Creatively, the Kenyan youth are portrayed as individuals who will stop at nothing in order to earn a living, explaining why they engage in various day-to-day activities in order to sustain themselves.

NOTES

1. *Benga* style is a variant of traditional Luo dance music.

2. *Nyatiti* is an 8-stringed plucked lyre from the Luo community located in western Kenya. *Litungu* is also a lyre, mostly seven-stringed, a traditional instrument from the Luhya community in Western Kenya.
3. *Zilizopendwa* is a Kiswahili word that loosely translates to ‘old favourites’ or ‘golden oldies’.
4. *I am Unbwogable*, which loosely translates to ‘unbeatable/undefeated’, is a popular song by Joseph Ogidi (Gidi) and Julius Owino (Maji), which occupied a central stage in the political arena of Kenya’s December 2002 general election.
5. Ukoo Flani Mau Mau refers to a group of artists based in Nairobi and Mombasa, Kenya, who have appropriated hip hop and created a movement through music. The group includes popular music artists such as Kamau Ngigi, Robert Matumbai Joni, John Vigeti as the founders, who were joined by new groups and individuals that follow this mantra and understanding such as Washefa, Mashifta, Kitu Sewer, Joga, Malcom X, Wakamba Wawili, Kah, Mombasa Ukoo Flani, Wenyeji, Gidi Gidi Maji Maji, Juliani, and female artists Atu Kandi and Nazizi.
6. The political class in Kenya offers an inflection of the definition of the term youth. This was especially articulated in the 1997 KANU manifesto to continue to serve the interests of the ruling class.
7. This definition of the youth is adopted from the *Kenya National Youth Policy Document* of 2006.
8. The Kenyatta era lasted for a period of 15 years from 1963 to 1978 while the Moi era lasted 24 years from 1978 to 2002.
9. Sheng is a corrupted form of language primarily drawn from Kiswahili, with infusions of ethnic languages.
10. See the *Washington Post*, December 26, 2002, and Marc Lacey, *New York Times*, February 16, 2003.
11. The use of Kiswahili as a national and official language in Kenya was enshrined in the new constitution promulgated in August 2010.
12. *Ng’ang’ana*, which loosely translates to struggle, and *Salari*, which means salary, are popular songs by nameless (real name is David Mathenge), which explore the various challenges that the youth have to undergo in order to earn a living.
13. Hustler is a term used to refer to the intricate culture of resilience among contemporary urbanites, particularly urban youth.
14. *Kigeugeu*, which loosely translates to turncoat, explores the uncertainties and lack of trust in Kenyan society.
15. Jaguar, whose real name is Charles Njagua Kanyi, is a Kenyan musician well known for his popular song *Kigeugeu*. He was named the best performer and most influential Artiste brand in Kenya in 2014 by ICERTIAS.
16. Juacali, whose real name is Paul Nunda, is a successful Kenyan musician who is famed for his *Ngeli ya Genge* hit song.

17. *Bongo La Biashara*, which loosely translates to business brain, is a song that captures aspects of treacherousness and ingenuity mandatory for survival in the Kenyan urban space.
18. *Ting badi malo* loosely translates to ‘Lift up your arms’ as sung by GidiGidi Majimaji.
19. *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo* is a song which literally translates to ‘A country of small-things’ meaning ‘a country where people give bribes’.
20. *Angalia Saa* translates to ‘look at the watch’ by Ukoo Flani Mau Mau <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqARPgKnTnE> (19 December 2008).
21. Ngare featuring *Mashifta* (2010), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osbO03vxNgo&> (accessed 28 August 2010).
22. Vision 2030 is an economic blueprint document outlining the roadmap for Kenya to achieve middle class economic status by the year 2030.
23. The actual name for Googs is Moffati Omari while Vinnie Banton is Vincent Ihaji.
24. *Wasee tumetoka Githurai* loosely translates to ‘people, we hail from Githurai’. Githurai is an informal, middle to low-income peri-urban settlement about 14 kilometres east of Nairobi city.
25. *Usiku wa manane* translates to ‘at midnight’.
26. *Sitoi Kitu Kidogo* is a kiswahili expression, which is a blatant refusal to offer a bribe: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-L79xtsz40>. Jimwat (2008), Calif Records.

REFERENCES

- Bauman, Z. 1998. *Globalization: The human consequences*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U. 1992. *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies that matter*. London: Routledge.
- Connell, J., and C. Gibson. 2004. *Sound Tracks. Popular Music, Identity and Place*. London: Routledge.
- Diouf, M. 2003. Engaging postcolonial cultures: African youth and public space. *African Studies Review* 46(2): 1–12.
- Ewens, G. 1991. *Africa o-ye! A celebration of African music*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Fabian, J. 1997. Popular cultures in Africa: Finding and conjectures. In Karin Barber, *Readings in African popular culture*, 18–28. Oxford: James Currey.
- Featherstone, M. 1991. *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. London: Sage.
- Frith, S. 1996. Music and identity. In *Questions of cultural studies*, ed. S. Hall and P. du Gay, 108–117. London: Sage.
- Gecau, K. 1997. The 1980s background to the popular political songs of the early 1990s in Kenya. In R. Zwiwarara, K. Gecau and M. Drag *Media, democratization and identity*, R. Zwiwarara, K. Gecau and M. Drag, 149–176. Harare: University of Zimbabwe.
- Georgiou, M. 2013. *Media and the city*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Gervais-Lambony, P. 2006. Space and identity: Thinking through some South African examples. In *Reflections on identity in four African cities*, ed. S. Bekker and A. Leilde, 53–67. Cape Town: African Minds.
- Giddens, A. 1979. *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis*. London: Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. 1991. *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Blackwells.
- Giddens, A. 2000. *Runaway world*. Routledge: New York.
- Gitonga, P.N. 2009. Music as social discourse: The contribution of popular music to the awareness and prevention of HIV/AIDS in Nairobi, Kenya. PhD thesis, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.
- Graeber, W. 1987. Music in Kenya – A historical overview. In *The rough guide to Kenya*, ed. Richard Trillo, 359–360. London: Routledge.
- Gray, S. 2000. *Rumba on the River: A history of popular music of the two Congos*. London: Verso.
- Haugerud, A. 1995. *The culture of politics in modern Kenya*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, S. 1996. Who needs ‘identity’? In *Questions of cultural identity*, ed. S. Hall and P. du Gay, 1–17. London: Sage.
- Koster, M.M. 2013. The Hip Hop revolution in Kenya: Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, youth politics and memory, 1990–2012. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6(3).
- Low, J. 1982. A history of Kenya guitar music 1954–1980. *Journal of International Library of African Music* 6: 17–36.
- Lukalo, F.K. 2006. Extended handshake or wrestling match? Youth and urban culture celebrating politics in Kenya. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- MacDonald, R.A., J.D. Hargreaves, and D. Mill, 2002. *Musical identities*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, S.H. 1991. Popular music in urban east Africa: From a historical perspective to a contemporary hero. *Black Musical Research Journal* 11(1): 39–53.
- Masolo, D. A. 2000. Presencing the past and remembering the present: Social features of popular music in Kenya. In *Music and the racial migration*, ed. Ronald Rodano and Philip Bohlman, 349–402. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Miles, S. 2000. *Youth lifestyles in a changing world*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Mwangi, E. 2004. Masculinity and nationalism in east African Hip-Hop music. *Tydskeif vir Letterkunde* 41(2): 5–20.
- Odhiambo, E.S.A. 2002. Kula Raha: Gendered discourse and the contours of leisure in Nairobi, 1946–1963. In *The urban experience in east Africa*, ed. Andrew Burton, 254–264. Nairobi: British Institute.
- Ogone, J.O. 2014. Framing the urban hustler: Space and identity discourse in Kenyan popular music. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6(9).
- Okumu, C.C. 1998. The development of Kenyan popular guitar music: A study of Kiswahili songs in Nairobi. M.A, Thesis, Kenyatta University.

- Omolo, K. 2002. Political ethnicity in the democratisation process in Kenya. *African Studies* 61(2): 210–221.
- Patterson, D. 1999. The life and times of Kenyan Pop. In *World music: The rough guide. Volume I: Africa, Europe and the Middle East*, ed. S. Broughton, M. Ellingham and R. Trillo, 509–522. London: Rough Guides.
- Rice, T. 2001. Reflections on music and meaning: Metaphor, signification, and control in the Bulgarian case. *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10: 19–38.
- Samper, D. 2004. ‘Africa is still our Mama’: Kenyan Rappers, youth identity and revitalization of traditional values’. *African Identities* 2(1): 37–51.
- Sobania, N. 2003. *Culture and the customs of Kenya*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Stapleton, C., and C. May, 1989. *African All-Stars: The pop music of a continent*. London: Palladin.
- Stokes, M. 1994. Introduction: Ethnicity, identity and music. In *Ethnicity, identity and music: The musical construction of place*, ed. M. Stokes, 1–28. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Taussing, M. 1992. *The nervous system*. London: Routledge.
- Wa Mungai, M. 2014. *Nairobi’s Matatu men: Portrait of a subculture*. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation/Twaweza Communication Ltd.
- Wa Mũtonya, M. 2014. *Jogoo La Shambani Haliwiki Mjini*: The village and the town in the Mũgithi and one-man guitar performances in Kenya. *African Studies Quarterly* 14(4): 1–16.
- Wainaina, M. 2008. Lemme do m’thing: Objective possibilities for social meaning and re-visioning youth identity through pop music. In *Culture, performance and identity: Paths of communication in Kenya*, ed. K. Njogu, 57–74. Nairobi: Twaweza Communications.
- Whiteley, S. 2004. Introduction: Music, space and place. In *Music, space and place: Popular music and cultural identity*, ed. S. Whiteley, A. Bennett. and S. Hawkins, 2–7. Aldershot: Ashgate.