

POLITICS AND POPULAR SONG: YOUTH, AUTHORITY, AND POPULAR MUSIC IN EAST AFRICA

by

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In 2003, the Tanzanian rapper AY released the song “*Binadamu*” (Human) [CD track 1]. Recorded in Uganda, mixed in Tanzania, with a video filmed in Somalia and Uganda, the song reached top ten lists at radio stations in every country in east Africa. The song discussed the fate of someone who had become ostracized by his friends and family after falling on hard times. It was a socially significant song, demonstrating forms of marginalization that occur in contemporary cities where people are consumed by cosmopolitan fantasies. Along with several other songs released in the early 2000s, “*Binadamu*” garnered AY the nickname “*Mzee wa Commercial*”, which literally translated as the “Elder of Commercial [Music]”. The word ‘*mzee*’ (elder), used by Tanzanian youth to signify their desire for social power within society, was a means of self-actualizing the status and prestige associated with elders in African societies. As a result of the connotation to AY’s nickname, he became a highly respected person in releasing socially and commercially successful songs that could be heard throughout eastern Africa. His music had the potential to influence others, thereby embodying the role of the elder, while also being popular and commercially successful. The elder status of his nickname should not, however, be confused with his actual age. Born on July 5, 1982, AY was 21 when “*Binadamu*” first became a hit.

At times when there is conflict or a perceived injustice, music becomes a powerful means to generate social action. Whether through calming anxieties, raising awareness, or moving people to oppose an apparent inequality, songs assist in forming communities proclaiming common desires: desires to attain certain rights, draw attention to certain problems, or to mimic the financial wealth espoused in popular media. Given the potential of musicians to shape and define the direction of public cultures, they are important political figures. If political means to engage people to take sides and tactfully generate consensus, then musicians are significantly implicated in the politics of societies. Popular music can generate strong emotional and visceral responses, which allow musicians to motivate and inspire large populations of listeners. Artists can encourage protests or, even minimally, strengthen people’s views of government, another ethnic group, or social situations. Even though they may lack political power associated with government, they are able to generate actions and reactions within society.

In this article, I examine political songs in east Africa, particularly Kenya and Tanzania. I argue that composing political songs provides youth with opportunities to attain authority and shape people's views on a variety of social issues. From songs that address significant events, such as conflicts between two competing political parties, to responses to social injustices, such as lack of rights among the urban poor, young composers directly acknowledge and respond to the lived experiences of many east Africans in ways that other people, including political leaders, avoid. In addition, many songs reference financial wealth, and thereby encourage listeners to desire material success that is frequently elusive to most. These songs are also political in that they shape people's interpretations of themselves in relation to others and create responses among listeners to the capabilities of politicians. In situations where politicians are unable to generate opportunities for forms of financial success espoused in popular music, listeners can develop negative reactions to leadership viewed as ineffective in providing for citizens. Rather than view youth as marginalized or outside of the political sphere in east Africa, the composition of political songs provides a means for youth to establish themselves as prominent voices within public cultures.

In creating popular music, young people draw influences from a variety of sources. To create popular political songs in east Africa requires knowledge of international, regional, and local youth cultures. In composing songs, performing on stage, or recording music videos, many young people incorporate forms of dress, language, and actions, such as NY Yankees baseball caps and baggy pants, drawn from international interpretations of youth cultures. These forms of dress, language, and action provide a means for youth to show knowledge of transnational cultural movements and appear connected to global trends in popular music. Regional dialogue between youth in several east African countries allows artists to reach a wider audience and create broader social appeal. The attention to regionalism in popular music also identifies commonalities of experiences and frustrations that extend across borders. This helps to build consensus among youth that the goals they are struggling for are more endemic to east Africa, rather than to a specific country. At the same time, local aesthetics, language choices, and political issues are also important in speaking directly to specific communities. When Issa B (Emmanuel Simwinga) released "*Ridhiwani*", a 2011 song that asked the son of the Tanzanian president to tell his father that life is hard, the lyrics directly referenced social and political issues of that country. The ability of artists to consistently and systematically generate ideas drawn from so many potential sources is central to establishing credibility within music scenes in east Africa.

In addition to the influence of youth cultures, many young people in eastern Africa are also highly respectful of older generations and recognize the political and cultural importance of this age-group. It is misleading to say that young people are in opposition to elders or that they do not follow any traditions associated with elders. In referring to each other as *mzee* or *msee* (elder), young people attempt to more centrally position themselves as important, knowledgeable, and respected figures in society. There is also

a strong recognition and commentary among many youth that elders hold power in social, religious, and ethnic communities. While there are youth who purposefully compose music in opposition to that of elder generations, there is also regular dialogue of the ability of elders to pull countries together, unite communities, and hinder social problems. There is power attributed to the notion of elder, which many youth attempt to coopt in their music and public identities. Since being political is often linked in east Africa to elders, young artists attempt to position themselves as more powerful through drawing on the social status of this age-group both in their interactions with each other and the composition of lyrics.

In creating public identities, youth attempt to embody elements of being young and old, trendy and wise, riotous and mature. Navigating through these cultural possibilities presents options for multiple outcomes in the production and reception of music that evidence the heterogeneity of youth identities in popular culture. In addition, the composition of music, even by the same artist, moves across several different musical categories. In particular, many youth in Tanzania and Kenya use two broad compositional strategies to produce two broad categories of songs: educational songs, depicting social problems experienced by youth; and commercial songs, espousing notions of financial or material wealth. Whereas educational songs frequently draw on post-independence efforts to collectively build equitable communities, commercial songs often orient the listener more toward individual interests, desires, and fantasies. Lyrically, educational songs build on notions of east African traditions popular in the 1960s and 1970s, whereas commercial songs stress the prevalence of capitalist ideologies within a neoliberal framework. Both forms are commentaries on public life, authority, and power, which make them important in comprehending political songs in eastern Africa.

Through research conducted in Kampala, Nairobi, Arusha, and Dar es Salaam since the late 1990s, my focus in the next several sections is to examine age-related classifications and the production of political songs, particularly within the categories of educational and commercial music. What is unique about political songs in east Africa is that artists are able to receive attention for their ideas at an increasingly young age in part through their ability to compose music that combines a wide-array of spatial (local, regional, international), economic (socialist and capitalist), and age-related characteristics. This combination of characteristics attracts a wide array of listeners and often cuts across age-groups, particularly in dealing with enduring social issues, such as corruption, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of political leadership. The rapid growth in radio stations, recording studios, and new media has encouraged the popularity of youth voices in east Africa by allowing artists to move around any restrictions placed on them in the past (Perullo 2011). The ability to pull together various musical and social aesthetics in the composition of songs that have wide political impact has also encouraged listeners from many age groups, classes, and political affiliations to take notice.

Youth of the new generation

It is common to hear reporters and development specialists talk about the enormous population of young people in African countries. Particularly in development reports, authors argue that the growing percentage of youth, ranging anywhere from 20% to 33% of a given population, place a tremendous strain on resources, educational systems, and society as a whole (UNESCO 2010; National Research Council 2005). Historians, however, have noted that Africa has always had a large population of young people. In the 1957 census taken in mainland Tanzania, for instance, 70% of the population was under the age of 29. In 2002, that percentage rose to 76% (Burgess and Burton 2010: 2). While there are more youth now than in the past, due to the overall growth in east African populations, their percentage as part of the larger populations is relatively similar to the previous several generations. More importantly, the data suggests that young people have been a prominent population of east African societies for the past sixty years.

Despite the relative consistency in the percentage of overall youth living in east Africa, there is frequent dialogue about the *growing* and immediate problems brought on by this population. In Tanzania, government speeches frequently reference “the imperialist invasion” taking place in society and the need for elders, including those in government, to find ways to better shape the manners and behaviours of Tanzanian youth who have become too drawn toward traditions of Europeans (Mwinyi 1990). Newspapers frequently carry stories about the “Western world” corrupting youth in “African societies”, and the need for elders and religious leaders to stand up against corruptions of culture (Qorro 2011). In school textbooks, stories discuss the need for young people to avoid bad habits, such as using drugs, in order to better society and assist elders (Waweru et al. 2005: 32). In Kenya, public commentary often focuses on the connection between youth and violence, and the need for elders to control problematic youth. In Nyeri Town, the provincial commissioner Japhther Rugut urged elders to “focus on the youth who are prone to engaging in violence” (Njagi 2010). In another effort, elders were encouraged to control youth violence through “preparing a new generation of mature and responsible Africans, with the feet in tradition and the head in modernism” (Shiundu, 2009). Material excess, the desire for money, and the lack of identification with traditional cultural practices are further mentioned as reasons for the problems brought by the growing number of youth in Kenya (Moraa 2011).

Taken together, the commentaries from government officials and public media in east Africa generate a notion of youth as coopted by the West, often violent, and out of touch with traditions of their countries. Scholarly studies on African youth occasionally support these views, and argue that youth become disaffected and capable of “indescribable atrocities against their own people” (Mokwena 1992: 39; El-Kenz 1996). Social movements created by young people contain “the recourse to violence . . . the destruction of the places and monuments of postcolonial munificence” (Diouf 2003: 7).

Authors write that the world of youth is “clearly bounded”, and attention is often given to “the marginalization and exclusion that are daily experienced by children and young people in Africa today” (De Boeck and Honwana 2005: 10). Youth music is discussed as being in a “moral universe in stark contrast to that of their elders” (Shepler 2010). It is not that these authors are incorrect in their given contexts – Shepler, for instance, writes about post-civil war Sierra Leone where the composition of music is quite different from that of east Africa. Instead, the culmination of these materials is a dialogue about youth that establishes in the minds of readers a checklist of characteristics that serve to stereotype young people as “alienated, embittered, ill-educated, prone to violence, socially and economically marginalized, politically radical, etc.” (Van Zyl Slabbert et. al. 1994: 18).

There are many issues with this static and bounded notion of young people. First, and most essentially, it creates a presumption that there is a group called youth that share common goals and aspirations. The term youth is an organizational category where people have many divergent motivations, and desires. There is little in the way of consistency among young people or other age-based groupings or populations. Even as some youth can be considered embittered or marginalized, many others attain economic or social accomplishments well beyond their age. Others work responsibly for family or on their own, and are able to attain social conceptions of success, power, and resourcefulness. Culturally, music, language, and dress diverge significantly among different populations of young people even if there are commonalities and unifying factors. These multifaceted formulations of youth provide a more resonate understanding of lived experiences of young people in east Africa than is often evidenced in considerations of this age-group.

A second issue with the term youth is that it creates a political separation between social groups. By arguing that youth lack maturity, education, etc., there is no need to include them or allow them to participate in political debates since these areas become the domain of adults and elders (Mwangola 2007: 137). Youth representation in politics in east Africa remains low even though many people have called for increased representation by youth in politics (Githahu 2011; Tuju 2011; Wanjohi 2011). In interviews with Kenyan and Tanzanian youth, some voice frustration at their lack of political power, particularly in believing that their country’s leadership poorly represents their concerns. When Amina Chifupa became a member of Tanzanian Parliament in 2005, at the age of 24, many people were excited that the concerns of young people could now be addressed within government. Her death after only two years in office was viewed with both suspicion and grief. Conspiracy theories circulated, and members of government were accused of playing a hand in her death (ultimately, most people acknowledge that she died from a combination of malaria and diabetes). In Kenya, political problems such as corruption, nepotism, and collusion have kept many young people out of politics, particularly when other, less volatile opportunities are available to them in business and commerce.

The relative absence of youth in east African politics does not mean that they are not active in social organizations. Many youth are prominent journalists, work or run organizations committed to assisting others, and are visible in combating corruption. One characteristic common among many youth is their willingness to take chances given their transitive status between being the responsibility of their parents and bearing responsibility for their own families. In situations where youth do not need to care for others, they are often less fearful of using their actions to confront and contest situations that they view as barriers for social and economic development. Being less risk adverse is part of the reason that some youth become involved in unsavory activities often associated with this social category. Yet, it is also that which inspires some to take chances in speaking out against political leaders or in raising concerns over inconsistencies in cultural traditions. There is a means by which youth push against social conventions, often causing consternation among more senior officials comfortable in their own worldviews.

The most prominent area available to youth to publically comment on political issues without being directly involved in government is popular music broadcast on the radio. Due to the increasing privatization of media in east Africa, including the proliferation of independent radio stations and recording studios, many youth attain wide media exposure from their musical compositions. Several radio stations broadcast throughout entire countries, and a few companies, such as Radio Free Africa, based in Mwanza, Tanzania, can be heard throughout east Africa. If artists are able to receive regular airplay on these stations, they attain social and economic legitimization among a broad network of listeners. Many young artists become celebrities within a few months of appearing on the radio, and can receive lucrative performance and distribution contracts, awards, publicity, or other accolades. Radio remains the most important and popular medium in east Africa, and regular airplay can achieve dramatic results in moving the ideas of young people into society. Whereas previous generations may have spent considerable effort performing, recording, and broadcasting their music before attaining widespread notoriety, artists can now release a single song on the radio, having never performed a live concert, and attain broad recognition for their ideas. This allows youth to quickly enter into dialogues taking place in public cultures in ways that they have been unable to in previous generations.

Recognizing the popularity of youth music, politicians comment on or employ the messages heard in popular songs. In Kenya, the duo Gidi Gidi Maji Maji released the song "Who Can *Bwogo* Me?" (Who Can Scare/Stop Me?) in 2002. Popularly known as "Unbwogable", an adjective that can translate as unbeatable, unshakable, or unstoppable, the song moved quickly to dominate most spaces where recorded music was played: public transportation, bars and clubs, people's homes, and restaurants. It also became an anthem for opposition parties in the 2002 election period, particularly the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). The original song focused on Luo identity but was remixed with an added voice of the Tanzanian rapper Mr. Ebbo, a frequent

purveyor of Maasai identity. The intention of adding Mr. Ebbo was to “capture, in their respective accents, the socio-economic woes of a host of Kenyan ethnic groups” (Nyairo and Ogude 2005: 241). Along with other songs, “Unbwogable” propelled the NARC presidential candidate Mwai Kibaki to an eventual victory. The song transformed “the national imaginary” and provided a means to unify populations in a common cause of “resistance and victory” (Nyairo and Ogude 2005: 244).

Many other east African artists release songs criticizing or supporting political leaders. In these cases, music is directly involved in public debates about the future of societies. This empowers young composers and provides them with political and social opportunities often elusive to other age-mates. It is important to note here that popular music in east Africa is dominated by the music of young artists. Far from being marginalized, static, or circumscribed, the many youth voices present in popular music become actively engaged in shaping the content and ideas circulating in public cultures. Still, there is intense competition to attain recognition in the cacophony of voices being recorded, broadcast, and sold in eastern Africa. Attaining authority, power, and knowledge through the composition of music can be elusive. And, despite the fact that many artists take risks, overcoming the fear of releasing a potentially controversial song keeps many politically-oriented songs off the radio. Even more simply, writing a song that is both politically conscious and popular is extraordinarily challenging.

The point here is that the category of youth is flexible, dynamic, and made up of many individuals with divergent backgrounds, interests, and skills. In this dynamic population, there is the potential that young people, in any social position, can create opportunities and foster social change. While some scholars argue that social changes have made youth vulnerable (Selvam 2008: 206), others write that youth in vulnerable positions, such as street children, “exhibit powerful signs of resilience” that “promote a sense of meaning, purpose, participatory opportunities, belonging and attachment, recreation, financial stability, personal and social power, social support, food, and shelter” (Malindi and Theron 2010: 318–319). The recognition that young people offer potential for creating social changes has led to a growing body of commentary about the future of societies and the broader role of youth. In an opinion piece, one author notes that, “Perhaps the most crucial determinant of our country’s future security is the recognition that the youth of Kenya will make or break this country. Today’s youth are the most numerous, most self-aware and possess the most phenomenal global exposure of all generations in Kenya, ever” (Tuju 2011). Even as some people may attempt to confine and refine the choices of youth, others argue that the possibilities brought on by new media, technology, and transnational social movements provide youth with increasingly prevalent voices in creating social and political opportunities.

The increasing prominence of youth voices in east Africa does not negate the authority of elders. Elders continue to shape many facets of social life and frequently maintain the respect of younger generations. Given the significant problems in Kenyan political elections, these elder leaders hope to create more beneficial approaches to the

future for Kenya. For many musicians, there is also a sense of their responsibly toward respecting the interests and desires of elders. The artist Balozi Dola (Ahmed Dola), who was born in Kenya but formed his musical career in Tanzania, explains:

We have a saying back in Tanzania that says – after God your parents are next in line. The youth of Africa revere and respect their elders so much that it almost seems like worshipping their elders. So they always seek their advice in everything that they do. It is believed that without doing so you will not be successful if whatever you do in life; if they do not consent with what you are doing. Some adults have had a huge influence in the musical careers of their sons and daughters (pers. comm. 20 Mar. 2010).

Many artists in Kenya and Tanzania commented to me about their alterations to lyrics and music in order to appease their parents, teachers, or religious leaders collectively referred to as elders. While there is an image of youth constantly rebelling against elders – a practice that certainly occurs in east Africa – there are those that follow and seek out the advice of older generations in attempting to attain more authority, power, and wisdom. This shows that the significant role elders played in traditional societies remains important in the daily lives of contemporary African youth.

The commercial success of many artists in contemporary east African music economies, however, has pushed against the ability of elders to remain influential among young composers. Dola comments on these shifts taking place:

I would say that today [2010], elders are less influential than they were ten years ago due to the commercial aspects and changing nature of the music industry. The young people now seek the advice from industry experts such as deejays, music promoters and managers to figure out how they could best penetrate the music market with their next single or album. This happens all over east Africa as far as I know. Also, the advent of information communication technology, such as the internet and access to television, has provided more information that has made it easier for younger artist to learn from other artists, interviews and radio shows in order to make more informed decisions about their respective careers. Nowadays, the elders mostly comment on whether they understand the message of the young or not and advise others to emulate those who can articulate a clear message in their lyrics to come up with educational and socially acceptable lyrics that do not have any profanity (pers. comm. 20 Mar. 2010).

The success of popular music within local music economies allows younger artists to move away from relying on older generations for support, advice, and ideas. There is the potential to form networks that do not rely on elder voices, as was common in the past. Nonetheless, elder voices still emerge in media commentaries that criticize or praise the music being composed by young people. Parents and community leaders also remain influential in the content of songs. And, for many young people, being acknowledged as an elder (*mzee*) signifies their accomplishments in attaining authority and wisdom within society.

Educational songs in Tanzania

In Tanzania, songs have long encouraged social movements against conflicts or perceived injustices. During the 1950s, songs allowed people to actively critique the distortions of power presented in colonial administrations. Music was used to gather people together and support the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), which was a pro-independence party of African leaders. Bibi Titi Mohammed, one of the leaders of independence efforts, stated, "To mobilize the women, I went to the *ngoma* [traditional music] groups. First of all, I went to their leaders. The leaders got together in a meeting, and after I spoke to them, they told me that on a certain day at a certain time they would call all their people so that I could come and talk to them about TANU – what it does, what it wants, where it is going" (quoted in Geiger 1997: 58). Many events occurred under the pretext of attending or participating in musical celebrations, but which actively pursued opportunities for independence from colonial rule.

After independence, the Tanzanian government pushed to Africanize the country's popular music, which could then be used to promote the state's interests. Bands were encouraged and then required to sing in Swahili while avoiding ethnic languages. Even band names could not reference ethnic identities. Popular genres needed to incorporate more traditional musical elements, particularly from the country's *ngoma* traditions, even though these too became re-imagined in the political landscape of the country's nationalist efforts (Askew 2002). Through controlling the country's only radio station and recording studios, the government required artists to compose songs that dealt with nationalist themes, such as socialism, the prominence of the ruling party, and the importance of education. Government parastatals owned most of the popular Tanzanian bands, which further promoted music that responded to and helped to shape public interpretations of socialism and state policies. Other types of music were also composed during this time, particularly love songs that were popular through eastern Africa. Political songs, however, were important for unifying citizenry support and interests in socialist ideologies.

By the 1990s, hip hop took over as a dominant vehicle for young people to express frustration with the economic and political situation of Tanzanian society. Tanzania's second president, Ali Hassan Mwinyi, had ushered in reforms meant to allow for more business opportunities thereby dismantling economic socialism in the country. The music economy expanded significantly, particularly through the introduction of independent radio stations and recording studios. Artists used the newly expanding economy as a vehicle to promote their problems that they encountered on a daily basis. Whereas the 1970s and 1980s frequently featured pro-government music, the 1990s saw youth become critical of the country's leadership and offer assessments of the social problems encountered in the country. Topics that would not have been allowed in the past, such as corruption, domestic violence, prostitution, and political incompetence, became commonplace. As noted earlier, however, elders continued to wield influence in shaping the content and language of youth music.

In 2004, the Tanzanian rap artist Juma Nature released the song “*Umoja wa Tanzania*” (Tanzanian United), [CD track 2]. Nature was hired by the ruling party to tour throughout Tanzania with members of Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) to promote the election and CCM candidates. This song was Nature’s commentary on the state of politics and ability of the country to remain united despite divisions over the future of leadership. It built on many previous nationalist songs from the socialist period, and added issues related to reforms occurring in Tanzanian society, such as multipartyism and conflict between two political parties CCM and Civic United Front (CUF). CCM was the only party or the dominant party in Tanzanian politics since independence. CUF, however, had quickly gained momentum with each of the previous multiparty elections. Nature commented on the conflict among supporters of both parties:

<i>Siasa ukifuatisha sana unaweza hata kulia.</i>	If you follow politics it can make you cry.
<i>Ubaya upo nchi zote hata kwenye familia.</i>	Bad things are in every county even among families.
<i>Tujiulize kuna nini kama sisi wenyewe tutapigana.</i>	Let’s ask ourselves what happens when we fight each other.
<i>Na katika hayo mapigano nani atakayeumia?</i>	And in those fights, who will suffer?
<i>CCM na CUF kwa sasa mmeshaelewana.</i>	CCM and CUF they have reached agreement
<i>Haina haja muda wote mkawa mnabishana.</i>	There is no need to argue all the time.
<i>Tumelewana siyo? Naomba mniazime masikio.</i>	Do we agree? Please listen to me.

The message of unification between conflicting groups was prominent in the post-independence period, particularly in state efforts to erase divisions between ethnic and religious groups. In the opening to the song, Nature emphasizes the importance of reaching an agreement in order to ensure peace and stability (mentioned later in the chorus), hallmarks of the country and its people.

Nature then moves to discuss problems that ensue from those who disrupt the unity he espouses in the song. His first criticism is toward those who enter into protests without clear intentions or expected outcomes.

<i>Mimi ni kijana [lakini] kasheshe lipo kwa akina mama.</i>	I am a young man, but problem is with mothers.
<i>Wengine ni waja wazito lakini bado wanaandamana.</i>	Others are pregnant but still they join demonstrations.
<i>Mnataka nini jamani si mwende mkalale?</i>	What do you need to do people except go to sleep?
<i>Wee, unafikiri kuandamana ni jambo la kitoto?</i>	You, do you think demonstration is a kid’s task?
<i>Utapigwa mawe baadaye utachomwa moto.</i>	You will be beaten by stone then you can be set to fire.
<i>Vurugu za mwembe chai wote tulikuwa hatunywi chai.</i>	The riots of Mwembechai, we could not even drink tea.
<i>Haipiti dakika boom [simulated gun shots] chali.</i>	Within a minute boom [simulated gun shots] down.

<i>Wengine ni wazito ubongoni sijui wana matatizo gani,</i>	Others are slow in thinking, I don't know what their problems are,
<i>Hata kadi ya chama hawana [lakini] wanaandamana.</i>	They don't have party cards but they still demonstrate.
<i>Hawa nawo, kujipeleka peleka tuu.</i>	They just want to be seen.
<i>Ukikaa vikao nyao utasikia damu lazima imwegike humu.</i>	If you sit with them, you hear the talks of bloodshed.
<i>Hafahamu kwanza nyumbani ameacha watoto wamelala.</i>	Also they left their children sleeping at home.
<i>Halafu wana wiki mbili hata ubwabwa hawajala.</i>	Their kids have gone two weeks without a good meal.

Nature refers to the Mwembechai riots, where violence occurred on February 13, 1998, at the Mwembechai Mosque in Dar es Salaam. Nature, who lived near the Mosque and was a practicing Muslim, chastises those who simply attended protests to stir up controversy or invoke bloodshed. Since many protests in the pre- and post-Mwembechai riot were led by women, Nature states that it would have been better for those who were mothers to take care of their children first and leave the protesting to other people. This reflects Nature's interest in unity, not just political, but familial. To achieve such unity, according to Nature, mothers need to take care of their children first before protesting on the streets where the police can [and did] attack with weapons.

Nature then discusses the problems encountered among Muslims in Tanzania. It was early in Ramadhan, the period of Muslim fasting, when the violence occurred at Mwembechai.

<i>Migongano ya awali ilitufanye tuogope.</i>	The initial clash made us scared.
<i>Tulishaingia wasiwasi tukasema jamani sana vita.</i>	We were anxious we thought it was war.
<i>Ilikuwa kimuhemuhe, wa ndani atoke nje wa nje akimbilie ndani.</i>	It was panic, those inside ran outside and those outside ran inside.
<i>Walikufa watu kibao, kilio kikubwa kwa watoto.</i>	Many died, many of them children.
<i>Watoto wadogo masikini ni wale wanaosoma shule za msingi</i>	Sadly most of the children were those going to primary school.
<i>Na wengine ni wale wanaosoma shule za nursery.</i>	And others they were in nursery school.
<i>Wengine wanarudi nyumbani mikononi wakiwa wamechukua madaftari.</i>	Other children they go home carrying their notebooks in their hands.
<i>Hata kula hawajala, anatokea askari kwa nyuma anawapiga ngwala.</i>	Without even eating anything, the police beat them from behind.
<i>Lakini shwari tunakaa tunakula ugali.</i>	When there is no problem we sit down together and eat ugali.
<i>Waliofunga ramadhani wote tunakula futari.</i>	Those fasting we sit together and eat evening meals after a day's fasting.

The Mwembechai violence occurred on a Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, and also a day when many schoolchildren were around. One of the people shot and arrested was a 17 year old named Chuki Athmani. In the hospital, he was chained to the bed and, according to Hamza Mustafa Njozi (2000), denied medical treatment. Hundreds

of others were arrested, young and old, men and women. In the end, four people died in the violence while many more were maimed or injured. Still, Nature's message is not of condemnation or revenge. He ends the verse by describing what happens on a more typical night of Ramadhani when there are no problems: the fast is broken and everyone sits together in unity. The chorus then proclaims the union of CCM and CUF in the name of Tanzania.

Many other composers of contemporary youth music in Tanzania set out to describe difficult situations, fictional or real, that occur in their lives. The range of topics discussed is considerable. Some artists directly comment on political policies, such as Joni Woka and Ras Lion's song "*Mrisho*", which is a respectful commentary to the Tanzanian president Jakaya Kikwete. In 2007, Naakaya (Naakaya Sumari) released the song "Mr. President", which did not directly refer to any politician by name, but mentioned the problems that occur in Tanzania, such as inadequate infrastructure, healthcare, and education, which she attributes to the incompetence of elected officials. In an interview, Naakaya comments on the song and its relevance in Tanzanian society.

This song is part of my own experiences living in Tanzania as a normal citizen. I do not come from a rich family. I wake up in the morning and I cannot get to work on time because the roads are a mess. [The politicians] say that there is going to be better education, roads, healthcare, and infrastructure. Exactly what they say that they say they will do, they do not do. It is a very greedy, corrupt system because they do not give a damn about normal citizens. I am a normal citizen and it hurts me to live like this. There is always a water problem in Tanzania. All of these political people, they do not have problems because there are always [water] trucks going to fill up their homes. They do not know how we feel when we cannot get to work on time because we are looking for water in buckets, which [has to keep you] healthy. Okay, I do not have clean water, I will probably get cholera. Who is going to take care of me? The hospitals that are so corrupt they do not even have needles to inject you with? Everything is just crazy right now. It bothers me to see so many people suffering and to see the people who we put in power do not really care about us. I believe that there are some out there trying to make a difference. But, the major ones who can actually make the big changes are too greedy and focused on their own lives. My song was really just an expression of frustration from this whole thing (interview with author, 19 Mar. 2010).

The song "Mr. President" became popular in part because the message, sung in Swahili and English, presented criticism commonly heard in many areas of east Africa. By never mentioning politicians by name or listing specific areas of Tanzania, the critique could easily be moved and shifted to different parts of the region and remain equally applicable.

Considering the strong language of "Mr. President" and other politically-oriented songs, artists often discuss the ramifications of composing controversial texts. Will politicians become angry and censor the work of artists? Will elders condemn them as being disrespectful? Naakaya comments that she was fearful before she released "Mr. President":

I am not particularly sure that I knew what would happen. It was just a fear in me because I felt that we come from a culture where we really fear elders therefore, you cannot challenge any thoughts, you cannot challenge any agendas. It is almost disrespectful to differ in thoughts or opinions [from elders]. Therefore I felt like it was dangerous. Fear is exactly that. It is just fear. And it worked out all right, I am still here (interview with author, 19 Mar. 2010).

Many artists discuss a similar apprehension in composing songs that challenge the wisdom of elders. There is sense that, culturally, artists need to remain respectful of their elders and political leaders. If youth challenge their decisions then they could encounter problems, such as censorship, public condemnation, or police harassment. The Balozi Dola quote above, however, also shows that after releasing a political song, young artists attain a sense of freedom in their speech. While there are still limitations on the contentiousness of lyrics – composers remain respectful of elders even if they are critical of them – artists increasingly recognize their abilities to make their voices and opinions heard. This has allowed youth to achieve authority in their music even when they are young and not supported by society's elders.

Political songs in Tanzania cover those that are supportive of political campaigns to those that are highly critical of the country's leaders. The use of songs in political campaigns, such as Juma Nature's "*Umoja wa Tanzania*", encourages people to avoid violence, support certain political candidates, and generate consensus on certain issues. The airing of denunciatory songs, such as Naakaya's "Mr. President", provides reasons for people to complain, resist, or protest political parties and leaders. Within these two extremes, there are many variations of political songs, including those that offer respectful critiques of political power to those that hide the intentions in metaphors and double entendre. The culmination of these songs evidences the active roles of youth in influencing the opinions and actions of a broader public, particularly in relation to a country's leadership. This is more than just an increase in freedom of speech; it also represents a cultural shift where artists can achieve political power or social influence through their music without needing to depend on hierarchies of power common in cultural traditions of the past.

Politics and history in Kenyan songs

Kenya's historical connection to political songs may be more varied than in Tanzania given the expansiveness of relations between political leaders and ethnic groups. Whereas Tanzania managed to attain some level of cohesiveness even before independence – particularly due to the prevalence of the Swahili language – Kenya's many ethnic groups frequently contested each other in the pre- and post-independence periods. These contestations became manifest in people's views of political leaders and their policies and were often a significant element of the divisions and biases promoted in popular music. Each post-independence president in Kenya has been argued as favoring his own ethnic group more than others and invoking ethnic identities that draw on the boundaries established during British colonial rule (Haugerud 1995:

40). Some citizens and artists have responded to the perceived ethnic divisions by emphasizing regional and cultural differences in attempts to unify their communities against political leaders viewed as working against them. For this reason, there is a wide variety of styles of political songs from those that focus on specific ethnic groups to those aimed at a broader Kenyan population.

Given the expansiveness of political intentions in Kenyan popular music, this section examines only one. Mainly focused on the Gikūyū ethnic group, the Mau Mau Movement emerged in the 1950s as an armed resistance against British colonial rule. The Gikūyū had many grievances, including issues of race, education, land, and freedom from colonial rule. Oaths had long been a part of Gikūyū society and were used in the Movement to encourage collective action and unity in a common cause. Fearing the potential of a significant uprising, the Kenyan Government declared a state of emergency on October 20, 1952, which led to arrests, the formation of concentration camps, and violence against both resistance fighters and those caught between the Movement and the colonial government. Songs and music were an important part of the Movement, and were used to record and document key events, political figures, and forms of social action. They were also used for entertainment, education, and encouragement to either join the Movement or remain active in resisting colonial rule (Barnett and Njama 1966; Mwaura 2007; Pugliese 2003).

Among the Gikūyū, four booklets were published between 1951 and 1952 containing political songs. The songs were compiled or composed by people involved in political organizations that supported independence efforts. Kīnūthia wa Mūgīia, who compiled the songbook *Nyimbo cia Kwarahura Agikuyu* (Songs to Awaken the Agikuyu), was an activist in the Kikuyu Central Association and the Kenya African Union, while Gakaara wa Wanjau, editor of the newspaper *Waigua Atia* (What's New?), assembled *Nyimbo ci Gikuyu na Mumbi* (Songs of Gikūyū and Mumbi) (Biersteker 2004: 312). Songs in the booklets emphasized struggles encountered under colonial rule and encouraged people to take part in the liberation struggle. Although the colonial government confiscated many of the songbooks, the songs continued to be sung at political meetings, by freedom fighters, and others during the 1950s.

Several Mau Mau songs encouraged youth to participate in an uprising against colonialism. The song "Rise up, You Youth" incited young people to "arm themselves with spears and shields" against British colonialism (Kinyatti 1990: 85). Another song, "We Will Smash Their Political Power", compelled youth to take control of the situation for liberation (Kinyatti 1990: 86):

Wake up the youth!
Seize the leadership from the elders,
Because if you hesitate, the foreign enemy
Will seize more of our land and wealth.

These songs remained important even after Kenya attained independence in 1963, both in academic discourses and in popular cultures, informing people's interpretations

and reinterpretations of nationalist and ethnic conflicts (Biersteker 2004; Kinyatti 1990). Songs became performed by popular artists, released on cassette recordings, and reinterpreted in more contemporary struggles against corrupt political leaders (Mũtonya 2007b: 171). David Kamaaru's *Nyimbo cia Mau Mau* [*Mau Mau Songs*], released in 1982, encouraged Gikūyū identity through his interpretations of Mau Mau songs (Wa-Mungai 2007). Joseph Kamaru released songs in the early 1990s criticizing the Moi government and used Mau Mau as a means to emphasize the need for combating contemporary "perpetuators" (Mũtonya 2007a: 39). Even as the Kenyan government censored political songs on the radio and confiscated cassettes tapes, liberation songs remained a part of post-independence popular culture.

Several Kenyan rap artists picked up on the resistance themes of the Mau Mau movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In a similar vein as the previous generation, rap groups composed songs criticizing authoritarian government rule and neocolonialism. The notion of neocolonialism conceptualizes contemporary governments as continuing many political and economic forms of rule consistent with colonialism but under new leadership. The call by many young artists was to use the Mau Mau as a model for contemporary struggles against neocolonialism. The names and photographs of freedom fighters, such as one the foremost leaders of Mau Mau, Dedan Kimathi, became re-popularized among these youth.¹ The rap group Kalamashaka, which formed in 1995, used Mau Mau as a model for their efforts and even formed a collective group of youth called Mau Mau Camp. In August 2001, the Tanzanian music magazine *Rockers* featured a piece on Kalamashaka titled "Troubles finally eaten by Kalamashaka, 'Ni Wakati' is released". In the article, the author writes, "If Dedan Kimathi walks out of his grave today, he will be proud of one thing: the Mau Mau spirit is still preserved among the Kenyan youth. From the slum city of Dandora in the outskirts of Nairobi, comes the most ferocious of all hip hop cartels in Kenya, Mau Mau Camp." Through composing songs about Kimathi and other independence leaders the intention was to acknowledge, in the words of Kalamashaka, "our fallen unsung heroes". It was also a means to use those leaders as inspiration for new efforts to resist corruption among current political leaders.

The first time that I met Kalamashaka was in Dar es Salaam while they were working on their album *Ni Wakati (It is Time)*. The title song from the album, recorded by P Funk, features one of the more captivating introductions to a rap song [CD track 3]. It opens with a speech by Malcolm X given in Detroit, Michigan in 1963: "There's been a revolution, a black revolution going on in Africa. In Kenya, the Mau Mau

¹ Mau Mau is not always viewed positively among Gikūyū peoples. Several older Gikūyū men explained to me that Mau Mau was as much an ethnic conflict as a nationalist struggle, and many atrocities were committed by Gikūyū on other Gikūyū peoples. To these individuals, the popularization of Mau Mau glossed over the past and glorified the atrocities of ethnic violence. It was a revisionist history that interpreted the past through the lens of the present in order to attain some inspiration to overcome authoritarian rule equated with colonialism.

were revolutionaries. They were the ones who made the word *uhuru* [freedom]. They were the ones who brought it to the fore. The Mau Mau, they were revolutionaries.” When Malcolm X says “revolutionaries” the first time, P Funk brings in a sustained, synthesized chord that focuses attention on the theme of the song. After the first verse, the chorus enters with a call and response that is clear about the call to action:

<i>Ni wakati, wa Afrika yote kusimama,</i>	<i>It is time, for Africa to stand up,</i>
<i>Ni wakati, kwetu sisi hapa na vijana,</i>	<i>It is time, for the youth [to rise],</i>
<i>Ni wakati, tusiishi kama jana,</i>	<i>It is time, let's not live in the past,</i>
<i>Ni wakati, siku za usoni kutazama.</i>	<i>It is time, to focus on the future.</i>

The theme of “*Ni Wakati*” is important for it draws attention on the need for other youth to do something about their situation, to rise up, and to live like the freedom fighters of the past. People need to stand up against oppressive rule, which include structural adjustment loans by the IMF, mentioned in the third verse of the song (discussed in Ntarangwi 2009: 36).

Before the 2002 political election, Kalamashaka’s music brought them attention not only within Kenya, but also east Africa as a whole, Europe, and the United States. Their music was featured on early collections of African hip hop music and appeared regularly on radio stations in Kampala and Dar es Salaam. Kalamashaka composed mostly in Swahili, which offered them a wider audience than if they relied on languages spoken only in Kenya.

Other artists also drew on the Mau Mau and freedom fighters for inspiration and encouraged youth to collectively create social change. Necessary Noize, contemporaries of Kalamashaka, were another important early group in Kenyan hip hop that found success in east Africa, as well as on internationally released albums. Their song “*Shujaa*” (Heroes) talks about the need for heroes to rise up among youth and provide them with direction in attaining political and social power.

<i>Waangapi wanaweza kujiita, “Shujaa”?</i>	How many can call themselves, “Heroes”?
<i>Ni nani anayedhani ana uwezo-a, “Shujaa”?</i>	Who has what it takes to be, “Heroes”?
<i>Wako wapi waSwahili hilo jina, “Shujaa”?</i>	Where are the Swahili with this name, “Heroes”?
<i>Tunataka mashujaa peke yao.</i>	<i>We need heroes by themselves.</i>

The attention to heroes is found in many Kenyan traditions. Among the Luo ethnic group, for instance, many song compositions provide biographies of important social and political figures. These songs “demonstrate the everyday embodiment of desirable qualities of social and moral integrity and leadership qualities” (Masolo 2000: 368). The benga singer D.O. Misiani draws on the famous Luo text *Thuond Luo* (Luo Heroes) in his song “Political Genealogies of the Modern State”. He traces the history of his people in order to be reminded, “[O]f the heroes and warriors/ For their leadership brought us forth/For heroism is a virtue/Heroes to be remembered even in good

times”² Other song compositions praise other significant figures in local, regional, and national contexts. It is a reminder of the people that the current generation should model themselves after.

“*Shujaa*” can, therefore, be seen as a struggle to identify the heroes in a contemporary context. Who are the people that youth should look up to, emulate, and praise? The female artist Nazizi Hirji opens the song by suggesting her role as a leader, a hero in Kenyan politics:

<i>Ningetawala</i>	[If] I could govern
<i>Ningewafanya watu wote Rasta kutoka baba yangu mtoto wangu mpaka pasta.</i>	I would make everyone a Rasta from my father to my child until the pastor.
<i>Kama huna locks moja kwa moja mpaka jala.</i>	If you don't have dreadlocks, you'll go straight to jail.
<i>Ningewabia matajiri na kuwapa masikini hizo hela</i>	I would steal from the rich and give the money to the poor.

In the second verse, this time in English, the artist Bamzigi sings about his role as a hero and political leader. Starting each verse with “Imagine if”, he mentions making everyone rich, giving them Mercedes-Benzes, legalizing marijuana, and getting rid of sexually transmitted diseases. Despite the forthrightness of the chorus, there is something fanciful in the lyrics, as the group makes proclamations of their potential if they could govern Kenya. At the end of “*Shujaa*”, a list of prominent political leaders and freedom fighters are mentioned: Jomo Kenyatta, Harry Thuku, and Dedan Kimathi. The juxtaposition of a sort of magical realism of the verses to the song with real freedom fighters, aggressive lyrical presentation, and a strong chorus presents a mixed message. There is a sense of purpose in the chorus that becomes negated in the verses. Nonetheless, the attention to Mau Mau, freedom fighters, and resistance to government rule is a lasting image of the song.

The attention to heroes and the Mau Mau movement continues in many political songs in Kenya. The group Wafalme, for instance, features children and teenagers from poor areas of Nairobi. Organized under the Slum Talent Trust, the group performs several songs about their living conditions, including “Trash is Cash”, which won the 2009 MTV Positive Climate Award. In the song “My Story”, an opening poem is recited by one of the younger members of the group, Lucy:

<i>Slum ndio shule ya kutrain, make it rain, brain disable.</i>	The slum is the school of training, make it rain, brain disabled.
<i>Watu hawa think straight juu ni late waiting for power.</i>	People don't think straight forward, always waiting for power.
<i>Hata God amenawa, akatusahau ka watu wa Mau Mau.</i>	Even God washes the hands [of us], he has forgotten us, the people of Mau Mau.
<i>Ukiomba peace, weather ni bullet.</i>	If you ask for peace, the weather is bullets.

² This translation appears in D.A. Masolo's article, “Presenting the Past and Remembering the Present: Social Features of Popular Music in Kenya”.

The poem emphasizes the hindrances placed on people from poor and destitute areas of Nairobi who lack economic, social, or political power. Even God ignores these people, referred to here as descendants of Mau Mau. There is no peace, only violence, as people attempt to get by on a daily basis.

Given the political and ethnic tensions occurring in Kenya, including the 2007-2008 election violence where hundreds were killed and thousands displaced, political songs are being composed in a variety of genres of music. These songs are being heard in a multiple ways depending on the context of listening and the interests of audiences. There are also songs being composed to avoid ethnic tensions and support a more unified vision of the country and its people. The Mau Mau songs discussed here represent only a small piece of this larger body of songs that many other authors are exploring in their work in Kenya (see Njogu and Maupeu 2007). Yet, the songs provide a significant outlet for young people to enter into public debates about the way forward. Mau Mau symbolizes both oppression by and resistance to hegemonic rule. It is a metaphor that many believe remains applicable to the current social and economic conditions of living in Kenya. It connects the fight of previous generations, now elders, with those attempting to invigorate contemporary social change.

Commercial songs

Despite the success of many artists who compose educational music, commercial songs remain more economically viable for young artists. Urban populations desire images that show prosperous, influential people enjoying themselves. Mary Bucholtz notes that even though popular media can be “associated with unattainable images and capitalist urgings toward consumption, media representations may also be a source of knowledge and agency” (2002: 542). For many young people well aware of the problems encountered on a daily basis, music needs to provide something more than just commentary on social problems. A fantasy of the real, a simulacra of the present, becomes important for encouraging listeners to attain satisfaction from the potential for better future outcomes. Imagining interconnectedness with performers both locally and internationally inspires listeners to attain fulfillment from the possibilities presented in songs. It promotes aspirations to the fantasies being projected even if the result is anxiety over being able to fully realize them (Weiss 2009: 37). Commercial songs and music videos generate desires and motivations that influence the way people approach their own lives. This makes commercially-oriented music politically significant since it encourages audiences to conceptualize alternative forms of success, power, and authority.

Unlike educational songs, which directly comment on issues of authority, power, and mismanagement of government, the connection to politics is not as obvious in commercial songs. Artists often talk about material wealth and commodities, such as clothes, alcohol, jewelry, and fancy cars. There are references to relationships, sexuality, and parties. In these songs, artists present images and language that comments on

the ways to improve one's social status, connect with other people, and attain power through symbols of success. Artists that focus on commercial music also earn higher salaries from regular performances, sponsorships, and album sales. Even musicians that compose educational songs find that their commercial music attains more marketability throughout east Africa. Juma Nature, for instance, became popular throughout east Africa due to his songs about celebration and women, including "*Hakuna Kalala*" (No Sleeping) and "*Mugambo*" more so than his political music.

For many elders in east Africa, including members of government, commercial music presents a situation where artists have "deliberately abandoned the indigenous traditional cultural base – with its emphasis on human dignity and educational role and task – and have opted to aping foreign stage performance art models and formats (which include semi-nude stage costumes, public displays of simulated sex acts, and lewd stage dialogue and lyrics)".³ Even though commercial music may be popular and financially beneficial, a common theme in east African discourse is to consider this style contrary to the values and beliefs of east African peoples.

Many artists, however, argue that commercial songs are political in part because they do not invoke traditional east African practices and beliefs. There is innovation, appropriation of musical and aesthetic forms, and songs where artists "challenge the status quo and vigorously pursue alternatives" (Askew 2003: 631). Through composing commercial songs, artists are able to create popular songs desired by local audiences, which illustrate alternatives to the contemporary situation. It is as much a comment on the political situation of the present as an imagined ideal of the future potential of human desires. This is not to say that people, including artists, believe that the commercial songs are direct commentaries on the economic and social conditions of those living in east Africa. Rather, these songs express forms of human enjoyment that are frequently absent from many people's daily lives. They are political because they speak to that which is wanting in everyday circumstances.

In understanding songs that focus on desires, it is also important to note that artists also criticize people's fascination with commodities. While many songs can be read as endorsements of material success, artists are also aware of their role as leaders in communities and their responsibility to communicate positive social messages within commercial music. Abbas Kubaff's song "*Chapaa*" (Money/Cash) illustrates a fascination with western commodity culture but also provides a critique of youth mismanagement of that culture. The song features a simple chorus about people's interest in money.

*Mi nalike chapaa vile
we u-like chapaa (yeah)*

I like money just like
You like money (yeah)

³ Ministry of Education and Culture's 2001 policy document, Cultural Development Master Plan for Tanzania. The ministry is now known as the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training; the culture section was moved to the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Sports in 2006.

Mi nazipeleka bank
Ukizipeleka bar

I take mine to the bank
 While you take yours to the bar

The focus on taking money to the bank becomes a constant refrain in the song, as does the admonition of using one's earnings senselessly at a bar. In the first verse of the song, Kubaff moves into a description of his lifestyle, dress (jeans and t-shirt), and need for money. He raps, "MCs *wana ji-do kumbe hawan hata* dough/Dough *zimefanya ati watu mapembe zi grow*" (MCs act like they're all that while they don't even have money/Money has made people grow horns). The song addresses the irony of money where people want it, but it often leads to competition, jealousy, and social problems. The chorus admonishes people to stop wasting any money they have and save it in the bank, which corresponds to many of the educational songs previously discussed, even though the theme and content is expressly commercial.

In the remix to the song called "*Chapaa Remix*", Kubaff and many other popular Kenyan artists build on themes set out in the original. There is an effort to show the way each artist tries to make a living through wearing flashy jewelry, hustling, or getting his or her music on radio, mentioned in magazines, and other forms of entertainment. In the opening verse, the artist Prezzo (Jackson Ngechu Makini) states, in English, "I'm young, rich, Kenyan and famous".⁴ The lyric establishes a clear message of the self-aggrandizement common in many contemporary hip hop lyrics in eastern Africa. Prezzo, who also raps about having gold teeth, watches, and necklaces, draws attention to commodities of commercial success. While some people criticize Prezzo for being too commercial or too much of an imitation of American rappers, others argue that his approach to music and business provides him with opportunities for economic success that is often elusive to many other young people. In an online debate about whether Prezzo is a real artist or a fake, one individual wrote: "Let the brother do his thing. You don't pay his bills and you don't feed his family. *Mbona mnaingilia maisha yake?* [Why are you getting involved in his life?] Mind your own business and let him mind his own! You guys remind me of how white folk used to *ingilia* [interfere with] blacks about what they rhyme about, how they dress and their lifestyle. I can't believe you guys are doing the same thing to your own countrymen!"⁵

In addition to the fascination with commodities in popular songs, artists often compose lyrics about celebrations and parties. In clubs, these selections are popular, particularly for encouraging people to listen to and then imitate the meaning of the lyrics. They also address frustrations and questions that arise in attempts to go out with friends. The songs are frequently geared toward male perspectives, even though female artists do compose lyrics in a similar vein. In the song "*Twenzetu*", [CD track

⁴ Mwenda Ntarangwi writes more about Prezzo and his image in Kenya, including his 2004 stunt to fly to an event in a helicopter, even though the distance covered was only a half a mile (2009: 35).

⁵ The quote appeared on mashada.com in the forum "Prezo [sic] a Kenyan Rapper Is He Fake Or Real?" on 14 March 2006.

4] attributed to the artist Chege (Said Juma), several artists discuss their plans for the evening. In the opening of the song, Chege raps with the artist YP:

[Chege]

*Twenze, twenze, tukapige ulabu,
Tukishakuwa basi twende zetu klabu,
Twende tukawacheki wachumba,
Ila kila mtu angoke na demu bomba.*

[Chege]

Let's get going, let's go drinking,
If we are ready, let's go to the club,
Let's go to check out beautiful girls,
So that everyone leaves with a beautiful lady.

[YP]

*Sikiliza kwanza we Chege we,
Nikueleze mambo yenyewe,
Tumpitie kwanza demu wangu,
Ambaye mimi ni mchumba wangu,
Yupo kule kwenye Kitchen Pati,
Tukimpata twende tutapati.*

[YP]

Listen first, Chege,
Let me explain the situation,
Let's pick up my girl
Who is my fiancée,
She's at a Kitchen Party,
If she is there, then we go party.

[Chege]

*Hakuna mpango wowote kwenye Kitchen Pati,
Sasa kumejaa hakuna change,
Amepiga simu Fella, kuna show,⁶
Twende tukachonge naye kariakoo.*

[Chege]

There is nothing at the Kitchen Party,
First, it is overcrowded, nothing for me,
Fella called, there is a show happening,
Let's go with him to Kariakoo.

Twenze x2 twenzetu x2

Let's get going x2 let's go x2

[YP]

Kama ni Fella mwambie tuko fiti

[YP]

If it is Fella, tell him that we are fit [all set]

[Chege]

*Tuko fiti ile fiti,
Tuko fiti hata hakuna na mabinti.*

[Chege]

We are fit, very fit,
We are fit even though we don't have any girls

[YP]

Ila sawa tukifuatwa na mabinti.

[YP]

It is okay, we could be followed by some girls.

The focus of “*Twenzetu*” is on the conversation between friends trying to go out for the evening and find women. The vernacular language for talking about women (*mabinti/demu/mchumba*) can be read in a number of ways. *Demu* also means ‘rag’, and there is a derogatory connotation to referring to someone as ‘*demu bomba*’. YP’s reference to his finance is at first respectful, until one realizes that he is going to party without her. Generally, “*Twenzetu*” is a fairly moderate presentation of women in a male-oriented song about celebration. Others are more graphic with details about sexual exploits in

⁶ Said Fella is a manager in Dar es Salaam who has worked with Juma Nature and Wanaume. Both Chege and YP were members of Wanaume at the time this song was released.

nightly celebrations.

Many other commercial songs center on relationships. This is by far the most prevalent category with an abundance of themes, emotions, and identities being presented. Many artists that attain commercial success compose songs in this category given the interest by radio broadcasters and listeners in being presented with fantasies of male/female relations. Songs range from those that are romantic to those that are graphic. In the song "Prisoner" by the Kenyan artist Nameless and the Ugandan female group Blu3:

[Blu3]

What can I say, what can I do,
To prove this love is true.
Temptation taking over my body,
Like fire burning through my soul.

[Nameless]

You're giving me a life sentence
And my cell number is 69,
I am locked up in solitary
And it's fine, as long as you're mine.

The video features one singer (alternatively male and then female) strapped with chains to a cement wall while another singer wears leather, handcuffs, and, in some scenes, carries a baton. Other songs employ similar metaphors or fanciful scenes though the "Prisoner" song is more equitable in its treatment of both sexes. In many other videos and songs, male dominance and power in physical relationships controls the content of the images and words.

Despite the condemnation of some commercial songs, they are popular and widely listened to (even one Tanzanian Parliamentarian admitted that the songs were popular among many age groups).⁷ The prevalence of these songs, even if considered immoral by a broader social standard, captivates audiences on both television (where commercial music videos dominate airplay) and radio. The interest is more than enjoyment and celebration. Robert Foster (2002) explains that the movement has been occurring in many parts of the world where consumers are replacing citizens. Whereas the post-independence period signified the establishment of a strong citizenry, neoliberalism is generating individual-oriented consumers that have an interest in attaining financial wealth and political power. In contrast to educational approaches in music, neoliberal reforms, such as privatization of local industries and the promotion of free markets, encourage youth interests in the commodification of everyday forms of life. There are many youth who desire foreign commodities that foster notions of ownership, property, and wealth consistent with those being viewed on the internet, in music videos, and

⁷ Tanzanian Parliament, Fourth Meeting, 24th Session, 18 July 2006.

in films. Foreign songs further convey the necessity of economic wealth that emerges in products, such as cars, jewelry, and brand name clothes. Among many east African youth, there is a craving for commodities in order to fulfill aspirations of attaining similar forms of social power as imagined in images and sounds coming from overseas.

People's views of politicians, particularly the success and failures of an administration, are often informed by the ability of leaders to create opportunities concomitant with expectations portrayed in popular culture. Commercial music represents a potent and prominent form of popular culture where young people convey an imagined sense of the "good life". One artist explained to me that people in east Africa would not know what to complain about unless they were given images and ideas for other ways of living. The fancy cars, nice clothes, parties, and jewelry are only part of the picture developing in commercial music. It is also about having money, running water, electricity, and, in general, a relaxed and easy life. The power and prominence of hearing fellow east Africans portray themselves as financially and socially successful captivates many listeners who then reflect on their own situations. When those situations do not appear to match up with those that they hear about and see in popular culture, the blame often falls first on the failure of politicians to create more opportunities for success.

One final note: despite the economic success of many artists in the commercialization of their music, there is a cautionary tale emerging about economic prosperity. The careers of artists are improbably short with only a few finding success over a long period of time. For those that do find economic success in their careers, that wealth tends to disappear quickly. When a new hit song does not emerge, artists struggle to maintain their lifestyles and commodity choices. AY's song "*Binadamu*" is about the problems that come from both being wealthy and from losing one's money. AY explains:

People think that if they have money they will be fine. If you have money, there are no problems. But, even if you have money, what is going to happen? You will get a lot of guests coming to your house; you will have many friends; people who are sick will come to you; you will not greet people because you know that they will ask for money; conflicts [will happen]. In conflicts, people need to survive off those with money (interview with author, 4 June 2005).

According to AY, those with money attract attention because there are so many others struggling on a daily basis. When that person loses their income, then the people who paid attention to him also disappear. When I asked Naakaya Sumari about the economic success of many east African artists, she questioned their success:

We are not rich. None of us are wealthy. You have a little bit of clothes and you think that you made it? You are economically free? I mean, you can't even buy land, you can't even buy a business. You are not free. The problem with my people [Tanzanians] is that we are still mentally colonized. And that is the one thing that we need to break free from. How can you be free in one of the poorest countries in the world? How can you think you are rich? It's

crazy (interview with author, 4 June 2005).

The artists Chege and Lady Jaydee also have a song called “*Mambo Bado*” (Not Yet) in which they discuss that Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania have not become economically and politically free. Commercial success does exist and provides an enticing allure for many youth. But, it is a fantasy for most, which makes commercial songs hopeful presentations about the potential for future outcomes.

Conclusion

Popular music in east Africa provides a means for young artists to attain recognition and success through their compositions. Young artists are able to compose songs that inspire others to respond to or take sides on the issues being discussed, whether they are the social problems dominant in educational lyrics or fantasies evidenced in commercial songs. The educational and commercial divide could be viewed as embodying divergent philosophies about the history and future of east African societies. As the careers of many of the artists discussed in this article illustrate, however, many performers want to unify both the commercial and educational aspects of music in order to attain statuses associated with both. Commercial music remains the most popular on the radio, in clubs, and among music distributors. Radio stations are more willing to play entertainment music since they are less likely to offend media owners, politicians, and others who can ultimately influence the content of those stations. These songs often provide more economic benefits, allowing many artists to attain financial rewards that exceed similarly aged individuals. Educational songs can bring broader recognition of social issues facing east Africans. Many popular songs have been instrumental in pushing ideas within public cultures and fostering political activism. The rewards for this type of music are significant, allowing artists to attain political and social credibility well beyond what is often attributed to those of their age. Taken together, songs in both musical categories speak to the role that youth have as knowledgeable and engaged citizens/consumers in eastern Africa. And, both challenge the way people perceive each other, the government, and their own successes.

The result of these political songs, whether educational or commercial, is a number of shifts in people’s relation to youth and popular artists. Over the past two decades, young artists have increasingly gained attention as active members of society willing to take risks for social change. The rap artist Joseph Mbilinyi, more popularly known as Sugu, became an elected member of Tanzania’s Parliament in 2010. Throughout his career, Mbilinyi used music as a means to criticize and condemn the country’s political problems (Perullo 2005, 2007). Drawing from his musical prominence, Mbilinyi campaigned on a platform of social changes for the same issues he spoke about in his music. He spoke openly in Parliamentary sessions about changes that were needed to improve education and access to jobs. While people criticized his continued use of music as a vehicle for speaking about social issues, others supported his vision of using music and governance as a means to foster social change.

In Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, other authors have recognized the increasing authority of youth in affecting politics. In the 2011 Parliamentary sessions, newspaper articles wrote about the role of youth in changing and pushing for broader social change (Abdallah 2011; Anon. 2011). In the Tanzanian newspaper *The Citizen*, a quote appears from an “eminent” Ugandan official who states, “We are now in a world where one youth can organise a revolt against the government through Facebook (a social network)... We need to work together to make sure the problems of the young generation are resolved quickly before it is too late” (Ernest 2011). While the quote is in reference to the North African revolutions, which were partially generated through Facebook, there is concern over the possibility of a youth revolt in eastern Africa. Rather than remain marginalized, the quote places youth centrally within the future possibilities of east Africa. It also recognizes that more viable opportunities for youth need to be created to stave off impending revolts. For youth, one way they remain a vested participant in these future possibilities of east Africa is through popular music. Political songs create opportunities to voice concerns, establish young people as knowledgeable and engaged citizens, and foster visions for new possibilities for the next generation of youth.

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