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The Emerging National Culture of Kenya: Decolonizing Modernity

Olubayi Olubayi

Abstract

Kenya exists as a legitimate nation state that is recognized by the United Nations and by other countries. This paper is an exploration of, and a response to, the following two questions: "Is there a national culture of Kenya?" and "what is the relationship between the national culture of Kenya and the 50 ethnic cultures of Kenya?" The evidence indicates that a distinct national culture of Kenya has emerged and continues to grow stronger as it simultaneously borrows from, reorganizes, and lends to, the 50 ancient ethnic cultures of Kenya. The emerging national culture of Kenya has several strong dimensions that include the rise of a national language, the full acceptance of Kenyan as an identity, the success of a postcolonial constitutional order, the ascendancy of ecumenical religions, the urban dominance of multiethnic cultural productions, increased national cohesion, and the *Sheng* struggles to decolonize modernity.

The Emerging National Culture of Kenya: Decolonizing Modernity

For these patriotic defenders of the fighting cultures of African people, imperialism is not a slogan. It is real . . . the oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their

capacities and ultimately in themselves. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986, p. 3)

A national culture of unity is emerging in Kenya in addition to, not in place of, the 50 ancient ethnic cultures of Kenya. This emerging national culture acts as the "glue" that holds the 50 ethnic groups together in one nation state. Without this "glue," the nation state would either remain "united" only through governmental military and police force, or it would break up into 50 separate ethnic microstates. It is the role of the emerging national culture to hold the nation together. A national culture promotes a general voluntary acceptance of the legitimacy and sanctity of the multiethnic, multicultural nation state. In Kenya, the national culture is just evolving compared with the 50 mature ancient ethnic cultures of Kenya. This is why I refer to Kenya's national culture as emerging. Some dimensions of Kenya's national culture are already at an advanced stage, while others are just beginning to evolve. For example, the place of Kiswahili as the national language of Kenya is already secure and advanced relative to the much weaker dimensions of national constitutional faith, national consciousness, and national ideology.

In discussing the emerging national culture of Kenya, I will highlight only some of the major solutions to the problems of coexistence and only some of the mechanisms promoting national cohesion in Kenya as a means of illustrating the active emergence of a national culture in Kenya. The highlights will include the acceptance of "Kenyan" as an identity, the rise of a national language, the proliferation of interethnic marriages, the "creation" of a national formal dress code, the entrenchment of *harambee*, the flowering of the ecumenical religions, the fight for a better constitution, the implementation of the Constituency Development Fund (CDF), the rooting in of universal primary education, the rise of a national literature, the improvement of physical and communications infrastructure, the widening of civil society, the revival of national political history, the increasing celebration of things African, the build-up of resistance to racism, the invention of *Sheng*, and the beginnings of a national consciousness, of a national ideology, and of national cohesion in Kenya.

The emerging national culture is one of many cultures within Kenya. And those many cultures are in active collaboration. It is my observation that the emerging national culture of Kenya sits both above and between the 50 ancient ethnic cultures, deriving strength and ideas from the ethnic cultures and from the rest of our common global human heritage. The 50 Kenyan ethnic cultures continue to exist and to flourish despite the emergence of an overarching supraethnic national culture. It is not an either or situation. The growth of the national culture does not mean the death of ethnic cultures. Cultures can and often do coexist. And the identities of a Kenyan do not have to be singular.

To inhabit this overarching supraethnic national culture of unity does not preclude a Kenyan from maintaining full ethnic identity. Human beings simultaneously inhabit several identities as so well explained by the Indian economics Nobel laureate and philosopher, Amartya Sen, in his essay “Making Sense of Identity,” in which he says:

We are all individually involved in identities of various kinds in disparate contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our background, or associations, or social activities . . . the same person can be for example a British citizen, of Malaysian origin, with Chinese racial characteristics, a stockbroker, a nonvegetarian, an asthmatic, a linguist, a body builder, a poet, an opponent of abortion, a bird watcher, an astrologer, and one who believes that God created Darwin to test the gullible. (Sen, 2006, p.24)

Amartya Sen is insistent that when we push a person into a singular identity, be it cultural or religious or ethnic, we miniaturize the person. It is the multiple identities that we all inhabit simultaneously that enable civic life and citizenship. We associate with other citizens because we share some of our multiple identities with them. The emerging overarching supraethnic national culture of unity is founded on our multiple identities and borrows freely from all the 50 ethnic identities in the country and from global sources.

To paraphrase Sen, the same person can be, for example, a Kenyan citizen, of Turkana origin, with Masai ethnic characteristics, a teacher, a *nyama choma* eater, a football player, a dancer, a Christian, an alumnus of Alliance High School, and an in-law to a Kikuyu family. Such a person can associate with thousands of his fellow citizens on each of his different identity dimensions: With fellow Turkana ethnics he will build on shared language, with fellow teachers he will invoke the experience of being a teacher, at the *nyama choma* bar he will find company, at the football field or at the bar watching football he will feel at home, at the dances he will have partners who share not ethnicity but a love of dancing, at church he will enjoy Christian fellowship, among Alliance High School alumni he will revel in their common elitism and mutual concerns, and with his in-laws he will share in the joy of family life as facilitated by the Kiswahili national language and by the emerging sense of shared membership within the same national culture of Kenya.

The most revolutionary dimension of the emerging national culture of Kenya is the growing voluntary mutual acceptance of the sanctity and legitimacy of one's neighbor's ethnic culture, and the accompanying acceptance of multiple mutually reinforcing ceremonies in important cultural human life cycle events such as marriage, birth, and death. This means, for example, the now commonplace

interethnic marriage ceremonies in Kenya are conducted not as a one-day event in the manner of an American wedding, but as a series of mutually reinforcing ceremonies that acknowledge all the key identities that the bride and groom inhabit. If a Luo man is marrying a Kikuyu woman, for example, there will usually be three major public weddings: the Kikuyu traditional-*ngurario* wedding at the bride's home, the Luo traditional wedding at the groom's home, and the Christian or Islamic wedding at a church or mosque.

Although many Kenyans perceive Raila Odinga (the main presidential opposition candidate) who is ethnically Luo, to be the main threat to the continuity of Kikuyu governmental power under President Kibaki who is ethnically Kikuyu, those who are interested in the complexity of the emerging national culture of unity in Kenya should note that the most widely read newspaper in Kenya, *The Daily Nation*, reported on its front page on March 18, 2007, that Raila Odinga's son, Mr. Fidel Castro Odinga, married Ms. Veronica Wangunyu in a Kikuyu wedding ceremony, the *ngurario*, in which the Luo bridegroom and Kikuyu bride publicly shared, not a neutral Western cake, but a piece of Kikuyu-blessed goat meat as a symbol of the beginning of their matrimonial union as required by the ancient Kikuyu *ngurario* rites. Mr. Fidel Castro Odinga was not required to undergo a Kikuyu circumcision initiation into adulthood in order to qualify to marry a wealthy Kikuyu bride. Instead, Mr. Fidel Castro Odinga's new parents-in-law implicitly applied a broadened sense of qualification to marry, which recognized Luo initiation practices and the individual qualifications of the groom. And it should be noted that the "ancestor" after whom Mr. Fidel Castro Odinga is named is not Luo, but is the Cuban revolutionary who is a respected ideological role model for the Odingas. This highly publicized Kikuyu *ngurario* highlighted the Kenyanization of ethnic traditions. The Kikuyu *ngurario* was Kenyanized in the sense that the rites and the attendant sympathies were enlarged to include a multiethnic audience, and to acknowledge the sanctity and legitimacy of non-Kikuyu, Luo qualifications and individual qualifications for marriage, and the *ngurario* blessings were effectively extended to fully include a new son-in-law who may be from a different ethnic group, but is now a bona fide member of the newly expanded "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's famous phrase (Cohen & Kennedy, 2000, p. 377).

The guests at Ms. Veronica Wangunyu's *ngurario* represented all the major regions and major ethnic groups of Kenya, and the formal dress of the most distinguished guests such as the Honorable Mama Ngina Kenyatta, the widow of Kenya's first President, and Mrs. Ida Odinga, the mother of the groom, was West African. West African formal attire, and not the Western suit, is nowadays the ceremonial attire of most of Kenya's emerging upper class and of most of Kenya's most impressive thinkers. For example, it is usual to see Kenya's most respected

cultural philosopher, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, in his Kenyanized West African formal shirts; and it is usual to see Kenya's most celebrated political scientist, Ali Mazrui, with his Kenyanized Ghanaian *Kente* draped on his shoulders; and it is equally usual to see Kenya's distinguished political historian, Eric Masinde Aseka, lecture in his Kenyanized West African suits. Likewise, the globally recognizable visage of Kenya's Nobel laureate, Prof. Wangari Muta Mathai, is that of Mathai in her Kenyanized West African formal dress and headgear. This positive Kenyanization of West African formal dress is a way of silently announcing that, in a world of postcolonial African reassertion, the best does NOT have to be Western.

Like the situation described for marriages above, the birth of children, and the birthdays of children, in virtually all of Kenya's urbanized spaces (which include small towns, bigger towns, and cities) are multiethnic events that are attended by workmates and former schoolmates and friends of friends representing multiple ethnic backgrounds.

The multiethnicity witnessed around urban births is also seen around deaths and funerals. Death, within Kenya's urbanized spaces, is handled in very similar ways by virtually all Kenyan ethnic groups: The place of burial is still almost always the paternal ancestral home. This means, for most families, that *Harambee*-style fundraisings attended by workmates, friends, and friends of friends from many different ethnic backgrounds are conducted to raise money for transporting the body for burial. And the religious prayers are usually at a church or mosque and similar for the majority of Kenyans who are either Christian or Muslim. Although church or mosque prayers for the dead have become customary for most Kenyans, they are not done in full substitution for older traditional burial practices; they are done in addition to, not in place of, the ethnic-based religious burial practices that in most cases have been shortened and modified as demanded by new arrangements of work and living spaces.

The *Harambee* collaborations and fundraisings that are witnessed around arrangements for weddings and funerals are part of a more general national ethos of group self-help in which "the in-group" is increasingly a multiethnic entity that is constituted on many bases that go beyond ethnicity, when citizens maintain friendships on the bases of shared experiences at school or at work, shared interests, and shared goals. *Harambee* is a philosophy and a practice of self-help that was heavily promoted by Kenya's first president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, and remains a strong national practice that contributes heavily to the advancement of national cohesion in Kenya. From independence, Kenya's founding president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta "became the cornerstone of multi-ethnic and multi-racial stability in post-colonial Kenya as there was a remarkable degree of unity centered almost entirely on his personality" (Aseka, 1992, p. 40).

What the political scientist Sanford Levinson (1989) has called “constitutional faith,” in his book of the same title, and refers to the complex web of beliefs that provide cohesion and national identity to a multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural modern nation, is not yet fully developed in Kenya. The current intense public debates and activism over questions of constitutional rewriting in Kenya are an attempt by Kenyans to construct the kind of constitution that will, over time, provide Kenya with the “constitutional faith” that is currently absent. The gap left by this missing secular constitutional faith is currently occupied by the ecumenical Christian and Islam religions, and by *ubuntu*. And so, these ecumenical religions, together with *ubuntu*, are an essential part of the emerging national culture of Kenya.

Christianity is the religion of about 70% of Kenyans nowadays; Islam is the religion of about 10% of Kenyans; and the remaining 20% of the population practices nonecumenical faiths such as ancient African religions, Hinduism, Judaism, and so on. The success of Christianity in Kenya is a spiritual solution to the crises of indigenous religions in Kenya. In the past, ethnic nationalities of present-day Kenya practiced nonecumenical ethnic-specific religions that still inform the ethnic rituals and traditions of each of the 50 ethnic groups. Imperialism, colonialism, forced and voluntary migrations, and the resultant changes in living spaces, work, education, and the new ethnic juxtapositions created a crisis of ethnic-specific religions because the new changes called for a much more ecumenical moral order that Christianity and Islam provided. Although many Africans were forced and deceived into Christianity by colonial forces, the full acceptance and celebration of Christianity in postcolonial Kenya cannot be understood within the framework of colonial force. Kenyans today have the open option to abandon Christianity, but 70% of them have enthusiastically chosen to keep it. I think that the best explanation lies in the fact that it is easier for intimately multiethnic societies such as Kenya to enable coexistence within an ecumenical religious framework that identifies one’s new neighbor or workmate or school mate or spouse as a fellow sister or a fellow brother in Christ, or in the case of Islam as a comember of the *umaa*, that is, the religious community.

Christianity in most of Kenya and Islam in coastal Kenya provide powerful spiritual and philosophical foundations for a shared moral order that is essential to the emerging national culture of Kenya, and will complement the still weak, but evolving national consciousness and national ideology in Kenya. It is these ecumenical religions that have provided an effective foundation for a broad and inclusive set of mutual sympathies that are open to all ethnic groups and that attempt to define everybody as a sibling without regard to ethnic or racial identity.

Ubuntu or “*mtu ni watu*,” that is, the African philosophy and spiritual-cultural ethic of caring for and respecting others, including strangers, is as

important as Christianity and Islam in providing an ecumenical moral framework for multiethnic and multiracial coexistence in Kenya today, as elsewhere in Africa. *Ubuntu* teaches that it is not enough for a person to be an individual, that the flowering of a person's individuality is enhanced by the web of human relationships that she or he inhabits, that she or he is a person because of other people. In my own experience, it is from my peasant grandmother, and my mother, and my father, and from our peasant neighbors in Kakemer village that I was first introduced to the ethical imperatives of respect and care for human relations and respect for all people regardless of ethnicity. The basis of respect that I was taught as a child was not ethnicity, but age and character, and this early childhood education in *ubuntu* formed the foundation for my success in the multiethnic boarding schools in which I was educated in Kenya, and for success in the multiracial global universities in which I was educated in the United States of America. Reflecting on the existing capacity for coexistence and organization within African cultures, Williams (1987) declared that:

When, if ever, black people actually organize as a race in their various population centers, they will find that the basis and guiding ideology they now seek and so much need is embedded in their own traditional philosophy and constitutional system, simply waiting to be extracted and set forth. (p. 161)

The people of Kenya, are in Williams's words, "extracting" from their ancient ethnic cultures, and from global sources, and setting forth a national culture.

What are the governmental initiatives that promote the rise of a national culture?

The governments of Kenya, from colonial times to the present, have done many bad things, but they have also done some good things. Some of the good things were governmental initiatives; and some of them were a result of democratic pressure from the people. Among the most notable of the governmental initiatives that contribute heavily to the rise of a national culture are the building of the national infrastructure of roads and telecommunications, the establishment of provincial and national schools, the institutionalization of Kiswahili as a subject of mandatory study in public schools nationwide, the promotion of a national literature curriculum as demanded by political activists, the creation of a Ministry of Gender, Sports, Culture, and Social Services, and the establishment of a Constituency Development Fund.

The Kiswahili language became a subject of mandatory study in all public primary and secondary schools in Kenya in 1986. This governmental language mandate

accelerated the linguistic dimension of interethnic communication and facilitated the rise of a national culture in Kenya. Although mastery of only English and Kiswahili is helpful in enabling one to live and work successfully in any part of Kenya, it is simultaneously limiting because the failure to speak a regional ethnic language marks one off as “foreign” and therefore unfit for political office in that region. And this is why a Kenyan cannot run for elective political office in rural regions of Kenya unless she or he speaks the local regional language. This absence of broad multilingualism in the current generation of Kenyan leaders is slowing the rate at which national unity can be deepened in rural Kenya and simultaneously privileging the cities and towns as the centers for the flourishing of the emerging national culture.

Free universal primary education has been instituted by the government of Kenya nationwide with the aim of achieving 100% adult literacy. Adult literacy is currently at 80%. Because this free education inculcates a mastery of basic writing and reading in Kiswahili and English, it is the most effective tool for social cohesion, enabling all Kenyans to communicate with each other nationwide, and to live and work in any part of the county.

Literature, in the nationwide curricula in English and in Kiswahili, provides each generation of Kenyans with powerful shared stories, and common thoughts, common sympathies that contribute heavily to the presence of a feeling of common membership within the same generation, within the same national culture, in the same country. The political role of in-school literature when a common nationwide curriculum is mandated by government is one of the most effective means of promoting a sense of national unity because people feel closer to each other when they share narratives, and when their own individual narratives and sensibilities are influenced by ideas and insights from common sources. There are millions of Kenyans that together laughed and cried as they read and discussed the joys and tragedies that engulfed Grace Ogot’s characters in *The Promised Land*. And there is a generation of Kenyans for whom Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s fictional village of *Ilmorog* in “Petals of Blood,” and in “Devil on the Cross,” conjures up many images of struggle, corruption, disappointment, and hope. Just as each ethnic culture has had its own narratives in Kenya, and continues to do so, the emerging national culture of Kenya has its own common narratives that are embedded in the new Kenyan literature, and in the new songs and creative productions of Kenyans.

What have been the roles of political dissenters and of civil society in fighting for a Kenyan national culture?

Frantz Fanon, in his classic work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), observed that:

History teaches us that the anti-colonialist struggle is not automatically written from a nationalist perspective This fight for democracy against man's oppression gradually emerges from a universalist, neo-liberal confusion to arrive, sometimes laboriously, at a demand for nationhood. But the unpreparedness of the elite, the lack of practical ties between them and the masses, their apathy and, yes, their cowardice at the crucial moment in the struggle, are the cause of tragic trials and tribulations. (p. 63)

Thousands of Kenyans risked or lost their lives starting in 1966 when the Kenyatta government turned into a dictatorship, and throughout the brutal 24-year dictatorship of the Moi regime, in their "fight for democracy against man's oppression" and in their struggles to diffuse and to eliminate dictatorship in order to free up the creative energies of the masses that are requisite for building an effective national culture.

The struggles of the political dissenters and of civil society generally have had a strong national orientation and have evolved a nonethnic dimension of Kenyan politics in which many political conflicts and political debates are about issues that have nothing specific to do with ethnicity. This is not to deny the near ubiquitous power of ethnicity in Kenyan politics, but to highlight the fact that political life in a modern nation within a global economy cannot really be reduced to the colonial notions of African "tribalisms." It should be noted that the loudest critic of the Kikuyu-led Kenyatta regime was Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who like Kenyatta, is ethnically Kikuyu, and was detained by Kenyatta. And the biggest critic of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, Kenya's first vice president, was Tom Mboya, who like Odinga, was ethnically Luo. And in recent times, the biggest challenge to the current Kibaki regime in Kenya, which led to the resignations and firings of some of Kibaki's key allies in 2005, was waged by Mr. John Githongo who, like Mr. Kibaki, is Kikuyu. Githongo's fight against Kibaki is based on Githongo's contention that the Kibaki government is corrupt; it is not based on the fact that Mr. Kibaki is Kikuyu. The head of the official opposition is Mr. Uhuru Kenyatta who is critical of Mr. Kibaki despite a shared ethnicity. It is also worth recalling that the forces that brought Mr. Kibaki to power were multiethnic and premised on the desire to rid the country of Mr. Moi's 24-year dictatorship in order to open

up democratic spaces in Kenya (Obbayi, 2007).

Civil society organizations in which citizens of Kenya freely associate on the basis of shared goals and common interests have proliferated into thousands. It is these civil society organizations that push for the opening and protection of democratic spaces that actually promote our common citizenship and place limits on governmental power. Some of the most noteworthy include the Federation of Women Lawyers Kenya (FIDA Kenya), whose goal is gender equality and the protection of women, the Green Belt Movement of Professor Wangari Muta Mathai, and the Kenya Human Rights Commission, whose motto is “to enhance the enjoyment of all human rights by all Kenyans.” Civil society organizations have continued to be an arena that is both multiethnic and multiracial, as a few politically progressive Kenyans of Asian origin and of European origin have remained involved in our common human progressive struggles that are contributing to the emergence of a national culture that promotes peaceful coexistence.

One of the most important achievements of the civil society struggles in the area of Kenyan political history has been to force the government of Kenya to recognize Kenya’s political heroes. And the most recent example of this is the erection of Honorable Dedan Kimathi’s statue. On February 18, 2007, the government of Kenya formally unveiled a 7-foot tall bronze statue of the Mau Mau Land and Freedom War hero, the Honorable Dedan Kimathi, on a 10-foot pedestal on Kimathi Street, in the middle of the business district in Nairobi, Kenya. Kimathi now stands tall with his head towering 17 feet above street level on a street named for him. Kimathi was murdered by the British on February 18, 1957, and resurrected by Kenyans on February 18, 2007, fifty years later. Kimathi’s resurrection is the most dramatic reminder that civil society forces are increasingly effective in imposing democratic demands on the government of Kenya to recognize Kenya’s political history, which is an essential dimension of the emerging national culture of unity. At the formal unveiling, Vice President Moody Awori stood next to the Honorable Mukami Kimathi, the widow of the Land and Freedom War hero. Kenya’s colonial and neocolonial history had kept the Kimathis veiled and out of sight. The British colonial masters and their neocolonial clients of the Kenyatta and Moi regimes had no intention of welcoming “dirty natives” like Kimathi into their city center. But the people had spoken and forced the government to join them in their ceaseless struggle to Africanize their city, which was always built by their labor despite the claims of global capital and British colonialism.

A few minutes walk from the new Dedan Kimathi statue, *KoOsewe*, which is Nairobi’s first modern multiethnic African foods restaurant, is located on Kimathi Street. An afternoon at *KoOsewe* will awaken the most determined skeptic to the reality of the emergence of organic institutions of national unity in Kenya.

Middle-class Kenyans of all ethnic, racial, and regional backgrounds crowd at *KoOsewe's* to sample the varied cuisines from the various ethnic regions of Kenya. To understand the significance of *KoOsewe* as a cultural landmark in Kenya, one must take into account that, one, colonial governments forcibly excluded African cuisines from modern restaurants in the city center, and two, that *KoOsewe* is the only upscale restaurant in Nairobi's central business district that is proud to dedicate itself to multiregional, multiethnic Kenyan cuisines seven days a week.

The new Kenya of citizenship for all

Kenya is in the process of rising above the past brutal experiences of enslavement, colonization, and neocolonialist dictatorship, and in the process of redefining itself in many dimensions. This new Kenya is actively building a national civil society, intensely negotiating a new inclusive constitution that protects the rights of all humans within the borders of Kenya, and forcefully erecting a new national culture of unity as a complex attempt by millions of people to solve the problems of living together in a rapidly changing world. In this process of self-reinvention, it will do Kenyans great good to heed the warnings and reminders of the Kenyan political scientist Ali Mazrui (1980), who advises Africa to modernize without Westernizing:

If modernity is defined according to these three basic principles of responsiveness to the highest levels of knowledge, encouragement of innovation, and enlargement of social sympathies, there are clearly different roads to modernity. For the Third World the best way of modernizing without Westernizing is, on the one side to adopt those three principles of modernity that I have mentioned and, on the other to pursue strategies of decolonization and of reducing dependency. What is needed is a dual effort to modernize and decolonize at the same time—it is an effort to decolonize modernity. (p. 80)

A little reflection will remind us that Mazrui is right even for the history of Kenya's colonial master, Britain. The recognizably advanced and scientific culture of Britain is directly dependent on a borrowed Greco-Roman alphabet (that is an Egyptian derivative) and a borrowed Arab numbers mathematical system (that is an Indian derivative). Britain modernized without having to invent its own alphabet and without having to invent its own numbers, and yet it remained distinctly British. This seems to be Mazrui's challenge to Africa: to modernize without Westernizing, as Britain modernized without Arabizing

itself. The historical insights of the Indian economist and philosopher, Amartya Sen, reinforce Ali Mazrui's advice on modernization without Westernization. Sen has written that the free borrowing of the best ideas from our common human heritage should not be mistaken for Westernization because a lot of what is assumed to be Western in the modern world is part of the collective human heritage that did not begin in the West. Sen observes that:

It is similarly important to see how so-called Western science draws on a world heritage. There is a chain of intellectual relations that link Western mathematics and science to a collection of distinctly non-Western practitioners. For example the decimal system, which evolved in India Went to Europe via the Arabs consider printing whichoccurred far away from Europe. (Sen, 2006, p.56)

The *Sheng* Generation and *Sheng* Culture in the New Kenya

For the majority of Nairobians below the age of 25, the place of birth is Nairobi, and often their first language is Kiswahili, and not the regional ethnic language of their mothers or fathers. This generation is often referred to as the *Sheng*-generation because they have created their own hybrid language that sits between Swahili and English and borrows heavily from Kikuyu, Kamba, Luo, and the other major ethnic languages. For example, the most commonly recognized word across Kenya nowadays for the concepts of intimate conversations and accompanying gossip is *moshene*' from the Kikuyu language, and the most famous *Sheng* arts festival held in celebration of 40 years of independence in 2003 was named *maboomboom* or *mabumbumbu* from the coastal Giriama language (see www.magicalkenya.com).

Sheng is both a language and an urban cultural style that is the linguistic emblem of the new hybrid urban-ethnic group that I will call *Shengites*. The *Shengites* are hybrid culturally and often hybrid ethnically as well, as many of them are the children of interethnic marriages. For example, 8 of my 10 nieces and nephews in Nairobi are genealogically multiethnic as their parents are from different ethnic communities, and this is nowadays a commonplace development in Nairobi. The interactions and mutual borrowings among standard English, standard Kiswahili, and *Sheng* are really the Kenyan domestication of English—they are a way of announcing that English is no longer foreign, and Kiswahili is no longer a language of the Waswahili ethnic community, but of all of Kenya. This is in keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's insight that "language becomes one's own only when the speaker populates it with her own intention, her own accent,

when she appropriates the world, adapting it to her own semantic and expressive intention expropriating, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" (Bakhtin, as cited in Narayan, 1997, p. 2).

Nairobi's *Sheng* hybridity is best understood within the framework of what the cultural theorist Homi Bhabha (2004) has called hybridity and third space. *Sheng* is hybrid in the obvious sense of being a recent product of the interactions of several languages and several ethnic groups within one complex urban space; and it has been created in a third space, between and above, ancient languages, and between ancient ethnic communities sharing physical, social, economic, political, and psychological spaces in the city of Nairobi. *Sheng* culture is a loud resistance to the attempt to force a cosmopolitan generation into narrow ethnic spaces and into narrow ethnic identities that they sense as attempts to stifle their broad ambitions and organic lived experience of ethnic-multiculturalism.

The *Sheng* generation has rejected imposed narrow definitions and insisted on being, in what Antonio Gramsci (1971) terms, "what one really is as a product of the historical process." The millions of *Shengites* in Kenya are from two streams. The dominant stream in cultural production is that of young Kenyans born and raised in the cities and towns (who have never lived in the rural villages). The other stream, which is numerically dominant, is that of young Kenyans born in the rural villages, but not of the rural villages in the sense that they were educated in the boarding school system and have placed their dreams and aspirations outside the rural village of their birth. Although raised outside of the cities, the rural *Sheng* stream is educated in a network of thousands of urbanized boarding schools that are multiethnic and psychologically linked to the urban-*Sheng* stream through their dreams, music, interschool competitions, travel, visits to relatives, dates, newspapers, radio, TV, cell phones, the internet, and books.

As a product of the Kenyan boarding school system myself, I can attest to the fact that the interpersonal relations and ties developed in boarding school (where the majority of Kenyan children acquire their secondary school education) are just as strong, if not stronger, than the ties of a common-blood ethnicity. The Kenyan boarding school system is really one of the most powerful machines involved in the production of what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) has called the "habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association" (p. xix). The provincial and national secondary boarding school system in Kenya is an academic infrastructure in the service of coexistence and national unity in Kenya. As early as the 1930s, it was at boarding school at the Alliance High School that the future nationalist Oginga Odinga expanded his capacity of "living together" and his role models

beyond ethnic Luoland when according to his biographer, E.S. Atieno Odhiambo (n.d), "here he met students from all over Kenya, which impressed him and made many friends" (p.3), and James Samuel Gichuru, a non-Luo became one of Odinga's mentors and role models.

As young Kenyans struggle to name their struggle and to contribute to the building of the emerging national culture, it should not be surprising that the most famous of the Sheng musicians is a man actually known as Nameless. Mr. Nameless is struggling to construct and to name the Sheng culture and the Sheng politics of his generation. Part of the naming process has included taking back popular culture and popular sports from total foreign domination. Starting in 2002, the lead selling music albums for young Kenyans were no longer Western imports, but local Sheng productions such as Nameless's famous Ninanoki music album. Prior to the Sheng generation, mentally colonized Kenyans signaled their achievement of cosmopolitan sophistication by projecting a rejection of African art forms, and by appearing Western and listening to American music. Not so with Nameless and his generation. Their sophistication, which is much admired by their generation, is premised on being Kenyan, on being Sheng. The Sheng generation has actively rejected the near total subservience to things Western that was emblematic of their parents' generation. To them things African are equal to things Western and can be mixed at will.

In the spheres of popular culture and of fine arts, there are now *Sheng* productions in Kenya that cannot be pigeonholed into the narrow frozen-ethnic spaces of so-called tribal art that racists and Eurocentrics insist on for African creations. The world class works of the sculptor Kioko Mwitiki, or the amazing works of the painter Peter Ngugi, or the near-priceless pottery of the ceramicist Magdalene Odondo cannot be classified as Kamba or Kikuyu or Luo or traditional, but as Kenyan.

In highlighting the artistic *Sheng* creations of Nameless or Kioko Mwitiki or Peter Ngugi or Magdalene Odondo, the point is not to claim that art should be nonethnic, but to underscore the fact that African cultures are not frozen, but like all human cultures, they are breathing and growing and learning and expanding and involved in mutual borrowings from our shared common human heritage. The second point is that persons whose lives are lived in spheres of multiculturalism and multiethnicity will create within a multicultural, multiethnic context and will contribute to the national culture that forms part of the glue necessary for coexistence. And the third point is that just as there continue to be identifiably Masai or identifiably Kikuyu art forms, between the identifiably ethnic art forms there are emerging nonethnic and national Kenyan *Sheng* art forms that speak to the emergence of a national culture in Kenya.

Sheng political criticism has been waged most effectively through the device of popular comedy and unifying critical popular music. The most notable of the masters of political comedy in Kenya is the group RedyKulass, which commands a nationwide and a diaspora-wide following among Kenyans. RedyKulass has employed comedy to criticize governmental excess in Kenya, and RedyKulass contributed heavily to the democratic removal of the Moi dictatorship from power in 2002. The other major contributor to popular political criticism from the music world is the group *Gidi Gidi Maji Maji*, which composed the music “anthem” of democracy, *unbwogable*, that aroused Kenyans to vote, and that Kenyans sang and danced to as they voted out the Moi dictatorship in 2002.

Unbwogable is a new political *sheng* word that is recognized by virtually all Kenyans and captures the new positive nationwide energy of political resistance and cultural creation that has engulfed Kenya. *Unbwogable*, in typical *sheng* fashion, is derived from an ethnic-specific word, (in this specific case Luo) and dragged into nationwide service. The term *Unbwogable* has been invested with the nationally understood political idea that the “power of the people is supreme,” that the people reject dictatorship and elect leaders of their choice as they struggle together to build a new national culture of Kenya.

Conclusions

There is strong evidence to support the proposition that a national culture of Kenya is emerging in addition to, not in place of, the 50 ancient ethnic cultures of Kenya. This national culture of Kenya is emerging because the 34 million people in Kenya today no longer live in what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) has called separate noninteracting “local troops” (p.xiii); and it has, therefore, become necessary for them to create a national culture that unifies and enables the former “local troops” to live together within one nation state, and increasingly within one globalizing planet. According to Appiah (2006),

Each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities: to say this is just to affirm the very idea of morality. The challenge, then, is to take minds and hearts formed over the long millennia of living in local troops and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become. (p. xiii)

The people of Kenya have created and are actively creating “ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together.” These ideas include *harambee*, a widened multiethnic *ubuntu* as seen in Ms. Wangunyū’s and Mr. Odinga’s *ngurario*, Kenyan

as an identity, a national literature in Kiswahili and English, universal free primary education, and so on. And the institutions include a national administration that is largely accepted by the majority as legitimate, with elections, the use of Kiswahili language nationwide, a physical infrastructure of roads and railways and airports, a telecommunications infrastructure, public schools, and so on. It is these ideas and institutions that enable us to live together in Kenya, and that in my opinion, constitute the emerging national culture of Kenya.

The difficult and long-term Kenyan project of building an effective national culture within the global system in which we all live is highly incomplete: Some dimensions of the national culture, such as the institution of Kiswahili as the national language of Kenya and the spread of *ugali* and *sukuma wiki* as key newer parts of the national cuisine, are secure and fully accepted; while some other dimensions, such as national consciousness and national ideology, are weak and just beginning to evolve. Political activists, academic intellectuals, civil society organizations, and *Sheng* artists are actively engaged in the process of creating a Kenyan national consciousness and a Kenyan national ideology that will defy the anti-African forces that Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986, p. 3) has called the "cultural bomb," and enrich and secure the place of the emerging national culture of Kenya.

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