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‘Made in Riverwood’: (dis)locating identities and power through Kenyan pop music

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Local scholarship seems to deliberately cultivate invisibility for local creative expressive forms especially when these happen to fall under the popular culture rubric. This phenomenon is related to broader questions of cultural identities and their authorship. However, where scholars might not have enthusiastically taken up their role in studying unorthodox cultural phenomena, popular culture practitioners have actively taken up the work of reflexive self-documentation. My assumption is that the academy is aware of the tremendous capacity of popular culture to influence people but it is quite unwilling to cede the authority to define taste and identity to ‘street’ practitioners. Not studying popular modes of creative expression at all or merely according them peripheral attention ensures that these artists do not enter into mainstream academic discourse. This paper hopes to show that the vast popular culture industry that is located in Nairobi’s RiverRoad – now branded ‘Riverwood’, Holywood’s local variant – is quite aware of some of the key questions about contemporary popular culture and the power of its representation. A key argument is that visual recording is a critical aspect of ongoing transformative cultural innovation in which the VCD form has come to impact significantly on popular musicians’ ability to influence viewers’ self/other perceptions. Data is drawn from RiverRoad-recorded music VCDs and from conversations with consumers of popular culture in order to show urban artists’ contribution to on-going discourses of power and identity.

1. Introduction: cultivating academic blinkers

I am excited at the prospect of helping to document the creativity and the energy that is expressed here. Soon we will be releasing a CD on these artists. But I am disturbed that local people, especially scholars, do not take the initiative in documenting these things.—A member of the French Cultural Center team documenting the work of performers at Mau Mau Camp, Dandora, June 2005.

In June 2005 I took my students to observe first hand the process of creative expression in a contested space – Mau Mau Camp at Dandora in Nairobi’s Eastlands – by a group of urban performers operating under the name Ukoo Flani/Mau Mau. In itself the Mau Mau bit, an umbrella term under which various practitioners ranging from fine artists to rappers operate, was unsettling to my students evoking as it does memories of Kenya’s anti-colonial struggle. As I hope to demonstrate towards the end of the paper, Mau Mau history supplies critical tropes by which popular musicians seek to apprehend and explain the tensions in their everyday lives, especially those to do with identity and power. I heard repeatedly the words ‘violence’, ‘revolt’, and ‘decay’, metaphors of life on the fringes yet one which insists on calling attention to itself. The fact that the camps’ resident artists repeatedly stated that ‘this is our *base*’ lent credence to the perception of the site in military terms. I could see the reasons for these anxious perceptions; Dandora is not only the location of one of Nairobi city’s largest dump

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sites but it has also been traditionally associated with vicious crime and appalling poverty. It might be taken to be the perfect instantiation of the urban wasteland but for Nairobi youth it is one of the principal spaces for the emergence and development of a pop culture as seen in the MC Kah, Zakah and Kabee's 2002 rap *Dandora L.O.V.E.* The awareness of this latter aspect of cultural production is what had brought the team from the French Cultural Center here; so far three volumes of CD recordings of contemporary Kenyan popular music, not all of it from Dandora, have come from the effort.

I had gone to Dandora for reasons that were quite different from those of the team from the FCC but I was nevertheless struck by the Frenchman's assertion that local scholars have tended to ignore popular culture and to neglect its documentation. Reflecting about this charge, I recalled that only a few months earlier, Granqvist had just published *The Bulldozer and the Word* (2004) in which he had included analytical chapters on *matatu* culture and sign writers in Nairobi. Ironically, in April 2000 a research proposal for the study of *matatu* culture as folklore had been presented at a local university's department of literature but it had been dismissed with the 'explanation' that the subject was 'unworthy of study' in the department. Over the years I have been mulling over the work on popular cultures and literatures put together in the two edited volumes by Karin Barber (1997) and by Stephanie Newell (2002). In either of these volumes, there is not a single contribution by a Kenyan scholar; the chapters on Kenya in Newell's volume have been done by Granqvist and Frederiksen both of whom have had stints working/researching in Kenya. While not in any way imputing that non-Kenyans should not undertake such studies, and though diverse reasons might account for the phenomenon that has been pointed out immediately above, I am interested more in the apparent dearth of local initiatives in that direction. To be sure, there is emergent scholarly interest in such undertakings (for instance Ogude and Nyairo 2007; Mwangi 2004; Mutongi 2006). Atieno Odhiambo (2002) has also done an analysis of 'maps' of leisure in urban East Africa. *Jahazi* and *Kwani?*, the latter being a post-modernist journal, have also become important spaces for expression and criticism by both non-canonical writers and practitioners. However, it is worth noting that on the whole, such interrogations are few and far between and that they are mainly carried out by younger scholars who are necessarily positioned at variance with most of their older colleagues. Most such scholars also happen to be based at research institutes and universities abroad. Murunga and Nasong'o (2007: xvii–xviii) have attempted a bold explanation for the tensions – and subsequent failures – that have over time become a tradition of intra-disciplinary turf wars.

My contention is that the deliberate invisibility that Kenyan scholarship cultivates for local creative forms, especially when these fall under the popular culture rubric, is related to broader questions of identities and their authorship. Up to a point, one might argue, as do Murunga and Nasong'o (*ibid.*: xviii), that conceptually and methodologically local researchers are ill-prepared to undertake research outside traditional domains. But even if they were well-prepared, would they be willing to get out of their comfort zones in university libraries and delve into such crime and grime-infested zones like Nairobi's Eastlands or dingy RiverRoad? In fact this question has already been posed (see Mungai 2003). The dismay articulated in the quote at the head of this paper becomes relevant in this regard; but where scholars might not have enthusiastically taken up their role in studying unorthodox cultural phenomena, it is necessary to observe that popular culture practitioners, as 'local people', have actively taken up the work of reflexive self-documentation. My assumption is that the academy is aware of the power of popular culture but it is not quite eager to cede the authority to define taste and identity matters to 'street' practitioners; not studying them keeps them out of the limelight of serious academic discourse. Some of these anxieties obviously spring from the old high brow vs. low brow

dichotomization of culture. But Fabian (2006: 145) has issued an apt caveat that is well worth heeding: Africanists document and interrogate popular culture not necessarily in order to show that it exists in contrast to 'high' culture but because they 'recognize its vigor and contemporaneity'.

In this paper I hope to show that the vast popular culture industry that is located in Nairobi's RiverRoad – now branded 'Riverwood', Hollywood's local variant – is quite aware of some of the key questions about contemporary popular culture and the power of its representation and that its practitioners are not merely waiting and hoping for [local] scholars to go and 'discover' them in their retail music outlets and 'bases'. As Kah who tended to be the more passionately militant among the performers at Mau Mau camp pointedly stated on the afternoon of our visit in 2005: 'We know the universities here are not interested in people like us because their idea of what an artist is has already been determined for them by the government. However welcome such recognition might be, we really don't care and we'll just continue doing our thing'. Indeed this censure is a severe indictment of local scholarship; when researching on popular culture often the most useful place is newspaper archives and not university libraries because the latter have little or no such material.

I will draw my data from RiverRoad-recorded music VCDs and from conversations with consumers of popular culture in order to show urban artists' contribution to on-going discourses of identity. However, the paper cannot exhaustively analyse the full range of artists whose work animates Nairobi's popular music scene. As such I will mainly use recent work by two popular Gikūyū musicians, Joseph Kamarū and Makibi James, to illustrate my arguments, but occasionally I will refer to other musicians for the purpose of drawing comparisons. I will argue that visual recording is a critical aspect of ongoing innovation in cultural processes in which the VCD form has come to impact significantly on popular musicians' ability to influence viewers' self perception. In this regard, the paper's discussion will be anchored in observations made in the course of barroom conversations during the October 2005 constitutional referendum as well as the present moment when Kenyans' attention is riveted on the December 2007 general elections. It is worth noting here that the barroom has over the years become a central site for social organization and dissemination of ideas; in itself the barroom signifies power relations. Ultimately there exists a critical problematic in the marking of these sites as predominantly masculine space in that popular musicians use it to affirm and contest ideas of manhood as a basis for leadership. In effect this dovetails with the kinds of identity statements that emerge from the music videos that are played in particular establishments. My arguments will draw from observations made in barrooms in both rural and urban Kenya. Urban centres lend themselves as particularly suitable fieldwork sites not only on account of their cosmopolitanism but even more importantly, as Bhabha (1990: 320) has stated, because it is in the complexity of such 'liminal' spaces that 'the perplexity of the living is most acutely experienced'. Kah has recently observed that creative expression is one of the means through which he and fellow residents explore alternative ways of self-understanding and getting on with their lives within larger social and material contests regardless of Dandora's grime (see *Daily Nation* 2007a). Popular musicians' modes of self-expression often result in an oppositional framing of the questions of identity and power. Thus the identity and marginalization of the residents of Nairobi's Eastlands and generally those perceived to be poor are key themes in RiverRoad productions.

The twin questions of artists' self-identity and the exercise of power that I hope to interrogate in this paper, whether the basis of its definition is ethnicity or personal achievement, can never be meaningfully delinked from a discussion of cultural production. This position is even more pointedly evident when the creative expression forms under scrutiny carry the popular culture

tag. In this regard one of the critical questions that needs to be interrogated in a discussion of such forms in Kenya is not if there exists anything that can 'truly' carry this label or whether it is worth studying such forms but, more productively, what meanings are infused into them. How do they work within the broader frames that are used in discussions of identity matters? Especially important for this paper is an understanding of how cheaply produced music VCDs work as a mode of self-representation that revises official discourses of personal and national identity.

2. Dislocating Hollywood: the politics of localization

The nature of modernity is such that realities in one part of the world can have far-reaching ramifications for people in diverse and far-off places. This is one of the principle ways in which we might understand electronic forms of communication, i.e the 'mediascape' (Appadurai 1997: 8–9). However, people do not merely latch onto global phenomena but rather their interactions with the 'global pool of culture' (Hannerz 1996) which involves considerable domestication in what Pred and Watts (1992: 2), in their discussion of how modernity is continually being reworked, have termed processes of 'glocalization' contingent to particular needs that simultaneously evince how 'difference and connectedness [...] are produced and reproduced within some sort of contradictory global system, within a totality of fragments.' Of course given the economics and politics of cultural production, the local and the global cannot coexist in equal terms. In Kenya, one of the arenas in which the localization of global culture has conspicuously happened is electronic communication particularly in regard to film viewership trends and music production. Other than films obtained and approved by the Kenya Film board which then found their way into theatres, the main avenue through which Kenyans accessed such forms of cultural production in the 1970s and 1980s was through the public broadcaster Voice of Kenya (VoK) TV (now Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, KBC). Thus for those that had access to TV then *Dallas*, *Sanford and Son*, *Different Strokes* and *The Jeffersons* – all of which are currently being re-screened on KBC TV – constitute the fare of their nostalgic gaze into a youthful past. In this way, once Hollywood was introduced to Kenyans, it became and has remained a principal lens through which locals could view the outside world, and largely themselves.

This continued enthrallment by Hollywood heritage is demonstrated by the committed audiences that soaps such as *The Rich also Cry*, *Wild Rose*, and *The Bold and the Beautiful* have traditionally drawn amongst Kenyans. The allure of the 'foreign' continues to be seen in the fact that even with the recent emergence of several privately-owned TV stations, Mexican and Filipino soaps have become a central feature of entertainment on these channels as well. Indeed, during the launch of what was billed as 'a riveting local action-packed drama', *Cobra Squad*, on 8th October 2007, *Nation* TV's Nimrod Taabu ecstatically stated: 'Watching *Cobra Squad*, you'll see that this film is as good as those made in Hollywood!' The TV drama had been advertised as a showcase of local talent. However scriptwriter-producer, Alfred Mutua, has publicly acknowledged the role that Western training has played in his professional development as a film maker (see *Sunday Nation* 2007a). Ironically, if the film is aimed at celebrating Kenyans' creativity, then it ignores the fact that Nigerian videos, not Hollywood producers, supplied the critical impetus that saw Kenyans begin experimenting with film. Nollywood, the Nigerian version of Hollywood, has been responsible for the heavy presence of Nigerian homemade movies on local television and more generally in popular culture through the underground pirate VCD industry. Thus whereas Western movies provided

much-needed variety for viewers, I consider Nollywood's gifts to be a seminal moment for Kenyan video producers who, upon learning the fact that Nigerian VCDs were low-budget home-made films, began grappling with the question: 'If Nigerians can do it, why can't Kenyans do it?' As humour writer Wahome Mutahi often lamented, there is no good reason for Kenyans' continued feeding on Nigerian popular culture whereas they can create their own films (see Mungai 2005: 144). It is indeed illustrative that some of the producers of popular Kenyan TV dramas have admitted their being indebted to Nollywood for their skills (see *Sunday Nation* 2007b). To be sure, no movies have emerged yet from Riverwood to challenge the dominance of those from Nigeria due to questions of capital, the dearth of skilled script-writers and perhaps the assumed commercial unviability of such a venture, but the recording of music videos has become a vibrant culture industry.

On the other hand, the Riverwood phenomenon has been aided by the availability in the Kenyan market of previously unaffordable electronic technologies such as DVD/VCD players, computers and digital camcorders. An additional and relevant aspect in the evolution of audience trends, as Harding (2003: 71) has argued, has to do with the fact that TV programmes in many African countries have traditionally been produced by broadcasting stations that are allied to ruling political parties and thus often do not have compelling content. In a significant sense then the production of videos by non-state organs directly challenges the authority of the state to define not only what people watch but also how and where they view it. Where previously watching TV was governed by the routine timing of particular programmes by the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation – even if they enable variety private TV stations also operate along fixed schedules – with videos, viewers do not need to set viewing times. One of the ways in which the state has sought to curtail this newfound freedom is by shutting down illegal commercial video halls that proliferate in many Kenyan urban centres within which are often screened films with unpalatable content. Sometimes these halls are fronts for various underground activities such as prostitution, drug-dealing and the planning of robberies and as such they do not fall within the ambit of cultural practices that this paper is interrogating. Be that as it may, overall it is necessary to point out that the entry of home videos – regardless of their content – into the Kenyan market has given choices to consumers such that both secular and gospel popular music videos have come to challenge the tyranny of regulated TV programmes.

While for viewers electronic forms of entertainment often matters with regard to the question of choice, for artists these media present challenges in terms of which ones might enable appealing presentation. Technological evolution in terms of production has taken huge leaps from the 1960s/1970s vinyl disc and the 1980s/1990s music tape to the audio CD and ultimately to the present in which the digitally recorded music VCD predominates. This last fact has seen the older generation of Kenyan artistes such as Wahome Wa Maingĩ, Joseph Kamarũ, Mwalimu James Mbũgua and Wanganangũ redo their music in video form while Daniel Kamau 'DK' is considering releasing in video format his early compositions, some of which he never got to record even on vinyl; he claims to have 750 such unrecorded tracks (see *Daily Nation* 2007b). In the case of deceased musicians such as Lawrence Ndũrũ, John Ndichũ and Sammy Mũraya contemporary performers like Salim Junior and Wangarĩ wa Kabeera have 'remixed' the music and re-issued it in VCD format. In remixing, the words remain the same as those of the original texts but the singer's voice is 'new' and the dancing is choreographed to contemporary styles. This allows us to think of remixing as a model of inter-generational musical collaborations. In this sense then technological evolution is tied to the private narratives and fortunes of these artistes just as it is linked to the broader story of

the nation's economic development. Accordingly the advances in recording technology that are referred to here need to be seen as applying to music and other popular cultural productions beyond the work of Gĩkũyũ musicians that is presently under discussion.

3. Self-visibility: bodies in space

One of the reasons that makes electronic media such a powerful force in the creation of meanings has to do with spectacle, understood as powerful visual imagery, and the ways in which the spectacular creates ideas about (other) people and spaces. In her discussion of television, film and video in Africa, Harding (2003: 69) has correctly identified 'the role of early photography in setting up a bank of seemingly definitive images of "Africa" and its people [...] in the colonial and missionary enterprise.' These early images of Africa pervade later forms of imaging such as filming leading to the widespread assumption that viewing films on Africa becomes an immediate way of 'knowing' the continent. However, it is necessary to point out that as a construct of Western notions of 'Africa', these visualizations become misrepresentations of Africa in at least two senses. First, as Ngũgĩ (2003: 57–58) and Musila (2007: 68–69) have argued in their discussions of Attenborough's 1987 film *Cry Freedom* and Meirelles' 2005 *The Constant Gardener* respectively, even well-meaning films on/about Africa suffer ideological questions of framing. In such films, to which might be added some recent ones such as *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *Tears of the Sun* (2003), often poor desperate Africans have to rely on a Westerner, usually a male outsider, to rescue them from a problem or situation – usually war or, in Musila's terms, 'multiple layers of crises' – in which they are too helpless. This sort of framing might be argued as being patronizing, and one that perpetuates negative, historically situated perceptions of Africans. Secondly, as we see from Colleyn's (2004: 125) discussion of films on African folklore, in the past there have been attempts to 'salvage' a past Africa through ethnographic filming. These efforts arise out of a Western misconception of what Africa was (normatively inhabited by ritually scarred and masked bodies in wild spaces) in contrast to Western cultures. Such ideas and images still filter into present Western (mis)understanding of Africans, for instance as seen in television reports (Colleyn, *ibid.*: 133). My argument is that Kenyan musicians are aware of the politics of (mis)representation and they are consciously deconstructing this discourse by placing themselves and other 'ordinary' persons (hawkers, shopkeepers, matatu drivers and bar tenders amongst others) as central performers in their VCDs. This gesture might be understood as an attempt to shape not just artists' self-perception but also, perhaps more significantly, viewers' sensibilities. This is an especially relevant dynamic given the fact that even though the role and functions of musicians have always been acknowledged and respected (Akuno 2007), the political class is often uncomfortable with them because, among other things, as groups both singers and politicians are in direct competition for public attention. This was the case with Joseph Kamarũ whose music was banned from public performance during the early 1990s on account of its overtly political content (Haugerud 1997: 28–30). That local popular musicians are aware of the power they wield can be seen in the song 'Artist' (2004) by Kwegeka wa Wanjikũ in which the persona states that musicians are philosophers of great influence. Incidentally, 'Kwegeka' is not a proper noun in Gĩkũyũ but is an action verb that is adopted here as a *nom de performance* that literally means 'to tickle'. On the other hand as a proper noun Wanjiku has become a generic reference to 'common people', *wananchi*, as politicians often refer to their electors, who are perceived to be of little or no consequence after voting day. When thus juxtaposed these two names speak to

musicians' awareness that within their commonplace existence they have the means with which to deal blows against the mighty by means of their critiques of society, especially through the satirical laughter that their work evokes amongst audiences.

Perhaps it is an awareness of this last point that has made musicians to increasingly feature 'ordinary' people such as matatu crews, bicycle transport workers and poor villagers in their videos as well as capturing mundane but familiar locations like bus stops, bars, market places and rural shopping centres. Another significant issue relates to the fact that whereas in tape recordings only voices can be heard – and thus in analysis we can only allude to a 'persona' – in the video the speaker is clearly identifiable as the singer. To my mind this manner of self-presentation is a radical gesture that redefines the tropes that have hitherto been deployed in cultural productions to enunciate identity; the dusty village replaces Hollywood glitz just as the visibility of the 'unrefined' villager supplants that of exotic icons of global culture. Of course the allure of far away spaces and cultural practices (American country musician Don Williams's Cow Boy hat and stretch limousines, for instance) continues amongst local performers. Still it is worth noting in this regard that when local singers like gospel musician Esther Wahome use recognizably exotic places such as Scotland in their VCDs, these 'elsewheres' merely act as backgrounds; secular performer John De Mathew uses internet photos of such places but the blending between these images and the videotaped performance is often so poorly done as to make it manifest that they are mere superimpositions. However what the music videos in the latter category help to demonstrate is a movement away from one-star shows towards communal/collective performances. It is in this regard for instance that we might understand the significance of the throng formations in *Mugithi*¹ performances in Nairobi bars; everyone, regardless of social-economic class, religion or ethnicity, join in the performance at will. Indeed, a good number of Salim Junior's VCD remixes have been recorded at such sites. One of the most notable aspects of these recordings is their heterophony; the voices of the main artist and his dancers as well as those of revelers, both those that are dancing on stage and the seated ones, are all captured alongside the visual imagery of everyday commonplaces. In this manner, music VCDs enable voices and images that would otherwise never be allowed any space in formal mainstream broadcast structures particularly radio and TV. In this case 'underground' sites such as disco halls, bars and matatu become significant avenues which unrecognized musicians often use to gain entry the public realm before radio and TV stations 'discover' them (*Sunday Nation* 2007c).

4. Case study: popular conceptions of power and identity in Gĩkũyũ popular music

I will now turn to examine Joseph Kamarũ's VCD, *Nyũmba ya Mũmbi* (2007), and Makibi James' *Nyũmba itũ Gĩkũyũ* (2007) in order to interrogate their specific renditions of the questions of power and identity. I have deliberately chosen Kamarũ – a prolific performer who has attracted scant academic attention (so far as I am aware only from Wainaina 1998), because he represents the pioneer generation of secular Gĩkũyũ popular musicians and as such his work might be useful in an attempt at creating an evolutionary map of a 'Gĩkũyũ world'. More recently, he has become 'born again' but it is interesting that unlike other singers who have undergone a similar transformation, notably Kĩmani Thomas, Kamarũ has gone ahead to record on VCD both his old secular tracks as well as new Christian ones. This new placement is significant in a number of ways as will be demonstrated in the analysis below. On the other hand, Makibi, who used to perform with the late John Ndichũ's Rwengo

Brothers Band, represents a much younger generation of Gĩkũyũ singers whose understanding of their history is not necessarily informed by the same set of circumstances as Kamarũ's, yet his work evinces a narcissistic preoccupation with the politics of Gĩkũyũ ethnic supremacy.

4.1. 'Of houses and palaces': dashing for the nyũmba on the hill

The concept of *Nyũmba*, 'house', as Jomo Kenyatta argues in *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938) is central to Gĩkũyũ self-understanding and hence the saying *Nyũmba na riika itiumagwo*; one's membership to either clan or age group can't cease. Whilst *nyũmba* as 'clan' is clearly understood within a stable communal context, one must ask what the term presently stands for when deployed in Gĩkũyũ music and political messages circulated via cellphones (see Mungai 2007). My argument is that *nyũmba* now is a symbolic evocation of a pan-ethnic Gĩkũyũ identity, regardless of the contradictions in time and space that this process entails, especially one that is buoyed by both a sense of entitlement and threat. To be sure, popular musicians from other ethnic groups have tracks that call for one of their own to grab power (Peter Wafũla, p.c., referring to Luhya musicians), but Gĩkũyũ singers feel more the threat of immediate collective loss since they consider Kenyatta and Mwai Kibaki, the first and current president respectively, as being 'ours'. In this manner, present allusions to an originary Gĩkũyũ *nyũmba* are at one level a rhetorical trope that is geared towards rallying 'our people' against perceived enemies, especially those who want to take the instruments of political power away from where they 'properly belong' – in the house of Mũmbi, thus named after the matriarch of the Gĩkũyũ people. This gaze into the past has its uses, as Rushdie has argued in relation to artists who write from exile:

If we look back, we must do so in the knowledge that [...] we will not be capable of reclaiming *precisely the thing that was lost*; that we will, in short, create *fictions*, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, *imaginary* homelands [...] of the mind. (Rushdie 1991: 10, my emphasis)

The singer who harks back to a past history operates in a manner akin to that of the exile; the past and the present are different chronotopically yet that is not to deny the usefulness of that past in the forging of new, contemporary imaginaries. Thus away from immediate political imperatives, the house of Mũmbi is a mythical space that cannot be reclaimed; rather it can only be re-organized in a process that allows the construction of concrete meanings of the house beyond 'the mind'.

Kamarũ's '*Nyũmba ya Mũmbi*' contains eight tracks which have as a running thread a commentary about impending doom upon the Agĩkũyũ. Kamarũ also suggests a programme of action that can be used to thwart the 'imminent disaster.' Indeed, an elderly informant, Joel Ndirangu, while contemplating the proliferation of music VCDs, compared both popular and secular Gĩkũyũ singers to traditional seers:

There are many of these seers now. Do you know that long ago every ridge had its own *mundu mugo* [medicine man], and if you found that there was something going wrong in your household then you consulted him. If he told you that there was something you needed to do then you had to do it in order to avoid calamity [...]. These singers that you now hear are playing the role of the seers of old. Listen to them (conversation with the author, 6th October, 2007, Heni village, Kinangop).

This sense of impending gloom, and the need to take urgent preventive action is a familiar theme amongst the Agĩkũyũ given the social-economic turmoil that the community faced under colonialism; any music that invokes that past is bound to resonate with audiences. Indeed, one of the reasons that enables viewers to identify with the tracks in this particular VCD is that they are set to recognizable tunes taken either from Mau Mau liberation songs or from the artist's earlier

secular compositions titled *Nyĩmbo cia Mau Mau* in which the theme of persecution is preminent. The predominantly traditional attire might be another reason for Gĩkũyũ viewers' close identification with the songs' message. When Kamarũ began producing his earlier secular tracks on VCD he had initially commissioned Nyamũga Cultural Troupe to do the job but he took over after the group's first video; the reasons for his action are not clear. Nevertheless I would argue that his recordings hold sway over audiences more than those that were done by Nyamũga precisely because Kamarũ, with his trademark Cow Boy hat and distinctive voice, features as the soloist and thus affects the songs' aesthetic dynamics. This also panders to audience nostalgia, a possibility that fellow musician DK acknowledges elsewhere (see *Daily Nation* 2007b).

The first song in Kamarũ's collection, *Nĩũgaitĩrĩra* 'We shall put together', is a call to all Kenyans – whether resident in the country or abroad – to go turn out and cast their ballots. However, as the song's narrative unfolds, it turns into a specific appeal to the Gĩkũyũ who are warned that they must unite in the face of a common enemy (here the video focuses on the opposition Orange Democratic Movement, ODM, leaders): *yaaga mũhĩti yũnagĩrwo iriũko* ['if there is no one to hunt down the animal, then break its legs at the watering point']. The watering point, as a metaphor for the ballot box, is crucial to survival and in this case for the Agĩkũyũ, Kamarũ seems to suggest, it is a life and death situation. The second track, *Nyũmba ya Mũmbi* 'The house of Mũmbi', has an introductory scene depicting the crucifixion of Jesus after which the singer calls upon the Gĩkũyũ, Embu and Meru (GEMA) communities to recall their past tribulations under Daniel arap Moi's rule and defend the good fortune that has come with the election of a Gĩkũyũ, Kibaki, as president. The latter is seen as God's anointed guardian of the fortunes of the house of Mũmbi. This song is set to the tune of *Twathiaga tũkenete*, a Mau Mau song, and depicts Dedan Kĩmathi, a key leader of Kenya's armed anti-colonial resistance. Colonial-era travails that the Gĩkũyũ experienced are used to read the narrative of struggle against Daniel Moi's dictatorship; Charles Rũbia, Kenneth Matiba and Wangarĩ Maathai (Gĩkũyũ politicians opposed to Moi's rule) are regarded as Kĩmathi's successors. *Nĩatĩa Twikĩte?* 'What have we done?' makes the assumption that Kĩrĩnyaga peoples have erred in some way and as a collective punishment, 'the devil has sworn to see that the house of Mũmbi perishes from the face of the earth.' By means of biblical allusion, the struggle is mapped in the terms of the story of the fall of man to imply that the opposition seeks to lead the (Gĩkũyũ) nation astray, away from the tranquil and prosperity of the Garden of Eden. In itself, the Garden of Eden calls to mind the land question which was one of the key issues in dispute during the anti-colonial struggle; it is still an explosive question to date. The loss of (eternal) life that Kamarũ alludes to in the song has a religious meaning at one level given his Christian background but at another level it carries a more mundane one related to the deaths experienced during the 1992, 1994 and 1997 violence that saw the displacement of many Gĩkũyũ land owners in Molo district of the Rift Valley province.

In *Kĩmiiri* ['Crusher' – in contemporary Gĩkũyũ a euphemism for HIV/AIDS], Kamarũ conceptualizes his responsibility as a singer as similar to the spiritual role played by the Biblical prophet Samuel, in the life of Israel; having been summoned from the pastures, he is now charged with guiding the nation. Fellow Gĩkũyũ musician John De Mathew has used the HIV metaphor extensively in his compositions to refer to the ODM, also referred to as 'the enemy'. In an apparent extension of the idea of calamity that is invoked by the reference to *Kĩmiiri*, Kamarũ contends that the beheadings that occurred in various parts of Nairobi and Central provinces in early 2007 that were blamed on the Mũngĩkĩ² cannot have been executed by anyone who is familiar with Gĩkũyũ traditions. According to the singer, outsiders/enemy/devil instigated the

killings so that the state would turn against the Gikūyū male youth who the singer deems to be an important reserve army that can be deployed, when necessary, for the defence of ethnic interests. The minister for security – himself a Gikūyū – under whom the organs of state violence such as the police fall, is portrayed in the video as having played into opposition's tricks. Again, the 'prophet' repeats the injunction that the house of Mūmbi has defied God's will and hence their current travails. The message about the Gikūyū nation's sins is reiterated in *Ngai Tuohere* 'Forgive us God' but an intercessory request is made on behalf of the nation; 'command the devil to leave us alone.' The seer warns that after this last chance – supposedly to get another term for Kibaki as president – God might lose patience with the Gikūyū.

The land question is revisited in the succeeding track, '*Ngai nī Ngai*' which might be rendered as 'God is God' or, even more pointedly, as 'God is the divider'. The latter rendition has an especially profound significance around the hot topic in contemporary Kenyan politics, about *majimbo* or regionalism, and land redistribution all advocated by the oppositionists. The singer states: 'God knew why he allocated particular people to specific locations and he does not need any help.' This is in apparent reference to the fear that *majimboism* would not only lead to the balkanization of the country but also, more critically, lead to the expulsion of people, especially the Agikūyū, from non-native regions into which they have settled. Thus whereas Kamarū does not repudiate the idea of the larger Kenyan nation, he is emphatic that the place of the Agikūyū within that construct is firmly inscribed upon the country's map and any attempts to redesign it through *majimbo* would be tantamount to tampering with God's will. There is a conspicuous attempt here to mark Gikūyū land in terms of an idyllic Garden of Eden; tampering with it can only portend disaster. This message dovetails with the theme of the song *Ngwa na marurumī* 'Lightning and thunder' which warns the Agikūyū, *andū a Mwathani* 'God's people', that a time will come when they must run away from the devil and ascend to heaven. It is noticeable here that the idea of 'chosenness' is emphasized as a marker of Gikūyū identity, a notion that is important in two senses. First the idea is raised that God's elect have particular claims upon the world that come to them by means of that privileged position. In this way, the Gikūyū assume a natural claim to leadership of Kenya. It marks them as the chosen ones, different from other nations, *Akalidei* [Chaldeans] as they are often referred to in conversation. This enables us to understand the often-stated Gikūyū aversion to voting for people from ethnic groups such as the Luo (perceived to predominate in the opposition) and whose difference is constructed principally on the fact that they don't traditionally practice circumcision as the Gikūyū do.

Unlike preceding songs, *Thayū wa Ngai* 'God's peace' is a chanted peace prayer composed in a blend of slow reggae beat and *benga* rhythms. The code-switching from Gikūyū to Kiswahili and English makes it appear like a truly nationalist prayer. However, the fact that he is interested first in the Gikūyū nation before looking outwards to pray for Kenya and subsequently Africa suggests that while Kamarū might appreciate the ideal of pan-Africanism, he chooses to proceed from an awareness of the ethnic nation as the primary site of identity alongside which relationships with others (in the nation and on the continent) are negotiated. The singer's understanding that identity must begin from an essential particularity (the ethnic and then the broader nationality) is extended to his reading of the relationship between Kenya and Africa in the last song, *Kenya ni yetu* 'Kenya belongs to us all' when he asserts that 'Kenya is the heart of Africa . . . the pride of Africa.' This might be a good way of accounting for the persistent code-shifting in this song. The shift from Gikūyū to Kiswahili and then English reflects the idea of the greater nation built upon ethnic states. However, if we view the theme of the song against the entire VCD's running theme (i.e. Gikūyū placement vis-à-vis others),

it might be argued that the soloist's repeated chant *Kenya ni yangu* 'Kenya is mine' here seems like Kamarũ's disguised way of saying that even when viewed alongside other Africans, the Gĩkũyũ rank first.

Overall, the choreography in Kamarũ's music makes use of semi-gospel dance and lyrics which are complemented by Gĩkũyũ traditional costumes – thus establishing a ground upon which viewers might interpret the performances – in order to speak to contemporary secular realities of the ethnic nation. A religious reading of the idea of persecution as divine punishment enables the music's audience to examine narratives about the Agĩkũyũ against the Biblical idea of God's elect. In turn, this legitimizes whatever sentiments might be expressed against other Kenyan people because they are considered as 'enemies' of God's people. By raising the 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomy, the singer invokes an ethnic identity whose interests are at variance with those of the larger state and other nations within it.

5. 'We've been scorched by the sun': strategies for surviving persecution

If Kamarũ formulates his representations of identity along a semi-religious plane, his younger colleague Makibi James emphasizes an identity based upon a complex intertwining of religion, ethnicity and patriarchy. Further, where Kamarũ's music is not necessarily centred on elections, Makibi's heavily ethnocentric music seems to be informed by and directed at short-term periods of political contest. Thus for instance where Kamarũ's music takes a broader perspective of Gĩkũyũ history, Makibi's has the 2005 referendum and the December 2007 elections as the critical background. The first song *Nyũmba ĩno itũ* 'Our house' in the VCD titled *Hau nĩho turi* 'That is where we are', seeks to outline the 'special' character of the Gĩkũyũ nation as opposed to that of other Kenyan ethnicities. First the artist claims that leadership comes naturally to them 'from the beginning'; Jomo Kenyatta and Kibaki are cited as both explanation and proof of that claim. The Gĩkũyũ people are further portrayed as peaceful and hardworking, a theme that also runs through the third and fourth tracks, *Nĩtwakei Kenya* 'Let us build Kenya' and *Baba ũnjiragĩra* 'Father who defends me'. This is contrasted to other tribes whose 'warlike' qualities and 'laziness' are widespread in Gĩkũyũ popular discourse. Another is that the Gĩkũyũ 'fought for independence' – which is the third reason for their self-perceived unique character; those 'others' people are seen to have collaborated with the colonial authorities, a view that the singer seems to share with his contemporary John DeMathew. Fourth, the Gĩkũyũ have a large pool of skilled human capital, in addition to being God-fearing. Finally, they are a united people who love one another. They love their neighbours and even embrace former tormentors, an allusion to their assumed expansive and kind nature. Here the video depicts then-president Daniel Moi accompanied by Mwai Kibaki, his deputy then, with the caution that 'one's membership to the clan and age set can never cease'. This apparently is an attempt at explaining the rapport between the former and current presidents; their age confers upon them the wisdom only available to 'men'. The theme is reiterated in the VCD's fourth song which evokes a wider contest of masculinity and power that pits the Luo against the Agĩkũyũ. Delving into the bible for 'proof', in the track *Hau nĩho tũrĩ* Makibi states that the Levites and Jesus' disciples were all circumcised and therefore qualified to perform special roles leadership. Thus the Luo opponents' claims to power are delegitimized.

The song *Gĩkũyũ nĩtũnyitane* 'Gĩkũyũ let us unite' has the prominent idea of a besieged nation which has only recently been delivered from 'Misri' [Egypt] to Canaan with the departure of Daniel Moi from power. The theme of deliverance is echoed in the fourth song *Riua Nĩtwotete* 'We have been scorched by the sun' in which 'enemies' of the Gĩkũyũ are metaphorized as

hyenas and leopards. However, the artist here is optimistic that the vastness of the Gĩkũyũ population – including those in the Kenyan diaspora – will be a guarantee, that one of their own will always be voted into power as a means of ensuring that the perceived persecution of the Gĩkũyũ will never happen again. In itself this is an echo of the Jewish slogan ‘never again!’ in relation to Nazi atrocities. Memory here becomes a plane upon which to constitute both self-understanding and that of the nation. The assumption is that the Agĩkũyũ have a common memory about a collective past and a shared vision of the future. However the reality of intra-Gĩkũyũ tension suggests otherwise (see Mungai 2007) and the glossing over that is evinced here is a rhetorical tactic aimed at forging a sense of unity in the face of perceived imminent disaster.

The final song *Ngũhe kīrīra* ‘Let me educate you’ speaks to the theme of inter-generational competition by calling upon Gĩkũyũ elders, led by Kibakī, to show the younger generation, represented by Uhuru Kenyatta, how to share the spoils of power in order to ensure that the house of Mũmbi doesn’t perish at the hands of ‘the enemy.’ There is need for a complementary mutual existence between the generations as deduced from the saying ‘no one can shave one’s nape’. Therefore even if Uhuru had kept ‘bad company’ during the 2005 referendum campaigns this is not a good enough reason to throw him out of the house and leave him to the mercy of the ‘hyenas’. In the end, Makibī’s worldview comes down to an ‘us’ (Gĩkũyũ) vs ‘them’ (mainly Luo) bifurcated understanding of contemporary Kenyan politics and identity.

6. Conclusion

It becomes difficult to think about questions of identity without revisiting its origins vis-à-vis contemporary moments and events that frame its interpretation. As we have seen, popular music here works as a distillation of memory in a manner that enables the circulation of narratives about Gĩkũyũ history amongst listeners at the same time as past responses to persecution are suggested as possible paths of action should the need arise at present. Both Kamarũ and Makibī, by repeatedly using video scenes that depict rank and file citizens (street vendors, bicycles taxi workers, musicians and farmers) going about their regular work of literally ‘building Kenya’, create amongst viewers a sense of foreboding about ‘imminent danger out there’ which will radically disrupt their business. Thus, these viewers are depicted as having more to lose than their wealthy leaders; it becomes the burden of common folk to rally around their Gĩkũyũ leaders who will then safeguard their interests against those of perceived enemies. In part because it is difficult to police the video recording technologies that are easily accessible mainly in Nairobi’s RiverRoad, performers can cater for the tastes and desires of ethnic constituencies in ways that subvert the official discourse of a united Kenya. However, for Kamarũ and Makibī it is easier to appeal to an assumed Gĩkũyũ sense of unity because both Jomo Kĩnyatta and Kibakī can be cited as embodied proof of Agĩkũyũ leadership gifts. Of course, it can be assumed that singers from other ethnicities who do not have their ‘sons’ in power narrate their identities and relations to the state differently. Whether the self-perceptions and desired programmes of action that they suggest might ultimately translate into the search for alternative forms of social organization (e.g. armed rebellion within the state, secession or criminal mini-states) is a different matter. Suffice to say that popular music has been and is a potent tool for anti-state social mobilization. In this regard popular musicians discussed here seem to foresee a situation in which Gĩkũyũ identity and ideas of their nationhood might need to be renegotiated vis-à-vis other tribes’ perceptions of them.

The understanding of identity by popular singers whose work has been examined here is wrapped within an assumed collective which functions by seeking to legitimize one’s authority

(as singer-herald/seer-philosopher) and the house of Mūmbi's 'natural' claims to power while simultaneously delegitimizing such positions when they are staked by others. This often includes juxtaposing allusions to real and perceived historical injustices alongside contemporary social-political experiences. The past, whether real or imaginary (as in the case of the biblical claim to chosenness), is always *the* key without which present dilemmas cannot be understood.

Notes

1. *Mugithi* is a performance in which a solo guitarist – initially male but now also female – reworks popular tunes often by inserting his/her own words, to the great amusement of patrons because such 'corruption' of familiar lyrics is often vulgar. For an elaborate discussion of the aesthetics of *Mugithi* see Mutonya (2005).
2. The Mūngikī are a violent quasi-religious group that claims to be working to restore the Gikūyū back to their 'roots' but which has steadily evolved into an amorphous mafia-like organisation. Its membership is distinctly Gikūyū and it operates by stealth in both rural Central province and parts of the Rift Valley as well as Nairobi.

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