Extended Handshake or Wrestling Match?
Youth and Urban Culture Celebrating Politics in Kenya

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Kenyan National Anthem

Ee Mungu Nguve Yetu       Oh God of All Creation,
Iielete Baraka Kwetu       Bless this our Land and Nation,
Haki iwe Ngao na Mlinzi    Justice be our Shield and Defender,
Natukae na Undugu          May we Dwell in Liberty,
Amani na Uhuru             Peace and Unity,
Raha Tupate na Ustawi      Plenty be Found within our Borders.

Amkeni Ndugu Zetu          Let One and All Arise,
Tufanye Sote Bidii         With Hearts both Strong and True,
Nasi Tujitoe kwa Nguvu     Service be our Earnest Endeavour,
Nchi Yetu ya               And our Homeland of Kenya,
Kenya, Tunayoipenda       Heritage of Splendour,
Tuwe Tayari Kuilinda       Firm may we stand to Defend.

Natujenge Taifa Letu       Let All with One Accord,
Ee Ndio Wajibu Wetu        In Common Bond United,
Kenya Istahili Heshima     Build this our Nation Together,
Tuungane Mikono Pamoja     And the Glory of Kenya, the Fruit
Kazini                      of our Labour,
Kila Siku Tuwe Nashukrani   Fill every Heart with Thanksgiving.

The hopes and dreams of the Kenyan people at independence as contained in the words of their national anthem form an important backdrop to the questions raised in this paper. The historical and social contexts of the words reflected for the youth how far from those ideals the political cal regime had drifted by 2002.
Introduction

_No matter how violent the wind may be, it can never force the river to flow backward._  
(Zimbabwe Proverb)

In African countries where political misrule exists, musicians are often the first to react, and ultimately often suffer for their critical and contentious messages. In some cases, despotically inclined African leaders strive to maintain good relationships with musicians who support them and become their cheerleaders, but in others political decay and political shifts are too extreme to win over any musicians. Nonetheless, a love/hate relationship has often existed between many of Africa’s musicians and their governments.¹ In former Zaire, we know of the mutual relationship between the despot Mobutu Sese Seko and the late singer Lwambo Makiadi Franco, and in Zimbabwe there is the case of Robert Mugabe and government critics such as Thomas Mapfumo and Oliver Mtukudzi.²

The postcolonial ruling elite in Kenya has often sought the services of praise singers, and in many instances young children and youths been formed into well-known school mass choirs for national celebrations and festivities.³ Commenting on this model of participation in the public sphere, Karlström (2003:67) notes that “far from zombifying its participants, however, such ceremonies can and often do have mutually beneficial and empowering effects … [they] also [set] the stage for communicative interaction between rulers and subjects”. Conversely, until the late 2000s in Kenya groups such as the Muungano national choir of Nairobi, prisons band choir, Kenyatta University choir and other mass choirs from public universities, primary and secondary schools responded in song and dance to support the ruling party, behind the façade of national celebration. During this political era, popular music served as a safety valve: patriotic texts became praise songs for the president and one theme echoed through them all, namely “age-old longevity” for the president and the continuation of Kenya African National Union (KANU) rule. It is in this context that any non-conformist political component in popular culture was controlled through the state’s interference in the media sector, so that the political impact was insignificant.

1. Kariuki, Special Correspondence on “Out of tune Mugabe Tormenting Musicians,” East African, 2002-04-10
2. Ibid.
3. During President Moi’s rule 1998–2002, many choir leaders were generously rewarded with tokens of appreciation for composing songs in his honour. An easy theme to target was longevity for the life and rule of the president
The dominant view was that opposition politics during KANU’s 40-year rule from 1962 to 2002 had been contained and had failed to engage strategically with the changing political landscape of Kenya or provide effective alternatives to despotism. Karlström (2003:57) sees the ideological power of the postcolonial state as “… terminally mired in inherently dysfunctional political dispositions and practices”. Therefore, the experience of the majority of youth as evidenced in their lives generated not just artistic expressions but also became a source of varied political engagement, including uncompromising opposition to political oppression and strong condemnation of and disillusionment with the government. Thus, the themes of change, continuity and succession became legitimate charters and areas of contestation in the lives of the youth.

Indeed, socioeconomic tensions were increasing, fuelled by the respective agendas of the 42 ethnic groups arising from poverty inequalities, gender discrimination and calls for a new constitution. By 2000, 22.8% of the youth population ranged from 15–24 years and they were a disenfranchised lot! The opposition parties, which had unsuccessfully tried in the 1992 and 1997 elections to unseat President Moi, were keen to mobilise willing partners and actors in their renewed political onslaughts and many youth were readily recruited (cf., Gado cartoon strip 1). Ironically, some lumpen urban youth groups such as the Mungiki, Baghdad Boys, Taliban and Kamjesh, were manipulated during this period to participate in the narrow KANU political project as youth militia. The results of this participation in the urban settings of Nairobi and Nakuru were the alienation and embitterment of the urban dwellers by lumpen youth groups. Two scenarios emerged: whereas ardently pro-establishment Mungiki followers supported the ruling party before the general elections of 2002, the more conventional voice of progressive youth belted out musical expressions and indirectly added impetus to the new surge of democratisation and political conflict. Such variations and dichotomies in the political mobilisation and participation of youth point to a gap in information on the nature of youth involvement in the ongoing democratisation process in Kenya, especially through popular culture. Clearly, also, there is an urgent need to discount the theory that all youth are part of a lost generation.

While the political climate of 2002 was unstable and NGO and civil society agencies engaged publicly with the regime, in Kenya, as elsewhere in Africa, ethnicity and political patronage militated against their effectiveness, as Okuku

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5. Further readings can be obtained from, http://www.esa.un.org/socdev/unyin/country1.asp?countrycode=ke

6. The cartoon strips used in this project are a collection from the Kenyan Nation Newspapers cartoonist, Godfrey Mwampendwa, whose works are found at, http://www.nationaudio.com/News/DailyNation
(2003:56–63)\(^7\) has noted. Evidently, many of these organisations staged their debates at exorbitant conferences in a language medium that was donor friendly and with minimum meaningful input from the youth. However, an aesthetic revolution was observed in the 1990s through an upsurge in the use of Kiswahili to symbolically combat the climate of disenchantment amongst Kenyan people, particularly the youth who were disadvantaged in their access to political influence. The use of Kiswahili as a unifying language and means of aesthetic expression blending in with ethnic languages was a significant development for popular culture and served both as an impetus for youth reaffirmation and a trajectory for cultural identity. I shall emphasize that a critical juncture in the new political dynamics in Kenya had been reached with this development, and a scholarly study of the thematic concerns, intentions and political implications of youth identity, urban dynamics, music and popular culture is critical.

Much of Africa’s political protest in the 1990s emerged primarily in urban settings, and cities like Nairobi were platforms for varied youth expressions, with the rural-urban interface continually feeding into this trend. Therefore, the city context acts as the social representation of the changing lives of the youth, as seen in the example of Wainaina (discussed below) – it was Nairobi that introduced and exposed him to the finesse of music-making. The urban environment thus becomes a stage for refining youth identity and remains pivotal to the growth of youth musical groups and expressions. I argue that the late 1990s increasingly saw music sung by urban youth in Kenya becoming a contradictory yet relevant and urgent mode of political and religious expression in the public sphere. My research also emphasizes that the dynamics of this ascendency were hardly reflected in contemporary mainstream political awareness, since these youths were thought to lack a constituency that would enable them to play a more effective role in the democratisation reform process. Nevertheless, this youthful musical ascendancy went beyond hedonism to clearly address and emphasize the paradoxes in the lives of ordinary Kenyans, so that these popular culture compositions became real barometers of what the community felt. The present study positions itself within both global and local popular cultural experiences, specifically through the experience of Christianity, which contributed to the emergence of varying perceptions of youth, urban culture and identity. Along similar lines, this study asserts that the social realities and political dichotomies within a community help in the reception, interpretation and perception of popular culture as a counter-hegemonic process.

However, the artistic role of Kenyan youth musicians in political debate and change beyond the gaze and control of the government, has been conspicuously absent in media coverage. Yet, because of a relatively liberalised media, music became a vital vehicle by which the excesses of the Kenyan government were exposed. Thus,

\(^7\) For details of this article, see *Politikon*, (2003, 30:1)
from an historical and contemporary perspective, dissent through music has provided opportunities for chronicling the despondency felt by many ordinary people. As expressed in everyday practices, the changing and challenging role that youth are playing in Africa today often goes unnoticed, and when it does get noticed the power and resource dynamics at play tend to camouflage youth power and political self-determination. In Kenya, the musical duo Gidigidi Majimaji’s composition ‘I am Unbwogable’8, (the 2002 NARC political slogan)9 was the most overt expression of this dissent, but the presentations of Eric Wainaina, the focus of this study, also contributed enormously as defining moments for initiative, symbolism, culture and youth identity. At a personal level, this youthful composition redefined the borders and meanings of politics and Wainaina became a political actor as his song, ‘Nachi ya Kitu Kidogo – The land of small-things meaning bribery’, took on political and self-representational meanings that signified and embodied the contradictions evident in Kenyan society.

The Main Objectives of the Research
The critical role that popular culture plays in the construction of different social identities for the youth in Kenya cannot be overlooked. In this respect it becomes necessary to:

– explore the role of youth in varying contexts, using popular culture to critically address local power relations and the contemporary political and socioeconomic tensions embedded in those relations;

– provide varying perspectives on the centrality of youth identity, culture and urban settings in the complex interaction between music, religion and politics; and

– highlight popular culture’s complex interrogation of meaning at a local and global level through youth music

The research focuses on two critical areas: first the role of the youth and music in the political dispensation of the late 2000s in Kenya at both local and regional levels, and second, the linkage between the nuances of youth identity, urban popular culture and the claims of religion. Since the ascendancy of youth is hardly ever reflected in the political mainstream, often times youth’s views are seen as misplaced or unconstructive. Yet, as the research shows, youth in urban settings have effectively

8. The anthems for NARC political campaigns are a shift away from the uncreative “Moi must go” slogans of the 1997 election. Haynes (2003) notes the video by Gbenga Adewusi, “Maradona” is also known as “Babangida must go”.

9. NARC (National Rainbow Coalition) refers to the political coalition that was formed by opposition political parties in Kenya not only as a campaign strategy but also to oust the Kenya African National Union (KANU) after 40 years of rule.
used popular culture for political contestation and change. The heavy influence of youth identity and the urban setting within the uncertain politics of Kenya during the late 1990s is relevant to this discourse. The research captures the paradoxes and tensions in Kenyan life by focusing on the Kora 2000 award song for the East African region ‘Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo’, and the appropriated Christian song, ‘Yote yawezekana … bila Moi’. This situation must be elucidated in the context of the political circumstances prior to the general elections of 2002 and the overwhelming enthusiasm with which Kenyans anticipated change. The political concerns discussed in this paper are further elucidated by reference to the cartoon strips of the Nation Media House cartoonist Gado, which augment the narrative discourse by the political media on the 2002 election.

The Research Questions

No doubt, the political, economic, social and cultural context of rural and urban life in Kenya in the 1990s greatly increased the suffering of vulnerable groups such as the youth. These changing dynamics increasingly caused the voice of the youth to be heard through popular culture, and musical compositions brought to the fore complex self-reflexive questions about democracy, political uncertainty, self-discovery and youth identity. At the same time, the twists and turns of self-discovery enabled the youth to become more exploratory and to make strong connections with their audience at the international and local level. Evident in the youth political acc-lamation of 2002 was renewed awareness that popular culture is shaped out of the historical trajectories that sustain it, develop it and transform it. Also of concern in this study is the fact that the youths who challenged, resisted and criticised the injustices of the Moi regime were largely ignored or treated as peripheral by the political mainstream.

The aim is to interrogate the role of urban youth in popular culture, a niche within which their artistic talent thrives. Other questions dealt with in the larger context of contemporary African uncertainties are: How has youth music that uses political concerns flourished in urban settings? Is there any relationship between the ascendency of youth in music and the social and political uncertainties? How did the compositions ‘Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo’, ‘Yote yawezekana … bila Moi’ facilitate understanding of the social relations in which issues of youth, culture, religion, politics and identity are articulated and can be broadly understood? And how can one understand the role of religion in the 2002 political campaigns?

Chapter One

*Even when the bird is up in the sky, its mind is always on the ground.*

(Gambian Proverb)

Setting of Democratic Spaces

The emergence of national states and the fight for citizenship has an important bearing on the shaping and remaking of the public sphere in Kenya. After independence, culture and music were notable business for the country and at this time political neutrality was appropriate to the historical context (Arieno–Odhiambo 2003). In this period, Miriam Makeba propelled the song ‘*Malaika*’ by Fadhili Williams into the global musical sphere and, to date, this song, plus Them Mushroom or Uyoga Band’s ‘*Jambo Bwana*’ are arguably the most widely known songs from Kenya. The buoyancy of its musical scene meant that in these early years Nairobi became the hub of musical activity in Africa. Political interference by the hegemonic rulers in the production of music in the independent state grew as the regime became more unpopular, as evidenced by the 1995 assassination of politician J.M. Kariuki. Like many other artistic performers during times of political misrule, in 1975 the Kiambu Gathaithi choir recorded music, ‘*Maii ni Maruru*’ (‘The Water is Bitter’), that critically engaged the government over rising inflation and sociopolitical decay. The result of this musical attempt to challenge hegemony was a scathing rebuke by President Kenyatta and the first step had been taken towards the rocky relationship between state and politically motivated composers (Kariuki 2003). However, one needs to interrogate history, music, politics and power to understand the shift from commodity culture to these forms of resistance (Giroux 1994). It is within the urban context that new, constantly evolving sites of meaning for popular culture can be found.

For millions of Kenyans 40 years of *de jure* single party rule by KANU ended with the departure of President Moi, President Kenyatta’s successor, in 2002, amid a crippling economic and political crisis (Orvis 2003:247–68, Korwa & Munyae 2001). There had been spatial and demographic changes in those 40 years, during which many youths were born and grew up in various poor and unchanging circumstances. Perhaps the political slogan ‘*Vijana Viongozi wa kesho*’ (‘Youth as Leaders of Tomorrow’) was derived from the assumed association between youth and greater tolerance and open-mindedness. However, despite the fact that most youth are viewed as being modern in style and outlook, the sense of attachment to family, home, community and ethnicity in Kenya reflects a sense of identity that is
local in character. Indeed, this identification with the local has often been spiced by the social dynamics of ethnicity, cronyism and nepotism. To a great extent, until the death of the Kenyatta in 1978, the Kikuyu community regarded the political regime as their time “to eat ugali (pounded maize)” and the available national resources, and similar sentiments were apparent during Moi’s regime. This assumed dominance filtered into the civil service and great laxity was evident in the work ethic. Aseka (2003) aptly summarises the political situation as “… populism that drove its supporters overboard into unpalatable obstruction of other people’s rights, denial of independence of opinion and freedom of association and assembly”.

Undeniably, by 2002 the population of 9.1 million youths had grown up constantly facing everyday struggle and denial, and many never had the legitimacy, energy or opportunity to speak out against their oppression. Their individual and collective ethnicity, age, gender, socialisation, class and geographical home locales, especially in urban settings, represented versions of their varied identities. Here, for a start, two terms emerge, ‘youth’ and ‘identity’, which need brief consideration. The term ‘youth’ in contemporary Kenya has been politically inflected to mean anyone between the ages of 18 and 65!11 This age spectrum on one hand represents the majority of the population but in socioeconomic terms is a construction that enables the continued empowerment of the ‘old guard’ in politics. Thus, this social construction deliberately ignores intergenerational and gender tensions. Given the period when this inflection was coined, it should be interpreted in the context of the further alienation and marginalisation of the youth,12 since it overtly assumes continuity. The shortcoming of this categorisation is that it ignores the fact that today’s youth are more connected than ever before to each other globally and have their own symbols and voices that are distinctly different from the so-called ‘youths’ of 65. So, the collective denial of the voice of the youth generation further exacerbates the intergenerational gap and the debate that categorically pitches youth against the aged.

Another site of intergenerational convergence is at the level of policy. Recognition of unemployment difficulties experienced by the youth led to as early as 1964 to the creation of national youth service by act of parliament, and for the purposes of this act ‘youths’ are people of 15 to 30 years of age.13 Though the national youth service is still operative, the attempts in the 1980s at disciplining qualified pre-university students for it were not only too expensive but a Moi-era white elephant. Currently, this scheme has been modified to facilitate the controversial Nairobi Street Families

11. This was especially articulated in the KANU manifesto to continue to serve the interests of the ruling class.
12. In this paper, the term ‘youth’ is adopted from the Kenya Youth Policy document to cover the ages of 15–30 years.
13. The following website discusses the creation of the national youth services, www.ceasurf.org/icnyp/ceayouthpolicy.doc
The Youth in Kenya account for about 32% of the population or 9.1 million. Of these 51.7% are female youth. These form 60% of the total labour force … More than 75% of AIDS cases occur between the ages of 20 and 45. Approximately 33% of all AIDS cases reported are of those aged 15–30 (Kenya National Youth Policy 2002:5).

Arts and Culture (8.6) are presented as critical priority areas and support the view that youths are socially different from adults. Their social interests are listed as follows:

The Youths in Kenya find themselves at a crossroads between the Western culture and the remnants of traditional culture that has been watered down. In order to address the issue of Arts or Culture the following strategies are proposed:

i. Establishing more cultural centres to promote material and non-material aspects of culture;

ii. Establishing Community resource Centres organisations to provide information on culture;

iii. Facilitate forums where the old and the young can exchange ideas/views;

iv. Promote and protect local Arts and Culture;

v. Lobby for more coverage of youth issues and of role models for the youth by media;

vi. Lobby for the affordability of the existing theatres or clubs to enable the youth to utilise them;

vii. Ensure investment in training, advancement, financing and empowerment of young artists; and


It is particularly telling to note that efforts to achieve a practical implementation policy are still wanting. This situation lies beyond the present discussion. However, the documentation of a youth policy is a necessary starting point for government’s engagement with youth activities. The Institute for Education and Democracy Report (IED 1998:62) notes that the role of the youth in the 1987 Kenyan elections was twofold: either as party supporters/spectators or as hecklers out to create chaos and often demanding bribes or ‘toa kitu kidogo’ to support various candidates. The report, however, concludes that many youths attended political meetings out of cu-

riosity about different parties’ stands on youth issues, especially employment. It is
evident from this report that the focus on the manipulation and mayhem caused by
youths during political rallies disregards the political silence of particular individu-
als and reinforces the stereotypical view of youth as confused and gullible.

Probably the most dramatic political shortcoming for the youth after the 1991
advent of multiparty politics was the political lobby group ‘Youth for KANU 92’,
better known as ‘YK 92’, formed in 1992 to enable KANU to win the elections.
Paramount in President Moi’s mind, and to prove he was indeed was ‘a professor of
Kenyan politics’, was avoidance of political defeat. To prevent this, over four million
eligible voters, the majority of whom were youths, were denied registration in 1992.
Ajulu (2002) aptly notes that ‘YK 92’, led by the youthful and agile Cyrus Jirongo,
and ‘Operation Moi Wins’ (OMW) were youth-led networks that enabled KANU
to win the election but failed to deliver the youth vote, amid reports of poll rigging.
This also suggests that some youths were, as it were, passively active in other ways
to deny KANU the presidency. It is difficult in this paper to establish the extent of
this activity, but is a vital area for further research. However, it does show that the
perception of being relatively powerful agents of change and of making a substantial
difference was growing among the youth.

The two billion shilling loss to the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NSSF)
as a result of its being funnelled into youth-led groups during the 1992 elections
continues to register negatively for the Kenyan economy (cf., Gado cartoon strip
2). ‘YK 92’ proved temporary, even if the initiative to which it referred provided
opportunistic youths with a conduit for personal embezzlement. It was during this
period of political debacle that some very visible youthful economic schemers, such
as Asian businessman Kamlesh Pattni (the face behind the monumental Golden-
berg scandal), Mohammed Aslam, Ketan Somaia, and Gideon Moi and his siblings
took advantage of the obscene state of affairs to pilfer many projects for individual
financial gain. Based on these examples, the weaknesses of a younger consumerist
generation were all too apparent and their role as custodians of national resources
became increasingly questionable. The Kenyan Indian bourgeoisie during this time
had become ‘… a formidable and most dynamic force among the contending ra-
cial fractions of capital in Kenya …’ (Himbara 1995:30).15 The Indian presence
in the Kenyan economy gave rise to varying views during the ‘second Kenya de-
bate’ that was prompted by Himbara’s revelations (1995), and these views cast their
shadow over the dealings that took place during Moi’s regime (Chege 1998, Cowen
& MacWilliam 1996, Vandenberg 2003). Recast in terms more relevant to this
paper, all other such portrayals, regardless of their intent, project such youth as
the equal of the ‘old guard’ in their power hunger, thereby further marginalising

15. Himbara discusses the Asian question in Business and Politics in Kenya. See also Transparency
ency International.
other youths, and this perception helped stoke up anti-youth sentiments nationally. Of significance here is the fact that the 1992 and 1997 election process resulted in KANU’s gaining younger, first-time backbencher MPs as replacements for some of the ‘old guard’. During these two parliamentary terms, these youthful backbenchers were critical of KANU government policies and were seen to undermine the legitimacy of the government. Based on the way it operated, government in Kenya was characterised by political ambiguity. Nairobi, being the capital city and seat of centralised government and decision making, is the site of political contestation and a convenient ‘hiding place’. Recognition for many MPs lies in their movement into parliament, a perception that provides justification for their physical absence from their constituents. Thus in a variety of ways the city of Nairobi enables the ‘lie’ of detachment to become real for some MPs. But parliament does have operational sessions. How many Kenyans know this?

Perception of Reality, Memory and Age

Contributing to these political developments from 1991 was increased press freedom, information dissemination and fundamental political consciousness, especially marked in urban settings where most residents had increased access to the media. Taken together, these forms of social engagement speak of public political organisations and gatherings unseen in the history of post-independence Kenya. Even though the 1992 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act made it mandatory for Moi to step down in 2002, the public rhetoric he used to present his idea of succession was often publicised in newspaper cartoons, and demonstrated a lack of political goodwill on his part to allow for the free choice of his successor (cf., cartoon strip 3). The political impact of these cartoon strips cannot be realistically assessed here, but their ability to generate debate around oppressive discourse in public spaces was emancipatory. The cartoon strips from the Daily Nation serve as one of the sites for observing emerging political debates on a variety of social issues in urban contexts. They represent an interesting means of deciphering the shifting political realities being formulated nationally. These drawings are used as powerful political commentaries that bear traces of memory and tolerance and draw our attention to the ways in which we have historically documented our expectations. As a form of popular culture, these artistic expressions contain within them the dialogical capability and space to present an alternative society. As Hyden, Leslie and Ogundimu (2002:25) point out, “… because they thrive on local idioms, they help to promote an authentic interpretation of political events that, in turn, is important for the evolution of democratic forms that are grounded in a society”. It suffices to state here that Moi’s Nyayo regime (Kiswahili for footsteps) witnessed the development of political satire in all its forms, but that newspaper cartoons
and artists proved to be very popular. Leading in this field was Paul Kelemba (*The Standard*), along with Gado.

After ten years, the 2002 elections were heralded with yet another sobriquet, ‘Young Turks,’ to counter the political mandate of the ‘old guards’ and as an olive branch to the more youthful leadership (cf., Gado cartoon strips 4, 5 and 6). Initially, this was a regionally divisive ethnic decoy by President Moi, who appealed to younger leaders within KANU such as Uhuru Kenyatta (P-Kikuyu–Central Province), Musalia Mudavadi (P-Abaluhya–Western Province), Raila Odinga (P-Dholuo–Nyanza Province), Kalonzo Musyoka (Akamba–Eastern Province), Julius Sunkuli (Maasai–Rift Valley) and Noah Katana (P-Giriama–Coastal Province) to take over the mantle of leadership (cf., Gado cartoon strips 7 and 8). This move crystallised in the ‘Uhuru for President’ leadership project, which failed. Nonetheless, there were underlying gains for the more alert and better educated younger generation, who moved into echelons of power in KANU over the ‘old guards’ (cf., Gado cartoon strips 9, 10, & 11). However, KANU activism, KANU politics and individualistic social class tendencies showed up these select ‘Young Turks’ as a group indifferent to the needs of the poor majority of Kenyans (Omolo 2002). In this context, the ambiguity evident in the various categorisations of youth in Kenya was more than a linguistic curiosity, but rather underlay the divisive politics of the regime (cf., Gado cartoon strip 12). This historical situation and these political power structures created the possibility for new meaning and sites of knowledge for the youth.

As a means of celebrating Kenyan history and presenting reality through popular music, foreign artists were flown into Nairobi to become ‘imported’ praise singers during the Moi regime. Inadvertently, this drew attention to the Congolese style of music not just as a further expression of the hybridity of musical taste, but as another attempt by the elite class to favour Lingala music from the DRC. This Congolese influence on the Kenyan music scene in Nairobi arises from the city’s being an historic site or ‘war city’ and employment centre (Atieno–Odhiambo 2003:157). It is further noted that,

The founding father of rumba music in Kenya was Jean Bosco Mwenda. Born of the Sanga people in Shaba, Bosco was an urban musician who also prided himself on a multiple ethnic identity, singing of himself as Bosco wa Bayeke and Bosco was baSanga in Kiswahili and in various Congolese languages. Initially observed by Hugh Tracey playing his guitar under the clock tower by the post office in Jadotville (now Likasi), Bosco signed on with Tracey who produced his records under the Gallotone label. That was how his voice found its way into Nairobi in the early 1950s

16. This formulation highlights those youth politicians who enjoyed political patronage through family links. P stands for those politicians whose fathers were once political figures in Post-Independent Kenya, i.e. Jomo Kenyatta, Moses Budamba Mudavadi, Jaramogi Odinga and Ronald Ngala.
alongside other rumba labels like Pathe, EMI, and Ngoma from Leopoldville (now Kinshasa). His records joined the ranks of the post-war ‘GV’ series of EMI. He sang in Shaba, Kiswahili, and also in Sanga and Yeke. His records were identified by their CO label. About 1957, Bosco’s style was adopted by Losta Abello, another Congolese voice who took urban Nairobi by storm. Abello’s most illustrious Kenyan pupil became Ben Blastus O’Bulawayo. Congolese music became indigenised with the long residency of Edouad Massengo in Nairobi from 1958 (Atieno-Odhiambo 2003:163).

The history of contemporary urban music in Kenya requires the acknowledgement of these early Congolese musicians and their influence. More interesting from the point of hybridity, is Kubik’s (1981:93) description of Bosco’s or Mwenda wa Bayeke’s guitar playing technique as ‘… the process of re-Africanisation of imported Afro-American kinds of music …’ This may not have been for reasons of political sycophancy, especially before independence, but the contours of urban space and settings, which offered challenges and meaning to the lives of these performers, are relevant to the focus of this paper. The success of the guitar was based on its varied pitch possibilities that many Kenyan stringed instruments, such as the *nyatiti* and *litungu*, could not offer. The roots of modern Benga music in Kenya, according to Barz (2004:108–16), can be found within the traditional ‘*nyatiti*’ lyre of the Luo people. This music was made popular from the 1960s by the composer or ‘King of Benga’, Daniel Owino Misiani. Since music can be regenerated years later, Wainaina as a youth composer in modern Kenya, uses this Benga fusion form as a backdrop to his musical style. The contradictions found in musical style seem evident since, “Benga participates in and evokes multiple worlds – traditional, popular, elite and religious – for its varied performers and audiences”. (Barz 2004:116)

The urban context does facilitate the rewriting, construction and production of cultural practices, and the narrative of Kenyan popular culture musical forms was shaped there. I can imagine that the Nairobi Eduoad Massengo tried to capture in music was a melting pot of many cultures, local and external, and thus an important site for daily battles of identity and survival on its streets. Patterson (1986–87) refers to the late 1970s and early 1980s as extremely creative times in the world of popular music in Nairobi. At that time, Nairobi was awash with musical talent from the region, legendary groups such as Orchestra Makassy, Super Mzembe, Orchestra Virunga, Simba wa Nyika and Maroon Commandos. I believe that in 2002, Nairobi as urban cultural terrain had not changed much for the youth, except for its startling exclusion on basis of poverty, gender, class and race. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, bands like Ochestra Virunga, Lipua–Lipua, Mangelepa, Super Mzembe, and L’Ochestre Baba National ruled the music scene in Kenya from their bases in Nairobi, in 2000s the popular Congolese band was rare and short lived. Congolese musicians are part of this cultural status quo, for some in a bid to gain citizenship, for others for commercial and marketing reasons. Indirectly, musicians like Franco
Luambo Makiadi, who visited Kenya in 1986 with his composition ‘Mobutu’, lent credibility to President Moi by suggesting that his was a softer dictatorial stance. Others like Mbilia Bel’ sung ‘Nakei Nairobi’, which culminates in praise for President Moi, ‘Tuende Nairobi, Tuwimbia Baba Moi – Let us go to Nairobi and sing for Baba Moi’, confirming the place of the court jester and the aesthetics of power in Africa, which are rooted in patriarchy and the personalities of those who wield political might. The rise of Benga music also attracted interest from groups that were trying to carve out their own identity but were not mired in the politics of the day (Barz 2002). Among these were the Black Savage, Uyoga, Safari Sounds and Makonde bands, all based in Nairobi. Therefore, in a real sense the urban context represents political and cultural shifts and regeneration. This corroborates the view that any discourse on urban culture is a complex relationship of culture, power, memory and history (Gilroux 1994).

The refined nature of music sung in Lingala mixed with Kiswahili appealed to a diverse Kenyan audience, particularly the youth. Political controversy was, however, not absent. A typical example was the 1991 incident at the wedding of the daughter of the powerful permanent secretary in the office of the president, Hezekiah Oyugi. This was graced by the Congolese female singer Tshala Mwana, after another musician, Kanda Bongo–Man, turned down an offer to perform (Ngaira 2003). This incident highlighted the wanton use of state funds, as did the sponsorship of musicians during the 1992 elections by the money-guzzling ‘YK 92’ lobby group. In due course, Samba Mapangala and Pepe Kalle, with his Emperor Bakuba entourage, were hired to traverse the country belting out pro-KANU compositions, distributing T-shirts and spreading the ideals of the KANU political party. All this demonstrated the gullibility of the mass electorate in Kenya in investing power and responsibility for change in the exploitative ruling class. Furthermore, these episodes indicate why it continues to remain important to question and understand popular culture as a form of resistance and accommodation (Stapleton & May 1990).

Political patronage has its rewards and many talented choirmasters among the Zalo, Wesonga and Muganga participated in the exaltation of power and were recognised and rewarded. Even though patriotism and loyalty to the motherland featured as an important theme in school mass choirs, the practice was to praise the president in music. This would explain why the hegemonic song ‘Tivala Kenya Tivala – Rule Kenya Rule’, became the totem song of President Moi, being often played at and military passing out parades, thereby illustrating how hegemonic rule used music to penetrate the minds of many Kenyans. It is therefore not surprising that President Moi took the view that he was ‘a professor of Kenyan politics’ and that KANU was the ‘baba na mama wa Kenya – father and mother of Kenya’. The height

18. Ibid.
of recognition for many of these composers was the national media attention they received and the power they could exercise within their respective areas. ‘Catching the eye’ of the president involved fraternising with the ruling elite and was seen to symbolise power. It was no surprise, therefore, when the Kenyan armed forces also perfected this art of ‘court praises’ and joined the list of groups (public universities, selected parastatals, school mass choirs, prisons band) that were accorded the privilege of singing for the president on national occasions. As I have discussed elsewhere (Lukalo 2001), there existed the repression of political criticism through music, thus diminishing the possibility of the emergence of new sites of knowledge. History reveals that through activist drama, criticism levelled at President Moi’s corrupt regime by Ngugi wa Thiongo’s Kamitithu Cultural Centre quickly proved unpopular and was banned (Bjorkman 1989). The use of songs in these forms of theatre often tends to create new meanings and insights for the audience: “… a work song becomes a protest against unjust labour relations, a love song becomes an allegory of national unity”. (El-Bushra & Dolan 2002:40).

Despite all the patronage and favours attached to composers’ positions, these composing agents never lost the space to express their artistic abilities. Indeed, to date a song like ‘Tiwagivunia Kenya ni Nebi yetu tukufu, Kenya tunayoipenda – We boast of Kenya, It’s our beloved Nation, the Kenya we love’ by Wesonga is exemplary in terms of musical arrangement. The KANU regime strove for sycophancy through such music but also propelled good composers to heights they would otherwise not have attained, even though they were constrained in their comments on the deteriorating economic situation in the country. In this respect, KANU rewarded artistic ability based on the praise genre and not the ethnicity of the composers, as was the case elsewhere in Africa (Kerr 1998, Chirambo 2001, Gilman 2004). The result in practice was that praise singing became a controlled state domain for professionally trained musicians who had the advantage of placing their institutions within the reach of key resources for musical development. A key example was the Muungano choir formed in 1979 by Boniface Mganga, which reaped success with their Missa Luba19 Album recording, thus becoming the first Kenyan group to enter the Billboard magazine music chart (Kariuki 2002).20 It is important to note that this choir was formed one year after Moi took power and his twofold aim at the time was the creation of a mass choir to represent the cultural diversity of the Kenyan people, while maintaining cultural continuity and homogeneity. The state actively promoted the Muungano choir and offered it the resources to achieve unprecedented musical heights. It was within the urban, global possibilities of Nairobi that the Muungano choir developed a new avenue for social engagement. Yet again, this achievement represented a step in the direction of populist rule by Moi, with

19. The Muungano national choir performed this song using the famous setting of the Roman Catholic mass in ‘Congolese’ style, with infusions of Kenyan folk melodies.
most songs composed for him and about him. Two differing views concerning this political patronage were noted:

I think President Moi appreciated the power of music as a propaganda tool and he used it to the fullest ... Our objective was to sing patriotic songs as part of the broader role to enhance social-politico development (Mganga).

I had good sales with Chunga Marima because it had commercial appeal and I believe others saw it from a commercial perspective ... He made State House accessible to music and we became a function of all his public activities. This endeared him to us. (Kamaru accompanied President Moi to a State trip to Japan in 1979). (Kariuki 2002)

These two views provide a basis on which to examine the meanings of the political associations. The ability of musical talent to access State House gave many of these composers a glimpse into echelons of power hitherto unknown to them. Not only did they feel compelled to compose songs in praise of Moi, but also the risk of manipulation was increased when rewards accompanied this praise. The ‘otherness’ of State House provided them with global opportunities for exploration. Mganga cites ‘Kenya Kipenzi Changu – Kenya my Love’, as his most memorable and remarkable song of its time and genre, but ironically he never absolved himself of plundering the Kenyan economy, or sang against corruption or the corrupt state of affairs. In general, I summarise his involvement as ‘Music in one’s mouth for money in the hand’ (Lukalo 2001:4). Thus, the contradiction between citizen and political praise composer became embodied in the title of his most memorable song, ‘Kenya Kipenzi Changu’. These ironies become the more significant when one considers the extent to which government’s political, economic and cultural power pervades the diverse realms of ordinary life.

Meanwhile other institutions advanced political patronage in music through the creation of in-house choirs. While they lasted, they provided an after-work avenue for cultural meetings and music thrived, though the narrow political agenda they developed led many of them to disintegrate early. Other indirect players in this brief interlude included choir trainers, choir members, uniform suppliers, transport operators and patrons, who saw the regime from 1978–2002 as providing them with avenues of exploitation and corruption. So, these actors connived with government agents to access funds for the annual celebrations, despite declining economic trends. Kenya had achieved unparalleled levels of the commoditisation of artistic talent. This phenomenon extended in the *Nyayo* era to other art forms, but these lie beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that by the 2002 elections the collection of praise songs from the 24 years of Moi’s presidency must have been enormous!

Music also began to be emphasized in the school curriculum, with some positive but

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21. This article, entitled, "Flashback to Praise Songs Era", by John Kariuki can be found at, http://www.nationaudio.com/News/DailyNation/Supplements/lifestyle
short-term results for the discipline. It was during the Moi years that schools such as Kenya High, Mukumu Girls, Kabarak, Sacho, Moi Girls Eldoret and Friends School Kamusinga exerted an influence on the development of music and became prominent showcases for musical talent. Nonetheless, the intervention of a political agenda shaped the genre publicly and represented direct manipulation of individuals and creativity in defence of the political status quo. This dynamic interplay between music and politics also saw many acclaimed musicians in Kenya adopt a non-partisan stance. For instance, the Congolese band Mangelepa composed the song, ‘Rais Moi’, Uyoga Band came up with their ‘Hongera Moi’, and Joseph Kamaru sang his ‘Safari ya Japan’ after the failed 1982 coup plot. The motive of these composers was, I believe, the commercialisation of their music and the opportunity to parade their bands. Was this a material celebration of their image?

Within the larger politics of Kenya, the increased use of Kiswahili as a medium for praise songs was a hallmark of the Moi regime. Perhaps the reason for this promotion of Kiswahili is to be found in the politics of marginalised minority groups: Moi himself evidently found himself to be part of the wider Kalenjin Nilotic group. Being of the minority Tugen Kalenjin sub-group, Moi may have found it impossible to push the cultural agenda in favour of his ethnic musical preferences, so he practised ethnicity in political appointments, employment and economic positions, but allowed for varied ethnic entertainment and preferred Kiswahili for national occasions. My point is illustrated by the fact that State House appointed musical composers from varied ethnic groups. For Moi, the use of Kiswahili was part of his populist drive and a symbolic cultural tool to crystallize and make visible the idea of nationalism, thus whitewashing the problem of ethnicity. Unlike Kenyatta, the first president, who publicly delighted in the use of his ethnic Kikuyu language, Moi used Kiswahili. In this sense he projected the image of a leader who visibly and consciously championed the cultural rights of all minority groups in Kenya, while resculpting a national identity and collective existence recognisable through the aesthetic medium of music performance. Thus, music became a potent celebratory form of social expression through which Moi’s Nyayo philosophy was expressed. Whether the ideology was ever collectively accepted or understood by the majority of Kenyans is an issue requiring further interrogation. However, these claims to nationhood played an important role in this historical context. As Mans has noted (Mans 2003:119):

… identities are not an indication of timeless and static qualities but are rooted in complex histories, discourse and interpretations of intergroup relations … In the increasingly urbanised environment, people are confronted with ‘new’ realities and find themselves removed from the familiarity of communities that sustained the cultural identity.
Struggles for political dominance using music and culture saw the presidential commission on music assume the role of a pro-establishment institution, instead of safeguarding and advancing the cultural musical rights of Kenyan artists during the height of Nyayoism (post–1997 elections). During this period, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) became the dominant organ by which government controlled and regulated information and the type of music being aired. Consequently, KBC acquired the nickname ‘KANU Broadcasting Cooperation’, since all primetime news broadcasts on radio until 2002 ended with the song ‘KANU yajenga Nchi – KANU Builds the Nation’, a song that had dominated the airwaves since independence. Such attention left a skewed view in the minds of young Kenyans that it was only KANU that had the resolve to build the country. During the 2002 election process, this role was radically changed to accommodate views from the opposition parties.

Youth Identity and Contemporary Political Uncertainties

Yet again, the applicability of the questions posed by Werbner (1998) about youth memory, consciousness and social deictics remain to be explored in these circumstances. As the anthropologist Durham (2000:114) notes,

Youth are particularly sensitive to transformations in the economy as their activities, prospects, and ambitions are dislocated and redirected. New forms of political participation and authority exclude and include youth in novel ways, and debates about these forms are debates about the nature of citizenship, responsibility, and the moral, immoral and amoral nature of social action, issues particularly acute for youth, whose memberships are rapidly changing and multiply. Changing technologies of governance, often shaped through Western discourses and the knowledge industries of social science, target and redefine youth through schools and other educational initiatives, through programs on health and sexuality, and through attempts to control population movements. And the movement of Western discourse on youth through various institutions and personnel, to which youth are framed both as prototypical consumers and as prototypical social problems, condenses many of the critical issues of globalization and historic conjuncture. Moving through these conjectures, reconfiguring webs of power, reinventing personhood and agency, youth stand at the center of dynamic imagination of the African landscape.

It seems clear, as Durham contends, that any discourse about youth must be localised, since their lived experience and life trajectories differentiate them from the aged. Schools, religion, and urbanisation have resulted in youth being exposed to Western modernity on an unprecedented scale. Along with other scholars, I contend that the term ‘youth’ should be viewed as a social ‘shifter’—that is, fluid and drawing meaning from varied situations (Durham 2000). The situations in different African countries point to the fact that youth live and are involved in various differing situ-
ations. Thus while public university students in Kenya may riot and cause mayhem in Nairobi, their counterparts in private universities seek to solve their problems through dialogue. The same behaviour by public university students can be seen at funerals, even well catered funerals. The mayhem they created at the funeral of the retired President Moi’s late wife (2004) caused dismay among many Kenyans. If youth is a transition to adulthood, should it be marked by unrest? The answer is that youth are not a homogenous group and their actions and abilities depend on the historical and social conditions at play. Erikson (1968) had engaged in this debate by approaching the subject of youth identity as a generational issue. Thus, societies are the providers of ideologies, which youth play a vital role in regenerating.

Elsewhere in Africa, new dynamics of the postcolonial state brought about changes that impacted youth. Burgess (1999:29–50), in noting this, alludes to the metaphor used to describe the youth by the Zanzibar President Aboud Jumbe: they are figuratively one of the three cooking stones, the other two being the aged men and women. Here, Jumbe is situating youth as a generational issue in the process of social evolution. In this case, Zanzibari politicians during the 1960s and 1970s misused youth identity in support of the political status quo as, “… the decisive constituency in sustaining revolutionary momentum”. Therefore, history constitutes a force in the process of social change. Examples also abound in Africa of the projection of youth as a threat, irresolute and unconnected. Present wars and feuds in Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Algeria have witnessed marauding groups of youth in risky situations attempting to retain a particular ascriptive identity. Diouf (2003:1–12) sees this as the product of a lack of representation in national prioritises, and exclusionist policies and tendencies, which ultimately have both a geographical and historical component. It is especially in the rural/urban interface that youths seize opportunities, both on the streets and from history, to search for and explore ideologies. However, a tendency towards ambiguity among youths also exists: ”idealism, nihilism, and sometimes even pure, childish naughtiness seem to coexist” (Diouf 2003:9). Other scholars such as Waldron (1995) treat identity as related to both personal and social histories. The history that informs youth memories often contains lapses and unfulfilled expectations: for instance, in the case of Kenya (1992–2002) the wanton plundering of state funds discredited the ideals of hard work and recognition in the lives of the youth. The life of the youth is a constant pursuit for meaning. Diouf (2003:6) continues:

Mistrusting both indigenous memories and the nationalistic ideology of development, they present an organised and sometimes violent challenge to the construction of youth as a period of ‘life on hold’ and of their generation in particular as situated between a glorious past, a present of sacrifices and a radiant future. Rejecting the conception of a life that must be prepared for and supervised by adults, they substitute risky behaviours in the street, the underground and informal economic practices, which provide them with alternative modes of self-expression and new procedures
for inhabiting the public sphere. Thus they are defining new modalities of action and proposing a new language in their musical, iconographic, and military expressions and sometimes in political, economic, and religious life.\footnote{22. My italics.}

While the term ‘youth’ may be used politically as a marker that enhances divisions, the version of youth I would agree with is Diouf’s – youth is about daily life practices, self-identification, and social constructions enmeshed in localised socio-historical contexts.

At the school level, the annual Kenya national music festival in August is the climax for all musical institutions. Traditionally, Nairobi hosts this event. The competitions start at local divisional level, but the pride of each performer is to go to Nairobi not only because the best ensembles meet here but also because of the allure and promise of Nairobi for many of the rural participants. Many of these children are later lured back to Nairobi for jobs or simply to remain in step with their urban counterparts. There is an obvious unification tendency inherent in these competitions. Moreover, their inclusion as part of the school curriculum has helped to bridge the gap between music and culture: with genres like Zilizopendwa, African folk, African pop and African sacred songs a national identity is fostered. Clark (2003:4) notes that, “any discussion of urban culture seems rooted in the complex relationship between memory and history on the one hand and culture and power on the other”. Overtly stated, urban culture is politically and culturally constructed. Borrowing from Appiah (1992:157), examining cultural realities in the urban setting seems especially relevant.

Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite the unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease and political instability, African cultural productivity grows apace: popular literatures, oral narrative and poetry, dance, drama, music and visual art all thrive. The contemporary cultural production of many African societies – and the many traditions whose evidences so vigorously remain – is the antidote to the dark vision of the postcolonial novelist.

As was the case in many other countries in Africa, the 1990s marked a renewed generational shift from old guard leaders such as Moi, Kamuzu Banda and Kenneth Kaunda, who delighted in musical presentations with a popular orientation, with women playing a conspicuous role in Malawi (Chirwa 2001). In Nigeria the artist Adewusi’s anti-establishment composition ‘Babangida must go’ influenced political events, while the actors in the associated video film were “… a representative element of the population, expressing a sturdy outrage against the flaunting of their electoral will” (Haynes, 2003:83). Youth needed progressively more space to comment critically on their pressing needs, and the urban setting contained a rich tapestry of interweaving cultures, identifies, genders, races and classes. The dynamic nature of this blend of music represented a projection of national culture that built on rather
than destroyed the social repertoire of values, ideals and visions in Kenya, and was often overlooked. McLaughlin (2001:154) observes of popular songs during the Set-Setal movement in urban Dakar in 1989 that they were seen as redefining public space:

… pre-eminent Senegalese pop star Youssou Ndour’s hit, Set (‘clean’), which became somewhat of a theme song for the movement. In addition, a new genre of song celebrating the city and its people emerged around the same period, typified by Ndour’s Medina and Baaba Maal’s Ndakaaru (Dakar). Medina is about Ndour’s own origins in the populous Medina neighbourhood of Dakar, and celebrates the neighbourhood and the imprint it leaves on its inhabitants by claiming that ‘children of Medina’ (xaley Medina) can be recognized by the distinctive way in which they walk. Baaba Maal’s song, Ndakaaru, is a verbal mapping of the city in which he enumerates, the various popular neighbourhoods, but most significant is that Maal sings Ndakaaru in Wolof, the urban language … Equally important, and perhaps even more closely associated with the Set-Setal movement was its visual aspect, characterized by the proliferation of painting that sprung up overnight on walls throughout the city, creating an overwhelming visual effect in the public spaces of individual neighbourhoods.

It is important to realise that this new self-conscious urban identity arose historically from political disenchantment and is often legitimised in language use. Thus, attempts to sustain the use of a language medium that reaches out to the majority represents a key moment in the configuration of an urban identity. That the youth musical discourse in Kenya in the late twentieth century provided a channel for political and social engagement by urban youth and enabled them to expand their message is crucial. These conditions formed a rich and diverse bedrock for challenging hegemony through creative processes in popular arts and popular culture.

Collectively, youth groups emerged in theatre, music (gospel and secular), and poetry and ultimately as successful artists This tendency seemed to mirror the historical vibrancy of African associational life on the eve of independence (Hyden & Okigbo 2002). Lacking any obvious political pursuits or organisations, youth popular culture was expressed in music, especially with the emergence of rap and hip-hop. Popular compositions were interwoven with Kiswahili and vernacular, thus serving a positive cultural linguistic function. Such differences were accentuated in urban settings by so-called ‘pop idols’ or ‘role models’ for African youth (Collins 1985). The influence of commodity culture has been significant, with the meteoritic rise of youth musicians bearing hip-hop labels and paraphernalia, thus creating a dynamic mix of commercialisation and popular cultures of resistance.

23. The use of Kiswahili as a national language in Kenya seems to work in theory, yet many songs from Tanzania by youths such as TID, the late Cool James, Mad Ice and Mr Nice seemed to appeal to Kenyan youth, primarily because of their exploitation of Kiswahili.
The democratisation processes in Kenya in the 1990s included the repeal of the one party state provision in the constitution, thus ushering in a multiparty system. These trends need to be appreciated in the contemporary context of global democratisation. Thus it was not surprising that the voice of discontent was heard at the Kora awards in the composition, ‘Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo’. Since there was little real political commitment from civil society in Kenya, the role of the youth was basically relegated to a secondary level. Constitutional reform pressure groups were an exception, but these did not amount to the ‘bottom up’ pressure that was witnessed in the independence days.

Music Constituting Identity

Within the hybridised space of urban culture ‘… battles over the interconnected questions of memory, identity and representation are being intensely fought’ (Clarke 2003:4). The emerging fluid cultural identities were contested and negotiated in the contemporary urban settings of Nairobi, Nakuru, Mombasa and Kisumu. The message and content of the musical expressions were diverse: challenging hegemonic representations, love, sex, betrayal, self-determination, cultural erosion, gender, changing customs and modernity either in rural or urban surroundings. The tensions and paradoxes experienced by Kenyans were encapsulated in these songs, yet the youth composers were viewed as the ‘lost generation’ (Tengo 2003). By the early 2000s, groups and individuals such as ‘Hardstone’, ‘Them Mushrooms’, ‘Kalamashaka’, ‘E-Sir’, ‘Gidigidi-Majimaji’, ‘Jabali Africa’, ‘Redsan’, ‘Darlin’ P’, ‘Suzanne Owino’, ‘Princess Julie’, ‘Poxie Presha’ and ‘Mighty King Kong’ became popular in re-imagining the city and voicing the concerns of youth. However, until 2002, the compositions appealed to relatively few adults in echoing and promoting democratic views. Youth musicians led by ‘Gidigidi–Majimaji’, ‘Poxie Presha’, ‘Mighty King Kong’ and ‘Kalamashaka, were at the heart of popular culture and helped construct and project various identities.

As has been noted above, youth identity can be approached from multiple perspectives (Hofmeyr, Nyairo & Ogude 2003, Sommers 2003, Stokes 1994) Youth popular culture was not in constant dialogue with government or its agents about critical matters of exploitation and represented a heterogeneous agency. Consequently, these bands did not effectively feed into the current political commentary, except in a few cases such as ‘Gidigidi Majimaji’ and Eric Wainaina, who made vital incursions into the public debate and democratisation process using musical texts. Through these compositions, injustices in Kenya were projected at the global and local levels, utilising local symbols and language. Evidently, identity became yet another dimension of popular culture. On a personal level, many of these youths are defined by ethnicity, social and economic status and the litany of ills, such as unemployment, affecting them. Collectively, youths involved in the world of popu-
lar culture identify with each other as a group intent on carving out its own type of
music, an approach that emphasizes the inter-generational differences in music from
the 1990s and promotes the idolisation of youthful superstars.

The deep fissures and contradictions that are embodied in music often shape
the aspirations and discordances of youth. Some youth musicians give in to the
discourse and practice of music as a commodity for sale and profit. These instances
resonate in youths’ lives as

... moments when the post-colonial discourse of resistance fails to ward off the lure
of the dominant elite sensibilities that speak the language and politics of privilege
and maintenance of the status quo in the linguistic mediums of ordinary people.
(African Identities, editorial remarks 2004:5)

Clearly significant in this discourse is the emergence of the role of youth, and even
they along with the peasants lack the depth of support to change the dictates of the
ruling classes. The current focus on popular culture complements all the other ef-
forts by civil society to vent societal grievances against the Moi regime. Kenyan hip-
hop came to life in 1997, at the time of another historic multiparty election (Cowen
& Kanyinga 2002). The Kenyan rapper Hardstone (Harrison Ngungiri), acclima-
tised to the music of his base in the US, pioneered this development with his hit song
‘Uhiki’. Subsequently, many young rappers have come forth and, importantly, many
established groups claim the need for music that has social and cultural, not just
entertainment value (Gecau 1993, Martin 1991). The potential for Kenyan youth to
carve out spaces through music for their self-perceived sense of position is discussed
by Samper (2004), who discusses youth expressions of traditional culture and how
they modify it into a code the can be understood in contemporary times. Samper
also views these young rappers as the creators of a ‘third space’ in music through
the construction of hybridised forms and expressions. These young people construct
music for their peers to enable them confront social issues, above all HIV/AIDS.

They are innovative, reflexive about their cultures, and active in introducing change
and mediating between the local group and outside agencies. They work in-between
spaces, the liminal, third spaces of culture. This in-betweeness allows them access
to two (or more) linguistic, cultural, musical and image systems. Culture brokers
have an intimate knowledge of local institutions, are adept at manoeuvring through
informal economies and networks, and are skilful at adapting, appropriating, and
translating transnational cultural forms (Samper 2004:37–8)

However, the cultural domain remains a site for the reinscription of subjectivities
(Nyairo & Ogude 2003). Many upcoming youth musicians, irrespective of genre,
are not driven by artistic talent, but rather are taking a step along the way to another
career. Consequently, the notion of temporariness and impatience is evident. Can
these aspects be reflective of the dynamic and diverse ways in which youths’ lives
are led or as a depiction of the material, historical and psychological circumstances
in which they find themselves. In order to engage critically and creatively with the realities youth face, Mercy Myra, Mighty King Kong, and the Redkyulass, among others, became involved in the ‘Chanuka’ anti-AIDS campaign. As musician Mighty King Kong, said:

We young artists can no longer afford to look aside as things slide to worrisome levels. The future is ours. So we have to jolt everyone into fixing the broken parts of our Country … [A] role model is someone who embraces the responsibility of influencing others positively. (Mighty King Kong 2002)

“It certainly is not for the money, because we do it voluntarily.” (Mercy Myra)

Clearly these comments cannot be construed as the collective views of all youth musicians in Kenya, since they too differ in terms of their attitude towards certain social activities as a function of their gender, social class and individual experiences. But these sentiments are important for this paper because they shed light on the type of reasoning some youth involved in music use to agitate for social change. It is artists like these who inform and encourage youths to see themselves as agents of change. In the present political dispensation, these sites present opportunities for agency. As depicted by Olukotun (2002:195), in Nigeria “…the struggle for democritisation and a reformed polity moved into the crucial terrain of controlling discourse at popular levels, especially in the vernacular medium”. In the context of these transformations, and especially with soaring unemployment in the late 1990s, young Kenyans obtained a growing public voice in defining their political contributions and space. In urban Nairobi and the rural areas, youth transformed the Nyayo slogan from “leaders of tomorrow to leaders of change in their actions”. Participation became real through the growth of many youth performance groups, especially in the mixing of hip-hop culture with the infusion of Kiswahili. In this context of competing themes and lyrics, variegated sources of cultural knowledge, and notions of political disquiet, young Kenyan men and women artists made claims to legitimacy through popular culture (Gecau 1999). This use of popular culture and political knowledge by the youth allowed them to reckon with local dictatorial powers embedded in sycophancy, corruption, betrayal as well as the social divisions arising from ethnicity, gender disparities and ancestral ties.

The 2002 elections in Kenya were dramatically different from previous elections in various ways. Demographically, there were more educated unemployed youths, many born during the Nyayo era, a circumstance that fed into the political debate (Anderson 2002, Ajulu 2002). With President Moi repeatedly emphasising the role of youth as tomorrow’s leaders, there appeared to be no moral justification for him to continue as leader. Kenyan voters had to think on two levels. One stressed con-

24. These sentiments were reported by Dan Tengo, Sunday Nation, 15 December 2002.
25. Ibid.
tinuity based on the conservative religious principle that any change would lead to bloodshed (Holmquist & Oendo 2001). However, more ominous were the faith-led Christian groups that believed in fundamental political change, and this belief held true by some youth composers had subterranean influence in the political process. In this light, the vital ties between a global view of Wainaina’s contribution to political contention and the association with local political elite disputes in Saba- tia constituency need to be traced. In fact, the question that needs to be asked is whether Wainaina’s ‘Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo’ and the Kora award were the impetus for the wider youth self-expression and was a context of discourse by the young political elite, or were both phenomena part of a common historical trajectory? And how can one understand the articulation of Christianity and political change in the chorus ‘Yote yawazekana bila Moi’? Any attempt to address these questions will highlight the need to examine the emerging localised youth identities and social dynamics enmeshed in the above compositions.

Urban Culture and Youth Identity: Politics or the Ordinary?

The youth of Kenya of the late 20th century, a marginalised group with fewer work opportunities than their parents, can be seen as having the initiative to challenge political autocracy, exploitation and the globalisation of poverty. In countless ways, cultural values have been eroded by Western influences, but this has not deterred many youth from contesting the situations they lived in through a variety of forms of expression, of which music was simply one (Weinstein 1994, Harrison 2002, Vambe 2000, 2004). Popular culture expressed through drama, theatre, dance, song and mimicry to provide the avenue for addressing critical issues in a country that was ruled by stifling information. Research into popular culture raises fundamental issues about human realities and the agency of knowledge (Patterson 2000). Studies of popular culture and youth in Kenya are minimal. For urban African youths, the odds they face daily as a result of political miscalculation as articulated in their songs are often ignored. Little research has been undertaken in this area, particularly youth connections at the local level within a larger context of global complexities.

As urban youth music developed, it also gathered a great following national-wide. For the youth, air time for music gave them meaningful channels of communication. From as early as the 1990s, the youth of Nairobi engaged in various cultural discourses to give expression to ideas, messages and group purposes. There was an upsurge in the use of Kiswahili as a lingua franca or as a badge of identity for youth music. Kiswahili made the music significantly more accessible to all social groups, and youth music became more reflective of the subtle changes in society. However,

26. This paper takes account of Karin Barber’s identification of popular culture and considers musical compositions from that perspective. See also Barber, 1987 and 1999.
there was still debate about the proliferation of urban youth groups and their music, the factors motivating the artists and the music’s cultural and sociological significance (Gondola 1997). The manner in which this music mediated between government and society in Kenya needs to be addressed, and the current study attempts to address how urban youth music engaged the state in the political sphere and to assess the significance of the phenomenon.

As Haugerud (1995:28) comments:

Music and theatre became important avenues through which criticisms of the ruling regime coalesced, influencing individual consciousness as the opposition grew wider and became more public by 1991 … some of the music built on earlier expressive forms, such as popular anti-colonial songs from the 1920s and Christian hymns sung in the 1950s whose words were altered to praise Kenyan political leaders … In 1992 Kenyan mothers of political prisoners protesting publicly at Nairobi law courts sang Gikuyu funeral songs. Protest themes expressed in Kenya’s contemporary music and theatre included official corruption; rapid increases in cost of living; violent evictions from and government demolition of ‘shanties’ in Nairobi; and government efforts to silence political opposition.

Evidently, most youth cultural displays of political discontent had privileged urban roots, with support from and coverage by the national media. The social and cultural legitimacy of the youth was also achieved through the assertion of language and a localised notion of popular culture. This was particularly evident in the production of music garnished by local languages, Sheng27 and cultural forms that aimed at unifying the youth and breaking down ethnic exclusiveness in support of “the Kenya we want”.28 Githiora (2003:159–81) notes that the growth and development of Sheng was predominantly rooted in the low-income suburbs of Nairobi and that it was spoken primarily by young people. Elsewhere, in Dar-es-Salaam, Sommers (2003:32) addresses the growth of a similar form of Kiswahili among the youth that asserts their “… connection to Bongo-land [literally ‘Brainland’, the nickname for Dar-es-Salaam] and their separation from elite society”. I believe that appropriated language forms such as these indicate the tenuous nature of the relationship between youth and the ruling class and the way in which youth consciously celebrate their position as underdogs through cultural forms. The nexus between youth, language and popular culture enabled them to express defiance for the regime and assert their exuberance for life from a base that was screened and that allowed content to be masked: in short they could mask, perform and locate their otherness through language. As a form popular culture “depends on words and the development of shared meaning as it defends existing gains” (Kaarsholm & James 2000:208), often

27. This is a corrupted form of language primarily drawn from Kiswahili, with infusions of ethnic languages.
28. This was a rallying cry in civil society in the 1990s to reclaim a sense of fulfilment in Kenya’s destiny.

... what is understood to be institutionalized as ‘politics’ has become the space of such alienation, self seeking and irrelevance that a real articulation of needs and values appears possible only within cultural realms which do not, at first sight, appear to be really political.

From this basis, youth who pursued issues related to the deepening economic crisis were often viewed as pursuing a mirage or were seen to be wapoteevu, the Kiswahili word for “lost”. To avoid escapism and to engage the audience, the youth invented themselves individually and collectively using contemporary discourse in song (Frederiksen 2000:213). While this categorisation ‘wapoteevu’ to a significant degree draws on intergenerational differences an explicit study that focuses on youth, music and the paradoxes of youth identity in urban settings from the 1990s is essential. The 1990s offer a political context of the second wave democratisation process in Africa (Hyden & Okigbo 2002:29-53). During this second wave of democratisation in Africa, the Kenyan government, epitomised by President Moi, faced opposition from politicians, civil society and the youth. Young artists used the alternative forms such as cartoonists Madd and Gado, the TV comedy “Redykyllass trio”,29 the KISS FM radio show, and “The Peoples’ Parliament”30 to creatively strengthen their democratic public discourse and appropriated their voices to pursue a democratic agenda. All such youth-driven political expressions were artistic forms intended to connect with everyday politics and the draconian character of Moi.

The shift in power from militant urban youth groups to national artists armed with nothing more than their creative musical abilities is worth exploring. Various issues key to them gave impetus and drive to these artists. Corruption was one, particularly after 1995. That was the year when the first Transparency International Report was produced, and Kenya has always languished in the bottom 10 per cent (Otieno 2003). Against this socio-economic context, Sampers (2004: 43), in discussing the role of Kenyan youth rappers, claims that their cultural role “is to express the attitudes, values, imagination, hopes and dreams of Kenyan youth that otherwise go unsaid”. Nonetheless, the themes of tradition, self, identity, modernity, and globalisation are highlighted by Sampers as some of the critical areas for youth rappers. Evidence of political engagement in these compositions was lacking, leading to the typical view that youth are either politically ignorant or apathetic. Akindes (2002:93) specifically notes:

29. This television comedy was noted for its humorous depiction of the sycophancy and parochial views of most Kenyan politicians (and common in much Kenyan behaviour). This show was run on the independent TV channel, which subsequently terminated production.
30. This show elicited an overwhelming response from the audience, since matters that were key to the welfare of Kenyans were debated on air with the Peoples’ Parliament speaker, with presenter Jimmi Gathu acting as moderator. This show is still running.
As in many African countries, the political elite in Cote d’Ivoire has refused to take into account the identities and differences that make up their society and has undemocratically attempted to create a nation state without a critical reappraisal and reformation of the foundations of pre-colonial political systems and of the colonial state.

From this perspective, youth’s apparent lack of interest in politics is merely a rational response of their own exclusion – their being ‘positively disenfranchised’ (Bhavnani 1991) – from the domains of power. In order to understand these dynamics and how they feed into youth identity, the context of the urban setting is pivotal.

A distinction is made in the construction of the urban setting as a sense of place and its redefinition as the ideology of home. Urbanisation in Africa is a topic of concern and interest. “Wailola omwene wailola amenyi musit – You are proud, You, you are proud, because you live in the city.” These are the words of an Abaluhya wedding song and significantly they refer to a different, Western style of living that is associated with urban settings. It is precisely this that has always been central to the allure of the urban areas for African youth. The reality, however, is that the East African region exhibits one of the fastest urban growth rates in the world – it is estimated that by 2025 nearly half of all East Africans will live in urban areas (Hope 1998), notwithstanding persistent urban unemployment. Factors like war and discord have further lead to shifting identities, with many youth considering the city their home. In Nairobi the phenomenon of urban street families is an increasing dilemma. Cases abound of youths from the rural areas who have been lost in Nairobi. One such case concerned Mzee Raphael31 in Sabatia constituency, who revealed that his son had “disappeared in Nairobi”, even though there were claims that he was alive. Situations such as this suggest that some youth have no desire to return to rural areas and prefer a collective subaltern urban identity. I also overheard the following conversation at a bus stop in Eldoret between an old man and his niece (my colleague) who was travelling to Nairobi.

(n) Uncle, it’s been many days, I hope you are fine. (u) Am fine and still alive, tell me do you see my son in Nairobi? It’s gone on three years now, and no word from him. (n) Oh yes, I often see him as he passes by my house walking to work every morning to the construction sites. (u) Why can’t he even write a letter to us? His mother, she misses him! (n) Dear uncle, the boy can hardly feed himself let alone buy a stamp, which costs enough to buy himself some vegetables. It is not easy for him. (u) Tell him to come home. There is a shamba that needs him. I am old, tell him to come home. No one chased him away. He had better come and suffer at home. Tell him to come home, don’t forget and greet him too.32

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31. Mzee Raphael was one of my research participants in a project on aging in rural areas in 2000.
32. ‘U’ denotes uncle and ‘n’ niece.
As her old uncle walked away, my friend turned to me and wondered how the boy would go home to their rural area when his own father – the old man – had never gone there after retirement from the Eldoret municipal council. “Who needed to go home?” she asked. With this remark, the issues of gender and age in cities became even more real for me.

For the young man, going home would signal failure or lack of independence, and for his father going home would mark a change in lifestyle arising from the absence of the infrastructure available in Eldoret or simply the feeling of certainty when he is in Eldoret. Claims to space in urbanised areas were evident in the conversation and two adult males had in different ways sought some form of refuge in their urban environments. What common urban denominator appeals across such age differences? It is hard to escape the conclusion that at a symbolic level urban settings do offer some hope for their inhabitants, but whether this is true in fact is part of a different debate. Sommers (2003:36) claims that “… urban migration is a risky challenge …”, and consequently it is often the youth who accept the risk of discovering the world. Herein lies the relevance of popular music in capturing the emergent urban identities, such as class, generation and gender.

Many urban centres such as Nairobi provide a base for “creative abilities innovation and mediation” as an essential part of economic survival (Barber 1997). It is here that youth popular culture and music presents a distinct youth identity and I believe that youth based in urban areas play a leading role in such performances. Despite Kenya’s rather open door to Western social influences, the youth continue to define their self-representational identity in popular culture in modalities of language (Kiswahili, Sheng and ethnic languages). With the emergence of Sheng in Nairobi in the 1980s, as a hybrid of English, Kiswahili and ethnic languages, new spaces for urban popular culture groups in Nairobi, Nakuru, Kisumu and Mombasa were created and became the basis not just for livelihoods but also for self-identity, ‘exclusive empowerment’ and the insertion of youth perspectives into the political arena in 2002.

The elite in Kenya believe they are firmly in control of events when the reality is the other way round. They believe they are providing leadership when, in fact, the supposed led are marching to their own drummers. There are two operative realities in Kenya and they will clash. How this will resolve itself is too early to judge. One certainty is that fundamental change is underway in Kenya. Those who grasp its magnitude will rise. (Mulaa 2002) 33

33. Views expressed on 1 December 2002, before the general election.
Chapter Two

*When a handshake extends beyond the wrist and the elbow, it is no longer a handshake but a wrestling match.*

(Kenyan Proverb)

**Singing In or Out for Politics**

This research is set within the political context of uncertainty and corruption in Kenya. As the above proverb suggests, government had extended it handshake to ordinary Kenyans through extreme forms of political coercion, ethnic discrimination, corruption and state terror. Different wrestling matches were taking place, and during elections politicians’ need to use art to appeal to voters becomes even more urgent. Art forms begin to project and echo either a message of complacency or change, depending on the stakes. In so doing, art takes on varying shapes and sizes, with the artist renegotiating the stakes (Bjorkman 1989, Heilman & Kaiser 2002).

Religion became another wrestling arena during the political turbulence of early 2000s. Kenya is known for its multiplicity of religious forms, with Protestants comprising 38% of the population, Roman Catholics 28%, indigenous beliefs 26%, Islam 7% and other 1% (Throup 2003). The 24 years of President Moi’s rule imprinted on the minds of many Kenyans the dual role of religion as spiritual and political milestones. Whereas the African Inland Church was projected as a state church, the larger Catholic Church in Kenya often played the role of state critic. From 1990 until his retirement, President Moi had constant battles with church organisations such as the umbrella National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK), the Church of Province of Kenya (Anglican Church), the Presbyterian Church of East Africa and the Catholic Church (Sabar–Friedman 1997). The continued role of the churches in political issues arose from ongoing tribal clashes and atrocities against civil rights organisations. “I shall not protest against violations of human rights in South Africa if I am not allowed to protest the violation of human rights in my own country”, Bishop Muge stated. Church compounds were converted into refugee camps and pro-democracy venues, although this did not deter the regime from sending in soldiers to discipline the critics of government. Men of the collar were not spared the brutality of the regime. In 1990, Bishop Alexander Muge went to his death in horrendous circumstances and the death of Father Anthony Kaiser in 2000 remains contested. Reverend Timothy Njoya was arrested repeatedly and in 1999 he was severely injured by the militia youth group ‘Jeshi la Mzee’ for criticising the government. These events stand out as extreme forms of state brutality.

At its 1993 Kenya episcopal conference, the Catholic Church through its pastoral letter brought to the attention of the head of state the fact that his regime was full of perpetrators of injustice against ordinary Kenyans, who were being victimised on ethnic grounds. (Further information on these human rights abuses and their perpetrators is contained in the Akivumi Commission Report on Land Clashes released in October 2002). Shoumatoff, (1988) describes the Njoya attack as demonstrating “societal madness” among the detribalised youth of Nairobi, who oscillate in their identities and mode of behaviour between the traditional and modern world.

The following are brief narratives by the controversial retired Anglican archbishop of Kenya, David Gitari, who was not spared state surveillance.

In March 1975 a very prominent politician, J.M. Kariuki was assassinated by the government … the National Council of Churches of Kenya asked me to give a series of talks on the radio … I thought I would expound the national anthem which runs ‘Oh God of all creation bless this our land and nation, justice be our shield and defender’. So every morning I took one verse of that … my sermons were beginning to have some effect. I was asked to go to the Minister of Information (Gitari and Knighton 2001:253–4).

My final example took place in 1997 when the church leaders were really trying to fight so that the constitution would be changed before the elections … they were beaten, bleeding inside the cathedral … So a week later about a thousand people were there, with the international press. I cleansed the cathedral by spraying holy water everywhere, and then I preached from Daniel chapter five … On Tuesday he invited me to State House and he told me, ‘I now agree you can change the constitution before the elections’. There were other witnesses there and we were asked as church leaders to try to reconcile our position with members of parliament.

Of course members of parliament made their own mistakes but this is the kind of struggle that we are involved in and it requires a lot of courage, a lot of faith, a lot of prayer, and it is dangerous (Gitari and Knighton 2001:255)

The implication of the foregoing is that, individually or collectively, actors have always presented an opposing view to authoritarian hegemonic rule. With over 66% of the Kenyan population professing Christianity, it becomes imperative that their spiritual leaders have the courage to speak out against state-funded atrocities and empower their followers to question corrupt practices. The cultural reference to the national anthem in Gitari’s broadcast illustrates the complex nature of citizenship, identity and modernity. Collectively the song is in Kiswahili, a language that irons out differences of ethnicity and region to enhance the individual and collective sense of nationhood. It is my contention that in the long term, many people are drawn to become agents of change.

35. The letter was published in The Standard newspaper, 30 October 1993.
Reasons for the overwhelming importance of religion in Africa, especially Christianity, have been seen as a result of the associations between modernity and the colonial project (Bourdillon 1990). The Kenyan scholars Gecau (1996) and Kinyatti (1980) focus on the historical fight for independence and the protest songs of the Mau Mau liberation struggle which based its vibrancy and philosophy in the spiritual. The purpose of these songs was to forge unity, boost morale and foster a common identity among freedom fighters. The militancy evident in the songs’ words shifted emphasis to nation building after independence. By and large, Christianity attracted more members and neutralised the war rhetoric of many of these fighters. During the latter years of President Moi’s rule, the urgent need for change and the sense of optimism found expression and meaning within the established tradition of the Christian song. At the same time, especially after 1990, many youth-led gospel groups emerged in Kenya, such as Munishi, Chibalonga, the Mwauras, the Kassangas, and Mary Atieno, but their role was essentially viewed as that of nourishing the soul. Accordingly, the militancy and protests against the state were found in African traditional churches, such as the Tent of the Living God and Mungiki, whose ideals, philosophy and way of life irked not just those in power but also a majority of Kenyans. Many evangelical preachers rose to prominence in the early 2000s, such as Pastor Muiru, Margaret Wanjeru, Pastor Mark Kariuki and Pastor Gichana, with religious affiliations to the Western world, and their churches flourished. It is not surprising that Christianity flourished and played a liberating role during this time, given the suffering many Kenyans were experiencing. Urban youth were able to delight in the ‘Malebo’ compositions of Reverend Munishi as well as the Kalamashaka hip-hop song ‘Tafsiri Hii’. Youth’s appreciation of both genres of music and their ensuing success “… highlights the reality of hybridity” (Chitando 2002:92).

The role of Christian music and gospel singers during these political crises requires more work. However, as a musical form, Christian music had the power to transcend ethnic, gender and age divisions among Kenyans. Religion at this time filled an important communication gap and helped counter the ambiguities put forward by the political leaders. There was an increasing mismatch between the public professions of Christianity by President Moi, with his personality cult, and his cronies on the one hand, and his authoritarian rule, questionable human rights record and his regime’s rampant institutionalised corruption, on the other (Oyugi 1997, Korwa and Munyae 2001). Consequently, there was an urgent need to counter the claim in his political rhetoric to be ‘Baba Taifa – the father of the nation’. However, as a pragmatic survivor, Moi did understand the limits to his mortality and dismissed as misplaced flattery Education Minister Aringo’s attempts to dub him the ‘Prince of Peace’ at a Nairobi University graduation ceremony.

As is well documented, 2002 marked 24 years of Moi’s regime and 40 years of KANU government. During this period, the youth of Kenya were referred to as ‘leaders of tomorrow’, an avant-garde that was put to test when, in March 2002,
President Moi unveiled his ‘Uhuru Project’. At this time, political abuses and the construction of the hegemonic Nyayo (‘footsteps’) ideology was the key feature of the oppressive Moi regime (Throup 2003). As part of this regime, Moi adopted the slogans of peace, love and unity to express his humanism, which was watered in his African Inland Church (AIC) Christian background. Church attendance became a compulsory exercise for Moi, and a huge retinue of his sycophants would always accompany him. These two moralistic expressions of Moi’s regime, the Nyayo philosophy and Sunday church attendance, subtly portrayed an image of continued links between church and state to the masses in Kenya. In this Sunday ritual the public memory of political Leadership projected the patriarchal image of an older generation adhering to religion. Thus Church attendance when politicised by a large entourage of self-seekers, takes on the form of a confession space for older politicians. Given the growing indications that KANU’s ‘Mzee – old man’ approach to politics was being challenged, it became an important quest for youth to develop a culture of integration in which all human beings are respected. Undoubtedly the political uncertainties of the 1990s were full of paradoxes for the youth. In some instances there was extreme youth mobilisation to safeguard the narrow ruling elite class interests and parochial ethnic interests. Such activism was mainly in urban centres, especially Nairobi, Nakuru, Mombasa and Kisumu. The linkage between the political climate of the time and the use of urban youth music is critical. Whereas youth militia groups undermined democratic agendas, youth involved in artistic expressions of popular culture through their musical compositions progressively advocated for democracy.

The religious element assumed greater urgency in 2002, and took on the assertive character of a contest between God and man. In this binary contest, God was identified with the marginalised against an unjust leadership. In this situation, religion for the average man was either the basis for challenging hegemony or for accepting things the way they were. For this and other reasons, nationalist enthusiasm for and expectations of the regime had given way to great cynicism about what the state is and would be able to do. President Moi attempted to resist pressure for change, and publicly declared that the word defeat had never existed in his vocabulary. But religion once his safe haven formed a nexus with the political that saw the nascent beginning of ‘Yote Yawezeekana Bila Moi’ – All is Possible without Moi’. In public meetings this chant, appropriated from a Christian chorus, symbolised the imminent transfer of power and, with it, the end of Nyayo hegemony (Wekesa 2002). When it was realised that the majority of Kamukunji (political campaigns) attendees were youth, this chant takes on varied new forms. The impact of this, although largely overlooked, was that it depicted a relationship between ignorance, religion, knowledge and democratic politics. The song ‘Yote yawezeekana bila Moi’, was derived from ‘Yote yawezeekana kwa Imani – All is Possible with Faith’. Why did Kenyans cry out in song for this possibility? The aspiration of many Kenyans
Extended Handshake or Wrestling Match?

was the immediate removal of their problems in the person of President Moi, which testifies to the peculiar fact that politics in Kenya still revolved around personalities. Yet the critical questions of corruption, bad governance and a new constitution required a long-term re-examining of the institutional frameworks that give rise to these practices. For opposition meetings, the Christian chorus emphasized the urgency of the need for people to transform their reality, and their collective and public defiance of the uncompromising KANU regime. Beyond all the euphoria, it is important to note that the manner in which issues are broadly framed and defined for the electorate is important as Kenya moves towards a new political dispensation. In this context, one must recognise how the youth, feeling disenfranchised and excluded under Moi’s regime and by KANU’s politics, were keen to seize appropriate means of political participation.

Drawing attention to this relationship is relevant to the theme of popular culture in this study and may raise awareness of civil society’s ethos of hope in the consolidation of a democratic government in Kenya. By focusing on youth and urban culture in Kenya, my aim is to document specific issues and songs that fed into subterranean forms of resistance during the elections of 2002 in Kenya. Across the African continent, African youth in urban centres have used music as a mode of communication to express dissent. Research across Africa (Palmberg and Kirkegaard 2002, Nantang 2003) clearly depicts a young urban elite, not quite ready to promote African culture, but enthusiastic in projecting a youth identity. My report, while recognising this aspect, examines how youth music embodies social realities and at the same time serves as a mediator for those excluded by politics and economic challenges in Kenya.

The Emergence of Youth Music and Democratic Spaces?

The question of good governance became a rallying cry for reform in Kenya in the early 2000s, after major donors from the West (Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Britain) either discontinued or cut their aid to Kenya. Bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank also scaled back their aid to Kenya. Mutonyi (2002:22) states that at this time, “according to the report of the select Committee, corruption in Kenya is estimated to account for almost 56% of the tax revenue loss, which amounts to approximately 20% of the national GDP”. Not only does this convey an alarming picture of financial deterioration in Kenya, but it also clearly indicates the poverty with which the majority of Kenyans had to contend (Throup & Hornsby 1997). Critical to my narrative is the fact that there were institutions in place to curb official graft, but “… the fragmented nature of these institutions is a fundamental flaw in the fight against corruption” (Mutonyi 2002:379).

Yet, understanding the potential of youth will require that societies dispel the many myths about the inherent violence of youth. It is not enough that we make youth
a priority on the policy agenda. We must seek to understand them, ameliorate the
depression they feel, and include them in the development process. (Tulchin, Varat
& Hanley 2003:5)

These ideas need to be connected to Eric Wainaina’s presentation at the 2002 Kora
awards that won acclaim for being the best song representing East Africa. The two
aspects: not all youth are prone to violence; and understanding youth through
Wainaina demonstrate youth concerns with messages and images from their uncertain
political world, which are treated in this work as a scholarly text. As Chirwa
(2001:2) notes, song texts behave as expressive statements of people’s behavioural
patterns and depict skewed leadership. The songs analysed below point to contesta-
tions about patriotism, nationalism, nation building and the challenges of modern-
ity. With a tinge of Christianity (a moral force against greed and corruption),
various political actors in the process of democratisation provided the institutional
modes for the production and reception of youth pop culture. These banyan asso-
ciations that arise in connection with political struggles can give rise to important
symbolic challenges for the youth. These connections, many of which are histori-
cal-cultural formations, open up possibilities for transcending national spaces for
recognition and identity. Musicians like Suzanne Owiyo, Lydia Abura, Kayamba
Africa, Mr Googs, Vinnie Banton, Eric Wainaina and Henri Mutuku, all nomi-
nated for various categories of the Kora Africa musical awards deconstructed the
myth of a collective national identity. During the awards festival, Wainaina (Secular
– ‘Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo – The land of small-things meaning bribery’ and Mutuku
(Religious – ‘Nakuhitaji – I need you’) jointly won the prize for best artist from the
East African region. Wainaina was able to present Kenya to the world through a live
performance of his song, ‘Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo’, which enabled him to relay the story
of corruption in Kenya and to sing in Kiswahili, the symbol of Kenyan nationhood

What is important here is that the political environment in Kenya and Africa at
the time tolerated the critical deconstruction of hegemony. Wainaina’s engagement
with the corrupt regime in Kenya took on a less structured form of political involve-
ment or activism. This disconnection from overt politics (cf., Gado cartoon strip
13) is symbolised by and constructed within musical expressions. But music relays
our daily experiences in ways that show we are connected, intimate and engaged
with our lives in specific geographical spaces.

The Personal becoming Political

The experience shows that, given the right environment, Kenyans can place the
national interest above sectional interests. (Ghai 2001:27)

When politics is broadly understood to mean a division of power among various
sectors of the government, every citizen is bound to be interested in appropriate
forms of governance. How then do artists use music to construct the world around them? The disillusionment that was experienced by many Kenyans in 2002 cannot be dwelt on at length here, but was well captured in song by Wainaina. He seems to have dodged controversy during the Moi regime and at times others suffered for his work: “… English presenter Bill Odidi [was suspended] in September 2002 when he aired Eric Wainaina’s much famed and highly critical ‘Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo’” (Hofmeyr, Nyairo & Ogude 2003:375). By being in a position of opposition to government, he unconsciously became a societal marker of a generation and of generational change. Youth identity can be seen in Wainaina’s case as relating to the personal, social and historical construction and understanding of the world around him. Since music allows us to be submerged in sound and space, the reaction to it can affect our moods. So, the manner in which Wainaina as an artist decided to carve out a niche for himself in the political discourse of his Kenya served to distance him from other artists. This became clear in the way he composed his music and defined the issue of corruption or ‘TKK’.36

He’s a breath of fresh air. What excites me a lot is that when I was in Kenya, I found lots of musicians who were mimicking the Americans – playing hip-hop – and to see a young person like Eric Wainaina play traditional music is really amazing (Nwamba 2002).37

The songs that Wainaina produced dealt with socio-political problems in East Africa and this was a primary reason for his winning the Kora awards for best male artist in 2002. Prior to this, Wainaina had found himself consoling the nation in the aftermath of the August 1998 bombing of the American embassy, when 299 Kenyans were killed, with his song ‘Kenya Only’. This composition, with its typical Wainaina theme of unity, created for the country a moment of reflection during its time of grief and crisis by echoing the Kenyan national anthem’s definitive message of hope and unity Wainaina became the contemporary youth performer who soared above ethnic divides to present Kenyans with the hope of nationhood. Thus, the use of symbolic communication through music seems to be a recurrent goal for Wainaina. ‘Kenya Only’ illustrates this aspiration by being subjective to the historical circumstances. Wainaina’s musical style is a product of creative choices that are socially and historically constructed.

In the following example, Wainaina sets out to mourn Kenya and derives identity from the emblem of the ‘flag’. This flag occupies a religious space in his life and constantly drives his actions. By using this image, the role of religion in matters of citizenship and state becomes central to the everyday life of Kenyans. In Wainaina’s song, the tragedy of August 1998 brings Kenyans together in a way and mood

36. ‘TKK’ or Toa Kitu Kidogo was used to mean an exchange of money for services.
typified in the earlier struggle for independence. The ideals of freedom and four
shared values of the people, land, bloodshed and peace were disrupted on that day
and the re-emphasis of nationhood and unity was important. In this, I agree with
Mans 2003:17, that “… musicians seek an area of balance between the search for
the national unifying commonalities and enjoyment of the creative but potentially
divisive differences”.

I’ll weep, I’ll mourn, I’ll pray for Kenya only,
Let my flag remind me of my sacred duty,
Black for the people,
Green for the Land,
Red for the price of freedom,
And White for Peace in Kenya,
My pride, my strength, my joy,
Always will be Kenyan
In pride and strength and joy.\(^{38}\)

This song brings to mind all the cultural and social differences in Kenya. Perhaps,
having grown up and lived in urban Nairobi, Wainaina had experienced the raw ef-
effects of corruption both individually or collectively. In this sense, political thinking
and his involvement in music from the age of 18 became a personal process, which
helped in the construction of his social identity. His inspiration for music and per-
formance came from two groups, ‘Take 6’ and ‘Ladysmith Black Mambazo’ and
not surprisingly he and others formed an a cappella gospel group, ‘Five Alive’, which
disbanded in 1997. His solo musical album ‘Sawa Sawa’\(^{39}\), embodies the differences
embedded in the notion of national identity and artistic expression. Three langu-
gees feature in the songs on this album, namely Kiswahili, English and Kikuyu, the
last-mentioned reflecting his ethnic roots. It is on this album that ‘Nchi ya Kitu
Kidogo’ was first featured. Other songs on this, his debut album are, ‘Ritwa Riaku’,
sung in Kikuyu, ‘Who is to blame’ in English, ‘Daima’ or ‘Kenya Only’, ‘Usiku wa
Manane’ and ‘Mashaka’, both sung in Kiswahili. The album also incorporates one of
Kenya’s leading groups of young comedians, Redkyulass, who not only spice up the
album with needed humour but also project their political views. Part of Wainaina’s
commitment to the fight for social justice is his composition ‘Ukweli’, dedicated to
Father John Kaiser, the American Catholic bishop who was murdered.\(^{40}\) At the time,
agitation for constitutional change in Kenya was at a fever pitch and the implica-
tions of this for the youth cab be seen in the draft constitution of 2004.

\(^{38}\) These are the words of the chorus to ‘Kenya Only’, from www.mnet.co.za/Car-teBlanche/Dis-
play

\(^{39}\) Christian Kaufman, Salmon Kitololo, Ali Makunguru and Ben Wainaina combined their talents
to produce this album.

\(^{40}\) The case of Father Kaiser is to be reopened, since the Catholic Church disputes the theory that
he committed suicide.
ARTICLE FOR YOUTH, 39

(1) The youth constitute an integral part of society and are entitled to enjoy all rights and freedoms set out in the Bill of Rights, taking into account their unique needs.

(2) The state shall take Legislative and other measures, including but not limited to affirmative action policies and programmes, to promote the welfare of the youth.

(3) The measures referred to under clause (2) shall include measures to ensure for the youth
   (a) access to quality and relevant education and training;
   (b) participation in governance;
   (c) access to gainful employment;
   (d) adequate opportunities in the social, political, economic and other spheres of national life;
   (e) freedom of association to further their legitimate interests;
   (f) protection from any cultural custom, tradition or practise that could undermine their dignity or quality of life; and
   (g) a life free from discrimination, exploitation or abuse.


41. Copies of this document were reproduced in the national print media: Daily Nation, East African Standard and Kenya Times. This section is quoted from the Daily Nation, 26 March 2004.
Chapter Three

Nobody gathers firewood to roast a thin goat.
(Kenyan Proverb)

Kenya, my Home, which Songs do you Deserve?

Politics is not about politicians or their actions, but rather the practise of politics should be of relevance to the realities and concerns of the youth. Whereas they may feel unable to intervene, it is only by participating politically that the youth can push through their agenda, especially by voting, as they did in 2002. With increasing age, youths are able to understand corrupt manipulations and thus directly experience their own powerlessness. Wainaina was ready to challenge what he saw as an inconsistency in Kenyan society. In various ways, the complacency and hypocrisy of working class Kenyans and their lack of commitment to turning the economy around was evident. This indicated that corruption emanating from the highest levels had become ubiquitous in society. Wainaina connects the everyday political encountered in real life situations to the official discourse on politics in the national media. He demonstrates both a cynicism towards those in authority and, at the same time, a genuine attempt to highlight the disadvantages of a lack of patriotism-as-individual-commitment. In many ways, 'Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo' deals with the immediate concerns of the people: education, health facilities, identification, and police and judicial corruption (Omolo 2003). In so doing, Wainaina places political debates where they should begin, institutions of governance (cf., Gado cartoon strip 14). Political concepts often thrive in the daily experiences of family life and schools. Therefore, notions of power, marginalisation, discrimination, poverty, control and authority are already formed long before the young become youths. The choices available to Kenyan children in this respect were ‘politicised’ long before the child became an adult. The idea that in order to survive in Kenya one had to bribe clearly implies the endemic state of corruption. The popularity of this song was grounded in the fact that corrupt key government officials did not want to be faced with the reality that Kenya had become. To them, music should have offered a backdrop motif that blurred reality and gave temporary relief. However, such temporary amnesia, especially in public life, offered an opportunity for different voices, most of them in opposition to the government’s approach. As Gicheru (2004)\textsuperscript{42} has docu-

\textsuperscript{42} This article can be retrieved from http://www.publicintegrity.org/ga/country.aspx?cc=ke&act=notebook
mented, when Wainaina attempted to present this song to government officials, the following reaction was evident:

... at a gala attended by then Vice-President George Saitoti and a host of other government officials. Inexplicably, the microphone went dead just when he started singing the second verse. Undeterred by the technical hitch the audience continued singing the song, disrupting the program despite attempts by the organizers to restore order.

What, then, is the text of 'Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo'? 'Kitu Kidogo' simply means ‘something small’ or a bribe. For many Policemen, ‘Toa Kitu Kidogo’ or ‘TKK’ specifically related to a bribe for services. For any service, which Kenyans rightly deserved as citizens, institutions such as the judiciary and armed forces would demand ‘TKK’, which could take many forms. Thus, Kenyans had experienced the grand-scale corruption and abuse of power that is presented in 'Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo'. Next is the term ‘Nchi ya …’, which refers to Kenya. For a long time Kenyans were proud of the peace that they enjoyed and the free space they had for their entrepreneurial spirit. However, with levels of poverty increasing, bribery became too much of an economic haemorrhage, “… around 16 bribes a month, an average of $100 …” (Robinson 2002). In these circumstances, the ability to manipulate Kenyans in dire economic difficulties was great, but 24 years of Moi’s rule had given many ordinary Kenyans well-earned resilience and they could differentiate between the Kiswahili terms ‘Kura – vote’ and ‘Kula – eat’. What is striking here is that the electorate believed in their power to change the course of politics in Kenya, and that they would not be gullible to the empty pledges given by politicians at election time. What is also fascinating is that these moments of collective opposition in 2002, saliently emerged through musical expressions while public political protests took some time to be visible. Thus, those musicians like Wainaina and Gidigidi–Majimaji who emerged were not intending to make political capital but, nonetheless, blended in with the protest against social inequity and corruption. By virtue of their musical standing and their established names in Nairobi, these youths had a privileged status and an audience that popularised their compositions. It was mainly the text of their songs that conveyed a message which acted as a banyan reality check for the audience, causing them to reflect on their situation. Therefore, for this generation of youth performers the narrative of change was a central motif in such of their songs as ‘I am unbwogable’ and ‘Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo’, thereby making popular music an embryonic site for future protest. Perhaps this is nowhere truer than of the Kenyan national anthem itself, which continues to remind Kenyans of their role in maintaining and guarding their freedom. Needless to say, the blind sycophancy and patronage during President Moi’s regime metaphorically depicted Kenyans as entranced to the singing and dancing to his tune of Nyayo. Is it surprising that by
2002, the *Nyayo* tune and trance had dropped from the public political trajectory? This reality may have spelled defeat for KANU in the 2002 elections and it becomes necessary to reflect on Wainaina’s musical exuberance.

Talking the Political and Singing the Social

As I have already written, Wainaina represents and personifies the hope that young people in Kenya needed in those political times. The title of the song ‘*Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo*’ embodies the nature of Wainaina’s approach to the subject of corruption without hiding behind varied meanings and intentions. In a way, such blunt rawness imparts the same feeling that those Kenyans felt when demands for ‘TKK’ were put to them. One may call this unfairly dissecting Kenya in the open, and herein lies the parallel that corruption unfairly dissected the lives of many innocent Kenyans. The difference, however, is that Wainaina’s song did not have immediate and dire consequences for its audience, though at a personal level, he was often censored and denied public access in presenting his song. But corruption, as he aptly sings, interfered with literally all forms of livelihood like some form of cancer. Fascinatingly, he heralds in this song a ‘sick’ country with ‘sick’ minds. Such an image is powerful, evocative and was damaging to those in leadership, who needed to hold on to the reigns of power so as to continue the cycle of corruption. Meanwhile, Kenya was in the ‘jaws of the crocodile’ (cf., Gado cartoon strip 13) and such a recognition renews the need for re-examining the structures of governance. In recreating ‘*Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo*’, Wainaina openly rejects the ambiguities of patriotism, patronage and corruption.

*Mzee alisema,* The old men say,
*Hakuna cha bure,* Nothing is for free,
*Huo msemo tunautafsiri kinyume,* We have interpreted this proverb out of context.

It becomes typical of his songs that Wainaina creates a central theme, from which he muses over the socio-economic differences that existed. In the foregoing lines, the wisdom and identity of age are critical. Thus, as the national flag is emblematic of national identity in his other songs, wisdom through culture is relevant in the political sphere, where ‘might’ is found in status and money. The intergenerational view and the important place of the aged are sought out in the truth that has been given, but the meanings of this truth we choose to renegotiate to suit our convenience. In so doing, I believe that history, politics and memory are umbilically connected in a form of organic nexus between national exhaustion and literary emptiness, the antidote to which, the energy for renewal, can be found by seeking the answers in culture. Primarily, culture remains a changing yet reliable construct which we can continuously tap into to derive meaning about the contemporary world. The abso-
lute nature of corruption that represents a lack of security in life and property are themes that are relevant to all Kenyans and critically so to the future of the youth.

Even getting your child to school,
You must give a bribe,
Getting a telephone line installed is a nightmare,
You will pay a high price for a road licence,
Losing your Identity Card means big trouble,
We are drawing back our Nation!

Wainaina’s critical engagement with social issues can thus be summarised as targeting education, communication, transportation, and citizenship (identity card). All these realities affect the lives of many, irrespective of ethnicity and social class. The text captures the commonality of all Kenyans in experiencing economic difficulties and he bemoans the fact that ‘Twairudisha Jamburi yetu nyuma!’ Needless to say, by fanning the roaring fire of corruption, Kenyans were passively complicit in the emptiness of the reactions to their situation. Here, the political and economic motives of Kenyans are questioned and it seems that at this juncture in the song Wainaina is seeking for legitimate ways to protest. At the time, despite President Moi’s harsh punishment of criticism, the albeit limited coverage of the song was part of a new reality that political criticism was tolerated. This meant that the possibilities for forms of dialogue became more palpable, so the potential to hold up a mirror to Kenyans to look at themselves became real.

A land of small-things meaning bribery,
Is a land of small people,
If you need chai (tea), dear countrymen,
Go to Limuru,
If you need chai, mama buy ketepa.

These are allusions to images familiar to Kenyans, ‘chai’ being another local term for a bribe, and we are left in no doubt about the complacent attitude of Kenyans in letting the fabric of social life deteriorate. Naively, we are presented with a political view and perceived sense of corruption. By prescribing the simple answer to corruption as “if you need chai, go to Limuru”, humour highlights the mismatch between reality and the colossal nature of corruption. However, the fact that generations of Kenyans tolerated these circumstances of corruption meant it had not only become endemic, but was quite unnecessary in some of the forms it took – no wonder “… a country of small people”. For some, the song at this level becomes a form of catharsis, since the denial of corruption was achievable. Just as one could buy tea from Limuru or the ketepa brand, the rejection of overtures of corruption was within one’s grasp. And this becomes a temporarily welcome expression and ray of hope for those experiencing the paralysis of corruption. While being somewhat powerless to change the outlook of many Kenyans, the song at this point implies that one can be...
powerful by being an agent of change in fighting against corruption. The need for youth to develop structures to achieve this collectively is important.

The need for security in all its forms runs unmistakably through this text.

_Hata nyumbani ukipatwa na majambazi_  
_Ukipiga 999 wanasema “sisi hatuna gari”_  
_“Lete elfu tano, ya petroli, saidia utumishi”_ “Give us five thousand shillings for petrol, and to assist the force”

Doubt is expressed here, when one cannot rely on the police to provide security during times of crisis, such as robberies. The purpose of the song is obvious, since insecurity was a prime issue in many communities throughout Kenya. Kenyans seem enmeshed in corruption, the result being payments even for policing. Was it that the police force was poorly paid? Undeniably ‘TKK’ had become a way of life and had fundamentally perverted cultural values, including the vision of the police force, ‘Utumishi kwa wote – Service to all’. In a broad sense, this abuse of power permeated all sectors and brought into question the integrity of many. What is interesting about this focus on the police force is less about who is saying it than what is being said. For the Police force as part of the national security agents, demands for ‘TKK’ compromised their integrity. However the fact that traffic policemen were notorious for taking bribes leaves open the debate about the factors that encouraged this practice.

It is worth mentioning that Moi’s regime ‘bought out’ the armed forces and many of their senior personnel received large land tracts, so that the foot-soldiers also sought ways of benefiting and corruption became almost a legitimised way of life.

With caustic sarcasm, the song also places the judiciary in a questionable light:

_Mahakamani, hela ndiyo haki,_  
_Kwa elfu chache mshtakiwa ndio mshtaki,_  
_Utajiri huwa ushahidi,_  
_Twairudisha jamburi yetu nyuma,_  
In courts of law, money is justice,  
For a few thousand shillings the accused becomes the accuser,  
Wealth is an accepted testimony,  
We are drawing back our Nation!

From the 1980s, when high court judges, the comptroller and the auditor general lost their security of tenure, many corrupt deals were given space to thrive. In essence, this state of uncertainty allowed for no transparency or checks and balances in the public service and spoke to the regime’s general lack of political goodwill: clearly good governance had ceased to matter in Kenya. This represented a sharp historical detour from the ideals echoed in the national anthem: “And the Glory of Kenya, the Fruit of our Labour, Fill every Heart with Thanksgiving”. Instead, one had a situation shaped by greedy individuals all aiming to hold on to the reigns of power. The lopsided nature of justice in this era of ‘purchased justice’ through the court system increased the incidence of mob justice and indirectly contributed to the laxity of the police force. The excesses of this regime were epitomised by the
record-breaking Harambees, which gave rise to images in the media of fat wads of contributions from persons trying to outdo each other in pursuit of political patronage. However, as Wainaina reminds Kenyans, there can be alternatives, like the different brands of tea which Kenya is known for. Generally, the image of tea growing has been used to project a positive image of Kenya to the world. But when does this image become clouded so that, instead, Kenya is seen primarily as being involved in corrupt deals?

*Nchi ya kitu kidogo* A Country of small-things meaning bribery,
*Nchi ya watu wadogo* Is a Country of small people,
*Ukitaka chai ewe Mama nuna ketepa* If you need chai, Mama buy ketepa,
*Nenda Limuru* Go to Limuru,
*(Ukitaka soda ewe Inspector burudika na Fanta)* ‘If you need a soda, Inspector drink Fanta’.

The interconnectedness of memory, representation and identity is also apparent in the image of Kenyatta Hospital (now Referral Hospital). This urban space has been contextualised in a way that resonates with the ethos of life. Yet the irony was that in going to Kenyatta Hospital one was sure to meet death through enormous neglect. In a symbolic twist of images, the hospital becomes one of many sites of decay that daily flood the minds of Kenyans.

*Huko Kenyatta, madawa zimekwihsa* In Kenyatta there is no medicine,
*Mashiti ya uzwa Marikiti, mia kwa mia* Bed sheets are sold for 100 shillings,
*Wafanyi kazi waenda miezi bila pesa* The medical staff go for months with no pay,
*Ni bahati ukitibiwa* You are lucky if you get treatment,
*Mzigo wetu unazidi kuwa mzito* Our burden gets heavier and heavier,
*Watoto wanne na mshahara wa elfu mbili mia tano* Four children and a salary of two thousand five hundred shillings,
*Ya vitabu na viatu na vyakula* For books, shoes and food,
*Nauliza na Mbotela, Je huu ni ungwana?* I ask as Mbotela, is this right?

In Kenya, Kenyatta Hospital symbolised the legitimacy of a government that made the health of its citizens a priority. The likelihood of this being achieved is reduced when basic requirements such as medicine, bed sheets and staff salaries are neglected, even though the medical staff threatened strikes on many occasions in the 1990s. The knowledge that such a facility, heavily used by poor Kenyans, could be plundered, epitomised the despair evident in many lives. Living in Kenya became burdensome, and for the sheer lack of statistics it may never be known how many Kenyans lost their lives as a result of this neglect and corruption.

Consequently, there was marked waning in enthusiasm for national events and holidays. The emphasis on Kenya as a trademark in his songs reflects the collective celebratory spirit that many young Kenyans saw as a stimulus to change.
With its focus on Kenya, the composition transcends ethnic and regional boundaries and becomes legitimised for any Kenyan. This song suggests that Wainaina was operating and probing within the boundaries he had already created through his blend of *Benga* fusion and his critique of the social issues militating against Kenyans’ freedom. Finally, when he performed the song during the Kora awards in South Africa, the projection of what was happening in Kenya as affecting other countries was echoed as a truism by the contemporary global forces of change and accountability. The reality that popular musicians can present the cancerous nature of their governments to a global audience provides the incentive for more youths to use protest songs as a form of personal legitimacy (cf., Gado cartoon strip 15). It is not altogether surprising that the post-election observations in 2003, noted the following:

6.2.2 ROLE OF THE YOUTH

Every party had a youth wing. The youth agenda featured prominently since Moi had pledged to leave leadership to the youth and made good his promise by nominating Uhuru Kenyatta his successor. The youth played the role of mobilising their colleagues and other people to attend campaigns. They provided security during campaigns. Providing security mainly involved countering attacks from other party youths. In the 2002 elections, however, the violent side of the youth was rarely exposed. One stark example is when youth allegedly allied to FORD-People attacked Raila in Keroka Township and forced him to sing songs in praise of Nyachae. The top FORD-People officials came out in the open to deny any relationship with the said youth. Uhuru Kenyatta also had to openly denounce his purported relationship with the outlawed Mungiki group. In many constituencies, however, young men and women were paid by party advance teams to drive around town in hired lorries, dancing and chanting party slogans on behalf of KANU, NARC and FORD-People. The same scenario was observed in 1997 and 1992. The youth were also very crucial in mobilising people to attend meetings.

(IED Report 2002:80–1)
Conclusions

The role of popular music and the place of urban youth are important in contemporary Kenya. At a personal level, the social identification youth musicians invest in particular political issues is important to understanding their dilemmas and their participation in events. To this extent, there may be limitations, but as Wainaina illustrates, youth can reflect and occupy an important fundamental democratic discourse through music. By carving out a niche for national identity, youth continue to be pathfinders for change and initiative. His determination to present themes and compositions that draw attention to the social, cultural and political changes in Kenya demonstrates his optimism. Not only is he, like other urban youths, shaped by the events of his time, but his optimism is historically situated in the nation of Kenya. Thus, the moment for youth involvement in the political and social events of Kenya was evident and, indeed, the Kenyan youth duo of Gidigidi and Majimaji were appointed ‘Messengers of Truth’ by the United Nations in 2004 with the aim of supporting youth initiatives in slums and inner cities.

A recent study undertaken by UN Habitat reveals that hip-hop is more than a genre of music or dance; it is a social movement. It is both a product of and a reaction to globalisation that represents a strong political statement …

Books, Conference papers and Journal articles


1. Year 2002: Former President Moi taking the penalty-shot against the defending opposition team.

2. NSSF – National Social Security Fund, one of the Government parastatals that was plundered in the Moi regime.
3. Former President Moi, addressing the 2002 presidential candidates.

4. Young turks debate.
5. Former President Moi, deciding on which young Turk to succeed him as president.
7. Succession of Moi's presidential debate.
9. Former President Moi, offering Uhuru Kenyatta to the Nation. As usual Uhuru is portrayed as being undecided.

10. The portrayal of Uhuru as the “baby” being led by former President Moi.
11. A blindfolded, former President Moi leading the political party KANU with the young turks still debating the meaning of succession.

12. The meaning of young turks being debated upon by ordinary citizens.
13. The colossal nature of Corruption within the Kenyan context at the time of President Moi’s tenure.

14. Notorious nature of the Police Force with bribery exhortations or TKK.
15. Citizen Moi faced with the trap he forced may Kenyans into – bribery.
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