

## Chapter 13

# Language and Performing Arts: East African Hip Hop and Public Sensitization for Political Change

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### ABSTRACT

*One of the many consequences of globalization and the new world order is the increased cross border interaction among people, leading to more transfer and exchange of knowledge, technology, values and virtues, vices and viruses, and other traits among nations. One area that has been impacted heavily by this flow, largely aided by the Internet and other emerging media, is culture. To a large extent, though, the transfer of cultural practices appears to be more from the western and more developed world to the weaker, economically and politically less powerful nations. But what is borrowed is indigenized, sometimes entirely altered, to meet the needs of local communities. These changes are reflected in Africa's music scene, dances, and other genres of popular culture. Within that context, this chapter aims at meeting two goals. First, to analyze the extent to which musicians, especially the youth, have managed to maintain a balance between educating and entertaining society at the local level, while keeping abreast with emerging global trends and influences. Particularly, it will show how the young generation of East African musicians uses music to sensitize the public by serving as critics of the management of public affairs and how this has contributed to political change. Secondly, it will investigate the effects that these emerging practices have had on the use of African languages in the performing arts.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses East African hip-hop by analyzing its content, language use, and the role in political change, and social and cultural transfor-

mation. Also, it broadly examines the intersection of hip-hop as a cultural form with the emerging communication technologies, partly leading to the globalization of hip-hop. The first part, the transnationalization of hip-hop, traces the origin of hip-hop and explains some of the factors that catapulted it to the realms of acquiring traits as-

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sociated with global cultures. The second part examines the emergence of East African hip-hop, before proceeding to take a closer look at the content of songs by Kenyan and Tanzanian hip-hop artists. Section three examines the language used by the artists in conveying their messages. Also, this section discusses the role that hip-hop music plays in East Africa, how it is perceived, and its place in society. We conclude by noting the potential of hip-hop as a social and political mobilizing agent as well as an educational tool, but hasten to point how that potential has neither been realized nor fully utilized.

## **THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF HIP-HOP**

Expanding on Benedict Anderson's (1991) notion of imagined communities, Corona and Madrid (2008, p. 3) have pointed the folly of insisting on the nation-state as a unit of analysis, especially in matters of culture where most nation-states are made up of diverse groups. Still, members of such groups are not restricted in their trans-border interactions:

Such a view emphasizes the fact that culture and the people who produce it, consume it, and identify with it continuously move through the borders of the nation-state via a wide range of technologies. These people group together in a variety of "imagined communities" that might be greater or smaller than the nation-State, but transcend it as a unit of identification (Corona & Madrid, 2008: 3).

Likewise, cultural theorists have accepted this position, especially considering that there is an increase in the flow of capital, people, information, and culture under globalization. This is evidenced in the growth of special interest groups with membership in several nations across the globe. In his article "*Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy*," Arjun Appadurai (1990), argues against the Cartesian plane of op-

positions – center vs. periphery, North vs. South, global vs. local, which has been the strong point of globalization studies until recently. Appadurai suggests the need to focus on global dynamics from a viewpoint that acknowledges the ceaseless interaction of global relations- what he calls *scapes* - which mutate constantly. The Appadurain "*scapes*" dissect the dynamics of global imaginary by examining the fluid constitutional make-up of our globe, which constantly transmutes, and especially the electronic ability to penetrate previously impervious national borders. This contemporaneous trait of our 21<sup>st</sup> century digital millennium facilitates and enhances deterritorialization of its citizens who have become subjects in search of cosmopolitanism and/or globality. The media, in their copious manifestations, are at the nucleus of these changes. It is not surprising how the mediascape, as Appadurai illustrates, possesses the power to form scripts about "reality" informing how different parts of the globe can be formed (See also Wachanga, 2010). We argue that the youth are more likely to be influenced by and open to such transnational movements. We will use this background to examine the growth and spread of hip-hop culture in East Africa. But using text to discuss music – a genre that is appreciated through lyricism – is "like dancing about architecture" (Goddard, 2002, p. 9). Even more poignantly put:

*Words can never fully capture the electrifying rush and emotional punch that a great pop song can deliver. While a common objection among fans, journalists and performers is that attempts to analyze music often fail to grasp what makes the sound so important in the first place. (Car-rabine, 2007 p. 231*

Corona and Madrid (2008, p 5) see music as being "in constant flux," that "music is the perennial undocumented immigrant; it has always moved beyond borders without the required paperwork." If indeed music is that undocumented immigrant, it is, as Josh Kun (2005) notes, always from some-

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