Africa

<http://journals.cambridge.org/AFR>

Additional services for **Africa**:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)

HIP-HOP AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP ON KENYA'S 'SWAHILI COAST'

Andrew J. Eisenberg

Africa / Volume 82 / Issue 04 / November 2012, pp 556 - 578

DOI: 10.1017/S0001972012000502, Published online: 09 November 2012

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0001972012000502

How to cite this article:

Andrew J. Eisenberg (2012). HIP-HOP AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP ON KENYA'S 'SWAHILI COAST'. *Africa*, 82, pp 556-578 doi:10.1017/S0001972012000502

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

HIP-HOP AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP ON KENYA'S 'SWAHILI COAST'

Andrew J. Eisenberg

East Africa's historically Muslim 'Swahili coast' has always served as a conceptual as well as physical periphery for post-colonial Kenya.¹ Stereotyped as 'neither completely African nor, by extension, Kenyan' (Prestholdt 2011: 6), it provides a foil 'in opposition to which non-coastal Christian Kenya may construct an identity' (Porter 1995: 147). In the context of generally heightened tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims, this symbolic violence is fuelling a rise in Islamism and coastal separatism as alternative political imaginaries among Kenya's coastal Muslims (Goldsmith 2011; Mazrui 1993; Mazrui and Shariff 1994; Prestholdt 2011; Seeseman 2007). Mediating present and future conflicts between the state and those who may embrace such imaginaries will depend upon a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of social identification and citizenship among the denizens of the Kenyan coast. This article works toward developing such an understanding by examining processes of 'cultural citizenship', in Aihwa Ong's sense of 'self-making and being made in relation to nation states and transnational processes' (Ong 1996: 737), among young members of the Kenyan coast's Muslim-Swahili society. Working through an ethnography of hip-hop artistry in the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa, I explore the epistemic terrain upon which young subjects of the Swahili coast (as I shall call them) are objectified and subjectified as 'Kenyan youth' in the twenty-first century.

The peoples I refer to collectively as subjects of the Swahili coast are, in broad ethnic terms, Swahili and Swahili-speaking Muslims of Arab and South Asian descent. They are recognizable as a social unit by virtue of their shared primary socio-spatial context (neighbourhoods like Mombasa's Old Town), religion (Islam, primarily Sunni), language (Swahili with Arabo-Islamic elements), and genealogical link to the pre-colonial Islamic trading civilization that long ago came to be called 'Swahili' from the Arabic word for 'coastlands' (*Sawāhil*). But as the admittedly awkward neologism suggests, I am mostly interested in grouping together Kenya's subjects of the Swahili coast as a people with a shared social positioning: as traditional urbanites with (real and imagined) ties to the Indian Ocean world, they exist in tension with a dominant national imaginary grounded in the idea of a coalition of rural, African 'tribes' (see Lonsdale 2004).

ANDREW J. EISENBERG is Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Faculty of Music at the University of Oxford, and Junior Research Fellow at St Catherine's College. His work focuses on music and subjectivity in post-colonial Kenya. His current research concerns the digitization of the Kenyan music industry. Email: andrew.eisenberg@music.ox.ac.uk

¹This article is based on eighteen months of dissertation-related fieldwork carried out in Mombasa between 2004 and 2006, and some follow-up interviews carried out in Nairobi in early 2012. The Mombasa fieldwork was supported by Fulbright-Hays, Columbia University, and the Social Science Research Council. The follow-up interviews in Nairobi were carried out under the auspices of the 'Music, Digitisation, Mediation' research programme at the University of Oxford.

In Mombasa, subjects of the Swahili coast experience this tension at a visceral level, on a daily basis, because the Kenyan nation is always present for them – not only in the form of the state apparatus, but also in the form of the mainly Christian, economically and politically powerful ‘mainlanders’ (*Wabara*) who have been settling in the city in large numbers over the past century.

In addition to keeping the analytical focus on subjectification, the term ‘subject of the Swahili coast’ carries the benefit of clarifying that my analysis is not solely concerned with the Swahili. This ethnic group has received a great deal of scholarly attention over the past few decades, thanks in no small part to the efforts of committed intellectuals to combat the marginalization of East Africa’s coastal Muslims by asserting that these people are, indeed, ‘an African people, born of that continent and raised on it’ (Nurse and Spear 1985: viii; other examples include Abdallah Khalid 1977; Mazrui and Shariff 1994; Middleton 1992).² Many – perhaps most – subjects of the Swahili coast today describe themselves as ‘Swahili’; however, there are also many who do not, or who only do so with qualifications, including the vast majority of Swahili-speaking Muslims of South Asian descent, and many Swahili-speaking Arabs of Hadrami, Omani and Baloch descent.³ There are also many self-described ‘Swahili’ whom I would not describe as subjects of the Swahili coast, as the term has long been used in East Africa to refer to those who have adopted the Swahili language (the regional *lingua franca*) as their primary means of communication.

My ethnographic entry point for examining cultural citizenship among young subjects of the Swahili coast in Mombasa is the youth-oriented popular music that has emerged as a key component of Kenyan public culture over the past couple of decades. Kenyan youth music borrows from global hip-hop culture the idea that the role of the ‘artist’ is not only to make music but also to ‘represent the real’ by embodying and expressing the authentic subjectivity of her place in the world, her ‘hood’ (Forman 2002; Bennett 2000: 133–65; Maxwell 2003: 135–7). The musical and other ways in which Kenyan youth music artists construct their public personae thus provide rich data on processes of cultural citizenship: in addition to being direct examples of a highly public form of cultural citizenship, they also reveal a great deal about the intersection of public culture and everyday life where cultural citizenship happens even for those who do not live their lives in the spotlight.

The core of this article is an analysis of ‘tracks’ (recorded songs) and music videos recorded by youth music artists in the Kenyan port city of Mombasa between 2004 and 2007. During this period, a number of local artists began to embrace a coastal ‘identity’ (that is, a framework for persona construction) that subtly excluded subjects of the Swahili coast and reinscribed their otherness *vis-à-vis* the Kenyan nation. Those coastal youth music artists who happened

²Swahili is a centuries-old social identity that began to be understood as an ethnic identity only in the late-nineteenth or in the twentieth century. The consensus among scholars of the Swahili coast today – or at least among those who do not oppose ethnicity itself on epistemological grounds – is that there exists a unitary, albeit porous, Swahili ethnic group of mixed Bantu, Arab and Asian origins (see *inter alia* Mazrui and Shariff 1994; Middleton 1992).

³East African Baloch traditionally refer to themselves as ‘Arabs’, because of their historical links with the local Omani elite.

to be subjects of the Swahili coast were thus forced to grapple with their marginality as a practical and aesthetic problem. The representational strategies they employed in their works speak to the conditions of cultural citizenship for young, urban subjects of the Swahili coast in Kenya in the twenty-first century.

HIP-HOP AND CITIZENSHIP IN KENYA

Following the liberalization of the Kenyan media in the mid-1990s, stiff competition for the ears of the youth led to a near-complete monopoly of US hip-hop and R&B on Kenya's radio airwaves.⁴ Emerging just as the personal computer-based 'bedroom studio' was coming into common use in the Kenyan music industry, this new soundscape was soon met with a dialogical response in the form of locally produced, youth-oriented music genres grounded stylistically in hip-hop with inflections of Jamaican dancehall, Caribbean zouk, and Congolese soukous. This youth music 'explosion' (as it is often called) had an enormous impact on the Kenyan media. By the early 2000s, Kenya had become host to a vibrant, youth-oriented 'mediascape' (Appadurai 1996), dominated by the sounds, images and narratives of a fully 'indigenized' (Mitchell 2001), albeit intensively 'glocal', hip-hop culture.⁵

Hip-hop culture – a cluster of African American expressive forms (rap music, breakdancing and graffiti art) and associated stylistic and ideological commitments that emerged in America's post-industrial urban ghettos during the late-1970s and 1980s – has proved highly flexible and highly mobile, having been adopted and adapted by young people, albeit variously and differentially, in diverse locales around the world (Alim 2009; Mitchell 2001). Its presence in Kenya is not surprising, given the foundation provided by Afro-diasporic cultural matrices that had previously taken hold among the country's urban youth – namely, African American soul and Jamaican reggae (Nyairo 2004). But its pervasiveness in the Kenyan public sphere is nonetheless remarkable. Propagated through radio, television, print media, the Internet, and (not least) the sound systems of public service vehicles, hip-hop culture has come to suffuse public space in urban Kenya, in both the concrete and abstract senses of the term. In the process, it has become deeply implicated in the ways in which young, urban Kenyans are objectified and subjectified as members of the large and politically significant class of Kenyan citizens known as 'the youth'.

In line with the overriding emphasis on oppositionality and resistance in the global hip-hop literature (see Mitchell 2001, for example), scholarship on

⁴That Kenya's first private radio stations would focus on 'the youth' made sense from a financial perspective: according to Kenya's Ministry of Youth Affairs, 'the youth in Kenya number about 9.1 million, and account for 32 per cent of the population. Of these, 51.7 per cent are female. The youth form 60 per cent of the total labour force but the majority are unemployed due to the country's high unemployment level' (Ministry of Youth Affairs, Kenya 2006: 1).

⁵I use the term 'mediascape' with Arjun Appadurai's definition in mind – that is, as both a media infrastructure and a set of 'characters, plots, and textual forms' that subjects use in imagining 'scripts' for their and others' lives (1996: 35). I would only add that mediascapes also provide soundtracks – affective grooves, tunes, refrains, anthems and associated lyrical content – for these scripts (Nyairo 2007).

Kenyan hip-hop culture typically approaches the issue of youth citizenship through discussions of the ways in which Kenyan hip-hop adherents construct a 'youth nation' as an alternative to the country's 'tribe'-oriented national imaginary (Behrend 2002; Samper 2002: 242–8; 2004). Rare exceptions to this include Nyairo and Ogude's (2005) discussion of how a Kenyan hip-hop track became 'official state culture' after its use in the 2002 presidential campaign and Evan Mwangi's (2004) analysis of the ways in which masculist tropes in East African hip-hop texts borrow from the discourses of nation building. Here I follow Nyairo, Ogude and Mwangi in suggesting that hip-hop culture in Kenya at times serves as an instrument of normativity in the process of transforming young Kenyans into 'Kenyan youth'.⁶

The potential normativity of Kenyan hip-hop culture became evident in Mombasa during the first decade of the twenty-first century, in the ways in which some local youth music artists began to construct a regional identity for themselves. The agents of this project were reacting to the industrial and thematic centrality of Kenya's capital city in Kenyan youth music. With the country's music studios, radio stations and media houses largely clustered in Nairobi, most successful Kenyan youth music artists are based there and 'a significant share of [their output] generates various discourses of the capital city' (Nyairo 2006: 71). Hence Nairobi has become synonymous with 'real' urban youth experience in Kenya's youth-oriented mediascape, forcing artists not from Nairobi to either refashion themselves as Nairobians or work to construct a convincing regional identity that would enable them to argue that they are also a part of the Kenyan 'youth nation'.

BEING 'IN MOMBASA'

The project of developing a 'coastal' youth music identity in Kenya arguably began back in the mid-1990s, among the young, male, socially conscious rappers who founded the 'underground' rap collective Ukoo Flani (the forerunner to the Nairobi-based Ukoo Flani Mau Mau).⁷ For decades, Ukoo Flani members have put forward descriptions of urban life in Mombasa performed in a slang register of Swahili that is slightly different to Nairobian underground rap's primary code – the hybrid argot Sheng, which was originally developed, and is still constantly reshaped, by young people in Nairobi's slums and lower-middle-class housing estates.

While Ukoo Flani have long been at the forefront of the development of a coastal identity, for a brief moment in 2004 an upstart Mombasan rapper by the stage name Pharaoh (Eric Omondi) stole the mantle of leadership from them.

⁶I am also informed here by works on global hip-hop that take a more critical approach to the politics of hip-hop expressions and scenes – in particular, Ian Maxwell's book on hip-hop in Sydney, Australia, which examines the political conservatism of Australia's 'hip-hop ideoscape' (2003: 121–4), and Geoffrey Baker's recent book on hip-hop in Cuba, which reveals that 'resistance links [Cuban] hip-hop to the state as much as it separates the two' (2011: 103).

⁷*Ukoo Flani*, which translates to 'a certain clan', is said to be an acronym for '*Upendo kwote olevenu ombeni funzo la aliyetuumba njia iwepo*' ('love everywhere all who seek teachings of the Creator; there is a way').

Constructed upon an Ukoo Flani-style mid-tempo beat sparsely decorated with minor-key synthesizer riffs, Pharaoh's '*Mombasani*' served as something of an anthem for struggling youth music artists in Mombasa.⁸ The verses, comprised of jokes and 'disses' aimed at dressing down some of the most successful Nairobi-based youth music artists, are interspersed with a repeating refrain sung in a conspiratorial whisper: '*Mombasani twaja kali/Roundi hii hatutaki utani*' (In Mombasa we're coming up strongly/This round we're not joking). The track ends with a message in spoken English, aimed at the Nairobi-based media establishment and referencing the slogan for what was then Kenya's most popular radio station, Kiss FM: 'And to those presenters who don't play coast music: coast music can be played on "Nairobi's freshest" because it's not Nairobi's, this is Africa's freshest. I thought you knew, damn!'

While '*Mombasani*' is full of clever wordplay, the real key to its affective power lies in its use of the slang word *Mombasani* (a non-standard Swahili lexeme combining Mombasa and the locative suffix *-ni*), which references an urban Kenyan experience unique to the coast. Literally translated as 'in Mombasa', *Mombasani* has long been used as an in-group identifier among young Mombasans of upcountry descent (ethnic Embu, Kamba, Kikuyu, Kisii, Luo, et cetera) who have lived most of their lives in Mombasa and speak standard Swahili (inflected with a bit of Sheng, to be sure) as a primary language. Such people often use *Mombasani* to refer to their city ('I come from *Mombasani*') or themselves ('[I am] one of the *Mombasani*' [Mahoney 2009: 18]), though the locative suffix often serves no grammatical purpose.

The idea of using the *Mombasani* concept to construct an authentic Kenyan youth music persona did not originate with Pharaoh. Indeed, around the time Pharaoh's '*Mombasani*' was released, the word *Mombasani* also popped up in a popular track called 'Street Hustlers' by Ukoo Flani-affiliated artists Cannibal and Sharama. In a Sheng-inflected Swahili verse, Cannibal (Ralph Masai) extols the resourcefulness and determination of '*sisi Mombasani*' ('those of us in Mombasa' or, simply, 'we *Mombasani*');

<i>Walai, kama mwanamziki ndani ya pwani</i>	I swear, as a coastal musician I can't deny
<i>sikatai</i>	
<i>Kusakanya gizani hauwezani nao</i>	No one is better at searching in the dark
<i>Master ndio sisi Mombasani</i>	The masters are <i>sisi Mombasani</i>

Pharaoh's contribution was to distil the idea of being a *Mombasani* artist into a nicely flowing, repeatable slogan. This distillation was so successful that *Mombasani* is now used in blogs and online comments as a generic term for Kenyan coastal youth music. One *Mombasani* artist, Sokoro, even added 'Mombasani MC' as a tag to his stage name upon making his return to the scene after a lengthy hiatus.

The branding of Kenyan coastal youth music as *Mombasani* would seem to be useful for coastal artists seeking to carve out a place for themselves within Kenyan

⁸Two men who were at the time in constant contact with aspiring Mombasan youth music artists impressed upon me the significance of this track: anthropologist Dillon Mahoney, who was then conducting research among young entrepreneurs in various parts of the city (Mahoney 2009), and producer Andrew Burchell of Jikoni Records.

youth music writ large. But not every coastal youth – not even every Mombasan youth – is a *Mombasani*. Certainly, the *Mombasani* identity is inclusive: it is embraced by young people of different ethnic and even religious backgrounds (while most are Christian, many, like Pharaoh, are Muslim). But a closer look at the *Mombasani* lexeme reveals a limit to this inclusiveness.

The fact that *Mombasani* bears a locative suffix means that it does not literally translate to ‘Mombasan’ when used as a personal moniker; instead, it translates to something along the lines of ‘person-in-Mombasa’, conveying the idea of being in, but not of or from, the city.⁹ This is a significant distinction in Kenya. For most Kenyans being a ‘person of’ (in Swahili, *mtu wa*) a place means being a member of whatever ‘tribe’ claims that place as their ‘ancestral homeland’. For the most part, this rule does not apply to Kenya’s urban centres – for instance, the phrase *‘chali wa Nairobi’* (‘Nairobi boy’) in Necessary Noize’s ‘Kenyan Girl, Kenyan Boy’ clearly means a boy who is at home in Nairobi, not a boy whose ‘ancestral homeland’ is Nairobi – but coastal urban centres provide an exception to this exception. Centuries older than any upcountry town or city, Mombasa and other coastal towns and cities serve as ‘ancestral homelands’ of a sort for certain peoples – namely, subjects of the Swahili coast – who have been settled there for generations.

The ostensibly inclusive *Mombasani* identity thus rests upon a conceptual opposition to the Swahili coast and its subjects. Being *Mombasani* means being a Mombasan who is not a subject of the Swahili coast. Accordingly, I never heard a young subject of the Swahili coast refer to themselves or their city as *Mombasani* during the course of my fieldwork. *Mombasani* youth music artists do not emphasize the exclusionary aspect of their identity, but it is nonetheless evident in their works – particularly in their videos, which represent the city of Mombasa in a particular way (or we might say, which represent a particular Mombasa).

THE OTHER MOMBASA

Mombasa is essentially two cities in one, a century-old Kenyan port city and an ancient Swahili town, known as Old Town, which has always been home to subjects of the Swahili coast. Situated like a casbah within the larger city, Mombasa Old Town is a place of narrow alleyways lined with late-nineteenth century stone buildings, women in black purdah and men in white tunics and embroidered caps, soundscapes of muezzin calls and Arabic- and Indian-influenced Swahili taarab music, and aromas of incense and foods cooked with coconut milk and spices.¹⁰ Videos by *Mombasani* artists typically avoid any such signs of Mombasa’s ancient, Swahili heritage, showing only its modern, Kenyan side. We can see how this works by juxtaposing the videos for two different

⁹According to Swahili morphology, *Mombasa*, without the locative suffix, would mean *Mombasan*, but such a word does not exist in practice. The idea ‘Mombasan’ would generally be expressed with *‘wa Mombasa’*.

¹⁰UNESCO appears to be on the way to listing Mombasa Old Town as a World Heritage Site, having already done so for other Swahili towns.

FIGURE 1 Video stills from CLD's 'Soldier' (top), and Cannibal and Sharama's 'Street Hustlers' (bottom)

Mombasan(*i*) youth music tracks whose only real connection is their prominent uses of the word *Mombasani*: the aforementioned 'Street Hustlers' by Cannibal and Sharama, and 'Soldier' by R&B-oriented singer CLD (Lennox Mwale).¹¹

At first glance, these videos offer starkly different portrayals of Mombasa. In 'Street Hustlers', the city appears as a collection of gritty spaces that could just as easily be parts of Nairobi or any other major African metropolis. 'Soldier', meanwhile, mixes beach vistas with scenes of strangely abandoned urban spaces, all tied together with the recurring trope of oddly placed television sets replaying scenes from the video. But the portrayals of Mombasa in these two videos share two important features. The first is a lack of visual references to Old Town (as I will explain below, 'Soldier' shows a small area of the neighbourhood, but it is one that few would recognize as such); the second is the use of storefront security curtains as backdrops for the performers (see Figure 1). Security curtains index consumerism and insecurity, key facets of everyday life in a modern African city that are, stereotypically, not to be found in a Swahili town. The image thus places the performers squarely in the modern, 'Kenyan' Mombasa, rather than the ancient, 'Swahili' Mombasa. The same image also appears, for example, in the

¹¹'Street Hustlers' was recorded at Tabasam Records. 'Soldier', released in 2007, was recorded at Nairobi's Ketebul Music and also features Nairobi-based rapper Bobby Mapesa. Both videos were shot in Mombasa, by different production companies.

2004 video for Necessary Noize's 'Kenyan Girl, Kenyan Boy', which is a paean to Nairobi's public transport workers and their role in promoting an authentic local youth culture.

In avoiding visual references to Old Town in their videos, *Mombasani* artists represent the real life experiences of their peers: most *Mombasani* have no compelling reason to visit Old Town, and some consciously avoid it out of fear of the 'genie' magic and homosexual practices rumoured to be common among coastal Arabs and Swahili (cf. Porter 1995). But this absenting of the Swahili coast is also a central tactic of a broader representational strategy for *Mombasani* artists, one aimed at rendering their city as a kind of Kenyan Los Angeles, an urban space that can be just as cosmopolitan or gritty as Nairobi even though it happens to be situated amid beaches and coconut palms.

As an answer to the dominance of Nairobi, this representational strategy is not really a form of resistance. Whatever Pharaoh's fighting words might suggest, being *Mombasani* poses no real challenge to the dominant hip-hop imaginary in Kenya. On the contrary, this strategy specifically avoids the most radical challenge to Kenya's dominant hip-hop imaginary that could potentially come from a 'coastal' identity: a critique of the marriage between Kenya's dominant hip-hop imaginary and its dominant national imaginary. The fact is, the same absenting of the Swahili coast that we find in the *Mombasani* representational strategy has long been a part of official expressions of Kenyan national identity. In the iconography of the national currency, for example, the nation appears as untamed wilderness, plantations, and the modern metropolis of Nairobi. The only urban image that is not of Nairobi is of the iconic, colonial-era elephant tusk installation in Mombasa's Central Business District. This image inexplicably fades into an image of camel riders in Kenya's untamed north-east, the other predominantly Muslim area of the country. The Swahili town, with all its iconic potential, is conspicuously absent – just as it is absent from 'Street Hustlers', 'Soldier', and hundreds of other videos by self-described *Mombasani* one can find on YouTube.¹²

The absenting of the Swahili coast in Kenya's dominant national imagery already poses a distinct challenge for youth music artists who happen to be subjects of the Swahili coast: how do they position themselves as authentic purveyors of urban Kenyan youth culture when their 'hood sits on the periphery of the Kenyan nation? With the burgeoning of the *Mombasani* representational strategy, this challenge only became more daunting. The remainder of this article focuses ethnographically on two young, male subjects of the Swahili coast who were working to succeed as Kenyan youth music artists between 2004 and 2007. The ways in which these two young men sought to appeal to a national Kenyan audience, and the successes and failures they found in the process, tell us a great deal about the conditions of cultural citizenship for young subjects of the Swahili coast.

¹²One interesting exception is the 2011 video for 'Msoto Millions' by Ukoo Flani and Nairobi ragga artist Jahcoozi. One would expect something different from this video, however, as the track is part of the Goethe Institut-funded Berlin-Nairobi (BLNRB) project, which brought together German producers and Kenyan artists. Produced by the high-end outfit, DYMK Films, the video features evocative scenes of Old Town.

A MOMBASAN ARABESQUE

When I met rapper Showdeemo (Mohammed Essajee), he was in Mombasa for what he described as an extended vacation from his life in Bergen, Norway. The child of a marriage between two Old Town natives from different communities (one a Punjabi of the Bohra Muslim sect, the other a Baloch), he grew up speaking Swahili as a first language and identifying variously as 'Swahili' and 'Arab'. As with many landed elites in Kenya, he has family all over the world. Eventually, he took up a life with relatives in Bergen, where he studied theatre and entered into a career as a cook.

In our conversations, Showdeemo described himself as an amateur rapper with a minor career in Norway. He hoped to participate in the Kenyan youth music scene while he was in town, but didn't much care whether he made any money in the process. He was not in great need of money while staying in Mombasa. Moreover, he was well aware that making a living as a Kenyan youth music artist would require years of hard work developing fame and parlaying that fame into gigs, sponsorship deals and other opportunities. His goals, then, were to pass the time, develop his performing skills, and earn a bit of respect from his childhood friends in Mombasa.

Most afternoons, Showdeemo could be found hanging out with other young men under a fraying Brazilian football banner on the veranda of a mysteriously abandoned stone building located in Old Town's high-rent Fort Jesus district. Dressed as 'thugs' and 'rastas', the young men who gathered there sat around talking, chewing *qat*, and listening to hip-hop CDs on a boombox (as in Figure 2). Since the Fort Jesus district is frequented by tourists, these young men included tour guides, souvenir sellers, and others who were not necessarily from the neighbourhood. Their afternoon gatherings thus served as a rare site of connection for young subjects of the Swahili coast and their *Mombasani* counterparts. This was not lost on Showdeemo, who had use for this sort of social nexus. He was interested in collaborating with experienced local artists – and this, by definition, meant *Mombasani* artists. Yet, as he expressed to me, he was also interested in representing his 'hood, Mombasa Old Town. He thus used his afternoon hangouts as an opportunity to bring *Mombasani* artists whom he had met into his world. One of these artists was the aforementioned singer CLD, who ended up featuring the distinctive scene underneath the Brazilian football banner in his 'Soldier' video.

Showdeemo had arrived from Bergen with a hard drive full of prefabricated accompaniments, or 'beats', which he had created with Bergen-based friends who were mostly immigrants from the Middle East and Turkey. One beat that he particularly prized was based on a sample of an up-tempo prelude to an Arabic song, featuring a descending melody on zither (*qānūn*) and reed flute (*nāy*) over Arabic percussion pounding out a syncopated *mālḥūf* rhythm.¹³ Combined with a half-time drum groove, it creates a perfect template for an arabesque hip-hop track of the type associated at the time with US producers Scott Storch and Timbaland. Showdeemo approached CLD with the idea of collaborating on a

¹³The sample is taken from a 1979 recording of '*Bahibbak yā Lubnān*' (I love you Lebanon), a classic Arab nationalist song by legendary Lebanese singer Fayrūz, but Showdeemo did not know this until I found out and emailed him about it some years later.

FIGURE 2 Showdeemo (back row, second from left) with friends, under the Brazilian football banner (Photograph by the author)

track based on his arabesque beat. CLD agreed to participate, but he wanted to bring others on board. He approached a fellow *Mombasani* artist, a rapper by the stage name Redwax (Alex Njuguna), who was then a budding music producer and had connections at a number of studios around town. Redwax secured time for the project at a small studio in Mombasa's Tudor area.

The collaborators (Showdeemo, CLD, Redwax, and another rapper by the stage name GK) wrote the refrain and verses for the track together in the studio. A decision was made (no one remembers by whom) to make it an ode to a fictional Arabian woman named Samiya. CLD then asked Anwar, the Arab owner of the studio, how to say 'baby' or 'my love' in Arabic. Anwar answered '*yā habibī*' (apparently unaware that Arabic popular songs typically use the gender-neutral *yā habibī*), prompting the first line of the refrain: '*Samiya ya habibti, nakupenda unavovaa*' (Samiya my love, I love the way you dress). The rest of the track was then filled in with similarly sexually charged lines in Sheng-inflected Swahili, save for brief linguistic departures from Showdeemo, who raps one verse in English and inserts a brief Norwegian phrase (a shout-out to his friends in Bergen) into the refrain.¹⁴

¹⁴My information about this process comes from informal conversations with Showdeemo as well as recorded interviews with CLD (Lennox Mwale, recorded interview, 15 July 2005) and Redwax (Alex Njuguna, recorded interview, 1 February 2012).

As soon as the rough mix of 'Samiya' was completed, Anwar encouraged the collaborators to shoot a video (Alex Njuguna, recorded interview, 1 February 2012). As luck would have it, Ali 'Canada' Mbarak, a friend of Showdeemo's family, was also in town at the time on his own extended vacation from his life in Canada. Looking to parlay his film school training and family property in Mombasa Old Town into a media production house, Ali agreed to direct and produce a video gratis.

Ali's 'Samiya' video offers an orgy of Orientalia, including belly dancers and just about all the Arabian imagery the Mombasa environs can possibly provide: the sixteenth-century limestone walls of Fort Jesus, a large sculpture of an Arabian coffeepot, faux Arabian architecture from a North Coast resort, a camel (kept by a local hotel for giving rides along the beach), and East Africa's own 'ūd (Arabic lute) virtuoso Ustadh Zein L'Abdin. For the *pièce de résistance*, Ali Mbarak drew on his Canadian film school training and high-end software to conjure up a flying carpet.

Unlike the audio track, the 'Samiya' video begins with a brief 'ūd introduction – a short improvisation (*taqsīm*) performed by Ustadh Zein. During this introduction, images of Zein playing his 'ūd are interspersed with other arabesque imagery: a man pouring himself coffee from a brass-coloured Arabian coffee pot, a reined camel, and a belly dancer in a green dress. The performers then appear, all of them wearing Islamic-Swahili *kanzu* tunics and Islamic head-coverings (*kofia*, turban, or skull cap). As Zein's introduction ends, another light-skinned Arab man (Ali Canada's collaborator, Salim Nasher) climbs onto the flying carpet. He is wearing an Arabian white robe and head covering; in his hand is a reed flute. As the original 'Samiya' track begins, Salim soars above Mombasa Old Town, the tall buildings of Mombasa's Central Business District visible in the background. At the first sharp turn, he grips the sides of the carpet in terror (see Figure 3).

The 'Samiya' video turned out to be unique and interesting enough to capture the attention of the Nairobi television producers on whose desk it landed: it was featured on the music video programmes of at least two national television networks. But what did a national audience see in this Orientalist fantasy? There are, of course, many possible readings of the work. But in considering its reception among upcountry Kenyans, one cannot ignore the fact that its imagery, however ridiculous, is not unfamiliar. The Swahili coast has long served as something of an internal Orient for Kenya, and in recent years this has become even more the case. As the Kenyan government has begun to push domestic tourism (Mahoney 2009: 330), narratives and images of the Swahili coast as an Oriental wonderland that were once aimed solely at foreigners (albeit also consumed by Kenyans) are now aimed also at Nairobi's growing middle class. 'The coast has its own fascination,' one Kenyan tourism guide tells this new dual readership. 'Towns such as Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu have a unique and special magic. Their Arabian Nights ambience that forever holds one's imagination is simply unforgettable' (NMG 2002).

For many, if not most, upcountry Kenyan viewers, the 'Samiya' video surely seems like a musical advertisement for coastal tourism, complete with images of beaches, hotels, and the arabesque aesthetic that has been marketed to European tourists for years and is now being actively marketed to upcountry Kenyans. Some might ask themselves whether the work is ironically playing with their own

FIGURE 3 Video stills from Showdeemo's 'Samiya'

preconceptions of coastal culture. But while it is playful, there is nothing in its words or images to suggest an attempt at deconstructing or undermining the status of the Swahili coast as Kenya's internal Orient. If anything, the work is a celebration of this status.

I was never able to elicit an answer from Showdeemo as to what he had intended to create with his arabesque beat before he got to work with his collaborators; however, I got a sense from our discussions that he may not have intended the kind of (self-)parody that the 'Samiya' track and video both turned out to be. His ideas were clearly transformed in the process of working with others to create works for a national audience. Though it hardly seems possible when viewing the 'Samiya' video, Showdeemo's original intent may well have been, simply, to 'represent the real'. As I discovered during my fieldwork, the sounds of hip-hop arabesque bear a powerful resonance in Showdeemo's 'hood.

'WELCOME TO DUBAI!'

I first got a sense of the resonance of hip-hop arabesque in Mombasa Old Town while hanging out at Island Fruits, a juice bar run by an unctuous man, Swaleh, who made sure the juices were sugary enough for local taste buds and the atmosphere welcoming enough for locals and foreigners alike. As I approached Island Fruits one afternoon, my ethnomusicologist's ears picked up an Arabic groove pulsating within it. Coming closer, I heard synthesized organ and strings

sounds, a muted electric guitar, and a youthful woman's voice singing Arabic words to a melody punctuated by responses from a synthesizer. The song, I would later learn, was '*Ah W Nus*' ('By Half' [I Mean It]) by Nancy Ajram, a young Lebanese pop star whose youthful voice and playfully coy dance moves were by then well known by the many Mombasans with access to Arabic satellite television.

'Welcome to Dubai!' Swaleh shouted, exultant, as he saw me enter. Swaleh had never been to Dubai, but he had certainly heard first-hand accounts from friends and family members who had. It is a shopping destination for wealthy Mombasans as well as a place of opportunity for some of Mombasa's musicians and entertainers. More than anything else, however, Dubai is a sign vehicle for many Mombasans, signifying a fantastical Arab modernity, bubbling over with capitalism, ingenuity, progress, development, and a hint of debauchery. By sonically transforming his juice bar into 'Dubai', Swaleh promoted it as a suitably modern place for cosmopolitan Mombasans as well as Western tourists, researchers, and students.

I eventually came to hear Swaleh's Dubai soundtrack as a congruous addition to the soundscape of Old Town. I also heard songs by Nancy Ajram, Amr Diab and other Arab pop stars reverberating from the private cars of wealthy young residents. In the Kisauni District special parliamentary election of 2004, a Swahili candidate even attempted to capture the Old Town vote with Amr Diab's '*Layly Nahāry*' (Night and Day), blasting it into the narrow alleyways from car-mounted loudspeakers.

But just as soon as I got used to sipping saccharine juices to Arabic pop, Swaleh's soundtrack suddenly changed – to US hip-hop. What was Swaleh up to, I wondered. Didn't he realize that these new sounds would dissolve the aura of 'Dubai' that he had been so keen to instil? Once again, I was not yet listening with the right ears. Swaleh's first hip-hop obsession was rapper 50 Cent's 'Candy Shop', which features a synthesized string riff outlining the tones of what Western music theory terms the Phrygian mode. The Phrygian mode has long been a favourite Orientalist device in Western music; it places the listener in an imagined Spain or Middle East, depending on how it is used (Scott 1998: 327). In 'Candy Shop' the mode is deployed with just the right timbres (synthesized strings) and inflections (a slide downward from the flatted second to the tonic, for example) to place us in 'Arabia'. Produced by Scott Storch, who has made a career out of incorporating Arabic and Indian sounds into his grooves, the track is a prime example of US hip-hop arabesque.

The success of hip-hop arabesque mavens like Scott Storch and Timbaland speaks to the popularity of this aesthetic among US consumers. There is, however, an interesting study waiting to be done on the reception of hip-hop arabesque in the Arab world, and in places like Mombasa Old Town where the religion, language and musical systems of the Arab world have been instantiated. The apparent affinity for US hip-hop arabesque in Mombasa Old Town can be explained, on one analytical level, by its timbral, melodic and rhythmical similarity to Arabic pop and London bhangra, musical forms that find their way to Old Town through flows of people and media. Indeed, 50 Cent's 'Candy Shop' generally elicited the same response from Swaleh's elite Swahili, Arab and South Asian friends as did Nancy Ajram or Amr Diab. Driving by, slowly, in their expensive cars, they would yell, '*Kama laaandan!*' (Just like London!)

This slogan was clearly a reference to the experiences some of these highly mobile young men had travelling in London. But it was also something more. London is both the official capital of the United Kingdom and, for many in the Anglophone post-colonial world, the *de facto* capital of the diaspora of the Global South. I heard it first with a degree of bemusement, the word ‘Londonistan’ deployed by some in Old Town during my fieldwork. This sensationalist nickname for London, originally coined by European intelligence agents and conservative cultural critics concerned with the prevalence of Islamic extremism, seemed in the conversations of my interlocutors in Mombasa to refer more generally to the prevalence of Middle Eastern, Asian and African Muslims in the city. To the extent that the *Kama Laaandan!* slogan indexes ‘Londonistan’, it points to the possibility that young people in Old Town’s private homes, juice bars and automobiles might appreciate hip-hop arabesque for its potential to validate global Arabness over the global blackness that lies at the heart of Kenya’s dominant hip-hop imaginary.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) describes taste as a recursive process of subjectification and objectification: as social boundaries of taste begin to take shape they are ‘misrecognized’ as ‘the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference’ (*ibid.*: 56); and partly through their misrecognition boundaries of taste continue to take shape. In a similar fashion, arabesque sounds that may be sensible at some unarticulated (perhaps ‘unconscious’) level within Old Town’s daily soundscape of muezzin calls and Arabic-influenced Swahili taarab music also work as a ‘practical affirmation’ of Old Town’s indexical connection to Dubai and ‘Londonistan’. Hip-hop arabesque brings Old Town, Dubai, and ‘Londonistan’ together under the sign of a parallel modernity discrete from a Nairobi-centric Kenyan modernity.

Armed with this nuanced conception of the politics of taste, we may begin to hear and see the ‘Samiya’ track and video a bit differently. We may begin to appreciate how the track began as a response to the hip-hop injunction to ‘keep it real’. And we may begin to hear and see, somewhere buried under the video’s many layers of parody, a deconstruction of Kenya’s dominant hip-hop imaginary. It would be difficult, however, to argue that the ‘Samiya’ project actually achieves any sort of social critique. Even if critique were the aim, the work’s critical edge is dulled by the intractability – the ‘rigor mortis’ (Bhabha 1995) – of the stereotypes it employs.

‘SOMETHING FROM HOME’: PRINCE ADIO’S TAARAB TINGE

Showdeemo was not the only subject of the Swahili coast who sought to succeed in Kenyan youth music between 2004 and 2007. The case of Prince Adio (Adio Mohamed), an ethnic Bajun, adds another dimension to the present discussion. Unlike Showdeemo, Adio was (and still is) a career musician, whose intent in becoming a youth music artist was not simply to garner fame but to make a living. Before reinventing himself as a youth music artist in 2003, Adio struggled to carve out a career in modern taarab, a coastal popular music rooted in a tradition of sung Swahili poetry that began in the late-nineteenth century. This career path took him to Nairobi for six years, where he performed with a group that was popular among transplanted subjects of the Swahili coast. When he moved back

to Mombasa, he continued with this genre for a while, though he made more money playing American jazz and pop songs on the keyboard on the Tamarind Dhow floating restaurant.

Adio's move to youth music began with experimentation at Jikoni Records, a bedroom studio set up by British expatriate Andrew Burchell in the mid-1990s. Burchell introduced Adio to a music sequencing software called Frooty Loops, with which Adio ultimately developed a style he referred to in our interviews as 'hip-hop taarab'. Described by Adio as '*kitu ambacho ni cha kinyumbani*' (something from home), this style brings together modern taarab's poetic sensibilities and vocal performance style (most obvious in Adio's nasal timbre) with aspects of danceclub-oriented Kenyan youth music, including synth-heavy, riff-based accompaniments; rapping (always performed by another artist in Adio's tracks); and a heavy use of the ubiquitous Latin/Congolese *kapuka* beat (recorded interview, 15 September 2004).¹⁵

When I first met Adio, in 2004, he was already nationally famous for his hip-hop taarab track '*Nikiwa Ndani*' ('When I'm Inside'), recorded at Tabasam Records (the same production house that recorded Pharaoh's '*Mombasani*'). '*Nikiwa Ndani*' is ostensibly a straightforward song about domestic tensions; however, in the typical manner of Swahili taarab poetry, its lyrics invite alternate readings. The first two lines of the refrain, '*Nikiwa ndani, wapiga kelele/Nikitoka nje, unanunika*', can mean either, 'When I'm home you argue with me/When I leave you sulk' or 'When I'm inside you are loud/When I pull out you sulk'. Adio maintains that this double entendre was unintended (recorded interview, 2 February 2005), but it is clearly what made the track successful: attracted by the raunchy wordplay, young men working in Nairobi's *matatus* (public service vans) made it part of the everyday soundtrack of Nairobi commuters (as late as 2006, I saw the words '*Nikiwa Ndani*' decorating the inside of one such vehicle). Having garnered *matatu* credibility, '*Nikiwa Ndani*' easily made it onto the playlists of Nairobi DJs and the major Kenyan radio stations.¹⁶

Adio has released an entire album's worth of hip-hop taarab tracks since '*Nikiwa Ndani*', most of them stronger in composition, arrangement and production. And yet, he has not managed to replicate the national success he found with that first release. What he has achieved, however, is the establishment of a new Mombasan youth music style distinct from the styles of *Mombasani* artists. This style has earned him a great deal of respect among his fellow subjects of the Swahili coast, as evidenced by the mural of him that appeared on an Old Town storefront in 2005 (see Figure 4).

In the past few years, other Mombasan artists have followed Adio's stylistic lead, albeit without embracing his 'hip-hop taarab' label. The most successful of these has been singer and songwriter Sudi Boy (Sudi Mohammed Sudi), who records at Adio's own Jungle Masters Records. Though Sudi characterizes his

¹⁵*Kapuka* is an onomatopoeic term used in Kenya to refer to a duple-metre drum beat in which the bass drum plays steady half notes as the snare drum fills in syncopated upbeats.

¹⁶This is a common route for a successful Kenyan youth music track; indeed, many artists take new tracks to *matatu* crews before taking them to radio stations. Adio never approached Nairobi *matatu* crews with '*Nikiwa Ndani*', however. The track became standard *matatu* '*mahewa*' (musical atmosphere) without any effort on his part.

FIGURE 4 A local icon: a mural of Prince Adio in Mombasa Old Town
(Photograph courtesy of Beatrice Ngũthũ)

own style as unique, it clearly shares a great deal with that of his acknowledged mentor and ‘musical brother’ Adio (Madiangi 2010). His debt to Adio even extends to the use of close vocal harmonies recorded all on his own voice, an effect used throughout *‘Nikiwa Ndani’*.

The media in Nairobi largely ignore Mombasa’s hip-hop taarab scene. It is not immediately clear why, however. The idea of ‘fusing’ modern taarab with mainstream Kenyan youth music is something that the Nairobi-based Kenyan media and major stakeholders in the music industry in Nairobi clearly consider aesthetically and commercially viable. Mombasan singer Nyota Ndogo – a ‘discovery’ of Andrew Burchell, whose style has been described in the Kenyan press variously as ‘R&B’, ‘Afro-fusion’, and ‘taarab’ – is often praised for supposed taarab influences that, by her own admission, are actually rather slight (Mwanaisha Abdallah, recorded interview, 12 March 2005). Likewise, Ukoo Flani co-founder Alai K’s recent experiments in ‘Swahili hip-hop Afro-soul’ have garnered support from the major Nairobi-based international patrons of Kenyan ‘Afro-fusion’ music (the Goethe Institut-Nairobi and Alliance Francaise de Nairobi). Why, then, is the arguably more organic hip-hop–taarab ‘fusion’ of Adio and Sudi virtually absent from the national airwaves in Kenya?

One Nairobi music producer who began his career in Mombasa argues that hip-hop taarab artists have trouble reaching a national audience because they have not invested in production quality at a time when artists in Nairobi are increasingly recording with high-end, professional equipment (Amin Virani,

personal communication, 22 January 2012). No doubt there is something to this. But another problem hip-hop taarab artists face is the similarity of their hybrid style to Tanzanian bongo flava, a genre that shares hip-hop taarab's flowing Swahili lyrics and modern-taarab influences.¹⁷ While bongo flava is quite popular in Kenya, being a Kenyan artist whose music sounds like bongo flava puts one in a difficult position when trying to construct a compelling persona for national circulation. For years after the success of *'Nikiwa Ndani'*, the dominant media narrative about Adio was the 'revelation' that he hails from Kenya rather than Tanzania. Similarly, Sudi was asked in his first major press interview whether he was truly Kenyan, as his 'music sounds more like Bongo' (Madiangi 2010). In this (feigned) surprise at the fact that an artist like Adio or Sudi could be from Kenya lies a thinly veiled insinuation that their music must either be an imitation of a foreign genre or a music of people caught between two national identities. In either case, what follows is that their tracks are merely poor substitutes for the 'real' bongo tracks that have been vetted by the dynamic industry in Dar es Salaam.

BRIEFLY BHANGRA

A restless entrepreneur, Adio has tried a number of different ways of monetizing his talents over the years. In addition to his gig on the Tamarind Dhow, he has started up his own production house, acted in Kenyan television programmes and films, and produced a number of Swahili-language Islamic *kaswida* music. For a brief moment in 2005, he also tried out a different stylistic direction for his youth music: bhangra.

Developed in Britain in the 1980s, bhangra is a South Asian diasporic music based on a 'syncretic fusion of Punjabi folk elements and disco/rock rhythms and instrumentation' (Manuel 1995: 235). In Adio's hands, however, it was something a bit less defined. Adio's bhangra experiment began and ended with a single track, entitled *'Sikitiko'* (Regret), whose accompaniment features (synthesized) Indian string and percussion sounds (sitar and tabla) mapped onto a rhythm much closer to *kapuka* than a Punjabi folk beat. I did not recognize *'Sikitiko'* as bhangra until Adio informed me that it was intended as such. But I later came to learn that this bhangra experiment, however subtle, was something special for Adio, something he was looking at as a possible way of reframing his artistic persona.

One day in 2005, Adio popped in on me at my apartment in Old Town to invite me to a 'beach party' music festival at which he was scheduled to perform. He had two other artists in tow: his collaborator, Stinky D, and Pharaoh. 'He is a hip-hop artist, like Tupac Shakur', Adio told me by way of introducing Pharaoh. 'What about you?', I countered to Adio. 'Aren't you a hip-hop artist?' Adio quickly

¹⁷Bongo flava has received a great deal of scholarly attention. For an overview of the history and sociology of the genre, see Reuster-Jahn and Hacke 2011 and Perullo 2007. Bongo flava artists often play down their taarab influences. The influences are audible, however, especially in vocal style. Little research has been conducted in this area, but Tanzanian musician Adelgot Haule argues that bongo flava incorporates subtle Arabic vocal decorations borrowed from Swahili taarab (Suleyman 2011).

shrugged off the idea and started fumbling around for a more suitable genre title, ultimately landing on 'bhangra'.

If considered as a claim of personal connection to the global South Asian diaspora, Adio's embrace of a bhangra identity seems puzzling at first. After all, his Bajun ethnicity marks him as 'African' with perhaps a bit of 'Arab' heritage. But being an African who happens to have a deep personal investment in diasporic South Asian culture does make sense in the context of the Swahili coast. Unlike in other parts of East Africa, where diasporic South Asians are quite segregated from their African neighbours, on the Swahili coast South Asians have always maintained intimate social and cultural ties with their 'African' and other neighbours. There is even one Indian clan whose members are today reckoned as ethnically 'Swahili': the Badala, a Gujarati group that settled in East Africa some six or seven centuries ago and have recently supplied some of the most famous and influential 'Swahili' men, including politician Abdullahi Nassir, poet Ahmad Nassir, and taarab singer Juma Bhalo (cf. Salvadori 1989: 194).

Adio's own development as a man and musician attests to the close relations between diasporic South Asians and (other) subjects of the Swahili coast. His father and musical mentor, taarab instrumentalist Mohammed Adio Shigoo, has long specialized in accompanying taarab singers who frequently set Swahili poetry to Hindi film songs. Before switching to synthesizer in the 1990s, Adio Shigoo even used to perform this so-called 'Indian taarab' on two instruments brought to East Africa via South Asian diasporic networks during the course of the twentieth century: the hand-pumped harmonium and the *taishogoto* (a Japanese toy string instrument found throughout the Indian Ocean world).

Of course, all this is very difficult to bring across to a broad Kenyan audience. Rather than try, Adio ultimately abandoned his bhangra identity. I witnessed what may have been an important moment in his decision to do so during the filming of the 'Sikitiko' video.¹⁸ The video was directed by Ali Canada, the same man who directed 'Samiya', and was shot at an Indian-themed hotel in Mombasa. At one point during the shoot, Ali decided to demonstrate how he thought Adio should be dancing. With palms facing upward, he thrust his shoulders up and down in a perfect imitation of a Bollywood bhangra dance. Most of us in the room found the scene hysterically funny, but Adio was not amused. '*Sitaki kufanana nao mimi!*' (I don't want to look like them!), he said sharply.

Later, Adio told me that his hesitance to dance in true Punjabi style and thereby 'look like them' stemmed from a concern that he might be accused of imitating Akhil the Brain, an ethnic South Asian singer from Tanzania who had developed his own style of Swahili-language bhangra. Specifically, Adio felt the accusation would come from his fellow Swahili, who can be '*watu wa mdomo sana*' (big-mouths). In other words, Adio doubted that his own personal connection to South Asian diasporic culture would be understood or accepted even by his fellow subjects of the Swahili coast, much less by a broader Kenyan audience.

Adio's hesitance to commit to a bhangra persona surely also had to do with his knowledge of the images of bhangra that were already circulating within Kenyan

¹⁸At Adio's request, I helped out with the shoot, working (unpaid) as a second cameraman and an extra.

popular culture. Kenyan audiences in 2005 were familiar not only with Akhil the Brain's campy videos but also with Kenyan group Kleptomaniac's Orientalist track '*Belly Naach Di*', which implores listeners to 'wiggily wiggily to the bhang-a-ra beat'. In other words, the rigor mortis of the bhangra stereotype had already set in in Kenya.

CONCLUSION: AN UNREALIZED COSMOPOLITICS

The difficulties Adio and Showdeemo faced in working to (re)present themselves to a national audience illustrate the difficulties subjects of the Swahili coast face in finding a place for themselves within the imagined community of the Kenyan nation. Their failed/aborted experiments – Showdeemo's arabesque style and Adio's 'bhangra' direction – reveal that even the ostensibly post-tribal 'youth nation' that is the great promise of Kenyan hip-hop culture holds little room for subjects of the Swahili coast. I would suggest that Adio and Showdeemo ultimately abandoned or transformed these experiments because they understood that they rested on premises that upcountry Kenyans would not easily understand or accept: namely, that East Africa is connected to the Indian Ocean world, and that the Indian Ocean world is home to a post-colonial culture every bit as rich as that of the 'Black Atlantic'. What most upcountry Kenyans know from school textbooks and other media of Kenyan public culture is that the Indian Ocean world's only relationship to East Africa is as the source of foreign interlopers (that is, Omani Arabs) who dominated and enslaved Africans for centuries before the Europeans came (cf. Mazrui and Shariff 1994; Porter 1995).

Why, then, did Adio and Showdeemo work so hard to reach a national audience in the first place? It does not seem as though either of them was compelled to do so on financial grounds, given Adio's demonstrated ability to make a living on the local scene and Showdeemo's apparent lack of need to make a living from his Kenyan musical projects. Why didn't they accept their subaltern status, then, and maybe even work to challenge the racial and spatial commitments that serve to alienate them and their fellow subjects of the Swahili coast? Given how subjects of the Swahili coast commonly describe themselves as 'dispossessed' (Mazrui and Shariff 1994), marginalized, and oppressed, there would seem to be room for a Swahili coast youth music oriented toward resisting the hegemony of upcountry Kenya.

Asking why Adio and Showdeemo failed to politicize their music may seem a bit unfair. But the fact is, at the level of style, their music is already political: by incorporating Indian Ocean sounds that resonate in 'Swahili' places, their tracks 'provincialize' Kenyan youth music, revealing its underlying Afro-diasporic cosmopolitanism as just one of the many cosmopolitanisms with which subjects of the Swahili coast engage on a daily basis (Simpson and Kresse 2008). It is fair to ask, then, why Adio and Showdeemo did not articulate through words (both lyrics and public statements) the (cosmo)political critique that is immanent in their music? The simplest answer to this question, beyond that they were not interested in being controversial, is that they lacked the words to do so.

Speaking about the Indian Ocean world does not come easy. Unlike the Afro-diasporic world, it has never had an 'intellectual elite [committed to articulating] irredentist sentiments and [placing] them in public discourse' (Alpers 2001: 32).

David Samper (2004) offers a striking example of the ways in which Nairobi rappers are able to deploy conceptions of the 'Black Atlantic' developed by scholars like Melville Herskovits and Paul Gilroy. 'Rap is an African thing; not an American thing', one artist told him. 'Those Americans doing it there are still from Africa. The blacks there are still Africans' (*ibid.*: 42). There are simply no Indian Ocean parallels to these well-worn references to Black Atlantic diasporic connections – or, for that matter, to powerful Black Atlantic concepts like Négritude, pan-Africanism, and black power; not to mention soul, reggae, and hip-hop. If a politicized Swahili coast youth music is to emerge, then it will rely in part upon the establishment of a dynamic intellectual discourse on the Swahili coast as a cultural nexus of Africa and the Indian Ocean world. The present article represents a small step in this direction.

REFERENCES

- Abdallah, K. (1977) *The Liberation of Swahili from European Appropriation*. Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau.
- Alim, H. S. (2009) 'Translocal style communities: hip hop youth as cultural theorists of style, language, and globalization', *Pragmatics* 19 (1): 103–27.
- Alpers, E. A. (2001) 'The African diaspora in the Indian Ocean: a comparative perspective', in S. de S. Jayasuriya and R. Pankhurst (eds), *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press.
- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large: cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Baker, G. (2011) *Buena Vista in the Club: rap, reggaetón, and revolution in Havana*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Behrend, H. (2002) '“I am like a movie star in my street”: photographic self-creation in postcolonial Kenya' in R. Werbner (ed.), *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- Bennett, A. (2000) *Popular Music and Youth Culture: music, identity, and place*. Basingstoke and New York NY: Palgrave.
- Bhabha, H. (1995) '“Black male”: the Whitney Museum of American Art', *Artforum* 33 (6): 86–7, 110.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*, trans. R. Nice. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Forman, M. (2002) *The 'Hood Comes First: race, space, and place in rap and hip-hop*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Goldsmith, P. (2011) 'The Mombasa Republican Council conflict assessment: threats and opportunities for engagement', Kenya Civil Society Strengthening Programme.
- Lonsdale, J. (2004) 'Moral and political argument in Kenya' in B. Berman, D. Eyoh and W. Kymlicka (eds), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*. Oxford and Athens OH: James Currey and Ohio University Press.
- Madiangi, G. (2010) 'Sudi's soul music comes of age', *Buzz*, [pullout magazine of] *Sunday Nation*, 2 April 2010, <<http://www.nation.co.ke/Features/buzz/Sudi+ soul+music+comes+of+age/-/441236/891730/-/item/2/-/f65rpmz/-/index.html>>, accessed 26 July 2012.

- Mahoney, D. (2009) 'The Art of Connection: negotiating the digital divide in Kenya's curio industry'. PhD thesis, Rutgers University.
- Manuel, P. (1995) 'Music as symbol, music as simulacrum: postmodern, pre-modern, and modern aesthetics in subcultural popular musics', *Popular Music* 14 (2): 227–39.
- Maxwell, I. (2003) *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes: hip hop down under comin' upper*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Mazrui, A. A. (1993) 'The black Intifadah? Religion and rage at the Kenyan Coast', *Journal of Asian and African Affairs* 4 (2): 87–93.
- Mazrui, A. M. and I. N. Shariff (1994) *The Swahili: idiom and identity of an African people*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press.
- Middleton, J. (1992) *The World of the Swahili: an African mercantile civilization*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.
- Ministry of Youth Affairs, Kenya (2006) 'Kenya National Youth Policy', <<http://www.youthaffairs.go.ke/>>.
- Mitchell, T. (ed.) (2001) *Global Noise: rap and hip-hop outside the USA*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Mwangi, E. (2004) 'Masculinity and nationalism in East African hip-hop music', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 41 (2): 5–19.
- NMG (Nation Media Group) (2002) 'Jewel in the crown of tourism in Kenya', *The What's On Guide*, 2002, <<http://www.nationaudio.com/News/DailyNation/whatson/June2002/jewel.htm>>, accessed January 2008.
- Nurse, D. and T. Spear (1985) *The Swahili: reconstructing the history and language of an African society, 800–1500*. Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Nyairo, J. (2004) "'Reading the referents": the ghost of America in contemporary Kenyan popular music', *Scrutiny* 29 (1): 39–55.
- (2006) '(Re)configuring the city: the mapping of places and people in contemporary Kenyan popular song texts' in M. Murray (ed.), *Cities in Contemporary Africa*. Gordonsville VA: Palgrave Macmillan.
- (2007) "'Modify": Jua Kali as a metaphor for Africa's urban ethnicities and cultures' in J. Ogude and J. Nyairo (eds), *Urban Legends, Colonial Myths: popular culture and literature in East Africa*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press.
- Nyairo, J. and J. Ogude (2005) 'Popular music, popular politics: *unbwogable* and the idioms of freedom in Kenyan popular music', *African Affairs* 104 (415): 225–49.
- Ong, A. (1996) 'Cultural citizenship as subject-making: immigrants negotiate racial and cultural boundaries in the United States', *Current Anthropology* 37 (5): 737–62.
- Perullo, A. (2007) "'Here's a little something local": an early history of hip hop in Dar es Salaam, 1984–1997' in J. R. Brennan and A. Burton (eds), *Dar es Salaam: histories from an emerging African metropolis*. Dar es Salaam/Nairobi: Mkuki na Nyota/British Institute in Eastern Africa.
- Porter, M. A. (1995) 'Talking at the margins: Kenyan discourses on homosexuality' in W. Leap (ed.), *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon: authenticity, imagination, and appropriation in lesbian and gay languages*. New York NY: Gordon and Breach.
- Prestholdt, J. (2011) 'Kenya, the United States, and counterterrorism', *Africa Today* 57 (4): 2–27.

- Reuster-Jahn, U. and G. Hacke (2011) 'The Bongo Flava industry in Tanzania and artists' strategies for success', Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Working Paper 127, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz.
- Salvadori, C. (1989) *Through Open Doors: a view of Asian cultures in Kenya*, revised edition. Nairobi: Kenway Publications.
- Samper, D. A. (2002) 'Talking Sheng: the role of a hybrid language in the construction of identity and youth culture in Nairobi, Kenya'. PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania.
- (2004) "'Africa is still our mama": Kenyan rappers, youth identity, and the revitalization of traditional values', *African Identities* 2 (1): 37–51.
- Scott, D. B. (1998) 'Orientalism and musical style', *Musical Quarterly* 82 (2): 309–35.
- Seesemann, R. (2007) 'Kenyan Muslims, the aftermath of 9/11, and the "War on Terror"' in B. F. Soares and R. Otayek (eds), *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, first edition. New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Simpson, E. and K. Kresse (2008) 'Cosmopolitanism contested: anthropology and history in the western Indian Ocean' in E. Simpson and K. Kresse (eds), *Struggling with History: Islam and cosmopolitanism in the western Indian Ocean*. New York NY: Columbia University Press.
- Suleyman, M. (2011) 'How Swahili poetry has shaped today's popular music', *The Citizen* (Tanzania), 25 October 2011, <<http://thecitizen.co.tz/uhuru/16461-how-swahili-poetry-has-shaped-todays-popular-music.html>>, accessed 26 July 2012.

ABSTRACT

The Muslim-dominated 'Swahili coast' has always served as a conceptual as well as physical periphery for post-colonial Kenya. This article takes Kenyan youth music under the influence of global hip-hop as an ethnographic entry into the dynamics of identity and citizenship in this region. Kenyan youth music borrows from global hip-hop culture the idea that an artist must 'represent the real'. The ways in which these regional artists construct their public personae thus provide rich data on 'cultural citizenship', in Aihwa Ong's (1996) sense of citizenship as subjectification. I focus here on youth music production in the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa between 2004 and 2007. During this time, some local artists adopted a representational strategy that subtly reinscribed the symbolic violence to which members of the coast's Muslim-Swahili society have long been subjected. I examine the representational strategies that were adopted during this period by Mombasan artists who happened to be members of the Muslim-Swahili society ('subjects of the Swahili coast', as I name them), with an ethnographic eye and ear trained on what they say about the ways in which young subjects of the Swahili coast are objectified and subjectified as 'Kenyan youth' in the twenty-first century.

RESUMÉ

La côte swahilie à majorité musulmane a toujours servi de périphérie conceptuelle et physique pour le Kenya postcolonial. Cet article voit la musique de la jeunesse kenyane sous l'influence du hip-hop mondial comme une inscription ethnographique dans la dynamique d'identité et de citoyenneté dans cette région. La

musique de la jeunesse kenyane emprunte à la culture hip-hop mondiale l'idée qu'un artiste doit « représenter le réel ». Les manières dont ces artistes régionaux construisent leur personnage public fournissent ainsi une richesse de données sur la « citoyenneté culturelle », dans le sens que donne Aihwa Ong (1996) à la citoyenneté en tant que subjectivation. L'auteur s'intéresse ici à la musique de la jeunesse produite dans la ville côtière de Mombasa entre 2004 et 2007. Pendant cette période, des artistes locaux ont adopté une stratégie représentationnelle qui a réinscrit avec subtilité la violence symbolique à laquelle sont soumis depuis longtemps les membres de la société swahilie musulmane. Il examine les stratégies représentationnelles adoptées au cours de cette période par les artistes de Mombasa qui se trouvaient être des membres de la société swahilie musulmane (appelés ici « sujets de la côte swahilie »), en portant un regard et une écoute ethnographiques sur ce qu'elles disent sur les manières dont les jeunes sujets de la côte swahilie sont objectivés et subjectivés en tant que « jeunesse kenyane » au vingt-et-unième siècle.