

Children's Lives and Children's Voices: An Exploration of Popular Music's Representation of Children in East Africa

Introduction

Much research on childhood in Africa centers primarily on children as victims and passive participants in larger socio-political problems. Even a general search for literature on childhood in Africa reveals a great number of entries that are limited to health issues, vulnerability to war, malnutrition, or other rights-related issues. It is quite telling that African children are predominantly perceived in the same way the continent and its people are, as pitiful, backward and chaotic. It is an image of children as threatened by disease, hunger, civil war and lack of education. If Africa is a 'dark' continent, then African children have a 'dark' childhood. Without playing down the reality of Africa's and African children's very difficult social, economic, and political challenges, I want to use a slightly different approach to the reality of African childhood and its representation. I want to see how a different kind of representation, based on expressive culture, may allow us to see the complexity of childhood realities in Africa and explore new facets of child and youth studies. I am particularly interested in how childhood in Africa is caught up in the transitions to modernity; a modernity that is itself regarded as the panacea for Africa's transition from 'darkness' to 'light'. The expectation is that when African countries modernize, then children's lives will be improved. I, therefore, want to ponder how modernity could itself be a hindrance to positive experiences for children and youth in Africa.

The challenge that we face in this investigation of childhood representation in Africa is to move from the ideology of children as objects to be represented by others to one where children participate in their own representation. In the same breath, we have to be careful not to fall prey to the tyranny of participation, in which we may assume that having children and youth present in the works we engage constitutes their participation. Participation entails power relations and choices. This is particularly important. Many African cultures emphasize the view of children as inarticulate and incompe-

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tent in socio-cultural matters. Many African children are often 'seen' not 'heard', being spoken for than being regarded as beings with views and opinions to contribute to and about their social worlds. They are, as anthropologist Allison James, says 'silenced spectators' (2007:261) watching their world but not talking about it in any publicly accepted manner. And yet competing with this common perception and regard for children as 'inadequate' members of society are the realities of child soldiers, child headed households, and children engaged in productive economic activities, both in rural and urban locations in Africa. How do we reconcile these two competing scenarios? How does the field of childhood representation look in general and in Africa in particular? What place does popular music as an expressive genre occupy in this terrain of representations of childhood in Africa?

To respond to these questions, while pursuing this new facet of children and youth representations in popular music, I use a symbolic and interpretive approach to analyze songs as symbols and as processes of performance through which musicians and their listeners assign meanings to their experiences and address fundamental questions about children's social lives. I, therefore, see song texts, their performance, and the meanings they carry as important symbols that point to various social and cultural realities of not only children and youth within their realm of production, but also their own communities. To analyze these symbols is thus to access an important cultural repertoire that informs children's lives, perceptions of youth and childhood, and their lived experiences. For purposes of this work, I will use the term childhood or children in reference to individuals below eighteen years of age. This I do, in full recognition

of the reality of a possible conflation of the term children with youth whose age is often both sociological and chronological.

Studies and Representations of Childhood: An Overview

Studies of childhood have, until recently, been mostly confined to developmental issues, especially in psychology or within family studies in sociology. Within anthropology, childhood studies emerged in the 1930s in the US under the Culture and Personality School spearheaded by Margaret Mead (1928, 1935) and Ruth Benedict (1934). In the UK, anthropological work on childhood came in the 1970s through Charlotte Hardman's work in Oxford (1973, 1974). In Africa, childhood studies have predominantly been carried out by Western anthropologists that were spearheaded by the work of Robert Levine and others on childcare (Levine et. al. 1994) and more recently by Alma Gottlieb's work on children and religion in Ivory Coast (2004). More focused studies of childhood identities by anthropologists have represented the voices of children, revealing things that are important to them, even those that adults may consider unimportant or childish (James 2007:264).

Outside anthropology, Childhood studies in Africa have been spearheaded by different research institutes, including the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and southern Africa (OSSREA) in which scholars from various disciplines have come together to conduct studies that have challenged Western notions of childhood that are based on chronological age rather than social roles. In his work on children working in Zimbabwe, for instance, Victor Muzvidziwa challenges the categories of child labour that are shrouded in issues of rights and illegality and asserts that children should be regarded as workers who are positive contributors to the household income and survival, irrespective of their chronological age (2000). He shows that unlike Western categorizations

of children that are based on chronological age, many children in Zimbabwe work as a means of survival for themselves and their siblings especially in households that have single or no parents. Pamela Reynolds' work in Zimbabwe also shows the role played by children in the liberation war as well as in religious matters (1995). Focusing on children and youth in contexts of conflict, Ibrahim Abdullah shows how youth culture that was anti-establishment emerged in Sierra Leone by appropriating a revolutionary language of university students to contest political power (1997, 1998, 2006). Despite this growing interest in childhood studies within and outside anthropology, there is a dearth of scholarship on how children's lives, aspirations, and realities are represented in popular music in Africa.

The realities surrounding children's inability to freely and easily enter the public realm of self-representation complicates attempts to have any representations of childhood. This is primarily due to the complexity and politics of representation, whether of children or any other groups and individuals. Cultural critic Ella Shohat has rightly stated that any representation 'must be analyzed, not only in terms of who represents, but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address' (1995:173). Such post-modernist critiques of grand narratives in ethnographies as well as the suspicions surrounding textual representation of lived realities calls for self-reflexive approaches to any socio-cultural representation(s). Acknowledging these challenges of representing others, and even self, I also believe with James and Prout that children are articulate social actors who have much to say about the world (James and Prout 1990) and can, and do, articulate themselves in various ways at different times. What follows from this realization is the need to pay more attention to avenues through which children find a voice to articulate these realities and experiences. I argue that one such avenue is music and especially popular music, which has recently become quite prevalent in East Africa with the advent of Hip-hop. This music has, through various socio-economic changes, become increasingly identified with youth and children.

Conditions created by the instability of the nation-state following various global

economic and political changes have been a blessing in disguise for many youth in East Africa. Such changes have led to the emergence of a Hip-hop culture based on local and global sensibilities that in turn create certain political and economic opportunities for the youth. The youth have been able to insert themselves into the local and global spheres that shape national and regional political and cultural structures and destinies, by using music as a platform for self-expression and social critique. As a result, numerous opportunities availed to many youth in East Africa through Hip-hop have enabled a number of them to redefine their social identities while expanding their economic opportunities.

When Hip-hop music emerged in urban locations in East Africa in the mid 1990s, it was in response to material conditions of joblessness, decline in living conditions, and massive urbanization with its attendant problems. Many youth across social and ethnic divides were facing these declining living conditions, many of them having been born in the cities to parents who emigrated from rural areas as agriculture failed to provide a stable source of livelihood. Attracted to cities by the lure of modern life, these new immigrants saw their living standards continue to decline.

In the late 80s and early 90s Hip-hop became one medium through which to make sense of and respond to these conditions of extreme poverty and political quagmire. It provided a much-needed voice and public presence to many youth facing unemployment and political powerlessness. From its direct links to rap music in urban Black America to its localized versions, Hip-hop music traversed the public sphere hitherto occupied by politicians, scholars and other opinion shapers, generating not only enormous popularity among young people, but also stepping into an expanding vacuum of social, political and economic commentary (Ntarangwi 2009). Hip-hop took on another role, becoming part of the emerging global take-over of the local resources that contribute to the formation of youth identity and their creative expressions. This take-over was predicated on an overwhelming presence of Western (predominantly American) popular cultural material and expression mediated by, among others, television, the Internet, digital music, telephony and video games that aggres-

sively compete with and subdue local cultural expressions. It was also predicated upon an already existing Western cultural dominance perpetuated by historical structures.

The emergence of Hip-hop in East Africa was influenced by the presence of Western popular culture that intensified in the 1980s through the 1990s, as well as by certain political structures propelled by colonial and neo-colonial forces and socio-economic changes that followed Structural Adjustment Programs. These political and socio-economic realities precipitated the culture of expression realized today in Hip-hop. Embedded in this structural reality, however, is a culture and value system that has continued to evaluate Western modernities over those that are African. Through a colonial system of education, in both public and private secondary schools (where many East African youth are socialized), for instance, Western cultural ideals became idolized, a foundation for cultural expression into the post-colonial period (Ntarangwi 2003b).

It is due to this popularity of Hip-hop among youth and children and their direct participation in it that has led me to explore children's voice and childhood representations in popular music. In this way 'giving voice to children is not simply or only about letting children speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of our theorizing about the social world that children's perspectives can provide' (James 2007:262) and the media that they choose or have access to in such representation. I am primarily interested in how narratives contained in popular music in East Africa represent childhood in East Africa in ways that give voice to otherwise 'voiceless' children and, by extension, how such representation confronts and reflects changes in the socio-cultural and political terrain.

Popular music, especially Hip-hop, has become a medium through which youth and childhood is represented in two ways: first, through its lyrics, artistes are able to articulate critical issues on behalf of children and youth. Second, as a platform that children and youth can and have used to express their creative abilities in ways that were not available to them only a few decades ago. To date, many Hip-hop groups in East Africa comprise of children and youth, some of who are below

twelve years. In Tanzania, for instance, the group Xplastaz (based in Arusha) is made up of siblings who include Diana Rutta (Dineh) and Steven Rutta (Steve) who joined the group in 1997 when they were just eleven and nine years old, respectively. In Kenya, the group Ukooflani Mau Mau (based in Nairobi), which is a conglomeration of many music groups, nurtured and mentored a group of thirty children and youth from Mathare and Dandora, some of whom formed two Hip-hop groups—Eastlandos and Wafalme. Today (2009), these artists are between 10 and 15 years of age. Clearly, children are finding avenues of representation through popular music.

A number of reasons explain this phenomenon: First is the sheer expansion and popularity of Hip-hop music, due to the transformed nature of music-making. Nowadays, one requires minimal capital investment to record a song or songs. With the current technology that allows one to use generic sounds as background music as well as the ease with which one can record a song on CD, many young people are able to make music much more cheaply and fast than it was in the past. Second, Hip-hop music, and especially rap, does not require much singing expertise, as long as one can develop rhyme and rhythm. This may explain the flooding of the East African urban scene with new Hip-hop music and musicians every month. Sadly, these artistes often disappear as quickly as they appear. All in all popular music has opened up spaces for children and youth to not only represent their own realities, but also to be much more engaged in the representation done of them by others.

Popular Music and Social Realities in East Africa

For decades, social scientists, especially anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, have acknowledged the existence of a strong link between music and culture. Generally, music has also been used as a source of ethnographic data, leading to a better understanding of a society (cf. Askew 2002; Cooper 1982; Firth 1987; Ntarangwi 2003a; Perullo 2005) and as an expression of discontent with existing social and political structures (Berliner 1993; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Hebdige 1975; Pratt 1990). More specifically, research on popular music in East Africa has also shown that music is an ideal tool

through which to assess a variety of cultural realities of a given community or society. It has been regarded as a way of reasserting an erewhile African identity (Samper 2004), as a means of negotiating modernity (Nyairo and Ogude 2003), and as a reflection of everyday socio-cultural youth realities (Lemelle 2006; Ntarangwi 2007). Some scholars have specifically looked at how gendered identity is mobilized through popular music (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2002; Ntarangwi 2003; Mwangi 2004) while others have explored, in general terms, how national politics and imaginations of statehood are constructed or mobilized through popular music (Askew 2002; Wekesa 2004).

Specifically focusing on Hip-hop, scholars have shown how music is very much linked to the politics of identity among youth in East Africa. Ssewakiryanga's (1999) work analyzes the emerging youth culture in Uganda where American popular music is an important framework from which local Hip-hop culture developed. He argues that while this music may have important contributions to the local Hip-hop scene, it becomes localized through a process of reinterpretation and redeployment. Perullo's (2005) work in Tanzania looks at how rap music confronts stereotypes about young people by using politically and socially relevant lyrics to reach a broader listening audience, while Samper's (2004) work on rap in Kenya shows that, rather than mere copycats of American Hip-hop music, youth use traditions of revolution associated with the anti-colonial movements such as the Mau Mau to respond to post-colonial realities of cultural colonization. It is clear that popular music in the form of Hip-hop has become an important avenue for children and youth in East Africa to represent themselves and their realities or dreams. Further, many organizations working in the area of socio-cultural change have noticed the role played by music and sought to push various social messages to the youth through music.

South Africa's popular music star, Zola (Bongi Dlamini), for instance, was appointed Goodwill Ambassador for Eastern and southern Africa by UNICEF. His ability to connect and capture the attention of youth and children through his music precipitated this appointment. On his first tour to Kenya in early March of 2007, he visited a primary school in Kiambu (Central Kenya) that has been

ravaged by violence against children. During the school visit Zola was reduced to tears when children from the school accounted their encounters and experiences of violence. It is quite telling that the children used the medium of music to articulate their pain and despair, saying as Chinyama and Mwabe (2007) report that 'No one cares for us, we are raped, sodomized and destroyed by people who should be protecting us; We don't know what the future holds for us, only God knows.'

The fact that these atrocities are perpetrated by people who 'should be protecting' the children, convinces them that 'no one cares.' In 2005, a nine-year-old girl was raped and killed on her way from the school and, in 2006, eight girls and four boys were sexually abused on their way from school (Chinyama and Mwabe 2007). The fact that little was done to punish the perpetrators traumatized the students and instilled fear in the community. It is possible that children hardly receive the necessary responses from relevant parties because, as children, they do not have the power to demand attention from the public. This is why it is interesting to see that their readily available medium through which to express their views, experiences, and opinions is music. It is also not coincidental that Zola himself grew up in the harsh Soweto slum environment and turned to music as a way of articulating his views on social issues. The centrality of music as an important tool for representing childhood experiences is here unquestionable.

Representing Modernity and Tradition in Childhood Experiences

Besides becoming a platform for children and youth agency in East Africa, music has also slowly emerged as a medium through which to symbolically debate the representation of African cultures within a dialogic structure, brought about by the interaction between modernity and tradition. Many Africans today struggle with the dialogic structure within which their cultural practices and attitudes develop. On the one hand, African culture has been denigrated to a relic of the past and often considered a hindrance to modernity as expressed through *Maendeleo* (development). On the other, there is a growing move to reclaim a proud heritage of an ideal African cultural past that seeks to

establish a certain cultural rootedness in the face of global cultural and politico-economic hegemony. The latter is especially articulated by Thabo Mbeki's notion of African Renaissance.¹

Political and cultural globalization that was mobilized by imperial and colonial expansion prior to, and later in, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, paved way for contemporary globalization now centered around economics and technology. In much of East Africa, this has become an ongoing process of cultural expression that takes on different forms and acquires different identities especially as a consequence of the neo-liberal economic project. The process has in turn opened local markets up to foreign (mostly Western) cultural products such as movies, music, dress and other opportunities for cultural exchange (or dominance) through satellite television, FM radio, email, Internet, cell phones, and other forms of cultural expression. The mixed opportunities availed by globalization has led to insecurity and reclusion as certain individuals and communities reinvent their cultural identities in response to the homogeneity brought by globalization. Others have taken on the opportunities availed by globalization to positively enhance themselves socially and economically.

Tanzania's popular music artiste commonly known as Professor Jay (Joseph Haule) presents the dialogism brought by a pull between tradition and modernity in a song titled *Taifa la Kesho* (Tomorrow's Nation) in which he becomes the voice of children, castigating the neglect, apathy, and moral decadence facing Africa's children. He starts by stating:

I am pained when I see children
vending water

Every day you say that education is
their investment

Education is a right for every child

The government has declared free
primary education

Imagine children paying to ride
commuter buses

Their parents have abandoned and
sacrificed them.

It is now a truism that formal education has become the most important form of socialization for East Africans in preparing them to successfully integrate into the

modern-state. This is why basic education has been recognized as a basic right for all children in East Africa. To this end, the East African governments have instituted free primary education programs, but, as Professor Jay shows, the program has not benefited all. Professor Jay's commentary here on education and children paying to ride public transportation reveals the challenges of education in a poor nation like Tanzania. When the then president, Benjamin Mkapa reintroduced compulsory free primary education, the existing infrastructure could not cope with increased enrolment (Otieno 2002). Therefore, despite the country's declared free education programme not all children attend school, and some engage in income generating activities such as vending water. With high numbers of pupils enrolled in primary school, and few opportunities to proceed through secondary school where only about 9 per cent of all primary school children go on to secondary school (Nkosi 2005), a large number of youth will end up in poor social conditions because of the role of education in social mobility.

Childhood representation in East Africa is also challenged by the ambiguity created by a desire to see children in a traditional sense that regards them only as invalids who have to be represented in all facets of life by adults and by the reality of living in a fast-changing socio-cultural terrain. This romantic cultural representation of African traditions of childhood clashes conceptually with the reality of the actual lives community members live in a modern nation-state that is driven by Western modes of modernity. Here is how Professor Jay articulates this reality:

Who should have a seat in public
transportation, the young or old?

I think it's the child so (s)he can bring
forth others

You bring up old traditions such as
those stating the old should eat steak

While children eat the heads and
hooves so that you may rejoice.

It is very common for younger people to give up seats in public transportation to those older than them as a form of respect. Children, it is expected, can withstand the challenges of standing in a moving vehicle and that they have many more years to ride public transportation, and so, they need to show deference to adults. Yet,

what Professor Jay presents in this song is a cultural dilemma. Public transportation signifies the modern amenities of mobility, moving from one's locality to another, and especially to urban areas. But in the midst of engaging with this modernity, the people also want to maintain certain traditional ideologies and practices that favour adults over children who the song refers to as 'leaders of tomorrow.' How can modernity be upheld while holding on to traditional ideas and practices that do not allow for such forward movement? This seems to be the question Professor Jay is indirectly asking here which challenges the audience to change such behaviour when he brings in children to sing the chorus that says, 'sisters, mothers, brothers, have mercy on me, brothers, fathers, mothers, have mercy on me.'

Quite clearly Professor Jay recognizes that children's identity is tied to their relationships with others in the society. This explains the appeal made directly to family members from whom the children ask for mercy even though such concerns cannot be limited to filial relations. By couching their appeal in the context of mercy, the children are targeting the emotive and 'soft' side of the society. It pre-emptly the existence of ill treatment on the children. The children are suffering and if the community truly cares about them, then it would show mercy on them. This appeal is important when seen in relation to how adults have responded to an invitation to help children. Realizing their unwillingness to assist children, Professor Jay presents his appeal in a way that compels adults to see the importance of helping children. He turns to every adult and asks them to recognize the interconnectedness between childhood and adulthood as well as the continuity of the nation-state. He says:

Those who are adults now were once
children

But when I ask them to help children
they turn away

Yet they daily sing that children are
the leaders of tomorrow

We are losing many of these children
and others are continually suffering

Oh God almighty please help these
angels.

The irony of stated ideals and practical realities regarding children is quite evident here. As it shows, many people say

that children are tomorrow's leaders but refuse to assist them when requested. In their song about youth, Eastlandos, comprised of Ciku (Mary Wanjiku, 14), Nash (Nahashon Ng'ang'a, 15), Sam (Samantha Nyokabi, 14) and Mary (Mary Nzomo, 13), challenge this notion of children as tomorrow's leaders when they state:

Who said that we are tomorrow's leaders?

We are today's leaders!

The young generation has emerged from the ghetto and is bringing you education.

In this song, Eastlandos show that youth in Kenya may not be interested in waiting for years to take up leadership because of their age. Indeed, the four artists continue to perform music while maintaining their goals of acquiring an education. Wherever they make money from their music performance, they first pay their school fees, and as a result convince their parents of the value of music. Their parents then allow them to continue performing music while in school.²

As East African communities wrestle with a type of modernity that challenges their cultural practices, a number of new ideologies emerge. Composed in the first years of the twenty first century when there were many socio-political and economic changes in East Africa to match the emerging modernity, Professor Jay's *Taifa la Kesho* reveals once again the prevailing and challenging social issues of the day. One of those issues affecting children directly is that of spanking. Spanking children as a form of punishment is not only common in much of East Africa, it is also expected and accepted. Yet, as these communities change, they are confronted with new ideas regarding spanking. This is an issue that Professor Jay addresses quite forcefully, saying:

It's not necessary to spank a child when (s)he is wrong

This is where I see parents have gone astray

Does spanking teach or hurt children?

That is a fundamental question you need to ask

Because too much spanking makes children stubborn

I do not mean you should pamper the child.

No, first (s)he should go to school, after which (s)he can play.

It has taken many communities in East Africa a while before they could consider spanking of children as a practice that needs to be re-evaluated and even abandoned altogether. Even though formal schooling came to East Africa as part of Western modernity, spanking became accepted as a form of punishment that endured for a long time. In Kenya it took government intervention through the Legal Notice 56/2001 to ban the use of corporal punishment as a method of disciplining students in school. Yet, a 2002 survey conducted by Population Communication Africa (PCA) showed that out of 1, 140 students surveyed, 52.6 per cent reported being caned (Lloyd 2002). In Uganda, Bishop Elisha Kyamugambi of the Ankole Diocese asked the government to revisit the law barring corporal punishment for children, arguing that it instills discipline (Basiime 2002). So far, corporal punishment is still lawful in Tanzania and leaves open the process through which it can be opposed or even abandoned. It is not that Professor Jay is opposed to corporal punishment in its entirety, but to that used 'unnecessarily' on school children and actually suggests harsh punishment for such crimes as rape. In a quick turn-around from condemning corporal punishment in school, Professor Jay calls for the harshest penalty for sex offenders, especially those who defile children. He argues that:

It would be good for the public to assist the courts

Rather than get off the boat when it's sinking

I am shocked that an old man with grey hair can rape a child

I advise the courts to double the punishment on such men

Hang them or give them a life sentence, it is justified

I am amazed humans are greedier than hyenas

How can they rape a two-year-old child?

These criminals don't deserve to live they should be hanged.

Kenya's nominated Member of Parliament Njoki Ndung'u (2003-2007) proposed a motion that would quite literally reflect Professor Jay's call for harsh punishment on rapists. In the motion, Ndung'u pro-

posed that convicted rapists be castrated. The motion was passed unanimously but with amendments that rejected the call for castration. The motion, which became the Sexual Offences Act 2006 states in part that 'A person who commits an offence of defilement with a child aged eleven years or less shall upon conviction be sentenced to imprisonment for life' (Government of Kenya 2006). This law and Professor Jay's song texts reflect the extent to which violence on children in many East African communities has escalated as children make transitions to new politico-economic and social realities. Sociologists have examined the link between crime trends and social change and shown that crime rates increase as society goes through socio-economic challenges (see, for instance, Arthur 1992). These social changes affect children as well. Professor Jay shows that when children are neglected, they turn to criminal activities. He says in the same song that:

Why do you give our children such a hard time?

Now see how this five-year-old child is already sniffing glue

He has become distressed and turned into a pickpocket

We do not even value education any more

Is this the kind of nation you want?

I am not sure if you recognize the consequences of this reality

At night these children will pick up guns and come after you.

Without proper socialization children will turn to other forms of socialization including those mediated through criminal activities. Sniffing glue, pickpocketing, and criminal activities are very much tied to urban youth, many of whom live on the streets. Research on street children in East Africa reveals that when family income decreases, members are forced to put pressure on children to work in order to support the family (Kapoka 2000; Kilbride, Suda and Njeru 2000; Lorraine and Barrett 2001). These are the realities that Professor Jay highlights in this song. Yet, to consider some of these 'anti-establishment' activities as only tied to social and economic challenges is to ignore the agency of youth and children as individuals who through various forms of marginalisation and exclusion from the state, community, and even filial privileges, strategically and

forcefully, insert themselves in these public spaces. Many children and youth caught up in conflict and war, for instance, have often been drafted forcefully but there are others who find participation in conflict as avenues through which to become useful members of an otherwise excluded social group. In the case of children in northern Uganda, however, the neglect and exclusion shown by the government of Yoweri Museveni begets a more complex analysis of the attendant historicity and ethnic dimension.

Giving Voice to the Voiceless: The Case of Children in northern Uganda

They have been known as 'night Commuters' following various documentaries in Western media, but the children of SOUTHERN Uganda are more than commuters. They have been both victims and villains of the civil war that has primarily pitted the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and the Uganda government. The historicity of this experience is quite intriguing and sheds light on the complexity of the current conflict. During Obote's reign in the 1980s, the majority of the national army soldiers were Acholi who together with the Langi (Obote's ethnic group) formed a formidable force against insurgency coming from the south, led by Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Army (NRA). The Acholi/Langi coalition did not last long. After Tito Okello and Basilio Okello, two Acholi senior officers in the army, were bypassed in the appointment of Uganda's Commander-in-Chief, there was in-fighting in the army that pitted the Acholi against the Langi. The Acholi defeated the Langi and established Tito Okello as president. Tito Okello's reign was, however, short-lived. The NRA defeated Okello's army and Museveni was sworn in as president in January 1986 (Allen 1991). This succession of events led to regional groupings which saw former Acholi soldiers and others aspiring for political leadership, regroup in opposition to the Museveni government. The ethnic animosity that ensued between the Acholi and their counterparts in the South, primarily the politically-powerful Baganda has had an important role in the stretched-out conflict.

In 1987, the self-elected spiritual leader of the Acholi in Uganda, Alice Auma (later known as Alice Lakwena when she took on the name of the spirit that possessed her) saw her campaign to liberate the Acholi of northern Uganda militarily crum-

ble in the hands of the NRA. Alice had in 1986 initiated a movement for the Acholi to reverse the NRA political might but failed. Joseph Kony's LRA came in almost as a continuation of the struggle initiated by Alice (Behrend 1999) but instead of liberation, the LRA tormented and traumatized the Acholi for years. Joseph Kony's army has survived through brute force, abducting children and forcing boys to become soldiers while girls are sexually abused and turned into servants or wives of the soldiers. This went on for over two decades until there was international pressure to highlight and stop the plight of the people of northern Uganda, many of them children. In 2001, the US Patriotic Act declared the LRA a terrorist organization; in 2004, the US Congress passed the northern Uganda Crisis Response Act; and in 2005, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Joseph Kony and four of his top commanders (www.invinciblechildren.com). All this attention helped sensitize many Westerners of the plight of northern Uganda but the most effective program came through three young Americans—Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole—who went to Uganda in search of some 'cool' pictures and came back with a story. Their trip was visually recorded and later turned into *The Invincible Children: Rough Cut*, a movie that changed many American youth's response to children in northern Uganda. The movie was packaged in a medium that appeals to youth, with fast music, moving captions on screen, and focusing on school. Through this movie, a movement emerged that led to partnerships between schools in the US and Uganda, where funds were raised to aid in the everyday needs of Ugandan children. These responses by youth in aid to other youth brought a new way of cross-cultural interactions, connecting outsiders with locals.

Locally in Uganda, a group of musicians also came together to respond to the silence that shrouded the atrocities facing northern Uganda. This silence especially increased when many families in northern Uganda were moved to internally Displaced People's camps where they live in squalor. In a song titled 'No More Virgins in Gulu' the artistes—Halima Namakula, Butcherman, and Ngoni Group—contextualize their representation within the prevailing politics in Uganda. The group uses President Museveni's visit to Gulu in 2005 to specifically fore-

ground their story. The song narrates the difficult circumstances in which people in northern Uganda live. It is quite instructive that the song is titled 'no more virgins.' Reference to virgins symbolically denotes purity and innocence that many associate with children and childhood. Yet, all this has been taken away from the children of northern Uganda literally as their fellow Ugandans and government watch. In the chorus, the song indicts the neglect that the Museveni government has shown to the people of northern Uganda who now live in Gulu. They sing:

Dear Museveni we are happy, to receive you here in Gulu

The education is poor, communication is poor

There is (sic) no more virgin in Gulu, they were all raped by Kony

The situation is poor, but all the same we are happy.

The use of the phrase 'but all the same we are happy' is to show that children and people of Gulu have been so neglected that hardships make them 'happy' rather than bitter. How can people facing such hardships be happy? These artistes are showing the sarcasm that comes from a condition where people realize that the government may not really care about their welfare. Why else would they be neglected for two decades unless they were living in conditions that make them happy?

Uganda's geographic regions reflect ethnic boundaries with the Acholi primarily occupying northern Uganda. Their neglect is not only regional but also ethnic. The perception in Uganda is that the southerners are the ones who have ruled Uganda for the longest, with the Buganda Kingdom in pre-colonial times and Museveni who is from the south having been president since 1986. This ethnic neglect may explain why the song goes on to say that the musicians are wondering why Ugandans are so saddened by international catastrophes, like the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, yet not bothered by the death and suffering of their fellow Ugandans in the north. The artistes ask, 'is the blood of Americans so special different from ours? Is their blood blue and ours red?' The musicians then give an example of how all the churches in Uganda prayed for the US after the September 11, 2001 attacks but they didn't pray for Gulu.

When the children of Gulu sing that they are happy despite the breakdown of infrastructure, they are responding to this cold treatment they receive from their fellow Ugandans and the government. The people in Gulu have lost all hope as the artistes explain when they say that, 'Even when they say that they are happy to see President Museveni; they sing it with their lips, but their hearts are bleeding.'

The song then urges Ugandans to pray for the people of Gulu, for the hard and sad life that they have endured for so long. They say that every day is a day of running, running in search of safety, unlike people living in the other regions of Uganda where there is peace. The song reminds the audience of the atrocities that have been endured by the people of Gulu. Even if there has been truce and not much fighting going on in NORTHERN Uganda recently, the people, and especially the children have to live with the emotional and physical scars of war. Many of them had their noses, ears, breasts and limbs cut off for refusing to join or support the LRA. They carry those physical scars that also extend to emotional and psychological levels. Even with reduced atrocities towards the people in Gulu, their living conditions in the camps have been terrible. This is why the song continues to narrate the challenges of living in the camps. The artistes say:

War is a very nasty experience

People suffer and sleep in Internally Displaced Peoples Camps

Parents share a single room with their six children

When the parents are having sex in the night

The children see or hear everything that is going on.

War has dehumanized and left them naked, robbed them of privacy and culture

Congestion in the camps spreads diseases faster

Leading to high infant mortality, and bad general welfare.

The humiliating living conditions at the camps show that there is need for new and deliberate ways of helping people in northern Uganda. The song highlights the shame and loss of culture, this time not due to modernizing, but due to internal warfare. It is clear that, to understand the

role played by popular music in highlighting the plight of children and youth, one has to pay attention both to the content of various songs as well as the socio-cultural realities of the day. In so doing, one can make connections between the lives of children and youth and the challenges they face on one hand, and the representations of such realities on the other.

Conclusions

I have argued here that while representing children and youth in Africa is quite a challenge for lack of ample scholarship, popular music has emerged as an important platform for such representation. Popular music, as a cultural product, reveals a lot about the social structure of the society from which it emanates. Indeed, popular songs and culture in general, are not only about society, they do not just reflect, but are part of the socio-cultural fabric. They articulate and mould life experience while at the same time becoming forms of expressing social reality and aspirations of children and youth in a rapidly changing context. In revealing what I would like to call the deep structure of socio-cultural reality of East African life, music is here able to get into the core of the issues that are not otherwise addressed by those in positions of power that cannot otherwise be said in other fora. In this way, music is a central medium through which social experience is channeled.

In privileging music as a source of ethnographic data and a platform for representing children and youth in East Africa, I am showing that cultural activities and events are often mediated through popular culture and are worth of independent analysis and interpretation. It is therefore my argument that songs can be viewed as 'cultural texts' that hinge on the discursive, representation and contestation of the cultural whole of any community or society. Seeing music as a creative expression of a society's institutions, values, and experiences, I have shown how social issues get played out in music whose structure directly reflects social reality and ideology. Though few scholars have concentrated on the analysis of song texts as cultural texts (and in particular popular music), I have here argued that song texts are important sources of ethnographic data and can be good pointers to East Africa's changing

social structure, especially as it affects children and youth.

Notes

1. See, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/1998/tm0813.htm> accessed May 12, 2009.² I am indebted to Felix Gicharu (Felo) for this information on Eastlandos.

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