



Gengetone music as a subversion of the urban space

Antony Mukasa

Department of Humanities, Chuka University, Kenya

Email: mukasamate@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examines how Gengetone, a new music genre birthed on the streets of Nairobi and “hoods” of the inner estates like Jericho, Ongata Rongai, Langata and Umoja has revolutionized Kenyan music, sparked controversy by becoming the object of a national debate after being criticized for its explicit lyrics. However, despite the criticism, the music has instead become popular in mainstream media like Ghetto classics and alternative media spaces like Facebook groups, YouTube channels as well as nightclubs and matatus. I examine this genre, which has adopted “sheng” as its primary idiom and combines elements of American Hip-hop with different kinds of Kenyan popular music. The paper argues that the popularity of this underground street music can be studied as an expression of resistance against the mechanisms of social marginalization. And that normative understandings of what constitutes proper music is at play in the suppression of the genre. The paper looks at the politics of Kenyan Urban street music, discusses the Gengetone in relation to the notion of an authentic Kenyan genre. The second part examines selected lyrics of Gengetone artists such as *Ethic*, *Sailors*, *Boondocks Gang*, *Mbogi Genje*, *Ssasura*, *Ochungulo family* and *Zzero Sufuri*. The paper adopts a perspective that engages critically with aesthetic norms in popular music and argues that the lyrics of mentioned artistes can be understood as a distinct literary form.

Keywords: gengetone, popular music, urban culture

Popular music and the emergence of gengetone

This paper interrogates Gengetone music as a form of Kenyan popular literary mode. I examine Gengetone music as a popular mode pegged on Mbugua wa Mungai's (2008: 58) assertion that: "Local scholarship seems to deliberately cultivate invisibility for local creative expressive forms especially these...fall under popular culture rubric" (1). Mbugua's assertion brings to fore the need to study new popular forms like Gengetone which he labels as "unorthodox cultural phenomena", a perception from early scholars in the academy reluctant embrace what he calls "street" practitioners. Mbugua advocates for more space for such popular forms in mainstream academic discourses as they act as significant tropes of representation. Mbugua's analysis is a justification for undertaking this research on this new genre.

Nairobi is a divided urban space encoded with metaphors of 'uptown' and 'down town', 'upscale' and 'ghetto' and can be labelled a contested city (Wasike 2011:20). Wasike notes that the divided city "... invokes images of the urban space as ... defined by unequal distribution of 'cultural' and 'social' capital" (20). Gengetone music has emanated from Nairobi's 'downtown' and 'ghetto' areas (Onsando,2020). Wasike (2011) observes that most youths who live in Eastlands survive on the margins of life and thus themes on struggle and resilience in Genge Rap songs like *Jua Kali's* "Ngeli ya Genge" resonate with them. He calls these neighbourhood *mitaa-hoods ya Eastlando* where many Genge-rap artistes, Gengetone's predecessors mostly emanate from and gives examples of places such as California also called *Calif*, Dandora also called *Dandosh*. Wasike posits that:

This dichotomization of the city into the rich versus poor binaries is also reflected in the type of music emanating from these sections of the city. While genge artists believe theirs is real hardcore rap because it comes from *mitaa ya Eastlando*, they nonetheless have to compete with other genres from middle-and upper -class suburbs like...

boomba and bounce. All these rap varieties compete for the attention of urban listeners... However, genge artists consider themselves more authentic allegedly because their music is for the masses-*ngoma za watu*. (p. 24)

Gengetone has been described as a rapidly growing movement because of its popularity among the youth and been labelled as the new sound accelerating out of the Kenyan streets (Storm, 2020). The paper concurs with Mbugua's (2008, p. 58) assertion that the streets are the principal spaces for the emergence and development of popular culture.

As we examine Gengetone music in Kenya it is important to note that there have been other studies on popular music genres in Kenya (Nyairo & Ogude 2014, Mwangi 2004, Wasike 2011, Mboya 2015, Mbugua wa Mungai, 2008, Eisenberg, 2012, Ogone 2014,). Mwangi (2004) investigates how hip-hop music employs masculinity as a trope in grounding an elusive East African identity. Mwangi demonstrates that the music is quite sexualised as it is haunted by images of hegemonic masculinity. Nyairo and Ogude (2005) interrogate the link between popular music and politics in Kenya. The scholars point out how politicians adopt popular literary forms like popular music to propagate the national discourse vis-a vis their own political agendas. Wasike (2011) examines the emergence of Gengetone's predecessor Genge-rap music. He analyzes how the lyrics of artistes like Jua Kali and Nonini influence and occupy urban spaces. Ogone (2014) interrogates the Urban "hustler" identity in Kenyan popular music. He points out that contemporary urban artistes have reinvented the negative hustler identity to mean different strategies that urbanites use to cope with the myriad challenges in the city. The artists celebrate these hard-working urbanites especially from the lower classes. Mboya (2015) brings to fore the link between popular music and identity. He argues that popular music in Kenya acts as a site on which ethnic identities are created and consolidated. Mboya repudiates the categorization of Awillo Mike's popular *Benga's* song "Riziki" as a

Western Benga category. He argues that the song's categorization is pegged on the artists ethnicity rather than its national appeal that cuts across all ethnicities. Mbugua wa Mungai (2008) examines the popular cultural industry that is located on Nairobi River road labelled as "Riverwood". He argues that such popular art has been neglected because it is outside the academy. The paper concurs with Mboya and Mungai's suppositions that popular music needs to be interrogated beyond limited prisms.

Eisenberg (2012) examines the link between hip-hop and the construction of a Swahili-Muslim identity on the East African coast. In his study, Eisenberg interrogates how the youth at the Kenyan Coast use hip-hop music to create their own coastal identity in relation to the Kenyan nation. The scholar argues that factors such as feeling of marginality and other social and cultural factors affecting these youth are represented in the content of the music. The concept of marginality and the need to be different and create a new identity espoused by Eisenberg is also central within Gengetone music. Mwangi (2004) also avers that East African hip-hop music is performed by young people struggling with their sense of self thus forging new identities. Marginalization is a key factor because the genesis of this music are lower income inner estates of Nairobi like Dandora, Jericho, Maringo etc.

Nyairo and Ogude (2005) examine how popular music can turn into a catalyst of political transformation adopted by politicians to influence the masses. This paper concurs with the two scholars on the strong influence of popular music on society. Nonetheless in our context the popular music is used to subvert the popular narrative that popular music has to be in line with narratives of the nation like politics and economy as pointed out by Gengetone artist *Nelly the Goon*. Famous Gengetone artists like *Nelly the Goon* of *Ochungulo Family* argue that Gengetone goes beyond the music and represents a lifestyle (Storm, 2020). Gengetone is a subgenre of Kenyan hip-hop music that evolved in 2016-2017 period from *Genge-rap* (Storm, 2020). Initially there was *Kapuka* in the 90's which was followed by *Genge rap* in the 2000s. (Storm, 2020,

Kasuku 2020). Wasike explains that Genge the term that Gengetone emanates from in swahili/sheng interpretation denotes a horde or bunch of people who look suspicious or criminal but in the Kenyan rap context refers to “ rapid-fire proliferation of rap lyrics that are characterized by deliberate attempts to play around with word puns,sounds and rhymes while upstaging ghetto...lifestyle of the Eastern suburbs and neighbourhoods of Nairobi ”(21). Genge rap was propelled by artists such as *Hardstone, Pili Pili, Circuite and Joel,Mejja ,DNA,P-Unit Gidi Gidi Maji Maji, Kalamashaka ,Necessary Noise(Duo of Nassizi and Wyre) ,Jua Kali, Nonini ,K-rupt, Flex ,Deux Vultures* just to name a few.

De(constructing) gengetone music

The originality of Gengetone is credited to music group *Ethic* for pioneering the genre with their controversial explicit song with coded lyrics “Lamba Lolo” (Mbuthi,2019, Kasuku, 2020,Wangeci,2021). Genge means a mass of people hence when attached to the music describes Genge as the music of the ordinary people. Content of their music include street culture and life in the ghetto. Gengetone employs multilayered thin- or thick-textured one-track drones with the occasional melodic accompaniment expressed by synthesizers; crisp, grimy, and rhythmic snares. It is characterized by its ominous and raunchy, gritty vocals and lyrical content conveyed in *sheng* (Kasuku,2020). Typical themes include general life in the ghetto and street culture. Topics vary from night life to casual sex, twerking, funny news sound-bites and even recreational drug use(Mbuthi,2019).Gengetone’s sordid lyrics are accompanied by catchy beats that compensate for the lack of philosophy in most, if not all Gengetone songs (Kasuku, 2020).The genre has become popular among members of the young generation and has been strongly influenced by the urban street popular culture (Musyimi, 2020, Storm, 2020).

Gengetone like other Kenyan hip-hop forms like *Genge-rap* has been greatly influenced by foreign forms like Jamaican dancehall and American hip-hop forms though it has been struggling to have

its own distinct identity. This influence is evident in *Boondocks Gang's* song "Rieng Remix" that also involved *VDJ One, Kristoff* and *Rankaddah*. The artists have borrowed heavily from Jamaican dancehall and even quote "Ting-A-Ling" lyrics of Jamaican dancehall King *Shabba Ranks*. The artists also emulate yard settings from their "hoods" (estates) as backgrounds of their music like their American and Jamaican counterparts. Mwangi(2004) explains that local hip hop music "... appears at pains to define itself as different from the Western art-forms with which it is hastily associated ... (1). Ogone (2014) concurs with Mwangi in noting that: "Contemporary Kenyan urban music tends to echo global music genres " (181). Wasike (2011) also observes that Kenyan rap genres like Genge rap have strived to curve out a distinct identity but they remain " politically and culturally indebted to their American roots"(24). Eisenberg (2012) also observes that the liberalization of the media in Kenya in the 1990's led to a near monopoly of American hip-hop on the Kenyan airwaves. He further asserts that the Jamaican dancehall wave and Caribbean "zouk" later also strongly influenced Kenyan hip-hop music. Hence these new forms were adopted by urban artists who were mostly youthful. The local artists tried to fuse the different form (Hip-hop and Jamaican dancehall) with the local style to come up with a distinct style which Eisenberg categorises as a "gloco hip-hop culture" (558). This is a combination of foreign and local genres of music which Wasike (2011) aptly labels as "glocal" (combination of global and local). Thus Gengetone music is a fusion of rap, reggae ton, dancehall and local styles. The above fusion is a clear illustration that popular culture transcends boundaries. However, as noted above no study has examined Gengetone music. Odidi (2020) points out that discussion on Kenyan music is incomplete without mentioning the impact of Gengetone. Nevertheless, the genre has not been devoid of criticism. Notable antagonist of this genre has been the then Chief Executive of the Kenya Film and Classification Board, Dr Ezekiel Mutua also called the "moral policeman" for his tough stance and censorship of creative works that are deemed

pervasive (Carpus, 2020, Owuor 2020). Dr Mutua pointed out that such “ratchet content” is not fit to be consumed by Kenyans and blames the media and artistes for promoting it (Carpus,2020). The Film Board Chief Executive banned Gengetone songs such as “Tarimbo” by *Ethic* and “Wamlambezi” by *Sailors Gang*(Storm, 2020). Dr Mutua even pledged to follow up with popular social media site of You Tube to make sure the controversial Gengetone artistes’ songs are pulled down (Carpus, 2020). He labelled *Sailors* song “Wamlambezi” as corded pornography (Kasuku, 2020). Mbuthia (2019) also notes that most of the songs in this genre have a lot of sexual imagery both lyrically and visually. He gives examples of lyrics like ‘Pekejeng’ by *Sailors*, ‘Pandana’ and ‘Instagram’ by *Ethic*, ‘Thutha’ by *Ochungulo family*.

However, not all agree with Dr Mutua. Kasuku (2020) in defence of Gengetone, argues that, “Music hasn’t suddenly become ‘trash’. All music is art, and all art-when put on display-is subject to the judgment and interpretation of both appreciative and unappreciative audiences” (1). The differing perspectives on Gengetone music bring to fore the key question of what makes these Gengetone artistes popular despite the vulgarity and controversy in their songs. It is important to note that musicians sometimes use controversial lyrics to gain popularity. Wasike (2011) gives an example of Genge rap artist Herbert Nakitare whose stage name was *Nonini* rise to fame as a result of his controversial lyrics *Wee Kamu and Manzi Wa Nairobi* that were mixed with a lot of sexual overtones. He notes that “Nonini’s singles were instant success partly because of the raunchy and prurient lyrics...provoked an uproar among the conservative section of the Kenyan populace”(23). Gengetone artistes have capitalized on this aspect of controversial lyrics. Mithika(2020) also observes that despite Gengetone’s popularity it is also very much on its deathbed because of lack of a strong cultural foundation. He argues that unlike genres like Taarab that have a coastal tradition and Mugithi, a Kikuyu tradition, Gengetone’s Eastlands foundation is shaky that is why it cannot go beyond our borders. This paper disagrees with the above assertion. This is an

assertion the study concurs with but argues that apart from the negativity, Gengeone music also represents challenges that youth in low income areas experience like police brutality, violence, unemployment, rape and gender based violence. Take for instance Gengeone Group *Rekless* song Featuring *Meja* called “Sota”

Sheng

Ni funny unadhani una chapaa

Buda kusota ni dhambi acha kukataa

Gari ni ya sugamummy,keja aliomba Mwaniki

Looku aliomba jirani,na kwa baze vile anajidai

Bazuu bizu bazu,hauna kakitu bazu uduu...

Lifestyle ni madeni,ni kuchotwa chotwa na Benki

Wacha kupost ukichochoa ati uko lamu na vile umesota

English Translation

It is funny that you think you have money

To be broke is a sin stop denying

Your vehicle belongs to a sugar mummy,

you have borrowed accommodation from Mwaniki

You have borrowed everything from your neighbour

Yet you are so proud

You have nothing accept

You live on debts and Bank loans

So posting on social that you are on holiday in Lamu

Yet you are broke

The song examines the challenge of living in low-income areas amidst a lot of societal pressure to have a successful life despite the poverty. The social pressure leads to most of the settlers adopting social pretensions or vices to create images of “success” which ends up being a façade.

Gengetone straddling linguistic barriers

The paper contends that the Gengetone's style of deviating from the norm which gives it more freedom of expression has also increased its popularity among the youth especially after adopting "sheng" as its vehicle of communication. "Sheng" is a language of subversion from the norm as it deviates from standard language. Wasike (2011:21) labels "sheng" as the rhyming urban youth patois that entails a mixture of English, Swahili and other Kenyan languages. Thus Gengetone music has achieved what Mugubi (2012) calls a "prison break" in terms of its use of "sheng" as its main vehicle of expression. Kasuku (2019) has described Gengetone musicians as new age, out of the box, fresh artistes that have defied all rules in the game by going against the traditional approach. She describes the evolution of this genre as the disruption of the static industry. The visibility of the music to large audience in both mainstream and alternative media has also promoted this informal language that has always been put in the periphery (Mugubi, 2012). Mutinda (2021) observes that Gengetone artists have adopted "sheng" for their lyrical poetics. The scholar has been advocating for more freedom in terms of expression in African literature and castigated the limiting of expression. He notes that "Our fears have been heightened by proliferation of nonconventional art... yet what actually risks extinction are not the three literary fossils but our own indigenous literary types which we only quietly acknowledge (152). Though Mugubi's argument is on literary forms, I argue that this limitation in terms of expression has also transcended to music brought about by limited critical studies on these different genres. Gengetone music uses poetic idioms to convey explicit lyrics in the urban colloquial Swahili idiom "Sheng (Odidi 2020, Carpus 2020, Storm 2020). Popular Gengetone group *Mbogi Genge* comprising of Milton, Smady Tings and Guzman Teddy use a lot of sheng in their music like their song "Kidungu" which camouflages the meaning and seem obscure (Onsando,2020). Their use of sheng is influenced by their background as they were all born and bred in Umoja, a place that speaks a lot of sheng (Onsando, 2020). Onsando

points out that the obscurity in the group's use of sheng creates a lot of attention as people struggle to decipher what they mean. Onsando points out that the group uses a lot of word play in Sheng that enhances their lyrics.

Mugubi observes that Sheng is misconstrued as language of the outcasts in society like the illiterate, indolent, drug users and violent. On the contrary, he explains that Sheng is a language with clear structures (155). Gengetone group *Sailors* explain that they use the street language or "sheng" metaphorically to communicate to their fans (Storm, 2020). I argue that the use of Sheng aesthetically by the artists curves out a unique niche of expression that can only be identified by their legion of fans hence creating thus creating a unique identity linking the two parties. Odidi (2020) also corroborates with Mugubi's assertion when he postulates that Gengetone's freedom of choice in terms of language, style and not requiring any formal set up has made it quite popular among the youth from low and middle class who might not have high formal education. He observe that Gengetone music production is void of structured system of producers in having a say on the set ups thus giving the artistes unparallel freedom. Mugubi's postulation brings to fore the need to open the space in music criticism and analysis. The artists use different languages which frees them from the narrow straight jacket that Mwangi (2004) calls monolingualism. Language itself is a sign of liberalization and flexibility. It narrows down to what Englert (2005) categorises as the artistic cultural expression of popular culture through literary genres. Hence popular literary works are sold out in large quantities because they avoid intense formal artistry. As noted earlier, Gengetone has become a popular mode due to the freedom of expression it allows its artists. Gengetone artists deviate more from convention and focus on invention.

Re(examining) urban disparities through gengetone

Thus this paper concurs with Mwangi (2004), Eisenberg (2012), Nyairo and Ogude's (2005) arguments that popular music has to be

interrogated deeply beyond the content because it is a representation of the various social, political, economic or cultural factors of the society. Cohen (1955) argues that music contextualizes social, political and economic aspects of a society within a specific place. He further notes that identities emerge through performances from these spaces. This genre resonates quite strongly with the urban youths in the low- and middle-class categories in the city but has begun spreading among other youths in counties outside Nairobi (Owuor, 2020). Hence we contend that the popularity of Gengetone by the selected group of youth from Kenya's low income areas is not only due to its popularity purely as entertainment, it is a symbolic representation of youth protest and identity politics as they (artistes) try to carve out their own niche in the tough environments riddled with crime, unemployment, alienation and disillusionment. Mbugua wa Mungai (2008) corroborates this assertion when examining *Ukoo Fulani*, a group of talented Kenyan hip-hop artistes based in Dandora. He describes Dandora as "...one of Nairobi city's largest dumpsite...traditionally associated with vicious crime and appalling poverty...(1)". The scholar asserts that artists in such low urban fringes of society use music to express the tensions in their everyday lives. He further illustrates how these artistes use recurrent motifs of violence, revolt and decay to epitomize their life in the tough neighbourhoods. Wasike (2011) also points out that frustrations and tensions of marginalized groups are often channelled into verbal expressions...thus empowering the youth and giving them a voice"(24). It is important to note that Genge-rap, Gengetone precursor was popular among the low and middle class youth who strived for upward economic mobility (Wasike,2011). For instance It would be wrong to criticize American hip-hop music, violence, sex and gun culture without interrogating the challenges of the African-American from many years of slavery, segregation and racism and finally settling in tough neighbourhoods like Harlem. African Americans in what was known as the Harlem renaissance used art as a vehicle to express their challenges, fears and aspirations in a deeply

segregated America. Hence just like their American counterparts, Gengetone's artist expressions in the music is an epitome of these inequalities. Music acts as the outlet. From these social pressures caused by inequalities in society. Take for instance the song by Bahati featuring Mbogi Genge called "Ndoto" which translates to dreams the artists examine the dreams and aspirations of young people from this struggling neighbourhoods who strive to make it in life despite their harsh backgrounds. Some of their friends die in crime as they pursue these using wrong channels dream of getting wealth equating American popular rap singer Curtis also called 50 cents song "Get Rich or Die Trying". To some youths just like on the American streets crime becomes the avenue towards these riches.

Sheng

Skiza, ni mbali nimetoka

Mawazo stress lini nitaomoka

I've seen my friends die everyday

Because of crime I loose my day.

English Translation

Listen, I have come from far

Stressed, wondering when I will become rich

Thus we concur with Wasike (2011) that such cultural expressions give voice to the marginalized urban youths(1). Hence the proposition that this paper puts forward is that there is need to examine Gengetone music beyond the lyrics to artistic expressions that represent youth aspirations, frustrations and lamentations in tough urban neighbourhoods wrought with crime, poverty, and unemployment and police brutality. These are element synonymous with American tough neighbourhoods that have sowed seeds of rap and hip-hop music. For these young people it is about the need to survive in this harsh environment. Some Genge artists have even invoked religious tones in their music and turn to God to give them hope and inspiration in a society that perceives them as

outcasts. To them God is their only hope through these tribulations. This is clearly illustrated in *Sailors* song “Jesu ni Mwathani” which translates to Jesus is God:

Sheng

*God umenitoa place flani
Then umenishikilia toka mbali
Kani chuom mguu tupu kama punda
Kijijini watu we walibonga
Na wazai walikuwa wamehunyoka
Na masiz waliishi kwa wakunga
Wengi wao wakidai kuniouruga
Nawaomba wanasema nina pupa
Sasa cheki blessings zinajaa ifufa
Umenibless wanasema Gai fafa*

English Translation

God you are the only person
Who knows where we come from
We all go through pain and suffering
People talk behind our backs
Others going to witchdoctors
Just to see us fail
When we succeed they sat its
Not out of God’s will

In this song the artists point out that God is the only person who knows their challenges and where they have come from. They note that during pain and suffering people abandon them and talk behind their backs while others go to witchcraft so that they can see them fail but God is their fortress.

Therefore, we argue that Gengetone’s popularity is a result of the artists striving to subvert old styles and opening the urban space to new possibilities. In discussing popular forms and their link to popular culture, Englert (2005) corroborates with Odidi’s

supposition when he affirms that popular forms appeal to the mass culture because of their “openness in the sense that entry barriers are relatively low and access to it not overtly institutionalized” (6). This freedom of the genre not having intense formal artistry though popular with the artistes may also have some misgiving in terms of quality.

Gengetone is part of the society’s popular culture. Popular culture involves the music we listen to, movies we watch and even the clothes we wear (Mate, 2017). Gengetone has entrenched itself in Nairobi’s urban space and become an identity for these youth to vent out the challenges and experiences of the city albeit with a radical way that has been perceived deviant (Odidi, 2020). Urban space in this paper resonates with Massey (2000) description of space as a social construction by the people that inhabit the area. Hence Gengetone artists will create an identity within the area they mostly stay in. The identity of the music will be influenced by the socio-economic or cultural factors within that environment.

The popularity of the music among the youth has been quite evident with the visibility of the music in social media platforms that attract many youths (Mithika, 2020). Odidi (2020) points out that Gengetone’s popularity has been heightened by the artists powerful digital presence that allows them to be streamed by many youths in this digital era. Hence the controversial lyrics which are the face of protest or subversion of the prescribed moral codes seem to increase popularity for these groups especially on alternative media channels like you tube (youtube.com/watch?v=LFFNpklhf4) by Jun, 4, 2021 support this assertion. “Pandana” by *Ethic* generated six million views. “Lambalolo” by *Sailors* got 5 million views. “Wabebe” by *Gwash and Brazer* generated five million views. *Zzero Sufuri’s* “Mathogothanio” by *KRG the Don and Boondocks Gang* generated 3.1 million views. “Thao” a collaboration between *Ethic and Boondocks Gang* generated 3 million views. “Daktari” by *Ethic* generated 3.4 million views. “Riang” by *Mbogi Genje* generated 2.7 million views. “Tarimbo” by *Ethic* generated 2 million views. In discussing the spread of *genge* rap the precursor to Gengetone

Wasike (2011) credits local media stations for helping the spread of this genre. He points out that FM stations like Kiss 100, Metro FM and Capital FM were instrumental in the dissemination of *genge* rap through regular air play. In contrast Gengetone artistes initially had not been given airplay by these mainstream media because of the obscenity in the content of the music. Nevertheless, because of the liberalization of TV and Radio in Kenya some stations have begun playing the artist because of the popular demand (Odidi, 2020, Mithika 2020). Mithika (2020) aptly describes this shift when he posits that: "... after the meteoric rise of Gengetone, media houses, which had for years shunned Kenyan music in favour of Nigerian and Tanzanian hits, also took notice of consumers' shifting tastes and began adjusting their playlists accordingly" (1). Mwaniki (2020) explains that young Gengetone artistes have taken over the airwaves. Englert (2004) notes the importance of liberalization of radio and TV stations in Africa. He avers that the deregulated media created a platform for popular forms that were previously censored in mainstream media. The paper concurs with Newel's (2002) assertion that popular forms are not limited to the urban spheres but spread out to rural areas especially with technological innovations. For instance, the increasing access to Internet among rural populations has been an important avenue for spreading this music beyond the urban centres.

Odidi (2020) avers that Gengetone artistes have discerned the power of the internet which has propelled their art as they are prolific online. He further asserts that dialogue on Kenyan music cannot be complete without a discussion on the impact of Gengetone

The paper contends that urban spaces especially these inhabited by the downtrodden and less privileged members of the society are not just sites of crimes but also act as fertile grounds for creativity in popular arts. Thus these areas act as archives of popular forms of art like in our context Gengetone music. The paper concurs with Ogone (2014) assertion that urban spaces in countries like Kenya despite their challenges are not dysfunctional

but forums for creativity and resilience. Ogone further asserts that “... musicians have creatively appropriated the negative hustler mentality through contemporary urban music...(1).Take for instance Gengetone group Mbogi Genge featuring Ritchie Haniel and Meja’s song “Wamocho” that critically examine the challenges of unemployment among the youth despite having passed through higher education system that the former thought would guarantee them employment:

Sheng

Mbuku jo nimekula jo

System jo imeninyima kazi jo

Degree yangu ni urembo jo

Mbogi jo inataka dishi jo

Itabidi twateke wamocho tupate za machwara wamocho

English Translation

I go through the education system

But after graduation cannot find a job

My degree has become a meaningless paper

There is no food to eat even to share among friends

Most of us the youth have turned to drug peddling to earn income

The artistes lament how pursuit for education to the highest level has not changed their life as they are denied employment because of corruption leading to a lot of disillusionment. Finally, the young educated men resort to drug abuse as a form of escapism. The degree just becomes a paper that cannot help them. Hence it is our contention that Gengetone represents the voice of the struggling and marginalized Kenyan youth. The music acts as a vehicle of expressing their trials, tribulations and world views.

Just like earlier East African hip-hop forms like Genge, Gengetone is also male dominated. Most of the Gengetone artists are

male and the songs glorify sex and conquering of women (Mbuthia, 2019). Wangeci (2021) notes that despite Gengetone's popularity for a period of time, the genre has been mostly dominated by male artists with a few notable female artistes like Femi One, EeQue and Sssaru. She further explains that most of the songs in this genre are misogynistic and uses the term "sexualization" of women in the music. This observation corroborates Mwangi (2004) assertion that East African hip-hop music is a representation of male hegemonic masculinity and marginalization of women.

In a nutshell Gengetone is a protest mode of popular music emanating from the low income urban areas. It is a voice against perceived mis(representation) of the marginalized youth that the artist seek to deconstruct. The artists use a lot of irony for instance the group called *Ethics* is known for very explicit lyrics yet their name denotes morality. The group recorded a song titled "Mathogothanio" which means rubbish in Kikuyu. The song is a protest form and it can be alluded to the absurdist movement that questioned human life and the narrative of order. To the artists life is irrational or illogical because of the suffering of the youth hence the reference to rubbish or "Mathogothanio." Just like the Absurdist writers like Balzac in *Old Goriot*, the artistes are questioning the order of human society which has marginalized the youth from low class areas and the meaning of life in a society that does not seem to understand them.

Lastly this paper also concurs with Mbugua wa Mungai's (2008) observation that research on contemporary Kenyan popular culture can mostly be got from newspaper archives rather than University libraries and hence recommends more research in these popular forms invented by "street" practitioners.

References

- Camille, S. (2020). "The Rise of Gengetone" <https://boilerroom.tv/article/rise-gengetone>.
- Carpus, C. (2020). "Why Always Gengetone." standardmedia.co.ke/ureport/article/2001368605/why-always-gengetone-music
- Eisenberg, Andrew J. "Hip-Hop and Cultural Citizenship on Kenya's 'Swahili Coast'." *Africa*, 82.4 (2012): 556-578.
- Englert, Birgit. "Popular music and politics in Africa: some introductory reflections". 2008. *Stichproben. Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien* Nr. 14: 8. Jg., pp.1-15.
- Kasuku, M. (2019). "Gengetone -The Defining Sound of 2019". kenyabuzz.com/lifestyle/gengetone-the-defining-sound-of-2019
- Kurtz, R. "Mwangi, the Mau Mau historian." (1993). Available on 12th May, 2017]. <http://www.meja-mwangi.com/files/critiques>
- Massey, D. (2000). Space-time and the politics of location. In A. Read (Ed). *Architecturally Speaking Practices of art, architecture and the everyday*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Mboya, T. Ethnicity and the brokerage of Kenyan popular music: categorizing Riziki by Ja-mnazi *Africa. journal of African studies* vol, 27, N.o 2, (2015): 205-215
- Mbuthia, G. (2019). "The Evolution of Explicit Kenyan Music". [the star.coke/sasa/lifestyle/2019-09-07-the-evolution-of-explicit-kenyan-music](http://the-star.coke/sasa/lifestyle/2019-09-07-the-evolution-of-explicit-kenyan-music)
- Mithika Bonface (2014). " Gengetone on its Knees. <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/entertainment/showbiz/2001407549/gengetone-on-its-knees>.
- Mugubi, John. "African Literature in a Structural and Linguistic Jail: Acknowledging, Apprehending and Advocating for Prison Break." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2.22 (2012): 152-156.
- Mungai, M. (2008). Made in Riverwood Dislocating Identities and Power Through Kenyan Pop Music. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 20(1), 57-70.

- Mutinda, L. (2021). "Ukoo Flani Said It First, But Wakadinali Are Drilling It Better" 23 March 2021 <https://debunk.media/ukoo-flani-said-it-first-but-wakadinali-are-drilling-it-better>.
- Musyimi, E. (2020). The Rise of Gengetone. [https://www.the star.co.ke/sasa/word-is/2020-01-02-the-rise-of-gengetone/](https://www.the-star.co.ke/sasa/word-is/2020-01-02-the-rise-of-gengetone/)
- Mwangi, Evan. "Masculinity and nationalism in East African hip-hop music." *Tydskrifvirletterkunde* 41.2 (2004): 5-20.
- Mwaniki, R. (2020). "Young musicians are driving the 'gengetone' takeover of airwaves". <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/young-musicians-are-driving-the-gengetone-takeover-of-airwaves--3213668?view=htmlamp>
- Nazareth, Peter. *Literature and Society in Modern Africa: Essays on Literature*. East African Literature Bureau, 1972.
- Odidi, B. (2020). "Gengetone to keep Music Alive in 2021". businessdailyafrica.com/bd
- Wasike, C. (2011). Jua Kali, genge rap music and the anxieties of living in the glocalised city of Nairobi. *Muziki*, 8:1, 18-33, DOI.10.1080/18125980.2011.570073
- Wanjala, Chris L. *For Home and Freedom*. Kenya Literature Bureau, Nairobi, 1980.
- Wangeci, T. (2021). "Angaza Women in Gengetone" <https://tangazamagazine.com/features/2021/2/26/women-in-gengetone>