

Kaya Hip-Hop in Coastal Kenya: The Urban Poetry of UKOO FLANI

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Abstract

In the global world of the 21st Century, music is one of the few things that has the ability to cross physical as well as cultural borders, which is why my Independent Study Project (ISP) focuses on the role of hip-hop music in the youth culture in Kenya's largest coastal city, Mombasa. Throughout history, music has proven its artistic power; inspiring people to resist oppression, challenge inequality, and even claim salvation.

This enduring characteristic of music is central to my ISP which explores the emergence of hip-hop in Kenya as well as the evolution of Ukoo Flani, one of the groundbreaking *kaya* hip-hop groups from Mombasa who have been described by many youth as a revolutionary musical movement. The objective of this ISP is to prove to the reader that hip-hop has become a culturally-relevant, culturally-significant form of artistic expression for urban Kenyan youth to cope with the struggles they face on a daily basis.

Introduction

Hip-Hop & Kenyan Youth Culture

One can hardly walk through the busy streets of Mombasa without observing the many ways in which American hip-hop has permeated the youth culture in Kenya. The messages and images communicated in hip-hop music have influenced the way Kenyan youth dress and wear their hair, the way they dance, the way they speak, the way they vote, and even what they choose to believe. Although many critics have labeled hip-hop as violent, misogynistic, and morally repugnant, in this study, I will explore a style of Kenyan hip-hop known as *kaya* which seeks to positively affect consumers of hip-hop culture and their communities by raising awareness about global issues that are important to young people. This ISP will demonstrate the fact that hip-hop has, and will continue to influence the lives of Kenyan youth, especially those who have experienced the harsh realities of poverty, marginalization, and discrimination.

Research Problem

When I arrived for my semester study abroad program in Kenya, I was thrilled to observe the extent to which the musical genre of hip-hop had permeated the youth culture in Kenya. I was eager to learn more about Kenyan hip-hop so that I could see if, and how, it was connected to the hip-hop that I have come to know and love in the United States. In this ISP, I will explore the following research questions:

1. What is hip-hop?
2. How has American hip-hop impacted Kenyan youth culture?
3. What are the similarities between American and Kenyan hip-hop?
4. What is the current state of Kenyan hip-hop?
5. How is hip-hop used as a source of entertainment and enjoyment for young Kenyans?
6. Who is Ukoo Flani and what are their goals?
7. What themes/concepts does Ukoo Flani address in their music?
8. What is *kaya* hip-hop?

9. Do the values of *kaya* hip-hop align with the values of traditional Coastal Kenyan culture?
10. Do Kenyan youth in Mombasa identify strongly with Ukoo Flani's music? Why or Why not?

Current State of Kenyan Hip-Hop

During the mid-1990s, the early development of Kenyan hip-hop was heavily influenced by American hip-hop, which was transported to the country initially via radio and television. Within the last 5 years, the internet has catalyzed the global expansion of hip-hop music as websites like www.myspace.com and www.youtube.com provide web browsers with free access to the latest hip-hop recordings and music videos.

Most Kenyan hip-hop artists rap (or deliver their lyrics) in Sheng, “a mixed language that emerged from the complex multilingual situation of Nairobi” (Githiora, 2002: 159). Sheng “is mainly spoken by young people—preadolescents to young adults” from the urban estates of Nairobi and Mombasa (Githiora, 2002: 159 and UFMM website). The syntax of Sheng is basically Swahili, but through “ingenious code-switching, it draws from the phonology, morphology and lexicon of Kenyan languages” including, but not restricted to, Luo, Gikuyu, Masaai, Luhya, Giriama and Taita (Githiora, 2002: 159). “English is also an important source of many loan words for Sheng” (Githiora, 2002: 159). Kenyan hip-hop artists regularly employ code-switching (the interchanging of English, Kiswahili, and Sheng) within the same lines, thus, it may be difficult for people who are not familiar with Sheng terminology to understand or decode the messages or themes within the lyrical structure of many Kenyan hip-hop songs.

Although the hip-hop trio, Kalamashaka is often credited with being the founding fathers of Kenyan hip-hop, Mombasa's underground hip-hop scene had been thriving since as early as 1992 when individual members of Ukoo Flani such as Nguchi P, RIC, and POP as well as artists like Fundi Frank were already making music. Nevertheless, Kalamashaka achieved early success when their 1998 hit song “Tafsiri Hii” (Translate This) hit the radio airwaves by storm and

set the stage for hip-hop in Kenya to grow. The “Sheng-speaking, dread-locked ghetto youth” who formed Kalamashaka, which means “eaten troubles,” represented Dandora slums in Nairobi and are now part of the Nairobi-based Mau Mau hip-hop group (UFMM website). Within the last five (5) years, hip-hop solo artists, such as Jua Cali and Nonini, as well as large hip-hop groups, such as Ukoo Flani and Mau Mau have solidified themselves as musicians who are dedicated to the creation of their own style of Kenyan hip-hop, despite being influenced by American hip-hop.

Bribery of radio presenters is a major challenge facing truly talented Kenyan hip-hop musicians. Unfortunately, “pay to play” is a common and accepted practice in Kenyan’s hip-hop industry. Usually, an artist will pay a few thousand Kenyan shillings (usually 2000-3500 Ksh) to a popular radio presenter so that their song can be included on the presenter’s playlist for as long as one (1) month. Once the presenter has been paid, he/she is expected to fulfill their obligation to play the artist’s song, even if the radio station’s listeners do not like the song or if that particular artist is not talented.

Piracy is another major problem facing Kenyan hip-hop artists. It is easy to purchase a cd for 150 Kenyan shillings that contains pirated songs from various artists. The artists do not receive any funds from the sale of those mix cds; however, most artists “hustle” their own cds, which are sold for 300-500 Kenyan shillings and exclusively feature their own music. Thus, like many aspects of Kenyan business, the Kenyan hip-hop industry is currently part of the country’s informal economy.

Although hip-hop is continuing to grow in Kenya, the recording industry is not yet fully developed. Since most hip-hop musicians do not have recording contracts, they rely on their popularity to increase their demand so that they can be booked for performances at hotels and nightclubs all over Kenya. According to Pwani FM radio presenter, Peter Adamz, most Kenyan hip-hop musicians make money from performances, not from record sales (P. Adamz, October 26th Interview).

Hypotheses

Before beginning my ISP research, I made the following hypotheses about the general topic of Kenyan hip-hop.

1. If hip-hop has permeated the youth culture in Kenya, then hip-hop is a global art form that has universal themes and components that young people relate to and identify with.
2. If American hip-hop has influenced the development of Kenyan hip-hop, then Kenyan hip-hop musicians would incorporate distinctly African musical aspects to create their own unique style of hip-hop.
3. If the global art form of hip-hop is *embraced* by youth in Kenya like it has been *embraced* by youth in America, then the *criticism, censure, and disapproval* of Kenyan hip-hop would be similar to the *criticism, censure, and disapproval* of American hip-hop.

I will address the accuracy (and inaccuracy) of these hypotheses in the conclusion of my ISP.

The Setting

My research was conducted in Mombasa, Kenya's second largest city. Mombasa is a large, diverse urban city located within the Coast Province. In Mombasa, I had access to the latest music recordings, news, as well as venues where hip-hop music is a central component, such as nightclubs, hotels, and concert halls.

The socio-economic and socio-political history of Mombasa helped me to better understand the challenges faced by hip-hop artists and musicians who live and work there. For example, a common theme that came up during my research was the lack of resources for artists living and working in Mombasa or other smaller cities in the Coast Province. According to members of Ukoo Flani, all of the best recording studios are located in Nairobi and the most lucrative gigs (or opportunities to perform for money) are based in and around Nairobi. Additionally, large FM hip-hop stations, such as Capitol FM are broadcast nationally and tend to play music from Nairobi artists, while stations that provide radio airplay for Coastal musicians, such as the regional Pwani FM, are only broadcast in Mombasa. Thus, Mombasa musicians feel that their opportunities for success are limited. This inequality between Nairobi, Kenya's capital city, and Mombasa, Kenya's second largest city, can be linked to the historic marginalization of the Coast Province by the British Colonial government as well as the Post-Independence governments of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi.

Many Coastal people, especially the Mijikenda and the Swahili, feel that the larger Kenyan ethnic groups, such as the Gikuyu, Luo, Kamba, and Kalenjin have deliberately underdeveloped the Coast Province and marginalized Coastal peoples due to claims that Coastal people did not participate in the fight for Kenyan independence from the British. Furthermore, the Swahili Muslims in Mombasa were specifically targeted and marginalized prior to Independence in 1963 due to their resistance to British Colonial and Christian missionary schools. The large Muslim population living in Mombasa feels that their marginalization by the governments of Kenyatta and Moi was a continuation of their

marginalization by the British Colonial Government as well as an effect of “negative ethnicity,” or what many refer to as “tribalism.”

Although the Mombasa Port generates a significant portion of the country’s revenue, Mombasa residents feel cheated by the Central Government which many claim misallocates resources which rightfully belong to Coastal peoples and Mombasa infrastructure. Additionally, Mombasa’s position on the Coast makes it an ideal tourist location, another lucrative revenue generator for the Kenyan economy. Yet, the people in Mombasa continue to feel betrayed as they see money being drained from the Coast Province and poured into development for other areas such as the Gikuyu-dominated Central Province and Kalenjin-dominated Rift Valley. As the December 27, 2007 Presidential election quickly approaches, calls for “majimboism,” a federal system of governance that would ideally allow all eight Kenyan Provinces to share equitable distribution of resources, have intensified.

It is within this socio-economic and socio-political context that I conducted my research.

Methodology: Data Collection

Although I initially planned to use local secondary schools to gain access to student informers, I found it easier to build a strong network of young hip-hop lovers by attending local nightclubs and events that were targeted toward teens and young adults. Events that I attended included: October 20th Ali Kiba concert (held at Camper’s Haven Jamboree), November 10th Anti-Drug Event sponsored by Pwani FM (held at Mombasa Stadium Grounds), and a November 17th Jua Kali concert (held at Mamba Disco). At the Ali Kiba concert, I met Pwani FM radio presenter, Peter Adamz whom I befriended and interviewed formally three (3) times. At the anti-drug event, I met Mombasa hip-hop group, Ukoo Flani, who became the focus of my I.S.P. During my research, I conducted three (3) formal, group interviews with various members of Ukoo Flani (Nguchi P., R.I.C., Sharama, Cannibal, Cannibal, FUJO Makelele, and Alai K).

In the field, I spent a lot of time with my primary sources, the musicians who make up *kaya* hip-hop crew, Ukoo Flani. Most of my interaction with the members of Ukoo Flani was done in their *mtaani*, or “hoods,” so I conducted all of my group interviews in Magongo and Barsheba. My secondary research relied on the S.I.T. Library and J-Stor, an online database with a wealth of articles from scholarly journals. My access to J-Stor was provided by my home school, the University of Southern California. Using key terms such as “hip hop” “East Africa” “culture” “music” “tradition” “Sheng” and “Kenya” I was able to locate scholarly articles that provided background information about the traditional role of music in East African culture, the development of the youth hybrid language known as Sheng, and the effect of African American musical forms on African music.

On Sunday, November 25, 2007, I conducted a focus group that doubled as a listening session. There were eight male participants between the ages of 17 and 25 years old. I selected three American hip-hop songs and three Kenyan hip hop songs for each focus group. The American songs were: “Juicy” by Notorious BIG, “Pop, Lock, and Drop It” by Huey, and “They Schools” by Dead Prez. The Kenyan songs were: “Ulimwengu” by Ukoo Flani, “Banjuka” by DNA, and “Burn Dem” by Ukoo Flani. I focused on the content and themes of the songs by providing copies of the American song lyrics in English. The music, which was both mainstream and underground hip-hop, prompted discussion about the influence of hip-hop on Kenyan youth.

Although most of my research sites had a high level of English proficiency, I made a conscious effort to speak in Kiswahili as often as possible. Language did not pose a major barrier to my research; however, my informants appreciated my efforts and therefore, divulged more information. I also learned some of the slang language used often in Mombasa youth street speech. For instance, instead of responding with “hakuna matata,” the proper Kiswahili response meaning “no problem,” I would respond “hakuna noma,” a slang reference with the same meaning.

I took an active role as a researcher by employing participant observation, which helped me build strong relationships with my informants. I actively participated in my research by serving as a guest host on Peter Adamz' hit hip-hop radio show "Tafrija" on October 26, 2007. Not only was I live on the airways for all of Mombasa to hear, but my willingness to contribute to the show helped to solidify my working relationship with Peter Adamz, a key informant who proved to be invaluable to my ISP. Additionally, when attending concerts, I sought to immerse myself in these events by joining other concert-goers in dancing and celebrating the music in a way that allowed me to easily blend in with others in attendance. This participation made me seem like less of an authority figure, which established a level of comfort between me and my informants.

Since Ukoo Flani became the focus of my ISP, I wanted to do more than just relay their story through this document. Thus, I helped them update their website: www.myspace.com/ukooflani, the result of which will enhance their marketability, increase their exposure, and allow them to more effectively promote their music.

I also sought to infuse my research with action by planning and funding a *kaya* hip-hop festival which would feature performances by Ukoo Flani and a freestyle battle between aspiring hip-hop musicians from Mombasa, Kenya. The event took place on Saturday, December 1, 2007 at Barsheba Estates. I set aside 10,000 Kenyan shillings of my ISP budget to pay for sound equipment, microphones, and amplifiers. Unfortunately, the event did not go as planned. Many of the musicians showed up late and did not follow the program that I had previously discussed with Ukoo Flani members, R.I.C. and Nguchi P. Although the event was not the success that I planned it to be, I learned a lot from the experience. I also would not recommend that any future S.I.T. students attempt to organize an event. Logistically, it is difficult due to the time constraints of the ISP period, which is only four weeks.

Biases and Assumptions

Biases

As a lover of socially-conscious American hip-hop artists such as Dead Prez, Talib Kweli, Common, Kanye West, Immortal Technique, Tupac, and Mos Def, it can be argued that I am biased against more commercialized hip-hop artists. I admit that, as a consumer of hip-hop culture in America, I make a conscious effort not to purchase music from artists whose message I feel is antithetical, and often detrimental, to the progress of the urban communities to whom they are marketed. This includes artists who advocate selling drugs, murder, and the exploitation of women as well as artists who fail to address social issues in their music. Thus, it was only natural that I would focus my ISP on Kenyan hip-hop artists who are in line with my idea of constructive hip-hop. Therefore, my preference to highlight *kaya* hip-hop, as opposed to *genge*, reflects my bias towards music that I consider to represent positive hip-hop. Nevertheless, I have worked hard to present a fair, balanced account of Kenyan hip-hop.

Assumptions

One of my largest initial assumptions was that I would get the best feedback if most, if not all, of my informants were local secondary school students. My access to school sites was limited because of KCSE (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) testing in early November followed by a December Holiday. By the end of ISP, most of my informants were young men and women from the many *maskani*, or hangouts, I visited in Mombasa neighborhoods such as Barsheba, Magongo, and Old Town. Although some of them were enrolled in secondary school, many were not. If I had focused only on student informants, I would have missed out on interacting with a large number of thoughtful, inquisitive, intelligent, and mature youth (who cannot be identified as students either because they have aged out of the school system or they lack the funds to pay school fees).

Another major assumption I had was that a majority of youth would rally behind the messages in *kaya* hip-hop. During my field research, I found that the exact opposite was true. Most Kenyan youth are not receptive to hip-hop music with socio-political themes. A large majority of Kenyan young people see hip-hop music as a way to escape the harsh realities of their life. By listening to *genge* party songs like “Banjuka” which urges you to “weka shida chini na tupa mikono juu, ba-ba-ba-banjuka tu” (put your problems underneath, put your hands up, and dance), Kenyan youth are able to celebrate instead of dealing with songs that remind them about the socio-political problems facing the next generation of Kenyans. Nevertheless, there is a distinct community of informed, young Kenyans who identify with “ghetto life” and are major supporters of the *kaya* style of hip-hop.

I also assumed that young Kenyans would largely identify as a homogeneous group. For instance, if Kenyan youth from the Magongo neighborhood identified with Ukoo Flani’s music, then Kenyan youth from Old Town would also identify with Ukoo Flani’s music. However, my findings indicate that the class and ethnic distinctions that exist at the highest levels of Kenyan society also exist among youth social networks. Mahumud Fauz, a 17 year old participant in my focus group told me that “tribal differences” explain why an Old Town youth would describe Ukoo Flani’s latest single, “Burn Dem,” as “noise;” while a Barsheba youth feels that this song gives him a voice (Mahumud Fauz, November 25th Interview).

Discussion and Analysis

Ukoo Flani ni nani: Who is Ukoo Flani?

Ukoo Flani is an acronym: *Upendo Kwote Olewenu Ombeni Funzo La Aliyetuumba Njia Iwepo*, which means *love everywhere all who seek teachings of the Creator; there is a way*. Furthermore, *ukoo* is the Kiswahili word for *clan* and *flani* is the Kiswahili word for *certain* or *specific*; therefore *ukoo flani* literally means *a certain clan*.

Ukoo Flani has been described as a movement led by thirteen self-proclaimed soldiers who use their unique *kaya* style of hip-hop as a tool to wage war against social injustice and inequality in their hometown of Mombasa, Kenya. In 1996, ten young hip-hop lovers representing different religions, backgrounds, neighborhoods, and tribes combined their love for hip-hop to form Ukoo Flani.

The ten original members of Ukoo Flani are: Nguchi P (also known as Mapipi), P.O.P., Shaolin (also known as Grand Mantis), Dr. Dunga, Sharama, Chizzen Brain, Labalaa, Alai K, R.I.C. (also known as Jina Mizi), and FUJO Makelele. Except for one original member, Dr. Dunga (who recently moved away from Mombasa, got married, and started a family), all of the original members are still affiliated with Ukoo Flani. Since 1996, Lavasti, D'costa, Richie Rich, and Cannibal have joined Ukoo Flani, which brings the total to 13 young men from Lamu and Mombasa hoods, such as Magongo, Mtwapa, and Barsheba, who have transcended their differences to make groundbreaking music that addresses issues such as poverty, tribalism, government corruption, religious intolerance, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, and ghetto life.

Kaya hip-hop

Among the Mijikenda people of Kenya's Coast Province, "kaya" means homestead or temple. Young hip-hop musicians representing Mombasa have embraced this historic term as well as the relevance of the *kaya* complex to form a new style known as *kaya* hip-hop. According to members of Ukoo Flani, who claim to be the creators of the *kaya* style, *kaya* hip-hop is socially conscious music that seeks to educate listeners about reality in ghetto life. Nguchi P, of the Ukoo Flani crew, passionately explains that *kaya* hip-hop "keeps it real" (Nguchi P, November 13th Interview). As *kaya* hip-hop musicians, Ukoo Flani feels that it is their duty as artists to rap about the reality they see in their respective mtaani (neighborhoods). This reality includes, but is not limited to, trash in the streets, lack of access to food, clean water and electricity, government corruption, and an unaffordable education system.

Ukoo Flani got their inspiration from African American hip-hop artists such as Dead Prez, KRS-1, Notorious BIG, Wu Tang Clan, Talib Kweli, Common, Mos Def, Kanye West, and Tupac Shakur. Alai K of Ukoo Flani believes that the influence of American music is “like a double edged sword” for Kenyan youth who listen to hip-hop as well as those who are aspiring hip-hop musicians (Alai K, November 10th Interview). For Ukoo Flani, the influence of American hip-hop is positive because it teaches Kenyans the American style of hip-hop; however, Ukoo Flani notes that this influence becomes problematic when Kenyan youth blindly imitate what they see and hear in American hip-hop lyrics and music videos.

Unlike many of the African American hip-hop musicians who regularly feature scantily clad women in their music videos, Ukoo Flani’s *kaya* style of hip-hop condemns the negative portrayal of women. For Ukoo Flani, this trend represents a gross exploitation of women, a concept that R.I.C. claims is foreign to traditional African culture (R.I.C., November 13th Interview). “In our culture, women are treated with the utmost respect. They are praised for their beauty and productiveness. Ukoo Flani would never use abusive words about women in our songs or have naked chics in our videos” (R.I.C., November 13th Interview). For Ukoo Flani, it is better for Kenyan youth to learn about hip-hop from African Americans and then adapt the genre to fit Kenyan culture and traditions. Thus, Ukoo Flani feels that, despite being influenced by American hip-hop, *kaya* hip-hop represents a new style that is uniquely African. When asked what the difference between American and Kenyan hip-hop is, R.I.C. explains that:

Kenyan hip-hop musicians, especially *kaya* artists, are influenced by the mizuka (ancestors). The ancestors give extra power to Kenyan artists who seek to speak the truth and educate the community through the music. The ancestral spirits guide the music so that, 20 years from now, people will still appreciate our music. Will anybody care about “Banjuka” 20 years from now?! (R.I.C., November 10th Interview)

Due to the guidance Ukoo Flani receives from these “ancestral spirits,” they insist that wazee (elderly people in the community) appreciate and embrace the messages in their music.

The wazee who resist hip-hop and say bad things about hip-hop artists have a skewed perception of hip-hop because all they hear on the radio is mainstream *genge* that has obscene lyrics about sex, drinking, and materialism. Those who resist do not know *real* hip-hop; they do not know *kaya* hip-hop (R.I.C., November 10th Interview).

FUJO Makelele adds that the wazee who live in the neighborhoods of Magongo and Barsheba respect the message that Ukoo Flani is trying to spread in their music (FUJO Makelele, November 10th Interview).

Ukoo Flani argues that *kaya* hip-hop contrasts starkly from the more popular style, known as “*genge*” hip-hop, which they describe as party music. According to Ukoo Flani, *genge* is characterized by thumping beats that are ideal for dancing as well as repetitive lyrics that mostly center on themes like alcohol, sex, and material wealth (Alai K, November 10th Interview). Popular Kenyan musician, Jua Cali claims to be the creator of *genge*, a style of hip-hop that has won him numerous awards and recognition with Kenyans and has landed him “a reported Sh 1 million-a-year deal” with Motorola (Mwaniki, Philip, The Saturday Nation, Sept. 22, 2007). Jua Cali, who has also served as a corporate spokesperson for Pilsner beer and Protex bath soap, released this statement to The Saturday Nation: “I am very happy that corporate organizations have started to recognize the role we artists play in Kenya, and they have seen that working with us sells their brand among the youth” (Mwaniki, Philip, The Saturday Nation, Sept. 22, 2007).

Kaya hip-hop artists such as those who make up the Ukoo Flani crew cannot claim the same level of commercial success, but feel that their achievements are worth just as much, if not more than the millions of shillings being made by their *genge* counterparts. When asked what Ukoo Flani has achieved after more than 10 years on the Kenyan music scene, R.I.C. responded by saying that Ukoo Flani has affected the lives of countless ghetto youth who, prior to being embraced by the Ukoo Flani family, were leading lives of crime in the streets of Kenya or abusing heavy drugs such as heroin or cocaine (R.I.C., November 24th Interview). After being inspired by Ukoo Flani’s message, R.I.C. argues that many Kenyans have changed their lives and are now learning

computer skills, acrobatics, and karate. “The guys in Ukoo Flani cannot show you some awards or a big fancy car or a mansion as evidence of our success,” R.I.C. says, “but the people in our hoods know the positive effect that we have had in our communities. To us, that is success” (R.I.C., November 24th Interview).

Despite their feelings that success is not measured by material wealth alone, the members of Ukoo Flani do not deny the fact that, after 11 years on the hip-hop scene, they are still living in the same hoods, have never traveled abroad (except for Tanzania) to perform, and are still struggling financially, to make ends meet. This lack of economic success has led to many fans accusing Ukoo Flani of being weak. R.I.C. admits to feeling trapped when loyal fans confront him with questions like: *how does genge artist Nonini have a Beamer after only 5 years in the game and Ukoo Flani are still catching matatus?* (R.I.C., November 13th Interview). Likewise, in one of our many interviews, Pwani FM radio presenter, Peter Adamz says that he would not characterize Ukoo Flani as successful artists because they have little, or nothing to show for their 11 years in the industry (P. Adamz, November 20th Interview). According to Adamz:

True artists know how to change with the times and technology. You cannot be a role model to young kids when you are not achieving success. I was in Form 2 when I first heard Ukoo Flani and I admired them. But now, 11 years later, I have one of the top hip-hop shows in Kenyan radio, and what does Ukoo Flani have? They still hang out in the same maskani and have the same dressing code. They have not matured. I would like to see those guys cut off their dreads and put on a nice suit (P. Adamz, November 20th Interview).

Traditional Role of Music in African Culture

In order to contextualize the role of *kaya* hip-hop as a relatively new phenomenon in urban Kenya, I felt that I first had to get an understanding of the traditional role of music in societies throughout the African Diaspora. My research indicated three key elements:

- (1) the centrality of music to African societies

(2) the use of musical expression to provide social commentary about important community issues

(3) the role of the African performer as teacher/educator

This framework allowed me to understand how something like the *kaya* style of hip-hop could develop in Kenya, and analyze its potential for the future.

Traditionally, music has played a central role in societies throughout the African Diaspora. According to Dr. J.H. Kwabena Nketia, the current Director of the International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD), based at the University of Ghana:

The musical types that are maintained in African societies are used in well-defined situations in community life. They may be organized on the basis of occasions for which musical provision is considered necessary or desirable, such as formal occasions on which ceremonies are performed—festivals, ceremonies of the life cycle, occasions of worship. Musical provision may also be made for informal occasions—recreation, storytelling and some forms of manual labor (Nketia, 1973: 596).

Citing the fact that, in the culture of many Kenyan ethnic groups, there is music for “good times, music for harvesting, music for weddings, music for funerals, music for appreciation, music for religious worship, and music for celebrating new children,” Pwani FM radio presenter, Peter Kamwi Gatiti Mwadime (also known as Peter Adamz), corroborated Nketia’s assertion about the important role of music in many African cultures (P. Adamz, November 9th Interview). Similarly, the musicians who make up Ukoo Flani insist that their music is an extension of the lessons learned from the mizuka, or ancestral spirits, who also used music and oral expression to teach younger generations.

Historically, African music has not only been used for celebrations and worship, but also to provide critical social commentary about important community issues. In his discussion of the traditional role of African popular music, Dr. Stephen H. Martin, Professor of Music (ethnomusicology and history) and International Studies asserts that, in modern East Africa, “music continues to be the main medium for the communication of values and political ideology. Musical events continue to be important opportunities for social interaction” (Martin, 1991: 52). Likewise, Nketia’s research indicates that “there is a cultural

focus on it [music] as a rallying point in community life and in the life of associations bound together by common beliefs and common values” (Nketia, 1973: 598).

The role of “performer as teacher” is another critical aspect of traditional African music. Nketia argues that:

The creative performer must be guided by a knowledge of tradition, a knowledge of how to construct a phrase, how and where to add a second part, how to build up new material and place it against something that is already going on; how to increase the animation of the piece. A performer can always reproduce what he has learned, but always the best performers of African music are creative performers who can bring their own individual artistic contribution into what they are doing (Nketia, 1973: 591).

Nketia’s description indicates that performers in African music need to be skilled in such a way that they employ traditional techniques while also innovating and re-creating new musical aspects. Similarly, Martin provides an example of “urban musician as educator” by highlighting the contribution of Tanzanian urban jazz artist Mbaraka Mwinshehe Mwaruka whose song “Chakula Bora,” or healthful food, “was released at a time when malnutrition was threatening Tanzania” (Martin, 1991:51).

Genesis of Rap/Hip-Hop in American Ghettoes

The influence of American styles of hip-hop on the development of Kenyan hip-hop is undeniable. Therefore, in order to understand a group like Ukoo Flani, it is essential for readers to have a basic working knowledge about the history of how rap, or hip-hop, was created in the United States of America in the early 1970s.

It is generally accepted that hip-hop originated in the East Coast of the United States in the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City. During the early 1970s, Black American disc jockeys (djs) would travel from hood to hood mixing “pre-recorded hits alternately on two turntables while reciting party phrases to the crowd in a microphone” (Keyes, 1996: 223). Eventually, these djs added the aspect of “verbal performance” to their shows which would feature the

artistic mixing of records by the dj and the lyrical prowess of “verbal emcees” (Keyes, 1996: 223). As hip-hop developed into a distinct new sound, the East Coast hip-hop culture was characterized by four main elements: (1) break dancing, (2) graffiti art, (3) emcees or rappers, and (4) disc jockeys (Greenwald, 2002: 260).

One of the groundbreaking music recordings of early hip-hop history was Sugar Hill Gang’s 1979 release of “Rapper’s Delight” which featured the now infamous lyrics:

i said a hip hop
 the hippie the hippie
 to the hip hip hop, a you dont stop
 the rock it to the bang bang boogie
 say up jumped the boogie
 to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat
 now what you hear is not a test--i'm rappin to the beat
 and me, the groove, and my friends are gonna try to move your feet
 (Sugar Hill Gang, 1979: Sugar Hill Gang)

Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Fives’ 1982 hip-hop classic “The Message” provides another example of timeless lyrics over a pulsating beat that catapulted hip-hop music into the annals of American music history. “The Message” contains the following lyrics:

A child was born, with no state of mind
 Blind to the ways of mankind
 God is smiling on you but he’s frowning too
 Cause only God knows what you’ll go through
 You grow in the ghetto, living second rate
 And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
 (Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, 1982: The Message)

Comparing the urban slums of the United States to a jungle, Grandmaster Flash’s lyrical proclamation that “its like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under” represents the intelligent, articulate ghetto youth

interpretation of life for America's urban underclass (Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, 1982: The Message)

By the mid-1980s, hip-hop music “recordings, concert sales, television commercials and films were a billion dollar industry” (Keyes, 1996: 223). This early success of American hip-hop has only improved as major Black American hip-hop artists such as Jay-Z, Lil' Wayne, Kanye West and T.I. have achieved international fame, selling out concerts from New York to Japan to the UK to Tanzania. The international success of these artists suggests that, almost 30 years after the release of the classic hip-hop song “Rapper's Delight,” hip-hop has indeed become a global phenomenon.

Despite the undisputed success of hip-hop, the genre has been “dismissed as culturally insignificant” by critics who claim that hip-hop music “lacks artistic value and is little more than a commercial fad” (Keyes, 1996: 223). Similarly, other hip-hop critics scrutinize the genre as the creation of a “degenerate urban black youth culture” (Keyes, 1996: 223). Nevertheless, a growing number of academics and even the hip-hop artists are challenging the elitist view which denies the validity of hip-hop as a distinct, culturally-significant, relevant urban musical genre. According to research on this topic, “rap music expresses the everyday harsh realities of ghetto life and socio-political sentiments ranging from poverty, police brutality, and racial genocide to class and gender relations by an urban black youth constituency” (Keyes, 1996: 224). It is only within the last 10 years that academia has begun to realize what many of us in the hip-hop generation have known all along: hip-hop is a universal, revolutionary musical genre that allows youth to “resist and contest” issues that adversely affect the communities in which they live (Keyes, 1996: 224).

The Ties That Bind: Exploring Links between African American & African Music

Many scholars have noted the various “Africanisms, or African-derived concepts” that exist, “either consciously or unconsciously” in hip-hop music (Keyes, 1996: 241). Furthermore, cultural scholars and musicologists are eager to study “the historically unprecedented event of indigenous African musical

traditions being exposed on a large scale to Afro-American musical traditions which...has returned to its own musical roots” (Martin, 1991: 40). Although there exists within the literature information about the “influence of Afro-American music on the development of urban popular jazz bands” in East Africa, thus far, this “historically unprecedented event” has not been studied comprehensively in relation to hip-hop music (Martin, 1991: 43). We have already established hip-hop as a creation of the urban Black American underclass; however, it is also important to note that hip-hop is a global phenomenon that is influencing urban music in many African nations throughout the motherland.

The idea of “rapping—talking in rhythm over music or to an internally realized beat—can be traced from African bardic traditions to the rural oral southern-based expressive forms of African Americans” (Keyes, 1996: 225). *Nommo*, or “the power of the word” has been a vital concept of the rich oral tradition that has historically existed throughout the African Diaspora (Keyes, 1996: 234). Hip-hop is an extension of the concept of *nommo*, thus this can be seen as one of the many Africanisms that exists in the African American genre of hip-hop. Other Africanisms include “posturing, dress, jewelry, and hairstyles” (Keyes, 1996: 241). For example, Keyes shows the crucial link between the “African ritual gesture known as libation—the pouring of a beverage towards the ground in acknowledgment of deceased relatives, community members or ancestors” and music videos that portray African American hip-hop artists “pouring beer from a 40 (a quart of beer) towards the ground in recognition of ‘dead homies’ (neighborhood peers) whose lives have been lost through gang-related violence” (Keyes, 1996: 242). Furthermore, many hip-hop artists play the role of traditional African griot, or storyteller, as they eloquently and articulately narrate their life stories using their own linguistic style.

Through my research and observation, I have identified the following similarities between the largely Black American dominated hip-hop culture and Kenyan hip-hop culture:

1. use of urban language (“slanguage”)

2. song production featuring elaborate drum sequences and pulsating rhythms
3. aesthetic symbolism such as dress, jewelry, and hairstyles
4. lyrical content that addresses socio-political and socio-economic issues

The use of urban language (slanguage) has always been a characteristic of hip-hop music, and Kenyan hip-hop is no exception. It has been noted that many critics of hip-hop often misunderstand the message of the music due to their inability “to decode its language” (Keyes, 1996: 231). Thus, the critics of American hip-hop music often do not know what the artists are saying because they do not know the slang terminology or they misunderstand the intended meaning of “black street speech.” According to Keyes, “black street speech” is a “nonstandard dialect” of the English language that “thrives within African American street culture” (Keyes, 1996: 231). Keyes explains:

the term ‘nonstandard’ does not suggest that rap language or street speech is grammatically incorrect when compared to mainstream English, but rather the term defines the constant reinvention and variation of new terminologies associated with street speech (Keyes, 1996: 231).

For example, in urban African American communities, the “word *bad* means *good* or *exceptional*...thus, determining the meaning of *bad*...depends solely on the speaker’s vocal inflections, verbal stress, facial expression, and the context in which *bad* is used” (Keyes, 1996: 232). In “Bad Bitch,” a popular song by African American hip-hop artist Webbie, the artist says:

And she walk like a bad bitch
 talk like a bad bitch
 And go and get her hair and shit fixed is a habit
 Now bad bitch go and buy Finch more than average
 And bad bitches get to take trips with the savage
 (Webbie, 2004, Gangsta Musik)

Someone who is unfamiliar with “black street speech” may see the description of a woman as a “bad bitch” as vulgar and disrespectful; however, in this context,

Webbie is actually praising women who “walk like a bad bitch,” meaning they walk with confidence, “talk like a bad bitch,” meaning they know how to speak well, and “go and buy Finch more than average,” meaning they have the financial independence to purchase name brand items on a regular basis.

Although Keyes discusses the use of urban language in the context of black American street speech, similar conclusions can be drawn from the lyrical content of Kenyan hip-hop, which is characterized by code-switching between English and Kiswahili as well as the use of slang terminology and Sheng, the peer youth language that I discussed in the introduction. The lyrical structure of Kenyan hip-hop is difficult to understand if you do not regularly interact using this complex, multilingual method of communication. Therefore, just as critics of American hip-hop are “unable to decode the language” in the lyrics, my research indicates that critics of Kenyan hip-hop also respond negatively because they have difficulty deciphering the complex, multilingual lyrical structure used by many Kenyan hip-hop artists (Keyes, 1996: 231).

Another similarity between American and Kenyan hip-hop is the song production featuring beats with elaborate drum sequences and pulsating rhythms. The rhythm and melody of hip-hop songs by African American and Kenyan hip-hop artists make the listener want to dance; to move. In his study of hip-hop drumming, Jeff Greenwald, a professional studio drummer and adjunct faculty member in the Fine Arts Department of College Misericordia in Dallas, Pennsylvania, emphasizes the importance of the drums in the structure of hip-hop music:

“...drums in hip-hop serve an important role; they not only establish the groove and emphasize vocal style, but they also act as a cultural signifier. The incorporation of various drumming sounds and styles (including scratching) into hip-hop adds breadth and variety to the music beyond the lyrical content. The drums in hip-hop define the music as much as any other element, musical or extramusical” (Greenwald, 2002: 270).

Many Kenyans mention the beats of hip-hop songs as one of the defining characteristics of the music. “When I hear American hip-hop, it’s like I felt that drumming before. It’s African! You can see the sounds and rhythms they use in

their songs are just like the Giriama people in the villages” (Chai, November 24th Interview). When watching music videos featuring African American and Kenyan women dancing to the beat of hip-hop songs, at times, it is difficult to distinguish the two. During my field research, I attended Mamba Disco and was surprised to observe all the young Kenyans performing with amazing accuracy the latest American hip-hop dances such as the souljah boy, the lean wit it rock wit it, and the motorbike. I could have taken any person out of that disco and put them in a Los Angeles or Chicago nightclub and they would have fit right in!

The aspect of aesthetic symbolism (dress, jewelry, and hairstyles) represents another similarity between Kenyan and American hip-hop youth culture. During my visit to Mamba Disco, I was shocked at how many of the young people were dressed in Western style clothing that had an urban flavor: young guys had on baggy jeans, name brand athletic shoes, athletic style fitted hats, extra large tee-shirts with logos like Sean John, RocaWear, Akademics, and Nike while the women wore fitted jeans, mini skirts, strappy tank tops, stiletto heels, and had permed hair, elaborate braids, and hair extensions. I found it interesting that so many of these young people could afford to keep up with this urban hip-hop style (and pay the 200 Kenyan shilling admission fee to Mamba Disco) considering the poverty rates in Kenya. However, the same can be noted of urban African American youth who, despite the restrictions imposed by their class status, somehow find a way to access expensive material items that one would assume is economically out of their reach.

The final comparison between African American and Kenyan hip-hop culture is a focus on lyrical content that tends to address socio-political and socio-economic issues. The now deceased African American rapper, Tupac Shakur, is a perfect example of a musician who used hip-hop as a form of urban poetry to speak about the realities of life for America’s urban underclass. It can be argued that with songs like “Hit Em Up,” “Gangsta Party,” and “I Get Around,” Tupac made party music that lacked a real social message, disrespected women, and promoted violence and drug use. Nevertheless, the level of social consciousness in many of Tupac’s songs cannot be denied. Furthermore, this

mixture of socially-conscious and party music represents the complexity of many hip-hop artists, including the late Tupac Shakur. In the song, “Brenda’s got a Baby,” Tupac assumes the role of traditional African griot (storyteller), as he skillfully uses his lyrics to paint a vivid, tragic picture of a young, impoverished African American girl whose struggles with poverty, parental neglect, and self-esteem leads to an unwanted pregnancy at age 12:

Brenda got herself a boyfriend
 Her boyfriend was a cousin, now lets watch tha joy end
 She tried to hide her pregnancy, from her family
 Who really didn't care to see, or give a damn if she
 Went out and had a church of kids
 As long as when tha check came they got first dibs
 Now Brenda’s belly is gettin bigger
 But no one seems ta notice any change in her figure
 She's 12 years old and she's having a baby
 In love with tha molester, whos sexin' her crazy
 And yet she thinks that he'll be with her forever
 And dreams of a world with tha two of them together,
 whatever
 He left her
 and she had tha baby solo,
 she had it on tha bathroom floor
 And didn't know so, she didn't know,
 what ta throw away and what ta keep
 She wrapped tha baby up and threw him in tha trash heep
 (Tupac Shakur, 1991: 2pacalyspe Now)

As this lyrical excerpt shows, Tupac uses Brenda as a symbolic figure for impoverished teenage mothers everywhere. The song lyrics go on to criticize absentee fathers, lack of government support, and the American society’s failure to address the serious issue of teen pregnancy. Just like Tupac, Kenyan hip-hop artists, such as those who make up Ukoo Flani, are using their lyrics to tell their stories of life in the ghettos of urban Kenya. On the chorus of their song “Ulimwengu,” which is the Kiswahili word for *world*, Ukoo Flani professes that:

tuna saa baza huu ujumbe ukweli : now, we are spreading a truthful message
ulimwengu ni kwote fikiri yenii : all over the world, so think about it

tukikataa ma situkikubali : whether we refuse or agree (if we like it or not)
ujumbe ni kwetu fikiri yeni : this message is for us, so think about it
 (Ukoo Flani, 2005 : Ukoo Flani Volume II)

Kenyan Radio

What's on the radio, propaganda, mind control
 And turnin it on is like puttin on a blindfold
 Cuz when you bringin the real you don't get ro-tation
 Unless you take over the station
 And yeah I know it's part of they plans
 To make us think it's all about party and dancin
 And yo it might sound good when you spittin your rap
 But in reality, don't nobody live like that
 (Dead Prez, 2000: Let's Get Free)

With the explosion of FM radio stations in Kenya within the last 10 years, radio has become the key vehicle for aspiring musicians to popularize their music and build a steady fan base. As I mentioned in the introduction, with the absence of an established recording industry in Kenya, musicians rely on their popularity with the masses to increase their demand so that they can be booked for performances at hotels and nightclubs all over the country. According to Pwani FM radio presenter, Peter Adamz, most Kenyan hip-hop musicians make money from performances, not from record sales (P. Adamz, October 26th Interview). Therefore, radio airplay is critical to an artist's financial success, since most music lovers are listening to the radio, to find out about the hottest new music on the Kenyan hip-hop scene.

While radio-friendly songs such as Jua Kali's "Nipe Asali," D.N.A.'s "Banjuka," and Nonini's "Kushoto Kulia" are in constant rotation on Kenya's top FM stations, non-mainstream musicians such as Ukoo Flani feel cheated out of an equal opportunity to spread their message. In an article entitled *Can't Live Without Radio*, The Standard's trendy Pulse Magazine purports that "radio does not cater for the real hip hop enthusiasts as it tends to play only current and commercial tracks" (The Standard, Sept. 21, 2007). R.I.C. of Ukoo Flani echoes this sentiment by arguing, "of course the media prefers to play *genge* songs because they use their music as advertisements. It's all commercial. Nonini is not

a real hip-hop artist. He is a brand; just like Fanta or Coke” (R.I.C., November 10th Interview). Therefore, *kaya* hip-hop, which R.I.C. describes as “music of substance,” is not given as much airplay because it deals with tough, and sometimes uncomfortable issues such as social injustice, poverty, violence, drug abuse, classism, and political corruption (RIC, November 10th Interview).

The Maskani

In Kenyan slang, the *maskani* is known as a gathering place where people from similar age sets meet to socialize. Since the members of Ukoo Flani come from several Mombasa neighborhoods, such as Magongo, Mtwapa, and Barsheba, they have several maskani hangouts in each hood. Most of my interviews and interaction with Ukoo Flani artists and fans took place at the various maskani.

Ukoo Flani’s maskani sites are in obscure areas of the neighborhoods in which they are located. They are not clearly visible from the main roads. In Magongo and Barsheba especially, we had to walk through several narrow pathways to reach the maskani, all of which are emblazoned with graffiti-style art that identify the location as the home of Ukoo Flani.

For Ukoo Flani, the maskani is a place where ghetto youth can assemble to confide in their peers while also sharing their hopes, dreams, and fears. During my observations, I noticed that anywhere between 10-30 young men and women would come in and out of the maskani, greeting their peers with enclosed fists (instead of the more formal handshake greeting) which are almost always followed by phrases like mambo vipi (what’s up), poa poa (cool cool), freshie (fresh), safi kama kawa (cool as usual), sina noma mshikagi (I have no problems homie), and tuko pamoja jamaa (we are together family).

In Barsheba, a group of about 7 young men, 1 young woman, and 3 members of Ukoo Flani (R.I.C., Nguchi P., and FUJO Makelele) sit on the porch of the maskani where the shade protects them from the scorching heat of the sun. The music of artists such as Tupac, Jay-Z, Dr. Dre, Notorious B.I.G., and of course, Ukoo Flani blares from a computer set inside the maskani. Inside the

small, but comfy maskani, there is a computer set with speakers, a couch, four lawn chairs, a small television set, and a video game system where two young men are playing a soccer match that reminds me of NFL Madden showdowns that take place in the ghettos of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. R.I.C. of Ukoo Flani is highly respected by the youngsters who, upon entering the maskani, eagerly greet him as mzee (elder) and feel honored by his requests to send them to the local shop to buy him a Fanta baridi (cold soda) or 50 shillings worth of Safaricom credit.

In the maskani, the members of Ukoo Flani regularly share and exchange knowledge with the youth as they discuss and debate politics, culture, sports, and economics. R.I.C. emphasizes the importance of the maskani as a safe haven for Kenyan youth to stay out of trouble and interact with people who are like them. He points out that there is a growing culture of Kenyan youth who would rather stay in the house and watch television instead of exchanging knowledge and ideas at the maskani (R.I.C., November 24th Interview). At one point during my visit to Barsheba on a Saturday afternoon of field research, most of the young people expressed anger at the hypocrisy of Kenya's current President, Mwai Kibaki who, in his bid for re-election, hosted a one million shilling per plate campaign fundraiser. Many of the youth feel betrayed by actions such as this because they do not see this type of investment being put towards development in their communities.

Ghetto Life

Ukoo Flani music video editor, Victor Abae Linge (also known as "B"), describes the ghetto not as a place or a location, but rather as a "state of mind" (Victor "B" Linge, November 24th Interview). B tells me to imagine waking up everyday being broke with no money to contribute to the well-being of myself or my family (Victor "B" Linge, November 24th Interview). "Imagine being a 23 year old man, still living with your parents who are constantly quarreling you, telling you to go look for a job," B passionately explains to me. He continues

“but you know that, despite having completed secondary school or even university, you have no job prospects for the future. You become depressed all the time” (Victor “B” Linge, November 24th Interview). According to B, this hopelessness represents the ghetto in which so many Kenyan youth feel entrapped. The research on this topic validates B’s grievances. According to the 2004 International Labour Organization (ILO) report on “*Global Employment Trends for Youth*” youth unemployment rates in sub-Saharan Africa have “increased steadily from 11.7 per cent in 1993 reaching an all-time high rate of 14.4 per cent accounting for 88 million unemployed youth in 2003” (ARYCE, June 2005).

B explains that Ukoo Flani’s music gives hope to countless numbers of youth who are coping with this powerful sense of hopelessness on a daily basis. Arnold Chai Malindi (also known as Chai), is a 21 year old Form 3 student from the Mombasa hood of Barsheba. He is also an aspiring *kaya* hip-hop artist. He credits Ukoo Flani with inspiring him to pursue his musical ambitions by making positive hip-hop that uplifts and empowers Kenyan youth (Chai, November 24th Interview). According to Chai, Ukoo Flani are big brothers who serve as role models to young Kenyans, especially those living in Mombasa (Chai, November 24th Interview). These urban youth have grown up as ardent fans of Ukoo Flani’s hardcore, uncompromising, and sometimes controversial *kaya* style of urban poetry.

Despite the abundance of support and adoration that Ukoo Flani received from youth in Barsheba, a focus group/listening session that I conducted with youth in Old Town revealed that not all young people are receptive to Ukoo Flani’s style or the themes in their music. In Old Town, there were eight male participants in my focus group who were between the ages of 17 and 25 years old. The goal of the session was to let music prompt our group discussion. Although all eight participants identified the message of “surviving in the streets” as a theme in the Ukoo Flani songs they listened to; they did not feel that they could relate to this message in particular, or Ukoo Flani’s style in general (Mohamed Ali, November 25th Focus Group). When asked to explain why a

young person in Magongo would identify with Ukoo Flani's music, while a young person in Old Town would not, one participant, Mahumud Fauz, explained that "tribal differences" cause people to "interpret things differently" (Mahumud Fauz, November 25th Focus Group). Another participant said that ghetto life is not something most Old Town youth can relate to, adding that "only about 20% of Old Town youth live a ghetto life" (Mohamed Ali, November 25th Focus Group).

Will the real UKOO FLANI please stand up?

Ukoo Flani Mau Mau (UFMM) represents the merger of the Coastal hip-hop group Ukoo Flani and the Nairobi hip-hop group Mau Mau. After the two groups collaborated on an album, *Dandora Burning*, in 2004, the joint name "Ukoo Flani Mau Mau" stuck. The problem is that the guys from the Ukoo Flani camp claim that they never gave the artists in Mau Mau permission to use their name, their vision, and the acronym that they created: *Upendo Kwote Olewenu Ombeni Funzo La Aliyetuumba Njia Iwepo*.

Initially, Ukoo Flani appreciated what they thought was a symbolic expression of brotherly love on the part of their Mau Mau counterparts. But last year, Ukoo Flani artists learned that the Mau Mau artists were reaping rewards that should have been shared jointly by both groups. Nguchi P hurtfully tells me that the Mau Mau guys are "not real friends, they are not true brothers" (Nguchi P, November 13th Interview). According to R.I.C. of Ukoo Flani, the Mau Mau artists have only used the Ukoo Flani name to selfishly enrich themselves.

They have fancy ipods, they got a studio with recording equipment, some of them have even traveled to Holland and Sweden to perform using Ukoo Flani's name. They are getting money from aid organizations who are supporting the mission statement that *we* created. We prepared a meal, yet they took the food from the table. We are hungry here in Mombasa while they eat well in Nairobi (R.I.C., November 13th Interview, *emphasis added*).

The bitterness is evident as R.I.C., Alai K., and Nguchi P share their story with me during a group interview. But this bitterness is not accompanied by hatred, animosity or anger; rather, it is characterized by feelings of pain and betrayal.

The betrayal felt by the Ukoo Flani artists were also felt by their Mombasa fans who accused Ukoo Flani of going to Nairobi and “selling the name” (Victor “B” Linge, November 24th Interview).

You have to understand that young guys here in the Coast feel that the artists in Ukoo Flani are our representatives. They speak for us. So when we heard that Mau Mau was now being called ‘Ukoo Flani Mau Mau,’ we were angry because we felt like our representatives had sold us out (Victor “B” Linge, November 24th Interview).

R.I.C. echoes B’s sentiments: “For a long time, we were not safe in the streets. Guys felt like we had betrayed them” (R.I.C., November 24th Interview). It was only through their music that Ukoo Flani was able to explain to their most loyal fans what really happened and regain their street credibility in Mombasa.

Ukoo Flani has attempted to set the record straight by taking their story to major Kenyan media outlets. However, they feel that their story has yet to be portrayed in a fair and balanced manner because the big media stations are all based in Nairobi and therefore, tend to favor the Nairobi artists, Mau Mau. During one of our group interviews, R.I.C. tells me that the artists from Ukoo Flani and Mau Mau had a meeting earlier this year to discuss this problem. The Ukoo Flani artists stated their case and the Mau Mau artists agreed to stop using the Ukoo Flani name. A verbal agreement was made but Ukoo Flani does not know whether the agreement will be kept. Their trust has already been breached. Ukoo Flani plans to address this problem by continuing to uphold their message of “upendo kwote” in everything they do, but they vow to never again let their kindness and humility be mistaken for weakness.

Urban Poetry: Analyzing Ukoo Flani’s Lyrics

In order to give the reader a well-rounded view of the themes that are characteristic of Kenyan hip-hop, I will compare the (1) linguistic structure, (2)

rhythmic structure and (3) lyrical content of the *kaya* style of hip-hop and the *genge* style of hip-hop. I will provide a Kiswahili-English translation of a lyrical excerpt from one *genge* song: “Banjuka” by DNA and one *kaya* song: “Burn Dem” by Ukoo Flani.

“Burn Dem” [Verse 1] performed by FUJO Makelele (of Ukoo Flani)

Kiswahili Translation

Kum Kum Babbaz
Ukoo Flani **soldiers** *twaja*
Nandege tumejiami na vifaru
Tuna majeshi wa **desert storm**
na SS **marine**
Wafuasi wa Bin Laden
*Tumekuja kuchukua huu udhamin madin*¹
*Tuko majesh bwenza zaidi ya elfu hamsini*²
Tunatumia **TNT**
Tufanya ufiatu na **B52**
Kwenye umati **soldier** nati
Navuta kenti *na* seti jeti
Natuma **missile**
Dis *hilo linageuka* **diesel**
Ndani ya **mental**
Na **incognito**
Kambi ya jeshi kutoka **ghetto**
Daily na gain, daily I fight for my rights
Na checki *kwa* **scope** *kama* snipa
Pum kapuka *tunatupa kwenye pipa*
Na tia **grenade full real** gwamba
Na inuka nikizinduka
Nina **bazooka**

English Translation

Kum Kum Babbaz³
 Ukoo Flani soldiers are coming
 We have fighter jets and tankers
 We have a desert storm army
 and SS marine soldiers
 We are followers of Bin Laden
 We have come to collect these resources
 We are many soldiers, more than 50,000
 We are using TNT dynamite
 We are doing crazy things with B52s
 In the crowd, there is a soldier with dreadlocks
 I’m smoking weed and then I set the jet⁴
 I’m sending missiles
 This and that turns into diesel fuel
 Inside my mental (my brain)
 I am incognito
 Soldiers from the ghetto camp
 Day by day I gain, daily I fight for my rights
 I look into the scope like a sniper
 BOOM! We throw kapuka⁵ into the rubbish
 Then, I put a grenade inside of it; no nonsense
 I suddenly appear and when I turn
 I am holding a bazooka

* please note : in the Kiswahili lyrics, the English words are **bolded**, Kiswahili words are *italicized*, and slang/Sheng words are underlined

¹ madin is a Kiswahili word meaning “precious stones”

² FUJO Makelele pronounces hamsini as *hamsin*; he does not pronounce the final (i) thus, the way he delivers the line, *madin* and *hamsin* rhyme

³ Kum Kum Babbaz is the nickname of an mzee (elder) in the Mtwapa neighborhood of Mombasa; Kum Kum Babbaz is described as a triple OG (original gangsta); in this context, FUJO Makelele is giving a shout out to the mzee

⁴ *seti jeti* is slang terminology; in this context, FUJO Makelele says that he “sets the jet” meaning that, after he smokes *kenti*, the slang term for marijuana, he feels high like a jet

⁵ *kapuka* is another style of Kenyan hip-hop that is similar to *genge*; however, Ukoo Flani does not differentiate between *kapuka* and *genge*. They feel that it is all commercialized hip-hop.

“Burn Dem” is Ukoo Flani’s latest release and features lyrics from Ukoo Flani members Richie Rich, FUJO Makelele, POP, and Lavasti (who sings the chorus). Ukoo Flani has recorded a music video for “Burn Dem,” which has been

getting a lot of airplay on Kenyan television shows such as “The Beat,” a daily TV program that features Kenyan and American hip-hop music videos.

Since 2006, “Banjuka,” a certified *genge* hit, has been all over the Kenyan radio airwaves. Currently, “Banjuka” is arguably the most popular song by any Kenyan artist. “Banjuka” is so popular in Kenya that DNA has been “contracted by the Party of National Unity (PNU) to mobilize Kenyans to re-elect President Kibaki” (“Banjuka Star Takes the Local Music Scene by Storm” Oct. 9, 2007).

“Banjuka” [Verse 1] performed by DNA

Kiswahili Translation

Me na come through

Niki rap tu

Ma one two

Na kwenye club na what you wanna dance to
there'll be no kanya track majabu

VIP ma scene sauti ya dhahabu

unatakaaje ma, welcome to

Porto Suda ni nice

mimi im da bombs ooooh

na jua ni mi wha-what

tunajua leo lazima watu wabanjukeeee

maisha fupi kwa ni nini?

wanauuliza tutasifu hepi mpaka lini ?

situna shida zetu tusikiza zako kwa nini?

*watanishika **drinks** nikishika warenbow hivi?*

tuangalianeeeee

tusalimianeeeee

izo numba za simu tubadilishane

badalishane badalishane bada-bada

badalishane ivi letu

mejua na leo

tu kwa hivyo leo tutabanjuka tu na kuruka tu

na kuruka tu

ruka ruka ruka tu

kuruka tu

juka tu

ba ba banjuka tu

life ni fupi na misi jivungi

na weka shida chini

na tupa mikono juu

ba-ba-ba banjuka tu

English Translation

I'm coming through

just rapping

the one two

Inside the club, people are dancing

this song is out of the ordinary

VIP¹ in the scene, golden sound

Welcome lady, how can you refuse me

Porta Suda is nice

I'm the bomb² oh!!!

You know what, its me

and today, people must dance

Why do you say life is short

they're asking, when will we praise happiness

We have our own problems, why listen to yours

I want to grab drinks and touch beautiful ladies

we look at each other

we greet each other

we exchange phone numbers

exchange them, exchange them, ex-ex

exchange them

because today I know

we shall dance and jump

and jump

jump, jump, jump

we shall jump

dance

da-da-da dance

life is short, I won't miss out

So put your problems underneath

And put your hands up

da-da-da dance

* please note : in the Kiswahili lyrics, the English words are **bolded**, Kiswahili words are *italicized*, and slang/Sheng words are underlined

¹ VIP : very important person

² “I'm the bomb” is black street speech meaning “I am amazing” or “I am cool”

Although I will demonstrate that both songs use code-mixing, have similar beats/melodies, and employ rhyming schemes, I will also argue that the content of “Burn Dem,” a *kaya* style song has a clear, relevant social message while “Banjuka,” a *genge* style song lacks a clear, relevant social message. As both lyrical excerpts show, both the *kaya* artist (Ukoo Flani’s FUJO Makelele) and the *genge* artist (DNA) use code-mixing between English, Kiswahili, and urban colloquialisms, or slang. For example, in the lines of “Banjuka,” the artist says:

[Line 1] *wanauuliza tutasifu hepi mpaka lini?*
 [Line 2] *situna shida zetu tusikiza zako kwa nini?*
 [Line 3] *watanishika **drinks** nikishika wardenbow hivi?*

In [Line 1] DNA uses *hepi*, a Sheng word meaning happy, in the middle of a line that is mostly composed of Kiswahili terms and grammar. Similarly, in [Line 3] he uses the English word **drinks**, in reference to the alcoholic beverages that he buys for beautiful women (*wardenbow hivi*) in the club or disco. This code-mixing is also present in the lines of FUJO Makelele’s verse on the song “Burn Dem”:

[Line 1] *Kwenye umati **soldier** nati*
 [Line 2] *Navuta kenti na seti jeti*
 [Line 3] *Natuma **missile***
 [Line 4] *Dis hilo linageuka **diesel***
 [Line 5] *Ndani ya **mental***
 [Line 6] *Na **incognito***

FUJO Makelele uses mostly Kiswahili terms and grammar in the preceding 6 lines; however, he also uses the English words **soldier**, **missile**, **diesel**, **mental**, and **incognito**. Additionally, he uses the slang terminology *kenti* (marijuana), *nati* (dreadlocks), *seti jeti* (see reference⁴ in translation box on page 33) and *dis* (black street vernacular word for *this*). Another similar aspect between both songs is the beat or rhythm of the music, which is constructed in a way that makes the listener want to dance. In addition to the code-mixing and the fast paced beat, both artists have structured their lyrics to rhyme using slang, English, and Kiswahili.

[Line 1] **Me na come through**
 [Line 2] Niki rap tu
 [Line 3] Ma one two
 [Line 4] *Na kwenye **club** na **what you wanna dance to***
 [Line 5] **there’ll be no kanya track majabu**

[Line 6] **VIP** ma **scene** *sauti ya dhahabu*
 [Line 7] *unatakaaje* ma, **welcome to**

As these lines show, DNA rhymes the English words **through**, **two**, and **to** with the Kiswahili words tu, majabu, and dhahabu. Similarly, in the following lines, FUJO Makelele rhymes the English word **marine** with the Kiswahili words *madin* and *hamsini* and his pronunciation of *Bin Laden* completes the rhyme scheme.

[Line 1] *na SS* **marine**
 [Line 2] *Wafuasi wa Bin Laden*
 [Line 3] *Tumekuja kuchukua huu udhamin madin*
 [Line 4] *Tuko majesh bwena zaidi ya elfu hamsini*

The lyrical content of “Burn Dem” seeks to communicate a message of urban survival, struggle and endurance; whereas, the lyrical content of “Banjuka” does not. In my focus group/listening session, I asked my informants what was the message in “Banjuka,” they laughed and told me “there is no message...just dance...we don’t even listen to the lyrics, just the rhythm and the beat” (Mohamed Ali, Feiswal Fauz, Hussein Mohamed, November 25th Interview). In the lyrical excerpt I have provided here, DNA is talking about going to the disco to “banjuka” or dance, buying (alcoholic) drinks for and admiring beautiful women, and exchanging phone numbers with pretty girls. In the lyrical excerpt from “Burn Dem,” FUJO Makelele is saying that the members of Ukoo Flani are ghetto soldiers who have united to form an army of more than 50,000. These ghetto soldiers have come to collect the resources that rightfully belong to them. FUJO Makelele expresses the viewpoint of many urban ghetto youth in the lines:

[Line 1] *Kambi ya jeshi kutoka* **ghetto**
 [Line 2] **Daily** *na* **gain**, **daily I fight for my rights**

In the line *wafuasi wa Bin Laden*, FUJO Makelele claims that Ukoo Flani are followers of Osama Bin Laden. When I inquired about this reference, I was told that many ghetto youth identify with Osama Bin Laden, the Muslim extremist leader of Al-Qaeda, which has been characterized as a terrorist organization and blamed for the September 11th attacks that killed thousands of Americans. I was also told that Kenyan ghetto youth, many of whom were raised as Muslims, identify with Bin Laden because he denounced the wealth of his family to go live

a “ghetto life in the caves” (Speaker Asked to Be Anonymous). I was also told that Bin Laden is a hero because he has dedicated his life to the worldwide fight against “American Imperialism” (Speaker Asked to Be Anonymous). Although some people may not agree with the content of this lyrical excerpt or even understand it, the fact remains that, like conscious American hip-hop artists such as the late Tupac Shakur, Ukoo Flani musicians are using their urban poetry to give a voice to Kenyan ghetto youth who have their own opinions and interpretations about life’s struggles and rewards.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusion Part I: The Future of Ukoo Flani

The Ukoo Flani crew is in the process of recording a new album that will be released in February or March of 2008. With this new album, Ukoo Flani hopes to solidify *kaya* hip-hop as a style of socially-conscious, positive music that is here to stay. Additionally, Ukoo Flani is working with music video editor, Victor Abae Linge (also known as “B”) on a documentary that will contain all of their music videos, let their fans know their plans for the future, and address the Ukoo Flani (Mau Mau) naming confusion. During my field research, B allowed me to view some clips from the upcoming DVD, and I am confident that this documentary will make Ukoo Flani a household name among many Kenyans.

Plans to secure funding for the Ukoo Flani hip-hop academy are also being formulated so that Ukoo Flani can see the manifestation of their vision of teaching the next generation the “science of hip-hop.” Ukoo Flani is also working with Kereketa Africa Entertainment to secure a venue for Free Style Fridays, a weekly musical event that will feature aspiring hip-hop artists battling each other with lyrics in a traditional hip-hop freestyle battle. Ukoo Flani has already presented their idea to the manager of Salambo Club in Mombasa. Their goals include:

1. establish a sense of cohesiveness in the entertainment industry
2. provide gifted youth in Mombasa an alternative to hanging out in the streets
3. create a venue to showcase talent in Mombasa

4. offer an alternative voice for local talent
5. boost creativity among artists

According to a copy of the event proposal, Kereketa Africa Entertainment will have a disc jockey play music and conduct a freestyle battle session every Friday from 6:00-10:00 pm. These weekly events would feature music, comedy, poetry, and other forms of art. Ukoo Flani and Kereketa Africa Entertainment plan to charge an affordable admission fee of 50 Kenyan shillings. By the time I hand over my ISP, Ukoo Flani has yet to get a response from the Salambo Club management but they are hopeful that their efforts will be successful.

As I prepare to turn in the final draft of my ISP, I learn that Ukoo Flani has been nominated for a Coast Music Award under the category “Best Hip-Hop Group”. The awards show will take place on Saturday, December 8, 2007 at Mombasa hot spot, Carnival. Ukoo Flani has invited me to attend. As I sit in Ufuoni Records studio with the Ukoo Flani crew and their fellow artists, I have no doubt that Ukoo Flani’s message of “upendo kwote” will be heard around the world.

Conclusion Part II: Hypotheses Results

As I stated in the introduction, I entered this project with three hypotheses. In my first hypothesis, I believed that, since hip-hop had permeated the youth culture in Kenya, then hip-hop is a global art form that has universal themes and components that young people relate to and identify with. My research has revealed that hip-hop is indeed a global phenomenon with which youth from many different religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds can relate and identify. However, my research also suggested that, specifically in Kenya, the youth feel that there are strong class and tribal barriers that prohibit certain Kenyan communities from enjoying and/or fully understanding the messages in hip-hop.

My second hypothesis asserted that, if American hip-hop has influenced the development of Kenyan hip-hop, then Kenyan hip-hop musicians would incorporate distinctly African musical aspects to the universal genre of hip-hop

to create their own unique style of hip-hop. The creation of the *genge* and *kaya* styles indicates that this hypothesis was true. The *kaya* style, especially, seeks to stay true to local Mombasa traditions and the teachings of the *mizuka* (ancestral spirits). For example, *kaya* hip-hop artists feel that their condemnation of the exploitation of women in their music aligns with their traditional African-Kenyan ideas about the value of women as mothers, sisters, and wives who should be respected and praised for the productiveness and their roles in the traditional family structure.

My final hypothesis stated that, if hip-hop is truly a global art form, then the support for and criticism of hip-hop music would be similar in Kenya and America. Although my research indicates that this is true, there are limitations. In general, it can be concluded that, globally, young people who identify with and understand the content of hip-hop music tend to make up the genre's fan base. Similarly, those who criticize and oppose hip-hop music tend to be people who are outside of the cultural framework of the genre's language, themes, and aesthetics. The conclusions from this hypothesis are limited though. The issue of Kenyan tribal affiliations (serving as a point of contention between young people) does not relate to the social networks of urban youth in America; therefore, the conclusion that young people tend to represent the hip-hop generation has to be analyzed in the context of ethnic divisions in Kenya. Nevertheless, my research indicates that, through the leadership of the forward-looking artists who represent the hip-hop generation, hip-hop music has the potential to overcome these ethnic/tribal divisions that have separated Kenyans for so long.

Conclusion Part III: Recommendations for Future SIT Students

Kenyan hip-hop is a ripe topic that is worthy of serious academic study and I would highly recommend this topic for future S.I.T. students who have an interest in the culture of urban Kenyan youth, music, in general, and hip-hop, specifically. Although I have tried to provide a detailed, thorough analysis of

kaya hip-hop, this ISP project is only scratching the surface of this culturally rich topic.

The gender and generational aspect are two features that I would have liked to study. During my research, I found that the urban hip-hop youth culture in Mombasa tends to be dominated by males in their teens and twenties. Unfortunately, I did not have enough time to really explore the female perspective; either fans or female hip-hop artists. I would have liked to interview more young women about the challenges facing aspiring female Kenyan hip-hop artists as well as female views about the portrayal of women in Kenyan and American hip-hop. The generational aspect is another interesting sub-topic that I would have liked to study further. The high regard given to wazee (elders) in traditional Kenyan society seems to conflict with hip-hop culture which oftentimes encourages rebellion and disobedience towards authority figures such as parents, police officers, politicians, and teachers. Additionally, in my experience in the United States, older people tend to be harsh critics of youth hip-hop culture. It would be interesting to research if this same generational dynamic exists in Kenya.

Although I decided to base my project in Mombasa so that I could be aligned with the theme of the S.I.T. study abroad program: *Coastal Cultures and Swahili Studies*, the Nairobi hip-hop scene seems to be much more developed than the Mombasa industry. Therefore, a one month study in Nairobi would be beneficial. If possible, students who are enrolled in the *Coastal Cultures* program could spend the first half of the ISP period in Mombasa and the second half in Nairobi. This will allow future S.I.T. students to get a comparative perspective about regional differences, how the artists work, the resources available, and the club/concert scene.

As I mentioned earlier, I would not recommend any future SIT students to attempt to plan and organize (and fund) any performance-based events. As my experience has shown, there is not enough time to thoroughly plan and execute a quality event during a one month research project. Additionally, problems tend to arise when money is involved. When I made arrangements to use 10,000

Kenyan shillings of my ISP budget to fund part of the event, some of the artists mistakenly believed I would be able to invest in their careers in a way that I was not.

Any students who are interested in this topic should not hesitate to contact the artists whom they want to work with and/or study. Myspace (www.myspace.com) is a great resource. You are very likely to get a response directly from the artist if you send them a message or an e-mail from his/her personal MySpace Music website. Additionally, please reference the ISP Review Sheet (on page 46) where I include contact information for Ukoo Flani, Ufuoni Recording Studio, and Pwani FM radio presenter, Peter Adamz.

A study of Sheng, the peer language used often by Kenyan hip-hop musicians and their fans, would also be a worthwhile ISP project. Although Sheng originated in Nairobi, it has spread throughout the country so a study of Sheng in Mombasa would be a meaningful academic contribution by any student who is interested.

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Schedule of Interviews & Meetings

1. Formal Interview with Peter Kamwi Gatiti Mwadime (also known as Peter Adamz)—Male—Age: 28 (Radio Presenter of “Tafrija” hip-hop show on Pwani FM 103.1).
 - a. October 26, 2007 at KBC Studios in Mombasa, Kenya.
2. Formal Interview with Peter Adamz
 - a. November 9, 2007 at KBC Studios in Mombasa, Kenya.
3. Formal Group Interview with R.I.C, Alai K, and FUJO Makelele (of hip-hop group Ukoo Flani).
 - a. November 10, 2007 at Mombasa Stadium Concert Grounds.
4. Informal Group Interview with Sharama, Alai K, Nguchi P., R.I.C., and Ndolo (of hip-hop group Ukoo Flani).
 - a. November 13, 2007 at Ukoo Flani Maskani in Magongo neighborhood of Mombasa, Kenya.
5. Formal Interview with Peter Adamz
 - a. November 20, 2007 at Ooooh Ice Cream Parlour [Makadara Road] in Mombasa, Kenya.
6. Formal Planning Meeting with R.I.C. and Nguchi P. (of hip-hop group Ukoo Flani).
 - a. November 21, 2007 at Mombasa Car Park.
7. Formal Interview with Juma Athman Mwatunya—Male—Age: 24
 - a. November 23, 2007 at Benac Café in Mombasa, Kenya.
8. Informal Interview with Victor Abae Linge (also known as “B”)—Male—Age: 23 (video editor for hip-hop group Ukoo Flani).
 - a. November 24, 2007 at Ukoo Flani Maskani in Barsheba neighborhood of Mombasa, Kenya.
9. Informal Interview with Arnold Chai Malindi—Male—Age: 21 (of hip-hop group Jamii Tofauti, the youth auxiliary of Ukoo Flani).
 - a. November 24, 2007 at Ukoo Flani Maskani in Barsheba neighborhood of Mombasa, Kenya.
10. Formal Group Interview and Listening Session with Feiswal Fauz—Male—Age: 17, Nagib—Male—Age: 17, Mohammed Ali—Male—Age: 23, Abdul Wakil—Male—Age: 18, Mohammed Zenuidin—Male—Age: 17, Hussein Mohammed—Male—Age: 25, Mahumud Fauz—Male—Age: 18, Mundhir—Male—Age: 20
 - a. November 25, 2007 at S.I.T. Office in Mombasa, Kenya

ISP Review Sheet

1. Your topic—suitability, development, accessibility

The topic of hip-hop is very suitable for students interested in youth culture. The youth are eager to share their thoughts about hip-hop; a topic that they feel does not get enough credit from academia, society, or the Kenyan government. The research sites are easily accessible, especially if the researcher has a passion for hip-hop music.

2. Location of field study—where you conducted your field study; who helped set it up (who was helpful and who was not; include names, addresses, and phone numbers, strengths and weaknesses of the site).

I conducted the majority of my field study in the Ukoo Flani maskani (hangouts) in Barsheba and Magongo. The sites were suitable locations for my topic because I gained access to many young people. The members of Ukoo Flani also took care of me during my visits to the maskani; safety was never an issue. I also conducted field research at KBC studios (the home of Pwani FM 103.1).

The contact information for these sites is as follows:

Ukoo Flani Main Contact: Richard Amuok (aka R.I.C.)

Phone: +254720803336

Email: thaflaniz@gmail.com

Website: www.myspace.com/ukooflani

Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC)

Pwani FM 103.1

Fax: (011)- 226929

Tel: (011) - 313380

P O Box 86108 Mombasa

Email: pwanifm@swiftmombasa.com

3. Nuts and bolts—where to get water & food, where to stay, bugs & other critters, other problems

I rented a room in a house near the S.I.T. office in Old Town for 700 Kenyan shillings per night. I enjoyed living in Old Town and working/researching in another place. I liked the fact that my work was separated from the community in which I lived. I purchased fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, and 5 liter bottles of water from small shops in Old Town so that I could cook my meals and save money. Some of my field research required me to return home late; however, safety in Old Town was never a problem since people in the neighborhood know me and recognize me as mwanafunzi. Additionally, it is only a short walk from Old Town to the Posta, which was the main place to access matatus. The Posta also served as the key meeting place for many of my informants.

4. Other noteworthy comments: Not applicable.