

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Popular Music and Construction of Ethnic Political Identity

Dr. Mary Karuri

Teacher, Department of Linguistics, Chuka University, Kenya

Jacob Murigi

Teacher, Department of English, St. Louis Nyagithuci, Secondary School, Kirinyaga County, Kenya

Abstract:

This article injects Discourse Analysis into a literary genre, popular music, to show how language is creatively manipulated to position a group within a larger society, while also portraying the group's beliefs about 'Others'. As many studies of creation of identity have argued, a group defines itself by 'subscribing' to some ideologies and holding claims of similar historical experiences which are presumed to bring the members of the group together. Membership to these groups is largely imagined and only brought to consciousness in discursive sites such media, social gatherings and others. In such sites, together with other form of discourses such as media debates and informal discussions, popular music may play a big role in 'reminding' people of shared heritages, fears and aspirations. The need for defining a group identity is heightened during conflicts such as political strife. In this paper, we show how Kikuyu (one of the big tribes in Kenya amongst forty one others) popular musicians use language to create a collective identity of the tribe, largely portraying it as superior with unique capabilities. The relationship between the tribe and the political establishment is crucial in the artists' articulation of how they view their tribe versus the rest of the Kenyan society. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this article analyses and interprets the language in Kikuyu popular music to show how the artists endeavour to shape a socio - political identity of the Kikuyu people.

Keywords: Popular music, identity creation, ideologies, CDA

1. Introduction

Popular music dominates the entertainment scene in Kenya (Wa Mungai, 2008). Music encompasses written, oral and visual images which depict societal beliefs. According to Ramet (1994) music is a powerful force for sociopolitical change as it brings people together evoking for them a collective emotional experience to which common meanings are assigned. Mattern (1998) offers a systematic attempt to connect music to political action. He highlights the different uses to which music may be put in the organization of political action: deliberative use which refers to the way music allows for debating collective identity; the confrontation use which refers to music's application to a situation in which communities oppose each other; and the pragmatic use which refers to the place of music in promoting a set of interests. This grounds popular music to what can be termed as persuasive discourse which allows the listener (interpreter) to make sense of text by supplying his Members' Resources (MRs) (Fairclough, 1989) or context models (Van Dijk, 2000). These context models are socially determined and they influence our understanding of texts and hence our response to them.

Music is an integral part of any culture and communicates the virtues, vices, norms, values and beliefs of a community. But the idea of a community larger than face to face groups is basically imagined as the members will never know most of their fellow members. Thus, the idea of "our community/ identity" lies in the mind of each member (Wodak, Liebhart, Reisigl & De Cillia, 1999). Referring to the same notion of no fixed identity, Laclau & Mouffe (1985) hold that there are no "true" social relations but people are interpellated, as discourses designate positions for people to occupy as subjects. For instance, a subject may be a teacher at school, at a fundraiser a guest and a husband at home.

Identities are constructed through discursive means and in social contexts. Fairclough (2003) building on the notions of logic of difference and logic of equivalence, holds that the process of classification is perpetuated in texts where entities are differentiated, put in opposition or equated to one another. He views a text as any actual instance of language use having causal effects of bringing about change as well as shaping people's identities in particular aspects of social life. The texts are textured by social agents who are socially constrained thus they allocate meanings to texts according to their positions. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) observe that identity is always relationally organized; the subject is something because it is contrasted with something that it is not. To put it in other words "we are because we are not". Karuri (2016) opines that the linguistic choices made in newspaper headlines are core in the creation of identities. Identities are accepted, refused and negotiated in discursive processes. Therefore, identities are entirely social creations.

2. Methodology

Purposive sampling was used to select songs from various popular artists in Kikuyu that were considered as furthering group identity and 'Other' representation. The tracks used are those that articulate a political agenda. Chilton and Schaffner (2011) argue that anything political involves power and resistance. They propose three "strategic functions" which can be used to categorize the political nature of any discourse. The functions are: (de) legitimization which involves positive self-presentation and negative other presentation. This can be done through the use of self-praise as well as speech acts of blaming, accusing and insulting. The second function is (mis) representation which entails withholding and controlling of discourse through the use of features like secrecy, censorship and euphemisms. The third function is coercion and resistance and this involves controlling others through language through such things as commands, making assumptions about realities, and positioning of self and others. Based on these criteria, the music tracks were considered for what was seen as political in their content. These criteria ensured that the songs chosen had an aspect of political identity creation thus serving the purpose of this study. From this sample, a second level sampling was done randomly to come up with fifteen songs which produced the data for analysis

The texts were analyzed using Fairclough's (1989) model. The model proposes three-pronged discourse analysis processes that are a product of three dimensions of discourse. These dimensions are:

- The object of analysis which refers to texts (verbal, visual, verbal and visual.)
- The processes by which the object is produced and received (writing/speaking/listening or viewing) by human subjects.
- The social historical conditions that govern these processes (context)

The processes that arise from these dimensions include description- this involves the linguistic analysis of the formal properties of language used in a text. This addresses itself to the vocabulary items used, grammar and the textual structures. The second stage involves interpretation of the data. This relates the text and interaction, where the text is seen both as a product of a process of production as well as a resource in the process of interpretation. Finally, the stage of explanation- this stage describes the relationship between interaction and social context. It also holds that the social processes of production and interpretation are socially determined.

3. Discussion

This section discusses various language choices made by Kikuyu popular musicians to politically position the tribe and its place in Kenya. Through choice of lexicon, structural arrangement, use of pronouns, metaphors the artists articulate issues they deem important in defining the identity of the Kikuyu community.

3.1. Discourse Structures in Creation of Identity

According to Beard (2000), passivation or activation is a grammatical feature which assigns roles to a subject either as an agent of an action or affected by the action. The choice of either depends mainly on the intention of a speaker when making an utterance. Activation may be used to emphasize the subject's role while passivation can be used to conceal responsibility. In Kikuyu popular songs, activation and passivation has been used to allocate or attribute specific identity. The active voice has been used to allocate blame to actors who take the subject position as well as emphasize the subject. This is illustrated in text 1 and 2. The texts are drawn from song two which was produced after the 2007-2008 post-election violence (PEV) in Kenya. The italicized texts are in Kikuyu language and the subsequent English translations are given.

- Text 1
Na nonĩ ndaugĩte kũrutũo maroro nyũmba ya Mũmbi ĩgĩkua ngirinyĩngĩ
(It is I who said the flecks should be removed and consequently, the house of Mumbi died in their thousands.)
- Text 2
Nĩ ngũigua ndĩna ũcuke mũingĩ ngoro-inĩ ndaria gwakanaga ta mwaki
(I feel very guilty, for when I spoke, it was like lighting a fire)

The ambivalent referential use of the pronoun "I" in texts 1 & 2 helps the musician to conceal the identity of those accused of fueling the post-election violence of 2007/2008 and specifically those that allegedly caused deaths of the members of Kikuyu community through incitement. The post-election violence was and still is an emotive issue in Kenya and hence the need to be vague about those who were believed to bear the greatest responsibility in it. By being vague, the artist can still castigate the culprits without giving their identity and he therefore protects himself from possible legal action. In emphasizing the goodness of the Kikuyu, the same process of activation is used when the positive actions are attributed to the agent initiator. Texts 3-8, show the positive actions of the Kikuyu on behalf of the nation.

- Text 3
Twarũire wĩyathi wa mbere no ithuĩ twaingatire mũthũngũ
(We fought for freedom and chased the white man away)
- Text 4

Tūrī atongoria
(We are leaders)

- Text 5
Twagūrire ithaka thakame
(We bought land with blood)
- Text 6
Nītwahotire nderi magogo matīrema
(We overcame the vultures so crows cannot defeat us)
- Text 7
Mūthūngū twamūingaitire agīthī
(We chased the white man away)

The confrontational approach for the struggle for freedom is shown through the use of verbs “overcame”, “fought” and “chased”. This portrays the Kikuyu as courageous as they were able to defend the nation from the colonialists. The use of the copular ‘be’ in text 4 makes the statement ‘we are leaders’ categorical and hence indisputable while the plural pronoun ‘we’ gives the impression that all Kikuyus possess the qualities so mentioned. The metaphor of “vultures” in reference to the white people and “crows” in reference to the Kenyan opposition is meant to show how easy it is to get power from an opposition leader for the Kikuyu have already overcome a stronger opponent. These are all positive attributes assigned to the Kikuyu. Therefore, the choice of the positive sentence is deliberate to emphasize the qualities of the Kikuyu as the fearless defenders of the country.

The pronoun “we” is also relevant in separating those who belong from outsiders. The pronoun creates solidarity for the Kikuyu and their political leaders excluding all other communities. This implies that the qualities assigned to the Kikuyu are lacking in the ‘Other’. Negation serves the purpose of dismissing those who hold a contrary opinion as well as presuppose that the other could be a sluggard, warmonger, sell outs of the nation as shown in texts 8, 9 and 10. The artist uses the conditional marker ‘unless’ in text 8 as a hedge to the aggressiveness of the Kikuyu by portraying it as only applicable in self-defense.

- Text 8
Tūtienda mbara tūrī andī thayū tīga no ūria ūngītūcogotha
(We don’t like war; we love peace unless we are attacked)
- Text 9
Tūtīrī igūta tūrī arīmi ng’ūndū na mahiū
(We are not sluggards we are farmers and herders)
- Text 10
Ithaka ici nī citu na tūtiengīendia
We cannot sell these our lands
- Texts 11-12 highlight some of the violent acts meted against the Kikuyu in Rift Valley province in Kenya during the Post-Election Violence after the 2007 general elections. The Kikuyu are made to occupy the subject position where they are portrayed as recipients of the Other’s aggressiveness
- Text 11
Twacinīrūo irio
Our food was burnt
- Text 12
Tūgīcinīrūo manyūmba
Our houses were burnt

The use of genitive ‘our’ serves to emphasize the loss that the Kikuyu community went through during the PEV. It is instructive that other people, other than the Kikuyu suffered a similar fate but the artist makes it look like only the community was affected. The omission of the agent is important as the audience has background knowledge of PEV where property was destroyed in Rift Valley and people were burnt in a church. The agent is part of background information or the episodic memory (Van Dijk, 2003). This paints the agent as evil, cruel while the Kikuyu are shown as the victims of unwarranted violence of the agent.

In texts 13-15, the oppressive nature of the ‘Other’ is captured. Manyani was a detention Camp where the Mau Mau freedom fighters and their supporters were detained by the colonial government, being taken back there is a way of oppression. The verb phrase “*kaba n I* would rather be taken back to Manyani in text 13 portrays the Kikuyu as being the target of oppression by neo-colonialist in text 14, who is defined as having a club. The neocolonialist in this context makes reference to the second president of Kenya when the Kikuyu were mainly in opposition.

- Text 13
Kaba njokio Manyani kana ngu
(I'd rather be taken back to Manyani or be killed)
- Text 14
Tūratūire tūhinyīrīrio nī mūthūngū mūrū na njūgūma
(We had been oppressed by the neo-colonialist with a club)
- Text 15
Tūrenjagwo machigo na rwenji rūene rwa thūgūrī
(We were shoddily shaved with a borrowed razor)

Text 15 is derived from a song produced after Mwai Kibaki (a Kikuyu) took power after 2002 general election in Kenya after a 24yr rule by Daniel arap Moi (a Kalenjin) who was generally believed not to be fond of the Kikuyu community. The artist captures this with the metaphor: 'being shoddily shaven with a borrowed razor' which basically means being ruled by an 'outsider' with oppressive tendencies towards the Kikuyu. The use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our' is illustrative of the solidarity of the Kikuyu who are portrayed as victims of the sadistic nature of others not mentioned, the other tribes. It is therefore conclusive that the Kikuyu is shown as the victim implying their innocence and hyping the guilt of the Other who is fighting the Kikuyu.

In texts 16 & 17, the artist uses the active voice to attribute negative actions towards the Other who is shown to be destructive in text 16 the artist says 'they uprooted the railway line'. This is in reference to the members of mainly the Luo community and whose leader Raila Odinga was a powerful opposition leader during Kibaki's first term in office (2002-2007). At some point, they destroyed a part of the railway that passed through a residential area where they are a majority. The use of pronouns 'they' and 'these' generalizes and condemns the whole community. Such generalization denies the individuals within the group personal identities as not all the members of the tribe participated in the destructive acts. Stereotyping is a common strategy in power struggles where a whole group bears the iniquities of individuals and this serves to support the perception that nothing good can come out of the community. This is particularly important in Kenya where political support for top leadership is largely ethnically influenced. In text 18, the opposition leader, metaphorically referred to as 'this rat' is given the agent role and accused of planning for the imprisonment of the Kikuyu leader. This helps in portraying them as sadistic who rejoice in "our" suffering.

- Text 16
Andū aya makīmunya reli Kībera
(These people derailed the railway line at Kibera)
- Text 17
Marīkia gūkūra reli makīrarīra
(After they derailed the rail they slept without eating supper)
- Text 18
Mbīa īno īmwe nīyo yachorete Hague yendaga mūrū wa Ngīna athunwo yathane
(This one rat had organized for the imprisonment of Ngina's son at The Hague for it to rule)

Texts 19 and 20 portray the Kikuyu as knowledgeable people. The usage of the negative marker "never" in text 19 implies an insinuation that the Kikuyu are foolish. The absence of the accuser is left to the judgment of the listener to know and in this case make assumption it is other communities. In text 20 the declarative sentence is meant to impose an identity of being wise through mentioning of professions (engineers and pilots) regarded as prestigious in society. The pronoun 'we' is used exclusively referring only to the Kikuyu who are shown to possess all talents. This portrays the Kikuyu community as better than any other community through presupposition. Taken in the context of national identity, it suggests the 'Others' are not nearly as endowed as the Kikuyu people.

- Text 19
Nao anake arīa mararuma maithe mamenye Gīkūyū gītīrī gīakīga
(Those young men who abuse their fathers should know that the Kikuyu have never been foolish)
- Text 20
Nyūmba īno itū īna andū athomu mainjinia, atwari a ndege, iheo cio the
(We have educated people, engineers and pilots, all talents)

The leaders of the opposition are referred to as 'three blind rats' in texts 21 & 22 which implies that those who are in government are sighted. The metaphorical sense of the word blind is that of lacking a clear goal for the communities hence the followers will end up in a ditch which can be interpreted as opposition politics.

- Text 21
Kūhūta nī mūkūhūta irimū ici mūrūmirīre mbīa ithatu ndumumu
(Hunger will be your portion you fool as you follow three blind rats)
- Text 22
Mūdū ūrīa mūgī nī oime Jubilee thutha ndama ciao irigagīrīria na ūhotani
(The wise should follow Jubilee as their plans always succeed)

The idea of 'hunger will be your portion' in text 21 rhymes well with the Kenyan notion of politics that when one of "us" is in leadership it is time for us to "eat" while those in opposition lack a chance to benefit equally from state resources (Karuti, 2014). The description of the Other as fools and Kikuyu as wise is enhanced through the use of the evaluative adjectival phrase "ūrīa mūgī" (the wise) in regard to those who are in Jubilee (the ruling coalition) which is led by a Kikuyu. Thus all the followers of the main opposition coalition CORD led by the trio of Raila, Kalonzo and Wetangula (the three blind rats) are shown as fools who knowingly follow "the blind rats" yet they have no clear goal. This is contrasted through the choice of the statement "the wise should follow Jubilee". This portrays the Kikuyu as wise while the other is a fool as he does not know how to choose and have to be directed.

The superiority of the Kikuyu and their right to leadership is asserted through various means as shown in the following texts. Where the artist employs the usage of declarative sentences and the negative marker to show how the Kikuyu are superior to others.

- Text 22
Nyūmba īno itū nī ya athamaki gūkū mūhuro wa Kīrīnyaga kuma o kihumo
(Our house, here, south of Kirinyaga is made of kings right from origin)
- Text 24
Kībakī we ti mūteti Kībakī nī mūtongoria
(Kibaki is not a politician Kibaki is a leader)
- Text 23
Tūtīrī ateti, tūrī atongoria
We are not politicians, we are leaders

The usage of 'kings' and 'leaders' shows that the Kikuyu view themselves as better than others in terms of national leadership. In text 24, Kibaki, the president during the production of the song is described as a leader and not a politician. The artist asserts the right to leadership using the prepositional phrase 'from the origin' meaning that a Kikuyu is a king by some kind of divine design. This implies that other communities can only be leaders if the Kikuyu choose to allow them. The artists capture the right of the Kikuyu to leadership by portraying them as defenders of the nation who are fearless and hence discrediting the other tribes' desire for leadership. The artists allude to history to justify why the Kikuyu should be leaders. This is as captured in the following texts.

- Text 26
Wiyathi wa mbere no ithui twarūire na tukīngata mūthūngū
The first freedom, it is us who fought for it and chased the white man away
- Text 27
GEMA noyo yaingatire mūthūngū
GEMA was the one that chased the white man away
- Text 28
Mūthūngū twamūingatire agīthī
The white man we chased away

In texts 26-28, the artist emphasizes the central role played by three closely related tribes (in terms of dialect) that live around Mt. Kenya region in Kenya (Gikuyu, Embu and Meru hence the acronym GEMA) in fighting for freedom from British colonialists. The question of the participants in Kenya's fight for freedom is a controversial one and there are many angles and opinions and this study did not wade into the historical debates that surround this issue. The focus was on Kikuyu artists' views on the fight for freedom and what they thought it meant in defining the identity of the Kikuyu people. In texts 26 - 28, the artist seems to suggest that the GEMA group of tribes is entitled to leadership because of its major role in Kenya's struggle for freedom.

3.2. Conclusion

The discussion in this article shows how popular artists manipulate language to create identities for an ethnic group. By choosing particular lexicon, sentence structures, using metaphors and pronouns in particular ways, the artists engage in acts of 'Othering', drawing distinct characteristics between the Kikuyu and other communities in Kenya. In doing so, the artists

propagate the ideology of superiority of one ethnic group over others. It becomes particularly significant when such an ideology is spread through popular music because of the power of music in influencing opinion. Through music, the artists perpetuate the beliefs they have about their ethnic group versus others and thereby create an identity of their group. It is such discourse that can polarize groups in an axis of 'Us' versus 'Them'. Although Althusser (1971) observes that ideologies only serve to mask the way people relate because they construct imaginary relations, yet in times of conflict, groups coalesce around the 'imaginary' identity to guide them on the best course of action.

4. References

- i. Althusser, L. (1971) 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in L. Althusser Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. London: New Left Review
- ii. Beard, A. (2000) The Language of Politics. London: Routledge.
- iii. Chilton, P. & Schaffner, C. (2011). Discourse and politics. In: van Dijk, T. (Ed.), Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction (p.303-330). London, Sage.
- iv. Fairclough, N. (1989). Language and Power. London, Sage
- v. Fairclough, N. (2003). Analyzing discourse: Textual analysis for social research. London, Routledge.
- vi. Karuti, K. (2014). Kenya democracy & political participation. Nairobi. Open Society Foundation
- vii. Karuri, M. (2016) Representation of Political Conflict in Kenyan Newspaper Discourse (Unpublished PhD Thesis)
- viii. Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985). Hegemony and socialist Strategy. Towards a radical democratic politics. London, Verso.
- ix. Mattern, M. (1998). Acting in Concert: Music, Community, and Political Action. New Brunswick NJ. Rutgers University Press
- x. Ramet, S. P. (Ed.) (1994). Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia. Boulder CO: Westview Press
- xi. Van Dijk, T. A. (2003). Ideology and discourse: A multidisciplinary introduction. Barcelona, Ariel.
- xii. Van Dijk, T.A. (2000). Ideologies, racism, discourse: Debates on immigration and ethnic issues. In Wal, J. T. & Verkuyten M. (Eds.), Comparative perspectives on racism (pp91-116). Aldershot, Ashgate.
- xiii. Wa Mungai, M. (2008). Made in Riverwood": (Dis) locating identities and power through pop music. Journal of African Cultural Studies, 20 (1) 57-70. Routledge Taylor and Francis Group
- xiv. Wodak, R., De Cillia, R., Reisigl, M., & Liebhart, K. (1999). The discursive construction of national identity. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.