

# ***Jogoo La Shambani Haliwiki Mjini: The Village and the Town in the Mũgithi and One-Man Guitar Performances in Kenya***

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**Abstract:** The 1990s marked an emergence of a relatively new genre in the contours of Kenyan popular culture. The *Mũgithi* performance signaled a beginning of new directions, largely in Kenyan music and specifically in the contemporary Gĩkũyũ music in terms of themes and style. The performance, mostly an urban phenomenon dominated by Gĩkũyũ one-man guitarists, is a major site for negotiation of identities and incorporates the interface and interplay between the traditional and the contemporary, especially in the urban setting. This article highlights the inherent contradictions in creation and re-creation of urban identities as expressed in this music. The main argument is that identities are always contested and different socio-economic situations call for a negotiation, if not a re-negotiation of identities.

## **Introduction**

*Jogoo la shambani haliwiki mjini* ("The village cock does not crow in town") is a Swahili proverb commonly used in East Africa to capture the rural/urban tensions that characterize everyday life. An examination of popular culture reveals, however, that the rural/urban distinction captured in this saying is not nearly so clear cut, for urban identities, like all identities, are always contested terrains. This is especially so with the knowledge that an argument for a fixed identity is always problematic. As Clark contends, it is the popular cultural forms expressed in the urban landscape that provide an arena for engaging with and framing these complex debates around identity.<sup>1</sup>

Again, aware of the diverse interpretations of this tradition/modernity dyad, especially in postcolonial studies, this paper appropriates a geographical angle to delineate the urban/rural divide as expressed in the performance of *Mũgithi*. As Brodnicka is wont to remind us, it is always important to "differentiate the ideology of tradition and modernity from tradition or modernity as they are experienced."<sup>2</sup> In this light then, this article investigates the performance of urban identities in the changing cultural terrains of music in postcolonial Kenya. The one-man guitar phenomenon and the resultant *Mũgithi* performance epitomize these concerns. The word "*Mũgithi*" is derived from "*mixsi*" a term used in the 1950s in Kenya to refer to a particular train that ferried both passengers and cargo in the same compartments. It was probably an earlier version of third class and maybe the only train Africans could then ride. The etymology of *Mũgithi* is "Mixed train," which Nairobi youth in the 1950s referred to as simply "*mixsi*." A Gĩkũyũ rendition of "*mixsi*" would assume linguistic features common in other word borrowings. For instance, "s" is

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realized as “th” (e.g. *thogithi* for socks; *thothenji* for sausage) and “mũ-” for the noun class marker.<sup>3</sup>

The two terms, one-man guitar and *Mũgithi*, are quite interchangeable. One-man guitar refers to a singer-guitarist backed up, at most, by just a drummer. *Mũgithi* is “train” in the Gĩkũyũ language. In the performance, there are no defined steps, and the participants, (mostly patrons in a restaurant) are linked by holding onto the waist or shoulders of the one ahead. Though the actual *Mũgithi* may take up only a few minutes of an entire night of undiluted revelry, it has come to define the night and has almost become an anthem in most clubs around Nairobi.<sup>4</sup>

I start by defining the terms in a Kenyan context and locate their origins before delving into the thematic issues. How this music becomes vital in the performance and propagation of urban and suburban cultures and identities constitute engaging arguments in the Kenyan popular music scene. The suburban restaurants in Nairobi have provided the space for this musical blending of cultural influences that has produced so many innovative and distinctively Kenyan urban performance styles. Similar to the *shebeen* in South Africa, the restaurants located inside and outside the busy capital city of Nairobi have facilitated the convivial interaction necessary for urban Kenyan social survival.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Mũgithi*: The Kenyan Context**

Owing to the informality that characterizes this performance, there exists scanty literature on *Mũgithi* as a musical genre. Maupeu and Wa-Mũngai (2006) locate the bar as the space in which Gĩkũyũ nationalism thrived at the height of the one party dictatorship of Daniel arap Moi (1978-2002) in the late 1980s. This was mostly achieved through the performance of *Mũgithi*. Mutonya (2005; 2007) similarly locates the politics of everyday life through ethnic stereotypes as expressed in the music, while Githiora (2008) examines how the *Mũgithi* performance embodies *Gĩcaandĩ*, a Gĩkũyũ poetic tradition while recreating Gĩkũyũ traditions and social-cultural discourses.

The performance referred to as “one-man guitar” should in fact be labelled as a “one-man, one-guitar,” an expression that captures the reality of *Mũgithi*. The *Mũgithi* performance has, however, been borne of a guitar tradition that has defined the popular music of Kenya over the years. Low has traced the history of guitar music, which has been present in the Kenyan music scene as early as the 1940s. However, Low’s research on the history of the Kenyan guitar styles is biased towards western Kenya, which coincidentally happens to be the “home of so much fine Kenyan guitar music.”<sup>6</sup> His assertion could be buttressed by the fact that even before the contact with foreign musical traditions, the Luhya and Luo communities in Western Kenya had elaborate string instruments in lyres such as the Luo *nyatiti* and the Luhya’s *litungu*.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, musicians from other parts of Kenya in the 1960s who attempted the *benga* beat had to hire guitarists from these two communities. For example, in the development of popular music of the Gĩkũyũ people, where *Mũgithi* performance falls into, and forms the mainstay of this article, one unforgettable name would be Odhiambo Sumba Rateng (himself from western Kenya) who worked as a “session guitarist on many Kikuyu songs with a variety of musicians for over thirty years.”<sup>8</sup>

With the appropriation of the guitar in Kenyan popular music, it is only suitable to assert that what is defining about Kenyan music is the interplay of guitars. Added to the existence of the traditional lyres, as explained above, the first contact with the guitar as it is

known today was evident in Kenya “even before 1900 when guitars were played among the freed slaves.”<sup>9</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, the guitar playing styles in Kenya benefitted greatly from contacts with other parts of Africa like Malawi, Zimbabwe, the then Zaire, and South Africa, as well as with Latin America, North America, and Europe. Today, Kenyan pop remains as this *mélange* of musical styles that “borrows freely and cross fertilize each other.”<sup>10</sup> The electrical guitar bands from the 1960s hitherto have also thrived on this rich culture. Presently, the Gikũyũ exhibit this “cross-fertilization” especially from the western country music tradition, in terms of regalia and beats. Stetson hats and cowboy boots are a common feature of many a Gikũyũ musicians that completes the picture of the Wild West, added to the western country rhythm that some of the musicians have adopted in their performances.

Although in this article I dedicate my efforts to analyzing the emergent *Mũgithi* one-man, one-guitar phenomenon in the 1990s, this tradition was vividly evident in the 1960s in Kenya. In the 1960s, however, especially with the advent of the electric guitar which could not be drowned out by audience noise or swamped by singing and other instruments, therefore better to dance to, other band members playing different instruments always accompanied the one-man guitarist. From the 1990s onwards the one-man guitarist was all by himself/herself as both the guitarist and the vocalist.<sup>11</sup>

These performances then and now have been purely part and parcel of the urban culture. In the 1960s, the songs of the Kenyan groups were aimed at the “urban working class, whose *lingua franca* was Swahili,” while richer Kenyans with higher aspirations tended to prefer Zairean or Western records.<sup>12</sup> During this time, immediately after independence, the musicians had a conscious desire to develop a truly national music, hence their preoccupation with the Swahili language, which the independent nation had adopted as a national language.

While considering the *Mũgithi* spectacle of the 1990s, it is clear that the musicians are responding to the challenges of the Kenyan postcolony where the diverse cultures of the nation has been politicized, leading to a strong urge for Kenyans to identify more with their ethnic heritages, rather than as a nation. However, it is important to note that the emergence of *Mũgithi* also coincided with a period when Kenyans developed an affinity to their local music, which had been completely overwhelmed by Western music, as well as South African and Congolese beats. From the 1990s, Kenyans have evolved musical styles that consciously attempt to bring about a Kenyan rhythm. For example, the urban youth have *genge* and *kapuka*, styles that have a resemblance to hip-hop and rap, especially from the US but with distinct local flavors. According to Nyairo:

...this fusion is not about how the local gets drawn and absorbed into Western modernity, but rather it is about the artful forging of local derivatives of modernity, a project that is clearly fraught with potential contradictions, and sometimes, given its techniques of appropriation, often lacks either consistency or cogency.<sup>13</sup>

Such fusion, however, is beyond the scope of this article. But as Githiora argues, “modern-day Kenyan musicians and especially *Mũgithi* and hip hop artists have either retained or continue to re-create traditional musical forms and practices by remaking modern music that is grounded in popular traditional forms.”<sup>14</sup> It is against this background that the article turns its attention to the negotiation of urban identities in the performance of *Mũgithi* in Kenya.

## Urban Space

The conceptualization and representation of urban identity is “an enactment of the complex and multi-layered interweaving of culture, tradition ... gender and class.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, any discourse about identity and the politics of location holds the possibilities for the emergence of new and innovative sites of meaning and knowledge. The emergence of the *Mũgithi* phenomenon in the urban space of Kenya then assists in the performance of this interplay of divergent identities. Like most popular cultural forms and productions in Kenya, *Mũgithi* performance becomes important in the discussion around the negotiation of urban identities because it straddles and dissolves distinctions. A study of this music provides insight into the manner in which old, new, and fluid cultural identities emerge, are negotiated or are contested within and between the spaces in urban areas where the music is performed. The one-man-guitar phenomenon and the resultant *Mũgithi*, is seen in this paper not only as a musical trend emergent in the city of Nairobi but also as a cultural site where urban identities are performed.

Like most urban centers, Nairobi is a cosmopolitan city housing people from disparate ethnic, religious, class, gender, and political identities who have to co-exist despite their diverse characteristics. *Mũgithi*, as music and performative act, becomes crucial in integrating the disparate lifestyles in day-to-day city living. The form of performance and music, though often in the Gĩkũyũ language, accommodates almost every participant, or patron in the bar. But as argued above, music, as sound, has this talismanic tendency to bridge all gaps as the universal language of humankind. It is only in a club where *Mũgithi* performance takes place that all reticence is disregarded as patrons, unknown to each other, celebrate the climax of the performance by linking up in a dance movement (i.e., *Mũgithi*, or train) that will involve everyone on the dance floor, irrespective of their backgrounds. In this sense, the cosmopolitan nature of the performances comes out clearly.

The *Mũgithi* performance has introduced a new mode of music where musicians have had to deal with limited resources. At the same time, the new style, which is enjoying popularity amidst an outburst of digitalized music, signifies a major shift in the music and entertainment circles in Kenya. The artistes' indulgence in taboo subjects like sex, which earlier artists hardly touched on, points to a major innovation in Kenyan music. However hedonistic as the *Mũgithi* craze may seem, it was, ironically, adopted from those familiar all-night religious *keshas* (charismatic prayer vigils) where Christians link up to "join the train to heaven" with Jesus as the driver of the train.

## The Origin of *Mũgithi*

As noted above, the one-man guitar craze can be traced to the late 1990s. Amidst the economic depression characteristic of this period in Kenya, many club owners resorted to hiring solo artists instead of entire bands, which would lead to lower costs for the owner. The effect of economic depression did not only apply to the club but to the artists as well who had to make do with rudimentary and less expensive instruments. It was also a kind of cultural return to the music of the 1960s and 1970s, which afforded the interaction between the artists and patrons. Again, unlike in the past when people with a strong rural background embraced traditional music, a growing number of musicians based in the urban centers are turning to music they either heard during music festivals or from their parents.

This recourse to the past for lyrical inspiration also corresponded with a burnout of the Congolese music on the Kenyan music scene, according to Kariuki.<sup>16</sup>

The late Jean Bosco Mwenda is credited with having started it all. Armed only with his guitar—no back-up drummer, as is the present trend—Mwenda was well known for his cover versions of western pop classics. Mwenda's acoustic-guitar style was quite popular in Kenya in the late 1940s and 1950s. His style, combined with the rhythms and vocals from *bodi*, a ceremonial music sung by Luo women, has been considered as the origin of *Benga*, a distinctive Kenyan music style.<sup>17</sup> At Ngong Hills Hotel, he found particular demand for cover versions of popular Gikũyũ and Swahili numbers, which he often flavored with his own lyrics.

The origin of the *Mũgithi* performance can also be linked to what Ndigirigi accounts for the proliferation of bar productions. Faced with low audience turnout in conventional theater halls, performers literally followed the audience where they frequent most.<sup>18</sup> Musicians have followed suit and have redefined the bar in urban centers as a space for performance. A criticism levelled against the bar productions was that they deal with issues of sexuality *ad nauseam*. Ndigirigi argues that the quality of such productions is generally poor: "The audience (which drinks beer during the performances with waiters moving in between the seats to take orders) is normally looking for entertaining diversion and not a quality performance. The bawdier the performances, the merrier the audiences."<sup>19</sup>

It is also true, however, that quality theatre productions and music productions as well, have emanated from this tradition. Successful music groups like Them Mushrooms and Bilenge Musica amongst others continue to attract huge crowds at Simmers Restaurant in Nairobi's central business district. The same pattern is prevalent in many entertainment spots in the peri-urban spaces around Nairobi as well as major towns in Kenya.

The bar in the context of the *Mũgithi* performance in Kenya may be seen in the same light with the *shebeen* in South Africa, which provided a place for the interaction "necessary for urban African social survival and the musical blending of cultural influences and produced many innovative and distinctive urban South African urban performance styles."<sup>20</sup> In fact, *marabi*, a whole new musical style in South Africa, was born there.<sup>21</sup> In relation to the above, my argument is that *Mũgithi* performance has carved a niche in most urban restaurants and beer halls. The proliferation of *Mũgithi* artists even outside Nairobi attests to this.

### The *Mũgithi* Performance

Kenyans refer to Friday as "members" day, which significantly marks the beginning of the weekend. The Friday evening culture involves all the extracurricular activities especially for most working people, and "clubbing" (dancing and drinking) is the major activity. On typical busy nights (mostly Fridays and Saturdays) in beer halls and bars, the performance usually begins at around 8pm, when musicians start by giving patrons slow numbers ranging from English to Kiswahili oldies. This is the time of the night when most people are just settling down, and it is a challenge to begin gradually working them up. By 11pm, the pattern is switched to playing up-tempo cover versions of more contemporary hits.

In fact most one-man guitarists follow a systematic order on any night. They start mostly with renditions of songs by popular country musicians like Kenny Rogers, then to gospel hymns. As the night wears on, they introduce local songs by renowned Kenyan musicians. Towards midnight, they bring in the funky beat by redoing songs popular with

the youth. The switch to traditional music finally opens the floor to the *Mūgithi* performance. Seen in almost the same light as traditional music like *Mwomboko*, *Mūgithi* dwells on redoing almost all songs, even the ones without sexually explicit tones, by corrupting the lyrics.<sup>22</sup> Traditional music used heavily allusive language when engaging on themes of sex and sexuality. However, for the artiste to accommodate the disparate classes of people, a rendition of the traditional music as well as the contemporary becomes crucial.

The real *Mūgithi* action begins after midnight, when most patrons are on their feet and, properly intoxicated, free of all inhibitions. This is when the "adults only" segment begins. Mike Murimi, one of the artists says, "I realised that blending new wording and beats to the song, rather than simply singing straight, was more appealing to the audience."<sup>23</sup> He adds that it is due to the pressure from revelers that he uses the trademark bawdy lyrics, but he is quick to point out that naughty songs are not the main ingredient of his shows or the reason for his success.

<i>Mūgithi ūyū</i> x3 –	This train
<i>Mūgithi ūyū wa Daytona</i> -	This train of Daytona
<i>Salim nīwe ndereba, Mūgithi ūyū</i> x4.-	Salim is the driver of this train
<i>Ūthiaga ūkīgambaga</i> -	The train makes
<i>chu chu chu chu</i>	the chu chu chu sound while moving
<i>Mūndū ahutie kīrīa atarī.</i>	Touch what you don't have
<i>Mūgithi ūyū</i> , x4 –	in this train <sup>24</sup>

In the one-man-guitar and the *Mūgithi* performance, there's the copying and parodying of music done by renowned artists, reworking or reproducing famous originals, releasing self-sufficient tunes into the flux of the dance hall. But I am arguing that reproductions are the products of experiential ownership and this experience then stimulates variants and even new work.

On a *Mūgithi* night, patrons experience renditions of song done by established popular musicians, for instance, the guru of Gikūyū music Joseph Kamaru, Kakai Kilonzo, the renowned maestro of Eastern Kenya *benga*, Musaimo, and Queen Jane amongst others.<sup>25</sup> This is brought about by the need to accommodate the disparate age groups that patronize most of these restaurants and bars. Once in a while, the artist will introduce renditions of songs by musicians from all over the world but subtly done in the local vernacular and that somehow retains the beat and the rhythm. As argued above, this is a conscious effort, or financial strategy to give the performance a national and remotely global outlook. It is important to note at this juncture that until recently none of the music had been properly recorded and thus could not go beyond the walls of the restaurant. However, there existed recordings of live performances that produced copies of quite poor quality but which were able to sell widely due to the popularity of *Mūgithi*.

Of the most popular rendition, among most one-man guitarists (Salim Junior, Mike Rua, and Mike Murimi) is Tabu Ley's hit "Muzina." The late Tabu Ley from the Democratic Republic of Congo is one whose music is still very popular amongst Kenyans. The Gikūyū have a male name, almost similar to the title of this song, "Mūcina" (pronounced Musina). The Jamaican ragga duo Chaka Demus and Pliers' song "Murder She Wrote" is also quite popular, and corrupted as "Mama Cirū" (literally meaning the Mother of Cirū, a short form of Wanjirū, a female Gikūyū name). A Luhya wedding song ("Ng'ombe"), Princess Julie's "Dunia Mbaya," and the Kalenjin Sisters' song "Magdalena" are all redone in the Gikūyū

language, thus forging a synthesis of the best of local traditional cultures and foreign modern life ways and technologies. Several examples suffice.

The *Mūgithi* performance, having originated from the prayer night-vigils, as indicated above, incorporates popular gospel songs. Most of them though are corrupted to fit the secular mood of the performance. One song, “Kuma Ndaiga Mīrigo Thī” (“Since I Let Go My Burdens”) in Christian discourses is meant to express the joy of the faithful after denouncing the sinful life. It is a song full of praise for the Lord. But Mike Murimi, one of the leading one-man guitarists, gives it explicit connotations, which are that for a girl “letting go her burdens” means acceding to a young man’s sexual advances. *Mīrigo* may mean burdens, but in popular discourse, especially among the Gīkūyū youth, it means the genitalia!

The corruption of the popular gospel songs might be indicative of a feeling of inadequacy in Christianity, an exotic spirituality, which is best expressed by a number of traditional Gīkūyū songs on a *Mūgithi* night. However, this can be subject to a host of other possibilities. Traditional forms such as *Mwomboko* are ubiquitous in any performance and again serve as a pointer to the different age entities in the audience. But it could also be indicative of how song travels and acquires new meaning in different contexts. The songs retain most of the gospel lyrics, but with snippets of vulgar language filtering throughout the songs. For instance, the original version of “Mīrigo Thī” (“Since I Let Go My Burdens”) goes.

*Kairītu gaka* - young girl

*ūiguaga atīa* - how does it feel?

*Kuma waiga mīrigo thī* - after you let go your burdens.

The response:

*Njiguaga o kūgoca* – I only like praising God

*Kuma ndaiga mīrigo thī* - Since I let go my burdens.

Then follows the corrupt version. And the girl's response is distorted:

*Njiguaga o kūgoca* – I feel like praising

*Ma ya Ngai nī* – I swear by God

*Tiga kuma hīndī iria ndahoirwo*- when he made sexual advances to me

*Nī ngīona ndingīkira rīngī* – I decided to say it all

*Nokīo njiguaga o kūgoca* – that’s why I always feel like praising

*Kuma ndaiga mīrigo thī* – since I let go my burdens

The *Mūgithi* artist here appears to give a gospel song lewd connotations, which leaves the audience craving for more. The huge success of *Mūgithi* as exhibited in the song arises from the interplay between the secular and religious. Harping on the popularity of the gospel song, the artist then introduces the sex theme, which is never a topic in religious circles, and manages to negotiate the blurred boundaries between the mundane and the spiritual. Despite the fact that performing songs with religious themes has been popular in secular settings as bars and other entertainment circles, the *Mūgithi* performance is unique in contemporary Kenya in that the theme of sex is introduced but in rather humorous terms. The same can be said of other serious issues like ethnicity in which the performance treats it lightly by application of ethnic stereotypes.<sup>26</sup>

In the *Mũgithi* performance there is liberating humor, but which is more inward looking. The artists as well as audience members, especially during the call-response moment, laugh at themselves, mock themselves. These songs at the same time are also reflective on the social realities in Kenya, the social change occasioned by urbanization, and most important in *Mũgithi* the play on rural and urban identities realized through language.

Like the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which involves the “temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men ... and of the prohibitions of usual life,” *Mũgithi* may be seen in almost the same light because during the performance, the normal constraints and conventions of the everyday world are thrown off.<sup>27</sup> With the suspension of hierarchy in this performance, the reveler from the village will be as comfortable as his or her colleague from the city as they inhabit the same social space, the utopian ideal of an egalitarian society, yet in everyday practice, this is not the case. In the same way, this can be read as a social critique of the postcolonial authority that has neglected development in rural areas and concentrated all its efforts to appease the middle and even more so the class, the class of the ruling elite!

### Urban Identities

From the above and coupled with the fact that the performance is mostly an urban phenomenon, it then becomes clear that the *Mũgithi* performance can be seen as a site where urban identities are performed. Although the performance could be said to have started in Nairobi, it is presently prevalent in other cities as well as small towns within and around Kenya. While considering urban identities in the one-man guitar and *Mũgithi* phenomenon, the ambiguities and contradictions of modernity are imminent. Being an emergent trend in the Kenyan music scene, a parallel study with musicians of yore is quite important, but it should not cloud its distinct features. Contrasting urban space *vis-à-vis* that of the village thus becomes a defining concern when examining urban identities in the said music. I will discuss urban identities from various angles namely, the space where the performance takes place, thematic concerns, and the language used.

The music of the one-man guitar is firmly rooted in contemporary urban society and reflects the discussion of ideas around crime, corruption, adventure, and intrigue, sex, love, and romance, conflicts of cultures, linguistic innovations, idiosyncrasies and stereotypes in the city. Most themes in the music are taken from the everyday urban life, and they are able to capture both the restless excitement and the frustrations of life in the city and its ramifications. The fact that the *Mũgithi* performance takes place mostly in urban bars and clubs points to a dialectic relation between music and space. The argument here is that music shapes spaces and spaces shape music. In various ways, as Connell and Gibson assert, sounds have been used “to create spaces and simulate patterns of human behaviour in particular locations.”<sup>28</sup> The kind of discourse that *Mũgithi* and one-man artists engage in their song and performance will look completely out of place if performed, say, in a stadium or in an open-air market stage. It is no wonder that this is music hardly ever aired on most radio stations in Kenya.

Several striking signifiers define the space of *Mũgithi* performance. Given that this mostly happens in bars and restaurants, beer drinking is inevitable. There is a shared community of patrons that frequent the bar. Some kind of carnival atmosphere is created within the *Mũgithi* space in which certain realities are suspended and new ones introduced. The performance creates and celebrates its own world and its own set of moralities.

The carnival nature of *Mūgithi* offers the participants a cathartic effect to experience a world out of the normal lived reality. There is a motivation during this carnival time during *Mūgithi* to create a form of human social configuration that lies beyond existing social forms. For a nation that is so divided along ethnic lines, especially politically, during the performance, as seen above, a sense of egalitarianism exists where people from different classes, communities, and religions fuse into one apparent homogenous entity.

*Mūgithi* performance succeeds in bringing disparate identities together. For a first-timer to a *Mūgithi* night, the form of entertainment is alluring, but so is the variety of patrons. It has become a space where anybody, without boundary of class or status, will mingle freely and let their hair down with wild abandon, where the *matatu* tout will mingle freely with the high-powered corporate executive. This is where all inhibitions are cast aside as Ngaira notes:

Total strangers mark the climactic moment by linking up in a *Mūgithi*, which will snake across the dance floor, negotiate its way around tables and every available place. Everybody—the matronly housewife, the quiet academic, the shy, church-going girl, the noisy politician, the garrulous *matatu* driver, the repressed accountant and the lady of easy virtue—will joyously sing together, as one, the most bawdy lyrics imaginable.<sup>29</sup>

The end result is the blurring of perceived disparities—urban/rural, men/women, employed/unemployed, student/teacher, etc. Popular music, in this case, *Mūgithi* reflects the fluxes and fluidity of contemporary life, unsettling binary oppositions established in earlier phases of modernity (traditional/contemporary, authentic/inauthentic, local/global), thus enhancing the dynamic nature of music.

The association of music and performance in a bar, with the accompanying homogenizing attitude amongst the patrons, drinks, and sexual adventure underlies the entertainment component of *Mūgithi*. In the same vein, the performance in the bar and the various topical issues addressed in the music gives the participants a chance to create a sense of space as well as to reaffirm various social identities and challenges in which every day urban spaces are gendered in particular ways. The performance and reception of *Mūgithi*, therefore, in particular locations, in this case the bar, may provide an effective form of resistance not necessarily by producing an alternative sound, since most of these songs are renditions, but by enabling people to experience music in distinctive localized ways to suit their demands. This in turn provides a means through which a sense of “urbanity” is created and contested, especially when one considers the thematic concerns of most of these songs.

### Sex and the City

The one-man guitarists who entertain revelers in nightclubs in big cities like Nairobi specialize on renditions of popular songs but they infuse them with subverted lyrics. The theme of sex becomes quite prominent amongst many. The prominence of the sex theme accentuates the idea that cultural and social norms are not strictly adhered to in urban settings unlike in the villages. The fact that the one-man guitarists only perform in nightclubs in major towns confirms this fact. The guitarists therefore redefine and create a new audience and space for their music. The urban setting being cosmopolitan in nature encompasses people from all cultures and settings.

Sex, infidelity, and prostitution are the most overt themes and the explicit lyrics, performed especially during the ‘adults only’ segment attest to this. This explains partly why the music is never aired on any broadcasting station in Kenya. In fact, *Mũgithi* artistes performing in smaller bars and hotels deal with issues of sexuality in clearly explicit terms.

In a corruption of Simon Kihara’s (better known as Musaimo) “Cai wa 14,” one-man guitarist, Mike Rua assumes the traditional *Ngũcũ* beat, but subverts the lyrics to sexually explicit overtones:

Ndathiite gũcera Majengo – I went to Majengo  
 Ngĩnyua ũcũrũ na kukumanga – and drank porridge with an aphrodisiac  
 Ngĩgwata maraya ngĩnina – I slept with all prostitutes  
 Ngĩambĩrĩria kũgwata ng’ombe –till I started mounting cows<sup>30</sup>

In *Mũgithi* performance, messages about the relativity and arbitrariness of the social conventions are experienced. The above lyrics can never be found in a normal conversation, especially where people from different age groups are gathered, but this is more like the norm in a *Mũgithi* night.

What can be gleaned from the above is that the melodramatic representation of sex and sexuality is actually meant to evoke laughter and merriment as well as some relief, since sex and related subjects in Kenya are shrouded in some mystery and the subject hardly appears in public discourses. In most Kenyan communities, sex is not usually discussed openly, unlike the pre-colonial days when people received sex education through the performance of puberty rites. Due to urbanization and industrialization, these rites are seldom performed. When a proposal to include family life education in Kenyan schools was made some years back, it was met with a lot of resistance. In 1996, the Catholic Church participated in the burning of condoms and other AIDS materials as a protest towards the idea of introducing sex education in schools, a clear pointer to the conservative nature of most Kenyans.<sup>31</sup> *Mũgithi*, however, works to open up discourses on sex and sexuality by introducing them into the public domain.

One-man guitarists have, however, transcended issues surrounding sex and secrecy, and in their songs, sex, copulation, and overt mention of genitalia form the mainstay of their performances. A clear example is the corruption of Sam Muraya’s song, “Mama Kiwinya,” where artists Mike Murimi and Salim Junior engage in clear and explicit obscene language, but which fires up the audience. Mention of the genitalia, goes on *ad naseum*:

Ngahutia nyondo – I touch her breasts  
 Ngahutia kĩnena – I touch her crotch  
 Ngahutia matina –I touch her behind  
 Ngahutia rũng’ũthũ – I touch her private parts  
 Ngarĩra – and I cry.

Departing from the earlier musicians with their over-used theme of romance and relationships, the one-man guitarist, opts not to present sex, copulation, and genitalia in a private form that is separated from everyday life, but as in an open, quotidian sense.

The climax of the evening is the *Mũgithi* performance where patrons join together in a “train-like formation” dancing around the pub. The musicians in their lyrics call upon the participants to feel free to “touch what you don’t have.” This is a sexual implication for members of the opposite sex in the audience to engage in all manners of sexual/romantic gestures while still on the floor. It is almost similar to the *Pata Pata* in a South African

context.<sup>32</sup> This sexual play in dance was also dominant in performance in most traditional and folk music amongst most Kenyan communities.

The interaction between the traditional and the contemporary is manifest in such regards. Though mostly an urban performance, tradition comes to haunt the *Mūgithi* space. By engaging in themes like sex, which are usually not in the public domain, the musicians are simply reminding their audiences of realities and emphasizing, though inadvertently, the need for the society to engage continually in discussions around such themes.

### The Village and the City

As argued above, *Mūgithi* is mostly an urban performance. Themes of rurality or the country, as Ferguson argues, have often provided metaphors for the construction of indigenous critiques of urban, capitalist encroachment. The village is associated with moral purity as contrasted to the town, which is conceived as “immoral, artificial, corrupt and anomic.”<sup>33</sup> One-man guitarists deviate from this conventionality. Unlike most local popular musicians in Kenya, one-man-guitarists are overly concerned with the celebration of the city and its perceived ills while mocking the village. The city is not seen as a “sea, which has drowned many,” as singer Joseph Kariuki describes Nairobi. It is seen as an opportune space for one to earn a livelihood. It offers a glimmer of hope towards economic emancipation. Musicians like Joseph Kamaru and D.K. Kamau in the earlier days always castigated the city and its entrapments, singling out prostitution and the good-time girls who would fleece working and married men of all their wages and salaries. The village has been celebrated as virtuous while the city is evil, but *Mūgithi* artists work to subvert this paradigm while celebrating the city.

Sex and sexuality are inevitable topics in day-to-day life, and the *Mūgithi* artists bring them in the public domain, to make the themes items of discussion especially in the era of HIV/AIDS that continues to afflict Kenya. Silence about sex makes it especially difficult to educate the public on matters related to the syndrome. In most of these songs by earlier musicians, men drawn into dissipating pleasures of urban women and the fast life are castigated. In a rendition of a song by Joseph Kamaru, a man tells of his long journey to come and see his darling in town. Having not seen her for some time, he is taken aback when he discovers another man’s outfit in her wardrobe. To cushion this shock, he rushes to the shops for breakfast, but on returning, he finds used condoms in the room, and his hunger disappears.

In echoing themes of the village and the city, most lyrics in these songs portray the rural folk as a backward and primitive society where notions of romance are foreign to them. A song tells of this man from the village that meets a girl in town. A kiss from the girl leaves the man dazzled that he nearly faints! So, for participants to convince others during a *Mūgithi* night that they are not from the village, they engage in the weirdest sexual gestures on the floor. These musicians do not apportion blame to prostitutes and sweet-time girls, but lash out at the “primitive” man from the village who cannot cope with the fast life in the city.

Sex and drinking, which previously marked the city as evil, become positive icons of urbanity and the freedom of space and body that comes with the city in *Mūgithi* performance. What seems to have been treated as evil by the ambiguous and double discourse of modernity (for example, the Christian influence and its tendency to cast away reference to sex as evil) is thus reversed. There are certain subtleties that connect *Mūgithi*

with *Mwomboko*, a traditional Gikũyũ genre in which there were no inhibitions on matters of sex and sexuality.

The ambiguity expressed in *Mũgithi* can be traced in this interface between *Mũgithi* and *Mwomboko*, or rather the contemporary and the traditional. Notes Masolo:

... due to socio-geographical concentration, the new musical tastes and styles [are] associated with the loose lures of urbanism. Even as the new guitar styles become popularly embraced, the conservative voice of tradition continues to regard them with moral contempt and suspicion. Widely associated with the moral permissiveness or decadence of the cities, the "modern" was in some ways seen as "corrupt" and "immoral" at the same time as it was admired as a "good" and "desirable" sign of new elitism.<sup>34</sup>

The above at best describes the moral ambiguity of contemporary music, especially *Mũgithi*, which enables the performance to draw audiences from all spheres of life.

The irony of the whole *Mũgithi* performance is that despite lambasting the village, which is supposed to be unspoiled by western values, the artistes use vernacular in almost all songs; in this case, Gikũyũ. However, the suggestion here is not that the village is the custodian of vernacular languages. But given the cosmopolitan setting of the city, several vernaculars fuse into urban slang in Nairobi, called *sheng*.<sup>35</sup> It is therefore feasible to say that most vernacular speakers are mostly found in villages, where levels of inter-ethnic interactions are minimal.

I acknowledge, however, the fact that the migratory nature of the labor force, from the city to the village transports a number of urban styles, of dress, language and music. My argument here is that *Mũgithi* occupies a liminal space, bearing the past as it embraces the present. Traditional songs, where cultural values are exalted, play a major role in a *Mũgithi* night, but enjoyed and danced to by the diverse groups that patronize *Mũgithi* joints. The village thus is cast both as backward in some ways, but it is also as a bearer of wisdom and morality. Much however can be said of the duplicitous nature of the "country" much as it can be said of the "city."<sup>36</sup> Thus, as Haugerud asserts, presumed boundaries between town and countryside, like those between town and countryside are fuzzy at best.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

*Mũgithi* demonstrates the audience members' willingness to mingle freely despite their diverse backgrounds, as they assert their diversity. Musical style may articulate and define communal values in heterogeneous, rapidly transforming societies. As Anderson argues, "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."<sup>38</sup> Thus, musical metaphor plays a role in the imaginative modeling of Kenyan urban society as a hierarchy in communal values, comprised of interdependent, yet unequal actors. *Mũgithi* performance style portrays an imagined community of a large number of people in the urban setting. However, these urban identities are not fixed identities. They are not created inside a self-contained urban grouping but at a site of many overlapping identities/players including the villager, the urbanite, the foreigner, etc. It is thus difficult to talk of pure urban identities, and the *Mũgithi* performance best attests to this. The recreation of rural identities through language, dance and the performance (again these identities are not fixed and exhibit ambiguities) in music and dance by the urban folks, point to the complex relationship of ethnicities and class

identities, another broad area beyond the scope of this paper. The deliberate choice of language clearly emphasizes its cultural and political significance.

## Notes

- 1 Clark 2003, p. 3.
- 2 Brodnicka 2003, p. 2.
- 3 I acknowledge Mzee Jeremiah Mũtonya's oral explanation of the term *Mũgithi* and Mũngai Mũtonya for the linguistic analysis. All translations of songs excerpts from the Gĩkũyũ language are done by the author himself.
- 4 Anthems are normally the undisputed positions of the musical presentation of place. Played in almost all the night clubs, dance halls, and bars in most urban Kenyan centers, Mũgithi has ascertained its position as most clubs' favorite.
- 5 Shebeens are taverns in black populated townships in South Africa, which have continually provided space for cultural expressions among the young blacks. It is this interaction, as Coplan (1982, p. 115) argues, that gives rise to innovative and creative urban performance styles.
- 6 Low 1982 p. 17.
- 7 *Nyatiti* is an 8-stringed plucked lyre from the Luo community located in western Kenya. *Litungu* is also a lyre, mostly seven-stringed, a traditional instrument from the Luhya community in Western Kenya too. However, the Gĩkũyũ too had a one-string instrument, *wandĩndĩ*. The influence of these traditional instruments has defined the various emergent guitar styles emerging in Kenya. *Benga* was born when Luo dance rhythms were pushed into the acoustic guitar. *Benga* in fact is a Luo word meaning "soft and beautiful."
- 8 Mutonya et al 2010, p. 33.
- 9 Paterson 1999, p. 509.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Low 1982, p. 27. With the development of this music, female musicians have entered the fray and are referred to as one-lady guitar. Their songs are devoid of the bawdy lyrics that characterize performances of their male counterparts, but the form and nature of the performance remains the same. Florence Wangari wa Kabera is the pioneer of this female tradition.
- 12 Low 1982, p. 29.
- 13 Nyairo 2004, p. 47.
- 14 Githiora 2008, p. 92.
- 15 Clark 2003, p. 3.
- 16 Kariuki 1998.
- 17 Stapleton and May 1989, p. 233.
- 18 Ndigirigi 1999, p. 90.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Coplan 1982, p. 115.
- 21 See Martin 1992, p. 197, where he avers that "*marabi*, South African jazz and even *kwela* were the offspring of a mixture: music from the city, in which supposedly ethnic origins

- disappeared to make way for the input of all.”
- 22 *Mwomboko* is a traditional Gĩkũyũ dance of young people where a couple moved two steps forward, stooped, and made a turn. Men pressed their partners to their chests, and occasionally spun them around.
  - 23 Ngaira 2002.
  - 24 Daytona Nightclub on the fringes of Nairobi city is where artiste Salim Junior used to perform. But different artists in different renditions of this *Mũgithi* chorus mention the specific spaces where they are performing. While people are holding each other’s waist, there is the license in the performance for men and women to touch each other in a sexually suggestive manner.
  - 25 Though *benga* was initially a dance rhythm from the Luo, other variations of *benga* in Kenya have emerged (see Mutonya 2006). Kilonzo’s variation is what I am referring to as Eastern Kenya *benga*.
  - 26 For more on *Mũgithi* and ethnic stereotypes, see Mutonya 2005.
  - 27 Bakhtin 1968, p.15.
  - 28 Connell and Gibson 2002, p. 192.
  - 29 Ngaira 2002.
  - 30 Majengo is a famous Nairobi slum, known for its commercial sex industry.
  - 31 See Wanyeki 1996: “Again, in 2003, a parents’ caucus in Kenya fronted a crusade to ban Chinua Achebe’s book, *A Man of the People* and other two textbooks from the secondary school syllabus.” Those pushing for the ban on the books picked excerpts from *A Man of the People*, which they said were clearly explicit and were likely to excite students’ imagination and stir their sexual desires. See also Mwangi 2003 for more on this attempt to ban Achebe’s book. Such instances denote clearly the conservative nature of Kenyans, especially in matters related to sex and sexuality, which however, *Mũgithi* artists have subverted.
  - 32 Also *phata-phata*, *patha patha* in the Xhosa and Zulu languages in South Africa. *Phatha* is “touch” or “feel.” It is a sexually suggestive dance-style in which pairs of dancers touch each other’s bodies with their hands, a dance tempo that Miriam Makeba popularized.
  - 33 Ferguson 1992, p. 80.
  - 34 Masolo 2000, p. 377.
  - 35 *Sheng* has been defined as an acronym for Swahili-English slang, developed in Nairobi in post-independence Kenya. This innovation however incorporates also lexical items, not just from the two national/official languages but also from the wide array of the linguistic diversity defining the Kenyan nation. For more on *sheng*, see Githiora 2002, Githinji 2006, and Mũtonya 2007b.
  - 36 Ferguson 1992, p. 90, asserts that the imagined locus of moral purity and wholeness of the village, as contrasted to the city, obscures the reality of the village too as the “seat of actual and antagonistic social relations.”
  - 37 Haugerud 1995, p. 139.
  - 38 Anderson 1983, p. 15.

## Discography

In this analysis, songs from three leading *Mūgithi* artists in Kenya, Mike Rua, Mike Murimi, and Salim Junior have been quoted. Discographic details of their works are hard to come by. The music is hardly played on radio stations in Kenya, and all of them perform live in various locations. However, this music is now available on copied tapes and compact discs, but with no details such as dates of recording and recording companies. Such informalities inform my study of *Mūgithi* performance.

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