11 In the realm of uncertainty

Kenya's Ghetto Radio as politicised space

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Introduction

In the period starting from the early to the mid-1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent global wind of transformational change that brought democracy in its wake, Kenya's media and political landscape greatly changed – from state monopoly and domination to a vibrant plural space. A hitherto, patrimonial and autocratic state gave way to a nascent multiparty and socially diverse state. The historian, Hornsby (2012), has ably captured the events – internal and external of this period which impacted the Kenyan state leading to intense internal questioning of the power and legitimacy of the authoritarian one party state, while at the same legitimating divergent political voices. In this moment, the seed of economic, social and political change was planted. The communications environment, previously dominated by the state, was gradually freed as new private commercial players entered the scene.

Subsequently, in the two decades that followed, Kenya's media landscape has expanded, and transformed into one of the most vibrant in Africa (see also, Ismail & Dean, 2008). The radio sector has seen phenomenal growth – with private local language FM radio stations mushrooming across the country. In the past, the dominant languages of Kenya's establishment media were English and Kiswahili. The growth of the sector has opened up a market niche that is primarily based on local languages. More significant, however, is the power that this has brought to communities and social groups that could not get easy access to national information flows through the state broadcaster on the basis of language. What has happened is a keen to the low-power radio revolution – also known as media democracy, in the United States of America (USA) that brought non-mainstream voices into the broader national communication agenda (Dunber-Hester, 2014).

Ogolla (2010) contends that general disillusionment with mainstream media that mostly broadcast in English and Kiswahili (the two main national languages) provided timely impetus for the rise and growth of local language FM radio in Kenya during the first decade of the new millennium. The new model of urban-based FM radio that became popular in the mid-to-late

1990s was mostly apolitical and tended to take a more globalist entertainment orientation in their programming. In a sense, this emerging model of FM radio was alienating, especially for certain groups within the Kenyan society that had traditionally felt left out during the age of dominant top-down and heavily state-dominated radio since independence. The general ideological thinking that informed mainstream media's functioning was the state's agenda for perpetual control of the masses by way of controlling information flows. Media were therefore generally coerced toward the state's development agenda.

The private owners of media who ventured into local language FM radio did not anticipate the social, cultural and political impact that these new ventures were going to have on the Kenyan society. They were mostly just shrewd business men and women breaking into virgin territory. The 2007 disputed general elections and the aftermath of violence saw local language feature prominently in national debate. Most observers, as the BBC Report (2008) shows, were obviously intrigued and confused by the political mobilisation potential of local language radio during this period. Subsequent discussions, including an expert report on that year's election by an Independent Review Commission (IREC) led by retired South African judge Johan Kriegler, provided useful hints showing local language radio assuming a more central role in grassroots political discourse across the country.

Historically, the dominance of English and Kiswahili as the languages of mainstream media in the country has, on the whole, had an alienating effect on certain social groups within the country. According to Ogolla (2010), the use of these languages by the country's media has always been in keeping with the state's policy of a unified country/Kenyan society. However, this dominant ideology of unity obfuscates the reality of the multiple shades of identities, and political and cultural differences that manifest within the Kenyan society. The emergence of local language radio seemed to provide the space where non-mainstream views would be unleashed – sometimes in the most creative and novel ways.

A multi-perspectival view

Generally, as noted in the foregoing discussion, the media, specifically the FM radio scene across the globe, has greatly transformed and expanded in the last two decades of the twenty-first century. As it innovates and continues to target diverse audience groups, the attendant cultural forms have and continue to engender complex richness, variety and novelty. They are also fluid and in a constant state of flux. The implication of this is that scholarship has to seek and adopt a different mix of theoretical perspectives and approaches to assist in making sense of this emerging and constantly changing reality.

Acknowledging the vastness and complexity of the terrain of contemporary culture, Kellner and Durham (2006) note the implication this has on

the ensuing debate, especially given the maze of, and intensity of the theories and debates over media and culture. In this regard, one can only draw from some perspectives while leaving out others, and yet also acknowledging that one specific theory may not adequately assist in exploring today's changing media culture landscape. In this chapter, we have attempted a multi-perspectival approach – from where attempts are made to draw from the expansive literature on language and identity as well as the emerging discourse on postmodernism to problematise, and understand the complex reality of a media space that speaks to and for non-mainstream voices within the Kenyan urban society context.

Ghetto radio 89.5 FM

Ghetto radio 89.5 FM was set up in 2007. The mother company – Ghetto radio – also operates two news websites: Ghettoradio.co.ke and Thisafrica.me. Priding itself as the number one Sheng¹ radio station in Nairobi, Ghetto radio 89.5 FM was set up with the aim of providing what its website refers to as, “street credible news, views and entertainment by people from the urban slums and targeted at a broad public that stretches beyond the slums”.

The main target however is Nairobi's slum dwelling, lower class and mostly unemployed youth. Ghetto FM's programming takes a unique character – first, all the programs are done in the Sheng language. Program content mostly draws from the lived experiences, struggles and circumstances of ordinary people, living in the less privileged sections of Kenya's urban cities, and who feel removed from the centre of the country's social economic and political structure.

Ghetto radio's policy deliberately privileges the voices of those in the informal sector, and, as its website also declares, “The guy close to the streets”. The radio station harnesses the creativity and bohemian inventiveness of young artists, the craziness, chaos, humour and vibrancy of modern Kenyan street life. In doing this, Ghetto radio has brought to the mainstream voices and lived experiences of urban slum life that two decades earlier could not have found expression in Kenya's establishment media. Background information on Ghetto FM's website says that the radio station's mission is to offer an insider's view of the craziness, chaos, ingenuity, absurdity, novelty, humour and vibrancy of urban street life, society and culture. In an interview with the DW TV Ghetto radio's founder, Mr. Jabel Julius Owino also known as Maji Maji says the radio was set up to explore the undocumented, non-mainstream narratives and lived experiences of urban slum life.

News and feature articles on Ghetto radio's website as well as the radio bulletins featuring various subjects, such as politics, social and economic events of national and even global magnitude, are always presented from the perspective of those close to the streets and in the country's informal economic sector. For instance, a recent story on the spread of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic featuring on Ghetto radio's website foregrounds

the plight of ordinary people in Nairobi's slums. This story is appropriately titled – expensive sanitisers, lack of water exposing slum residents to Corona.² In the follow-up coverage of the spread of this epidemic, several interesting stories with a similar slant are featured; for instance, this one that says: tension in Mukuru slums after taxi driver is quarantined over corona virus.³

In yet another story, in the Sheng language, “Judgiko amekesi chini ya mti ku avoid korona” – translated into English, this headline says: a judge holds court session under a tree to avoid corona virus. This story followed an announcement by the country's Chief Justice to introduce the measures that would ensure the safety of judicial officers and the public from the corona virus during court proceedings. Some court sessions were therefore conducted in the open to ensure social distancing requirements among those involved.

Ghetto FM mainly targets the 15–25-year-old demographic category. In the last few years, Ghetto radio has been nominated for several awards – such as best radio station, best show (*goteana* and gospel nite) and best presenters (Mbusii, Esther Kagamba and Angel Wainaina). A part from news, Ghetto radio's programming includes feature articles – for radio and the website. These features are also about slum life and provide a view that draws from the lived experiences of individuals drawn from the margins of contemporary urban life.

Generally, Sheng language is used to a certain extent on most of the radio stations in Kenya. However, it is Ghetto radio that has formally adopted and institutionalised Sheng as the main language for their radio programs. The pace at which Ghetto radio's daily radio programs such as “*Goteana*” – evening drive show – and “*brekko*” – morning breakfast show – have attained popularity among Kenya's urban youth is testimony to the place that sheng occupies in the lives of many young people in the country.

Ghetto Radio's programming and presenters

Ghetto radio's key presenters uniquely fit the mission and character of the radio station. Unlike Kenya's mainstream media, whose core staff reflect Kenya's mainstream culture – educated, English and Kiswahili speaking – and with the etiquette and general demeanour of the dominant economic and social elite, Ghetto radio's celebrated flagship presenters – such as Joseph Kangethe, also popularly known as *Bonoko*, and Nicholas Cheruyiot, popularly known as *King Kafu* – do not fit these mainstream media requirements for professionalism. The stories of their personal lives generally reflect a sense of abandon and a recklessness that is not normal in the context of mainstream Kenyan culture. Yet, these are the very qualities that they bring to their roles as key presenters on Ghetto radio.

Bonoko was formerly a street urchin, who started leaving on Nairobi's streets from a very early age. Born in Banana, a poor settlement on the outskirts of the city of Nairobi, he was, together with his siblings and mother,

thrown out his home by his father. Left with no choice, he moved to the streets of Nairobi to find something to eat and a place to shelter. His street name was “Tete”, and like every other street child of his age, he spent most of his time scrounging Nairobi’s dumpsites for leftover food, or lazily sniffed glue while dozing under a street corner or in one of the city’s many alleys.

One day, he witnessed a man being killed by security officers. As he narrates in an interview on KTN Prime News, this individual was shot for attempting to run away from city security officers who had spotted him urinating at a public place, which is against the city by-laws. When journalists came around to ask for information regarding the slain man, Bonoko sleepily volunteered to talk to the media, as the only authoritative primary witness to the incident. Bonoko says that it is after this event that the owner of Ghetto radio spotted him and requested for him to visit the radio station to shed light on this story.

While there, Mr. Jabel Julius Owino – popularly known as Gidi Gidi – convinced Bonoko to stay on and just talk on their programs about life on the streets and in the slums for a salary. Bonoko stayed and his show “go-teana” (Ghetto radio’s evening drive show) has transformed into one of the most popular shows on radio in Kenya. Meanwhile, Bonoko has also transformed from a street urchin into a commentator and advocate for those who have to endure the degrading life and violence of the streets of Nairobi and other urban towns in Kenya.

Bonoko has been on Ghetto radio for almost five years now and acquired celebrity status by virtue of his radio presence. In the meantime, he has, using his salary, moved his mum and siblings into a decent house in one of the city suburbs where he continues to provide for them. Bonoko is also actively engaged in charity work mostly supporting various children homes around the city. Using the platform of his radio program, he has reached out to donors to contribute food and other material items to support orphaned children in these homes.

King Kafu – or otherwise by his official name Nicholas Cheruyiot – is the other celebrity presenter on Ghetto FM whose life has changed from that of a hard core criminal who snatched bags and planned car jackings around the city before joining the radio station to share his lived experience of crime and being born and raised in squalor and poverty in Nairobi’s East lands area. In a TV prime time interview with Sophie Wanuna of KTN, which aired on 17 September 2014, he says that he spent six months in prison after being falsely accused of stealing a camera from a journalist. Later, after his release, he formed a team of young rascals whose work was to snatch, violently rob people of their valuables in the city. Without an education and parental care – since his parents died when he was still very young – this became his lifestyle until he landed the opportunity to work for Ghetto radio.

In 2006, after spending a year in prison for robbery with violence, a friend bailed him out, and soon he started looking for a job. He ended up working

as a messenger at Ghetto radio, and after that, he was trained on the job as a radio presenter. He started the drive show – which became the most listened show – and then later, he was promoted to host the morning breakfast show also known as “Brekko” in sheng. Mr. Julius Owino, the founder of Ghetto radio, is quoted in an interview with the German TV (DW), saying that his motivation was to develop a radio station “that can learn”, one that is adaptive and can provide a unique insider view into the craziness that attends life especially for the poor in Nairobi’s slums. It would seem that hunting down, and convincing hard-core criminal and street urchins such as Bonoko and King Kafu was the best strategy for achieving this goal.

Shideh hosts *Jamrock Doba* night show on the Ghetto radio. This show features reggae music. Like Bonoko and King Kafu, Shideh does not have any formal training in journalism, nor does she boast of any firm roots in Kenya’s mainstream culture. She is however fluent in sheng and has a deep understanding of the life of Nairobi’s lower class areas such as Githurai where she previously worked as a small trader. Once on a vox pop recording mission in Githurai, Mr. Julius Owino – the Ghetto radio founder – noticed Shideh’s fluency in sheng and knowledge of the local surroundings. This was exactly what he was looking for to reinforce the Ghetto radio brand. Shideh was hired and now she is one of the established and star presenters at Ghetto radio.

Sheng the language

According to several writers (see also Mazrui, 1995; Too & Barno, 2016), Sheng language was developed as a code by gangs in the poorest sections of Nairobi. Although there is no clear evidence of the reasons behind Sheng’s ascendancy, some studies have suggested that the youth in these areas of Nairobi devised this language to enable them to hide their secrets from their parents and seniors within the community. In other instances, it developed out of the need to communicate by a largely heterogeneous group of young people from the multiplicity of Kenya’s ethnic groups who could not speak English or Kiswahili. Mazrui (1995) cites the case of Charles Otieno, who in a column published in *Men Only* (1984) reveals that, growing up in Nairobi’s Eastlands area, in their parents’ house they would speak in vernacular, but in the streets they had to find a way to easy communication since they were yet to go to school and did not understand English or Kiswahili – the two official languages.

Yet, in other instances, as argued by Too and Barno (2014), the origins of Sheng may have sprung from migration from various parts of Kenya to Nairobi and other urban towns in search of jobs. Those arriving tended to settle in the low-income areas of the city and mostly lived in crowded quarters. Sheng became a unifying code that enabled easy communication among people who spoke different first languages. Overtime, however, the influence of Sheng has grown as the language has also evolved. Mazrui (1995) argues

that whatever its origin, Sheng is a slang based primarily on Swahili-English code switching, which serves mainly as a para code of mainly lower class urban youth.

Milu (2017) observes that Sheng is characterised by multiple discursive practices such as code mixing and switching, word coinage, innovation and inventiveness, semantic inversion and extension, unconventional spelling and pronunciation. In this regard, Sheng users draw from a diverse range of linguistic resources and hardly worry about proficiency. Given its roots in Kenya's urban slum culture, the language comes with its own fashion style – exhibited in dress, attitudes and gestures. Elsewhere, Samper (2003) identifies the role that manambas⁴ play as cultural agents in the shaping and development of Sheng language. They infuse a sense of defiance in the Sheng language culture, which, ironically, is at the root of the inventiveness and innovation that Sheng constantly draws from in its evolution.

Ghetto Radio, Sheng and identity

Sheng language is also about the struggle to construct identity – away from what Milu (2017) says are dominant, hegemonic colonising identities that have predominantly tended to define the modern Kenyan society. In this regard, Sheng can be seen as a decolonising cultural force. A key motivation in the founding of Ghetto radio was a recognition that today's youth, as Milu (2017) further argues, are engaged in a project of developing and projecting new ethnic identities and mostly shaped by their everyday language use. In the low-class and marginalised areas of Nairobi where Sheng found its roots, young people are undoubtedly confronted by different ideologies that tend to define them and this can be confusing. For this reason, they are locked in a constant struggle to locate and define an appropriate, flexible identity to fit their circumstances.

Ghetto radio plays an important part in this identity formation project for it provides a space for young people to escape a persistently hegemonic system with its mainstream practices and culture. Those lacking competence in these two languages – mostly represented by the audience that Ghetto radio's Bonoko speaks to – have constantly felt different and excluded. However, using his Goteana (evening drive show), Bonoko provides reassurance, comfort and belonging to this group, which mainly comprises what one would be referred to in Sheng as “Wasee wa ghetto” – ghetto guys or those on the streets including school drop-outs, the unemployed, and informal sector (jua kali) workers. In this way, Ghetto radio, and its Sheng speaking – from “the street heroes” such as King Kafu – give young people hope and a cultural thread to hold onto in a turbulent world. Those struggling with unemployment and poverty see role models in Bonoko and King Kafu who are now successful and famous in spite of the fact that they started out on the streets and have experienced the hard life of street crime.

Kenya has 42 ethnic groups, each with its own language. English and Kiswahili are the two national languages by which formal transactions are carried out. These are also the languages of instruction for the country's education system. Primarily, and as observed by Milu (2017), it is from these languages that a majority – up to 99% of the population – derive their primary ethno linguistic identities. However, looking at the country's history from colonial times to the present, this ethno linguistic characterising has also been at the heart of the country's major social, political and economic challenges. The country's national elections have increasingly become a source of conflict – mostly pitting ethnic groups or blocks. This is primarily due to the reason that ethnicity and national economic and political interests are closely intertwined.

For this reason, ethnic groups want to feel that they have a stake through representation by one of their own in the national political hierarchy of power. Ultimately, elections have become a zero-sum game. Kenya's establishment media, including the more recently established commercial radio stations across the country, are easily sucked into this mix, as they openly tend to perpetuate this situation by repeatedly focusing on ethno linguistic differences and assigning ethnic tags to political players on the national scene. In this context, and with ethno language differences accentuated, it is always clear who belongs where and whose interests are at stake. Inevitably, support for political parties tends to take the ethnic angle, with little or no consideration given to policy ideas espoused by the different political formations.

Sheng language, however, provides a melting pot – a cultural space in flux! In this way, it enables those who belong to its culture to remove themselves from mainstream identity characterisations that have traditionally been associated with the dominant ethnic groups in the country. Milu (2017) argues that the sheng language space enables Kenya's youth to resist hegemonic racial and ethnic identification practices – a form of ethnic activism that challenges the country's dominant modes of ethnicity.

Ghetto Radio and hybridity

At another level, sheng language, according to Samper (2003), is also a point of convergence between the urban, global and cosmopolitan with the rural, local and traditional – a seamless juncture between Kiswahili, English and the local languages. In this regard, Sheng is further seen as a form of hybridity in practice. Hybridity in this sense is viewed as an opportunity for forging what Milu (2017) refers to as emergent ethnicities, away from dominant, hegemonic and colonial ethnic identities. Consequently, sheng affords a hybrid identity space where the most unlikely characters such as Bonoko, King Kafu and Shideh come to assume recognisable status, becoming celebrities for their fans who comprise a culturally, non-mainstream audience.

Ghetto radio can therefore be defined as a project in cultural hybridity. Smith (2008) argues that cultural hybridity is beneficial, especially in today's changed and globalised world. It affords one the opportunity to negotiate across barriers – language, cultural, spiritual, racial and physical. This is possible because the hybrid contains elements of the local and the global, and the intermixture makes it unique. In this regard, those occupying hybrid spaces have an understanding of both the local and global cosmopolitanism. They can easily cross borders in a world of amorphous borders. Bonoko's "goteana" – evening drive radio show – is possibly a perfect example of what hybridity may imply in this case. The show is rendered in the Sheng language, but is interlaced with music that draws from global popular artists – itself a feature of global cosmopolitanism. Bonoko, however, is a child of the streets and nothing about his presentation of the show betrays this. Nonetheless, in spite of his background, he uses his show to talk to a largely cosmopolitan audience, who find him normal, unique, contemporary, entertaining, crass, unhinged all rolled up in one.

In this way, he is able to seamlessly glide across the various boundaries – cultural, local, global with ease. His show is organised to conform to current trends in the entertainment industry, which combine information and entertainment in uniquely creative ways to build audience numbers. Yet, it also has a superb blend of the uniqueness of Nairobi's urban slums and those who experience its attendant life of squalor on a daily basis. With time, and in the spirit of hybridisation, Ghetto radio enables a co-influencing between the local and the global, where the local is universalised and the universal is localised. This process of hybridisation can also be understood in the context of translingualism, with respect to the Sheng language. Translingualism describes the dynamism with which speakers move across different types of multilingualism as they construct their ethnic and linguistic identities. Milu (2017), for instance, notes that with the spread of the global hip hop, reggae and dancehall music, elements of other international linguas – such as African American language, Jamaican Creole and Dread Talk have, for instance – found themselves enmeshed into the Sheng language.

Consequently, Ghetto radio's use of the Sheng language exhibits strong elements of translingualism, ultimately enabling the formation of hybrid cultural-linguistic spaces. The resulting hybrid space is flexible, constantly changing and adaptable to the shifting needs of urban slum life. Smith (2008) notes that hybridity is a subversion of hierarchy, thus enabling the formation of a truly multicultural society. In the case of Kenya, Sheng language subverts traditional ethno linguistic barriers, as local languages enmesh to create a cultural hybrid, a process to which Ghetto radio has evolved into and, in turn, is an important agent.

While Kenya's establishment media has tended to promote mainstream culture, as exemplified in the privileged prominent (news) voices who are mostly drawn from the country's economic, political and social elite, Ghetto

radio's primary news voices are drawn from the back streets and Nairobi's low-end residential areas. Yet, with creativity and cultural imagination, two core things at the heart of hybridity (Smith, 2008), these two worlds – the global and Nairobi's street life – are brought together in Ghetto radio's programming. Bonoko, King Kafu and Shide subsequently become the co-creators and cultural agents of the emerging reality of partial identities, multiple roles and pluralistic selves.

Ghetto Radio and a postmodern perspective

It may be useful to note at the onset that the Kenyan society, and its media system may not, in the very ideal sense, be described as a postmodern society, similar to observable trends in the Western world as described and discussed by various authors such as Wood (2003). One however recognises instances where Ghetto radio – itself a product of the unrelenting forces of globalised communications – approximates the general sense of dynamism, diversity and difference which characterises contemporary media cultures. Ghetto radio, in other words, is a mirror reflection of today's mixed media culture – what Kovach and Rosenstiel (1992) describe as a diversified media culture in which cultures of entertainment, infotainment, argument and analysis intermingle and merge. Prominent scholars on the media and culture such as Ang (1998) and Fourie (2005) use terms such as pluralism, heterogeneity, ambivalence, hybridity and hesitation to describe this emerging reality.

In a similar vein, McQuail (2003) refers to a media and communications reality that is defined by unbounded freedom and diversity essentially allowing for out of the norm behaviour as we note with Ghetto radio. Giddens (1990) uses terms such as disembeddedness and reflexivity to describe these new trends. These references are reflective of what Wood (2003) sees as the postmodern moment – one that is defined by instability. It privileges spontaneity and chooses a loose form of moral relativity, thus leading to the transformation of what was traditionally regarded as modern civilisation and its focus on certainty based on reason and structure. For Jameson (1983), postmodernism is also a periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture – the society of the media or the spectacle.

Generally, the postmodern moment is manifest in the quest by today's society to liberate itself from what Wood (2003) refers to as the tyranny of history and the rigidity of truth seeking and the burden of responsibility. The emerging era and society is one that is defined by a sense of general abandon, ambiguity and a vague sense of loss of coherence. It can be argued that the society to which Bonoko and King Kafu are heroes and celebrities – two former street rascals – is one that is keen to recreate a dominantly top-down social hierarchy. In the process, new voices, heroes and heroines emerge out of the story of Ghetto radio. The playfulness with which Ghetto radio will

recast mainstream news subjects to reflect the interests and the lived circumstances of Nairobi's low-class settlements is telling of postmodernism's embrace of the chaos of modern life.

The general style of programming and presentation adopted by Ghetto radio's daily shows is largely reflective of general trends in today's pop culture and infotainment world. This for instance includes trends such as joke for jokes' sake character of most programming which predominates instead of serious content, substance and meaning. In other words, Ghetto radio's shows are not meant to provide their audience with a serious feel of the events of the day nor are they cast in intellectual depth and analysis. Segments of the audience seeking serious or in-depth analysis of the day's news and events have to look elsewhere. In the same vein, mainstream (authority/prominent) news voices will most likely be missing from Ghetto radio's Sheng news bulletins. This very important consideration in writing or scripting of news is not recognisable in Ghetto radio's sheng news bulletins. Instead, it is ordinary voices – urban slum dwellers who take center stage as privileged news voices.

Yet, in the same vein, postmodernism is, as asserted by Strinati (1992), also an attempt to understand today's media saturated world. Various media types and varieties emerge to cater for differentiated tastes and preferences. Ghetto radio's ascendancy is largely connected to the need to provide a media space to a non-mainstream audience – Nairobi's backstreets, slums and low-grade living areas. This contrasts with other niche radio stations in Kenya, such as Capital FM, which are oriented toward catering for Kenya's upper income brackets. The station airs commercials and general advertising that is targeted at a prosperous domestic market. Among others, Capital FM carries advertisement on golfing tournaments, mortgage companies and vacation packages. All these will not feature on Ghetto radio, whose target audience embraces a different lifestyle and world view. However, in spite of these differences, Ghetto radio, just as much as the whole lot of emergent commercial radio stations around the country, exemplifies contemporary mass media's take over or what Strinati (1992) refers to as a cultural inversion of our senses – and which knows no boundaries.

Postmodernism's rejection of metanarratives or universalising "knowledge" and social practices (Lyotard, 1984) offers yet another critical angle through which we attempt to understand Ghetto radio's unique position. We are told postmodernism is skeptical of any absolute, universal and all-embracing claim to knowledge, thereby exposing theories or doctrines which make such claims open to criticism, contestation and even doubt. Ghetto radio's claim to fame is its unorthodox presentation styles, cast of presenters whose personal stories and by extension personalities do not reflect dominant cultural trends, and the total embrace of the Sheng language. In this disposition, one discerns strong oppositional tendencies, and an attempt to embrace and bring to the mainstream, voices and media practices considered non-mainstream and uncultured within the Kenyan society.

It is this embrace of the “other” – the non-normal side of life – represented by non-mainstream narratives that draw from the lived experiences of Bonoko, King Kafu and Shideh as the true voices and faces of those from the margins of Kenya’s contemporary urban society that qualifies Ghetto radio as a postmodern (cultural) project. This very characteristic distinguishes Ghetto radio from Kenya’s mainstream media culture, which is founded on and guided by traditional ethical and professional considerations – guided by a code of ethics for the media and a cast of general normative expectations by society. Postmodernism, however, embraces mediocrity (Bonoko, King Kafu) and rewards all equally (Bonoko and King Kafu’s celebrity status). Yet, as Wood (2003) further asserts, in a postmodern world, there is little originality or skill displayed – which is the case with Bonoko and Kafu who have made a name on radio but without any formal mastery of skill of professional knowledge.

Further, to be neat and orderly, to demonstrate any lyricism or to display any actual talent is considered somehow elitist. Listening to key programs on Ghetto radio and Bonoko’s or Kafu’s flagrant vulgarities rendered in the Sheng language, one would easily dismiss the dominant non-serious style as spontaneous silliness. Overall, Bonoko, Kafu and Shideh represent a general playfulness and non-professional approach to media business associated with the non-professional. Where Kenya’s mainstream media will compete to hire the most professional, talented, educated radio and television presenters, Ghetto radio is at home with Bonoko – a child of the streets or King Kafu a self-confessed former violent criminal. In other words, affirming the observation by Woods (2003) on the nature of post-modern art, to be civil is to be snobbish, to be talented is to be elitist. Ultimately, Bonoko, King Kafu and Shideh seem to urge us to accept life with all its absurdities – as it is.

Conclusion

This chapter sets out to demonstrate the place and significance of non-mainstream media spaces such as that provided by Nairobi’s Ghetto radio 89.5 FM in contemporary society. In preceding sections, we have shown the unique media culture that Ghetto radio has demonstrably assisted to nurture through the use of the Sheng language. The vibrancy of Ghetto radio’s programs and its unique and out-of-norm daily show presenters are illustrative of the power of non-mainstream media spaces in empowering and subsequently bringing to the mainstream voices and narratives hitherto considered anathema to mainstream culture. Through Ghetto radio’s programming and audience base, one sees an attempt for non-mainstream voices to ride on new postmodern trends to find space in a dominantly top-down, hierarchical society that has traditionally had no space for them.

Subsequently, voices from Nairobi’s backstreets and the poor urban settlements embodied in Bonoko, King Kafu and Shideh find acceptance in a

new world that must embrace the chaos of our lived experiences, mediocrity and the simplistic stories of the streets in order to find a balance. Yet, as we have also observed, Ghetto radio serves to bring together a confluence of cultural influences, especially as expressed through the Sheng language. Through the Sheng language, cultures meet and mingle, the global and the local are enmeshed. The end result is inimical to traditional ethno-cultural identities. It takes the format of a fluid, discontinuist cultural space that provides a restless youthful audience a convenient and shifty space where they are active agents – co-creators of culture.

Consequently, Ghetto radio's role as an oppositional cultural space manifests in its embrace and ability to nurture new forms of creativity, expression and politics. Its heroes and heroines are from the streets and therefore bring a rich mix of lived experiences to the station's programming, especially the manner and language with which they engage the audience. As shown in preceding sections, these presenters do not mirror the sophistry of traditional culture, neither do they come armed with the professional tools and ethics of journalism. Bonoko and King Kafu have not demonstrated history of formal learning, but their voices have assumed undeniable significance in Kenya's media sphere. On the whole, these trends provide a glimpse into the potential of media to contribute to the emerging forces of decolonisation (from hegemonic cultural tendencies) within contemporary Kenyan society.

Notes

- 1 Sheng is largely regarded as the unofficial language of the urban (Nairobi) streets. It is popular among the youth and people living in Kenya's informal settlements. Sheng language borrows mainly from Kiswahili and English, and depending on where it is used in Kenya, a sprinkling of words and phrases from the local ethnic language of the area will feature prominently in the sheng variety of that locality.
- 2 This was published on 17 March 2020 as one of the trending news stories on Ghetto radio.
- 3 Available [o] <https://www.ghettoradio.co.ke/tension-in-mukuru-slums-after-taxi-driver-is-quarantined-over-coronavirus/> accessed on 19/3/2020
- 4 Young men who work in Kenya's public transport vehicles, popularly known as matatus.

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