

# The Criminalization of Youth in Popular Art in Kenya

by

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## Abstract

Couched on cultural criminology, this article presents a critical exegesis of how popular cultural productions in Kenya mediate the “criminal” label among youth in Kenya using purposively selected popular arts like pop music, film and parodies. It further examines how branding youth in Kenya as “criminals” is symptomatic of abuse of and excessive use of power by state agents. As such, in this paper, popular arts are viewed as ontological modes of resistance through which youth in Kenya not only voice their displeasure, cope with physical and ideological realities imposed on them by state operatives, but also show an ambivalent sense of morality towards social norms which stifle them. This paper, therefore, contends that these mediated popular cultural texts re-imagine and reconstitute social realities of the “criminal” youth in Kenya.

## Introduction: Conceptualizing Popular Art and Crime

“Criminal” youth as a trope permeates popular cultural productions in Kenya today. Much of these cultural productions take the form of media reports and primetime news items about youth activities that are considered criminal. Sectarian violence and mayhem meted on innocent citizens in Kenya by outlawed youth groups<sup>1</sup> is often a subject of focus in the Kenya media. Some of these criminal activities feature as fictional narratives, lyrics and burlesques embedded in various popular arts such as film, music and comedy respectively. Most of these popular arts, however, espouse critical stances taking swipes at state operatives that label the youth as “criminals”. Anchored within the realm of popular culture, this paper examines the figuration of youth and crime in popular art.

Karin Barber in *Readings in African Popular Culture* (1997) points out that one of the ways in which popular culture functions is by foregrounding aspects of culture often ignored in formal spaces, which are, however, very definitive of practices and relationships that take place in different segments of society. Such cultures can be quite revealing of undercurrents that mark relationships between members of a society or define codes and ideologies that shape a people's lives. Examining aspects of popular culture that feature in alternative spaces allows one to engage with the manner in which the general public deals with everyday concerns such as crime. It, thus, enables one to interrogate various responses and attitudes toward particular social occurrences in society.

This paper argues that popular art forms provide spaces for the underrepresented to articulate their concerns, express their displeasure, present the unsaid, and negotiate meanings of issues affecting their everyday lives. Cognizant of popular arts' possibilities to articulate various issues, this paper engages the selected arts from the prism of cultural criminology in examining "crime" among the youth showing the complex ways in which these popular cultural productions can be read not merely as being oppositional to power, but most importantly, on how they reveal deep-seated anxieties among Kenyan youth towards the label "criminal" and/or "radicalized" youth.

Cultural criminology emphasizes the centrality of meaning and representation in the construction of crime as a momentary event, sub-cultural endeavor, and social issue. Jeff Ferrell (1999) points out that cultural criminology transcends traditional notions of crime and crime causation to include among many other aspects popular culture constructions of crime and criminal action. Transcending traditional notions of crime allows scholars to understand crime as meaningful human activity and to penetrate more deeply the contested politics of crime control. In this regard, cultural criminology relies on textual, semiotic, and visual analysis as ways of elucidating on representations of crime in popular culture. This unravels the shared meanings and perceptions of crime in popular culture such as the arts, and in the process, situates the meanings within larger historical patterns in society. While accounting for crime within the dynamics of the everyday lives in popular arts, cultural criminology allows one to highlight the carnivalesque, pleasure, and risk-taking that animate everyday life as embedded in the popular cultural productions.

Focusing primarily on meaning and perceptions of crime among the youth in popular arts, this paper questions the truth of crimes that youth are accused of, the workings of the Kenyan police, and the relationships of the police and civilians, particularly the youth, in Kenya. In this regard, it reveals underlying sets of complex relationships that youth in Kenya have towards those in power and government agencies, particularly the police. To do this end, the paper embraces popular art as an alternative media, which is made of "contested spaces constructed and reconstructed anew, according to the needs, experiences, and aspirations of specific groups (particularly those otherwise underrepresented, ignored, or trivialized elsewhere in the mediascapes)" (Allen 2008, p.x). Indeed Stuart Allen (2008) reflects that, "alternative media are part and parcel of the daily life of individuals, at once 'banal' and 'political' in their significance" (p.x). The focus on the everyday becomes key towards unpacking meaning in popular culture as mediated through popular arts such as comedy, film and music.

One of the defining characteristics of popular arts is that they are situational in nature. Put differently, popular arts are fashioned from a particular situation which they seek to address. Everyday experiences that characterise life in society form the subject of popular art. Through art, a people's fears, misgivings, pains, joys and convictions are depicted with authentic accuracy. Often such depictions are bold, direct, appraise, and openly express dissident to power and systems of governance as reflected in public discourses in society. In this way, and as Barber (1997) aptly observes, popular arts seem to have a better claim to speak with the authentic voice of the people. Indeed, this article taps into these nuanced messages in popular art as it explores the representation of crime among the youth in Kenya.

This article recognises that popular art is diverse because it is open to different uses and interpretations by different people in society. It also concurs with Dominic Strinati (2004, p.35) who adumbrates that popular culture itself has to be seen as a diverse and varied set of genres, texts, images and representations that can be found across a range of different media. In this regard, popular songs, cartoons, parodies, and anecdotes among many others may be principal channels of communication for people who are denied access to official media. This is so because they are endowed with greater dynamism, vitality, and are at the centre of representing cultural outputs of a people. Because of these characteristics, popular art is generated from a wide range of societal actors and cannot be restricted to a number of socio-cultural, economic, political or any other sub-societal groupings. For this reason, it can be viewed as a versatile art form, capable of generating and maintaining presence in the gamut of public discourse, from the centre to the periphery.

It is with this background in mind that this article interrogates the representation of crime and/or radicalization in popular art in Kenya. It reads popular art as one such alternative space where "unofficial" cultures in Kenya are conceptualized, imagined, performed and reconfigured. Unofficial cultures, following Barber (1997) and Allen (2008), are read as popular art forms that are representative of muted, under-represented, trivialized, ignored or misrepresented aspects in main stream media. The idea of the unofficial is understood as fluid and uncategorized precisely because it defies and/or traverses known boundaries.

This paper hinges on Johannes Fabian's (1997) methodology which teaches that in order to read any popular culture form with thoroughness, one must take cognisance of the context in which the form is produced and re-enacted. Analytical foundations of this paper are, therefore, built on Fabian's insistence on understanding the contexts of production of popular cultural forms because they are inextricably linked to their contexts. They are not only by-products of their contexts but also echo and shape these contexts. Most importantly again, popular cultural productions must be understood for their multi-media capacities and interrogated for the social referents that they invoke (Wanjala and Kebaya, 2016). Thus, purposively selected popular songs, comic strip and film are discussed, issues raised concerning youth and crime analyzed, and conclusions drawn on how the popular arts articulate meanings and perceptions of the youth and crime in Kenya. While analysing the contexts of the selected popular arts, this article is mindful of Taussing (1994) who cautions that contexts of popular cultural texts do not necessarily offer stable, inscrutable truth or factual vision of the societies in which they are made and about which they speak.

## Criminal Youth as Spectacle in Television Drama and Film in Kenya

Crime and criminal justice have been central themes in oral culture, fables, literature, and the theater since time immemorial (Cavender & Jurik, 2014, 2016; Greer & Reiner, 2012). The narration of crime has continued in cinema, which together with television, have proved to be perhaps the most extensive, popular, and powerful media in society today. Undeniably, anyone who has spent time watching television or goes to the theatres can attest that crime is significantly featured. The drama of a law breaker brought to book, workings of law enforcement agencies, stories of notorious and sometimes sensational crimes, and of justice done or denied are a common sensation in mass media reports. In the same vein, news of a fugitive's capture or of a criminal conviction may satisfy the public's faith in the criminal justice system and provide a sense of pleasure in serialized TV drama and/or film. This is viewed as crime in popular culture or popular criminology. Consequently, Rafter (2007, p. 415) suggests that it is important to analyze how popular criminology affects ordinary people's beliefs and perceptions about crime.

Popular criminology, according to Rafter (2007), is essentially the representation of crime and criminals in the form of a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values expressed in various forms that are accessible to and experienced by the masses or 'the people'. These forms include film, Internet, television, newspapers, novels, rap music and myth (Rafter 2007, p.415). The various forms of representation provide the means by which some form of knowledge about crime and criminals is imparted to, captured or constructed by 'the masses'. Popular criminology therefore makes possible the production of this knowledge.

There are a limited number of films and serialized TV dramas that can be categorized as crime dramas in Kenya. Characteristically, crime TV dramas in Kenya are episodic and largely employ youthful characters playing the role of criminals. The TV dramas primarily tell distinct stories across one, self-contained, weekly episode. The formula of crime across these TV dramas is varied but fairly recognizable: a crime is committed and discovered at the start of the show; a team (more often the police but can also comprise of ordinary citizens) set about their task of solving the detected crime; and, in the process, administers some form of justice. Each episode ends neatly in a self-contained manner, maintaining the same platform for next week's story. While characters, settings, and wider narratives (such as relationships) extend beyond individual episodes, these do not concern the audience too much as the primary intent here is that the viewer is able to make sense of each episode when viewed in isolation. The best example of this type of TV drama is Kenya's twin police investigative TV shows *Cobra Squad* and *Inspekta Mwala*.

*Cobra Squad*, conceptualized as an action TV drama, lasted two seasons after it first premiered on NTV in October, 2007. *Cobra Squad* is the name of a fictitious special unit of the Kenyan police mandated to track down, find and stop criminals using latest techniques and cutting-edge technology. The detective-thugs (largely youthful) chases, hijacking of helicopter and blowing of a boat in Lake Victoria are among scenes that provided the most hilarious entertainment.

Unlike *Cobra Squad* which is a serious detective crime drama, *Inspekta Mwala*, is a police comic drama that has remained a regular TV show since it premiered on Citizen TV in 2007. The hilarious TV show revolves around the everyday activities at Kona-Mbaya police station and the escapades of a very short policeman, Inspekta Mwala. On the one hand, Inspekta Mwala is keen on maintaining law and order, while on the other hand, wittingly managing his rowdy police juniors and strict Boss.

Episodic dramas such as *Cobra Squad* and *Inspekta Mwala* have much to offer in terms of their suitability for cultural criminological analyses. Notions of justice and retribution, of evil and righteousness, and the virtues of law and order are their staple concern. However, it is held here that their utility is somewhat limited in comparison to well-developed films such as *Nairobi Half Life*. The claim here is that complex crime dramas such as *Nairobi Half Life* have much more to offer than their episodic counterparts and, as such, they help realize the portrayal of youth as criminals. Put differently, a full film can tell stories regarding crime among the youth with a greater level of depth, veracity and complexity than a 21-28 minute self-contained TV drama can ever hope to achieve.

The study of criminology and film is an interdisciplinary field animated by a basic research question that ultimately seeks to address how crime is mediated through film. In pursuing this research question, the study of criminology and film comes together in a singular unit of analysis: the crime film. Crime stories are a staple of news media (see Jewkes, 2004), and also feature in several movie genres (e.g., thrillers, police procedurals, action movies, etc.). The popularity and prevalence of representations of crime in popular culture is said to be evidence of a growing public fascination with crime and criminal justice (Mason, 2003). The crime film is, thus, a complex and variegated object of study, with many facets (Benyahia, 2012; Rafter, 2006; Thompson, 2007) as it canvasses on a number of issues which include the intersection of law, crime and film. Consequently, public consumption of representations of crime is thought to affect public perceptions of criminals, victims and the criminal justice system (Mason, 2003).

The construction of crime as a trope in film is central in understanding how crime's images are structured according to a binary logic of representation. Oppositional binaries such as man/woman, good/bad, rational/irrational, and mind/body among others are constructed in a system of values which facilitate the visibilisation of crime in film. This then shifts the analytic focus to the interpretation of crime to the audience. That is, and as Young (2008) observes, attention is paid to "the matrix of intersections between spectator, the image and the context of reception" (Young, 2008, p.24). As Young further teaches us, cinematic form (i.e. how a film constructs its images through tracking shots, music cues, genre expectations, etc.) and cinematic narrative (i.e. the story told by a film) are key in the interpretation of crime. These aspects are called upon in analyzing representation of crime in *Nairobi Half Life* (2012) and in an attempt to understanding how this film constructs a particular representation of society.

*Nairobi Half Life* (2012) narrates the story of an aspiring actor, Mwas, who travels from his rural home to Nairobi with the hope of achieving his dream but instead ends up tangled with a mob of criminals. The film is built around crime and violence. It's a tale of ambition, struggle, crime, corruption, prostitution and homosexuality. The life Mwas had imagined is crashed as he gets a taste of the cruel and unforgiving city. He is robbed of all his belongings and worse still, thrown into jail after a misunderstanding.

At Central Police station, Mwas meets Oti, a conceited criminal. They strike a surprising partnership and once released, combine brains and brawn with the other gang members, Mose, Waf and Kyalo, to eke out a living in the criminal underworld. Mwas is, thus, consciously drawn into a life of crime, which the business minded and fast thinking country boy takes to like a duck to water. In order to keep themselves out of prison, they have to pay off corrupt police officers. Eventually Mwas and the rest of Oti's gang get into an argument with Dingo's gang over money. Dingo is killed in a fight. The police round up Oti's gang, they kill them and use them as evidence for crimes they did not commit. Mwas survives and eventually makes it by becoming the actor that he had always wanted to be.

In *Nairobi Half Life*, the criminality of the Police force is contrasted with that of petty thieves, carjackers and ghetto gangsters. The police who are entrusted with the duty of taking care of the citizens are portrayed not only as criminals but also as collaborators in crime. In the film, the police are in cahoots with the criminals who are allowed to commit crimes and give the police their share so that they are not arrested. The police also kill a lot of people without any justification and when under pressure from higher authorities to arrest criminals, they not only arrest the wrong people but also prefer trumped up charges against them.

Despite the fact that Mwas is radicalized in crime, he, however, doesn't abandon his dream of acting. He pursues it and manages to get himself a role in a play. In line with the title, Mwas finds himself living a half-life in Nairobi: actor by day and thug by night. The film, therefore, succeeds in showing half-truths held by majority of Kenyan youth that their aspirations and dreams can only be achieved by moving to Nairobi. They are, however, not prepared to cope with the pitfalls of Nairobi's fast-life as Mwas' father remarks, "Nairobi is not a city for brilliance." Consequences of living in the fast-lane are wrought out as the film heads to a tense and emotional but satisfying conclusion.

Ultimately, this analysis reveals that *Nairobi Half Life* not only makes captivating viewing, but also meaningfully contributes to the critical debates on crime among youth in Kenya. Fiske and Dawson (1996) demonstrate that the representation of violence in films can have different and even diametrically opposed meanings—and be appreciated for different reasons—depending on how the audience interprets the narration of the film. This is indeed the case with *Nairobi Half Life* because it incisively and graphically provides the theoretical understandings of the reasons why and how youth in Kenya consciously end up in crime and radicalization. It is in this way that crime operates as a source of horror and/or pleasure to the audience.

## Parody and the ‘Criminal’ Youth

Comedy in Kenya has been at the forefront in portraying intrigues that the Kenyan youth undergo in their everyday lives. A number of standup comedians have come up with satirical strips which, while portraying the predicament of the masses, aim jabs at government and government agencies such as the police. Renowned, but now defunct, Redykulass<sup>2</sup> is arguably the best standup comedy show that was ever assembled in Kenya. The comic show challenged the establishment through its jokes (Kebaya, 2015; Musila, 2010). Made up of the trio, Walter Mong’are aka Nyambane, Tony Njuguna aka Mdomo Baggy, and John Kiarie aka JK, though it focused on satirizing Rt. President Daniel arap Moi (Walter Mong’are), his right hand man Joseph Kamotho (John Kiarie) and a body guard (Tony Njuguna), Redykulass humorously explored a number of issues affecting society. One of the show’s skits pertinent to this discussion is entitled, “*Unataka Gani?*” (Which one do you want?).

*Unataka Gani?* best exemplifies the relationship between the youth and police in Kenya today. The image of the oppressor and the oppressed easily plays out in the three- man skit. In a swift series of interrogatives, the policemen bombard a bewildered pedestrian with a barrage of questions which he barely has time to respond:

1 <sup>st</sup> Policeman: Unataka wapi Kijana?	Where are you coming from young man?
Unakwenda wapi?	Where are you going?
Jina yako nani?	What is your name?
Unaishi wapi?	Where do you stay?
Baba yako anaitwa nani?	What’s your father’s name?
Apana jibu?	No answer?

While the questioning is going on, screams are heard from the hapless young man as the two police thrash him. The second police quips:

2<sup>nd</sup> Policeman: Eh, Kijana (young man) you are definitely a suspect!  
Can you produce your ID?  
Young man: I’m not  
2<sup>nd</sup> Policeman: Kama huna ID lete kitambulisho.  
(If you don’t have an ID, bring your Identity Card)  
2<sup>nd</sup> Policeman: If you cannot produce 3 legal documents...  
1<sup>st</sup> Policeman: Twende. Twende. Criminal.  
(Let’s go. Let’s go. Criminal)

The skit starkly and graphically paints the picture of the tribulations that youth in Kenya undergo in the hands of the police. They are not only manhandled, harassed, whipped but also trumped up charges are preferred upon them:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Policeman: We can charge you with anything:  
Obstruction of justice, smoking, violence.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Policeman: Yes.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Policeman: Being in possession of firearms with an intention of breach of contract
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Policeman: Yes
- 1<sup>st</sup> Policeman: Loitering with intend of first degree murder,  
Looking at a government building suspiciously,  
Soliciting sexual favours from unwilling female gender,  
Unataka gani? (which do you prefer?)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Policeman: Unataka gani? (which do you prefer?)
- Youngman: But I am innocent.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Policeman: Innocent kitu gani? (Innocent how?)  
Si umeskia ile (You have heard all)  
Makosa yote umesomewa? (the offenses read out to you)

Cornered, the young man pleads his innocence. Fearing threats of arrest and false charges preferred, the young man eventually becomes easy prey for the policemen's demands for a bribe:

- Young man: I am innocent.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Police man: Jitetee, Jitetee (defend yourself)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Policeman: Can you buy your freedom?  
Can you purchase your freedom?
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Policeman: Toa kitu Kidogo (Give us something small)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Policeman: Tunaelewa lugha ya chai,toa!  
(We understand the language of tea, give!)

The comic clip at this point shows that the young man is visibly terrified and therefore easily agrees to the demands of the policemen. He is not ready to go to jail for crimes he has not committed. He, therefore, prefers to bribe his way out. Paradoxically, the policemen do not wait to be given the bribe but physically search for it as they are shown reaching out to the wallet of the young man.

In an interesting twist, once the policemen pick money from the wallet, they offer to chaperon the bemused young man to his destination:



2<sup>nd</sup> Policeman: Can we give you a push?

Young man: (still bewildered nods his head in the affirmative)

The skit presents us with not only ambivalent ways of understanding the workings of the police force in Kenya but also the strained relationship between the police and Kenyan youth. The youth are always easy targets for bribes from the police in the guise of having committed crime. Ironically, the police are ready to serve once they have been bribed, “Can we give you a push”. It is precisely this tendency to ask for bribes, “Toa kitu Kidogo (Give us something small)”, from innocent youth that strain the harmonious existence between the youth and police in Kenya, which *Unataka Gani?* exposes.

Under the gambit of popular cultural forms such as comedy, the police are cast as self-seekers who blatantly commit crime. Instead of serving the people, they are forcibly and visibly robbing them. The police are the criminals but because they wield power, they apportion the crime to the youth. On their part, the youth have to contend with the nightmares of being labeled criminals, regardless of having not committed any crime, since they are powerless. To this end, *Unataka Gani?* vividly brings out the image of the oppressor and the oppressed, as it is in Manichean terms, showing the difficult circumstance that youth in Kenya (the oppressed) operate in.

### **Figurations of Youth and Crime in Popular Music in Kenya**

In their analysis of popular music in Kenya, Wanjala and Kebaya (2016) conclude that popular music plays a significant role in understanding Kenyan youth because the youth are not only active partakers of popular music but are also creators of the music. In the same breath, popular music has a critical index in understanding figurations of youth and crime in Kenya. Careful readings of selected popular musics herein reveal images of police brutality towards the youth in their quest to fight crime in society. A number of renowned popular artistes paint this bleak picture as they voice their displeasure towards the criminalization of the youth by police. Eric Wainaina in his song *Usiku wa Manane*<sup>3</sup> graphically depicts the trepidation towards Nairobi’s streets and some of its estates due to crime. The song shows how crime is on the rise with the police cooperating with the criminals rather than stemming out crime. The song offers valuable advice to those visiting Nairobi by night:

Hebu shika maarifa  
 Kama wewe mgeni  
 mjini huu wa taifa  
 Hizo pesa ufiche  
 Na huo mzigo uushike  
 Unapofika huko kibanda  
 Cha Akamba  
 usikawie  
 Wenyeji wa Nairobi  
 hawafiki mjini  
 Usiku wa manane

Take these pieces of advice  
 If you're a visitor  
 In this capital city  
 Hide that money  
 And hold your luggage  
 when you get to  
 The Akamba bus stop  
 Don't delay  
 Residents of Nairobi  
 Don't get to the Capital  
 In the dead of the night

In this song Wainaina starkly paints images of fear and insecurity due to the upsurge of crime in the city with the police as key actors. Wainaina talks of smartly dressed youth who are pickpockets in streets and bus stops such as “the Akamba bus stop”. He further sings:

Hasa ikiwa Friday  
 Usiwanyime pesa zao za pombe  
 Usiku wa manane  
 Na usifike huko mtaani  
 Kama ujulikani  
 Utauwacha mshahara wa mwezi  
 Usiku wa manane

Particularly on Friday  
 Don't deny them money for a drink  
 In the dead of the night  
 And don't get to the estate  
 If you aren't known  
 You'll lose a whole month's salary  
 In the dead of the night

Wainaina shows that crime is rife not only in city streets and bus stops, but also at residential estates where one can lose up to a month's salary if (s)he is not known to the criminals. Ironically, the police who are supposed to prevent crime not only take bribes from criminals but have turned to crime themselves. This situation is further amplified by K-South in the song *Nairobi* where he decries the fact that the police have turned into crime instead of preventing it:

Nairobi kuna machizi  
 Chunga mafisi  
 Zitaku dishi ukiwa mumbichi  
 Ubaki uchi  
 Kisha utawekwa  
 Kwenye boot ya Mtishubishi  
 Maombi kisha mazishi na makasisi  
 priests

Nairobi has many con people  
 Watch out the police  
 they'll eat you if green  
 you'll be left naked  
 then be thrown  
 into the boot of a Mitsubishi  
 Prayers then your funeral by the

The song emphasizes the fact that in Nairobi one has to be always alert and careful otherwise comen, such as the policemen, will take advantage of one's naivety implied in the song as "green".

Animal imagery, fisi (hyena), has been deployed in the song to show that the police are as a ravenous and devious as the hyena. Fisi (hyena) is a slang and negative reference to the police prompted by their insatiable desire for bribes. Failure to bribe the police often leads to contrived offenses, harassment and torture as depicted in the song *Mr. Policeman* by K-South:

Umefanya hatia	You have committed an offense
Kuranda tauni	Loitering in town
Barabarani	on the road
Mtoto wa mdosi	A rich person's child
Kuvuta bhangi	Smoking marijuana

As is evident from the excerpt, police are quick to point out a number of offences upon arresting the innocent youth. As seen in the comic strip analysed above, helpless youth are at the mercy of the police once contrived charges are preferred upon them. Eventually, the police demand bribes in order to set them free. If they fail to give hefty bribes, the innocent youth are often harassed, tortured and detained for long.

The image of police as offenders and harbingers of corruption is blatantly captured in Jimwat's song *Sitoi Kitu Kidogo*<sup>4</sup>. The song revolves around the persona's refusal to give a bribe to a police officer. To make things easier for the adamant persona, the policeman first negotiates for the exact figure that he wants as bribe and second, threatens to apprehend the persona if he does not co-operate with him. Eventually, the policeman makes good his threat by arresting the young man, fabricates the charges and then offers the young man a chance to purchase his way out of his new-found trouble. In these circumstances, the young man is left with no choice than to choose between the bad and the ugly. Noteworthy is the fact that it is actions like this by the police that encourage the youth to be anti-system, which ultimately makes the work of the police harder and more treacherous since the youth begin to see the police as people to be wary of.

The criminal label among youth in Kenya is aptly captured in the song *Gunshots*<sup>5</sup> by Ngare and Mashifta, where the youth decry wanton killings by the police without trial. In the song, a warning text flashes on screen reading, "Hatutaki na tumechoka na ma gun shots ... maboys tuwache guns na macops tuwache kuwaua vijana wa mtaa" (We do not want, and we are tired of, gunshots ... boys let's abandon guns and cops let's stop killing the youth). The song issues veiled warnings to the police thus, "Hatutaki /na tumechoka/na ma gun shots ... maboys tuwache guns/na macops tuwache/kuwaua vijana wa mtaa" (We do not want/and we are tired of/gunshots ... boys let's abandon guns/ and cops let's stop/ killing the youth).

On the one hand, the song reveals that the police kill the youth arbitrarily because they mistakenly consider them criminals. Ironically, such innocent youth are killed instantly without being accorded a fair trial. On the other hand, it shows the youth's willingness to stop crime and in turn asks the police to stop killing them. The criminal identity makes the persona in the song wonder whether the country will be able to achieve vision 2030<sup>6</sup> if the youth, that is the energetic group in society, are killed mercilessly and indiscriminately in the guise of being serial criminals.

The image of the criminal youth recurs in the song *Angalia saa*<sup>7</sup> by Ukoo Flani Mau Mau<sup>8</sup>. In an attempt to underscore the frosty relationship between the youth and police, *Angalia Saa* takes a historical trajectory by juxtaposing colonial times with the present. By drawing parallels between colonial and present times, the song shows that there is no difference between the colonial police and the current post-independent Kenya police. Therefore, the current police are taking us back to the dark colonial days by perpetuating the same old practices. This is made explicit in the song thus "Tushavumilia viboko mbele ya ma slave master" (We have already persevered lashing under the slave masters). The song celebrates freedom fighters as heroes while depicting police in Kenya as enemies to social justice and human rights.

The police are branded as enemies of the youth because they not only mishandle them but are in inhuman. The inhumane treatment of the youth prompts Ruff to refer the police as "hii pack ya mawolves" (this pack of wolves) in the song *Makarao*<sup>9</sup>. He further harshly indicts the police in the refrain:

Makarao...mbona mwajifanya ma-pharaoh, maisha  
hamthamini...kama za wanao...twauliza kwanini,  
kwanini...? Police, why do you pretend to be pharaohs,  
why is it that you don't value (others') lives as you'd  
value the lives of your own children?

Through the use of rhetorical questions, Ruff asks why the police have failed to recognise the value of other people's lives. The song further condemns police actions on innocent civilians, particularly the youth, and shows how they are a source of fear, apprehension and a threat to humanity in society. Similar allusions relating to the disregard of human values by police is amplified by various popular musicians such as Ngare and Mashifta who view the police as "beasts" in the song *Gunshots*; Big Mo sees them as "terrorists" in the song "*Kumbe ni ma-terrorist*"; and Wenyaji calls them "bloodthirsty devils" in the song *Tunavyoishi*.

In sum, all these popular song references to the police are not only predicated on innocent civilians' experiences on their hands but the trauma and negative perception the Kenyan youth have towards the police. Although most of these songs are recorded and are known to the general public, most of the musicians perform them in live musical concerts allowing the audience, largely youth, to sing along with them.

Relying on an antiphonal structure, the musicians would be heard imitating the police orders, insert humour to the lyrics while the singing, ululating and clapping from the audience (the youth) create dissenting voices against police brutalities meted on them. While these musical concerts may simply be seen as entertainment and leisure, they are capable of generating solidarity and a form of collective effervescence from the audience.

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this paper has been the portrayal of youth and crime in popular art in Kenya. The foregoing discussions reveal that it is indeed the case that popular art explores a number of issues touching on youth and crime in Kenya. Crime, administration of justice, and agencies involved in combating crime prominently feature in popular art in Kenya. The analyses reveals that popular art, be it film, parody or music, indict the workings of Kenyan police and cast aspersions on the authenticity of crimes that the youth are accused of. Undeniably, the selected popular arts show that the youth do commit crime consciously as is the case in *Nairobi half-life*. However, each genre of popular art analyzed show that, and to a large extent, innocent youth are falsely accused of having committed certain crimes by the police. In this way, the youth are left with no option than to cope with the nightmares of being labeled criminal, which include arbitrary arrests, torture, bribery, maim and extrajudicial killings. Using popular arts, therefore, the youth not only question the commitment of the police to combat crime but also highlight the questionable integrity of the law enforcers. In this context, the people entrusted to enforce the law are portrayed as dishonest when they prefer fabricated charges, openly ask for bribes, connive with criminals and apportion crime to innocent youth. Through the popular arts, the youth decry the criminal label imposed on them by the law enforcers, a notion that is amplified by the society at large. Paradoxically, while the police consider the youth as criminals, the youth view the police as terrorists because they not only terrorise them (the youth) but also break the very laws that they are meant to enforce.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed list of the outlawed groups in Kenya such as Mungiki, Gaza Boys, Sungusungu, Wakali Kwanza, 42 Brothers, Baghdad Boys and Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) among others, read Zadock Angira's article in the Saturday Nation, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Redykulass rose to national acclaim in 1999 as stand-up comedians specializing in political satire. A number of comic strips from this group were aired in commercial television stations such as NTV and KTN.

<sup>3</sup> *Usiku wa manane*, translates to at dead of the night is one of the songs in Eric Wainaina's album *Sawa sawa*

<sup>4</sup> Swahili idiomatic expression stating a blatant refusal to offer a bribe: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-L79xtsz40>. Jimwat (2008) Calif Records.

<sup>5</sup> Ngare featuring *Mashifta* (2010) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osbO03vxNgo&feature=related> uploaded by 'karitemkenya' on 28 August 2010

<sup>6</sup> Vision 2030 is an economic blueprint document outlining the roadmap for Kenya to achieve middle class economic status by the year 2030

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<sup>7</sup> *Angalia Saa* translates to “look at the watch” by UkooFlani Mau Mau (2008) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqARPGKnTnE> uploaded by ‘rwangal’ on 19 December 2008

<sup>8</sup> Ukoo Flani Mau Mau refers to a group of artistes based in Nairobi and Mombasa, Kenya that have appropriated hip hop and created a movement through music. The group includes popular music artistes such as Kamau Ngigi, Robert Matumbai Joni, John Vigei as the founders, who were joined by new groups and individuals that follow this mantra and understanding like: Washefa, Mashifta, Kitu Sewer, Joga, Malcom X, Wakamba Wawili, Kah, Mombasa Ukoo Flani, Wenyaji, Gidi Gidi Maji Maji, Juliani, and female artists, Atu Kandi, and Nazizi

<sup>9</sup> *Makarao* is slang for ‘police’. Ruff (2003) ‘Makarao’ [http://www.myspace.com/ralph\\_sipalla](http://www.myspace.com/ralph_sipalla). Ngare featuring *Mashifta* (2010) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osbO03vxNgo> & feature= related uploaded by ‘karitemkenya’ on 28 August 2010