

# **The Hip Hop Revolution in Kenya: Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, Youth Politics and Memory, 1990-2012**

by

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## **Abstract**

In Kenya, Hip Hop music has created a new surge of revolutionary energy embraced by many unemployed youth living in the urban slums of Nairobi and Mombasa. This research aims to analyze the relationship between memory, empowerment, and Hip Hop music to treat unresolved economic, social, and political disparities. The study focuses in on the music and impact of the Hip Hop group of artists called, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau located in the urban centers of Nairobi and Mombasa in Kenya who have banded together to create a new revolution in Kenya. The group uses Hip Hop to contest, resist, and mobilize. The music rallies around the memory of the Mau Mau war, a heated, controversial, and bloody revolution from 1952-1960, that lead to the dismantling of British hegemony in Kenya. Ukoo Flani Mau Mau in name and in content has kept the Mau Mau past and struggle alive through their music. This new Hip Hop revolution was explained during an interview, “Our Mau Mau forefathers fought a physical war, but ours is a mental war”.

This work is grounded on previous Mau Mau research and field work from 2010-2012 surveys and interviews conducted in Kenya and the United States. The study traces the group's historical development, Hip Hop opportunities and challenges, and Hip Hop refashioning and customization based on Kenya history, culture, and language. The study argues that when conscious lyrics full of meaning, purpose, symbolism, time, history, various languages, hope and unity are strung together with melodies, beats, and dance movements, participants have knowingly or unknowingly unleashed spiritual power.

*"We are starting a revolution!"<sup>1</sup>*

Kamau Ngigi (Kama), Hip hop Artist, Kenya

## **Introduction**

Revolutions are not the same. They are the product of time, place, and circumstance that manifest in different forms, contours, and expressions. When narrowly defined as acts of violence, guns, and blood shed, it is easy to miss the more profound nature of a revolution, which is a spirit rooted in and based on energies that are often already known by the revolutionaries building from unfinished grievances of the past. In Kenya, hip hop music is fostering a new youth energy showing what can happen when the past catches up to the present. The moment is often driven by the Kenyan youth between 15 and 24 years of age, who are mostly clustered in the urban centers. They represent approximately 71% of the Kenyan population.<sup>2</sup> They are a force with energy that cannot go ignored. However, not all writers on hip hop agree that rappers have the insight to actually revolutionize or create sustainable political solutions to problems. For example, John McWhorter, in *All About the Beat*, questions whether hip hop can truly revolutionize and prefers to equate hip hop as "feel-good, meticulously crafted music"; in fact, he outright holds that the music fails to move people forward despite their ambitions.<sup>3</sup> However, many Kenyan youth have embraced the messages of hip hop, speaking issues of unemployment, inequality, corruption, disease, housing conditions, and living life on the edge. Hip hop quickly emerged in the 1990s joining in on a political conversation with an appeal that crossed local, national, and global boundaries.<sup>4</sup>

Hip hop in Kenya offers insight that can help us identify the complexity and importance of interactions between the African Diaspora, Africa, and the World.<sup>5</sup> This study argues that hip hop can revolutionize Kenyan youth listeners by providing messages for healing, empowerment, and unity, thus planting the seed for change. This research examines the work of artists from Nairobi and Mombasa in the group, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau as a case study. The group has made strides to use hip hop music to make a difference in the Kenyan slums. The group is creating a revolution different from their Mau Mau forefathers that fought a physical war; their war is a spiritual one designed to fight by educating, uplifting, inspiring, and calling to action listeners to embrace change.

There is a connection between hip hop in Kenya and the history of Mau Mau revolution from 1952-1960.<sup>6</sup> The historiography of Mau Mau reveals the nature of the topic, one that is difficult to define, often obscure, and contradictory. Marshall Clough's 1998 work *Mau Mau Memoirs, History Memory & Politics* examines some of the debates within Mau Mau historiographies. Mau Mau does not fit into a neat category; it is a history full of varied interpretations, truths, and untruths. This is exemplified by the question, *what is Mau Mau?* Was it a revolution, rebellion, tribal revolt, a nationalist movement, or something else? This question is posed in Aiteno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale's 2003 publication *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*. This question continues to linger and many in Kenya, like the youth, are vocal about their Mau Mau perceptions. From the war's commencement in October 1952 to its end in 1960, details and facts have been blurred and polarized with tales of African savagery spreading among British populations in the colony and in Britain, to narratives of heroic African fighters seizing back their land and freedom. Although the Mau Mau revolution led to the dismantling of British colonial rule and eventually Kenya's 1963 independence, the fruits were short-lived and the promises were unfulfilled.<sup>7</sup> The reasons for the failures and shortcoming are complex and not limited to Kenya, as many other African countries are still dealing with the disappointments of independence and post-colonial aspirations, expectations, and hopes. The unrealized freedom struggle in Kenya and in Africa has much to do with its history, specifically the legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism. However, freedom is always urgent and on the minds of those who are not free. What is particularly engaging is how many Kenyans, especially the youth population, have responded to what is viewed as an unfinished fight.

In Nairobi, "The Theatre Company" uses the theatrical stage to boldly question, "*Are We Here Yet?*" in a dramatic musical about two Mau Mau fighters still living in the forest and fighting for freedom.<sup>8</sup> The play reveals the fighters' struggles with Mau Mau aspirations, fears, and past actions in light of how Mau Mau has been reinterpreted and remembered. It is clear from the discussion that followed the play between cast and audience, that Kenyans are unclear on their final freedom destination.<sup>9</sup> Despite the ambiguity of the play, the "freedom struggle" discourse continues to resonate with many Kenyans. It is clear that Mau Mau continues to find new expression and new energy with hip hop serving as a powerful medium to help Kenyans redefine their lives and economic constraints. There are many different pieces to this dynamic puzzle. With this in mind, this study will examine various components to discern how and why these factors connect together and what they reveal about the nature of hip hop in Kenya.

## Dandora's State of Emergency: Hip Hop in Nairobi, Kenya, 1990-2012



Figure 1.0 – The Birthplace of Kenyan Hip Hop - Dandora, Kenya 2011<sup>10</sup>

In Nairobi's Dandora slums, residents are experiencing what should be viewed as a state of emergency on a daily basis because there are many basic needs not being satisfied. Although the Kenyan constitution claims that "everyone has the right to healthcare, to access adequate housing, to live in sanitary conditions, to be free from hunger, to have clean and safe water, security and education", these rights are in violation in the slums of Dandora.<sup>11</sup> In Dandora, there is little employment and food, limited or no clean water sources, over-crowdedness, poor sanitation, and crime. To make matters worse, Dandora is the only trash dump site for 3 million inhabitants of Nairobi; the smell and pollution levels are problematic. Hip hop surfaced in Dandora in the 1990s through Ukoo Flani Mau Mau.<sup>12</sup> Hip Hop music made a political and national mark when the song, "Unbwogable" by the group Gidi Gidi Maji Maji became the theme song for an eventual political party winner. Gidi Gidi Maji Maji was initially apart of the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau family, but are now on their own.<sup>13</sup> The group appropriated hip hop and created a movement through the music.<sup>14</sup>

The music of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau is a revolutionary form that began in Nairobi in 1994. At this time, three artists, Kamau Ngigi, Robert Matumbai Joni, and John Vigeti, joined forces and entered several music competitions under the label of 3D crew, which by 1996 transformed into the well-known group called “Kalamshaka”.<sup>15</sup> But, it was due to the growing national and international recognition and success that eventually led the group to form under the identity, “Mau Mau Camp,” a label associated with the group’s resistance to following what is now viewed as the more commercial hip hop forms. Through growing popularity, fusion, unity, and cooperation from Mombasa to Nairobi, the group called Ukoo Flani changed their name in 1999 and turned into the conglomerate of many different groups called “Ukoo Flani Mau Mau”.<sup>16</sup> Consistently, the group has revealed the powerful two-way exchange and influences that exist between music, identity, and political matters.<sup>17</sup> The activism in the group goes beyond the stage. Ukoo Flani Mau Mau regularly conducts community outreach programs with children in Dandora centers. This study is a focused treatment of the perceptions associated with the artists working under the label of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. The group’s embracement and connection to their Mau Mau grandfathers represent an important narrative that deserves treatment in the hip hop discourse in Kenya. The group should not be viewed as equals to Mau Mau fighters, but a new kind of revolutionaries that decided not to follow the commercial hip hop forms and instead use their identity, memory, and history of Mau Mau to recreate a different struggle through hip hop.

## **Mau Mau History, Silencing, and Memory in Kenya**

In 1952, resisters of British inequality and domination launched the Mau Mau rebellion against British colonial administration<sup>18</sup>. Despite successfully ending British colonial rule in Kenya in 1963, the war disproportionately impacted Africans with large casualties, detention, and violence. Economic deprivation, stolen land, social constructions, and lack of political representation were the major factors that led to Mau Mau. Economically, there were problems as far back as 1930 in the Central Highland where the land was appropriated to British settlers. Policies on livestock, taxation, forced wage labor, low wages, urbanization, and racial discrimination also played a role in creating unbearable economic conditions. Some of the key issues were tied to internal Kikuyu conflicts associated with the changed conditions and roles of women, young men, and the poor. Politically, tensions increased dramatically following WWII, and African labor was exploited even more. For Africans, there was little political representation and outlets for grievances and groups like the Kenyan African Union (KAU) founded in 1942 who were ineffective in fostering change with the colonial government. The constitution was clearly in favor of serving the interest of the settlers. Together all of these economic, social, and political tensions merged to contribute to the grievances attached to the Mau Mau movement.

Unresolved and painful histories like Mau Mau that go untreated carry visible scars in the present. The Mau Mau scars are pervasive in modern Kenya. What really happened and what is remembered is always an interesting relationship as it is often shaped and crafted by those in the position to record and publish their version of the story. Mau Mau history and historiography is a contested space full of many truths and untruths. According to colonial perspectives, Mau Mau activities were shaped in the shadows of savagery and barbarism.<sup>19</sup> Publishing power has favored colonial narration, but these colonial accounts differ from Mau Mau fighters and other Africans like Josiah Kariuki, Karari Njama, and Waruhiu Itote who showcased their authority and version of the story. Unfortunately, these polarized views and issues have been exacerbated for decades since the war, limiting our understanding of the history of Mau Mau - a history with destroyed Mau Mau war documents and secret files. However, after nearly 50 years, the Mau Mau ban is over under President Mwai Kibaki, creating new spaces for Mau Mau remembrances. As a result, new Mau Mau narratives are emerging from the testimonies from surviving Mau Mau fighters speaking out against the atrocities experienced during the war to the hip hop artists questioning Mau Mau aftermath.<sup>20</sup>

The memories of the ex-fighters, decedents, and millions of others impacted by the war are sharpened with new Mau Mau information. New scholarship by Carolyn Elkins and David Anderson show the dirty side of the Mau Mau rebellion, from the battleground and colonial courts to the detention camps, and help confirm and recast memories.<sup>21</sup> The nature of Mau Mau and Mau Mau historiography is important because it helps explain the significance of the treatment of Mau Mau knowledge and history in hip hop music. The connections forged by the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau artists are responding to a very important aspect of Kenyan history aimed to help the Kenyan fans resolve this past and use it as a source of unity and strength.

### **“Ukoo Flani Mau Mau” Identity**

One of the first indicators of the mission of a group lies in how they call or identify themselves. The name of hip hop group, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, serves as a reminder of the group’s purpose and identity. Like many African naming practices, the name of the group actually came out of their collective “Mau Mau” consciousness.<sup>22</sup> This evolution was explained by one of the group’s founders, Kamau Ngigi:

In 1998, before we recorded the first track/song, “Tsifiri Hii”, we had problems with the producer, up town but spoke English; never recorded (we were trying to since 1996). There was rebellion inside that studio, because we are not trying to be what they wanted us to be. Our response, “We are a part of the Mau Mau camp”. This statement pulled us. By 1999 we were considered Mau Mau and if others wanted to join the artistic group, they had to embrace Mau Mau past and culture.<sup>23</sup>

According to Ngigi, the use of Swahili assisted in the appropriation of hip hop in Kenya and signaled a new energy in the group, consciously deciding not to follow the more commercial forms of hip hop. Commercial hip hop is typically associated with gangsta rap, thugs, foul language, degrading messages, abuses of women, and embracement of drugs, criminality and the fast life that sells albums. Commercial hip hop is lucrative compared to conscious hip hop artists but the cost of the damage created by commercial hip hop is still unknown. However, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau decided to take a different path, putting their community and people first by focusing on their own “hood” and underground meaningful messages that would inspire and unite listeners.<sup>24</sup> They were resisters and agents of change. The resistance also involved acknowledging and accepting Mau Mau past and remembering the heroes. These heroes include controversial individuals like Dedan Kimathi who was a leader in the Mau Mau rebellion and executed in 1957.<sup>25</sup> Kimathi is a symbolic figure for the hip hop group; he is featured in graffiti art and often center of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau songs like *Angalia Saa*, which translates in English as “look at the clock/watch”. Figure 2.0 depicts the graffiti art of Dedan Kimathi pictured on the wall located in the Dandora slums of Nairobi.<sup>26</sup>



Figure 2.0 Mau Mau hero Dedan Kimathi Graffiti Art –  
Dandora, Kenya – July 2011

According to Kamua Ngigi, one of the founders of the group, the “Ukoo Flani” part of the name means certain tribe<sup>27</sup> (note “flani” is a contracted Kiswahili word derived from “fulani” which implies a certain tribe that is either unknown or the speaker deliberately refuses to refer to directly) and the “Mau Mau” was to symbolize the clan. The identity was that the members were all united as Mau Mau clan. However, the “Mau Mau” component of the name requires analysis as it reveals the complexity of Mau Mau identity and can serve to help explain the identity of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau.

The logical literal translation of “Mau Mau” does very little in assisting with its meaning; the name lacks direct translation in Kikuyu and Swahili. However, it was associated with many different origins, which can lend some insights about Mau Mau. Njama and Kariuki were both consistent in their accounts to view the term “Mau Mau” as “the White man’s name for the movement” and both held that the term was never used by Africans and never accepted by Africans.<sup>28</sup> However, the discourse of the Mau Mau name has changed over time and now is used and embraced by many Africans, especially the youth, as a form of power. Also, as reinforced during the field research, “Mau Mau is a name that was actually taken over from Mau Mau freedom fighters.”<sup>29</sup> One explanation, according to Mau Mau fighter Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, in *Mau Mau Detainee*, is that “Mau Mau” meant “Go, Go.”<sup>30</sup> In another interpretation, Kenyan historian John Lonsdale, in the article “Mau Maus of the Mind,” holds that one of the most plausible accounts is that the word comes from “*Kau*” as the colloquial for the Kenya African Union (393). In Swahili, “*ka*” is considered a diminutive prefix, so the application of Mau instead of “*Kau*” meant one, with the repetition of the words (“Mau Mau”) meaning something larger in scope (Lonsdale, 393).

In another view, authors Donald Barnett and Karari Njama trace “Mau Mau” to 1950 documents describing a group of nineteen Africans accused of oath binding (51). Barnett and Njama also note that there was not a translation of Mau Mau into Kikuyu or Swahili and that there is “no generally accepted meaning or origin for the term Mau Mau” (54). It was associated with various interpretations and words. For example, it was often linked to “*Uma, Uma*” meaning “Out, Out” referring to the African desire to have the Europeans out of Kenya (Barnett and Njama, 53). Barnett and Njama show how Africans used the words to describe the movement. They associated Mau Mau with words or phrases like: “*Uiguano wa Muingi*” to mean “The unity of the community movement”; “*Gikuyu*” to mean “the founders of the Kikuyu tribe”; “*Muhimu*” to mean the “most important”; “*Muigwithania*” to mean “the unifier”; and “*Muma*” to mean “oath of unity” (Barnett and Njama, 54-55). The term has now been recreated and refashioned in Kenya, which is most evident by the deliberate use of the name with hip hop artists in Kenya.<sup>31</sup> The adoption of “Mau Mau” in Ukoo Flani Mau Mau clearly indicates awareness and acceptance of the relationship between the Mau Mau past and the Hip Hop present.

## Analysis of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau Surveys and Interviews

In order to understand Ukoo Flani Mau Mau intentions, messages, and perceptions, it was necessary to collect information from the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau artists and individuals familiar with their music. Although these participants are referenced sometimes as “fans”, not all support them.<sup>32</sup> Between April 2011 and July 2011, about 50 surveys and interviews were collected in Kenya in two phases.<sup>33</sup> The data was captured on printed forms that were read to participants and later typed into survey and interview files. The research areas were concentrated primarily in (Nairobi’s Dandora Estate) Dandora, Kenya but information was also collected in Nairobi, Westlands (Nairobi), Njoro, and Nakuru. The ethnicities of the participants were Kikuyu, Kamba, Luo, Kisii, Kalenjin, and Luhya. But the bulk of contributors were from the Kikuyu ethnic group. The survey statistics for gender and age have been pulled from the second phase data collection. In terms of gender, approximately, 75% of the individuals polled and surveyed were male compared to about 24% female. Although the aim was to have gender balance, males were more available, willing to talk, and familiar with the music of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. In terms of age, 60% of the participants were between the ages of 18-24; 18% were between the ages of 25-29; and 21% were between the ages of 30-45. Figure 3.0 in the appendix lists selected questions asked in the survey. The questions were designed to better understand the different views on the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau relationship to Mau Mau, hip hop, and power. Though small in terms of the number of participants, the data yielded valuable, in depth information. Results in Figure 4.0 reveal participants were overwhelmingly positive in their response to whether there was a link between the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau music and Mau Mau. They all expressed knowledge of Mau Mau history; 90% expressed that the music reflects the history; and over 80% noted a clear connection between the hip hop music and Mau Mau directly.

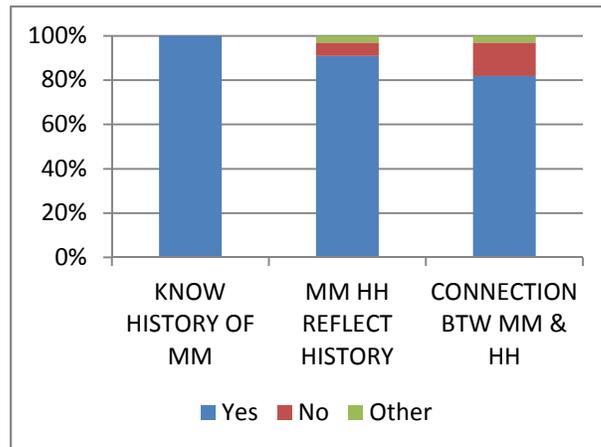


Figure 4.0 Survey Analysis – Kenya 2011  
Aggregate Responses to Questions related to: Is there a Link between the Music and Mau Mau?

Although the survey results provided insight, questions of the relationship were clarified even more during interviews. In 2011 interviews, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau artists and fans were asked, “Please explain your interpretation of the title of the group, “Ukoo Flani Mau Mau”. What does this name mean to you? What do you think it means to the group?”<sup>34</sup> The responses offer insight into how the group is perceived, identified, and represented. The answers fell into three dominant themes: love, struggle/liberation, and Mau Mau freedom fighters. On the topic of love, there is a phrase connected with the group, “Love everywhere, and pray for the teaching of the Creator that a way is found.”<sup>35</sup> This statement surfaced frequently, speaking to the spirit of love, peace, and clear spiritual connection of the group. The message expressed by some fans and artists was that through hip hop music, the group aims to help use love and the power of the Creator as a force for equality and justice; in addition, there is the consciousness and clear memory of the past. The new hip hop revolution was a spiritual one, deeply rooted in the past. The notion of this statement is also prevalent in the songs. For example, in *Hip Hop Halisi* with the female artist Nazizi, the main chorus states:

Swahili	English <sup>36</sup>
<i>Ipe upendo hip hop halisi</i>	<i>Show/give love to the real hip hop</i>
<i>Kwenye streets mitaani machizi</i>	<i>In the streets and neighborhoods</i>
<i>Ukoo flani tunahitimu kwenye kaya za mabaa</i>	<i>Ukoo Flani we have graduated from the temples of our forefathers</i>
<i>Vile inafaa</i>	<i>The way it should be</i>
<i>Ipe upendo hip hop halisi</i>	<i>Show/give love to the real hip hop</i>
<i>Kwenye streets mitaani machizi</i>	<i>In the streets and neighborhoods</i>
<i>Ukoo flani tunahitimu kwenye kaya za mabaa</i>	<i>Ukoo Flani we have graduated from the temples of our forefathers</i>
<i>Vile inafaa</i>	<i>The way it should be</i>

The song shows the spirit and importance of spreading love and empowerment.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, some interviewees viewed the name as one associated with struggle and liberation. For example, one response was: “The name tells more about the reason why the group was formed. It was to carry on Mau Mau struggle through hip hop music.”<sup>38</sup> In other accounts, participants say the name is used to “carry on the anti-colonial Mau Mau struggle,”<sup>39</sup> and they feel that the “struggle runs throughout their music.”<sup>40</sup> In another interpretation:

The Mau Mau title is a symbol of Kenya’s liberation struggle. Therefore, I think the title is used to mean that the group wants to keep the liberation struggle on...it is about the struggle that they have entered into so that they can liberate the society from oppressive economic, political and social structures . (B.C.M.)<sup>41</sup>

The message of struggle is an important dimension because through the name and the content of the song's lyrics, it is clear the artist and fans collectively acknowledge a necessary "call to action" or "fight" which is linked to the longer and larger struggle that has existed in Kenya since the days of British colonial rule. The "struggle" concept connects to the notions of liberation/emancipation. Several respondents connected the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau name with liberation. For example, in one account it was stated, "The title shows that the artists have stood for the truth that will liberate the society."<sup>42</sup> The idea of truth is an important part of the music, and one aim is to attempt to educate listeners so that they are knowledgeable about their history and their existing placement in society as a means for emancipation. In another response, the interviewee holds, "the title illustrates the originality and depth of underground hip hop. It goes beyond music for the sake of art to music of liberation. To the group, I think this means struggle. The struggle for a better society is still on."<sup>43</sup> In all of the interviewed accounts, it is clear that the title of the group appears, with a few exceptions, to embody music with a message and purpose to fight and to bring deliverance.

The last theme identified by the majority of participants on the Ukoo Flani name was the group's connection with Mau Mau freedom fighters. Responses illustrated that the artists were using the title to "compare their struggle to that Mau Mau freedom fighters,"<sup>44</sup> and in another comment by a responder, "Ukoo Flani Mau Mau means a given clan of Mau Mau, the group is connected to Mau Mau freedom fighters in ideology."<sup>45</sup> The continuity of Mau Mau is a message that resonates and is supported by the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau songs and lyrics, and therefore it is not surprising that fans are making the connection and understanding the revolutionary nature of the music. Through hip hop some of the artists have made connections to Mau Mau to invoke and remember the unfinished.<sup>46</sup> The Mau Mau freedom fighters fought a physical war, but hip hop is a mental one.<sup>47</sup> This statement is the best summary of the freedom fighter connection and how the hip hop artists view themselves within this struggle. Collectively, the research analysis on the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau name reveals that the group has been very successful in establishing a clear and conscience identity under the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau umbrella. The name is far from random, but has been used to help establish unity and membership based on a shared Mau Mau history of resistance that is meaningful and relevant to the injustices that so many youth living in Dandora and other urban centers of Kenya face.

## **The Political Messaging of Hip Hop**

Hip hop music can serve as a vehicle to address political matters, as well as provide a source of power for those that feel that they have been marginalized from political discussions. The artists are responding to the troubled moment, and this movement is being fueled primarily by millions of frustrated underemployed and unemployed youth who listen to the music. The hip hop message is meant to inspire and uplift. Like all productions, the political production of hip hop starts first with an understanding of the consumer, the youth, and their needs. In the hip hop study *Native Tongues*, Jenny Mbaye discusses the impact of hip hop on youth politics:

Hip-hop music has become a concrete means for young people to affirm their rights to differential identities and alternative socialites. This musical genre has provided a form in which an alternative public space can be nurtured and a differential praxis of the city, in cultural and political terms, can be developed. (51-52)

## **Youth Are Necessary in Conveying Political Messages**

The language of the message is obviously important. In *Hip Hop Africa*, Jean Ngoya Kidula refers to the process of “Making Rap Kenyan.” A major component of this process is centered on the use of language in hip hop. As Kidula points out, and which is also supported by the discussed survey and interview analysis, hip hop in English only alienated some Kenyans, so the use of language varieties offered unity and the ability to clearly communicate the messages. Artists used the dialect called *Sheng* based on a combination of English, Swahili, and other Kenyan languages with meaning understood by the group. Thus, language helped to disperse the hip hop message by embracing all fans and potential fans despite ethnicity, religion, gender, and location.

Several key questions were posed to understand the perception of hip hop statements, messages, and empowerment. The hip hop lyrics and statements are not just words; on the contrary, they are a collection of long narratives, stories, and meanings similar to storytelling but with messages clearly focused on encouraging and educating Kenyans on the current political, economic, and social conditions. Several questions were asked to attempt to understand how fans perceive and view the messages of the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau artists. However, for this analysis three questions will be explored as a sample to understand the hip hop messages and statements.

One question asked fans to reflect on the following question, “*Why do you think Mau Mau Hip Hop has been so popular in Kenya? Do you think it has something to do with the messages and memories associated with Kenya’s colonial past?*” The responses fell into several themes. First, the name was portrayed as a factor in their popularity. “Mau Mau is a big name, not just in Kenya but the whole world...but the group is relevant for Kenya. They talk about what people go through. They fight alongside ordinary people in their struggles. They give a way forward and solution to societal problems.”<sup>48</sup> Another theme was that their messages convey the same problems that were faced by Mau Mau. For example, consider the second liberation struggle posed by one commenter:

The problems that Kenyans grapple with are so much related to what they used to experience during the colonial times, only that the oppressors is not White but Black. Just the way Mau Mau was famous in Kenya during the colonial times for their fight for independence, so is hip hop popular in its fight for the second liberation. (K. John)<sup>49</sup>

In addition, the music conveys struggle that is very clear to fans. The hip hop message is about life struggles that are still very similar to life experiences during the colonial times.<sup>50</sup> Another fan states that the hip hop messages give a voice to many Kenyans.<sup>51</sup> The theme of struggle is the most pervasive message that is represented through the music, but it is one that is effective because it is relevant to listeners. As several respondents articulate, the music “talk[s] about what many youths go through like hustling”<sup>52</sup> and the messages are understandable as they “talk about what Kenyans know that is in a language that is understood by all Kenyans.”<sup>53</sup> This point reflects the theme that the hip hop message is relevant. From the interviews, it was clear as one interviewee articulated, “hip hop tells the message that Kenyans want told, in the colonial times it was a fight for freedom - political freedom...Presently, it is still a fight for freedom – economic freedom; freedom from tribalism, corruption, and misrule.”<sup>54</sup> The words truth and knowledge surface often under this theme; there is a growing desire for the youth to want to know the realities of their current situation so that they are more informed. Hip hop’s pursuit of truth is an objective of the group. The messages appear designed to promote justice based on what the artists hold as truth. In addition, the music is described as entertaining and educational. In many ways, this implies that most fans view the Ukoo Flani artists as moving beyond just entertainment, but representing hip hop with a political agenda by creating new levels of fan awareness. One fan commented, “Their message is powerful and educational. They talk about issues affecting many Kenyans; diseases, corruption, immortality, unemployment, poverty, etc...”<sup>55</sup>

In another attempt to understand the impacts of hip hop music and culture, fans were asked to reflect on their favorite song/lyric. They were asked to respond to the question, “*What is your favorite hip hop rap or lyric? Explain your selection. What does it mean to you and why?*” The open-ended nature of this question allowed for the fans to showcase what moved them about the music. The songs all appear to embody messages that are political and inspirational in nature. Although there were no major themes, there were varieties in the selections that in many ways point to the appeal of the different artists. However, there were some top picks that will be useful in this analysis. The Ukoo Flani Mau Mau song, *Kama Si Sisi* (If Not Us) by Juliani, was a popular response. The message is simple, as one interpreter accounts: “The responsibility to change the society rests on us, you and me...Siachi mpaka nchi inipe number plate ya red [I will not stop until the society gives me a red number plate]...I will not stop calling for change until the society recognizes my effort.”<sup>56</sup>

Another fan translates the main message of this song as, “it is up to us to change the course of events in the society. That we should not let the politicians dictate everything for us. This means that the voice of the people is the strongest.”<sup>57</sup> This song is without question political in nature, asking listeners to take a stand to make a change. Another popular song, *MAU Double* by the artist Wenyaji, provides a summary of the music designed to enlighten people and even addresses the placement of money or lack thereof in the society. A key statement in English from the song states, according to one responder, “You parade your clouds on money, we parade ours on wisdom”.<sup>58</sup>

The Ukoo Flani Mau Mau political message and position is far from simple. Although the artists are not experiencing the economic security of commercial hip hop artists in Africa or the United States, the artists have used their music to empower listeners providing content that is relevant and desired. This empowerment is rooted in finding elements of unity through the use of language and through their imagined history of Mau Mau freedom fighters. Hip hop in Kenya is a response to the political and economic conditions, planting the seeds for revolutionary change. This message is confirmed by even analyzing the common verbs and expressions to describe the impact of Ukoo Flani Music like feeling, “connected,” “uplifted,” “educated,” “renewed,” “united,” “liberated,” “influenced,” “emancipated,” “inspired,” “not oppressed,” and believing “it is better to die fighting for your rights than live as a slave.”<sup>59</sup> The words and message convey this “revolutionary” position.

## Conclusion

The potential of hip hop to revolutionize is actually in the hands and minds of the artists and listeners receiving the message. Although still unfolding, change has to come to Dandora and the many other impoverished communities in the world where economic injustice and disparity is evident. Hip hop is revolutionizing Kenyan youth listeners by providing messages for healing, empowerment, and unity. Despite McWhorter claims in *All About the Beat* that hip hop is unable to truly revolutionize and move people forward, this study holds that it is very possible that hip hop can act as a catalyst for a new revolution in Kenya.<sup>60</sup> McWhorter appears to minimize the power and history of grassroots revolutionary developments in America, African Diaspora, and Africa that used words, pledges, affirmations, oaths, dance and songs to energize, mobilize and strengthen members. The power of conscious hip hop is not simply in the beats, but the use of words in combination with other elements (like music and dance) to create a meaningful spiritual experience and messages based on shared connections and unity. Again, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau’s revolution is different from their Mau Mau forefathers that fought a physical war. Instead of taking up arms and machetes to the forest to fight, the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau artists are conducting a spiritual war designed to fight by educating, uplifting, inspiring, and calling to action listeners to embrace change.<sup>61</sup>

This point was firmly and directly addressed during a classroom presentation in the United States. During this visit, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau founder, Kamua Ngigi was asked by an undergraduate student attending the University of Texas if he was trying to start a revolution. After a long pause, Kamua Ngigi responded with the simple, soft, yet powerful statement, “Yes, we are starting a revolution!”<sup>62</sup> The class fell silent. Without question, this is a different type of revolution.

## Appendix

Figure 3.0 Selected Survey Questions<sup>63</sup>

<b>Selected Field Questions for Survey Analysis</b> (note the term Mau Mau hip hop was used as an expression to classify conscious hip hop music in Kenya)
Do you feel powerful, connected, strengthened, and uplifted after listening to Mau Mau hip hop/Rap music? Why?
Do you think Mau Mau hip hop is important today in Kenya? If yes, explain why briefly?
Did you know about the history of Mau Mau prior to listening to the Hip hop/rap lyrics?
Is there a spirit to hip hop music?
Is Mau Mau hip hop spiritual? If so explain
Is Mau Mau hip hop a political, social, and cultural practice for justice in Kenya?
Do you see a connection between Mau Mau and hip hop music? Explain this connection.
Do you think there is a relationship to rapping and oathing during Mau Mau? Explain Why?
Is there power in the spoken word? Do you think hip hop provides a form of spoken word power? If yes, why?
Is Mau Mau hip hop an effective way to unite, energize, and inspire people today in Kenya?
Individuals that listen to Mau Mau hip hop are bad people or society outcasts?
Is Mau Mau hip hop or rap associated or viewed as a practice associated with criminal activity? If yes why?
Do you think Mau Mau hip hop has had a positive impact on Modern Kenya? Explain.

## **Interviews**

- K. Ngigi. Interviewed by author, Texas, United States, February 2012
- R. Chombo. Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Westlands, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011.
- G. Grongi. Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011.
- Z. Mwaura. Interviewed author and by F.M. Ndaka. Roy Sambu, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011.
- J. Macharia. Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011.
- D. Munywoki Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011.
- M. Musyoki. Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- S. Ngigi. Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Westlands, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011.
- F. Olendo Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011.
- O. Muraya interviewed by author. Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011.
- K. Pearson interviewed by author. Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011
- K. Sewer Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Pangani, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011.
- R. Raballa. Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011.
- N. Jim Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011.
- B. Kitwa Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011
- N. Grang Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011
- A. Rose Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011
- M. Justus Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011
- B. Mweche Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 2011
- W. Kisia Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011

B.C.M Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011

M.Musyoki Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011

J. Ndungu. Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011

K. John Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011

Y. Nnoiz Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011

K. Michael Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. April 2011

0008(Anonymous). Interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka. Dandora, Nairobi, Kenya. July 201

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interview, K. Ngigi, interviewed by author, February 2012. Kamua Ngigi (Kama) is one of the founders of Kalamashaka ( and Ukoo Flani Mau Mau) a Hip Hop group based in Nairobi, Kenya.

<sup>2</sup> Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, Kenya Population and Housing Census, August 2009. <http://www.knbs.or.ke/Population%20by%20Single%20years.php>. Accessed, March 24, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> John McWhorter, *All About The Beat: Why Hip Hop Can't Save Black America* (New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 2008), see inside flap and page 59.

<sup>4</sup> The Hip Hop development in Kenya mirrors in some ways the transformation of Hip Hop in the United States surfacing from the marginalized neighborhoods in New York with rap lyrics and beats that spoke to their culture, experiences, and position in society.

<sup>5</sup> For more and the treatment of African historiography, see Eric Charry, *Hip Hop Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1-25. Also, these interactions are often dismissed and minimized, but are connections that have actually intensified as a result of the new and improved communication technologies that are faster, more frequent, and more visual.

<sup>6</sup> This is most evident in the music of the artists connected to Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. This grounded form of hip hop is also referred to in this study as "Mau Mau Hip Hop" to represent a conscious hip hop type in Kenya that is aware of their history and able to use it as a source of power and unity.

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<sup>7</sup> Although there are many blurred notions about Mau Mau, the fact that Mau Mau helped inspire and led to Kenyan Independence is not a major debate point. The major points of debate are still around understanding and defining Mau Mau, understanding the nature of the war and the knowledge produced, and discussing the aftermath/consequences which are points that some hip hop artists are attempting to treat in their music.

<sup>8</sup> Muraya, Ogutu. *Are We Here Yet?* Play performed on July 10, 2011. The Theater Company, Nairobi, Kenya.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, Ogutu Muraya and Keith Pearson, Nairobi, July 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, K. Ngigi, February 2012. Ukoo Flani Mau Mau co-founder, Ngigi describes Dandora as the birthplace of Hip Hop in Kenya.

<sup>11</sup> The Constitution of Kenya, The Official Law Reports of the Republic of Kenya, Nairobi: National Council for Law Reporting, 2010 p. 24

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Kamau Ngigi, United States, Texas, February, 2012. The group

<sup>13</sup> Personal Communication, Kamau Ngigi, United States, Texas, May 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Kamau Ngigi, United States, Texas, February, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Kamau Ngigi, United States, Texas, February, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Joining Kamau, Joni, and Robi, were now new groups and individuals that follow this mantra and understanding like: Washefa, Mashifta, Kitu Sewer, Joga, Malcom X, Wakamba Wawili, Kah, Mombasa Ukoo Flani, Wenyeji, Gidi Gidi Maji Maji, Juliani, and female artists, Atu Kandi, and Nazizi.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the author's argument and relationship between music and politics see Joyce Nyairo and James Ogude's "Popular Music, Popular Politics: Unbwogable and the Idioms of Freedom in Kenyan Popular Music" in *African Affairs*, 104, no. 415, 225-249. See page 226.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the economic systems of exploitation, see Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis*, p. 91.

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<sup>19</sup> See one of the first colonial writings on Mau Mau, Frank D. Corfield, *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1960), 5.

<sup>20</sup> On June 23, 2009, five elderly and fragile Mau Mau veterans entered the British Courts to sue the British government for the atrocities committed against them during the Mau Mau period. *BBC On-line News*, “Kenya Mau Mau Veterans to Sue UK,” May 11, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8043442.stm>.

<sup>21</sup> See Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2005) and David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain’s Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nelson, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Author often uses the term “Mau Mau Hip Hop” to express this specific genre of conscious Hip Hop based on Kenyan history and united struggle.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, K. Ngigi, February 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, K. Ngigi, February 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Kimathi has been the center of a new Mau Mau discourse with the building of a statue in his honor, signaling a shift from his character to one of a Kenyan hero. But, this was not met with controversy or resistance. Nevertheless, his position continues with a recent celebration of his birthday in his hometown and requested a Kimathi monument in Nyeri, see: [http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?articleID=2000069700&story\\_title=Residents-decorate-Kimathi%E2%80%99s-hometown-on-his-birthday](http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?articleID=2000069700&story_title=Residents-decorate-Kimathi%E2%80%99s-hometown-on-his-birthday) by The Standard Newspaper, Marion Ndung’u “Residents decorate Kimathi’s hometown on his birthday”.

<sup>26</sup> Photograph taken during field work in Dandora, Nairobi in 2011.

<sup>27</sup> The spelling of Ukoo Flani is deliberate and should not get confused with Ukoo “Fulani.” This connection was asked specifically during fieldwork to understand if there was a connection to the Fulani ethnic group. However, this may be an area for more study.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> Interview/Survey, K. Michael, interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.

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<sup>30</sup> See Josiah Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee* (Nairobi and London: Oxford University Press, 1963). Europeans thought they heard as Mau Mau participants urgently disbanded. Kariuki also pointed out that the words “Mau Mau” was never used by the actual forest fighters or those apart of Mau Mau, instead it was a term used by others in describing the revolt.

<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that the term is Mau Mau is free of debate. There is still resistance and disagreement about Mau Mau, mostly as it connects to the groups in the Kenyan Government and British Government.

<sup>32</sup> These listeners are sometimes referred to as fans, but only because they have at least heard or have some knowledge of the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau group. This was a requirement for individuals to participate in the survey and interview process.

<sup>33</sup> There were interviews conducted in April 2011 mostly preliminary analysis and July 2011.

<sup>34</sup> See Appendix, Survey Analysis, July 2011, Nairobi, Kenya.

<sup>35</sup> Interview/Survey, N. Grang, 0008 (Anonymous), Y. Nnoiz, 0011, and 0012, interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Translations conducted by F. Mutunga, Kenya

<sup>37</sup> Nazizi is not Ukoo Flani Mau Mau but she is a close to members of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau and like family to the group. Personal Communication, Kamau Ngigi, United States, Texas, May 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Interview/Survey, K. Michael, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Interview/Survey, M. Musyoki, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Interview/Survey, J. Ndungu, interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Interview/Survey, B.C.M, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Interview/Survey, W. Kisia, interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.

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- <sup>43</sup> Interview/Survey, 0008(Anonymous,Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>44</sup> Interview/Survey, K. John, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>45</sup> Interview/Survey, BMB, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview, K. Ngigi, Texas, United States, July 2011. Ngigi mentioned that he and other members of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau had grandparents that fought in the war.
- <sup>47</sup>Interview, K. Ngigi, February, 2012. Texas, USA.
- <sup>48</sup> Interview/Survey, N. Grang, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>49</sup> Interview/Survey, K. John, interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>50</sup> Interview/Survey, B. Mweche, interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>51</sup> Interview/Survey, J. Ndungu, interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>52</sup> Interview/Survey, A. Rose, interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>53</sup> Interview/Survey, M. Justus, interviewed by author and F.M. Ndaka, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>54</sup>Interview/Survey, BMB, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>55</sup> Interview/Survey, C. Mutui, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>56</sup> Interview/Survey, A. Rose, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>57</sup> Interview/Survey, K. Michael, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>58</sup> Interview/Survey, 0008(Anonymous), Nairobi, Kenya, July 2011.
- <sup>59</sup> Interview and Survey Analysis, Collected results, Nairobi Kenya , July 2011

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<sup>60</sup> John McWhorter, *All About The Beat: Why Hip Hop Can't Save Black America* (New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 2008), see inside flap and page 59.

<sup>61</sup> Interview, K. Ngigi, February, 2012. Texas, USA. But, this was a statement that was also informally communicated by other Ukoo Flani Mau Mau artists in July 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Interview, K. Ngigi, February, 2012. Texas, USA

<sup>63</sup> List of Selected Survey Questions, April and July 2011. Questions outside the scope of this study have been removed. In some cases, participants were asked to explain more, this additional information was collected for each response to help better interpret the analysis.