MEANING AND MULTIPLICITY

Complexity and Play in Tanzanian Hip Hop

David Kerr

Introduction

Since the 1980s, hip hop has become a vital element of cultural life across Africa (Charry et al. 2012; Clark et al. 2013). A significant body of scholarship has developed analysing hip hop’s role as a critical space of expression for young people excluded from social, economic and political life. Particular areas of focus have been the emergence of African hip hop and its relationship with global hip hop culture (Toop 1991; Ntarangwi 2009; Osumare 2007). As well as the role of African hip hop as a site of social commentary, political expression and resistance (Clark and Koster 2014; Haupt 2008; Osumare 2001), it is also theorised as a space through which young people refashion themselves in the neo-liberal present (Shipley 2013). This chapter examines the life and lyrics of a single, but significant, Tanzanian rapper, Hashim Rubanza. Using literary theory, hip hop studies and scholarship on cultural production in Tanzania, it aims to develop a critical method for interpreting Tanzanian hip hop texts. Drawing on Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s (1988) theory of ‘Signifyin(g)’ as an African American practice of playfully multiplying interpretative possibilities, this chapter argues that Hashim’s hip hop texts emerge from hip hop practices of signification and East African Swahili traditions of linguistic play.

As George Ogola (2017) argues in his book Popular Media in Kenyan History: Fiction and Newspapers as Political Actors, popular culture in Africa is complex and multifaceted. In Kenya, he suggests popular culture cannot easily be reduced to expressing class interests, marginalisation or resistance (Ogola 2017, p. 35). This paper responds to Ogola’s invitation to explore
the multifaceted nature of popular culture in East Africa by engaging with the subtle and intricate ways in which Hashim’s hip hop lyrics play with ideas. I argue that Hashim’s complex and sophisticated texts are popular with Tanzanian hip hop fans precisely because they are somewhat abstract and open to interpretation. In my wider research on masculinity and street performance I have found everyday social life in Dar es Salaam to be suffused with acts of verbal ingenuity and play. As Alamin Mazrui (2007) and others have argued, in Swahili-speaking societies “the poetic is often invoked in regular social interlocution, the boundaries between poetic language and conversational language are not always easy to define, and the two are in constant conversation with each other” (Mazrui 2007, p. 70). An important element of the argument I make this chapter is that linguistic play and textual interpretation are a vibrant part of Tanzanian everyday life. These practices of textual interpretation are embedded in a cultural ecology in which “subtlety in language. . . saturated in metaphor and double entendre” is prized (Askew 2002, p. 76). The streets of Dar es Salaam are full of texts in the form of song lyrics, street literature, kagas and inscriptions on dala dalas (city buses), the meaning of which is often ambiguous and open to interpretation (Callaci 2017; Topan 2006). Hashim’s texts are part of this long tradition of subtlety, multiplicity and playfulness in the use of language in Dar es Salaam.

**Introducing Hashim Rubanza**

Hashim’s recordings have not circulated widely in Tanzania and have largely been popular among a small community of hip hop fans. Yet, despite having made only a handful of recordings during the 1990s, for many in Dar es Salaam’s community of hip hop practitioners Hashim is a seminal, almost mythical figure. AY, one of Tanzania’s most successful popular musicians, described Hashim to me as “Bad news. I appreciate him more than he knows. There are a lot of people, a lot of artist that appreciate him for his new ideas” (Interview Dar es Salaam 2006). For many hip hop fans in Dar es Salaam, Hashim seems to represent the latent potential of incipient expressive paths. His status in this community rests, in large part, on his complex and consequential lyrics. Hashim’s lyrics skilfully use the multiple meanings of Swahili words and their resonance in local discourses to create a dense web of potential readings. This practice of multiplying interpretative possibilities is akin to what Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes as signifyin(g). For Gates, signifyin(g) the intertextual practice of borrowing from other texts is the central African American cultural trope. Gates uses the Yoruba trickster figure of Esu as a
symbol of signifyin(g) practices, which “by tropological revision or repetition and difference” create a “double voiced” speech (Gates 1988, p. 96). He argues that through these intertextual practices African American texts speak back to each other, the difference between the denotative and figurative meanings of words opening a space for multiple interpretations. In this chapter I argue that Hashim’s texts signify in a distinct way, employing both East African practices of textual ambiguity and the signifying history of hip hop.

Hashim spent his formative years in Michigan and developed a deep familiarity with hip hop culture, artists and songs. On returning to Tanzania in the 1990s, Hashim made a small number of recordings. However, by 2006, when we met, these were no longer available to purchase nor regularly played on the radio. His time as a performer has left Hashim with extensive networks in the Tanzanian music industry, including close friendships with studio owners, producers and other rappers. The multiple readings that can be given to his lyrics retain the capacity to captivate hip hop fans in Tanzania. A decade after Hashim’s songs were recorded, for example, there was a page discussing Hashim’s lyrics on the Tanzanian-run website TZhiphop.com. This celebrity and fame comes, in part, precisely from Hashim’s decision to stop recording and the paucity of the material available about him. Outside of the circle of hip hop MCs and dedicated fans Hashim is largely unknown. The reputation that he continues to have among his fans is based on how elusive the meaning of his music and his identity are. As the rapper D-Knob told me, “The respect he created is bigger than his music” (Interview Kiwalani Dar es Salaam 2011). As a well-connected and influential figure in the Tanzanian hip hop scene, Hashim appears occasionally in the margins of the scholarly literature (Kerr 2020, p. 24; Perullo 2007, p. 268; Mbuya 2014, p 191; Higgins 2009, p 106). During the decade or so that I have been conducting research in Tanzania, several rappers, producers and hip hop fans have expressed the desire for Hashim to return to making music. This potential not fully realised, or musical direction under-explored, seems to entice the imagination of Tanzanian hip hop fans.

The meaning of many of Hashim’s most popular songs are abstract and elusive. Tanzanian rapper D-Knob describes Hashim’s lyrics as “more conscious, you could be listening to his music and wondering what is he thinking?” (interview 2011, Dar es Salaam). While this chapter will not try to answer the question D-Knob poses, it explores the ideas that Hashim articulates in his song texts and some of the lyrical techniques used to express these. The complexity and multiplicity of meanings that can be brought to Hashim’s lyrics, as well as his own often mercurial approach to presenting himself as an artist, suggest a desire to play with, rather than fix meaning. One way we could read Hashim’s play with meaning is as a post-modern expression in which, as Zigmunt Bauman suggests, “the snag is no longer how to discover, invent, construct, assemble (even buy) an identity, but how to prevent it from sticking” (Bauman 1996, p 25). Rather than representing some sort of postmodern malaise, Hashim’s texts are a sophisticated creative response to Tanzanian practices of textual play and hip hop histories of signifying. To return here to Gates, my aim in this chapter is to begin to develop a novel approach to analysing these lyrics from within the ecology of textual practices in which they have emerged. More broadly, this chapter argues for an interrogation of African hip hop lyrics that moves beyond reading them for what they can reveal about the politics of youth in the post-colony to explore rappers as “dusty foot philosophers” (Clark 2018).

The research for this chapter was carried out over a decade-long relationship in which Hashim and I have been friends and frequent collaborators. Over the last ten years, Hashim and I have frequently participated in each other’s projects. In 2009, during a long period of fieldwork in Dar es Salaam, I stayed with Hashim for 6 months at his home in Namanga, Msasani. It was during this time that we began to develop a collaborative creative project for which we
Meaning and Multiplicity

received funding from the UK Arts Council. This grant enabled Hashim to take up an artistic residency in the UK in 2010, and during these six weeks he stayed with me in Birmingham. During his residency he met with, and contributed to, several arts organisations, artists and cultural entrepreneurs in Birmingham. He was interviewed on the radio, performed at a public event and recorded a body of recordings alongside the important UK MCs Juice Aleem and Kosyne. Over the intervening years we have frequently discussed whether, and how, to make these recordings public. This somewhat complicated archive of sonic and verbal texts form the basis for this chapter.

The chapter is oriented, analytically and methodologically, to co-creating and co-constructing knowledge with Hashim. In 2020 we co-authored an article Sounding Tanzania in the studios of Dar es Salaam, which appeared in volume 3, issue 3 of the Riffs: Experimental writing on popular music. The lyrical texts which form the basis of this chapter were co-created during Hashim’s artistic residency in the UK. Translation of the lyrics involved a process of reading my initial translation together, whether in person or through WhatsApp calls, and discussing alternative possible meanings for words or phrases. All of the translations in this chapter have been co-created using this method. Our collaboration over a long period of time and across a range of projects is both complex and messy.

Hip Hop Practices

I was introduced to Hashim Rubanza in 2006 during my first research trip to Dar es Salaam. In the weeks that followed that first meeting, Hashim frequently invited me to accompany him as he travelled around the city. At the time, he worked as a property broker and would collect me as he drove to a property deal. Business often involved lengthy periods sitting outside properties waiting for buyers and sellers to arrive. As we waited for Hashim’s clients to arrive, he entertained with freestyle rap performances. It was immediately clear that Hashim was a talented rapper and charismatic performer. These freestyle performances lasted up to twenty minutes at a time as Hashim’s lyrics responded to events happening on the street outside. It was during these impromptu performances that the idea that would later coalesce into Hashim’s artistic residency in the UK first emerged.

As was evident during these first meetings, Hashim regards rapping as an art to be taken seriously, one which requires skill, knowledge and practice. The act of MCing and hip hop itself are often described by Hashim as ‘the art’, a term which has deep roots in hip hop’s history. For Tanzanian hip hop fans Hashim suggested to me that “if you got skills, there is no discussion there. People like skills” (Interview Dar es Salaam 2009). Drawing on idioms from wider hip hop discourse, Hashim conceptualised these skills as “flow”, “rapport”, “punch lines” and “mathematics”. As articulated by Hashim flow and rapport are the subjective qualities of the relationship of the rapper’s voice to its musical accompaniment. Rapport is the bonding of the rapper’s voice to the beat; in essence the ability of the rapper to ride the beat. Flow is, for Hashim, the “harmonious continuity of words and beat” (Interview 2020) described by Adam Krims as the sum of all the elements in an “MC’s rhythmic delivery” (Krims 2000, p. 15). Punchlines “are bars that conclusively make points, using double entendres, homophones and or puns” (interview 2020) to forcefully make a point. Mathematics are the “micro calculations . . . which create rapport, flow, punchlines and rhythmic complexity” (interview 2020), which Oliver Kautny describes as “using the vowels and consonants to form a mostly rapid and rhythmical highly organized flow of syllables” (Kautny 2015, p. 101). Example of mathematics can be seen in the compact web of rhyming syllables in many of Hashim’s own lyrics.
Hashim’s conceptualisation of rappers’ skills demonstrates his deep familiarity with global hip hop culture. However, the signifying practices he employs speak not only to hip hop history but are embedded in East African cultures of meaning-making. As Hashim entered adulthood in the 1990s, the Tanzanian state abandoned the project of African socialism and increasingly began to encourage young people to find their own means of making money. Hashim comes from an educated, if not wealthy, family. This location between the poor and the elite has given Hashim particular access to both vernacular and intellectual discourses. His lyrics engage with a heterogeneous range of popular, intellectual and religious references which makes them open to such a range of interpretations. As we will see, Hashim’s ideas were shaped by the pan-Africanist, socialist ideas of Ujamaa and the radical intellectual environment of the University of Dar es Salaam. References to the radical ideas that circulated at UDSM can be found in Hashim’s songs, alongside ideas circulating on the streets of Dar es Salaam.

One way in which Hashim generates this multiplicity of meaning is through his use of a number of pseudonyms, each with a distinct ‘voice’. These personae articulate particular perspectives, using distinct expressive techniques. Mwenda wazim (the madman) is a persona Hashim used when performing freestyles, in which the delivery of lyrics could be unconventional, agitated and less linear. What mwenda wazim communicates is also frequently controversial and unorthodox; it is a persona that allows Hashim to express opinions which seem crazy or at odds with social consensus. The persona Mwana Haram (the illegitimate child) delivers his lyrics more slowly, more deliberately and more calmly than those of wenda wazim. Lyrics by Mwana Haram are controversial, addressing illicit and illegal topics. Dogo (the child), perhaps the most prevalent of all Hashim’s personae, speaks with the voice of the mnyonge (the meek) – those who are disenfranchised and marginalised. The lyrical deliveries of dogo are complex and the images in the songs woven together. Hashim’s final persona is Hashim, who raps largely in English and often addresses the topics of his songs in a socially and politically conscious way. Hashim describes these various voices that he has employed throughout his career as central to his creative practice saying:

If I look back now at my history in music, I look at it and I am like shit, there is no solid identity. But I can see trends, there are numerous, a few different identities that pop up and I can even pinpoint and tell you this one here is that guy, I can tell you the state of mind of each one. In over twenty years these guys kept coming back.

Pseudonyms have been widely used by musicians, poets and politicians in Tanzania (Omari 2011, p. 70). In her book The power to name: a history of anonymity in colonial West Africa, Stephanie Newell (2013) unpicked the multiple modes in which pseudonyms operated. She argues that pseudonyms acted as means through which authors could resist colonial modes of classification, as well as drawing on West African traditions of naming which resist Western notions of a singular identity. In Hashim’s case, I argue, these multiple public identities are “playfully mischievous, experimental” and allow him freedom to move between the identity positions and not to be fixed to a singular identity (Newell 2013, p. 21). For Hashim, the use of pseudonyms introduces ambiguity about the relationship between the speaker and the text, creating an additional way in which he can play among the meanings in the texts. In explaining the different names he adopts Hashim uses the image of possession as a metaphor for how he occupies his multiple identities as an artist.

That some people are either cursed or blessed I don’t know which one it is but they are cursed with what we Muslims like to describe as Djinns. There are people who
possess a few of them you know you have two, three, four, five, sixteen, twenty, whatever the number. In western psychology this can be described as multiple personality disorder, where you have a guy who sometimes is this way and sometimes is that way. . . . I thought it would have been interesting to have played around with that.

Hashim playfully describes his identities through reference to local Islamic practices. For many Muslims in Tanzania, Djinns represent something of an uncertain force that can be both benign and dangerous. Djinns engender forms of subjectivity which exist within, but are separate from, the individual in whom they reside. Djins are in the self, but not of the self. If identity is a metaphorical form of possession, identities are not of the self but are a relationship to an external force.

**Biography**

Hashim was born in the late 1970s in Bukoba, a town in Northern Tanzania close to the Ugandan border. Shortly after his birth, Hashim’s father was admitted into a PhD programme to conduct a study on Haya verbal morphology at the University of Michigan (Rubanza 1988). The family moved to Lansing, Michigan, where they lived for several years off campus in Spartan Village. Growing up in the United States had an important influence on Hashim’s intellectual and creative development. Spartan Village was a predominantly white neighbourhood, though Hashim’s school was multicultural and attended by the children of academics, visiting scholars and students. These formative experiences developed Hashim consciousness both racial and African identities. Groups at the school formed loosely around racial identity, and Hashim began to feel part of a community made up of African American children and those from other African countries. When describing the experience, Hashim makes reference to the concept of the “third culture kid”, developed by sociologist Ruth Hill and popularised in the late 1990s by David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken in their book Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds.

It was during this time that Hashim first encountered hip hop. His older sister, then in her early teens, was a popular music fan and regularly brought home cassettes of new music. In the early 1980s, at the time when the Rubanza family was settling in the United States, hip hop was growing in popularity and Hashim’s sister began to bring home hip hop cassettes. As Hashim says of his early experiences of listening to hip hop,

> I recall myself sitting next to the radio listening to Easy-E and what Easy-E said, the first few lines he said never, I never wrote this down but I never forgot this. (Hashim then recites some lines from Easy-E Duz It). I never forgot that, that has always been in my head, I never forgot that.7

*(Interview Dar es Salaam 2009)*

From the age of 7 Hashim was “drawn and lured into hip hop” and began memorising and reciting the lyrics of American hip hop songs on his sister’s cassettes (Interview 2020). On the way to and from school Hashim would practice rapping with Simba one of his close friends, describing listening to songs like The Fresh Prince of Bel Air’s ‘Parents Just Don’t Understand’, released in 1988, as “experience for the first time something that speaks on your behalf” (Interview Dar es Salaam, 2009).

In 1990, following the completion of his father’s doctorate, the family moved to Dar es Salaam where his father took up a position at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM).
In the United States Hashim had spoken little Swahili and it was on returning to Dar es Salaam that he immersed himself in the language and culture of Tanzania. By the early 1990s, Tanzania had begun to move away from the policies of Ujamaa African socialism which had characterised the post-Independence era. However, the history and philosophy of Ujamaa continued to be taught at school and the importance of concepts such as kujitegemea (self-reliance), haki (justice), Uhuru (Independence) and umoja (freedom) emphasised. The ideas of Ujamaa, as well as a critique of the iniquities of colonialism and the continuing exploitation of a neo-colonial global economic order were, therefore, ideas with which Hashim became familiar.

Hashim's intellectual development was also influenced by the community of radical scholars by whom he was surrounded at UDSM. In particular, Hashim developed a close friendship with James Wamba, a neighbour and the son of another of the academics at UDSM, the noted political scientist Professor Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, who was at the time a member of the history department at the University of Dar es Salaam and one of the founding members of the philosophy club there. Professor Wamba was an important part of a community of radical pan-Africanist, socialist and anti-colonial scholars at UDSM. His politics, conduct and approach to debate had a profound influence on Hashim who describes him thus:

Professor Wamba was in a rebellion against Mobutu and Kabilla. He had been imprisoned. There has always been a constant struggle. He would speak even to us. He would throw out philosophical question for us to grapple with. He was very critical and critical of the status quo.

Debates at the house of James and Professor Wamba-dia-Wamba, as well as the wider radical, political and critical environment at UDSM, were critical in Hashim's intellectual development. It was here that concepts and ideas about the nature of freedom, inequality and the predicament of the post-colony that resurface throughout Hashim's lyrics were discussed.

During the years living on the UDSM campus Hashim began to write his own lyrics, and it was through the medium of hip hop that he found a space to express his thoughts and ideas. Hashim started a hip hop group with rappers Sos B and Jam B called Black Houndz. At this time, a vibrant local hip hop scene was developing in Dar es Salaam and the first hip hop recordings were being made and aired on the radio. In the 1990s, there were few recording studios in Dar es Salaam producing hip hop, and the opportunity to record was highly prized (Rubanza and Kerr 2020).

In 1993, at the age of 16, Hashim was able to make his first recording with one of the most significant emerging producers of hip hop in Tanzania, P-Funk Majani. The song went on to receive some play on radio stations in Dar es Salaam. A later recording ‘98 Born Hell’ explored ideas of liberation and justice influenced by the 5 per cent Islamic ideology. On returning to Tanzania as a teenager, Hashim had begun to explore Islam, attending Sunni as well as Shia Mosques and taking lessons from Shabbir Hassan-Ali. Through their mutual interest in hip hop, in particular the lyrics of Rakim, James Wamba and Hashim were exposed to the ideas of 5 per cent Islam. Their radical notions of themselves as Gods, their own inventive naming practices and the links with hip hop culture fascinated Hashim. While Hashim was not an adherent of 5 per cent Islam during this early stage in his career, he drew on its discourses in his lyrics. Hashim’s early recordings were contemporaneous with many of the artists who have become known as the originators of hip hop in Tanzania including Kwanza Unit, Hard Blasters, GWM
and the Villains. He has however, made a considerably smaller number of recordings and these recordings do not circulate freely in Dar es Salaam.8

Instead of pursuing a career as a rapper, Hashim chose to establish a collective of young men which he called Kikosi cha Mzinga (The Tank Battalion). Located in a compound in the Block 41 area of Kinondoni the collective sought to provide an alternative path to creative expression and recording outside the institutions of the mainstream music economy. Hashim felt that his ability to freely express himself was constrained in the popular commercial music economy, describing his experience thus:

I had problems with producers because I would always express what I wanted to express. Part of it is because hip hop is not new to me, I know what it is all about, it’s about expression, freedom of expression in fact.

In the collective, the art of rapping was taught and provided a medium through which to interrogate and articulate views on a range of social issues facing young men. In Kikosi, rapping provided a practice through which young men could be mentored. Hashim’s approach to the Kikosi collective was grounded in his own experiences at UDSM; this was to be a space in which those without access to higher education were able to interrogate ideas and develop their ability to express themselves. Political and philosophy texts he had become familiar with while at UDSM were used as catalysts for debate. He describes the approach of the collective at the time as:

defiantly a Pan-African stance. We felt that the Tanzanian pan-Africanist didn’t have a voice. We covered the basic stuff, you know, Fanon, Che Guevara the biography of Malcolm X. To give Tanzania a Pan-African voice.

Kikosi was a space for discussion, creation and performance. As the singer and Block 41 resident, Carola Kinasha describes the collective

When I came to their so called kijiwe and I sat with them, we talk, I realised that these kids are reading. You know whoever has a knowledge more than the others will come and give it in a very informal way.

The Kikosi collective was a distinctly masculine space that sought to teach and mentor young men on their changing roles in society. Its name, and the adoption of military titles and a military sartorial style within the group, evoked a physical, combative and military masculinity.9 For Hashim, Kikosi was a space of learning, debate and creative experimentation. Existing outside the constraints of the commercial music industry and the influential cultural brokers at Tanzanian radio stations, Kikosi was to be a space of creative freedom. As a result, songs performed by the group used forceful and profane language on occasion, language which would not be played on the radio at the time. The lyrics of many of the group’s members, including Hashim, delivered a robust critique of contemporary politics and the difficulties faced by young men in post-colonial Tanzania.

His time as part of this masculine collective is reflected in a number of Hashim’s songs. The lyrics of the untitled song below, recorded while he was in Birmingham, describe masculine friendship and having fun despite limited financial means. While the song does not directly address the Kikosi cha Mzinga collective, it speaks to a young man’s experience with his friends. In a further reference to the street life of the Kikosi collective, the song uses several terms such as kula bata,
buku and kidosi from lugha ya mtaani (street Swahili). Widely spoken and understood by young people in Dar es Salaam, lugha ya mtaani locates the song as speaking from and to the street.

Haya tusahau matatizo angalau ilivyo
Tujipe udau likizo yenye malipo walau,
Kitivyo hicho ni cha Mafalao
Igizo litafana lau kama huna mafao kihivyo, au sivyo?
Na hakuna makau kau tulizo
Ni kitu cha Bau Bau kwenye vikao au sivyo,
Moshi tupu, kikosi changu hakikosi buku,
Mikosi huku, hata bibie anafosi huku
Ukokosa bata hukosi kuku
Misosi tupu, cha kidosi nakichapa na utosi huku,
Kutojishuku ni kanuni ya kwanza,
Kutothubutu kupakaza utamaduni nawaza.

Let’s forget the problem a little
Make ourselves the boss and give ourselves a paid holiday
The luxury of the Pharaohs
This can be beautiful even if we don’t have money
There is no makau kau, instead
There is something from Bau Bau in our meeting
Smoke is all over, my squad is never without a thousand shillings
It’s crazy here, the women are forceful
If you don’t get duck (fun/luxury) you will get chicken (fun/luxury)
Food is here, the Indian product (marijuana) gets sent to the brain here
To have confidence is the first formula,
Don’t tell, I’m thinking about culture (the art of hip hop).

While Hashim is steeped in a deep understanding of hip hop as a global art form, his lyrics are a dense web of allusions to discourses in Dar es Salaam. In her seminal book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* Tricia Rose (1994) uses signifyin(g) to theorise how hip hop intertextual lyrical and sampling practices are creative acts of “repetition and recontextualization” (Rose 1994, p. 73). As Gates argues in his forward to *The Anthology of Rap*, the “signature characteristic” of hip hop is “parody and pastiche” arguing that hip hop

Figure 19.2  Musical Recording by Hashim Rubanza, Produced by Myke Forte, Recorded and Mixed by DJ Cro, Birmingham 2010. The recording can be accessed by selecting Figure 19.2 (ZIP 2.7MB) under Support Material at the bottom of the weblink
"is the art form par excellence of synthesis and recombination" (Gates 2011, xxiv). Drawing on these observations, this chapter argues that Hashim’s practices of signifying are part of Tanzanian, Swahili language and post-colonial cultural ecology of playing with meaning. Hashim frequently draws on the multiple meanings of Swahili words to create a web of allusions and a multiplicity of interpretations, leaving his lyrics open to being read and re-read. This signifying practice allows Hashim playfully to avoid fixing the meaning of his texts. His texts refer to an array of discourses, popular, intellectual and religious, enabling them to be read and interpreted as playfully signifying their relations to their referents.

Collaboration

When I first encountered Hashim, in 2006, he had left Kikosi cha Mizinga and was no longer actively engaged in the hip hop scene in Dar es Salaam. His decision to cease involvement with music was multifaceted. In part, it was a response to the strictures of the Tanzanian musical economy and the constraints it imposed upon his ability to express himself. However, another significant element of the decision was related to Hashim’s faith and his desire to follow the obligations and prohibitions of Islamic practice. Whether music is permissible is a source of debate in Muslim communities across the globe (Niang 2014). For Hashim, the debate about whether or not music is allowed in Islamic practice remains unsettled and is one of the main reasons for his decision to no longer perform as a rapper. These concerns are reflected in the lines from the song Jua Kwa Jua (Scratching the surface) quoted in the opening to this chapter. Hashim is at the Mosque when his fans come to ask him if he will return to making music, his answer being that for the meagre money that the industry offers he will not return.

Despite this conflict Hashim was keen to take the opportunity to develop the Arts Council bid and seemed to relish the opportunity to meet other musicians and artists that his artistic residency in Birmingham offered. When he came to the UK in 2010 to record music he had not been recording or performing for more than five years. During his six-week stay in the UK, Hashim collaborated with a number of producers and rappers, making sixteen recordings at the studio of DJ Cro in Stirchley. It is this somewhat complex archive of recordings and texts which forms the basis for this chapter. In the ten years since they were recorded, Hashim and I have, on many occasions, had discussions about if and how we might make the recordings public. As we began, recently, to work together on more conventional research outputs, the idea of using the songs in an article or book chapter emerged. The songs chosen to appear as part of this chapter do so, in part, because they do not contravene Islamic practices or contain profanity.

In 2010 Hashim arrived in Birmingham for his six-week artistic residency. The residency involved meeting local music producers, rappers and cultural intermediaries. Through a nationwide network of hip hop producers that had coalesced around the Louis Den events run by rapper Kosyne in Birmingham, we established contact with several up-and-coming producers. Some producers living in Birmingham came to meet and create beats with Hashim.

In many of the songs that Hashim recorded in Birmingham, it is the art of rapping, creative practice and the act of being an artist that are the central themes. In the song Maisha Yale Pale (That Life There), written while Hashim was in Birmingham, he describes the difficulties of progressing with musical projects. The song, as is characteristic of many of Hashim’s lyrics, speaks to multiple Tanzanian discursive registers.

Huwezi kusonga ukikataa vumbi miguuni
Dunia kama jukwaa na huu ukumbi wa mhuuni
Nang’aa hata nikoge maji ya chumvi na mbuni
No way forward without getting your hands dirty
The world is like a stage and this hall is for hooligans (this hall is mine)
I shine even if I take a bath in hard water with mbuni (local soap)

These lines show Hashim’s propensity for playing with dense rhyming patterns, as the last two words of each line rhyme. In the second line Hashim describes himself as *mhuaui* (a hooligan), a pejorative term which has been co-opted by many young men on the streets of Dar es Salaam to refer to
themselves. He thus situates himself firmly as a member of, and participant in, the street culture of Dar es Salaam. This location is further emphasised through his use of several terms drawn from *lugha ya mtaani* (street Swahili), such as the term *nang’aa* (to shine), to describe his success.

In the section that follows, Hashim makes a somewhat tongue in cheek comparison between himself and the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Like Ngugi, Hashim suggest that he is not read or understood. This playful reference to one of the grand figures of African literature alludes to Hashim’s familiarity with the idea that his texts are deeper and more complex than those of other Tanzanian rappers.

In his songs, Hashim often address the experience of the artist and their relationship to wider society. The song *Mnyonge* explores many of the difficulties Hashim experienced during his early musical career and addresses the freedom of artists to express themselves. The title of the song *Mnyonge* (humble or meek) signifies on discourses from the Ujamaa period which celebrated the meek, in contrast to the unproductive and lazy who were termed *wanyonyaji* (exploiters).\(^{11}\) Hashim signifies upon these discourses, contrasting the ‘true’ artist who speaks to society with those who would seek to prevent artistic expression.

In his songs, Hashim often address the experience of the artist and their relationship to wider society. The song *Mnyonge* explores many of the difficulties Hashim experienced during his early musical career and addresses the freedom of artists to express themselves. The title of the song *Mnyonge* (humble or meek) signifies on discourses from the Ujamaa period which celebrated the meek, in contrast to the unproductive and lazy who were termed *wanyonyaji* (exploiters).\(^{11}\) Hashim signifies upon these discourses, contrasting the ‘true’ artist who speaks to society with those who would seek to prevent artistic expression.

This text is narrated from the position of the artist and addresses those who are envious of him. The lyrics of *Mnyonge* draw on a tradition of rap battles, and in them Hashim asserts his supremacy and skill. The text can be read as a reference to jealousy of Hashim’s talent and standing within Tanzanian popular music.

This text is narrated from the position of the artist and addresses those who are envious of him. The lyrics of *Mnyonge* draw on a tradition of rap battles, and in them Hashim asserts his supremacy and skill. The text can be read as a reference to jealousy of Hashim’s talent and standing within Tanzanian popular music.

\[\text{Kama Ngugi hamnisomi} \]
\[\text{Hamjifunzi kwa masumbwi au ngumi} \]
\[\text{Utafikiri ninazungumza na wajumbe mbinguni} \]
\[\text{Situngi nabuni} \]

Like Ngugi you don’t read (understand) me
Lesson has not been learned fists and punches
Like I’m talking to angels,
I don’t just make shit, I create shit

\[\text{Maisha yangu mimi ni maisha yangu,} \]
\[\text{Nyiinyi mnachokipata kwa kunifuata fuata ni nini} \]
\[\text{Na matatizo kibao, nahitaji likizo} \]
\[\text{Kama unaona na kipaji kichukue kama ndivyo} \]
\[\text{Najihisi ka na laana ya Ibilisi} \]
\[\text{Najihisi kama Ghana kombe la Dunia Bondeni}\(^{12}\)\]

My life is my life
What do you get from following me (being in my business)
I got mad problems, I need a vacation
If you think I got talent, you can take it
Feel like I am cursed by the devil
Feel like Ghana at the world cup in South Africa

This text is narrated from the position of the artist and addresses those who are envious of him. The lyrics of *Mnyonge* draw on a tradition of rap battles, and in them Hashim asserts his supremacy and skill. The text can be read as a reference to jealousy of Hashim’s talent and standing within Tanzanian popular music.

\[\text{Ni rahisi kuzungumza unapo kuwepo pembeni} \]
\[\text{Sote tuna taka pepo mapepo pembeni} \]
Figure 19.4  Hashim Rubanza and Myke Forte in Moseley Birmingham Creating Music

Photograph by the author.

Nilipo kuwepo huwezi kuwepo leo, semeni
Kama vile wanataka nizile
Kama vile wanataka nisile
Wabaki wao tu
Mafao hu ambatana na fitina
Makao makuu maadui ni hao hao
Na kama hujui mambo yao ni yale yale
Kamuulize Bau Bau\textsuperscript{13}
Sijui wana taka mi nikale kwao,
Nikavae hata sare sare nao
Haiwezekani.

It's easy to talk, when you are an onlooker
We all want heaven (bliss) not things that possess you (used by Christians to describe
Djinns – possession)
Where I am you can't be today, keep talking
Like they want me to have sour grapes (to give up)
Like they don't want me eat,
So that only they remain
Money always is accompanied with problems (politics)
The capital our enemies are the same
And if you don't know the kind of shit they on – same shit
As Bau Bau
I don't know what they want, do they want me to sleep at their house
Sleep at their house, wear matching clothes
Impossible

The song might also be read as a commentary upon the money and politics that accompany
the music industry. If read in this way, the meek of the title are Tanzanian artists and the song a
critique of the conformity that the music industry seeks to impose upon musicians. The song,
if read like this, asserts the freedom of the artist for whom it is impossible to conform to the
expectations of the music industry.

The song Mysticism, recorded while in the UK, is another example of the deliberately layered and
complex web of allusions in Hashim's texts. In this song, Hashim's opening lines address the subject of
the unknown and unknowable. He opens the song with images of two visceral phenomena, the smell
or feel of marijuana and the self-consciousness felt on arrival in Europe. These two images operate as
emotive symbols for what cannot be known until experienced. Both the effects of marijuana and the
unease of heightened consciousness of your race are felt both corporally and psychologically.

Huwezi kuelezea harufu ya bangi,
Wacha wenye wainuse
Wacha waiguse
Ni kama kwepo Ulaya ukajishuku kwa rangi
Wacha wenye wainuse
Wacha waiguse

One can't describe the smell of marijuana
Let them smell it
Let them feel it
Like when you are in Europe and start feeling self-conscious of your colour
Let them sense/smell that
Let them feel it

Hashim then introduces the mystical practices to which the title refers. There is no direct refer-
ence to witchcraft in the songs opening lines, only to that which is unknown but can be sensed.
It is through reference to the song’s title *Mysticism* that we can understand what the unknown subject of the song is. *Uchawi* (witchcraft practices) are a feature of everyday popular discourse in Dar es Salaam. In the lyrics of the song, Hashim uses the idea of *uchawi* to interrogate that which is unknown. In the lines that follow, Hashim introduces the participants in these mystical practices.

Haijalishi ka unapiga hatua  
Au unapiga hisabati kama mwizi, napiga ya kuua  
Vita haviishi jua litazama litaibuka  
Kama amba la mwezi, wanga na wezi,  
Si kwamba hawawezi kutamba ambako kuna mwanga  
Ni ushenzi napanga ya kupanga yana panguka  
Wana sema kuna mchanga nimetambuka

Doesn’t matter if making progress  
Or calculating moves (hitting maths) like a thief, my hit is to kill  
The struggle (war) is never-ending, the sun will set and rise (the struggle just goes on)  
Like moonlight, it’s not that witches and thieves  
Can’t dominate in their field if there is no light.  
Wickedness, I make plans but all of them fall through  
They say somebody pulled the root on me (I have been bewitched)

In this section of the song we are introduced to the figures of the thief and the witch, who operate in darkness and the unknown. The verse describes thieves and witches as endeavouring to gain control over the author. Hashim’s description of both thieves and witches is embedded in vernacular discourses of witchcraft which circulate throughout Dar es Salaam. As Simeon Mesaki (2009) suggests, discourses of the occult are “manifested in everyday conversation, gossip or a way of speaking and means of handling day-to-day ambiguities or means of allocating responsibility, branding scapegoats for misfortunes, eliminating rivals and competitors” (Mesaki 2009, p. 132). Following Independence, the Tanzanian state sought to dispel discourses of the occult, viewing them as antithetical to building a modern socialist country. The occult, remains a vibrant explanatory framework and part of everyday practices of meaning-making (Mgumia 2020). In everyday life in Dar es Salaam, references to the occult operate as a tool for engaging with ideas of ethics, wealth
and as a means of joking, Hashim frequently references occult practices in his lyrics; these references are open, signifying on this discourse but open to multiple interpretations.

*Mysticism’s* lyrics are characterised by Hashim repeatedly using a single word open to a variety of interpretations. The Swahili word *kupiga* (to hit) changes the meaning of the noun which follows it. In this verse Hashim uses *piga* as a suffix to the word *hisabati* (maths) changing its meaning from maths to the act of calculation. In the remaining part of the line the figure of the thief who is making the calculations is introduced. If read together with the thief, the verb *piga* can be understood to refer to the common punishment administered in Dar es Salaam when a thief is caught. The final words of the line, *napiga ya kuua*, can be read directly as my hit is to kill. Alternatively if read in relation to the earlier use of *piga* as calculation, this line can be read as I am calculating to my maximum ability. If we read them as related to the figure of the thief then this could be understood as my hit will kill the thief.

Si mapema kusimama nakupiga rakaa  
Kumi na moja ngumi na hoja zimekataa ngoja

It not too soon to stand up in prayer (to perform raka’ah)  
Eleven to be precise, arguments and fists fight have failed, wait

The protagonist of the song responds to the threat of occult interference by immersion in Islamic practice. It is by performing the taraweeh prayer, containing eleven units of prayer (rak’ah) and typically practised during Ramadan, that the protagonist seeks to protect themselves from occult activities. In the response to the occult, Hashim again draws on local Islamic religious discourses as an alternative reaction.

Wanasiasa wanakwambia ni imani potofu  
Nenda kwake utakuta mganga  
Nani kipofu  
Nyie ni wanga

Politicians say this is make believe  
Go to their homes and you will find a healer (someone who cures witchcraft)  
Tell me who is blind here (we see you)  
You are witches
In the final section of the verse, the political and social discourses around the occult are addressed. This quest for power for thieves and witches in their area of expertise implies a struggle over wider social control. Since independence, politicians in Tanzania have spoken of the harm and illegitimacy of occult practices. At the same time, a widespread trope in the popular imaginary that circulates on the streets of Dar es Salaam is the notion that politicians themselves actively engage in occult practices. Discourses about *uchawi* in Tanzania have been understood to provide “imaginative moral frameworks” through which the money and power operate (Sanders 2008, p. 122). In this section, Hashim suggests that politicians are part of an occult economy employing *mganga* to cure the effects of witchcraft. Politicians are critiqued for hypocrisy for engaging in occult practices while advising ‘the people’ that these are false beliefs. We might read a further accusation of hypocrisy here in an analogy drawn between the activities of *wanga* and politicians. *Wanga* are understood to be members of the community who have one type of appearance during the day and another at night. The analogy between *wanga* and the political class references how both have an unknown and hidden nature.

**Conclusion**

Hashim’s creative practice is characterised by linguistic play which creates somewhat abstract lyrics open to a multiplicity of interpretations. In this chapter I have sought to show how these forms of creativity are embedded both in a hip hop history of signifying and in an East African cultural ecology of interpretative play. Hashim’s lyrics use the multiple meanings of Swahili words as a tool to open themselves to a variety of meanings. In this chapter and drawing on Henry Louis Gates Jr’s concept of ‘signifyin(g)’, I have sought to show how, by reading the referents in his texts, we can understand Hashim as speaking to, and riffing on, a range of popular, intellectual and religious discourses.

The main argument I have sought to develop, however, is that this multiplicity responds to the creative and intellectual environment in which Hashim’s career developed. Dar es Salaam is a site in which multiple discourses circulate, and these are deployed by Hashim to create a dense web of meaning. It would be tempting to read this as part of a post-modern literary turn in which the voices in texts are multiple and the notion of the singular authorial voice and meaning is rejected. I argue, however, that, for Hashim, this lyrical practice emerges from the expressive, linguistic and discursive world of Dar es Salaam. As a young man, Hashim grew up in an environment in which the nationalist, pan-Africanist and socialist discourses associated with the era of Ujamaa continued to circulate. At the same time the state was increasingly addressing young people through a rhetoric of entrepreneurship and self-making. These two seemingly competing injunctions were brought together in the Kikosi cha Mzinga collective which sought to teach and mentor young men in how to survive in the new private economy and among the ideas of pan-Africanism. At the same time, initiatives such as the Kikosi collective and his economic activities as a young man gave Hashim access to, and an understanding of, the everyday discussion of the street. It is this discursive heterogeneity which has given Hashim the reputation he has among hip hop fans in Dar es Salaam.

**Notes**

1 Here Msia Kibona Clark is signifying on the album title of Somali rapper Kanaan.
2 Hashim collaborated among other organisation with Nu Century Arts, Professional Incredibles, Friendly Fire, Kamba Arts, Louis Den.
3 The term the art has deep roots in hip hop – see for example the Wu-Tang Clan’s 1992 single Protect Ya Neck where Inspectah Deck raps in the first verse “Deep in the dark with the art to rip the charts apart”.

4 The idea of Mathematics in hip hop is perhaps most clearly articulated by Mos Def in his song titled Mathematics. The song uses figures to illustrate racial injustice in the USA as well as using complex rap patterns ending the chorus with the line; “You want to know how to rhyme, you better learn how to add. It’s mathematics” (Mos-Def, Mathematics).

5 Class is an important popular analytical tool in Dar es Salaam, and there are many different terms to denote class (Matawia Jua – the high branches – wakisure – those who are sure and perhaps most evocatively Utayari wa Maisha – those who are ready for life). Hashim does not fit easily into any of these categorisations. He would I suggest come from a class whose education and connections open opportunities but where the path for the future has not been made ready nor sure. Issa Shivji describes the Tanzanian middle class as “fragile and precarious” (Shivji 2008, p. 50)

6 Djinns are Islamic “spiritual forces that are either inimical to mankind or that may serve individuals through positive and enlightened guidance” (Bravmann 1977, p. 46).

7 Eazy-E was a founding member of the important and controversial West Coast hip hop group N.W.A. His Easy-E Duz It album was released in 1988 prior to the seminal and at the time highly controversial Straight Outta Compton album by N.W.A.

8 The only commercially available recording of Hashim’s rapping is his guest appearance on the song “Not Ready”, which featured on the “Maasai Hip Hop” album by Arusha-based hip hop group X-Plasterz.

9 For example the rapper Kala Pina who has gone on to lead Kikosi called himself Commander Mullah.

10 There are many prominent American rappers, including Mos Def, Rakim, Ice Cube and Ghostface Killah, who are practising Muslims. In the United States many rappers have had strong links with the Nation of Islam and Black Nationalist politics (Abdul Khabeer 2007, p. 126).

11 The term mnyonge was adopted by the revered Dansi singer Remmy Ongala who called himself Sauti ya Mnyonge (the voice of the poor) (Hilhorst 2009).

12 Dunia Bondeni, or down in the crater, is Swahili slang for South Africa.

13 Bau Bau is a friend of Hashim’s from the Block 41 area of Dar es Salaam who was involved with Kikosi cha Mzinga and has stayed in Block 41. He was the person in Kikosi cha Mzinga (reminded him of Prodigy from Mobb Deep).

14 For example, piga sim, to hit the phone, means to call a phone, or piga goli is to score a goal.

Works Cited


Meaning and Multiplicity


