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YOUTH FOR LIFE: LANGUAGE, NARRATION, AND THE QUALITY OF YOUTH IN
URBAN KENYA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	v
List of Plates	vi
List of Tables	vii
List of Abbreviations	viii
List of Language Abbreviations	x
Transcription Conventions	xi
Note on Transcriptions and Conventions	xii
Acknowledgements	xiii
Introduction	1
Pt. I	
Chapter 1	
The Quality of Youth: Practices, Categories, and Rejoinders	61
Chapter 2	
Kisumu’s Chorus of Voices	111
Chapter 3	
“ <i>Kuenda Sheng</i> ” (Going Sheng): Ideologies of Sheng and the Meaning of <i>Youth</i>	163
Pt. II	
Introduction to Pt. II	206
Chapter 4	
Talking Futures: Autobiographical Narrative and the Logic of Talent	207
Chapter 5	
“You don’t have to pray to somebody in special English”: Narrative and Realizing a <i>Youthy</i> Christianity	240
Chapter 6	
“ <i>Kujenga Mayuts</i> ” (Building the youth): Standardizing <i>youth</i> in a Kenyan comic book	276
Conclusion	317
Appendix A	328
Diana’s Narrative	
Appendix B	332
Joshua’s Narrative	

Appendix C Eunice's Narrative	334
Bibliography	338

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 0.1—Map of Kenya	15
Figure 0.2—Map of Kisumu	27

LIST OF PLATES

Plate 0.1—Lake Victoria Boys’ High School	34
Plate 0.2—Nam Lolwe Girls’ High School	37
Plate 0.3—Masani Youth Group	41
Plate 0.4—Kwetu Dance Company	45
Plate 0.5—Masani Youth Group meeting	53
Plate 1.1—“Work for Youth” (<i>Kazi kwa Vijana</i>) political cartoon	82
Plate 2.1—Advertisement incorporating Urban Swahili	160
Plate 3.1—Lyrics, “Am Living in Christ”	194
Plate 3.2—Raphael Tuju	199
Plate 6.1—Shujaaz covers	281
Plate 6.2—Testimonials in Shujaaz	286
Plate 6.3—Shujaaz cover with four main characters	292
Plate 6.4—Interviews with small-scale entrepreneurs in Shujaaz	299
Plate 6.5—Frames from Shujaaz story	311
Plate 6.6—Sheng glossary	313

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1—Clines of social meaning for selected linguistic registers	125
Table 2.2—Urban Swahili verbs	159
Table 3.1—Sheng word truncation	169
Table 4.1—Metricalization within motivational voice	230
Table 4.2—Metapragmatic framing and parallelism in narrative	235
Table 4.3—Theodic lamination in autobiographic narrative	236
Table 5.1—Narrative elements of the salvation genre	264

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AIC (African Independent Church)
- CBO (Community Based Organization)
- CITAM (Christ is the Answer Ministries)
- CU (Christian Union)
- DfID (Department for International Development, UK)
- GSU (General Service Unit)
- GTZ (German Development Cooperation)
- IRE (Islamic Religious Education)
- KANU (Kenya African National Union)
- KCSE (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education)
- KNA (Kenya National Archives)
- KPC (Kisumu Pentecostal Church)
- KPAG (Kenya Performing Arts Group)
- KPU (Kenya People's Union)
- KVDA (Kenya Voluntary Development Association)
- LVB (Lake Victoria Boys' High School, *psuedonymn*)
- MYA (Ministry of Youth Affairs)
- NARC (National Rainbow Coalition)
- NGO (Non-Governmental Organization)
- NLG (Nam Lolwe Girls' High School, *psuedonymn*)
- NYTA (National Youth Talent Academy)
- ODM (Orange Democratic Movement)

PCC (Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity)

PNU (Party of National Unity)

RIU (Research Into Use)

SDA (Seventh Day Adventist)

WTS (Well Told Story)

LIST OF LANGUAGE ABBREVIATIONS

Dh (Dholuo)

En (English)

Gi (Gikuyu)

Sh (Sheng)

Sw (Swahili)

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

<u>Word</u>	Underlining indicates some sort of stress or emphasis on the underlined item
.	Period indicates a falling or pause of (1s), not necessarily the end of a sentence or thought
::	Double colons indicate the stretching of the preceding sound
(word)	Parenthesis indicate quieter tone
()	Empty parenthesis indicate inaudible or unclear section
((word))	Double parenthesis indicate transcriber's comment
...	Ellipses indicate trailing off
(2s)	Time in parentheses indicates a pause of the indicated duration
[...]	Ellipses in square brackets indicate a break in the recording/transcription due either to a stop and start in the recording or another unrelated interruption
?	Question mark indicates a rising tone, not necessarily a question
[word]	Square brackets indicate overlapping speech

All quotations are rendered in their original languages.

Regarding plurilingual texts:

Words in *italics* represents Swahili

Words underlined represent Dholuo

Words in **bold** represent Sheng.

NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTIONS AND CONVENTIONS

Many of the transcripts that appear herein are renderings of utterances that would be recognized by speakers and other urban Kenyans as Sheng or Urban Swahili. My rendering, however, does not reflect these utterances as Sheng or Urban Swahili alone. Instead, I have chosen to represent these utterances by demarcating the different denotational codes incorporated into Sheng and Urban Swahili. Lexemes unique to Sheng (or widely recognized as unique to Sheng) are represented as such in their graphic representation. My rendering in these transcriptions is intended to give the reader who is a non-speaker of Swahili (or Dholuo) a clearer sense of the richness and density of codswitching present in each of these registers and graphically document them as genuinely plurilingual registers.

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INTRODUCTION

The wedding preparations had been in the making for months. Diana and Bernard, both in their mid-twenties, were to walk down the aisle at the local Seventh Day Adventist Church and formalize their three-year relationship.¹ Diana had been watching *The Wedding Show* on Citizen TV for well over a year and knew exactly what she needed for her white wedding. She would have a ready-made white dress from Nairobi and she would have bridesmaids, lots of bridesmaids. These bridesmaids would all wear wine colored dresses embellished with cream satin roses and made by a local tailor. We—I was also a bridesmaid—would also wear gold shoes. We would walk up the aisle in a wedding march that Diana had choreographed with a few of her friends. It would be a march unique to their wedding, one that would display style, savvy, and creativity. The groomsmen, whose line-up changed because not everyone could get the money together for the grey suits they were to wear, were matched to the bridesmaids by height and reminded to walk as slowly as possible to make the procession—the wedding’s central performance of style and swagger—last as long as they could. We would pile into the cars loaned to the wedding party by wealthier neighbors to travel to the church. We needed enough cars for everyone; no car should be seen turning back to pick up a second load. We would take the same motorcade out to the Lake Vista Hotel in Kisumu City where Bernard’s friend would take hours of photos on the posh grounds before returning to the decidedly less posh, peri-urban neighborhood where the wedding and reception would take place. The day after the wedding, Bernard and Diana would leave town for a few days to create the illusion of a honeymoon—no matter where went, they couldn’t stay at home. While they rarely mentioned it, the vast majority

¹ All personal and institutional names have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

of this would be paid for by Joanne, Bernard and Diana's American friend (and bridesmaid) who also sponsored the Masani Youth Group of which both Diana and Bernard were active members.

Bernard had been consumed by the stress of bridewealth negotiations, concerned that Diana's paternal uncles—her parents had died years before—would be greedy, demanding much more than he could offer. He had to travel to Diana's natal village near Kendu Bay to negotiate and pay bridewealth, in cash and in cows, to his future in-laws. The Seventh Day Adventist church that they would be married in required signed documentation of assent from the bride's family to avoid any embarrassing scenes on the wedding day in which the bride's family demanded more bridewealth. He had to be sure they were satisfied with him and with what he could offer. That required managing their expectations, presenting himself as a man financially stable and secure enough to support his new bride, but not such a wealthy man that they'd demand more than he could provide.

In the year and a half since their son was born, Bernard had slowly constructed a *simba* in his own natal village near Homa Bay. A hut built by a young Luo man in his father's compound sometime after he reaches sexual maturity and is thus no longer allowed to sleep in his mother's house, a *simba* is a central sign of the transition from youth to adulthood for Luo men. Building the structure marks a shift from dependence to independence. It demonstrates the capacity to build a family as much as it does the ability to amass the resources required for construction. Bernard had lamented the embarrassment of taking his wife (as he called Diana both before and after the white wedding) back to the village before he had resources to construct a *simba*. They were forced to stay at a neighbor's or in a hotel, something he was certain the village gossiped about. Now, with the *simba* built Bernard could proudly and properly take his wife and their young son back "home" on occasional visits from Kisumu City for funerals and festivities.

In the lead-up to the wedding, both Bernard and Diana told me about the pride they would feel after the ceremony. They complained that neighbors, fellow church members, kin, and even fellow Masani Youth had gossiped about them, judging the impropriety of cohabiting and having a child outside of wedlock. While theirs was the sort of relationship common across Kenya, often called a “come we stay” marriage, it is still a type looked down upon as a practice of the poor and the desperate. Before the wedding, Diana expressed with equal parts pleasure and relief that people who thought themselves better than her and Bernard would have to change their opinion after the two were formally married. She looked forward to the solid ground she could stand on as she shooed away other women who came sniffing around her husband. She could finally respond to the women who dismissed her when she spoke of Bernard as her husband, saying, “that thing is not even formalized!”

More than anything, however, Bernard and Diana were glad to finally attain status and acceptance in the church. There they had kept their cohabitation tight under wraps. Diana hid her pregnancy, staying away from the church until it was time for the baby’s dedication ceremony six months after he was born. Diana explained that in the eyes of the church, their relationship was wrong; it was as if Bernard had “stolen” her from kin and community. They also feared the disappointment of the congregation, some of whom had contributed to Diana’s secondary school fees when she was a struggling student with no parents to support her. After they were married they could officially take part in men’s groups or women’s groups (although, Diana explained, they didn’t have to leave the bible study youth groups they most enjoyed) and be full, respected members of the congregation.

Inspired by popular styles advertised on televisions, insisting on fashionable ready-made clothing, and securing multiple American bridesmaids, the wedding was full of the urban

“swagger” central to notions of youth in contemporary Kenya without entirely dismissing the requirements of Adventist and Luo tradition or the expectations of rural kin. At the same time, the entire marriage process was an exercise in struggle and performance. They cobbled together the resources to pay brideprice and build a *simba*, leaned on foreign friends and donors to fund the wedding, and orchestrated the ceremony and events that followed to display aspiration as much as status.

Having a child, paying brideprice, building a *simba*, having a church wedding, living independently, and even supporting other kin were all markers of “adulthood” that seem out of reach for many young JoKisumu, and yet Bernard and Diana still claimed youth.² A few weeks after the wedding, the seeming culmination of her transition to adulthood with its status and responsibilities, Diana considered how she could assert this new prestige as married woman and at the same time remain “youth,” a status that would allow her to take on a role as peer counselor in the Masani Youth Group. In an interview with him, Bernard repeatedly insisted to me that he was a “real youth,” and on Facebook he proudly announced that he was “Youth for Life!”

Bernard and Diana were hardly alone in their embrace of youth. Over the course of my fieldwork I encountered people of a variety of ages laying claim to the category. At times these were claims to the material resources dedicated to “the youth” by government and international aid agencies, but more often asserting “youth” appeared to be a political or ethical stance. Claiming youth was more than age and aesthetics, it meant aligning with an entire set of social qualities and commenting on the constellation of stereotypes of “the youth” in Kenya.

² JoKisumu is a Dholuo term that technically refers to people from Kisumu; I use it here to refer to Kisumu residents. Bernard supported his younger brother who had moved to the city from rural Homa Bay in 2011.

Language—the linguistic styles, voices, and discourses mobilized—was nearly always at issue in the ways people positioned themselves around youth.

The quality of youth

In Kenya, as throughout sub-Saharan Africa, elderhood with its associated wealth and authority, is the pinnacle of social status. Youth on the other hand is a status to be transitioned beyond, not gripped tightly. Marriage is a critical marker of the transition from youth to adulthood and yet both Bernard and Diana seemed ambivalent about the transition. They both sought to maintain their positions as youth while embracing the added respect they could command after formal marriage.

Their experiences in the lead up to the wedding highlight many of the themes that emerge in contemporary scholarship on youth in Africa and around the world. They were concerned about dependence and independence, both material and social. They yearned for status and recognition. And yet their story also runs against the grain of that literature, which has highlighted the struggle, frustration, and marginalization of youth in the search for adulthood. If adulthood is the status that youth yearn for, feel stuck outside of, or feel incapable of achieving, why might Bernard eschew this categorization and instead insist upon his own youth? If a young man who has fathered a son, built a *simba*, paid bridewealth, and formally married a wife still claims to be youth, not only for a fixed time period, but “for life,” what does youth mean for him?

This dissertation is a study of the processes through which the meaning of youth emerges, is meted out, asserted, and contested through language and communicative practice in contemporary urban Kenya. Recent scholarship on young people in the global south has examined circumstances in which young people lament their youth and strive, often unsuccessfully, for social

adulthood. However, as Bernard and Denise show, there are many for whom youth is a valuable category, one worth holding on to even when access to adulthood is available. As I use the term here, youth refers not only to a chrono-biological category, a relative generational position, or a culturally organized age grade or life stage, but also to an ever-emergent set of locally-salient social qualities and styles. That is, a semiotic category. It is not simply that these styles are associated with particular ages or generations, but that “youth” has also come to act as a metasign. It is a marker of a semiotic cluster—qualities, styles, and positionalities that are not necessarily contingent on age but often tagged as “youth.” Like many places around the world, in Kenya a notion of youth is complex. It includes senses of freedom, modernity, creativity, and coolness but also struggle, stymie, and dependence.

This project takes up youth in two ways, both as an ethnographic object and as an analytic. As a locally-meaningful ethnographic category, “youth” is deployed in English, Sheng (*mayouth/mayuts*) and less commonly in Swahili (*kijana/vijana*, pl.), designating a category of personhood—one that of course has political as well as social valences—and rarely as an abstract noun.³ Socially, youth are no longer children and not yet adults, and politically they are a category in need of intervention on the part of the state, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community based organizations (CBOs).

The phrase “the youth” is common, often referring to the stereotypical figure of an idle young man with few prospects for the future. I seek to examine the ways that some young people are intervening in the enregisterment of the figure of “the youth” in Kenya, that is, the ways young people work to alter both stereotypes and the qualities that “youth” invokes and invoke

³ Sheng is a plurilingual register of language associated with urban youth in Kenya. The register incorporates Swahili, English, and other local languages, relies on a Swahili-like grammar, and involves a range of different types of lexical manipulation. See Chapters 2 and 3 for more detailed discussions of Sheng.

youth. I show how a notion of it can be detached from the social category “the youth,” and mobilized beyond the bounds of the stereotyped figure of “the youth.” As I elaborate in Chapter 1, I use *youth*, demarcated with italics, to analytically capture an ethnographic process through which particular qualities become meaningful and associable, tropically deployed, reflexively worked on, and performed.

The focus of this dissertation is twofold: first, to understand the processes through which *youth* becomes aligned with particular qualities and second, to understand how young people use those alignments to make claims to recognition, resources, and opportunities. Language is central to these processes not only because it is the medium through which these claims and alignments are made but also because it is the object of reflexive activity about youth and its meaning. Language thus forms the basis for my analysis in this dissertation.

Linguistic style and communicative practices are everywhere constitutive of the social world. They are means through which actors draw lines between social types, identify people, and make assumptions about them. Language-in-use and metapragmatic commentary offers remarkable insight not only into the constant (re)construction of social categories, but also into the ways that social categories and other phenomena intertwine.

In Kenya, language plays a particularly important role in the construction of social difference. Indeed, models of ethnicity are deeply grounded in linguistic practice, which has had troubling consequences in Kenyan politics and inter-ethnic violence in the country (Lynch 2011). Language and communicative practice are also mined for information about a person’s essential nature in Kenya (McIntosh 2009). “Language essentialisms,” McIntosh argues of coastal Kenya, “stipulate deep intrinsic connections between the language and ethnically based rights, obligations, cultural patterns, or attitudes” (2010: 347). These essentialisms can extend beyond

the nexus of language and ethnicity into other forms of belonging, including youth. In Kenya the languages one speaks are not only reflections of one's class or upbringing, they also illuminate something deeply ingrained, natural, and inescapable about a person. The qualities associated with a language are ideologically transferred onto its speakers as if there were something inherently natural about the link between the two. Ideologies of language essentialism are not unique to Kenya. Indeed, around the world they offer productive means for understanding how social worlds are built and reconfigured in everyday practice.

In the remainder of this chapter, I lay out the frame for this dissertation. First, I discuss the dissertation's positioning within scholarship on youth and most particularly youth in Africa. I suggest that thinking about youth as a semiotic category—one that insists that qualities of youth are analytically and ethnographically irreducible to questions of demographics—opens up space to understand the shifting meaning of youth in Kenya, its mobility, and its value. I then go on to describe various ethnographic sites in which I conducted my fieldwork in Kisumu City, followed by a discussion of my methods in the field with a particular focus on the importance of considering addressivity in ethnographic work. I conclude with a discussion of the project's scholarly contributions and an outline of each of the six chapters of this dissertation.

Youth in Africa and the global south

Youth and more particularly the transition from childhood to adulthood has long been a focus of anthropology. Even early Africanist anthropologists highlighted youth's relationality, insisting that the status, seemingly grounded in age, life-stage, or birth cohort, is in fact much more complex. Such scholars focused attention on age grade systems (Baxter and Almagor 1978, Evans-Prichard 1940), initiation rituals (Richards 1956, Turner 1970), the complexities of

intergenerational kin relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1965, Wilson 1950), and conflict between elders and youth over authority and access to knowledge (Murphy 1980) demonstrating the uncertainties and tensions inherent in social reproduction. Rather than focusing on a single life stage as Margaret Mead (1928) so famously did, scholars like Victor Turner (1957) and Meyer Fortes (1984) considered generational logics showing that relative position within descent groups can often be more meaningful and statusful than chrono-biological age. Indeed, glaring mismatches between age and status achieved through schooling or the early accumulation of significant wealth generate conflict and anxiety about the social order just as Isaac Schapera (1966) showed in the case of colonial Botswana. Christianity, mission education, and wage labor complicated generational status relationships and new claims to authority produced different varieties of “problem youth” and panics over changes in youth sexuality. Similarly, more recent studies of emergent youth categories like the *jaombilo* in Madagascar (Cole 2005) and *bluffeurs* in Côte d’Ivoire (Newell 2012) have shown how newer youth social practices and named social types informed by transnational flows not only constantly reconfigure each other but also generate intense anxiety about social reproduction. This dissertation is part of this shift toward understanding the social, historical, and semiotic processes through which different types and typologies of youth emerge.

Stepping away from an overemphasis on violence and youth in Africa with its focus on child soldiers, witchcraft accusations against children, and violence against young people (Argenti 2007, DeBoeck 2005, Vigh 2006), Africanist anthropology has trained its gaze on the everyday mundanity of youth experience. In these studies, the everyday experience of young Africans is more about “getting by” or “surviving” and negotiating the complexities of social life when few material resources are to hand. While sexuality, marriage, and fertility often determine

young women's relative status (Bledsoe 2002, Johnson-Hanks 2005), young men's experiences and even their ability to marry is dictated by land, material resources, and formal labor dictate young men's status and even their ability to marry (Hansen 2005, Masquelier 2005). For example, young men in Ethiopia, frustrated at the lack of opportunities despite their formal education, find themselves watching films and waiting for a future that they are uncertain will ever come (Mains 2012). Similarly, young men in Senegal who are unable to find work and lack resources to marry "kill time" together in elaborate rituals of tea making and talk (Ralph 2008) and young barbers in Tanzania imagine futures and construct identities within global circuits of commodities and aesthetics amid the pain of their inaccessibility (Weiss 2009). Despite the apparent impotence of the position of youth, scholars have also insisted on youths' agency in circumstances seemingly beyond their control and have demonstrated how young people create remarkable new ways of claiming resources and status (see especially the essays in Honwana and DeBoeck 2005).

Much of this scholarship frames youth in Africa as a problem—sociological, demographic, political, and experiential. Young people are effectively trapped in youth, facing stymie, restriction, and the inability to successfully transition to more statusful positions of social adulthood. For young men in particular, youth means an inability to complete education, start businesses, find stable employment, pay bridewealth and marry, or establish independent households. The problem of youth is about more than independence; it is also about having dependents (Hoffman 2011, see also Murphy 2003).

Honwana's (2012) recent discussion of "waithood" considers the problematic in a different way proposing a compelling challenge to scholarship that has consistently considered youth in terms of transition to adulthood and extended youth as pathology. She argues that such

approaches characterize young people as failures and implicitly lay the blame on their shoulders rather than highlighting the structural conditions that have produced such impossibilities. Despite the implications of the term, Honwana insists that “waithood” fundamentally concerned with activity; it is about what young people do to cope with circumstances of inequality that have left them unable to attain conventional social adulthood. She argues that the majority of young Africans are in waithood, it is something that is “gaining a more permanent status and becoming a new form of adulthood” (2012: 27).

Stymie and waithood certainly resonate with the experiences of my young informants; however, they also offer an incomplete view of it. The youth I worked with in Kisumu rarely spoke of escaping youth. In it they saw distinct value, status and opportunity. A semiotic analysis of the category—understanding how its meaning emerges and changes in practice—allows us to see the complexity of youth in urban Africa. While current scholarship provides important analyses of the socio-political and economic experiences of youth across Africa, it has largely neglected the semiotic (and especially linguistic) processes through which *youth* becomes meaningful in such contexts, processes that are squarely the focus of this dissertation.

Semiotics of *youth*

Even amid international campaigns and programs directed at “youth” as a globally relevant age category, the growing scholarship on youth, particularly in the global South, shows that notions of youth are far from consistent around the world and we must focus our attention on the local specificities and valences of youth (Hansen 2008).⁴ In her suggestion that we view

⁴ The UN official designates “youth” as those between the ages of 15-24, while the African Union’s “African Youth Charter” extends the range to 15-35. The reader may note how often

youth as a “social shifter,” Durham (2004) importantly argued that without considering the particularity of youth’s configuration in a society and its invocation in different situations—acknowledging both its relational and indexical values—its meaning slips away. To name someone “youth” goes well beyond positioning them in a birth cohort or in chrono-biological relation to another person, it is to position him or her in relation to a variety of social attributes including dependence, authority, knowledge, and responsibility.

In Kisumu City where over 1,000 NGOs are registered (although somewhat fewer are actively operating), the valence and value of *youth* is informed by global and development discourse. Some young people are able to make consistent money by attending youth-oriented forums, training programs, and “empowerment” or “sensitization” events, most of which offer around 200KSh (approx. \$2.50) for attendance. Effective performance of youth—simultaneously indexing a sense of potential and frustration in a variety of ways—can elicit invitations to more and more forums, providing a steady stream of income. In a way, being youth could also be a part-time profession. However, as I argue throughout the dissertation, claiming *youth* is about much more than material resources.

Thinking of *youth* then requires that we attend to the semiotics of youth in addition to the unique sets of social, political, and economic circumstances that young people face. It means both determining the most socially salient contrasts to *youth* in a particular time and place, and unpacking the qualities locally understood to inhere in those contrast sets. Adulthood and childhood are often not the most relevant point of comparison and in fact, an understanding of the meanings and nuances of *youth* can be restricted by relying on those categories alone.

the 15-35 age range appears in my young informants’ formal definitions of “youth,” reflecting how deeply immersed in its institutional production they are.

In this dissertation, I move toward a focus on the quality of *youth*—a term I use to indicate not only the features of *youth*, but also their relative valuations—to suggest that a declaration like Bernard’s, to be “youth for life” is not necessarily about being stuck, unable (or unwilling) to transition, but about alignment with particular features and attributes. As I show further throughout this dissertation, notions of corruption, ease, freeness, and sincerity are terms that can be much more germane to understanding the local meaning of *youth* in Kenya than generational classifiers or a strict contrast with elderhood. Only when we tease apart its internal dynamics and contextualize its deployment and uptake can we begin to see the nuance and profound variability of the category.

Youth has meaning much greater than the experiences of young people and, as Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff remind us about the social category, “‘youth’ stand for many things at once: for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of the future. For old hopes and new frontiers” (2005: 20). *Youth* is a theme around which societies voice anxieties and debates about wider social issues and as an epicenter of social anxieties. It is no wonder that the tastes, dress, and importantly, the languages of youth also become sites of concern and often criticism (Eckert 2000). These semiotic forms offer widely visible ways of identifying *youth*, but also tracing change and pinpointing particular qualities that are then read back on individuals as belonging to the chrono-biological and socio-cultural categories that such qualities are otherwise ideologically understood to follow from. These processes of reading, remarking, valuing, and mobilizing semiotic forms as signs of *youth* are precisely the focus of my analysis of the category.

Belonging, distinction, and the enregisterment of *youth* in Kisumu City

My first visit to Kisumu City was in the summer of 2009.⁵ I arrived in the very early hours of the morning on an overnight bus from Mombasa where I had been studying Swahili. While I hadn't expected anything on the scale of Nairobi, I had presumed that Kisumu City would look a bit more like Mombasa with its various bustling districts and packed roads. When the bus came to a stop behind what I would later learn was the town's main market, I had to ask a co-passenger if this was really Kisumu—it seemed too empty and isolated to be Kenya's third largest city, with a population of around 400,000. She confirmed and I alighted the bus and went to hail a *tuk tuk*, motorized rickshaws nearly as ubiquitous in town as the bicycle taxis (Sw. *boda boda*) I had never seen elsewhere in the country. As it turned out, there was little need for the *tuk tuk* because the center of town is relatively compact and entirely walkable.

⁵ Kisumu was only granted city status in 1996. Some young residents looked at this status with a bit of skepticism. They claimed that while Nakuru is negligibly larger and certainly wealthier, the state granted the status to Kisumu to placate Luos. Kisumu City is in the far west of Kenya in Nyanza Province, sitting on the banks of Lake Victoria where the Winam Gulf protrudes from the main body of the lake. It was founded in 1901 when the British railway that began in Mombasa and snaked its way across the country finally reached its endpoint at the lake, successfully joining Uganda with an Indian Ocean seaport and securing the mouth of the Nile.



Figure 0.1: Kisumu City in western Kenya on the banks of Lake Victoria

Discerning distinction and belonging

Kenyans often talk about difference and belonging in terms of language, something that drew me to Kisumu in the first place. As I elaborate in Chapter 2, Kenya’s indigenous national language, Swahili, was touted in the independence era (1963) as a language to unify the nation (see Brummel 2009). Although it is the mother tongue of very few Kenyans, Swahili (in all its varieties) is the most widely spoken language in the country. As I came to know rather quickly in the midst of my Swahili studies on the coast (where it is spoken natively), there is a common stereotype in Kenya that Luos—the ethnic group dominant in Kisumu City—cannot speak Swahili and do not like Swahili. Drawn to the question of language’s role in national belonging and its resonance with Luo narratives of political and social marginalization in independent Kenya, I organized pre-fieldwork trips to Kisumu City only to discover somewhat different notions of belonging and difference than I expected.

My initial focus on the emergence of ethnic belonging among Luo youth rapidly gave way as my interlocutors continually drew my attention to Sheng. For some, Sheng seemed to fulfill the role Swahili was never fully able to in the country—it could unify Kenyans as Kenyans regardless of ethnicity. For others, Sheng was a dilemma, as sign of the deterioration of society and the breakdown of the nation through the mouths of the youth. In both evaluations, Kenyans vocalized wider anxieties and hopes through stances on language and the ways young people use it.

The metapragmatics surrounding Sheng were only the most obvious, named languages and registers are always the easiest objects of such commentary. Through the course of fieldwork, it became clear that *youth* was its most visible and commentable in a range of linguistic practices. Wider discourses of development and Christianity, genres invoking empowerment and self-realization, repertoires including global languages, mothers tongues, and very particular registers of codeswitching were indexical of *youth*—they not only pointed it out, they also brought it into being and constantly refigured it.

Youth was also ethnographically central in urban Kisumu. As I wandered around town through its different neighborhoods, stopping for tea, or watching English Premier League matches over beer, most people I met and talked with were in their late teens and early twenties. Most of these young people didn't have steady paying jobs, but all of them were busy. They were members of youth groups, they volunteered at local children's homes or with community based organizations (CBO) geared toward "community development," the oft-cited term encompassing anything from picking up garbage on the street to providing legal services for abused women. When I spoke with them about ideas of difference and belonging, almost without fail, these youth mentioned Kenya's post-election violence (discussed below) and insisted that

the country would not—and could not—go down that path again. They often talked about the violence in terms of age cohorts—the elders orchestrated it, “the youth” were hired hooligans—and insisted that “the youth” had learned important lessons while the elders maintained dangerous and divisive ethnic attachments. While ethnicity was certainly a critical factor in social reckoning and self-conception among these young people, many of whom I came to know very well between 2009 and 2012, the most important forms of social distinction were, at first glance, generational. They seemed to be related to age-informed experiences of key sociopolitical events such as the Moi-era of single party rule or the later post-election violence of 2007/8. Through the course of fieldwork, however, I came to realize that these generational differences were a bit more complex than a model that privileges birth cohort in relation to particular socio-historical events or movements (Wohl 1979) and that those complexities were made discernable and commentable through language use and metapragmatic discourse.

As I elaborate throughout the dissertation, the distinctions that were often talked about in terms of *youth* seemed more about the qualities associated with a person or a practice than about birth cohorts. Indeed, *youth* was at times something more of a social, ethical, or aesthetic stance, something that has intense meaning politically even if somewhat detached from a demographic sense. Much as Danny Hoffman argues of Liberia and Sierra Leone where “‘youth’ remained one of the few salient categories of political opposition” (2011: 103), for many of the young people I worked with *youth* in Kisumu is also about an ethical struggle against corruption in its many senses over and above its demographic delimitation. The stereotype of “the youth” as idle, futureless young men was palpable and informed the notion of *youth* that emerged and was mobilized by the young people I worked with. It was equally informed by the overabundance of

NGOs, national projects, and CBOs focused on empowering and sensitizing youth in Kisumu City.

The enregisterment and reconfiguration of youth

This project focuses on the processes through which co-occurring semiotic forms become understood as signs of *youth* and how those connections are mobilized in everyday communication to make claims through that very notion of *youth*. I build on the concept of enregisterment, which is concerned most explicitly with the ways registers of language (that is, repertoires of linguistic features) “come to be associated, culture-internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage those social practices” (Agha 2003), and I suggest that these practices are highly multi-modal. The ways in which styles of speech—the various voices, genres, and registers that are mobilized in everyday interaction—become recognizable are dependent on entire sets of co-occurring signs. Put simply, styles of speaking are heard differently depending on what other “cues” are available. It depends largely on context and those contexts consist of such things as bodies, sartorial choices, and physical or institutional spaces. Semiotic combinatorics generate recognizability as when deeply enregistered signs of a social type “fit” together in an expectable way, cowboy boots and a wide Texan drawl, for example. But they can also disrupt assumptions about social types or contexts with a lack of “fit” (cowboy boots and tight Cambridge accent) which is, most certainly, contingent on the interpreter’s social position and the utterance’s context.

Young people in Kenya, as I show throughout this dissertation, challenge a stale stereotype of low status, idle, or immoral youth (one enregistered figure of youth) by invoking highly valued transnational rights discourses or telling generically ideal Christian conversion

stories. At the same time, they contest stereotypes of youth as innocent children or pure idealists and future-makers by deploying registers like Sheng and musical genres like hip hop, semiotically complicating *youth*. In doing so, they attempt to differently enregister figures of youth, articulating different social qualities and indexical values to the very category they inhabit and bring into being. The contrasts between style, persona, and topic are not simply meaningful because they disrupt assumptions about social types and semiotic forms. They are also part of the process that reconfigures ideologies about the qualities inherent in each. Because the links between a semiotic form and social type are often iconic—grounded in a sense of similarity—disruptive semiotic combinatorics can call into question the qualities thought to be inherent in each. Thus, when a conversion story is narrated in urban slang, for example, notions of immorality associated with slang can be disturbed by the purity or sincerity associated with the generic form.

The re-enregisterment of semiotic forms and evaluations of those who mobilize them also takes place at the level of metapragmatics and language ideology. Commentary about language and language-in-use consistently informs and reforms the social meaning of styles. It is in these explicit commentaries, descriptions, and justifications for the use and structure of languages that we begin to hear the breadth of qualities understood to inhere in them and often in their speakers. As those evaluations and ideologies of language change, so to do the stereotypes of groups associated with linguistic styles (even if they are non-speakers) and vice-versa.

Nyanza and discourses of marginalization

The experiences and meanings of *youth* for my interlocutors are also deeply informed by Kisumu as a social and historical space. Part of that socio-spatial endowment is a sense of

marginalization. Geographically and politically, Kisumu has been ever-present, yet on the edges of Kenyan public life since the colonial era.

While there were minor revolts against the British establishment of the protectorate in the early years of the 20th century, Kisumu remained a relatively quiet, provincial town throughout the colonial era. With no mineral deposits to speak of and comparatively poor farmland, few Europeans apart from missionaries and a handful of colonial agents settled in Kisumu. Even destined as a port city on Lake Victoria at the end of the Uganda Railway (starting at Mombasa), Kisumu never really grew into a bustling city. Far from the “white highlands” in central Kenya, the epicenter of the Mau Mau Rebellion, Kisumu saw little of the anti-colonial uprising apart from prisoners detained on Mageta Island in Lake Victoria.⁶

Kisumu’s population has historically been majority Luo, the ethnolinguistic group that dominates western Nyanza Province.⁷ While people from other ethnolinguistic groups (namely Luyia, Kisii, Kikuyu, and Nandi) have had significant presences in the town, the 2007/8 post-election violence saw a dramatic decrease in the town’s ethnic diversity, something I will discuss further below. The majority of the people I worked with in Kisumu were Luos. Those who

⁶ The Mau Mau Rebellion (1952-1960) was a revolt against colonial rule and land alienation fought largely in central Kenya by Kikuyus, the ethnolinguistic group whose access to land and freedom of movement had been most affected by British settler colonialism in Kenya. For thorough accounts of the Rebellion including the violent and gruesome British reprisals, see Anderson 2005, Berman and Lonsdale 1992, and Elkins 2005.

⁷ Luos are the fourth largest ethnic group in Kenya, making up a little over 10% of the population (about 4 million people). Luos had been, by all previous estimates, the third largest ethnic group in the country. The most recent (2009) census, surprisingly, released the numbers of ethnic populations, showing the Luos had lost ground to the Kalenjin group. The rankings currently stand: Kikuyu, Luyia, Kalenjin, Luo, etc. (Njiranini 2010). This ranking is seen as politically salient for two purposes: making ethnic alliances during election times and making claims on resources from the state. The immediate reactions to being “downgraded” (as many saw it) were twofold: numbers were “cooked” or Luos have once again shown their “natural intelligence” by lowering their birthrate (see Comments, Daily Nation online edition: <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/1000340/-/11114rlz/-/index.html>).

weren't Luos acknowledged with little consternation the Luo dominance in the city and most even spoke the Luo language, Dholuo. Kisumu also has a sizable South Asian population—historically traders and shopkeepers who were aided by the colonial authority in establishing businesses after the completion of the railway. The South Asian and black African populations are noticeably segregated, a source of bitterness for those who continue to see South Asians as outsiders or foreigners and discriminatory against black Africans.⁸

The geographical distance from the political and economic centers of the country map on to perceptions many Luos have of their own political and social marginalization as an ethnolinguistic group and the narrative told in Kisumu of the early days of independence also reflects this ideology. The story features Oginga Odinga, a Luo politician prominent in nationalist politics, poised to take the seat of the first presidency, but magnanimously ceding it to Jomo Kenyatta.⁹ After serving as Kenyatta's vice president for two years (1964-1966), Odinga resigned his post to form an opposition party (Kenya People's Union, KPU). With the strength of the Kenyatta regime, this move effectively shut Odinga of politics by the late-1960s. The exclusion was sealed by an exchange of insults between the two leaders at the public opening of a national hospital in Kisumu in 1969 that led to Kenyatta's security detail opening fire on the crowd, killing dozens. Kenyatta never returned to Kisumu and the event is understood to play a significant role in the systematic underdevelopment of Luo-dominated areas (Hornsby 2013).¹⁰

⁸ Many shops and other businesses in town are owned by South Asian Kenyan citizens. Black Kenyans often complain that as customers they are treated poorly and as workers they are abused by South Asian business owners.

⁹ These stories are deeply imbued with, informed by, and (re)productive of the reciprocal suspicion and prejudice between Luos and Kikuyus in Kenya. (See Hornsby 2013 and Throup and Horsnby 1998, for further discussion)

¹⁰ New Nyanza Hospital is locally referred to as "Russia" a nod to the funding for its construction secured by Oginga Odinga. Parts of the hospital have been renamed after Odinga. One gate has been named after Barack Obama after he and his wife, Michelle, visited the

The story normally follows with varying details of the corruption of the Kenyatta era including land grabbing and the enrichment of the Kikuyu ethnolinguistic group and always includes mention of the assassinations of Tom Mboya in 1969 and Robert Ouko in 1990, promising Luo politicians who were perceived as threats to the Kenya African National Union's (KANU) grip on power.¹¹ Even young JoKisumu who could have barely been aware bring up the series of crooked deals in the mid-1980s and 1990s that kept a molasses plant from being rehabilitated in their own sugar-producing region (Hornsby 2013). They question the motives for building the country's largest fish processing plant in Thika, near Nairobi in central Kenya, rather than in Kisumu, the largest town near Lake Victoria and the hub of western fish production. Even with Mwai Kibaki's election to the presidency as an opposition candidate with NARC (National Rainbow Coalition) in 2002, Luos in Kisumu see broken promises and marginalization, and not only because of Kibaki's Kikuyu ethnicity. JoKisumu recall Raila Odinga's (son of Oginga Odinga) famous call in support of Kibaki, "*Kibaki Toshi!*" (Sw.: Kibaki is enough!) as an echo of his father's selfless support for Kenyatta, support that would again go unrewarded in the following election cycle.

hospital and were tested for HIV in a public event in support of voluntary counseling and testing in the region. Luo Nyanza has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the country (see Mojola 2014).

¹¹ KANU was the political party in power from independence in 1963 through 2002. In 1982, then-president Daniel Arap Moi declared Kenya a single party state under KANU. While multipartyism was reinstated in 1992, KANU remained in control of the State House until the 2002 election. In Kisumu, KANU was seen as a Kikuyu party, even when under the leadership of Kalenjin politician Daniel Arap Moi. Known for rampant corruption, state violence against opposition, and the systematic underdevelopment of "unfriendly" regions, many in Kisumu refer to the KANU era not long past as "the bad old days."

2007/8 Post election violence

The 2007 presidential election and its aftermath served to bolster young Luos' perception of marginalization and was deeply influential in the lives and outlook of young people around the country in general. Raila Odinga stood in 2007 as the candidate for the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) against the sitting president, Mwai Kibaki, the Kikuyu politician elected in 2002.¹² The campaign quickly developed a “strongly ethnicized discourse” (Lynch 2008:544), and is remembered by Luos as a quintessential example of Kikuyu corruption and Luo dispossession at Kikuyu hands.

On the evening of 29 December 2007, the election appeared to be settled. Raila was nearly one million votes ahead. The next morning, however, the election council announced that the incumbent, Kibaki, had won the election. Anger over the “theft” of the presidency sparked public demonstrations, ethnic-based killings, and state reprisals. The violence that engulfed the country was not unprecedented (Ashforth 2009; Throup and Hornsby 1998), and it was widely considered by analysts to be “the outcome of decades of political manipulation of ethnic tensions, and of impunity intertwined with longstanding grievances over land, corruption, inequality and other issues” (Human Rights Watch 2008:3).¹³ While the bulk of the violence was

¹² In the 2007 election the Orange Democratic Movement proposed what it referred to as a “third liberation.” It promised “*maisha bora*” (Sw. better life) and a “trusted government,” in direct opposition with its characterization of the Kibaki regime and his Party of National Unity (PNU). The ODM website states the party would “build an inclusive society that protect and empower the poor, the marginalized and the vulnerable together with the rest of the Country (sic). We shall transform this country into a prosperous industrialized and modern society where every Kenyan enjoys abundant economic, social and democratic rights and, (sic) lives in dignity” (www.odm07.com last accessed 9/1/2010). The references to compassion, rights and justice for the marginalized should be noted as resonant with self-ascribed notions of “Luoness.”

¹³ The post-election violence also saw a particularly salient form of abuse against Luo men and a central sign of Luo alterity in politics: foreskin. There were multiple reports of forced circumcision of Luos in particularly gruesome fashion (Human Rights Watch 2008:48-51). These acts of violence stand out because unlike that occurring between mainly Kalenjins and

carried out by un- or underemployed (often called “idle”) young men, it is widely understood to have been orchestrated by national politicians.¹⁴

Unlike in the Rift Valley, the epicenter of the post election violence, Kisumu City saw more street protests and destruction of property presumed to be owned by “outsiders,” non-Luos, but especially Kikuyus. One of the largest grocery stores in town, Uchumi, was looted and burned to the ground.¹⁵ There was a notable police presence in the city and, according to Human Rights Watch, the majority of deaths in Kisumu were caused by police shootings (HRW 2008). Many locals maintained Luos’ innocence in the post-election violence, telling me that Luos killed very few people.¹⁶ Yet again, Luo JoKisumu saw themselves as unprovoking victims of aggression.

In their tellings, many young people recalled facing hunger and boredom as they and their families stayed locked in their homes both out of fear and because of police curfews. However, some of the young men I worked did take part in looting. Eko recalled that the trouble after the election was not simply ethnic, it was class based. He explained, “I remember when we used to come up to town to grab things, loot and then we go back down town with them, carrying

Kikuyus over land rights, forced circumcision is violence directed a significant sign of cultural difference. A witness to two such instances describes the use of broken soda bottles and *pangas* [machetes] to circumcise men prior to killing them (Human Rights Watch 2008:51).

¹⁴ The orchestration of the post election violence was the subject of cases pending at the International Criminal Court. Current president, Uhuru Kenyatta (son of Jomo Kenyatta), his deputy (but then rival) William Ruto, and radio announcer Joshua Arap Sang were all facing charges, however the case against Kenyatta has been dropped due to “insufficient evidence.” It is widely asserted by Kenyatta’s critics that witnesses against Kenyatta were intimidated and some disappeared, circumstances that greatly diminished the ICC’s case.

¹⁵ By the time I conducted my long-term fieldwork, people had begun to make occasional jokes about the rioting and looting. Of this particular grocery store, one young man told me that on the news he would see people running off with appliances and then returning for more of the same. What can you do with two refrigerators! He laughed.

¹⁶ An older woman justified her stance by invoking cultural belief. In Luo culture, she explained to me, “the blood follows you home.” Meaning that one is cursed in the act of committing murder.

them, and we are shouting and really happy because now you know the rich man is suffering.”

Many non-Luos fled Kisumu in the aftermath of the post-election violence, and many Luos who had settled in the Rift Valley or Central Province “returned” to Nyanza and Kisumu amid claims of autochthony and threats of violence. As a consequence, the schools and neighborhoods in and around Kisumu City became more and more ethnically homogenous. Peace building and conflict resolution forums intended to stave off recurrence of such devastating violence also began to pop up around the city and the peri-urban areas surrounding it and were largely geared at young people who were seen as both the perpetrators of the violence and the hope for future national harmony.

The media circulating both in the course of the violence and afterward reinforced already durable stereotypes of “the youth.” Images featured angry, marauding young men with stones and machetes, countless lifeless bodies, and scattered weeping women and children. In the imagery, “the youth” were dangerous and unpredictable lot. They threatened young women and children (who were excluded from the category). Much of the work of self-positioning I describe throughout this dissertation acts as rejoinders to such stereotypes.

Fieldsites—*Youth* in Kisumu City

The majority of Kisumu City’s 400,000 inhabitants live in densely packed slums skirting the edge of town and bleeding out into peri-urban areas at the edges of the Nandi Hills to the north and the west. I slowly gained my bearings in Kisumu and got around mainly on a bicycle, which wouldn’t have been unusual were I not white and a woman. The two secondary schools I conducted fieldwork in, Lake Victoria Boys’ High School and Nam Lolwe Girls’ High School, sit adjacent to one another in town at the bustling intersection that served as a stage for a

majority of the local *matatu* (minibus taxis) and was lined with hawkers selling anything from high heeled shoes to machetes. The noise of town—booming music from *matatu*, pattering engines of *tuk tuk*, calls and curses of vendors and pedestrians—floated over the glass shard-topped walls of both schools’ rather large and seasonally verdant compounds. Most of the students, whether “day scholars” or boarding students, came from nearby slum neighborhoods or the more middle class neighborhoods like Tom Mboya or Migosi on the road to Kakamega. Few of them came from “Town” (or “*tao*” in Sheng) as the central business district was called. The Masani Youth Center, a place I spent a good amount of my time, was much further along the Kakamega road in a peri-urban neighborhood, Mamboleo (often called Kajulu after the wider, more rural area that stretches up into the hills above the neighborhood).¹⁷ The Kwetu dancers, a small local, youth-oriented contemporary dance company with whom I also spent a good deal of my time, performed in various hotels and events spaces around town—including the sportsgrounds near the center of town where most major public events and many political rallies took place. Their primary rehearsal space, however, was a disused community center on the edge of Milimani. In the following sections, I describe in much more detail each of these four ethnographic fieldsites, all decidedly *youthy* spaces and spaces in which young people worked to refigure a stereotype of “the youth” in subtle, everyday ways.

¹⁷ Mamboleo began to see some significant investment toward the end of my fieldwork. Apparently Luos—although not locals to Kajulu, I was always told—were buying up land and building nice houses in the hills beyond Mamboleo. At the time of my fieldwork, Mamboleo was mixed middle class and lower class households. Like much of the rest of Kisumu’s environs, Mamboleo had irregular electricity and water was delivered by *mikokoteni* (Sw.: handcarts) throughout the day. While there were many concrete homes, many more were built of wattle and daub type construction and had no electricity. These were also the style of homes one would find in Manyatta and Nyalenda, two of the largest sprawling slums at the edge of Kisumu’s town center. Between town and Mamboleo is the bustling neighborhood Kondele, which features a number of shops (selling agricultural and construction supplies, cosmetics, and sundries, etc.), bars, and a few three- and four- story apartment buildings. These buildings normally had (sporadic) electricity, but no plumbed water.



Figure 0.2: Map of Kisumu City and environs

As I have noted, much of the recent scholarship on youth in Africa has focused on young, idle men. Those who are killing time, drinking tea, or watching films and lamenting a lack of opportunity have become the *sine qua non* image of African youth and young African masculinity (Masquelier 2005, Ralph 2008, Mains 2012). It reflects critical anxieties about the

future in Africa and speaks to pervasive concerns about social reproduction, stagnation, and generational relationships that inform social policy and politics. As these studies artfully show, youth are as concerned as if not more so than their elders about their ability to attain a sense of financial and social stability and responsibility. They are worried about becoming adults (and more specifically, becoming men). These concerns also inform notions of “the youth” across the continent. These anxieties and realities produce the stereotype of “the youth” as idle men susceptible to thuggery, thievery, and stagnation.

Over the course of my own fieldwork, I rarely heard laments of being “stuck” in youth as is common in Africanist literature. Instead, I encountered young people who actively spoke against stereotype of idle youth and felt threatened by the potential of idleness and did everything they could to keep busy. Also unlike the literature, which describes an almost exclusively masculine youth, young women were also readily incorporated into the image of *youth* my interlocutors held. Quite a few women, like their male counterparts, not only filled their time with youth forums, youth groups, and entrepreneurial endeavors, they also justified what might have been thought of as “idleness” like watching movies, listening to music, or flipping through newspapers in terms of research or learning lessons from their content (see Mains 2012, Masquelier 2009).¹⁸

My focus during fieldwork was with what youth are actively doing to shape their own lives and stake claims on meaningful futures. This led to my attention to youth who are engaged to one degree or another with creative or social projects in Kisumu. To be sure, in Kisumu there is an abundance of young men who fit the stereotype of the dangerous, idle young man. They

¹⁸ Self-help and entrepreneurial youth groups have been present in Kenya since the colonial era and have consistently been thought of as fundamental to the protection and rehabilitation of youth. See Chapter 1 for a further discussion of youth policy and ideologies from the colonial era onward. See also Hornsby 2013, Parsons 2004, Sandgren 2012, and Thomas 2003.

hang out in “*bazes*,” roadside watering holes, and video game kiosks and are not entirely distinct from the youth I worked with.¹⁹ Many of the young people I knew certainly occasioned some of the same spaces but they marked themselves as different from that stereotype, not “stuck.” Together with my focus on students and the secondary schools in which they live and study, I found that while most of the young people I worked with were not necessarily middle class, there was a palpable middle class aspiration.²⁰

Secondary schools

In the years leading up to independence, completing secondary school was a decent guarantee of a successful future in Kenya, particularly for those who could attend state-sponsored schools (Sandgren 2012).²¹ In contemporary Kenya, a Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) rarely paves such a path to success.²² White-collar work now requires

¹⁹ *Bazes* in Kisumu were simple shelters built on the sides of roads. They had benches around the edges on which young men would sit, often smoking and heckling passers-by.

²⁰ That aspiration was of course not solely economic, but often also aesthetic. Aesthetic middle class aspiration often took the form of seeking out branded western style clothes, being unimpressed with clothing made by local tailors, even if it was western style. None of the young people I knew wore the local prints aside from the incredibly useful *kanga* (wraps, also called *leso*). Recently, young artists in Kenya have begun developing a small-scale fashion industry that embraces African fabrics, often blending them with design inspired by Western high fashion. Modeling is also a large part of this market. While there were a handful of “fashion shows” in Kisumu while I was there (normally meaning one or two models would strut and pose at wider arts and music events), it has exploded into a full scale “fashion week.” I knew many people who aspired to be designers and models, but I didn’t know any youth who could afford bespoke designs. Most continued to buy *mitumba*, second hand clothes, often imported from the US and Europe.

²¹ The alternative was “Harambee” schools, funded and run by the community. These schools generally have scant resources and while students who graduated from them still had high expectations of continuing further in education, few of them did (see Sandgren 2012).

²² Kenya instituted an 8-4-4 education system in 1986, replacing a model based on the British school system that had been in place since the colonial era. Much like the American system, students spend eight years in primary school, four years in secondary, and four years at university. Children are officially required to attend primary school, although I never heard of

university degrees or tertiary training certificates (or better, a well-connected social network), neither of which was widely accessible for the young people I worked with in Kisumu. Even so, the secondary schools I worked in, schools with good reputations in the city and in the province, were still spaces of hope and aspiration. At the same time they were spaces full of anxiety about the future, something everyone understood to hinge on national exam scores.

Its centrality in urban Kenyans' notions of coming of age is one of the reasons I chose to spend a great deal of time in the compounds and classrooms of secondary schools in Kisumu City. For many Kenyans, secondary school years were their glory days, they look back fondly on their friends and experiences. Much like the college years in the US, secondary school is seen by many as a time to discover oneself and one's talents as well as learn to cope with the challenges of the real world after school. Indeed, it is memorialized on the television program, *Tahidi High*, a widely popular and long-running Kenyan program set in a secondary school. The show is full of intrigue, romance, and important life lessons and while the actors are easily in their 30s and the classes have only about twelve students, many of the students I work with claimed the TV program was "just like" their experience in school.

During the week over the course of my fieldwork, I spent four days in state-run secondary schools—two in an all-girls school and two in an all-boys school. I sat in on classes, went to assemblies, played games, and just talked with students over the course of the school year. I met some of their parents, went to some of their homes on school holidays, and shared chips and sodas with others in town after they finished their final year.

truancy cases being pursued. Primary school is ostensibly provided for free by the government, although some schools do charge additional fees, if illegally. Secondary schools are heavily subsidized by the government, but most carry with them fees. Consequently, matriculation rates drop dramatically between the final (8th) year of primary and the first year of secondary school. Attending secondary school is very common among urban dwellers, especially because schools are nearby and students can live at home, thus avoiding boarding fees.

Lake Victoria Boys' High School (LVB) and Nam Lolwe Girls' High School (NLG) are sister schools and two of the most well-respected secondary schools in Kisumu City. Lake Victoria Boys' was founded around the turn of the century as an "Asian school" but was opened up to African students soon after independence in 1966.²³ A select few girls were allowed to attend the school in the early years, but they were cordoned off in the school's massive compound. Nam Lolwe Girls' was founded in 1961 and cut the Lake Victoria Boys' compound roughly in half. Now the schools are divided by a ten-foot wall that the girls' jokingly refer to as the Berlin Wall.

The academic year in Kenya is twelve months long, running from January to December and divided into three terms with a roughly one-month break between each. Day students, normally spend around 10 hours a day in the school compound, arriving at seven or eight in the morning and not leaving until at least six in the evening with two hours after formal class ends for sports and extra curricular activities like Junior Achievement, religious clubs, and drama clubs. After the day scholars leave for the day, boarding students line up for meals, wash clothing, study, and clean the compound. They sleep in large, open, over-crowded dormitories, some with triple bunk beds. Boarding students are allowed to bring one approved metal footlocker to school and are only ever allowed to wear various iterations of their uniforms around campus (for example, the relaxed "weekend dress" or athletic skirts and t-shirts were allowed for girls after formal school hours)

In the first two years of secondary school, when they are in their early 'teens, students take ten subjects, but then choose which seven of the national exam subjects they want to be tested thereafter limiting their studies to those subjects. The choice, taken at the end of their

²³ During the colonial era schools were segregated into European, Asian, and African schools.

second year in secondary school, provokes both aspiration and anxiety in students. Their subject choices are tied directly to future career choices, most of which are explicitly named professions like medicine, law, or journalism that few of them will ever have to opportunity to pursue. By the time students reach form four (their final year) greater pragmatism sets in. Students, who are by this time between 17 and 19 years old, have a sense of how well they will perform on national exams, the likelihood of attending university, and the actual opportunities that await them.²⁴

Visions of adulthood—with formal employment and predictable life trajectories—often fades at this point in young people’s lives. The space of *youth* opens up in a marked way and struggle and style become central to forging futures. In contrast to their female counterparts across the Berlin Wall, form four students at Lake Victoria Boys’ worried about how they would make money after leaving school—even if they had plans on attending university.²⁵ Male students hoped to help their parents financially, take responsibility for their own material needs, and be able to take their girlfriends out occasionally. Young women mentioned short term work (or “hustling,” see Chapter 5) less often, instead they were preoccupied with additional post-secondary training courses (often in computers) and all of the free time they would have after leaving school.

Lake Victoria Boys’ High School

Lake Victoria Boys’ reputation precedes it whenever its students travel to inter-school

²⁴ Admission to university with state-aided tuition (often loans) as well as a student’s particular program of study is determined through these KCSE exam scores. Students with adequate exam scores may also apply to university if they agree to pay their own tuition. Known as a “parallel course,” this option is only open to the wealthiest of Kenyans.

²⁵ There is a lag time of one full year between the time students learn their exam scores and potential for entering university and their matriculation. Many students who expect to attend university use this year to take computer courses, driving lessons, or train in other practical skills.

events for sports, academics, or music. Students are known throughout the region as being particularly rowdy, causing trouble at most events they take part in. Many of the boys relish this reputation, and delight in the fact that their maroon blazers, grey trousers, and maroon and gold ties inspire fear in other students. Lake Victoria Boys' is also known for its somewhat regular student strikes. While they didn't strike the year I spent in the school (the teachers did instead), I heard many stories about the previous year's strike.²⁶

Primarily a day school, the majority of the students come from the Nyalenda and Manyatta slums, although there are also a number of middle- and upper-class students. The boarding students at the school—and even a few of their day scholar classmates—generally come from rural areas surrounding Kisumu. State run secondary schools in Kenya charge school fees to cover the shortfall in their public funding and many of the students I worked with struggled to pay their fees and would occasionally disappear for a week or two at a time, having been “sent for fees”—excluded from the classroom until they covered at least some of their arrears.

²⁶ Depending on who was telling me the story, the strike was either about students' rights and their access to resources in the school or about their desire to watch the World Cup. The students caused quite a stir marching and shouting just outside the walls of the school compound and the principal had the gates to the school locked, ostensibly to keep the boys from destroying school property. Police were called and rumor has it that a few students were beaten at the nearby bus stage.



Plate 0.1: Form 2 students at Lake Victoria Boys' study in their classroom between lessons

My host teacher at LVB was the head of the Swahili program and boarding master and I spent quite a bit of time talking with him and his officemates (a fellow Swahili teacher and a physics teacher) about language, discipline in the school, and national politics. Most often, I ate lunch with these three teachers at their insistence. They didn't want me to purchase a plate of beans and rice at one of the few kiosks that lined the back edge of the school's compound and eat with rowdy boys. I was, to them, somewhere between a colleague and a guest. When I sat in on classes—normally four classes a day—I sat in the back and crammed myself into a desk like the other 40-50 students in each classroom. I rarely participated unless explicitly asked or when the teacher was gone.²⁷ When teachers were absent, not a rare occurrence, students would take over the lessons themselves or study independently. The history class taught by Mr. Oluoch, who was beloved by his students despite his poor attendance record, was my favorite. It met in a half-

²⁷ I was asked to “fill in” for a Swahili teacher on afternoon for a lesson in sociolinguistics, but that was a rare (and mildly terrifying) occurrence.

finished classroom set apart from the school block. Dirt floored, one of the students normally sprinkled water on the ground to keep the dust from kicking up in the middle of the lesson. In Mr. Oluoch's absence, the students revised history in Sheng or engaged me in long, winding conversations about their lives and their school. They also often asked me to tell them about life in America or American history.²⁸ I also attended school assemblies (every Monday and Friday) along with religious services, study sessions, club meetings, and a few weekend events at Lake Victoria Boys'.²⁹

Nam Lolwe Girls' High School

Nam Lolwe Girls' reputation also preceded them, but primarily for their academics. Nam Lolwe was recognized as one of the best girls school in Nyanza and certainly in Kisumu City. In the three years leading up to my fieldwork, Nam Lolwe Girls' was converted from a day school to an all-boarding school. As the school's deputy principal explained, the conversion to boarding was in the best interest of the students who were in peril in their travels to and from school. She insisted that entering the school compound through the melee that was the *matatu* stage meant they were subject to sexual harassment and could potentially be picked up by some of the ne'er-do-wells outside the school compound's protective walls. Further, she claimed that girls needed protection from the everyday stress of living with families, some of whom were facing serious

²⁸ These same students asked me to give them a lesson on settler colonialism in the US and the treatment of Native Americans. They understood there were interesting parallels between Kenyan history and the American case and wanted to learn more.

²⁹ One of the weekend events was an inter-school Swahili symposium for form four students intended to offer a boost to their Swahili exam scores. I was asked to give a brief lecture about "register" at the symposium as it was a topic in the *Isimu Jamii* (Sw.: sociolinguistics) section of the high school Swahili curriculum. By and large, my Swahili lecture was ignored by the hundreds of students in the assembly hall. Ignored, that is, until I inserted some Sheng, which was met with titters and a few gasps. See Chapter 2 for a further description.

financial instability or illnesses. The girls were, in no uncertain terms, cut off from the outside world, sounds of which drifted over the compound walls. Girls were not allowed mobile phones or visits from parents and family outside of official visiting days nor did they have any regular access to the internet. Even newspapers were difficult to get a hold of as they were kept in the library and normally monopolized by teachers. Some girls asked me to ferry notes to their boyfriends next door and many more asked me (just as the boys did) what their neighbors thought of them. They effectively binged on pop culture during school holidays, coming back rapidly telling stories about Justin Bieber's love life or the hottest Nollywood films they had seen. Not only was the girls' access to the outside world profoundly more restricted than the boys', so were their sartorial options. The girls' yearned for make-up and tight fitting clothes, they wanted weaves or braids and they couldn't fathom why I would choose a short haircut unless it was required.³⁰ They were stuck with their pleated royal blue skirts, white shirts, blue and white ties, long white socks, and royal blue sweaters even in the hot and humid Kisumu weather.

³⁰ Indeed, my short hair contributed to the girls' understanding of me as only a few years their senior. My hair must simply be growing out from a shorn style required in secondary school, they reasoned.



Plate 0.2: Students at Nam Lolwe Girls’ prepare chemistry demonstrations during family day, when parents and siblings could visit the campus.

As a boarding school, the fees at NLG were higher than LVB and the students’ families were somewhat more well-off, but not decidedly so. While boarding students weren’t sent home for fees, many would arrive at school a week or two into the term because they hadn’t been able to make up the money they needed for tuition although this was rarely, if ever, a point of commentary or mockery. When I asked the girls whether economic class was ever an issue at the school, many insisted that the uniforms made them all “the same.” Even when I pushed them further, telling them of my own experience in uniformed secondary school, where class was highly visible, they said the only way you could tell who was wealthy was on parents’ weekend or when some students had more pocket money than others.

At NLG I moved more somewhat more freely and often sat in on classes outside of the history and Swahili lessons I was largely restricted to at Lake Victoria Boys’. Girls demanded I

share their desks, or attend their religious education lessons. They encouraged me to take part in their English classes, hoping to hear me read the assigned novel aloud. I also ate lunch with the girls in their overcrowded assembly hall, something that perplexed and amused the teachers who knew how horrible the students' food was (normally boiled beans and maize with no seasoning along with a cup of sweet black tea). In the afternoons I visited girls while they studied, sat with them on the edge of the playing field (occasionally and embarrassingly playing field hockey), or chatted in the art classroom or Islamic Religious Education (IRE) rooms where some of the most loquacious of my informants liked to spend time.³¹ I attended guidance and counseling sessions on a weekly basis, regularly attended either the Friday Christian services or Muslim prayers, and occasionally came to the school on weekends for special events.

The weekly guidance and counseling sessions marked one of the biggest differences between LVB and NLG and reflected one of the most important gendered distinctions of “the youth” in Kenya. Girls were to be protected and boys were to be reprimanded. The same old themes emerged again and again in the Nam Lolwe guidance sessions; most involved protecting oneself from a social danger. Early pregnancy, boy–girl relationships, self-esteem, and the dangers of the internet—were all framed as threats to young women. Lake Victoria counseling sessions focused more on stress, preparedness for exams, and how *not* to treat sexually

³¹ While not officially, Christian students felt the IRE room was effectively off limits to them. Like Kisumu, the Muslim population in Nam Lolwe Girls' was relatively small (5%). Unlike Lake Victoria Boys' all the Muslim students in each year at Nam Lolwe were assigned to a single class. Administrators at the Nam Lolwe argued that this was to make attendance at IRE classes easier while their colleagues at Lake Victoria argued that incorporating Muslim students into each classroom discouraged them from developing a sense of marginalization. Concerns about “marginalized Muslim men” are rife in Kenya where anxieties about the threat of al-Shabab loom large particularly after Kenya's incursion into Somalia in 2011 on a purported anti-terror mission. The subsequent attacks by the al-Shabab on the coast, in Nairobi (most notably in a multi-day siege on the posh Westlands Mall), and the more recent slaughter at Garissa University heighten such concerns.

transmitted infections or have sex (avoid traditional healers and masturbation). The Nam Lolwe sessions were much more deeply informed by the self-help and psychology discourses rapidly growing in popularity across Kenya. While girls readily embraced some of the “psychology” they quickly grew tired of the lectures on the importance of self-esteem or the dangers of romantic relationships.³²

Like LVB, NLG classrooms were cramped and spare. Students leaned over handmade hinge-topped desks taking down notes—often verbatim—in well-worn notebooks. Larger classes, like one of the history classes I regularly attended which had upwards of 60 students, were held outdoors under a shelter facing the Berlin Wall on which a large blackboard was hung. Students brought their own chairs to this classroom and furiously took notes on their laps or on the seats of their chairs while kneeling in front of them, backs to the teacher. These students took their studies extremely seriously, often waking up earlier than the required 5:00 am for additional study and developing stomach ulcers out of worry (and probably a bit out of poor nutrition). They had high expectations of their futures, some hoping to become doctors and human rights’ lawyers, environmental activists, or interior designers. None of them imagined petty trade or unemployment in their futures, but lofty plans certainly changed after receiving sub-par exam scores.

³² One of the girls’ favorite phenomenon was “Johari Windows,” something that I also heard about from post-secondary students on multiple occasions. The “Johari widow” is a psychological model devised the 1950s by Josphe Luft and Harrington Ingham (the name a portmanteau of their forenames). The model divides knowledge of the self into four quadrants: 1) Open (that which is known to the self and to others) 2) Blind (that which is known by others, but not the self), 3) Façade (that which is known to the self but not to others), 4) Unknown (characteristics known neither to the self nor to others).

The “outside”

Beyond the school walls, both spatially and temporally, youth life looked quite different. Peter was a form four student at Lake Victoria Boys'. He was thoughtful, bright, and interested in pursuing a degree in agriculture from university. On his final day of exams, he seemed a bit melancholy as we talked on the pathway between his classroom and the assembly hall where all the exams were given. When I asked him if he was glad to be finished with exams and finished with secondary school he paused and then told me yes, he was, but he wasn't ready to go “outside.” “Outside” meant beyond the walls of the compound that bound his life and his time for the past four years. “Outside” was a space in which he would need to find a way to make money, to help support his family, to take his girlfriend to Milimani Resort for a swim. It was squarely the space of *youth*. The bulk of my fieldwork took place with the people and spaces that constitute this “outside.” I spent most of my time with young people who had either finished or dropped out of secondary school and were in spaces that kept them occupied and kept them from being “idle.” We spent time in youth group offices, informal practices spaces for drama and dance groups, living rooms in front of televisions, and under the shade of trees along the streets or in the sportsgrounds. These were quintessential spaces of *youth* where aspiration is thick in the air, but struggle is the day-to-day experience.

Masani Youth Group

The Masani youth group was relatively small, around 30 members, and based out of the front room of one half of a duplex in Mambleo on the outskirts of Kisumu. Most members were aged somewhere between 17 and late-20s. None had steady work, but many in the group would do “small-small” jobs or attend paid youth forums to make pocket money. The majority of these

young people (Bernard and Diana being an exception) still lived with their parents in Mamboleo, although a few lived alone in single rooms nearby. While the group had a longer history, when I got to know the Masani group an American woman, Joanne, funded them independently.³³ She paid the rent on a small house, the youth center (with a handful of computers, three digital cameras, a random assortment of school books, and a cobbled together recording studio) was in the front room and Diana and Bernard lived in the back. She also paid a small salary to Bernard to lead the organization. Masani was never run as a non-governmental organization (NGO) and was organized much more like Community Based Organizations (CBO) or “self-help” groups that proliferated in Kisumu City as across Kenya.³⁴



Plate 0.3: *Masani Youth Center and recording studio. Note the poster pinned onto the lean-to recording booth, “Do not be corrupt during elections.”*

³³ She also helped to organized women local to Mamboleo, many of whom were the mothers of Masani members, to make crafts that she would then sell to raise money in the US. I was introduced to Bernard, the sometime “chairman” of Masani, through contact with this woman who I had met in Kenya during my university years.

³⁴ As I discuss in much greater detail in the Conclusion, the breakdown of the organization was related to the unsuccessful formalization of the group as a CBO.

Masani Youth Group's focus varied over the course of my fieldwork. While the leaders of the group made much of "sensitizing" and "empowering" the community around issues of HIV/AIDS, in fact, I witnessed very little of that type of activity. By and large, the youth center became a place where young men (and women to a lesser extent) would come to avoid being "idle." The group built a lean-to recording booth and some of the most active members spend a great deal of time recording songs, laying down beats, and making plans for a record label. The group also made occasional comedy videos with the intention to sell them for a little cash. A normal day around the youth center (which later became a dismal failure of a cyber café) involved talking, listening to music on the Masani Youth laptop, or reading the newspapers—especially the fashion and pop culture supplements—that I brought to the center on a regular basis.

I spent a lot of my time at the youth center talking and hanging out just as the young, often male, members did. The female members came by less often (some of them had children or domestic responsibilities) normally for the formally organized events like group meetings or film planning sessions.³⁵ Young men would trickle in in the late morning, and often disappear during the lunch hour when Diana, Bernard, and various other members of their family ate lunch in their small back-room living quarters. Young men came back in the afternoon to continue recording or reading. Monthly, the entire group met for organization meetings. These meetings were fascinating and surprisingly formal. They took place almost entirely in English and had agendas and minutes, even when the group was relatively inactive. Normally, the meetings were spent planning future activities, talking about membership rules (dues or requirements, for example, or

³⁵ It was also rumored that young women were shooed away by Diana who would get fiercely jealous of other women spending time with her husband, Bernard.

who was allowed to use the Masani name outside of the group), and coping with problems and complaints that arose over the course of the month. These meetings were also what made the group “serious.” For members, these meetings were an indication they were actively doing something. For Bernard, the chairman, they were a way to prove to Joanne that Masani merited the funding (and his salary) that she continued to send on a regular basis.

In many ways, Masani was not much different from other youth self-help groups that proliferate in Kenya.³⁶ It provided a space for young people to occupy themselves outside the home, especially if they wanted to avoid the streets or at the *bazes* that the rowdier men would hang out at. It provided also a network of other young people to share experiences, resources, and ideas with. It was a place to talk about music, art, and movies and one where young people lamented and joked about Kenya’s rampant corruption and hatched schemes for small businesses. It was a place where aspiration collided with struggle.

Kwetu Dance Company

Aspiration and struggle were also practically steeped in the walls of the disused community center the Kwetu dancers trained one another in contemporary African dance nearly six hours a day, five days a week.³⁷ In a way, Kwetu resembled a youth group (if one with more singular concentration and motivation) the difference being that they imagined themselves both

³⁶ Groups like Masani are legion across the country. These groups—which vary widely in funding and size—are often geared toward training or educating “the youth,” outreach regarding HIV/AIDS, opportunities in micro-enterprise, peace-building, sports, and generally keeping young people occupied.

³⁷ While there are a plethora of hip-hop inspired street dance crews across Kenya, Kwetu is unusual in its focus on contemporary dance and formal technique. To my knowledge, apart from Kenya Performing Arts Group (KPAG) and to a certain degree a national dance company (Sarakasi), there are no other contemporary dance companies in the same sense in Kenya. Kwetu has found related groups across Africa, collaborating with groups from Tanzania, Senegal, and Madagascar.

preparing for and starting out careers. I met Kwetu dancers at a popular watering hole in town soon after I arrived in Kisumu in 2011 and they invited me to the next day's rehearsal where I learned more about their tiny organization entirely run and funded by the dancers themselves.

While most Kwetu dancers, who were men and women in their late-teens to early 20s, were not able to make a living from dance—most supplemented with casual work and dependence on kin—dancing very much was their job. The dancers scheduled and taught classes to each other in technique (ballet, contemporary, African, and hip-hop dance), conditioning, and guided stretching. They had regular organizational meetings and official positions (like artistic director, costume manager, faculty manager); they printed business cards, developed a standard formal contract for performances, and outlined their “mission, vision, and goals” as all Kenyan businesses seemed to. Like Masani, they created their own institutional infrastructure, a sign of their “seriousness.” In the ways they organized themselves and talked about their organization, Kwetu insisted on the productivity and direction of their *youth* project, a model and discourse set starkly against a directionless figure of “the youth.”

Kwetu was founded by Oti in 2009, a 24-year-old local of Kisumu City (and proud graduate of Lake Victoria Boys') after he completed training in dance and theater training through the Nairobi-based Kenya Performing Arts Group (KPAG).³⁸ At the time of my fieldwork, Kwetu consisted of between nine and eleven regular dancers with other affiliated dancers coming

³⁸ KPAG is a Dutch-funded organization whose aim is to “create and establish a sustainable environment for performing artists, by promoting and using arts and culture as a tool in empowering people in becoming world citizens with basic human needs and expression.” Further, KPAG stresses the importance of training artists as “professionals” who will work in arts and culture industries in Kenya and abroad. Oti took his professionalization through KPAG very seriously and transferred this into the ethos of Kwetu. He took great pains to insist on his and the other Kwetu dancers' status as professionals in the fledgling arts market in Kisumu. See: <https://www.hivos.nl/dut/community/partner/10005971> (last accessed 5/7/2014). KPAG's current slogan, “Art without borders” has an interesting and perhaps intentional resonance with the international humanitarian organization *Médecins Sans Frontières* (doctors without borders).

through to train with Kwetu or lend their support in teaching. They were a remarkably close group, most from somewhat middle-class families and half of them lived on their own, sometimes with roommates or partners, on the edges of Kisumu City. All secondary school graduates, some were raised in Kisumu City but others had moved there from Nairobi either because of family or because they were friends of Oti from KPAG.



Plate 0.4: Kwetu Dance Company training session.

Training sessions, while full of the requisite pain and suffering of any dance training, were always a mix of fun and serious work. Kwetu regularly choreographed new routines and tried out moves they found on *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing With the Stars* videos posted on YouTube when they weren't preparing for the occasional performances that were commissioned of them. They performed at the Kisumu Peace Festival, at the Kenya College of Accounting, and at an Agribusiness conference at the Imperial Hotel at the center of town. Such as was the case at the Imperial, Kwetu were often mistreated by their patrons who would

withhold money or pull contracts at the last minute. They complained bitterly among themselves that they weren't taken seriously, they weren't seen as professionals. Kwetu prided themselves on the fact that unlike every other dance crew in Kenya, they insisted on "technique." Ballet, modern, Horton technique, hip hop, African, and more were strictly divided during classes. Only when the technique was built could they blend them into routines, what dancers called "the *real* [Kwetu]." Eunice, one of Kwetu's most gifted and committed female dancers, lamented their months' long participation in the televised *Sakata* dance competition, saying that playing to the judges popular tastes damaged their technique.³⁹

I occasionally (and even more embarrassingly than at field hockey) took part in Kwetu's training, but during most of my time in their practice space I would watch, control music, and offer input on timing and spacing—something difficult to gauge while training without mirrors. I talked for hours with the dancers on their breaks and after the day's work was completed. Even when they weren't dancing, they Kwetu spent most of their time with one another and a small, but extended group of artists (musicians, visual artists, and poets) that constituted the local arts scene.

Kwetu had big aspirations and many of them made good on them, travelling to Tanzania, Senegal, Norway, and England through dance. But there was still always a certain frustration that they and their art weren't being taken seriously enough. Not unlike Masani, for Kwetu "serious"

³⁹ *Sakata* ("Sakata" Sw.: verb form (*kusakata*) is "to beat," as in a drum; its nominal form refers to a ruckus or a commotion) is a Kenyan television show, now in its fourth season in which dance teams perform independently choreographed routines to a set music mix. Contestants are judged by a celebrity panel, similar to programs like *The X Factor*, and each week teams are eliminated until the final victor emerges and crowned the best dance crew in Kenya. In 2010, five of Kwetu's dancers decided to enter the second season of the competition.

could be measured in cash and respect; it meant wages they could live on and appreciation for their talent and skill rather than derision and suspicion.⁴⁰

Of course, much of my fieldwork also took place outside these formal organizations and institutions. I spent endless hours watching Nollywood films on television with young people, talking quietly in the front rooms of houses drinking sweet milky tea or in a shady spots outside of houses. We shouted and laughed at bars, watched football, and wandered through the streets of Kisumu with nothing better to do. Like every ethnographer, through all of these experiences with my informants, our relationships changed. Just as my perception of them evolved over time, so did their perceptions of me.

Methodology and Addressivity

In thinking about the ways in which my relationships with informants changed, I consider something beyond the intimacy that develops among friends and acquaintances as they spend a long time in close quarters— in practice spaces, classrooms, or cramped offices. I consider the ways in which my informants’ understanding of me, who I was, and what role I played in their social world, shifted. To take this into account is to consider the addressivity, the ways utterances, interactions, and performances are shaped by assumptions about their audiences (Bakhtin 1985). While anthropologists have taken pains to consider our own positions in the field—positions of power, outsidersness (or insidersness)—it is equally important, for the sake of our data and for the sake of simply understanding what happens in the field, to consider how our informants and interlocutors see us. Those two positions—a self-reflective awareness and an awareness of another’s perception of oneself—are quite often distinct even if they are, in a way,

⁴⁰ In Chapter 4 I discuss at length the Eunice’s experience with derision because of her decision to pursue dance.

intertwined. The dissonance and assonance of identity become striking particularly when race, gender, foreignness, and class feature in nexuses of identity. Attending to them and the variety of social positions and figured I was viewed as teach us something very important about a broad range of interactional frames in Kenya and the varieties of positions youth take within them. Rather than taking for granted our own identities as somehow stable across fieldwork, we must consider how our identities also emerge in interaction—and that emergence can also be part of our analysis.

Needless to say, I was not the first young(ish) foreign white woman in Kisumu City. Far from it. As a hub of NGOs for western Kenya and parts of Uganda as well as the center of Kenya's AIDS crisis, Kisumu has seen plenty of young, foreign, white women. It is they who by and large inform the stereotype of young white femaleness (although, interestingly, not “foreign youth”), a stereotype that deeply colored my informants' expectations of me and the ways they should interact with me in the early days of my fieldwork. When I first met many of my post-secondary informants, they talked about the purpose and success of their various projects and showed me programs they were involved in (real or fictional) like planting trees or cleaning up their community streets. They sometimes hinted at resources I may have access to or asked for help developing grant or business proposals. While most of the young volunteers who included Kisumu City as a stop on their “voluntourism” circuit, stayed in town for a couple of weeks, I stuck around. And the longer I stuck around without a development project, goals, or directives for them the more Kwetu dancers and Masani youth and other young people I met began to interact with me differently as quasi (albeit foreign) youth or elder youth. I became someone to ask for advice, someone who had an unusual interest in their opinions, and someone mildly entertaining to take around to social events.

Dismas, for example, a young man we'll meet again in Chapter 1, had been quite standoffish with me when we first met at Masani Youth Center. He presumed that I, like Masani's funder, was there to check up on things for a week and then disappear. When he started to notice me at arts events around town and he began to realize the inordinate amount of time I spent at the center seemingly doing nothing, directing nothing (and funding nothing), our relationship began to change. One afternoon as we sat outside in the back of Masani where few people passed by, I conducted an interview with Dismas. To that point I had taken him as little more than a shy young man with real lyrical skill in the recording booth. But after brief hesitation he described his recent past. For a couple of years, he had been involved in burglaries, heavy drinking, drug use, and gang rape. He was at Masani to effectively keep himself busy—to keep himself away from the crew he used to run with. That conversation marked a turning point in our relationship. Thereafter, Dismas would seek me out when he had trouble relating with his mother. He came by my house one evening crestfallen, his mother had burned everything in his metal footlocker—his song lyrics, the string he had been making bracelets with to sell, the 1,000/= he had saved for clothes for Bernard's wedding. He just needed to talk, he told me. After he told me the story, we actually didn't do much in the way of talking. Instead, we just shared a beer and listened to music.

In Dismas's eyes, I had become something different than a temporary visitor, but also different than the rest of those who spent time at the youth center. This transition from outsider to a sort of confidante is common for many ethnographers, but it is not this end point that I want to focus on. Rather, in this dissertation I want to think about the entire spectrum, considering different types of roles and positions my interlocutors understood me in as telling data. I want to insist that the interactions I had with my young informants in the early days when they saw me as

an aid worker, a volunteer, a teacher, or even a potential date were no less “authentic” than those that we had toward the end of my field stay.

Listening back to interviews and other recordings and reading through reams of fieldnotes at my desk in the US, I began to identify some of these different roles (and combinations of them) I took for my informants. For some I became counselor-like, for others a big sister, for some—particularly secondary school boys—I was just a confused (and sometimes annoyingly stupid) foreigner who never seemed to leave. I was a potential sugar mama, I was a writer, I was a volunteer. The point is, the person my informants interacted with was not static and figuring out to whom they were speaking—their audience—at different moments helps us to understand more completely what they are hoping to accomplish in interaction and the nuances of communication.

Interviews and interactional frames

I conducted well over 60 personal interviews over the course of my fieldwork. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of these semi-formal interviews ended up in English no matter how they started out. While other recorded interactions were more representative of the plurilingual everyday in Kisumu City, the introduction of a voice recorder and a named frame, “the interview,” dictated style for my interlocutors. That style was not necessarily English, but it was a single denotational code. When I prefaced our interaction as I did nearly all of my interviews with a comment that I didn’t mind what languages we spoke on the recording, one interviewee explained that he “should” speak just one language and the only language he could speak “purely” was English (see Chapter 2 for a further discussion).

My interviews outside of school normally took place near Masani or outside Kwetu's practice space. Occasionally people would come over to my house, I would go to their homes, or we would meet in a café or a local pub. I waited a few months before requesting and recording interviews with any of my informants, preferring to spend my time with them in less structured ways. Once I did begin interviewing, young people were eager, some complained if I didn't get to them soon enough.

I normally conducted interviews with students at both the boys' and girls' schools in small groups—two to three students—because I found the interaction became much less formal and free-flowing when students could react to one another. Responding to me alone, some students became stilted as if wondering if they were answering “correctly”—responding to me in a teacher-student modality. While among friends, however, students were both more playful and forthcoming. I also began to realize (perhaps too slowly) that in individual interviews some of the Lake Victoria boys understood our interaction in a different frame far different than I intended: as romantic interest. Close attention, eye contact, leaning in, and engaged questioning could all easily be mistaken for a “date” modality. In listening back to these interviews it is in fact quite informative to consider how some young men represent themselves to someone they see as a potential girlfriend.

Occasionally I conducted group discussions with the Masani Youth. I would organize with Bernard and we would all gather at the youth center to discuss a theme. While I would come with a (always overly long) list of questions and themes, the discussions nearly always veered away from my expectations, often in delightful ways. These meetings were ambiguous interactional spaces. In some respects, they resembled the youth forums with which so many of the Masani members were intimately familiar. In other respects, they were more like the

spontaneous conversations that arose as we sat around the youth center on any given day. Like youth forums, young people would gather to discuss a predetermined theme directed by someone who had authority status—normally a representative of an NGO or CBO, but in this case, a foreign researcher who just happened to spend an inordinate amount of time at the Masani. In the early days, I brought soda and cakes for everyone, but with some gentle nudging, I began to offer “fare” for participation in the meetings.⁴¹

At the outset of each meeting I would insist in my own (probably rather flat-footed) Sheng that all languages were welcome in the discussion, Swahili, English, Sheng, or Dholuo. However, like most forums, these meetings ended up being heavily in English with occasional bursts of Swahili and Sheng and only a peppering of Dholuo, which was normally met with titters among the participants (see Chapter 2 for a further discussion of local language ideologies).

⁴¹ The payments to participants in forums and other organized events was often called “fare” by NGOs and CBOs. Classified as a reimbursement for travel expenses (rather than payment) for attendees who may have spent 40Ksh for return transport. These forums were habitually attended by many men who, chronologically, would be difficult to classify as “youth.” However, their attendance was never questioned by other attendees or forum organizers. Attending many of these forms myself, I was also offered “fare.” After one such forum where the topic of discussion was the problem of rampant corruption in Kenya, some of my informants chastised me when I refused payment. I said that I didn’t think USAID really intended that money for someone like me. Just take it, they urged me without any sense of irony, and give it to us.



Plate 0.5: Meeting at Masani Youth Center.

The meetings had a certain formality to them; there was a meeting time (observed or not), a theme, and a moderator. But there were also significant features that made these meetings distinct from a more formal youth forum style, not the least of which was the absence of a giant pad of newsprint and colored markers that were so common in NGO settings. Rather than the rows or circles of plastic lawn chairs ubiquitous at forums, at these meetings we would cram ourselves into the small, single-roomed youth center, sitting on what was available: a slanting wicker settee, a desk, the floor, or the tiny Luo three-legged stool that I favored, much to the amusement of Masani Youth.

While in youth forums, the moderator would direct the conversation, calling on individuals to speak, interceding between most participant speakers, I tried to speak up as little as possible. However, when I felt some participants were being silenced (often women or those who

were uncertain in their English), I would occasionally interrupt to conversation, reasserting my role as moderator, to create the interactional space for them to speak.

The ambiguous interactional space created an unusual dynamic each time we met. The meetings would begin with Masani Youth members answering questions in a style I had become accustomed to in secondary schools—complete sentences, definitional, point-by-point. But then, as time went on, debates emerged and reliance on ready-made answers seemed to lessen. While I am not suggesting anything about the relative “authenticity” of either, within these debates, as meeting participants interacted with one another (rather than me, as easily recognizable as an NGO worker as I was a researcher), stances became more nuanced and a notion of correctness in response seemed less important to participants.

Our conversations would often last two or more hours. Sitting silently on the edge of the circle, I wasn't unlike many of the other young women who only spoke up occasionally as the men visited their opinions on one another, often forcefully.

Throughout fieldwork I also collected a wide range of less formal recordings, from class discussions and study sessions to club meetings and religious services at schools. I recorded Masani's regular meetings, when they brainstormed films, played games, and recorded music. I recorded (and sometimes video taped) Kwetu's rehearsals, their meetings, and their normal, meaningless chatter between classes. Toward the end of my fieldwork some of the Masani members were so accustomed to my recording, they thought something was wrong when I wasn't doing it. Recording became both a source of amusement for most of my informants and a good way to mock me.

In addition to a newspaper archive and detailed notes on some of the most popular television programs and films, I also collected an archive of youths' textual productions,

including poetry collections, sketches, hip hop lyrics, and screenplays. I videotaped and edited video of arts performances for young artists, we took photos together, and I returned home with samples of their visual art and jewelry. This archive gives a sense of the visual and aesthetic world young people created over the course of my fieldwork. It highlights some of the qualities and features of they see in and seek to imbue in a refigured notion of *youth* that emerged again and again. It also draws out contrasts to *youth* in different modalities—visual, aural, graphic—all of which are “textual” in a broader sense.

Young people often used these textual and artistic productions as evidence of their own creativity and productivity. They were, in a sense, arguments against the stereotype of idle youth. At the same time, young people pointed to their self-made institutions and organizations as evidence of seriousness—an assertion that they were not childlike or impotent. These were some of the critical ways young people proffered a new and refigured notion of *youth*, one that has durable value and status. Claiming this sort of youth for life is also a rejection of adulthood as a singular “next stage” for young people, it is a way of insisting on and claiming status outside a long-standing gerontocratic model of social value.

Contributions

This dissertation traces the range of ways *youth* emerges and is reconfigured in everyday communicative practice, contributing to an important and growing body of ethnographies of the enregisterment of semiotic forms and social categories. I show how amid the more durable stereotypes of youth as makers and breakers of the future, young people position themselves in relation to these images but at the same time complicate them. The use and avoidance of linguistic registers, the metapragmatic discourses about youth and related communicative forms,

as well as the ways speakers tap into the transnational voices of Pentecostalism tinged with neo-liberal ideologies are all part of the ongoing enregisterment of *youth* in contemporary Kenya.

Plurilingual styles of speech are fundamental to the image of “youth” in Kisumu and they are common throughout urban Africa. Analysis of these styles and their social meanings, as I show in the dissertation, offer particularly productive sites for exploring the relationships between micro-social interaction and the larger social world. Too often neglected in Africanist anthropology, a focus on languages in urban space demonstrates some of the more subtle ways Africans work through tensions surrounding modernity, national identity, and diversity. In my analysis of the rich and dynamic styles of speaking in urban Kisumu, I have suggested that an analytic of “plurilingual registers” is especially productive. In contrast with linguistic approaches that privilege named denotational codes in studies of multilingualism, my work takes seriously John Gumperz’s early assertion that studying codeswitching requires that we attend most closely to the communicative switches that are socially impactful and not just formally remarkable (Blom and Gumperz 1986 [1972]). Not only does this type of analysis direct our attention to the most locally-salient formal distinctions in communicative practice, using register as an analytic reminds that codeswitching involves shifting among multi-modal semiotic repertoires, not named languages alone.

This project also contributes to the important and growing literature on youth in the global south by arguing that some of the most important ways individuals intervene in the emergence of social categories (and particularly the meaning of *youth* itself) are in and through communicative practice. Largely neglected by scholars of youth working in Africa, language is a highly salient and deeply contested means through which group and individual identities emerge. It is not only the object of widespread and contentious local discourse (offering poignant insights

into anxieties about youth across the continent) language is also an abundant, malleable, and sometimes the only resource through which individuals make themselves socially recognizable in conditions in which material resources and opportunity are scant.

A cluster of qualities and constellation of stereotypes, *youth*, as I conceive it here, is constantly in motion. Tracing the ways it is differently invoked, contested, and reconfigured offers important insight into the meaning of “youth for life” but also how such a claim uncomfortably meshes with anxious assertions about Africa’s “youth problem.” “Youth for life” and the “youth problem” are arguments about the quality—both in terms of its value and its features—of youth.

Outline of chapters

Chapter 1, “The quality of youth: Practices, categories, and rejoinders,” further develops the argument for considering *youth* as a semiotic category. I delineate many of the qualities that emerge and become naturalized as *youthy* in political and media discourse and on an interactional level. I suggest that these qualities become relevant and legible as *youthy* through contrast with status quo in Kenya, often read by young JoKisumu as corruption.

To contextualize *youth* and understand why it has become relevant at the contemporary moment, I trace the discourses surrounding youth in Kenya from the colonial era through to the period between 2009 and 2012. My focus is less on the particulars of programs and the politics of “youth” than on the ways taxonomies of young people have shifted and over time. I then consider contemporary constructions and mobilizations of *youth* through young people’s explicit descriptions of it in interaction and through their inventive textual and musical productions. I identify key qualities like modernness, uniqueness, senses of struggle and potential along with

notions of deviance and idleness that are constitutive of *youth* as a qualia cluster full of conflicting qualities.

The second chapter, “Kisumu’s chorus of voices,” describes complex linguistic landscape in Kenya and argues that hierarchies of linguistic value do not emanate from a single source. Instead, the value and social meaning of language-in-use is always contextually contingent. Departing from earlier scholarship on language use in Kenya, I argue for an analysis that acknowledges plurilingual registers in speakers’ linguistic repertoires of everyday use. This approach—one that takes the most locally-salient distinctions among communicative forms—allows us to see more clearly the ways communicative forms are mapped on to social personae and qualities in Kenya. I describe language practices and ideologies common among young JoKisumu and show that language is a critical site in which conflicts over ethnicity, authority, and the meaning of *youth* are meted out.

“*Kuenda Sheng* (going Sheng): Ideologies of Sheng and the meaning of youth,” Chapter 3, makes an important contribution to Kenyan linguistics and the current scholarship on Sheng by delving deeply into local metapragmatics, the ways people classify, evaluate and describe the language. Describing metapragmatic discourses about Sheng reveals why it is heard as “youth language” whether its speakers are young or old. Here *youth* becomes a tag for a set of qualities—unrestrained, inclusive, incomprehensible, post-ethnic, and urban—that are identified with the linguistic register and often conflicting, but not entirely reliant on notions of age or generation. In this way, Sheng operates as an indexical icon—it both points to and resembles—stereotypes of the youth in Kenya, including those stereotypes’ internal contradictions.

The second part of the dissertation (Chapters 4-6) marks a shift from explicit description of the registers and languages that mark and produce *youth* to the styles, genres and discourses in

which *youth* is mobilized and contested in Kenya. In each of these chapters, I show how particular features of *youth* are erased or insisted upon—from pan-ethnic inclusiveness to sincerity—and demonstrate the breadth and importance of *youth* as a semiotic category in contemporary urban Kenya.

In Chapter 4, “Talking futures: Autobiographical narrative and the logic of talent,” I focus on future-oriented autobiographical narratives, a speech genre that proliferates in schools, churches, and youth centers across Kenya. I argue that in this type of narrative young people link their pasts to the present with an underlying logic of talent, ethics, and responsibility. Forging these past-present connections makes futures—viz., careers and vocations—appear as foregone conclusions. The logics through which these connections are grounded insist on a particular ethics of *youth*, which is set against a presupposed status quo of “corruption.” In addition to being frames through which identities emerge, these stories are justifications for career choices that are particularly *youthy* in Kenya (counseling, art, and motivational speaking). Their justifications are not only deeply informed by Protestant discourses of vocation and talents but also buttressed by neo-liberal discourses of entrepreneurialism and self-investment. Together these discourses make up the ether in which a *youthy* struggle for recognition takes place.

“‘You don’t have to pray to somebody in special English’: Realizing a youthy Christianity,” Chapter 5, centers on the important role of prosperity gospel Pentecostalism for youth in Kisumu and show how its ideologies inflect contemporary Kenyan *youth*. I make a close analysis of one young man’s salvation narrative to argue that the invocation and citation of a transnational genre provides a space for individuals to claim both access to and recognition within a global Christian ecumene. In this case, salvation narrative allows one young man to manage both the contradictions he sees in being both “youth” and “born again” as well as the

tension between continuity and rupture in Christian conversion. I show how the narrator makes claims for the commensurability of *youth* and Christian ethics through a notion of sincerity, which he understands as central to both.

Chapter 6, “*Kujenga Mayuts* (Building the youth): Standardizing youth in a comic book,” is about a rather remarkable attempt to mobilize qualities and indexes of *youth* and (re)model stereotypes of the youth in Kenya as self-sufficient, neoliberal, democratic subjects. I explore the ways a nationally circulating Kenyan comic book, *Shujaaz*, uses storylines and a particular variety of Sheng to model an ideal typification of “the youth” that is productive, creative, and “post-ethnic.” While the comic presents a Janus-faced image of youth, one that we see around the world—youth as both the future and those who endanger it—the heroes of the comic emerge as and model a distinct and ideal third type. I engage the concept of “clasps” (Gal 2007) to argue that *Shujaaz* represents an effort to reshape *youth* by reshaping youth language. I show that it is not simply publishing in this register that does this social modeling, but also the very unusual way the register is represented in the pages of the comic. With technologies of standardization *Shujaaz* erases some of Sheng’s key features because they make Sheng (as spoken) problematic to inclusive post-ethnic, modern *youth*, and I suggest that these little comic books, free with the Saturday newspaper, represent no less than an effort to manage *youth* and “modernity” in Kenya.

The dissertation concludes by returning explicitly to the contrast between *youth* and corruption with a discussion of the breakdown of the Masani Youth Group, a group that was a central focus throughout my fieldwork. I describe how, when rumors of corruption and idleness began circulating within the group, it became impossible to maintain the collective under the banner of *youth*.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

THE QUALITY OF YOUTH: PRACTICES, CATEGORIES, AND REJOINDERS

In Kenya “youth” is everywhere. An oft-cited cause and solution to issues up for national debate from employment and development to national unity and terrorism, youth is something inescapable in the country, especially in urban areas like Kisumu.¹ Daily reports of “youth” disrupting political rallies sit aside stories in national newspapers of “youth” cleaning up rubbish on the roads in their communities. Youth organizations abound as do youth groups within larger institutions like churches and political parties. On any given day in Kisumu, one can find a forum, meeting, or seminar directed at “youth.” These programs are often geared toward empowerment or behavior change and grounded in an assumption that youth experience in Kisumu is one of peril and powerlessness. The focus of these programs, and youth policy more generally in Kenya, like much of sub-Saharan Africa, is grounded in a conception of youth as both the bearers of and threat to the nation’s future. At the same time, they also reflect widespread concerns about the impossibilities of youth, particularly anxieties about idleness and the inability to advance into adulthood. A growing scholarly literature reflects these concerns, detailing the challenges of being “stuck” in youth and the ways young people cope and often

¹ Recent al-Shabab terrorist attacks in Kenya, including the September 2013 siege on the upscale Westlands shopping center in Nairobi and the April 2015 massacre of students at Garissa University, have heightened national concerns about the vulnerability of young Kenyan men (particularly ethnic Somalis and Muslims) to the organization’s recruitment efforts. Al-Shabab attacks in the county increased after the 2011 incursion by Kenyan national forces into Somalia (named “Operation *linda nchi*,” [=operation protect the nation]). These more aggressive efforts to weed out the group were sparked by a series of high profile tourist kidnappings along the coast, some of the most popular destinations for foreign tourists in Kenya.

circumvent the predicaments of youth (see, for example, Cole and Durham, eds. 2008, Honwana and DeBoeck, eds. 2005, see also Introduction for a further citations and discussion).

What seemed most remarkable to me in the early days of fieldwork were the ways that the young people I encountered talked about their experience of youth. They certainly complained about unemployment and lacking opportunities and they lamented the ways they were disrespected or not taken seriously, particularly in their creative and entrepreneurial endeavors. But while the young people I met were deeply concerned with respect and status, they seemed little concerned with the specifics of adult status. They rarely mentioned things like establishing their own homes or formal marriage as status markers. When they did mention marriage, it was normally about intentionally deferring the rite and the delaying the responsibilities of marriage. For the young people that became my regular interlocutors and friends, “youth” was not necessarily something to escape, but instead a position or stance through which to make claims about sincerity, corruption, and modernity in a variety of complex ways. These claims were not made in terms of age, or even necessarily in generational terms. Instead, they were grounded the quality of youth—both in the sense of what youth are like and a moral assessment of it. This dissertation is fundamentally concerned with how those qualities emerge and are debated in everyday interactions, that is, how *youth* operates as a semiotic category. These qualities congeal into an entire ever-changing constellation of images or stereotypes of youth and people position themselves in relation to those stereotypes in practices that shore them up or work as rejoinders to them.

In a group discussion at the Masani Youth Center that I will describe further below, I asked an intentionally vague and naïve-sounding question, “what is youth?” The first answers were closely tied to the age range of the category, echoing the demographic classification of

people in government policy. The discussion felt the same as those in exam prep in the high schools I spent much of my time in, my interlocutors seemed to be searching for a correct answer or an appropriately worded definition. Was youth 17 to “40 something”? Or perhaps 15 to 25? It was different from “teenagers” the group agreed, but they still couldn’t settle on a definition for a concept that was in such steady circulation around them and ostensibly the *raison d’être* of their own organization.

Eugene stepped in and changed tack. He insisted that youth was everything “modern,” it was “modern lifestyle, modern clothing, modern use of language.” Excited by his own description, he shouted, “It’s so modern, yea!” Modern, in this sense, was in contrast to not only tradition, but also to that which exists in the past, in rural areas, and is the stuff of elders.² Over the course of the meeting and throughout the many conversations I had with Eugene, I came to know that for him, modern lifestyle consists of things like computers, mobile phones, and having romantic relationships. Modern clothing is t-shirts and jeans, not the trousers and collared shirts men in the rural areas would wear. Modern language was Sheng; it could also be English, but it was decidedly not mother tongue. With the explicit mention of modernness also comes a sense of urbanness and the savvy (or “smartness”) experienced through cutting-edge fashion and linguistic style.

In this chapter I detail my approach to the study of *youth*, unpacking its multiple meanings and stereotypes and focusing on the qualities that are locally-understood to be imbued in the category. In order to understand *youth* as a semiotic category at the contemporary moment, I trace the discourses surrounding youth in Kenya from the colonial era through to the period

² This is, to be sure, not the only meaning of modernity in Kenya. As elsewhere, the modern is a complex and fraught category, something I will touch on further below and in Chapter 2. (See also J. and J.L. Comaroff 1993, Piot 1999 for further discussions of the notion of modernity with respect to sub-Saharan Africa).

between 2009 and 2012, when I conducted fieldwork in Kisumu. My focus will be less on the particulars of programs and the politics of youth than on the taxonomies and stereotypes of young people. I tease out the different “types” or classifications of young people, looking at the local evaluations and descriptions of these types of people, and trace the ways they have changed through different political eras. I then consider a critical contrast with *youth*: the old, a term that does not so much reference a generational contrast as it does a contrast of style and qualia. I briefly delineate some of the qualities of “the old,” including corruption and tradition, and show how this contrast that makes *youth* meaningful, contested, and valuable in contemporary Kenya. I then analyze constructions and mobilizations of *youth* by examining interactions, inventive texts, and musical productions by young people. I identify key qualities like modernness, uniqueness, senses of struggle and potential along with deviance and idleness that make up this larger metasign, *youth*. Finally, I describe a conflict over emblematic youth practices—Sheng and fistbumping—to suggest that essentialisms are also in play in local conceptions of the category, something that makes *youth* comparable in a way to other social categories like ethnicity.

Youth as a qualia-cluster

Eugene’s description of youth would be recognizable across Kenya (and across the continent) and it points us in a new direction for understanding meanings of youth. Rather than focusing on age ranges as the many development and government agencies with programs focused on youth do, it references cluster of qualities and practices that have become enregistered as *youth*. That is to say, *youth* has become a meta-sign for an entire repertoire of signs socially identifiable with social personae or practices and differentiable from other semiotic

clusters (Agha 2007). However, this notion of *youth* is certainly not singular. The content of this cluster—what “counts” as *youth* or *youthy*—is contested and results in multiple, often conflicting, meanings of *youth* in Kenya. Nor is it static. Enregisterment—the processes whereby semiotic repertoires, or indeed clusters of qualities, become socially distinguishable and recognizable—is always incomplete and in motion and “various boundaries and limits can be reset in regular ways” (Agha 2007: 186). Indeed, it is precisely their socio-historical contingency and iterability that makes categories like *youth* so socially productive and often the sites of debate and anxiety.

When Kenyans, young and old in socio-biological age, claim *youth* (explicitly as Bernard did in claiming “youth for life” [see Introduction] or more subtly as do the other young people or politicians I discuss throughout this dissertation) they are most often not indexing chronological age or relative maturity. Nor are they necessarily referencing generation alone. They are also taking stances and positioning themselves among sets of qualities and stereotypical images. In this chapter I delineate and describe many of these qualities as they emerge, are mobilized, and become naturalized as *youthy* in political and media discourse as well as within interpersonal interaction. I suggest that these qualities become relevant, legible, and often contested as *youth* by contrast to other qualia-clusters, including that of corruption.

From this perspective, *youth* operates as a tag for an entire constellation of qualities, sort of an umbrella quale (pl. qualia). This focus on the qualities that make up this complex of *youth*, along with the social-semiotic processes that produce it, allows us to understand more precisely how (not simply that) a variety of material forms and practices are read as “signs of youth”—

through a semiotic link between a social type and a set of qualia (Harkness 2013).³ My use of qualia here differs somewhat from a focus on sensual qualities—things like taste or touch—that have been the focus of much of the literature that engages the concept. I use the concept to think about the semiotic mediation of spatio-temporal qualities like newness or relational qualities like vulnerability in order to insist upon their similarity; these qualities are equally semiotically mediated. That is to say, they too are subject to and products of semiotic ideologies (Keane 2003).

Mobilizing indexes (indexes often read as iconic, thus rhemes) of *youth* in such modalities as linguistic form, religious practice, dance, or music can be understood as a way of aligning with and becoming identifiable with this set of qualities. It is through these qualities that

³ Qualia, in the Peircian sense, are experience of qualities. In this conceptualization, qualities in and of themselves do not exist for us, we must experience them in an embodied form and recognize that embodied form first as a sign, and then as a sign of a quality. Thus, to take a now classic example, red in and of itself does not exist for us unless it is experienced through a material form. The red may be experienced in the skin of an apple or the paint of a fire truck. From that experience, we are able to abstract away creating “mental entities” of qualities; in this case, an abstraction called “redness” (Parmentier 1993). It is critical to note, however, that the experience of qualia are not individual mental entities, they are cultural. Culture provides guidance for recognizing the experience of qualia as of a particular type; that is, for example, how to taste the “softness” of soju or the “denseness” and “thickness” of linguistic forms (Harkness 2013, Gal 2013).

Within anthropology, thinking through qualia has entailed a focus on the historical, social, and discursive conditions under which sensation becomes read as a sensation of a quality; the ways in which qualia become named, locally evaluated, and recognized as instances of “the same thing” (Chumley and Harkness 2013, Munn 1986). As social actors we learn how to understand, evaluate, and experience qualia. We also learn what they mean when co-present with other signs. An apple’s skin is not only iconic of the quality of redness, but also an index of the ripeness of its flesh. Thus, qualia can become read as both icons (with grounds of similarity) and indexes (with grounds of co-presence). As Chumley and Harkness argue, “indexical iconicity is at the heart of the signifying function of qualia in large part because of the inter-subjective achievement of a sense of shared experience that it facilitates” (2013: 7).

youth becomes a powerful means through which people, young and old, make claims to recognition, resources, and opportunity.

In order to unpack the variegated qualities within the *youth* qualia cluster, I examine stereotypy—the congealed images of social categories—along with the ways people position themselves in relation to youth stereotypes. Positioning the self within a constellation of youth stereotypes is more than an act of identity, it is at the same time making a claim about the meanings of *youth*.

This self-positioning often takes place through language and other intertwined elements of a semiotic repertoire. Linguistic register, narrative form, or clothing choice, for example, can be socially recognizable as *youthy*, always indexing qualities in addition to relative generational status. My approach to analyzing the meanings of *youth* by stereotypy and qualia is closely related to linguistic anthropological and sociolinguistic studies of style when taken as: “a bundle of semiotic resources, indexically tied to a social type, category, or persona. Styles do not exist in isolation *but acquire meaning only in relation to other styles* within the same semiotic system—that is, styles are distinctive” (emphasis mine, Bucholtz 2011: 11; citing Coupland 2007, Irvine 2001).

Much of the current scholarship on youth still restricts its view to finding the distinctiveness of youth in relation to other socio-biological categories (e.g. elders, adults, children) thereby retaining, if in only as an undercurrent, a frame grounded in age and relative age-relations. Themes of “waiting” (Honwana 2012) or being “stuck” (Sommers 2012) and unable to reach adulthood, while poignant and productive, also confine the focus to trajectories grounded, to some extent, in life course. I certainly do not disagree that youth around the world find themselves in a liminal social space, in search of recognition or status; the endpoint of

desires for statusful positions, as Nakassis points out, need not be limited to “adulthood” (forthcoming).

In my analysis, I look beyond (although I certainly do not dismiss) generation as a core analytic in search of the more locally-salient contrasts that make *youth* meaningful and distinctive. While “the old,” a critical contrastive set to *youth*, can be embodied in the stereotype of the elder male in Kenya, it need not be. A young man’s choice of a collared button down shirt and mother tongue on a *matatu* could be just as “old style” (distinctly not *youth*) as an elder man’s insistence on excessive deference in a local pub (see following chapter).

Implicit in this contrast is a development narrative that serves to bolster young people’s claims about the moral quality of *youth* and problematic corruption. James Smith (2008) argues that development in Kenya involves modeling a future in a comparative spatial and temporal frame and reimagining the proper order of social life and progress, precisely the sort of project that the young people I worked with in Kisumu see themselves engaged in. Indeed, the implications of the term “development” (Sw.: *maendeleo*) in Kenya resonate clearly with the notion and stereotype of *youth* popular among my interlocutors, particularly in its staunch rejection of the status quo be it in the everyday or at the level of national politics (Smith 2008: 8). It should come as no surprise then that young people marshal these logics in a reconfiguration of *youth* and their claims to recognition and futures given that NGOs and other international development projects are thick on the ground in Kisumu and today’s young people have come of age in a social environment in which the logics and discourses of development—both locally- and globally-informed—are commonplace, valued, and woven into everyday interaction.

Typologies and ideologies of youth in Kenya

The spectrum of youth stereotypes that Kenyans position themselves within has a history. It is this history, in part, that makes the images of youth appear so natural and unremarkable in local contexts. Noting the social and historical circumstances under which these tropes emerge offers insight into how and why they took (and take) the particular forms they do.

Concerns about African “youth” were readily voiced within the colonial administration, even in early days of the colony. Not unlike some of the young men at home in Britain, young African men were thought of as a “problem” by administrators, bureaucrats, and educators across the colony. An entire typology of young people emerged in the administrative record and it was a typology largely accounting for a non-rural and mobile population. Colonial officers were most anxious about young men who seemed to be outside traditional and gerontocratic authority and also not fully obedient to the disciplinary colonial regime. These were young men who left their rural homes, migrated to urban areas, or attended school and left with expectations of futures that were realistically unattainable. They were, in a way, “matter out of place.”⁴ In their efforts to understand and manage the new and problematic young men (and some young women), the administration began to delineate young people in ways still relevant to youth stereotypy today.

In terms familiar across British colonial Africa, young men in the city were often referred to as “vagrants,” “spivs” and “juvenile delinquents” who were described as “disorderly” and “undisciplined” in white papers and correspondence and reported in minutes from meetings

⁴ See Berman 1990 and Berman and Lonsdale 1992 for a discussion of the political and economic circumstances surrounding rural-urban migration in Kenya, particularly in central Kenya where the majority of migrants came from and the majority of youth programs were focused. Rural-urban migration in Kenya was due to mass land alienation by settlers by contrast to the extractive economies that forced a great deal of migration in central and southern Africa (see, for example, Ferguson 1999).

establishing youth organizations (Burton, et al. 2010; Parsons 2004).⁵ Youth with no appropriate way of orienting their “adolescent energy” properly were a threat, young men were found “wandering” like vagrants urban Nairobi and were often relocated back to rural areas where the colonial authority hoped they would fit back under the hand of gerontocratic authority and parental control (Ocobock 2010).⁶ While some migrants to urban areas were primary school leavers seeking formal job opportunities, the majority were boys and young men who sought refuge from difficult circumstances in rural areas, especially in central Kenya where disenfranchisement, landlessness, and poverty were increasingly common (Ocobock 2006). Such policy and regulations belie the anxieties about both the economic order in the colony, and the social order. In the eyes of the colonial authority, urban Africans in Nairobi—particularly the young men—represented a danger because they were “detrified,” removed from what was understood to be the discipline of the moral and ethical order of traditional, rural ethnic communities and were understood to be “a potential disruptive influence” (Berman and Lonsdale 1992: 238).

As Ocobock (2010) demonstrates, ideologies of youth circulating in Europe in the post-World War I period deeply informed the policies and programs in Kenya and across the British Empire. He argues, “the idea of youthhood became a social fact, created so it could be studied, understood and controlled” (Ocobock 2010: 4). Terms like “disorder,” “indiscipline” and “instability” imbued the imaginary of African boys and young men in urban areas with a sense of danger; they were types of people need of control in the form of youth organizations, special

⁵ KNA VT/1/11. R.G. Greaves. “The Youth Problem in Nyeri District.” July 1957.

⁶ “Adolescence” in colonial Kenya was largely an elite category including the select few who had access to steady formal education and at least semi-permanent urban residence. Parsons describes these youth as one of the “most serious threats to the stability of the colonial regime” (2004: 22).

schools, and training facilities that colonial officials for community and youth development like Barbara Dodd and Tom Askwith advocated even through the 1950s. If that control were not to be found with the return to rural areas and in the guise of parents and elder-kin or mission churches and schools, it must be imposed through the official policy of the colonial state.⁷ In addition, programs like the Boy Scouts and youth clubs, although initially focused in Central Province, were established across the country to provide that control and cultivate allegiance, or at least acquiescence, to the colonial order (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Ocobock 2006; Parsons 2004). Suffuse in the planning and purpose of these youth-focused organizations is the notion that young people, seen as inherently “vigorous,” had an energy that needed to appropriately directed.⁸

By the early 1950s, the notion of “youth” expanded beyond the types of youth men referred to as “spivs” and “vagrants” who were the primary concern in the inter-war period and began to include types with classifiers like “youngsters” and “young men,” people who were considered by officials in the Ministry of Community Development and Colony Youth Organizers as decidedly less criminal and threatening, but still in need of intervention. These “youngsters” and “young men” faced the ill-defined “youth problems” understood to be common to young people around the world, problems that could be addressed by a range of youth

⁷ BNA/PRO1. Vagrancy Act, “Bill Relating to Children and Young Persons,” 1932.

⁸ KNA AB/16/11. Barbara Dodds. “Encouragement of Youth Movements and Recreation Among Young People of All Races and Both Sexes.” 1955; KNA AB/16/14. Permanent Secretary for Community Development. “Community Development—Central Province.” 16th Sept. 1957; KNA AB/16/11. Ministry of Community Development. “A Study of the Youth Problems Among the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru Tribes” 17th Nov. 1957; KNA AB/16/13. C.W. Griffin (Kenya Association of Youth Clubs). “Youth Organization—Kenya Colony.” 8th June 1958.

organizations—from Boy Scouts and youth clubs to “approved schools.”⁹ The notion of youth dominant within the colonial administration was still infused with the ideas like “indiscipline,” “idleness,” and “despondency” and many officers insisted on the need to absorb the “idle, dissolute youth” who were susceptible to the Mau Mau rebels.¹⁰ In the midst of the Mau Mau Emergency, the colonial authority began to distinguish among different types of youth in ever more nuanced ways “students” were of a higher, more cultivated class, distinct from the “untrained boys” who needed to be kept consistently busy so as to avoid discontent or political agitation.¹¹ As this distinction was drawn, the notion of “energy” and appropriately occupying youth became increasingly important. While scouting was reserved to cultivate the “boys of the best character,” youth clubs would keep potential deviants busy, expend their energy, steer them away from delinquency and rebellion, reform “spivs,” and train non-student “boys” in vocations as well as hygiene.¹² While the energy of the “untrained boy” was dangerous and had to be redirected, the energy of the student type was seen by colonial youth officials such as Tom Askwith, C.F. Atkins, and G.W. Griffin more as an untapped potential. In a planning document for further youth organization in the colony, Barbara Dodds, the senior officer for Youth Movements and Recreation, insisted that Kenya would never be strong “unless its youth is also

⁹ “Approved School” is a term for residential schools for young offenders who are court ordered to attend. Not all residents have necessarily committed crimes, some are simply deemed out of control. KNA AB/2/30. Haut-Comité de la Jeunesse. “Study on the Relations Between Youth Organizations and the State.”

¹⁰ KNA VT/1/11. R.G. Greaves. “Youth Clubs” 14th Sept. 1957; KNA AB/16/14. T.G. Askwith. “Community Development—Central Province” 16th Sept. 1957.

¹¹ KNA AB/16/13. C.F. Atkins. Letter to the Minister for Community Development. 16th April 1958.

¹² Ideologies of hygiene as an index of moral rectitude were common throughout the British colonies in Africa (see Burke 1996, J. Comaroff 1985). KNA AB/16/13. T.G. Askwith. Letter to the Colony Youth Organizer. 3rd April 1958.; KNA AB/16/11 G.W. Griffin. Letter to T.G. Askwith. 25th May 1958.

strengthened.”¹³ The production of a sense of national identity, accordingly, required that young people identify as “youth” before tribe or race.¹⁴

In addition to drawing lines of distinction among youth, parsing the innocent although endangered “youngsters” and “students” with unifying potential, from the “abnormal” juvenile delinquents who required rehabilitation, colonial youth organization officials had concerns about mixing these categories of young people.¹⁵ The Kenya Association of Youth Clubs worried that the dangerous delinquents may scare off or pollute the “children in need of care.” In the end, they had determined that “mixing the bad with the good” instead saw improvements such that “the general behaviour of all [was] a high standard.”¹⁶ This potential for youth of high moral value to improve and influence delinquents remains important in youth policy and discourse today (see Chapter 6).

Chronological age, life stage, and gender began to more explicitly inform divisions within “youth” in colonial Kenya as official programs took institutional shape throughout the mid-1950s and early 1960s. While circumcision, other initiation rituals, and marriage guided the boundary drawn around “youth” in Kenya, the category continued to be refined until the range of ages 11 to 22 became the focus of youth resources in the colony by 1958.¹⁷ Distinctions among programs geared toward young men classified as “delinquent,” “good boys,” and girls (who were rarely classed as dangerous) not only determined who had access to what resources, but also

¹³KNA AB/16/11. Barbara Dodds. “Kenya Youth Development.” 1955

¹⁴KNA AB/2/30 “Draft, National Council for Kenya Youth” 1955.; KNA VT/1/11 G.W. Griffin. “Recommendations Arising from the Tour of Central Province with Regards to Setting Up of a Youth Organisation.” 23rd July 1957.

¹⁵ KNA VT/1/1 Kenya Association of Youth Clubs. “Minutes” 25th Feb. 1960.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ KNA AB/16/13 T.G. Askwith. Letter to the Colony Youth Organizer. 3rd Apr. 1958.

what the goals of each program should be: rehabilitation, leadership development, or “modern” homemaking.¹⁸

While varieties of youth were manifold in colonial Kenya, such typologies didn’t seem to incorporate all those that fit into the administration’s established 11-22 age bracket. The liminality of youth—and certainly the threat of vagrancy and thuggery associated with it—was largely associated with males. Girls and young women were only occasionally classed as “youth” in the official documentation and often set apart both in their classification—“youth” were distinguished from “young women” and “girls” in memos from the ministry for community development—and the projects geared toward them.¹⁹ While girls were certainly allowed to take part in local youth organizations along with boys, they were more often shuttled into domestic training run through women’s organizations such as *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* (Sw.: development/progress for women).²⁰

¹⁸ In a move that marked the familiar colonial (and contemporary) distinctions between male and female criminality, the Ministry for Community Development established that “the delinquent female” would be “treated as a separate problem” meaning that they would not be subject in the same ways as young men to juvenile courts, correction programs, and youth clubs aimed at rehabilitation (KNA VT/1/1 “Memorandum for the District Commissioners’ Meeting” 26th Nov. 1959). Girls were more often perceived to be in “moral danger,” a theme that carries through to the contemporary moment when schools like Nam Lolwe Girls convert to boarding only schools because the students are thought to be under threat by corrupting urban influences.

¹⁹ KNA AB/16/14. T.G. Askwith. “Youth Organizations.” 16th Oct. 1956.

²⁰ *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* was formed in 1952 and has slowly morphed from an organization focused on mothercraft and domesticity to one concerned with women’s rights and development. As throughout British Colonial Africa, women’s bodies and domestic activities were sites of disciplinary intervention into the daily lives of Kenyans by both missionaries and the colonial authority. In central Kenya, female circumcision practices were the subject of enduring conflict among the colonial authority, Christian missionaries, and local Africans. This “controversy” as it is often referred to, was critical to emerging political awareness and ideology that laid groundwork for the Mau Mau Rebellion (see Thomas 2003 for a thorough and thoughtful discussion of the female circumcision controversy and the socio-political impact of conflicts over control over the bodies of women in colonial Kenya).

Neither were rural boys and young men always a part of the category. Even if not solely an urban phenomenon, in much of the documentation of youth clubs and organizations “youth” is a classifier for young people who had formal education or had otherwise left their rural homes. Indeed, many young men were sent back to rural areas and often encouraged to take up agriculture seemingly as a way of directing them away from becoming “youth.” In the eyes of the colonial authority, people who fit in this typology were those who required management, cultivation, or rehabilitation; their “energy” needed to be appropriately directed. The typification of youth by colonial officers tended toward the “frustrated” and “idle” young men, “bitter” at lack of opportunity.²¹ Increased access to secondary education left a class of school leavers who were literate but still not perceived as ready to enter the work force. When they did enter the workforce, they often found opportunities incommensurate with their career desires (Sandgren 2012). Even primary school finishers were of concern to the Ministry for Community Development and Youth Council who worried that students would have heightened expectations for clerical or other higher status work after experience with education and would be frustrated with peasant farming or other manual occupations. The Colony Youth Office even considered the abrupt end to formal education students experienced to be “possibly the greatest single factor contributing to our Kenya problem” because it led to profound “frustration” among young men.²²

The spectrum of youth stereotypes that emerged in colonial Kenya resonates distinctly with the typologies of youth in the contemporary moment both in Kenya and around the world. Two images at the poles of this youth spectrum, the image of the young leader who carries with

²¹ KNA AMP/6/34. Kenya Government. Ministry of Housing and Social Services. “Volunteer Urban Youth Program.” 1962.; KNA AAL/1/11. “Note on a Meeting Held at the Ministry of Labour” 14th August 1962.

²² KNA BY/12/33. Office of the Colony Youth Organizer. “Youth Organization—Kenya Colony” Jan. 1960.

him the potential of national unity to that of the dangerous, idle juvenile delinquent both bear with them what Jean and John Comaroff have referred to as the “fusion of monstrosity, energy, and creativity” (2001: 19). While Comaroff and Comaroff referred to the particularity of youth at the millennium, this characterization actually has important resonance with anxieties and expectations of youth in Kenya’s colonial era and onward toward independence in the midst of radical political, social, and economic change.

Youth in the independence era

Institutional discourses on youth shifted at independence in 1963. In governmental and policy documents “youth” was viewed within the early independence vision as capable and productive rather than in terms of immaturity and instability that dominated in the colonial era. At the same time, the material resources dedicated to youth projects during the colonial era dried up and the independent government scrambled to find funding to support the new and changing youth programs.²³

Iconic of the nation, youth came to stand for national potential and unity and at least for a short time, the independent government fixated less than their colonial predecessors on youth as a threat to the social order. In contrast to the colonial era when youth were the responsibility of the state and other non-state actors like missions and charitable organizations, the youth in the independence era, the embodiment of the fledgling nation, were encouraged to take more responsibility for themselves as Kenyan citizens. Like all citizens, they were called on to become self-reliant and take up the nationalist spirit of *harambee* (pulling together). Jomo Kenyatta’s

²³ Much of the funding for youth programs during the colonial era came in the form of donations and grants from donors such as Save the Children and the Lord Dulverton Trust. After independence, the government relied on state funding and agencies like UNICEF for youth-oriented programs. KNA AMP/15/24. Kenya Association of Youth Centers. Report. [1980]

rallying cry signaled his vision of development as one of “individual initiative” well before the discourses of responsabilization entered with structural adjustment programs in the 1980s (Branch 2011). Discourses of youth and national development were interwoven in programs like the National Youth Service and Harambee Youth Week.

While the notion of youth potential remained consistent in government discourse, particularly that surrounding the National Youth Service, youth training centers, and polytechnics, by the late-1960s and 1970s anxieties about unemployment, a rapidly expanding population, and demands on the state began to temper the rosy vision of youth. The unemployed but educated youth were often-cited sources of concern, representing a threat to the nation that posed a “potentially disturbing element in Society [sic].”²⁴ Like many other parliamentarians who pointed unironic fingers at elders who would not step aside for youth advancement, during parliamentary debate K. Kimani encouraged elders to retire from work earlier to make room for the youth who were “languishing in poverty [and] joblessness.”²⁵

However, it was not just sympathy that met job seeking youth, but also fear. Frustrated at the few opportunities for work, some educated youth had turned to threatening their communities with violence and demanding aid, the Kenya Voluntary Development Association [KVDA] warned. Talk of the threat not only of physical violence but also vandalism and theft, posed by idle youth and unsuccessful job seekers was echoed in the pleas by the National Youth Service, Village Polytechnics, and Kenya Association of Youth Clubs as they sought more government resources.²⁶ Like the colonial government they criticized, the KVDA blamed the unruliness of

²⁴ KNA JA/17/1. “Report of Nambale Youth Training Centre.” January-October 1967.

²⁵ Report of the National Assembly (Hansard). 16th June- 29th July 1977, p. 98.

²⁶ KNA AMP/5/46. C. Mananairi. “KVDA Seminar on Youth and Re-Education for Development in Kenya.” 24th June 1979. KNA NYS/1/241. [Commonwealth African Regional Youth]. “Consideration of the Draft Agenda and Documentation.” [1969].

youth on family breakdown and increased urbanization, but they also pointed the finger at European influence. In the KVDA's analysis, youth had become more materialistic, drawn to substance abuse, and easily bored because they were not raised within "traditional" African societies. In some spheres such "youth" began to take on the quality of anonymity, as nameless hordes roaming in urban areas much like the young "vagrants" of the colonial era.

Whether educated or not, without aid, youth in poverty and without opportunity posed a threat. "This is what creates gangsters" Parliamentarian M. Bosire warned in 1977, "an empty stomach makes a lot of noise."²⁷ In the 1980s and even more so in the 1990s the concern about these "gangsters," embittered by poverty, ramped up as gang-like groups like Mungiki and the Taliban emerged in Nairobi and battles for territory (particularly over *matatu* routes) saw spikes in crime and violence (Branch 2011, Hornsby 2013).²⁸ During each election and often even between, politicians were known to hire "jobless youth" or ("idle youth" as they were often also known) to intimidate voters, disrupt opponents' rallies or even punish detractors through physical violence (Throup and Hornsby 1998). At the same time that youth were seen as dangerous, criminal and uncontrollable, there was an underlying sense of causality. These were not inherently dangerous youth, but instead vulnerable, often described in the media as having

²⁷ Report of the National Assembly (Hansard). 16th June- 29th July 1977, p. 114.

²⁸ Mungiki is an organization somewhat more complicated than a "gang" in the American sense. Mungiki is a neo-traditional religio-political organization founded in the mid to late 1980s in central Kenya in reaction to concerns over the degradation of "traditional values" in the Kikuyu ethnic community in Kenya. In the 1990s Mungiki began its increase in popularity, largely because of its appeal to jobless youth, and developed its reputation as both a political movement and a criminal gang. The organization became involved in the *matatu* sector, extorting funds from drivers and *matatu* owners and vying with other criminal gangs for control over specific routes and territories in Nairobi and its environs. The organization later expanded to a wider protection racket, extorting money from business owners and residents in various parts of Nairobi. Mungiki has since expanded its reach and is reported to have active members throughout central Kenya and has been characterized by some scholars as mafia-like. See Kagwanja 2003, Rasmussen 2010.

been manipulated by corrupt elders and politicians who took advantage of their desperate need and effectively turned them into gangsters.

This notion of the manipulability of youth, that even the dangerous were in fact endangered, emerged strongly in the 1990s and is a dominant theme in contemporary discourses surrounding youth. If the theme of manipulable youth emerged in the 1990s, it should be considered in light of the redirection of foreign aid money to civil society organizations, NGOs, and CBOs. Institutional aid discourse began classifying youth as “marginalized” and powerless (thus requiring “empowerment”). Youth as a category maintained a sense of potential, but it was now coupled with an even stronger sense of hindrance in popular and political discourse. Youth were lumped in with other so-defined marginalized and disadvantaged groups like women and people with disabilities, a clustering evoked in Kenya’s recent national youth policy.

Youth in contemporary Kenya

Mid-2007 saw the presentation of a remarkable document that would inform dramatic changes in official government policy and programs youth, even if it didn’t have a palpable effect on the lives of young Kenyans. Sessional paper #3, “Kenya National Youth Policy” was presented to the National Assembly in July and urged a “critical look at the plight of Kenyan youth” citing “challenges” like a 75% unemployment rate and “low status.” Who youth are institutionally was pegged to chrono-biological ages, in this document as 15-34, reflecting that set out in the African Youth Charter (2006). Such age ranges, can become problematic, particularly when there is no certainty that adulthood will follow, only a vague sense of post-youth, at least in bureaucratic terms. A representative of Ministry of Youth Affairs (MYA) offered a telling response when I asked in an interview how one might classify those who aged-

out of the governmental classification of youth. She replied, “I don’t know what you become, but you are no longer youth.”

Varieties of youth were typologized in the document by the precise forms of marginalization they faced. While all youth might encounter a generalizable set of challenges—most notably the inability to realize their “full potential”—each finer revision of the category represents the site of a double marginalization and the source of low social status. This finer distinction also sheds light on the set of qualities associated with the dominant stereotype. Between the lines emerges the unmarked image of youth in Kenya. Youth subsets (called “priority target groups”) included: youth with disabilities, street youth, youth infected with AIDS, female youth, unemployed youth, and out of school youth (MYA 2007: viii). With these finer distinctions delineated, the unmarked youth is male, he is able bodied and healthy, he has a place to sleep at night.²⁹ While the final two “target groups,” the unemployed and out of school, represents nearly all young people in Kenya, they are parsed out to demonstrate the compounded marginalization, the dual source of lower status. Jobless and outside of an educational institution, while common consistent throughout Kenya’s history, still compounds the challenges already faced by youth. This list of the doubly-marginalized offers insight into the ideal citizen, what a Kenyan should be—a healthy, employed, stable man—a status youth are understood in this policy to ultimately struggle to attain.

The 2007 youth policy aimed to create circumstances under which “young people contribute to the country and realize their full potential” and to ultimately reach full status as a citizen (MYA 2007: iv). It began with grand, nationalist language, predictably tying the future of the nation to its youth:

²⁹ Here, “unmarked” is used as a term to identify the ideologically dominant half of a set of hierarchical binaries (e.g., male/female, white/black), see Waugh (1982).

“Youth are the foundation of a society. Their energy, inventiveness, character and orientation define the pace of development and the security of the nation. Through their creative talents and labor power, a nation makes giant strides in economic development and socio-political attainments. In their dreams and hopes, a nation finds her motivation; on their energies, she builds her vitality and purpose. And because of their dreams and aspirations, the future of the nation is assured” (MYA 2007: iv).

If the rhetoric, with its mentions of “vitality” and “aspiration” is somewhat predictable, it is also striking because it was presented only six months before Kenya was gripped by violence after the disputed presidential election, violence widely described in the media as perpetrated by “idle youth” and “unemployed young men” who had been manipulated by dubious and corrupt politicians (Ashforth 2009, Human Rights Watch 2008). The stereotype of the violent thug, easily bought, is set against that of youth as the nation’s future, a figure full of dreams and hopes.

Programs like *Kazi kwa Vijana* (Sw.: Work for Youth) and the Youth Enterprise Development Fund followed quick on the heels of the 2007 youth policy document. They were intended to provide the hopeful and future-ful youth with access to material resources and skills training so they would be employable or able to establish their own small businesses. However, these programs were met with skepticism by many young people presuming (not incorrectly) that they were thinly veiled efforts to exploit and manipulate despondent and hopeless youth while benefitting elders and the well connected.

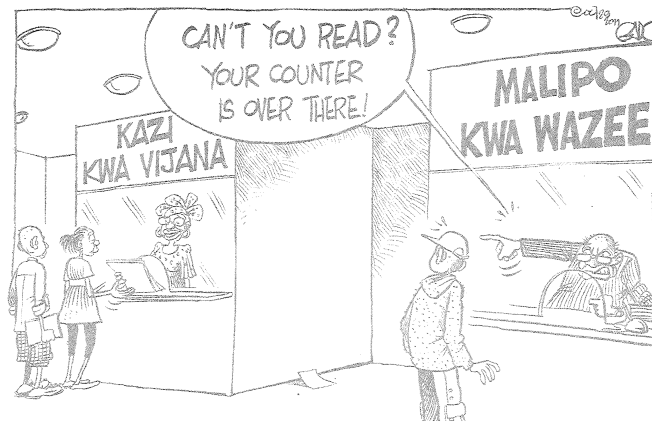


Plate 1.1: *Kazi kwa vijana, Pesa kwa wazee* (Sw.: work for youth, money for elders) was a common lament, repeated around the country as a critique of the Kazi kwa Vijana program. Here, *kazi kwa vijana* (work for youth) *malipo kwa wazee* (payments for elders). Note also the characterological form of the elder redirecting the “youth” (clad in hip-hop style baggy clothes and baseball cap) to the “work/youth” line: besuited, portly and seemingly impatient, he embodies corrupted authority. Gado, *Daily Nation*, 10/29/2011.

The two youth stereotypes—the idle thug and the icon of development—are widely recognizable, even if not equally powerful in contemporary Kenya. The contrast between these two poles of youth possibility framed the discursive environment in which the young people I worked with lived. During the post-election violence they had seen young men in the streets of Kisumu throwing stones, looting, burning buildings and being shot at by police. Some of them even took part in it. And yet they were also the youth who took part in the regular youth empowerment forums sponsored by the state, NGOs, and international aid organizations and worked toward futures in hip hop, dance, and business. In the remainder of this chapter, and throughout the dissertation I demonstrate not only the various ways young people position themselves in relation to these incongruent images of youth but also the ways they shape the processes of enregisterment that consistently form and reform typifications of youth. They exert this influence in normal everyday interactions through their explicit commentaries about *youth*, in their textual productions and song lyrics, and even in their evaluations of others. By unpacking

semiotically dense typifications of *youth* and analyzing it as a cluster of qualities, we can see how the meaning of *youth* changes in its finer inflections and more clearly what it is young people are positioning themselves against when they (re)claim *youth*.

“Corruption si poa” (Corruption isn’t cool): Corruption and the meanings *youth*

Walking through the streets of Nairobi, I often noticed stenciled on the backs of lightweight, knee-length coats worn by parking attendants the phrase “Corruption is Evil.” At the National Music Festival, where students competed in oral recitation, singing, dance, drumming, and drama, signs reading “Corruption *si poa*,” (Sh.: corruption isn’t cool) plastered the walls. “Corruption free zone” signs are posted on many government buildings across the country, to the bemused resignation of many. Corruption is a fundamental point of contrast to *youth* in the sense that many of my informants claimed it and it also features strongly in the notions of “the old” against which *youth* is made distinctive. Teasing apart dense and complex ideas of corruption can also shed light on the most salient features of *youth*.

Much like *youth* in Kenya, corruption is ubiquitous. In the history classrooms at Lake Victoria Boys’ and Nam Lolwe Girls’ corruption was cited as the primary hindrance of smooth governmental operation and national development. Corruption was given as the reason that Kwetu dance company would never win the national dance competition they entered; the judges would choose their own friends. Kwetu could only hope for second place. Corruption was a common refrain when the Kenyan national football team fared so poorly in the Africa Cup of Nations and never qualified for the World Cup. Players were chosen for their connections rather than their skill. When Diana didn’t win the “*Utahama lini?*” (Sw.: When will you move?) sweepstakes in which she could have won a new home, she blamed corruption. Someone, she

presumed a sweepstakes representative, phoned asking where she was and when she answered “Kisumu” they hung up; they didn’t want a Luo to win, Diana insisted. Corruption was about embezzling money, hoarding resources, favoring friends or co-ethnics, or even cheating on exams or in competitions.

Corruption in government and in daily life is often set against possibilities for the future and potential for development—that which could (or should) be. It emerged often in the conversations I had with young people and in those I was just an observer to. Corruption was not only part of politics, the term was inveighed against shopkeepers, teachers, pastors, and NGOs. Judges of any sort, peddlers, and policemen could all be among the accused. What links these different people in this wide range of statuses was their ability to affect the future or enrich themselves in a way that seemed, to their accuser, unfair.³⁰ It is this link to the future—scaling up to a nationwide level and down to the daily lives of young JoKisumu—that makes corruption such a salient contrast to *youth* in Kenya. Their contrastive relationship to the future and to potential produces the axis of differentiation through which *youth* becomes notable. This axis of differentiation—between the production of futures and its stymie—recurs consistently across space and time in Kenya. Indeed, within this contrast is an implicit narrative in which *youth* is linked to modernity and to development (Smith 2008); the future-orientation of *youth* is aligned with moral uprightness and progress. That this connection has become naturalized should not be wholly surprising considering the socio-cultural and institutional sites in which this contrast

³⁰ It is important to note the resonance here with notions of witchcraft. While witchcraft itself was rarely the source of accusation (or even conversation) for the young people I worked with, there was a thin line between the two. On occasion, my interlocutors would speculate about witchcraft as the source of Tanzanian pop stars’ success in comparison to Kenyan musicians. They insisted that the most successful politicians were surely “importing” witchcraft from Nigeria, which was described as having more potent forms. But in everyday interactions it was never inveighed. For the young people I spoke with most often, miraculous wealth or unbridled success were explainable through nepotism, tribalism, graft, and theft.

emerges, is reified, and naturalized. Conflict between *youth* and corruption emerges as a key theme in the novels, plays, and short stories that are the subject of national exams. In *Kifo Kisimani* (wa Mberia 2001) (Sw.: Death at the Well), a Swahili play that has been in the secondary curriculum for years, an entire community is threatened by the political machinations and corrupt maneuverings—“the old” ways—of a community leader Bokono and his corrupt advisors. The young, ethical, and modern Mwelusi stands against him for the sake of his community’s future.

The contrast emerges also in television shows sponsored by international development agencies like *The Team* where the characterological embodiment of corruption were elder men who spoke in local ethnic languages, bribed voters, and displayed blatant ethnic chauvinism.³¹ These men represented the qualities that were, at root, the cause of Kenya’s devastating post-election violence. Their rivals are the group of struggling future- (and nation-) oriented Kenyans trying to build a community mixed in gender, class, ethnicity, and age—so they form a football team (hence the name) showing themselves and their community that cooperation is possible across social divides.

While these didactic media productions make a contrast between *youth* and corruption crisp and circulatable, this sort of institutional pedagogy is not the only source of its emergence and diffusion. A couple of Masani Youth discussed William Ruto, a rising politician and Member of Parliament at the time and currently the Deputy President. They wondered aloud if he was actually a “youth” politician as he claimed. They resolved that no, he could not really be considered such not because of his age (although he was in his mid-40s at the time) but because

³¹ *The Team* was a television show produced in the aftermath of the 2007/8 post-election violence and was aimed at demonstrating the possibility of inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation. Sponsored by USAID, *The Team* was available online and was shown at various fora across the country, one of which I attended regularly in Kisumu.

he was to closely implicated with corruption scandals.³² In a way, it would be difficult for any Kenyan politician to be thought of in terms of *youth* because of the ethnic politics that are almost unavoidable in the country which are seen as antithetical to goals of development and modernity. Indeed, ethnic chauvinism (“negative ethnicity” or “tribalism” in local discourse) is a classic form of corruption, the quintessential “old” style. In a stance against this “old” style, many youth use only their Christian names, Islamic names, or nicknames rather than easily recognizable ethnonyms. This is not, however, a rejection of ethnicity in its entirety but instead a rejection of the ways that ethnicity can be misused, it is means of avoiding being the victim of corruption. Before the birth of her first child, Diana dismissed names easily recognizable as ethnically-Luo because she worried her child would suffer at the hands of tribalist teachers or potential employers. As we discussed the relative possibility of a Kenyan national identity Eko, one of the Masani Youth, explained that when everyone is speaking Sheng, the “youth language,” ethnicity is impossible to determine, Sheng is a language of “Kenyaness.”³³

When a notion of *youth* is contrasted with corruption as it was for many young JoKisumu, it acts as a rejoinder to one of the most prominent negative stereotypes of the youth in Kenya: a marauding thug, easily bought by politicians, and uncaring about his community. By marking out this contrast, making corruption antithetical to *youth*, young JoKisumu are distancing themselves from the negative image and claiming that the corruption one sees in the image of the marauding thug is not integral to the quality of *youth*.

³² While these young people did not discuss specifics, Ruto has been implicated in scandals like Anglo Leasing (a massive scandal involving sham companies in government procurement deals defrauding tax payers of many millions of dollars). Ruto is also standing trial at the International Criminal Court at The Hague for crimes against humanity during the 2007/8 post-election violence.

³³ See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of the role of language in the production of national identity in Kenya and the notion of “Kenyaness.”

In the following section I shift focus to the production of signs of *youth* and the everyday ways young JoKisumu are engaged in *youth*'s enregisterment. I consider some of the images, texts and descriptions of *youth* created by the young people I work with, attending to the qualities and hints at an underlying that encapsulates the constellation of youth stereotypes in urban Kenya.

“Tips to know if you are normal” Producing signs of *youth*

The image of youth circulating in Kenyan media and institutional discourse in contemporary Kenya is a familiar one. Photos of men disrupting political rallies or marching in unruly strikes are common in national newspapers while at the same time development agencies that abound in Kisumu rely on a stereotype of vulnerable orphaned youngsters. Marginalization, stymied potential, manipulability, vigor and vulnerability, danger and endangerment are also traits referenced in so much of the scholarship on youth in the global south that it seems belaboring the point to discuss them any further. Discussions of youth experience that focus on ideas like “hopelessness” (Mains 2012), “imagination” (Weiss 2009) and being “stuck” (Hansen 2005, Somers 2012), are useful and powerful in articulating the experience of youth-as-status in a globalizing urban Africa, and my own discussion of stymied potential resonates clearly with them. However, these foci don't fully explain the value that many JoKisumu saw in *youth*. The material resources that can be garnered through self-presentation as “a youth” are certainly critical to understanding such claims (something addressed more fully in Chapters 4 and 6) but access to resources is also not wholly adequate to account for the memorable declaration—“youth for life”—by someone like Bernard who, by all accounts had successfully transitioned from youth into adulthood. Recall, he had built his *simba*, paid brideprice, been married in a

church, and had a son (and also a daughter by the time of writing). He had steady income, ran a small business and helped to support his younger brother. And yet, he described himself as “real youth.”

It seems, then, that what Bernard aligned with, and what many of the young people I encountered over the course of fieldwork aligned with, is something more complicated than images circulating in the media and institutional discourses. Bernard was not simply indexing a sense of marginality or vulnerability. While they certainly feature in the *youth* cluster of qualities—some young people even voice these discourses openly and quite seriously—the cluster is much more complex in contemporary urban Kenya. When young JoKisumu like Bernard deploy the term youth and invoke the qualities associated with it, they are making claims to ethical stances, to opportunities, and to resources. Those claims, also grounded in the stereotypes JoKisumu position themselves among, become clearer in an examination of interaction and textual productions. In the following sections I show how a discussion explicitly dealing with the meaning of youth echoes and yet complicates institutional discourse, how a humorous list detailing what is “normal” points to qualia as much as aspiration, and how a set of song lyrics demonstrates an active alignment with the sense of “awareness” central to their composer’s sense of *youth*.

“Doing weird things in order to survive”

Every few months over the course of my 2011 fieldwork, I held group discussions at the Masani Youth Center. We talked about these as meetings, like those they regularly had at the youth center. Along with some members, I would decide on themes that could be interesting both to Masani Youth and to me. Many of the discussions ran on great tangents and occasionally

debates erupted that I never would have expected (who knew “jobless urban youth” gave a second thought to mother tongue instruction in the first three years of primary school?). In early October of 2011, we had one of these marathon discussions about “youth problems and prospects.” The clumsily worded theme had come out of a conversation I had had with Bernard over a plate of chips a few weeks prior. We meant to discuss, in as wide ranging a way as possible, the experience of being youth in Kisumu.

It was in this discussion that Eugene expounded on the “modernity” of youth (recall: “It’s so modern, yea!”) to my question about what youth actually is. Festus followed up, extending Eugene’s focus on the qualities of youth. He admitted, “it’s 15 to 36, that is the age, what we call the youths. But that, that is not a youth.”³⁴ He went on to explain that a youth is someone who is able, productive, and resourceful, arguing that when you are no longer active and productive, you are no longer youth. In Festus’s description, the end of youth started to sound like the beginning of death. Beatrice countered, claiming that in her experience around the neighborhood and in the Kisumu, youth was something different:

“The majority of them are those who are vulnerable to alcohol. The youth is someone who is struggling to get job. At the same time the youth is a person who is talented, especially in terms of music and performing arts. A youth is the same person who is doing weird things in order to survive. Things like prostitution, thuggery, yea.”

Festus disagreed, insisting thuggery doesn’t depend on age. Beatrice defended her statement, “it is not their will to do that bad thing that they are doing, it is because of the kind of life they are inclined to.” Youth are driven in to these “weird things,” they had no choice.

This momentary interaction drawn from the much longer, winding conversation encapsulates the themes that emerged throughout the course of our two-hour discussion but also

³⁴ Note here how Festus cites the general ages of youth as set by the Kenyan government and other institutions serving youth in the country.

conversations I had with young people about *youth* throughout my fieldwork. The qualities that emerge in these discussions, while drawn through *youth*, are not contingent on a youth-as-stage paradigm. It is, in fact, the reverse; *youth* does not necessarily make resourcefulness, for example, resourcefulness makes *youth*. Festus's claim of the link between *youth* and productiveness, often voiced using terms like "vigor" or "vibrancy" by others, had a sense of freeness associated with it when young people discussed their experience. This quality allows youth to do things that elders cannot, including fall in love. This sense of freeness and vigor is contrasted to a sense of constraint, something that will remain important through the course of this discussion.³⁵

Beatrice's depiction of *youth* is somewhat less flattering and at first glance it seems she is simply voicing an institutional NGO-style discourse; youth are defined by marginality and vulnerability. However, as the conversation continued, the tidy bundle that Beatrice presented was unpacked and laid out and the nuance of her statement became more and more clear. Looking more closely, we can read Beatrice's statement as double-voiced (Bakhtin 1981). At the same time that she uses NGO-style language, she takes a stance on it. Her hedging, bouncing from a description of vulnerability to potential to dangerousness for the same figure (note: "the same same person"), reveals variegation and contradiction in the qualia-cluster. She doesn't directly echo the dangerous/endangered binary mobilized by some development organizations (and often the Kenyan government), she complicates it.

³⁵ The freeness in falling in love was often noted in contrast to traditional Luo courtship and marriage. Young men and women alike mentioned how undesirable they found the prospect of being partnered with someone of their parents' or aunts' choosing. However, there was also a danger in the freeness of falling in love. Traditional Luo marriage is exogamous at the clan level. Some young men I knew lamented their inadequate kin-knowledge and worried that they would end up dating or sleeping with the wrong girl, that is, accidentally committing incest.

The vulnerability that Beatrice invokes in her description of youth is not a helplessness, but instead the vulnerability of exposure. This notion is drawn from NGO discourses, to be sure, but the precision—youth is not simply vulnerable, but vulnerable *to* something—invokes more. Her description is decidedly not of an endangered child, but of a person whose experience includes alcohol, joblessness, thuggery, and prostitution. These corrupting forces are something youth must grapple with on a daily basis. Indeed, in her next statement she insists they “struggle.”

“Struggle” and the related, “hustle,” are central to notions of *youth* invoked by my interlocutors and they are something that I will continue to elaborate upon further below. To “struggle” in this sense is not as much to have a difficult time as it is to consistently work to overcome obstacles. “Hustling” in the Kenyan English used by young JoKisumu is something similar, although the ends are slightly grander. Beyond the mere “survival” that is the end of “struggle,” “hustling” aims at recognition, improved status, or simply getting more money, for example. While most likely drawn into Kenyan English through American hip-hop, it doesn’t quite have the valence of taking advantage of someone else. Rather, for the young people I work with, hustling can be an honest way of making money (or even getting by in one’s studies).³⁶ “Struggle” and “hustle” have come to be responses to salutation, “how are you?” or “*mambo vipi*” (Sw.: what’s up?) may be met with “we’re just struggling” or “*huslin ka kawa*” (Sh.: hustling as usual). Most importantly, perhaps, is that “hustling” and “struggle” means working

³⁶ Owiti, a 20-year-old devout Christian who buys undershirts, socks, and underwear in bulk to then resell to street vendors and hawkers, confused me in the early days of my fieldwork by telling me his favorite song was “I’m still hustling” by Chamillionaire because it inspired him. As he went on to sing it I interrupted him asking how this (my American slang English definition) related to his dedication to Christianity—he had just been beamingly telling me about the last service he went to at the Winners’ Chapel—was taking advantage of others just a part of business? He assured me that it was not, “hustling” he insisted, is just working hard.

for success, in contrast to corrupt dealing where goods and cash seem to appear without effort. In a very real way, “struggle” and, to a lesser extent “hustle” are ethical pursuits and this sense of perseverance is important within the qualia-cluster tied to *youth* as a category in Kenya.

“At the same time” Beatrice insisted, “the youth is a person who is talented.” This notion of talent and that youth are by nature “talented” is critical to the sense of *youth* among young JoKisumu and is a quality that will emerge consistently throughout the dissertation. Talent simultaneously involves great potential and moral duty. Grounded in a Biblical notion, talents should be invested in, and that investment is a display of gratitude and homage to the divine. As I discuss further in Chapter 4, when young people talk about talent, they talk not in terms of the absence of presence of talent, but in terms of discovery. Finding and pursuing talent is understood to be the path to success—material and otherwise.³⁷ While Beatrice’s term, “talent” resonates with the self-reliance discourses urging entrepreneurship and the cultivation of talent in lieu of reliance on state resources (recall the Youth Policy document above), Beatrice sets talent up as a contrast to the “weird things” that youth must do in order to survive. Youth, with such potential, are stymied, unable to cultivate their talents and make livings as such a calling would dictate. They are pushed by a labor market that is both constricted and ruled by corruption and nepotism to finding survival through other means.³⁸ Survival, a companion term to struggle in many of my conversations with young people, depends on dangerous, if not immoral pursuits.

³⁷ As I elaborate in Chapters 4 and 5, ideologies of prosperity and success, grounded in Pentecostal Christianity, are very popular among the young people I work with, even among those who are not practicing Christians.

³⁸ Young people would often lament to me that qualifications are much less relevant than connections. I spoke with one informant as he poured over the list of new recruits to the military that was published in one of the national dailies. Normally jocular, his face became stormy and his tone angry. He had wanted so see if he knew any of the new recruits, something that would indicate the possibility of his own access to a military career through connections. He didn’t recognize any names, and bitterly declared that his father should have sacrificed more to make up the money for a large bribe he would have needed to pass through recruitment exercises.

Beatrice clarifies, however, that this path to prostitution and thuggery is not of their own making. They were born into circumstances that left them no choice.

In Beatrice's reckoning, the corruption that youth engage in their day to day lives is not of their own making. She distances *youth* from corruption by classifying it as a product of circumstance, not a necessary feature of *youth*. In her remarkable classification, she simultaneously takes up and complicates a standard and highly circulated image of the youth. She pushes against the negative valence of the stereotype and proposes a much more complex image of the youth.

“Hey You! Yes You!” Interpellating youth

In an open corridor leading away from the rows of classrooms and out toward the playing field was a cracked and dirty glass case dedicated to the Lake Victoria Boys' High School journalism club. Without the resources to actually publish a printed newspaper, the journalism club posted their work there. Members tacked up reports from “*mafunkies*” (Sh.: inter-school social and academic functions), stories, motivations, poems, drawings and jokes. Often written in English, sometimes Sheng, and only rarely Swahili, these texts were meant to entertain and inspire fellow students. Knowing my fascination with the board, the students in Class 3-Pink, many of whom were in the journalism club, alerted me to a post detailing the attack on the Lake Victoria Boys' school bus (known as the “red bull”) and plotting revenge for the damage. Surprised that they would “publish” such plans openly, I asked if the principal wouldn't be angry at the idea of a revenge attack, particularly because the school already had enough of a reputation as rowdy trouble-makers. Teachers don't read that, they assured me, and even if they did, we write in code. Indeed, I rarely saw anyone other than students give the case a second look, and

teachers shook their heads and chuckled whenever they found me reading the texts, taking photos, and scribbling down notes on my favorite pieces. And while the “code” the authors wrote it was relatively decipherable to anyone versed in common Sheng terms and the local LVB slang, teachers rarely cared enough to bother interpreting it. The boards were for the youth.

One afternoon, squinting through the clouded glass as I waited for the set of students I was accompanying to history lessons, a piece that was scrawled, as they all were, on loose-leaf paper hailed me: “Hey you! Yes you!” it began in English, and then identified itself as “Tips to know if you are normal.” An enumerated list followed:

Excerpt 1.1

1. You have a facebook account
2. You have a blackberry maybe
3. You watch MTV
4. You are fully aware of adult stuff
6. You register to unlimited text
7. You sleep late
9. You were so busy you forgot to read number 5
10. You actually look up again to see if there is a number 5 (don't worry coz there is no number 8)
11. Now you are smiling, possibly laughing 2 yourself Then you realise perhaps you are not as normal as you once thought.

A entertaining text to be sure, and I draw attention to it in order to suggest that it is recognizable as a *youthy* text precisely because it indexes central qualities of the *youth*-cluster that are naturalized (or conventionalized) as inherent to youth for young men at LVB. In my brief analysis of this list, I explore both the list's genre and its referential content. I will highlight some of the key *youthy* qualities indexed here, qualities that were in heavy circulation during the course of my fieldwork and reflect a sense of *youth* that is associated with technology, connectedness, and a keen awareness of life's struggles.

This list draws on a magazine style common to the special interest pop culture inserts in the daily newspapers, like *Pulse* in *The Standard* and DN2 in the *Daily Nation* popular among young people. These inserts were often referred to as magazines and included articles on local pop culture, advice, and sensationalist human-interest stories. They also often include lists similar to those one might see in an American glossy magazine (e.g. “How to know if you are over your ex”). Lists like these encourage readers to recognize themselves in each item; alternately, they encourage readers to recalibrate their lifestyle or mentality to the implied “correct” answer.³⁹ This list detailing signs of normalcy is intended to be as much about encouraging the reader to recognize himself in particular ways as it is about a test of fit of the classification “normal.” Importantly, recognition and identification with these items does not actually require practice or enactment of them. As Sasha Newell (2012) elaborates in the case of *bluffeurs* in Côte d’Ivoire, identification and claims to recognition need not always align with reality to be successful. In truth, only a handful of students may have had access to MTV and clumsy Chinese Blackberry knock-offs would be the closest any came to the genuine article (and even those knock-offs were rare and too expensive for a student). But readers of the list may recognize themselves as normally *youthy* through desires or aspirations if not in actuality (i.e. I know what MTV is and identify with what I understand it to index; Were I to have a phone and ready cash, I am the sort of person who *would* register for unlimited texting). The “maybe” that concludes the second item is telling; “you have a blackberry maybe.” It is a hedge indicating the author may be second-guessing this assertion of “normalcy” as perhaps a bit bold, a big step from a Facebook account, to be sure. The “maybe” hints further at the contingency of youth, it

³⁹ See Chapter 6 for a discussion of a similar quiz in the *Shujaaz* comic books where readers discover which character they resemble.

acknowledges that the material requirements or ideal embodiments of *youth* can be exclusive. In a way it acknowledges the complicated economic reality of youth experience.⁴⁰

The orthographic style encourages self-recognition as much as genre does. Here, “coz” [=because], and “2” [=to] represent a truncated orthography common in SMS text messages and Sheng writing (see McIntosh 2010). It evokes a playfulness and eschews the restrictions and standardization of orthography in English and Swahili. These standard languages, as elaborated in Chapters 2 and 3, are often seen as confining and rigid. Some of my interlocutors found Sanifu Swahili cumbersome, citing the length of words. Who would say “*wasichana*” (Sw.: girls) when you can just say “*demz*” (Sh.: girls)? one woman mused one afternoon, laughing at my too-standard Swahili. The style not only indexes the author’s text messaging and Sheng-savvy sensibilities, but also recruits the reader to recognize this list as expressly *youthy* and himself as an in-group member—a reader who gets it.

Numbers one, two, three, and six on the list (Facebook, Blackberries, MTV, and unlimited texting) demonstrate a sense of hyper-connectivity, steady communication and super-awareness of and, crucially, participation in a global modernity as represented in technology. If citing unlimited texting, MTV, and Blackberries are forms identification through desire-orientation, Facebook is somewhat different. To actively engage with Facebook, or even to send and receive innumerable texts (be they original messages or the ever-circulating jokes and blessings) is to be “modern,” “21st century” and “dot com” (local terms for this tech-aware type). But perhaps more importantly, having a Facebook account for many of these young

⁴⁰ Dramatically different from American and British secondary schools with which I am familiar, in Kenyan secondary schools I noticed little or no teasing or bullying tied to economic class. Students appeared to have acute awareness not only of the challenges of making a living in Kisumu, but also of the inability of fellow students as full-time students to effect change in their own economic conditions.

people, also means participating on a global platform. I do not mean, however, that taking part in Facebook means taking part in global networks or even, to any real and palpable degree for young people in Kenya, transcending many national boundaries. Daniel Miller is right when he argues: “Yes, Facebook is global in the sense that Facebook is used pretty much everywhere today but that is true of telephones and whisky. It does not follow that it is becoming some kind of aggregate entity like a global consciousness or brain” (Miller 2011, not paginated). It is the participation on a platform that is well-understood to be global that is relevant. It is *having* the account, even if it is rarely used, that indexes the hyper-connectivity and “modernity” that makes up a crucial aspect of *youth* for young JoKisumu.

The fourth item on the list, “you are fully aware of adult stuff,” while surely referencing sex and drugs, is also a more subtle reference to the sense of “struggle” or “hustle” to which numbers 9 and 10 also point, albeit indirectly. If awareness of “adult stuff” relates to the sense of struggle as elaborated above, it is through the awareness of the unavoidable struggle that would meet these students when they left secondary school and would face a disturbingly high unemployment rate and few opportunities even for steady, informal work. Although many students talked about struggle inside the school compound, with studies, exams, relationships with teachers, the real struggle would hit them when they left. The real struggle had to do with making a living, making money, and “surviving.”⁴¹

If number four is about future struggle, numbers nine and ten are about that struggle that they, as students, already find themselves in. These points make light of the busyness and

⁴¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, anxieties about the impending economic realities of post-secondary life struck young men much more deeply than young women. After secondary school young women may look for work, but they also took on significantly more responsibilities domestically whereas their male age-mates were often expected by parents (or themselves) to pay much of their own way and ideally contributed to household income.

frenetic pace of secondary school pointing to an anxiety that something has been missed (“you actually look up again...” “don’t worry...”) that makes up students’ experience. The intensity and sheer number of study hours secondary students work is remarkable. Many, closing in on the secondary school completion exam, would study for upwards of 18 hours each day. While what they learned for exams themselves didn’t help them for “the outside” (as many students called the post-secondary world), the pace and heavy workload of secondary school meant that they would be prepared to handle anything.⁴² In stark contrast to the idleness often associated with “the youth” in media representations, these points demonstrate and joke about the intensity and hard work of *youth* in the experience of secondary school students. This marks a distancing from a pejorative youth stereotype (i.e., idle young men susceptible to the whims of corrupt elders) and an insistence on *youth*’s ultimate alignment with hard work (and hustling), opportunities notwithstanding.

The eleventh point, “perhaps you are not as normal as you once thought” comments on possibility and stymie so central to *youth* across Kenya. What should be normal and should be

⁴² As noted in the introduction, secondary school in Kenya culminates with the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exam, which is a cumulative test of the secondary school curriculum. While there are three subjects required (English, Swahili, Maths), students choose four other examined areas from a range of other subjects (History, Chemistry, or Business Studies, for example). An intense amount of stress surrounds these exams, which students are consciously preparing for from their first year in secondary school. Not only does the exam determine access to university and government bursaries, but the subject choice also determines students’ specializations in university. While the overwhelming majority of students do not attend university, these exams still follow students through much of their post-secondary lives and are often required for entry to tertiary training institutes, job applications and even some volunteer programs. The evidentiary paperwork indicating one’s scores is also incredibly valuable. Results slips form a key part of the physical dossiers school leavers and job seekers carrying around as they search for work and opportunities (often called “tarmacking” because it involves so much walking around). The dossiers are normally folders (the more durable the better) filled with certificates, letters, results and any other evidence of qualification and merit are slipped carefully into plastic sleeves. These dossiers become something of a physical narrative of potential, evidence of a future that *ought* to be. For a more extended discussion of what ought to be in the future and the present, see Chapter 4.

part of everyday experience for youth is somehow withheld or impossible. The associations of *youth* with Blackberries and MTV represent an ultimate irony: the quintessential signs of *youth* are unattainable and one can only laugh in the end.

When the author predicts his reader is probably smiling and laughing to himself, it is a prediction of the giddiness of recognition. The author expects the reader to have had a three-fold experience of recognition: recognition of this list as keen, witty insight into “normal” youth; recognition of oneself (or at least desire and aspiration) within the enumerated normalcy; and finally, the recognition of the irony of such alignments and the stymie central to youth experience.

As with Beatrice’s description of “a youth,” struggle is central to the notion of *youth* presented in this text. However, it also insists on the quality of youth as modern, globally engaged, and importantly, not naïve. A critical rejoinder to the childlike or innocent notion of youth not unfamiliar in NGO and development discourses, this depiction of *youth* also insists that the alternative need not be dangerous, idle youth.

“This time it is the truth uncensored”: Reformed youth

Dismas was a member of Masani Youth and, like many of the young male members, was also a rapper. While uncertain of his skills when he first joined the group in 2010, he soon discovered that rapping, and wordsmithing more generally, was his talent. He would rarely write his lyrics out in advance. Instead, he would go into the tiny recording booth and just “spit” (rap). His freestyles were some of the more remarkable of those recorded at the Masani Youth Center and I asked Dismas to sit with me at one of the computers at Masani Youth’s failing cyber café so I could transcribe one of his songs.

Dismas's lyrics, in both their denotational content and their style, index critical aspects of the cluster of qualities experienced as a sense of *youth*. That is to say, there is a distinct flavor recognizable as Kenyan *youth*. The lyrics follow:

Excerpt 1.2:⁴³

Sheng:

Dis time *ni* truth uncensored. **Siwezi ogopa** *kusema* **nitaspit** *bila kujali*. **Najua miaka mob mabeshte** *wameshakuwa wa kitu danganya*. **Wanatuambia stori za varko na tunazisikia** *kila siku yeah*, **wamecome mob ka mvua mantudanganya ka** devils. **Wanatupa drugs sare utadhani zinadrop** from heaven. Yeah *tutulia mingi lakini hakuna difference kati yao na wake wanatudanganya* daily.

Verse 2:

Yeah my life was so bad *nimefanya ujinga tangu utotoni saa hizi naregret ningekuwa far ka ningechop, ningefika mbali*. **Mabeshte walicome na stori mob za ufara nilikuwa chuo nilikataa kusikia za mode**. *Nilikuwa kichwa ngumu nilidhani hiyo ni strength lakini ilikuwa ufara*. **Mode alinikataza niachani na mabeshte sikusikia paro alinikataza niachani na mabeshte sikusikia**. *Pole mama, najua nilikukosea sana ma little bro aliniangalia kama role model. Lakini nimeblunda sana. Usifuata footsteps yangu ni mbaya zitakulead to hell. Si ticket to heaven. Walidhani nitakuwa mtoi poa ukiwa shule fanya kitu ilikupeleka chuo usisikizi na mateeniez kwani watakuwa wakikudanganya. Mabeshte hucome mob ndiyo lakini ni mavarko, sikia ya paro. Itakufikisha pahali unataka wanakutakia uzuri si ubaya, akikuchapa jua ndiyo anakulainisha uwe mtoto mzuri milele. Drugs achana naye*

English:

This time *it is* the truth uncensored. **I can't be afraid to speak, I rap without caring**. *I know for so many years my best friends have been living lies. They tell us deceptive stories and we listen everyday, yeah. They [lies] have come so much, like rain, they lie to us like devils. They take [lit. drop] useless drugs you'll think they are falling from heaven. Yeah, we chill a lot, but there's no difference between their [lives] and his, they lie to us daily.*

Verse 2:

Yeah my life was so bad, *I did idiotic stuff since childhood, nowadays I regret it, I would have gone far, like I would have gone, I would have reached far*. **My best friends come with so many deceptive stories, I was in school, I refused to listen to the teachers. I had a hard head, I thought this is a strength, but it was lies. Teachers tried to stop me, I dropped them all with my best friends, I didn't listen to my parent, he tried to stop me, I dropped him with my best friends, I didn't listen. Sorry, mama, I know I did you wrong, my little brother looked up to me like a role model. But I really made blunders. Don't follow my footsteps they are bad, they will lead you to hell. It isn't a ticket to heaven. They thought I would be a good kid, if you are in school, do something, don't listen to the teeniez (teenagers, youth), what the**

⁴³ I've represented the lyrics as prose, the same way that Dismas represented them graphically on the computer at Masani Youth Center. This text would be recognizable to readers and listeners in Kisumu as Sheng. For a discussion of the reasoning behind representation in the transcript as codeswitching, see Statement on Transcriptions and Conventions.

free life *ishi* life *yako* **ka** *mtu* drug free.

hell, they will lie to you. Best friends always come so much, yeah, but they are lies, listen to your parents. *It will take you to the places you want to be, goodness not badness, if you work hard, yes he will soften you, always be a good kid. Quit drugs and you'll have a free life, live your life like a drug free person.*

The freestyle is largely in Sheng, a linguistic register that is an indexical icon of youth in Kenya (Chapters 2, 3, and 6 include an in depth discussion of the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of the register). In the song, Dismas tells the story of his past, one filled with drug abuse, dropping out of school, and ignoring all the direction and advice of well-intended teachers and parents. He laments that he betrayed his mother and set a disappointing example for his little brother, all because he believed the “lies” of corrupt youth. But he has turned his life around and now in his music he counsels others not to follow the same brutal path he trod.

Dismas raps in the voice of “reformed youth,” one that was the embodiment of a negative, thuggish stereotype, but overcame it. It is voice that relies on tropes of counseling and conversion, and one that young people invoke in making claims about the value in *youth*. It acts as a rejoinder to youth’s negative valence, reiterating senses of hope and possibility for moral recuperation. The notion of conversion and turning one’s life around is something I address more thoroughly in Chapters 4 and 5; it is a theme that circulates widely in Kenya and one that is popular even among non-Christians. In his lyrics, Dismas positions himself as one who can offer counseling from a position of authority; he was vulnerable to corrupt youth, succumbed to their deception (recall Beatrice’s assertion that youth “are vulnerable *to* alcohol”) and made a series of mistakes, but turned his life around. While in the song, Dismas does not reference his criminal past or his dramatic turning point—when a friend was caught and burned by a vigilante mob as they ran from a botched robbery attempt—he clearly voices experiential expertise in his lament.

He is ultimately transformed, but importantly, he is transformed into a different type of youth, not into an elder or adult. His authority is grounded in experience as youth and his progression to a higher, more expert status as one who can advise others but remains in the field of *youth*.

Counseling, in a motivational and psychotherapeutic mode, have become common in Kenya in recent years. Initially associated with HIV voluntary counseling and testing (VCT), counseling is a discourse deeply imbued with ideologies of “empowerment” and “sensitization.” When young people mobilize these counseling discourses in their own talk (and texts) as Dismas does it is often in a motivational and experiential modality. This modality involves an autobiographical elaboration of a wayward path, a turning point, and a revelation (e.g., “live your life like a drug free person”). Many of the young people I worked with had clearly developed stories of turn-around or overcoming, and those who did not freely retold others’ stories (see Chapters 4 and 5). The type of story Dismas tells is recognizably *youthy* in its senses of overcoming and experientially-based expertise and the lessons he “spits” (raps) elaborate on the danger of the deceptive and corrupting aspects of *youth*.

Perhaps most interesting in Dismas’s lyrics is the characterological embodiment of positive and negative influence. The corrupting influence comes not from elders, but from “*mabeshtie*” (Sh.: friends) and “*mateeniez*” (Sh.: teenagers). These so-called friends delude Dismas into believing hard headedness, drug use, and abandoning school were signs of strength. In this contrastive set Dismas, whose parents and teachers were supportive and thought he would be a “good kid,” are set against his friends who are the ones to hobble his potential. Here, it is the young who are corrupt. This contrast is much less about generation—that young people are misguided and need the direction of their elders—than it is about awareness versus corruption. Dismas’s transition is not into one of those parents or teachers who had encouraged him on the

right path. Instead, he becomes a different type of youth (“reformed youth”) within the variety of youth stereotypes, highlighting the possibility of repositioning the self in relation to the spectrum of youth stereotypy. The lyrics work as a warning and a rejoinder, insisting that the negatively valued image of *youth* widely circulating in the media and even on the streets is incomplete; there is room for redemption. They subtly underline qualities like struggle, creativity, and awareness in a refigured meaning of *youth* that proffers a newer stereotype: the wise but cool reformed young man.

In the following section, I lay out a conflict over two common indexes of youth, fistbumps and Sheng, to elaborate on anxieties about the uptake of youth style as criminal or corrupt and to highlight the contestation and incompleteness in processes of enregisterment.

Fistbumps, Sheng, Christianity, and *youth*

I sat with Frederick in the half-finished, dirt-floored classroom where I observed history classes at a Lake Victoria Boys’ High School. Not surprisingly, Mr. Oluoch, the teacher, wasn’t going to make it to class, so we could just talk. Frederick was telling me about different types of boys at the school, “cheeky boys,” “CU boys,” “rude boys.” Rude boys are boys who relish causing trouble and breaking the rules. He explained that even though he wasn’t one, he could be mistaken for a rude boy. He pulled up his grey trouser legs and exposed a pair of non-uniform socks, one of the telltale signs of rudeness, breaking uniform policy. Someone had stolen one of his two pairs uniform socks, so he just had to risk punishment and being taken for someone he was not.

Frederick also had some strong opinions on the “CU boys.” Christian student associations, known as Christian Unions (CU), are common in state run secondary schools in

Kenya.⁴⁴ At LVB, the CU holds services every Friday in the main hall of the school's compound. The services consist of lengthy praise and worship songs, songs that have very little in the way of chorus-verse alternation, songs that many who do not belong to the clubs mock, calling them boring and laughing at the way the Christian Union boys raise their hands and sway to the music. At LVB, the CU is a relatively small group, but they have a lot of resources. The students who study music and those who are part of the drama club complain: it is the CU boys who get the use of the school's keyboard, the school's amplifier, the school's microphones. They are the privileged set, they have the ear and the pocket of the principal, who was a vocal born again Christian.

While Frederick was a devout Christian—he attended Seventh Day Adventist services and his best friend attended the massive Kisumu Pentecostal Church—he deeply mistrusted the CU boys. The CU boys didn't fist bump and they didn't speak Sheng. In fact, they explicitly rejected such indexes of youth, practices seen by young men like Frederick to embody the freeness, creativity, cosmopolitanism, and modernity of *youth* and by no means limited to “rude boys” or thugs. For Frederick—and others I knew—CU boys' refusal to bump fists and their purported ignorance of Sheng was an affront, and not simply because they rejected being identified as youth through these registers. The CU boys' use of standard Swahili and English and their insistence on traditional handshakes with their age-mates was a judgment of youth style; it was an implication that *youth* and Christianity were incompatible.

In Kenya, young urban men bump fists. More precisely, young urban men who identify themselves as young urban men, bump fists. Much like a handshake, a fist bump serves as a form of greeting, solidifying an agreement and a form of saying goodbye. Like any register of

⁴⁴ A further discussion of Christianity and its public role can be found in the Introduction and in Chapter 5.

communication, it shores up boundaries between groups. Its use defines in and out-group status, it signifies alignment and is a mode of identification.⁴⁵

Amid the myriad contradictory stereotypes of youth in Kenya is an image of male youth is tough, ostracized, loyal, and fierce.⁴⁶ While not necessarily negative, the stereotype is of one who is cunning, savvy; a young urban man has got to “hustle” to survive and to help his family. This is the way that Frederick talks about himself. These are the qualities Frederick aligns with he bumps fists with friends and classmates around LVB and in town, but what he doesn’t align with are the more extreme “thug” or “rude boy” versions of this image.

To be sure, young, urban men like Frederick surely don’t fistbump their grandmothers, they shake hands. They are not trapped within the stereotype. A physical greeting—a handshake, hug, or fistbump—is reciprocal and involves awareness, positioning, and recruitment and involves calibration of each. Bumping fists not only means aligning oneself with a particular

⁴⁵ Fistbumps and handshakes are part of a fairly intricate set of registers of physical greetings in Kenya. Like all registers, they are indexical of social types, interactional norms, and evaluations of each. Upon meeting anyone in Kenya, a handshake is required. Upon saying goodbye, a handshake is required. Entering a room full of people requires doing a lap—shaking the hand of everyone around. Departure requires the same. To greet an elder or *mheshimwa* (Sw.: respected person), you shake with your right hand and hold your forearm with your left hand, bending your head slightly. Greeting an old friend, you grab his hand firmly shifting from shake to grip to shake all the while exchanging greetings. Women, and especially younger ones, hold out their hands, limp, to be taken and shaken gently, shakes between women are incredibly delicate. Even in the midst of dirty work or eating with hands, a handshake is expected. The person with soiled hands holds out his or her forearm with the hand curled under to the greeter, who grabs the arm to shake it. Young urban men and women have begun to press cheeks together, once on either side. Although rarely is a kiss exchanged this is a simultaneous expression and acknowledgement of cosmopolitanism. Adults even grab babies’ hands when they enter a room, impressing on them the importance of physical greeting. Young children are chastised if they do not appropriately greet with a handshake, “*tabia mbaya!*” is uttered accusingly, “bad character!”

⁴⁶ For some, this image resonated with one of African American men as represented in popular American hip-hop and film. Lil’ Wayne, for instance, was extremely popular among the youth I worked with. Tupac was also popular, but some young men hedged, seemingly wary of alignment with Tupac’s gangsta style, asserting they preferred what they called Tupac’s “positive” songs, like “Dear Mama.” See Weiss 2010 for a thorough discussion of the influence and import of American hip hop in East Africa.

stereotype of masculine youth, one of cunning and loyalty, it involves mutual recognition—the person you fistbump is more or less “the same.” Inadequate calibration of greetings, or failed mutual recognition can be awkward: a handshake turns into a hug, a kiss on the cheek becomes unintentionally intimate, or a boy is left punching the air.

Adding insult to the unreciprocated fist bumps for Frederick was the CU boys’ use of standard Swahili, standard English, and the common intergenerational Urban Swahili instead of Sheng (see Chapter 2). Frederick told me that these CU boys *acted as if* they didn’t actually know Sheng at all, something apparently impossible for young men in LVB.

Frederick’s annoyance at the CU boys and their refusal to engage in these practices of male urban youth is, at least in part, related to essentialisms and a wider ethnic modeling of society where an essential, collective identity restricts and requires particular forms of communication.⁴⁷ However, it is also importantly tied to his concerns about the residue of the

⁴⁷ See Chapter 2. Land, language, and practice compose a critical ethnic triad in Kenya. They are key nodes of distinction in a matrix of identitarian reckoning. Language ideologies prominent in Kenya disallow the possibility of not knowing one’s mother tongue, they disallow the possibility that one could be ignorant of the bodily practices of one’s own ethnic group. Thus, if a person claims not to speak the language of his or her ethnic group he or she is suspect. The nature of suspicion is contingent on whether ignorance is perceived to be genuine or feigned. Genuine ignorance of mother tongue points to a distance from grounded (indeed, landed) ethnicity and the moral and ethical worlds that are understood to obtain therein (See Berman and Lonsdale 1992). Much of ethnicity’s essentialism is carried in language. As the model goes, to be ignorant of language is to be ignorant of ethnicity, which is to be ignorant of a crucial element of one’s “authentic” self. The second source of suspicion is more dubious. Feigned ignorance appears as denial, or insincerity. It is not a matter of speaking or not speaking, it is a matter of knowledge. Denying capacity in mother tongue can mean covering something up, laying the groundwork for a con. It can also be understood as intentionally rejecting membership in an ethnic group as a form of judgment or eschewing the responsibilities and obligations that are part of that group. The rejection and denial can also be taken as shame.

Many of the same people who hold this ideology also claim that they “don’t know” their mother tongue, but this is a different assertion, one that refers to a knowledge of what is often called the “deep” language, the varieties spoken by rural dwellers, often in more monolingual environments. I once brought an English-Luo dictionary to share with a Masani member. He was surprised that such a textual artifact could exist for the Luo language. Although he recently

CU boys' assumptions about Sheng and fistbumping in the ways his communicative choices were taken up by others. They might think they are better, Frederick argued, but they just don't know that they are the same as we are, they think because they sway and sing that they are not youth. Frederick reads the CU boys' repudiation of Sheng and fist bumps as casting judgment on him and on *youth* as immoral, a judgment that reaffirms negative qualities associated with *youth* and the multiple ways *youth* becomes visible in interaction. Frederick saw this judgment as an assertion of an ethical superiority and as a way of distancing the image of a good, pious Christian from that of a Sheng speaker or fist bumper, thus reinscribing an image of young people displaying signs of *youth* as ultimately immoral. The semiotic blowback of such distancing threatens young men like Frederick, it blurs the boundary between corruption and *youth* and endangers the future uptake of Frederick's communicative styles.

Frederick's fist bumping and Sheng speaking while also espousing a deep commitment to Christianity worked as a rejoinder to widespread uptake of these practices as signs of ignorance, criminality, or simply impropriety (see Chapter 3). Frederick didn't see a fundamental conflict between being a good Christian and being youth (see Chapter 5). In fact, being sincere meant being both because it meant being true to himself. Loyalty, toughness and faith are not in conflict with one another. When Frederick attempted to fist bump these boys, when he greeted them with the Sheng "*Niaje?*" and they responded with a blank stare, it was not only a breakdown of communication, but also a misalignment of recognition. Frederick's perception of judgment by the CU boys is particularly troubling for him because it involves a misrecognition of his stance in bumping fists and speaking Sheng. It means they misrecognize him in the same way that many elders do, as a rude boy, a fundamentally different type of youth, a type that is not creative and

migrated to town from the rural areas and a speaker of Luo as his first language, he exclaimed, "I must not be Luo!"

loyal, but destructive and conniving. CU boys might be understood by elders or even other young men as being true to themselves and to God, potentially producing a contrast that would make boys like Frederick misrecognized as dangerous and untrustworthy. For young men like Frederick, the CU boys' stance threatens their own proper recognition.

Enregisterment is always incomplete. It is an ongoing process informed consistently by the production and circulation of media, institutional discourses, and everyday interactions. The annoyance and anxiety that Frederick had toward the refusal of the CU boys to engage in *youthy* communicative practices also demonstrates the stakes of such processes. These processes inform not only what social types registers and practices are associated with, but also evaluations and assumptions about the qualities of those social types.

Conclusions, qualities, and contrasts

In this chapter I have explored the fractured and multiple nature of *youth* in Kenya. I have argued that thinking of *youth* as a semiotic category rather than a means of social or demographic classification alone, allows us to see with more precision what individuals are aligning with as they claim or distance themselves from different images of youth within the constellation of stereotypes associated with the category. By tracing typologies of youth and the qualities associated with them in Kenyan institutional discourse from the colonial era through the contemporary moment, I have demonstrated some of the ways particular stereotypes including dangerous young thugs and students full of potential have become durably lodged in the popular imagination. Indeed, certain qualities, like idleness or criminality, have become so closely attached to the category over time in Kenya that young JoKisumu take pains to reconfigure the *youth* qualia-cluster in a way that asserts value and potential amid struggle. Song lyrics and

playful essays and even explicitly debating the meaning of *youth* engage institutional discourses and work as rejoinders against negative value, complicating stereotypes, and making arguments about who “the youth” are and what opportunities they should have access to.

Part of the constant reconfiguration of the meanings of *youth*—the ongoing and always conflicted processes of enregisterment—involves contrasting the category with other stereotypes and qualia-clusters. To argue what *youth* is, individuals often highlight what *youth* is not. I’ve suggested that practices and persona associated with the “old” ways of doing things—particularly corruption—have become salient points of contrast for young (and not-so-young) JoKisumu. Fundamentally contrastive in the ways they relate to the future—either inhibiting it or facilitating it—corruption effectively makes a revalued image of *youth* visible and definable. Sometimes in terms of stark opposition (*youth* is not corruption) and other times as subject to it (*youth* is stymied by corruption), the relationship between the two remains powerful and productive in social and political fields.

As I have hinted throughout, debates, discussions, and descriptions of *youth* always involve self-positioning. Those making claims about what youth is and what youth could be are also situating themselves within those meanings and the stereotypes associated with them. But self-positioning does not ensure uptake. For example, Frederick saw no incongruity between speaking Sheng and professing Christianity. In fact, for him to do both was an act of sincerity. His anxiety was piqued, however, when he saw the uptake of that combination skewed by born again Christian boys who refused to engage emblematic practices of urban youth.

In the following chapters I continue to trace forms of self-positioning and acts of identity along with the anxieties and debates that accompany them. As individuals situate themselves within constellations of youth stereotype and in relation to the meanings of *youth* they rarely do

so explicitly. Language choice, language ideologies, and speech genres are all subtle, everyday ways identities become visible in daily life everywhere, and in very poignant ways in Kenya. They are also critical resources with which to make claims about the future and opportunities for those who have few material resources and little social power at their disposal.

CHAPTER 2

KISUMU'S CHORUS OF VOICES

Oti was the founder of Kwetu Dance Company. He was a man in his early-20s, wiry, rambunctious, cynical, and deeply invested in the Kisumu arts community. He and I often met at the bar of Lake Vista Hotel to have a drink and a long talk about the state of the Kwetu or about my research—he was one of the most insightful and sympathetic people I worked with and he had a keen sociological eye. We also just chatted as friends do about our lives, mutual friends, our challenges, and successes. Lake Vista was a quiet place that catered to middle class Kisumu residents who came for tea or beer and brought their children to swim at the pool overlooked by the bar's patio.

Early one evening Oti and I went over to Lake Vista for gin and tonics and a few cigarettes as was our habit at the time. Sitting at the edge of the bar's patio looking out onto the wooded brush that obscured the actual vista of the lake, we were immersed in conversation. Later, a corpulent older man accompanied by two younger, thinner men sat down at the table next to ours in the largely empty bar space. Soon after sitting down the older man waved his hand and called over a member of the bar staff. He asked for tea and when it came, asked the waiter to stir his sugar into his tea for him as he leaned back in a groaning wicker chair. Oti and I looked at one another, both shaking our heads and smirking, bemused by the clichéd “big man” and annoyed by his treatment of the bar staff that we were both quite fond of.

We continued on our conversation and the elder man his. I lit a cigarette and after taking a few drags, the elder addressed me in standard English, calling me “young lady” and telling me if I wanted to smoke I should just go back to Europe to do it. My face reddened, I apologized and I pushed my chair closer to the edge of the patio, exhaled to the outside, asking if that would be

acceptable. “No,” he replied curtly, and I stubbed out the cigarette. Perhaps emboldened by our first round (although Oti was always quite bold), Oti immediately picked up a cigarette and lit it, infuriated by the elder. I looked at him, taken aback. In English and loud enough that the elder would be sure to hear, he told me that we were allowed to smoke, that we were here first and had been smoking when the elder sat down. Out of all these tables, why does he sit next to us? As if on cue, the elder told Oti in English, even less politely than he did me, to put out his cigarette.

Oti responded in decidedly polite English, peppered with “sir” and “kindly,” that smoking was allowed in this area and that he, as a paying customer was well within his rights to smoke. “Go slow young man,” the elder responded and continued in English, asking Oti his name. “Hosea,” Oti responded offering his Christian name. The elder asked again, this time in Dholuo, for Oti’s name, expecting it seemed, for a recognizable ethnonym. Oti lit another cigarette and repeated, in English, his Christian name. Again in Dholuo, louder and with a frustrated tone, the elder asked Oti his name, who his father was, and where he was from. Oti responded, again in English, again using “sir” and still in a calm, measured tone, that his name was Hosea, that he was a Kenyan citizen, and that his father need not be concerned with this situation.

The elder’s companions were silent as he began a frustrated rant in Dholuo about Oti, a rather unflattering appraisal of our relationship, and the problems that ensue when young men go around with Europeans. Oti lit another cigarette and asked me in a whisper if I had another pack. Chain-smoking was his silent protest (and considering that Oti only smoked occasionally, this was surely quite a commitment). The elder raised his voice, and returned to English warning us that he was now dialing his friend, a commander of the GSU, to come down to the Lake Vista to

sort this problem out.¹ His companion handed the elder his phone and he began to speak in rapid Dholuo that I wasn't able to grasp aside from "*Kamanda, bi*" (Dh.: commander, come). I looked at Oti and whispered "What is going on?" he casually shrugged his shoulders, but his clenched jaw belied his tenseness.

To my surprise, the elder wasn't bluffing. A tall, well-built, man with his head shaved bald appeared ten minutes later, greeted the elder in Dholuo, and took a seat.² The elder explained the situation to him in Dholuo, the commander shook his head and glared at Oti and me. He began to address Oti in English, calling him "son" and "young man" and telling him he needed to stop smoking and respect his elders. Oti replied in his calm English that he was a paying customer and that smoking was allowed. He was a full citizen, he continued, and these were his rights. Visibly angry, the commander began berating Oti in Dholuo, mocking his short dreadlocked hair and his shorts and telling him he would bash his head in. Oti replied, in English, that a beating was not a way to solve the problem.

The elder called over a member of the bar staff and made his complaint in English, which was met only with silence and a look of panic. "Get the manager!" he demanded in English. A woman walked over a few minutes later and calmly asked in English what the problem was. The elder made his complaint and Oti made his defense both in English. The manager calmly explained that Oti and I were paying customers who were allowed to smoke here if we so chose, she offered the elder a seat at the other corner of the patio or indoors. Furious, the heavy elder

¹ The GSU (General Service Unit) is a unit of the Kenyan police force known to be the toughest and least forgiving. Without exception, all of my personal encounters with the GSU were decidedly unpleasant.

² Both before and after this incident I had seen this same intimidating figure in his full GSU uniform.

stood up, followed by the commander and his young, lean companions, and walked out bellowing in English, “You will hear about this!”

Oti was shaken, but relieved (and grateful he could stop smoking). As we settled back and began sipping our drinks quietly again, Oti spit bitter words about elders who thought they could dictate the lives of everyone around them. I told him I was both impressed and proud at how calm he remained (I’d seen Oti fight a few times) and the bar staff began to trickle by quietly saying things like “*tuko pamoja*” (Sw.: we’re together) and explaining in both English and Swahili how “that man” had a habit of terrorizing them.³

In a reversal of our normal ritual at the end of an evening, Oti asked me to escort him out and ensure he got onto a *boda boda* (Sw.: bicycle or motorcycle taxi) safely—he was afraid that there would be a group waiting to jump him on his way out and my presence might offer a degree of protection.

Oti’s confrontation with the elder was about much more than smoking, it was an intergenerational conflict over propriety and the grounds of authority in contemporary Kenya and it is through language choice that both the elder’s and Oti’s sociopolitical stances become most visible. The key players couldn’t be more stereotypical: a young man with short dreadlocks, a cocktail, and a “European” companion set against a hefty elder with a cup of tea and a few cronies. Their communicative practices reflect two poles on a continuum of power and legitimate authority in town. Oti’s reliance on English alone simultaneously parallels and bolsters his evocation of citizenship and rights discourses as he asserted his will to chain smoke. Similarly, Dholuo shores up the elder’s demands grounded in a gerontocratic model of authority with its expectations of ethnic allegiance and consequent obedience to elders. One layer of the conflict is

³ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of demonstratives like “that” as pejorative in personal reference in multiple Kenyan languages.

apparent in the referential content of the exchange: the elder demands submission to his will and Oti refuses on the grounds of consumer and citizen rights. But there is a second layer: Oti squarely rejected the elder's efforts to draw him into hierarchical relationship based on ethnicity and generation by refusing to identify himself through an ethnonym and flatly rejecting the elder's attempt to switch the medium of conversation to Dholuo. A fluent speaker of Dholuo—he often helped me with its nuance—Oti's use of English was an explicit choice. The indexical values of Dholuo and English figure both in the elder's efforts to realign sets of rights and obligations by switching to Dholuo as well as in Oti's refusal (Gumperz 1982). Oti's refusal to follow the elder's switch both rejects the elder's efforts to re-frame the interaction as one between elder and junior and also insists on another quite different relationship: a formal one of citizen-equals. His use of standard, unbroken English, one of Kenya's official languages, pushes a different hierarchy, evokes discourses of legal rights and modern democracy, and indexes Oti's educational and class status for a number of socio-historical reasons I elaborate below. It also sidelines the rights and obligations associated with ethnic identification and belonging. The elder's move was not simple either. Recall that he did not simply switch into Dholuo, he switched back into fluent English on occasion distancing him from the figure of an illiterate rural elder and asserts status on a second front: as educated and well-to-do.

In addition to the languages deployed by the belligerents in this war of speech and smoke—Dholuo and English—there was a marked absence of any register of Swahili, particularly colloquial Swahili or a “mixed” variety of Swahili and English. This second register, which I call “Urban Swahili”⁴ and describe further below, creates and reflects friendly, informal

⁴ While this register is widely recognized in Kisumu as normal informal speech, it does not have a widespread name. Some call it “Kiswakingi” (Kiswahili+Kiingereza [Swahili+English]) and others refer to it as “broken Swahili.” I have chosen “Urban Swahili” not only because it refers to

social space in Kisumu City. It would be the expectable register between patrons in a bar like Lake Vista. Its absence, and the general absence of the intrasential code-switching common throughout urban Kenya, marked the interaction between Oti and the big man as decidedly stiff and tense. Both men stand their ground using “pure” varieties of English and Dholuo and refusing to accommodate one another. At the same time they tacitly acknowledged the other’s proficiency in both languages. Unused varieties and presumed competencies were as present in the interaction as the registers that were used.

Reading what happened in the Lake Vista bar that evening requires awareness of the indexical values of linguistic registers in Kisumu, which are neither static nor consistent across all social domains and among all speakers. Indeed, the terrain for “appropriate” speech is uneven and register use is always dependent on things like stance and the negotiation of social identity. Some time ago, Joshua Fishman (1972) insisted that establishing the meanings of interactions requires that one understand who speaks what to whom and where. Linguistic anthropologists have pushed this dictate further, insisting that there are entire discursive worlds, hierarchies, and casts of characters that are invoked by each language, register, and voice. In analysis, we must understand that registers (and the social personae they invoke) also make arguments. Oti’s obstinate refusal to stub out his cigarette would have been markedly different (and likely less successful) had he made it in Dholuo, Urban, colloquial, or even Sanifu Swahili (Kenya’s second official language). His English frames the disagreement within a discursive world of democracy, rights, and modernity, and eschewing one of traditional ethics and hierarchical relations. As I discuss further below, these arguments are always made from particular social positions and in

the most common variety of Swahili spoken in urban areas across Kenya, but also to parallel a linguistic register in Senegal, “Urban Wolof” (Swigart 1994) and the somewhat similar “Town Bemba” (Spitulnik 1999).

relation to other communicative forms. When read through communicative practice, we can see that this conflict as much about the grounds of authority as it was about enjoying a smoke-free cup of tea.

In this chapter, I will describe Kisumu's complex chorus of voices and landscape of languages along with the ranges of indexical value in play when they are deployed (or avoided) in urban Kisumu. While I include widely-held evaluations of language and language-in-use, I focus most closely on young JoKisumu's views of language-in-use in the spaces in which they spent the majority of their time: schools, youth-led institutions, and informal settings. I also tease out the variety of interactions that take place in these various spaces demonstrating that social spaces and actors do not simply dictate the languages used, but also emerge out of language-in-use.

The second half of this chapter and the following chapter considers the meanings that emerge in language-in-use by examining common styles of linguistic borrowing and intrasentential and intermorphemic codeswitching (CS) deployed, described and associated with young people through an analytic of plurilingual registers.

Codeswitching and plurilingual registers

Like everywhere, a great deal of social negotiation takes place through code choice in marketplaces, *matatus* (Sw.: mini-bus taxi), streets, and paths around Kisumu. People work out and assert social relationships, identities, and obligations. While like in institutional and other semi-formal spaces, there are expectations of language and register use, less formal settings involve more communicative negotiation, register shifting, and use of plurilingual varieties. These are places in which social status and relationships are sometimes less clearly defined and

involve stranger sociality. Often strangers feel one another out linguistically and Carol Meyers-Scotton (1995, 1988) has written extensively on these negotiations of relationships, rights, and obligations through language choice in Kenya. While her “markedness model” for codeswitching has been rightly critiqued for its circularity (an “unmarked” choice of CS is chosen often because it is “unmarked” and is “unmarked” because it is chosen often) (see Woolard 2006), I want to pick up on her observation that CS (normally between English and Swahili) is one of the most common communicative styles in Kenya, but argue that rather than thinking of these communicative practices in terms of CS, we think of them as plurilingual registers that are important parts of the chorus of voices in urban Kenya’s heteroglossic world.

In the Kenyan case, like many other cases of urban languages in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., McLaughlin 2009; Meewis and Blommaert 1998; Spitulnik 1999; Swigart 1992), CS can draw too much attention to the alternation between named languages when those switches do not necessarily take on social meaning. Indeed, thinking of Kenyan plurilingual varieties in terms of CS alone misses some of the most locally-important switches in voice, context, and social positioning by over-privileging named denotational codes in analysis. This is not to suggest that CS is not a productive analytic for urban African cases, far from it. CS remains incredibly powerful for analyzing the social implications and wider historical and political-economic circumstances of multilingual space. However, it is always critical to attend to appropriate units and in a study like this—with its attention to identity and material claims made possible through linguistic style—register and voice are some of the most salient units of sociolinguistic distinction.

Many of the most compelling and important studies of CS have focused on alternations between named languages even while acknowledging that one of the most enduring analyses of

CS was a study of alternation between a standard and local dialect of the same named language, Norwegian (Blom and Gumperz 1986 [1972]). In many CS studies the boundaries between named languages are most salient and they mark key economic, ethnic, or political distinctions in everyday communication. This scholarship has led to critical insights into the micro- and macro-social effects of CS, how those effects intertwine, and the ways that wider social and political worlds are brought in to everyday interactions through CS (Auer 1998; Gal 1987, 1988; Heller 1988; Hill and Hill 1986; Rampton 1995; Woolard 1998).

To be sure, there are many circumstances in urban Kenya where the boundaries between named languages matters a great deal and those boundaries are carefully guarded. However, there are also myriad circumstances in which plurilingual registers are the norm and speaking a single, “pure” language—as Oti did with the big man—is remarkable. In fact, switching between a “pure” variety and a plurilingual one can often be more noticeable and meaningful to speakers in urban Kenya than the consistent “switching” between two named languages, characteristic of plurilingual registers.

Relatively stable plurilingual varieties are not uncommon in urban sub-Saharan Africa (see, for example Swigart 2000 and McLaughlin 2009 on Urban Wolof in Senegal, Kube-Barth 2009 and Newell 2009 on Nouchi in Côte D’Ivoire). With many of these varieties, speakers may not experience themselves crossing linguistic boundaries, something that again calls into question if the boundaries of named languages are or should be the most relevant in analysis (Spitulnik 1999). While Gumperz noted early on that speakers are not always aware of their own or their interlocutor’s code alternation, he also insisted that switches have “communicative effect” (Gumperz 1982: 61) and in order to trace that communicative effect in situations where switching or mixing are the norm, we must reconsider what sort of boundaries should garner the

most attention in analysis. Speakers of plurilingual varieties in Kenya are certainly aware they are deploying both English and Swahili simultaneously, in fact, awareness is frequently a critical part of the registers' indexical loads (see also Chapter 3). However, switches between English and Swahili in everyday communication are not altogether remarkable and have little social effect whereas a switch from a fluid plurilingual register into pure English can be a highly meaningful act.

In urban Kenya, plurilingual varieties are identifiable styles within a speaker's repertoire, deployed with social effects, and associated with particular contexts, topics, and social personae. This is to say, they are registers or voices within the chorus that makes up the sociolinguistic world in which individuals communicate and identify themselves and others (Agha 2006). Indeed, things like bodily hexis and sartorial choices are often critical for the uptake of a spoken variety as a token of a given register. Bodies make languages sound different (and vice-versa). For example, a teacher from Nam Lolwe Girls' with a close-cropped haircut, pressed shirt, and well-fitting trousers defined the term "*collabo*" (Sh.: collaboration) in a classroom as "*kuagree kufanya kitu*" (Urban Sw.: to agree to do something) this was recognized as speaking "normally" (that is, in Urban Swahili) by students. However, were he to don baggy jeans this same utterance on the street might be understood by those same students as Sheng.⁵ A variety of other contextual elements like place, gender, or age feature in a hearer's uptake of registers. Registers are always highly ideological and they rely on semiotic combinatorics. Registers can also be recognized by single words, shibboleths that can then color an entire utterance. "*Niaje*" (Sh.: what's up?) or "*kujienjoy*" (Urban Sw.: to enjoy oneself) are widely recognized shibboleths of

⁵ As I will elaborate in the following chapter, Sheng and Urban Swahili cannot always be read as the same. There are certain lexical formations and shibboleths that are unmistakably Sheng. There is also an alternative Sheng meaning to *collabo*, gang rape, which was certainly not what the teacher was referencing in his use.

Sheng and Urban Swahili, respectively. Registers are also ever-emergent phenomena, they change in value and in form. They are subject to “reflexive semiotic processes”—like those mentioned above that draw connections among languages, qualities, and people—that establish, conserve, and reshape register distinctions in everyday practice (Agha 2006: 36).

Taking up the Bakhtinian (1985) notion of “heteroglossia,” referring to the variety of voices or styles of speech associated with social personae, stereotypes, qualities, or individuals within every language, I redirect the focus of analysis of language use in urban Kenya from alternations between named languages (CS) to switching among voices or registers, even if they are plurilingual. This is to highlight the locally salient distinctions among communicative forms rather than necessarily attending only to the boundaries among named languages formally defined.

Meeuwis and Blommaert (1998) propose a compelling approach to plurilingual varieties noting that among Congolese in Belgium often the most notable shifts are among different types of codeswitching themselves. They propose what they call a “monolectal view of code-switching” that takes these plurilingual (often termed “hybrid”) varieties as single codes in and of themselves, or “a single and autonomously existing code-switched code” (ibid: 86). While in the cases described by Meeuwis and Blommeart, speakers are often unaware of utilizing multiple denotational codes, as mentioned above in urban Kenya speakers (particularly younger ones who have more formal education) are highly aware they are deploying resources from multiple languages.

While different plurilingual varieties are used cross-generationally, they are particularly prominent among younger speakers. However, as I describe in further detail below and in the following chapter, awareness of and intentionally using multiple languages simultaneously is of

critical importance to young speakers in Kisumu. They are not, quite a few young JoKisumu insisted, mixing languages out of ignorance.⁶ That awareness, however, does not make the alternation between monolingual resources as socially meaningful as a switch from a plurilingual to a monolingual variety might be.

Consider Bernard’s switch from Urban Swahili to English in the course of a meeting as he voices himself speaking to Masani Youth’s sponsor, Joanne:

Excerpt 2.1

<p>Bernard: ‘cause [Joanne] <i>ndio aliprovide materials, sindio? Si</i> [Joanne] <i>ndio aliprovide materials?</i></p>	<p>Bernard: Because Joanne <i>certainly provided materials, no?</i> Didn’t Joanne <i>certainly provide materials?</i></p>
<p>Jeremy: Materials <i>zilitoka wapi?</i></p>	<p>Jeremy: <i>Where did the materials come from?</i></p>
<p>Bernard: Remember that time, we sacrificed. Me, [name] we went to buy these ones, <i>sindio?</i> [name] <i>akaleta color paint. Haya</i>, because we wanted that. <u>If we can do something serious in art we can ask [Joanne]. “Now [Joanne], provide us with other materials.” [Joanne] came with colors.</u> <i>Si colors ziko hapo?</i></p>	<p>Bernard: Remember that time, we sacrificed. Me, [name] we went to buy these ones, <i>no?</i> [name] <i>brought color paint. Ok</i>, because we wanted that. <u>If we can do something serious in art we can ask [Joanne]. “Now [Joanne], provide us with other materials.” [Joanne] came with colors.</u> <i>Aren’t the colors here?</i></p>

While the rest of the discussion took place in Urban Swahili, Bernard shifts momentarily in the lines highlighted above. He switches to “pure” English, performing himself as a formal, responsible broker between Joanne and the youth group. The transition from the casual Urban Swahili of the discussion to formal English is an act of self-positioning, and it is a switch much more meaningful than the intermorphemic switches (e.g., *aliprovide*)

⁶ Some, however, freely admitted ignorance of more obscure Sanifu Swahili lexical items. As I discuss below, ignorance of Sanifu Swahili can even be a sign of status as long as it is coupled with dexterity in standard English.

and intrasentential switches (e.g., *akaleta* color paint) that surround it. The shift to English-only has real “communicative effect.”

Registers, qualities, and social types

Linguistic registers do not simply map on to social types, activities, and stances in static correspondence or permanent, direct indexicality (Silverstein 2003a). Instead, these connections emerge out of social interaction, they are contingent on context, and they are reaffirmed through ideologies of language (Agha 2007). Language ideologies are rationalizations of a language’s use and structure, but they also form the basis of assumptions about a language’s speakers (Silverstein 1979). Qualities seem to leak across the boundaries between speaker and register and a speaking style can be taken up as reflections of speakers’ natural essences (McIntosh 2009). The connections, often unspoken or implicit, emerge out of three semiotic processes that are deeply embedded in the socio-political landscape and they also produce that landscape (Irvine and Gal 2000, Gal 2005). According to Irvine and Gal (2000) iconization (rhematization), fractal recursivity, and erasure are processes through which social and linguistic differentiation and their interrelationships emerge and are naturalized. Iconization refers to the notion that “a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence” (Irvine and Gal 2000: 37). For example, in one American ideology of language common north of the Mason-Dixon line, the slower cadence of a Southern drawl is often heard as indicative of slower thought or stupidity. These features don’t exist alone, they come in co-constitutive contrast sets, contrasts that make distinction meaningful, apparent, and remarkable even if the contrasts themselves are erased. Such contrast not only lays the groundwork for ideological arguments about similarity and difference, but also provides fodder for commentary about what a

language or register and its speakers are like. Slowness of speech from the example above only becomes meaningful by contrast with quick speech (or “normal” speech) and justifies dismissal or mockery of Southern speakers by their Northern countrymen.⁷ These contrasts are often relevant on one scale and then projected onto other scales or domains—the contrast of slow/fast speech is mapped onto the domains of thought and speakers. Slow speech becomes interpreted as an indexical icon of (pointing to and simultaneously resembling) slow thought and read as evidence of the slowness (or stupidity) of Southerners. Contradictions that may emerge in the recursion of these contrasts are ideologically “erased,” or explained away (ibid: 37). Examples of intelligent people speaking with Southern drawls may be ignored or classed as outliers and slow-speaking Northerners may be described as “deliberate” rather than “slow” thinkers.

Co-constitutive contrast pairs often appear in larger sets that link together remarkable varieties of qualities and span various social fields. Actors understand them in relational or causal terms, often on ideological grounds of similarity or co-presence. As I will show below in a discussion of the associations among speakers, registers, contexts, and stereotypes in Kenya, notions of femininity, rurality, and tradition often co-occur (as they do in many places across sub-Saharan Africa) coloring the evaluation of speaking styles. Of course, these terms do not always easily or consistently fall into line with one another, nor are they entirely exclusive of one another. It is the role of ideology to iron out or ignore inconsistency in making assumptions or arguments about relationships among them, but more importantly for my purposes here, it is ideology that relates these qualities to semiotic forms, social groups, spaces, or events.

⁷ This is, of course, not the only common ideology of language related to Southern accents in the United States (see Bonfiglio 2002). Folksiness also comes to mind, a key characteristic for a successful presidential candidate in recent years. This is perhaps part of the source the retained (or amplified, or affected) vaguely Southern accent of so many well-heeled, Northern-educated American heads of state.

Languages or linguistic styles are not inherently rural or urban, masculine or feminine, poor or wealthy. Instead, they become recognized as such in comparison to other languages. Nor are these contrast sets strictly binary—one or the other. Semiotic forms fall on continua. Languages in Kenya, for example, are viewed as more or less modern, masculine, or urban. Where a semiotic form falls on that continuum between these contrast pairs depends entirely on this comparison, even if the fact of comparison is minimized or entirely erased. As I will elaborate below, Sanifu (standard) Swahili could be cast on either side of the divide depending whether it is compared to Sheng—which makes Sanifu seem backwards or old—or if is compared to a local ethnic language, making Sanifu seem educated and urban.⁸ Position on this cline is highly situational—who is evaluating, when, where, and to what end all inform it. The table below is an example of this contextually shifting value:

Table 2.1: Clines of social meaning for linguistic registers. Note how the relationships change depending on the context, but also on the combinations of qualities. Some languages drop out entirely from the cline (Sheng in ex. B) because of the perceived impossibility for use.

A. In terms of “modernity” and “urbanity”:
(As viewed by Kisumu youth in informal settings)
 Dholuo < Sanifu Swahili < Colloquial Swahili < Urban Swahili < Sheng

B. In terms of “modernity” and “educated”:
(As viewed by Kisumu youth in formal settings)
 Dholuo < Colloquial Swahili < Sanifu Swahili < English

Qualities are, of course, not only mapped on to languages, they are also mapped on to the speakers of those languages. However, in intensely plurilingual places like urban Kenya where

⁸ *Sanifu* literally means “skilled” or “attractive” but is the accepted name for standard, formal Swahili. Sanifu is based on Kiunguja (the Uunguja dialect of Swahili spoken in Zanzibar Town), which was the lingua franca for most Swahili traders in the 19th century. This variety was then taken up and formally standardized by missionaries and colonial authorities (along with their zealous language committees) (Nurse and Spear 1985). What I am referring to as Colloquial Swahili includes the non-standard varieties of Swahili that incorporate little codeswitching, these varieties are also sometimes called “Kenyan Swahili” (Githiora 2008). The most notable feature of this variety is the laxity in noun-class agreement.

the vast majority of people are speakers of two, three, or more languages, this mapping is somewhat more complicated. Speakers are evaluated for the languages they speak as well as those they do not speak and the perceived reasons for those competencies. A speaker of Dholuo, for instance, is read differently depending on whether she or he is presumed to be proficient in other languages, especially English and to a lesser extent Swahili (making Dholuo a choice) or if that speaker is presumed to be monolingual. Thus in combination with other linguistic competencies (presumed or actual), to young JoKisumu Dholuo-use can be understood as a marker of cosmopolitanism whereas on its own it may index ruralness, marking the speaker as a bumpkin. Evaluations of languages and speakers are always highly situational as are the justifications people make for such evaluations.

Indexical value of communicative competencies

There are over 69 named languages spoken across Kenya and most Kenyans speak at least two and often three of those languages. Most of my young interlocutors spoke Dholuo as their first language along with varieties of Swahili and English, including plurilingual varieties like Urban Swahili and Sheng. Their elders—parents, teachers, and other community members—had similar language competencies, although lower class elders who had moved from rural areas tended to speak little English. Most of my own interactions in Kisumu took place in a number of varieties: Sanifu Swahili, Colloquial Swahili, Urban Swahili, Sheng, and English. While I studied Dholuo during visits leading up to and throughout the course of fieldwork, few young people would speak to me in the language beyond greetings and a few questions to test my competence. Even though they often talked about Dholuo as an “easy” language to learn and had this “proof” of my (admittedly sometimes clumsy) competence, the combination of my body and

a local “mother tongue” like Dholuo couldn’t be but funny to many.⁹ Not only that, it rarely seemed appropriate to them for our interactions; we were young people talking about things like school or music—Dholuo didn’t fit. Older women, by contrast (some were the mothers of the young people with whom I spent most of my time) spoke to me openly and freely in Dholuo. While it is possible these elder women were simply more polite than their juniors in accommodating my desire to speak the language, it may also reflect a different uptake of my own linguistic abilities and whether they did or did not correspond to my body and social position. In this section, I expand upon this and other ideologies of language to lay the groundwork for how linguistic varieties, their speakers, and the spaces in which they are spoken are understood in Kisumu City by young people who have had at least some experience in secondary school as the majority of my interlocutors had.

Dholuo, bumpkins and elders

Kisumu has always been seen as a Luo city. While by no means ethnically homogenous, the city is unquestionably Luo dominated. Over the permanent dais at the center of the city’s sportsgrounds, which is the site of political rallies, cultural events, and the occasional Christian revival is a sign that reads “*Od Mikayi*,” Dholuo for “the house of the first wife.”¹⁰ In the

⁹ I had a related experience with Sheng. While most youth who knew me well freely used the register, some students at Lake Victoria Boys claimed it would be “impossible” for me to speak Sheng because I was a) a woman, b) white, c) too old, and d) didn’t have enough “swagger.” A further discussion of ideologies of Sheng appears in the following chapter.

¹⁰ The house of the first wife is built in a place of privilege in traditional Luo homesteads (Dh.: *dala*), facing the main gate and just to the right of the patriarch’s home. Location of homes within the homestead is related to status within the wider kin system. The second wife’s home is built to the left, the third’s to the right of the first wife’s home, and so on. The homes that sons build and the plots of land they inherit are equally regimented. (See Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 1989 and Shipton 2008 for a rich discussion of the relationship between living space and social order in Luo culture). When I mentioned my interests in Luo culture in my early days

marketplaces, women selling fish and vegetables, many of whom travel daily from the peri-urban and rural areas surrounding Kisumu City, chatted to one another and many of their customers in Dholuo. Newspaper vendors and the elder men who seem to always cluster around them to talk politics do so in Dholuo. People shout quick Dholuo greetings of “*Nang’o?*” at one another from passing *boda boda*. While young people who were born in town—like most of the young people I worked with—all occasionally chat together casually in Dholuo, those who used the language most often in public are elders or recently from rural areas cementing young people’s ideological alignments between the language and notions of tradition, ruralness, and elderhood. Young people would readily use Dholuo, along with softened volume, and gentle head nods when interacting with elders as expressions of deference. Indeed, this was the interactional response (and social hierarchy) the big man seemed to desire when he made his switch into Dholuo with Oti at the Lake Vista bar. For Oti, as for many young JoKisumu, Dholuo between elders and juniors invokes gerontocratic authority and requires humble submission. As young JoKisumu used it with their elders, they voiced the obedient child and the respectful junior, one who would acquiesce to the needs and demands of elders and authority figures.

I spent a good deal of time with Doreen and her sister at the home they shared with their mother and each of their sons in Mamboleo. Our conversations always shifted from a Sheng-infused Swahili or English to Dholuo when Mama returned from her market stall in the

of language study and fieldwork, more than one person grabbed my notebook and sketched out an ideal Luo *dala*, and insisted that was the beginning of what I needed to know.

The sign also marks the centrality of Luo language and culture in Kisumu public life. Dholuo is a Western Nilotic language related to the Lwo languages (spoken in Uganda, DRC, and Kenya) and Dinka-Nuer languages (spoken in Sudan and South Sudan) (Tucker 1994). As a Nilotic language, Dholuo is, of course, morphosyntactically quite different from the Bantu languages that make up over half of the languages spoken in Kenya, including Swahili. Linguistic differences are sometimes offered as rationalizations for Luos’ stereotypical dislike and inability in spoken Swahili.

afternoons or at lunchtime. Mama certainly didn't demanded obedience in the way the big man did, but in our Dholuo use, we did position ourselves as respectful (and respectable) children.¹¹

With kin and in other intergenerational interactions, Dholuo use evokes a model of authority that privileges elderhood and masculinity. At the same time, its use by well-dressed men and women in town, aligns speakers with contemporary stereotype of urban Luoness epitomized by ostentatious men who speak loudly and brazenly display wealth. Plurlingual competency, however, is critical to this stereotype because part of this ostentation involves speaking English in remarkably erudite fashion, so much so that there is a stable of jokes about Luos making simple statements comically complex in English.¹²

In Kisumu and throughout Kenya knowing and speaking a “mother tongue”—the language of one's claimed ethnic community even if not one's mother—is, in effect, a requirement. Young people often explained that they needed to know Dholuo to speak with their grandmothers in the rural areas who were unable to speak any other languages; these local ethnic languages like Dholuo are the means through which people talk about the possibilities of connections across gendered time and space. They are also the means through which people become recognizable within the ethnic model of society that dominates Kenya. Ideologies of language essentialism proliferate in Kenya, to know a person's first language is to know who they are (McIntosh 2009).¹³ As such, those unable to speak their mother tongues are seen, at best, as troublingly removed from ethnicity's moral grounding (see Lonsdale 1992, 2002) and at worst

¹¹ Indeed, Mama took me on as one of her daughters even going as far as to jokingly offer me her breast for feeding.

¹² Barack Obama, the son of a Luo man, was described to me as quintessentially Luo by this stereotype. Not only was he intelligent, he dressed smartly, and spoke English eloquently.

¹³ In the course of the 2007/8 post-election violence, some people set up roadblocks and effectively enacted language tests to determine the ethnicities of the drivers and their passengers. Rumors of these roadblocks reportedly sparked a small market in informal lessons in local ethnic languages.

suspicious and potentially denying an essential part of themselves. Language is an important aspect of a literally grounded ethnicity in Kenya, not only does one's ultimate place of origin (i.e., ethnic homeland) the rural areas associated with an ethnic community is taken as the center of "authentic" spoken language. Educated urban youth are no exception, even to the point of judging one another in these terms. One secondary student told me that she was sent to her family's rural home for summer holidays because her mother had been chastised by kin for not teaching her children Dholuo. When I told Becky, a well-heeled young woman just starting university, that I had heard from a shared friend that she didn't speak Dholuo she was hurt. Language is such an important marker of ethnic identity—an index of one's connection to family, community, and land—that being accused of incompetence can be troubling or offensive even to upwardly mobile young urbanites who rarely use mother tongue.

The importance of ethnolinguistic recognizability and ambiguity became source of conflict in a conversation I had with two young men about whether their parents were aware of their long-term girlfriends. This was something surprised me, thinking that such ethnic positioning would be of middling importance between two friends who were hip-hoppers and proud of being "*born tao*" (Sh.: born in town, urbanite). Omosh was visibly upset when Marcus questioned his mother's ethnic identity because she spoke the Luyia language. Omosh firmly protested, saying his mother also spoke Dholuo and the only reason she knew Luyia because her father was forced to buy land "on the other side" (in an historically Luyia region). Language proficiency is powerful evidence of ethnicity, not only was Omosh's mother's ethnicity called in to question because of her language knowledge, but the issue was also settled partly through a logic of language use. Remarkable, too, is the fact that language also appears to trump land;

Omosh's mother's ethnicity was carried through her speaking body even if landed ethnicity was impossible.

Ethnic languages also inspire deep ambivalences. For example, Lillian and Doreen often talk about how people backbite, plot, or engage in ethnic favoritism in mother tongues when they know others cannot understand them. Not surprisingly, I rarely heard either of them mention how much they enjoyed a good public gossip session in mother tongue (although they were known to on occasion). It was, of course, always the other who committed such egregious offenses. This ideology of suspicion is widespread in Kenya, and concerns that meaning can be hidden so deeply in ethnic languages that native speakers can, in effect, send coded messages to one another become palpable, particularly around election time and other politically tense moments.¹⁴

¹⁴ This ideology has surfaced recently in the ICC pre-trial hearing of Joshua Arap Sang, a Kalenjin radio announcer. It is alleged that he sent "secret" messages to Kalenjin listeners to attack their Kikuyu neighbors in the course of the 2007/8 post-election violence.

The mistrust of other's language use runs so deep in local ideologies of language and corruption in politics that in 2011 Parliament proposed legislation banning the use of ethnic languages in public offices. Such a ban would not be unprecedented in Kenya. While Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, promoted Swahili media as part of a nation-building project, throughout his regime (1978-2002) Daniel Arap Moi effectively banned radio broadcast in local languages with his dramatic restriction of local press, a reflection of his concerns about political subversion plotted by rival ethnic communities in their own languages. However, the 1990s saw a loosening of media restrictions and a blossoming of alternative and local-language media outlets, particularly radio stations (Ogola 2011). While Swahili radio programming still dominates with 48% of the market, local language programming is certainly popular. Kisumu has at least two Dholuo stations as well as Kalenjin language stations.

The young people I worked with tended to listen to recorded music, local pop stations that broadcast in Urban Swahili or English, and Christian stations that broadcast in a variety of languages including Dholuo. Oti told me he occasionally listened to Dholuo radio (Radio *Nam Lolwe*) to hear the "proper" language and learn about tradition or cultural practices. One of the programs he listened to occasionally featured my Dholuo teacher, a local expert on Luo cultural practices. She and her co-presenters would advise callers on "appropriately" dealing with social and kin-based conflict—relationships among co-wives and problems with inheritance were especially common.

English, Dholuo and the indexicality of language interference

All of the young people I worked with in Kisumu spoke their respective mother tongues, but most who were born in town commented that they did not speak “deep” varieties.¹⁵ They weren’t particularly ashamed of their relative competence, in fact, their inability to speak what they called “deep” Dholuo was a marker of their urbanness, cosmopolitanism, mobility, and education. Their inferior skill relative to their rural counterparts is not thought of as lack, but instead as evidence of ability in other languages—most likely English. For young urban dwellers, the requirement to speak mother tongue does not necessarily involve virtuosity, but competence. In a way there can be value added for language interference. Pope, a young man who had moved to Kisumu City from his home village during my fieldwork, recalled being intimidated by people who would return to rural areas speaking what he termed “broken” Dholuo because of what he presumed about their levels of education, wealth, and experience. Inability in one language as a marker of competence in another is one of the many ways that the indexicality of different languages interweave. Even when only a single language is deployed, hearers also draw conclusions about speakers’ proficiencies in other languages. These linguistic assumptions are a central part of the chain of presuppositions and entailments through which social identities emerge in communicative practice in Kenya.

¹⁵ The “deep” variety was often talked about in terms of lexicon, registers of politeness, and occasionally in terms of avoiding clipping. On odd occasions, youth would comment on my Dholuo, which was taught to me by an author invested in Dholuo preservation and revitalization. I learned and used phrases like “*abiro ndika*” (I’m going to write) as opposed to the clipped “*abondika*” preferred by urban youth. In a discussion about varieties of Dholuo, some of the Masani youth claimed there were no polite forms in the language. When I asked about the polite phrase “*Adwaro pi*” (I would like water), with the *-dwaro* a marker of politeness, they laughed recognizing the construction but admitting that they rarely used language like that. Instead they used the command form: “*Miya pi*” (give me water). We had a parallel discussion about registers of politeness in Swahili. This time, however, the politeness (often longer and described by young people as “slower”) forms are understood to be most often used in Tanzania, the perceived center of “deep” Swahili.

Speaking English is a status marker in a variety of ways for young urbanites. It is evidence of education beyond primary school and therefore is also evidence of higher economic class status and indexes urban cosmopolitanism. Seemingly always on a mission to increase his reputation in his neighborhood, Bernard, took pains to speak English as often and as publicly as possible. Even in the comic films we produced with Masani Youth Bernard insisted on playing English-speaking characters, seemingly anxious that his reputation would be compromised by the qualities of a character he played on screen. English marks and is seen to facilitate spatial, social, and intellectual mobility.

The language of the former colonial power, the medium of instruction in schools, an official language, and the primary code for legislation and literature, English is widely associated with the top and center of a socio-economic pyramid. But that English must be an appropriate variety, one without “interference” from other languages. English is meant to be maximally abstract and clear and the leakage of other languages into it threatens this neutrality and its position as the ultimate language of non-ethnic, modern communication. Unlike Dholuo, where it is possible for interference from other language to raise status, English should be “pure.”¹⁶ Young people I worked with laughed at *boda boda* operators for using English phrases like “I am hearing pain” (calqued from *-winjo* in Dholuo, meaning “hearing,” “seeing,” and “feeling,” i.e., sensing), reduplication, (e.g., “It rained and rained and rained”), or elongating vowel sounds (e.g., I wa::lked, Dh.: *awuo::tho*), common features of amplification in colloquial Dholuo. To them the operators’ usage indicated that they were “thinking in Luo but speaking in English,”

¹⁶ While based on standard British English, Kenyan English has a number of distinct grammatico-semantic features (see Schneider 2007). Unless otherwise noted, “pure” English here refers to Kenyan English.

marking them as uneducated and lower status. *Boda boda* operators' English, then, didn't quite count as a marker of high status because it was tainted by the perceived interference of Dholuo.

The conflation of [s] and [ʃ] is an especially derided leakage of Dholuo into English (rendering the utterance of “silling” rather than “shilling,” for example, hysterical, to young urbanites). The conflation is not seen as an accent, but instead marks someone speaking otherwise grammatico-syntactically “pure” English with a shadow of incompetence. At a party on one of my final evenings in Kisumu, Bernard stood up and gave a heartwarming speech in his best standard English. A quick slip, pronouncing “she” as “se,” left the rest of the group roaring with laughter and inspired a few unfortunate heckles of “*mshamba!*” (Sw.: rural person/hick). These slips of the tongue or otherwise “imperfect” English utterances become emblems of ethnolinguistic identity (Silverstein 2003b) and they effectively re-locate their speakers outside of erudite urbanity (and its associations like education, wealth, and “highness”) and within rural ignorance and its associate “lowness.” Indeed, poor Bernard was also heckled with the phrase, “*Uko down, bana!*” (Sh.: you're down [=uncool], man!).

The boundaries between English and Dholuo are not always so strictly policed in urban youth speech. There are certain ways to incorporate Dholuo into otherwise standard English as an act of identification without it being perceived as uncontrolled “leakage.” Discourse markers like “*yawa*” (Dh.: oh my) or “*donge*” (Dh.: isn't it?) and certain nouns like “*omera*” (Dh.: friend) peppered in standard English don't tarnish its purity in the way a slip [s] and [ʃ] might. The distinction between these two types of linguistic transference from Dholuo into English is the way intention is understood. The presence of Dholuo in one's English is acceptable for young urbanites as long as it is a choice, it can be a marker of virtuosity and an indication that although

one is urban and well-educated, one is not ethnically unmoored. It marks a type of *youth* voice, one proud of ethnic origin but not limited by it.

When Dholuo seems to unintentionally leak in to English, as in the case of the lower class *boda boda* operators or even Bernard, the interference is a mark of incomplete competence and lower status. It is the voice of an unfortunate imposter, a person, often rural attempting unsuccessfully to raise his or her status. Within the valued meanings of *youth* that many young JoKisumu work to construct, English is almost a requirement. Marking formal education, urban savvy, and cosmopolitanism, the “real” youth should be capable of speaking standard English. There is, to be sure, negative value to English, particularly in the range of *youth* voices. Too much English is a sign of one who is putting on airs or so well-off as to be removed from the challenges and everyday experiences of *youth* life. Indeed, *youth* voices are plurilingual.

Swahili, It’s not my language, but it’s our language

Swahili sits in a rather unusual position in Kisumu City.¹⁷ While it is widely spoken, Swahili is disparaged by Luos.¹⁸ Bernard put it succinctly, “It’s not my language, but it’s our

¹⁷ Varieties of Swahili are spoken natively along Kenya’s coast and the language was used as an inland trade language throughout the 19th century (Nurse and Spear 1985). It eventually became a lingua franca across East Africa, was used to a certain degree by the colonial authority and was established as a national language in Kenya in 1969.

The role and status of Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania, its neighbor to the south, are quite distinct. Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, promoted Swahili as the only official language in the country as part of his efforts to promote a national policies of *Kujitegemea* (Sw.: self-reliance) and *Ujamaa* (Sw.: socialism). In Kenya, Swahili took a secondary status as a national language as compared to English’s official status. Although Kenyatta promoted the language as a means for building national unity, those efforts had little effect on the prevalence of English in the commerce and even legislative sectors.

¹⁸ Surprisingly, I never heard youth reference the common rationalization that I heard on the coast and in Nairobi for Luos’ purported dislike and incompetence in Swahili: they have “heavy tongues” that makes Swahili difficult to pronounce. Young people focused on noun class

language.” Swahili is Kenya’s national language and yet to many, it is also thought of as a quasi-foreign tongue. It is spoken by the majority of Kenyans, but as a second language. It is in varieties of Swahili that day-to-day life in urban areas is normally negotiated by those middle-aged and younger, but its utility doesn’t garner much prestige. It neither has value as a mother tongue nor as a fully cosmopolitan language.

The ubiquity of Swahili varieties in Kisumu is surprising in light of the frequency with which people dismiss the language’s value and undermine their own competency. Even though it is derided, Swahili—in all its varieties—was the most common language spoken in Kisumu public space. It is used in church services, in free time at schools, in shops, and in *matatus*. It appears on billboards and on the radio and a number of popular primetime television shows.

Young JoKisumu like Bernard see Swahili as a language that is useful, a means for wider communication, but little more. Swahili literature is relatively unpopular in Kenya and the country’s national Swahili newspaper, *Taifa Leo* has a circulation that pales in comparison to the two major English language dailies, *The Daily Nation* and *East African Standard*. Although Swahili was recently promoted to the status of co-official language (together with English), the idea of using Swahili for formal written documents other than school exams seems odd to many young Kenyans. Omondi scoffed when I offered my Swahili version of the constitution to him when the youth forum we were attending ran out of English versions. He claimed he could only understand the English version, not the Swahili. Doreen gave me her Swahili Bible, saying it just didn’t make any sense and that she had to read in English.

These evaluations of Swahili are always made with an implicit contrast to English. Swahili’s proponents in newspapers and on radio programs describe it as a language of Pan-

agreement—something they referred to by Swahili teachers’ admonishments, “*zingatia ngeli!*” (Sw. attend to noun class!)—as the main hindrance.

Africanism and international communication, sometimes referencing the Swahili courses taught in places like China and Germany. These claims fall flat on the ears of young JoKisumu for whom English is a path to global status and pop culture. Even more simply, many of my young interlocutors claimed that for them English just “flows better” than Swahili.

Much of the disdain levied at Swahili, particularly by young people, is directed at what is called “Sanifu Swahili,” the formal standard variety that is most closely associated with Tanzania and formal classroom instruction. This variety, in contrast to Sheng and Urban Swahili (which I will describe in greater detail below), is only rarely deployed in everyday communication. Many students question what the Sanifu they study in school is good for, after all, they communicated perfectly well in Swahili without grammar lessons. I found myself called out on numerous occasions in the early days of my fieldwork for sounding “like a book,” because I would use Sanifu grammar and formal vocabulary uncommon in inland Kenya. I relayed to Eunice a story of the blank stares I was met with when I asked at a hotel where “*chamshakinywa*” (Sw.: breakfast) would be served. She laughed, telling me in English, “the Swahili word is just not cool to use, it is too Sanifu!” one could instead use the metonym, “*chai*” (Sw.: tea), or the borrowed English word, “breakfast.”

For young people, particularly students, in Dholuo-speaking western Kenya it is not just the vocabulary that is seen as cumbersome, it is also Sanifu Swahili’s Bantu noun class system. The language’s 15 noun classes were the source of much ire in classrooms and widely ignored outside of them. Allan often bragged of his own Swahili prowess as evidence of his domestic cosmopolitanism as a professional dancer; he had spent time living on the coast and in Nairobi. I asked him once, when a little annoyed in the midst of one of his particularly pedantic monologues about Swahili grammar, why he often broke rules of grammatical gender agreement.

He offered an example simultaneously demonstrating his awareness of the Sanifu construction and expressing a preference for the non-standard, “‘*Hi* *vi* *ni* *vi* *tu* *vy* *a* *Beth?* No! It sounds weird! ‘*hi* *zi* *ni* *vi* *tu* *za* *Beth!*’” (These are Beth’s things? No! It sounds weird! These are Beth’s things!) in which the 9/10 (i/zi) class agreement is used for nearly all inanimate nouns.¹⁹ As I’ll elaborate below, and Allan’s classification of Sanifu noun agreement as “weird” indicates, this type of construction is common in colloquial and Urban Swahili (in Sheng it is used almost exclusively). Partly due a distaste for Sanifu many people claim not to speak Swahili at all. This conflation of “Sanifu” with “Swahili” leaves non-standard varieties largely unnamed in common parlance thus enabling the erasure of Swahili varieties’ frequent use.

Not surprisingly, as a standard variety, Sanifu is rarely spoken in everyday conversation in Kenya. It is experienced most often in school classrooms and on the evening television newscasts.²⁰ I want to pause briefly on these televised newscasts because they evidence Swahili’s often unacknowledged position in Kisumu public life. There is at least one television in most bars—large or small—around Kisumu. In many establishments (as in most homes) the televisions were on constantly, even if no one was watching; music normally blared over the television’s audio. Every evening at 7:00 pm the Swahili language news airs on all three national television stations and in bars everywhere the music is cut off and the sound of the television cranked up. In most places, conversations quiet and many turn their chairs to watch—and listen to—the news in Swahili, something that never happens when the English language broadcast comes on at 9pm. This daily Andersonian (1991) moment, while rarely mentioned or even noticed, reflects the centrality of Swahili in Kenyans’ daily lives.

¹⁹ *Vitu* (sing. *kitu*, class 7/8) (Sw.: things).

²⁰ Anecdotally, it seemed that most radio stations that broadcast in Swahili did so in non-standard varieties. The most popular stations mainly had music programming interspersed with comedic Urban or colloquial Swahili.

The television news is but one example of the ubiquity of Swahili in Kisumu public space despite the ideological assertions that Kenyans, and especially Luos, don't like it or speak it well. Importantly, the local insistence that Kenya's Swahili is poor, inexpert, or inadequate relates back to the notion of language interference and the indexical value of presupposed linguistic competence. When Kenyans speak of their poor Swahili, whether explicit or not, it is in comparison to their neighbor to the south, Tanzania, the perceived center of Sanifu Swahili. Within their admission of inability, however, is a boast. Kenyans' poor Swahili is attributed not to incompetence, but to the national prowess with that internationally valued language, English. At the national scale then the same dynamic recurs that marks urbanites speaking clumsy Dholuo in rural areas as educated and wealthy. Kenyans' purported inability in Swahili, the region language, indexes cosmopolitanism, a national capacity in an international language, and a status as the comparatively more developed nation.

These perceptions of Swahili's capacity and place—particularly in relation to English—are certainly informed by state institutions like schools, which I discuss below, and they also demonstrate the fact that Kenyans haven't really embraced Swahili standardization. In the following section I describe the institutional language hierarchies that contribute to these local ideologies of language across the country and reproduced by young people in their own institutions.

Institutional hierarchies of linguistic resources

While the prestige, propriety, and value of registers contextually vary and the relative evaluations of them and their speakers emerge in interaction, they are also deeply informed by institutional hierarchies of linguistic resources. Among the range of state institutions young

people encounter on a regular basis, schools play one of the most important roles in re-inscribing particular registers' statuses and the ideologies that inform them. I found that even after leaving school, young people maintained linguistic hierarchies that looked very similar to those in schools and state institutions as they developed their own institutions like arts and community organizations. "Purity" plays an important role in institutional expectations of language use across Kenya.²¹ While English most certainly indexes a form of prestige for young people through its connections with educational and political institutions, for my informants formality only required linguistic purity and not necessarily English. Some of my informants used precisely this term, "formal" to describe situations that they very expressly deemed in need of linguistic purity (also a term they used), these were namable interactions with clearly defined participant roles such as interviews, lessons, or meetings. Further, because of the dominance of English in educational institutions, many young JoKisumu described finding it easier to accommodate a dictate for purity with English. For example, Peter and I normally communicated in Urban Swahili, Sheng, or English but as we were settling in for an interview Peter explained that he would answer my questions in English only. When I asked why he claimed English was the only language he could speak without mixing and because this was an interview, he needed to use a pure language. Indeed, even my interactional coaxing, occasionally asking questions or offering thoughts in Urban Swahili, had no effect. For Peter the frame was firmly set.²²

English had been the language of administration through Kenya's colonial period and was designated as Kenya's official language at independence in 1963 and is considered by the

²¹ See also Dyers' (2015) discussion of Omondi Oketch's research on multilingualism and Sheng on Kenyan FM radio stations.

²² See Introduction for further discussion of linguistic practices in field interviewing.

state to be a “neutral” language.²³ While Swahili was also framed as an ethnically-neutral language, it never held the prestige English did as maximally clear and ideal for communication in commerce, legislation, and formal education. Swahili was designated national language, a way of acknowledging the importance of language in the nation-building project without relying on it for official state business. While the official status of Swahili shifted throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Mazrui and Mazrui 1999), it wasn’t granted co-official status with English until the constitutional referendum of 2010. Swahili’s secondary status is even reflected graphically—it appears below English on official signs and forms, often in a smaller font. Local ethnic languages are largely erased in state institutions although they are, on occasion, used in informal interpersonal interaction in public offices.

In a way, Kenya’s institutional multilingualism is aspirational. It is not only intended to produce a unified nation around a sense of non-ethnic “Kenyaness” through Swahili, but also to position the state within global political economies.²⁴ Notably, many domestic and international policies are given nicknames by the government that draw together the two official languages. “Operation *Linda Nchi*” (Sw.: guard the nation) and “Operation *Maliza Ufisadi*” (Sw.: end corruption) referring to the ground war against Al Shabab in Somalia and an anti-corruption campaign, respectively, are two examples of a plurilingual nationalist voice. These visual and institutional reminders of Swahili’s relative status certainly inform young JoKisumu’s evaluation of the language as less valuable and less comprehensible than English.

²³ In her discussion of the languages of Zambian radio, Spitulnik highlights the ideology of neutrality in language legislation. She points out that far from being neutral, English is a language that is certainly more accessible to the upper-classes. This aspect of bias (non-neutrality) is erased and English is marked as a language for “modern communication” (Spitulnik 1998: 171-172).

²⁴ See Brummel 2009 for a detailed discussion of the debates that resulted in Swahili’s status as national language. “Kenyaness” is a term popularized in the 1960s by the nationalist politician Tom Mboya to speak about a sense of national unity.

Languages in schools

Schools are the places where linguistic hierarchies are most explicitly stated and most firmly policed (Bourdieu 1991). In Kenyan state schools, English is the medium of instruction throughout primary and secondary school and onward into university classrooms.²⁵ While in some ethnically homogenous rural areas the first three years of primary education may be taught in local ethnic languages, after those initial years all students are transitioned into English as the medium of instruction. Some parents I knew in peri-urban areas on the edge of Kisumu were horrified at the fact that their children were studying mother tongue in the early years of primary. They were concerned that their children would fall behind in the curriculum and that their exam scores would never equal those of students who had begun their studies in English. Aside from the first few years in primary school, local ethnic languages are forbidden in schools. Echoing the colonial era, some schools institute a familiar disciplinary strategy in which a disk is passed around from one student to the next if they are caught speaking a local language in school. At the

²⁵ Language policy in Kenyan education had been the site of significant debate throughout the colonial era and into independence. Missionaries throughout the early 20th century promoted the use of local ethnic languages in the classroom with a few detractors preferring Swahili because of its status as a lingua franca across East Africa. Education policy consistently promoted the use of local ethnic languages (“vernaculars”) in at least the first three years of school (past which very few students continued) and generally promoted the introduction of English after this point. The purity of English was carefully guarded and nearly every policy document pertaining to English instruction included the caveat that it only be taught if “suitably qualified” teachers were to hand. Education policy in the 1940s through 1960s laid the groundwork for current policy in which the transition to English medium education is the main goal. Swahili was never promoted as the primary medium of instruction in Kenyan schools. The 1964 Ominde Report reaffirmed the policy and even further promoted the use of English where at all possible leaving education in local ethnic languages as an option only for schools in rural areas where teaching English at the outset appeared impractical. See Brummel (2009) for a further discussion of the Ominde Report and Gorman (1974) for a detailed account of language policy debates throughout the colonial era. See also McIntosh (2014) for a detailed discussion of the status of Swahili among white settlers and their descendants in Kenya.

end of the day, each student calls out the person from whom he or she received the disk and all were punished, often by beatings.

Ker, a university student, lamented that he hadn't had the chance to study in his mother tongue in the early years of school. He thought he would have been much more interested in education in those years had he not struggled so much with language.²⁶ In a discussion at the Masani Youth Center, some recounted such strong desires to speak English in primary school that they rarely used local languages intentionally. However, when they reached secondary and felt themselves to be quite accomplished English speakers, many would use their mother tongues to test boundaries and simply to be naughty. In the high schools I conducted fieldwork in, I only rarely heard Dholuo out of students' mouths (teachers were a different story), but I did hear stories about it. One parent recounted how his son was expelled from Lake Victoria Boys' High School for speaking mother tongue too often (he was later reinstated), and Linet, a student at Nam Lolwe Girls' bragged about how she liked to speak Dholuo at school precisely because it was against the rules. Note that students' desires to use Dholuo were not based on wanting to use a language that they felt more comfortable or confident in. Instead, it was a way of acting out playfully or challenging authority.

In schools, Swahili's secondary status is made plain. English is used for all subjects save for formal Swahili instruction one period each day. Swahili has been a required (and examined) subject in primary and secondary schools in Kenya since 1985 but is often underemphasized by teachers who favor focusing on sciences or English instruction. Taught in a very similar format to English classes, Swahili lessons in secondary schools focus on formal grammar and literature and have recently incorporated curricular sections on *isimu jamii*, or

²⁶ Apparently, however, language was not an insurmountable obstacle, Ker was one of only a handful of university students I knew in Kisumu.

sociolinguistics (something not taught in English classes). Many secondary students begrudged Swahili classes, claiming they were boring and irrelevant. Students often declared that the only people who really needed to learn Sanifu Swahili were journalists and Swahili teachers and vowed that after exams they would never use Sanifu again.

A sense of the inutility of Sanifu Swahili is not universally shared. Each year when national exam results are released, there is a flurry of angry letters to the editor in all the major dailies. Decrying the poor performance on the Swahili exam and noting that Swahili is a crucial language for national and regional communication, many writers blame the ubiquity of Sheng for students' poor performance. Much like debates concerning African American Vernacular English (AAVE, i.e., "Ebonics") in American schools, these letters are rife with anxieties about young people's "inability" to communicate (Collins 1999). Critics claim they suffer linguistic confusion, they don't know the differences between Sheng and Swahili and they "can't speak a single language" and are only able to use multiple languages at once. Many students I knew took up this ideology. Students in a form three classroom at Nam Lolwe Girls' even planned "Operation Sheng-out" (notably named in English) in their classroom to ensure that their Swahili scores were impeccable. They would refuse to use Sheng lexemes and constructions and call one another out for unauthorized usage.

To a large extent the LVB and NLG students' dismissal of Sanifu and its role in society and their own futures were right. Their opinions of the language was affirmed by teachers of other subjects who shruggingly admitted their poor Swahili and nearly always ignored the dictate to use Swahili only at the Friday all-school assemblies. Mr. Ong'ollo tried to dip into a little Swahili in a chemistry class at LVB laughingly telling the students in English "you can correct that!" in reference to his non-standard Swahili that induced a few chuckles from his students. At

NLG, after a group of students dramatically recited a Swahili choral verse poem about the importance of education for girls at the school's prize giving day, the headmistress applauded them saying to the audience of parents and local dignitaries it was a beautiful poem "from the little Kiswahili I can remember." The public dismissal of Swahili by the pinnacle of education authority in the school evidences its regular devaluation.

While they rarely used Sanifu, some teachers would occasionally dip into Urban Swahili in the classroom, marking off an informal, congenial space within the formal lesson in a classic Gumperzian metaphorical switch, albeit one between plurilingual and monolingual (or "pure") codes. I'll discuss this type of switching further below, but what is important to note is the way that the acceptability of the switch is contingent on authority. Teachers were free to shift "downward" into less formal registers, something Mr. Okeyo often did in his history lessons at NLG. His shifts were often met with titters of delight from students. In a transition from describing the Berlin Conference of 1884/5 to its impact on Kenya, for example, Mr. Okeyo shifted from English into Urban Swahili, drawing his students' attention, "*Kae smart, tumesikia story*" (Urban Sw.: sit properly, we've heard a story).

In small group work or in self-led classes when teachers were absent, the dictate for single languages was often broken by students. In Swahili classes they would work to keep the class in the Sanifu variety, but occasionally relied on other registers of Swahili and sometimes English to clarify the meaning of difficult or obscure terms. Linet explained that sometimes they just needed help understanding the Sanifu. Struggling over the Sanifu term "*njozi*," in a discussion of the Swahili novel, *Utengano* (Mohamed 1980), one student turned to her Swahili dictionary and informed her peers, "*ni flashback!*" (Sw.: it is "flashback"). In history classes, the

LVB students would talk through topics and pose questions to each other in Sheng or Urban Swahili, but they always made notes on their discussion in standard English.

Predictably, expectations of the classroom do not always recur throughout school space. Although students were rarely chastised for mixing their English and Swahili—normally only cursing or lewd terms that were reprimanded by teachers outside of class (if those terms were even recognized or acknowledged by teachers)—they still only addressed teachers in formal, standard English, presenting themselves as serious and dedicated students. During games time, meals, their scarce free time, and in the hostels at both schools students normally shifted among registers of English, Urban Swahili, and Sheng peppering their speech with the hyper-local in-group slang terms. In the less formal assemblies after the day's lessons were complete the linguistic restrictions were also loosened allowing for more Urban Swahili even though most of these events were largely conducted in English. However, in events like guidance and counseling sessions or religious services, key points, such as the definition of “self-esteem,” were delineated in standard English even if students and presenters discussed them in an Urban Swahili style. Even these less formal spaces belie a more durable linguistic division of labor—English is the endpoint, the final, authoritative word although discussion leading up to that point could take place in a variety of registers.

Youth institutions, language in Masani Youth and Kwetu Dance Company

Connections among people, events, statuses, and styles of speech are policed and naturalized in and through institutions, so it is not surprising to find that after leaving school, I found that young people reproduced many of the same hierarchies of language in their own institutions. For example, all of the meetings at the Masani Youth Center began in “pure”

standard English and all of the most formal meeting actions such as reports from group leaders were unfailingly in English. Meeting discussion, however, was held in a mixture of English, Urban Swahili, and Sheng and although every member of the group spoke Dholuo, the language required explicit permission in their formal meetings. Masani Youth underreported their use of Dholuo in everyday interactions at the center. They liked to consider themselves a non-ethnic and “modern” organization, which for them would mean using primarily English, Sheng, and Urban Swahili. Dholuo, a language they associated with rural areas and tradition, would counter this group positioning. Requesting explicit permission to use Dholuo is also a reflection of their perception that they, as a group, were not the sort to use Dholuo in formal interactions.

The Masani Youth met to discuss their plans for a shooting a short film about interreligious relationships and accidental incest and Emmanuel made such a metalinguistic request as he tried to explain the rather convoluted storyline:

Excerpt 2.2

<p><i>Ama</i> just express it this way, he is not getting it this way. <u>Can I put it in Luo?</u> <u>Ng’ani jadoho, ng’ani ne en, jadoho, iwinjo, oser nyakoni owe, oser maowe.</u> <i>Bahati mbaya, huyu ashika mimba. Wakakosana, mama akapotea na mtoto huko. Akaoa huyu akazaa na yeye.</i></p>	<p>Or just express it this way, he is not getting it this way. <u>Can I put it in Luo?</u> <u>This polygamist, this one sees her, the polygamist, you understand, seduces this girl, he seduces her completely.</u> <i>Unfortunately, that one got pregnant. They did one another wrong, the mama disappeared with the child over there. He marries this one, she gives birth to him.</i>²⁷</p>
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Note how Emmanuel not only requested in English his shift into Dholuo (underlined text), but also quickly shifted out of the language into another ratified meeting-language: unmixed Swahili (italicized text). Relying on English and Swahili in their meetings not only marks more formal social space, it also makes it. Not only that, but it also represents an effort on the part of the

²⁷ The storyline of the film, “Love is Never Blind” involved the relationship between a young Christian man and a Muslim woman. When their parents meet, they realize that their children are half-siblings and need to find a way to break the two young lovers up.

Masani members to be (and appear) more aligned with the model of *youth* they deem appropriate to a organization geared toward community development and sensitization—they *should* use Kenya’s national languages. While they use the same physical space for watching films, recording songs, and sitting around selling stories, their register shifts from the usual Urban Swahili, Sheng, and Dholuo into (“pure”) varieties of English and Swahili reform the space and its speakers, producing formal interactional frames and “serious” interactants.

In the course of one of the more intense meetings at Masani the indexical weight of English was inveighed in explicit metalinguistic commentary. Bernard and Balla were in a heated debate about representation of the group and the use of the Masani name at public events or other youth forums. In response to accusations that Balla had levied against him in English, Bernard drew direct attention to his language choice—as he voiced the group leader, one with authority and status—saying, “Understand this English very well.” Balla’s rejoinder was also metalinguistically marked, not only in reference to his command of English but apparently also his natural skill in the language, in an effort to trump Bernard’s status assertion: “I reached only class two, but I speak English.” In this assertion, Balla claims a sort of essential intelligence and status; he is so bright that English comes naturally to him. Frustrated that the Masani Youth appeared to be taking Bernard’s side in the debate, Balla took one more metalinguistic step, one that not only voiced status and authority with pure English usage, but diminished his interlocutors’ statuses, intimating they only understood lower-status languages: “Maybe my English wasn’t clear, I will speak Swahili.” Balla was then heckled by another youth saying, “Dholuo, *bwana!*” a jab both mocking Balla’s insult and dismissing Swahili’s usefulness in

clarifying.²⁸ Interestingly, Balla continued his self-defense in English. Bernard and Balla's metalinguistic back-and-forth demonstrates the rather unsurprising position of English in a hierarchy of formal languages and its connection to local voices of authority and expertise. Remarkable, however, is the way the languages are explicitly named in a battle of authoritative voices.

While normally much less formal than Masani, Kwetu Dance Company's meetings followed a similar pattern for language use. Unlike Masani, Kwetu didn't take meeting minutes or adhere to pre-set agendas. However, they did hold rather formal classes and instruction tended toward English. The nexus of socio-economic class, speech domain, and the interactional events made English an expectable choice. The Kwetu dancers came from somewhat wealthier backgrounds than Masani youth and attended more highly ranked urban high schools (although they were certainly not elites). Perhaps more importantly, much of their interaction in the practice space was in the form of students and teachers, even if those relative roles shifted throughout the day.²⁹ While not necessarily determining the use of English, recreating classroom dynamics in the domain of dance—which those who studied outside of Kwetu had formally learned in English—makes English an unmarked choice for Kwetu.³⁰ Even so, I was struck by Kwetu's heavy use of English in meetings and classes because nearly all of their social interactions were in Urban Swahili and Sheng. When I asked Eunice, a long time member of Kwetu, about this tendency, she responded, “we want to keep the tribal out” (thus not using local

²⁸ While in Sanifu “*bwana*” means mister or sir, in slang and among youth it generally means something more like “man” or “dude” in American slang.

²⁹ Recall that about half of Kwetu's members both led and were students in classes. Generally, the obedience afforded teachers transitioned seamlessly as roles changed from class session to class session.

³⁰ Recall that three Kwetu dancers trained with the internationally funded Kenya Performing Arts Group in Nairobi.

ethnic languages) and that they were not “fluent” in Swahili. In Eunice’s explanation, mobilizing plurilingual registers like Urban Swahili or Sheng in such interactions seems impossible, almost unthinkable. Teachers and students do not use these languages in the midst of instruction, thus to voice the seriousness with which they inhabited these roles, Kwetu largely relied on standard English. The only option appeared to be monolingual communication in Eunice’s framing.

In their own institutions, young people tended to reproduce the same requirements for monolingual communication that hold elsewhere. Voicing personae that were statusful, authoritative, and “serious” meant relying heavily on English. Further, their language use also represents a strategy for claiming appropriate recognition for their own organizations amid elder’s dismissal of them.

Multigenerational institutions

Schools and other youth-centered institutions are of course not the only spaces in youths’ social worlds that inform the ideologies and hierarchies of linguistic practice they challenge and reproduce. In addition to multigenerational institutions like churches and political forums, young people navigate marketplaces, *matatus*, and home lives. While these spaces have less explicitly regimented expectations for language use there are always acceptable and expectable styles of speech in any social interaction even when they are negotiated, contested, and played with in the course of interaction.

Churches are a remarkable place to consider the nexus of class, place, and aspiration in language. Most churches in Kisumu City offer services in both English and Swahili. None of the places of worship I visited over the course of my fieldwork offered regular services in Dholuo although the language was by no means excluded for churches and prayer groups. Hymns were

sung and translations into Dholuo were possible at many churches. The services most well-attended by young people (and certainly my informants) were conducted in English, although even the English language services included popular Swahili hymns. Nearly all of the prosperity gospel Pentecostal churches I attended were English only, aside from youth services where one would occasionally hear Urban Swahili, hinting at a *youthy* hipness. The largely monolingual English space in these prosperity gospel churches can be seen not only as a reflection of the relative wealth and educational attainment of the congregants, but also as a way of producing status through language choice. A more subtle aspect of the “name it and claim it” ideologies so central to these churches, monolingual English is both an aspiration to and assertion of social and economic status.

I occasionally attended a Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church in a peri-urban neighborhood outside of Kisumu with Bernard and Diana. Immediately prior to services, the church held bible study sessions and parishioners could join any of the small discussion groups. Diana always chose the youth group. She preferred it because they always used English (as opposed to the Swahili or Dholuo of the other study groups) and she could improve her language skills. Like many churches, the formal ritual at the SDA church was held in English, although many hymns were sung simultaneously in English and Dholuo (hymn books were available in both languages). The sermons, however, were somewhat of an outlier in my experience of Christian services in town. An interpreter who accompanied the pastor as he paced before the congregation preaching, translated the English and occasional Swahili into Dholuo. More remarkable than the presence of the interpreter—this area was mixed middle and lower income residents and straddled urban and rural areas—was his agility in translational codeswitching. He translated into pure Dholuo from both English and Swahili, but he also inverted the pastor’s shift

into Dholuo, translating it into English without pause. The dynamically plurilingual space reflected the congregation's generational, economic, and social diversity in an unusual way.

Language use, as I've said, not only reflects social context, it also creates it. Much like classrooms and churches, public meetings and political rallies in Kisumu were spaces where language use is subject to well known sets of expectations, albeit not singular ones. Across Kenya, political rallies, particularly when a politician is in his "home area," involve a conflicted set of linguistic expectations in addition to political and material expectations (Haugerud 1997). A politician like Raila Odinga coming "home" to Kisumu is generally expected to speak Dholuo, an indication that he is specially connected to the region. The Masani Youth found it impossible to imagine Raila visiting without addressing crowds in Dholuo, even they would expect it. However, they acknowledged, if reported in the press (and the use of local ethnic languages is always reported) an address in Dholuo would be read by outsiders with suspicion of ethnic favoritism or nefarious intentions. English and colloquial Swahili are the codes most often deployed in political speeches. A formal English speech is often followed by a Swahili elaboration in which politicians demonstrate their connection to the people. Rather than folksy charm, Swahili elaborations communicate to the significant population for whom formal English is inaccessible but they also metaphorically bridge the gap between the people and the state.

I never heard complaints about the use of Swahili as a strategy of condescension (Bourdieu 1991), perhaps because it always followed pontification in English. Sheng, however, was another story. Raphael Tuju posted an announcement of his candidacy for the presidency on YouTube in late 2011. Notably (and uncharacteristically) he made the announcement in Sheng. Within the cavalcade of comments that followed were stinging critiques of his usage as scripted or "plastic," along with a number of criticisms of his use of Sheng at all. It was taken by some to

be a great “insult” to Kenyan youth—an intimation that they could speak neither English nor Swahili and were effectively “stuck” in Sheng.³¹

Political and peace building forums were another space in which the gap between the state and citizens is managed. I attended many of these forums (some geared toward youth only, others not) which effectively created state-authorized discursive space. As such, the two official languages were expected and in Kisumu the preference tended to be toward English. However, these were also spaces in which a particular register of Urban Swahili, called “NGOese” by some youth, was also authorized and valued. Informed by development and international aid discourses increasingly prominent around Kisumu, NGOese is a register that invokes a *youth* savvy—but its speakers leave no question of their proficiency in English (and less importantly, Swahili) along with the discourses of rights and community organizing that are central to the register and evoked with key shibboleths like “sensitization” and “empowerment.” Speakers deft with their use of NGOese are able to position themselves as potential brokers between international NGOs and “the community” (see Moore 2014). Tensions occasionally arose among participants in these forums about the languages available for use and their reflection of the voices authorized in such settings. In a peace building youth forum that was dedicating to dealing with local corruption, a man requested to address the group in Dholuo (this was often an ethnically mixed group, although that was only selectively pointed out). His request was granted by the moderator, but one man loudly protested in English, “we have two perfectly good national languages!” The first man responded, in standard English referencing the newly ratified constitution, “I have the right to be addressed in a language I understand!” Here, a local language like Dholuo indexes ethnic solidarity, place, and ruralness, but it also invokes an image of the

³¹ See the following chapter for a further elaboration of the story and the insight it offers into conflicted senses of *youth* in Kenya.

everyday citizen and a claim to full representation across the citizenry. The request, made by a man I know to be quite able in English, was a statement about voice in everyday politics. Young people often expressed frustration that they were neither represented nor valued in Kenyan politics, however, this same claim could not be made in a demand to speak Sheng in a public forum. As I elaborate further in the following chapter, a meaning of *youth* that incorporates notion of mobility and cosmopolitanism requires a wide linguistic repertoire such that speakers don't appear limited to single language or limited in social status. Thus this interesting claim to wider inclusion in national politics could not be made but with an ethnic language. This minor conflict reflects many of the larger scale tensions between the state and the people in Kenya, not the least of which are the citizenry's (Sw.: *wananchi*) anxieties around incomprehensibility and its suspicion of state symbols (Blunt 2010), of state communication, and of the ability to be heard in national politics.

Young people, particularly those who have left secondary school, don't spend the majority of their time in formal institutional spaces. Even those, like many of my informants, who were intimately involved with youth institutions, took part in formal interactions that required monolingual communication only on occasion. The voices they invoked and the stances they took, of course, varied dramatically when chatting with friends, riding on *matatus*, or hanging out at home. Speaking monolingual codes in these interactions is not only uncool, it marks one as an outsider often in terms of class or even nationality. Coolness, that ultimate indicator of *youth* status, is marked by mobility in Kenya. Tied to cosmopolitanism and modernity, *youth* means not being restricted or "stuck" in a single language. Voicing *youth* means having a diversity of registers in one's repertoire and knowing when and how to invoke them. In the following section I describe one of the most commonly used plurilingual varieties in

urban Kenya, Urban Swahili, and the following chapter addresses descriptions and ideologies of Sheng the most talked about plurilingual register in urban Kenya.

Urban Swahili

Urban space is often the site of anxieties and ambivalences about morality, modernity, tradition, and authenticity, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (Cohen 1969, Ferguson 1999, Hannerz 1980, Mbembe 2001, Mitchell 1956). These ambivalences are often manifest in ideologies of urban languages, which are simultaneously praised for their creativity and modernity and criticized as corrupt or impure (Beck 2010, McLaughlin 2009). The semi-anonymity afforded by urban spaces in Kenya produces and is produced by linguistic registers like Urban Swahili and Sheng. Unlike local languages, which locate people within an ethnic frame (something the elder was trying to insist upon Oti), plurilingual registers of Swahili position speakers and interactions in the contemporary and in urbanity. Thus, at the same time they produce a degree of anonymity, plurilingual registers also index belonging within an urban modernity. Unlike “pure” registers of English or Swahili, both of which have a twinge of foreignness, plurilingual registers index a sense of the local, a form of national belonging. It should come as little surprise then that out of their wide linguistic repertoires, the majority of the youth I worked with (most of whom, recall, were city-born, secondary school graduates) preferred mixed registers.

Much like the case of Town Bemba detailed by Debra Spitulnik (1999) the use of Urban Swahili marks a sort of urbanity or cosmopolitanism that can even be invoked when the register is used in rural areas. More than colloquial Swahili, Urban Swahili, with its heavy English borrowing, has a caché. Some of my interlocutors described it as a way to demonstrate

knowledge of multiple languages, most importantly English. Urban Swahili is often seen by young speakers as indicative of access to the institutional and social status associated with English without the attendant associations of arrogance, formality, or social distance. While it is possible to speak “too much” English and thus be accused of putting on airs, speaking Urban Swahili can display alignment with some of English’s valued entailments while avoiding such accusations. Urban Swahili also doesn’t carry Swahili’s negative associations as a language that “doesn’t flow” or is too complicated in large part due to the plurilingual register’s laxity in grammatical noun class agreement. Of course, Urban Swahili is not the resolution to Kenya’s complex linguistic landscape. The register is maligned, even by its speakers, as a threat to boundaries between languages.

I will continue to detail ideologies of Urban Swahili (along with the related register, Sheng) in the following chapter, but here I describe a few of the borrowings, mixings, and innovations characteristic of the register. The following is an excerpt from a conversation I had with a group of form three girls at Nam Lolwe Girls’ High School after classes were finished for the day. The excerpt exemplifies some of the key features of Urban Swahili.

A group of us sat on the edge of the playing field and talked about the soap operas on local television, many of which were imported from abroad and dubbed into American English. *Soy Tu Dueña*, a telenovela from Mexico that features a powerful female hacienda owner as its main character, was one of their favorites and I asked why.

Excerpt 2.3

<p><i>Halafu pia Soy Tu Dueña inatuonyesha vile a woman anaweza kuwa independent. Kama huyu msichana hapo, anaitwa? Valentina. Tunaona vile ako independent. Hadeepend on hao men around her. Anatake care of herself peke yake na ye ndio anaown vitu zenye ziko</i></p>	<p><i>Then also Soy Tu Dueña shows us the way a woman can be independent. Like that girl there, what’s she called? Valentina. We see the way she is [loc.] independent. She doesn’t depend on those men around her. She takes care of herself by herself and she definitely</i></p>
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<i>hapo.</i>	owns a lot of things, they [the things] themselves are there.
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This brief excerpt incorporates many of the central features of Urban Swahili as it is spoken in Kisumu, the use of locatives, preference for 9/10 noun class agreements, and intermorphemic codeswitching. The use of a locative suffix (-ko) with subject pronomial prefixes to indicate “to be” or “to have” in place of their standard forms (*kuwa/ni/-na*) is common in Urban Swahili. The construction used by the student in Excerpt 2.3 “*ako* independent” (=is [loc.] independent) is particularly marked as Urban Swahili for its use of the “a” pronomial prefix, the same prefix used for the third person singular in normal verb conjugation (i.e., “*anaweza*,” she can). This is not used in Sanifu, which uses the prefix “yu” (thus: “*yuko shuleni*,” she is in school). However, the meaning of the phrase “*ako* independent” does not involve the subject’s position in space or time as the construction might indicate. Instead, it simply means “she is independent.” In Sanifu, the verb “*ni*” (infinitive: “*kuwa*”) would be used. A student at Lake Victoria Boys’ incorporated both Sanifu and Urban Swahili constructions in a single phrase about a school strike: “*Eh ni crowd power wakikuwa wengi sababu hapa pia tuko wengi*” (Eh! crowd power, if we were many, because here also we are [loc.] many).

As we saw much earlier, in Allan’s description of Sanifu construction as “weird,” Urban Swahili radically minimizes noun class agreement. The noun classification system in standard Swahili grammar consists of 15 classes and governs the forms of verb, demonstrative, locative, possessive, and adjective agreement prefixes. Often in Urban Swahili only four of the 15 noun class are used—the m/wa (1/2) and n/n (9/10).³² In Excerpt 2.3, the student says, “*vitu enye iko hapa*” (things themselves are [loc.] there). The noun *vitu* falls in the ki/vi (7/8) noun class

³² I should note that this is not exclusively the case. Some speakers follow Sanifu noun class agreement, even if laxly. An example appears in Table 2.1, *kinachoaffectiwa*.

and thus the adjective and locative would take the *vi* prefix in Sanifu: “*vi*tu *venye* *vi*ko hapo.”

This sort of minimal noun class agreement is thought by some speakers to simplify the Sanifu they describe as too complicated.

In CS terms, Swahili is Urban Swahili’s “matrix language.” It is the language into which embedded words are inserted, and it largely dictates the syntax and grammatical structure of the utterance. Nouns and noun phrases (e.g., from Excerpt 2.3, a woman, men around her, care of herself) and adjective (e.g., independent) from English are incorporated into a Swahili-style grammar. While English nouns and adjectives are frequent and a notable feature of Urban Swahili, the incorporation and conjugation of English verbs and verb phrases through Swahili is a more striking and key characteristic of Urban Swahili (and Sheng in a somewhat different way, which I will describe in the following chapter). When foreign words are consistently used among speakers, they are often linguistically classified as “loan words” or “borrowings,” however, in Urban Swahili the English verbs used tend to vary so much, even in a single speaker’s ideolect, that I hesitate to use those terms. These words might be considered nonce borrowings or even single word switches. Speakers tend to be acutely aware of this as switching, indeed, awareness lends status to the register. They see the style as using two languages simultaneously, incorporating the two together rather than alternating between them. In thinking of Urban Swahili as a plurlingual register, however, questions of borrowing, loans, or switches are less relevant because the lexemes are all part of the same voice. These words are part of a plurlingual register itself.

Returning to Excerpt 2.3, “*hadepend* (on)” “she doesn’t depend on” and “*Anatake* (care of)” “she takes care of” exemplify the Urban Swahili loan verb processing. The verbs “depend” and “take” are assimilated into Swahili (parsed: ha-depend, third person neg.-verb root; a-na-

take, third person-pres.-verb root) but largely unchanged morphologically from the English original. Table 2.2 includes further examples of English verbs borrowed into Urban Swahili without morphological assimilation, quite different from verb processing in Sheng. Each of these verbs borrowed into Urban Swahili from English have relatively simple and commonly used Swahili equivalents:

Table 2.2:

Urban Swahili	English	Sanifu
<i>kinachoaffectiwa</i> (<i>ki-na-cho-affect-iwa</i>) CLASS 7 SUBJ.-PRES.-CLASS 7 REL. PRONOUN-VERB ROOT “AFFECT”-PASSIVE	that which has been affected	<i>kinachoathiriwa</i> (<i>ki-na-cho-athiri-iwa</i>) CLASS 7 SUBJ.-PRES.-CLASS 7 REL. PRONOUN-VERB ROOT “ATHIRI”-PASSIVE
<i>kumake</i> (<i>ku-make</i>) INF. MARKER-VERB ROOT “MAKE”	to make	<i>kufanya</i> (<i>ku-fanya</i>) INF. MARKER-VERB ROOT “FANYA”
<i>tumerentisha</i> (<i>tu-me-rent-isha</i>) FIRST PERS. PLURAL SUBJ.-PAST PERF.-VERB ROOT “RENT”- CAUSITIVE	we have rented (lit. we have caused it to be rented to us)	<i>tumekodi</i> (<i>tu-me-kodi</i>) FIRST PERS. PLURAL SUBJ.-PAST PERF.-VERB ROOT “KODI”
<i>imedoublebounce</i> (<i>i-me-double bounce</i>) CLASS 9 SUBJ.-PAST PERF.- VERB ROOT “DOUBLE BOUNCE”	it has double-bounced (tennis)	<i>imerukaruka</i> <i>i-me-ruka-ruka</i> (lit. jump jump) CLASS 9 SUBJ.-PAST PERF.- VERB ROOT “RUKA”- REDUPLICATION

Urban Swahili’s association with a Kenyan urban modernity—and to a certain extent *youth*—is also reflected in and produced by its presence in national media. Many large national companies including condom manufacturers, mobile phone companies, and even relatively

stodgy firms like airlines and banks trying to key into a new audience, advertise in the register (See plate 2.1).



Plate 2.1: “*Nakuru tuko sorted*” (Nakuru we are taken care of). Advertisement for Consolidated Bank announcing its new locations in Nakuru town printed in the English language daily, *The Daily Nation*. Note the use of the locative form, “tuko” (1st person plural + locative) as “to be.”

Both of the most widely circulating dailies feature Urban Swahili in occasional columns in their weekly pop culture inserts. Television programs like *Tahidi High* (a comedy-drama set in a secondary school) and *The Team* (a development funded drama exploring the problems of tribalism and corruption) both use the register. Media images of the register in use are part of the set of meta-semiotic processes that produce the register as such. They, along with the locally circulating metapragmatic commentary on Urban Swahili’s use, qualities, and speakers, contribute Urban Swahili’s recognizability as an index of qualities like modernity, *youth*, urbanity, and sometimes wealth and education. At the same time, those commentaries and media forms are informed by ideological connections between the register and social types, activities, and spaces in through a dialectic of presuppositions and entailments (Silverstein 2003a).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to describe the heteroglossia of urban communication in Kisumu and the ways that different registers in the city take on meanings and values and are highly dependent on context including speakers and their intentions. As the story of Oti and the big man also demonstrates, there is not a strict, single hierarchy of languages in use in Kenya. Prestige does not emanate from a single source and in this chapter I have described the various ways speech styles and languages are valued, evaluated, and used in social interaction. Competing hierarchies of language and conflicted (and always situated) evaluations of communicative practice are part of the intensely dialogic social space in which speakers are always positioning themselves. The indexicality of communicative practices is always contextual and contingent not only on social spaces, speakers, and topics, but also on the entire repertoire of communicative forms available (presumed and actual) to interactants. As I have suggested, the interpretive uptake of an utterance can also rely on presumptions about its speaker's competencies in other languages. Languages and linguistic registers are constantly mapped and remapped onto qualities and social types, but only through processes of contrast and differentiation. Contrast sets tend to also cluster qualities together in ways that become predictable and inform the implicit assumptions that individuals make about speakers and semiotic forms, but always in comparison to other speakers and semiotic forms. For example, Swahili becomes recognizable as more or less feminine, mobile, or modern only in comparison to other languages. In contrast to Dholuo, it indexes mobility but as compared to English, Swahili is restricting. Qualities like those I have drawn out in relation to registers and voices throughout this chapter, tend to come in bundles and those bundles inform the presuppositions

about semiotic forms and social personae associated with them. The co-constitutive contrast sets most salient in Kenya, many of which I have illustrated throughout the chapter, are recognizable throughout sub-Saharan Africa, if not around the world³³:

Traditional (Backwards)	Modern
Rural	Urban
Feminine	Masculine
Old	Young
Ignorant	Educated (Savvy)
Poor	Wealthy
Down (Low)	High (Up)
Slow	Fast
Restricted (Static)	Mobile

The ways that such qualities are durably linked to social personae and semiotic forms (like linguistic registers) are deeply ideological. All of this meta-semiotic work takes place in a range of domains; through language choice or refusal (as in Oti's case), institutional policy, mass media, explicit commentary, and everyday communicative negotiations.

Plurilingual varieties are common across sub-Saharan Africa and they should be considered in their own right, on analytically even-ground with named languages. Analyzing such communicative practice in terms of register (be they monolingual or plurilingual) allows us to attend to the most meaningful communicative effects of "switching" rather than over-privileging named languages. This approach offers a more finely ground lens through which to view both the micro and macro social effects of language-in-use.

In the following chapter I continue a discussion of Urban Swahili and discuss it in relation to Sheng, a plurilingual register that is recognized in Kenya as an indexical icon of *youth*. There I will elaborate upon this chapter's discussion of language ideologies in order to show how Kenyans' deep ambivalence toward Sheng reflects and informs local notions of *youth*.

³³ See (Spitulnik 1998: 176) for a similar delineation of contrast sets with respect to language use in Zambian state radio.

CHAPTER 3

KUENDA SHENG (GOING SHENG): IDEOLOGIES OF SHENG AND THE MEANING OF YOUTH

When I asked Melvin what sort of people spoke Sheng—the plurilingual register associated with youth in contemporary Kenya—at Lake Victoria Boys’ High School (LVB) he laughed and replied, “*Hata teachers siku hizi! Wengine wameanza kuenda Sheng!*” (Sw.: Even teachers these days! Some of them have begun going Sheng!). Melvin’s surprising assertion that even teachers, representatives of elder authority and institutional propriety, were using Sheng speaks to his sense of its presence in nearly all spheres of urban social life. His turn of phrase, “going Sheng,” also points to an important theme in local descriptions of the register: Sheng is more than a way of speaking, it is a way of being or acting in the world. K-South, a Nairobi rapper, offered a similar description, “Sheng is a lifestyle, not just a language” (Samper 2002: 8).

Sheng is not only commonly spoken in urban centers across the country, it is also widely spoken about. Sheng is often the subject of letters to the editor in local daily newspapers, it is a source of anxiety in schools, and it forms the basis for play and joking among peers. It’s both an object of consternation and pride. Upon learning that my research concerned language in the country, strangers asked, without fail, if I knew about “this thing called Sheng.” In this chapter I examine metapragmatic commentary on Sheng circulating in Kisumu City and in the popular media and detail a range of language ideologies concerning Sheng held by young people and their elders. These ideologies characterize the relationships between Sheng as a way of speaking and a way of being in the world—what it means to “go Sheng.” These ideologies also position those who espouse them as particular types of people in relation to both stereotypical speakers of the register and to the qualities variously ascribed to the register itself. As Mary Bucholtz

reminds us, “Language ideologies are central to the construction of identity because they are not in fact primarily about language. Rather, they are in the service of other, more basic ideologies about social groups which they cloak in linguistic terms” (2011: 9). Ideologies of Sheng offer important insight into the contested meanings of *youth* in contemporary Kenya. When Kenyans talk about Sheng, its qualities, appropriateness, value, and origin, they also (re)produce the stereotypes of speakers and position themselves vis-à-vis those personae. It is rarely contested that the stereotypical Sheng speaker is “a youth” but what that youth looks like—which qualities inhere in the category and classifier—is precisely what is at stake in describing and evaluating the register. Because Sheng is so consistently part of conversation and locally seen to be so uniquely Kenyan, it provides special insight into the larger conflicts over meanings of *youth* and its enregisterment as a social and semiotic category.

In recent years public representations of Sheng have shifted from one of a criminal argot or convoluted code of Nairobi slum dwellers to a language of and for “the youth.” It is seen to have spread well beyond the perceived origin in Nairobi slums, softened by its appearances in advertisements (Mutonya 2008), newspaper pop culture supplements, public health campaigns, and in television programs. With increased circulation and visibility, the image of a typical Sheng speaker has expanded from brash *matatu* touts (Sh.: *manamba*) taking advantage of citizens to include polyglot middle class youth (or even their teachers).¹ Although Sheng has become more common—so much so that it is even deployed on occasion by national politicians—it is certainly neither universally acceptable nor unproblematic. Teachers, prescriptive champions of Swahili, and some elders still decry the expanded use of Sheng as

¹ *Manamba* is a common Sheng term for the touts who drum up business for *matatus*, privately-owned mini-buses used for public transportation, as they trace their routes through Kenyan cities. They are called *manamba* (ma [pl] + number) because they shout out the route number repeatedly as the *matatu* pulls into each stop along the route.

corrupting Kenya's languages and its youth. Perhaps more surprising, however, is that young JoKisumu are sometimes hesitant to use the register; their ambivalence, I suggest, is reflective of wider concerns about the meanings of *youth* in urban Kenya.

In Kenya, Sheng is widely seen as an indexical icon of urban youth; that is to say, it is ideologically understood to point and simultaneously to resemble its speakers. Two key figures on the cline of youth stereotypy emerge in metapragmatic discourse: the ignorant slum dweller and the hypermobile polyglot. Thus the perceived grounds of that resemblance, the iconism of Sheng, vary. Some see Sheng and urban youth to resemble one another through a shared quality of "corruption" or "incomprehensibility" while others see the grounds of resemblance in terms of "dynamism," "creativity," or "modernity." Either way, usage of Sheng and its metapragmatic evaluations are deeply intertwined with the meaning of *youth* and the qualities that are understood to inhere in it.

The social meanings of Sheng are, of course, not static, uniform, or universally agreed upon. They are subject to ongoing processes of enregisterment, where a semiotic repertoire becomes socially recognizable, namable, and variously aligned with qualities and speakers. Thus, the meanings of Sheng always rely on the contextually-grounded deployment and uptake of utterances and their producers. Its meanings are dependent not only on one's ideological stance on the register (viewing it as corrupting or creative, for example) but also one's assumptions about both speakers and interactional contexts. Even what "counts" as Sheng is highly ideological. Identifying a string of speech as Sheng rather than Urban Swahili can be an ideological pursuit that involves assumptions about who a speaker is based on other co-occurring signs like dress, age, or interactional context (see Chapter 2). Assumptions or presuppositions that allow individuals to make such judgments about interactions (i.e., what type of interaction?,

with whom?, how appropriate or unexpected?) are neither simple nor stable. They are constantly re-formed, disrupted, or reaffirmed in and through continued social interaction. These entailments of interaction then form the basis of further interactional presuppositions about speakers, registers, speech genres, and so forth. Such dialectics of language-in-use link micro-social interactions to the macro-social world, they create durability in sociolinguistic stereotypy. At the same time it is through this dialectic that stereotypy changes (Silverstein 2003a). Contradictions within stereotypy also emerge through these dialectical processes, producing a sort of stereotype dissonance. This is why a stereotype of Sheng-speaker can multiply to include cosmopolitan polyglot youth while at the same has maintained an image of Sheng-speakers slum-dwelling delinquents.

The tension between contrasting images of Sheng-speakers can be the source of anxiety as it was for Frederick, a LVB student, whose born-again Christian classmates refused to speak Sheng or bump fists (see Chapter 1). The Christians' refusal—presumably grounded in the assumption that Sheng is a code for immoral and unchristian interaction—was threatening to Frederick. It made possible a negative future uptake of Frederick's own use of Sheng and risked branding him a brutish unbeliever. His concern was that he might be (mis)understood as an unchristian thug when using Sheng if the entailments of the born again Christians' rejection of the register became durable and Sheng's associations with immorality were further shored up.

Sheng's linguistic features

Linguistic descriptions of Sheng occasionally come to inform everyday debates about the register in Kenya be they in the pages of local newspapers or in secondary school Swahili classrooms. I provide a more formal description of Sheng here to lay firmer analytical ground on

which to understand the folk descriptions and ideologies that are rife with assumptions and assertions about meanings of *youth*. Sheng emerged as a topic of scholarly interest in the late-1980s and although it has captured the imagination of a number of linguists, there still remain relatively few close analyses of the register in use. While some scholarship focused on classifying Sheng in terms of slangs, pidgins, creoles, or dialects (Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997, Githiora 2002, Mazrui 1995, Spyropoulos 1987) or identifying the origins and processes of coining of Sheng words (Bosire 2009, Ogechi 2005), others focused on sociolinguistic detail regarding relationship between “hybridity” in language and identity (Meierkord 2011, Samper 2002), variations within Sheng that index social, gender, and spatial differentiation (Githinji 2008, 2006), and Sheng’s increasing presence in the public sphere (Mutonya 2008).

Often described as a hybrid or mixed language with a Swahili-like grammar, Sheng is not only similar to Urban Swahili, it also bears resemblance to mixed urban varieties across Africa including Tsostitaal in South Africa or Nouchi in Côte d’Ivoire. Sheng word formation (including truncation, affixation, functional shift, and borrowing) are common in slangs around the world (Eble 1996). However, unlike monolingual slangs, Sheng involves regular intrasentential and intermorphemic switching with heavy English borrowing (including American hip hop registers [Beck 2010]), as well as borrowing from Gikuyu, Dholuo, and other local languages as well as European languages. Unlike Urban Swahili, which tends to retain the phonology of the source language in loan words, Sheng loans are assimilated into a local, Swahili-style phonology. For example, the Sheng phrase *aliget bol* (Sh.: she is pregnant, lit. she got a ball) involves a vowel shift where the |a| in “ball” becomes more like a mid-high back rounded |o|. In another example, *inabo* (Sh.: it is boring) lengthens the |o| sound and emphasizes a non-rhotic pronunciation of “bore,” the English word from which *inabo* is derived.

Sheng's lexical material is identifiable to many speakers through its switches between English and Swahili, the general style of switching along with phonological and lexical manipulation effectively makes an utterance into Sheng. Often described by speakers as a language that "mixes" English and Swahili, speakers are hyper-aware of and often point out the level of codeswitching in Sheng as a defining feature.² This hyper-awareness, however, is limited by competency in the source languages of loan words, particularly if they are local ethnic language from another region. For example, most JoKisumu recognize *ushago/shagz* (Sh.: rural area) as a quintessential Sheng term, but few point to Gikuyu *gicagi* (Gi.: rural area) as its source and instead considered it a Sheng neologism.³ Two common Sheng terms, *dem* (Sh.: girl/woman) and *doh* (Sh.: money) are also recognized by speakers as coined words, but not for their sources in English slang ("dame" and "dough").

Lexical manipulation is a source of pride for speakers who highlight the varieties of word play in the register. New terms are regularly coined in Sheng and as with all slangs, words are subject to semantic extension and sometimes negation. The coined term *buda*, meaning father, has extended to a form of address among male friends (similar to "man," "dude," or even the older "daddio" in white American slang). Loan words are also often extended semantically rarely retaining the full meaning of the original. The English loan *stori* (Sh.: story) for example, has

² The term "Sheng" itself is often described as a portmanteau of "Swahili" and "English" such that the name of the register is read as iconic of its nature.

³ In an elicitation session with LVB students I asked about word origins, when the acknowledged Sheng expert in the room (who was raised in Nairobi) wasn't sure where a term came from he expressed his uncertainty but assumed Kikamba, a language natively spoken in and around Nairobi. His awareness of the fact of borrowing and assumptions about origins illustrates the centrality of local languages in ideologies of Sheng, which contributes to a sense of Sheng's "diversity," a point I will address further below.

extended to mean “news” or “matters” and *mob* to mean “a lot.”⁴ The Swahili word *swara* (Sw.: gazelle) has extended to mean attractive woman in Sheng.

Truncation is a particularly common form of lexical manipulation of borrowed terms into Sheng (Ogechi 2005). For example, the Sheng word *practizi* (Sh.: practice, exercise), borrowed from the English “practice” is often further manipulated by clipping the first syllable resulting in the common word, *tizi*. More often, however, the endings of lexemes are clipped and often coupled with final vowel lengthening (see Githiora 2002).

Table 3.1: Truncation with final vowel lengthening

Sheng	Complete word
Common nouns:	
<i>daró</i>	<i>darasa</i> (Sw.: classroom)
<i>histo</i>	history
<i>hosi</i>	hospital
Proper Nouns:	
<i>Godi</i>	Godwin
<i>Edu</i>	Edward
<i>Nai</i>	Nairobi
<i>Naija</i>	Nigeria
Personal deictics:	
<i>mii (mi)</i>	<i>Mimi</i> (Sw.: me)
<i>wee (we)</i>	<i>Wewe</i> (Sw.: you, sing.)

Syllable inversion is also quite common in Sheng, and is regularly pointed out by speakers as integral to the register. For example, *kula* (Sw.: to eat) becomes *laku* in Sheng, and *nyumba* (Sw.: house) becomes *mbanyu/mbanyuz*. The second form, *mbanyuz*, is an example of the favored |z| sound in Sheng, often pointed to as a sonic shibboleth of the register (note also *shagz* above, an alternative of *ushago*). While the sound appears in Sanifu Swahili’s inventory of sounds, it never

⁴ This extension of *stori*/story bears some resemblance to the word *mambo* in Sanifu Swahili, which refers to matters/affairs, but also abstract things.

appears in a word final position and although the word final position of the |z| sound resembles English pluralization, it rarely serves the purpose of pluralization in Sheng.

Affixation is also a common means for assimilating borrowed English terms with particular preferences for the *ma-* plural affix. *Ma*youth/*ma*yuts (Sh.: youth) uses the *ma-* affix, *m*lost (Sh.: one who has not been around) uses the singular *m-* affix.⁵ Although English lexemes appear to be incorporated into the 5/6 (ji/ma) noun class with the use of the pluralizing particle, *ma-*, noun agreement does not follow the Sanifu Swahili grammatical strictures. Compared to Sanifu, Sheng has a radically simplified noun class system, preferring the *ma-* plural affix and agreement in the 9/10 (i/zi) noun class for nearly every noun class. Agreement in Sheng results in constructions like: *mabooks* *zi*meanguka (Sh.: the books have fallen/ Sw: *vitabu* *vi*meanguka) or *gari* *hi* (Sh.: this car/Sw: *gari hili*). However, Sanifu noun class agreement is occasionally used by Sheng speakers, and standard class agreement always follows when the subject is human (1/2, m/wa), thus: *maboyz* *wa*lirekord tracks noma (Sh.: the guys recorded cool songs).

There are three other features of Sheng rarely mentioned by speakers or linguists (particularly those who see Sheng as a lexical phenomenon): the expanded use of locatives, the *-ga* habitual, and the *venye* adverb. Like speakers of Urban Swahili, Sheng speakers occasionally use locatives as a copula or possessive (see Chapter 2). For example: *nani* *ako* opinion (Sh.: who has an opinion, lit. who is [loc.] with an opinion, Sw.: *nani ana maoni*), uses the locative *ako* in place of a possessive *ana*. *Ako* itself is non-standard, retaining the regular third person singular prefix [a-] rather than using the irregular form *yuko* of Sanifu Swahili. Sheng has developed a habitual suffix *-ga* in addition to the Sanifu *hu-* prefix (while possible, they are not often used

⁵ This formation comes from the common Swahili phrase *umepotea* (lit. you have been lost), something said to friends or acquaintances after not seeing them for sometime without explanation. The phrase “you are lost” is also often used in Kenyan English.

simultaneously), for example *tuenda*^{ga} *hao ya Godi* (Sh.: we normally go to Godi’s house, Sw.: *sisi huenda nyumba ya Godi/kwake Godi*). Finally, *venye* has become something of a shibboleth of Sheng in Kisumu and unlike the previous two features, is readily available for metapragmatic commentary. Used in place of the Sanifu, *hivyo*, for “like that” or “in the manner of” *venye* is remarked upon not only by Swahili teachers, but also by Sheng speakers as a sign of Sheng. In an excerpt below (3.1), Eko, a regular Sheng speaker, used both the habitual *-ga* and *venye*: “to my knowledge, *venye* *nimesikia*^{ga} *sahizi*” (Sh.: to my knowledge, the way I normally hear it these days).

Distinctions between Sheng and Urban Swahili, the plurilingual variety detailed in Chapter 2, are fuzzy. Sheng, as Melvin’s phrase “going Sheng” indicates, is much more than formal features. While there are a few identifiable formal linguistic distinctions between them aside from lexicon, the most meaningful differences arise through language ideologies and co-occurring non-linguistic signs. Perceptions of who a speaker is informs the way his or her speech is heard, which goes on to inform what a register “sounds like” to a listener. These sets of presuppositions and entailments are what build up ideas of languages-in-use and their social meanings. Understanding the social meaning of Sheng—and what “counts” as Sheng—along with its relationship to the meanings and qualities of *youth* in Kisumu requires unpacking and analyzing metapragmatic discourse surrounding Sheng’s use and the stereotypes associated with it and its speakers. Many of these assumptions and conflicts over stereotypes of Sheng speakers are grounded in stories about the origins of Sheng and its role in Kenyan sociolinguistic space.

Origins of Sheng

Folk and linguistic theories on the emergence of Sheng intertwine, and folk theories offer particularly useful insight into qualities locally thought to underlie the register and its original or ideal typical speakers. Origin stories are critical to processes of enregisterment—they concretize who and what a register is for. In Kenya, expert theories on Sheng are in ready circulation often appearing in newspapers and more recently in the secondary school Swahili language curriculum.

Linguists speculate that Sheng emerged in the 1950s (if not somewhat earlier) when the population of Nairobi boomed and migrants from different ethnic communities and rural areas across Kenya converged on the capital city and developed a grammatically imperfect Swahili as a *lingua franca* to fill gaps in competency with other ethnic languages (Mazrui 1995). Some argue that it was likely a product of urban migrants' children who sought privacy from their elder kin in their interactions in the cramped quarters in which they lived (Spyropoulos 1987) or among “teenagers that were rather wayward” seeking a way to exclude others from their conversations (Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997:49). Others suggest that it emerged in the *matatu* sector when *manamba* and their drivers required a way to communicate with one another about fares without passengers' awareness (ibid.). Without exception, scholars point to Eastlands, a large section of Nairobi on the southeastern edge of town spreading out toward Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, as the epicenter of Sheng.⁶

Folk descriptions of Sheng origins resonate strongly with those of linguists, particularly in its spatial emplacement. Everyone I spoke with about Sheng in Kisumu cited its origin as

⁶ Eastlands, which accounts for a significant proportion of Nairobi's population, is often described as a “slum” area. While many neighborhoods in Eastlands also feature tower blocks with electricity and some access to water even there utilities can be unreliable and the roads remain rather perilous, particularly during the rainy season and when compared to the city center or the posh Westlands area.

Nairobi, and many specifically mentioned Eastlands. However, unlike linguists who often mentioned cramped slum conditions, most young JoKisumu I spoke with referred to the ethnic diversity in Eastlands as justification for its origin and its place as the continued epicenter of ever-changing vocabulary. The associations JoKisumu make between Sheng and Nairobi remain so strong that more than a few suggested I travel to Nairobi if I really wanted to know about Sheng. For elders, especially schoolteachers, this might be read as distancing or defense of Kisumu as less linguistically (and, by extension, morally) compromised or corrupted than Nairobi. Young people's stance seemed somewhat different. They would often talk about the spatio-temporal distance between Kisumu and Nairobi Shengs in a recursion of a rural/urban contrast onto the provincial and capital cities. Nairobi was seen as the site of "deep" Sheng and the newest terms. Kisumu, by comparison, was "low" or "behind" and the newest Sheng terms would reach the western town two or three months after they originated in the capital. When I asked some LVB students how Sheng made its way to Kisumu, they were somewhat annoyed and insisted that they often travel to Nairobi, "you don't need a visa!" said one boy, defending his status as cool and in the know despite living in Kisumu.

JoKisumu of all ages were also fairly consistent in their stories about the types of people among whom Sheng originated. Both Sheng speakers and non-speakers alike described Sheng's origin among thieves, never mentioning "wayward" teens or the children of urban-migrants. *Manamba* were also often implicated for reasons similar to their thieving co-linguals: they needed a secret language in which to communicate about their schemes, plots, and plans to separate innocents from their money. These origin stories and tales from Nairobi figure centrally in the widespread associations of Sheng with thuggery, immorality, and low status. Its secrecy was associated with scheming and its origin was associated with lower class slum dwellers, even

if actual usage extended beyond such associations. These associations are one of the reasons many Sheng-speaking young JoKisumu work hard to distance the contemporary usage from its origin even though they do not erase the connections altogether. Distance without erasure can retain the register's risqué quality without necessarily casting all of its contemporary young urban speakers as villainous.

In recent years, Sheng has become more and more visible in local media, particularly through hip hop music and other pop culture forms, but it has also begun to appear in rather surprising contexts. The song, “*Unbwogable*” by the genge hip hop group, Gidi Gidi Maji Maji, was wildly popular in 2002. So much so that the Sheng term, meaning “unshakable” or “unafraid,” made its way out of Sheng-speaking spheres into common parlance, and was even used by then-presidential candidate Mwai Kibaki as a campaign slogan (Hofmeyr, Nyairo and Ogude 2010).⁷

For non-speakers and elders, the creep of Sheng into everyday communication requires something of a rationalization, even if not an explicit one. How is it that this language, one of thugs and *manamba* in Nairobi, can be uttered by well-respected presidential candidates and middle-class aspiring secondary school students in Kisumu so far from Nairobi? Metapragmatic models (or stereotypes) of registers don't necessarily expand to incorporate any and all speakers—indeed, mismatch between a linguistic register and social personae is the stuff of double voicing and does a great deal of social work (Bakhtin 1981)—but the models of a register's ideal speaker can and do shift.⁸ Sometimes they expand to incorporate a variety of

⁷ *Unbwogable* is a somewhat unusual Sheng term in that it Anglicizes a local language, Dholuo. Un-bwogo-able, with “bwogo” meaning “to scare, startle, or frighten”

⁸ Bucholtz (2011), for example, details the highly salient use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) by white students at Bay City High. White students' use of AAVE were acts of

social types and other times ideological models collapse differences among speakers, erasing discrepancies or ideological mismatches between a stereotype and a user. In the case of Sheng, there remains significant tension between the images of typical Sheng speakers, the *manamba* and average urban youth (or ignorant slum dweller and hypermobile polyglot). That tension results in metapragmatic commentary that is telling in the ways that it copes with this difference. Such rationalizations could, for example, make it seem that average urban youth and *manamba* are speak “different” registers (because they are so different socially) or that *manamba* and urban youth are just “the same” (because they deploy the same register). These stances always also position their holders vis-à-vis the meanings of youth.

De-fanging Sheng

While there are always associations of urbanity and modernity with Sheng because of its spatio-temporal origins, the implications and salience of those associations vary. Young JoKisumu created distance between their own usage and that of thugs or *manamba* in a number of ways including distinguishing among types of Sheng. They, for example, distanced the “basic Sheng” of schoolgirls or a local Kisumu Sheng from the “deep Sheng” of Nairobi street life, insisting they were radically different styles of speaking (see Samper 2002). The spatio-temporal distance from Sheng’s origin in Nairobi also worked as a form of distancing from negative stereotypy. Some differentiated themselves from Sheng-speaking thieves and thugs in stories about being taken advantage of by them. More than a few unembarrassed young men in Kisumu told me stories of being conned by unintelligible Sheng-speakers in the capital, unfortunate incidents they chocked up to language. This is not to suggest that young JoKisumu do not want

identity—they were aligning with particular social categories and styles—however, their usage and alignment has no palpable effect on the stereotype of the register’s speakers.

to be associated with Sheng, indeed, there is real prestige associated with using the variety skillfully and artfully. Instead, it is to show both ambivalence and nuance in those associations.

Many young JoKisumu also distance themselves from the negative valence of Sheng in the ways they talk about the “why” of Sheng, even if the “where” remains the same (i.e., Eastlands, Nairobi, in the cabs of *matatus*, in the muddied, littered streets of slums). The justifications for its usage were less nefarious and more acceptable within a schema of generational difference and personal privacy when speakers talked about their own use and even when elders described the usage of local youth. Many JoKisumu described Sheng as a way to maintain privacy, particularly in intergenerational contexts. Young and old JoKisumu alike explained that Sheng allows children to speak in front of their parents without being understood, a tamed albeit related reason thieves use the register. Younger secondary students would squeal with glee at the idea of hiding in plain sight while older youth would talk about the importance of being able to communicate openly with age-mates without the judgment or prying of elder kin. Even an older consultant of mine, Mama Jos, who was a regular critic of Sheng, softened in her stance as she told me about her childhood and the secretive Dholuo she and her siblings used. It was their own Sheng, she explained.

Ideologies of language are constantly in motion. As speakers rationalize their own usage of Sheng, differentiate varieties of Sheng, and distinguish themselves from older stereotypes they are also making assertions about what the register is (what “counts as” Sheng), what it does. While Sheng’s circulation increases and its stereotype expands to include average urban youth there remains a threat that its negative associations leak into evaluations of *youth* as a semiotic category. The tensions between different notions of Sheng (and *youth*) become visible in the ways that both speakers and non-speakers describe the register itself.

Self-presentation and typologies of Sheng

As with any youth slang, Sheng cleaves out generation space and draws important ideological boundaries (Eble 1996). However, as Bucholtz has rightly argued, “Slang is less important for creating symbolic division between youth and adults (or between youth and younger children who do not yet use current slang) than for differentiating styles. Moreover, what unifies slang users is not necessarily their age but their orientation to coolness” (2011: 69). In Kenya, this orientation is not only about coolness, but also about orientations to *youth* as a semiotic category. There are, of course, plenty of elders in Kenya who understand and speak Sheng. To their juniors these elders’ linguistic capacity indexed sympathy to or alignment with the challenges, ethics, and social dynamics of *youth*. They were, in a way, *youthy* elders.

Even if the use of Sheng is recognized by most Kenyans as an index of *youth* that does not imply that all Sheng speakers are “the same.” Gender, class, and social groups are also important lines of distinction that are managed by delineating variation in Sheng. Social difference is produced and made visible by ideologically constructed typologies of Sheng and the characteristics associated with them. I regularly asked people to describe Sheng and while the answers to this question varied widely, they were all important moments of stance-taking. My interlocutors would, in a way, tell me who they were in the ways they described what Sheng was and their relationships to it (i.e. as adept speakers, non-speakers, or occasional users).

Creativity, corruption, and awareness

Awino, a woman in her late-20s and a visual artist affiliated with Kwetu, highlighted Sheng’s steady lexical innovation and creativity and described the register to me in terms of a code-language or euphemism, but also in terms of freedom, openness and being “down to earth.”

She suggested Sheng was generally a way of talking about things without others understanding. She also made notable generational inversion, explaining that she and her husband had their own Sheng, one that they used when they did not want their daughter to understand what they were talking about. The alignment between Awino's self-description as a creative artist committed to free expression and the way she characterized Sheng is rather straightforward. But in her description she also maintained a stance with and as *youth* through her own usage despite being a wife and mother, those common indicators of adulthood. For her, *youth*, freedom, and creativity were deeply intertwined and they were not something she would grow out of. Expression in Sheng was a reflection of those qualities.

Mr. Wamalwa, a Swahili teacher at LVB in his early-30s felt rather differently about the nature of Sheng. For him it wasn't about freedom, creativity, or even about euphemism as Awino suggested. For him it was about disorder in language. He loved talking with his students about the proverbs and circumlocution in Swahili encouraging them to find a playfulness (and even naughtiness) available through Swahili mastery. After a particularly raucous Swahili lesson I asked if his students might confuse the euphemism he was teaching with Sheng because a few of his examples like "*sonko*" (Sh.: rich) or "*kusota*" (Sh.: broke) are widely recognizable by LVB students as Sheng words. Euphemisms like these, he insisted, were not Sheng. What characterized Sheng was intense borrowing and the random way that it disregarded grammar. In his estimation, Sheng couldn't be considered a variety of Swahili as many linguists he had read and heard insisted because it is so removed from the structure that characterized Swahili. Neither could it be considered its own language because it was ruleless. For Mr. Wamalwa, Sheng's very nature is disorderly, a characterization resonant with the negative value of modern youth in Kenya as people disrespectful of or outside the "proper" order of social life.

Mr. Wamalwa was certainly not alone in his description of Sheng as unruly, it was a critique often repeated in letters to the editor in both English and Swahili daily newspapers. Its apparent disregard for the grammatical rules of Swahili and seemingly wonton mixture of languages were an index of larger social disturbance. As we spoke about “come we stay” marriages, Mama Jos lamented what she perceived as young people’s ignorance of Luo culture and the ways they preferred to blend Kenyan and European lifestyles. People were suffering ill health because they preferred chips to traditional *kuon* (Dh.: stiff millet meal porridge), their relationships fell apart because they dated and married without the advice of elders. She laid the blame on elders who were not teaching the young Luos traditional ways of living. Amid this cultural breakdown, Mama Jos explained, it should be no surprise that the young people are “inventing” their own cultures and languages. Sheng, for Mama Jos, was the product of corruption and something born of lack or a failure to transmit traditions. In a way, Sheng is a symptom of the much larger “problem” of youth. By diagnosing Sheng as unruly and corrupt, both Mama Jos and Mr. Wamalwa position themselves as both linguistic experts and elder authority figures who know propriety and have respect for and knowledge of authentically African expression.

The opinions of Mama Jos and Mr. Wamalwa are neither surprising nor uncommon. Around the world, youth are admonished for their perceived irreverence and deviance, particularly in their language use (Eckert 1989). Within these anxieties, often held by elders (although not exclusively elders, and certainly not all elders) are familiar concerns about social reproduction and about the proper order of people and signs in the social world. In Kenya, this concern about social order and recognition is often read through linguistic capacity. Whether one is able to speak mother tongue and the national languages but, importantly, keep them all

separate when necessary is an indication of a person's status and awareness of propriety in society. Recall from Chapter 2 that from different standpoints, unintentional mixing or linguistic leakage is grounds for judgment or mockery. Educated urban youth laugh at their rural age-mates for accents or unusual grammatical constructions in English or Swahili because for them it evidences mother tongue seeping into modern communicative forms. Elders wring their hands over tea and in letters to the editor claiming that the youth can't even master a single language, all they can do is mix them, a sign of ignorance or incomplete competence.

Remarkably, however, many young people turn the elders' criticism of their linguistic ability on its head as they describe the differences between what I call Urban Swahili and Sheng.⁹ Dismas, a rapper, artist, and member of Masani Youth in his early-20s, explained that the biggest difference between Sheng and the ways elders mixed languages in terms of linguistic competence. Elders, he insisted, are sometimes "defeated" in one language and have to switch to another; their switches were born of ignorance. By contrast, Sheng speakers' switching between English and Swahili was intentional; it was done with style and certainly not the result of incapacity. From Dismas's perspective, it is the elders who have an incomplete knowledge; it is they who do not fully understand the languages they are speaking. Much like Awino, Dismas's characterization of Sheng was about creativity and a wide, cosmopolitan awareness—qualities that he aligns with *youth*.¹⁰

Even among young JoKisumu, what "counts" as Sheng is not entirely settled. A group of LVB students had a heated debate about the most salient features of the register. While some

⁹ Recall from Chapter 2 that Urban Swahili is an unmarked variety of code-switching in urban Kenya that shares many features with what linguists describe as Sheng (or "Engsh" [Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997]). Both elder and younger JoKisumu recognize this style as most commonly spoken in the city and often called broken Swahili or referred to as "just the way we speak."

¹⁰ See Chapter 1 for Dismas's song lyrics and a discussion of the reformed, aware, and creative youth he promotes in them.

insisted Sheng meant mixing languages, others insisted that coining new terms, inverting words, and expanding the meanings of words were its most important features. However, what they could agree on was the creativity and dynamism of Sheng, qualities that not only reflected those of its speakers, but also infused interaction with a good deal of fun. Speakers' metapragmatic awareness is central to their enjoyment but it also marks one as politically and socially aware—one who is “in the know.” Immediate referential content aside, part the fun (and assertion of status) of Sheng comes from its musical, political, and other pop cultural allusions. Calling beer “*maji*” [Sw.: water] is one thing, it is secretive and playful, but calling beer “*mututho*” accomplishes the same referential goal and at the same time makes knowing and incisive reference to MP John Mututho and his crusade against alcohol in the country. When young men uttered or heard “*mututho*” in Kisumu, they normally chuckled or smiled, their use and uptake was not only subversive but also a statement of political keenness.

In any language lexical choice can be a way of stance-taking, and in Sheng there is a heightened awareness of such social positioning through word choice due to the importance of the register's materiality for speakers. Word forms, both orthographic (see Chapter 6) and phonetic are important to speakers who are attune to the aesthetic qualities as well as the political and social implications of the words they use. Recall, for example, the young man who insisted a |z| sound made Sheng sexy or “sweet” (see Chapter 2). In the midst of studying for an upcoming Government exam about the new constitution, one Nam Lolwe Girls' student insisted that as a class they adopt a newer Sheng term for president. “*Prezzo*” was not only stale, it was the name of rapper and she claimed they shouldn't “over use” his name (presumably, she wasn't a fan). She insisted they use another, newer version “*orezzo*,” a motion that was met with no objection. These explicit discussions of phonological and orthographic preference, of better and worse

words in Sheng highlight speakers' interests in the materiality of the language—not only what it accomplishes referentially and phatically, but its sounds and shapes.¹¹

Exclusion and radical inclusion

Young JoKisumu also described Sheng as hyper-local. It not only varied from town to town, but from neighborhood to neighborhood. In an elicitation session at LVB, students from the Manyatta and Nyalenda slums compared the different words they used in each location, especially for marijuana, to demonstrate to me how Kisumu Sheng is not only distinct from Nairobi Sheng, but greatly variable within Kisumu. They, like many others, also insisted on Sheng's temporal variability. Leaving town for a few months saw the need to “catch up” on new words because the register changed so rapidly (although there was never a sense that one would be locked-out, only behind). These claims interestingly resituate the creativity of Sheng to include Kisumu while also insisting on its hyper-localness and instability without necessarily focusing on exclusion of non-speakers. Instead, these stances seem to insist on the possibility a sort of radical inclusion in the creative production of the code.

Many other young JoKisumu spoke about Sheng's radical inclusion in terms of communicative possibility. Slangs, cryptolects, and argots are often seen as boundary-making and exclusionary, but the boundaries also produce a sense of inclusion (Halliday 1976). Indeed, many young people in Kisumu tout the youth-wide comprehensibility of Sheng. One high school boy proudly referred to Sheng as the “national language for the youth” while a high school girl referred to it as the way that “we [youth] understand each other.” The notion of Sheng as a variety that can cross boundaries and allow for a sense of mobility and inclusiveness is one held

¹¹ Chapter 6 further addresses the materiality of Sheng in a discussion of standardization and orthography.

by most young people I know. A Masani member offered a hypothetical situation in one of our group interviews highlighting Sheng's mobility. He suggested we imagine going to a "different area" (i.e., non-Dholuo speaking) and think about how we would communicate. People won't speak English and they won't speak Swahili, he insisted, the only way to communicate there would be in Sheng.¹² For many others, including Castro a rapper born in Nairobi but living in Kisumu, Sheng produces a sense of modern belonging that no other Kenyan language could. Local ethnic languages could not, aligned as they are with "tradition;" English or Swahili could not foster the same degree of belonging, because they were too class dependent and rule-bound. Sheng is different, he said, "we are building it ourselves and people take pride in Sheng." Taking this stance, describing Sheng as radically inclusive and potentially a national language, positions its holders in opposition to the tribalism, exclusion, and corruption they see with ethnic languages. At the same time, Sheng's home grown qualities position it uniquely as a truly Kenyan code and those who espouse this language ideology see themselves as the standard-bearers of a modern nationalism.

I once asked Eko, a musician and member of Masani Youth, about a notion of "Kenyanness," national belonging that transcends ethnicity, in a conversation about Kenya's 2007/8 post-election violence. He described Kenyanness in reference to Sheng (while speaking Sheng):

¹² See McIntosh 2010 for a discussion of mobility and languages in Kenya.

Excerpt 3.1¹³

B: <i>Halafu unafikiri kuna mambo kama Kenyanness kama</i>	B: <i>Then do you think there is something like Kenyanness like</i>
E: Kenyannes okay Kenyanness to my knowledge venye nimesikiaga sahizi kuna ukabila inaexist tunajaribu kuifight , we are trying to fight it down kama mayouths, so tuforming groups and then Sheng <i>ndio ita-Kenyanness</i> the language Sheng it's Kenyanness because it brings all youths of all tribes together so that they can speak one language. That's why if you go to Nairobi, I have been there for some times, you get in the pub and you sit there <i>watu wanakunywa maboys, hakuna mtu utasikia anaongea Kijalou, Kikuyu, Kikamba, no. Ni Sheng.</i>	E: Kenyanness okay Kenyanness to my knowledge the way I [normally] hear it these days, there is tribalism that exists, we try to fight it. We are trying to fight it down like the youth, so we are forming groups and then Sheng <i>indeed, Kenyanness, the language Sheng, it's Kenyanness</i> because it brings all youths of all tribes together so that they can speak one language. That's why if you go to Nairobi, I have been there many times, you get in the pub and you sit there, <i>people are drinking, guys, there's no one you will hear speaking Dholuo, Kikuyu, Kikamba, no. It's Sheng.</i>
B: <i>Ni Sheng tu.</i>	B: <i>It's just Sheng.</i>
E: "Niaje buda." "Nipe tei" vitu ka hizo you will be like "kwani huyu ni tribe?" <i>Ati</i> there will be no time to ask that. That is now one Kenya. Kenyanness. Ya. Ya it's one Kenya one people but if you go back to the shagz [name] school <i>hivo utapata watu wanaongea lugha yao ya mama na hiyo nidiyo vi-wasee wako na hiyo</i> mentality bado wanajaribu kutuinfluence nayo though. <i>Tunajaribu kuget away from that mentality ili tuwe kama Wakenya wote.</i>	E: "What's up man?" "Give me alcohol" things like that you will be like, "what? what tribe?" Eh! there will be no time to ask that. That is now one Kenya. Kenyanness. Yeah. Yea, it's one Kenya one people but if you go back to the rural areas [name] school, <i>that one, you will find people speaking mother tongue and that's the way [it is].</i> These guys still have that mentality, still they try to influence us with it though. <i>We try to get away from that mentality such that we are like all Kenyans.</i>

What Eko describes here is the way that Sheng is seen to erase (or at least cover up) ethnic identity and effectively abolish the possibility of tribalism and the corruption that is so intimately bound up with it. He excludes the possibilities of accents, inflections, or word choices that could belie ethnic identity—all of which are entirely possible and recognizable in Sheng. He contrasts

¹³ This excerpt of discourse (and many others to follow, each noted) would be highly recognizable and Sheng (even the Sanifu Swahili elements) with shifts to English (notably beginning "the language Sheng it's Kenyanness..."). In this transcription, I have highlighted lexemes and constructions that are more highly recognizable as Sheng shibboleths although this risks misrepresentation of the utterance. See Statement on Transcriptions and Conventions for a further discussion of the reasoning behind this representational decision.

the pub in Nairobi to the rural areas, the seat of a traditional “mentality” indexed by the use of mother tongue (local ethnic languages). The “mentality,” inherent in local languages, is a tribalism impossible in Sheng. Eko is not alone in this idea. While features in Sheng may point to place—Nairobi, Kisumu, Nakuru, or even specific neighborhoods therein—it is rarely read as indicative of ethnicity. Because of this, Eko and many others see Sheng as fundamentally inclusive despite its characteristic secrecy.

Sheng’s inclusiveness is also bound up with ideologies of its origin. The ethnic diversity of Nairobi coupled with its multilingual borrowing infuse the register with this sense, it is not for a single ethnic group and instead thrives in multi-ethnic spaces, the space of *youth*. This stance, like Eko’s, erases the influences of ethnic languages or places of origin and instead highlights an ideal post-ethnic speaking subject. A group of high school girls saw an imagined Nairobi-like diversity replicated in their own home classroom. They claimed that they were the best Sheng speakers in the school and attributed it to their diversity. To prove their prowess, they began listing off terms they claimed to have coined in their classroom along with those particular to NLG.¹⁴ Their proud claims were about savvy in Sheng, to be sure, but they were also about cosmopolitanism. Their access, prowess, and creativity in Sheng indexed access to a wider, more diverse world than their school-mates.

¹⁴ Elder students in the school scoffed at the claims of these Form 2 students when I asked about a few terms I hadn’t heard. They went as far as to cite the source of some words, the story of “*skish*” was particularly detailed. While the Form 2 girls claimed to have coined the term after “*deski*” (deskmate) had grown stale, the Form 4 girls told me that the term was “brought in” by a student from another school during an academic colloquium. For many Kisumu youth, knowing the origins of words was a sign of special proficiency.

Co-occurring signs

Ideologies about inclusion and exclusion or creativity and freedom tell us quite a bit about the qualities of Sheng and the relationships between Sheng and *youth* as a semiotic category. Interestingly, however, they speak little to its formal features or what “counts” as Sheng. Not surprisingly, metapragmatic awareness and reflexive commentary peaks with Sheng’s lexicon. Speakers rarely reference the use of the locative as copula or possessive (e.g., *ako* in place of *ni* or *ana*) or habitual –*ga* when describing the register. Words and their indexical loads are handy chunks of language that speakers can pull out and point out to chastise or praise. Shibboleths of Sheng—often neologisms—become metonymic of the entire style of speaking for many in which dynamism and novelty are pointed out as central qualities.

For many non-speakers, single words were not only a way of describing Sheng, they were also a way of identifying an utterance as Sheng. Teachers chastised students for speaking “Sheng” if they uttered a single *venye* in the midst of a Sanifu sentence. Just like a single lexical item in Sheng can infuse an entire sentence for its critics, so can a non-standard styles of spelling. Writing *ma3* (sometimes pronounced “*ma-three*”) meaning *matatu* in Sheng, plays off of the Swahili word *tatu* (Sw.: three) and colors essays, like those penned by journalism club students at LVB, as “Sheng” by teachers even if the remainder of the text is composed in common colloquial Swahili. Sheng speakers, however, are a bit more discerning. A popular column by Smitta Smitten in The Standard’s pop culture insert, *Pulse*, on Nairobi nightlife and celebrity culture is touted as the newspaper’s hip, Sheng language nod to the youth. Smitta regularly uses Swahili and Sheng terms, loan words from European languages, and an unusual non-standard orthography. He also has a penchant for a “-ski” suffix (see Meierkord 2011):

Excerpt 3.2: “All the Meat” by Smitta Smitten, July 15, 2011

Jennie, the hoot lasski behind the counter din't seem dithered by the Smittski askin' 4 brandy at noonski . “ Niko na homa ” I sed in a straight-up <i>uongo</i> . ¹⁵	Jenny, the hot [=attractive] lass behind the counter didn't seem bothered by Smitten asking for brandy at noon . “ I have a cold/fever ” I said in a straight-up <i>lie</i> .
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Elders and even the Standard newspaper saw this sort of text as Sheng, but LVB students viewed it differently. While they made no comment on Smitta's ability to speak Sheng (as a young Nairobiian rubbing shoulders with the hip hop and celebrity elite, it was assumed he did), they described his column not as Sheng, but as English with some Sheng mixed in. Being able to discern and indeed make judgments about Sheng, these young men positioned themselves as Sheng experts.

With any register, speakers have more refined criteria for judging its proper usage. For Sheng-speaking students at LVB and many other JoKisumu, these criteria extended into prosody and tone as well as other semiotic fields like sartorial choices and bodily comportment. I was told more than once that my own Sheng sounded strange because I didn't speak with the requisite “swag” or swagger. I never spoke loud enough and didn't quite master the punchy, heavy, final vowels of Sheng truncation in regular conversation. In addition to seeming like an ontological impossibility, speaking Sheng as a white woman also hilarious. I delivered an address at a Swahili Symposium at LVB for form four students from schools around the district and I dipped into Sheng to make a point about formal and informal registers, a theme in the *isimu jamii* (Sw.: sociolinguistics) syllabus they would be examined upon. The steady murmur of

¹⁵ This style is something Meierkord (2011) and Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) might refer to as “Engsh,” a variety associated with upper-class Nairobi youth. This is not a classificatory term any of my informants used, nor was it recognizable when I asked them about it. Samper (2002) also found this term out of use in the course of his dissertation research. In Samper's reporting, the style preferred by upper-class Nairobi youth was called *Sheng ya Mababi* (or Sheng of the “Babylonians” in contrast to *Sheng ya Maghetto* or “ghetto Sheng.”

conversation that underlay my address in Sanifu quieted and turned to giggles as I uttered the (admittedly nerdy) Sheng phrase, “*Eh! Huyu boi si mnoma, ngoma zake ziko down, bana*” (Sh.: hey, that guy is no good, his songs are uncool, man). It wasn’t simply the unexpected deployment of the register in that context that gave students pause (and a laugh), but also the incommensurability of a white person’s “twang” (white people of all origins are heard to speak with pronounced nasality) with the deep sounds of Sheng.¹⁶ Indeed, there are a few “rib cracking” internet videos of *wazungu* (Sw.: white people) speaking Sheng that have wide circulation in Kenya and deemed hilarious.¹⁷

When I mentioned that it was fine to use Sheng in our recorded interviews at LVB Paul laughed saying, “eh! If I use Sheng *utadai!*” “*Sitadai!*” I protested, “You will just sit there!” Even my Sheng response to Paul’s Sheng claim *utadai* (Sh.: you will die, i.e., it will be too much for you), *sitadai* (Sh.: I won’t die) was inadequate to overcome gender, race, and quite possibly status in the school. Even when using and understanding Sheng, for Paul I could not be a Sheng speaker.

Beyond its racial dimensions and the requisite prosodic swagger, Sheng becomes recognizable through behavioral “swagger” as well as through the bodily comportment and sartorial choices of presumed speakers (presumably another reason my Sheng was never quite right). In a “cross-modal iconism” (Agha 2006: 41), clothing choice, gait, and prosody are

¹⁶ “Twang” is the local term for nasalization. I discuss the incompatibility of Sheng and twang further below. White people’s nasal-speech is mocked in a skit by the comedy group Pengele. A group of bumpkins who meet a single white woman in the village hold their nose whilst talking with her, comically assuming that she would understand their plugged-nose Dholuo because it resembled her own nasal speech.

¹⁷See, for example:

https://www.msupa.com/345_HILLARIOUS:_WAZUNGU_BOYS_SPEAKING_IN_SHENG.#.VKGtTsAAc

The oddity and hilarity of white people speaking Sheng is similar to the perceived impossibility of white people speaking mother tongue, see Chapter 2.

treated as resembling one another through a shared quality of “swagger” for some and “rudeness” for others. Recall from the previous chapter that there is a rather nebulous space between Urban Swahili and Sheng and each register becomes recognizable across a range of semiotic cues. Fashion choices, especially jeans and branded t-shirts, were coupled with Sheng in the streets (or “outside” as many students called it), while in the boys’ school fashion swagger translated into breaking uniform rules by wearing non-uniform socks or ornately scrawling slogans on uniform blazers or shirttails. At the girls’ school, uniform regulations were much more tightly policed, but girls yearned for slimmer-fitting, shorter skirts that were a sign of modern feminine swagger. Bodily comportment was also important to the bundle of semiotic resources that made Sheng recognizable. When Jasmine, a student at NLG, demonstrated how “real” Sheng was spoken she stood slouched over with bent knees and deepened her voice. Other NLG students described Sheng speakers as bouncing when they walk. The slouching and bouncing are often associated in both high schools with rude boys, or *marui* (sing. *mrui*) in Sheng, the bad boy rule breakers. Musa, a LVB student, who was neither very fond of nor very skilled in Sheng admitted that sometimes you have to use the register so people think you are *mrui* and won’t try to take advantage of you. *Marui* could be thought of in similar terms to *manamba*, they are brash, loud, and of course often rude.¹⁸ Such nonlinguistic signs of Sheng—the deep voice and slouching body—highlight its strong gendered dimensions. The students’ typifications of Sheng speaker are masculine, even girls who speak it, NLG students explained, are tomboys.

¹⁸ While there are certainly girls who are thought of in somewhat similar terms to *marui*, the name itself is not used because it would imply moral corruption and promiscuity that female students were hesitant to levy at one another.

Gender

Sheng's close alignment with masculinity doesn't exclude women from speaking it, but it does complicate the ways they are able to deploy and openly take-up the register. Many speakers insisted there were varieties of Sheng appropriate (and indeed created) by women. High school boys talked about the secrets girls could keep in their own varieties of Sheng. They claimed ignorance of a variety of terms girls used for attractive men in a stance of self-exclusion; were they to know these terms they might be cast as *gofa* (a sheng dysphemism for homosexuals), such are the sticky social implications of Sheng shibboleths. For women, the implications for using Sheng were somewhat different. Even if there are "girl" varieties, Sheng's associations with masculinity required a sort of balancing act. Just enough Sheng, and a woman is aligned with *youth*, she is savvy, cosmopolitan, and aware. But too much familiarity with it—partly due to Sheng's robust vocabulary for sex acts and rather crass lexicon for genitalia—and she may be viewed by peers (male and female) as suspiciously familiar with sex and potentially immoral. However, claiming complete ignorance also has negative implications and young women could be seen by their peers as too innocent or protected. The balancing act of gendered language is much less about linguistic competence than about its display.

Oti bragged many times about how he and his collaborator Allan were able to speak such a "deep" variety of Sheng together could have a private conversation in of front women, even wife Charity, who was no Sheng slouch herself. I refused to believe his claim until an angry Allan stopped over to Oti's house one afternoon while I was there to talk with him about divvying up the proceeds from a Kwetu show. Charity and I sat only a few feet away. I struggled to understand the detail of the men's conversation (even though I regularly spoke Sheng with each of them). Charity didn't react to their conversation whatsoever even though she had a

significant stake in its outcome. While it is possible that she couldn't understand, it is equally possible that she could follow perfectly well, but knew not to let on. The fact is, variation within Sheng successfully produced social distinctions, an awareness of who is included and who is excluded. Either way, Charity knew that this information was not for her because it was not offered in a register she was authorized in.¹⁹

While *marui*, like *manamba*, are ideal typifications of Sheng speakers, most Sheng speakers I knew (men and women) rejected such classification for themselves. While certainly not rejecting the register, they sought to distance themselves from negative associations with the social types much as they did to distinguish the “deep” Nairobi Sheng of thieves from their own. For example, two students, Patience and Frederick, both took pains to explain to me that while they both loved speaking Sheng, they were good students, they might break rules now and again they weren't actually “rude.” With these types of claims, young JoKisumu complicate the image of a Sheng speaker—separating the ideal typical from their own lived reality—much in the way they do the image of *youth* in Kenya. They acknowledge a stereotype at the same time they distance themselves from it and insist on another, positively valued image. Patience, Frederick, and many like them take up Sheng but at the same time make explicit efforts to manage the stereotype associated with it. By insisting that they are unlike *marui* or *manamba* they reject negative qualities associated with those social types, with Sheng, and often with youth including rulelessness and questionable morality. The relationship between Sheng and a notion of *youth* in Kenya is complicated in part because of the reasons young people are thought to use the style—whether it is a choice or a limitation.

¹⁹ For a lengthier discussion of secrecy and proprietary knowledge in Kenya, see Brummel 2013.

Many of the young people I knew in Kisumu thought of Sheng as a language of privilege or status. Some described Sheng as a way of “showing off” that they knew many languages and weren’t restricted to a single code. For them, Sheng was a sign of creativity and linguistic virtuosity. In these sorts of descriptions, speakers distance themselves from the image of an uneducated slum dweller and position themselves as hypermobile polyglots. If Sheng operates as an indexical icon of *youth* in Kenya then from the vantage point of the young people I worked with in Kisumu, Sheng points to and resembles the creative modernity of *youth*—an iconism in marked contrast to a widespread negative valence of “the youth” as idle, destructive, and nameless.

Managing the residue of Sheng

The threat of Sheng’s negative indexical value leaking into carefully managed contexts including schools and religion produces circumstances in which language is policed in explicit ways. The LVB Junior Achievement club was working on a presentation for the district-wide competition when they got word that the LVB administration wanted them to change their name. Part lottery and part savings bank the students had named their company “LV *Masonko*” using a popular and commonly known Sheng term for rich people.²⁰ They loved the name, their faculty advisor liked it, and they felt it made a rather unexciting venture sound much cooler. Much to their disappointment, the administration deemed Sheng unfit for a representation of the school in a quasi-public setting, it gave the wrong impression. The students acquiesced, adopting the rather

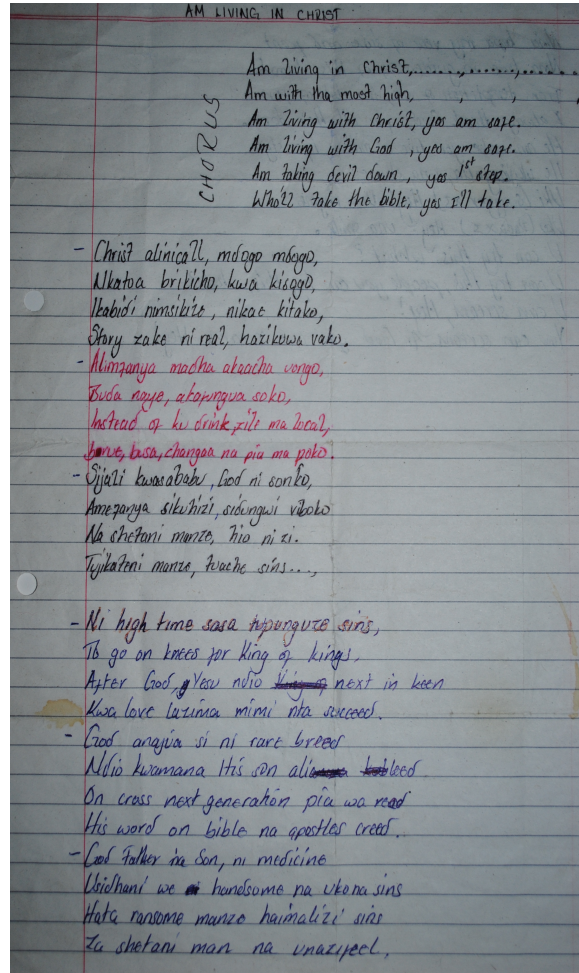
²⁰ MP Gidion Mbuvi is widely known as “Mike Sonko,” something that has made awareness of the Sheng term widespread. Sonko is known as such because of his flashy, youthful, style and penchant for wearing gold chains and sunglasses. In 2011, he was dismissed from Parliament for wearing his sunglasses and a pair of stud earrings. He defended himself claiming he was there to represent the youth.

mundane “LV Bank” in its stead. For the administration, the Sheng name not only seemed contextually inappropriate but it also tainted the project with a sense of immorality by bringing in a register associated with thieves and street culture. Might the judges (I was one) mistake a Sheng-named project for a scam, might they think it wasn’t serious enough?

The residue of Sheng’s origin and associations with street culture also creates a certain challenge for some of Sheng-speaking Christian hip hop artists in Kisumu who are concerned about the uptake of their lyrics. They worried that their messages would be dismissed or viewed as insincere when they rapped in Sheng. Omondi (aka Supa Crazy) told me that because he could “flow” in a similar style in both his Christian and secular rap, he knew there were many people who were suspicious of his faith and thought that he only rapped about the gospel because it was lucrative. Indeed, some girls at NLG warned me about such artists for precisely that reason. Max (aka RhymesMax) expressed a related concern when he pulled me aside on our walk toward a youth forum to hand me his handwritten lyrics to “Living in Christ” (see Plate 3.1). He wrote these lyrics in Sheng to prove to Christians that the gospel could be written in the language of *youth* and to prove to the youth that the gospel was relevant to them.²¹

²¹ Note the resonance here with missionary claims that the gospel should be delivered in local languages that are closer to “the heart” (See J and JL Comaroff 1991:213-128)

Plate 3.1: RhymesMax's lyrics, "Am Living in Christ"²²



²² Note: this text would be recognizable as Sheng in Kisumu and the textual distinctions between Sanifu Swahili, Sheng, and English represented here are intended to demonstrate the register's codeswitching characteristics to the non-speaker of Swahili. See Statement on Transcriptions and Conventions.

Plate 3.1 Continued:

<p>Am Living in Christ.... Am with the most high Am living with Christ, yes am safe Am living with God, yes am safe Am taking devil down, yes 1st step Who'll take the bible, yes, I'll take</p> <p>Christ alnicall, <i>mdogo mdogo</i> <i>N[i]katoa brikicho, kwa kisogo</i> <i>Ikabidi nimsikizo, nikaе kitako</i> Story <i>zake ni real, hazikua vako</i> <i>Alimfanya madha akaacha uongo</i> Buda <i>naye, akafungua soko</i> Instead of kudrink, <i>zile malocal</i> [borut?] <i>busa, chang'aa na pia poko</i> <i>Sijali kwasababu, God ni sonko</i> <i>Amejanya sikuhiizi sidungwi viboko</i> <i>Na shetani manze, hio ni zi</i> <i>Tujikateni manze, tuache sins</i></p> <p><i>Ni high time sasa tugunguze sins,</i> To go on knees for king of kings After God, <i>Yesu ndio</i> next in keen [kin] <i>Kwa love lazima mimi nita succeed.</i> God <i>anajua si ni</i> rare breed <i>Ndio [kwamana?] His son alibleed</i> On cross next generation wa read His word on bible na apostles creed God Father na Son ni medicine <i>Usidhani we handsome na uko na sins</i> <i>Hata ransome manze haimalizi sins</i> <i>La shetani man na unazifeel</i></p>	<p>Am Living in Christ.... Am with the most high Am living with Christ, yes am safe Am living with God, yes am safe Am taking devil down, yes 1st step Who'll take the bible, yes, I'll take</p> <p>Christ called me little by little <i>He played hide and seek in the back of [my]</i> mind <i>I had to listen to him, I had to sit down on my</i> <i>ass</i> <i>His story is real, it's not a lie</i> <i>He made a mother give up lies</i> Dude <i>with him, he opened the market</i> Instead of drinking that local brew [?], <i>millet beer, moonshine, and hookers</i> <i>I don't care why, God is rich</i> <i>What he's done these days, [I'm not</i> drinking?] <i>And the devil, damn, he is nothing</i> <i>We have given ourselves up, damn let's give</i> <i>up sin</i></p> <p><i>It's high time now {?} sins</i> To go on knees for king of kings After god, <i>Jesus is certainly</i> the next of kin <i>With love, I'll definitely succeed</i> God <i>knows [is not/is]</i> a rare breed Certainly, [?] His son bled On the cross, the next generation reads His word in the bible and the apostles creed God Father and Son are medicine <i>Don't think you are handsome and you are</i> with sins <i>Even [ransome?] damn, he's not done with sin</i> <i>No devil man [=give up the devil] and you feel</i> it</p>
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Although Omondi and Max both defended their use of Sheng in Christian music, they were still ambivalent about it. They both claimed to rap in a mixture of Swahili, English, and Sheng, which

they said would be more accessible and acceptable than “deep” Sheng. They also policed this boundary between acceptable and unacceptable Sheng words. When Max and Omondi were recording a new song with their collaborator Eko, they chastised him for using the Sheng term “*mabelieva*” (Sh.: believers), insisting that he use the Sanifu form “*waamini*” (Sw.: faithful). Eko’s Sanifu was sub-par and he asked to hear the word again, uncertain of it Omondi replied, “*Imani!* It’s faith, brother!” Omondi and Max sought to temper their embrace of Sheng lest they be taken as insincere Christians, as rappers just hoping to cash in on the gospel hip hop market. Max and Omondi’s insistence on “*waamini*,” an in-group term of self-identification for many born-again Christians, demonstrates to their listeners their awareness of appropriate and acceptable Christian language. It also marks the inverse of Max’s justification for Sheng use: incorporating Sanifu demonstrates to the conservative born-again Christian sympathy between *youth* and Christianity.²³

Sheng misfire

Even among Sheng speakers, there is tension over the register’s indexical value. Young men and women often talked with me about what languages were good for “seduction” with men claiming that Sheng or English were the most sexy (and successful) languages in courting women. Interestingly, the gendered assumptions about Sheng fell away in these discussions as young men assumed the female objects of their desire would understand them without trouble. For their part, few women mentioned the sexiness of Sheng and expected a man whose advances were worth listening to would make them in English demonstrating their educational (and

²³ See Chapter 5 for a deeper discussion of managing the potential incongruence between *youth* and Christianity.

hopefully financial) status.²⁴ This rift in the perceived acceptable languages for courtship became humorously clear in a scene that Fidel and Dona, two Masani Youth, shot for a short film. Their characters, a pair of college students, were sitting at a picnic table with Fidel’s character trying to play it cool while still expressing his interest in Dona’s character in basic Sheng. The Masani Youth never write scripts, preferring to simply plan out their films and encourage actors to “use their own words,” so this exchange was a hilarious surprise to everyone in the filming:

Excerpt 3.3

F: Hearti <i>yangu ni hearti yako</i>	<i>My heart is your heart</i>
D: I’m not getting you	I’m not getting you
F: Hearti <i>yangu ni hearti yako</i>	<i>My heart is your heart</i>
D: Maybe you can say it in English?	Maybe you can say it in English?
F: Cancel!	Cancel!

The disconnect between Fidel’s and Dona’s characters delighted the other Masani youth because Fidel’s earnest and sweet admission goes unheard by a slightly irritated Dona leading him to “cancel” the whole interaction (such is the uncertainty of gendered Sheng-awareness!). It’s unclear whether Dona’s repeated requests for clarification are due to referential failure—she just didn’t understand—or an insistence on English as a more appropriate code for such an interaction. For the Masani Youth, the quick exchange encapsulated a problem of cross-gender communication that they never tired of talking about and at the same time it exposed the vulnerability of a presumably tough Sheng-speaking man as his attempts at seduction prove to be misfire.

Some missteps, however, can have more explicit implications for the meaning and value of *youth* in Kenya and offer insight into the ways that that value is contested through language

²⁴ While the women at Masani Youth Center laughed at the idea of a man flirting in Dholuo (“there are too many words!”), they did mention that when a man says I love you in Dholuo (Dh.: *aheri*) “goes straight to your heart.”

use and metapragmatic discourse. In late 2011, Raphael Tuju announced his candidacy for Kenya's presidency in the usual fashion, with plenty of pomp at public rallies. Tuju was fairly well known across Kenya at the time, and many young JoKisumu, recognized him as an effective Member of Parliament (MP), citing the water and electricity projects he brought to his constituency in Rarieda. He was running on an anti-corruption, anti-tribalism platform and declared himself to be a member of "tribe Kenya" rather than a single ethnic group, something particularly poignant because of the ethnically-charged mass violence that followed the previous presidential election. Tuju positioned himself as a candidate for a new Kenya. Even though he was 52 years old at the time, Tuju was also running as a candidate of and for Kenyan "youth." He described himself as someone who understood the struggle of youth and had experienced many of the same challenges youth face today. In his efforts to perform *youth*, Tuju made an additional and rather unusual announcement of his candidacy in a video posted to YouTube.

In this video, Tuju stood before a plain pastel background wearing a partially unbuttoned oxford cloth shirt and an outdoorsy vest—a decidedly casual outfit for a man who normally wore dark suits and conservative ties—in an attempt to look relaxed and cool for his audience. The brief video (a little over a minute long) was directed at the youth in its theme and in its linguistic style. He addressed the camera face on and spoke in Sheng. Introducing himself as "Rapho" (which some heard as "Rav4," the light Toyota SUV), Tuju explained to his viewers that he knew the feeling of going to bed hungry, the struggle of trying to start a small business, and having to rely on others when you are broke. He wanted to work for the youth and work against corruption in the government. This video was met with a cascade of comments, and while some of them applauded Tuju's announcement and pledged their votes to him, most of them were

critical. He was criticized less for his political stance than he was for a bad haircut and uncool clothes. But most of all he was pilloried for his language use.



Plate 3.2: Left, Tuju’s uncool attempt at *youthy* style (from Sheng language video). Right, Tuju’s standard appearance (from English language video).

The Masani Youth, many of whom were initially supporters of Tuju as a youth leader and a Luo, were put off by his Sheng message and ultimately sided against him. Indeed, Tuju’s motorcade was stoned as it passed through Kondele, a booming area on the edge of Kisumu Town.²⁵ The online commentary about Tuju’s Sheng message is particularly insightful in understanding the conflicts over associations between *youth* and Sheng. One of these commenters on Tuju’s video put this reaction and the wider national response succinctly, “*hii*

²⁵ The widespread rejection of Tuju in Kisumu was certainly about much more than his use of Sheng but it was very firmly grounded in his positioning as a youth. Had he continued his campaign, it was feared that Tuju would draw Luo votes away from Raila Odinga, the most prominent Luo politician in the country and son of former Vice President, Oginga Odinga. Often called “*Baba*” (Sw./Dh.: father) or “*Jakom*” (Dh.: chairman), Raila is widely understood to be Luo people’s political leader and has been at the fore in national politics since his opposition to the Moi dictatorship. Having officially lost the 2007 election (many say it was stolen from him), and serving as Prime Minister, many Luos asserted that 2012 was Raila’s time to claim victory. For many elder JoKisumu, Tuju was usurping Raila, not waiting until his elder had the chance to rule. Young JoKisumu rarely made this critique, instead they were suspicious of him because he apparently colluded with the (winning) Kibaki campaign in 2007 and was rewarded with ministerial appointments. He was seen by many as a traitor and untrustworthy.

message ni fail” (Sw./Eng.: This message is a fail). For many, Tuju misunderstood *youth* much the way elders and politicians often do: as a time of liminality or being “stuck,” as a marginal status rather than a stance of radical potential and creativity.

To many viewers, Tuju’s claim to youth through linguistic style was clumsy, he used outdated slang terms, he was a poseur. But for others, Tuju’s apparent assumptions about youths’ linguistic proficiency were more damning; he seemed to think that young people used the style because they had no choice. To these viewers, Tuju’s language choice was an indicator of how he viewed Kenyan youth. He appeared to believe that youth must be addressed in Sheng because they did not have access to the appropriate and effective languages for formal public address in Kenya, English or Swahili. In a sense, the message these viewers heard was that youth are “stuck” in Sheng.

Recall that in the view of many elders like Mama Jos, Sheng is a restricting language, one that prevents its speakers from communicating outside of their own social spheres and beyond urban Kenya. Again, youth are “stuck” in Sheng. Note, however, how this sense of immobility is in radical opposition to an ideology of Sheng held by some youth that it is actually an index of hypermobility because it is a sign of linguistic virtuosity—they speak many languages.

This sense of immobility or “stuckness” resonates with widely held conceptions about *youth* in Kenya. Youth, recall, is understood by many Kenyans as a stage of low status or marginality, something to be passed out of as expediently as possible. It is also often seen as a stage that many get “stuck” in, unable to find work or other sources of income that could lead to stability, independence, marriage, and children, that is progression into adulthood. These competing notions of the value of *youth* are precisely what is at issue for Tuju’s critics.

Excerpts 3.4-3.6:

(3.4) Rapho! I want to give you some free piece of advise. When you address youth in sheng they will take you as a joker. Try to address them in a language they aspire to achieve, not what they already have [...]

(3.5) Sincerely Tuju, this is crap. If this is what you think about the youth, am sorry most will not agree with you. Your sheng is so poor. Am certain it was written for you [...] This is the biggest insult to the youth of this country [...]

(3.6) So are you are saying Kenyan youth are very simple minded, that they can not be addressed the way he addressed other Kenyans I.e. In English or Kiswahili? [...]

These viewers read Tuju's Sheng usage as ill-conceived and insulting because it meant that they were simple minded or incapable of using languages more associated with education and the upper-classes.

Note also that these critiques were levied in English, demonstrating their authors' abilities in the "appropriate" language of Kenyan political discourse, something particularly poignant because the message also seemed to imply that the youth were unaware (or incapable of abiding) communicative norms in Kenya. Tuju's announcement in Sheng was contextually incongruent, flouting the common sense rules of language use in the Kenyan public sphere. Standard varieties of both English and Swahili (Kenya's two official languages) are markers of formal and serious situations. Their use reflects back on speakers as espousing those very same qualities. While it is widely recognized that these two languages are inappropriate for informal and friendly communication (where one might speak Sheng, Colloquial or Urban Swahili, or a local ethnic language) English and Swahili are unquestionably *de rigueur* codes for public and political announcements.

In addition to the critique of the propriety of using Sheng for a formal political announcement, viewers mocked Tuju for his clumsy and "plastic" Sheng. To them it seemed like

pandering and it was inauthentic—inauthenticity is a quality many commenters viewed as antithetical to Sheng and the notion of *youth* that they associated with. He was called “fake” because of his perceived inability to express himself smoothly and easily in Sheng. Part of this inauthenticity is pinned on his age—as a man of 52 he couldn’t be chrono-biologically “youth” and thus not authorized to use Sheng. One commenter wrote:

Excerpt 3.7:

[...] Tuju, you should realise that sheng is a means of communication that the youth address themselves as young people. It feels creepy seeing someone who could be my father talking sheng [...]

Tuju is exposed as out-group and not authorized in his use of the semiotic resource. He illegitimately deploys the style and does so in a way that inspired many to reference scriptwriters and teleprompters. The combination of Tuju’s unauthorized and scripted usage conflicts with Sheng’s perceived “naturalness.” This sense of naturalness is cited often among speakers, it is a quality contrasted with the perceived restriction of Kenya’s official languages, English and Swahili—a contrast between seemingly ungoverned speech and policed standard languages. Speakers often report that Sheng doesn’t have rules, it is a language you can be “free” in.

Another comment exposes Tuju’s “real” identity, that of an upper-class English speaker. This commenter uses Sheng himself with a couple of key shibboleths and Sheng’s characteristically playful orthography. The comment positions its writer as an authority on the style by deploying it “properly” and expressly identifies Tuju as “other.”

Excerpt 3.8:

<p><i>ciriasly??</i> manze minakujua wee nimsee wa ngoso kila matym,,tangu wen sheng imekuingia</p>	<p>seriously? damn, I know that you are an English [=white/European] guy every time, since when did Sheng get into you</p>
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The final comment I will discuss explicitly remarks on Tuju’s accent. Recall that Sheng must be spoken with “swag” (or swagger) with its loudness and elongated heavy vowels. What Sheng doesn’t have is “twang” that descriptor of the perceived nasal pronunciation of English (particularly by white speakers). This comment does much what the previous example did—identify Tuju as “actually” an English speaker—but in a more subtle way:

Excerpt 3.9:

Hahaha <i>ati</i> Sheng this is more like shweng... <i>sheng ya ku tweng</i> he is shwenging	ha ha ha <i>what</i> Sheng this is more like shweng... twanging sheng he is shwenging
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Tuju’s twang then not only separates him from the “real” and “authentic” Sheng speakers—those who speak with swag—it also subtly aligns him with erudite foreignness that is distant from the Sheng-speaking youth in urban Kenya.

These comments question Tuju’s authenticity, exposing him as incapable of legitimately inhabiting an urban youth identity as evidenced by his linguistic practice. Unable to convincingly mobilize this iconic linguistic style, his status is called into question and the message of his entire video is lost. How can he be believed as a voice of and for the youth if he doesn’t have a *youthy* voice?

Conclusion

My goal in this chapter has been to offer a brief description of Sheng as a common register in use in urban Kisumu and one deeply associated with notions of *youth* across the country. Folk descriptions of the register’s origin play an important role in the tensions that emerge over the indexical value of Sheng. Its proponents acknowledge Sheng’s emergence in Nairobi slums and *matatus* they also work to distance its contemporary use from such social

fields, representing it as a reflection of the creative and linguistically savvy youth culture and a local iteration of global hip hop style (see Alim 2009). Sheng's detractors, however, see the origin stories as evidence of the register's corrupting influence and evaluate its speakers as immoral, corrupt, and a social threat. A palpable tension emerges here around the notion of "corruption," that key contrastive set to the revalued notion of *youth* with which my young interlocutors identify. Many elders and prescriptivists decry Sheng for its purported corruption of the Swahili language, the minds of its users (who are "unable" to distinguish among languages), and the activities they associated with the code (thievery and thuggery, for example). By contrast, many youth take the register to be a sign of modernity and a style of speech that is authentically Kenyan. For them it is a code that avoids and transcends the tribalist corruption of the old ways. The conflicting stances on qualities associated with Sheng are not limited to evaluations of language, but extend to evaluations of its speakers.

When Melvin said that even teachers these days are "going Sheng" it was most certainly not an observation that his teachers were being corrupted by language and *youth* style. Instead, "going Sheng" meant aligning with a notion of *youth* in Kenya and taking the style, ethics, and stances of it. However, as I've tried to demonstrate, the sociolinguistic dialectics in play makes this assertion of what Sheng is (and what *youth* is) far from straightforward. The associations with thuggery, slum life, and immoral living are not easily cast off, they form a lingering taint that speakers regularly work against (and sometimes acquiesce to) in their efforts to reform the valence of *youth* in contemporary Kenya. The young people I work with take pains to promote an image of Sheng as cosmopolitan, vibrant, vigorous, modern, and "up;" they were largely (although not uniformly) working against the lazy, idle, dangerous, "stuck" evaluation of the

language. Within this contrast of the qualities of a linguistic register, the debates about the meaning and value of *youth* not only become more visible, but more speakable for JoKisumu.

Language ideology is such a useful analytic because speaking about language is always about much more than language itself and the complicated sets of folk descriptions of Sheng and claims about its origin and use demonstrate a key ambivalence in the reformulation of *youth*.

While many young JoKisumu proudly deploy the register (and *youth* itself) there is a degree of hesitation, a desire to assert that they are not “stuck” in Sheng, or indeed in *youth*. Sheng, like *youth*, is a choice. As with any ideology of language, however, the ideologies of Sheng that I present here emerge from particular positionalities and perspectives. Recall that all of the young JoKisumu I worked with had at least some experience with formal education, and most of them had completed or nearly completed secondary school. For them, Sheng was one of many registers in their linguistic repertoire, a sign of virtuosity rather than restriction, and their stance is grounded in an understanding of Sheng as a linguistic choice rather than a linguistic sentence.

In the following chapter I shift from a consideration of linguistic registers themselves to the ways youth styles are deployed in locally salient speech genres. Mobilizing highly recognizable genres like that of Christian salvation narratives allows youth to position themselves as moral subjects without abandoning the styles associated with youth.

PART II

INTRODUCTION

The first part of the dissertation deals with the notion of youth language as denotational code. I have demonstrated that the use, avoidance, and ideological commentary surrounding language-in-use in a formal sense offers important insight into the ways youth and its stereotypes are imagined, deployed, and contested in Kenya. Urban Kenyans reference both linguistic cosmopolitanism and corruption, they voice concerns about young people's incompetence in "pure" languages and applaud their virtuosity with a variety of languages. These commentaries, I have suggested, are about much more than language, but about the meaning and quality of *youth* itself.

In the second half of the dissertation I effectively shift scales. I examine the ways *youth* is produced and contested on a discursive level by analyzing the voices and logics that young people powerfully invoke interpersonally, institutionally, and textually. I explore speech genres and textual forms that invoke transnational discourses from Pentecostalism to entrepreneurialism and demonstrate how young people invoke generic styles to make claims to opportunities like long-term careers and statuses like born again Christian. These discursive moves on the part of young people align *youth* with logics of rights, vocation, and sincerity. Such discourses taken up locally as distinctly modern and indeed, *youthy*.

CHAPTER 4

TALKING FUTURES: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE AND THE LOGIC OF TALENT

I sat on a wooden bench on the upper level of the hall at Nam Lolwe Girls' High School with a group of form three students during the school's weekly "Guidance and Counseling" sessions after classes were done for the day. The topic was self-esteem, a theme that the sessions revisited regularly from different angles. The girls I sat with were bored, one leaned on my shoulder hoping to drop off to sleep in the midst of the assembly. Mr. Sadiku, the popular young Islamic studies teacher and field hockey coach, stood up to offer apologies for a delay starting and opened with a prayer. Introducing the guest speakers and theme, Mr. Sadiku reminded the girls, "everyone in this world was created with talent."

This was nothing new to the students for whom talent was a given. For young JoKisumu, there was never a question of being talented or untalented but instead identifying what one's talent was. Indeed, it was part of identifying oneself. In youth-focused formal and quasi-formal contexts like forums or interschool symposia, one's talent was often part of introductions following a basic formula, "my name is X and my talent is Y." Talents could be wide ranging, from skill in math to dancing prowess. Participating in many of these events, I also had to identify my own talent—my early responses, that I didn't have a specific talent, were unacceptable. I settled, somewhat strategically, on being talented at "listening to people," a perfectly acceptable and sometimes praised answer.

Talents are gifts, everyone has them and they are to be invested in or cultivated. From the biblical Parable of the Talents, this concept of talent holds that one should seek out one's talent

and work to develop it as gratitude for the gift from the divine.¹ Among many Kenyan youth, discovering and cultivating one's talent is deeply tied to the Protestant notion of vocation or calling. Following a talent is fundamentally an ethical pursuit (see Weber 2003 [1958]).

However, as I elaborate below, following a talent and realizing its potential can present profound challenges in a place like Kenya where talk of success is widespread, but its actualization is hard won.

Indeed, the future and its realization is the ground of a central dilemma for young people across Kenya. With a finicky and profoundly constricted labor market, finding work and forging a future under an ideology of talents and a logic of vocations means facing impossibility. There are only so many operating theaters for doctors to fill or catwalks for models to strut in Kenya and the odds are stacked against the poorly connected, low-income people I worked with.² In response, some young people reconsider their aspirations, looking toward relatively new markets and seeking work with NGOs and international aid agencies, contemporary arts, or tourism. Even when they recalibrate their own career aspirations to fit a contemporary market, young people still invoke logics of talent and vocation to make claims to futures. Under these logics, it is not just they desire jobs and careers, but also that God wish it so and created the possibility by endowing talent. Such careers are then framed by youth as divinely ordained.

¹ Found in Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27, the parable of the talents is the story of three servants who were given money, or talents, by their master before he left on an extended journey. Upon his return, the master asked each servant what he had done with the money. The first servant invested the money and doubled it. The second also invested his somewhat smaller sum, but also doubled the master's money. The final servant, who was given very little, buried the money for safe keeping. The master praised the first two servants for making something with what he had given them. He lambasted the final servant for doing nothing with the money, took the pittance away from him and sent him packing.

² Thank you to Alex Perullo for an informative and fascinating discussion about the recent rise of fashion modeling in East Africa. See Perullo (2014).

In this chapter I focus on future-oriented autobiographical narratives, a speech genre that proliferates in schools, churches, and youth centers across Kenya. I argue that in these narratives young people link their pasts to the present with an underlying logic of talents or essences that appear naturally connected to the career path they desire. Forging these past-present connections makes a future—a career, a vocation—appear a foregone conclusion. They, in effect, appear destined for such work.

In addition to being frames through which identities emerge, these stories are justifications for career choices that are particularly *youthy*, they are generally newer markets or jobs that, in youth people's eyes, require a modernity, cosmopolitanism, and sincerity young JoKisumu assert as fundamental features of *youth*. The logic of vocation is not only deeply informed by Protestant discourses, it is also buttressed by neoliberal notions of entrepreneurialism and self-investment. Together these discourses make up the ether in which a *youthy* struggle for recognition takes place.

Producing coherence

Narratives are more than the construction, retelling, and evaluation of past events. They produce the present and the future as much as they are produced by it (D. Carr 1986). When narrators tell stories, they draw links between the past events (narrated event, E^n) and the present (event of speaking, E^s) and they also establish relationships between characters or people in the narrative (P^n) and participants in the event of speaking (P^s) (Jakobson 1971). That is, narratives, whether implicitly or explicitly, establish relationships between their tellers and those they are told about. These relationships are ideological—grounded in narrators' intentions, evaluations, and interpretations of the past, present, and the future. Autobiographical narratives are no

exception. What makes them unique is that a relationship between the speaker and at least one of the characters is ostensibly one of identity. Two people (P^n and P^s) are “the same.”

Rather than strict identity (in the sense of identicalness), however, the relationship between P^n and P^s is more complex. Rarely asserting complete sameness, autobiographical narratives establish relationships between the former self and the speaking self in terms of things like trajectory, rupture, growth, or essence. These might be stories of realizing a skill in childhood or stories about a life-changing (and self-changing) event.

As narrators construct and perform narratives of their pasts they can also actively enact social qualities, presenting themselves as particular types of people to their interlocutors in the event of speaking (Wortham 2001, 2003). This sort of dynamic figuration often happens through non-referential features of the telling. Features like intonation, repetition, and metricalization can be used to draw the narrator (P^s) and character (P^n) into alignment and make narrative arguments for an essential character, talent, or trait of the narrator. For example, in a narrative presented below, Diana voices her younger self with an authoritative tone and register as a way of evidencing an already present empowered woman in the body of a frightened young girl.

Whether about coherence—a consistency in the self across time—or about radical change, the relationship between P^n and P^s , a past-oriented one, tells the listener something about the narrator in present and potentially the future.³ This is to say, these narratively configured

³ For example conversion narratives, as discussed in the following chapter, focus on a rift or rupture between a sinful past and a “saved” present (see also Brummel 2014). These stories rely on a contrast on between an earlier self and the self of the here-and-now event of speaking. Similarly, Carr has shown how in the US, addicts in recovery learn to tell narratives that contrast the addicted (former) self to the narrator in the present who then becomes recognizable to their interlocutors as self-aware and reliably sober (E.S. Carr 2011).

cross-temporal self relationships are intended to guide the listener's interpretation of the story, as well as of its teller across time.

An approach to the ideological narrative construction of the self is bound up with addressivity (Bahktin 1985), it takes into account the speaker's assumptions about and attempts at managing uptake by a listener and is less concerned with a phenomenological argument about the experience of the self through its narrativization than with the social effects of the telling that emerge in interaction. In particular, this approach is concerned with the role of autobiographical narrative in processes of recognition (Ricoeur 2005) and identification along with the claims to futures that can be made in these narratives. Each of the stories I analyze here was told to me, a young(ish) white woman. As discussed in the Introduction of the dissertation, the uptake of me and my social position changed throughout the course of my fieldwork. These narratives were all elicited at a point in time when I was seen much more as a researcher and quasi-youth than an NGO-worker with cash and opportunity at the ready. However, there were certainly different ends to each of these stories. While the narrators of each of these stories told similar tales elsewhere and to different audiences, these stories were told for me and with me. My own co-authorship (Ochs and Capps 2001) is visible in the transcripts (see Appendices A-C) and addressed in analyses. It certainly informed narrative turns, I make no claims otherwise. What I do suggest, however, is that the narrative form—the genre—and the logic that underpins it were neither purely for my benefit nor necessarily products of my participant role. Indeed, they were features of autobiographical narratives that I encountered (without being the primary audience) throughout fieldwork.

Narrative dialogism—the intention-laden interactional nature of narrative—is not restricted to the two co-present interactants, as a narrative is told many other voices enter into the

narrative. Some voices enter through reported speech. Quotatives (direct reported speech), indirect reported speech, and even indirect free style feature in narrative, giving the narrator opportunity to comment upon them within the narrative frame. Other voices exist only in the mind of the narrator, voices of the past and of the future echo with provocations, disagreements, and evaluations. They become audible only through the narrator's utterance, with its traces of never-ending Bakhtinian dialogism. In Eunice's case (see below), she grapples with the voices in her past that told her dancing was immoral or sinful and her responses to them emerge in the present telling of her own story of becoming an artist.

In the autobiographical narratives I analyze here, narrators work to establish coherence between the earlier selves about whom they tell stories and the here-and-now selves who do the telling. Constructing a sense of coherence between the selves in the past and present encourages listeners to recognize the narrator as always-already a particular type of person.⁴ Many of the young people I worked with in Kenya engaged this technique. Secondary school students, for example, would tell me stories from their early childhood as justifications for their desires to be doctors or scientists. The stories that post-secondary youth would tell me about careers (and they would often use this English term) were often about in a realization of talent in the past. They told stories about the past to make their present claims to a particular career (or market) appear incontrovertible. As they tell the stories, the narrators I discuss here are arguing that they are "meant to be" dancers, motivational speakers, or counselors.

Young people place value in following a career trajectory dictated by talent. Indeed, to do so is both to fulfill God's will and to embody *youthy* qualities, including notions of talent,

⁴ See Bourdieu 1987 for a cautioning against taking what he calls the "biographical illusion" seriously as analysts. My project is, of course, not to take the illusion seriously, but instead analyze the construction of that illusion.

struggle, and importantly, sincerity. Within a logic of the calling, vocation, and talent the pursuit of these careers is an ethical requirement.

(Im)possibilities, talent, and self-responsibility

The unemployment rate in Kenya hovers around 40% and is estimated to be upwards of 80% for youth in the country. Secondary school certificates that once propelled their holders into relatively decent clerical work now afford graduates little opportunity without further training (Sandgren 2012). The Ministry of Youth Affairs actively dissuades young people from relying on the state for work or resources, instead promoting petty entrepreneurialism, offering small loans to youth, and sponsoring programs devoted to the business aspects of careers in the arts or sport. While high school career counselors openly encourage students to pursue nameable career paths (e.g., engineering, medicine, education), most teachers talk informally about the implausibility and unsustainability of such work. They cite their own circumstances as evidence; many teachers find themselves needing to take on additional work or run small businesses on the side.

After secondary school, young people talk about future careers in the past tense: I wanted to be a lawyer, a doctor, a pilot. This post-secondary space is a space of *youth*, one in which talk of struggle to find work or opportunity melds with talk of talent and potential. After secondary school, imagination of formal careers fade, sometimes bitterly, and young people's musing about the future takes vocational turn and an entrepreneurial tone. After secondary school, as many young people themselves begin to dismiss white collar work as both impossible and undesirable, space opens up to consider other ways to make money. Deeply influenced by the inescapable entrepreneurial talk, most contemplate plans for micro-enterprises like selling juice, installing

pirated software on computers, or selling second hand clothes door-to-door.⁵ Some of the secondary school graduates I worked with (the majority of whom had neither the money nor the exam scores to attend university) found themselves scrambling to gather enough cash to pay the fees for tertiary training programs ranging from basic computer literacy and business management to guidance and counseling. These programs were understood to be necessary if one had any hope of regular, formal employment without a university degree. In reality, tertiary training resulted, at best, with temporary contract work with one of the hundreds of active NGOs in Kisumu. Other young people took part in the steady stream of non-profit youth forums to make a little money to help out their parents or cobble together rent. Nearly all of them would, from time to time, sit around living rooms and youth centers brainstorming business ideas that rarely came to fruition or talking about what they should be (or should have been).

Self-responsibility

This entrepreneurial talk is hardly surprising considering the discursive environments in which they came of age. Founded with the call for “*harambee*,” often glossed as community self-help, the state in Kenya has a long history of shunting the responsibility for work and welfare onto the backs of its citizens (Branch 2011, Hornsby 2012, Sandgren 2012). As elaborated in the Introduction, the young people I worked with in Kisumu, were born in the 1980s and 1990s and were raised in the midst of the Moi era with its structural adjustments and neoliberal economic

⁵ One of my closest friends, Oti, always told me that the last thing he wanted to do was own a small-business. One of the few people to critique the entrepreneurial discourse, I was quite surprised, and he was somewhat embarrassed to admit that he had secured a market stall to sell cushions that he and his wife would make. Interestingly, Oti never considered the dance company he founded (and made a small amount of money through) to be a business or, as they are often referred to in Kenya, SME (small and medium enterprises).

reforms.⁶ Discourses of privatization and responsabilization and the logics of entrepreneurship of the self were very natural to them.⁷

These types of neoliberal discourses sit neatly alongside the theologies of prosperity gospel Protestantism. While prosperity gospel discourse figures individual personal responsibility somewhat differently—as faith based and a moral imperative—they resonate in powerful ways making the ideology almost inescapable for young JoKisumu. It should come as little surprise that entrepreneurialism of the self and the presentation of the self as a bundle of skills and abilities appear regularly in young people’s narratives (see Urciuoli 2008). Even stories of resignation—normally tales of corruption dashing dreams—evoke these discourses. Hard work, dedication, and self-investment are no match for the old ways, the status quo where nepotism, tribalism, and sexual favors are paths to success. It should be apparent that through shared contrasts with notions of corruption make self-responsibility and entrepreneurialism appear *youthy* as much as they are directed at “the youth.”

Talent and entrepreneurialism

For young JoKisumu, talent is deeply grounded in the Christian notion of gifts endowed by God, but that is certainly not the only discursive space in which it is a central factor in forging futures. Indeed, talent has become a central focus of youth programs across Kenya in recent years and artists and athletes have been re-cast as entrepreneurs of their own talent. The British Council established a “Creative Enterprise” program in 2007, aiming to teach young artists business skills and the Kenyan government established the National Youth Talent Academy

⁶ See Horsnby 2012 for a detailed discussion of such reform.

⁷ While many youth argued that the state should take responsibility for the well-being of its citizens, they also cite the impossibility of a true welfare state in Kenya because of rampant corruption.

(NYTA) in 2010 with the similar aims. Participants at NYTA walked around with the Swahili and English code-mixed slogan “Talent *Yangu ni Maisha Yangu*” emblazoned on their t-shirts, “My talent is my life.” Televised talent competition programs like *Tusker Project Fame* for singing and *Sakata* for dancing are hugely popular in the country.⁸ Thus, for young people in Kenya, talent not only offers a sign of vocation, but also a distinctly “modern” path toward future success. Contrasted with the old style—following parents’ wishes, aspiring to high status white collar professions—cultivating talent, a gift from God, is a “modern” or *youthy* way to build a future.

What might seem most unusual about the talent-grounded vocations that are the focus of the narratives I present here are the markets they seek to engage: guidance and counseling, motivational speaking, and contemporary dance, which are all relatively new markets in Kenya. Successes and futures can exist only within a sphere of imagined possibilities and I suggest that the possibilities these youth imagine for themselves say something deeply important about the way they view Kenyan society, as something that requires therapy, inspiration, and critique.

Youth narratives

I turn now to three autobiographical narratives about experiences in which youth discovered their talents. Each of these stories ends up being a sort of argument for its teller’s vocational pursuits. I offer analyses that highlight different techniques their tellers engage to produce a sense of coherence in the self across time along with a sense of self-evidence in their claims to career paths.

⁸ In these programs, contestants demonstrate their skills and talents before judges with the hopes of winning fame and middling fortune, much like *The X Factor* and *America’s Got Talent* on American television.

In the first narrative my analysis attends to character development in two ways: first through characterological contrast and second through voicing. Diana, the narrator, presents herself as a naturally talented and attune counselor by telling the story of the surprising prescience of her younger self facing off against a predatory older man. Diana draws stark contrasts between characters and makes prosodic shifts as she voices her younger self to enact a remarkably bold little girl. The story legitimizes Diana's desire to be a youth and community counselor by presenting her as naturally talented in dealing with threatening situations; her formal training is bolstered by personal experience.

In the second autobiographical narrative, Joshua tells a story about motivating a houseboy to pursue a better life for himself. As he tells the story, Joshua claims to a natural talent for inspiring youth to self-improvement. My analysis of this story focuses on double voicing, quotative reported speech, and Joshua's deployment of a clearly recognizable register of Christian motivational speaking. I focus on direct reported speech in the narrative to highlight how Joshua shows his dexterity with the register in the act of narrating at the same time he tells the story of his effectual motivational speaking.

The final autobiographical narrative is Eunice's in which she discloses to her mother that she wants to pursue dance as a career. Poetics, metapragmatics, and the very artful layering of events are central to my analysis of this narrative in which Eunice's claimed career appears divinely predetermined.

Diana, the counselor

Discourses of talk therapy and counseling have become increasingly common throughout Kenya in recent years as part of wider efforts for sustainable and community-led development

projects that focus on women and children as key sites of intervention. Young people encounter these discourses in schools, through youth organizations, and in the HIV/AIDS voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) centers that pepper Kenya's urban landscape. In 2010 secondary school "prefects" were renamed "counselors" to reflect the state-mandated shift in their role from disciplinarians to peer advisors. In addition to career counseling, many secondary schools also house "guidance and counseling" departments and "peer counseling" programs. These programs focus on advising students on the same topics *ad nauseum*: self-esteem, choosing friends wisely, "boy-girl relationships," peer pressure, the dangers of drug abuse or the internet, and general "behavior change." Outside of schools, many locally-based NGOs, churches and youth organizations feature some aspect or another of individual and group counseling. The prevalence of such programs rests on the presumption of dysfunction within targeted groups, often the youth, women, or the ever-vague "community" that have distinctly colonial undertones.

The visibility of counseling and its association with NGOs and other Western agencies has given the career a certain caché among young JoKisumu. Advertisements for post-secondary (non-university) certificate courses in "Counseling," "Community Development," and "Social Work" are wheat pasted on walls and fill notice boards around Kisumu. These schools and training institutes are doing brisk business. In a very real way, the predominance of such tertiary training programs contribute to the imaginary of a market for their graduates. Many assume that there wouldn't be so many programs unless there were a real need for counselors in the community.

This notion of personal counseling is creeping into wider discourses in urban Kenya, often coming into conflict with older notions of secrecy and discretion in coping with inter and intrapersonal conflict. Masani Youth, for example, considered the possibility of nominating a

counselor with the justification by the leader of the group, “*Tuko* youth, and sometimes we don’t understand each other *vizuri*.” (Sw./Eng.: We are youth and sometimes we don’t understand one another well.) Diana was the nominee for this post.

Diana, who we first met in the Introduction of the dissertation, is a 23-year-old mother who holds a certificate in “Community Development” from a local tertiary training institution. She is also member of the Masani Youth group and was sponsored by the group’s patron (an American psychotherapist) to continue in her studies. Diana took two further courses, one in general counseling and one in VCT-specific counseling. Formally unemployed, Diana asserts herself in youth meetings and with local women (her elders) as a resource to talk through their problems with or someone from whom to get “modern” child rearing advice. Her resources are rarely, if ever, taken up and Diana expends extraordinary effort detailing her authority and legitimacy as a counselor to her peers and women in the local community. Diana grounds her counseling expertise in two ways: through her formal training (and the certificates garnered from it) as well as through personal experience and natural proclivity. In counseling and NGO spheres in Kenya personal experience is a highly valued form of knowledge and didactic testimonials of that experience are common. Thus, one of the primary ways Diana makes herself visible and recognizable as a counselor both in the job market and with her local potential clients is to paint herself as someone who has struggled through life and has ultimately survived due largely to her inborn savvy. She presents herself as one who has a talent for knowing how to cope with difficult situations ethically and bravely even from a young age.

Diana’s narrative (see Appendix A for full narrative) is one I have heard her tell on many occasions. It’s used as a cautionary tale for her juniors warning them of the challenges of youth and also as a means of validating her authority to offer advice. I have also heard her tell it to

visiting American donors demonstrating her awareness of social issues like early marriage and her shrewdness in dealing with such issues. In each telling, the story was strikingly similar, although not rehearsed sounding. A few days after I heard her relay the tale to her younger brother-in-law who had recently moved to Kisumu from a rural area, I asked Diana if she would tell the story to me so I could record it. By this time in my fieldwork, Diana knew me well as a researcher interested in youth and language and was accustomed to my regular requests to record. There had also been recent discord among members of Masani Youth as well as with their American patron. Many members, Diana included, voiced their complaints about the group and their insistence of their own innocence in conflict and indispensability to the group to me. I understood these complaints and defenses in two ways: a) as requests mediate the conflict and b) as messages intended for the group's patron. Many Masani members thought the patron and I were in regular contact because were both American and knew one another through time spent in Kenya.⁹ In this frame, Diana's narrative was not just kindly providing me with a story, but a justification of her training as a counselor sponsored by Masani's patron through a logic of talent.

In her story a young, orphaned Diana is searching for school fees to enter her second year of secondary school. Her paternal uncle, who should be responsible for her care after her parents' deaths, is unwilling to pay for her. Instead, he calls her to travel to Nakuru (about a 4 hour bus ride from Kisumu) to be interviewed by a doctor who was reportedly willing to pay fees at a school for needy orphans. Diana goes to Nakuru with all the requisite paperwork—including her parents' death certificates and her exam scores—thinking she would meet a benevolent doctor

⁹ Masani's patron and I did know one another, having met 12 years prior to my fieldwork on a study abroad program in Kenya. We communicated rarely when she was not in Kenya but did socialize when she was in town. When Masani Youth began to disintegrate, something I will discuss in greater depth in the conclusion, she and I were in regular contact.

and be offered a space at the orphans' school. As it turns out, the doctor is a predator who wants to coax young Diana into marrying him (or at least granting him sexual favors) in return for his generosity. In his closed office the doctor advances on her but Diana refuses his advances firmly announcing she will embarrass him by screaming. She wrests herself free from the doctor and runs away from his office, escaping back to her uncle's house and announcing she will be returning to Kisumu without relaying anything that transpired.

In the following, I focus on three aspects of Diana's story: the description of the young Diana as a vulnerable, yet precocious girl, the shockingly despicable doctor, and finally the way that Diana enacts her rebuff of the doctor's advances. I consider how contrasting qualities of two characters, a young Diana and a creepy doctor, emerge referentially but also prosodically, and in intonation. Together these features work to construct a sense of coherence across Diana's life course—she has *always* been attune to threat and able to respond with the sort wisdom and strength taught in guidance and counseling sessions—and that coherence legitimizes her status as counselor.

Early in the story, Diana represents herself as vulnerable. As she introduces herself in the story, Diana is the grammatical patient of action, she is “called” and “taken” from her home to Nakuru. Diana is young and vulnerable, her uniform skirt and cheap shoes reaffirm this saying “So we went there. I was in uniform with my “*kadong, kadong*.” Even my skirt.”¹⁰ She carries little with her to Nakuru apart from her primary school results slip and copies of her parents' death certificates; Diana is pitiable (Appx. A: lns 47-50). Amplifying the tragedy of

¹⁰ The “we” here is somewhat unclear. In her telling, Diana travel's to her uncle's home in Nakuru alone. Occasionally in Kenyan English and single and plural first person are interchanged. *Kadong kadong* is an onomatopoeic term for extremely cheap shoes that make noise when they are walked in. Diana had introduced these shoes earlier in our discussion as she told me about her experience as a poor child in school. Schoolmates mocked Diana's poverty shouting, “kadong kadong!” when she walked around the school.

parentlessness, Diana stumbles over her phrasing, drawing out the syllables “my:.” twice (Appx. A, ln 48) appearing to have difficulty with the reality even years later.

Her vulnerability comes not just as young girl with no parents to protect her and an uncle who refuses to protect and provide for her. Much later in the story, after the climax in which Diana is emboldened, the young Diana appears once again small and vulnerable in contrast with her physical surrounds, a hospital that is “very big” (Appx. A, ln 111) with “big big doors” (Appx. A, ln 104); one door resists her attempts to close them because “it’s heavy somehow” (Appx. A, ln 106). The bold young Diana is now shrunk back down to her diminutive size, her boldness, in retrospect, appearing all the more remarkable. In her telling, Diana iconically reproduces her state; the verbs “trembling” and “crying” are emphasized with loudness, and her silence is marked by a lower tone and followed by a significant pause:

Excerpt 4.1:

139 ... And I was just trembling. I couldn’t say
140 (anything). (2s) I started crying.

The young, orphaned Diana is set in stark contrast to the doctor. At each description of him, Diana encourages her listener’s shock and surprise at the disconnect between this man’s supposed trustworthiness as a doctor and his behavior. She repeats the name of his profession three times, whispering on the second repetition after a significant pause, as if in disbelief: “This man was a doctor (2s) (he was a doctor) he was radiotherapy I think” (Appx. A, lns 34-35). Diana marks her own retrospective surprise both at the doctor’s audacious behavior and her own response with a quickened prosody, she emphasizes his physical size after I take up her invitation to shock by asking for further detail about his chronological age:

Excerpt 4.2:

82 **B:** How old was this man?
83 **D:** That man is big!

- 84 **B:** Mmm.
 85 **D:** Having *kitambi*,¹¹ a very big (man). Very fat. And having a big (belly).
 86 **B:** {Laughs} Mmm.
 87 **D:** And I threw this man away!

She emphasizes in lexical intensifiers (“very”) and vocal emphasis. Layering different types of bigness—size, social status, age, and wealth—constructs the doctor character as a formidable force in contrast to the small, vulnerable Diana.

Further, throughout the narrative, the doctor is referred to with demonstratives, he is either “this man” (e.g., Appx. A, lns 25, 34, 87) or “that man” (e.g., Appx. A, lns 83, 117). This construction, with emphasis and descending intonation on the lexeme “man” is marked in Dholuo, Sheng, and Kenyan English as pejorative, often accompanied by a dismissive or judgmental shake of the head.¹² Diana’s evaluative stance, calling a man who would command respect “that man,” positions her as a moral authority. “That man” should know better, “that man” should not take advantage of his authority.

Diana voices the doctor through direct reported speech marking him as an unsavory and sleazy older man by contrast to her innocence. Diana’s tone is noticeably lower as she reports what the doctor said in his attempted seduction. Syllables are drawn out and breathy as the doctor details his wealth and status (“I have a:: wife” [Tr 4.1, ln 56]; “I am owning some *shamba::s::*” [Tr 4.1, ln 57]; “I’m a doctor by profession::” [Tr 4.1, ln 57]). The doctor then becomes truly predatory, sharklike as he circles young Diana. The narrator’s staccato repetition iconically figurates the laps the doctor makes (“he was. going around, saying those things and going around, walking” [Tr 4.1, lns 64-65]). Diana is once again contrasted with the doctor, she is stationary and markedly lower than the circling doctor (“I was sitting down” [Tr 4.1, ln 64]).

¹¹ *Kitambi* (Sw: Pride, arrogance). Often understood informally to refer to a big stomach, often in reference to the rotundness of “big men.”

¹² In Dholuo: “*dhanocha*.” In Sheng: “*huyu boi*” (more properly glossed as “that guy”).

Transcript 4.1

52 **D:** So I brought everything. Then he told me. “I’m ready to do you anything. I’m ready
53 to help you. And (2s) before I,”

54 **B:** Mmm

55 **D:** “Would you help me?” And I said “yes, I will, (if I can). What kind of help is that?” I
56 asked him (3s) “O::h, you know,” he says, “you know, I have a:: wife at home. And
57 (some kids). And I am owning some *shamba*:::s::¹³. I’m a doctor by profession:: I have so
58 many things, I can take care of you. And, ah, you can be my second wife. And uh also

59 your school fee, I’ll pay, and you’ll not even go to
60 that orphanage, the school of that orphanage, you’ll just go to a good school, I’ll pay
61 everything”

62 **B:** so he wanted a second wife, who is still in secondary school?

63 **D:** yeah. Then he was saying these things? (2s) and he was really obsessed? (2s) he

64 was coming around? I was sitting. down, you know, on the chair. he was. going
65 around, saying those things and going around, walking. (3s) then all of the sudden, he
66 told me to stand up. (2s) “just stand, just stand.” And he told me, *yaani*¹⁴, he was like
67 forcing. coz I’d already seen something, on his eyes.

Threatened and having previously recognized a vague danger (“coz I’d already seen something on his eyes” [Tr 4.1, ln 67]) the story reaches a turning point. The small and vulnerable Diana is able to hold the floor even with long pauses (Tr 4.2, lns 69-70), indicating interactional authority. Initially speaking quietly in Swahili, a language used in situations of uneven power as a demonstration of subservience, Diana then switches into English but maintains a quiet tone.¹⁵ The tone then escalates and the phrasing grows step-by-step, encouraged by my own evaluation (“you were brave to say that” [Tr 4.2, ln 75]). She repeats herself, but adds emphasis and then expands her phrasing at each turn: “I’ll shout” (Tr 4.2, ln 74) becomes “I’ll shout” (Tr 4.2, ln 76) where both words are enunciated loudly, and finally the phrase is extended and in a tone near shouting, “I’m going to shout” (Tr 4.2, ln 78).

¹³ *Shamba* (Sw.: Small farm). While the Swahili plural is “*mashamba*” the term is borrowed into Kenyan English, thus pluralized “*shambas*.”

¹⁴ *Yaani* (Sw.: In other words) *Yaani* is used as a discourse marker in both English and Swahili.

¹⁵ See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of the relative status and indexical value of named denotational codes in Kenya.

Transcript 4.2

68 B: Mmm hmm

69 D: And I told him, “don’t even try to hold me the way you are holding me. (2s) Cause
70 now (4s) (*Nitapiga kelele*¹⁶).”

71 B: Mmm

72 D: “And you’ll be embarrassed”

73 B: Mmm

74 D: “I’ll shout.”

75 B: You were brave to say that.

76 D: Yea! “I’ll shout!”

77 B: Ah.

78 D: “I’m going to shout!” Then he was telling me, “No, don’t bother shouting, this is
79 something good, good for you, good for your life.” You know. “You, you, you will
80 always say bye to the the the the poverty you are. I’ll give you (a good thing).” Then I
81 said,

As the young-Diana’s speech grows bolder and bolder, traits of the younger Diana (Pⁿ) seem more and more like those of the present day narrating Diana (P^s); she becomes a stronger and more self-assured person. The alignment between these two figures solidifies a sense of coherence across time, justifying a claim that Diana is naturally inclined or called to a vocation in counseling because she can recognize and respond to a threat of early marriage. Diana’s narrative positions her as someone who has been through struggle (as an orphan, as a student seeking school fees, as a girl accosted by older men), but also as someone who innately knows how to cope with such struggle. There is no character in the story advising her to reject the sleazy largess of the wealthy doctor, nor is there anyone to comfort her in the end.

In the plot points of the story a young Diana is able to stand up to a physical and social superior in precisely the way that girls are counseled to in empowerment sessions across the country. Diana often layered autobiographical stories with similar themes, one upon the other to reaffirm an identity as often threatened but brave and resilient: uncles had taken advantage of traditional Luo inheritance practices to leave her and her siblings destitute, men, like the doctor,

¹⁶ *Nitapiga kelele* (Sw.: I will make noise, I will make a ruckus)

take advantage of positions of power to attempt to extract sexual favors. She has suffered, but come out as a survivor. “Like me,” Diana told me a few minutes after relaying this story, “I’ve suffered a lot and I know what suffering is. And there are some people out there in the community who are also suffering like me who are also had suffered like me, I’d like to empower them. You know empowering communities is very good.”

Joshua, the motivational speaker

The self-help and motivation industry rose to prominence in the late 1990s around the same time that newer Pentecostal Christianities began to really take hold in Kenya.¹⁷ Aside from textbooks, “motivational” and “inspirational” books dominate sales. Even secondary school students carry around copies of Joel Osteen’s *It’s Your Time* and Ben Carson’s *Gifted Hands*.¹⁸ Pepe Minambo, a Congolese motivational speaker who built his career in Kenya, was often quoted to me during my time in Kenya, “Inspire before you expire!” Just as the Pentecostal preachers talk of tithing and reward, the logic of the Christian motivational speaker is that as others succeed through your message, so you will be (materially) blessed.¹⁹ The market for motivation is vast and self-perpetuating. The challenge is to be recognized in that market. Those who are successful—the Osteens, the Carsons, the Minambos—narrate themselves in a particular

¹⁷ See Chapter 5 for a lengthier discussion of Christianity in Kenya.

¹⁸ Regardless of religion, nearly everyone in the secondary schools I worked in knew the big names in Christian motivation. At one school assembly I was called upon to talk about my conational, Ben Carson, a neurosurgeon and Seventh Day Adventist who writes about his rise from poverty in *Gifted Hands*. Embarrassingly, I knew nothing of Carson, which came to a shock to most of the three hundred or so students assembled.

¹⁹ Sermons on tithing are common in the charismatic and Pentecostal churches, they reference several biblical passages including Deuteronomy 14:22-29, Leviticus 27:30-34. An example of such prosperity logic shared with me by a churchgoing informant was: *Why Non-Tithing Christians Become Poor And How Tithing Christians Can Become Rich* by Dag Hewerd-Mills, the founder of the Lighthouse Ministries.

way (i.e., triumph over adversity stories) and embed within their own narratives stories of the many they have inspired to greatness. Successfully inhabiting this genre is fundamental to being recognized as a motivator.

Joshua, whose story of being born again in Pentecostal Christianity I analyze in the following chapter, mastered the motivational genre. He dropped out of secondary school in Form 3 because his father ceased paying his fees, calling him a failure for his lack of interest in hard sciences. He still lived with his parents, relying on them for basic necessities. Joshua had no formal wage-earning employment but he attended a number of youth forums for cash and did occasional jobs at churches such as painting banners. He is also a hip hop artist and records music at the offices of Masani Youth. His lyrics once tended toward themes of love and the challenges of life as a young, unemployed man in Kenya. However, after getting born again, he vowed to only produce music with Christian themes; he was infused with the spirit of the prosperity gospel and he was inspired to inspire.

In the narrative below (see Appendix B for full narrative) Joshua recounts a time when he was decidedly effectual as a motivational speaker, evidencing his true vocation. He reports having changed the life of a young man who was working as his uncle's "*shamba* boy" (Sw./Eng.: "farm boy" but here: house help) to earn his keep while training in welding. Joshua was concerned about the self-confidence of the *shamba* boy when he offered Joshua his bed to sleep in, insisting he would sleep on the floor. He worried that the *shamba* boy would never strike out on his own and find his own success. As Joshua tells it, after a single evening of conversation the young man begins to see things differently and is inspired to change his life.

In the following excerpts I concentrate on the way Joshua expertly voices a stereotypical motivational speaker in direct report of his own speech. Joshua deploys this register with formal

and referential fidelity to minimize the intertextual gaps between its ideal-typical performance and his own performance thereof. His narrative incorporates a metricalization common in Christian preaching and motivational speech in Kenya, which involves: 1) interrogation (often rhetorical) 2) declaration of a problem (often with simplification), and 3) a clear solution (often vague). Like many preachers and motivators, repetition features centrally in Joshua’s narrative. He repeats a key lexeme (“change”) demarcates key points on the narrative arc, returning consistently to the theme, much as a Christian preacher would.

Joshua tells his story almost entirely in reported speech. He animates his own speech in the past—when he was performing the motivator role—as well as that of the *shamba* boy. Interestingly, the *shamba* boy appears to speak very little in the narrative and the interaction between he and Joshua comes across much more in preaching mode rather than in conversational adjacency pair parts. Joshua poses questions, identifies problems, and proffers solutions and scripts with little input from the *shamba* boy.

Transcript 4.3

- 1 **J:** “But, let me tell you one thing (2s) it doesn’t matter where you are coming from.
 2 What is the reason why you came here?” He, she told me, my uncle went to *ushago*’s²⁰
 3 place and picked him to come and learn, welding. And learn there for some times
 4 then? he’ll go back. Then I told him: “how many months have you been here?” “Six
 5 months” “what have you done about your life?”
 6 **B:** Mmm hmm
 7 **J:** He had done nothing and he seemed the same way he had came. Then I told him,
 8 “that is the reason why my uncle speaks to you that way. change your life.”
 [...]
 25 him, “have you ever got job opportunities within this welding you are doing?” and he
 told
 26 me, “Yea, there was a certain guy recently who called me for a job, but I was afraid to go
 27 because I thought. your uncle could have, you know...”
 28 **B:** Been like angry or...
 29 **J:** Yea, or angry about me, and I told him “no, this guy will never be angry when he
 30 sees that whatever he’s doing for you is doing something in your life. When

²⁰ *Ushago* (Sh.: Rural countryside, farmland, often also a rural “homeplace.”)

31 somebody picks you up to help you, he needs. to see. that your life is really
32 changing.”

33 **B:** Mmm hmm.

34 **J:** “And show him that you’ve changed. Stop putting on these rags in front of him,
35 he’ll see you as stupid.”

36 **B:** Mmm.

37 **J:** “Start putting on your own clothes, your own: *mafuta kupaka*²¹, just live a
38 comfortable life. Then. don’t wait for him to tell you, ‘now your time is up. Go’ No,
39 just tell him? “I’m thankful for helping me, but now I’m stable I can leave” yeah.

From the outset, Joshua takes on a very recognizable Christian motivational voice uttering phrases that could be as easily heard from a pulpit in any of the dynamic prosperity gospel churches across urban Kenya: “it doesn’t matter where you are coming from,” (Tr 4.3, ln 1) “what have you done about your life?” (Tr 4.3, ln 5) and “change your life” (Tr 4.3, ln 8).

But it is not simply the referential content of his voicing that makes it recognizable, the structure itself is drawn from a Christian motivational and preaching frame. Table 4.1 illustrates metricalization common in Christian motivational discourse. First, the listeners are interrogated, often rhetorically, and encouraged to reflect on their own lives and actions. The motivator then offers an explanation or declaration of the “problem” a listener may be facing (knowingly or not) often in very simple terms. Finally, the motivator offers a solution, often in pithy or memorable phrasing.

²¹ *Mafuta (ya) kupaka* (Sw.: Body lotion)

Table 4.1: Metricalization within motivational voice

<u>Ln</u>	<u>Interrogation</u>	<u>Declaration of problem</u>	<u>Solution</u>
2	what is the reason why you came here?		
4	how many months have you been here?		
5	what have you done about your life?		
7		he had <u>done</u> nothing and he seemed the same way he had came.	
8			<u>change your life</u>
25	have you ever got job opportunities with this welding you are doing?		
30-31		when somebody picks you up to help you, he needs to see. that your life is really changing	
34-35			and show him that you've changed. stop putting on these rags in front of him, he'll see you as stupid.

As we can see, Joshua starts with general, somewhat vague interrogatives about what the *shamba* boy had done with his life and offers an equally vague solution, “change your life.” He then refines his point, asking about specific job opportunities, identifies slightly more precise problem and prescribes a clear solution, “stop putting on these rags.”

Joshua’s story consists primarily of his own quotative reported speech, he reanimates his voice in the past, encouraging me as the audience not only to understand that he was an effective motivator, but to understand how he was (and is) one. Rather than saying something like, “I asked him what he had done about his life,” Joshua quotes himself in the past, “what have you done about your life?” (Tr 4.3, ln 5). Joshua not only demonstrates his deftness as a motivator in the past, and also reanimates that position in act of storytelling—laminating one performance

atop another—reaffirming a consistent inhabitation of that social role across time. He legitimizes his claim to be a motivational speaker.

Further figurating the role of Christian motivational speaker, Joshua repeats his urge for the boy to “change” throughout the narrative, punctuating each point on the story arc. At the story’s commencement “change” is encouraged, Joshua insists, “change your life” (Tr 4.3, ln 8). When the story builds tension toward the climax a path for “change” is made plain, the *shamba* boy should change his clothes, his behavior, and his ambition (Tr 4.3, lns 32, 34). Finally, at the story’s dénouement when “change” is presumed complete Joshua announces to me, “and his life may change, and he feels different” (Appx. B, lns 54-55).

By the end of the story, Joshua takes no chances in my evaluation of his efficaciousness. He animates the voice of the *shamba* boy and insists on his success. His interlocutor must recognize Joshua as an effective motivator for Joshua’s performance of the role to be felicitous. The *shamba* boy’s reactions, “By the way!” (Appx. B, ln 44) and “*Kwani!*”²² (Appx. B, ln 46) index the appropriate uptake to Joshua’s motivational speaker and encourages my own. The *shamba* boy is simultaneously impressed with the advice Joshua has to offer and amazed at the humility with which Joshua presents it.

Excerpt 4.3:

54 **J:** And I spoke? it was only one night we spoke. and his life may change, and he
55 feels different.
56 **B:** He feels different now?
57 **J:** He feels different now

While we do not get a report about the *shamba* boy’s success or failure embarking on a life of prosperity Joshua represents it as a foregone conclusion, “he feels different” (above,

²² *Kwani* (Sw./Sh.: Why? What the hell?) In colloquial Swahili, *kwani* is a shortening of the longer *kwa nini?* meaning “why?” However, in Sheng it has a stronger sense of “what the hell?!”

Appx. B, ln 54-55). I question the conclusion (above, Appx. B, ln 56), but he insists, “he feels different now” (above, Appx. B, ln 57).

Joshua and I spoke often and he regularly referenced his natural talent for motivational speaking and helping people “change their lives.” When he looks back on his days running with thieves and miscreants, he stresses that even these bad boys and thugs would come to him for advice, motivation, and inspiration. He told me story upon story of well-positioned others—preachers, businessmen, lecturers—mistaking him for a university graduate with a uniquely mature perspective. Earlier in our talk Joshua had told me, “I don’t know what it is in me that makes them see that I’m part of them. That is what I still don’t understand, and that is what I want God to make me understand.” There is something essential and God-given in Joshua that he comes to recognize through his interactions with others “I see it coming, I see it go through other people,” he told me. Joshua re-establishes consistently that others have recognized this ability in him. The story, especially with its quotative richness, is Joshua’s demonstration to me of his efficaciousness as a motivator; he did not simply tell me he was an efficacious motivator, he demonstrated it in his performance.

Eunice, the dancer

While many of the artists I worked with in Kisumu were encouraged by institutional attention and potential investments in arts and artists in Kenya, they still talked about pursuing art as a constant struggle. Like Joshua, most young artists I knew had ongoing conflict with their parents and elder kin about pursuing contemporary and cosmopolitan arts. Nearly all of them had coming out stories—stories of disclosing that they wanted to be artists.

Parents were not only concerned about their children's wage-earning capacities, they were concerned about their moral fiber. Leaving aside the fact that the creative economy in Kenya is minuscule, particularly outside of the tourist industry, there is a pervasive and pejorative stereotype of the artist. These are artists who engage in what I will call cosmopolitan art, such as hip hop or other pop music styles, contemporary dance, or modern painting, art that references and take part in transnational genres. These artists (at least those that are not national sensations) are often cast as stupid, addicted to drugs, sexually promiscuous, or mad and unstable. They are imagined as particularly incapable of making a living. What's more, the ethnic ambiguity of and Western influence on what I am calling cosmopolitan art can make it even more problematic. Cosmopolitan artists embody a type of non-ethnic Kenyaness, that when generalized is laudable as nationalist, but when specific and proximate (i.e., my kin, my neighbor) is troubling, particularly for elders. It produces an ambivalence—the inability to locate an art form, and therefore its producer, within an ethnic schema upsets a standard and durable model of social reckoning, but it can also be understood to extricate the artist from the particular moral and ethical responsibilities and obligations that are, in Kenya, often understood to be grounded in ethnic belonging.

Eunice grew up in Nairobi in a home bordering on middle class, but far from the wealthy elite. A few years after her father died and not long after she finished secondary school, she and her mother moved to Kisumu so her mother could pursue a job opportunity at the massive Kisumu Pentecostal Church. Supported by her mother, Eunice was always giddy at the chance to

contribute to the household, especially through her work as a dancer. After one particularly lucrative show, she shouted, “I can buy *unga* for my mom!”²³

Eunice’s autobiographical narrative is exemplary of artists’ coming out narratives (see Appendix C for full narrative). Eunice had mentioned to me that her mother, prominent in a large local Pentecostal church, had initially disapproved of her pursuit of contemporary dance. I had asked her to tell me more about it. Her mother and pastors at the church (a church Eunice was deeply committed to) were concerned about the immorality of contemporary dance and whether Eunice was treading a sinful path. Eventually, after much judgment, fighting, and silence, her mother and pastors realized Eunice’s talent and accept her decision.

Eunice’s story has different levels of dialogism within it. Her moral quandary is not yet resolved when she tells it to me and in the event of storytelling, she is actively responding not just to me, her co-present interlocutor, but to echoes of voices from the past, the present, and the future. These voices challenge her and judge her as immoral, they are voices she ventriloquates in the narrative: she is “getting lost” (Appx. C, ln 95) and following “Satan’s way” (Appx. C, ln 97). Even though she believes she is doing the right thing, discovering and investing in her talent, Eunice is apprehensive.

Excerpt 4.4:

- 76 I I knew, I used to be told “you can be a really good contemporary dancer”
“Yeah:.”
77 back of my mind I’m thinking, “my mom, my pastors”

She shifts from the pluperfect, “I used to be told” to the historical present, “back of my mind I’m thinking” which allows this anxiety about “my mom, my pastors” to bleed into the present. Thus, she must continue to justify her career path.

²³ *Unga* (Sw.: maize flour). *Unga* is used to make *ugali*, a stiff cornmeal mush, that is the staple across most of upcountry Kenya.

Eunice asserts her moral character in the following excerpt metapragmatically framing her coming out moment and constructing a parallelism in which she quotes herself and she becomes more assertive and self-assured.

Table 4.2: Metapragmatic framing and parallelism

<u>Ln</u>	<u>Metapragmatic framing</u>	<u>Parallelism</u>	<u>Coda</u>
16	And I told her		
16-18	I have never spoken my mind. <u>ever in my life</u> . I was all about, my mom tells me:: I want you to do this and this and this and “yes, mom.” And then I ()	“No. I am dancing.”	
18		“I’m not doing that I’m <u>dancing</u> .”	
18-20	So, I think I think, you know, I’m not I’m not normally, I:: never used to be that soft person. I used to say things straight up, so she used to take it really hard.		
20-21			and think I’m her her only daughter I know she wanted a friend. which we are by the way, we are friends

She creates a parallelism within her narration, “No. I am dancing” (Appx. C, ln 16) and “I’m not doing that I’m dancing.” (Appx. C, ln 18) This parallel, with the second phrase lengthened and intensified, shows Eunice’s strident assertion of herself as a dancer in the narrated event (Eⁿ)—that is, in the past—but it also allows her to reaffirm and inhabit in the present (E^s) that same position as assertive and self-actualized. She frames her assertions metapragmatically, contrasting herself before her disclosure, “I have never spoken my mind. ever in my life” (Appx. C, ln 16-17) to herself after her disclosure, “I used to say things straight up” (Appx. C, 19-20). She has progressed from a child who is obedient to someone who is

forthright and adamant. In her coda, there is a certain resolution, even though it appears she has disobeyed her mother, she has still given her mother what her mother wanted, “I know she wanted a friend. which we are by the way, we are friends” (Appx. C, ln 21).

Later in the same narrative, Eunice relays another moment of coming out to her mother. This time she characterizes herself in a wider cosmological frame; she discloses to her mother that she would pursue art on the same day that she learned her father, a photojournalist and amateur guitar player, had died. This is a theodicy common in youths’ autobiographical narratives; things happen for a reason, events are not coincidental, but instead moments of divine intervention, indications of God’s plan. In table 4.3 I lay out the way Eunice laminates her disclosure onto the death of her father, making his death and her career choice effectively part of the same event. In this part of her narrative, she also uses repetition to recast dance as “art,” as well as using parallelism to distinguish this from mere work.

Table 4.3: Theodic lamination

<u>Ln</u>	<u>Theodic Lamination</u>	<u>Repetition</u>	<u>Parallelism</u>
141-142	E: And then that that that day that was the <u>exact</u> day I told my mom (3s)		
142-143		“I’m going to do art .” (3s) not just. not just art like I’m going to practice art no I’m going to do art art	
143-144			as my job as my career as my profession (lns 143-144)

Layering a second instance of disclosure upon the first, Eunice further positions herself as an authentic artist. She laminates the event of revelation “I’m going to do art” (Appx. C, ln 142)

onto the moment of learning of her father's death, "the exact day," (Appx. C, 142) and the two become inseparable. The narrative co-occurrence of her father's death and her artist's disclosure fortifies her position, this is divine affirmation of her artist identity. Then, in her repetition of the token "art"—she uses it five times—Eunice underlines its role in her life. She contrasts her categorization of contemporary dance as art with others' characterizations that she voiced through quotation earlier in her narrative. They call contemporary dance "dirty,"

Excerpt 4.5:

3 [...] those (2s) pastors there were all about "contemporary is a dirty dance"

It is "Satan's way" or "getting lost":

Excerpt 4.6:

94 **E:** [...] You know so my mom, they used to tell my mom uh:: "Your

95 your your daughter is, she's she's getting lost."

96 **B:** Mmm

97 **E:** "She's going to Satan's way"

Art is more than an activity, it is a "practice." This practice is then amplified from a "job" to a "career" and finally to a "profession." It is much more than simply work. Eunice responds to the silent voice of resignation, "*kazi ni kazi*" "work is work," a phrase that echoes throughout urban Kenya, one that justifies taking part in unpleasant, immoral, or low-class labor. Work is work because it pays. But for art qua work to be defensible on *moral* grounds, it must be elevated above "work." Eunice's parallelism does the work of this elevation promoting through a classification as "job" then to "career" and finally "profession." If pursuing art is a fulfillment of the moral imperative to invest in one's talent, it is, and should be a *profession*, it should even be a vocation.

Conclusion

Eunice, like many in Kisumu, is working through a *moral* quandary. Looking at the narratives of these young dancers, motivators and counselors, we can see that the process of fashioning a future for some is about more than fantasy and finance. Understanding more specifically the valence of these logics of talents, vocations, responsibility, investment and entrepreneurialism helps us understand the particular anxieties and compulsions these young people face in producing futures. These apprehensions are not just founded in concerns about reproduction—social, financial, or otherwise. They are grounded in anxieties of sincere moral personhood. These Pentecostal and neoliberal discourses of individualism wedded to a moral imperative for self-actualization appear to come into conflict with older expectations. Often held by elders, these are expectations of corporate participation, financial contribution to kin, and status derived from namable, white-collar professions. Claiming, as they do with such stories, that desired professions fulfill God’s will and produces opportunity within harsh economic circumstances positions *youthy* careers as not only viable, but valuable.

If one of the central features of *youth* as style is struggle and vitality along with sincerity in a sea of corrupting forces, these autobiographical narratives are exemplary of *youth*. Their narrators emerge through them as people who, amid strife and struggle, come to embody the vitality and creativity—the dedication to a more pure, naturally endowed “talent” that exists, even as a kernel, in every individual. The realization of that talent and its cultivation are central to notions of *youth* that validate the choices, ambitions, and desires of the young JoKisumu I worked with.

These stories also demonstrate diversity within the field of *youth*, the range of positions that people can take within the constellation of *youth* stereotypy and the qualities they invoke. In

these stories—and the ways they are told—class and gender emerge as salient social factors that inform the positions their tellers can take up and the stereotypes they situate themselves against. Someone like Eunice can imagine (and assert) herself as an artist engaging in the cosmopolitan world of contemporary art while Diana remains restricted to development within her own community; *youth* is not a space of boundless opportunity. The poor orphaned Diana positions herself as prematurely empowered, not simply the victim of a predatory, corrupt older man. She is fundamentally strong and virtuous. As a woman, Eunice similarly works against the image of the always-morally-endangered, explaining (and performing) the virtues of her chosen career. Joshua, the quintessential unemployed young man, demonstrates his natural proclivity for positive influence even pointing out his misrecognized status as university student.

Qualities like awareness, empowerment, creativity, and moral uprightness appear in each of these narratives. Along with claims to individual futures, these autobiographical stories are assertions of the quality of *youth*.

In the following chapter, I delve deeper into the importance of sincerity in reframing *youth* as morally upright and valuable. I show how a young man realizes the possibility of a *youthy* Christianity, one that embraces the aesthetics and practices of *youth* through an expertly-styled salvation narrative. It acts as a rejoinder against common negative stereotypes of “the youth,” particularly young men, as thuggish, idle, and insincere. It also aligns its teller with a discourse of transnational Pentecostalism, drawing newer forms of value and status into the field of *youth*.

CHAPTER 5

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO PRAY TO SOMEBODY IN SPECIAL ENGLISH”: NARRATIVE AND REALIZING A *YOUTHY* CHRISTIANITY

Joshua grew up in a Christian household in Kisumu and when I first met him in 2009 he was attending church regularly and recording gospel hip-hop music at the Masani Youth Center. He understood himself to be a quintessential token of stereotypical youth in urban Kenya. He spoke Sheng, the emblematic plurilingual register of *youth* (see Chapter 3), in most of his day-to-day interactions and always with his friends. He reserved his near-fluent English for church and the youth forums funded by the state and NGOs that he regularly attended. He had a certain hip-hop aesthetic, wearing oversized athletic jerseys, twisting his hair into tight knots, and adhering faux diamonds to his teeth. He often told me that he was a “black American born in Africa.” He was unemployed and had few opportunities for work. He aspired to be a youth motivator and organizer as well as a musician, but his predicament was the predicament of *youth*: so much potential, so few prospects. While Joshua embraced *youth*, he also knew that some of the widely circulating stereotypes of “the youth”—those idle or dangerous young men unmoored from morality—conflicted with ideal Christianity. In many Christian congregations in Kenya the trappings of urban youth, its music, language, and aesthetics, are indexes of criminality, thuggery and immorality. To Joshua and to many conservative Christians, to be born again with a *youth* style seemed contradictory if not impossible.¹ The image of a sincere, pious young Christians is much like the Christian Union (CU) boys that inspired the ire of Frederick (see Chapter 1). They reject the trappings of *youth*, reaffirming the alignment of things like Sheng, fist bumping, and hip hop to thuggery. The blending of *youth* aesthetics, especially hip hop, and Christian

¹ For further examples of conflict between youth culture and Christian ethics, see van Klinken 2012; Werbner 2011.

discourse was read by many—even Sheng loving students I knew—as insincere or suspect.² Indeed, the two stereotypes sit uneasily next to each other in Kenya.

This was a conflict that vexed Joshua. If he wanted to be a good Christian, someone who inspired other youths to change their lives for the better, he should be born again. But for Joshua being born again meant wearing “nice suits” and speaking “nice English.” In Joshua’s understanding the ideal-typical born-again Christian was very proper and conservative, the antithesis of the creative, cosmopolitan dynamism he associated with *youth*. In Joshua’s mind, salvation would mean turning away from a lifestyle and aesthetic with which he identified closely; it meant turning away from himself. How could he be a sincere, born-again Christian if he was no longer being true to himself?

Eventually, Joshua was born again. His revelation came not at a moment of dramatic rupture but instead when he realized the potential for continuity between his life before and after getting saved. Listening to a sermon that was delivered in Sheng, a metonym for *youth* style, Joshua heard a resolution of the dissonance in his spiritual life. With the Sheng sermon he discovered that becoming born again did not require him to cast aside hip-hop and baggy clothes in favor of hymns and tailored suits. If a compelling sermon could be delivered by a successful preacher in Sheng, Joshua did not have to give up the aesthetics and practices of urban youthful masculinity—the material manifestations of what he understood as his “true” self—in order to get saved. He could be both *youth* and born again; he, too, could speak the gospel in Sheng. Joshua explained, “I came to realize you don’t have to pray to somebody in special English, bombastic words and whatever. No. If this person is to get saved, even a single word he will

² Recall the concerns Omondi (aka Supa Crazy) and Max (aka RhymesMax) had about the uptake of their Sheng-infused Christian rap (see Chapter 3).

speak, even how broken it is, this person will change his life.” Joshua realized the potential of a *youthy* Christianity; he could be sincerely saved because he could remain a sincere youth.

In this chapter I analyze Joshua’s story and show how it becomes recognizable as a classic conversion narrative—a tale of sin and salvation—despite being about its narrator remaining more or less the same. I tease apart the content of his narrative from its linguistic style, attending most particularly to generic conventions and poetics to show genre helps Christians manage the tensions between continuity and rupture. I argue that while a continuity enables Joshua’s getting saved—he finds himself open to being born again precisely because he realizes doesn’t have to reject his former *youthy* self—he still narrates his salvation in the expected terms of a “radical break with the past.” Through narrative embedding and parallelisms drawn with linguistic gestures like repetition and reduplication, Joshua calibrates his own story to the transnational genre of salvation narrative. In so doing, he makes his story widely recognizable as one of salvation and, by extension, makes himself recognizable as a born-again Christian within a global Christian ecumene without compromising his commitment to *youth* style and ethics.³ In the end, Joshua is able to realize a *youthy* Christianity.

As a genre, salvation narratives reference “generalized or abstracted models of discourse production and reception” (Bauman and Briggs 1992: 147). They share general themes, style, and structure that make the narratives recognizable to an audience as versions of a particular type of story. Listeners know what to expect of the story’s style as well as of its meaning. For example, when born-again Christians incorporate certain nodes on a narrative arc—a sinful past, revelation, rupture, and, finally, salvation—they make the story recognizable as one of “getting

³ Joshua’s preoccupation with sincerity is a reflection of the anxieties about fakery and corruption dominant in the Kenyan public imagination, and often on the lips of young people, which suggests that even as salvation narratives are a transnational genre, they are also locally accented in ways that illuminate anxieties particular to their sociohistorical contexts.

saved” and make themselves recognizable to listeners as born again. Genres shape and are shaped by individual utterances. While some genres are more rigid than others, singular iterations of a genre are always infused with the particularities of their utterance (Bakhtin 1985). Thus, unlike an “original” that is subsequently copied or reproduced, a generic form is more like an “organizing framework” (Hanks 1987) that both informs the way utterances are produced and is also informed by those same utterances.

In a Pentecostal Christian language ideology, which I elaborate further below, narrating effectively and acceptably within this salvation genre is evidence that one has learned to see in a godly way. Thus Joshua’s narration within the genre is also part of his process of spiritual rebirth. He engages stylistic conventions common in salvation narratives and minimizes intertextual gaps between his autobiographical story of getting saved and an ideal version of the narrative genre. For Joshua, the preacher who inspired his rebirth embodies a novel ideal: an urban youth masculinity blended with a sincere born-again Christianity. Embedding the preacher’s story in his own and drawing parallels between the two inflects Joshua’s version of the salvation narrative with that same urban *youth* masculinity. He lays claim to a certain type of recognition: as true to *youth* and to born-again Christianity not by mimicking the preacher’s story, but by aligning with his story. In this way, Joshua’s practice of mobilizing genre is somewhat different than young Ivoirian *bluffeurs* who value mimicry as a mode and means of identification (Newell 2012). His practice is also distinct from students in Zambian Catholic mission schools who seek to become like an “Other” through conversion (Simpson 2003). Joshua is invested in the idea of sincerity, that his actions accurately reflect his interior. Embedding the Sheng-speaking preacher’s story within his own, Joshua seeks not to become another but instead become recognizable *through* another. The preacher evidences the possibility—and indeed

efficaciousness—of a *youthy* Christianity and functions as a newly-emergent archetype through which Joshua can make himself identifiable to audiences like me and to his fellow born-again Christians.

Rupture and continuity in Christian salvation

Becoming “saved” or “born again” in Pentecostal Christian theologies requires that one make a concerted effort to establish a personal relationship with God and turn away from a sinful life.⁴ Much like conversion, “getting saved” can emerge out of thoughtful deliberation and intentional dedication to the Christian God, or it can follow a more radical Pauline model in which the Holy Spirit inspires a dramatic and immediate change of heart.⁵ The former is often reread and renarrated in terms of the latter; after deep deliberation the Holy Spirit can enter and inspire the moment of rebirth. Conversely, the lead-up to a dramatic moment of conversion can be reread as full of signs and inspired actions that slowly build to the moment of salvation.

Learning to understand daily life and the most mundane aspects of human existence as full of

⁴ The most common biblical reference for the requirement of being born again is found in John 3:1-21, specifically John 3:3-6, “Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again’. ‘How can a man be born when he is old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.’” Getting born again is not always dramatic. Upon my first visit to the Winners’ Chapel in Kisumu I, like other first-timers, was invited to the rear of the church for welcoming and prayers after the service. One of the welcoming committee members asked me if he could pray over me. As a non-believer from a large, devoutly Catholic family, I was quite accustomed to people praying for my soul and so I obliged. Toward the end of my welcomer’s prayer, while both of our heads were still bowed, he declared, to my surprise, that I had been reborn in the spirit. He later invited me to be baptized, an invitation I politely declined.

⁵ The story of Paul’s conversion can be found in Acts 9:1-19. Saul of Tarsus, an infamous enemy of early Christians, was struck by the Holy Spirit on his way to Damascus, famously being knocked off his horse. For three days he neither ate nor slept, praying all the while until a messenger was sent by God to baptize him as Paul and compel him to preach Christianity.

miracles and the working of the Holy Spirit is central to becoming a born-again Christian. Rather than considering this skill one of interpretation, however, Pentecostals understand it as one of awareness. With a faithful heart, one open to experiencing the divine, it becomes readily apparent that every event, from a child's birth to arriving safely at a destination, is the work of God.

Conversion and rebirth in African Pentecostal Christianity is often represented by believers as a break with both "traditional African" (read as sinful) and individual sinful pasts. The sinful past, however, is key to constructing a righteous present and heavenly future. One must dig deep into the past, plucking out and reporting examples of sin and misdeed. A sinful past can even be exaggerated, thus making the moment of conversion or salvation appear all the more profound (Marshall 2009, Meyer 1998). The devil, one might say, can be found in the details. The contrast enlivens the rupture; the darker the past, the brighter the future. While they are often part of a long process of salvation, these moments are represented, in narrative and in wider discourse, as just that—moments. They are often constructed by believers as events, dramatic points, or specific moments at which nonbelievers or those who have fallen from faith are struck with the compulsion to change. I focus on this tension between continuity and rupture and consider not only how Christians themselves manage the contradiction through language, but also to think about how Joshua's salvation is only made possible through his realization of the potential for a *youthy* Christianity. This type of Christianity, made visible to him through linguistic register, allows for a continuity between his life before and after salvation.

Taking conversion or salvation as terms of analysis, however, can be problematic because it can elide the disconnect between the Pauline model of conversion—one of rupture—and an experience of slow, nonlinear, spiritual, and intellectual transformations (J. and J.L. Comaroff

1991).⁶ Engelke (2008) shows that while there are dramatic moments of revelation among Zimbabwean Apostolics, conversion itself can be a very long and very slow.⁷ It is always a process of becoming; deliberation is, for these Apostolics, ideal and necessary. Conversion may take years, it is much more complex, more “gradual and piecemeal” (Engelke 2004: 105) than a strict Pauline model allows.

I had many conversations with Omondi, a dedicated Pentecostal Christian and one of Joshua’s musical collaborators and best friends as he grappled with becoming born again. Omondi framed it as a choice—a choice with which he weighed options. At one point, he told me he couldn’t decide because being born again meant he couldn’t “walk with women.” What should he do? he wondered aloud to me. In an interesting way, Omondi was deliberating precisely that moment of rupture; he was thinking through and preparing for a cleavage between his life before and after salvation, a point of dramatic change.

Omondi’s deliberations may seem contradictory to a classic notion of being struck by the holy spirit, but a nuanced view of conversion and salvation requires distinguishing between the process of becoming a Christian and the narrative of salvation. His contemplation of getting born again doesn’t necessarily contradict the Christian notion of the radical break. As Robbins argues, “conversion itself, however long it takes to get there, is always an event, a rupture in the time line of a person’s life that cleaves it into a before and after between which there is a moment of

⁶ In William James’s considerations of the psychology of conversions, what is construed as “conversion” tends to be dramatic but the aftereffects less so. Conversions often involve moments of marvel or radical rearrangement. He writes, “Hope, happiness, security, resolve, emotions characteristic of conversion, can be equally explosive. And emotions that come in this explosive way seldom leave things as they found them” (1994: 220).

⁷ Engelke’s fascinating work focuses on a charismatic African Independent Church founded by Johane Masowe. While many features of this Apostolic church are quite distinct from transnational Pentecostalism (including Apostolics’ rejection of the printed Bible as unnecessary mediation between God and man), Engelke’s arguments regarding conversion and salvation are certainly applicable to Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity (PCC) more generally.

disconnection” (2007: 11). The process of becoming born again is uneven, there are discontinuities, there is backsliding and rededication, moments of revelation stack atop one another in unsteady piles. Social ties and obligations, particularly with kin, are not totally severed in the way that the phrase “complete break with the past” implies (Lindhardt 2010). It is the story, I argue, that is linear; the narrative is one of rupture and one of radical change; the story helps create that rupture in the personal timeline (Robbins 2007).

Narratives, however, are not simple reports of experience. They construct a social world and position narrators and their interlocutors within that world (Wortham 2001). They “are keyed both to the events in which they are told and that they recount, toward narrative events and narrated events” (Bauman 1986: 2). The narrative event itself (the event of storytelling) and not simply the narrated event (the event a story is told about) is central to the process of salvation. It is not enough to be saved; one must tell the story.⁸

Attention to narratives of conversion and salvation is not in itself novel. However, the literature has focused much more closely on its content than its linguistic or poetic features. A more fine-grained analysis of the style of salvation narrative allows us to see the very subtle ways narrators make claims to recognition and accomplish acts of identity (Hastings and Manning 2004) as born-again Christians that an analysis of content alone often does not illuminate; it allows us to see what they are saying by how they are saying it.

Scholars have focused on stages and themes in conversion narratives and considered how these tropes become meaningful in discourse and experience (Gooren 2010a, 2010b; Pype 2011). Stromberg (1993) has argued that its narration is central to conversion, attending to language’s mediation of conversion. While he is interested in the individual, experiential, and psychological

⁸ A lengthier discussion of the relationship between events of narration and narrated events appears in the previous chapter.

effects of this mediation, I focus on its social effects. That is, I draw attention to the ways people make themselves socially recognizable as born-again Christians through linguistic style and the poetics of salvation narrative.⁹

Pentecostal salvation stories are repeated again and again in services and texts. They are told in small fellowships and at massive revivals. Variations on this genre are told around the world, and they resemble one another in structure, theme, and style even as they are accented by individual authors and local contexts and concerns. Narrating and re-narrating the moment of salvation, the moment at which life turned from profane to sacred, is a critical part of Christian testimony and “witness.” To be a “witness for Christ” is to testify to his presence and influence in daily life, it is to testify to those who are non-believers or not yet born again. The stories are meant to inspire salvation in those who are not yet born again, they should “create a spiritual crisis by calling to the fore one’s desperate and lost conditions, which one may have been totally unaware of” (Hill 1985, quoted in Harding 2000: 38). Thus, the narratives told have two sides. They produce the narrator as a saved Christian and they recruit the audience as not just sympathetic, but empathetic. Listeners should feel their own suffering outside of grace, and begin to read their own life stories through a lens of sin and salvation. This is the moment when listeners may be convicted by the Holy Spirit, recognizing their sinfulness and defilement and make a break with sin, opening themselves up to salvation through sincere repentance and conversion.¹⁰

⁹ Elsewhere I argue in more detail that the generic features of the salvation narrative are critical to the emergence of the imaginary of a global Christian ecumene (see Brummel 2014).

¹⁰ “Convicted by the Holy Spirit” is a somewhat common phrase in born again denominations. It refers to a moment when the Holy Spirit makes a person distinctly aware of the sinful nature of one’s life or particular acts. Much like a juridical conviction, a spiritual conviction requires repentance or restitution for wrongdoing. One should repent and then (re)dedicate one’s self and spirit to God.

For born-again Christians testimonials and telling the story of salvation are not simply ways of speaking; they indicate the ability to recognize divine omniscience and influence in the everyday life. This link between speaking and believing is an ideology of language; a style of speech is understood as evidence of an interior state and way of being in the world. Within this language ideology a salvation narrative or Christian testimony is not seen as mastery of rhetorical technique or narrative style, but instead as an index of the openness, sincerity, or earnestness of one's heart (Shoaps 2002). This relies on the presumption of "sincere speech" (Keane 2007: 186), that there is no mediation between the interior (faith, belief) and exterior (narrative, testimony, witness, prayer) and the latter is evidence of the former. The fact that these narratives take on similar generic qualities then is seen by Christians as much more a testament to the universal influence of God and God's inspiration than it is to the global circulation of Christian media and discourse.

Unmarked Christianity

As discussed in the Introduction, public space in Kisumu is also decidedly Christian space. While there are Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh presences in town, Christianity is the "unmarked" religion of black Kenyans in the city.¹¹ Even nonreligious meetings, such as those of youth groups, business workshops, or theater rehearsals, often begin and end with Christian prayer and hymns are sung to pass the time or entertain in the event of delay. The state-run high schools in which I conducted part of my fieldwork held weekly, Pentecostal-style Christian worship services. A pastor preaching at Lake Victoria Boys' High School urged students to be

¹¹ Here "unmarked" is used as a term to identify the ideologically dominant half of a set of hierarchical binaries (e.g., male/female, white/black). Benjamin Lee (1997) ably traces the concept of markedness from its linguistic origins in Trubetzkoy and Jakobson through to its use in contemporary linguistic anthropology. See also Waugh 1982.

strong or “hot” in their faith, warning them, “If you are lukewarm, you will be puked out!” and reminding them of the coming rapture—“All the time, we should be ready!” NLG held a revival every term, a “weekend challenge” to inspire salvation through the Holy Spirit. Healing hands were laid on the sick and girls danced to booming music; some of them ran to the front to be saved.

Revivals and reminders of rapture in schools are indications of an important recent shift in the unmarked style of Christianity in Kisumu and across Kenya. In the 1980s and 1990s newer Christian denominations began to gain prominence and slowly but steadily drew congregants away from the mainline denominations established by missionaries in the early twentieth century (Gifford 2009).¹² Once viewed as bizarre or cult-like, varieties of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity have begun to exceed the Anglican, Catholic, and Seventh Day Adventist denominations in popularity.¹³ Rebirth and public declaration of salvation is now an unspoken requirement for politicians. Presidential contenders in the 2012/13 election cycle Raila Odinga, William Ruto, and Uhuru Kenyatta all made public displays of this unmarked Christianity in the

¹² While African Initiated Churches (AIC) or *Roho* Churches (Spirit Churches), as they are also known locally, are common in the area, I do not address them here. These churches are visible throughout Kisumu but they feature little in this generalized, unmarked Christianity. Only four of the over 800 students in Nam Lolwe and Lake Victoria high schools identified with AIC churches, none of the post-secondary youth I worked with did. Locally, these churches are generally understood by outsiders to be part of a local “cultural tradition.” Their hymns and dress featured alongside other “traditional” ethnic displays at events such as school music festivals. For a thoughtful and thorough discussion of *Roho* churches in Nyanza, see Hoehler-Fatton (1996). See also Schwartz (2005) for a discussion of *Legio Maria*, one of the more visible AICs in Kisumu Town.

¹³ Most discussions distinguishing between Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianities (PCC) and “mainline” churches do not include Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) churches in the mainline category. I include them in the set of other conventionally understood mainline denominations not for theological reasons but because of their sociohistorical position in Kisumu. SDA missionaries arrived in Nyanza Province in the early 1900s and historically have had sizable congregations in the area. At present there are at least nine SDA congregations in Kisumu and they are often recognized as part of the “old guard.”

course of their campaigns, engaging in rituals of baptism by immersion, anointment by chrism, and prayer rallies. The local media is also saturated with Pentecostal and Charismatic messages. Television stations broadcast transnational televangelists like Benny Hinn and Joyce Meyer as well as local stars at Kenyan megachurches who preach the same style of salvation and prosperity. Walking through urban markets, one is almost as likely to encounter books by Christian motivators like Joel Osteen and Pepe Minambo as one is school textbooks.

Pentecostal congregations in Kisumu range in size from those with a small cadre of congregants housed in a tent or corrugated tin shack along the roadside to those with hundreds of worshippers gathering in imposing permanent structures on large compounds. The larger congregations, such as Winners' Chapel and Kisumu Pentecostal Church (KPC), boast national and international connections.¹⁴ An individual's attendance at a particular church is often more social, circumstantial, or instrumental than theological. Members will sometimes follow a pastor from one church to another if a schism, as likely to be personal as theological, inspires the foundation of a new church. One young woman explained to me that she started attending a local Pentecostal church because it was a half-mile closer than the Catholic Church that she grew up attending; it was just easier to get to early on Sunday mornings.

¹⁴ Winners' Chapel is a transnational ministry founded in Nigeria by David Odeyepo, a self-proclaimed prophet. Odeyepo retains fairly strict control over the churches within the ministry and sets monthly themes, which are revealed through prophecy. One of Odeyepo's dictates is that there be no more than one Winners' Chapel in a single urban area, thus consolidating the congregation and filling imposing church structures. In addition to the predictable paraphernalia—books, CDs, and pamphlets—members of Winners' Chapel are encouraged to purchase stickers to affix to their cars declaring "I am a Winner." Even Winners who do not have cars are encouraged to purchase these stickers as a way of attracting a car under the prosperity gospel's "name it and claim it" ideology. For discussion of Winners' Chapel in South Africa, see Gifford and Nogueira-Godsey 2011. Kisumu Pentecostal Church is part of Christ Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM), which has at least eleven congregations across Kenya.

Like Joshua, many of the young people I spent time with grew up in mainline Christian households but described those denominations as “boring” and preferred the Pentecostal varieties; the music is livelier and the preaching more entertaining, they would say. Some young people attend services to socialize or to keep from being “idle.”¹⁵ Others, like Joshua, begin attending particular churches and revivals to build networks and gain access to work or other opportunities because pastors occasionally offer temporary work or small jobs to young, unemployed congregants. But Pentecostalism’s lure isn’t simply about material gain. The instrumentalist impetus to initially attend does not explain why young people remain in these congregations. “Prosperity gospel” Pentecostalism is particularly popular among young JoKisumu because in addition to the promises of wealth and health, these churches are also more adept at addressing “youth problems” and some are more supportive of the music, art, and fashion popular with younger Kenyans.¹⁶ In these churches it is not uncommon to see fashionably dressed youth performing skits or poems during services, fully amplified and sometimes projected on large screens behind the pulpit. Choirs may incorporate popular contemporary gospel music and the better funded are accompanied by full bands with guitars, keyboards, and drum sets. These churches are also more likely to have talk-therapy-style counseling for youth and workshops on study skills or CV preparation. Dedicated physical

¹⁵ A further discussion of “idleness” can be found in the Introduction and Chapter 1.

¹⁶ While Pentecostal churches are often discussed collectively in the scholarly literature, there are particular distinctions within the theologies and sociologies of these churches that are important to note. A crucial line of distinction in Kisumu and elsewhere is visible both theologically and socially and distinguishes between “prosperity” and “spiritualist” churches (see Anderson 2010). The prosperity churches, younger churches that gained more prominence in the 1990s, tend to focus more directly on the material and financial rewards that the divine can provide in this life. These churches draw younger, urban, and aspiring middle-class congregants. Spiritualist churches in Kisumu, by contrast, tend to draw poorer, rural-to-urban migrants; congregations (but not their leadership) are dominated by women, often middle-aged or older. In spiritualist Pentecostal churches gifts of the spirit such as *glossalalia* and faith healing are more important than material prosperity

spaces and youth ministries draw in young people, who are quickly delegated responsibilities within the church by pastors.¹⁷ The appeal to young people is rarely in the sort of *youth* aesthetic with which young JoKisumu like Joshua align—with hip hop style clothing and music. The contemporary music might involve live bands, but never rapping. Sermons might incorporate Urban Swahili, but Sheng is decidedly uncommon. For Pentecostal Christian churches there is a point in the continuum of *youth* aesthetic and practice that becomes morally questionable. The *youth* practices and aesthetics within a Christian field are tempered.

Prosperity gospel churches draw in members not only by making resources available but perhaps more importantly by presenting examples of success out of humble beginnings. One pastor at Winners' Chapel in Kisumu, for example, regularly drew the congregation's attention to his fine attire. "Wearing an Italian suit like I'm wearing will not make you better," he exhorted in a bragging humility one Sunday morning as he preached about being a true spiritual being. He went on, "Come into my library ... and you will see so many books, so many tapes, so many CDs. When you care for the spirit, others will clothe you in finery!" Omondi, Joshua's long-time musical collaborator, told me of a youth pastor he had met:

Excerpt 5.1:

O: I see myself, the way my background is? and the background of that pastor it was the same. but. if you compare the pastor with me (now) the com- that pastor is:: just high(er) than (me)

B: OK

O: but the age mate. the pastor was uh thirty two years

B: OK

O: Yea

B: So ten years older than you

O: Yea. just ten years. but he's a billionaire.

¹⁷ Larger churches generally have multiple pastors. Often pastors will specialize in a social category, i.e., a youth pastor or a women's pastor; however a specialty in a social category does not always imply identification with that category.

This pastor, one who inspired Omondi to become born again, was also walking evidence of the power of the gospel and faithful living. Omondi considered this man an age mate who came from a similar humble background but has managed not only to succeed but, as Omondi stressed, to become a billionaire. Unlike the political elite in Kenya, often understood to attain their wealth and success through trickery, corruption, or witchcraft, for Omondi this pastor has followed a righteous path—a path that he too can follow—to success, wealth, and influence.¹⁸ When I asked how the preacher was able to accrue such wealth in his thirty-two years, Omondi’s response was simple: “He believed God and he started a small business.”

Many young JoKisumu, Joshua included, are drawn to these churches in particular because they appear to offer a space in which *youth* is not immediately a problematic category. In these churches the aesthetics of urban youth culture is not always seen to index criminality, sin, and the ne’er-do-well as they might in some mainline or spiritualist Pentecostal churches even if it is not modeled at the pulpit. Indeed, for young people like Joshua these churches open up the unusual possibility of realizing a *youthy* Christianity.

Joshua gets saved

As we walked away from a weekly peace-building forum held in Kisumu’s main Anglican Church, Joshua and Omondi told me about a “Youth Alive” event in Nairobi; they needed to collect bus fare for the eight-hour journey. Youth Alive, an annual youth revival put on by the transnational prosperity gospel church, Winners’ Chapel, is a weeklong event filled with

¹⁸ While the young people I worked with rarely discussed witchcraft, on the few occasions they did mention it, it was in terms of the remarkable success of musicians or the power and wealth of politicians.

services, lectures, music, and drama. National gospel acts and international motivators are invited to “rescue all youths from purposelessness, failure, frustration, and destiny damage.”¹⁹

Joshua and Omondi had only recently visited Winners’ Chapel in Kisumu for the first time. There they spoke with a youth minister who invited them to join the nationwide event and enticed them with the possibility of performing at the event. While Omondi and Joshua were practicing Christians, they were also both rappers trying to build careers in the emerging genre of gospel hip hop in Kenya and saw the Youth Alive event less as an opportunity for spiritual edification than as an unusual opportunity to sell a few of their CDs, perform, and get their names circulating outside of Kisumu.

The next time I saw Joshua was after he returned from the weeklong event. When I asked him how it was he told me he got saved. He was born again. He had changed his life. He spoke less about performances than he did about preachers. He was learning, as he put it, to live a “youthful godly life.” As Joshua told me his story of getting saved, I was struck by the central role of sincerity in his narrative, something Joshua called being the “real you” as it was for many of the youth I worked with.²⁰ Sincerity, being the “real you,” was an ongoing concern for Joshua. Indeed, it was a central theme of one the songs he had recorded under the name G-Nex (from “Next Generation”) many months before attending the Youth Alive event. Joshua’s preoccupation in the song, later echoed in his salvation narrative, was with a disconnect between an internal, “real” self and an outward expression of identity. He saw this disconnect as a form of

¹⁹ <http://www.winnersnairobi.org/youth/index.php?flag=youth&yth=2> (last accessed 5/1/2012) The idea of “destiny damage” points to the particular understanding of faith and the future in Winners’ Chapel among other prosperity gospel churches around the globe. “Destiny damage” refers to the potential hindrance or harm that an individual can do to the prosperous (health and wealth) future that God has in store.

²⁰ A further discussion of sincerity among youth and the ethics of fulfilling a divine plan through individual career trajectories appears in the previous chapter.

corruption, it was the source not only of problems for the youth, but also as the source of economic, political, and social failures countrywide. Private firms in Kenya failed, he suggested, because people were doing what they “were not.” The corruption so rife in Kenya presents people with jobs to which they are ill-suited simply because they know the right people, Joshua explained, and when you try to follow a career that doesn’t suit you or that others foist on you, you fail.²¹

This anxiety about sincerity frames Joshua’s story of salvation. His story reveals the realization that the sinfulness of his past was not, as he had imagined, grounded in *youth*, in hip hop, baggy pants, and Sheng. Instead, the sinfulness of his past was rooted in, as he put it, not “walking the talk;” he encouraged youth to embrace salvation without being saved himself. Rebirth could come for Joshua by managing the incongruence between the internal and the external, but it meant altering his interior. By and large, his behavior—his dedication to the gospel and delivering its message in his speech and his music—appeared to be that of someone already born again. But, he lamented, “that change was not in me.” This presented another peculiar node of tension between continuity and rupture for Joshua. His external expression—his aesthetic, his music, and the way he inspired other young people—would appear the same even though its relationship to Joshua’s interior was dramatically different. Even though he should be radically different, he would seem just the same. As I’ll show by analyzing his narrative, genre allows him to manage this problem.

²¹ His concerns about sincerity are not his alone. Indeed, stories circulate across the country about imposter police officers, pastors who promise miracles but only drain pocketbooks, and “fake” HIV medication. “All you need are empty branded packets. You just fill them up with bad flour and put them on the market” an “anticounterfeit” agent reported in Kenya’s *Daily Nation* (7/26/2013) warning citizens of dangerous, contaminated maize meal. People and products are not what they appear to be. In Kenya the misalignment between appearance and reality can be dangerous, even deadly, and, in Pentecostal discourse, it is often framed as sinful.

In what follows, I relay Joshua's narrative as he told it and show how he makes dramatic rupture visible in a story enabled by and infused with continuity. I suggest that by mobilizing a locally-inflected genre as he does, Joshua makes a claim to be recognized in a particular way: as sincere, born again, and *youth*.

Joshua's salvation story

Joshua told me his salvation story over the course of a few hours one afternoon on the porch of Masani Youth Center. While such stories are often a means of inviting conversion (Harding 2000), the interaction between Joshua and me was somewhat different. As a self-styled expert on *youth*, Joshua would often take hours of his time to talk with me about the particulars of youth life in Kisumu. During this conversation, Joshua walked me through his experience of rebirth not so much to invite my own conversion as to become recognizable to me as expert of born-again *youth* as well as urban *youth*.

I had invited his story, telling him that I kept hearing people use the term "born again" and I wanted his help understanding what that meant here in Kenya. He began by speaking in generalities, defining the term for me. Being born again, he explained, is just a way of changing your style. It means changing the way you live your life, it means praying when you wake in the morning and when you sleep at night. It means "transforming to the godly way." He then went on to tell me just how he was born again.

In the months and years leading up to getting saved, he told me, Joshua took part in youth events and forums organized by NGOs, international organizations, and religious and other local organizations. He was often selected to speak to or on behalf of "the youth." He would talk about positive approaches to life and inspire young people to change negative habits. He was

consistently successful in these pursuits. “I would change them,” he explained; he could “crack their melons” because his insights were so amazing. With Joshua’s inspiration, young people were turning away from bad habits, changing their lives, and often getting saved. But Joshua himself was never saved. He was the voice that could inspire people to change, but he did not feel this same change internally. For Joshua this felt insincere; it was sinful. If he was inspiring spiritual rebirth in others, he should be born again.

Over the course of the weeklong Youth Alive event in Nairobi, Joshua heard successful gospel musicians, DJs, producers and quite a few pastors. Some of the musicians were inspiring to him, offering advice on how to live a godly life that was not in conflict with the aesthetics and practices of Kenyan *youth*. He felt he could apply this type of advice to his life in the future and share it with others that he hoped to help. Yet Joshua was still not saved. Most of the pastors he heard were quite average and unremarkable; they dressed well, spoke nicely, but were not particularly compelling or unique. In Joshua’s words, they sang a “common song.” Even though there was an altar call after every sermon and even after some advice sessions, Joshua never felt compelled to walk up to the pulpit, pray and be prayed over, and dedicate himself to rebirth in the spirit.

On the final day of the event a new preacher approached the pulpit and gave his sermon. Although Joshua had heard similar sermons throughout his life and throughout the week, there was something different about this one: the preacher spoke Sheng, the register iconic of masculine, urban, Kenyan *youth*, not the standard English of born-again prosperity gospel Christianity. Joshua listened closely to the story that the preacher told. While compelling, it was not totally novel. The story was a standard tale, from sin to salvation, but the way the preacher told it inspired Joshua in a profound way. As the preacher told his story, Joshua felt that these

words were about actually him. “And I just found,” he told me, “that whatever he was talking about was just me.” At the moment of the altar call, a moment that Joshua had consistently ignored throughout the Youth Alive event as he had throughout his life, Joshua stood up without even thinking. He began walking toward the pulpit. Unaware, as if in a trance, he found himself at the front. He turned around to see a group of other youth following him. He felt as if God had chosen him to be saved that day. He then began to speak, declaring that this time he was not pretending, he was truly giving his life over to God. After being prayed over and getting saved, Joshua met the preacher outside of the hall and repeated over and over, “Thank you for saving my life.”

That is the story of Joshua’s own rebirth, and while it seems largely unremarkable, wholly undramatic, the way that Joshua tells his story is anything but. What I’ve just relayed is the product of teasing out Joshua’s own story from the full narrative he told, which was one that interwove his own experience with that of the preacher who inspired him. Joshua retold the preacher’s tale as evidence of how compelling it was, but as I’ll show in an analysis of the fuller narrative, the embedded story works to make Joshua’s more recognizable as a story of salvation. I suggest it is less Joshua’s story than the poetics of its telling that make him recognizably born again.

The preacher’s salvation story

The preacher was a poor young man living with his mother and a few other family members in the slums of Nairobi. To help support his family, the preacher collected scrap metal around the slum and occasionally engaged in petty theft. Scrap metal collection was territorial in the slum, but the gang leader who controlled the territory took a shine to the young preacher,

allowed him to continue collecting scrap, and eventually invited him over to his home. The young preacher was impressed by the gang leader's wealth and, putting aside any shame, invited him to the home that he shared with his mother and siblings. The gang leader was struck by their poverty and offered the young preacher a new tool to support his family with, a gun. The young preacher did not know how to use a gun, he had never shot one in his life, but he took it and kept it in his house for a few weeks as he contemplated what to do with it. Desperate to find a way to help his family, he finally decided to try using it. He went to the local market, fired a shot into the air, and demanded that everyone lie down. To his surprise, all the market women obeyed. He walked up and down the market row, commanding the saleswomen to put their earnings into a plastic bag. They did so, and the young preacher got away without even encountering the police. When he got home he handed the sack of money to his mother, telling her that he had collected a lot of scrap and was paid well for it. He wasn't even sure how much he had made. His mother counted out the money. Elated with the handsome sum, she proclaimed, "God bless the work of your hands!" Pleased with his work, the young preacher continued his thievery, engaging in bigger and bigger plots. Each time he returned home and handed the booty to his mother she would proclaim, "God bless the work of your hands!" He eventually took up work as an assassin, still taking the proceeds back to his mother, who would always say, "God bless the work of your hands."

The preacher was hired to take part in a great heist in Nairobi where well-to-do members of a women's rotating credit society would meet to take their individual contributions, totaling over a million shillings, to the bank. The four men involved in the heist were to gather in town in the afternoon. The young preacher had been using drugs earlier in the day and, disoriented, lost track of time. He ended up arriving in town hours early for the criminal rendezvous. To pass the

time the young preacher decided to go rest in Uhuru Park, the main city park full of idlers and preachers. That day there was a small revival led by a female preacher taking place. The young preacher sat resting, and upon seeing his co-conspirators got up to meet them. At that moment the female preacher prophesied that there was a man in the park who was part of a gang that was planning on robbing a group of women. She called on this person to approach the stage and find salvation. Hearing that, the young preacher walked purposefully in the opposite direction. He passed a group of women talking among themselves, saying that if the man the female preacher was referring to really knew the wrath of God, he would march right up to the prophetess and hand himself over. The young preacher continued to walk away, still hearing the voice of the female preacher who declared that the potential thief should surrender his life to God or risk dying with his friends. He continued to walk away until he heard the female preacher identify him down to the shirt on his back. He had been singled out; the female preacher was undoubtedly talking about him. He turned around and walked up to the female preacher and surrendered his life and his gun. He and the female preacher took the gun to the local police station to give it up, but the policeman with whom they spoke questioned the sincerity of the young preacher's conversion. Was he feigning conversion to get out of trouble? The female preacher vouched for him, stating that this man would bring great change. Not long after, the very same policeman was spiritually saved by the young preacher.

Later, as he sat down to watch the evening news, the young preacher saw a story about a group of three thieves who were murdered whilst attempting to rob a women's group. It turned out that the plan for the heist was a set-up by an Indian man who felt that the Africans he used as hired guns were getting too powerful and too savvy and decided to have them assassinated. By

being spiritually saved, the young preacher discovered, his physical life was saved. The preacher now leads a congregation of Sheng-speaking former thugs, now faithful youth, in Nairobi.²²

As I discuss further below, the story itself was not remarkable to Joshua, but the register of language the preacher deployed in telling the story. The preacher's use of Sheng, according to Joshua, was amazing and made Joshua feel directly addressed. "And there was one think about that guy that I that made me still remember his preaching" Joshua told me as his story was drawing to a close, "the way he spoke it. it was purely Sheng. And it was a common language for the youths. And I was like 'wow wow wow' ((laughs)) this guy has really picked me out of this." If register made salvation appear possible to Joshua, he uses narrative technique to make it recognizable to his listeners.

"So I tried to picture him as me": Narrative embedding and generic expertise

Joshua told the preacher's story excitedly, laughing and encouraging my surprise at certain moments and my shock at others. But he did not tell the preacher's story simply because it would entertain me or even convert me. He told the story as part of a process of identification; he identified with the preacher as both *youth* and as a born-again Christian. He also wanted me, his audience, to identify him as sincerely born again and recognize his spiritual rebirth as a radical transformation. Joshua's "change," in his idiom, was entirely internal, but his narrative style makes it visible to his audience.

Joshua engages a number of techniques in his narrative to accomplish this identification, strategies that become evident in a closer examination of his linguistic style. The parallels—some explicit, others more subtle—that emerge as he narrates his story and the story

²² See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the "reformed youth" stereotype.

of the preacher are ways of aligning his own salvation experience with a more stereotypical one, making his clearly recognizable as a story of sin to salvation. Joshua encourages the listener to acknowledge that he embodies the same qualities as the preacher in both sin and salvation.

Embedding one story within another forges links between characters or events, making them appear similar. It recruits the audience to acknowledge a “sameness” in meanings or qualities across domains. Laminating and mapping events onto one another can make one narrative readable and recognizable through another. It can elucidate meaning in one narrative time and space through another. Biblical stories embedded in contemporary Christian rhetoric, for example, encourage listeners to see a sameness between the here and now and a biblical space and time. Susan Harding (2000: Chapter 1) details the biblical stories that her American Evangelical interlocutor, Reverend Campbell, embedded in his own narrative about killing his son. Campbell aligns his narrative with stories of Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac and God’s sacrifice of Jesus by embedding abbreviated versions of each in his own narrative. Through narrative alignment the death of Campbell’s son becomes recognizable as a sacrifice. Killing his son was necessary so that he, Campbell, could then be moved to convert nonbelievers.

Standard stories of salvation often incorporate common points on a narrative arc. Joshua’s narrative includes many of these common points (a sinful past, intervention, compulsion, salvation, and, finally, efficacy), however, they are much more evident in the retelling of the preacher’s tale. By explicitly framing the preacher’s story as “just me” Joshua primes the listener to hear these same narrative elements in his own autobiographical story. A young man wants to do well by his family, but gets mixed up in immoral pursuits that snowball to a point beyond his control. Foolishness and greed blind him to the dangers of his actions and it

is only by the grace of God, in the form of a preacher, that death is narrowly escaped. This divine intervention inspires spiritual conviction and conversion.

In the table that follows I identify these narrative elements in both Joshua’s and the preacher’s stories of salvation:

Table 5.1: Narrative elements of the salvation genre

Event	Joshua	Preacher
<i>Sinful past:</i> Misdeed and sin (Some good still comes by the grace of God)	Joshua encouraged other youth to change their lives but he wasn’t born again, he was insincere. (Many youth are inspired to behavior change and rebirth)	The preacher is a thug and assassin, and he lies to his mother about his ill-gotten gains. (He is still able to support her.)
<i>Intervention</i> Being called on directly	Joshua understands the style and themes of this particular sermon as speaking both about him and to him directly.	The female preacher in Uhuru Park identifies the preacher as a thief who will be killed if he does not get saved that day.
<i>Compulsion:</i> Approaching a source of salvation without full awareness	Joshua finds himself walking toward the pulpit without consciously contemplating the decision.	The preacher turns around as if called out by the female preacher.
<i>Salvation:</i> Life is saved, spiritually and sometimes physically	The born-again Joshua repeats to the preacher, “Thank you for saving my life.”	The preacher is converted and later watches the evening news to discover that his partners in crime were killed in the heist.
<i>Efficacy:</i> Development of the power to change other’s lives	A group of youth follows Joshua up to the altar to be born again.	Soon after conversion, the preacher converts the police officer to whom he surrendered. He later leads a congregation of reformed thugs.

Throughout the narrative Joshua encourages his listener to recognize the similarity between the stories, reminding me that the story of the preacher was “just me,” that “I tried to picture him as me,” and “I felt the same as him.” As he was telling the story of the preacher, he

was also telling his own story. In his narrative structure as well as these explicit declarations of stance, Joshua draws direct links between himself and the preacher. Forging connections between the events in each of the stories, Joshua recruits the listener to draw commensurate links between the qualities of the characters. The insincere youth forum attendee is commensurate to the thug; the born-again Joshua before me is “the same” as the efficacious, savvy preacher in Nairobi.

Joshua’s story displays sort of “fluency” in salvation narrative and it is another way Joshua emerges as identifiably born-again Christian to his listeners. He weaves the preacher’s story into his own conversion narrative displaying a mastery of the genre itself as he does with other key stylistic conventions of Pentecostal rhetoric including reduplication, repetition, and reporting internal dialogue. Joshua’s story is also calibrated to fit an appropriate narrative arc.

Two moments in these conversion stories—the compulsion toward salvation and then the construction of a sinful past—exemplify the way style accomplishes alignment between events, characters, space, and time in rather subtle ways. Parallels between the two stories align Joshua with an ideal typical version of the born-again Christian validating him as such. In a fine-grained analysis of a transcript of Joshua’s narrative, I illustrate how those more delicate parallels between his experience and the preacher’s story emerge in telling. In the following three transcripts taken from different points in the narrative I have highlighted the lines in transcripts to which I wish to draw the most attention.

Genre fluency, repetition, reduplication, and parallelism

First, the preacher’s moment of intervention: as you recall, the preacher was going to take part in the heist of a women’s group, but after a mix-up ended up in a park where a Christian

revival was taking place. Resting peacefully and waiting for his thug friends to appear, he began to hear the prophetic words of a woman preaching nearby:

Transcript 5.1

- 86 J: and he was sitting in a place where? there was a certain toilet they were to meet in. so it was he was lo-he
87 was looking in a place that was looking at that toilet. when he sees those guys coming out of that toilet. he
88 says “ok. fine. they have come. now let me go let me go.” so he sat there:: he sat there:: he sat there:: and then
89 he was listening they were preaching? and it (reached?) the point where that woman. “there is somebody
90 among you here. who is:: (2s) having a gang. and he’s planning to go and rob. some women. if you know that
91 is you. get up here.” and when he heard that he stood up on his feet and started walking away.
92 B: away.
93 J: yeah. so he was like walking away walking away walking away walking away walking away then. he meets
94 some women who were like. speaking. the women said. “if that guy really knew. what this woman is talking
95 about is true then he. if I was him. or her I could have just walked my way up there.”
((laughs))
[...]
111 J: or you’ll go to eternal life getting salvation now. then he was like the more he was walking away. the more
112 the voice of that woman was sounding so loud next to him next to him next to him. and whatever was moving
113 away from the crowd and the smaller crowd he:: he found were just speaking about him speaking about him.
114 then he had a t-shirt. a blue t-shirt. and that woman said “that guy is on a blue t-shirt” (3s) ((laughs)) and he
115 was amazed. by that he said “ok now this woman has identified me? let me just go up there” (2s) then he
116 walks *anakwenda* up there. on getting up there. he? surrendered his life and took his gun (2s) gave the woman
117 (2s) then on the same same night when he was watching the television at seven. he saw that. the four friend.
118 the three friends were shot dead?

The preacher is miraculously identified and quite literally saved by the prophetic preacher in Uhuru Park. Joshua’s prosody reproduces the moment of prophecy (Tr 5.1, ln 90). He draws

out the word “is” and follows it with a two-second pause, voicing the female preacher who doesn’t consciously know what she is about to say, the words are flowing through her as prophecy. In Joshua’s autobiographical story (see Tr 5.2) this prophetic voice is echoed—the word “know” is emphasized and repeated; three long pauses, including one seven seconds long, create a sense of prophecy (Tr 5.2, ln 182-183) similar to that in the preacher’s story thereby turning a simple altar call into a moment of divine intervention. Just like the preacher who was called to “get up here” (Tr 5.1, ln 91), Joshua is called to “get up and walk up here” (Tr 5.2, ln 183). Phrasal repetition across the stories encourages the listener to hear these two disparate events as synonymous.

As Joshua continues the preacher’s story, the preacher finds himself faced with divine sign upon divine sign, all of them directing him to surrender his life and surrender his gun. Joshua’s reduplications (in this case, repetition of the phrases “next to him” and “speaking about him”) in lines 112 and 113 mark this divine semiotic bombardment. The reduplication in telling the preacher’s story is iconic and indexical, that is, it both resembles and points to the constant opportunities for spiritual rebirth that Joshua encountered throughout his life. The possibility for salvation was ever present for Joshua at youth events and at the innumerable church services he had attended. His own refusal of spiritual rebirth is parallel to the preacher’s refusal with another reduplication, again this is both iconic and indexical of his own past behavior. The preacher was “walking away walking away walking away walking away walking away” (Tr 5.1, ln 93), mirroring the way Joshua regularly and repetitively ignored the call to salvation.

In Joshua’s autobiographical story (see Tr 5.2), he also rejected the first calls to salvation, but he then he felt a compulsion he could not explain. Like the preacher, he “found” himself drawn to salvation (Tr 5.1, ln 113; Tr 5.2, lns 183, 186, 188). The repetition of the word “found”

in his autobiographical story imbues Joshua’s experience with a sense of divine intervention. There is no intentionality; Joshua and the preacher are both divinely drawn to salvation, they “find” themselves there. With both characters compelled to the altar, Joshua focuses on the physical movement and the preacher’s movement “then he walks *anakwenda* [he’s going] up there” (Tr 5.1, ln 115-116) maps onto his own “walking going up there” (Tr 5.2, lns 183-184) with nearly identical phrasing, albeit using two languages.²³

Transcript 5.2

- 181 J: there was nothing. like, telling me “get up and go.” but when this person was here. it made me. stood up
 182 and go because. he said it very simple. he didn’t () he just said, “I know. (2s) I know. several of you are not
 183 saved. (2s) can you get up and walk up here.” (7s) and. I just found myself. standing up and walking going
 184 up there.
 185 B: and you didn’t even think about it? or did you decide to stand up? or did did you just like find yourself?
 186 J: I found myself, you know, I found myself standing in front.
 187 B: mmm
 188 J: yeah. I didn’t remember how I walked getting up there? and when I looked at my side I found like I am the
 189 first to get up there. as:: when I looked back, I saw a group following me. and I looked at my side I saw them
 190 and I’m like the only person who’s standing in front in here. then:: I looked back and I saw this group
 191 coming (2s) and I said, “*kwani*, how did you walk from there to here?” so fast ((*laughs*)) and reach here the
 192 first (2s) and I said “let me just speak. (let me just speak)” and said “this is the last time I’m pretending about
 193 this.” that’s how I got saved. then. funnily enough, when we walked out of the hall () here again. I met this
 194 guy. and, the first thing that came out of my mouth was like “thank you for saving my life.” ((*laughs*)) that
 195 was the first thing I said to him. because. ok. I didn’t know what I wanted to say to him. because I just met
 196 him and our eyes got caught. because we were like, he’s looking at me and I’m also

²³ This type of code-switching (switching from English to Swahili) is quite common across generations throughout Kenya, and would not be marked as Sheng. See Chapters 2 and 3 for a fuller discussion of language use in Kenya.

looking at him. then I
197 just walked over and said. “thank you for saving my life.” (2s) and. he said uh “can I have
your contact” and
198 I gave him my contacts and all that. then. after leaving him I’m now walking. going. (2s)
the same same word
199 again came into my mind. “thank you for saving my life, thank you for saving my life.
((laughs)) thank you
200 for saving my life” that day that was the only words.

Joshua “finds” himself there at the front, embracing salvation. Somehow Joshua becomes an immediate inspiration to others, he emphasizes twice: “I saw a group following me” (Tr 5.2, ln 189), “I looked back and I saw this group coming” (Tr 5.2, lns 190-191). He raises his voice (group, me, group coming), indicating surprise and engaging me as the listener to share that surprise. Like the preacher who later saved the police officer who questioned him, Joshua becomes almost immediately efficacious, seemingly inspiring conversion in an entire group, a group that is already “following” him (Tr 5.2, ln 189). When he meets the preacher after the service the only words that come to his lips are “Thank you for saving my life.” As Joshua tells the story, he repeats these words four times. Echoing the experience of the preacher whose life was literally saved, Joshua’s repetition of gratitude and emphasis on the word “life” in “thank you for saving my life” (Tr 5.2, lns 199-200) amplifies his own salvation to the level of the preacher’s simultaneous physical and spiritual salvation.

Amplification, sincerity, and constructing a sinful past

As noted above, in conversion narratives born-again Christians juxtapose the self before to the self after, highlighting salvation by contrasting it with depravity. Sinful characters, catalogues of misdeeds, and vile tendencies make conversion seem more compelling and salvation more dramatic. Joshua’s infractions are internal and may seem negligible, but for him

speaking of faith without being born again is insincere and an affront to God. He expounds on the sinfulness of insincerity as he reports internal dialogue (see Transcript 5.3): “trying to change so people’s li::ves. then in me I don’t have that change” (Tr 5.3, ln 137-138), “*kwani* [why?!] what have I been doing.” “I’m doing nothing” (Tr 5.3, ln 144), “but it wasn’t here” ((points to chest)) (Tr 5.3, ln 160). Joshua emphasizes through verbal stress (me, *kwani*, doing, nothing) and with physical gesture (pointing to his chest) in an insistence of the audacity of such insincerity.

Transcript 5.3

- 135 J: and we were like by the end of that story. I was like, “what am I doing here.” (3s)“what is so important that
- 136 I’m doing in this world? that I’m I’m still this way.” because. I was. I tried to picture him as me and I was
- 137 like. I’ve been into so many forums I’ve been spoken, I’ve been speaking positive, stuffs to people:: trying to
- 138 change some people’s li::ves. then in me I don’t have that change.
- 139 B: so it was like you were only talking about the change but not feeling it
- 140 J: yeah yeah. I was just like, “am I? am I among these people or I’m just outside?” because I was li- I was
- 141 feeling I was doing zero job.
- 142 B: ah
- 143 J: yeah. because I was walking to forums () whatever:: speaking on the youths’ behavior changes and I was
- 144 like. *kwani* what have I been doing. and I was like, I’m doing nothing. and (2s) that story touched me and I
- 145 was like. if you know you are here. and he said, he used to walk the way people walk. good lies. he used to
- 146 bash the person. even in ma-Mathare:: Mathare children’s home.
- 147 B: mmm
- 148 J: he used to donate some cash there when he was still a thug. yea. And () even though he was doing all that
- 149 but. he was going there to help. so. I was like, I felt the same as him. because I help people but that change is
- 150 not in me. So I was like. “(what can I do about myself)?”
[...]
- 154 J: yeah I was able to really help some of them and they used to change. and some of them changed even in::
- 155 the church. some of them:: ok. but when I got there I was like I didn’t know I was, I was not saved. I will just
- 156 go there. so I used to
- 157 B: you just knew how to do it

158 J: yeah, I knew
159 B: but it wasn't
160 J: but it wasn't here ((points to chest)) but I knew how to. speak

Joshua's life experience appears commensurable with that story of the preacher as he explicitly aligns his insincerity with the criminality of the preacher, magnifying his insincerity and making it recognizable as sin: "I tried to picture him as me" (Tr 5.3, ln. 136). He recognized his own insincerity in the preacher's hypocrisy, saying "I felt the same as him. because I help people but that change is not in me" (Tr 5.3, ln 149-150). While Joshua would change the lives of youth without changing himself, the preacher he donated funds to an orphans' home in the slums but he would also "bash the person" (Tr 5.3, ln 146) and tell "good lies" (Tr 5.3, ln 145). This direct link between insincerity and criminality amplifies Joshua's insincere past to an unmistakably sinful level.

Joshua draws distinctions between an interior and exterior on two scales that not only map onto one another but also demonstrate the importance of coherence between an interior and exterior for him. Even as he is doing good, helping youth to change for the better, the change is not "in" Joshua (Tr 5.3, ln 138, 150). He wonders if, even though externally righteous, his insincerity excludes him from incorporation into the collective that he is party in converting: "am I? am I among these people or I'm just outside" (Tr 5.3, ln 140). This is the moment in the narrative in which Joshua is convicted by the Holy Spirit; he realizes his sin.

Joshua's turning point comes in a series of quotatives that report internal dialogue. He recounts the questions he asked himself as he listened to the preacher's story. These are questions that demonstrate for the listener an awakening, a sudden awareness, indeed, a revelation. Joshua narrates his inner interrogation: "what am I doing here," (Tr 5.3, ln 135) "what is so important that I'm doing in this world?," and (Tr 5.3, ln 135-136) "(what can I do about

myself)?” (Tr 5.3, ln 150). The final question, voiced with markedly softer prosody, indicates a moment of shift. The self-accusatory rhetorical questions (i.e., “what am I doing here”) shift to a gentler, literal question (i.e., “(what can I do about myself)?”)

Register, recognition, and continuity

Since he narrated these stories as “the same,” I want to return, if briefly, to why Joshua understood these two seemingly quite different stories as compatible. What was it that made this tale so compelling and personally identifiable for Joshua? As he told it, Joshua began to ask himself this same question, what was it about this preacher that inspired his conversion? After all, he had been privy to so many other sermons by so many other preachers, but this preacher’s testimony did exactly what it should do: it inspired conviction, revelation, and salvation. Those other preachers, ones who dressed impeccably and spoke admirable English, signified a Christian ideal that was recognizable, but not personally identifiable to Joshua. The story, but more importantly the way the preacher told it, was startling to Joshua. In the register, Sheng, Joshua heard authenticity. In the story itself, Joshua heard not only what he described as “real life,” but he heard the story of his own life. The preacher’s enregistered authenticity and referential cogence inspired Joshua’s rebirth. Joshua saw himself in the preacher’s story, he reported, “and I just found that whatever he was talking about was just me.”

Recall that Joshua regularly attends forums directed at and interpellating youth.²⁴ He uses Sheng habitually and, like many young people in Kenya, recognizes it as a fundamental emblem of *youth* in the country. In a sense, he builds his life out of being “a youth.” Joshua’s alignment with a positively valued *youth* and his recognition of the pastor’s archetypal display of his

²⁴ See Introduction and Chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of youth forums and serial forum attendees.

inhabitation of the category allow him to understand and re-present his story and that of the preacher as the same, even though the events of each story may appear profoundly different. The solution to Joshua's initial conundrum, how to be himself, savvy, urban *youth*, and, at the same time born again, became visible to him through language. The testimony of a successful, sincere and effective preacher in Sheng made salvation seem possible. He realized the potential for salvation in a continuity between his life before and his life after being reborn. There was no need for him to don the "nice suits" and speak the "nice English" he once identified with born-again Christians. However, a story of "remaining the same" isn't recognizable as one of salvation. Joshua needed to make apparent the radical break he felt internally, a shift from insincere to sincere. By retelling the preacher's story, nesting it within his own autobiographical story, Joshua made parallels with an archetypal salvation story, one of radical rupture, and with an archetypal born-again type, the preacher. Embedding the story along with subtle linguistic gestures in his narration Joshua claims recognition for having made a radical break with the past, and being born again.

Conclusion

Joshua's story should seem remarkably familiar. Salvation narratives like his are part of a transnational Pentecostal Christian genre, one that simultaneously produces and is a product of an imagined global Christian ecumene.²⁵ These stories share fundamental features: a narrative style, structure, and theme that make them globally recognizable as different versions of the same story. This story and its generic form are ever-emergent in the imaginary of the global

²⁵ Detailed examples of these narratives abound in scholarly literature, from across Africa (e.g., Engelke 2008; Marshall 2009; Meyer 1998), to Latin America (e.g., Gooren 2010b), in the Caribbean (e.g., Hurbon 2001), the Pacific (e.g., Keane 1997; Robbins 2004), and North America (e.g., Gooren 2010b; Harding 2000).

Christian ecumene, an imaginary that is becoming increasingly important in global politics and economics (Coleman 2000). Invoking the generic conventions of a salvation narrative, born-again Christians actively take part in and reproduce this imaginary of this global Christian ecumene. Sharing a way of speaking about autobiographical experience that is understood as a way of seeing the world and being aware of God's presence in it works to produce an imaginary through which Christians across the globe, to some extent or another, see themselves in one another. Engaging closely with the particular linguistic style of these narratives, we can see more clearly how Christians like Joshua manage the tensions between the global and the local as well as continuity and rupture in everyday practice.

These stories are also familiar and highly recognizable locally. Joshua's narrative is exemplary, but far from uncommon. Indeed, Omondi told me his salvation story, one that beautifully illustrated the conventions and narrative arc of the genre. Church services are full of these tales about the path from sin to salvation.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, the narrative style of locating and expressing the sincere self is a fundamental part of *youth* with which many of my young informants identified. For them *youth* is something authentic, valuable, and ethical.

I intend the "realizing" of a *youthy* Christianity in two senses: to become aware of and to bring to fruition. The Sheng used by the preacher is what made Joshua aware of the possibility of a *youthy* Christianity. Joshua's alignment with it effectively brings it to fruition in his own life by getting born again. Reconciling *youth* and Christianity, which Joshua worried were incommensurable, is a further rejoinder to widely circulating stereotypes of youth as idle or immoral. It makes a claim for the fundamentally ethnical and sincere qualities of *youth*, those to which Joshua and so many other young JoKisumu sought to be recognized as embodying.

In the following chapter I address a rather remarkable institutional effort to reconfigure and model *youth* in Kenya. Like Joshua's *youthy* Christianity, the hero *youth* of the following chapter acts as a corrective or softening of the widely circulating negative stereotype of the idle, dangerous, Sheng-speaking "youth."

CHAPTER 6

KUJENGA MAYUTS (BULIDNG THE YOUTH): STANDARDIZING YOUTH IN A KENYAN COMIC BOOK

Shujaaz is a comic book that first appeared in Kenya in 2010 in the lead up to a controversial constitutional referendum that would see voters return to the polls for the first time since the contested December 2007 presidential election.¹ The violence that followed the election, which played out largely along ethnic lines, was widely understood to be enacted by idle youth but orchestrated by a corrupt political elite (Ashforth 2009; Human Rights Watch 2008).² The events brought long-standing anxieties about Kenya's "youth problem" to the fore in public discourse. As the narrative propagated by the state and international aid agencies went, "idle youth" were susceptible to the whims of corrupt elders and they might be lured into the ranks of criminal gangs. Youth lacked opportunities for work or formal training after leaving secondary school and illegal and immoral pursuits offered ways of making a living—or if not a living, at least a little cash. Without action, endangered youth could become dangerous youth.

Shujaaz,³ meaning "heroes" in Sheng, represents one of many efforts across the country to manage Kenya's youth problem. Along with NGOs, international development agencies, and

¹ Divisions between the opposition and support for the constitutional referendum, which ended up passing, fell along strikingly similar lines to the 2007 presidential election, heightening anxieties that the return to the polls would see a repeat of the devastating violence that followed that election.

² See Introduction for a lengthier discussion of the post-election violence and the media portrayals of youth involvement.

³ "*Shujaaz*" is derived from the Sanifu Swahili *shujaa* (pl. *mashujaa*). *Shujaaz* also includes a 6-day weekly radio program that is about 15 minutes long and airs on upwards of 30 radio stations across the country. A few of my secondary school-aged informants reported listening to the radio program on occasion. The campaign also has a social media presence. *Shujaaz* also launched a television show, *Jongo Love*, in 2012 after I completed my fieldwork in Kisumu. Now in its third season, *Jongo Love* is about sex, love, and relationships in the slums of Kisumu. My focus here, however, is squarely on the *Shujaaz* in form of the comics.

the state, *Shujaaz* counsels behavior change, national peace building, and entrepreneurialism, but it does so in a rather unusual format: comic books. A relatively uncommon media form in Kenya, these comics are a remarkable artifact of institutional efforts to manage Kenya's youth.⁴ *Shujaaz* consists of a multi-modal representation of a social category; *youth* emerges in language, images, and plotlines. As a comic book—something that relies on graphic representation of language and sketched people and places—complicating aspects of social identity like ethnicity can be erased in favor of forefronting characters' youth as the defining social characteristic. The model of youth presented in *Shujaaz*, however, is not simply a reflection of reality as manifold and complex as it is. *Shujaaz* represents a unique institutional intervention into the enregisterment of *youth* in Kenya. Along with its stories and characters, *Shujaaz*'s remarkable linguistic style creates a new typification of Kenyan youth and presents it as an ideal, indeed a standard for *youth* in the country.

Much like language standardization (see Bonfiglio 2002, Errington 2000, Silverstein 1996), standardization in this sense works to erase problematic difference and amplify an

⁴ While I did see NGO and development agencies use comic strips or posters with a paneled format similar to comics in some HIV and domestic violence prevention campaigns, I did not encounter other full comic books in the course of my fieldwork.

Shujaaz's methods for promoting behavior and conflict management resonate with widespread projects dubbed "theater for development" or entertainment-education, and the comics represent a recent trend in mobilizing popular media for development goals. Like development-themed television and radio programs *Shujaaz* circulates nationally. It appears monthly as free insert in the *Daily Nation* newspaper, an English language daily that has the widest circulation in the country, and at some Safaricom kiosks. However, the material format of *Shujaaz* comics allow for significant re-circulation; comics are passed from reader to reader in ways that development television and radio programs do not. While video and audio recordings of television programs can certainly re-circulate through such vehicles as YouTube or pirated DVDs/VCDs/CDs, local development programming such as *Siri* or *The Team* rarely re-circulate in this way.

imagined sameness across a social category in order to produce group identification mediated by a semiotic form. It creates a model by which iterations of the form can be judged as appropriate or inappropriate, ideal or aberrant. However, standards are not simply plucked from the real world. They are constructions born of ideology that have enduring effects on structures of power and status. But first they must be recognized by those they are meant to regulate. *Shujaaz* represents an early point in a project of standardization, one in which a model of both a social category and an associated register are presented but not yet hegemonic.

In this chapter I tease apart the *Shujaaz* model of standard youth and suggest that it represents an unusual effort to fulfill the goals of international development agencies (and the state to a certain degree) by promoting individual responsibility, micro-enterprise, and self-help as solutions to the dilemmas facing youth in contemporary Kenya. *Shujaaz* works to manage Kenya's "youth problem" by modeling an ideal: young people adept at navigating and thriving within the structural and economic conditions of late capitalism and reforming a corrupt political system from the grassroots. The *youth* ideal, hero youth or *shujaaz*, emerges as a distinct type in contrast to the Janus-faced image of youth—the innocent child and the dangerous thug, the future and its breakdown—familiar around the world (see J. and J.L. Comaroff 2005). They are youth who are working to protect the endangered and fight against the dangerous in their own communities. They have an entrepreneurial spirit and a profound faith in the future as they fight against the forces of tribalism and corruption that threaten the liberal democratic, "post-ethnic" future of the nation.

In what follows, I analyze the different ways *Shujaaz* constructs "hero youth" by unpacking characters and their stories as well as the ways they are represented through image and language. *Shujaaz*'s efforts are intended to operate as both models of and for Kenyan youth.

Readers should recognize themselves in the pages of the comic. They should recognize their own sartorial choices, their own linguistic style, and their own predicaments. Readers are meant to think of themselves in the comic's fictional stories and then, when they face these situations in reality, they are forearmed with a knowledge of how they—as ideal youth, hero youth—should respond.⁵

Subtler, however, is the way this model of and for hero youth emerges through linguistic register in *Shujaaz*. As elaborated in Chapters 2 and 3, Sheng is recognized in Kenya as an indexical icon of its speakers—that is, it is seen to both point out and bear resemblance to those who deploy it. I argue that in *Shujaaz*, language is a site of intervention precisely because of this semiotic relationship between Sheng and youth. It works as a clasp where manipulation of a semiotic form by one group works to remodel a different social group associated with the form (Gal 2007). In this case, the authors of *Shujaaz* with the funding and direction of a range of international development agencies manage the image of Kenyan youth as they simplify and soften the Sheng iconic of it. Certain ideological features of the register like opacity, mutability, and hyper-localness conflict with the hero youth model, which values comprehensibility and a post-ethnic sensibility. In the pages of the comic, these features are erased, inverted, and counteracted. Such linguistic interventions not only refigure Sheng, but work through an indexical iconic relationship to re-figure Sheng's speakers, modeling them as modern, post-ethnic citizens.

⁵ Young people in Kenya are by and large familiar with (and often voice appreciation for) this sort of behavior modeling. Indeed, “lessons” are everywhere. When I asked a small group of 15 and 16 year old boys why they liked *Soy Tu Dueña*, a Mexican telenovela that was exceedingly popular at the time, they responded they liked the lessons in it. Perplexed, I asked what lessons were those. They explained that they learned about how to treat a woman properly in a romantic relationship.

On a larger level, I argue, *Shujaaz* is working to manage signs-of-youth. I argue in Chapter 1 that qualities like restriction (freeness/constraint), modernity (modern/backwards), struggle (strain/ease) are central elements of *youth* as a semiotic cluster and I suggest here that *Shujaaz* represents an effort to direct the deployment and uptake of those signs in particular ways; it aims to temper freeness with responsibility, to offer hope within struggle, and to insist on an intelligibility of modernity.

A Well Told Story

Shujaaz follows the stories of four main characters as they navigate the challenges of youth in contemporary Kenya, or at least those challenges most widely represented in media and other institutional discourses. Boyie, Maria Kim, Charlie Pele, and Malkia struggle against corruption, thuggery, and ethnic chauvinism while also coming up with new ideas for making money and supporting themselves.

Shujaaz is produced by Well Told Story (WTS), a Kenyan communications firm. While WTS is run by British expatriate, Rob Barnet, the majority of staff and creative team are young Kenyans.⁶ The comic is sponsored by the Kenyan government and a wide range of international aid organizations and corporations.⁷ Its aim is printed in various iterations on the front cover: to “inspire,” “empower,” and “*kujenga*” (Sw.: build) Kenyan youth.

⁶ The authors and artists that create *Shujaaz* are rarely represented in *Shujaaz*'s international publicity—that appears to be one of Barnet's main roles. Barnet proudly announces of the creative team in interviews: “they're just like our audience” he explains, because their average age is 23.

⁷ Barnet has also worked for the Ford Foundation and the Kuona Trust, a center for visual arts in Nairobi. In addition to being the director of Well Told Story, Barnet is the “face” of *Shujaaz* to the development community. In 2012, he gave numerous interviews, a Nairobi “TED talent search” talk, and a presentation at a “Communication is Aid” conference in Nairobi. (For the



Plate 6.1: Covers of Shujaaz with various named aims, “*kujenga*,” “inspiring”, and “empowering” Kenyan youth.

WTS describes itself as a social communications firm that “creates tangible, shared value for our audiences, our partners, and ourselves.”⁸ Aside from *Shujaaz* they have produced radio, print, and social media focused on social issues from early marriage to the stigma of HIV/AIDS. Financial sponsorship or “partnership” with WTS in the production of *Shujaaz* has evolved over the course of its publication, but it is clear that *Shujaaz* is a development project. International agencies including USAID, the British High Commission, and the Kenya German Development Cooperation (GTZ) were early sponsors of the comics. The list of sponsors grew (and continues to grow) over the course of its publication to include a number of NGOs with a variety of aims including sexual and reproductive health, modernization in farming and animal husbandry, democratic citizenship, and transparency in government.

TED talk see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPm9wWkt1wg>, For the Communication is Aid talk, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5xxxEd5p98).

⁸ <http://wts.co.ke/> (last accessed 4/1/2014).

Following the trail of funding, however, tends to lead back to nationally and privately backed aid agencies from the North Atlantic.⁹ In 2012, WTS reported that 40% of their funding came from corporate sponsorship, something that became more and more visible as runs of the comic went on (Chonghaile 2013). Logos of other major corporations including Nike and Google joined the ubiquitous Safaricom logos present from the very first issue.¹⁰ Like other sponsors, corporate sponsors direct some of the comic's content. For example, Google-sponsored issues offer lessons on internet searches and online translation. Advice on farming and husbandry often appear in issues sponsored by organizations like Research Into Use (RIU).

Two of *Shujaaz*'s early corporate sponsors, Safaricom and the Nation Media Group, also played a major role in its distribution. Published monthly, *Shujaaz* is distributed as an insert in the English language *Saturday Nation* newspaper (published by the Nation Media Group) and free at many of the Safaricom kiosks around the country where Kenyans purchase airtime and send or receive cash.

⁹ Exemplars of these internationally backed NGOs operating in Kenya and sponsors of *Shujaaz* include: Tupange, Research Into Use (RIU), and Twaweza. Tupange is the "brand name" of the Kenyan Urban Reproductive Health Initiative, which is funded largely by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and is associated with Marie Stopes (a UK based health charity that is also a direct sponsor of *Shujaaz*), Johns Hopkins, and the National Co-ordinating Agency for Population Development among others. RIU is funded by the British Department for International Development (DfID) and part of the "strategy for research on sustainable agriculture." Twaweza, founded in Tanzania and funded by American, British, Dutch, and Swedish agencies, is an East Africa-wide initiative focused on "social change" and "transparent governance."

¹⁰ Safaricom is Kenya's largest telecommunications firm that until just recently dominated the mobile phone and data markets across the country. Google has displayed interest in Kenya relatively recently, identifying it both as a market and a new source of technological talent and ingenuity. In 2012 *Shujaaz* began dedicating entire pages to educating its readers on the very basics of using Google as a search engine. Space does not allow for a longer discussion of internet and technological use practices in Kenya, but suffice to say that a mobile phone (sometimes smart, often not) is the most common tool for accessing the internet, although cyber cafés are still quite popular.

WTS insists that the basis of their storylines are grounded in research and use the term “scientific” to describe their communication, aligning their with accounting practices in many international development agencies in which defined metrics are sought after as indicators and evidence of a program’s success (Merry 2011). WTS field tests storylines and themes in advance of publication, often in the Mathare slums in Nairobi, to feel out their audience, determine what their messages should be and evaluate the relative effectiveness of the messages delivered through the comics. They run focus groups, develop impact surveys, and host an in-house call center to “consult with our audience.”¹¹

I will discuss *Shujaaz*’s messages further below, but I want to first consider *Shujaaz*’s audience and their uptake of the comic. The audience, for WTS, is rather broad; they aim to reach individuals between the ages of 13 and 34 living in urban, peri-urban, rural, and slum areas across the country (Gibson 2013). An impact study conducted by Synovate (Steadman) for GTZ in 2010 touted the diversity of *Shujaaz*’s audience, which they claim is wide ranging in terms of socioeconomic status (from “very poor” to “relatively stable”), age (13-35), as well as educational background and aspiration. In this impact survey, Synovate highlights the influence that *Shujaaz* had on individuals “across the spectrum of the ‘youth’ category” (Synovate 2010: not paginated); suggesting that a variety of young people took important lessons away from *Shujaaz* about soaking seeds before planting them, resolving conflicts, and devising business plans.

WTS reports publishing runs of 500,000 monthly and estimates that each copy is read by at least ten individuals (Barnett 2012). While its readership is likely far fewer than the millions WTS estimates, *Shujaaz* does get around with its widest circulation in rural and peri-urban areas (Gibson 2013). Students occasionally bring copies to schools and *Shujaaz* circulates among

¹¹ <http://wts.co.ke/research.php> (last accessed: 8/4/2014)

friends or family members who simply want something to flick through or read while sitting around together.¹²

Rural youth are perhaps the largest readership of *Shujaaz* in the country (Gibson 2013) and while I conducted the majority of my fieldwork in urban Kisumu, I was able to gain a sense from young rural-to-urban migrant interlocutors of the social marginalization and distance felt by rural people from urban sociality. In a rather remarkable way, *Shujaaz* makes the urban and rural commensurable through shared experience (of, for example, corruption), but more importantly the representation of language use, which I will elaborate further below. The comics draw rural readers into the hero youth model, which has a particular sensibility of urban modernity embedded in it. With rural and urban characters and storylines that are not radically different, *Shujaaz* makes all youth ultimately tokens of the same general type—a departure from most institutional typologies of youth in Kenya that identify rural and urban youth as facing markedly different social challenges.

The audience for *Shujaaz* is not simply imagined in the Andersonian sense, exemplars are actually reproduced and represented in the pages of the comic itself. WTS provides evidence for this appropriate and expected uptake of the *Shujaaz* stories by individual readers in nearly every issue. Photographic and textual features of the living, breathing young readers who have been “inspired” and “empowered” by the comics bridge the gap between the fictional world of comic

¹² In Kenya periodicals have a surprisingly long shelf life. Daily newspapers are retained and recirculate regularly, perhaps both a cause and result of Kenya’s remarkably high literacy rate which is estimated at around 80% (of course the meaning of that number is rather ambiguous see Collins 1995). I received three national dailies, the most widely circulating *Daily Nation* and *Standard* (both English language papers) and the markedly less popular Swahili language daily, *Taiifa Leo*. After a month or two, when some of the members of the Masani Youth group learned I received these papers, they asked for my old copies. Thereafter I regularly strapped stacks of them onto the rack of my bicycle and pedaled them out to the youth center, much to the amusement of the many people I passed on the 30-minute ride to the center.

book and the actual lives of its readers, the features link the narrated world with the real one. Through the pictured exemplary readers who have successfully figured “hero youth,” WTS shrinks the gap between aspiration or possibility and reality. They draw on evidentiary connection between ideal and real, incorporating icons of actuality in the form of photos and written testimonials into the hand-drawn world of comics.¹³ Readers featured in *Shujaaz*’s pages offer testimonials of the ways the comics have helped them; they write about making money by raising rabbits, successfully fighting sexual harassment in schools, and carrying on inter-tribal romantic relationships. Not unlike testimonials on television commercials or even in Christian testimony, these stories of personal experience are carefully curated claims of effectiveness. It goes without saying that the real-life stories that appear in the pages of *Shujaaz* are validations of its message and narrative.¹⁴ They are interstitial tissue between a model of Kenyan *youth* and model for hero *youth*.

¹³ Another notable instance of the use of photographs within the comic is a flashback Charlie Pele has to the 2007/8 post-election violence. His sketched figure is superimposed over photographic images of young men looting and burning small shops as if the events were too real to depict through drawing.

¹⁴ I read these testimonials with a degree of skepticism because this mode of testimonial has become an increasingly valuable speech genre in Kenya. Validating the efficacy of programs and services, especially those provided by NGOs and international aid organizations, is an important way of expressing appreciation and retaining resources. These testimonials often verge on hyperbole, talk of life changing is common.



Plate 6.2: Testimonials in the pages of *Shujaaz*. Eunice Mwangi (upper right) is highlighted as the “hero of the month” for rejecting tribalism. Other readers write in thanking *Shujaaz* and DJ B for lessons about the problems of alcoholism, the importance of youth groups, as well as advice on selling new varieties of sweet potato and dried fruits.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I never came across a young person who explicitly attributed life changes to *Shujaaz* in the way photographed people in its pages did. Nor did I see *Shujaaz* circulate with the rapidity and regularity that WTS claims. People—both young and old—did read copies of it and they did indeed share it with others who wanted something to flick through. My delight at the comics was rarely matched by that of my young informants’. They saw the comics as novel and entertaining, but not life changing. Boys in their second year of secondary school at Lake Victoria Boys’ in Kisumu enjoyed access to some of the new Sheng in the comic books and they appreciated the stories and lessons in it; but the fourth year students at the same school openly dismissed the Sheng as passé by the time it reached *Shujaaz*’s pages. Their dismissal of the register as represented doesn’t mean that they did not read the comics. Instead, their dismissal of them could be read as taking a stance in relation to the texts, they

positioned themselves as temporally ahead of the comics. Put simply, they were cooler than the comic books.¹⁵ Others—jobless secondary school leavers like Boyie, *Shujaaz*'s central character—paged through the comics, confirmed they knew all of the new words in the glossaries and moved on with little interest in the stories. These young men preferred different newspaper inserts like *Pulse* (in *The Standard*) and *DN2* (in the *Daily Nation*) that covered pop culture, music, and new media, inserts that appear primarily in standard English.¹⁶

Instead of its readers, many of my young informants who had finished or left school imagined themselves as the potential producers of such texts. Visual artists, musicians, dancers, and actors, these young people regularly volunteered to teach and train their juniors. They produced their own didactic films, dances, and songs. Recall Dismas (see Chapter 1), who wrote hip hop lyrics encouraging his fellow youth to avoid drugs and alcohol. Eunice, one of the Kwetu dancers, even ended up a few years after my fieldwork as a star on the *Shujaaz* spin-off television show *Jongo Love*. Rather than the objects of the clasps, these young people fancied themselves the producers of the clasps that manage a social group by manipulating a semiotic form.

As I proceed into the following sections I examine how ideal hero *youth* is modeled in *Shujaaz* through characters, plots, and registers to suggest that this model encourages a distinctly neoliberal subjectivity—one that is entrepreneurial and self-reliant with democratic values.

¹⁵ Not unusual for my time in Lake Victoria Boys, a group of Form 3 students (aged 16-18) all rolled their eyes at me when I asked how they got to know the newest Sheng from Nairobi. “We travel to Nai, Eliza!” one young man insisted, annoyed that I would think their lives were restricted to Kisumu.

¹⁶ A further discussion of language and reading/writing practice appears in Chapter 2. The exception to the use of standard English in these periodicals is occasional and widely-known Kenyan slang. In addition one page Nairobi glitterati run down penned by entertainment journalist, Smitta Smitten, appears in *Pulse*. Smitten—an accomplished playwright and poet—writes his column in an even more accessible Sheng than *Shujaaz*, a variety one of my informants called “English with Sheng mixed in.”

The *shujaaz* and their stories

Whatever its funding or end goals, *Shujaaz* is a comic book. Like any other comic book, *Shujaaz* has heroes and villains. The hero youth, those models of ideal citizenship, become most recognizable as they avoid and thwart their nemeses. There are a few—largely unnamed—individual recurrent personified villains in the pages of *Shujaaz*. A manipulative older man known only as “godpapa” is one, he often appears with a crew of young men willing to do his bidding. Rather than set up against recurring archrivals, *Shujaaz*’s hero youth fight against a villainous phenomenon: corruption.

Corruption along with entrepreneurialism, which is something like its antidote, seep into nearly every storyline. They underlie seemingly unrelated plots in *Shujaaz*. Romance becomes entangled with ethnic chauvinism, getting clean water requires confronting unethical state agents, and starting a small business is the way to avoid gangs. In nearly every issue in my corpus characters confront a variety of practices that are lumped together as corrupt and antithetical to development. These practices range from state officials soliciting bribes to young men stealing public water pipes and they are often explicitly labeled “corruption.” Corruption, and its characterological forms—various types of elder males as well as thuggish young men—are set in stark contrast to the hero youth. Hero youth avoid corruption, refusing to join gangs, and they work against it, bravely confronting elders and their tribalism. Entrepreneurialism represents one path of avoidance, its self-reliance obviates dependence on corrupt men and corrupt means for support.

The comic’s main characters—the hero youth—simultaneously represent and reproduce a typology of youth prevalent in contemporary Kenya, a typology that is dominant in development discourse and widely recognizable to young people. Readers are meant to see themselves in one

(or more) of these four characters, recognizing their own predicaments and seeing potential futures. Indeed, a self-assessment quiz asking which character you resemble appeared in *Shujaaz*'s one year anniversary issue.¹⁷ Below, I offer sketches of the four main characters that appear in the comic, the hero youth themselves, each of whom has his or her own recurrent storyline. I also describe a fifth character, a thuggish boy who means well. He's not hero youth, but represents a potential path out of corruption. I then return to *Shujaaz*'s central themes, entrepreneurialism and corruption, and elaborate two exemplary stories. *Shujaaz*'s authors intend these stories both to represent everyday experiences of Kenyan youth and to model the "appropriate" ways of dealing with struggle. Throughout, I demonstrate how a notion of *youth* is de-masculinized, de-ethnicized, and distanced from a prevalent negative youth stereotype of anonymous, marauding young men.

Boyie

Boyie is the central character in *Shujaaz*. A recent secondary school graduate, he is 19 years old and jobless. He wears baggy jeans and a big purple jacket, noticeably patched. He keeps his hair in short dreadlocks and his round glasses are held together with tape. Boyie is recognizably cool, but his hipness doesn't come from wealth or access to the latest fashion. We rarely encounter Boyie's kin, and when we do, we see a dying widowed mother and scheming uncles. Boyie is remarkably self-reliant.

In a small corrugated tin shack, Boyie has managed to build an FM radio transmitter from which he delivers his message to the youth across the country under the moniker DJ B. Boyie was troubled to discover many of his old schoolmates had joined a youth "self-help" group that

¹⁷ Six options appear for the character you as a reader resemble, the four hero youth along with Chuxx and Charlie Pele's father.

acted more like a gang of thugs demanding money from innocent people. They were dangerous and easily bought by elders meddling in local elections. His concern for his thuggish age-mates inspires his radio messages which center around the ways young people can make money (Sh.: *kuchapa dooh*) by other means. He talks about own ideas and those sent to him from around the country, all are simple and all encourage entrepreneurialism and liberal democratic ideals to one degree or another. DJ B shares techniques for growing *sukumawiki* (Sw.: dark, leafy greens) in urban areas using gunny sacks as planters or raising healthy chickens, he encourages his listeners to read the new draft constitution and vote their consciences, and he urges young voters not to be being swayed by small bribes or intimidation.

Maria Kim

Maria Kim is a Form 3 student and an orphan who is also struggling to raise her little brother on her own. A beautiful young woman with long hair, she wears fashionably tight capri pants when she's not in uniform.¹⁸ Maria Kim is constantly harassed by men on the street, but she rebuffs their advances and offers of material support in exchange for her affections. She doesn't need their money because she knows how to budget well. She advocates for the disabled, sensitizing the community to the challenges they face. Maria Kim often worries about her future and that of her little brother but she perseveres, protecting and setting a good example for her young brother without forgetting to have fun with her friends now and again.

¹⁸ Maria Kim's uniform is somewhat unusual in that her skirt falls well above her knees. No schoolgirl I encountered (either in school, town, or at various school festivals) was allowed to wear a skirt above the knee. While not a reflection of reality, Maria Kim's style was what the Nam Lolwe students yearned for in a uniform—short, tight skirts were decidedly “cuter” than their long, pleated versions.

Charlie Pele

Charlie Pele is in late primary school and lives with his backwards father somewhere in the Rift Valley after they were displaced during the 2007/8 post-election violence. Charlie Pele loves nothing more than playing soccer, and proudly sports his homemade soccer jersey (“*Kama Rooney!*” Sw.: Like [Wayne] Rooney!), unfortunately pink rather than red owing to a botched dye-job.¹⁹ But Charlie Pele has real responsibilities on the family’s very small farm. His father is resistant to new farming techniques and is an unapologetic ethnic chauvinist (although his ethnicity is left undefined in the comics). Charlie Pele struggles to convince his father to practice new agricultural methods and warns authorities about the hate speech and incitement of his father and his father’s friends. Charlie Pele, although small and fun-loving, is not afraid to confront his elders when he knows what is right.

Malkia

Malkia is a sassy school-aged girl and a bit of a tom boy who lives on the coast and spends a great deal of time discovering, contemplating, and cultivating her talents, especially comedy—Malkia is queen of *mchongoano* (Sw.: insult jokes).²⁰ She works for democratic ideals in schools and is deeply concerned about equity and fairness in institutions across the country. She touts the benefits of reorganizing student leadership around a counselor model from an older

¹⁹ Wayne Rooney is a striker for Manchester United Football Club in the English Premier League. The league is wildly popular across Kenya as evidenced by the packed pubs at match time, young men donning the jersey of their favorite squad, and team crests plastered on *matatus*.

²⁰ Mchangoano are similar to “your mama” jokes in America. While they commonly invoke ethnic sleights, Malkia’s jokes never do. Her jokes are more often about being stupid or skinny. For example, “*Nyinyi wote ni madanda hucount vidole zenu na calculator*” (Sh.: You all are so stupid you count your fingers with a calculator) or “*We ni mkonda ukisimama kwa ukuta watu wanasema ni crack*” (Sh.: You are so skinny when you stand against a wall people say it’s a crack).

disciplinary, prefect-model and learns important lessons about hard work in the rural areas when she is on school holidays.²¹ Although from the coast, a predominantly Muslim area, Malkia displays no sartorial evidence of religion (no headscarf or *buibui*), instead donning a tank top, baggy pants and mussed up short hair when not in school uniform.



Plate 6.3: Our Shujaaz protecting the integrity of the Kenyan nation (in the form of the flag) from the looming specter of corruption (in the shadowy form of an elder male). From left to right: Boyie (DJ B), Malkia, Charlie Pele, and Maria Kim.

²¹ The shift from student leaders labeled “prefects” to those labeled “counselors” in state-run schools took place in 2010. This model, in which students chose their leaders (although they had to be vetted by teachers and administrators), was intended to foster more open and mutually beneficial relationships among students as well as among students, teachers and administrators. In my experience in secondary schools the shift in leadership nomenclature did not have an equivalent shift in power and disciplinary relationships in schools.

Chuxx

Chuxx is an outlier among the characters I describe. Occasionally one of Maria Kim's harassers, Chuxx is lazy, thuggish, and crass. He is fat, wears a scowl, a backwards baseball cap, a gold chain with his name, and a big green hoodie at all times. But Chuxx is different from the other nameless thugs in the comics in that we catch glimpses of his home life and his life story. Chuxx was inattentive and idle in school and never learned how to read or speak English properly. He was lazy when he went out to visit his rural kin who were shocked at his work ethic. He drinks too much and wants to make money out of nothing. However, we also see the occasional moment where Chuxx wants to change, he wants to be a father to his child born out of wedlock, but can't see a way to be a good provider. Chuxx serves as a foil and a warning for *Shujaaz* readers. He's a ne'er-do-well but one redeemable through hard work. In the results of a quiz to determine what character you resemble, those identified as "like Chuxx" (Sw.: *kama Chuxx*) are chastised and told, "*Tafuta jambo ambalo uko poa ku-do na unaeza find out kuwa unaeza ishi maisha poa kwa jasho yako!*" (Sh.: Look for something that you are good at doing and you'll find you will be able to make a good living from your own sweat!)

Mitigating youth

Our hero youth, the characters in *Shujaaz*, are intended to represent a range of youth types in contemporary Kenya: urban and rural, male and female, school age and beyond. The characters presented in *Shujaaz* expand a stereotype of "youth" well beyond the young, urban, jobless male that dominates in popular media as well as Africanist scholarly literature (e.g., Christiansen, et al. 2006, Honwana and DeBoeck 2005) and opens up space for *youth* to be recognized as a solution and not simply a problem. The thuggish young man stereotype is of

course not entirely absent in the pages of *Shujaaz*; Boyie's former schoolmates and Maria Kim's harassers are thuggish and idle. But what is important is that these thugs neither fit nor are incorporated into the ideal model of youth in the pages of the comic book. Aside from Chuxx, they are shadowy and nameless. They provide a contrast against which the hero youth are set, and these thugs are bundled together with the elder men in the comics into the forces of corruption that are fundamentally threats to the nation.

The four hero youth characters play on dominant youth stereotypy, but they temper it. Boyie is not overly-masculine. Unlike Chuxx, he is slight and cerebral. Maria Kim dresses in hip, modern, and even sexy clothes, but refuses sexual advances. As I will suggest below with respect to language, these characters are de-masculinized, de-ethnicized, and asexual. Their model softens youth into something that fits more easily within development goals. Problems are simplified and *youth* becomes something less complicated and internally contradictory. In the pages of *Shujaaz*, *youth* is flattened.

Unlike the ways my own young informants reshaped images of youth in Kenya by complicating, diversifying, and expanding them, *Shujaaz* strips away problematic qualities of *youth*, softening it and simplifying it. Below, I describe how linguistic style plays a critical role in this process of tempering youth and producing a standard.

The hero youth characters and their stories model an ideal that is bound up with a particularly Kenyan neoliberalism. These heroes are invested deeply in the future of the nation and the nation form and they believe that that future is in the hands of a creative, entrepreneurial class of young people who will develop the it through individual mirco-enterprise. They espouse the virtues of liberal democracy, urging their peers to vote their consciences, eschew bribery and tribalism, and invest themselves in local and national politics. They are also decidedly post-

ethnic. Not only are ethnolinguistic groups left entirely unnamed in the comics, ethnonyms are absent and characters are known only by given names or nicknames, and other telltale markers of ethnicity are absent.²² The hero youth do not aspire to named professions (like air hostess or neurosurgeon, two surprisingly common aspirations among my young informants); instead, they ground their aims in a pragmatism informed by Kenya's political economy and aspire such things as running micro-enterprises or cultivating small farms.

Below I describe two storylines in which models for being and models for action are glaringly apparent. In these stories Boyie urges his friends to take part in the constitutional referendum and Malkia's big dreams are scaled down to fit within a possible and practical future.

Boyie and Dede's story

In a series of three special issues of *Shujaaz* published in the weeks leading up to the constitutional referendum, Boyie and his buddy Dede sit together on a bench outside a small shop talking about the draft constitution and the possibility of voting for the first time. Dede is put off from reading the text because, he says: "*eeh! hiyo kitabu inakaa big!*" (Sh.: that book is big!). Undecided on whether to ratify the constitution, Dede doesn't see the point in voting at all. Boyie is dismayed at his friend's apathy and insists "*Dede, wacha mchezo! ni right yako! pia ni decision itaku-affect in future*" (Sh.: Dede, quit playing! It's your right! It's also a decision that will affect you in the future). Their discussion is interrupted by a kerfuffle outside the shop; a

²² Malkia could be noted as an exception. Her name is recognizably Muslim and therefore likely of Swahili origin. However, within Kenya's ethnic model of belonging, Swahili people are more often identified through religion rather than ethnicity. In the view of inland/upcountry Kenyans, Swahili are not classified as a "tribe" in the same way that Kenyans native to the inland (*bara*) are (see McIntosh 2009 for a discussion of the intersection of religion and ethnicity on Kenya's coast). While the specificity of ethnic groups is absent, the fact of ethnicity is exceedingly present in these comics. Tribalism and ethnically based hate speech are important forces to fight.

couple of young men are kicked out and told by the shopkeeper they can only come back when they have money. Angry and hungry, the young men mumble about how they are suffering for lack of cash and opportunity. Boyie urges them not to lose hope (Sh.: *msi-loose hope*) and to take action instead (Sh.: *chukueni action*), presumably that action is voting. They shrug him off and tell him that they've got some other ideas about how to make money. "*Nai-suspect*" (Sh.: I'm suspicious of that), Boyie thinks as they walk away.

In the next panels, we see one young man meeting with a shadowy elder man with a big smile holding out stacks of 50KSh notes (approx. \$0.55 at the time). "*Watu ni pesa*" (Sw.: people are money) he says laughing. Later, the young men are seen handing out these 50KSh notes to a small crowd of young men, telling them "*Kila mtu ata-get fifty bob yake! Na mjue job lazima infanyike vipoa ndio dooh zaidi zitoke*" (Sh.: Everyone gets his fifty shillings! And you know the job has to be done well, surely more money is coming). Dede is with the group and got his cash, but one of the beefy, thuggish men in the group beats him up and steals his money. Poor Dede runs home to his mother. Boyie sees him running and follows him. Boyie is just as dismayed as Dede's mother. She tells him that he should just stay home and make and sell chapati with her rather than doing a gang's dirty work. Boyie agrees, "*Skiza mathako Dede! Hiyo story ya chapati ni poa na sio risky!*" (Sh.: Listen to your mother, Dede! This chapati idea (lit. story) is cool and it's not risky!).

Soon after, we see a rally taking place at the polling place as voters line up to cast their ballots deciding on the new constitution. Once again we see the unruly gang members. This time they are making a ruckus, shouting, and disrupting the rally.²³ The police arrive and chase some

²³ This scenario, young men hired to disrupt and wreak havoc on opponents' political rallies, is a common one in Kenya. See Berman 1999 and Haugerud 1997 for further discussion of the culture and politics of political rallies in Kenya.

of the gang members away and arrest others, tossing them in back of a truck. Boyie, who had been standing in line waiting to vote, sees the unruly youth getting nabbed and worries that Dede is among them. Boyie runs to the police station to search for his friend, but Dede is not there.²⁴ We then see the gang members in a jail cell trying to phone the shadowy elder man (godpapa) for help. Laughing, he ignores their calls and pours himself a nice glass of whiskey. Boyie is worried and stops by Dede's mother's home where he finds Dede, wrapped in an apron, making chapati with his mother and her friends. They are delighted that Dede is helping and tell Boyie how their male kin have also agreed to help them in these feminized business ventures like selling kale or cooked food instead of joining gangs.

In Boyie and Dede's story we see the ideal hero youth in Boyie, he is engaged in the democratic process, excited about exercising his right to vote as an informed and invested citizen. Boyie's belief in the power of democracy is profound—voting is the solution to young men's poverty. Dede is vulnerable and easily manipulated but, in the end, with the encouragement of fellow youth, he finds his way. Not only does he discover that entrepreneurialism is a positive alternative to corruption, but he has reaffirmed positive intergenerational kin ties. What's more is the gendered solution to the problem of unemployment—Dede is encouraged to move into a feminized sphere of activity, away from the hyper-masculine world of thuggery and political corruption. Here the standard youth is demasculinized (thus less dangerous), entrepreneurial, and a motivated participant in liberal democracy.

²⁴ The police in this story are decidedly friendly, polite, and helpful—a remarkably inaccurate and almost laughable depiction. Bribery and corruption are rampant throughout the ranks in the Kenyan police force.

Tempering Malkia's aspiration

Malkia lays back in her hammock as the sun is setting wondering wistfully to herself what type of career she should pursue in order to get famous. “*Aii... kuna choice nyingi! Sina idea*” (Sh.: Eh, there are so many choices! I don't have an idea [lit.]), she thinks as she imagines herself as an astronaut and as a scuba diver spear-hunting unhappy octopi. Unsure what to choose, she texts DJ B when she hears him on the radio. She writes, “*Mambo Dj B! aki na-need help yako ku-decide juu ya career*” (Sh.: What's up Dj B! I need your help deciding about a career). DJ B obliges and relays stories of four of his listeners, photographically represented and interviewed about their work, their lives, and their advice to the youth. We meet Giks, who has a market stall, Tony Ongaria who collects rubbish on the roadside, Betty Njeri, who caters from home, and Jamlick Butali, who started a one-man interior design company.²⁵ After hearing the stories, Malkia is ‘inspired’ and decides that she wants to become a cook.

²⁵ I should note that Njeri's and Butali's businesses appear to be micro-enterprises. From her interview, it appears Njeri cooks at home and transports chaffing dishes of food to weddings or parties all on her own. Butali's company is likely equally small scale.

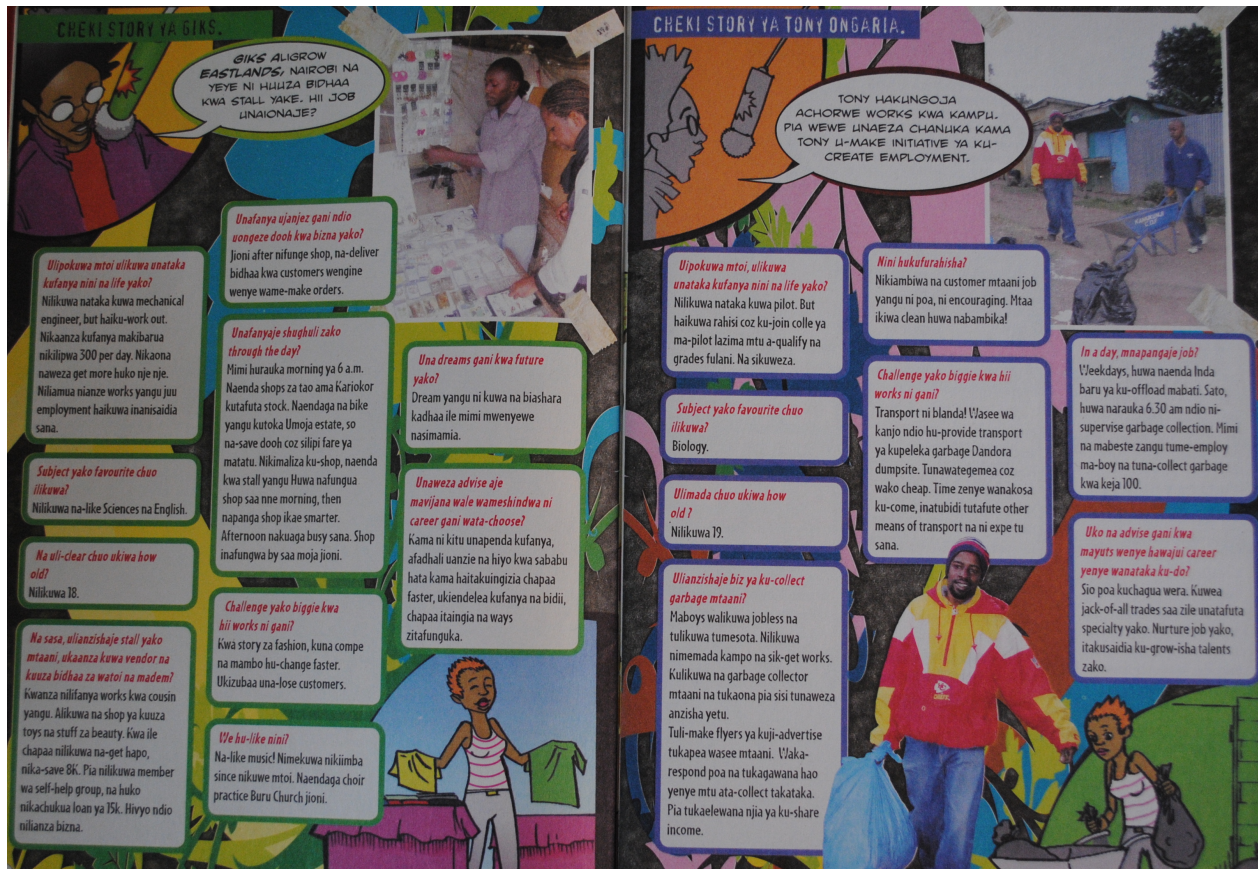


Plate 6.4: Interviews highlighting the small-scale enterprises engaged by real life Kenyan youth. Giks (left panel) runs a market stall and Tony Ongaria (right panel) collects rubbish on the roadside.

Most remarkable about these testimonial stories from the “real fans” is that each of them involves a dramatic shift from aspiration to pragmatism. The recalibration of aspiration to real life opportunity becomes clear in the first question each is asked, various versions of: what did you want to be when you grew up (note the past tense). In each testimony, dreams are scaled down to size or completely reformulated in the face of impossibility. Giks had wanted to be a mechanical engineer “*but haiku-work out*” (Sh.: but it didn’t work out), Ongaria wanted to be a pilot, “*But haikuwa rahisi coz ku-join colle ya ma-pilot lazima mtu a-qualify na grades fulani*” (Sh.: but there wasn’t the opportunity because to join pilot college (lit.) a person has to qualify with certain grades), Njeri wanted to be on an airline’s cabin crew, Butali wanted to be an

architect. In segments like this *Shujaaz* is not counseling unbridled hope and boundless success. Instead, it promotes a profound practicality. The message, it seems, is that dreaming of nameable, white-collar, salaried careers while in school is admirable, but those dreams will end. Reality, and indeed success, is found in starting a micro-enterprise—making your own job.²⁶

Shujaaz is filled with stories that resonate with neoliberal ideologies like individual responsibility, the ultimate good of free market capitalism, and self-entrepreneurship or investment. However, these themes take on a very particular tone as directed at “the youth” in places like Kenya, and this tone becomes more apparent when attending to absences in the world of the comics. Reliable patrons in the form of parents or state institutions make only rare appearances (indeed, Dede’s supportive mother is unusual), the hero youth are self-reliant or depend on one another for support and inspiration. Our hero youth make no complaint of the fact that neither schools nor the state produce opportunity for young people; their response to this absence is to fill it with excruciatingly small-scale enterprises. A lack of jobs and resources are not seen as a problem with the economic model, but as a lack of imagination and creativity.

These hero youth and their stories are intended to work as both models of and models for a type of ideal *youth* in Kenya—where creativity and ingenuity supplant qualities like vulnerability and dependence. The hero youth are a standard by which other youth can be judged. They are unquestionably good, they don’t struggle with the addiction or early pregnancy nor do they occasionally steal or con as many of my young informants did. In the pages of the comics there is a *youth* without moral ambiguity, one wiped of the ambivalence central to young

²⁶ There is important resonance here with government concerns about the aspirations of educated youth that reach as far back as the colonial era. School leavers should be encouraged to find value in manual work and not expect to be employed in the clerical, white collar work they desired. These concerns carried over into the independence era when members of parliament and youth organization officials encouraged young people to create their own jobs rather than relying on the state to provide opportunities (see Chapter 1).

people's lived experience. In the remainder of the chapter, I show how this standard of ideal *youth* emerges through the management of voice and linguistic register.

Voices in Sheng

Narrative representation in comic books relies largely on dialog among characters or between a character and him or herself. Much like theatrical or filmic representation (as distinct from the novel), there is minimal intervention from a narrator explicitly framing the interaction that readers consume on the page. In each speech or thought bubble readers are meant to hear the voice of characters. Character's voices along with a visual representation of them allows the reader to follow a narrative, learn about the persona of characters, and glean insights about the socio-spatial world. *Shujaaz* abides most of the standard conventions of comic book representation, presenting a story in panels top to bottom, left to right with each panel demarcating a micro-event. Thought, normal speech, and shouting are all distinguishable by bubble styles.²⁷

In *Shujaaz* a narrative voice preceding the commencement of the story, which is often boxed or in italic typeface, reminds readers what took place in the previous installment (called "*chapta*" in *Shujaaz*). Readers of *Shujaaz* are also reminded of the qualities and broad storylines of each of the main characters at the beginning of their stories. For example, we are reminded about Maria Kim, "This ghetto girl is an orphan who is raising her brother and really shining in school. She faces a lot of challenges, but she completely casts aside corruption's obstacles. Only

²⁷ Standard comic book conventions (no pun intended) have thought represented by either a series of small circles connecting a character's head to a text-filled oval, normal speech represented by an speech-filled oval disrupted by a curving, pointed protrusion pointing to the character speaking, and the slightly less conventionalized shouting which is often represented by a jagged-edged oval-like shape with a protrusion clearly indicating the shouting character (alternatively, shouting can be indicated by bold or relatively larger typeface).

fools would try to challenge her. Only the brave would try to ask her out.”²⁸ Unlike a standard comic book, however, many *Shujaaz* stories end with a coda. The narrative voice returns and ensures the reader has appropriately apprehended the lesson represented or listing resources readers may seek out to learn more about a topic. For example, after a story in which Charlie Pele learns how to weave a small chicken pen from tree branches there is a distinctly separated box with the heading “*Kuku=Dooh!!!*” (Sh.: Chickens=Money!!!). The text then goes on to recap important (and sometimes surprising) suggestions for chicken rearing: “*Zi-protect kutoka predators kama mwewe. Uki-dye kuku pink, mwewe hatazichukua*” (Sh.: Protect them [chickens] from predators like hawks. If you dye the chickens pink, the hawks won’t pick them up.) The codas also often include multi-page spreads representing readers’ comments (like the testimonials above) or question-answer features about social or political issues such as the constitutional referendum or legislation on hate speech. The comics are explicitly didactic.

There is a wide range of voices in the pages of these comic books, including the narrational voice, but striking is the limited range of linguistic registers within its pages. Nearly everyone, including the governmental “Committee of Experts” that answers questions about a newly drafted constitution, speak the same variety of Sheng. Thugs use the same variety as hero youth and constitutional experts. In the world of *Shujaaz*, Sheng is a universally understood register—the standard of the modeled youth world—even if it isn’t deployed by everyone. While teachers occasionally speak standard English and some elders speak (non-standard, colloquial) Swahili, they still understand their Sheng-speaking interlocutors. Sheng’s ubiquity and comprehensibility is a radical departure from the real world in which readers live where Sheng is

²⁸ *Huyu dem wa mtaa ni orphan anaye-raise bro wake, na huku anang’ang’ana na chuo. Ana-face challenges mob sana, lakini hakubali anything kumzuia kuzima corruption. Mafala pekee ndio hu-try kum-challenge. Only the brave hujaribu kum-ask out!*

evaluated as a deviant or incomprehensible language. As noted in Chapter 3 and elaborated below, its purported unintelligibility by certain others is precisely what makes Sheng attractive to young speakers. Further, as with any register, Sheng is seen as more appropriate for some topics, speakers, and spaces than others. Constitutional experts talking about a draft constitution in a printed publication, for example, is the last place one would expect Sheng. But perhaps that is precisely the point: that democratic values can be spoken of in a youth register demonstrates the commensurability between the two.

While *Shujaaz* is published almost entirely in a register that would be widely recognizable as Sheng, it is in fact a rather unusual variety of it. This representation of the Kenyan youth register is actually a deeply important part of the model of ideal *youth* in Kenya and represents a strategy for managing the rather unruly and contradictory semiotic cluster of *youth*. With certain technologies of standardization—orthography and glossaries—*Shujaaz* erases some of the most salient non-referential features of Sheng, features that are central to local ideologies of the register. Some of these ideological features, like opacity, instability, and local variability make Sheng (as spoken) problematic to inclusive post-ethnic, modern *youth Shujaaz* promotes as standard. Efforts to control, standardize, or clarify languages are always about much more than denotational codes, they are about people, power, and in many cases the national imaginary (Bourdieu 1991, Bonfiglio 2002, Errington 2000).

While Chapter 3 provided an in depth description of Sheng along with a detailed discussion of local evaluations and perceptions of the register, many of which are conflicting, reflecting their holders stances in relation to youth, class, and aspiration among other things. I recapitulate aspects of that discussion here highlighting those features that are either erased or amplified in the pages of *Shujaaz*.

Sheng is a highly dynamic plurilingual register formally not dissimilar to other “youth languages” like Nouchi in Côte d’Ivoire or Tsostitaal South Africa. In addition to intra-sentential code-switching where a speaker shifts from one language to another in the midst of a single sentence, Sheng also incorporates inter-morphemic code-switching, syllable inversion, semantic extension, and truncation among other forms of lexical manipulation (see Chapter 3, see also Bosire 2006).

As a simple illumination of some of these features, I offer two examples. The first, involves inter-morphemic switching, which could also be read as borrowing:

“*Nimeboeka*” in Kismu Sheng means, “I’m bored,” parsed out, Ni+me+bo+eka.

<i>ni</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>bo</i>	<i>eka</i>
(1 st pers. sing.)	(past perfect)	(verb stem)	stative
I	have been	to bore	

The first two morphemes are prefixes in standard Swahili verb construction, -ni- indicating first person singular, -me- indicating the past perfect aspect followed by the morpheme –bo- which is where the “switch” occurs (or borrowed word appears). Syntactically, -bo- works like a verb root in standard Swahili, but its referential content comes from the English verb “to bore.” The local, non-rhotic pronunciation is exaggerated the pronunciation: “bore” becomes “bo.” Followed by –eka— a stative suffix in standard Swahili, *nimeboeka* means, literally, “I have been bored.”²⁹

The second example involves syllable inversion and a dummy suffix common in Sheng. The lexeme, “*mbanyuz*” meaning “home” is derived from the Swahili “*nyumba*,” but inverts the

²⁹ Whether *nimeboeka* is technically codeswitching or borrowing is much less important to my point than the fact that it is recognized as a truly Sheng word by its speakers. For most speakers, the English source of the word isn’t immediately apparent. I once clumsily attempted to use a related Sheng phrase meaning “it’s boring” (*inabo*, i+na+bo; it+pres.+boring), pronouncing it with a rhotic American accent as *inabore**, which was met with confused looks and finally laughs when my interlocutors realized what I had done and what I was trying to say.

syllables (“nyu+mba” becomes “mba+nyu”) and then appends /z/ a dummy suffix. The /z/ adds nothing referentially (it does not, for example, pluralize as the /z/ in *Shujaaz*), however it does contribute non-referentially; as one of my male informants explained to me, /z/ makes Sheng words “sexy.”³⁰

More important to my point than linguistic description, are the local metapragmatics of Sheng. First and foremost, Sheng is described by speakers and non-speakers alike, as a language of and for the youth. Many young people told me gleefully, with Sheng, you can talk right in front of your parents and they won’t understand. This ability to obscure, to hide meaning in language, to speak and be only selectively understood, is also central to the local ideologies of Sheng held by young speakers. It excludes others. Recall, most Kenyans cite Sheng’s origin as in the *matatu* (minibus taxi) sector, or among thieves in Nairobi who needed a way to plot about their marks in public. With this origin story, Sheng’s opacity is tinged with nefariousness; one not only hides meaning in Sheng, but one schemes in Sheng. Furthering the notion of Sheng’s incomprehensibility to outsiders is the idea that Sheng is constantly changing. Neologisms emerge regularly, the meanings of words are extended or inverted. One young man insisted to me that once people start catching on to the meaning of a word, Sheng speakers have to come up with a new one to recover the secrecy of the code. Many Sheng-speakers talk about the need to catch-up with Sheng after being away from the city for some time because the language changes so quickly. Sheng is not only temporally variable, but understood to be very regionally specific. While speakers refer to a consistency of stylistic features across the country, they insist lexicons vary from urban center to urban center particularly because of both independent emergence and

³⁰ The same young man also said that the most important part of coining a Sheng word is whether it is “sweet” in the mouth (“sweet” in Kenyan English meaning any pleasant taste). The ideologies of the sweetness or sexiness of Sheng’s sonic qualities deserves further research.

much of the lexicon relies on borrowed terms from local, ethnic languages. For example, a group of LVB students explained that the word “*panch*” (from the English “punch,” a clenched, five-fingered fist) in 2010 Kisumu meant “five” whereas it meant “five hundred” in Nairobi at the time. Mixing those meanings up could lead to amusing (or potentially disastrous) consequences. Many young Luo men in Kisumu described their nervousness about a visit to Nairobi in terms of language—the Sheng there is so different, not only is it the epicenter of Sheng, but so much of it is Kikuyu. Even a savvy man from Kisumu, they insisted, might be taken advantage of because he can’t understand the Nairobi Sheng there.³¹

For many Sheng speakers, neologisms are the defining feature of the register. Innovative new terms give Sheng an opaque character and demonstrate the creativity of its speakers. However, many of the terms that are recognized by these speakers as Sheng shibboleths are older English (both British and American) slang terms or have been borrowed into the register with the source language erased. Terms like “*dooh*” (dough, money) and “*dem*” (dame, woman) are taken up as quintessential, long-standing Sheng terms.³² English slang is not the only unrecognized source language for Sheng borrowings described as neologisms. While local ethnic languages are often the source of Sheng terms, outside of the areas where a language is widely spoken, they may not be recognizable as source languages. For example, many of my informants in western Kenya, where relatively little Gikuyu is spoken, identified the term “*shosh*,” (grandmother) as a “Shenged” Swahili word, rather than a quite direct borrowing of the Kikuyu “*cucu*” (pronounced: “shosho”). Often, when written (and the writing might be on Facebook walls, in

³¹ Note also this evaluation of the Kikuyuness of Nairobi Sheng deals in local negative ethnic stereotype of Kikuyus as thieves.

³² Speakers who were surprised at my knowledge of some of these terms refused my suggestion that they were borrowed terms, insisting instead that they must have serendipitously emerged separately.

texts, or playful essays), the novelty of a term becomes amplified and the code mixing or source language is deemphasized.³³

Outside of social media or text messages, Sheng was rarely written by my interlocutors. Quite a few young male speakers even described difficulty they had in reading or writing Sheng although they spoke without difficulty. Further, writing Sheng inappropriately freezes a register that, by nature, is constantly changing. These ideologies of Sheng as a fundamentally oral language were and common render *Shujaaz*'s publication in a variety of the register all the more unusual. Those who reduce Sheng to writing spell phonetically, often playfully, sometimes obscuring deducible meaning. For example, somewhat recently the use of the letter X to represent |s| has become fashionable in SMS and Facebook communication. Common greetings like “*sasa*” (lit. “now”) and “*sema*” (lit. “speak”) are spelled “*xaxa*” and “*xema*.”

If Sheng is understood as exclusionary in one sense, it is thought of as inclusive in another. A young woman described Sheng to me as the “way we [youth] understand each other.” Under this evaluation, Sheng—the language of the youth—can transcend the confining prejudices of the past, it can be the standard bearer of a modern, post-ethnic Kenya. Sheng, one young man asserted, is “a national language for the youth.” Note the implications here: Sheng becomes a language for national (read: pan-ethnic) communication, transcending local barriers to communication and cultivating a sense of nationhood. The idea of Sheng as a language of mutual understanding is particularly salient in a country where ethnicity has not only been a central organizing principle, but a source of constant and acute anxiety. In one sense, Sheng fulfills the role that standard Swahili was meant to in the immediate independence period, that of a unifying

³³ See McIntosh 2010 for a discussion of SMS text style in Kenya. I helped one young rapper who was highly literate in both English and Swahili to transcribe his Sheng lyrics. For us it became a fascinating process of transliteration.

language that was distinctly African and expressly “non-ethnic.”³⁴ Castro, a local hip hop artist, captured this essence of nationalist modernity, describing Sheng to me as a language that can “identify with the new things...without aping from any society, any whites.”

Even amid the praise for its pan-ethnic creativity and unification by youth, for others Sheng also represents a threat to the proper order of things. Many, both young and old, argue that Sheng diminishes awareness or respect for the boundaries among named denotational codes. Sheng speakers, some fear, cannot distinguish between Standard Swahili and Sheng. They don't, some elders argue, even know how to speak a single language, they can only speak by muddling multiple languages. Many students shared this concern, particularly when it came to their Swahili exams. Anxious they would accidentally use a Sheng word in the essay portion, some lamented that they used Sheng in their everyday conversation. Conversely, some suggest that Sheng is in fact a way of “showing off” that a speaker knows numerous languages; it's a display of status and marks a speaker as a cosmopolitan polyglot (see Chapter 3).

As with all language ideologies, the local evaluations of what Sheng is, what it does, and where it comes from can also be read as evaluations of the register's speakers. As I've shown, these ideologies are highly contradictory. Sheng is seen as both inclusive and exclusive, a sign of both linguistic prowess and ignorance. *Shujaaz* works to manage such conflicting evaluations by presenting Sheng as a creative, inclusive language for pan-ethnic, nationwide communication.

In the *Shujaaz* comic books, Sheng works like what Gal (2007) has referred to as a “clasp,” a way for one social group to “work on” (or create, see Inoue 2006) another by evaluating, manipulating, and characterizing a semiotic form. To put it simply: the authors and funders of *Shujaaz* publish in a very particular variety of Sheng to produce a type, the hero

³⁴ See Brummel 2009 for a further discussion of Swahili and Kenyan nationalism.

youth. A transparent Sheng—one that effectively erases association with criminal opacity or ethnic exclusion—is a language of a pan-ethnic, hero youth. While the comic manages Sheng in numerous ways, my focus on orthography and glossaries insists that as standardizing technologies, they represents efforts not only to “clarify” the language or make it more “transparent,” but also to manage the metapragmatic typification of its users: youth.

Orthography

In its representation of the register, *Shujaaz* authors work to retain the Bahktinian (1981) “taste” of Sheng while effectively opening it up, making it more transparent to readers. One way of doing this is through parsing out code mixed verbs and following the orthographic conventions of source languages. These strategies allow Sheng to appear much more legible and accessible to the average literate young Kenyan who would have at least adequate skills reading both English and Swahili. Readers can decipher the referential meaning of otherwise new terms by reading them through two languages simultaneously.

In spoken Sheng, as mentioned above, the source languages—be they English, Gikuyu, Dhouo or any others—of borrowed terms are erased and words appear as neologisms. The same is true in the technologically-mediated written texts, the most common format for written Sheng. Even many of the testimonial texts published in *Shujaaz*, for example, are not rendered in *Shujaaz*-standard Sheng, using spellings like “myn” (mine) or “bt” (but) (see Plate 6.2). Recall also “*nimeboeka*” (I’m bored) above. Among Sheng speakers, even when written the source lexeme for the verb stem is obscured, “bore” becomes “bo” and embedded into an unbroken, conjugated Swahili verb.

In its orthography, however, *Shujaaz* is quite different. Verbs that incorporate inter-morphemic codeswitching, be they conjugated or in the infinitive, are parsed out. Thus we see a word that might be written on a Facebook wall “*usikwit*” (don’t quit) rendered “*usi-quit*” (don’t quit) in *Shujaaz*. Even when the root might be easily recognizable as in the infinitive, always identifiable by its “ku” affix, *Shujaaz* spells thus: “*ku-search*” “*ku-include*” “*ku-celebrate*” (see Plate 6.5).³⁵ Further, *Shujaaz* tends to preserve the orthographic convention of the source language in inter-morphemic switching thus making borrowing (rather than novelty) more visible. It is important to note here that in *Shujaaz*-standard Swahili verbs are not parsed out in this way but spelled in the unbroken, standard way. Note the disparate conventions in a single line of text: “*Ngoja, tuendelea ku-search usi-quit!*” (Wait, let’s continue to search, don’t quit). Rather than rendering “*tu-endelea*” as the parsing model would dictate, *Shujaaz* uses a standard convention, “*tuendelea.*” (Note here that *ku-search* and *usi-quit* are rendered in the parsed form.)

³⁵ This partial verb parsing echoes the form that students learn in school Swahili lessons. They are taught to break apart conjugated verbs and identify element in a way similar to my parsing of *nimeboeka* above.



Plate 6.5: Note in the third row of frames “*una-come*” and “*ngoja, tuendeleo ku-search usi-quit.*”

Another example of the production of a more inclusive-appearing register through parsing and retaining the orthographic conventions of the source language are the words “*ni-come*” and “*una-come*” (I should come, you are coming). Normally written (again, in texts, on Facebook, etc.) as “*nikam*” or “*unakam*,” speaker-writers simultaneously occlude the source language (“come” becomes “*kam*”), reflect local pronunciation, and abide orthographic

convention of standard Swahili.³⁶ Parsing out the verb root, “come” and spelling it with standard English convention, the verb phrase becomes easily understandable even to readers who may not be savvy Sheng-speakers. When *Shujaaz* authors engage these conventions, I argue, they work to make Sheng more transparent, more legible and comprehensible to a wider swath of readers who can, by “reading Sheng,” begin to identify themselves as part of the modern, Kenyan hero *youth* even if they don’t have access to the social worlds in which the register is most commonly spoken. Widening the audience capable of reading (or at least deciphering) this “youth language” makes Sheng appear more inclusive, a language that can speak to all the youth—or at least the large number who are able to read both English and Swahili at a primary level. If this language is able to speak to all the youth, it also promotes a particular version of what that youth is—the inclusive, pan-ethnic/post-ethnic, productive youth explicitly presented in *Shujaaz* story lines.

Glossaries

Shujaaz does not rely simply on the reader’s knowledge of or ability to decipher Sheng terms, it even incorporates a glossary of terms, called a “Sheng dictionary” in every issue. These glossaries highlight terms that the authors may feel are not in wide enough circulation for presumed knowledge. More common terms like “*dook*” (money) “*dem*” (girl/woman) or “*manze*” (damn) have a wider spatial and temporal decipherability. The words in the glossaries are not neologisms produced by the authors of *Shujaaz*, but taken, they claim, from “the streets” and incorporated in to the comic books. Occasionally, readers send in Sheng terms, the coolest (Sh.: *noma*) of which are published and earn the reader a T-shirt (Sh.: *T-sho*).

³⁶ I became intimately familiar with this phrase in a textual, SMS form, *nakam* (I’m coming), as I never truly managed to overcome my American clock-time obsession.

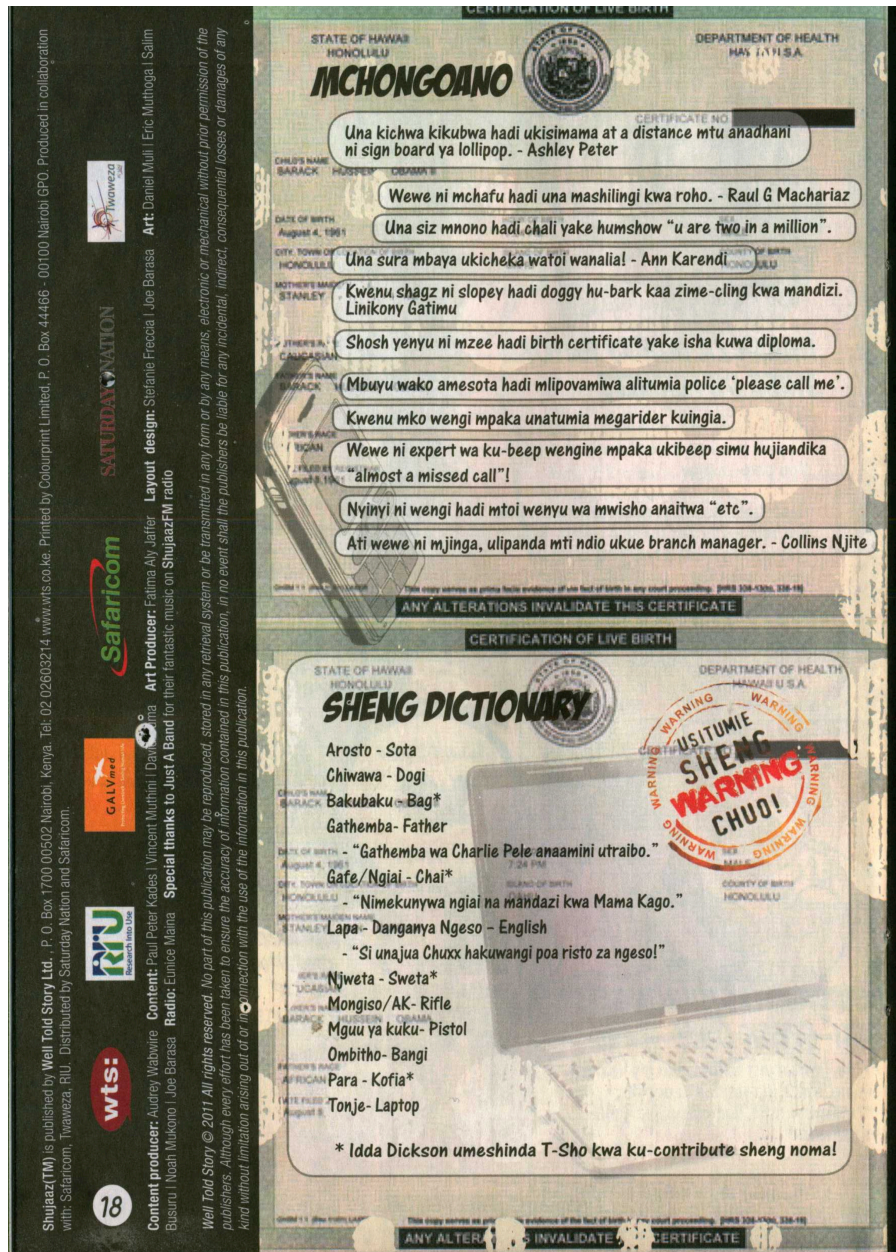


Plate 6.6: Sheng Dictionary. Note the “warning” stamped on the dictionary, “*Usitumie Sheng chuo!*” (Sh.: Don’t use Sheng in school!). Note also this page is printed on Barack Obama’s birth certificate. Somewhat related, the term “McCain” is included in another Shujaaz Sheng dictionary; its English equivalent was listed as “loser.”

In a way similar to *Shujaaz*’s orthographic convention, the glossaries work to make Sheng more transparent and less regionally specific. A new word is directly linked to a more recognizable referant (in either English, Swahili or Sheng) with which the reader is presumably already familiar, but to ensure such legibility, *Shujaaz* occasionally offers multiple referants in

different linguistic codes thus “*kisisa*” and “*manwinch*” are translated into both Sheng and English, as “*doooh*” and “money” in one glossary. “*Gouko*,” in another, is clarified through standard Swahili and English as both “*vita*” and “fight.” Word origins—linguistic or geographic—are never explicitly noted erasing any regional or ethnic specificity as the glossaries circulate nationally.

The dictionaries do more than make Sheng transparent or comprehensible to readers, they also tame Sheng. As discussed more fully in Chapter 3, along with the stereotypically rich lexicon for scheming, Sheng also has a fulsome vocabulary of terms for sex and sex acts, a wide range of pejoratives for women, and rather salty terms for female anatomy (see Githinji 2008). Indeed, this lexicon along with its perceived source contributes to Sheng’s recognition as a hyper-masculine register. Used for strutting and incomprehensible if not uttered with swagger (Sh.: *swag*; see Chapter 3), Sheng pushes up against—and often blows through—the bounds of propriety, something that makes it less deployable for young women.³⁷ The Sheng represented in the pages of *Shujaaz*, and particularly the “new” words found in the *Shujaaz* dictionaries, is decidedly softened, de-masculinized, and somewhat detached from a criminal sphere of reference. The authors admit as much, stating that the Sheng they write with is not the “deepest” variety, but they still work to incorporate newer terms (Gibson 2013). However, while the lexicon presented in the dictionaries is, by and large, quite mundane listing terms for trousers, tea, and short cuts, there is the occasional lexical item that the street savvy hero youth must

³⁷ See Chapter 3 for a lengthier discussion of gender in the use of Sheng. It is worth noting here that girls and women did use a version of Sheng, but rarely “deep” Sheng. Women and girls who did speak a “deep” Sheng were seen as tomboys. The register is so gendered (a sort of gendered cryptolect) that young men would feel comfortable speaking in front of women, convinced that they wouldn’t understand.

know. Words for types of guns or marijuana, tame insults (e.g., *oboho* “bad boy”), and ethnic groups occur, but are vastly outnumbered by inoffensive terms.

Conclusion

Shujaaz comics create a unique world in which micro-enterprise, positive thinking, and a genuine belief in liberal democracy resolve Kenya’s greatest foe: corruption. They also create a world of perfect intelligibility, most remarkably through a language that is widely seen as unintelligible, corrupt, and corrupting. *Youth*, importantly, is at the center of these efforts. *Shujaaz* authors along with their international and domestic sponsors invested in a particular notion of development in Kenya work through Sheng because it stands as an indexical icon of youth in Kenya. Not only pointing to, but also seen as resembling youth, managing the linguistic form becomes a way to manage, or standardize Kenyan youth. *Shujaaz*’s use of this unusual variety of Sheng is intended not only to speak to youth, but to teach youth how to speak and how to be—it creates a standard *youth* by which readers can measure themselves. The hero youth in *Shujaaz*’s pages speak across ethnic and sometimes generational bounds to build communities and build futures; the linguistic style must reflect that. Through story and style, *Shujaaz* works to recruit its readers to recognize themselves in its pages and works to interpellate them as the type of youth—the hero youth—who may imagine themselves as already speaking this modern, pan-ethnic code, one worthy of the moniker, “national language for the youth.”

Although the stories and characters may not have resonated with many of my young interlocutors in Kisumu, the idea of *Shujaaz* does. They saw themselves as clasp-makers and as the young people who could model, or at least play an important part in creating, the image of

ideal *youth* in Kenya. Similar to the plotlines in the pages of *Shujaaz*, my young informants viewed corruption as the ultimate challenge to youth and to a modern, developed Kenya.

In the conclusion to this dissertation, I return to the Masani Youth Group when rumors of embezzlement and nepotism led to its dissolution. Ultimately for the Masani members, it became impossible to maintain an apparently corrupt organization under the moniker, “youth.”

CONCLUSION

In a final anecdote, I aim to show how the contested meaning of *youth* and its contrast with an ever-complicated notion of corruption along with the threat of being cast as “idle” had palpable implications for young people I worked with. In what seems like a series of rather inconsequential conflicts, ones that are common in small-scale organizations across Kenya, the Masani Youth Group found themselves debating central issues of and threats to the valence of *youth* they had once rallied around. Their creativity and seriousness was threatened by complaints of idleness. Their stance as an upright and modern youth-governed collective was threatened by suspicions of corruption.

Corruption in a *youth* organization

Midway through my fieldwork some Masani members had begun grumbling about the direction the organization was taking. The group, which had been focused on music, film, and even photography on occasion was actively doing very little. The chairman, Bernard, had designs on recasting the center as a cyber café. Initially the other members were excited about the venture, many of them had been frustrated by their earlier attempts to make a little money through Masani. Selling DVDs of their comedy films or CDs of their music were never lucrative. A handful of members even occasionally grouched about investing so much time with the youth group without getting something in return. Those members, I began to suspect, imagined the funds sent by Joanne, Masani’s sponsor, were much more generous than they were.¹ The critics

¹ Recall that Joanne funding Masani independently and there was very little money involved in the organization. However, members knew nothing about the financial transactions between Bernard and Joanne and they were thus rich topics for gossip, particularly because Bernard’s precious guarding of status within the group and within the neighborhood prevented him from

of those who expected some sort of compensation for time spent at Masani argued that these members were actually only idling at the center and doing little productive for the group.

The cyber café that Bernard envisioned along with the potential work and income it signaled portended the beginning of Masani's demise. Through Joanne, a local businessman had decided to donate four computers to set up the business in the youth center in Mamboleo. Unlike in town, there were very few places in the peri-urban neighborhood for locals to access the internet, type documents, or even play video games. Joanne had organized with a friend of hers in the US to pay the bill for internet connectivity for one year as the business got off the ground. Joanne even sent more personal funds to build small carrels for the computers, making the youth center look all the more "serious" and ready for business.

The day the cyber (the local shorthand for internet cafés) was set up there was a buzz around Masani. The sawing and banging of local carpenters drew in small children and some of their caregivers. Many of the youth members milled around excitedly as the computers were set up chatting about how the new cyber was a sign that Masani was getting "serious" again. But not long after, the sheen wore off. Members discovered they weren't allowed to use the machines for free. They discovered they wouldn't have jobs manning the main desk, that work was for Bernard (and eventually his younger brother). All told, they would see no material benefit from the cyber at all, but the presence of the resources and their imagined abundance inspired frustration, bitterness, and suspicion that contributed to the group's breakdown.

mentioned the financial struggles (and stress) that he would mention to me on occasion. It is also distinctly possible that Bernard saw me as a potential patron as well and his mentions of stress and struggle were attempts to curry financial favor. While I aided him and his family on occasion—as I did many of the young people I worked with regularly as is socially expected among friends and family—it would be a stretch to call me any sort of patron. I would help on occasion with hospital bills, bus tickets, a chicken for a feast, or other such basics—all common and part of socially productive gifting practices in Kenya.

After the cyber was functioning for a few months, members' suspicion was piqued. They hadn't seen any its proceeds and they hadn't been invited to take part in the business in any way. Those who recorded music and spent time at the youth center more or less ignored the cyber, continuing to record music and plan video shoots much as before. While it occupied about half of the small front room, the computers sat largely empty throughout the day. Adult customers appeared only on occasion and when they had a few shillings to spend, some of the local children would excitedly play a pirated copy of "Grand Theft Auto." Although they were well aware of the level of business the cyber conducted, a few Masani members began wondering where the money from the small business were going.

Rumors began circulating that Bernard viewed the business as a family enterprise rather than a group one. Some claimed to have seen Diana dip into the locked drawer where the cyber's cash was kept before she went to buy eggs or *sukumawiki* (Sw.: dark leafy greens) to cook for lunch. Others claimed that Bernard was suspiciously silent and irritable when they asked him about Masani's finance. They claimed that Bernard must be withholding funds from the group, his silence was an indication of his guilt. In whispers, the news circulated that the chairman was corrupt.

The circulation of these rumors began around the same time that Joanne suggested from abroad that Masani seek official recognition from the government as a Community Based Organization (CBO).² Bernard gladly acquiesced to Joanne's suggestion—he regularly talked about feeling overwhelmed by his responsibilities as a youth leader and this would mean more people would officially be responsible for the groups organizational health. He was especially glad because he would maintain what he called the "main position" at Masani, which included a

² Joanne was working in the Democratic Republic of Congo at the time and had only scant awareness of the group's day-to-day activities.

small salary from Joanne.

CBO registration required that the group vote in an executive board consisting of a chairperson, a secretary, and a treasurer. The registration process also required that the group evidence an open and fair election of the executive board in the form of meeting minutes and any application could be nullified through complaints made to the registration board.

Masani met one afternoon to elect their new board, beginning the process of official recognition (which carried with it the potential for small government grants or microloans from local banks). The election of chairperson and secretary went fairly smoothly and predictably with impromptu speeches voicing discourses common in NGO-Africa: representative democracy, micro-enterprise, self-reliance, and transparency.

The election of treasurer, a post Bernard described as “very delicate,” was somewhat more complicated. Two people nominated themselves: Gideon and Diana (Bernard’s wife). Each offered a brief speech about how they would handle this “delicate” role and, at the request of another member, they also described their qualifications. Gideon was a visibly a bit miffed by this request, he often talked with annoyance at how the requirement for “experience” was precisely what kept the youth out of jobs around the country. He did, however, oblige his questioner after which the conversation turned to a decidedly more complex and telling one about the potential of corruption, the as-yet-unrealized misuse of Masani funds.

While it hadn’t been openly stated, it was clear that the treasurer would have no part in the small amount of funding that came from Joanne or even the cash from the cyber. The funds that would be the treasurer’s responsibility would be membership dues and any additional levies approved by the group for parties or other events. However, these funds, by and large, didn’t

actually exist.³ Officially, members were to have paid dues of 50KSh (\$0.75), a rule that seemed to come into effect after the majority of members had already established themselves within the group and were grandfathered out of the requirement. To my knowledge, two or maybe three new members paid dues upon joining, making the total funds around 150KSh (about \$2). This paucity of cash didn't hinder the nearly twenty minute debate about the rights, responsibilities, and privileges of the treasurer. This debate, the ways the Masani Youth hashed out precisely what the treasurer could or could not do with the funds outside of the organization, evidences the pains that these young people took not only to ensure they were not perpetuating corruption, but also the care they took to figure out exactly what corruption looked like amid desperate economic circumstances.

Bernard laid the initial groundwork for the discussion, mentioning nonchalantly that the treasurer could do what s/he wished with the funds as long as the appropriate amount of cash was available when the group needed it. He suggested they establish a time frame—a week or two—that the group would abide to let the treasurer know when they planned on using funds so that s/he would have time to replenish the coffers. The assumption and proposal were met with agreement and Bernard justified it further: How could you not use this money if you or your family were in need and it was just sitting there? If no one was using the money, what harm could come from using it and then returning it? What needed to be established, however, is how the other members could feel assured that their (as yet non-existent) contributions to the coffers would be fully refunded and available when the group needed them. Perhaps even more

³ A few months after the election, Masani did put on a “bash” for members and their guests, who they hoped to recruit as new members. The bash was paid for by member contributions (suggested 400KSh (about \$5) but few were able to afford that amount, and paid what they could). They were also planning on charging increased membership dues for these new members (around 100KSh, about \$1.25). By and large, this plan didn't pan out and Masani remained in the same position they were generally in, bereft of locally-generated funds.

importantly, if the treasurer decided to leave the group, how would the group ensure the funds were fully reimbursed? Diana's response to these questions was that as treasurer she would simply tell her husband, Bernard (recall: also the man who would retain the "main position" at Masani) that she no longer wanted to be part of the group. Surely he would ensure that she did not run off with the (as yet non-existent) funds.

The conversation took an even more complicated turn when one member asked what would happen when the (as yet non-existent) funds came to such an amount that holding cash was untenable? Gideon offered a simple solution: I will deposit it into my M-Pesa account.⁴ Not everyone was happy with this option, personal and group funds should not co-mingle, one might unknowingly steal the Masani funds. So another member proposed a solution: they would establish an M-Pesa account for the Masani Youth and the money would remain separate from anyone's personal funds. If each member "invested" 2KSh (about \$.01), then the 50KSh cost of a SIM card that the M-Pesa account was attached to would not be a problem. Then the M-Pesa account itself was the source of a dilemma. Whose ID number would be used to set up the M-Pesa account? (A detail that would determine who could actually withdrawal funds from the account.) Who would hold on to the SIM card? (A fact that could potentially restrict the holder of the account from wonton withdrawals.)

The group more or less settled the debate—although they came to no strict conclusions—and voted Diana into office. But the discussion about the treasurer and the successful election of a new executive board did not resolve the issue of CBO registration. Through a series of frantic

⁴ M-Pesa is a mobile money technology ubiquitous in Kenya, it operates effectively as a branchless bank and users can transfer money to one another using their mobile phones. Users can also receive remittances from abroad through Western Union directly into their M-Pesa accounts. M-Pesa was the first mobile money technologies to be developed anywhere in the world and launched in Kenya in 2007, having since expanded to India, South Africa, Afghanistan, and most recently Eastern Europe.

phone calls and emails from Masani members and Joanne I learned that the attempts to officially register as a CBO and formalize their organization failed and that the group was on the path toward dissolution. It was not only dysfunctional, it was corrupt.

As I pieced the story together I learned that Bernard and two others (who were neither elected during the meeting nor even present at the election meeting) made the short trip into town to register the group claiming to be the executive board. After filing their documentation and paying a small filing fee they were told to return in a few days to pick up their certificate of registration.

In the meantime, Beatrice discovered this subterfuge and marched down to the office with another member, Dorcas. Beatrice said she had stumbled upon the “forged” meeting minutes that Bernard had used to register the group (although she got rather vague when I asked her the mode of discovery). Beatrice and Dorcas lodged a complaint, claiming that the executive board was not chosen through free and fair elections. They were told to return the following day with all the parties involved to officially resolve the situation. The complainants returned to the registration office, but neither Bernard nor the other attempted registrants did. Bernard later insisted he had been busy.

With the complaint and failure to appear to resolve it, the CBO registration board decided to nullify the application without refunding the filing fee. Masani, in disarray and with tempers flaring, met one final time. Over the course of four hours they quietly and tensely hashed out the problems of deception and corruption bedeviling the organization. Accusations of idleness were met with complaints about embezzlement and corruption. Regular fixtures at the youth center claimed the group was too passive and uninterested others claimed the regulars just lacked initiative. Eventually the group was dissolved.

At different points, Masani acknowledged and attempted to work around the complexities of everyday need and profoundly limited economic resources. Within the reality of youth lives, a notion of corruption and the particularities of what actually constituted it needed to fit within the practicalities of everyday life. But, negotiating this rocky terrain of corruption rubbed uncomfortably up against a notion of *youth* that was fundamentally set against it. Where opportunities and resources are lacking, young men and women struggled to model a productive and creative “seriousness” so fundamental to their vision of valued *youth*.

Corruption and the banner of *youth*

Masani simply could not sustain itself as an organization under the banner of *youth* amid such accusations of idleness and corruption. The tensions that built up within the group over the course of these events point to two of the most salient contrastive qualities to the *youth* that they worked to espouse and embody. For the Masani members, both of these qualities—corrupt and idle—were threatening to a notion of *youth* and ever present in the world around them. The series of discussions held at Masani—ranging from assumptions about what volunteers deserved to those about embezzlement, from feeling out the rights and responsibilities of a treasurer to wresting control of a group on the verge of gaining official recognition—were ways of working out what corruption actually meant up close; corruption is far from a straightforward idea. For these young people, corruption is always everywhere *in potentia* in Kenya; it is the state of entropy, that which all social organization tends toward in the absence of external force. This assumption is precisely what drove the discussion detailing the strict and strident rules that distinguished acting out of justified need (struggling or hustling for survival, as many young men would term it) from acts of corruption—acts that would threaten or hinder the future of others. In

a different, yet deeply related way, rumors of members' idleness equally threatened the group as truly *youth* in the statusful and reconfigured way they imagined themselves. The stereotype of idleness, one so closely associated with the youth, was one that many of the Masani members found levied against them as they sought opportunity and recognition in their daily lives. For them, idleness was the antithesis of a serious and productive *youth* group, but it too was ever-present.

Joanne eventually pulled her funding from the group as she saw it disintegrate from afar. Masani's young members, disillusioned by the lack of seriousness, potential, and creativity of the group dismissed it long before the resources themselves dried up. Members all went their separate ways, occasionally posting old photos and waxing nostalgic on Facebook about Masani. Some joined other youth organizations, others moved to Nairobi in search of work or other opportunities. Bernard moved down the road and opened up an even smaller cyber café with his brother. It was clear that, it was not the external funding (or even potential for government recognition) that sustained the collective, but instead a shared stance on and understanding of the quality of *youth* in contemporary Kenya.

Contributions: A semiotics of youth in Africa and the plurilingual registers

I've traced throughout the dissertation the range of ways *youth* emerges and is reconfigured in everyday communicative practice, as such this dissertation contributes to an important and growing body of ethnographies on the enregisterment and re-enregisterment of semiotic forms and social categories. I've shown how amid the more durable stereotypes of youth as makers and breakers of the future, young people both position themselves in relation to these images and complicate them. The use and avoidance of linguistic registers, the

metapragmatic discourses about youth and related communicative forms, as well as the ways speakers tap into the transnational voices of Pentecostalism and neo-liberal ideologies are all part of the ongoing enregisterment of *youth* in contemporary Kenya.

Plurilingual styles of speech are fundamental to the image of “youth” in Kisumu and they are common throughout urban Africa. Analysis of these styles and their social meanings, as I have shown, affords particularly productive sites for exploring the relationships between the micro-social interaction and the larger social world. Too often neglected in Africanist anthropology, a focus on languages in urban space demonstrates some of the more subtle ways Africans work through tensions surrounding modernity, national identity, and diversity. In my analysis of the rich and dynamic styles of speaking in urban Kisumu, I have suggested that an analytic of “plurilingual registers” is especially productive. In contrast with linguistic approaches that privilege named denotational codes in studies of multilingualism, the early assertion that studying codeswitching requires that we attend most closely to the communicative switches that are socially impactful and not just formally remarkable (Blom and Gumperz 1986 [1972]). Not only does this type of analysis direct our attention to the most salient formal distinctions in communicative practice, using register as an analytic reminds that codeswitching involves shifting among multi-modal semiotic repertoires, not named languages alone.

I have also sought to contribute to the important and growing literature on youth in the global south by demonstrating some of the most important ways individuals intervene in the emergence of social categories (and particularly the meaning of *youth*) are in and through communicative practice. Largely neglected by scholars of youth working in Africa, language is a highly salient and deeply contested means through which identities emerge. It is not only the object of widespread and contentious discourse that offers poignant insights into anxieties about

youth across the continent, language is also an abundant, malleable, and sometimes only resource through which individuals make themselves socially recognizable in conditions in which material resources and opportunity are scant.

A cluster of qualities and constellation of stereotypes, *youth*, as I conceive it here, is constantly in motion. Tracing the ways it is differently invoked, contested, and reconfigured in everyday practice offers important insight into what people like Bernard are doing when they claim to be “youth for life” but also how such claims uncomfortably mesh with anxious assertions about Africa’s “youth problem.” “Youth for life” and the “youth problem” are arguments about quality—both in terms of its value and its features—of youth. Claims made through *youth*, as I’ve suggested throughout the dissertation, are not only about material resources nor are they only assertions of status. They are claims about opportunities, ethical stances, and individual identity as well as being claims about the nature and value of *youth*.

APPENDIX A

Diana's Narrative:

- 1 **D:** So after that, I was, I was taken away. My uncle called me, to Nakuru. And we, uh, Mike was living with my uncle.
 B: In, with your uncle in Nakuru.
 D: there was this uncle of mine that I was telling you about, he was having money
5 but could not help us.
 B: So this is your, your father's brother?
 D: Yea
 B: Ah
 D: So, I went there. He called me to that, they had a school. They had some
10 applications that I should apply in a school
 B: Hmm
 D: 'These people are taking orphans. And they are ready to take you.'
 B: In Nakuru.
 D: In Nakuru. So I am only going to fill some, *nini*¹, some letters
15 **B:** But you, and the reason you had to leave, Kendu [bay]
 D: [and that was]
 B: is just because your uncle called you.
 D: Eh, my uncle called me coz there in Kindu Muslim I was paying fee, but if I heard
20 that I was not going to pay fee, these people were going to cater for my fee, and
 everything.
 B: Ah.
 D: Coz it was a boarding school.
 B: Oh, ok.
 D: So I thought that one would be kind. Then I traveled. (3s) Then after reaching
25 Nakuru I was taken to, this man, so they were telling me that the one who is going get me
 the school, was a doctor, in Nakuru hospital.
 B: Mmm.
 D: So we went there. I was in uniform with my '*kadong, kadong*².' Even my skirt.
 B: {Laughs}
30 **D:** Yea. So, I was carrying even my results slip for the last term. So I went there, the only
 thing that was remaining was inter(view).
 B: Mmm
 D: I thought the that's the only thing. So they told me to go and talk to the man before? I
 went for the interview. This man was a doctor. (2s) (He was a doctor) he
35 was radiotherapy I think.
 B: Mmm.
 D: So he was having a small portion of the, *nini*? He was having a room.
 B: Mmm.

¹ "*Nini*" (Sw.:) What (common discourse marker)

² Diana references this nickname for these cheap shoes earlier in the discussion. They are named such because of the sound they make as one walks in them.

- D:** The room was having a division like this one, the window.
- 40 **B:** Mm hum.
- D:** And I we... I come in and I got him. And he closed the the window. For people not to disturb, or distract him
- B:** Mmm
- D:** From doing the interview. Coz people were representing their letters from the
- 45 window. Its when you come around
- B:** Mmm hum.
- D:** Yea. So he closed (the window). Then we were now two people. Me with my result slips. He told me to bring my:: death certificates of my:: both my parents. I photocopied and bring them with me. And uh, all the result slips and the class 8
- 50 results slip.
- B:** Mm hum.
- D:** So I brought everything. Then he told me. ‘I’m ready to do you anything. I’m ready to help you. And (2s) before I,’
- B:** Mmm
- 55 **D:** ‘Would you help me?’ And I said ‘yes, I will, (if I can). What kind of help is that?’ I asked him (3s) ‘Oooh, you know,’ he says, ‘ you know, I have, eh, a wife at home. And (some kids). And I am owning some *shambas*³. I’m a doctor by profession. I have so many things, I can take care of you. And, ah, you can be my second wife. And, uh, also your school fee, I’ll pay, and you’ll not even go to
- 60 that orphanage, the school of that orphanage, you’ll just go to a good school, I’ll pay everything’
- B:** So he wanted a second wife who is still in secondary school?
- D:** Yea. Then he was saying these things? (2s) and he was really obsessed? (2s) He was coming around? I was sitting down, you know, on the chair. He was going
- 65 around, saying those things and going around, walking. Then all of the sudden, he told me to stand up. (2s) ‘Just stand, just stand.’ And he told me, *yaani*⁴, he was like forcing. Coz I’d already seen something, on his eyes.
- B:** Mm hum.
- D:** And I told him, ‘don’t even try to hold me the way you are holding me. (2s) Coz
- 70 now (4s) (*Nitapiga kelele*⁵).’
- B:** Mmm
- D:** ‘And you’ll be embarrassed’
- B:** Mmm
- D:** ‘I’ll shout.’
- 75 **B:** You were brave to say that.
- D:** Yea! ‘I’ll shout!’
- B:** Ah.
- D:** ‘I’m going to shout!’ Then he was telling me, ‘No, don’t bother shouting, this is something good, good for you, good for your life.’ You know. ‘You, you, you will

³ “*Shamba*” (Sw.:) Small farm. (While the Swahili plural is “*mashamba*” the term is borrowed into Kenyan English, thus pluralized “*shambas*.”)

⁴ “*Yaani*” (Sw.:) In other words (Often used as a discourse marker.)

⁵ “*Nitapiga kelele*” (Sw.:) I will make noise.

- 80 always say bye to the the the the poverty you are. I'll give you (a good thing).' Then I said,
B: How old was this man?
D: That man is big!
B: Mmm.
- 85 **D:** Having *kitambi*⁶, a very big (man). Very fat. And having a big (belly).
B: {Laughs} Mmm.
D: And I threw this man away!
B: {Laughs}
D: Coz he was holding (me).
- 90 **B:** He was holding you like, how was he holding you?
D: He would be, he was holding me here?
B: Ok, *kwa bega*⁷
D: Eh, *kwa bega*, from the back.
B: Ah.
- 95 **D:** And I turned around, and pushed (him).
B: And you pushed him.
D: Then I quickly ran to the door?, cause he had already closed the door?.
B: Mmm.
D: But he was stupid because he did not hold the key?.
- 100 **B:** Mmm.
D: The key was just there with the wha, the other one.
B: Mmm.
D: Then I turned it round, the door was opened?, I didn't wait?, the door was... You know this the big, big doors that if you are trying to, push it, it is very hard.
- 105 **B:** Mmm hmm.
D: You know? It's heavy somehow. Then I just left it open coz I was trying to close it, but, I couldn't.
B: Mmm.
D: I ran away, I was lost.
- 110 **B:** Mmm.
D: Cause the hospital is very big?
B: Mmm.
D: I don't know where I left those my brother, the brother and my uncles.
B: So they were there.
- 115 **D:** Yea. They were told to just, 'just wait for her there.'
B: Ah,
D: That man said. But, it was really (hard), for me to get where I came from. And I ran out screaming. And some patients were really amazed. They were like 'Oh! This is another patient,' No! Coz you know, you can't know the sickness of a person,
- 120 whatever he's doing, ah, you cannot know. Maybe he's mad. (2s) So they were like 'this girl is in uniform, why is she creaming, screaming?' Then I asked somebody, 'Let me, I

⁶ “*Kitambi*” (Sw.): Pride, arrogance. Often understood informally to refer to a big stomach, often in reference to the rotundness of “big men.”

⁷ “*Kwa bega*” (Sw.): By the shoulders

- want to go to the gate?, I don't know where I can follow?, can you show me the way?
Then she, he asked me, 'where are you from?' then I just said I was tempered coz I was
shaki::ng, you know?
- 125 **B:** Mmm hmm.
D: I was kind of fear::ing, yea. So I couldn't even talk cause I was, my lips also were...
B: Trembling.
D: Yea, so, then I, where did I go? I go, went to the gate. There at the gate I found a
person, a nurse?, I asked her, 'I'm going to:: my uncle's place?', and he's called Mr
130 Okello?, I don't know the house. Can you show me the house of Mr Okello?' Coz they
are living in this house, the headquarters of the hospital, so he is known.
B: So he's known
D: So he's known. So, the nurse took me to the house. There I waited. Then I told the, the
the kid of that, *nini*? That my uncle. 'Can you go and call Mike, I've left them
135 somewhere, if you know where the radiotherapy is taking place, I left them there. In the
fro::nt. So you can just go and call them, I'm just [*inaudible*]' and then he, he went coz
he knows everywhere in the hospital, they have lived there for so long. He went and
called them. Then I told him to just, 'you ca?, you can just leave, I'm already finished
with that? with the man.' And I was just trembling. I couldn't say
140 (anything). (2s) I started crying.
B: And could the the child of your uncle, could he tell something was wrong?
D: Yea, he could tell?. But I was not able to tell (him). So we went home with Mike, then
I told Mike that I'm going back to Kisumu.
B: Mmm hm.
145 **D:** He did not know anything about me, I'm going back to Kisumu, coz I did not even say
anything.

APPENDIX B

Joshua's Narrative

- 1 **J:** 'But, let me tell you one thing (2s): it doesn't matter where you are coming from. What is the reason why you came here?' He, she told me, my uncle went to *ushago*'s¹ place and picked him to come and learn, welding. And learn there for some times then? he'll go back. Then I told him: 'how many months have you been here?' 'Six
- 5 months' 'what have you done about your life?'
B: Mmm hmm
J: He had done nothing and he seemed the same way he had came. Then I told him, 'that is the reason why my uncle speaks to you that way. Change your life. Look for something about you that is good. Your privilege brought you here to learn welding.
- 10 (That's a good thing), there are so many people who live smartly because of this welding. And I want you after knowing this job very well (2s) make sure that you don't do this job, employ some people who do it because you have your machines.'
B: Mmm hmm
J: 'And don't let my uncle tells you, 'now your time of being here is up, now go.' Just tell him, 'I want to leave.' Then he'll ask you, 'why so early?' 'I've, I'm ok now, I've finished my training' but don't leave that you are going back to *ushago*, leave that you are going, you're opening a shop next. So that whenever he's passing with the vehicle, he'd see you morning'
- 15
B: Mmm hmm
J: even...'
[...]
- 20 I told him 'when this guy will, a, pu, getting, passing here, going to town, or coming back *jioni*², he should see you. on your workshop. Not that you are working for somebody, or not that you should have (your workshop).' And I told him, I asked
- 25 him, 'have you ever got job opportunities within this welding you are doing?' and he told me, 'Yea, there was a certain guy recently who called me for a job, but I was afraid to go because I thought. your uncle could have, you know...'
B: Been like angry or...
J: Yea, or angry about me, and I told him 'no, this guy will never be angry when he sees that whatever he's doing for you is doing something in your life. When somebody picks you up to help you, he needs. to see. that your life is really changing.'
- 30
B: Mmm hmm.
J: 'And show him that you've changed. Stop putting on these rags in front of him, he'll see you as stupid.'
- 35
B: Mmm.
J: 'Start putting on your own clothes, your own:: *mafuta kupaka*³, just live a comfortable life. Then. don't wait for him to tell you, 'now your time is up. Go' No, just tell him? 'I'm thankful for helping me, but now I'm stable I can leave' yea.
- 40 **B:** Yea.

¹ "Ushago" (Sh.:) Rural countryside, farmland, often also a rural 'homeplace.'

² "Jioni" (Sw.:) Evening

³ "Mafuta (ya) kupaka" (Sw.:) Body lotion

- J:** Yea. ‘Now I can leave.’ Then, he should see that you can leave (2s) Yea, then that is when what he did, and that is the day he’ll respect you. And you more or lessly find that when he is from work jioni he would stop:: by your shop and say ‘hi’ then go to his house’ (2s) And he was like, ‘By the way!’⁴
- 45 **B:** {Laughs}
- J:** {Laughs} And you know he looked at me like, ‘*Kwani?*’⁵ why are you, why did you say that?’ and like, he felt I would speak, I would na... I would not respect him::, speak trash to him::, look flossy::⁶ because he see me like, ‘this guy’s flossy type’ because that is why he said? ‘you should sleep on the bed, me, I’ll sleep down.’ (2s)
- 50 **B:** Mmm.
- J:** So, that is the first thing that told me what? this boy thinks. and what my uncle thinks about him.
- B:** Mmm hmm.
- J:** And I spoke? it was only one night we spoke. and his life may change, and he
- 55 feels different.
- B:** He feels different now?
- J:** He feels different now

⁴ “By the way” (often sounding more like “bithea::y”) is phrase commonly used in Sheng indicating affirmation and approval of what has been said as if it were a revelation.

⁵ “*Kwani*” (Sw./Sh.:) While in Swahili the phrase is a contraction of “*kwa nini*,” “Why?” in Sheng a translation of “What the hell?!” is more accurate.

⁶ “Flossy” slang meaning stuck-up or arrogant.

APPENDIX C

Eunice's Narrative

- 1 **E:** Mmm! And then uh I stopped going to to church? To learn dance with them? Coz it was, I was always tired every time I could come from space to there so I stopped and the uh those (2s) pastors there were all about 'Contemporary is a dirty dance' you know lifting your leg up:: what are you showing. You know and wearing a tight top and ((high pitched)) I would.
- 5 **B:** Yeah.
E: And uh, contact, body contact with guys, men
B: Yeah yeah
E: What are you doing? Yeah, so I kind of knew ah:: ah:: this rebel rebel rebellious spirit in me very strong one, actually I did not go to church for, months. So that's that's why the
- 10 the struggle with my mom and dance
B: And so it kind of came from that it was her also feeling like. wondering if this is actually an activity that she [can see as=
E: [Yeah]
B: moral at all]
- 15 **E:** [Yeah] And she was she was she wanted me to look for a college, classes where I could just go the whole day. And I told her 'No. I am dancing.' I have never spoken my mind. Ever in my life. I was all about, my mom tells me:: I want you to do this and this and this and 'yes, mom.' And then I [Inaudible] 'I'm not doing that I'm dancing? So, I think I think, you know, I'm not I'm not normally, I:: never used to be that soft person. I used to
- 20 say things straight up, so she used to take it really hard. and think I'm her her only daughter I know she wanted a friend. which we are by the way, we are friends
B: Yeah
E: Uh and uh we fought for months, uh we lived in the same house but we just passed () ' {Eunice} have you cooked?' 'Yeah' 'I'm going to sleep' 'Ok' 'Have you eaten?' 'Yeah'
- 25 That was [the best conversation=
B: [that's not really talking]
E: we even had we were like one word one word one word.
B: And so she was worried about, she was worried about what you were doing while dancing
- 30 **E:** Mmm hm.
B: And also like, was she worried about your future?
E: Exactly, that was the main thing.
B: It was the main thing?
E: She was saying, because she was sick actually that time
- 35 **B:** Ok
E: So she has a back problem? and she's hypertensive
B: Ok
E: So she used to tell me 'what if I die right now?'
B: Uh
- 40 **E:** 'How will you sustain yourself?' And I'm like, 'well dance, duh!'
B: ((Laughs))

E: No, but like what can you do right now?
B: {Laughs} She's not convinced

45 **E:** No! you cannot cannot cannot. So, ah!, after a lot of fighting and she talked to her friends her friends told her 'she's going to rebel and she's going to move out of your house she has made up her mind, so support her' In the meantime I was thinking 'why, why are we even fighting, come on, this is my life.' And I know she wants to best for me, she wants me to be happy and so if she wants me to be happy? I'm happy dancing. So I told her one Saturday, we used to have a:: a concert every Saturday called the {Kwetu} Live

50 **B:** Mmm
E: Where musicians come and dance and sing and just have fun you know?
B: Ah. What happened to that?
E: Mmm:: funds. And we didn't we never had a video and speakers, so yeah, it was it was so hard at first and then I decided I call her to come and see what we're doing coz she

55 **B:** [so she just knew *about* it]
E: So I called her, she came, sna::cks and all that and then the funny thing with my mom is even if you have a problem she never shows it to anyone, and like ((high pitched)) 'Hi baby! Come!' I sat on her lap and I was thinking 'What. Is going on?' She was angry at me

60 in the morning!
B: {Laughs}
E: So she saw she was like, 'wow, you guys can da::nce. You guys are doing a good job' so that's the day she accepted.
B: And so it was really taking her to see

65 **E:** Yeah. Yeah.
B: What you were doing
E: She she she she does believe actually she was asking me, 'do you even know how to dance?' Like, 'Yea mom, I know how to dance' 'I don't think so' so I was like 'Ok' So I proved her wrong that day and we that night actually we had a long long talk.

70 **B:** Mmm hmm
E: Talk? No. We had a long. cry and tell.
B: Ah!
E: {Laughs}
B: That must have been such a huge relief to you.

75 **E:** It was! You know even even before that, m::, I had not accepted some contemporary dance. I I knew, I used to be told 'you can be a really good contemporary dancer' 'Yeah::'. Back of my mind I'm thinking, 'my mom, my pastors'
B: Mmm hmm.
E: Then that day I talked to her and I told her, 'you know us when we are dancing we we are not, we don't think about, uh:: a man touching me.'

80 **B:** Yeah, this isn't sexual
E: This is dance. Hmm like, 'you don't feel funny when they' 'No, I don't feel funny' 'Ok' 'You're ok with that then fine' so we cried and told and explained and discussed and all that and then, since that day she has been she has been very s-supportive

85 **B:** and then what about the pastors at church, then?
E: Mm!
B: Are they::?

E: Ah:: They came to accept it? Af::ter they saw me in Sakata.
B: Ok.
90 **E:** I figured they (inaudible)
B: So they said ‘talent is talent’
E: Like ‘Ah! That’s our daughter!’
B: {Laughs}
E: You guys denied me::! You know so my mom, they used to tell my mom uh:: Your
95 you’re your daughter is, she’s she’s getting lost.
B: Mmm
E: She’s going to satan’s way (2s) And my mom was::
B: How did it make you feel when you would know that they were saying that about you?
E: I mean I I always knew, ah:: not everyone would support me. I knew that. But you see
100 my pastors, that is a very big blow (3s) and the::n, by the way, I-I stopped, I stopped going
to church and I-I backslid (2s) you know, went out, clubbing, c’mon why not?
B: Yeah.
E: and then, I decided I was going out to have fun for the wrong reasons, to prove them
wrong or whatever reason which is very wrong.
105 **B:** Uh huh
E: But after Sakata they were so supportive I mean I came home like ‘Ah:: I saw you last
week!’ ‘yeah::’ We were just laughing at that {Laughs} I mean, God’s time is God’s time.
so:: yeah, right now, I, yea I go to church, sometimes.
[...]
110 [18:36]
B: So:: when did you when did you really get involved in dance and arts:: in general
E: Mmm
B: Feel free to eat all of your all of your chips while talking
E: with my dad, my dad played the guitar?
115 **B:** Ok
E: and he sang.
B: and so and so you kind of grew up with music all around
E: mmm hmm
B: all the time
120 **E:** he was more he was the kind? Ok he was a photojournalist
B: ok
E: mmm so he used to go travelling:: and I used to think ‘I want to be like my dad.’
B: That sounds like such an interesting career
E: Because he could travel do his job plus. Entertain. To wherever he’s going. You know I
125 mean he has:: free transport
B: Mmm hmm ((laughs))
E: he just carries his guitar and goes:: ((claps)) to work and other work. So at first I wanted
to be an an air hostess. I just saw some TV ‘ahh:: she looks ni::ce I want to be an air
hostess::’ I was really very little and then I wanted to be my like my dad. I actually wanted
130 to be my dad.
B: ((laughs)) [its not just=
E: [I did
B: =like your dad

135 **E:** I did I did I wanted to be my dad I wanted to be him (2s) Uh:: he was you-you-you know? I was da-daddy's girl daddy's girl and then:: my mom used to beat me up I didn't like her at all

B: Hmm

140 **E:** My dad never touched me, like 'you' ((laughs)) so:: before he died (2s) I was actually in school. And he he he had told me he'd give me a surprise before ok after during the holidays. So, two days before closing school (2s) I was told he died (3s) but the principal says like 'nah, he's going to take me out, come on.' Cannot go just with that (4s) And then that that that day, that was the exact day I told my mom (3s) 'I'm going to do art.' (3s) Not just. not just art. like I'm going to practice art. no I'm going to do art. Art as my job as my career as my profession. So my mom was like 'Ah, ok:: ok, sweetheart, ok' I was like 'ah

145 ok.' so she she she never saw me as:: a dancer. Maybe she said 'ah, she'll want to sing' you know? or do weird weird stuff.

B: And when you said to her you wanted to do:: art, did you just mean kind of like any: you know?

E: {Laughs} Ah, when I went, when I said 'art' honestly I did not know what kind of art I was going to do. But I used to see:: I used to go the museum, to the I mean, to the:: theater, the National Theater

B: Ah

E: And there are so many artists there, so I used to say like 'this is very interesting' I mean, you manage your own life:: you don't have to be somewhere exactly at this time.

155 Like in offices you have to be there by seven, you know, you have to leave by, you know? So I said 'Ah! Let me just finish high school and I'll decide what I'll do' (3s) After I finished high school we moved to another estate and in that estate there was a there is a SOS children's uh:: center

B: Ok

160 **E:** And in that center there was Dashu Crew, used to do a lot of hip hop. Like 'eh, hi, hip hop is nice'

B: Mmm hmm

E: So I joined them. Um I joined them really funny. Very in a very funny way. Guys were head spinning?

165 **B:** Mmm hmm

E: and doing freezes. So there was this guy called Kama. I just new him like 'I saw him ()' so they said 'I think you can do it come and try' so then I spinned one and they were like 'Oh:: [she's in=

B: [Just the first time] you got right onto your head

170 **E:** =she's in!' that's how I got in.

B: ((laughs)) Oh wow. And so from then on you were just. In.

E: Yeah. I was, no aft-aft-after I joined Dashu I could not see my life anywhere else apart from dance. And then:: my mom forced me to come to Kisumu I was like 'ok. ok.'

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