

# **Framing the Urban Hustler: Space and Identity Discourse in Kenyan Popular Music**

by

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## **Abstract**

Rapid urbanization in Africa has visited myriad challenges upon the inhabitants. This has led to the perception of African urban spaces as largely dysfunctional. However, this essay illustrates the existence of an intricate culture of resilience among contemporary urbanites. In Kenyan cities, this survival attitude is evident in the “hustler” mentality popularized through contemporary urban music. Musicians have creatively appropriated the otherwise negative hustler identity and redefined it for coping within a challenging urban context. This has consequently radically altered the way urban space functions and is perceived. The essay explores the dynamics of the social and spatial aspects of urban identity and how the city residents engage their geo-social landscape in an attempt to make the city work for them. To achieve an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon, eight “information-rich” songs by Kenyan urban musicians were purposively selected, and texts interpreted against the backdrop of theoretical discourses on the notions of space and identity. The findings lend credence to the assertions that in an urban environment, music exhibits socio-spatial implications and space influences identity formation among the dwellers.

## **Introduction**

The post-colonial era in African countries has been characterized by a tremendous growth in cities and the corresponding urban populations. This has posed a myriad of challenges leading to African urban spaces being viewed as in crisis and largely dysfunctional (Hansen & Vaa, 2002; Mbembe & Nuttal, 2004; O’shaughnessy, 2008). For instance, Murphy (1994) describes Lusaka satirically as “tiny and charmingly fails to project an urban image...But none of this, somehow, adds up to a *city*” (Simon, 1993: 17). Rakodi (1995) too exhibits skepticism about Harare: “For the moment, the city works... [However] it is becoming a little like a pressure cooker” (Simon, 1993: 17).

Such negative views have been influenced largely by Western based urban theories which fail to accordingly appreciate the intricate forces at play within the daily operations of an African city. However, contemporary scholars are keen on shedding light on the unique ways in which the African city nevertheless functions oblivious to the foreign eyes. In his study on Lagos, Koolhaas (2000: 652) interestingly observes that “Lagos as an icon of West African urbanity, inverts every essential characteristic of the so-called modern city. Yet it is still-for lack of a better word-a city; and one that works.” This view, albeit exhibiting an element of pessimism, significantly recognizes the potentials of the inhabitants of African cities to, in the words of O’Shaughnessy (2008: 14), “make the city work for them”.

This article demonstrates that African city residents are not passive characters, but rather active participants engaged in attempts to shape their destinies within their challenging urban contexts. Against the backdrop of the grim picture painted by many scholars, a new culture of resilience among the contemporary African urbanites, who have mastered the art of survival against all odds, is emerging. In Kenyan cities, especially in Nairobi, this scenario has been brought to the fore by urban musicians who have popularized the hustler mentality through their music. The term “hustler” ordinarily bears negative connotations of dishonesty, unscrupulous profiteering, loose morals and drug peddling. However, Kenyan artists have appropriated the positive semantic notion of the word and currently associate it with being aggressive and enterprising. By redefining the concept, they have successfully created a new alternative identity that has potentials of radically changing the way urban space functions and is perceived. The hustler mentality is prevalent among the low and middle-class Kenyan urbanites who often desire socio-economic mobility. In this essay, attention is paid not only to the social aspects, but also the spatial dimensions of identity. Therefore, the manner in which the urbanites employ their hustler identity to actively engage their geo-social landscape in an attempt to make the city work for them is of immense interest.

The hustler mentality evident in Kenyan urban music bears influence from the prevalent attitude in American Hip hop scene where success in life is generally tied to amassing material wealth. The hustling culture in American society dates back to the birth of the independent republic and reflects a “combined ethos of the capitalist economic structure and the mythos of the self-made man” (Rose, 2011: 123). Hence, the self-made man itself is “a model of manhood that derives identity entirely from a man’s activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographic and social mobility” (Kimmel, 2006: 17). This centrality of materialism is demonstrated in the title of one of the most successful albums by the Hip hop icon 50 Cent (Curtis James Jackson): “Get Rich or Die Tryin”. Kenyan urban musicians often proudly identify themselves as hustlers and glorify the art of hustling in their works, thus, this essay delves into the creativity of the novel hustler identity within the Kenyan urban space.

Contemporary Kenyan urban music tends to echo global musical genres. Such genres as Hip hop, have however been notably adapted to the local context and developed into unique flavours such as *Genge*<sup>1</sup> and *Kapuka*<sup>2</sup>. Kenyan urban artists sing mostly in Sheng<sup>3</sup>, Kiswahili and English and address a variety of themes within the society. The discussions presented in this paper are based on the texts of eight “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1990: 169) purposively sampled to enable an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. These include *Lunch Time* (1972) by Gabby Omollo, *Mr. Policeman* (2001) by K-South, *Wasee (Githurai)* (2002) by Mr. Lenny (Lenson Njuki) and Mr. Googz (Moffat Omari), *Riziki* (2007) by Awilo Mike (Michael Otieno Ooko), *Bongo La Biashara* (2008) by Juacali (Paul Julius Nunda), *Mtaani dot com* (2009) by Colonel Mustafa (Daudi Mustafa) and Avril (Nyambura Mwangi) *Kigeugeu* (2010) by Jaguar (Charles Njuguna Kanyi) and *City Life* (2012) by Trapee (Godfred Mtatah) and Size 8 (Linet Munyali). These songs fall into a variety of genres and were sampled to illustrate the fact that the hustler mentality cuts across the spectrum in contemporary Kenyan urban music. The discussions here are limited to the lyrics of the selected songs as opposed to their other musical implications that actually go beyond the texts.

## **Spatial Dimensions of Music**

Space is a derivative of the tripartite interaction between certain elements crucial to its construction. Lefebvre perceives space to combine three elements: land as private property or other systems of territorialisation; the built environment as everyday resource and the spatial medium of human interaction (Shields, 1991). While characterizing space as material and concrete existence, Lehntovuori (2005) equally notes that space is a three-dimensional grid and an endless continuum. The reality constructed by space thus has potentials of yielding multiple perspectives that go beyond the physical. According to Lefebvre (1991), space should not be considered as some pre-existing void that is filled by social activities but is actually created through social actions. Indeed, Massey (2000) holds that social space is not an empty arena within which we conduct our lives but rather something we construct around us. As such, space is not synonymous to a vacuum, for it also serves a significant contextual function. As Jaffe and Sanderse (2010) argue, space and specific locations provide more than a contextual backdrop for social processes by actively structuring and mediating social action while continuously undergoing change through social action itself. In other words, space and context are often involved in a reciprocal interaction characterized by mutual transformation in both directions. As Zeleza and Kalipeni (1999: 2) rightly observe, “in as much as space is socially constructed the social is spatially constructed, too”. Consequently, “[s]pace is at once result and cause, product and producer” (Lefebvre, 1991: 142). In the urban context therefore, social circumstances shape spatial conceptions, even as space itself influences social relations.

As is the case with other art forms, music has “to be performed someplace” (Becker, 2004: 17), hence space constitutes an integral part of the musical experience. According to Kong (1995), music is both a medium and an outcome of people’s environmental experience, and as such, can be used to explore space as much as it can be the result of efforts aimed at making sense of space.

Indeed, Krims (2007) argues in favour of the perception of music as simultaneously part of the spatialization of social relations as well as its consequence. Therefore, music emerges as both reflecting space and taking part in its production. As Nyairo (2004) holds, popular music is the product of specified geographical locations and the relationship between cultural forms and places is symbiotic since places shape cultural forms while cultural forms in turn mediate how we perceive space and places. Therefore the space which serves as the context for music influences its nature and content just like the music itself constructs the space in which it is performed. Accordingly, Connell and Gibson (2003) argue that music is a spatial phenomenon as it is tied to specific places and is implicated in how sites or spaces are perceived. Thus, it is necessary to pay due attention to spatial contexts when attempting to interpret Kenyan urban music.

Furthermore, the reflective function of music implies an understanding of space as context. Whiteley, (2004: 2) argues that spaces provide the “socio-cultural backdrop” and the “rich experiential settings” for musical practices. Describing the details of the nature of the context reflected by music, Cohen (1995:444) cites “social, economic, political and material aspects of the particular place in which it is created”. It is thus tenable to argue that music largely remains faithful to its spatial context of production. This is evident in its tendency to convey the images of its place (Kong, 1995) and represent place “either through culturally familiar symbols...or in more particular ways” (Cohen, 1995:445). Music’s reflection of space is significant in that it has a bearing on the construction of identity, and as Whiteley (2004:2) maintains, music is key in the “narrativization of place” which is “the way in which people define their relationship to local, everyday surroundings”. As music mirrors place, it gives us insights into people’s connection with their environment, enabling us to draw conclusions on their sense of identity.

Cohen (1995) perceives music as involved in the social, cultural and economic production of place. Place itself is a part of space that becomes special when people attach or derive meaning from it (Tuan, 1977, Cited in Knight, 2006). Music thus, is perceived as going beyond mere reflection of spatiality, and somehow venturing into the physical production of place. This is because music serves as the frame for social relations which “shape material and geographical settings” (Cohen, 1995:445). And in so doing, music helps people appropriately “author space” (Whiteley, 2004: 3); a process akin to defining a particular geographical and material space and investing it with meaning (Cohen, 1995). Music consequently functions as a “soundscape”; a term used “to conceive how sound gives meaning to spaces and places” (Saldanha, 2009: 1). This essay examines how the Kenyan urban musical soundscapes inscribe meaning into the cityscape.

Music shapes space by effectively creating borders. Cook (2013: 238) observes that “[w]hen music creates boundaries, when it distinguishes my space from yours, it draws principally on its extraordinary capacity for generic differentiation: the walls between people erected by the constantly evolving sub-genres of dance music are as solid as any architect’s”. This implies that individual and collective musical preferences may structure society into distinct spaces often reified in material dimensions.

In the same way, Dibben and Haake (2013) perceive music listening in offices as being used to mark territories while respecting and/or trespassing on those of others, and this line of argument may be applicable with some measure of accuracy to musical preferences among members of the society in general. Hence, with regard to urban spaces, Whiteley (2004) points out that the contestation of space and marking out of cultural territory is facilitated considerably through musical innovations and practices.

## **Music and Identity**

According to Kong (1995), as a form of cultural communication, music is how identities are (de)constructed. People rely on music to articulate identity both at the individual and collective levels. Through music, people often explore their self-concepts either as individuals or groups with an intention of achieving a better understanding of themselves with respect to their environment. Thus, a sense of belonging to a given place is usually cultivated through music. Talking about immigrant Jews, Cohen (1995) argues that musical practices helped define the particular geographical and material space they inhabited within the city and invested it with a distinct sense of identity. Bennett (2004: 224) similarly observes that “locally produced musics become a means through which individuals are able to situate themselves within a particular city, town or region”. Indeed, “[p]eople look to specific musics as symbolic anchors in regions” (Lewis, 1992: 144). In Kenya, music has been used by the urbanite to stake a claim to the city.

Music inculcates a sense of belonging for members of a given society. Lewis (1992) maintains that music serves as a sign of community, belonging and a shared past. For the marginalized groups of people “[e]xcluded from official urban and national history, creativity within popular culture has long provided a medium for the representation of diverse identities and a tool for making the city a place of belonging” (Georgiou, 2013: 67). To the urbanite therefore, the psychological benefits of being part of some communal network are indispensable for the effective negotiation of the city space. Binnie *et al.* (2006) talk of the tensions around defining who and what actually ‘belongs’ in each part of the city (cited in Georgiou, 2013: 71). The issue of identity and belonging thus fragments the metropolis into segments characterized by boundaries which are both symbolic and spatial in nature.

In the forging of both individual and communal identities, music usually plays an important role. As Whiteley (2004: 2) believes, music informs notions of collective identity owing to the fact that it emanates from “a common stock of understandings” concerning its relationship to the local. Further, Cohen (1998) posits that music can serve individuals “as a cultural ‘map of meaning’, drawing upon it to locate themselves in different imaginary geographies” (cited in Mitchell, 2009: ii). These two arguments imply that music has both physical and imaginary spatial implications for identity. To this effect, Whiteley (2004: 3) posits that music’s articulation of notions of collective identity “grounded in physically demarcated urban and rural spaces, is matched by its role in the articulation of symbolic notions of community, which transgress both place and time”.

“Conflicting claims to physical and symbolic ownership” (Georgiou, 2013: 71) characterize the city space. Such conflicts are often captured by the lyrics of urban music as is the case in Kenya.

Kirkegaard (2002) describes music as part of an overall cultural identity. In a similar line of argument, Connell and Gibson (2003) say that music, among others, has the effect of reaffirming various social identities. Music is therefore deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural features that define a people. In the urban context, it reflects the characteristic social classes of the urbanites as well as their interaction with others within their environment. This is the case with Kenyan urban music that displays the daily struggles of a frustrated yet optimistic hustler community, as evident in the analyzed texts.

### **Space: Found and Constructed**

Borden (2001: 12) uses the term “found space” in reference to space as a pre-existent natural phenomenon. To the urbanite hustler, found space is often exploited in a manner as to yield newly constructed spatial entities. Constructed space is evident in Gabby Omolo’s all-time favourite urban hit *Lunch Time*. Although released in the 1970s, the song explores the varied ways urbanites engage with public space in a manner that remains relevant to date. The artist talks about city parks thus:

*Sasa ni lunch time, tufunge makazi  
Twende kwa chakula, tuje tena saa nane  
Wengine wanakwenda kulala uwanjani  
Kumbe shida ndugu, njaa inamwumiza*

It’s now lunch time, let’s take a break  
Take a meal and return at 2PM  
Others go to sleep in the parks  
Because of problems brother, hunger is ravaging him/her.

In this case, the public park as found space is meant for recreational purposes for the city residents. However, the hustling urbanite creatively constructs a new space out of that pre-existent space to suit his/her unique needs. The constructed space is thus a sanctuary; a refuge away from the immediate problem of hunger. While those who can afford go for lunch, the hard pressed urbanite can only enjoy the free luxury of a nap in the park. The urbanite therefore appropriates public space and conveniently turns it into a private space of temporary escape, away from the troubles that beleaguer him/her within the city.

In a similar manner, musician Mike Awilo engages in a debate about the construction of urban space in his song *Riziki*:

*Mimi ninalo jambo lanisumbua akili  
Ulimwengu imepasuka mahali  
Mungu aliupanga usiku saa ya kulala  
Mbona walimwengu mmebadili mipango?  
Usiku sasa imegeuka mchana  
Na mchana sasa ni kama usiki jameni nashangaa*

I have one issue that bothers my mind  
The world has a crack somewhere  
Night time is for sleeping as arranged by God  
Why have you people changed the arrangement?  
The night has become day time  
And day time like the night, people I wonder

In this extract, the artist acknowledges the existence of both found and constructed space in the urban context. By portraying the city nights as being meant for sleep by divine design, the artist perceives them as found space for the urbanite to fit in on as is basis. However, the artist reckons that the contemporary urban reality is in fact the opposite. Many people no longer retire to bed at nightfall, but instead continue engaging in a variety of business ventures in an attempt to make ends meet. In so doing, they actually construct their own spaces within the pre-existent city night space. This is apparent in the line “Koinange mnatafuta usiku” (In Koinange you seek at night). Here, Koinange Street in Nairobi constitutes a found space ordinarily considered public. Nevertheless, the hustler takes advantage of the night to construct private space and engage in twilight prostitution. The urban hustlers thus seem to demystify the portrayal of found space as being cast in stone. In their own unique way, they (the urbanites) emerge as having beaten the Kenyan government at implementing a proposed 24-hour economy.

Found space has also been interestingly re-constructed to include commercial dimensions of the urbanite’s unending exploits. In reference to Nairobi’s Eastlands, Connell and Gibson (2003: 133) argue that “[n]o distinctions are made between residential zones and commercial ones, all flow into one another in a seamless stream of haphazard spatial exploitation”. This is portrayed in the song *Bongo La Biashara* by Juacali. The persona tells a potential customer “Naweza kupitia leo nikuonyeshe ile kitu” (I can pass by [your place] so that I show you that thing). In this case, the hustler constructs commercial space from private space. This is because he/she expresses a willingness to take the business literally to the customer’s doorstep. The enterprising nature of the hustler is therefore demonstrated by the fact that the spatial boundaries between public and private space are not a hindrance to his/her operations. Indeed in many Kenyan cities, the doorstep hawking culture has become rampant, and many business deals, both legal and otherwise, are often sealed within the privacy of people’s homes.

Yet another interesting manner in which constructed space is coined from found space is through the use of temporality: the aspect of time. The urbanite may appropriate temporal circumstances to his/her advantage in the day-to-day hustles. The hustler portrayed in Juacali's *Bongo La Biashara* actually prefers deals done during evenings and nights:

*Time gani poa, majioni ama usiku?  
Ni laptop noma ka-14 inch hivi  
Ma wires ziko na screen yake ni fiti*

What is the best time? Evening or at night?  
It's a nice 14 inch laptop  
The cables are intact and the screen is fine

The cover of darkness seems to provide the convenient private space for the hustler's dealings. For the business appointment, he/she poses a closed ended question thereby restricting the customer to choose between the two time slot options that are both favourable to him: evening and night time. The preference for such times could be due to convenience or the suspicious nature of the deal in question. Either of these factors thus effectively informs the temporal construction of private space from public space in this case.

Constructed space can also be physically curved out of found space. In Juacali's *Bongo La Biashara*, the persona says, "vuta kioo juu kuna moto nataka kukuonyesha" (wind up your windows, there is some hot stuff I want to show you). The setting here is definitely a car parked perhaps in the street which ordinarily forms part of found public space. The hustler is alive to the reality that the setting is not right for the kind of deal he/she wants to transact. Private space is therefore constructed by winding up the car windows to provide the ideal atmosphere. Found space emerges as insecure for the hustler as evident in the use of the coded term "hot stuff" hence the need for constructed space.

## **Identity Formation in Spaces**

Space has a correlation to the identity of the urbanite hustler as portrayed in Kenyan popular music. The physical space inhabited or occupied by an individual extensively shapes his/her identity. It is interesting to note that the popular urban musical scene in Nairobi has been dominated by artists from the relatively low-income areas of the city, such as the so-called Eastlands, as opposed to the up-market residential areas. Artists from such areas find in music an avenue for packaging their identity in connection to their humble origins, and thus, stamping their authority in a city that has little space for the underprivileged classes. In the song *Wasee (Githurai)*, the artists Mr. Lenny and Mr. Googz assertively construct their spatial identities within the city:



*Na wasee tumetoka Githurai*  
*Tumekam kukupa rhymes zingine dry*  
*Tukifry whack MCs ka mayai kwa karai*  
*Ikiwa zimeshika sema my!*

And people we are from Githurai  
We have come to give you nice rhymes  
As we fry ridiculous MCs<sup>4</sup> like eggs in a pan  
If you like the lyrics say my!

The personas above announce their arrival in the urban musical scene by introducing themselves spatially as hailing from Githurai, a sprawling suburb in the outskirts of Nairobi city. In identifying with their slum space of origin, they introduce issues of space and class in the song and accordingly critique the urban space establishment that confines them to the outskirts of the city. Indeed, as Nyairo (2004) observes, contemporary Kenyan popular music succeeds in spatially defining and shaping urban class differentiation in postcolonial Kenya. The artists therefore boldly stake their claim for space within the alienating city and celebrate having overcome both symbolic and physical boundaries in the process. They openly show off their raw talent and take pride in “dissing”<sup>5</sup> the more established MCs who seem to have gained acceptance into the mainstream city space. The musicians thus accordingly exude “symbolic power” (Georgiou, 2013: 71) within the city. The song also constructs communal identity in the line “Na wasee tumetoka Githurai” (People, we come from Githurai). Here, the personal pronoun “we” is inclusive of the other peripheral city inhabitants with whom the artists share experiences.

Through popular music, the otherwise muffled marginalized urban voices manage to cause a revolution of sorts within the urban space with the backstreet gradually entering the mainstream. In the song *Githurai*, the phrase “kule chini Githurai” (down there in Githurai) constructs the artists’ spatial identity as people considered outsiders in the metropolis to which they belong. The song also mentions Inner Core (a section of Umoja Estate), which is another low-middle class residential area within Nairobi. The point emerging here is that the artists have come from far, both literally and symbolically, in their hustle to get to where they are currently. Once located firmly within the precincts of the mainstream city space, they do not intend to leave any time soon as evident in the line “come together we can do this together/take your time we are staying here forever.”

The prominence of space in urban music is also apparent in the works of the artist Juacali. Spatiality is entrenched in his very stage name which is a compressed form of “Jua California” (Know California). California being the artist’s estate neighbourhood, the stage name therefore demonstrates a commitment to form an intimate and almost permanent identity with his space of origin as he enters the larger arena of the cosmopolitan city space. In other words, merging neighbourhood space with the city space seems to yield certain psychological benefits for the artist.

The tendency to adapt the identity of one's place of origin is also evident in the group K-South whose name is an abbreviated form of Kariobangi South; a low-income residential estate in north eastern Nairobi. The stage name Juacali is also rich in symbolism and can yield other interpretations as it resonates *Jua Kali*<sup>6</sup> which refers to the famous informal sector in Kenya known for its hardships, ingenuity and "fix-it" predisposition. Hence, Nyairo (2007: 147) describes the *Jua Kali* artisan as one who "thrives on the margins of the structured economy in a culture of transgression whose genius lies in his instinctive capacity to appropriate whatever resources are available to him". By appropriating the *Jua Kali* identity, the artist Juacali therefore succeeds in claiming his space within the resilient hustle that is characteristic of the Kenyan *Jua Kali* culture.

In *Bongo La Biashara*, Juacali constructs urban space as treacherous and one where ingenuity is mandatory for survival:

*Ama twende ghetto tufungue kibanda  
Tuwauzie kahawa, nakuonyesha itawabamba  
Si dalasini, si karafuu  
Tutawachanganyishia zote waskie nafuu  
Kisha ikishawabamba, si unjaua nini itafuata  
Kuwasanyia njumu na mambota  
Washindwe ni mogoka imeshika ama ni kuota  
Wakishika ujanja, car wash tunaanza  
Kwa ile hali ya kuosha, rim inapotea  
Side mirror inapotea, tenje inapotea  
Makarao wakikuja, gari inabembea*

Or we go to the ghetto and open a kiosk  
To sell to them coffee, I tell you it will please them  
Not cinnamon, not clove  
We mix for them all so that they feel "relief"  
Then after it has taken effect, you know what will follow  
Collecting their shoes and watches  
They will wonder if it is khat<sup>7</sup> that made them high or they are dreaming  
When they become wise, we open a car wash  
In the process of washing, the rim disappears  
The side mirror disappears, the music system disappears  
When the police come, the vehicle is wobbling

The artist portrays the ghetto space as one that offers immense security to the urbanite hustlers who identify with it as their home. They operate freely within this space contravening the law with wanton abandon being aware that their geographical location is removed from the mainstream city space. The ghetto is the dominated space of the hustlers and they use it to express their defiance to the dominant metropolis that confines them to the periphery. The hustler owns the ghetto space and creatively exploits its many possibilities in an effort to survive. In this text, the artist seems to glorify crime. This tone effectively captures the slum inhabitants' anger at the establishment for forsaking them and labeling them outlaws; an identity that they accordingly embrace and use against the same oppressors. The line "Makarao wakikuja, gari inabembea" (When the police come, the vehicle is wobbling) demonstrates that the ghetto inhabitants are a forgotten lot by the security operatives who rarely patrol this space. The Kiswahili lexicon "wakikuja" has been used with a dual semantic notion in this context: 'when' or 'if they come'. This implies that whenever there are reports of crime in the slums, the police either arrive too late or never respond at all. The hustler's use of language also stands out in this extract. The preference for Sheng elevates the talk to coded language aimed at tactically excluding outsiders who do not form part of the ghetto speech community. Further, Sheng as a mode of expression also serves to construct the unique identity of urbanite hustlers as members of a sub-culture that seeks to "talk back" at the city establishment.

Indeed, class identity within the city is spatially constructed, and other than the locality where one lives, where one works as well as the social places one frequents speaks volumes about one's class in the society. In postcolonial Kenya, one of the greatest challenges to nationhood has been the prevalent socio-economic inequalities among the populace. Gabby Omolo addresses this issue in *Lunch Time*:

*Watu wa Industrial Area, watoroka maharagwe  
Waenda hotelini, kwa chapati na ng'ombe  
Na wengine nao, wale mishahara juu  
Siku hiyo wote, kwa hoteli za wazungu*

The people of Industrial Area abandon beans  
They go to hotels for *chapati*<sup>8</sup> and beef  
And others who earn high salaries  
That day they all go to European hotels

Industrial Area of Nairobi city is home to most of Kenya's industries and offers employment to thousands of citizens. However, it is a place of contradictions since while the owners of the industries are millionaires; the majority of their workers earn meager salaries and live in squalor. Being largely associated with the low class unskilled casual labourers, the Industrial Area space thus illustrates that spatiality has a bearing on class and identity of the urbanites.

In the text above, the Industrial Area labourers are portrayed as feeding on a monotonous diet consisting of beans and only go to a hotel to eat *chapati* and beef at the end of the month when they receive their wages. On the other hand, the working middle class people can afford to go to “European hotels”. By referring to the hotels as such, the artist creates a vivid spatial image of exclusion on the basis of socio-economic status. To the ordinary hustlers, such hotels are beyond reach despite being located spatially within their city. Thus, the hotel space is reserved for the privileged as opposed to the ordinary folks to whom it remains an imagined space. For those with no salaries at all, occupying the city public parks during lunch time is the preferred option. This is clear in the lines:

*Ukifika mwisho wa mwezi, uwanja thire mondo  
Ukiona anayelala ni asiye na kazi*

When the month end reaches, the park is empty  
If you see anyone sleeping, then he/she is jobless

The jobless people are thus a permanent fixture within the city parks even when everybody else deserts it. In fact, it can be argued that they form an integral part of the contemporary definition of the Kenyan public parks themselves, and thus, the otherwise empty city parks only gain their meaning when people populate them at various times.

## **Fluid Hustler Identity**

Kenyan music portrays the picture of an urbanite whose identity is permanently shifting to suit the contemporary context or situation. This is in line with Gervais-Lambony’s (2006) sentiment that identity is never fixed and can change depending on the social group or living space among other factors. The title of Jaguar’s song *Kigeugeu* effectively captures the hustler’s turncoat identity. The lines “dereva, kigeugeu/conductor, kigeugeu (the driver is a turncoat/ the conductor is a turn coat) alludes to the public space characteristic of the *Matatu*<sup>9</sup> sector which has become synonymous with everyday Kenyan urban life. In the absence of a state-run public transport system in Kenya, individual entrepreneurs and companies provide the essential transport services to the citizens. Despite the all-important but chaotic sector being associated with all sorts of ills, it has developed into being a symbol of ingenuity, resilience and Kenya’s urban identity. The often brightly coloured *Matatus* with their characteristic graffiti, loud music and boisterous crew, are a spectacle to behold in Kenyan cities. Wa-Mungai observes that the phenomenon “*matatuism* is also the metaphor for social survival in the face of tremendous odds” and underscores the “ever-shifting nature of the ‘matatu’ man’s identity” (2007: 29, emphasis added).

Located at the very core of urbanite hustler discourse, the *matatu* crews are obviously an embodiment of hustling based on the many challenges they face in their day-to-day operations, although they often manage to overcome them. As much as *matatu* space is public space, it is notable that the crews have appropriated it as their own personal space where they wield unparalleled power and influence.

In Juacali's *Bongo La Biashara*, the hustler emerges as a jack-of-all-trades and assumes different identities depending on the particular trade he does at any one time. He is a hawker, an hotelier, a car washer, a painter, a mugger, a drug dealer and a broker all wrapped in one. As a broker, he exhibits his real turncoat self when he turns against a customer: "Nitampiga bafu amesahau broker hugeuka mwishowe akuwe the owner" (I will con him, he forgets that a broker eventually turns out to be the owner). This demonstrates the extent to which the hustler is willing to go to achieve his/her ambitious objectives. As evident in this case, there is sometimes a thin line between the hustling mentality and illegality. Nevertheless, ardent hustlers often glorify their practice and justify it as a personal initiative towards making things work for them in the competitive city space.

The fluidity of the hustler's identity often enables him/her to transcend the various types of boundaries erected in his/her way. This is captured in *Mtaani dot com* by Colonel Mustafa and Avril:

*Kijana amekatia mama*  
*Mama mzungu, sasa anaishi majuu...*  
*Kila mtu kwa mtaa anasaka*  
*Hata five years old*  
*Anauza Karanga*  
*Mimi sihitaji visa*  
*Mimi ni vulture*  
*Natumia tu mabawa*

A young man seduces a woman  
A white woman, he now lives abroad  
Everyone in the estate is a seeker  
Even a five year-old  
Sells peanuts  
I do not need a visa  
I am a vulture  
I just use wings

As evident in the above extract, everyone within the ghetto space is embroiled in the hustling culture. In fact, the mentality knows no age distinctions. This is illustrated in the fact that underage children engage in petty trade and even emotional relationships too have been infiltrated by hustlers. Some young men take advantage of unsuspecting white women whom they marry with hopes of living a better life abroad. Evidently, the hustler's shifting identity is well captured in the lines: *Mimi sihitaji visa/Mimi ni vulture/Natumia tu mabawa* (I do not need a visa/I am a vulture/I just use wings) as the persona takes the symbolic identity of a vulture; a bird invested with a powerful and mysterious reputation. Equipped with the imaginary ability of flight, physical boundaries that characterize the city space are no longer restrictive to the hustler, and therefore he/she is able to traverse spatial confines within the city space in the process of realizing the desired ambitions.

The hustler is nevertheless fully aware of the hurdles on the way to achieving his/her objectives. In *Kigeugeu*, Jaguar acknowledges these in the line: *Niki-hustle juu chini ili nivuke border, wananigeukia* (When I hustle up and down to cross the border, they turn against me). In this case, the persona decries the constrained space in the form of barriers erected in his way to success. The border the persona refers to in this case may not be a real spatial entity but rather an imagined one. As Simmel (1997) maintains, “[b]oundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially” (cited in Georgiou, 2013: 72). This is evident in the case of the Nairobi central business district which the residents consider to be socio-economically divided into two distinct sections. The spatial actualization of the “tale of two cities” is said to be Tom Mboya Street which separates the Nairobi “proper” southwards, from the “Other” Nairobi northwards. In fact, River Road, which falls in the “Other” Nairobi is reputed to be the hustlers’ paradise. The street is associated with all sorts of enterprises, formal and informal, legal and otherwise, and is known to be the breeding ground for many successful people who eventually gain acceptance into Nairobi “proper”. Tom Mboya Street therefore serves as both the imaginary and physical boundary that divides Nairobi into two separate cities. The persona in the above extract is a victim of this socio-economic division of the city space and wishes to transcend this “border” in order to access the mainstream and realize the personal fulfilment that comes with it.

In spite of the difficulties encountered, giving up does not seem to be a viable option for the urbanite hustler. Colonel Mustafa and Avril in *Mtaani dot com* say:

*Kila siku mtaani ni ku-hustle*  
*Pengine upate, pengine ukose*  
*Ukipata shukuru Mungu jamaa*  
*Ukikosa pia kesho inakamu*  
Every day in the estate is a hustle  
You may get or you may not  
If you get, thank God people  
If you do not, tomorrow comes

The hustler's dynamic identity enables him/her to keep marching ahead towards life goals. When he/she stumbles, recovery comes pretty fast driven by the optimism that perhaps the next day will be better. Indeed, hustling is not for the fainthearted, impatient or rigid urbanites, but rather for those who are persevering and dynamic. And although the hustlers may use some unorthodox means to get what he/she wants, this does not bother his/her conscience. They often justify their actions as driven by survival instincts within their challenging urban environment. In *City Life* by Trapee and Size 8, a female hustler reveals her schemes:

You see the man in Runda  
He's there to pay my fees  
The lucky boy in my hood  
I love his bedroom skills  
For you Trapee my love  
I love you for your status  
I need a famous fellow

In this case, hustling is portrayed as breaking the gender confines in the society. The female hustler equally stands her ground within the urban context and earns a reputation as a smart and ambitious fellow. She is a social climber who tactfully uses men as mere pawns in her calculated moves to get to the top echelons. She operates multiple relationships with unsuspecting men with very clear objectives in mind. Despite opportunistically communing with the affluent class in the city, the hustler simultaneously maintains a nostalgic connection to her neighbourhood. She therefore displays a double faced identity. Her spatial loyalties to the neighbourhood are illustrated by the virility juxtaposition between the "boy in my hood" and the "man in Runda", an up-market estate. The female hustler thus has to shed off the traditional vulnerability tag within the city context to enable her to effectively claim her own space.

In the hustler's struggle to survive, the end often justifies the means, and thus the individuals cannot afford the luxury feelings of shame and guilt. The song *City Life* portrays this vividly:

Trapee you've never seen  
A woman selling her baby  
A brother killing brother  
I have seen my sisters in K-Street  
Hustling for their fees  
I have got some brothers in the street  
Struggling to get their food  
And yet you think I am worse  
Oh I think I am nice, nice!

It is evident above that anything goes in the hustlers' survival exploits. The series of betrayals cited in the text illustrate the double faced identities of the hustlers. It is significant that the persona, a female who lives off men, justifies her action by arguing that it is nothing compared to what others in her condition do to survive. She portrays a positive image of her lifestyle and does not see anything wrong with her pursuits as is apparent in the lines "And yet you think I am worse/Oh I think I am nice, nice!" The persona thus not only disagrees with members of the society who disapprove of her lifestyle but also bears no hard feelings against them: "Ni hali we, ya kusaka/Kaka we, usione mbaya/Hustling hustling, usinione mbaya" (It is a way of seeking/Brother, do not take offense/Hustling hustling, do not take offense). She therefore calls upon the society to understand her situation rather than condemning her wholesale.

### **The "Think Big" Strategy**

The increasing influence of materialism prevalent in Kenyan urban popular music can be traced back to Hip hop culture in America. Successful Hip hop musicians have often glorified and showed off their various material possessions such as money, sleek cars, big mansions and expensive jewels, popularly referred to as "bling bling". As such, being rich has fast become the ultimate ideal among Kenyan urban musicians who associate affluence with accomplishment and happiness. Indeed as Richins and Dawson (1992) argue, people who highly value material needs place possessions at the center of their lives, value them as a means of achieving happiness and use them as an indicator of success. In the Kenyan musical scene, celebrities paint a picture of glamour making them the envy of many in the industry, and inspired by the success of others, many artists demonstrate an aggressive aspiration to financial success. This is the case in *Mtaani dot com*:

*Alikuwa footballer Mathare FC  
Sasa boy wa mtaa amekuwa star Italy  
Majamaa wamesoma  
Lakini hakuna kazi wana-struggle mtaani  
Alikuwa thug na si kupenda kwake  
Pesa aliyopata alilisha familia yake  
School fees ilikuwa shida  
Lakini alimada chuo msahara six figures  
Yule boy alikuwa makanga  
Alizidi ku-hustle sana ana matatu saba*



He was a footballer at Mathare FC  
Now the regular estate guy is a star in Italy  
People are learned  
But there are no jobs, they are struggling in the estates  
He was a thug, not that he liked it  
He needed the money to raise his family  
School fees was a problem  
But he completed schooling and now earns a six-figure salary  
That boy who was a tout  
Kept on hustling and now owns seven *matatus*

The persona here makes reference to several members of the hustler fraternity who have made breakthroughs in life. The footballer, the thug and the tout were once ordinary members of their disadvantaged community and equally subject to the daily rituals of hustling. However, they have become living testimonies to the reality that social and economic boundaries can indeed be overcome. As role models, they are idolized and provide the necessary motivation for the other hustlers to keep going. The fact that all their stories have happy endings adds to the hustler's level of optimism. For the hustler, settling for the average is not an option. He/she needs a resoundingly big break in life as is illustrated in the admiration for "star in Italy", "six-figure salary" and "seven *Matatus*". The objective therefore is not just to live above the poverty line, but rather to be rich and famous and enjoy all the trappings that come with it. For the hustler, morality is beside the issue and therefore it does not matter what one has to do to actualize his/her dreams.

The urbanite hustler owns up to being an ambitious fellow whose actions are driven by the raw desire for material wealth. The persona in K-South's *Mr. Policeman* says:

*Ju mimi ni jamaa wa mtaa  
Ni vile tu njaa  
Ni kitu nimekataa  
Nina ile tamaa ya kutafuta chapaa  
La sio mang'aa, ni mambo jo  
Siku hizi si ka kitambo jo  
Nyumba ina stima kando jo  
Huku kumekua kudiambo jo  
Anyway, mi nitavumilia  
Pesa itakuja kunitumikia*

I am the regular estate guy  
It is just that “hunger”  
Is something I have refused  
I have that desire to look for money  
I am not a greedy person, it is the situations  
Nowadays is not like in the past  
You pay for electricity separately from the rent  
Life here has become challenging  
Anyway, I shall persevere  
Money will serve me in future

As apparent, the above persona confesses to desperation to get out of the prevailing social situation. He/she detests poverty and is prepared to do whatever it takes to acquire wealth. The hustler explains that such ambitions do not amount to pure greed as it is merely a battle for relevance within a dynamic city environment. The lines “Anyway, I shall persevere/Money will serve me in future” entail the persona’s ultimate conviction that his/her materialistic dreams will eventually come to fruition. Therefore, by conveniently constructing an imagined space where they call the shots, the hustlers accordingly equip themselves with the necessary psychological makeup to survive the complexities of the cityscape.

## **Conclusion**

As the forgoing discussions have sought to demonstrate, the contemporary Kenyan urban environment exerts immense pressure on the affected city dwellers who in turn react by adopting a dynamic hustler identity to succeed and make sense of their city environment. This implies that it would be naïve to assume that the seeming confusion evident in the Kenyan cities totally hinder them from functioning. On the contrary, the hustler mentality enables urbanites to exude a sense of resilience and pride amidst all the challenges posed by the demanding cityscape. This explains the overwhelming sense of optimism displayed in hustler discourse where success against all odds emerges as the *raison d’être*.

Of significance here is the fact that Kenyan urban music has spatial implications; thus through music, the urban space is interestingly explored and new spatial entities constructed at both the symbolic and physical levels. The hustler negotiates the cityscape via music to defy the prefabricated straight jacket of spatial categorizations in the city establishment. This is achieved by appropriating and creatively altering space to suit the hustler’s unique needs; hence, existing boundaries in the day-to-day life are dismantled while new ones conveniently created. Therefore, it is apparent that the city space influences individual and communal identity formation and that the group experiences of the urbanite hustler frame issues of self-conceptualization and belonging. Furthermore, the hustler’s “backstreet” identity seems to remain indelible even when he/she achieves social mobility and gains entry into the mainstream city space, although it is far from stable and keeps shifting in sync with the equally dynamic city space.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> A Sheng word for “mob”. Its origin is attributed to Calif Records, Nairobi, and popularized by artist Jua Cali.

<sup>2</sup> Also called *Boomba*, a kind of hip-hop music which incorporates Reggae and African musical styles.

<sup>3</sup> Sheng is a Swahili-based slang whose origin is attributed to the low class neighbourhoods in Nairobi city. However, it has become widespread in most Kenyan urban centres especially among the youth.

<sup>4</sup> Rappers.

<sup>5</sup> Treating with contempt.

<sup>6</sup> Literally means “scotching sun” connoting the hardships associated with the Kenyan informal sector.

<sup>7</sup> Khat is a stimulant drug grown in some parts of Kenya and whose leaves are chewed to result in increased concentration.

<sup>8</sup> Unleavened flatbread common in East Africa, but whose origins can be traced to Asia.

<sup>9</sup> Refers to the public motor vehicle transport sector in Kenya.