

*Caroline Mose*

*School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) - University of London*

*Fou(r )(l) letter words: Analyzing the use of modern-day dozens in African Hip hop music*

## ***Abstract***

The dozens, or toasting, has always been a feature of hip hop music from its inception. The dozens are characterized by the use of, in many occasions, four-letter words and insulting phrases aimed at a real or perceived enemy. Toop calls this phenomenon the 'toast', a narrative form, rhyming stories told mostly among men. He describes these toasts as verbally 'violent, scatological, obscene, misogynist...used for decades to while away time'. Hip hop, considered anti-establishment and protest in nature, has carved a niche by the defiant use of toasts, and it is now common to hear, in global hip hop music, what Celious describes as 'the language of bitches and hoes'. In African hip hop, Githinji among other scholars have described these toasts as 'ritualized genre of verbal duels...where one antagonist insults another or members of his or her family'. In most cases, these toasts are done in English, in both global and local hip hop. However, use of local argot, like Kenya's *Sheng* language, is also in wide use in delivering toasts and in tackling taboo subjects.

My paper begins an analysis of the use of toasts in African hip hop music. On one hand, there is the use of this 'scatological, obscene, misogynist' language, in English, that includes popular four-letter words that has given the label '*gangsta*' to hip hop genres. These English words are now in common usage in African hiphop music, raising critical questions of cultural translocation from West to South and authenticity of the local form. On the other hand, there is the use of local argot, where these English words and phrases are translated into slang and used in hiphop music. This presents interesting interpretations, considering the protest nature of hiphop, expressed mainly in its music, and the various publics it addresses in various languages.

Ultimately, my paper looks at the ways in which popular four-letter words in African hiphop, especially English-slang words that have been popularized in American hiphop music and translocated to the African local space, are used. Of key interest are the meanings and cosmopolitan linkages made from the use of this language in the local space, especially the more sexually-loaded and gendered words that are popular in hiphop.

## ***Introduction***

African hiphop has come a long way since its 'birth', as it were, on the continent in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Back then, many artists were exposed to American hiphop artists that were being marketed worldwide, like the Wu Tang Clan with its Busta Rhymes, the record label Death Row rappers Tupac Shakur and Snoop Doggy Dogg, and later, other solo performers like LL Cool J. As a result, these artists tended to copy the rapping style<sup>1</sup> of these performers, and to date, many rap artists speak fondly of the slain Tupac, and hail the longevity in the rap business of Busta Rhymes and Snoop Dogg. Over the years, African artists have come to develop their own rapping styles, and so have producers. In Kenya, a rapper like Abbas Kubba for instance, has his own unique style of rapping, infusing English with street slang *Sheng*. Many other local artists do likewise, while some, like Jua Cali raps almost exclusively in *Sheng* in the *Genge* genre of local rap. Others take a more laid-back and slow rapping style reminiscent of Southern United States style 'crank', infusing it with *Sheng*. Still, others rap in local languages, like Dholuo for rap duo Gidi Gidi Maji Maji for instance. All these different infusions work together to create a uniquely 'African' form of hiphop that can today stand on its own. However, there are still certain aspects of African rap that come into sharp focus when thinking of cosmopolitanism. A subject for my paper is the common use of four-letter words (or foul language) in both African and Western forms of hiphop, and specifically, the use of English-language four-letter words, and the meanings and ambiguities they raise in the local African space. The focus on language use in my discussion stems from two main premises- first, that hiphop culture comprises four main elements, that is, rapping, turntabling, dance and graffiti. Of these four, rapping, or rap, is the most visible, to the point where hiphop musicians are called rappers. Second, rapping is characterized by use of words, and therefore, language. A rapper can perform with or without accompanying music or beat, but never without words. Therefore, as Alim (2006) notes, language becomes the centre-piece of hiphop culture(s) worldwide, and its use a crucial step in understanding the said culture(s).

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<sup>1</sup> Style here refers to use of language, hand and body gestures, rapping speeds, clothing, and subject matter, all of which an artist uses to create a certain personal aura that becomes his trademark, or his personal style.

## *Gangsta Rap*

In 1988, the rap duo group NWA (Niggaz Wit Attitude) produced an album christened 'Straight Outta Compton', after Compton, the Los Angeles neighbourhood they lived in. The album, filled with highly explicit, violent and misogynistic content, presented a new kind of defiance and even boldness that struck a chord with audiences. This was especially so because Compton was long considered one of, if not the, one area of Los Angeles with the highest crime rates in the state of California. The album had a song titled '*Fuck Tha Police*', which accorded the group instant celebrity status from audiences sharing this sentiment, but also earned the group a stern letter from the American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).<sup>2</sup> However, the record was 'Straight Outta Compton's' biggest hit, and the album eventually sold two million copies<sup>3</sup>, which in those days was a staggering financial coup. Audiences loved the uncharacteristically explosive lyrics, awed in part by the revelation that there were people in certain areas of America who lived in constant opposition to, and seemingly unending violent altercations with, the police and law enforcement. Slain Hip-hop artist Tupac Umaru Shakur, himself one of the most prolific rappers the global Hip-hop culture has ever heard (and whose parents were active members of militant civil rights group *The Black Panthers*), says the same. Speaking in a documentary<sup>4</sup>, Tupac recounted that the rawness in the music, inspired by the real-life events experienced by the musicians themselves, was something audiences found fascinating, since many found the tales of violence and poverty completely new, even foreign. Shakur says

...it was their way of connecting with the reality of our lives...they came to concerts, bought our records...and empathized with us...then went back home to their safe lives...this for them was like a comic relief...

Here, Shakur points out the very point upon which violence and the 'gangsta' genre of Hip-hop music was built on, a market demand that places Hip-hop music within a profit-driven scope governed by what hooks (1994: 115-124) calls a 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy', or what Ro (1996) terms as 'propagating controversy for the sake of profit'. This type of music was called *gangsta rap* for its violent content and its frequent reference to people as niggaz, bitches, hoes, playaz and gangstaz<sup>5</sup>, and because NWA's producer, Dr. Dre, first called the music he produced 'gangsta rap music' (Gold 1993). Dr. Dre would go on to be a successful producer and rapper, and is still active to date.

Born as a subgenre and managed by big record producers, gangsta rap continued to be heavily commercialized, focusing on the now popularized themes of violence and misogyny<sup>6</sup> and inevitably gained considerable audiences worldwide due to this aggressive marketing, and the first rap records to reach Africa's shores were therefore decidedly 'gangsta'. Even Tupac, hailed as a militant, anti-establishment rapper, produced his fair share of gangsta rap, though many claim that Suge Knight, the president of Death

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://wm11.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:0ifuxq95ld6e~T1>

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/6598760/144\\_straight\\_outta\\_compton](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/6598760/144_straight_outta_compton)

<sup>4</sup> See 'Tupac: Welcome To Deathrow, A Documentary' by S. Leigh Savidge and Jeff Scheftel, 2001, Xenon Pictures Inc.

<sup>5</sup> See Celious 2000

<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/hip\\_hop\\_music/1891](http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/hip_hop_music/1891);

Row Records, cornered him into producing these kinds of albums in exchange for a huge fine that Knight paid to get Tupac out of a considerable stretch of jail time<sup>7</sup>.

It is worth mentioning here that the use and aggressive marketing of these types of violent and misogynistic rap records by the big record labels has been extensively critiqued by, among others, bell hooks. Many big record labels are owned by white corporate America, something that hooks points out in her analysis, further suggesting that white corporate America has marketed this type of music in order to cement a certain idea of the collective black psyche as chaotic, under-educated (if at all) and lesser- an othering of the black male as violent and animal-like, and the black female reduced to a mere physical form and object of a cheapened form of both desire and despise. These sentiments are important in the analysis of the use of this scatological language in the African context.

### *Toasts and Taunts*

The use of scatological language was not always as ‘gangsta’ as the commercialization of modern-day gangsta rap is making it out to be. Historically, use of language, either veiled or direct, has been the hallmark of the African oral traditions which many argue are the roots of hip-hop. Toop (2000:19) writes

‘Whatever the disagreements over lineage in the rap hall of fame or the history of hip hop, there is one thing on which all are agreed. Rap is nothing new...Rap’s forbearers stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, the tap dancers and comics, the Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Muhammad Ali, acapella and doo-wop groups, ring games, skip-rope rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying and the dozens, all the way to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia’

Bennet (1999) writes that Hip-hop ‘can be traced from African bardic traditions to rural southern-based expressions of African-Americans ... all of which are chanted in a rhyme or poetic fashion’<sup>8</sup>. These bardic traditions can be traced to the griot (praise singing) traditions of West Africa, written about as early as the 1300s by Ibn Battuta during his visit to Mali (Hale, 1999). Griots, according to Hale (1999) were ‘masters of word and music’ and keepers of the history and genealogy of their people. Spread out over the West African Sahel, griots mainly played the drums and the *kora*,<sup>9</sup> and sang in the Wolof, Bamana, Pulaar, Fulani and Hausa tongues.<sup>10</sup> The griot served in various capacities in society, including in the Chief or King’s courts, and some griots, passing on wisdom from folklore to an errant king would get punished, and in turn ‘curse’ him.<sup>11</sup> This gained them a revered status. Further to the griot tradition was the use of poetry and music in traditional Africa as a societal weapon. Specifically, the lampoon<sup>12</sup> was used as a means of communicating personal enmity between hostile individuals; or for griots to criticize corrupt rulers (Akintunde 2004). Yoruba abusive poems from Nigeria are perhaps a good example of this, where

<sup>7</sup> See ‘Tupac: Welcome To Deathrow, A Documentary’ by S. Leigh Savidge and Jeff Scheftel, 2001, Xenon Pictures Inc.

<sup>8</sup> Keyes C.J, (1999) pp 40. Here, Hip-hop and griot tradition are compared and mode of performance found similar. .

<sup>9</sup> See Hale (1999).

<sup>10</sup> These were the main languages in the populations of present day Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana and Mali.

<sup>11</sup> See Hale (1999).

<sup>12</sup> See Berry (1994)

quarrelling women would meet at a communal place and begin to sing their displeasure at each other in the hearing of other women.<sup>13</sup> The same can also be said of similar Swahili customs found in the Taarab tradition where both men and women engage in poetic/ritual insults, especially during ceremonies, in order to embarrass, scold, warn or even advise other people who are deemed to have erred (Omboga-Zaja 2008). An example from the group Zanzibar Stars:

Huniwezi kwa lolote	You are no match for me in anything
Mambo yangu poa	I have everything under control
Kwa mapenzi hunipati	You cannot rival me in the art of love
Raha nazijulia	I am a master of bliss and comforts
Penzi nampa lote	I indulge him in my whole/total love
Yeye anafurahia	He relishes my love
Wewe hujui chochote	You, you know nothing
Mimi ninavyosikia	From what I have heard
Na kupika si yako hadhi	cooking is not your fame/forte
Vibichi wampikia	You serve him raw food

Obviously, the author here, a woman, is verbally and poetically attacking her rival over a man. The author speaks of her own prowess in the bedroom and the kitchen, the two areas of the home where a woman is supposed to shine. In doing so, she reduces her rival to nothing, since the rival can neither cook well, nor perform well in the bedroom. The mention of the bedroom is to be termed as ‘taboo’, especially in African culture, pointing to the other use of the lampoon, where sensitive topics to do with sex and sexuality would also be tackled in these poetic forms.<sup>14</sup>

Again, these are important points to note with regards to African hip-hop and the use of these metaphors- we see clearly that the lampoon or toast is not exclusively ‘American rap’, but has its roots in African performances- however, their use in modern day American and African hip-hop provide a converging point that needs further discussion and analysis as I will discuss here. The relegation of the woman (both self and societal) to the kitchen and bedroom are also important to note here, as they crop up in modern hip-hop in interesting ways.

In Kenya, Githinji (2007) traces toasting and lampooning to *mchongoano* forums in schools in the 1990s, which were the sites where young (men) specifically gathered during breaks from class to regurgitate the rap music they were beginning to hear on radio. During these sessions, these young boys would engage in verbal duels with each other, using the machismo they had gathered from the hip-hop music they were listening to. These verbal duels would be characterized by trading of hyperbolic insults aimed at each other’s family. Githinji defines *mchongoano* as a ‘ritualized genre of verbal duels popular with Kenyan youth where one antagonist insults another or members of his or her family’. *Mchongoano*, he further says, is comparable to the ‘playing of dozens’ or ‘sounding’ among African Americans (Githinji 2007:89). Toop (2000:29-34)

<sup>13</sup> See Finnegan, 1970

<sup>14</sup> See Chimhundu in Furniss and Gunner: 1995

calls this phenomenon the ‘toast’, a narrative form, rhyming stories told mostly among men. He describes these toasts as verbally ‘violent, scatological, obscene, misogynist...used for decades to while away time’.<sup>15</sup> Githinji (2007:90) further argues that *mchongoano* is characterized first by its lack of shyness in tackling taboo subjects, and secondly, by its use of Sheng<sup>16</sup>, an urban popular language mainly used by youth with origins in Nairobi’s Eastlands<sup>17</sup> area (Githiora 2002:159-160). Sheng is the language of choice among most youthful speakers in Nairobi, especially those in Eastlands. Inevitably, it is also the language of choice in hip-hop music in Nairobi. Githinji further argues that because Sheng is not bound by prescriptive formations of language, it is the most appropriate for *mchongoano* delivery and artistic presentation. Samper (2002) furthers the discussion by linking identity and youth culture with Sheng use in Nairobi, bringing in a crucial dimension that firmly cements identity and language within urban popular culture.

Two points emerge here that link *mchongoano* and Hip-hop, that is, use of Sheng, and the discussion of taboo subjects. I have already discussed the finer points of sounding and toasting as tests of verbal virtuosity and as a legacy of bardic/poetic traditions of the griots. This is made more plausible by the fact that the nature of *mchongoano* is that of unscripted, quick formed wit, a core characteristic of the Hip-hop MC. Further, verbal contests using proverbs, jokes, taunts have long been a feature of modern Hip-hop culture.

While not necessarily equating *mchongoano* and hip-hop, it is important to note that *mchongoano* gives a local, historical basis for the use of toasting and lampooning in language, and therefore, in hip-hop. This is especially true in the use of slang. Clearly, toasting is found in both African and Western cultures, and these linguistic devices inevitably find their way into hip-hop. This is because in practice, hip-hop is also competitive. In Nairobi, hip-hop artists still have to perform unscripted rap verses in front of critical audiences in forums like ‘Wapi?’<sup>18</sup>. Veteran and upcoming artists have to get up on stage to perform to prove that they have *street cred*<sup>19</sup>, that aura or symbolic capital that an artist must muster and maintain in order to sustain the attention of their audiences. Taunting other artists therefore, becomes second nature, and in fact, this has the colloquial name of ‘beef’. Beef between artists can get very personal, and is often taken up by opposing audiences who equally engage in abusive exchanges in defence of their rapper, either in person or on social networking forums. And of course, beef is propagated by toasting. Of interest is the language that has been taken up by African artists in the course of toasting, and the mainly sexual references this language is composed of.

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<sup>15</sup> See Toop 2000:29

<sup>16</sup> Sheng is euphemism for ‘Swahili-English’, a word used to denote street slang spoken all over Kenya in one form or another. Sheng is a composition of many languages, including local languages and African-American slang. In as much as it is dynamic and changing, many key words and phrases have remained constant over time, leading to Githiora questioning whether it is an emerging Creole or simply an urban Swahili dialect.

<sup>17</sup> Eastlands is the area to the East of Nairobi, and it describes the area East of Nairobi City Centre that is home to the city’s low-to-mid-income earners. It is characterized by ghettos, slums and low-rent housing. However, the term ‘Eastlands’ is increasingly being used to describe any area East of the city’s ‘Leafy Suburbs’ which are home to the city’s wealthy.

<sup>18</sup> Wapi?, euphemism for ‘Words and Pictures’ is a monthly popular culture and music forum that is hosted at the Sarakasi Dome in Nairobi city. Originally established and funded by the British Council and currently being run under the Sarakasi Trust, it brings together both upcoming and veteran popular artists, especially rappers, for live performances that include freestyling competitions. Increasingly, artists from as far off as Tanzania come to participate and establish linkages with Nairobi-based artists and producers. Many new artists have cut their teeth on the Wapi? stage.

<sup>19</sup> I have discussed the issue of *street cred* in another paper on ‘Hip-hop and the city’. See AEGIS 2010 Birmingham Conference Paper.

## *From 'fuck tha police' to 'mathafucka'- gendered idioms of domination, conquest and angst*

Samper (2004:40) asserts that Kenyan musicians have not appropriated American hip-hop profanity and misogyny, quoting artist Poxi Presha as claiming that such profane language is not acceptable in Kenyan society. Six years down the line, and with Poxi Presha dead, the scenario has changed quite a bit. Four-letter words, in both English and local argot are in constant use in conversation and in popular music, especially hip-hop. The proliferation of American gangsta rap albums, together with (mostly pirated) American comedy shows that feature a heavy use of profane language, has contributed to the normalization of (mostly) English curse words and scatological language. And while such language may not occur in mainstream music played on local radio stations<sup>20</sup>, it features quite heavily in mixtapes<sup>21</sup> and music videos. Further, the proliferation of call-in radio programmes that feature heavy adult content has contributed to the normalization of the discussion of taboo subjects, albeit within the anonymity that radio offers speakers and contributors.<sup>22</sup>

Many American music CDs come with the tag '*Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics*'. Even matatus, Kenya's public transport vehicles, usually have, emblazoned on their bodywork similar tags to warn prospective passengers that explicit rap music is played within. Increasingly, local artists also produce CDs and mixtapes with this tag, and indeed, a quick play of these CDs verifies that the lyrics contained within are of an explicit nature- explicit in language, in subject matter (mostly taboo subjects as discussed above) and explicit in description. These explicit lyrics range in level, and in language. Samper (2002) discusses the several levels of Sheng in his paper, arguing that depending on audience, speakers of Sheng many times raise the notch in use of idioms and phrases- the more explicit a speaker wants to get, the more complicated the idioms and phrases, what he calls 'deep sheng'. This could be seen as a form of self-censorship, where a speaker switches to a dialect that other listeners cannot understand in order to pass on a message intended only for a select few. It could also be seen as subversive, where speakers deliberately exclude non-speakers and proceed to talk about them derisively. This selective use of language is demonstrated quite clearly in the afore-mentioned call-in radio programmes, where callers and even radio presenters refer to sex and all matters sexual using veiled yet obscene (to those who understand) slang words.

The same is also true of the use of Sheng in hip-hop, where artists use this deep Sheng to pass on verbal digs against certain members of the society who do not understand the language, or its various depths. It is not uncommon to hear, for instance, lyrics insulting Nairobians who live in the suburbs, or critiquing politicians. However, when hip-hop artists want to be more explicit and be understood by a wide audience, it is not uncommon to hear them insert English slang words, specifically, American slang words. Local artists are increasingly producing music that has explicit lyrics with the use of English slang words like 'fuck', 'freak', 'motherfucka', 'dick' and other such words with a direct reference to the sexual act and sexual organs. The link here is obvious- use of American slang words in a forum (rap) that also utilises slang in its

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<sup>20</sup> Most radio stations play the 'radio version' of most songs, which are the censored versions that have most of the profanities blacked out or replaced altogether.

<sup>21</sup> A mixtape is a music CD produced for independent circulation outside the mainstream media of radio and television. Artists produce mixtapes independently with more explicit and candid content than would feature in mainstream records/CDs-more and more, the mixtape is becoming the medium through which an artist's true mettle is seen, and many times, they feature uncensored thoughts, beef and a heavy dosage of four-letter words.

<sup>22</sup> See Odhiambo, CJ (2007:156-160) on the formation of interventionist and subversive radio characters. I have also researched extensively the use of foul language in the radio call-in programmes in a forthcoming paper, to be available on request.

local setting. But the use of these words in English is also telling.

First, is the cosmopolitan connection. Hip-hop gains its universality through many aspects, but mostly through the use of language, and in this case, this type of scatological language. Be it American hip-hop, Kenyan hip-hop or Ghanaian hiplife, scatological language emerges to link these different types together. Therefore, when Kenyan rapper Mwafrika says in his mixtape<sup>23</sup> *'nita kugwara kama paka mathafucka'* (I will scratch you like a cat, motherfucka), his warning to a perceived rapping rival is clear. By using the word 'motherfucka', Mwafrika uses a cosmopolitan English colloquialism that is common in Western hip-hop music. The word itself has origins in the *'yo mama'* jokes, the American equivalent of *'mchongoano'*, where protagonists take turns to taunt each other with nasty jokes that start with the phrase *'yo mama'* or *'your mother'*. The greatest jab is thrown when one attacks his rival's mother, and the nastier a rival's mother is portrayed, the greater the attack. In this regard, Mwafrika's rap song acquires a cosmopolitan feel.

Second, he engages in the characteristic nature of all forms of scatology- that of equating, and therefore reducing, a perceived rival into a feminine idiom over which one can lay claims of symbolic conquest and control. Ntarangwi (2009) discusses this at length, pointing out the linkages between hip-hop musical discourse, gender and feminism, and especially, the symbolism of conquest of the female form with a decidedly phallocratic idiom, in this case, the phallus or 'dick'. Musila (2009:42) traces the emphasis of the phallus as a conquering tool to the 'colonial mapping of the imperial conquest through grammars of 'penetration' of feminized territories'. McClintock (1995:26) draws similar parallels when she points out the colonial enterprise of conquering new lands, where 'land is named as female and a passive counterpart to the massive thrust of male technology'. The metaphors of the phallus conquering a (passive) female opponent are evident here, and they find their way most loudly into hip-hop language. In the particular song above, Mwafrika reduces his hip-hop rival(s) to nought using the idiom of the *'motherfucka'*- or someone sick enough to sleep with his own mother. This is the epitome of the lampoon, or the *mchongoano/yo mama* type of toasting, where a rival is reduced into a weird if not out rightly sickening 'other' by being portrayed as someone who has sexual relations with his own mother. That it is the 'mama' and not the 'papa' that is the subject of these types of jokes is of interest here. In local lingo, *'motherfucka'* can be equated with 'kumanina' or 'kumamako', phrases of extreme offence that became popularized by former President's Kenyatta's speeches regarding colonialists. Excerpts of these speeches are commonly inserted into modern hip-hop music, and artists express pleasure at the thought that the colonialist was reduced to sleeping with his mother. This pleasure is similar, in literature, to Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*, where the houseboy in the novel discovers that his French colonial master is uncircumcised, beginning the process of unmasking the Frenchman's mythological status of overlord. The issue of circumcision crops up in later discussions in this paper.

The idiom of the conquest of the female form is not confined to incestuous referrals. NWA's *'fuck tha police'* began these discourses by similar feminization and further reduction of the police, a perceived enemy of the people. By shouting *'fuck tha police'*, the idiom of penetration as reduction and conquest emerges strongly, as does that of power. Clearly, NWA imagine conquering the police, a representation of

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<sup>23</sup> Mwafrika presents 'Muki Garang, the Mixtape' independently produced, 2005.



state (and in this case racial) power by symbolically penetrating them sexually. By using the word ‘fuck’, the act of penetration is made more explicit, given a certain power that is almost brutal. Even the use of the word in its various local slangs also portrays the same meaning of brutality and aggressiveness<sup>24</sup> in penetration. The song *Una* by Jomino, P-Unit and DNA also directs lampoons against a perceived rival, and the line ‘*Unanijua, Mi ni ule boy huwa nawaua, Unanijua, Manzi yako mweke mbali nitamrarua, Unanijua*’ (you know me, I am the boy that kills you, you know me, keep your girlfriend away from me or I will tear her, you know me) portrays this same meaning where the term of sexual conquest is ‘*raru*’, or literally, ‘tear forcefully’ – an imagined, brutal, sexual conquest of a rival’s girlfriend, an extension of the perceived rival, is presented as an affront to the rival himself.

Other similar idioms in Kenyan hip-hop portray these same meanings, with the phallus equated to, among other things, symbolic tools like a hammer, and the sexual act of conquest described in terms that including eating and killing.

An example is artist Flexx’s ‘*Nyundo*’. While it can be described as an ode to the beauty of a woman, the reductionist sentiment in the song centering only on her sexuality and sexual body parts is telling. Flexx asks ‘*Nashindwa jo nizame wapi? Nyundo yangu sasa ita ua wapi?*’ (I wonder, where shall I penetrate? Where will my penis achieve its climax?). The Swahili word ‘*ua*’ or ‘kill’ is used here to explicitly denote a sexual climax, the ultimate sign of conquest where the male phallus leaves its indelible mark on a female. The said phallus is marked by the idiom ‘*nyundo*’ or ‘hammer’, to show its clearly unmistakable power and strength. It is also a weapon to be wielded to ‘*ua*’ or ‘kill’ the female by climax and therefore, subjugate her with its power. In the music video to the song, Flexx dances while wielding a hammer which he swings back and forth in a demonstration of power. Note also that Flexx asks where he will penetrate using the idiom of ‘*kuzama*’ or ‘to sink (into)’. Flexx further declares ‘*hiyo mwili yako ikisonga kidogo, nyundo yangu inaruka kidogo; come ubonge nayo inazusha, lakini chungu inaeza rusha*’ (when you move your body even a little, my penis jumps in response; come respond to it, it is calling, but beware, it might climax).

The sentiment is clear- the rapper boldly declares his wish to sexually dominate the female using his hammer to penetrate her, sink into her and achieve a climax. Even in the song *Una* above, the use of the word ‘*ua*’ is also telling and can be interpreted similar to the use of ‘*ua*’ in Flexx’s *Nyundo*. The rapper in *Una* states *Mi ni ule boy huwa nawaua*, which can be taken to mean he is the rapper who climaxes on other rappers in a show of dominance similar to when a dominant animal stakes its claim by urinating or even defecating on a territory or rival.

However, those unfamiliar with the Sheng phraseology in the song *Nyundo* take long to really understand what the rapper is trying to imagine, echoing Samper’s note regarding deep Sheng versus shallow Sheng. This is perhaps why the song was widely played on television without attracting the ire of censors or irate parents demanding its withdrawal from the media.

Jua Cali does the same with his song *Kiasi*. In the part where he plans to go and see his girlfriend, he says ‘*Leo lazima nijue ka ananipenda sana ama labda ananichukia (kiasi); Lazima nijue ka tazamisha yote ama taiekelea (kiasi)*’; (today, I must know whether she loves me or despises me even (a little bit); I must

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<sup>24</sup> See Reuster-Jan and Kiessling (2006:27) on the discussion of the use of aggressive four-letter words in Tanzanian hip-hop

know if I will sink it all in or just place it (a little bit)). The sexual act of sinking the phallus into the female is obvious here. What is less obvious is the power that Jua Cali places on his own phallocratic stance, especially when he uses the sinking of his phallus into his girlfriend to be a sign that she loves him, and a sign of despise if she does not allow him to sink all the way in, but just place the phallus ‘a little bit’ into her. The use of the idioms of ‘*zamisha*’ (cause to sink) or ‘*wekelea*’ (place upon) is interesting in that in the former, the dominance is more pronounced in the ‘sinking’ than in the latter ‘placing upon’. In the case of the latter (placement over sinking) happening, Jua Cali states that he will go and look for someone else, demonstrating the blackmailing and brutal nature of the phallus as a symbol of conquest- in this case, the girlfriend is still subdued when the protagonist goes to find another female to conquer if his own female denies him his right to ‘sink into’ her. This further reduction of the female into a position of deeper subjugation by making her see that she is not the only female in the male’s life is characteristic in hiphop music. An American example would be Ludacris’ song ‘*Area Codes*’, where the male rapper claims ‘*I got hoes in different area codes*’. This song, quite popular in Kenya during its time, reduces the female form to a ‘ho’, slang word for an ‘easy’ woman ready to be penetrated by the dominant male. Ludacris claims to have such women all over the United States, or different ‘area codes’, to signify their seemingly endless quantity. Such kind of braggadocio, the sexual prowess the male rapper bestows in himself, can never be satisfied by only one woman, or ‘ho’, and as a result, the rapper cements the power of his phallus over a large number of subjugated females regarded as ‘hoes’.

Other idioms like that of ‘eating’ as a sexual conquest<sup>25</sup> is carried in slang words like ‘*manga*’, ‘*dishi*’ or ‘*dema*’. The sexual act is reduced to that of devouring an opponent or his mother/girlfriend, usually, a significant female other. Note the use of ‘eat’ with reference to the kitchen, where, together with the bedroom, are the two symbolic areas of a home a woman is traditionally relegated to. Interestingly, the eating idiom is also political where Kenyan politicians are said to ‘eat’ off of state coffers the moment they get elected into power. Therefore, access to power is seen as an opportunity to eat<sup>26</sup>, and that access to power is symbolized in hiphop by a roving phallus intent on eating and devouring the rival who is often reduced to a female object. Further, the use of the idioms of ‘eating’ or devouring can also be interpreted in the light of felatio, where sexual prowess is measured by one’s skill and success in oral sexual activities. In the male, this bravado is seen where the mouth and in extension, the tongue acquire phallic status, and in reciprocation, the male phallus receives oral stimulation from the female in a further form of sexual conquest. This is seen in Flexx’s question ‘*Nyundo yangu sasa ita ua wapi?*’ (where will I achieve my climax?), implying that the phallus has a choice of different places to ‘sink’ into and ‘kill’ on the female body in its quest for climax and therefore, conquest. In fact, Flexx, rapping with Jua Cali in a section of the song, compares his phallus and the sexual act to a hammer hitting a nail into a wooden plank- the aggressive idiom is commensurate with that of a powerful thrust, the mark of any skilled male.

Third, the cosmopolitanism of the idioms of sexual conquest with the phallus as the central character in hiphop music portrayed in music by the artists mentioned here is that of homophobia. The issue of

<sup>25</sup> See Reuster-Jan and Kiessling (2006:27) to what they refer to as the ‘food metaphor’ in Swahili slang referring to sex in Tanzania.

<sup>26</sup> See Michela Wrong’s ‘Its Our Turn To Eat: the Story of a Kenyan Whistleblower’.

homophobia has been itself lampooned in the African American cartoon series *'Boondocks'*, where Riley, the main protagonist of the show, spends two seasons insulting other characters who appear to do things in a feminine way (like crying) 'gay', only for him to make friends with a closet gay rapper. The irony is that rappers, the quintessential, aggressive male figures, could actually be gay. Predominantly practiced by African Americans, hip-hop culture has qualities of homophobia,<sup>27</sup> and artists use deliberately male-versus-female idioms of power and penetration to show that they are not gay. The same applies to Kenyan hip-hop, and in fact, during my own research, I have sat in on discussions by male rappers on homosexuality, where they expressed disgust in the lifestyle by referring to themselves as *'ninjas'*<sup>28</sup>, claiming that a true *ninja* can never allow another supposed *ninja* to penetrate him.

These phallic anxieties become even more pronounced when the object of derision, or the rival, is decidedly male. For instance, NWAs *'fuck tha police'* presents this dilemma since the police are a representative of the State, which is presented as male and therefore, phallic. The flip side of these anxieties is the seemingly sexual domination over these male symbols, but in a way that should not be seen as homosexual, since being gay is seen as not masculine, and therefore, not desirable.

Kenyan rapper Bamboo in his song *One Blood* raps in English and American slang, presenting this dilemma when he says

my name is Bamboo on some Bamboo shit  
and you player haters just stay off my Bamboo dick  
I mean who would've figured he'd knock  
niggas with figures on blocks  
way the fuck outta the frame skippity dippity bop  
holding the flame like the statue of liberty doc  
clutching my book of rhymes listen this nigga be hot  
man fuck being hot  
I'm straight flamin  
no homo

Bamboo uses the idioms of phallic power in words like 'dick' and 'fuck', specifically telling his perceived detractors to stay off his 'Bamboo dick'. First, by naming and claiming his own dick, he attempts to characterize and therefore present his dick as unique and powerful. The same can be seen in Flexx's *Nyundo* when he says *'usiwache ilale, we cheza nalo, mpaka iseme zile jina zote unazo'* (don't let it sleep, play with it until it says all your names). In personifying his 'nyundo' or 'dick', he gives it an identity and uniqueness, just as Bamboo does in his song. Further, it must be noted that these idioms of the phallus represent it in two clear ways- as erect and as penetrative. Negative connotations of its deflation for instance, are avoided altogether, as are the anxieties of its emasculation and castration.

In the song above, Bamboo is, in essence, penetrating or 'fucking' his detractors, who find themselves literally, on his dick. But simultaneously, Bamboo expresses disgust at the said detractors by

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<sup>27</sup> This is with regards to artistic identity as male rappers who have been hardened into criminals and gang-bangers by life on the street. Since the originators of hip-hop culture were African-American youths who lived in the projects and other poor-crime-laden neighbourhoods.

<sup>28</sup> A *ninja* is a Japanese master of covert operations whose chief weapon of use was the *katana*, or Japanese long sword. The sword metaphor with regards to these hip-hop artists and their masculinity/phallogracies is not lost here.

telling them to stay off his dick, imagining them trying to impale themselves with it in a sexual act that makes him declare categorically that he is not homosexual. This is an interesting turn of meaning that can be found in many hip-hop lyrics from around the world- the desire to dominate other male hip-hop artists, but to also not be seen as homosexual in the act of dominating another male with one's own phallus using sexual metaphors. In the same vein, in using the metaphor of penetration over a male opponent, the male rapper also inadvertently tags his opponent as being 'gay', therefore reducing him to something less than male and therefore, open to subjugation and conquest.

Moreover, in his song, Bamboo uses the phrase 'fuck being hot, I'm straight flamin' and again we see here the use of the idiom of penetration over the notion of being 'hot' being replaced by 'flamin'. The 'hot', seen as less, is quickly penetrated and conquered and left to the side, the rapper terming himself to be 'flamin', a status seen as being far superior to being 'hot'. The word is used here, as in many conversations, as a dismissive idiom where the lesser object or action is dismissed with a certain degree of contempt for something better.

The song by Mwafrika also demonstrates the same anxieties in the line '*...if you think you got balls, I'm the dick on top...*', where perceived enemies, males who think they have balls, are reminded that there is a dick that sits atop them. This superiority of the dick or phallus is characteristic of lyrics where masculine anxieties seem to be settled by an understanding that the dick itself is superior to any other form of masculine symbolism, even balls.

But in cases where this fails, especially when the said rival rappers hit back in the aforementioned 'beef' in lampoons that threaten to de-masculinise the original rapper, feminine-reductionist strategies come into play, where for instance, a rapper calls the other rapper a 'pussy', which is slang for female sexual organs. In this case the rapper, reducing the male rival into familiar, albeit pejorative and misogynistic female idioms, restores a balance that is not homosexual, but 'normal', that of the male penetrating and therefore dominating the female.

Ntarangwi (2000:63) argues that the use of abusive language, what he terms as '*matukano*', is a reference to masculine and social power displayed over competitors. I add here that use of these metaphors is also a portrayal of masculine anxieties that exist within the acting and imagining of these very masculinities. As mentioned earlier, and as is prevalent and documented within African cultures (including urban cultures), masculinity is defined by phallic symbolisms, especially symbolisms of its erection and penetration. Other symbolisms like that of circumcision denote the maturity of the phallus (as referred earlier to Oyono's 'Houseboy'). A man is not fully a man until he is circumcised in a rite of passage from childhood to manhood. In Kenyan hip-hop, *beef* and *dis tracks* (records that rappers record specifically attacking other rappers perceived to be enemies by name) also centre on the themes of 'manhood' as denoted by circumcision. In personal interviews, many rappers have described some of their rap rivals as 'that kid' or 'that childish guy' with reference to their suspected lack of circumcision, since some communities in Kenya do not ascribe to circumcision as a rite of passage. Some also define their own masculinity in their music by differentiating between the past, when they were boys (and uncircumcised) and the present, where they are now mature men, capable of making their own decisions.

The use of four letter words or foul language is also characteristic of a generational discourse that expresses angst and defiance. To begin with, the use of slang words in both English (*fuck, motherfucka, dick, balls*, et.al) and in Sheng (*manga, dishi, kuta vitu, zama*, et.al) is associated mainly with the youth. The generational tensions, especially with regards to Kenyan parents over the hip-hop music that their children seem to live on is well documented, with the latter expressing disgust over the foul language in the music. Kenyan youth on the other hand engage in the use of these four-letter words in both English and local slang as a retaliatory measure against this perceived policing of what they should be listening to by their elders. For instance, Jua Cali's '*Ngeli ya Genge*' talks of the reaction of older men and women when they see a young girls with her G-string showing- '*...Ma mbuyu kwao ni kushangaa; Dudu zao zina amkaa; Njugu kibao wanatafunaa; Mamatha uku wanashtuka...*' which means (the old men stare in fascination; their penises begin to rise as they eat peanuts <considered an aphrodisiac>; while the older women get shocked...'. The rap song is an interesting mockery of older folk from a sexual perspective- the old men are reduced to admiring younger women, who are wearing G-strings, assumedly, an article of clothing associated with the younger generation, as they ingest sexual stimulants. The older women are relegated to the sidelines, watching their old men get turned on by younger women, taking offence in the process. This example is a typical portrayal of the generational tensions that exist between these two groups- the youth on one hand, and a censorious older generation on the other. Jua Cali's use of Sheng here further cements this imagined generational gap<sup>29</sup> as he derides the older generation using sexual metaphors that they are unlikely to understand in the first place.

Lastly, a subtle yet glaring sense of defiance is felt in this and many other songs that will not be included here at this time. Traditionally, it is taboo to speak of one's elders in sexual terms in many African cultures. Religiously, the theme of Ham, one of Job's sons who saw his father's nakedness and subsequently attracted an everlasting curse for going to talk about it with his brothers, features heavily in various fora that serve to teach young people about respecting one's elders. But Jua Cali here dismisses this theme by talking of his elders' sexuality. This generational tension is not confined to African hip-hop, but to hip-hop everywhere. Casco JAS has called hip-hop 'the language of the young people' in Tanzania, as have Kuenzler in West Africa and Ntarangwi in East Africa. Young rappers in Nairobi have confessed how they have enjoyed the cathartic effect of using such language in their music and in their everyday speech. One rapper told me '*hii lugha ni si tu Vijana tunaeza tumia, mabuda hawaezi, wasee wa gava hawaezi, sa hii ndio lugha tunatumia coz ni yetu*' (only we young people can use this type of language- old people cannot, government people cannot, that's why we use it, it is ours). This type of ownership over four-letter words is a demonstration of some level of self-empowerment that young people bestow on themselves, perhaps feeling marginalized in society. That young people claim it in self-expression despite its aggressiveness and offence is also a demonstration of a deliberate deviation from an established 'norm', which is characteristic of any popular culture. The angst and defiance that these young people feel in a society where young people feel they have no voice comes out in hip-hop music, one of the few platforms within which they can express themselves in the public domain.

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<sup>29</sup> I say 'imagined' because this dichotomy is never nuanced, merely representative of a perceived gap.

## *Conclusion*

My paper has attempted, within a short allocated time, to analyze the use of four-letter words, or foul language, in Kenyan hip-hop. Since most foul words that I researched ended up being of a sexual nature and reference, I have concentrated mostly on this feature, analyzing the gendered idioms of conquest, domination, angst and generational tension. I have also concentrated on the content of the music of male rappers because female rappers are few in Nairobi currently with no relevant recorded music in the public domain<sup>30</sup>. A longer chapter discusses these issues at length, going further to attempt an analysis of the impact of such language use, both in English and in Sheng, in the public domain (though these issues are not the subject of this paper). This further analysis is important in order to critically understand the impact of the widespread use of these four-letter words in Kenyan hip-hop. The artist Jua Cali has offered an explanation, claiming that the use of such words has opened up the Kenyan public space and made it possible for some taboo subjects to be discussed in a previously conservative and religious society. Fitzpatrick (2005:2) argues in like manner, acknowledging that while hip-hop language might be scatological, it nevertheless ‘brings to light some larger sociological problems such as racism, and as such, hip hop culture has an enormous potential as a catalyst for positive social change’. However, Thompson (2004:2) concedes that the negative aspects of hip-hop, specifically the sexism, violence and misogyny ‘sometimes overshadow the potential for the (hip-hop) movement to become a catalyst for positive change’. These conflicting viewpoints, together with some of the critiques I have mentioned here offered by bell hooks for instance, begin the critical discussions around the use of these idioms and language, both in American and diaporic hip-hop, including African hip-hop. Ultimately, critical questions are posed with regard to the cultural flows from global north to south, in understanding whether African hip-hop artists are mere second-hand copiers of western scatology, or if these four-letter words play a role as discussed above- in cementing male masculinities and identities by defining them through the lens of gender, homophobia and conquest. Further, how these masculinities affect the credibility of the female form in the public domain is also to be examined, and hip-hop culture’s more negative aspects be addressed as well, especially the translocation of western forms of hip-hop into the African cultural space.

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<sup>30</sup> Other female popular artists (non-hip-hop) however, also feature some of these gendered idioms in their music, usually filled with de-masculinising language that makes for interesting counter-reading.

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<sup>31</sup> Due to word-count and upload restrictions. Full bibliography on request