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Gengetone music as a subversion of the urban space

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Abstract

This paper examines how Gengetone, a new music genre birthed on the streets of Nairobi and “hoods” of the inner estates like Jericho, Ongata Rongai, Langata and Umoja has revolutionized Kenyan music, sparked controversy by becoming the object of a national debate after being criticized for its explicit lyrics. However, despite the criticism, the music has instead become popular in mainstream media like Ghetto classics and alternative media spaces like Facebook groups, YouTube channels as well as nightclubs and matatus. I examine this genre, which has adopted “sheng” as its primary idiom and combines elements of American Hip-hop with different kinds of Kenyan popular music. The paper argues that the popularity of this underground street music can be studied as an expression of resistance against the mechanisms of social marginalization. And that normative understandings of what constitutes proper music is at play in the suppression of the genre. The paper looks at the politics of Kenyan Urban street music, discusses the Gengetone in relation to the notion of an authentic Kenyan genre. The second part examines selected lyrics of Gengetone artists such as *Ethic*, *Sailors*, *Boondocks Gang*, *Mbogi Genje*, *Ssasura*, *Ochungulo family* and *Zzero Sufuri*. The paper adopts a perspective that engages critically with aesthetic norms in popular music and argues that the lyrics of mentioned artistes can be understood as a distinct literary form.

Keywords: gengetone, popular music, urban culture