

Abstract

This study explores the meaning of contemporary Kenyan popular music by undertaking literary interpretations of song lyrics and musical styles. In making these interpretations, the fabric of popular song is shown to be a network of referents and associations with texts situated both within and outside of the song-texts. As polyphonic discourse, these vast range of textual and paratextual referents opens up various points of engagement between artiste, songtext and audience and in the process, the surplus meanings generated by both the poetry of the text and the referents embedded within it account for the significance of popular songs as concrete articulations that mediate the realities of modern Kenya.

Through the six chapters that make up the core of the study we see the mini-dramas that are played out in the material conditions within which the songs are produced; in the iconographies that are generated by artistes' stage names and album titles; in the strategies of memory work that connect present-day realities to old cultural practices; in the soundtracks of urban spaces and in those of domesticated global cultural trends and finally, in the mediation of the antinomies surrounding the metanarrative of the nation and the realization of political transition.

I conclude by suggesting that Kenyan popular music demonstrates how contemporary postcolonial texts inform one another, opening up a dialogue between texts and also between local events, experiences and knowledges. Equally important, the study defines contemporary Kenyan culture by working out the sources of the images and idioms built up in this music and accepting the complexities of postcolonial existence as a site of fluid interaction between various cultural practices and competing modernities.