

This article appears in *Global Pop, Local Language*, edited by Harris M. Berger and Michael Thomas Carroll. Jackson: U. Press of Mississippi, 2003. 19-51.

Language Ideologies, Choices, and Practices in Eastern African Hip Hop

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Hip hop emerged as a musical and cultural force during the late 1970s in the United States and has followed a global trajectory ever since. Artists and fans around the world filter North American hip hop styles through their own local musical, social, and linguistic environments, making hip hop a highly visible (and audible) example of the intersection of global and local youth cultures. Young people in Tanzania and Malawi, neighboring African countries in the eastern region of the continent, are no exception to this creative process. Both countries have vibrant hip hop communities that draw on youth knowledge of international, as well as local and national, hip hop music and culture. Youth in the two countries listen to the same popular American stars and hold similar ideas about and interpretations of their lives and music. Yet, Tanzanian and Malawian hip hop scenes diverge in the social and cultural significance of local musical practices, which include performing as well as dancing, dressing, and talking about rap music. This tension between the similar and the different serves as an analytic backdrop for what follows.

In this essay, we examine the language choices made by Tanzanian and Malawian hip hop fans and performers to compare rap musical practices in the two nation-states. Patterns of language use in the two countries share a dualistic structure: Tanzanian youth draw on English or Swahili and Malawian youth rely mainly on English or Chichewa. The English language is a common component, representing elements of a shared colonial history. However, language use patterns diverge with respect to local responses to broader historical forces within the region,

preventing a sweeping analysis based on a presumed shared history or experience within East Africa. It is necessary to examine the local social and economic dimensions of rap musical practice in relation to both a (potentially) shared regional history as well as country-specific social, economic, political, and cultural systems, especially as reflected in language use and choice. Such analysis provides a broader understanding of hip hop's development in eastern Africa and its social and cultural importance in both Tanzania and Malawi. What are the similarities and differences and how do they play out in musical practice? What is distinctive about general language use in each country and how do these factors affect local hip hop musics? What are the tensions between "region-wide" and "country-specific" historical factors?

Following ideas outlined in Paul Kroskrity's *Regimes of Language*, we treat the processes of language choice in Tanzanian and Malawian rap practices as functions of explicit and implicit language ideologies that underlie social life. Language ideologies are people's beliefs and interests concerning the structure and use of language within social life. These ideologies motivate the ways individuals use languages, in both music-specific and more general social situations. In the first section of this essay, Alex Perullo analyzes the relationship between language choice and meaning in rap lyrics, the development of vernacular words and rap aliases, and the influence of commercialization on the burgeoning hip hop scene to comprehend the use of English and Swahili in Tanzania. In the second section, John Fenn examines Malawian hip hop scenes, exploring the ways youth strive to express themselves in both English and Chichewa as they generate and interpret the "messages" and meanings of rap music. Each of the authors draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted separately over the past several years, and their respective analyses reflect current trends and situations in the two countries. As these are constantly changing, this essay also serves as an indicator of future avenues for research into

language choices and popular musics.

Swahili and English in Tanzanian Hip Hop

The choices of language in Tanzanian rap music, whether English, Swahili, or a combination of the two, reflect particular ideologies held by hip hop musicians. English language rap tends to borrow from popular, American hip hop that emphasizes life's pleasures and the prowess of individual rappers. Songs are often about parties, friends, or praise for the group and the individual rappers in the group. Though also influenced by American hip hop discourses, rap in Swahili moves away from the more celebratory rap and focuses on social problems pertinent to Tanzanians, such as government corruption, lack of jobs and opportunities for youth, police violence, and health concerns such as HIV/AIDS. These issues confront the youth of the country everyday and, by addressing them in a language that is understood throughout the country, artists believe that they are educating their fans and listeners. While artists who use English also rap about important social issues and those who use Swahili discuss life's pleasures, generally the two languages offer different avenues for rapping and reach different audiences within the Tanzanian hip hop scene.

The separate uses of English and Swahili are a result of a number of factors, including language history in Tanzania, language valuation and evaluation, and commercialism. The history of language in Tanzania is perhaps the most important of these factors. Like most other African countries, colonialism dramatically affected local language choices among indigenous populations. German colonialism, which lasted roughly from 1884 until 1919, was unique in that the colonial government did not force people to learn German. Instead, administrators encouraged the use of Swahili, as they considered local people's mastery of German a threat.

Yahya-Othman, a professor of linguistics at the University of Dar es Salaam, explains:

Sous les Allemands, le Swahili était utilis non seulement dans la vie courante, mais aussi dans l'administration et le commerce. L'apprentissage de l'Allemand n'était pas encouragé, en grande partie de peur que les "indigènes" n'aient ainsi accès aux informations officielles. De ce fait, le Swahili prospéra considérablement durant cette administration Allemande.

[Under the Germans, Swahili was not only used in daily life, but also in administration and commerce. The learning of German was not encouraged, mainly for fear that the "indigenous" people would have access to official information. For this reason, Swahili prospered considerably during the German administration. (79, tr. Perullo)]

Though the Germans' approach to language may have kept specific information out of the hands of local peoples, it also encouraged the prosperity of Swahili, making it possible for large portions of the population to learn the language.

After World War I, the British took control of Tanganyika, the former name of Tanzania, and pushed the use of English in certain school and administration situations, in particular the education of teachers, clerks, and chiefs. Yet, the British also insisted that Swahili be the sole language of primary education throughout the country. By the 1950s, the British support of Swahili made it the universal language of communication between the country's cultural groups (Iliffe 529) and allowed the country's liberation party, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), to gain support throughout the territory to oppose British rule. Unlike Kenya and other neighboring East African countries, where no one local language dominated, Tanganyikans were able to establish a national independence movement mainly because of Swahili's widespread use (Temu 212).

Though several communities continue to use local languages, such as Smbaa, Haya, and Sukuma, in most parts of the country Swahili has become people's primary language. Dialects of Swahili have developed—as people integrated it with their own systems of pronunciation,

syntax, and vocabulary—but native Swahili speakers understand these dialects even though they vary at all levels of language structure.¹ While indigenous languages are rapidly disappearing throughout the country, a few rap groups have employed non-Swahili and non-English languages in their music. The X-Plastaz from Arusha, Tanzania, for instance, occasionally use the language of the Maasai people in their raps, though they primarily rely on Swahili. In other areas of the country, particularly Dar es Salaam, rappers tend to only include a few words from local languages and rarely rap entire songs in a language other than Swahili or English.

English is still taught in secondary and college education but is spoken by less than 5% of the Tanzanian population (Yahya-Othman 82). Though a small minority, English speakers have a great deal of power and resources, though not necessarily wealth, in Tanzania. Many are professors, politicians, or business owners and are in control of newspapers, radio, and television companies. For these reasons, English is considered the language of political and economic power, especially in international commerce and politics. Most other Tanzanians who have access to radio and television or who have gone through secondary education comprehend basic elements of the language and can appreciate some English rap lyrics sung by Tanzanians and, to a lesser extent, those sung by foreign rap groups.

The historical processes that allowed Swahili to be the most widely spoken language in Tanzania and English to be the dominant political and economic language created a unique environment for hip hop culture to develop. As youths aspired to rap, the choice between English and Swahili came from the musicians' backgrounds, their association with each language, and their particular language abilities. Many of the more affluent youth, largely those who had access to learning English, rapped in that language, mixing American vernacular and phrasing into their music. Other youth, even those who could speak English, relied on Swahili, as it gave them a

voice to speak to broader audiences about issues relevant to Tanzanians. As rap became more a part of both rural and urban life, Swahili dominated the country's hip hop scenes, though English continued to play a significant role within several rap groups.

To better comprehend how English and Swahili developed in hip hop culture, we must look at the early history of rap music in Tanzania. In the mid-1980s, as the Tanzanian government liberalized the country's economy, hip hop cassettes (video and audio) of American artists were imported by companies or brought into the country by individual travelers.² The introduction of cassettes caused an immediate interest in rap music partially because foreign music was formerly forbidden under the government's strict socialist policies and therefore created a great deal of interest when it began to be brought into the country. Cassettes of rap music were also socially and cultural important for Tanzanian youth since hip hop music reflected their sense of identity as poor, black, and outcast youth. Yet, the American hip hop artists were also successful, eloquent, and popular—powerful images for youth with little confidence in their own place in society. Even if Tanzanians could not understand the lyrics, the commanding visual images of artists such as Tupac Shakur, L.L. Cool J, and Ice T, accompanied by their strong, often angry, voices was taken by many Tanzanian youth as iconic of the autonomy and success they hoped to obtain themselves. Nigga J from the group the Hardblasters told Perullo, “In that time [1989] I liked to listen to rap like Public Enemy. They really attracted me to rapping because I saw the way black men liked the music and the way they searched for their own voice” (2001). For artists such as J, trying to rap or imitate American rappers was a means to overcome their social and political situation and attain the success that they envisioned American rappers had achieved.

Perhaps most importantly for Tanzania, hip hop was a means for the country's youth to

bond together and collectively speak out against their problems. Initially, youth participated in hip hop as an enjoyable way to collectively distinguish themselves from other members of society, such as their parents and elders. However, as the first generation of rappers and rap groups, particularly Kwanza Unit, the Deplomat, G.W.M. (Gangsters with Matatizo), and the Hardblasters, arose in the early 1990s, hip hop became both a marker of group identity and a vehicle for social commentary. It gave artists a voice to speak about their opinions and concerns in a way that they could not do elsewhere. As Nigga J told Perullo, “We have to speak about the problems that are nearest to us. I speak about the hard life here because it is something that I experience and I live in this environment. You can strengthen or destroy society by the words you use” (2001). J’s comment on the power of words is apropos to the philosophy many rappers have towards their art. Since so many youth are jobless after they finish school—loitering on the streets and working informal jobs to make money—and influenced by drugs and alcohol, rappers’ words, as J makes clear, can positively and dramatically influence youth culture. This style of educational lyrics ties into the country’s socialist past where aiding others was encouraged as a way to promote equality among the country’s people.

Many Tanzanians taught themselves to rap by imitating the lyrics, mannerisms, and gestures of American hip hop artists. Mr. II, who also uses the name II Proud and is currently one of the most popular rappers from Tanzania, explained to Perullo that he would listen to rap cassettes repeatedly until he could mimic the English lyrics. Though he did not speak English at the time, he would sound out the words until he had a sense of the rhyming and “flow” of the song. After establishing the song’s feel, Mr. II would create his own lyrics and rap over the music from an American rap tape. While learning to rap, Mr. II often studied the music of the American artist Tupac Shakur, a ubiquitous rap icon in Tanzania and other parts of Africa. In

explaining his relationship with Tupac Shakur, Mr. II stated, “I use Tupac like a role model, except that the things that we speak about are different. He discusses his environment in the States, while I discuss my environment here” (1999). Though Mr. II assimilated Tupac Shakur’s delivery and rhyming into his own music, he never lost sight of his own identity as a performer and artist in Tanzania. Other Tanzanians follow a similar course in acquiring rap skills and use American hip hop as a springboard to develop their own identity as rap artists.

Despite the growth of hip hop music during the late 1980s, it was not until the early 1990s that the first album of Tanzanian rap appeared. Saleh J (otherwise known as Saleh Aljabry) released the first Tanzanian rap album, *Swahili Rap*, with lyrics mostly in Swahili, but with sections, particularly choruses, in English.³ The album became an immediate sensation all over the country and, in many ways, set a high standard for future Tanzanian rappers. Most of the songs were based on the music and rhythms of American songs, such as Vanilla Ice’s “Ice Ice Baby” and Naughty by Nature’s “O.P.P.” Instead of translating the song from English to Swahili, however, Saleh J used the American rap as a framework to develop his own ideas—ideas pertinent to Tanzanian lifestyles. For instance, on his version of “Ice Ice Baby,” Saleh J turned a song about drive-by shooting and self praise into a warning about AIDS and multiple sexual partners (Remes 1999: 6). Throughout the song, Saleh J also uses English words and phrases from Vanilla Ice’s original version to identify the song to listeners.

Saleh J’s album marked a significant transition in Tanzanian rap. Up until that point, most youth who recorded music and many who performed used English as their primary language. A trend, however, was growing in live performances to use Swahili, particularly at the rap competitions called “Yo! Rap Bonanza” organized by Kim and the Boyz in the early 1990s (see Haas and Gesthuizen 284). Still, artists were unsure about using Swahili since it was not the

language used in “original” American rap music. The album *Swahili Rap*, however, legitimized rapping in Swahili and inspired others to drop English from their lyrics. Inspecta Harun, leader of the rap group Magangwe Mob, told Perullo, “So, then came a period when this fierce musician rapped in Swahili named Saleh Aljabry. He really moved me because he rapped in Swahili. This was at a time when Tanzanian [artists] had not proved ourselves” (2001).

Encouraged by Saleh J’s album, local rappers were given confidence to pursue rap music in the more dominant local language, though English remained a popular choice for youth who wanted their raps to remain “true” to the American music they heard.

The trend of rapping in Swahili about important issues that Saleh J began in the early 1990s continues today. Swahili lyrics often speak directly to social and cultural issues pertinent to the country’s youth. Mr. II is the most prominent rap artist using this style. He has released five albums to date, each critiquing different aspects of life in Tanzania. The song “Hali Halisi” is one such example.

Washikaji zangu kibao wako jela, eti
wazuruaji

Dada zangu wengine hawapendi kuwa Malaya....
Mi nasema sawa, vijana kupagawa sawa
Hii ni hali halisi

Many of my friends are in jail for they don’t
have work

Others of my sisters don’t like to be Prostitutes...
I’m saying it’s alright for youths to go crazy
This is the real situation
(1998, tr. Perullo)

Throughout the song, Mr. II explains what he sees as the real situation: his friends are in jail, there are no jobs, and his female friends earn their living as prostitutes. In other parts of the song, he criticizes the government for not assisting local youth and for destroying education by not supporting teachers. Similar to the way that Julius Nyerere—leader of the country’s independence movement and the first president of the country—sparked a nationalistic fervor by using Swahili during Tanganyika’s independence, Mr. II uses Swahili to connect to the youth of the country in hopes of getting them to take action for their problems.⁴

English language lyrics often support different ideological interests than Swahili lyrics. One group who uses English in their music is Kwanza Unit (The First Unit, also known as the K.U. Crew). Kwanza Unit formed in 1992 and became one of the top rap groups in Tanzania. In their lyrics, the group borrows heavily from American rap discourses in their English language songs. Take for example the song, “Inahouse.” The song describes a party with women, cigars, and other “pleasures”:

Ladies in lingerie, passion, *ménage à trois*...
I'm sipping older sex Mafioso....
I'm in my silk robe, puffing a cigar, laying on my waterbed
I'm about to be fed by this Puerto Rican love child ...

Kwanza Unit's lyrics use themes, such as women, wealth, and ability to do whatever one wants, that are common to many popular American rap songs heard in Tanzania. More telling, however, is the choice of words used by the group; “*ménage à trois*,” “Puerto Rican love child,” “Mafioso,” and even “waterbed” indicate the group's in-depth knowledge of American and European culture. Kwanza Unit's talent lies in their ability to draw from their vast knowledge of these cultures and present their own unique sound to Tanzanian audiences. Even though many Tanzanians might not understand the meaning of words such as “Mafioso,” they can relate to the song because certain aspects—such as the smooth, upfront delivery of the rap lyrics and the use of common rap words “sex,” “love,” and “ladies”—resemble the American rap songs with which they are so familiar.

What is important for Tanzanian hip hop, however, is that Kwanza Unit develops their music without stories of violence or vulgar language, even though these themes are prominent in the rap music they hear from the United States.⁵ When I asked rappers about their selectivity in copying certain elements of American music and not others, they stated that the expression of themes such as violence and vulgar language was frowned upon by Tanzanians and considered

disrespectful, while the topic of male/female relations was more appropriate and found in most Tanzanian music. Though Kwanza Unit moves beyond typical discussions of love and sex employed in Tanzanian music, the themes in their lyrics still fall under the rubric of “male/female relations.” Part of the reason for the disinterest in some American themes is that older hip hop artists and people in charge of performance, radio, and other events continually monitor lyrical content of rap music. Taji Liundi, a radio deejay who assisted in bringing hip hop to a broader audience through his radio shows in the mid-1990s, stated how he discouraged artists from incorporating vulgar language into their music: “So I started telling people that you must have music that is entertaining but it must also have a social message. And that is what they started doing. If they brought music in that had cursing, I wouldn’t play it” (2000). While the restrictions placed on artists are not censorship, since artists are never forced to alter their songs, older hip hop artists are central to maintaining a common vision for local hip hop music and emphasizing its social importance. For youth who want their music aired on the radio or who want to perform at major rap events, they need to be cognizant and respectful of the social, political, and linguistic ideologies of the older rappers.

By rapping in English, but limiting themselves to themes that are appropriate in Tanzania, Kwanza Unit reaches their niche audience—affluent East African youth familiar with American and European cultures. Additionally, their use of English is a strategy to communicate with people outside Tanzania, employing American rap discourses as cues to signal outside listeners to the group’s understanding of hip hop music and their legitimacy as rappers.

Unfortunately for groups such as Kwanza Unit, however, their music is lost on a majority of the Tanzanian population who either do not understand or have no interest in English lyrics. The audience referred to as “affluent youth” are a minority of the urban population. Many do not

remain in Tanzania, as they travel outside the country to attend college or find work. Since Kwanza Unit's music, even some of their Swahili rap, does not engage the larger population, the group has only had a steady fan base of diehard rap fans and have recently been moved to the periphery of the larger hip hop scene.⁶

The choice between English and Swahili becomes more complicated when considering the use of vernacular words and phrases—such as the American words “gangster” and “fresh” or the Swahili words “*bongo* (wisdom)” and “*msela* (urban ‘sailor’)”—in hip hop lyrics and conversations. The creation and incorporation of new words or altering the meaning of old words is central to Tanzanian hip hop culture. Peiter Remes points out in his study of urban youth and language in Mwanza, Tanzania that, in using vernacular words, “Tanzanian youth are pursuing distinction, as they mediate societal and parental expectations as well as their own desires and perspectives” (1998: 270). Borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu, Remes uses the notion of distinction to highlight how youth employ vernacular words to set themselves apart from others in Tanzanian society. Such usage creates a sense of identity and a common culture, one with which many youths all over the country relate and identify. By creating words that are only understood by other youth, they are separating themselves from their parents, elders, and even other youth who do not participate in hip hop culture. They are also creating a vast network of rap fans that can interact with one another through their own use of language.

Depending on the language used, rappers incorporate vernacular words into their music and conversations in different ways. English words often develop from American, European, and, more recently, South African rap lyrics and from rappers' in-depth knowledge of foreign cultures. This is a common aspect of Swahili in general, as many words, such as *pasipoti* (passport), *polisi* (police), and *kompyuta* (computer), have developed from American, European,

and Arabic linguistic influences. Tanzanian rappers, however, incorporate other words such as ghetto (*geto*), fresh, microphone (mic), nigga, flava, and mission into their music. These words, borrowed from American rap artists, demonstrate a person's in-depth knowledge of rap music and his/her desire to identify with an international hip hop culture.

One area in which American vernacular words feature prominently is in the use of rap aliases. Rap groups such as Underground Souls, Rough Niggas, Gangsters with Matatizo, Dogg Posse, Dream Team, East Side Killers, East Side Group, Hard Blasters, and Mob 'n' Genius (F.B.I.) use names of American rap groups or words found in American rap songs to identify themselves with American culture. Almost all Tanzanian rappers use pseudonyms as a way to self-identify with a particular American group. In a 1999 interview, one of the members of Kibo Flava, a rap group from the Kibo section of Dar es Salaam, explained the origins of his rap name and its importance to him: "My rap name is Ice II. I chose this name because of the musician there [in America], Ice T. I am fascinated by his raps and the way he started [rapping]. People said I resembled his rapping style." Through hearing and reading about the music of Ice T, Ice II perceived himself, and was perceived by his peers, to be much like his American counterpart. By using the name Ice II, he hoped to show his fans with whom he wanted to be associated with and whom he most resembled in terms of the flow and delivery of his lyrics. Further, Ice II believed that a particular English word from an American rap artist would help promote his career as a rapper. Many rap fans in Tanzania knew the name Ice T and understood that Ice II was emulating his style and identity by using that name. Other rappers use the same approach as Ice II, searching for American names that most resemble their music or their approach to music, thereby acknowledging their heritage as followers in an American musical tradition. Still, while a rapper can be complemented on his resemblance—in name and music—to another artist, he

would be insulted if someone said that he sounded exactly like another rapper. Even if a rapper borrows from American rap icons, they must still show that they are creative and have a unique style of rapping independent of any other rapper.

Rap artists and aficionados also use *maneno ya mtaani* (Swahili vernacular words) in their music and conversations. New words develop so quickly that even fluent speakers of Swahili have to continually interact with hip hop fans and artists in order to follow conversations, jokes, and rap lyrics. Among one group in Arusha, for instance, Perullo spent a significant portion of daily conversations discussing vernacular words. Each day, several new words appeared, such as ways to say police (*momwela, makuda, njagu, and ndata*), English (*ung'eng'e and umombo*), and woman (*sambra, nyusti, and dem*). These words develop from numerous sources, such as other local languages, the transformation of Swahili words, or the Swahilization of English words. Though some words never leave a particular community, others become widespread through rap songs and concert performances.⁷ For instance, Magangwe Mob, a local hip hop group, popularized the word *ngangari* with their song of the same name. *Ngangari*, which loosely translates as a tough-minded, resilient person, was used in the Temeke district of Dar es Salaam to describe members of the government opposition party, Civic United Front (CUF).⁸ Because of the song, however, *ngangari* became a national word, initially used by the hip hop community and residents of the Temeke district before entering into general use throughout the country.

Though the use of vernacular is not solely a hip hop phenomenon, the creation of new words has become a central part of Tanzanian hip hop culture. Youths create their own identities, in part through language, thereby separating themselves from other Tanzanian social groups. Of course, this is a common phenomenon all over the world, as language is a powerful means to

assert group identity and separateness from the dominant culture. For example, Roger Abrahams, in his study of African-American communities in the United States, “Black Talking on the Streets,” examines how the invention of new words and the innovative use of old ones is an important part of the community members’ relationships with one another. Similarly, by creating their own words, the youth of Tanzania identify with one another and create group solidarity. American hip hop musicians and fans experience the same processes of language creation, but tend to rely almost exclusively on one language, such as English or Spanish. Tanzanian youth develop a unique music through the junction of two languages, English and Swahili.

Most rap musicians consider hip hop to be a voice for youth culture in Tanzania and a way to speak about the “reality” of living in a “third world” society. The choice between English and Swahili lies in the musicians’ conception of and association with each language and the processes by which they attach meaning and value to each language, a concept which Debra Spitulnik terms “language valuation and evaluation” (164). Language valuation and evaluation is a phrase that depicts language as value laden, always undergoing social evaluations and judgments that are embedded in constructions of power. In Tanzania, for instance, members of the media, such as radio owners, deejays, and station managers often regard Swahili as a weak language since it is used by poor, rural people. English, on the other hand, is an international and therefore powerful language. The apparent language valuation and evaluation is that English offers more opportunities within European and American societies and is therefore more valued than Swahili.

Many Tanzanian rap musicians, however, do not value and evaluate English in the same way. Dolasoul, also called Balozzi, is fluent in both English and Swahili. For him, each language has a distinct importance based on the audience that his music reaches. In a year 2000 letter to

Perullo, he wrote:

Wherever I go on the face of this planet, I will always represent the thoughts of my people, ideas and views and speak on their behalf. I stand for the Truth and the Vision of a better tomorrow. Using my language “Swahili” and English as a second option if the need be.... I also try to provide solutions and give a wake up call to my people.

Most of the tracks [on my album] will be in Swahili - I just want to make my Language more acceptable internationally and at the same time I wouldn't like to leave too many people in the Dark so there will be about 3 Tracks in English.

For Dolasoul, rap music provides him with the means to represent his people and speak about changes that can be made for “a better tomorrow.” The choice of language, whether English or Swahili, is based on his valuation and evaluation of that language within a particular context. In other words, language ideology, or Dolasoul's interest in using language to reach a certain group of people, affects his choice of language, whether English or Swahili.

Other artists who are unable to rap in both English and Swahili cannot switch languages like Dolasoul. Yet in the early years of hip hop, when English was more valued for rapping, many youth learned to compose and use English in their music. Songs in this style were often simple and repetitive, but they maintained the status quo by rapping in the dominant language of that genre. As Swahili became the more accepted language, a flood of new artists appeared who were better able to compose and rap in their own language. The change of language choice by the hip hop community was due to an acceptance and legitimization of Swahili over English, which had previously been thought to be the most appropriate language for hip hop.

One other area that needs to be addressed in this section is the influence of commercialism on language choice in hip hop, an issue which is intertwined with the previous discussion on language valuation and evaluation. Making records and finding ways to sell those records is a constant challenge for Tanzanian musicians. Though Tanzania exceeds other African countries, such as Malawi, in recorded rap, the majority of rappers are never able to record and release an album since they have no way of paying recording studio fees.⁹ Only through

continual performance, sponsorship from local businesses, or employment at other jobs can rappers afford to record a single or an album in a local studio. Yet, members of the hip hop community also consider language choice to be intrinsically tied to their ability to make and sell records.

Many Tanzanian rap artists stated that between 1994 and 1999—a period when independent radio stations played far more foreign than local music—English, rather than Swahili, was more beneficial for attaining airtime on local radio stations. These artists commented that Tanzanian radio stations, such as Radio One, often featured a great deal of hip hop music, but almost none in Swahili. To these artists, radio personnel valued English over Swahili, and therefore made an effort to play English hip hop on the air. In an interview, however, one of the hip hop deejays from Radio One stated that his station had no access to local Swahili music for their shows since so few recordings existed. Though, at that time, a great deal of Swahili rap was available, especially rap singles, most was poorly recorded. In another interview, the program director at Clouds FM (a popular, youth-oriented station that began in 1998) said that in order for stations to remain professional, the music they played needed to be of a quality comparable to American, European, and other African countries. The English rap, he continued, tended to be of better quality, while the Swahili rap was usually recorded on cheap, multitrack cassette recorders. For this reason, stations initially focused their efforts on promoting English language rap music.

Though radio employees dismissed the notion of favoring one language over another, to many hip hop performers, English was the stronger language for gaining airplay, sponsorship, and recording opportunities. By mid-1999, however, well-recorded Swahili rap swelled the local market and forced many stations to search for high quality copies of local material. Stations

which initially ignored local Swahili hip hop music began to work with local musicians to gather as much material as possible. English rap continued to exert its influence with several groups releasing singles in English, or even albums that combined English and Swahili, such as Dolasoul's album "Balozi Wenu." Where many groups had initially rapped in English believing this would give them more radio play, by the end of the decade local attitudes changed and fans and artists pushed Swahili rap onto the airwaves. The shift in language choice within the local music industry was largely due to the success of several artists who used Swahili and the push by a few radio deejays to promote a local hip hop scene that focused more on social and political issues relevant to Tanzania.

Swahili became the more powerful language choice within the hip hop scene because of a desire among youths to build a national hip hop culture that promoted local values, ideas, and language, rather than foreign ones. But the shift only occurred because of the interest in Swahili during live performances and especially due to the release of several high profile albums, particularly Mr. II's (well-received) 1998 album *Niite Mr. II*, which was the first highly successful album of Swahili rap since Saleh J's album appeared in 1992.¹⁰ These albums proved that Swahili rap could be commercially successful, despite beliefs by those in the local music economy that English language rap would become more popular.¹¹

Since Tanzania's music economy is still developing and changing, it will continue to influence language choice in Tanzanian hip hop. Artists pay attention to the demands of record companies, radio stations, sponsors, and promoters in hopes of finding support for their music.¹² Although commercialism is not the sole contributor to language choice—as this section has shown—it has a powerful presence in Tanzanian hip hop culture. Many artists desire financial success and fame from their music, such as is portrayed on American hip hop videos and will

bend some of their creative style to accommodate commercial interest. Further, as artists find success in other countries, the international community may desire more music in English, depending on their interest in Tanzanian rap. Tanzanian artists may therefore monitor national and international music industries to inform their choice of language use.

Tanzanian hip hop artists choose between English and Swahili, relying on both languages to construct a unique soundscape for their music. They rely on their knowledge of historical, commercial, and political dimensions of their social identities, using language to position themselves within national and international hip hop culture. As hip hop “develops” in Tanzania, the choice of languages and a performer’s interests in those languages will change as beliefs and interests in hip hop music and culture continue to shift. Clearly, however, neither language will dominate the local rap scene, as each plays a significant role in Tanzanian society and will continue to do for the near future.

The Message Inside: Rap and Language Choices in Malawi

The English language pervades rap musical culture in Malawi, but it occurs alongside and is often interspersed with Chichewa. This dual presence reflects the more general daily linguistic environment of Malawi, where English and Chichewa interweave as the two dominant elements of the social and linguistic environments. Much of the discourse about rap music, including newspaper articles, discussions with and among youths, and radio broadcasts, takes place in English, but youths acknowledge that at times Chichewa is more appropriate, especially with regard to conveying “messages” in certain situations. The general concept of “message” comes up often in discussing rap music with youths throughout Malawi, highlighting perceptions about social functions of the music and the importance of language as a vehicle for transmitting

meaning effectively. Being able to transmit messages to peers often means knowing or guessing which language(s) audience members understand, just as being able to comprehend and interpret messages in rap music from the United States means having a strong grasp of English and some sort of understanding of cultural context.

Language choices in Malawi straddle the line between consuming and producing rap musical culture—receiving and transmitting messages—and youths hold varying notions of “appropriate” and “effective” language use. Different perspectives on language use arise from the complex weave of contemporary social, economic, political, and cultural forces as experienced by Malawian youth. It is in these differing perspectives that language ideologies underpinning popular musical practices in general and those of Malawian rap in particular reside. A brief description of the general linguistic topography of Malawi and the recent development of the country’s rap scenes, followed by several specific cases illustrating language use in musical practice, will provide material for considering the nexus of popular music, language choice, and social construction of identity for Malawian youth.

The legacy of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda forms a backdrop for contemporary linguistic practice in Malawi. Throughout his three-decade rule of the country, Banda maintained strict national policies on all aspects of life in Malawi, including language. He championed Chichewa, a dialect of Chinyanja, as the national language of Malawi, despite the fact that it was only spoken in the central region (Banda’s home district). His policies affected language use in education, the print media, and the national radio. Other regional languages, such as Chitumbuka, were barred from media and educational institutions, effectively providing Chichewa with a linguistic monopoly until 1994, when a referendum brought about multiparty democracy, the end of Banda’s reign, and concomitant alterations in policy. Due to Banda’s

institutionalization of Chichewa, it continues to have a strong presence in Malawi as both a *lingua franca* and an official language, but its status as “national language” has come into question as of late (see Kishindo).

The English language has a social and political history in Malawi due to British colonial rule as well as Banda's language policies. Throughout Banda's presidency, English served as the language of governmental proceedings, business, education, and elite society (Kishindo 275), and alongside Chichewa continues to be an official language in Malawi—a situation parallel to that of English and Swahili in Tanzania. Today primary school students throughout Malawi begin learning English in Standard 1, and continue to learn it throughout primary and secondary school; in secondary levels and in university, English is the language of instruction as well as a topic of study.¹³ While English appears daily in markets, on the radio, and in the newspapers, it has not completely supplanted local or regional languages as a means of communication, mainly due to widespread differential access to education between genders and economic classes. Code-switching is a common phenomenon in Malawi among people who can speak and understand both languages (Kayambazinthu), and English words can easily appear in Chichewa speech when there is no Chichewa equivalent, e.g. “democracy” or “hip hop.” In some cases, English words are transformed into Chichewa, such that “computer” becomes “*computala*”—again, similar to the situation in Tanzania with Swahili.

Language choice potentially carries political overtones in Malawi, especially given strong regional divisions between national political party affiliations. Chichewa—originally spoken only in the central region of the country—has come to symbolize the historical (pre-1994) dominance of that region in Malawian politics and economics. Negative feelings surrounding this perception clash with the current rhetoric of national unity, especially in certain intellectual

and political circles based in other regions and languages. Regional and ethnic identities are important in Malawian society and often are carried on the back of language choice. Choosing or refusing to speak a certain language in particular situations can communicate one's stance on issues of politics and identity in contemporary Malawi.¹⁴ While such politicized discourse currently does not enter into Malawian rap, it does form part of the general linguistic backdrop against which Malawian rap musical culture continues to emerge.

Banda's strict national policies extended to cultural phenomena as well, and he celebrated "traditional" Malawian expressive forms over "foreign" influences in expressive practices such as dress and music (Phiri 159-161). Censorship was rampant in Banda's Malawi, and all arts suffered as means of expression for anything other than approved messages or themes (see Chimombo, Ch. 1). In the 1994 general elections, the political opposition to Banda won the presidential office as well as a majority in Parliament, and a general liberalization of national policies followed. There was a subsequent profusion of expressive practices that, up until that point, had been suppressed and seemingly non-existent in the public sphere. For example, several individuals told Fenn that after the election, males were able to wear earrings, grow their hair long or into dreadlocks, and, perhaps most importantly, express themselves freely in song lyrics. Under Banda, these phenomena were not permissible, and would likely have lead to harassment or prosecution by governmental or quasi-governmental forces.

In conjunction with expressive freedom in cultural practices, the economic sector opened as the market became deregulated. Banda-era economic policy favored politicians and pro-Banda businessmen; a chameleon-like confederation of private and government interests controlled the economy, relying on a model that is best described as capitalism without the free-markets.¹⁵ The rich (politicians and businessmen) prospered while widespread poverty dominated most of the

population (see Lwanda, 16–33). Of particular relevance to musical culture in Malawi, the sales of cassettes during Banda’s rule was restricted to a handful of licensed merchants, with street vendors being regulated and relatively rare. Selection and availability of cassettes was low, and rap music was almost always dubbed from cassettes purchased abroad. After 1994, however, the informal economic sector of street vending was deregulated, and stalls flooded the streets and markets. Highly prized items such as (pirated) cassettes became more widely available, leading to spikes in popularity for many types of music. Rap was one of these, and several Malawian youths stated that it was around this time that they first started listening to this music extensively.

Since 1994, youth involvement with rap has surged around the country. From the large urban centers of Blantyre and Lilongwe to the more rural areas of Nkhata Bay or Chitipa, rap music and its associated paraphernalia (such as t-shirts and posters) blanket the cultural landscape. Vibrant rap scenes have emerged in urban and rural areas, existing partly as locally bounded entities but simultaneously connected to each other through nation-wide institutional networks of radio and newspapers. Such connections extend to the global level as Malawian youth partake of the latest trends in hip hop culture from the United States, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean via such media as satellite television and video cassettes. Following Sara Cohen’s discussion of the notion of scenes, we suggest that these Malawian scenes should be viewed as dynamic instances of both local and global culture. That is, they serve as social and physical sites for musical practices that are an emergent mixture of local and global streams of influence. Such streams of influence involve more than just the sounds of imported rap music, and include styles of behavior and dress from around the world as well as aspects of local economic, social, and cultural contexts and practices. One significant component of rap musical practice in Malawi that illustrates the confluence of multiple influences and forces

is language choice.

Language choice is fueled by language ideology, but language ideology is not necessarily a unilinear force that binds together speakers of a language. As Paul Kroskrity points out, in any context there are often multiple language ideologies that interact and inform language use (12). These multiple ideologies may be held by one individual and called upon in different situations, or they may spread across individuals, providing apparently conflicting explanations even when describing the same phenomenon. Multiple language ideologies do not necessarily compete to describe some absolute truth but rather reflect the differing interpretive and experiential positions held by individuals with regard to their own and others' language choice or use. Several examples gathered during fieldwork in Malawi will illustrate the enactment of language ideologies underlying rap musical practice there. As mentioned previously, English and Chichewa stand as the two main languages of rap music in Malawi; they are also the two main and "official" languages for general communication. Other languages are widely spoken, mainly within specific geo-political regions. For example, Chitumbuka and Chitonga are found in the north, and Chiyao and Chilomwe in the south. Singing rap music in languages other than English or Chichewa, however, is not at the core of rap musical practice in Malawi. Recalling that language choice in Malawi can mark ethnic, political, and social identity in general, it is interesting to note that rap music performance practices rarely stray from the English/Chichewa paradigm that characterizes the national or "official" level of Malawian language practice. The following examples, then, deal only with the choice between Chichewa and English and the ideologies that contribute to such choices.

Language choice related to rap music in Malawi cuts across processes of both production

and consumption. In terms of the production of rap music, the choice involves the languages used in composing and performing rap songs. Malawi is unlike Tanzania in that there is not as strong an infrastructure for the manufacture and sale of rap music recordings. In Blantyre, home to most of Malawi's recording studios, only two offer viable access to youth interested in recording their songs: MC Studios and GME Studios. In these studios, performers usually cut a "single," meaning not only one song, but also only one copy of that song. For economic reasons, most youth are not able to reproduce their music for distribution, and the most common practice is to get the song to a sympathetic deejay in the hopes that he or she will play it on the air at least once. The political economy of making rap music in Malawi reflects the general situation of popular music there: lack of economic and material resources for producing music coupled with widespread poverty and subsequent lack of a lucrative market for many musicians. However, the situation for rap is even more desperate. Many youth interested in recording their songs told Fenn that they have even less access to jobs or other income-generating activity than adults do and as a result have very little money to put toward their music careers. Furthermore, while many youth involved with rap music expressed hope for rap's future in the Malawian music market, there was strong agreement that right now, people (mainly adult consumers) are not interested in hearing Malawian rap, preferring instead to listen to reggae or "traditional sounds"—usually performed in Chichewa. Consequently, locally produced rap is not widely heard, and English-language rap music from North America or the United Kingdom dominates the airwaves and cassette stalls.

There is, however, another option for performance and presentation of local rap music. "Rap and ragga" competitions are dynamic spaces in which young performers can make their music heard. Competitions may be sponsored by private organizations or individuals that are

profit-oriented, but more often they are held by non-governmental organizations (NGO) dedicated to youth issues. Such groups may be local or attached to international donor aid programs and will offer cash prizes in addition to t-shirts, hats, and posters promoting their cause. Participating—and, indeed, placing—in competitions forms an important portion of rap musical practice and discourse in Malawi.

During competitions, participants perform original lyrical compositions over pre-recorded instrumental backing tracks. Performers might find these instrumental tracks on cassettes purchased from street vendors, record them from the radio, or create original instrumentals at places such as MC Studios. The first option is the most common, and due to financial constraints, contestants will often share instrumentals within a single competition. Also, groups or individual performers may have only one instrumental in their possession and will sing numerous original compositions to this lone track over the course of several competitions. In general, “copyright” or cover songs are not permitted in competitions, and thematic lyrics are sometimes a requirement for participation. This is especially so if the event is sponsored by an NGO dedicated to particular interests, such as HIV/AIDS awareness and education.

In competitions observed in the town of Mzuzu (northern Malawi), English was the predominant language for rapping, but performers also used Chichewa. When members of Mzuzu Crew, a group that sang in Chichewa about AIDS, discussed their choice of language with Fenn, they all agreed that Chichewa allowed more people to understand their message.¹⁶ They anchored this explanation in their belief that more people understand Chichewa than English, and thus the importance of their message warranted communication in Chichewa. Many performers (and competition veterans) in Blantyre echoed this explanation that the message of a song was more likely to be understood in Chichewa. The belief that there is a prevalence of

Chichewa speakers over English speakers draws on the positioning of Chichewa as the “national” language of Malawi. Youths often referenced this notion, reflecting the historical imprint of Banda’s language policy and the contemporary situation of Chichewa as a lingua franca, by referring to Chichewa as “our language” and glossing over current debates in the political sphere about Malawi’s multiple languages. Young rappers, then, replicated broader language ideologies concerning widespread use of Chichewa by positing—for the most part, correctly—that audience members would easily understand rap in that language.

Mzuzu Crew also performed a song in English at the same competition, but this song had a very different theme. Drawing on young Malawians’ interpretations of rap music from the United States, the lyrics focused on celebrating the rappers’ skills and invoked a “party and good times” atmosphere. The performers held no strong opinion about why they used English in this second song. Their lack of an ideological stance attached to the use of English in combination with a “lighter” lyrical theme recalls the distinction made by Tanzanian rappers presented in the previous section. Such a distinction was also echoed by some performers in Blantyre who stated that rapping in English often involves talking about oneself or “boosting.” In these cases, the implied criticism was that using English in a rap song might preclude meaningful content or messages, the underlying belief about language being that many youth who sang in English did not know the language well enough to create meaningful lyrics and were instead rehashing themes found in imported rap music.

However, several other performers in Mzuzu stated that they specifically employed English in their songs when they wanted a majority of people to comprehend their messages, reflecting another commonly held belief: more people in towns regularly use English over Chichewa.¹⁷ Conflicting interpretations of the effectiveness of English over Chichewa were also

held by performers in Blantyre and serve to highlight an intersection of processes of differential identity construction and processes of language valuation and evaluation.¹⁸ Such conflicting interpretations also underscore the multiplicity of language ideologies, especially as refracted through individuals' language experiences. Choosing a language to rap in at a competition often means choosing the "right" language to reach the audience, as language is a means to pass along particular messages to particular audiences. But depending on an individual youth's background and situation in life, the choice will be based in a variety of considerations: What language might the majority of the audience understand (or might the performer believe them to understand)? What language is he/she particularly proficient in (and how does this influence the answer to the previous question)? What kind of image does he or she want to project via language (or what carries importance among peers)?

Urban dwellers often see themselves as living in a more sophisticated environment than their rural counterparts, with command of English serving as a status marker connecting youth to a more cosmopolitan sphere.¹⁹ Such a perception extends to the regional level as well, with individuals living in Blantyre or Lilongwe—Malawi's two large urban centers, located in the south and central regions respectively—often viewing other areas of Malawi as devoid of material, cultural, or intellectual sophistication. Such biases or prejudices (simplified here for the sake of brevity) are not necessarily politically motivated, even though regionalism is rampant in Malawi and language choice can carry political overtones and generate political debate. Rather, motivations behind valuation and evaluation of English in rap music arise from a predominant notion that youth gravitate toward English as more fashionable or international than Chichewa—a notion expressed in interviews Fenn conducted as well as in non-rap related conversations. No matter which languages are statistically more prevalent or actually used and understood more,

contrasting language ideologies are important because they illustrate the diversity of perspectives that inform individual choices in language use. Such choices arise in shared social contexts and reflect the array of concerns held by youth in Malawi as well as the myriad influences on language practice, such as implicit notions of sophistication or cosmopolitanism. Ideas that one language or another more effectively carries a song's message within a polyglot society implicate language ideology as a factor in popular musical practice. Choice of language in rap performance practices is a key element in analyzing both semantic and socially symbolic meanings of words and linguistic practices, and in the case of Malawi such choices are influenced by a combination of broader social, political, and historical forces that act upon language use in general.

In addition to serving as conduits for messages, language choices also enter into the ways that youth conceptualize and articulate their places within Malawi's rap scenes. Language choices and underlying ideologies can serve to either differentiate or unify individuals, drawing and redrawing lines of social interaction. Several discussions with youths in Nkhata Bay about their self-descriptions as "O.G.s," "niggas," or "gangstas"—all terms taken from American rap vernacular—revealed beliefs about language use that work into the ongoing formation of young Malawians' social identities. These radically recontextualized terms take on new sets of meanings, partially based in an American inner-city gang culture provenance (or, rather, Malawian interpretation of that world) and partially based on the contemporary political, social, economic, and cultural experiences of Malawian youth.

These terms are multivalent markers of identity shared by Malawian hip hop fans and performers, but there is not always a consensus about what they mean. Moreover, the immediate social context of language—the "here and now" of Malawian youth in relation to the rest of the

world—figures into the interpretation of such terms. For example, Van Nyasulu, a nineteen year-old Form 4 student at the time of fieldwork, based his self-identification as a gangsta or “G” in his fluent command of English. In addition to being a dedicated student in school, Nyasulu worked as a woodcarver in the tourist town of Nkhata Bay, talking to and negotiating with many English-speaking travelers on a daily basis, especially during the tourist season. He made good money selling woodcarvings and attributed his success to hard work in both carving and school. During discussions with Fenn, Nyasulu qualified his status as a “real G” by attaching it to his knowledge of English and his willingness to work. He believed these two factors distanced him from the others in town who were “lazy” and unwilling to learn English or work hard. Linking his status as a serious “G” to his ability to comprehend lyrics of songs by American stars like Snoop Doggy Dogg or Notorious B.I.G., Nyasulu indicated he found messages in those lyrics that helped shape his lifestyle. A major lifestyle component that set Nyasulu apart from peers in town was his material possessions (portable stereo system, compact discs, rap posters, trendy clothing), all status-laden items that he gained through hard work.

What is interesting about Nyasulu is the degree to which he linked his command of English to his economic success and social status as a “real G.” As far as violence or crime is concerned, he had no interest in living the lifestyle of a “gangsta” in the United States and being a “tough guy” did not appeal to him. Nyasulu acknowledged that in comparison to “G’s” from the U.S.—which he knows about primarily through lyrics—he and his cohorts were not truly “real.” After all, they did not have cars or guns, so how could they measure up to those in the U.S? On more local ground—Nkhata Bay—Nyasulu’s command of English grew out of his valuation of that language as important and status-granting. He set himself apart from his local social group via his use of English, turning to a more abstract social world that, for him, the

lyrics of Notorious B.I.G. or Snoop Doggy Dogg embodied. He yearned to be independent and respected, just as his favorite artists were—at least in their lyrics. The core value of being a “G” for Nyasulu was to stand on one’s own and he connected this value directly to competence with English. To be a “real G” meant economic and social independence. The disparity between these interpretations and the “meaning” of the term back in the U.S. was not lost on Nyasulu, but neither did he place much significance on that semantic gap. The symbolic meaning of the English language and competence with it was at least as significant as replicating any literal meanings of terms through social practice. Nyasulu posited an equation of competence in English with some sort of social status, such that choosing one language over another was not as important as accurate or competent use of a particular language that carries significant social and political history in Malawi.

The above example illustrates how language choice can serve to differentiate youths via language ideologies. Another example illustrates how language choice can unify youths into groups and provide an individual with a way into a local scene. The youth in this case, Malenga Msiska, was born in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania to Malawian parents, and he completed his primary level education in Tanzania. In a February 1998 interview, Msiska explained that he learned to rap while living in Dar es Salaam, honing his rhyming and composing skills in Swahili during his Standard 6 year of schooling (circa 1994). For two years he wrote rap songs and sang only in that language. Following his family’s move to Lilongwe, Malawi in 1996, he began to learn to rap in Chichewa, but soon decided that people were not interested in hearing Chichewa rap. By then, he had begun secondary-level education at a boarding school in the Nkhata Bay district, and friends there taught him to rap in English, the language in which he now composes and performs.

Through his narrative about the phases of his own language use in rap music, Msiska traversed a broad ideological and cultural space while fitting himself into different scenes. At the time of his family's return to Malawi, the country was undergoing significant political change. This was not coincidental, for many Malawians who had been living outside the country for political reasons returned when multiparty democracy took hold in 1994. Msiska negotiated his personal geographical relocation with a parallel linguistic shift; Swahili is not widely spoken in Malawi, so he began to rap in Chichewa. Changing locations and languages again shortly thereafter, he learned to rap in English at Nkhata Bay Boys Secondary School, a prestigious boarding school that recruits students from all over the country. The environment of the school itself presented another level of language ideology, for posted in a central courtyard there was a hand-lettered sign that read: "Academic Grounds—English is the Official Language." When Fenn inquired about the sign, students of the school, including Msiska, confirmed that they were required to speak only English both in and out of classes. Fully exploring the implications of this institutionalized ideology is beyond the immediate scope of this essay, but here we can observe yet another facet of the broader sociolinguistic landscape of Malawi.

A key aspect of Msiska's experience with language choices and practices is that his successive social identities flowed from contextualized language ideologies. In each living situation or scene that he found himself in, choosing a language for his rapping had a lot to do with merging into dominant patterns of practice. His desire to be part of a scene intersected with prominent language ideologies and practices, such that choices he made served as portals into each successive scene. Just as with Nyasulu, Msiska's language choices undergirded his social identity, but toward slightly different ends. Whereas Nyasulu relied on language to set himself apart from his peers, Msiska used language as a means to integrate. The many different ways that

language choice lends itself to the construction of social identities in Malawian rap scenes, as illustrated in the above cases, underscores the wide range of language ideologies that individuals can draw on in different situations to bolster or justify their social and musical practices. The multiplicity of such ideologies, then, comprises a rich and dynamic pool of cultural resources that serves as a bridge between global and local levels of rap musical practice.

Mimesis and embodied motivations, as manifested in the style of using a language such as English, represent a final angle for examining language choice in Malawian rap.²⁰ This more tacit realm of language choice finds expression in appropriation or imitation of ways of talking, and these linguistic practices are not as readily acknowledged by Malawian youth in terms of the kinds of overt language ideologies (beliefs about language) seen in preceding examples. Accents, vernacular terms and phrases, or aspects of nonverbal communication take on rich meanings and serve as status-markers in rap musical culture, yet they do not necessarily involve explicit language choice. More important here is the style with which English is used, rather than whether or not it is used and/or understood accurately. Talking in a certain accent or using key vernacular phrases entails a level of participation in rap music via language that does not necessitate or invite overt explanation, as previous examples and situations have, in terms of intended audiences or relaying messages. The meaning of linguistic elements such as curse words or “American” accents stems from mimetic use, in the sense of “enacting” rather than “copying.”²¹ Use, rather than metalinguistic acknowledgement of use, undergirds these aspects of language choice, and a sense of aesthetic accomplishment arises through employing them. For example, on one of the national radio stations in Malawi, Radio 2 FM, disc jockey Vic Smooth hosted a weekly program dedicated to “hip hop, R&B, and soul.” This show was popular with youth throughout the country, and the days following any given broadcast often were filled with

discussions about Smooth's playlist or particular events in the show. His on-air announcing was in a highly affected "American" accent, complete with phrases Smooth extrapolated from hip hop culture—"Where's the party at, caller?," "enough respect," or "give a shout-out to...." Many Malawian youth, including those that Fenn met and worked with in Nkhata Bay, enjoyed imitating Vic Smooth and incorporating his idiomatic phrases into their own daily speech. Knowledge of English was necessary to do this, but not the same kind as in other cases presented above. Youth instead were concerned with the "doing" of speech acts and through this "doing" enacted membership in localized rap scenes. The meaning of language in these cases lies not in the semantic realm, but in participation-through-doing that is socially meaningful. As in the Tanzanian examples, some individuals here may not have known what a phrase literally meant, but this did not necessarily matter to them. It was more important to be able to replicate the phrase, incorporating it into the situation at hand and thus highlighting one's knowledge of rap vernacular. For example, greeting someone with "Where's the party at, caller?" signifies familiarity with Smooth and his speech in general, identifying the speaker as a hip hop supporter—even if there is no party and there is no caller. The language choice here lies in choosing to use English phrases at key moments. And this choice serves as a badge of belonging, a status-symbol indicating that one knows a phrase and can employ it aesthetically, whether or not semantically it is totally grasped or even makes sense. This is not a false or incorrect meaning but an important, socially emergent one that is rooted at the intersection of linguistic, social, and musical practice.

Language use in Malawian rap musical practice spans the issues of choice between languages (generally English and Chichewa) and styles of speaking a language (mainly with English). The former entails more explicit explanations or rationalizations, whereas the latter

encompasses a more mimetic dimension of language ideology. The two realms, however, constitute aspects of discursive and musical practice in Malawian rap culture that are conjoined via language ideologies and are not so easily separable in lived experience. It is at their intersection that youth formulate their places in the world and negotiate social identities, and it is here as well that language ideologies come into play as components of these identities. Like their Tanzanian counterparts, Malawian youth draw on beliefs about language when either performing or talking about rap music. These beliefs stem from larger historical and social developments and connect rap musical practice to the issues and linguistic institutions that pervade contemporary Malawian life. The focus on “messages” and conveying or interpreting them through music exhibits the confluence of a global popular music (rap) with local youth concerns (HIV/AIDS, economic stability, and so forth). In all of this, language not only “means” in a referential or semantic fashion but in a social fashion as well and serves as a vehicle for conveying young Malawians’ participation in a globalized musical culture that they enact daily as a localized identity phenomenon.

Conclusion

The essay has shown how a new popular music, hip hop, was linguistically localized into the music scenes of two countries in Eastern Africa: Tanzania and Malawi. While the language practices and choices of youths drew on the predominant linguistic duality of their respective countries (Swahili/English or Chichewa/English), the reasons behind individual choices differed in terms of language ideologies as experienced and expressed in social contexts. In each country, colonial and post-colonial influences informed the broader social attitudes toward language while the English of American hip hop—which youth in both countries initially considered to be

the “authentic” language of the genre—influenced how youth learned to rap and compose lyrics. In Tanzania, English became less popular as Swahili gained recognition as more socially and culturally appropriate to the aims and goals of hip hop participants. Youth continued to adopt American vernacular into their music and into their identities as rappers, but they altered the language and the meaning of the musical culture that they borrowed to accommodate their unique social circumstances. In Malawi, English was the favored language particularly in young people’s mimetic enactment of American hip hop and their appropriation of American hip hop terminology in descriptions of themselves. Youth sometimes held Chichewa to be more important, believing that language would allow the messages of songs to reach the broadest possible audience. But multiple language ideologies existed, leading to differing perceptions of the “best” language to use in a given situation. These multiple language ideologies arose out of the varied social, economic, and demographic experiences of individual Malawian youth.

Larger social and economic forces—aspects of recent history in Tanzania and Malawi—also factored into language choice in each country. Some of these forces were the state of the music industry, commercialization, and the acceptance of hip hop among parents, elders, and others in Tanzania and Malawi. Other forces were broader and less specific to the two musical cultures. Patterns of language choice in Tanzanian and Malawian hip hop scenes are strongly tied to the time when hip hop musical culture began to flourish in each country. After Tanzania liberalized its economy in the late 1980s, hip hop music flooded local markets. At that time, the government was still trying to push socialism and maintain a strong, community-based society. Filtered through this socialist ideology, hip hop music changed from an imitation of North American styles to an educationally and socially conscious music. Even though English still commanded a large presence among the many urban youth who identified linguistically with

African American culture, Tanzanian hip hop was now delivered in Swahili, the most widely spoken and accepted language in the country. Malawi, on the other hand, did not see a surge of hip hop until 1994, when massive political change and economic deregulation resulted in social and cultural liberalization. Malawi was then a country reeling from years of repression under a semi-dictatorial government that had influenced everything from musical preferences to language use and beyond. Chichewa—a forced national language under Banda’s government—maintained its status as an official language and lingua franca, but because of politics, it did not command unilateral usage or support. The choice of language in Malawian hip hop scenes has been based in individuals’ ideologies regarding English and Chichewa, which in turn are tied to broader debates and practices of language use. While English has been the dominant language of Malawian rap musical culture up to this point, changes similar to those seen in Tanzanian rap may be on the horizon (that is, a shift towards Chichewa or other regional languages).

The cases of rap music in Tanzania and Malawi illustrate the complex intersection of language ideologies, larger historical shifts (political, social, economic), and popular musics. In either country, the choice of language both in performing rap and talking about it reveals the constant negotiations between individuals and larger groups, whether these are local or transnational, physical or conceptual. It would be erroneous to assume that the use of English in either Tanzanian or Malawian rap musical practice simply reflects a global influence and the use of Swahili or Chichewa a local influence, for in both countries more general linguistic histories serve as backdrops that continuously anchor language usage at the local level. Though English is not indigenous in either country, it has strong local presence, mainly due to colonial forces that have been partially internalized and have resulted in particular structures of valuation and evaluation. Subsequently, the choice to use English or another language in rap musical practice is

not always couched in terms of “foreign” versus “indigenous” by performers or enthusiasts.

Usage often entails more of a choice between two (or more) locally viable alternatives that carry different meanings, depending on the language ideologies invoked by youth to justify or explain their choices.

Our research has sought to highlight the processes through which musicians in Tanzania and Malawi engage a “global” popular music and incorporate it into their own experiences as youth. But, inquiry into this area is only just started. Much more in-depth study of performance practices, discursive fields, and language ideologies needs to be done by scholars working with popular musics. It is by talking to people about what they are hearing in music, and what they are trying to communicate through music, that we can move closer to understanding the role of musical practices in social economic, political, and cultural life.

Notes

All translations of interviews from Swahili to English by Perullo.

1. Some examples of differences in Swahili dialects are: Sound differences, for instance ‘*jicho*’ (eye) in standard Swahili is ‘*dito*’ on the island Mvita; morphology, such as ‘*nyumba hii ni yangu* (this house is mine)’ in standard Swahili is ‘*nyumba hii ndangu*’ in Lamu; and vocabulary differences, ‘*soko* (market)’ in standard Swahili is ‘*marikiti*’ in Zanzibar (Deo Ngonyani, pers. Comm. 11 Jan. 2002).

2. After Ali Hassan Mwinyi took over as the president of the country in 1985, he made changes over his ten years in office that dramatically altered the economic and political state of the country, such as allowing for private business, the importation of luxury goods, and the opening

of the country's airwaves. When the government allowed independent broadcasting companies to operate in Tanzania, radio and television became extremely important in disseminating rap music. However, these stations preferred to play English rap music, as discussed later in this section. Swahili rap grew with live performances and later with cassettes (see Haas and Gesthizen 284), until the late 1990s when radio started to play local Swahili rap.

3. *Swahili Rap* appeared in Tanzania in 1992, though Saleh J's version of "Ice Ice Baby" was released a year earlier as a single.

4. Mr. II even refers to himself as the "Nyerere wa [of] rap" (Remes 1999: 1).

5. Violence does appear in some Tanzanian rap lyrics, such as Hashim's song "I Smoked a Deejay," but in general, violent themes are uncommon.

6. For many fans and older rappers, however, Kwanza Unit is recognized as an important innovator in the Tanzanian hip hop scene. Their production quality, vocal techniques, and lyrical flow exist as guidelines for young rappers and remind experienced rappers of the ability of one of the older Tanzanian rap groups.

7. Rap lyrics and the widespread sale of rap tapes have created a quick way for new words to develop. Pieter Remes points out, for instance, that the song "Msela" which means urban 'sailor,' by Kwanza Unit became a common word after the song was released on cassette in Tanzania (1999: 1).

8. The word “*ngangari*” originally was an ideophone and no exact translation exists in English of its original meaning. Yet, the image portrayed by the word, which is now used as a noun, is that of a strong, unwavering person.

9. In the year 2001, Tanzanian rappers released approximately fifteen albums and over a hundred singles, though hundreds of groups and artists never recorded throughout the country, despite their desire to do so.

10. Several other Swahili rap albums appeared between 1992 and 1998, including two other by Mr.II. After 1998, however, that the market for Swahili albums grew tremendously.

11. Even in the international music industry, many musicians see Swahili as being the more important language for hip hop music. In a 2000 interview, Mr. II spoke with Perullo at length about the importance of Swahili in selling Tanzanian music to Western audiences. Having traveled to Europe and the United States, Mr. II realized that Western audiences desire to hear African languages, like Swahili, in African music. He explained that most Tanzanian artists realize this as well and switched from English to Swahili in an effort to sell their music internationally.

12. For instance in the year 2000, the R&B artist Lady JD switched from English to Swahili because her new manager decided that she would be able to draw larger audiences and sell more albums with Swahili.

13. In the Malawian school system, which is based on the British system, primary school starts in Standard 1 and ends in Standard 8. At that point, students move on to the secondary levels, Forms 1 to 4.

14. The three main political parties in Malawi are based in the three different geographic regions of the country, and the bulk of their support follows those divisions. AFORD (Alliance for Democracy) is from the north, MCP (Malawi Congress Party) is from the central region, and UDF (United Democratic Front) is from the south. Ethnic identities are also regionally based, and even after many years, a family from the north that has been living in the south will refer to northern heritage and cultural traits as “theirs.”

15. Under Banda, there was only one legal political party, the Malawi Congress Party. All politicians were members of that party, and all citizens were required to become members and pay for a party card. Banda was both president of the party and “president for life” of Malawi.

16. Mzuzu Crew is not the actual name of the group. The name has been changed here for ethical reasons.

17. Situated in a traditionally Chitumbuka-speaking area, Mzuzu is in the north of Malawi; this adds a further linguistic twist to the situation, especially given recent tensions over regional identities and the political past of Malawi. No performers sang in Chitumbuka, but more research is needed to explore the unfolding situation.

18. The notion of “differential identity” refers to the ways in which people structure their identities as individuals and members of social groups according to both shared and non-shared characteristics. In Malawi, the rural/urban breakdown is commonly referred to by individuals seeking to align themselves with certain material and social goals and can be articulated differently depending on where an individual is trying to “place” him or herself. See Bauman for a general folkloristic examination of the concept.

19. See Turino for a recent examination of “cosmopolitan” in relation to African popular musics. While he looks specifically at Zimbabwean musical culture, his developments of the concept speaks to the situation of Malawian rap in numerous ways.

20. See Dell Hymes’s 1974 article “Ways of Speaking” for an expanded discussion of the concept of style, especially his notion of style as a “way of doing something.”

21. See Winn (42-43) for an expansive discussion of mimesis that takes into account gesture, performance, and enactment.

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