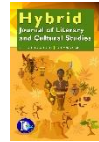




Emerging performance spaces: Kass FM Radio Station and the expansion of the Kalenjin performance stage



Research Article



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global in the *Hybrid Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, Volume 4, Issue 1, 2022

© 2022 The Author(s). This article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY-NC-SA) license.

Article Information

Submitted: 16th March 2019

Accepted: 30th April 2022

Published: 1st May 2022

Additional information is available at the end of the article



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

ISSN 2707-2150 (Online)

ISSN 2707-2169 (Print)

To  please



Kiprotich E. Sang

Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies, Moi University, Kenya

Email: kiprotiches@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6339-847X>

Abstract

This study addresses the role that Kass FM through its innovations has expanded the performance stage by incorporating a big number of audiences in diverse locations in a single performance. The study argues that the radio station has afforded the performers, especially musicians, an avenue for transmission of their performance beyond the limitations of the traditional space and at the same time offering an opportunity for immediate feedback on their performance. The study thus concludes that Kass FM has expanded the traditional concept of oral performance through the employment of emerging technologies. This enables the audiences and the performers an opportunity to incorporate other emerging issues in their performances which may be brought about difficulties which may result from the particular physical location that the performer and the various audiences may find themselves in.

Keywords: economic upheavals, identity, Kalenjin, Kenya, oral performance



Sang, K. E. (2022). Emerging performance spaces: Kass FM Radio Station and the expansion of the Kalenjin performance stage. *Hybrid Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 4(1). Retrieved from <https://www.royalliteglobal.com/hybrid-literary/article/view/807>



Public Interest Statement

The social, political and the economic upheavals in Kenya in the 90s resulted in the opening up of the airwaves in the country. The greatest impact of these changes was felt in the radio and the internet. FM radio stations were established, many of them broadcasting in the numerous vernacular languages that exist in Kenya. One such station was Kass FM., a radio station which broadcasts in the Kalenjin language. The radio station is significant in that, it has gone beyond the traditional mode of broadcasting using radio waves and has incorporated the internet. As a result, people who speak the language can access the programmes aired by the station wherever they are in the world. The station has also incorporated audience participation by providing an avenue for listeners to respond in real time by providing a short number where one can call and interact with the presenters of the programme.

Introduction

The political and technological advances experienced in the world in the 90's have had far reaching implications on all spheres of human life and more specifically on African cultural and artistic formations. The crumbling of the Berlin wall, the end of apartheid in South Africa and the end of the cold war meant that the world was more open to democracy and individual freedoms. The end of the cold war specifically meant that the western world focused more on democracy with focus being put on the third world. The catch words were then, accountability and transparency. The import of this focus meant that attention was directed at ensuring capacity was built to enable democracy to thrive. One of the ways of "opening up the democratic space" was through encouragement and promotion of free information flow.

Kenya was not left behind in these changes. The glamour for opening up the space took the form of struggle for the return of the country to multi-party democracy. The agitation at times turned into a bloody confrontation with the police who in most cases were under a tight control of the forces which were against the push for change. This in turn forced the civil society to aggressively campaign for the opening up of the airwaves to enable their ideas to be disseminated more readily and widely. The resistance, coming from the ruling elite at the time did not act as a deterrent but it acted as a reason why the airwaves had to be opened up. Up until then, the only radio station was the state-controlled Voice of Kenya (VOK) which was funded fully by the government and was therefore under obligation to give the official government position. The editors could not risk their jobs or even lives by going against the official government position. Those who had tried to be independent minded either found themselves jobless and being constantly harassed by the special branch of the police, in exile or in detention in the infamous Nyayo House torture chambers. For those who tried to question the government, physical and psychological torture was constantly meted on them.

The pressure to open up the democratic space continued to mount thanks to artists and civil society activists who had gone to exile and were therefore in a position to highlight the state of things in their motherland. They could manage to draw the world's attention to what was happening in Kenya because of the availability of open media in the countries of their exile. With time, the airwaves began to open up and ideas began to flow freely. The lifting of the airwave 'embargo' consequently provided a means through which the germ for a people driven democratization was midwived and eventually resulted in a new constitution which was promulgated in August, 2010.

The entry of FM stations coupled with the rapid growth of the world wide web made things easier and access to information more efficient. It is within this environment that Kass FM came into being. Kass FM is a radio station that broadcasts in the Kalenjin language which is spoken by eight sub-groups with the level of intelligibility varying depending on the spatial differences existing between the various sub-groups.

The first signal broadcast by Kass FM was in late 2003. This may sound late in the day but Simatei (2008) has given a possible explanation for this and observes that:

The resurgence of Kalenjin consciousness in the post-Moi era is given impetus by confluence of factors.... the overriding sense of persecution in the post-Moi era and, ironical enough, independence from Moi's patronage of Kalenjin culture and politics (p. 2)

It is clear that the exit of Moi (former president of Kenya and a member of a Kalenjin sub-group the Tugen) from power allowed members of the Kalenjin community to chart their future destiny without his overarching control. Kass FM thus became a strong pillar towards the achievement of this objective. The station provided an opportunity and space for members of the community to rework and repackage cultural symbols, historical past and folklore themes and to express the same over a wide spatial and social context. In a sense, the station has provided an avenue and means through which the members of the Kalenjin community have found themselves subjected to "an ideological insemination on a large scale" (Brennan, p. 52).

Kass FM claims to front for the interests of the Kalenjin over and above its own commercial interests, a point that is debatable and beyond the scope of this study. What is significant however, is its attempt at bringing the disparate sub-communities that make up the Kalenjin into one homogeneous unit and in the process, aim to contract the wide divide that exists between the various sub-ethnic groups. The Kalenjin is made up of about eight sub-groups namely; Kipsigis, Nandi, Keiyo, Tugen, Marakwet, Pokot, Sabaot, and Terik. (Toweet, 1979, Ogot, 1995). Among the Kalenjin themselves however, they recognize two other sub-communities that linguists and researchers have always subsumed under neighbouring communities. These are the Sengwer, also known as the

Cherangany and the Okieek (Sambu 2007). The members of the various groups are in constant contests for individual visibility and Kass FM attempts to bring them together, nay, to create an homogeneous entity. This project has its problems and as Simatei (2008) has noted, “The main dialect used in Kass FM, despite its claim to a Kalenjin “kutit’ (language) are Nandi and Kipsigis” (6). The predominant use of the two dialects tends to create a chasm between the two sub-communities and the others.

However, the divide is bridged, albeit inadvertently, through the programme line up and the music available and aired on the station. The musicians and their music have picked on thematic contents that tend to cut across all the sub-ethnicities and, in the process, close the divide that exist. This action captures the old Kalenjin practice of “*kaptien*” (song party), where people, who were otherwise sworn enemies, would for the duration of the dance forget their differences. In most cases, at the end of most dancing sessions, the adversaries would be reconciled with musicians acting as mediators. This was done by the soloist raising the issue in contention and others would take it up and dissect the problem offering possible solutions to the differences in a chorus or as a supporting soloist. All the while, the adversaries would be enjoying the music. Kass FM has employed the same tactic by deliberately selecting and playing on air songs with relevant thematic content which inevitably tend to seal the divide that may exist between the various sub-ethnic groups. Kass FM and the music they play therefore provides a strong link to the ethnic chain.

The discussions about contentious issues are presented by the programme anchor first, through relevant songs which lay the ground. The presenters of the programme then use the arguments raised by musicians to provide the basis for discussion. It is worth noting that Kalenjin musicians have rendered most of the issues that are of significance to the Kalenjin community in song. The issues mainly revolve around culture and identity which inevitably raises the issue of land and politics. To the members of the Kalenjin community, land is at the centre of their existence and world view. The significance of land among the Kalenjins can only be compared to the significance which they attach to the cow. The Kalenjin identity cannot usually be discussed without the issue of Rift Valley the physical land mass appearing in the picture. The members of the all the Kalenjin sub-groups can be found in this region except the Sabaot who are in Western Province. Kass FM and the musicians have managed to contract this land mass and transformed it into a spiritual principle and in the process managed to incorporate inhabitants from outside the physical boundaries of the Rift Valley. For instance, Jane Kotut a musician and composer of the Keiyo Stars Band has conveniently reduced Rift Valley to all the lands inhabited by members of the Kalenjin community in total disregard to the administrative units as currently constituted. In her opinion, Mount Elgon is in Rift Valley although it is actually in Western province. She says in her track “*Tanjawe*”,

Kiong'ete tanjawe, Misri tanjawe
I came from Egypt
Aasubu tanjawe, oinob Nile tanjawe
Followed River Nile
Omong'chi tanjawe, Tulwop Kony Elgon tanjawe
And came upon Mt Elgon
Olinyo tanjawe Rift valley tanjawe
Our home in Rift Valley

It is for this reason that the performance by musicians through Kass FM has had an impact on the inhabitants of Mt. Elgon district particularly the Sabaot who have begun to strongly associate themselves with members of the Kalenjin community with serious political and administrative implications which have at time led to ethnic violence being meted out to non-Kalenjin inhabitants of Mt. Elgon District. The Sabaot community participates fully in all the programmes hosted by the station. It is possibly either, because of this strong participation or the station's commercial interests that have compelled the station to involve the Sabaot dialect in its programming and has even employed staff who speak it.

Impact of Kass FM

Mytton (1983) has observed that, "the ability of radio to span the twin barriers of distance and illiteracy makes it a medium worthy of interest." (5). In regard to the Kalenjin, the availability of Kass FM can be said to have managed to help transcend the limitations of physical proximity of the performers and the audiences and secondly, because it employs a language in use by all members of the Kalenjin, the entire community is thus captured, despite the lack of literacy among majority of its listeners. The station speaks directly to its audience using a language they do not struggle to understand and focuses on issues that are close to their hearts.

The impact that the radio station has had on the community can be observed in the way that musicians, as oral performers, have centralized it in their own creation. The effect of this has been the elevation of the station to a community symbol. The significance of the station is further observed in the sense that it has gone beyond the traditional channels of transmission and incorporated other emerging media.

For a start, Kass FM is a part of a larger Kass Media Group, which incorporates Jamii Telecom an internet service provider in Kenya and Karibu Online in America and Europe. It has also set up a studio in Washington D.C. in America which acts as a base station for re-broadcasting programmes aired through Kass FM in Nairobi and which is transmitted to the Washington studio via the internet. Karibu Online has been used as a link by the listeners in the diaspora to the station and by extension to the members of the Kalenjin community to which they spiritually belong even if they are not within the physical domain

of the community. The listeners can call the studio and participate in its programmes real time. It does not matter whether the performance is taking place in Nairobi, listeners wherever they may be, can log onto the internet and speak to Kass FM in Nairobi where listeners in the whole world can hear them.

Consequently, the station has not only expanded the audience but also spread the geographical reach to overcome traditional barriers such as distances and location. Listener participation is also assured through the feedback channel that is availed through the advances in computer technology. The integration of the various media ensures that the performances become alive and immediate overcoming the encumbrances brought about by physical situations of both the listeners and performers.

Similarly, through its appeal and capture to a wide spectrum of Kalenjin listeners, the station has managed to provide a forum on which Kalenjin identity is generated and performed. The physical location of the listeners and the performers does not prevent individuals from contributing and participating in cultural activities which also help in developing and affirming the community's identity. The Kalenjin in the diaspora interpret the culture in consideration of the special circumstances that they find themselves in. As a consequence, to the availability of the radio station, their perspectives are transmitted back for consumption by the local audiences. They as a result manage to influence and become participants in the everyday life in the community irrespective of the physical geographical distance. The result is that, the Kalenjin culture and world view becomes hybridized thus enabling it to be continuously modified and modernized. This argument is best summarized by Gould (2004) who while writing in another context has observed that:

[C]ultures are constructed and transformed over time by the people within them as well as through interaction more globally showing the capacity for people to change themselves and their culture (p. 154)

The radio station has therefore provided members of the Kalenjin community an opportunity to be within their culture and to participate in its performance even when they are removed from the geographical vicinity of the centre of that culture.

Similarly, the technological resources that the station employs have allowed scholars Kalenjin scholars who have carried out studies on the community to simplify and broadcast their findings to a wide audience. The result is that audience critique the findings through the same medium. For instance, the station has provided the Egyptologist/Historian Kipkoech Araap Saambu an opportunity to relay the results of his Ph.D thesis about the Kalenjin Egyptian myth of origin (Sambu 2007). The programme entitled "Kakiptai" is aired on the station every Saturday evening and from the listeners who call in, it is obvious that it is listened to all over the world, owing to the fact that callers

are from all corners of the world. On the same vein, the historian Kipnyango Seroney has also benefited from the station in that, he has been able to let the Kalenjin listeners know about the *Nandi Orkoiik* (Prophets) and the impact of British colonization on the Nandi. The myths which are highlighted by scholars give a basis for the generation of a Kalenjin identity. This is the same issue that Kalenjin musicians have taken up in their songs.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the station in aiding the incorporation of all listeners in performances is captured by the musician Kipchamba Tapotuk in his track “Kongoi Kass FM” (Thank you Kass FM), in which he praises the station for involving everybody in its activities, the musician says:

Kongoi Kass FM nenyo tugetab kalenjin

Kass FM our voice, the kalenjin

Nekokokass chepyosok akiche taarifa

The women can now listen to happenings in the society and the world

The women, a significant sector of the potential audience has been included in performance courtesy of the station. This fact is significant in considering that the Kalenjin is basically a patriarchal society and women have always gained their identity through the men (Snell 14). As such, the assumption was that whatever the husbands heard was deemed to have been heard by the womenfolk. What the stations seems to have done, according to the musician, is open up a new group of audience and participants in performances. The station as a result, manages to liberate and empower a sizable number of audiences that had all along been unavailable. The impact of the station can be observed to be expansive because it has managed to free a big unit of the audience and given them a voice to also express their perspectives and to participate actively in the activities of the society.

Implication of Kass FM on performance space

In consideration of the central position that Kass FM occupies in the lives of the members of the Kalenjin community, it is probable that it also has a major impact on the creative products of the society. This implies that the radio must necessarily be of interest to any scholar interested in the oral and performance artistic creations of the Kalenjin community. Kass FM can provide the first entry point to researchers interested in Kalenjin culture and art.

The innovation that the station has employed in the process of broadcasting, has an impact on any researcher who may be interested in the oral arts of the community. For instance, owing to its ability to broadcast all over the world, the station has had an impact not only on the quality of the oral product but has also influenced the content and the structure of the products. For example, most Kalenjin musician have been compelled to

put into consideration the possibility that the consumers of their songs may be outside the traditional boundaries of the community. Consequently, they have developed the songs in such a way that it involves those outside the traditional physical boundaries of the community. The musicians and composers do this by recognizing the audience in the diaspora within the songs. This action has had the ability to incorporate those in the diaspora to feel part and parcel of the cultural centre that the musician is developing his songs from.

Similarly, the requirements for high quality products from the artists to meet the standards of audiences, some of whom may have advanced tastes, have forced the artists to improve on the quality of their products, not only in terms of content, but also the production mechanics. These mechanics would perhaps explain the current move by Kalenjin artists to have their products in digital video discs and video compact discs. Similarly, musicians are discovering the significance of the internet in marketing and transmitting their music. As a result, they have been forced to improve on the quality of their productions.

Owing to the role that the radio station has played in promoting the Kalenjin artistic products, there has been a marked growth and establishment of internet-based storing and distribution system of the products. The creations which have been rendered in digital form is being offered for sale over the internet. One such source of Kalenjin art is www.tinderet.com where one can access and purchase Kalenjin music and other artistic products.

Similarly, in consideration of the station's ability to reach audiences in diverse geographical locations, it has created a market and opened up a forum for appreciation and interrogation of the artistic products. As a result, the artists find themselves challenged to improve on the quality of their products through incorporation of ideas and techniques that appeal to, not only those with the traditional domicile of the members of the community, but also those in the diaspora. The consequence is that, the quality of production goes up.

Apart from widening the audience base and expanding the scope of participation, the radio station also managed to homogenize perception and consumption of the artistic products. For instance, the station regularly sponsors an artist to perform during conventions of members of the kalenjin community in the diaspora. Most conventions are hosted by *Gotabгаа* (Our House), a social organization for members of the Kalenjin community in America. In addition, the station relays the proceedings live both on KassTv and KassFM from the convention, thereby bringing together members in the diaspora with those at home in a single performance. This has a dual effect, the first is that the members of the community become audience in a single performance irrespective of their individual physical location and secondly, it strengthens the bond between members of the community at home and those in the diaspora. The performances also link those

outside the community with it and the station provides a strong bond with the cultural centre which symbolically is in the Rift Valley.

The significance of involving musicians in these conventions can be attributed to the nature of Kalenjin songs. Most of the songs are narrative in nature. Most songs involve the musicians rendering popular narratives in musical forms. The effect is that musical performance becomes a story telling session wherein, the audience respond and interject to the musician's pronouncements. This is significant in consideration of the earlier stated fact that Kalenjin music revolves around issues that the community considers important and current. The audience's responses during a performance, therefore, offers them an opportunity to comment on their feelings about the issue in question.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that Kass FM has not only created and expanded audiences but has also facilitated the transmission of oral material. Through the employment of emerging technologies, the radio station has expanded the performance stage and, in the process, opened up possibilities for innovation in research especially in terms of data collection, and in the process impacting strongly on the need to re-appraise existing methods of explaining oral performances.

References

- Brennan, T. (1990). The National Longing for Form in Homi Bhabha (Ed.) *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge
- Gould, C. (2004). *Globalizing Democracy and Human Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kotut, J. (2005). *Maendeleo* (Audio Cassette), KSB Vol.9. Eldoret: M.K Tanui Productions.
- Mytton, G. (1983). *Mass Communication in Africa*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Ogot, B. A. (2003). Mau Mau and Nationhood: The untold Story” In E. S Atieno-Odhiambo and John Lodsdales (eds) *Mau Mau and Nationhood*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Saambu, K. A. (2007). *The Kalenjin Peoples’ Egypt Origin Legend Revisited: Was Isis Asiis? A study In Comparative Religion*. Nairobi: Longhorn Publishers.
- Simatei, P. T. (2008). *Kalenjin Popular Music and the contestations of National Space in Kenya*. Younde: CODESRIA.
- Snell, G. S. (1954). *Nandi Customary Law*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.
- Tapotuk, K. A. (2005). *Kongoi Kass FM* (Audio Cassette) MMB 012, Eldoret: Bamwai Productions.
- Toweit, T. A (1979). *Study of Kalenjin Lingiustics*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.