African Studies Program

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Dr. Wilson Shitandi
Associate Dean and Senior Lecturer,
School of Music and Performing Arts, Kabarak University

“Popular Music Textuality and the Politics of Interpreting Hate Speech in Kenya”

Kenya is a member state of the East African Community with a population of approximately 50 million people. Drawn from slightly over 42 different ethnic communities, the people of Kenya leave in relative harmony. The peaceful social fabric has, however, witnessed frequent uneasiness and instability during the electioneering period. The causality and the catalyst of the violence that has become synonymous with Kenya politics and the electioneering period has in recent times become a subject of both national and international discourse. From a national perspective, various schools of thoughts have emerged to advance arguments for the causality and catalysts of election violence. The arguments that have been put forth have not been without a reference to popular music textuality and its role in perpetuating hate speech, a trend that has been viewed as a precipitator of, and catalyst to, election violence. It is against this backdrop that this narrative seeks to (i) provide an overview of factors that have shaped the contemporary Kenya socio-political landscape; (ii) undertake textual analysis of popular songs of three musicians to ascertain the amount of hate speech perceived to be inherent in the songs; (iii) delve into the national debate for and against the arrest of the three musicians accused of hate speech innuendos in their music; (iv) premised on popular music culture theories and literary theories of textuality, offer a proposal for addressing one, the dilemma of intercepting and dealing with hate speech in popular music phenomenon and two, the elusive debate on hate speech in Kenya.
Biography: Dr. Wilson Shitandi

Dr. Wilson O. Shitandi is Associate Dean and senior lecturer at Kabarak University in the School of Music and Performing Arts. He teaches courses in ethnomusicology and African music, including traditional dance, instrumental, and vocal music, as well as courses in composition, harmony and counterpoint. He is a former DAAD Scholar, having undertaken research studies at the universities of Mainz and Hildesheim in Germany. He is an active choral conductor and is a strong advocate of community-based music making as a vehicle towards social change in Kenya. In this regard, he and other music educators from universities in Kenya and the USA have initiated a project called Tunaweza Kimuziki—a music and cultural exchange project that aims to nurture and promote music talents through workshops, online learning, seminars, and performances. Wilson has published in book chapters and peer reviewed journals with research interest in the areas of African music, ethnomusicology, musicology, hymnology, and choral music. In addition, Dr. Shitandi sings, composes, and arranges African indigenous and national songs, and Euro-American classical music; he has also earned an international reputation as an expert in Kenyan drumming and vocal music. Among his choral compositions are ten masses for mixed chorus in Kiswahili and English. He is the director of St. Cecilia Holy Cross Choir in Nairobi, a board member of MUZIKI for Africa and Utafiti Foundation, and a founding member of the Tunaweza Kimuziki initiative. Recently, Dr. Shitandi was appointed Dean of the Nairobi Chapter of the American Guild of Organists. He is also a member of the American Guild of Organists and Choral Directors, Pan African Musical Arts Education, International Council of Traditional Music, Historische Toenetrager Gesellschaft, and Nairobi Choral Music Society.