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Kutuma Salamu on Public Service Radio and the Performance of Popular Culture: Voice of Kenya from the 1960s to the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

Radio is one of the mass media technologies that were readily absorbed in and adapted to the patterns of construction and integration of communities. Among non-elite Kenyans, radio was inserted into their performative practice of greetings through a quasi-interactive programme known as *kutuma salamu*, which literally translates as “sending greetings.” This article analyses the practices of *kutuma salamu*, a significant popular cultural phenomenon that is worthy of academic attention for at least two reasons. First, Voice of Kenya was the only radio service operational in Kenya from the 1960s to 1980s and it was largely associated with the serious business of official government communication. Second, in form and substance, this programme was very similar to present-day popular digital social media, yet dates from a time before the invention of the internet. The article examines how this popular cultural phenomenon thrived by disrupting official public service radio and how it mediated the performance of social identities. The main argument here is that radio has always provided an opportunity for alternative voices to be heard, and some of these voices can be understood as metaphorical extensions of the performance of transgressive social identities.

IKISIRI (Abstract in Swahili)

Redio ni mojawapo kati ya ala za teknonolojia ya habari na mawasiliano ambazo zilikumbatiwa katika mifumo ya ujenzi na utangamano wa kijamii. Miongoni mwa Wakenya wenye elimu ya kiwango cha chini, redio ilihusishwa katika mchakato wa salamu katika vipindi vya kutangamana hewani, almaarufu *kutuma salamu*. Makala haya yanachanganua shughuli za kutuma salamu kama utamaduni pendwa uliosifika na ambao umevutia maswala mawili ya kiusomi. Kwanza, redio ya Sauti ya Kenya ilikuwa redio ya pekee kati ya miaka ya 1960 na 1980 na ilihusishwa na shughuli rasmi za mawasiliano ya kiserikali nchini Kenya. Pili, umbo na kiini cha utaratibu huu ulifanana sana na mitandao maarufu ya kijamii ya kisasa licha ya kuwa ilitokea kabla ya uvumbuzi wa intaneti. Makala haya yanachunguza namna utamaduni huu maarufu uliweza kusitawi kwa kuvuruga redio ya kutoa huduma rasmi za umma na jinsi ulivyoweza kupatanisha

KEYWORDS

Disruption; interruption; *kutuma salamu*; public service radio; popular culture; Voice of Kenya

ISTILAHU MUHIMU

vurugivu; katizi; *kutuma salamu*; redio ya huduma za jamii; tamaduni pendwa; Sauti ya Kenya

utendaji wa utambulishaji wa maswala ya kijamii. Swala nyeti ni kwamba kwa wakati mwingi, redio imetoa nafasi mbadala ya wale walio na mitazamo tofauti kuweza kusikika na baadhi ya sauti zao zinaweza kueleweka kama njia za kisitari zinazokiuka utambulishaji wa maswala ya kijamii.

Introduction

Radio is an important form of mass media that infiltrates much of everyday life across Africa. This was especially true from the 1940s to the 1980s, when radio was the most accessible and utilised form of mass media on the continent. This period saw a fairly small number of mass media technologies circulating across the spectrum of class divide; as Charles Ambler (2002, 130) observes, the lack of infrastructure necessitated a collective use of mass media for both information and leisure activities in many parts of the continent. Thus, mass media was shaped by and in turn shaped the sociality of people in the various locales where it was used. In Kenya, radio was an inherently useful mass media mechanism for defining both ethnic and national identities, and for the performance of individual and collective self-fashioning (Prinz 2008; Ogola 2011).

This article interrogates how *kutuma salamu*, a series of radio greetings shows, introduced a playful disruption into the hegemonic use of state-controlled radio. It did so through enabling a multi-directional interactivity that centred the audience as both source and recipient. This created pockets of play and resistance that defied the unidirectional nature of broadcasting at the time. Equally importantly, we extend the argument to think about how *kutuma salamu*, arguably perceived in the light of secondary orality, provided local communities with the opportunity to perform camaraderie and play in an otherwise official medium. The “greetings” represented breaks from serious, top-down communication and cast radio presenters as facilitators of a performance whose actors were “out there,” beyond the perimeter and control of the media – and, by extension, the state.

Using Karin Barber’s conceptualisation of popular culture and Debra Spitulnik’s interpretation of the sociality of radio, the article demonstrates that *kutuma salamu* constituted a form of popular culture that thrived by disrupting official public service radio and also by mediating the performance of self and collective social identities. The article begins by offering a brief review of related studies on radio and sociality in Africa in order to situate this study within a continuing conversation around the interactivity of radio in Africa. Second, a contextual exploration of *kutuma salamu* on VOK (Voice of Kenya) radio from the 1960s to the 1980s provides a clear outline of the form and structure of the show. The third section shifts the discussion to a consideration of *kutuma salamu* as a popular cultural form of interactivity, generating mediation of the self and by extension of ethnic social identities.

The study combined archival research with unstructured interviews to frame an understanding of *kutuma salamu* in Kenya. Additionally, a historical chronology of the *kutuma salamu* shows on VOK national service radio was extracted from “The Week in Sound and Vision” column in *The East African Standard* newspaper for the period 1963–80. This extensive archive was used not only to help delineate the progression of radio programming, but also to extrapolate the range of programming and what that meant in terms of the shows’ frequency and their popularity among and identification with the Kenyan masses.

Radio and Sociability: The Background

Radio as a form of mass media that enables different forms of sociability has received extensive critical attention in African contexts. In South Africa, for instance, radio was used to carve out a specific identity of blackness and black culture in an environment encumbered by segregation (Gunner 2019). Jendele Hungbo (2013) notes that interactive radio talk shows were a particularly viable site for negotiating forms of citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa. The participatory model of the radio talk show opens up possibilities for radio hosts and audiences to negotiate positionality, however the form is mediated. In Zambia, it is suggested that broadcasts to local listeners began in 1941 with the setting up of a radio station in Lusaka (Powdermaker 1965, 231). In her anthropological work on the copper town of Luanshya in Northern Rhodesia, Hortense Powdermaker (1965, 234–42) argues that radio defined forms of leisure for local audiences, with music and “request” programmes emerging as the most popular. At the dawn of independence, radio was used to weave an authentic Zambian identity through the deliberate incorporation of local music into programming (Heinze 2016). Spitulnik’s work on Zambia and the sociability of radio in the 1950s and 1960s moves beyond Robert Heinze (2016) and Powdermaker (1965) to explore how post-independence radio programming by the state-controlled Zambia Broadcasting Corporation enhanced contestations of national versus ethnic identities and created a hierarchisation of languages and, by extension, notions of belonging to the nation (Spitulnik 1992). Elsewhere, Spitulnik explores how the media technology of radio enables or inhibits audience engagement and fashions forms of social identities in Zambia depending on radio’s various uses as well as the mobility practices associated with radio (2002). These studies reveal the various purposes of radio in Africa and their links to everyday social and material life.

In addition, studies suggest that the relationship between radio producers and consumers involves a constant negotiation where no single party holds total power. Spitulnik’s (1993, 2002) commentary on Zambian audiences’ tendency to reimagine and repurpose radio to meet their own needs offers significant insights into this study’s exploration of *kutuma salamu* as not only a series of radio shows but also a way of life in parts of Kenya. In Heinze (2016) and Winston Mano (2007), we again see how the popularity of local music forces the owners of radio stations to push further the indigenisation agenda, while radio acts as a medium through which Zimbabwean musicians undertake activism and condemn the government of the day. Consequently, it is clear that “mass media are at once cultural products and social processes, as well as extremely potent arenas of political struggle” (Spitulnik 1993, 303).

In Kenya, Dina Ligaga (2008) explores the way in which radio theatre served both to advance official state discourse and simultaneously to subvert that discourse in the 1980s, producing popular forms of culture that are ingrained in the everyday. In this article, we are interested in the ways in which the earlier programming of radio greetings shows (which emerged before radio dramas) both imagined forms of social identities and initiated a playful interruption of state control. We examine the forms of public self-fashioning and collective fashioning of identities that emerged from *kutuma salamu* during this period of state control and argue that they disrupted the agenda of state control through the introduction of alternative uses and intentions for radio. In this regard,

VOK is seen as a site for social negotiation and radio emerges as an instrument that fashions forms of social negotiation.

The theoretical arguments guiding this work revolve around the sociability of radio and the politics of fashioning social identities. Gunner (2019, 3) observes that repeated radio listenership has the capacity to generate “a particular kind of aural media ... [and] can hone particular affects and sensibilities.” The sense of repetition in radio programming generates specific and collective performances of association between the listener and the host; and these, in turn, generate specific behaviours, moral codes and personalities that create a virtual community.

In exploring the workings of radio, it is important to contextualise the media technology itself – in this case, the infrastructure of radio as an instrument – and the way in which it operates. To do this, one needs to explore the media technology in context, revealing the ways in which “media both create and are created by social spaces” (Spitulnik 2002, 338). While it is obvious that the correlation between repetition and discourse affirms VOK radio’s functionality of imparting and concretising the idea of the power of the state among the masses, it also fashions the social contexts of radio and creates forms of collective and individual social identity defined by the community and generated by *kutuma salamu* and the habits that surround radio use and mobility, as we shall explore below.

The mass media has always made claims to operational independence; however, it has also always been embroiled in contradictions. Media independence involves “working with freedom: from state control or interference, from monopoly, from market forces” (Bennett 2015, 1). The media operates as part of the ideological apparatuses that the state wields to control and dictate the masses. In Kenya, the period from the 1960s to the 1980s was marked by an entangled relationship between the state and the media. George Ogola (2011, 82) notes how the independent press declined in the early 1960s because of constant monopolisation by the state. The two print media outfits that survived this onslaught – *The East African Standard* and *The Nation* – were forced to support the state in order to gain goodwill and uninterrupted operations. Broadcast media, on the other hand, was fully state-owned, since the only operational broadcaster, VOK, had been nationalised at independence. In these prevailing circumstances, radio programming was largely vetoed by the state.

From 1963 to 1978, VOK radio was used to push President Jomo Kenyatta’s unity agenda, part of which was to generate a national identity. One way in which unity was centralised in radio broadcasting was through language. VOK radio operated two main frequencies: General Service radio, which aired in English and catered for the elite; and National Service radio, which utilised Kiswahili and catered for the non-elite, who formed the majority of the newly independent country’s audience. In the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic space Kenya was then, English and Kiswahili served as assets in honing a national identity. Moreover, President Kenyatta’s constant use of Kiswahili to frame his national speeches, which were also aired on radio, endeared Kiswahili to the masses as a national language. The demarcation of radio into General Service and National Service radio created a standardised idea of national identity through language as well as a sense of linguistic hierarchisation, similar to the situation Spitulnik (1992) identifies in Zambia. In the case of Kenya, National Service radio was identified as catering to largely rural listeners as well as to semi-literate audiences across the nation, while General Service radio was aimed at the urban elite and fashioned urban identities.

National Service radio, which catered to the majority of Kenyans, became the government's mouthpiece, with programmes that directly and indirectly propagated Kenyatta's pillars of development. Kenyatta extensively preached that the three evils of development that Kenya needed to eradicate at independence were *ujinga* (lack of knowledge), *umasikini* (poverty) and *ugonjwa* (disease). Radio programmes such as *Ukulima Bora* (Better Farming) focused on training listeners in better ways of farming for maximum yields; *Elimu kwa Redio* (Education on Radio) taught different academic topics; *Maisha ya Afya* (Healthy Living) focused on teaching audiences about proactive ways of dealing with illness and health; *Utaalamu wa Uchumi* (Economic Expertise) looked at economic matters such as trade and profits; and *Je Wajua* (Do You Know) explored interesting facts about the world. These programmes were some of the early local additions to National Service radio in 1964 and 1965 that pushed Jomo Kenyatta's agenda of eradicating the three evils of development. They were handled by specific government ministries and acted as spaces for the propagation of Kenyatta's development and unity agenda.

National Service radio was also instrumental in disseminating nationalist ideas through political sloganeering; this included Kenyatta's ideology of *Harambee* (Togetherness), which marked almost all of his speeches broadcast on radio and extended to other programmes. Radio news, which aired hourly, always began with an extensive exploration of the president's escapades around the country. The updates would largely centre on "*Baba wa Taifa, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta*" (The Father of the Nation, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta). This repetitive foregrounding and framing of the president deliberately located President Kenyatta as a father figure and the head of a united family – Kenya – and instilled this image in the masses. Through these broadcasts, National Service radio encouraged paternalism and state control of radio and signalled a hierarchy that allotted unquestioned power and control to the president and the government. Ogola (2011) observes that, when President Moi took over the government in 1978 after the death of President Kenyatta, his philosophy of *fuata nyayo* (follow the footsteps) positioned him as continuing the ideologies of his predecessor.

Indeed, state control over radio extended to all aspects of programming and news updates. Each of the news segments would begin with "*Baba wa Taifa, Mtukufu Rais*" (The Father of the Nation, Honourable President), which concretised the entitled sense of nobility in the idea of the presidency. During President Moi's regime, the (in)famous hourly news updates were a site where people were hired and fired. In addition, the interruption of normal radio programming was initiated by the government: for instance, during live football commentaries, President Moi and members of his cabinet who attended the matches stole the limelight from the football because attention always shifted from the game to the dignitaries in attendance at the stadium. Football commentaries would be interrupted to note the presence of the president and his cabinet and the effect of this on the fans (Waliaula 2012, 868). In this regard, as Solomon Waliaula (2012) observes, the soccer stadium becomes a site for the negotiation and concretisation of power. By extension, the radio, which relays this interruption live, also emerges as a site for the power play that locates the president as absolute ruler. The same can be seen in the ways in which normal programming was interrupted to air parliamentary proceedings, presidential speeches, national events and agricultural fairs, to name but a few examples. These interruptions invite the idea that the main purpose of VOK radio was not the mediation of information but the mediation of absolute power.

In the context of the government's total control of radio, *kutuma salamu* greetings shows appeared as a disruption, affirming the sociability of radio and the centrality of different actors and repurposing radio in a different way. This potential was visible in *kutuma salamu* for several reasons. First, unlike the examples of programmes offered so far, which position the state as a source of information, *kutuma salamu* shows imagined the listeners as being in charge of the direction of the broadcasts. The shows were dependent on greetings sent into the station by listeners from all over the country. Second, by centring the listeners, *kutuma salamu* fostered in them the fantasy that, even for a short while, they and not the state were in charge. However fleeting, the feeling of control was a much needed reprieve from the constant state surveillance and control prevalent in the country during the era of one-party autocratic regimes. Lastly, the greetings shows' constant encouragement of play fashioned radio as a medium that not only provided pleasure but enabled listeners to participate in the generation of forms of leisure and entertainment.

Ritualisation of Salaams: Defining the Form

The *kutuma salamu* shows that form the focus of this article were aired on National Service radio, which served the masses. The term "*kutuma salamu*" loosely translates to "sending greetings." Following Tanja Bosch (2010), who categorised the radio talk show as a genre, we locate *kutuma salamu* shows as part of the genre of radio greetings shows, a form of radio programming where the host engages audiences by either reading out on air greetings and messages sent to the radio station by listeners or allowing listeners to call in with greetings and messages. In the 1960s and 1970s, these greetings and messages were drafted on cards that one could buy from VOK or Kenya News Agency outlets across the country. The cards were then sent to VOK by post or through the VOK and Kenya News Agency outlets. Once they reached the broadcasting station, they would be read out on air during the specific *kutuma salamu* shows by formally employed staff in the media house. We refer to these different shows as *kutuma salamu*, adopting the popular phrase that was used to introduce the greetings read out on air as well as reflecting the popularity of the term in referencing all such greetings shows within the Kenyan public psyche.

Kutuma salamu shows emerged in 1963 as part of National Service radio's indigenisation agenda, which was meant to shift broadcast content from a colonial focus to one reflecting the independent state. Unlike print media, which was privately owned, radio was state-owned and saw a massive transformation in programming to reflect a nationalist agenda prescribed by the first president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta. The main intention of the indigenisation of radio was to make it appeal to local audiences; radio was also restructured to centre messages of national unity. In July 1963, *Taarab*, a music show hosted by Khadijah Ali, was the first local programme introduced on VOK National Service radio; it aired regularly until the end of the year.¹ *Taarab* music is a genre that utilises Kiswahili but fuses coastal sounds with Arabic sounds. *Taarab's* use of Kiswahili endeared it to the new government, which had an interest in creating a unified Kenyan identity, but it also gained traction with the masses, who were already finding Kiswahili a language of unity.

On 15 December 1963, National Service radio ran the first greetings show, called *Christmas Greetings*.² This show was structured around listeners sending in to the radio station Christmas greetings that were then read live on air. This show was aired between 8 and 8.30 am daily until 25 December. The popularity of the show may have been instrumental in the formation of the ensuing *kutuma salamu* shows.

After the *Christmas Greetings* show, the earliest traced *kutuma salamu* programming in the schedule of National Radio service appears on 28 December 1963 in the form of three shows: *Salamu na Sahani* (Plate Greetings), which was scheduled for 6.08–6.30 am; *Salamu za Asubuhi* (Morning Greetings) at 6.45–7.30 am and again at 7.35–1.00 pm; and *Kipindi cha Hadithi na Salamu* (Storytelling and Greetings) in the 4–5 pm slot.³ After this initial scheduling of general greetings, subsequent days and years saw a gradual rise in *kutuma salamu* shows as more slots were opened for different kinds of *kutuma salamu*, as explored in Table 1.

As Table 1 suggests, the increasing popularity of the *kutuma salamu* shows led to the addition of new slots to fill the demand among National Service radio audiences.

Kutuma salamu greetings shows were a type of radio talk show that was interactive in nature, even though they appeared before the emergence of the telephone technologies that have become central in defining interactivity on radio today. With the advancement in telephone technology in the period after 1980, the format of these shows has gradually shifted from greetings cards to call-ins by listeners as well as conversations on trending or topical issues initiated either by the host or by listeners. This genre of radio programming has been popular across Africa (Powdermaker 1965; Hungbo 2021).

Within the *kutuma salamu* shows of the 1960s to the 1980s, the broadcast would involve the radio presenter reading out greetings such as this example given by one of

Table 1. Breakdown of *kutuma salamu* shows in the years 1963–80.⁹

Year	Time slot	<i>Kutuma salamu</i> programming
1963 (December)	Daily 6.08am–6.30am Daily 6.45am–7.30am Weekdays 7.35am–1.00pm Daily 4.00pm–5.00pm	<i>Salamu na Sahani</i> [Plate Greetings] <i>Salamu za Asubuhi</i> [Morning Greetings] <i>Salamu za Asubuhi</i> [Morning Greetings] <i>Kipindi cha Hadithi na Salamu</i> [Storytelling and Greetings]
1964	Daily 6.08am–6.30am Daily 6.35am–7.00am Saturdays 4.00pm–5.00pm	<i>Salamu za Asubuhi</i> [Morning Greetings] <i>Salamu za Asubuhi</i> [Morning Greetings] <i>Kipindi cha Watoto, Hadithi na Salamu</i> [Children's Show, Storytelling and Greetings]
1965–70	Daily 6.08am–7.00am Daily 7.15am–8.00am Fridays 8.15am–9.00am Fridays 9.00am–10.00am Fridays 3.30pm–4.00pm Saturdays 10.00pm–11.00pm Saturdays 4.15pm–4.45pm Sundays 10.00pm–11.00pm	<i>Salamu za Asubuhi</i> [Morning Greetings] <i>Salamu za Asubuhi</i> [Morning Greetings] <i>Salamu za Walio Nyumbani</i> [Greetings for Those at Home] <i>Salamu za Wagonjwa</i> [Greetings for the Sick] <i>Salamu na Nyimbo</i> [Greetings and Music] <i>Salamu za Usiku</i> [Night Greetings] <i>Salamu za Makundi</i> [Group Greetings] <i>Salamu za Usiku</i> [Night Greetings]
1970–80	Daily 6.10am–7.00am Daily 7.20am–8.00am Saturdays 9.30am–10.30am Saturdays 2.20pm–3.15pm Timeslots unclear/not constant Timeslots unclear/not constant Saturdays 10.00pm–11.00pm Sundays 10.00am–11.00am Sundays 4.15pm–4.45pm	<i>Salamu za Asubuhi</i> [Morning Greetings] <i>Salamu za Asubuhi</i> [Morning Greetings] <i>Salamu za Vijana</i> [Youth Greetings] <i>Salamu Zenu</i> [Your Greetings] <i>Salamu za Jumamosi</i> [Saturday Greetings] <i>Salamu na Muziki</i> [Greetings and Music] <i>Salamu za Usiku</i> [Night Greetings] <i>Salamu Zenu</i> [Your Greetings] <i>Salamu za Makundi</i> [Group Greetings]

our interviewees in an interview conducted on 18 December 2021 in Vihiga Town, Western Kenya:

Moses Shoto Omunyololo omwana wa ingo akiwa pande za Kakamega angependa kutuma salamu kwa mke wake mpendwa Diana akiwa Kakamega, wazazi wake wapendwa Rufus Wafula na Mary Wafula wakiwa Luanda, ndugu yake Jonas, fundi wa viatu akiwa Mathare hapa jijini Nairobi, Binamuye John akiwa Mathare hapa jijini Nairobi, na rafikiye wa karibu, Francis Kadenge Omwana wa Leah akiwa Stend Matope. Ujumbe ni kwamba, kuvinjika kwa mwiko sio mwisho wa kupika ugali. (Kutuma salamu fan 3)

Moses Shoto Omunyololo, a child of home who is located in Kakamega, would like to send greetings to his lovely wife Diana who is located in Kakamega, his loving parents Rufus Wafula and Mary Wafula in Luanda, his brother Jonas, a shoemaker in Mathare here in the city of Nairobi, his nephew John in Mathare here in Nairobi, and his close friend Francis Kadenge Omwana wa Leah. The message is that the breaking of the ladle is not the end of cooking *ugali*.

The above illustration was an impromptu example provided by one of our interview participants to give an idea of the form of greetings in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, as we could not trace any audio files via VOK. From this illustration, one can deduce that *kutuma salamu* operated on the plane of play, as evidenced by the playful connotations attached to the names of those mentioned in the greeting as well as by the messaging. This further locates *kutuma salamu* as a site for citizens to get in touch via radio and pass messages to each other. If we locate this show within the official form of radio explored earlier, it emerges that *kutuma salamu* managed to insert a playfulness into official discourse as it seemed harmless.

Two important factors define *kutuma salamu's* playful nature: naming and messaging. From its inception, *kutuma salamu* was a creative enterprise where users styled themselves in ways that conveyed connotations of selfhood and identity, starting with the presenters. Many of the hosts of the *kutuma salamu* shows across the years styled themselves in innovative ways through the use of acronyms or pseudonyms that painted humorous images in listeners' minds. One of the earliest hosts of the *kutuma salamu* shows, Kazungu Katana, was popularly known by the self-styled abbreviation "KK". The use of an acronym afforded Kazungu Katana a sense of informality that the masses needed within the formal, state-controlled radio. Another presenter, Khadija Ali, referred to herself as "Dada Mrembo", a nickname that translates as "Beautiful Lady" or "Beautiful Sister" as the word "dada" can be translated as lady or sister. Another host, Uncle Fred Obachi Machoka, styled himself as an uncle as well as "The Blackest Man in Black Africa". Both the impression of familiarity through sisterhood and feminine guile in Khadija Ali's pseudonym and Fred Obachi Machoka's use of "Uncle" and "The Blackest Man" invite listeners to craft specific images of the hosts in their minds. By hinting at assumptions of physicality, the names encourage listeners to form vivid images in their minds and by extension approximate the hosts' physical appearance. This serves to invite listeners into the radio space, where they can imagine the presenters as friends or close acquaintances. This is especially true if we foreground Khadija Ali's use of the word "dada", which makes reference to "sister", or Fred Obachi Machoka's use of "uncle" to style themselves.

The use of pseudonyms and acronyms was a way in which the presenters of the *kutuma salamu* shows not only appealed to the listeners but also bridged the gap of formality on state-controlled radio. Acronyms and pseudonyms ideally invited informality,

which not only positioned the presenters as bridging the distance created between them and the listeners by the formality of radio but also disrupted the formal nature of radio. As the first step in informality, the presenters set the stage for the listeners who participated by sending in greetings to also engage in play by inventing particular self-identities.

The listeners also styled themselves via acronyms and pseudonyms that implied the creative capacity cutting across hosts and listeners. One of the most popular fans of the show in the 1970s went by the pseudonym "*Sura Mbili Amukaka*", which loosely translates as "Two-face Amukaka". A particular idea of transgression and disruption is seen to emerge from this self-stylisation. On one level, this listener's pseudonym "Two-face" suggests a mischievous performance of duplicity. This playful naming foregrounds the capacity of the genre to enable different people to enact versions of the self that are hidden, invented or imagined; it provides for a public performance of being and selfhood. On another level, we can read the naming as signalling the subject's critique and play on the nature of the state as two-faced. In this case, the listener styles himself thus to mimic the nature of the government apparatus (radio) and the government, which operates in a hypocritical manner where it pretends to be one thing but does another. Moreover, this form of personal stylisation enables the listener to evade the strict surveillance of the state – the pseudonym provides a way of concealing the self and hence of protecting the listener from the hyper-surveillance of radio and state organs during the autocratic regime of the 1970s – and to refashion the instrument of the state for "writing back". Having achieved concealment, the listener is at liberty to use the messaging attached to the greeting genre to communicate disruptive politics, directly or indirectly.

Other examples of self-stylisations centre the idea of one's roots. These include "*Moses Shoto Omonyololo, Omwana wa Ingo*" (Moses Shoto Omonyololo, a Child of Home), "*Adhumani Osman, Mwana wa Ali*" (Adhumani Osman, Son of Ali) and "*Zebedee, Mwana wa Zebedayo*" (Zebedee, Son of Zebedayo). These three examples suggest identity tied to either place ("Home") or the paternal lineage. At the same time, if we locate this rootedness within the Kenyan public psyche, Moses Shoto Omonyololo is not only styling himself in relation to home but also implying a sense of specificity about which home this is. He invites the listeners to identify with a specific and identifiable home – Western Kenya. For the other two examples, identity is linked to paternal ancestry. In such cases, the listeners' stylings hint at a desire to perform identity with reference to place and lineage.

Another kind of self-stylisation foregrounded personality and lifestyle: "*Dictator Enock Onyango*", "*Mama Safi Agneta Machinga*" (Clean Mother Agneta Machinga) and "*Sweet Lady Molly Akinyi*" are nicknames that create virtual personas for the listeners to identify with when they encounter them. While the "Dictator" tag signals a sarcastic critique on leadership in the 1960s–80s, when there were claims of dictatorial tendencies in President Kenyatta's and President Moi's regimes, the latter two – "Clean Mother" and "Sweet Lady" – expose attributes of cleanliness and politeness that were celebrated in society at the time. Naming as an aspect of *kutuma salamu* shows thus acts as an archive of historical realities, disquiet about the politics of the day, socio-economic realities and the resilience of the Kenyan public. The names archived the everyday realities of the masses through play and by generating a sense of familiarity.

These acronyms and pseudonyms locate the presenters and listeners as make-believe characters in the plane of play that characterised the programme. They allowed the

presenters and the senders of greetings (who used pseudonyms widely), as well as the listeners, to approximate a space of encounter that was not only virtual but also imaginatively flexible. These examples of self-styling by the listeners and users of *kutuma salamu* are not just a disruption of the formal nature of government-controlled radio but also an insertion of play and transgressive politics that enabled the common folk to expose the contemporaneous issues of their time. The play on words invites a sense of public performance of identity, denoting an idiosyncratic and supposedly harmless form of mediation. Yet, from this public performance of selfhood, deeply veiled revolutionary ideas and forms of engaging with the state are revealed. *Kutuma salamu* therefore emerges as a popular genre that taunted the controlled stiffness of state radio as embodied by VOK. *Kutuma salamu* injected play and mild mockery of cultures and reality; it enabled the publics carved by the state to carve out alternative, transgressive identities that mocked the high-handedness and inaccessibility of the state as minor inconveniences that are easily overcome. By playing with the state machinery through interruptions and form, *kutuma salamu* provided little enclaves of freedom in an otherwise unfree space. And while this started off as ordinary people's way of finding small crevices in a highly constrained system, it ended up defining a sense of defiance and self-styled identity.

The second element defining *kutuma salamu* is the messaging. This genre incorporates short messages that accompany the greetings shared. Ideally, the sender of the greetings gives a list of names of the people they are greeting, after which they add a message preceded with the words "*ujumbe ni*", loosely translated as "the message is". The message is always given as a simple, single line. In many cases, the one-line messages are idiosyncratic in form and often seem comedic. One common kind of messaging hinged on local gossip or personal news relating to the local area of the sender. An example of this given by one of our interviewees is: "*ujumbe ni kwamba, mbuzi ya jirani bado hajjaza*" (the message is that the neighbour's goat is yet to give birth).⁴ The message suggests an infringement of the neighbour's privacy but also seems like a celebration of nosiness. The anonymity afforded by the use of pseudonyms allowed for gossip and rumours to flourish in this form of orality as well as in the official space that was radio. It also enabled humour to be generated for the listeners, who might find this intrusive interruption of good neighbourliness as funny and laughable.

It is possible to see this messaging as deeply veiled with codes that the specific recipients could unravel. What this suggests is that the public space of VOK radio served as a site for the very private encoding of messages. Only the listeners with the correct key for unravelling the message understood the connotative meanings; the rest of the audience heard merely a highly playful and humorous play on language. Again, one can read this tendency for gossip and rumours about neighbours to be a play on the secrecy and codes of rumours and gossip that plagued the autocratic regimes of the 1960s–80s in Kenya. It was common knowledge that distrust was prevalent during these years, which led to paranoia about events and people in the state. When senders of greetings made play with gossip and rumours about neighbours, they provided a sense of comic relief in the paranoia surrounding interactions that were marked by surveillance. Their messages could also be read as a parody of the rumour system of surveillance enacted by the government at the time. In this way, *kutuma salamu* functioned as a disruptor of state agency through challenging the available forms of agency.

It is particularly interesting that some of these *ujumbe* were neologisms or local sayings, and, as in the case of “*kuvunjika kwa mwiko sio mwisho wa kupika ugali*” (the breaking of the ladle does not signal the end of cooking *ugali*), they were also signifiers of defiance and resilience.⁵ This messaging takes advantage of a common, wise saying that denotes resilience in the face of adversity or limited resources. However, most of these messages also suggest a context-specific allusion to shared realities of life that are known only to the participants invited to share in the greeting. The fans of the show appropriated the public medium for personal ends, which, ironically, maintained the privacy of the messaging. In repurposing public service radio for private messaging, the fans interrupted the formal functioning of radio and allowed it to act as a personal medium that could be understood as a precocious trend that later on – with advances in technology – became social media.

Moreover, these forms of play in naming and messaging locate *kutuma salamu* as a popular genre “unconstrained by the power relations put in place by ‘official’ sites and bodies”, which is what VOK radio was then (Newell and Okome 2014, 6). The playfulness of the presenters was a nod to the fans of the programme that they had the free will to circumvent the officialdom machinery of the state and could operate on a plane that did not conform to the power dynamics of state-controlled radio. This lack of constraint is partly responsible for the very productive nature of popular culture.

Production of Popular Culture

The genre’s use of radio incorporated the masses using radio in the functionality of the medium as a socialisation tool central to the framing and imagining of a social identity. *Kutuma salamu* invited listeners into the studio indirectly and allowed listeners to feel a sense of agency in the previously distant identity of radio. Its concentration on listeners’ contemporaries enabled the masses to identify more with radio as it now reflected everyday subjects in its messaging. The participants in this programme lay outside the common figures repetitively accorded airtime during the news programmes that populated VOK as the mouthpiece of the state. Therefore, *kutuma salamu*’s foregrounding of the common masses pushed what was otherwise in the margins of radio and gave their reality and lifestyle a central position. The fact that those hailed in the programme were not part of the state machinery was in itself something that ensured popularity of the form because it allowed anonymous listeners to hear themselves on radio. One of the most important elements shared by a majority of our respondents was the joy in encountering a familiar name on radio but also the fact that they had the power to ensure that their names would be heard by others:

I personally knew Francis Kadenge omwana wa Leah. All of us knew him and could resonate with names of other people he alluded to in his greetings. (*Kutuma salamu* fan 1)

This was said by a fan interviewed on 18 December 2021 in Vihiga town, Western Kenya. This idea of familiarity with one or some of the figures mentioned in the greetings enabled radio to move from just connecting those in rural areas with city residents to allowing listeners to imagine themselves on and as part of radio. In the process, it enabled radio to become close to listeners.

It is within this context that *kutuma salamu* emerges as a very vibrant form of popular culture. The experience of constraints in government-controlled VOK is what provided a conducive environment for this form of culture to emerge. In this case, the genre lives up to Barber's argument that forms of popular culture emerge in unexpected and transgressive places (2014). It initially emerged out of the programming slots meant to localise radio in Kenya. However, when one looks at its development into a culture, it has reared its head in the rest of radio programming too. For instance, in the 1970s and later, *kutuma salamu* has extended beyond the specific programmes for greetings and permeated almost all forms of VOK programming through its interruptive style. Live football commentaries on radio incorporated greetings in the midst of the commentary (Waliaula 2012); radio interviews with celebrities incorporated greetings for fans or friends; radio hosts who encountered their listeners in their everyday lives extended greetings to these listeners on air; and, in live broadcasts involving interviews with citizens, sometimes there were moments when the citizens forced greetings into the interviews themselves. Even in this age of social media and the advancement of radio and TV media, a lot of the interactive shows aired have a segment where *kutuma salamu* is incorporated. This is evidence that *kutuma salamu* has become part of the everyday media culture of Kenyans. It is a particular way of engaging with radio and redefining the role of radio as a mode of greeting, communication and entertainment.

Indeed, *kutuma salamu* has gradually become part of the grammar of radio in Kenya, and, in interactive shows, it is almost always part of the script. In this sense, *kutuma salamu* has been ritualised, such that it is no longer a simple interruption in the official radio programming but a regular space of agency. It is a space that affords the listeners some visibility and an avenue for social interaction. In hindsight, this radio-mediated social interaction developed in the same way that social media works in the age of new media. Within the Kenyan space, *kutuma salamu* has also emerged as a form of popular culture that is largely associated with the Luhya identity. Most of the participants interviewed argued that the majority of listeners who participated and identified with the shows were Luhya, hence the conclusion that *kutuma salamu* is part of the Luhya identity.

Part of the public archive on the link between *kutuma salamu* and Luhya identity is a corrupted version of Les Wanyika's popular Kiswahili Benga hit song "Jina Langu Mambo".⁶ This song, which was released in 1982 as part of the album *Safari ya Samburu*, was a hit that was played repeatedly on Fred Obachi Machoka's Rumba and Zilizopendwa Radio shows from the 1980s onwards. In the Les Wanyika song, the first verse goes as follows:

*Penye jambo hapakosi mambo
Kwani jambo husababisha mambo
Mie mambo jina langu Mambo
Ama kweli nimeshaona mambo*

*An issue always leads to problems
I am problematic, my name is problems
Truly, I have seen problems
Where an issue exists, problems arise⁷*

Out of this popular Les Wanyika hit song emerged the corrupted version that centres the Luhya as defined by *kutuma salamu*:

*Kwenye barabara hapakosi baiskeli
Kwani baiskeli ni gari yake Mluhya
Kwenye baiskeli hapakosi paperbag
Kwani paperbag ni handbag yake mluya
Kwenye paperbag hapakosi redio
Kwani redio ni mobile ya mluhya
Kwenye redio hapakosi salamu
Kwani salamu ni hobby yake mluhya
Kwenye salamu hapakosi ujumbe
Ni kwamba kuvunjika kwa mwiko sio mwisho wa kupika ugali*

*On the road a bicycle is present
A bicycle is a Luhya man's car
On the bicycle is a paper bag
A paper bag is a Luhya man's handbag
On the paper bag is a radio
The radio is a Luhya man's mobile phone
On the radio is the greetings show
Greetings is a Luhya man's hobby
On the greetings show is a message
That a ladle breaking does not signal the end of cooking ugali⁸*

The corrupted version of Les Wanyika's song makes a play on the Luhya affinity to not only the radio as a mobile form of technology but also the place of Luhya culture in the creation and popularisation of the *kutuma salamu* shows. The popularity of the corruption within the everyday space of children's play and comedy shows suggests an ingrained acceptance within the Kenyan psyche of the Luhya and their place in the greetings shows.

The Luhya identity in reference to greetings is implied not only in the *kutuma salamu* shows; references to the community in other Kenyan forms of popular culture, such as cultural theme nights, suggest the centrality of greetings in Luhya culture and identity. For instance, traditional music cultural nights for the Luhya are referred to as *Mulembe* nights. The word *mulembe* is a Luhya word that directly translates to greetings. The Luhya identification as a *mulembe* nation foregrounds the central space greetings occupy in their everyday lives, which again goes to support the implication evident in the corrupted version of Les Wanyika's song.

The sociality of the radio as connected to livelihoods is also captured in the song in the way in which the radio is seen as linked to the bicycle as an infrastructure of mobility and its ability to ensure uninterrupted engagement with *kutuma salamu* as well as other programmes regardless of the location of the listener. In this regard, unlike Spitulnik's (1993) identification of the living room and the placement of the radio for family times, among the Luhya, the bicycle offers a sense of uninterrupted listenership and flexibility. What this means is that radio's centrality is defined by the service it offers to its users, enabling a sense of interactivity with loved ones far and near through greetings shows that allow not only connection across space but also a feeling of familiarity. At the same time, it hints at the sociality of radio to define everyday activities enabled by the bicycle and its mobility.

Conclusion

This study set out to describe a media practice known as *kutuma salamu*, which is prevalent in Kenya. We have argued that, while *kutuma salamu* was about sharing greetings on public service radio, the conditions in which it thrived provoked the repurposing of the practice into a site of agency where the common people bargained for visibility. Using archival research and ethnography, this study engaged with listeners to the shows and information from print media to reconstruct and explore the context and performance of *kutuma salamu*. We have established that, initially, *kutuma salamu* was a minor programme within the indigenisation agenda of VOK and was perceived as a playful and harmless insertion into the otherwise serious business of public service radio. To an extent, it was considered merely entertainment, and hence posed no risk to the approved single Voice of Kenya – state authority. However, the programme gradually accumulated agency through a number of ways that were not initially anticipated. First, the presenters deliberately styled themselves playfully to make this a distinctly informal and creative space. Second, the fans of the programme took their cue from the presenters and also engaged in elaborate forms of self-stylisation that drew attention to themselves. Most importantly, the messages included in the greetings transformed the previously perceived “empty” greetings programmes into a medium for communicating alternative messages. In the process, the programmes shifted the one-directional and top-down structure of public service radio into a multi-directional interactive media where transgressive politics thrived. The irony is that the power of *kutuma salamu* as an alternative voice declined with the opening up of the airwaves in the early 1990s because the previously monolithic radio audience was now fragmented. We have also established that, in building forms of identity, *kutuma salamu* became associated with Luhya. This is seen in the offshoots in music, comedy and theme nights that nod to the place of the Luhya and Luhya ownership of the genre.

This article has raised fundamental questions about the relationship between public service radio and its audiences. It is assumed that audiences are passive receivers of information on state-controlled radio. However, *kutuma salamu* affirms the active role that audiences play in the context of media perceived to be controlled by regimes. In addition, we have established that the interactive element of social media in the age of new media is not new. Traces of audiences’ use of virtual space for interaction – parallel to or at times engaging with mainstream media – have always been there.

Notes

1. “The Week in Sound and Vision”, *East African Standard*, 19 December 1963, p. 8.
2. “The Week in Sound and Vision”, *East African Standard*, 20 December 1963, p. 14.
3. “The Week in Sound and Vision”, *East African Standard*, 27 December 1963, p. 10.
4. *Kutuma salamu* fan 4.
5. *Kutuma salamu* fan 3.
6. Les Wanyika was a popular rhumba/Benga band that emerged in 1978 after the split of the Simba Wanyika band. They performed rhumba music which evolved into a type of Benga due to their unique way of playing the guitar (Eagleson 2011).
7. Les Wanyika, “Jina Langu Mambo” on *Safari ya Samburu* (Polydor 1982).
8. Nicholas Sangoda, “Kwenye Parapara Waluya,” YouTube, 2020, accessed 31 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByU4UCVZJaw>.

9. The details of the programming of *kutuma salamu* shows in Table 1 have been generated from “The Week in Sound and Vision” column in *The East African Standard* newspapers for the period 1963–80. Where specific mentions are given in the text, the particular referencing details of the newspaper are provided.

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