

# Intra-national Ethnic Diasporas: Popular Culture and Mediated Translocal Spaces in Kenya<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Diasporas are conventionally perceived in terms of dispersed populations on a transnational scale. However, this paper demonstrates that the international dimensions of diasporas do not discount their potential for manifestation at intra-national levels, especially within countries made up of various distinct ethnic 'nations'. In the multi-ethnic African context, populations tend to construct an 'imagined community', within which connections are maintained among members scattered beyond the boundaries of the homeland, but still within the confines of the nation in question. In this paper, attention is paid to the dynamics involved in the local ethnic populations' appropriation of communication technologies to render mediated popular culture and construct translocal spaces in Kenya. It emerges that through vernacular radio, television, and mobile phones, the in-country diasporas maintain vital socio-cultural contact among members. By mainstreaming local migrants, whose experiences remain hardly visible in contemporary scholarly discourse, this paper accordingly expands the definition of diaspora.

## Introduction

Etymologically, the word 'diaspora' can be traced to a Greek verb *diaspeiro* (*dia* for 'through' and *speiro* for 'to sow'), hence its meaning 'to disperse' or 'to scatter' (Quayson/Daswani 2013: 8). The word 'diaspora' accordingly

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bears connotations of widespread movement of communities across national borders, especially considering its familiar use in reference to the dispersal of Jews beyond their historical homeland in the Middle-East region. Müller/Van Gorp (2011: 2, 4) indeed acknowledge the “complex transnational flows” associated with diasporas and perceive them as “transnational ethnic groups defined by a common identity and attachment to a real or imagined homeland”. While this paper acknowledges the transnational dimension of diasporas, it further argues that similar kinds of mobility occur at other levels that may not necessarily amount to cross-border movements. The expanding notion of diaspora over the years certainly calls for the need to examine “non-national or even a-national cultural patterns” (Wilding 2007: 345) in our attempts to properly comprehend the phenomenon in contemporary contexts.

I am therefore more drawn towards Daswani’s (2013: 36) definition of diaspora as “different kinds of migrant groups who have left their homeland but who continue to share a religious, ethno-national, or national identity”. Rather than emphasize transnational dimensions, this view of diaspora uses the term ‘homeland’, which may not necessarily be equal to the spatial configurations of the modern nation-states. ‘Homeland’ thus could refer to a particular locality within a nation-state with which a group of people closely identify. Indeed, homeland is “located within, rather than of the nation” (Brickell 2011: 31). This understanding accordingly enables us to come to terms with the possibility of diasporas manifesting themselves within the borders of given nation-states. As used in this paper, the phrase ‘intra-national diasporas’ therefore precisely captures the dynamics of diasporas within the confines of a given country; in this case, Kenya.

In the African context, it is important to note that intra-national diasporas are an ever-present reality. The colonial history of the continent led to the invention of arbitrarily created nation-states, many of which are still struggling to forge a real working nationhood to date. In most of Africa, ethnic allegiance often takes precedence over nationalistic sentiments. This trend usually manifests itself in a strong sense of community, bordering on

ethno-nationalism, among most peoples. Due to the realities of modern life, many members of the different communities have migrated from their original localities to other places within the nation-state. Rural-urban migration in search of better job opportunities, for example, is one manifestation of intra-national mobility. In addition, there are significant numbers of people who engage in rural-rural migration across the country. In both cases, the migrant people often maintain strong links with their homeland and its people. Such people therefore meet the threshold for treatment as diasporas albeit at the intra-national, rather than the usual international level.

As is the case in transnational diaspora, in-country ethnic diasporas in Africa are largely “imagined communities” since their members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 2006: 6). Popular culture often plays an influential role in the process of imagining communities. Due to the amorphous nature of these communities, face-to-face communication has become spatially challenged. Consequently, the popular cultures used to sustain the diasporas are increasingly technologically mediated to cater for the elsewhere audiences. Media technologies such as radio, television, and the Internet, among others, have been creatively appropriated by communities to establish connections among members of the diaspora. This paper demonstrates how a particular Kenyan community, the Luo people, use mediated popular culture to maintain contact among the members of the ethnic diaspora located in various localities within the country.

### **Theorizing Translocal Geographies**

It would be inappropriate to embark on a discussion of translocality without establishing its connection to the broader transnationality theories. Closely linked to the phenomenon of globalization, transnationalism has been associated with “deteritorialization” and “unboundedness”, hence implying the migrants’ “total disconnection from local constraints and

social moorings" (Guarnizo/Smith 2006: 12). However, such far-reaching suppositions of transnationalism have since been toned down with the growing recognition of people's tendency to be "firmly rooted in a particular place and time, though their daily lives often depend on people, money, ideas, and resources located in another setting" (Levitt 2001:11). The notion of translocality thus emerged to capture the sense of "local-local connections across national boundaries" (Brickell/Datta 2011: 10).

Although the acknowledgement of people's situatedness during mobility was a major development, translocality still remained trapped within the wider field of transnationalism and discourse on globalisation. There was a tendency to treat translocality merely as a "'subset' of transnationalism" (Velayutham/Wise 2005: 40) or a kind of "grounded" or "grassroots transnationalism" (Brickell/Datta 2011: 3, 10). The term therefore only recognized connections between communities on the global scale, thereby shutting out the viability of such relationships at other levels. Indeed, as Freitag and Von Oppen (2010: 6) acknowledge, translocality "proposes a more open and less linear view on the manifold ways in which the global world is constituted". Such views advocate for a pluralistic reading of translocality, thereby laying the ground for the expansion of the concept in contemporary scholarship.

At the core of the concept of translocality is the emphasis that while people are mobile, they retain connections with their places of origin. Oakes and Schein (2006: 20) argue that translocality "deliberately confuses the boundaries of the local" and retain the view of spatial processes and identities as "place-based rather than exclusively mobile, uprooted or 'travelling'". Translocality thus addresses "transgression" as well as the need for "localizing some kind of order" (Freitag/Von Oppen 2010: 8). The remarkable feature of translocality therefore emerges as its tendency to blur boundaries even as it gives prominence to the relevance of the "entanglements of roots and routes" (Blunt: 2005:10) in people's lives. However, critics point out that translocality still exhibits the legacies of transnationalism due to its tendency to emphasize national boundaries as

the basis of connections between people. It is precisely this deficit that the improved concept of translocal geographies, adopted in this paper, seeks to address.

Brickell and Datta (2011) propose the concept of translocal geographies to address translocality in other spaces, places, and scales beyond the national. They regard it as “simultaneous situatedness across different locales” and “‘groundedness’ during movement, including those everyday movements that are not necessarily transnational” (Brickell/Datta 2011: 4). They argue convincingly that translocal geographies enable us to make sense of migration across other scales and spaces such as rural-urban, inter-urban, intra-urban, and inter-regional. The concept of translocal geographies therefore succeeds in liberating translocality from the legacy of transnationalism with its over-emphasis on national borders. This effectively gives room for the examination of mobilities “within national boundaries or across localities situated within the nation” (Brickell/Datta 2011: 10). This paper uses this notion of translocal geographies in its attempt to put into perspective internal migration of members of the Luo community within the Kenyan borders.

Following in the footsteps of earlier theorists of translocality (such as Guarnizo/Smith 2006; Oakes/Schein 2006), proponents of translocal geographies emphasize the importance of local-local connections. However, they are keen to focus on such relationships “in their own right and without privileging the national” (Brickell/Datta 2011: 10). Significantly, the notion of translocal geographies dismisses the view of certain groups of people as immobile and parochial. This amounts to a rejection of locality as bounded and static. Contemporary scholarship acknowledges the fact that locality is produced socially and culturally (Freitag/Von Oppen 2010; Guarnizo/Smith 2006). Of particular relevance to this paper is the role of technologies in the production of locality. Appadurai (1996: 178) holds that locality is “constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts”. The prevalence of communication media therefore affords the so-called immobile

communities opportunities for mobility across spaces. This paper explores how communication technologies mediate the relationship between the Luo ethnic diaspora within Kenya by linking the mobile groups among themselves and to those back in the homeland.

### **Interactive Space of Vernacular Radio**

The traditional homeland of the Luo people of Kenya is geographically located in western parts of the country in the present day Kisumu, Siaya, Homabay, and Migori Counties. The Luo are often associated with the now defunct Nyanza province in Kenya, where they form the majority ethnic community. Although most Luo people live in this original homeland, a significant number have migrated to urban centres or other local parts of the country outside of the four Counties mentioned above. Nevertheless, the migrants have largely maintained contact with their homeland in one way or the other. The dispersed nature of the community typically poses a challenge to face-to-face communication. Ethnic media in the form of radio and newspapers thus step in to bridge this gap. Radio, specifically, plays a prominent role in the maintenance of diasporic relations among members of the Luo community and indeed many other African societies. There are at least four<sup>2</sup> radio stations that broadcast their programmes fully in *Dholuo* (Luo language) to listeners across the country. The vernacular radio stations include Ramogi FM, Radio Lake Victoria, Radio Nam Lolwe, and Mayienga FM.

#### *Communal Affinity via Shared Aesthetic Experiences*

The Luo vernacular radio stations may be regarded as ethnic media because they are “by and for” the ethnic group (Matsaganis et al. 2011: 10). Vernacular radio has been effectively used in nurturing a strong sense of

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<sup>2</sup> The four stations mentioned here are those that have a nationwide reach. However, the actual number of radio stations which broadcast in *Dholuo* is much higher if we factor in the several other regional stations currently in operation.

identity among members of ethnic communities scattered across the Kenyan nation-state. In fact, fears have been expressed to the effect that the emerging stronger ethnic loyalties pose a threat to the nation-state. The success of the vernacular radio stations is partly attributable to the use of local languages that easily break down class distinctions associated with English; a foreign language which dominates discourse within the national space in Kenya. The Luo vernacular stations often emphasize the common ancestry of the listeners through the use of such inclusive terms as *Nyikwa Ramogi*<sup>3</sup> (descendants of Ramogi) and *Jokanyanam*<sup>4</sup> (descendants of 'the daughter of the Lake'). The vital feature of "mobility" (Hungbo 2008: 5) characteristic of radio enables members of the Luo community to remain in touch with each other while on the move. It forges a space where the people converge and share information as members of a community with a common language and culture.

Popular culture features prominently among the content of vernacular radio in Kenya. In Luo radio stations, for instance, musical shows dominate the daily programme schedules. Popular Luo musical genres such as *Benga*<sup>5</sup> and *Ohangla*<sup>6</sup> are frequently showcased either in stand-alone programmes or integrated into other programmes. Other than their obvious aesthetic value, Luo musical genres are functional epistemological texts which entail a repertoire of the community's philosophy, ethno-history, and general wisdom. As Ntarangwi (2007: 14) rightly observes, many communities use music to "create knowledge networks that have aided members of the community to share, generate, and disseminate information". Luo songs are

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<sup>3</sup> *Ramogi* is the patriarch of the Luo having led the people during migration from Sudan to their current settlements along the shores of Lake Victoria, Kenya.

<sup>4</sup> *Nyanam* is the legendary matriarch of the Luo.

<sup>5</sup> *Benga* refers to a Kenyan popular musical genre whose origin is associated with the influence of Congolese *Soukous* music with a characteristic finger-plucking style. It was pioneered by Luo musicians equally inspired by the community's long-standing tradition of playing the eight-stringed lyre known as *Nyatiti*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ohangla* is a traditional Luo musical genre comprising of an ensemble of drums played to the accompaniment of other instruments such as flute. It was originally performed in weddings and funeral ceremonies but has since been rebranded into a contemporary popular musical genre. It currently incorporates modern musical instruments and addresses a broad spectrum of themes.

reputed for their remarkable narrative style, with the artists telling real and imagined stories laced with morals for their audiences. Such narratives often become part and parcel of the corpus of everyday knowledge, frequently cited as authoritative texts by members of the community wherever they are. Popular music therefore becomes a shared experience between the homeland and diaspora. As a mediated translocal space, popular music thus constitutes the common text that nourishes the diaspora-homeland relationship.

Ethnic media have been used for the mobilization of particular groups of people towards the achievement of a certain agenda. In this regard, vernacular radio has been effectively used and abused with equal measure in Africa. For instance, vernacular radio was accused of inflaming ethnic passions in the 1994 Rwanda genocide as well as the 2007/2008 Post-election violence in Kenya. Over the years, Luo vernacular radio has used popular music for political mobilization among members of the community across the country. In Kenyan political history, Luo *Benga* music was synonymous with the struggle for multiparty democracy in the period running up to the 1990s. The late Owino Misiani's *Benga* songs, for example, aesthetically exploited political imagery in the process of auditing the performance of the status quo.

Misiani's use of animal imagery can be read as a creative continuation of traditional Luo narrative conventions. Although the hyenas, leopards, baboons, and snakes the artist frequently sang about made little sense to many in the country, they remained quite familiar to the target audience. The Luo community both in the diaspora and in the homeland accordingly formed an "interpretive community" equipped with certain "interpretive strategies" for unravelling meaning in a contextually relevant way (Fish 1980: 14, 163). Engaged in a "co-constitutive" (Barber 2007: 137) and "collaborative" (Li 2006: 118) process of meaning construction, the Luo community in its entirety thus constitutes an efficient knowledge network that accordingly yields common meanings. The Luo *Benga* genre therefore

enhances “notions of ethnic affinity” (Carotenuto/Luongo 2009: 198) against the backdrop of long-standing feelings of political marginalization.

#### *Harnessing Radio Liveness and Remediation Potentials*

The liveness of the radio medium contributes immensely the sustenance of the relations between the Luo diaspora and the homeland. Radio is “broadcast as it [is] performed” and thus “guarantees a potential connection to shared social realities as they are happening” (Couldry 2004: 355). Liveness thus gives people in various localities an opportunity to be part of certain cultural events as they unfold. During the interactive musical shows held on Luo radio stations, the dispersed peoples conveniently overcome their spatial challenges courtesy of the electronic space of the radio. The listeners often participate by sending short text messages or making telephone calls to the studio in real time. This enables them to carve an interactive space with their kin elsewhere in the homeland and the diaspora at large. That is evident in such programmes when callers make song requests or dedications and call upon their friends or family to join them in a mediated form of ‘collective listening’. In such cases, the individual recreates a personal interactive space of sorts within the electronic space of radio communication, thereby mitigating the effects of spatial removal.

The mediation of Luo vernacular radio enables those in the diaspora to take part not only in the consumption but also the construction of popular culture. Through the interactive musical shows, the diaspora often achieves a sense of firm location within the dynamics that shape the homeland’s popular culture, even as they remain geographically located elsewhere.

The cooperative involvement of the diaspora and the homeland in the transformation of popular culture is evident in the development of *Ohangla* music among the Luo. *Ohangla* was originally a traditional musical genre played in villages during funeral and wedding ceremonies. Its origins were therefore in the local homeland contexts. However, this changed when some adventurous urban-based artists experimented with the infusion of

technologies, such as the piano keyboard, to replace the traditional ensemble of percussions. The recorded tracks then found their way into the Luo radio stations, which immediately appropriated the refurbished genre. Through generous airplay, *Ohangla* was transformed into its current status as a popular musical genre synonymous with contemporary Luo cultural identity. It has indeed come to be appreciated generally by many people across the wider nation-state. This case proves that the vernacular radio medium plays a great role in the validation of popular culture and that popular culture is constructed through a process of negotiation between the homeland and the diaspora.

The musical shows on Luo vernacular radio frequently feature an interactive segment called *Mos* (greetings). These segments are characterized by the host reading out greeting cards sent to the studio by the listeners. Serving as an oral 'mail delivery man', the host sends the greetings and the accompanying messages 'on air' to the listening audience. In this case, the greeting cards re-contextualize the face-to-face contact that distance deprives the members of the community in diaspora. The original words of the sender, already frozen by the written medium, are once again reactivated by the studio presenter. This oral remediation significantly reawakens elements of performance. Interestingly, should the recipient miss out on the greetings sent out to him/her, any other member known to him/her may take the initiative to deliver the greetings verbally. In such a situation, an originally written text mutates into an electronically mediated one only to be reincarnated into pure orality. The end result is the establishment of networks of communication between members of the Luo community located both in the homeland and the diaspora.

### **Mobile Electronic Spaces**

There are many electronic technologies of communication at peoples' disposal in contemporary Africa. However, the mobile phone stands out as the one that has brought about the most dramatic revolution in the continent's communicative space in recent times. At the technical level, the

success of the mobile phone has been attributed to the ease of its installation and relative affordability of the necessary infrastructural requirements. Most importantly, however, the mobile phone has found ready acceptance in Africa due to its oral nature which makes it the preferred medium of communication in a continent where a significant percentage of the population remains either non-literate or functionally illiterate. In Kenya, the impact of the mobile phone has been phenomenal since its introduction in the early 2000s. By the end of 2011, at least 93% of Kenyan households owned a mobile phone (Demombynes/Thegeya 2012: 2) illustrating the extent of connectivity among members of the population. Kenyans have since adapted the mobile phone to a variety of creative uses with many social and economic consequences.

Mobile phones play an important role in the construction of the “electronic public space” (Herbst 1995: 263) required for the maintenance of contact between the diaspora and the homeland. The mobile populations in the diaspora therefore enjoy the “portability of social connectedness” as they remain “bonded to distant, absent others” (Chayko 2008: 5, 4). By serving as the ties that bind the diaspora and the homeland, mobile phones thus sustain the sense of community that is definitive of most African societies. In the Luo community, an individual’s connections with *dala* (home) largely remain intact irrespective of spatial location at any one time. In fact, home is spatially defined as one’s place of belonging by ancestral ties. Therefore, even if one establishes himself elsewhere, that only qualifies as a ‘house’ or ‘residence’ away from the real home.<sup>7</sup> The mobile phone, therefore, comes in handy to sustain the already existing attachment to the Luo homeland.

Mobile phones are used in the Luo community, just like in other African societies, to “restore or maintain kinship bonds” (Brinkman et al. 2009: 77). On many occasions, one’s parents and extended family reside back in the homeland beyond the individual’s physical reach. People in the diaspora

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<sup>7</sup> The legendary supremacy of the Luo homeland was evident in the S.M. Otieno case in the 1980s, where the deceased’s wishes to be buried in his Nairobi home were overlooked by the courts due to the traditional Luo definition of ‘home’.

thus call home frequently to get updates about the goings-on in the village, which they remain very much part of despite their absence. They are often briefed about relatives and friends who are sick, getting married, or even dead. They also get informed about communal functions such as get-togethers and fund-raising events. However, one does not need to wait until there is a serious issue to call home. Michael Joseph, a former CEO of Safaricom mobile telephone company, once commented on Kenyan's "peculiar calling habits" that frequently contributed to network congestion. Most calls are often casual with no particular agenda other than 'greeting' recipients and inquiring about their health. To those in the diaspora, the electronic space afforded by the mobile phone thus "pushes the boundaries of social space" thereby creating the "technological conditions for a virtual community" (Lamoureaux 2011: 170, 161). This enables them to maintain intimacy with the homeland, albeit from a distance.

The act of making a phone call itself is a highly social activity in the African context. Who makes a call to whom is largely governed by various unwritten societal moral codes as well as "power relations among people" (Pelckmans 2009: 30). Those in the diaspora are usually associated with financial success and are therefore expected to bear the costs of phone calls to those located in the homeland. Out of courtesy, the younger people in the diaspora are generally expected to call their parents, younger siblings, and other senior members of the extended family like grandparents. A unique phenomenon of mobile phone use in Africa, with far-reaching social implications, is the practice of 'beeping', sometimes referred to as 'flashing'. This popular practice involves "placing calls fully intending to hang up" on the other person (Donner 2005: 2). It is used to attract the recipient's attention and request them to call back. Interestingly, this practice does not always imply the beeper's lack of credit but rather betrays the workings of power relations in the phone mediated electronic community. One's parents can beep him/her often without any sense of guilt as the younger person is perceived as having an obligation to sustain the connection with the

parents. The other way round would be considered inappropriate unless one is a minor or has well known financial issues.

However, beeping is not always meant to request somebody to call back. In some cases, it entails an effort at making electronic contact with somebody for particular reasons. Beeping is controlled by an “elaborate set of customized, coded messages” (Donner 2005: 3). Indeed, beeping could amount to “tapping someone’s shoulder or winking at them” (Pelckmans 2009: 29). Through the act of beeping, the caller appropriates the mobile phone electronic space to re-enact face-to-face communication. Someone can therefore beep you with an intention of jogging your memory about something or simply ‘waving’ at you electronically in symbolic contravention of spatial considerations. In a baffling turn of events however, some people even beep anonymously having withheld their phone identities! This seemingly unconventional act is not absolutely meaningless in the context of mobile phone use in Africa, where traditional etiquette standards expect one to acknowledge greetings even from total strangers.

Mobile phones significantly maintain the relationship between the diaspora and homeland by means of mediating financial remissions. The MPESA mobile money transfer system in Kenya, provided by Safaricom, has made this a reality. At the click of a button, a member of the diaspora can send money or air time credit to relatives and friends back at home. He/she can also conveniently pay their electricity bills and schools fees among other miscellaneous expenses. The convenience of the mobile phone transactions thus enables the diaspora residents to achieve “copresence” (Harneit-Sievers 2006: 9); a simultaneous absence and presence in daily life in the homeland. Therefore, an imagined community is constructed by the mobile phone “both as an extension of a community grounded in physical space, and as a collectivity that takes its meaning through specific phone interactions” (Lomoureaux 2011: 171). Members of the Luo community thus take advantage of the leverage of technological mediation to “have one foot in each world” (O’Connor 1983: 272). The role of the MPESA service in maintaining social networks is also evident in its contemporary

appropriation as a means of establishing a caller's real identity. Whenever one receives calls from unknown numbers, it has become a common practice to send some small amount of money to that number to confirm who he/she is and decide whether or not to admit the person to one's circle of friends.

Popular culture is often mediated through the mobile phone interactions among the residents of the diaspora and between them and the homeland community. In Kenya, popular songs are commonly used as ring tones in phones and these are usually shared freely among friends. Safaricom, the leading mobile phone operator in Kenya, offers the customers a choice of *Skiza*<sup>8</sup> tunes. These are custom musical tunes the callers hear when they dial your number. The flexibility of the mobile phone use in Kenya therefore allows the users to adapt it to their specific needs, hence nurturing a domesticated version of modernity. Mobile phone functions that enable the users to share videos have also increased the popularity of cultural material, which people in the diaspora rely on to identify with their roots of origin.

### **Diasporic Spaces of Consumption**

For the many Luo people residing outside their traditional homeland, popular culture remains one of the most important ways of maintaining contact with each other in a manner reminiscent of Velayutham and Wise's (2005: 28) notion of "translocal village" albeit in a slightly modified way. In the contemporary situation, the new village is not the exact mirror image of the "left-behind village" (Tan/Yeoh 2011: 42), but rather recreated in novel ways influenced by contemporary realities of modernity. An association known as Luo Union, quite active in the 1960s and 1970s, served as the umbrella body bringing together all Luo people in the diaspora within the larger East African region. However, smaller organizations based on people's places of origin, such as "*Riwruok mar Jokisumo ma Nairobi*" (Association of Kisumu People in Nairobi), are currently more visible. Such

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<sup>8</sup> *Skiza* is Swahili for 'listen'.

organizations serve as the “village away from the village” (Peleikis 2003: 17) thus enabling the people in diaspora to produce their own version of locality to satisfy their craving for the homeland.

Owing to the amorphous nature of the Luo diaspora, media and communication technologies play a crucial role in its governance. The coordination of the everyday activities of the ‘translocal villages’ heavily relies on technologies such as radio, mobile phones, and social media. The diaspora associations often need to hold meetings, organize certain events, or mobilize members towards a given cause. It therefore becomes necessary to make radio announcements or convey the information through social media. These media accordingly ensure speedy communication to a mass audience spatially located in diverse contexts across the country. Modern technologies are thus implicated in the mediation of the diaspora experience among contemporary Kenyan societies.

Of late, the popularity of ethnic themed cultural nights and festivals has been on the rise in Kenyan urban areas. In such widely publicised occasions, often sponsored by leading media houses, members of respective communities gather to celebrate their culture in a given venue overnight or over several days. The annual Luo Night organized by Ramogi Radio has been quite prominent in this regard. The Luo Festival, an elaborate event held in Nairobi, has also entered the scene since 2014. Such occasions serve as spaces of “media-driven patterns” (Aseka 2009: 87) of consumption of various commodities associated with Luo identity. These include music, traditional dishes as well as ethnic inspired fashion and designs. The village-like gatherings offer an opportunity for members of the Luo community in diaspora to re-enact their homeland and feel its aura despite their distance. It amounts to symbolically bringing the village to the city. The face-to-face interaction it affords the participants is also important in the establishment of the vital networks that individuals need in order to survive within the challenging modern cityscape.

As an aspect of popular culture, sports are also used in the construction of spaces of consumption which constitute the Luo diaspora especially in the

cosmopolitan urban areas of Kenya. Faced with the threat of oblivion under urban multiculturalism, the Luo diaspora reacts by producing its locality away from the homeland. This is evident in the fan culture revolving around the Gor Mahia Football Club based in the capital city Nairobi. The club is closely associated with the Luo community, which established it in 1968 and named it after a popular legendary personality. Therefore, the club is symbolically lodged at the core of Luo identity despite being based away from the homeland. To the Luo intra-national diaspora, especially in the urban centres, Gor Mahia Football Club is the ultimate symbol of ethnic camaraderie. Known for their boisterous nature and spectacular mobility across the country in their team's trails, the Gor Mahia fans have established a strong network community, whose influence has reverberated across the Luo 'nation'. The sounds and images of the fans' activities, mediated by radio, television, and social media technologies, have had transformative impacts on Luo popular culture all the way to the grassroots.

An emerging consumer culture is evident among Gor Mahia football fans in the Luo diaspora. During matches, the fans often steal the show by their open display of materialism. Long convoys parading some of the latest car models have come to characterize Gor Mahia match days. In the stadium, the fans are always a spectacle to behold in the terraces with their specially designed club merchandise. Other than the drinking and merrymaking that goes on in the side-lines, the match day also avails to the fans an opportunity to showcase their latest electronic gadget acquisitions such as smart phones and iPads. A critical look at this emerging fan culture characteristic of the Luo diaspora yields the realization that the football experience goes beyond mere love for the sport. Founded on the existing notions of Luo ethnic pride, and propelled by the media, this new consumer culture is fast becoming the norm among the members of the Luo community across the country.

A close reading of Gor Mahia fan jerseys reveal that they surpass mere fashion statements. The jerseys are custom-made, thereby giving the fans the freedom to personalize them by choosing the monikers or unique aliases

to be printed at the back. Such 'jersey IDs', owing to their frequently humorous nature, can be interpreted as a continuation of the Luo tradition of *pakruok*<sup>9</sup>. However, a significant number of them serve as translocal symbols. Such writings as 'Luo inside', 'Luo is a software', and 'Luo is a lifestyle' proudly announce the wearers' pride in their ethnic roots despite being located in the diaspora. Some fans opt to be more particular with their clans of origin, such as '*Jaber Nyakisumo*' (the beautiful lady from Kisumo). Others identify with their hometowns as is the case in '*Jamigori*' (the man from Migori) or "*Jarongo*" (the man from Rongo). Yet others boldly declare the names of their kin such as "*Nyakwar Osunga*" (Osunga's grandson) or "*Margi Mato*" (Mato's sister). During the football matches, fan jerseys therefore serve as billboards of sorts where individuals announce their desires to connect with their geographically removed homelands.

By popularizing a unique consumer culture, football fans in the Luo diaspora succeed in redefining the space availed to them by sports activities into a community with typical characteristics. As Clarke et al. (2003: 80) informatively observes, "consumption tends to 'reconfigure' space and place, often disrupting, undermining and 'displacing' consumption activities that were once thought of being related to specific places". The stadium thus evolves into more than just an arena for football action but also becomes a social site for forging communal ties. Indeed, the connections established in such consumption spaces rarely end there as evident in the existence of several structured fan club organizations, which hold regular meetings. A lot of networking is also done through the Internet by bloggers and other users to mobilize the fans to engage in various club activities. A case in point is the Facebook group *Gor Mahia is not a Club*, whose name betrays the intent to take the relations between its members surpass the confines of the football sport.

The consumption space of football can be argued to have certain consequences for identity formation among members of the Luo community. Di Maggio (1994, cited in Sanford 2008: 35) contends that

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<sup>9</sup> *Pakruok* is a Luo verbal art of praise naming often infused in speeches or in musical performances.

“consumption and lifestyle membership help constitute identity, where symbolic objects function as identity markers, and references to symbolic goods serve as ‘conversation tokens’”. The materials consumed by the highly mobile Gor Mahia fan fraternity thus constitute a shared sense of belonging, which serves to consolidate the diaspora community in the urban areas where the club’s activities occur. Patterns often emerge from the spaces of consumption patronized by the fans, initially perceived as stereotypes, but which slowly become authenticated by powerful agents such as the media. The popular television stand-up comedy programme ‘Churchill Show’, for instance, has served to validate the new Luo identity hinged on traditional ethnic pride but with a twist of modern materialism. Although having its roots in the urban context, this new identity is fast becoming acceptable in the rural areas of the Luo ‘nation’ as well. This proves that the channel of communication between the homeland and diaspora is mediated by communication technologies in a bidirectional fashion.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has established that the interactive space of vernacular radio reinforces the feeling of community shared by the members of the diaspora and the homeland within the context of the contemporary Luo community in Kenya. This ‘imagined community’ relies on the mediation of radio to establish some of the networks necessary for its sustenance. At the core of the interaction between the homeland and the diaspora is the cooperative construction and consumption of popular culture. This process is underpinned by shared notions of affinity and obligation among the members of the Luo ‘nation’ in whichever locality they live within the larger Kenyan nation-state.

Further, mobile telephony has become symbolic of the migrant experience in many African communities. By creating “translocal activity spaces” (Leppänen et al. 2009: 1080), the gadgets sustain the migrants’ social and economic link to the homeland as evident in the Kenyan context. At the

touch of a button, the migrant easily gains entry into the “virtual neighbourhoods” constituted by the phonebook thus illustrating that he/she is “no longer bounded by territory”(Appadurai 1996: 195). Connection with migrants in other localities as well as those in the homeland is therefore a possibility frequently exploited in such a manner that betrays the migrant’s close attachment to his/her ethnic fraternity.

Finally, it is apparent that the Luo diaspora in the urban areas of Kenya produce locality by creating spaces of consumption which operate like ‘translocal villages’. In such spaces, popular culture in the form of sports, music, food, and fashion serves as a point of physical and ideological convergence thus offering opportunities for the collective imagining of homeland. Fuelled by the media, the result has been the emergence of a new sense of ‘Luoness’ based a culture of consumption. This new identity displays a stronger keenness on ethnicity as opposed to nationalism. Interestingly, the new identity born in the diaspora is rapidly gaining acceptance in the homeland. This illustrates the power of mediated popular culture to govern relations in communities whose members are dispersed both at home and away.

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