

# Quest for Dreams: Kenyan Youth Identity at the Crossroads of Globalization

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**Abstract.** Since the 21st century, the process of globalization has been accelerating. Kenya has experienced all-round changes in politics, economy and culture in this wave. Consequently, the identity of Kenyan youth has become diversified and complex. This study analyzes two youthful protagonists in Ken Walibora's Swahili children's novel *Ndoto ya Amerika* (The American Dream), examining how ethnical politics, multilingualism, and mass media influence Kenyan youth identity from the perspective of global-local interactions. The study found that Kenyan youth are eager to integrate into modern globalized lifestyles, but it is difficult to get rid of the influence of local factors. This identity dilemma not only reflects their existential struggles between tradition and modernity, but also manifests their subjectivity in promoting social change and seeking their own positioning.

**Keywords:** Kenyan Youth; Identity; Globalization; Subjectivity.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the process of globalization has accelerated, and Kenya has undergone profound changes in politics, economy, culture and other domains. Against this backdrop, the issue of identity among Kenyan youth has grown increasingly complex and multifaceted. In June 2024, Generation Z spearheaded the movement called *Reject the Finance Bill 2024*, a protest against the fiscal legislation proposed by government aimed at financing a budget deficit through heightened taxation. However, this measure increased the high cost of living and aroused widespread discontent among young people. They used digital technologies such as social media and artificial intelligence to promote social change from screens to streets. Ultimately, under pressure from the public, President William Ruto withdrew the bill on June 26.

Although President Ruto withdrew the bill a week after the protests began, Kenyan young people continue to mobilize and put forward new demands such as *Ruto Must Go*, which shows that this movement is not only a dissatisfaction of young people with the government's economic policies, but also a profound questioning of the national governance system. In fact, as early as 2023, the Ruto government promulgated the *Kenya Finance Bill 2023*, which caused widespread discontent among the youth. They launched two nationwide protests on March 20 and July 7, 2023. But in 2022, Ruto was elected president as a "grassroots defender", and his success was inseparable from the support of young people. His success also gave young people hope to break out of the circle. The phenomenon of "love and hate" between Ruto and young people reflects the long-standing identity dilemma of Kenyan youth.

According to Article 260 of Kenya's Constitution (2010), youth aged 18 and 35, accounting for 35% of the population and 55% of the labor force.<sup>1</sup> It demonstrates that youth play big roles in society. Their identity is not only related to personal development, but also directly affects the country's social stability and economic progress. However, under the influence of globalization, Kenyan youth have not yet built a unified identity.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs, Kenya. *Kenya Youth Development Policy 2019: Popular Version* [EB/OL]. [2024-10-04]. <https://youth.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Kenya-Youth-Development-Policy-2019-Popular-version.pdf>: 2.

This article selects the *Ndoto ya Amerika* by Ken Walibora (1964-2020), a famous Kenyan writer and scholar, to explore the deep logic of Kenyan youth's identity from the perspectives of ethnical struggles, language environment and mass media. There are two reasons: First, literature, with its narrative flexibility, captures the interplay of globalization and traditional values in identity reconstruction and Kenyan collective cultural experience, serving as an ideal medium to show cultural tensions and belonging.<sup>2</sup> Second, awarded the prestigious Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature, *The American Dream* depicts Kenyan youth navigating the clash between Western cultural influences and indigenous values in their pursuit of aspirational futures under globalization. It especially emphasize how they reconcile personal aspirations (symbolized by the "American Dream") with their cultural identity—a theme with practical significance in an era of intensified globalization.

## 2. Literature Review

Youth identity is a subject of extensive research across sociology, anthropology, and psychology. In an era marked by accelerating globalization and technological advancement, the process of identity construction among young people has grown increasingly complex. Youth identity is shaped not only by individual psychological development but also by broader sociocultural environments, global influences, and systemic constraints.

Social environments critically mold youth identity. Schools, as important sites of adolescent socialization, shape identity through formal curricula and informal interactions.<sup>3</sup> Families, as foundational social units, imprint cultural values and generational expectations onto young individuals. Peer groups further influence identity through socialization, role modeling, identity experimentation, and social support systems.<sup>4</sup>

Traditional youth studies, predominantly rooted in Global North perspectives, often fail to account for contextual realities in Africa and other Global South countries. Therefore, research on African youth identity must be grounded in its unique sociocultural background.<sup>5</sup> Recent scholarship increasingly prioritizes African youth identity, recognizing its unique interplay of globalization, postcolonial dynamics, and localized cultural practices. Globalization has exposed youth to unprecedented cultural encounters and identity conflicts, particularly evident in the hybridization and friction between global influences and local traditions. Across Africa, globalization has facilitated young people's engagement with foreign cultures, fostering hybrid identities as they navigate the interplay of indigenous culture and globalized culture.<sup>6</sup> As McKenzie notes, African youth today must reconcile localized values with global values while navigating diverse identities shaped by globalization.<sup>7</sup>

The rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has revolutionized how youth construct and perform identity. Social media enable constant engagement with global cultural trends while offering spaces for self-expression and identity exploration.<sup>8</sup> In Africa, music genres such as Zimbabwe's urban grooves—which blend Shona, Ndebele, and English lyrics with

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<sup>2</sup> Hartmann R. Cultural identity in the East African novel [M]. diplom. de, 2014: 26.

<sup>3</sup> Best A. Youth identity formation: Contemporary identity work [J]. *Sociology Compass*, 2011, 5 (10): 908-922.

Verhoeven M, Poorthuis A M G, Volman M. The role of school in adolescents' identity development. A literature review [J]. *Educational Psychology Review*, 2019, 31: 35-63.

<sup>4</sup> Adler P, Adler P. *Peer Power* [M]. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper A, Swartz S, Mahali A. Disentangled, decentred and democratised: Youth Studies for the global South [J]. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2019, 22 (1): 29-45.

<sup>6</sup> Bhatia S. Decolonization and coloniality in human development: Neoliberalism, globalization and narratives of Indian youth [J]. *Human Development*, 2021, 64 (4-6): 207-221.

Kurebwa J. The effects of globalization on youth culture and identity: A Zimbabwean experience [J]. *Canadian Social Science*, 2020, 16 (4): 5-13.

<sup>7</sup> McKenzie J. Introduction to the special issue: Globalization as a context for youth development [J]. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2019, 164: 7-9.

<sup>8</sup> Manago A M, Pacheco P. Globalization and the transition to adulthood in a Maya community in Mexico: Communication technologies, social networks, and views on gender [J]. *New directions for child and adolescent development*, 2019, 2019 (164): 11-25.

hip-hop and dancehall influences—exemplify how youth fuse local and global elements to form distinct identities.<sup>9</sup> Nigeria's Lágbájá music not only emulates American hip-hop but also integrates indigenous elements, enabling youths to cultivate cultural confidence and a sense of belonging within a globalized context.<sup>10</sup> Similarly in East Africa, Tanzania's Bongo Flava<sup>11</sup> and Kenya's Genge, Kapuka, and Mugiithi construct and show youth identity by historical narratives, multilingualism, and cultural symbolism.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. The Diverse Identity Dilemma of Kenyan Youth

Before colonization, Africa lacked modern nation-state political entities. After the arrival of the colonists, they arbitrarily fragmented originally loose and diverse cultural communities according to their own interests, creating a fundamental mismatch between historical-cultural communities and subsequent political-economic frameworks. A feature of contemporary African countries is that the creation of sovereign states preceded the development of cohesive national identities - nations were first artificially constructed as political entities, then required corresponding economic, cultural, and ethnic foundations for survival.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Africa's profound cultural diversity and heterogeneity complicate the establishment of unified national cultural identities. These emerging African nations thus face dual challenges: pursuing economic development in the globalization wave while simultaneously attempting to construct homogeneous modern national cultures. This unprecedented developmental paradigm creates acute tensions for African youth, who find themselves struggling between aspirational alignment with Western modernity and persistent attachments to indigenous cultural roots. This dual orientation generates persistent conflicts in shaping both personal identity and collective national belonging.

1) National Citizen vs. Ethnic Guardian: Multiparty Politics Entangled with Ethnical Rivalries  
Kenya with 44 ethnic groups including the Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kalenjin, and Kamba as the largest communities,<sup>14</sup> exemplifies a multinational state. Since independence, ethnic competition has dominated its political landscape. The introduction of multi-party system in 1991 intensified this dynamic, with major political parties often aligning along ethnic lines. Politicians frequently campaign as ethnic representatives to seek support from their communities.<sup>15</sup> While Walibora's novel does not explicitly narrate ethnical politics, this study incorporates an analysis of tribalism's influence on youth identity, given its centrality in Kenya's society.

Since 2000, Kenya has pursued multi-pronged strategies to foster national cohesive identity, including equitable resource distribution, decentralization and reform of selection system. Introduced under Kenya's 2010 Constitution, the Equalization Fund allocates financial resources across counties, constituencies, and wards to prioritize development in marginalized regions. By pooling resources to improve essential services and infrastructure, the initiative aims to narrow regional development disparities while fostering social equity and inclusive growth. In the 2023–2024 fiscal year, the fund allocated KES 10.867 billion, with KES 10.541 billion directly distributed to 34 counties, 284 constituencies, and 1,236 wards. Turkana, West Pokot, and Narok counties—predominantly inhabited by the Turkana, Pokot (a Kalenjin subgroup), and Maasai communities<sup>16</sup>—received the

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<sup>9</sup> Tivenga D R, Manase I. Language syncretism and the expression of youth identities in Zimbabwe urban grooves music [J]. *Journal of Black Studies*, 2019, 50 (5): 484-503.

<sup>10</sup> Omoniyi T, Scheld S, Oni D. Negotiating youth identity in a transnational context in Nigeria [J]. *Social Dynamics*, 2009, 35 (1): 1-18.

<sup>11</sup> Ao, M. Y., & Yan, Z. Y. Kiswahili Cha Mtaani (Street Swahili): The Discourse Practice of Urban Youth in Modern Tanzania [J]. *African Studies*, 2021, 17 (1): 213.

<sup>12</sup> Wanjala H, Kebaya C. Popular music and identity formation among Kenyan youth [J]. *Muziki*, 2016, 13 (2): 20-35.

<sup>13</sup> Liu, H. W. *African Studies from Chinese Perspective* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2019: 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. National Profile of the Republic of Kenya [EB/OL]. (2024-01-01) [2024-10-09]. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq\\_676201/gj\\_676203/fz\\_677316/1206\\_677946/1206x0\\_677948/](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/fz_677316/1206_677946/1206x0_677948/).

<sup>15</sup> Zhang, W. J. The Rise and Impacts of Kenya's Hustler Movement [J]. *Contemporary World*, 2024, (1): 57.

<sup>16</sup> Kenya Gazette Supplement. The Equalisation Fund Appropriation Bill, No. 30 of 2023 [D/OL]. Nairobi: Government Printer, (2023-

largest shares. Concurrently, the 2010 Constitution also promoted the decentralization in Kenya, emphasizing the autonomy of local governments and the rights of citizens to participate in governance, which enhanced youth participation in local governance: 287 youths (19.8% of county representatives) were elected in 2017.<sup>17</sup>

Education also serves as a critical nation-building tool. Through standardized curricula and nationwide examinations such as the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), students engage with multicultural content reflecting the country's ethnic diversity while participating in a unified academic competition. This framework cultivates a shared sense of fairness and collective identity, as youth from disparate regions compete under equitable evaluation criteria. In summary, since the 21st century, Kenya has implemented multi-tiered institutional reforms and policies to according to its multi-ethnic and multicultural realities. These initiatives—improve equitable resource allocation, development programs for marginalized areas, and enhanced civic engagement—aim to strengthen citizens' sense of belonging and participation and to lay the solid foundation for equitable society and inclusive development.

As previously analyzed, the Kenyan government's multi-pronged strategies from the aspects of economic, political, and cultural domains to consolidate youth national identity have failed to achieve the best result due to systemic constraints. A critical failure is chronic underfunding of the Equalization Fund: despite of constitutional mandate of KES 54 billion, parliamentary approvals have capped at KES 26 billion, resulting in an implementation rate below 50%. Therefore, the policy largely tend to be performative.<sup>18</sup> While decentralization have expanded youth participation in local governance, youth representation only account for 5.9% in national parliament, 12% in the national senate, and a solitary governorship among senior leadership roles.<sup>19</sup>

Afrobarometer data reveals that 93% of Kenyans identify with both national and ethnic affiliations.<sup>20</sup> This duality stems from youth's instrumentalization in tribal politics, where they are mobilized as tools for elite interests or frontline soldiers in ethnic conflicts. The Mungiki movement, initially a Kikuyu youth religious-political group, co-opted by power brokers, and therefore has become a mercenary violent group implicated in 2002 election violence. Such tribalism fuels identity crises marked by disillusionment and distrust in traditional power structures. Yet, globalization has simultaneously exposed Kenyan youth to democratic ideals, inspiring their efforts to transcend ethnic boundaries. Increasingly, youth redefine their roles through advocating for democratic reforms, social justice, and inclusive governance to seek more political rights and social participation.

## 2) Global Elites vs. Local Speakers: The Identity Dilemma in a Multilingual Environment

Language is not only a communication tool, but also an important symbol of identity.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, individuals will have different understandings and value judgments on language due to internal and external factors, thus forming their own language values, language attitudes and language emotions. A person's specific language identity will affect his or her language attitude, and language attitude will also play a key role in the process of language identity construction.<sup>22</sup>

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07-20) [2024-12-09]. <http://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2023-08/The%20Equalisation%20Fund%20Appropriation%20Bill%2C%20No.%2030%20of%202023.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Ambani J Osogo, Kioko C. Decentralisation and inclusion in Kenya: From pre-colonial times to the first decade of devolution [M]. Nakuru: Kabarak University Press, 2022: 281.

<sup>18</sup> Ngari C, Ali M. Enhancing the Implementation of the Equalization Fund in Kenya [EB/OL]. KIPRA, (2024-01-08) [2024-12-09]. <https://kipra.or.ke/enhancing-the-implementation-of-the-equalization-fund-in-kenya/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ambani J Osogo, Kioko C. Decentralisation and inclusion in Kenya: From pre-colonial times to the first decade of devolution [M]. Nakuru: Kabarak University Press, 2022: 281.

<sup>20</sup> Mitullah W V. Identity in Kenya: Tolerance and trust deficits point to opportunities for progress [J]. 2021:1.

<sup>21</sup> Mukhwana A, Iribemwangi PI. Language Attitude and Language Planning: Emerging Trends in Kenya Since 2010 [J]. African Studies, 2021, 17 (1): 127.

<sup>22</sup> Yao X. The Essence of Language Identity and Its Development Path [J]. Journal of Xi'an International Studies University, 2020, 28 (04): 15.

As a multi-ethnic state, Kenya has 42 languages,<sup>23</sup> with English and Swahili serving as official languages. Indigenous languages like Kikuyu and Luo still occupy an important position in daily life and livelihood practices. In *American Dream*, it's ironic that Madoa refers to the United States as "Amerika" in English rather than "Marekani" in standard Swahili, which echoes the title of the book "Ndoto ya Amerika". In order to be more "worthy" of the American dream, Madoa changed his name to "Michael Monday" because he absurdly believed that all Americans were called Mike, and even that the president of the United States was called Mike Tyson, the minister of education was called Michael Jordan, the minister of health was called Michael Jackson, and the vice president was called Michael Johnson. Additionally, he ridicules an old man for his "non-prestige" Swahili dialects, exposing his sneer and contempt. In such a complex language system, Kenyans wander between different identities.

Firstly, the competition between English and Swahili in Kenya can be traced back to the British colonial rule. In the Kenyan education system at that time, English is used as the teaching language from the Grade 1 in most elementary schools (except in coastal regions), while Swahili was removed from the curriculum, and the status of Swahili was greatly reduced.<sup>24</sup> Benedict Anderson pointed that the imperialist colonial government used the colonial "Russification" policy to cultivate a group of colonial elites who were proficient in bilingualism. Through colonial education, these elites from different ethnic groups had a common language and learned European history, including the nationalism, vocabularies and action patterns of the past century. These elites were potential first colonial nationalists.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, since entering Kenya, English has been regarded as the exclusive language of the Kenyan elite and an important identification of the privileged class. These colonial elites played a pioneering role in Kenya's independence process. After independence in 1963, they naturally became the leadership of the new republic, and then declared English as the official language and followed the language policy of the British colonial government. Therefore, English has become the most respected and powerful communication language in Kenya.

Secondly, although Swahili is national language, due to colonial history and language policy, its limited success in strengthening the identity of "Kenyans" is not satisfactory. After independence, Kenya did not implement a Swahili-centered national construction strategy like its neighbor Tanzania, but adopted a more pluralistic approach that allowed multilingualism. This policy makes Swahili only a lingua franca in daily communication of Kenyan, diluting its potential in promoting national unity and consolidating national identity. The 2010 Constitution reaffirmed that Swahili is the national language of Kenya, Swahili and English are both official languages, and the country should promote and protect Kenya's linguistic diversity.<sup>26</sup> However, in fact, English retains dominance due to its close connection with education, legal systems, science and technology, and international affairs. It plays the role of official and national language in many occasions, while Swahili, which is nominally intended to promote national identity, is marginalized. This contradiction is particularly prominent in the field of education, where English is the medium of instruction and Swahili is a compulsory subject. Swahili is rarely used in government, diplomacy, business and other formal institutions.<sup>27</sup> In addition, as the official language of the former colonial Britain and the current world power, the United States, English has a natural appeal to Kenyan youth born in the millennium. Therefore, the disparity in the status of Swahili and English makes young people prefer English, believing that English is the key to the upper class and the realization of life ideals.

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<sup>23</sup> Kibui A W. Language policy in Kenya and the new constitution for vision 2030 [J]. *International Journal of Educational Science and Research*, 2014, 4 (5): 93.

<sup>24</sup> Yu, M. H., & Wei, Y. Y. *The Linguistic Situation and Language Policy in Kenya* [M] // Li, H. F., et al. *Research on the Linguistic Situation and Language Policy in African Countries*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2023: 202.

<sup>25</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [M]. Translated by Wu Ruiren. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2016: 11.

<sup>26</sup> The Constitution of Kenya, 2010. The Parliament of Kenya [EB/OL]. (2010-08-27) [2024-10-04]. [http://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2023-03/The\\_Constitution\\_of\\_Kenya\\_2010.pdf](http://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2023-03/The_Constitution_of_Kenya_2010.pdf), 13-14.

<sup>27</sup> King'ei G K. Gaps Between Language Policy and Practice in Kenya: Competition Between Kiswahili and English [J]. *African Language and Culture Studies*, 2022, 1 (1): 55-69.

Finally, in Kenya, in addition to the two official languages, English and Swahili, local ethnic languages also play an important role in communication in different regions. For most rural residents, they are not proficient in English or Swahili, but tend to use their mother tongue for daily communication. Among the many ethnic languages in Kenya, languages such as Kikuyu, Kalenjin and Luo have a wide range of users.<sup>28</sup> Madoa admires his brother Mwamba, who speaks "many European languages and all Kenyan languages":

*(Mwamba) Alikuwa mtu mzima aliyetembea dunia nzima. Aliweza kuzungumza lugha nyingi..... Pia alijua lugha zote nchini mwetu kama vile Kimaasai, Kikamba, Kikuyu, Kiluhya na kadhalika.*

*He (Mwamba) is a man, has travelled all over the world, speaks several languages. ... He also knows all the Kenyan languages, Maasai, Kikamba, Kikuyu, Luhya, etc.*

This multi-layered language usage phenomenon reflects the multiple identity construction paths of Kenyan youth. They are seen as a unified group at the national level, but at the same time are distinguished by the different languages and cultures, resulting in a feeling of being "homeless at home" and fluid, unstable, rootless identity.

### 3) Cyber Citizens vs. Offline Residents: Emerging Mobility Paradigms in the Mass Media Era

The emergence of electronic media has broken the original physical space divisions and established a new information system. People's choices of social identity and behavior patterns have become increasingly complex,<sup>29</sup> forming a new mobility paradigm of "mobility of thought" and "offline anchoring". In *American Dreams*, the main medium for the protagonist Isa to obtain information about the United States is radio; Madoa and "good brother" Mwamba also met on social media. From this perspective, mass media plays an extremely important role in Kenyan youth's perception of the image of the outside world and the shaping of their identity.

*...Nilikuwa nimewasikia katika redio ya jirani yetu Mzee Jomba. Hakuna hata mmoja wao aliyepata kupewa cheo katika serikali ya Marekani...*

*...I had heard them on our neighbor Mzee Jomba's radio. None of them had ever been given a position in the US government...*

Radio has become one of the mainstream mass media in Kenya due to its cheap and portable features. Kenya has 303 licensed radio stations, including 212 commercial FM stations, 78 community FM stations and 13 public FM stations, far ahead in East Africa.<sup>30</sup> The regions with the highest radio listening rates are rural areas, higher listenership rates than urban areas. Additionally, in recent years, with the popularization of mobile phones and digital technology, Kenyans' radio consumption media has also changed. Traditional radios are still the mainstream, while mobile phones, as an important platform, account for about one-third of the audience's media.<sup>31</sup>

As mentioned above, affordable smartphones and improving internet infrastructure are the main driving forces behind the popularity of social media in Kenya. Kenya is known as the "Silicon Savannah" and is a leader in the internet industry in East Africa. According to statistics, in January 2024, the number of Internet users in Kenya was 22.71 million, with a penetration rate of 40.8% of the total population, an increase of 445,000 people from 2023 to 2024, a growth rate of 2.0%. As of the beginning of 2024, the number of active social media users in Kenya was 13.05 million, equivalent to 23.5% of the total population, an increase of 3.6 million people from 2023 to 2024, a growth rate

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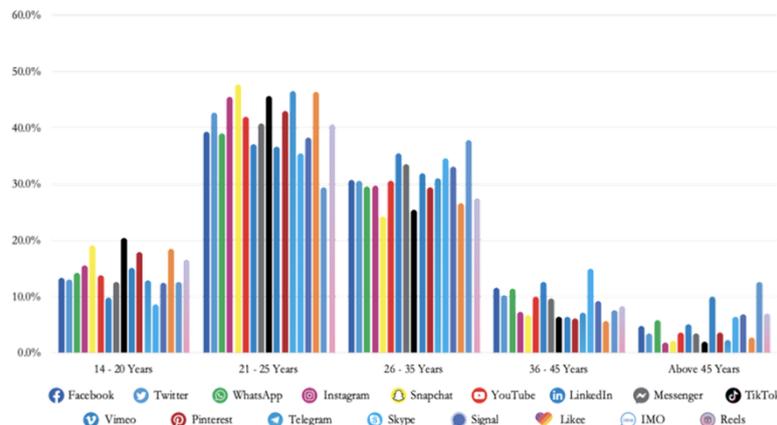
<sup>28</sup> Yu, M. H., & Wei, Y. Y. *The Linguistic Situation and Language Policy in Kenya* [M] // Li, H. F., et al. *Research on the Linguistic Situation and Language Policy in African Countries*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2023: 207.

<sup>29</sup> Wu, J. W. *Media Studies: An Introduction* [M]. Beijing: Communication University of China Press, 2024: 29.

<sup>30</sup> CDAC Network. *Kenya Media Landscape Guide* [EB/OL]. (2024-03) [2024-10-27]. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60996b757eb6521a42f3839d/t/663506da4298713cbe968d30/1714751203150/Kenya-Media-Landscape\\_Guide.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60996b757eb6521a42f3839d/t/663506da4298713cbe968d30/1714751203150/Kenya-Media-Landscape_Guide.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Communications Authority of Kenya. *Kenya Media Landscape Report, July-September 2023* [R/OL]. Nairobi: Communications Authority, 2023: 4-5, 8 [2024-10-27]. [https://www.ca.go.ke/sites/default/files/2024-02/Audience%20Measurement%20and%20Industry%20Trends%20Report%20July-September%202023\\_0.pdf](https://www.ca.go.ke/sites/default/files/2024-02/Audience%20Measurement%20and%20Industry%20Trends%20Report%20July-September%202023_0.pdf).

of 38.2%.<sup>32</sup> As shown in the figure below, young people aged 21-35 in Kenya are the main users of social media, especially on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.



**Figure 1.** Social Media Use by Age Group in Kenya <sup>33</sup>

Young people have a natural spirit of exploration and often desire to transcend traditional society and move towards a wider world. Modern communication technology takes young people away from their families and allows them to understand the outside world. Young people reflect on themselves from the global experience brought by the media. Therefore, the "sphere"<sup>34</sup> formed by the communication network gives young people "the mobility of thought"<sup>35</sup>; but on the other hand, local narratives are closely related to personal life experiences, social participation and national history. They provide individuals with identities and direct sense of belonging. Mass media has neither stifled the role of local connections and indigenous experiences in the process of identity formation, nor can it simply replace or eliminate local and national identities.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, young people construct their own identities in the intersection of global and local experiences.

The 2024 Kenyan rejection of fiscal bill movement precisely reflects the tension between the youth's "mobility of thought" and "offline anchoring". In a short period of time, the youth protesters widely spread dissenting voices through tools such as social media and artificial intelligence, exposed corruptions, built broad consensus, and called for protests. Through highly digitalized methods, they forged quick-response collective identity, transcending traditional social identities and geographical limitations, and demonstrated a collective "youth" identity that transcends conventional divisions. However, in the traditional political and economic structure, youth remain marginalized in benefit distribution—one of the fundamental reasons for this protest movement—indicating their "peripheralized and passive" identity in public affairs remains structurally entrenched. Although the movement ultimately pressured President Ruto's government to withdraw the bill, the youth protest group paid a huge price in life for it. According to statistics, at least 22 protesters were killed.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, this protest showed how Kenyan youth can navigate between traditional social identities and virtual political identities in the context of globalization and digitalization, showing the characteristics of "anchoring in motion". The success of the protest also indicates that young people are looking for the possibility of breaking the real dilemma, striving for discourse power, and reshaping their own identity.

<sup>32</sup> DataReportal. DIGITAL 2024: KENYA [EB/OL]. (2024-02-23) [2024-05-23]. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-kenya>.

<sup>33</sup> United States International University Africa. Kenyan Social Media Landscape Report 2021 [EB/OL]. (2021-03-18) [2024-10-28]. <https://www.usiu.ac.ke/assets/file/5aba9550-kenyan-social-media-landscape-2021-r.pdf>:13.

<sup>34</sup> Sphere: refers to an information system constructed by communication networks that can cover the entire world.

<sup>35</sup> Mobility: The capital and ability possessed by social actors to determine and control the mobility of themselves and others. People use it to decide whether, where and how they or others move.

<sup>36</sup> Waisbord S. When the cart of media is before the horse of identity: A critique of technology-centered views on globalization [J]. *Communication Research*, 1998, 25 (4): 377-398.

<sup>37</sup> MUSAMBI E. Kenya's president says he won't sign the finance bill that led protesters to storm the parliament [EB/OL]. (2024-06-27) [2025-01-01]. <https://apnews.com/article/kenya-protests-finance-bill-3378f8fd31402002cc5b3c8dfeff6f2a>.

#### 4. When Literature Meets Reality: Kenyan Youth's Identity "Consciousness" and "Self-Determination"

During his presidential campaign, William Ruto portrayed himself as a “son of a nobody”. He talked about his humble origins—going to school barefoot, and peddling chicken and peanuts in rural Kenya.<sup>38</sup> His rags-to-riches journey from a street vendor to the presidency inspired countless youth, reinforcing the belief that individual effort and self-determination could unlock opportunities for success. Young people believe that Ruto has broken the longstanding political dominance of the Kenyatta and Moi dynasties, symbolizing a new era of governance. Kenyan youth yearned for and need such a grassroots president to genuinely listen to voices and integrate youth concerns into policymaking.<sup>39</sup>

After witnessing the arrest of Mwamba, Isa realized that he did not want to achieve his "American Dream" in this way. Instead, he wanted to become a respected person like the founding father Jomo Kenyatta through his own efforts:

*Ni sanamu ya hayati Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, rais wa kwanza wa Kenya. .... Lazima alikuwa mtu wa maana sana. Nikakumbuka ndoto yangu nilipoota kuwa nimekuwa rais wa Amerika. Nikatamani isingekuwa ndoto. Afadhali ningekuwa rais mwenyewe. Hata kama si wa Amerika basi wa Kenya, badala ya kuwa mahabusu anayepelekwa mahakamani. Nilitamani nitengenezewe sanamu yangu kama alivyofanyiwa Kenyatta.*

*This is statue of Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya. .... He was a very great person. When I dreamed that I had become the president of America. I wished it was not a dream. I would rather be the president myself. Even if not of America, but of Kenya, instead of being a prisoner being taken to court. I wished that I could have a statue of me like Kenyatta was made.*

Isa's awakening reflects his active role as a young person, and his growth experience is exactly what the author expects of young people in Kenya. Since the 21st century, Kenyan youth have actively reshaped their identity under the dual influence of globalization and localization, hoping to integrate into the global youth cultural network through local practices and thereby reposition their role in society. This identity construction transcends the traditional binary paradigm, characterized by hybridity and fluidity, providing possibilities for shaping a more diverse and inclusive cultural identity. This practice is reflected in the creative use of Sheng language and the rise of grassroots movements, reflecting Kenyan youth's reimagining and revitalization of local cultural resources, as well as their proactive engagement with global cultural currents.

##### 1) Beyond Ethnicity: Sheng as a Third-Space of Identity Construction

As mentioned earlier, Kenya is a multilingual and multicultural country with more than 40 different ethnic languages. Urban youth experience contradictions and ambiguities in language, culture and identity. This contradiction is reflected in the fact that English represents modern language, Swahili represents traditional language, and ethnic language represents ethnic heritage. Therefore, young people try to seek identity "refuge" through a new language variant, seeking a balance between ethnicity and country, local and global, tradition and modernity.

As a response to multiple identities, Sheng has become a tool for Kenyan youth to build modern identities in a multilingual society. Sheng was originally born in the slums of Nairobi. It's an important variant of Kenyan Swahili, mixing multilingual elements such as Swahili, English and ethnic languages through lexical borrowing, truncation and neologisms. Its usage has expanded from street vernacular to permeate broader societal domains: media, political speeches, education, advertising, entertainment and various social occasions. Its influence now transcends and penetrates

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<sup>38</sup> Moyela W. The 'Son of a Nobody' That Became President [EB/OL]. Republic, 2022-08-23 [2024-11-10]. <https://republic.com.ng/august-september-2022/william-ruto-kenya-presidency/>.

<sup>39</sup> National Cohesion and Integration Commission, Code for Africa, Shujaaaz Inc, AI Fluence. "Breaking the Cycle": Young people's perspectives on the 2022 election [M]. Maintaining Peace through Early Warning, Monitoring and Analysis, 2022: 8.

into rural areas, as it evolves from a youth subcultural code into a pan-urban dialect, reshaping Kenya's linguistic ecosystem.<sup>40</sup> Sheng is not only a symbol of the identity of urban youth, but also a medium for them to transcend ethnic differences and express urban youth culture. Therefore, Sheng is a product of youth activism under the global-local interaction, also a catalyst for youth's glocalization identity. Sheng constructs a third place<sup>41</sup> for Kenyan youth that is distinct from the local and global worlds in two ways laying the foundation for them to reshape their identity.

First, Sheng has created a unified field of communication below English, Swahili, national languages, and above spoken dialects. Sheng's status has been continuously improved by the widespread dissemination of mass media. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the popularity of this urban dialect has been widely promoted with the rise of Sheng radio stations such as Ghetto Radio, Sheng Radio, Shujaaz.FM, Koch.FM, etc. Sheng is not only used by young people in Nairobi, it has also spread throughout the country through channels such as radio, television, music and social media, becoming a part of the Kenyan language system. The popularity of Sheng has had a profound impact on Kenyan youth culture. It has become an important tool for young people to express their views through comics such as Shujaaz<sup>42</sup> that target youth groups and satirical news programs such as Hapa Kule News<sup>43</sup>. In addition, online Sheng dictionaries such as Sheng, Sheng Mtaa, Go Sheng, etc., which are presented in the form of web pages and mobile applications, have promoted the standardization of Sheng. Therefore, although Sheng's legal status is not as high as that of English, Swahili and national languages, as a tool for youth expression and social change, its influence and audience have considerably surpassed the scope of general dialects and become a phenomenal form of street Swahili expression.

Secondly, Sheng has realized the two-way mutual construction of language and culture in the third space, becoming an important tool to weaken ethnical identity. Youth culture, with its constant pursuit of innovation and expression of individuality, has directly influenced the formation and evolution of Sheng, providing it with rich creativity and vitality; conversely, the widespread use and dissemination of Sheng has promoted the re-creation and identification of youth culture, blurred the boundaries between different ethnical languages, weakened the binding relationship between language and specific national identity, and enabled young people to find a sense of cross-cultural belonging through a common language platform.

The third space constructed by Sheng language provides Kenyan youth with a fluid and transformative identity field, enabling them to transcend the binary paradigm of tradition and modernity, local and global, and redefine and negotiate their own identity in a new cultural field that is neither completely traditional nor completely modern.

## 2) In The Name of Youth: A Grassroots Movement of Self-Empowerment

The grassroots movement is a direct response of the grassroots people to problems such as uneven distribution of resources and polarization between the rich and the poor. It fights against unequal

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<sup>40</sup> Githiora C. Sheng: the expanding domains of an urban youth vernacular [J]. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 2018, 30 (2): 107-111.

<sup>41</sup> Third Space is a concept proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, which refers to a space between two cultures where different cultural identities, values and meanings are intertwined, negotiated and integrated. This space allows transcending the traditional binary thinking mode and promotes the formation of cultural hybridity and new social identities. The Third Space emphasizes the dynamics, fluidity and transformation of cultural boundaries, which challenges essentialism and fixed concepts of identity.

<sup>42</sup> Shujaaz is a cross-media youth project in Kenya that aims to encourage young people to face challenges in life and explore opportunities through comics, radio and social media. It uses a dynamic narrative to show the daily lives of young people in Kenya and the social issues they face, and uses the Sheng language to bring them closer to the audience. Shujaaz is not only an entertainment tool, but also a media platform that inspires young people to take action by telling inspirational stories, helping young people promote social change and economic empowerment.

<sup>43</sup> Fred Omondi, best known for his role as anchor of the prime-time Sheng satirical news show Hapa Kule News, which aired from 2013 to 2017, is critical of the criminal label of Sheng, arguing that it is a product of the Kenyan elite. Omondi believes that "Sheng has become a focus of discussion today because some elites have tried to associate it with criminal behavior based on their biased way of thinking. However, when I communicate in Sheng, I am not talking to a minority group, but to a wider group. Therefore, Sheng as a discourse practice cannot be ignored and cannot be eliminated." This shows that Sheng has a broad social basis and cultural significance in Kenyan society and should not be marginalized or stigmatized.

distribution systems and political corruption by striving for fairness, equality, rule of law and rights, aiming to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of the group.<sup>44</sup> In Kenya, young people are often the main participants in grassroots movements. They advocate issue-oriented innovative political operations, reshape the previous electoral politics based on tribal and regional identity, build a "bottom-up" economic model, and seek to empower the grassroots people to change their own circumstances.<sup>45</sup> In this process of self-empowerment, participants not only promote social change, but also gradually form a new group identity of youth.

Hip Hop Parliament was born after the election crisis in Kenya in 2007. As a youth organization composed of underground hip-hop artists, its goal is to give voice to young people. It combines globalized hip-hop culture with local social issues to form an empowering grassroots movement model. Hip Hop Parliament strengthens the group identity of Kenyan youth through the triple empowerment mechanism of language, art and collective action: first, the parliament breaks the hierarchy and regional distinction of language through Sheng, giving young people a "classless" cultural expression tool to help them build an independent cultural identity; second, the organization expresses protests and puts forward demands through art forms such as rap, graffiti, and street dance, and promotes ethnical reconciliation. This peaceful resistance practice of local struggle and global characteristics gives young people subjectivity in social revolution, and also strengthens their sense of participation and influence in the public domain; finally, the parliament promotes young people from divided ethnical identities to the common identity of "Kenya"<sup>46</sup> by establishing a "neutral space" for cross-ethnic cooperation and using hip-hop culture as an "umbrella for different sub-cultures".<sup>47</sup>

In addition, Kenya's grassroots movement does not separate gender issues from youth issues. Instead, it promotes the deep connection between gender equality and intergenerational justice in the social structure through cross-empowerment, taking the equality of women and youth as the core foundation for promoting social progress, and enhancing the identity and cohesion of the youth group. GROOTS Kenya is a national women's organization founded in 1995. It is committed to solving the invisibility of grassroots women's development and their community development. It empowers grassroots women to lead change through the "champion model" and promotes the effective participation of grassroots women and girls in development. Since the 21st century, the organization has developed rapidly and won many international awards. In 2003, it won the UN Red Ribbon Award. In 2020, it won the Best NGO Project for Gender Equality in The National Diversity and Inclusion Awards & Recognition (DIAR Awards). Its Executive Director Fridah Githuku was named one of the 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy in the World.<sup>48</sup> GROOTS Kenya's Money Power<sup>49</sup>, Deliver for Good<sup>50</sup> and Champions for Transformative Leadership<sup>51</sup> projects promote the role transformation of women and youth at the cultural level through economic empowerment, social participation and leadership development, thereby strengthening their group identity. Through economic empowerment, women and youth have transformed from traditional dependent roles to autonomous economic individual; through social participation, they have become innovators in the public sphere and redefined society's perception of their group functions; through leadership development, they have transformed from "being led" to decision makers and leaders. These projects have given women and youth more economic capabilities, social resources and leadership power, while also internalizing

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<sup>44</sup> Xie J.L. On the Governance of Grass - Roots Political Movement in Cyberspace [J]. *Journal of Public Management*, 2011, 8 (01): 38.

<sup>45</sup> Zhang, W. J. The Rise and Impacts of Kenya's Hustler Movement [J]. *Contemporary World*, 2024, (1): 57.

<sup>46</sup> Marsh C, Petty S. Globalization, identity, and youth resistance: Kenya's Hip Hop parliament [J]. *MUSICultures*, 2011, 38 (1): 132-140.

<sup>47</sup> HIPHOP PARLIAMENT. HIPHOP PARLIAMENT DECLARATION [EB/OL]. (2008-02-02) [2024-12-16]. [https://jaluo.com/wangwach/200802/23/Microsoft\\_Word-HIPHOP\\_PARLIAMENT\\_DECLARATION\\_2008.pdf](https://jaluo.com/wangwach/200802/23/Microsoft_Word-HIPHOP_PARLIAMENT_DECLARATION_2008.pdf):1.

<sup>48</sup> GROOTS KENYA. Our History [EB/OL]. [2024-12-16]. <https://grootskenya.org/our-history/>.

<sup>49</sup> GROOTS KENYA. Money Power [EB/OL]. [2024-12-16]. <https://grootskenya.org/project/money-power/>.

<sup>50</sup> GROOTS KENYA. Deliver for Good [EB/OL]. [2024-12-16]. <https://grootskenya.org/project/deliver-for-good/>.

<sup>51</sup> GROOTS KENYA. Champions for Transformative Leadership [EB/OL]. [2024-12-16]. <https://grootskenya.org/project/champions-for-transformative-leadership/>.

their social and cultural roles, forming a cultural identity with self-awareness and self-determination as the core, and promoting the comprehensive reshaping of gender and intergenerational roles in society.

## 5. Conclusion: The practical significance of Kenyan youth identity research

Ken Walibora's Swahili novel *Ndoto ya Amerika* stands as an indispensable text for understanding identity formation among Kenyan youth. Centered on the aspirations and disillusionments of protagonists Isa and Madoa, the narrative exposes the crisis faced by young Kenyans under the dual pressures of Western cultural influence and local cultural preservation. The protagonists' pursuit and ultimate collapse of the "American Dream" poignantly mirror the broader tensions of Kenyan youth between embracing global modernity and clinging to indigenous identities.

Globalization has profoundly reshaped cultural, economic, and political landscapes across the Global South. In Kenya, youth identity crises emerge as a multifaceted social phenomenon rooted in colonial legacies, political instability, and entrenched economic inequality. These contradictions reflect their complex predicament within the entangled dynamics of globalization and indigenous culture. This study provides a new perspective for understanding Kenya society by investigating how Kenyan youth navigate ethnic politics, multilingualism, and media-driven pressures to redefine their identities, and how they show their pivotal role in national reconstruction.

In future, solving divisions stemming from tribalism, multilingualism, and mass media requires more inclusive frameworks for youth participation. Resource allocation mechanisms with of more equity, national governance structures with more transparency and civic engagement could empower Kenyan youth to reconcile their fragmented identities.

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