

## The Sociolinguual Disposition of the Emergent *Deejay Afro* Film Commentary in Kenya

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### Abstract

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*The Kenyan film scene has experienced a descending trajectory characterized by dwindling fortunes in cinema theatres, leading to closure of famed theatres like **Odeon** cinema, **Nairobi** cinema, **Fox drive-in** cinemas, and **Globe** cinema, among others, in Nairobi and other major towns in Kenya. As the cinemas auditoriums were succumbing to the culture of indifference to theatre-going in the 1990s, estate and village video shows proliferated in the densely populated low-income urban and peri-urban areas in Kenya. Typified by screenings of popular Hollywood and Hong Kong action films, the video shows filled their benches by featuring commentators, popularly known as video-show deejays, the most renown being '**Deejay Afro**'. The popularity of '**Deejay Afro**' cannot be overstated and to date his performances still endear a large section of the Kenyan audience in rural and peri-urban areas. So, what exactly about this modern film commentator endears him to his audience and what are the distinctive qualities of his art? These are the questions that this paper seeks to address, drawing parallels with the Japanese '**Benshi**' as described by Don Kiriara and Donald Richie inter alia, and guided by the aesthetic theories of Theodor Adorno, and the Frankfurt school perspectives of spectatorship. The analysis is based on a '**Deejay Afro**' commentary*

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### Introduction

Verbal film commentary is inherently an art; an old art of storytelling whose embers still glow, albeit buried under hills of ashes of post silent cinema era. It is almost a century since the advent of the talkies, the stars of the film theaters, like the Japanese *Benshi* and the American 'barker'. Such film commentators faded off eons ago, becoming some sort of legendary memory, when their pre-synch sound influence is spoken of. However, in Kenya, the shift from formal cinema theaters to estate and village video shows in the densely peopled low-income urban and peri-urban areas in Kenya has seen a re-emergence of a modern day film commentator.

Exemplified by shows of popular Hollywood and Hong Kong action films like ***Rambo***, ***Missing in Action***, ***Street fighter***, ***Commando***, inter-alia, the video shows attract audiences by utilizing such commentators. Fashioned as an omniscient explainer, avid entertainer, and talented analyst, *Deejay Afro*, in his commentary, exudes the talents of a voice actor, a storyteller and a commentator. Though ages apart, in view of geography and period, the Japanese *benshi* that ruled Japanese cinema during the silent era and Kenya's *Deejay Afro* share many qualities that elevate them into the podium of art forms that possess an inimitable language of communication.

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A stark distinction between the two, however, is that while the *Benshi* thrived during silent cinema era when the silent images accorded an avenue for the commentator to provide the aural perceptual stimulus - voice, *Deejay Afro* emerged and grew when cinema had fully developed a language, complete with a voice.

### **Synopsis of the Movie the Rock (1996)**

A rebel group of Marine Commandos led by their general seize dangerous chemical weapons and take over the Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, taking eighty one (81) tourists as hostages. They demand a ransom of one hundred million dollars (\$100 million) to be paid as restitution to families of military men who died in covert operations and were denied compensation; failure to which they would launch 15 rockets into the city. An elite seal team backed by FBI chemical warfare expert and a former Alcatraz prison escapee is assigned to get to Alcatraz and neutralize the terrorist threat before time runs out.

### **Deejay Afro the Narrator**

*Deejay Afro* takes up the onus to re-tell the story in a film through narration. The language of choice is Kiswahili, the national language of Kenya and recently elevated to a second official language - at the same level with English. Being the national language, Kiswahili is spoken and understood by majority of Kenyans – the young and old, literate and illiterate. Whereas English is mostly used in formal situations, Kiswahili is the preferred option in informal situations. *Deejay Afro*'s choice of language is therefore apt in as far as his target audience is concerned. However, most Kenyans only speak the formal Kiswahili in strict contexts and prefer code-mixing and switching in casual and relaxed circumstances. Code-switching and the emergence of new hybrid languages are widespread in contemporary urban culture in Africa. Rural-urban migration that necessitates the integration of people from different ethnic communities, and the current pervasive use of new media such as the internet, not only strongly heighten the amalgamation of languages and the establishment of new idioms but also instigate global ties within a language community.

In tandem with this reality and the linguistic inclinations of his spectators, *Deejay Afro* employs 'Sheng', a Kenyan urban slang that amalgamates a number of Kenyan language but whose foundation draws heavily from Kiswahili and English. However, it is also greatly influenced by other Kenyan languages including Gikuyu, Kamba and Dholuo.

In his narration, *Afro* re-characterizes the film characters by naming, renaming and attaching to them poignant personality descriptions that he consistently refers to throughout his performance. He for instance refers to some movie characters by their individual actor's names in the case of famous stars and performers. For instance, in *The Rock*, for the character Stanley Goodspeed, the FBI chemist, *Deejay Afro* decides to re-characterize him with the name Nicholas Cage, in reference to his more famous identity as a movie star, in order to make the audience relate more with his character as Nicholas Cage-the-action-star. The commentator also describes Cage as a biology lab technician, ably tapping to the audiences' indifference towards the sci-fi aspects of the movie, only falling short of simply referring to him to as a scientist. In trying to capture the stature of Stanley Goodspeed in the film, *Deejay Afro* says:

*Tuingie hapa tupate basi technician mwenyewe. The most advanced doctor Nicholas Cage... Ako na PhD, FGH, CIG, CGS, MWK na KBN. A very thomed person. (In this scene we find a technician. The most advanced doctor Nicholas cage. A PhD, F.G.H, C.I.G, C.G.S, M.W.K, and K.B.N holder. A very learned person)*

Aside from PhD, the other titles are simply neologisms, concoctions of the Deejay, all in the goal to try and create a mental picture of how learned and how important the character of Goodspeed is in the story. At the same time, the non-existent titles serve to add humour to the whole experience of a verbal commentary. In the case of John Patrick Mason, the ex-convict and ex-assassin who is tasked to help the navy seals together with Goodspeed, *Deejay Afro* refers to him by his real name - Sean Connery.

Further, in the attempt to capture how deadly Connery is in combat and how cunning he is in battle, the deejay describes him constantly as: “the most dangerous man alive”, “*Mburatha ya ngoma*” (brother to the devil) which infers from the lethal power and slyness of the fabled dark forces of the devil. The phrase ‘mburatha ya ngoma’ constitutes localization of the word ‘brother’ to ‘mburatha’ (as enunciated by some Kenyans from the Central province who have heavy mother tongue influence) and code-mixing since ‘ya’ is the Kiswahili equivalent of the word ‘of’ while ‘ngoma’ is a Kikuyu word for the ‘devil’. Such strategies help to localize the foreign content, thereby helping in capturing the attention of the spectators.

Besides employing actors real names, the narrator also gives the characters his own creative identities, which he adroitly localizes in a way that also inject hilarity.

For instance, the musician from whom Goodspeed takes a Ferrari by force in order to chase the runaway Patrick Mason, *Deejay Afro* calls him *Gacathi Wa Thuo*, a Gikuyu name. He also re-characterizes the Hummer vehicle owner as a Somali merchant and the tram driver as a Luhya man; and this he does by re-vocalizing their dialogues in phonological modulations idiosyncratic to the two Kenyan communities.

*Deejay Afro* also goes further and describes the characters’ thoughts, intentions, and feelings. This he does by giving viewers a background about a particular character. Towards the end of the film, the deejay vividly captures the determination of Goodspeed to live and save Alcatraz from the oncoming fire assault by the Government jet fighters. As Goodspeed runs amidst roaring gun fire, the commentator says,

*Yeye hajafunzwa vita, yeye hajafunzwa kupigana, ni lab technician tu. (He has never been taught combat skills, nor has he been taught how to fight. He is simply a lab technician)*

When introducing Goodspeed’s lover, *Deejay Afro* says,

*Jamaa wetu hapa Nicholas Cage ana mchumba, kituliza roho, mwanamwali, mrembo, sinyorita... Hayo yote ni ya kufafanua mpenzi wa mtu (Our man Nicholas cage has a fiancée, the balm of his heart, a beauty, seniorita... All that just to define someone’s lover).*

With the above statement, he adds to the spectator’s understanding of the character’s socio-emotional disposition.

*Deejay Afro* also employs the description of actions and activities in the movie as a narration technique to both inform and excite the spectators on different story aspects engendered by actions and activities. The descriptions range from direct pinpointing of on screen actions to explanations of the gist of an activity or the general idea of a scene. Vivid language is employed to capture the essence of particular actions or scenes. For instance, as the renegade marines take the chemical warheads, the deejay says,

*Na unasikia hizi silaha ndani zimekubebwa very dangerous chemicals. (You should note that these weapons contain very dangerous chemicals.)*

This is a cautionary statement that prepares the spectator mentally for the ensuing enactment where one soldier drops the warhead, making the chemical to spill, releasing poisonous gas.

The dropping of the warhead, one that the commentator elucidates through utilization of an idiophone “KU” (*Aliangusha basi moja ya zile chemical, KU! - He dropped one of the chemicals ‘KU’*) obligates the soldiers to run out, in the process, leaving one of them in the vault, closing the door to his face and leaving him for dead. As the chemicals corrode his system and his skin burns, *Deejay Afro* exclaims

*Cheki vile aligeuka...chemicals zinafanya unayeyuka, unatoboka, unamwagika. (Just look at how he transforms... The chemicals melt you, pierce you and spill you)*

This description aptly captures the grim danger in the chemicals and exemplifies the ghastly demise that may be generated by the chemicals; consequently illustrating the gravity of having chemical warheads in rancorous hands. While describing the actions and activities in the movie, the deejay also captures the scene and sequence transitions, plotting the narrative along. He introduces new settings to the viewer dexterously with an account laden with descriptions of the new setting.

*Tuchomoke hapo ndugu, kaka, brother mtazamaji, tuweze kuingia hapa kwenye monumentary. Yaani mahali Fulani watu wanakujanga kufanya touring. Ilikuwa gereza wakati wa vita vya pili vya dunia. (Let us turn our attention from there dear viewer, to this monument. A tourist attraction which was a prison during the second world war)*

With this, he lucidly and humorously (the latter, through another neologism –“**monumentary**” - instead of a ‘monument’) introduces the Alcatraz Island prison Museum, enabling the audience to begin the scene from a point of information by understanding the setting, a feature salient in *Deejay Afro*’s narration throughout the film. The deejay goes further to describe the mise en scene in shots. When the renegade marines get to the weapons vault door, just before they open it, there is a profile shot of the vault’s interior through a small glass on the door. The commentator describes the shots thus:

*Masilaha ndio hizo pande ya ndani. (You can be able to see the weapons inside.)*

Also, whenever there is a chase (such as car, on foot, or helicopter chases), *Deejay Afro* captures the non-stop motion and stunts by engaging the spectators adrenalin and surprise through utilization of exclamations and surprise expressions like; “*cheiki maneno!*”(Check that out!) “*Salaala!* (Expression of surprise) and, characteristically, in one on one combats, he exclaims: “*Haiya!*” (An exclamatory expression);“*uka vaa mwana wa kivetu*” (Bring it on you son of a woman – voiced in a Kenyan vernacular language called Kikamba). The spectators can relate to the expressions as they provoke surprise and amazement, all at once, in their own indigenous languages, while at the same time granting the crucial humour necessary to keep them engrossed in an art delivered in a language or twang they may either not penetrate or may struggle to decode.

As a narrator, *Deejay Afro* not only tells the story of the movie as packaged but also as observed. He describes characters, scenes, situations, settings, actions and activities in a language that his spectators fathom.

Beyond just retelling the story in an entertaining way, *Deejay Afro* also attempts at debunking and demystifying the ‘foreign’ story

### ***Deejay Afro the Explainer***

As a commentator, the *Benshi* was regarded as a film reader and an audience representative. In sharing this aesthetic quality, *Deejay Afro* serves as an omniscient explainer who relates to the facts in the film text and the ambient contextual factors that are intrinsically represented in the film.

*Deejay Afro* describes technical ideas in a story in a subtle layman's language to debunk them to the audience. He also connects plot points of the story and links them to the real life Kenyan situation. As the film opens with the burial scene of an army officer, *Deejay Afro* comments:

*Hakuna kazi ngumu kama ya mwanajeshi. Niwafahamishe, kifo cha mwanajeshi si cha kawaida. Unakufa ukililia na kupigania nchi yako.*

*(There exists no harder task than being a military soldier. Let me inform you that a soldier's death is no ordinary death. You die crying and fighting for your country.*

With the above comment, the *deejay* actually unwraps the concept of the film and shifts the spectators empathetically towards the renegade Marines. To affirm his belief in the vitality and larger than life notion of the army, he avers:

*Kazi ya mwanajeshi si Kama ya polisi. Polisi anakuwaga trained kudeal na raia. Onaona? Lakini wanajeshi wana train-iwa kupigana na majeshi wa nchi ingine... magaidi na watu hatari. (The work of the military is different from that of the police. The police are trained to deal with civilians. Do you see? But the military are trained to fight other nations, terrorists and dangerous people)*

The *deejay's* explanations are made simpler by his attempts to localize the actions in the film through allusions to local examples. This way, the commentator brings the film closer to the audience by relating organizations depicted in the film to their Kenyan counterparts. At one point, in *The Rock*, the commentator says that Patrick Mason was trained by among others, the NSIS (national security intelligence services); which is a Kenyan security organ.

*Deejay Afro* also attempts to explain the technical and protocol situations in a movie that would confuse the audience in terms of the distinction in roles between police detectives, FBI and the military and how they relate. At one point, when the FBI chief meets the military leaders, the commentator explains thus:

*Director wa FBI huwa anatoka kwa jeshi. Ili ndiyo uwe director wa FBI lazima uwe trained na military forces. (The FBI director is sourced from the military. For you to qualify as an FBI director, you must be a trained military man.)*

He also goes further to try and make the audience understand the various military artillery used in the movie. He identifies and explains the power of the F18 jet fighters, the general purpose machine gun and the mine load carriers that he simply and comically refers to as 'wheelbarrows'.

### ***Voice Acting – Recreating Dialogue***

Apart from narrating and commentating on the movie, *Deejay Afro* also comes out as a voice actor by recreating dialogue in indigenous language. The dialogue includes: direct translation, loose translation and completely recreated dialogue. Directly translated dialogue in the *Deejay Afro* performance is mostly in the simple dialogue scenes. The direct translation is played in alternation with the original movie dialogue. For instance, in the scenes where Goodspeed's lover reveals to him that she is pregnant, *Deejay Afro* accurately translates the utterance "I am pregnant" as "*Niko na mimba*", with a question from Goodspeed "what?" correctly translated as "*Ati nini?*"

Loose translations in *Deejay Afro*'s performance either aim at capturing the gist of the original dialogue by employing different words or are purely geared at eliciting laughter. For instance, in the scene where Goodspeed is in the process of neutralizing one of the chemical warheads, Patrick Mason looks at the warhead parts curiously, his mouth agape and ejaculates thus: "that looks lethal"; an exclamation that *Deejay Afro* humorously mis-translates as "*Haiya, kwani iko na mayai ndani?*" (You mean it has eggs inside?). Finally, *Deejay Afro* infuses dialogue where there isn't any. Such invented dialogue is drawn from the facial and emotional expressions of the characters and other body language elements such as gestures and character poise. For instance, after Goodspeed's lover informs him of her pregnancy, Goodspeed's expression betrays a perturbed and confused look, to which *Deejay Afro* sneaks a line,

*"We wacha hiyo mambo ya kuo. Kwani hujui watu wakioa wanakufa? Mimi sitaki kukufa"* (Cut the marriage banter. Don't you know that people die when they marry? Well, I don't want to die.)

In summary, as a voice actor, *Deejay Afro* not only translates the dialogue for his audience but also offers more comprehension of the film with ingenious and localized dialogue.

### ***Deejay Afro, benshi, and Spectatorship***

The popularity of *Deejay Afro*'s film voice performances soared in the low-income areas of Kenyan urban centers; pointing to a section of the populace that appreciated his kind of art. This is a population that does not have a high level of education but enjoys art and desire to decipher the scientific and technical aspects of an art form with a methodology and linguistic accent alien to them. The commentator therefore plays the function of peeling the surface meaning of the film just like the *Benshi* who endeavoured to demystify the "universal language" of the silent cinema to a Japanese audience. The Frankfurt school pointed to the callousness of the film producers and market towards the entertainment needs of the low class consumers of their programs. The entry of the film commentator in the Kenyan situation therefore serves a crucial role of ensuring that film does not remain a product of a "culture industry" but a universal product that ought to be devoured and relished by all.

Both the *benshi* and *Deejay Afro* are successful entities created almost entirely by their audience. In his evaluation of the *Benshi* and his beginnings, Donald Richie (1971) observes that the *benshi* was so powerful that he delayed the advent of sound film in Japanese cinema. This point that is affirmed by Robert Knopf (2005), who compares Japanese theater and film, tracing the beginnings of the *benshi* as a *Gidayu* chanter of the *Bunraku* Theater and the historical *Kodan*. Knopf (ibid) further observes that the all-knowing *Benshi* was poorly educated and was primarily there to make it possible for audiences looking for a theatrical experience to enjoy the presentational aspects of film. Similarly, rooted in the multi-ethnic culture of storytelling, *Deejay Afro* also offers a theatrical experience in movies, an experience that evinces an extremely technical language and ideas based on the advanced first world technology. Aesthetically, *Deejay Afro*'s enactment is moulded in the fashion of the narrative performances of the *Sigana* festival and the narrative genre of the Kenya schools and colleges drama festival.

In his performance, *Deejay Afro* speaks to his audience, drawing their attention and directly referring to them. From the beginning of the film, *Deejay Afro* invites his audience, whom he refers to fondly as *Ndugu/kaka* (brother), *dada* (sister), and *watazamaji* (viewers). He keeps referring to them throughout his narration and commentary, prodding and inviting their attention with phrases like "*kumbuka mtazamaji*" (remember, viewer), when alluding to a past scene, or an earlier stated fact. The commentator would say "*Tazama kwa makini*" (observe keenly) and "*Nikufahamisha/Nikujulisha*" (let me inform you), when he wants to demystify particular plot points or character actions.

### **Conclusion**

*Deejay Afro* can easily be called a reincarnation of the *Benshi*. The latter tried to lay bare the tremendously methodological “universal language” of the image and montage of the silent era. On the other hand, the whole idea of *Deejay Afro* is to “make-it-simple” for the audience and help them make sense of the stunts that are practically impossible in real life, humanize the characters and simplify the plot by explaining scenes and relating the scenes to real life using a language that the audience can penetrate and savor. The power of *Deejay Afro*, taken into the account, is subtle enough to let the movie images and film score speak to the spectator.

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