

Use of Songs as An Effective Communication Tool for Climate Change and Transformative Action in Kenya

Grace Waithira Njenga

Department of Literary and Communication Studies, Laikipia University, Kenya

Abstract

Music is a powerful tool that can be used for transformative action. Music can be used to communicate information and emotions, and thus, it influences the way people think and how they view the world. A song is a musical piece involving lyrics that can be sung with or without accompaniment. Songs have always been a uniting cultural tool throughout human history. Songs serve not only a single purpose of entertainment but also educational purposes. The objective of this research is to analyse the climate change themes addressed in environmental songs by Kenyan artists and to examine how these songs can be used in climate change conversations. Songs about climate change can drive and encourage people and even countries to make positive changes. Even though songs play a crucial role in transforming people's minds, limited research on using songs in climate change action has been done in Kenya. Kenyan artists have composed songs on climate change. However, only some of these songs are popular, but we predict they can bring substantial transformative change if utilized. This research uses data from YouTube channels. The study adopts a descriptive design guided by the Ecocriticism Theory. The researchers relied on previous studies and critical analysis of scholarly texts on songs. We argue that songs by Kenyan artists have themes that express the scenario of environmental degradation due to climate change. These songs can be an effective communication tool about climate change in Kenya.

Keywords: Climate change, communication tool, environmental degradation, Kenyan songs, transformative action

Introduction

Climate change and environmental degradation affect all humanity regardless of social class, economic system, political orientation, or profession. Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns in a region. Different countries adopt diverse ways of addressing climate change in their region. In 2010, the government of Kenya rolled out a strategic plan on how to deal with environmental degradation. The plan was part of attaining the Vision 2030 agenda on climate change (Government of Kenya, 2010). Favourable climatic condition is a major driving factor for most economic activities. In Kenya, the primary economic activity is agriculture, thus greatly affected by climate change.

Scholars have researched and written about the mitigation practices of climate change. The government has also involved other stakeholders in the fight against environmental degradation (Abbass et al., 2022). Government agencies, private sectors, youth groups, women's groups, faith-based organizations, and the media have participated in the climate change debate. Despite the efforts by the government, climate change awareness still needs to improve countrywide. Most community members need to recognise their role in the fight against climate change. Therefore,

there is a need to create awareness among community members. The government strategy plan highlights different tools that can be used to create awareness. Some of the tools proposed include print and electronic media, drama, community forums, and integrating climate change into the education system, among other ways (Government of Kenya, 2010). The role of creating awareness is to make citizens better informed on climate change issues and actively participate in programs to combat it.

There is a need to create appropriate models of communication that will be used to transmit and disseminate information on climate change. The community should own the communication model and devise appropriate tools for dissemination. These models and tools should have local content relevant to the target community. They should also have a language and cultural relevance for people to identify with. One such communication tool is the use of songs in climate change conversations.

Songs are emotive; hence, they can change the world by encouraging people and countries to make positive changes (Nabeta & Onguthe, 2014). Songs can be found in all spheres of life and serve diverse purposes. Songs make one creative, play with the emotions, make learning enjoyable, and develop listening skills. They can influence what people think and their view of the world. They also serve as a uniting cultural tool across the world.

In Kenya, artists have composed and sung songs about climate change. Even though most of the songs on climate change may be unpopular, they contain themes that express the scenario of environmental degradation due to climate change relevant to the Kenyan community. These songs touch on deforestation, environmental degradation, and other elements of climate change in Kenya.

Unlike the scientific jargon used in climate change workshops and forums, songs use simple language that people can flow with. Songs play a crucial role in transforming people's minds. Hence, more research on using songs on climate change action should be done in Kenya. This paper analyses the climate change themes addressed in environmental songs by Kenyan artists and examines how these songs can be used in climate change conversations. We argue that songs with themes on climate change can be an effective communication tool for transformative action. Such songs can be used as educational tools for climate change for the current and future generations.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The researcher deliberately selected three songs from the YouTube channel that have themes on climate change for analysis. These songs were selected from a pool of ten based on the thematic areas each song covered. The song's thematic areas were analysed, and a comparison between the songs was made. The research adopts a descriptive analysis where the themes of each of the songs selected were critically analysed.

This study is guided by the ecocriticism theory. Ecocriticism, also known as literary ecology or environmental literary studies, is the study of literature and its relationship to ecology (Barry, 2020). It adopts an interdisciplinary point of view where scholars analyse texts that illustrate concerns and examine how literature treats the subject of the environment. The following tenets of ecocriticism were used to guide this research:

- Ecocriticism theory studies the interconnection between nature and culture. This tenet was useful in investigating the cultural aspects of the songs.

- Ecocriticism, as a critical stance, has one foot in literature and the other on land. Through this, it was possible to discuss how man relates to the physical environment through the language used in the songs.
- Ecocriticism deals with the relationship between the physical environment and human beings. This tenet was useful in analysing how humans interpret land by reviewing the themes of the various songs.

The Role of Songs in Creating Environmental Awareness

Music remains one of the most universal ways human beings communicate and express their views in the present world. Music has been a characteristic of the human condition over the years. People of all ages and cultures worldwide use music as their language of communication. Although musical behaviour is universal, its achievement is shaped by the environment and experiences of people (Andang'o, 2020). There are different types of songs in every community. These songs are used for different purposes to cater for the diverse needs of society. The purposes of songs vary from entertainment, education, recreation, uniting the people, and cultural identity among others. Every community has its songs, which mostly harbour the culture that serves as an identity of a particular community.

In a study carried out on a song from the Central Pacific atoll nation of Kiribati, Hermann and Kempf (2021) argue that emotive songs are one of the artistic forms the community uses to articulate the vulnerability of the will to face the challenges brought by climate change. Further research shows how, in Kiribati, the Pacific Islanders used the reticulations of Noah Story with politics and songs to face the challenge posed by climate change (Kempf, 2017). Through songs, the Kiribati community reclaimed power, which brought meaning and shaped their future concerning land, culture, and nature. Mills (2016) claims that protest songs can be used to change how the community views the environment. The protest songs covered topics on the effects of climate change on global agriculture and environmental justice.

In Kenya, some communities perform rainmaking rituals to appease the gods. Rainmaking rituals are rites that accompany prayers for rain. Even if 'making rain' is entirely left to God, it is the responsibility of people to summon God's rain through prayers and singing (Ombati, 2017). The rainmakers sang songs touching on climate change issues such as drought and rainfall. The Akamba community also performed the *kilumi* dance to invoke blessings of water spirits. The dance involved singing about climate change. Researching oral poetry for environmental conservation, Monanti et al. (2014) concluded that several song texts from the Gusii community in Kenya are vibrantly addressing climate change.

Some songs can be relevant in one environment and lose meaning in another. It is important to note that the songs used in this survey are about environmental degradation and the conservation of water resources, which is significant in Kenya. Like most developing countries, the major environmental challenge is deforestation. Most Kenyan households in rural areas have limited alternative fuel sources and thus use charcoal or firewood as their primary energy source (Veldkamp et al., 2020). This results in the cutting down of trees, which leads to desertification. Nonetheless, natural water resources such as rivers, lakes, and oceans play an essential role in domestic and agricultural activities in Kenya.

The primary cause of climate change in Kenya is deforestation. Deforestation is cutting down trees indiscriminately. Deforestation is the second largest contributor to the climate crisis. The United Nations body warns that deforestation intensifies the effects of climate change, such as drought, water scarcity, and food shortages (Kumar et al., 2021). Deforestation mainly affects

rural parts of the world, who depend on farming for their livelihood. By nature, the backbone of Kenya's economy is agriculture. Most of the agricultural practices rely on rainfall to thrive. When the trees are cut down, there is a shortage of rainfall, which subsequently affects agriculture. Since most people in Kenya listen to, sing, play, or create music, singing about deforestation and its environmental effects will bring the message home. In this regard, the songs will be an effective tool for climate change and transformation action in Kenya.

Findings and Discussions

There are songs on climate change done by Kenyan artists. For this research, three songs were analysed. These songs are: *Together We Can'* by Dandora Music; *Pray for Nature* by Mwakazi, Kaisa and Mwanjala; and *Maji* by the indigenous music band Afro-Simba.

Dandora Music is a group of Hip Hop artists from Dandora, Nairobi-Kenya. The group was formed in year 2012 after members of this group graduated from Dandora Music School. Apart from the song Together We Can, the group partnered with Connect 4 Climate and produced a song, One Planet.

GREATSON's MUSIC released a music video, Pray for Nature, in 2021. The group comprises Kenya's rising rap artists whose song has a message about the climate crisis. The group leader, Mwakazi, comes from Kasigau Corridor, a severe drought region in South Eastern Kenya.

Afro Simba is a music band that explores the music of the Mijikenda community. Mijikenda comprises nine indigenous coastal communities of Kenya. The group sings songs that accentuate environmental stewardship and peace. In May 2017, Afro Simba released the song Maji. Maji is a Swahili word which means water. The song about water conservation is written in Swahili, which is predominant in the coastal region.

The three songs have diverse themes on climate change, such as the effects of deforestation, the role of the community in protecting the environment, and the benefits of environmental conservation. These are discussed in the next sections.

Effects of Deforestation

In the song *Together We Can*, by Dandora Music, the artist is lamenting the effects of cutting down trees without planting others.

1 TOGETHER WE CAN LYRICS- DANDORA MUSIC

I wish you could hear me and plant more trees to make the world green.

*Green for trees, blue for the sky, yellow for the sun,
Together, we can make these mother's colours shine.*

*Together, we can make Mother Earth smile,
Our eyes are in tears as we watch trees being cut down
I am asking where is the shade.*

It's climate change, it's global warming.

Our future is built on our past.

*We are the new generations, the pollution increase, there is no food, dust all over. Diseases like
Tuberculosis over.'*

One of the effects of cutting down trees is sadness. *Our eyes are in tears as we watch trees being cut.* The artist laments that it pains when people cut down trees. The earth also becomes dull and

gloomy. *Together, we can make these mother's colours shine. Together, we can make Mother Earth smile.*

Nonetheless, deforestation leads to a lack of trees, hence no shade: *I am asking, where is the shade?* Cutting down trees increases the daytime temperatures and heat levels, hence the need for shade. In Kenya, high temperatures have been recorded, which results in prolonged drought. India has also experienced heat waves, which caused deaths (Im & Eltahir, 2017). Deforestation causes global warming; *It is climate change; it is global warming.* Global warming increases the earth's temperatures, which can be disastrous.

Other effects of deforestation are the increase in pollution, lack of food, and spread of dust, which leads to diseases like Tuberculosis: *We are the new generations; the pollution increased, no food, dust all over. Diseases like Tuberculosis over.* According to this song, the future generation is at risk of experiencing harsh climatic conditions. Therefore, there is a need to sensitize the young generation on the importance of protecting the trees: *I wish you could hear me and plant more trees to make the world green.*

Whereas deforestation is a complex phenomenon, the songs are used to express the outcomes. The audience can resonate well with the environment due to the choice of words and figures of speech used in the song. In addition, the song also has simple lyrics that an ordinary person can sing along and remember.

*Our eyes are in tears as we watch trees being cut down
I am asking where is the shade.
It is climate change; it's global warming.
Our future is built on our past.*

Such a song can be used in schools to teach children about the importance of planting trees and the effects of deforestation. The song can also be played on media platforms for a wider audience.

The artist of the song *Pray for Nature* highlights deforestation as the significant cause of climate change.

2 PRAY FOR NATURE LYRICS - GREATSONS MUSIC

*I remember there was a big tree amid our village,
It was long ago, in the days of my young age,
We used to play around the tree when we were small
It was where grandparents told stories to us all,
On top of the tree, there were birds of all kinds,
Their melodious songs blessed the ears of the blind,
It was a landmark and the central meeting spot,
It was the holy spot that the ancestors brought,
One calm day, I heard a big boom,
I couldn't believe my eyes it was a sign of doom,
A big bulldozer fell the noble tree,
The locals who were watching were cheering with glee,
I was lost in the midst of the cheers and the dust,
Tears filled my eyes as I watched in disgust,
Oh! Baby chicks fell out of their nest,*

*They couldn't fly away, though they tried their best,
 This mindless act affected the rain,
 Bringing them drought with the hunger with the pain,
 There were no more cures for the sick and the weak,
 The future became quite sad and bleak,
 Forests have vanished, fading away, like the evening sun,
 From earth we'll be banished, sent away, life's gone and done.
 Warning to everybody living in the generation,
 Message to every state and every conscious nation,
 Death of our trees has become a fixation,
 We ain't moving forward with this null acceleration,
 It spits in the face of the source of creation,
 So mindlessly terminating our earth's duration,
 Destroying the trees causing irreparable harm,
 It is like slashing your throat and cutting off your arm,
 So, before I proceed, let me ask it,
 Why are you pushing us to this early casket?
 Calling our leaders to stop deforestation,
 Do what's right to end this abomination,
 We must shout real loud, Stand strong and proud,
 Our last opportunity, to achieve impunity,
 In all corners of the world and every congregation,
 We must put our efforts in one combination,
 Listen up, have no doubt,
 Hurricanes, fires, floods and drought,
 We must act without hesitation,
 There is no life on earth without conservation,
 Forests have vanished, fading away, like the evening sun,
 From earth we'll be banished, sent away, life's gone and done x2
 no, no, no, no, no no,
 We should never do it again,
 So I say no, no, no, no, no, no,
 Pray for nature and say amen,
 Sote twasema pamoja tuzidi,
 Kuitunza miti daima,
 Kunena kutenda tutaiweka bidii,
 Kuitunza miti daima,
 So it's time to wake up and care for the tree,
 It's time to make our world carbon-free,
 Cause the trees are the reason we breathe clean air,
 And we can only breathe if the trees are there,
 To protect the trees and avoid the strife,
 When you save the trees, you are saving your life.*

The effects of cutting down trees include the destruction of wildlife habitat, reduced rainfall, and hunger: Oh! Baby chicks fell out of their nest, they couldn't fly away; though they tried their

best, this mindless act affected the rain, Deforestation also causes early deaths: Why are you pushing us to early casket?

Furthermore, deforestation makes the earth unproductive: *there is no life on earth without conservation.* This implies that the world has been left bare. Cutting down trees leads to a lack of rainfall, which is essential for agricultural activities.

Solution to Deforestation

Although trees have been cut down, these songs solve this problem. In the song *Together We Can*, there is hope that people can come together and plant trees. Planting trees will make the planet blossom: *The only way to make Mother Earth smile is to plant trees.* The artist wishes people could plant more trees to make the world green.

The song 'Pray for Nature' demands that leaders take immediate action to protect the environment. This is an urgent plea to the leaders to sensitize the community on the need to stop deforestation. The community is also urged to join hands and save Mother Nature.

*Calling our leaders to stop deforestation,
Do what's right to end this abomination,
We must shout loud, Stand strong and proud,
Our last opportunity, to achieve impunity,
In all corners of the world and every congregation,
We must put our efforts in one combination...*

Sadly, the local community seems unaware of the effects of cutting down trees. Instead of fighting for their trees, the locals watched and cheered with glee when the tree was felled down by the bulldozers. A question arises about who brought the bulldozer and why the tree was cut down.

*A big bulldozer fell the noble tree,
The locals who were watching were cheering with glee,
I was lost in the midst of the cheers and the dust,*

This is an awakening message that even though forests, in this case, trees, are essential, most locals do not try to protect them. It could be because of ignorance or being helpless. If no action is taken, the future generation will suffer from harsh, severe climatic conditions: *The future became quite sad and bleak, from earth we will be banished, sent away, life's gone and done.* He cries for Mother Africa and urges people to pray for nature, whose future is at stake: *Pray for nature and say amen.* Deforestation is not only a local problem but a global problem because of the shared atmosphere.

The writer also emphasizes the importance of a tree in society: *Destroying the trees is equated to self-destruction. Destroying the trees, causing irreparable harm, is like slashing your throat and cutting off your arm.* The big tree has been there for a long and has a cultural attachment: The ancestors brought it to be used by the community. This sentiment shows that there is interconnection between nature and culture.

It is the responsibility of the local community to protect the surrounding physical environment. If the community does not protect the forests, eventually, the earth will be banished and doomed. Deforestation starts by just cutting down a single tree. The use of a big tree in the village is relevant because anyone can identify a giant tree that used to exist in their village or *homestead which is no longer there. The listener can comprehend the experience, and the message*

is sensible. Society has no option but to fix the challenges facing the environment. Deforestation does not only happen in large forest tracks but cutting down a single tree leads to environmental degradation.

Benefits of Environmental Conservation

Apart from songs about environmental degradation, some songs show the benefits of preserving the environment. One such song is 'Maji' by the indigenous music band Afro Simba. Maji is a Swahili word that means water.

3 MAJI LYRICS- AFRO SIMBA

CHORUS

*Mimi maji, Mwanijua
Wengi waniita bahari, mvua, mto ama ziwa
Mwanijua
Wengi waniita bahari, mvua, mto ama ziwa*

VERSE 1

*Wengi waniita maji, Maji ni uhai
Mwatatizika nami
Mwasema maji meupe, Baharini samawati
Mtoni maji ya vumbi*

PRECHORUS:

*Kuishi kwaraha (mwahitaji maji)
Mili yenu isafi (mimi maji)
Bustani zenu zanawiri (mimi maji)
Kiu na maliza (mimi maji)*

VERSE 2

*Je mashambani, Mazao kwa wingi
Vicheko na wapa, Mwaishi karibu nami
Asiye penda aseme
Nawachukua mbalimbali, Ulimwenguni mwote
Baharini na mitoni, Nahifadhi nakuwapa
Milki wanyama samaki binadamu*

English Translation

CHORUS:

*I am water, and you know me
You call me ocean, rain, river, lake
You know me
You call me ocean, rain, river & lake*

VERSE: 1

*You all call me water. And you say water is life.
Yet, you are confused about me.
You say water is clear, Oceans are blue
and the rivers are brown*

PRE-CHORUS:

To live happily , (you need water)

You are all clean, (it's me water)
Your gardens are flourishing, (it's me water)
I quench your thirst, (it's me water)
 VERSE 2:
Look at your farms. There's much to harvest
, and it gives you joy. You live by my side.
Whoever is not satisfied, may speak.
I take you to far places, around the world
through oceans and lakes. I help preserve surroundings
and all living things.

This song is a celebration of water conservation. The persona, water, talks about the positive things it brings to the society that conserves it well. Water is life as it is used for cleaning and also to quench thirst: *I quench your thirst (it's me water)*. Clean water brings happiness to people: *To live happily (you need water)*.

Another benefit of water conservation is a bountiful harvest, which brings joy to society and satisfaction to the people living near the water bodies. Water conservation also preserves the surroundings and living things: *Your gardens are flourishing, (it's me water): Look at your farms, there's much to harvest, and it gives you joy. You live by my side.*

This song gives hope that all is not lost if the community preserves the environment. Preserving the environment is a collective responsibility because it affects the whole world. Just as the water that goes to all corners of the earth, the effects, both positive and negative, will be felt the world over: *I take you to far places worldwide through oceans and lakes. I help preserve surroundings and all living things. There is a mutual relationship between the physical environment, the water bodies, and the people that live near them.*

Conclusion and Recommendation

Deforestation is the second largest contributor to the climate crisis in Kenya. United Nations body warns that deforestation is a catalyst of climate change. The effects of deforestation include water scarcity, drought, and food shortages. If the issue of deforestation is not addressed, millions of people, especially those in rural areas who depend on agriculture for their livelihood, will be adversely affected. There is need also to involve the young generation in the fight against environmental degradation. One way of reaching most people is through songs. The mainstream media should play environmental songs to reach a wider audience. Although the musicians do not tackle the climate change issue like climate scientists, policymakers in government, and other agencies, they use songs that reflect the accurate picture of environmental degradation (*Hermann & Kempf, 2021*). Literary language is a powerful tool that can awaken the audience into environmental action. Songs speak to the heart and soul; hence, they can be used for transformation action. It is time for the society to embrace green talent.

From our findings, we advocate for creating songs and music that address environmental degradation. These songs should be sung at public gatherings, played in media houses, and taught in schools for them to be effective. The Kenyan artists should take the challenge and sing about climate change. Songs have the power to bring out emotions and thus can give positive energy to people to change their situation. From this study, the role of the media cannot be underrated. It is through the media that the climate songs will reach a wider audience. We recommend further research on the role of the media in making popular climate change songs.

References

- Andang'o, E. A. (2020). I am exploring strategies for promoting the singing of multicultural songs in primary school education in Kenya. In *The Routledge Companion to Interdisciplinary Studies in Singing* (pp. 225-237). Routledge.
- Abbass, K., Qasim, M. Z., Song, H., Murshed, M., Mahmood, H., & Younis, I. (2022). A review of the global climate change impacts, adaptation, and sustainable mitigation measures. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, 29 (28), 42539–42559.
- Barry, P. (2020). Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory. In P. Barry (Ed.) *Beginning theory* (Fourth edition). (pp. 248-278). Manchester University Press.
- Government of Kenya (2010). National Climate Change Response Strategy.
- Hermann, E., & Kempf, W. (2021). Climate Change Songs and Emotions. publications.goettingen-research. Online.
- Im, E. S., Pal, J. S., & Eltahir, E. A. (2017). Deadly heat waves are projected in the densely populated agricultural regions of South Asia. *Science advances*, 3(8), e1603322
- Kempf, W. (2017). Climate change, Christian religion, and songs: Revisiting the Noah story in the Central Pacific. *Environmental transformations and cultural responses: Ontologies, discourses, and practices in Oceania*, pp. 19-48.
- Kumar, A., Nagar, S., & Anand, S. (2021). Climate change and existential threats. 1–31). Elsevier.
- Nabeta, S.N., & Ongutte, N.R., (2014). Literary Environmentalism: An ecocritique of Kiswahili Literature. *International Journal of Ecology and Ecosolution Vol. 1(2)*, pp. 29-41.
- Monanti, N., Amayi, Z., Okong'o, J. B., & Robert, W. (2014). Oral poetry for environmental conservation: A study of selected Gusii song texts. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 5(1), 25-34.
- Mills, L. (2016). The Use of Song in Social Movements: Where Are Songs for the Environment? 2016 NCUR. libjournals.unca.edu
- Ombati, M. (2017). Rainmaking rituals: Song and dance for climate change in the making of livelihoods in Africa. *International Journal of Modern Anthropology*, 1(10), 74-96.
- Pray for Nature: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dgswau8s8qM&t=137s>
- Together we can: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eX3V5f-6dFM>
- Veldkamp, E., Schmidt, M., Powers, J. S., & Corre, M. D. (2020). Deforestation and reforestation impact on soils in the tropics. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1(11), 590-605.