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Youth Livelihoods and Karaoke Work in Kampala's Nightlife Spaces

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Introduction

Youth, most frequently defined as those between the ages of 15 and 24, comprise a major part of the urban population in Uganda. It is estimated that about 17 per cent of Uganda's population falls in the 15 to 24 age group (Uganda Demographic and Health Survey – UDHS – 2006). In urban and rural areas, this age cohort represents respectively 25 and 16 per cent of the population. The preponderance of this age cohort in urban areas points to processes of rapid urbanization that impose an imperative on governments and communities to create and promote viable and sustainable livelihoods for urban youth. In Kampala, Uganda's administrative and commercial capital, the UDHS (2006) provides data that shows youth as suffering the highest rate of economic inactivity and that this rate is heavily gendered. Thus, on average females are three times more likely to be redundant compared to their male counterparts. At the same time, urban youth, especially in Kampala, are more likely to be redundant compared to their rural counterparts (see Table 1).

Nevertheless, for a substantial number of unemployed youth in Kampala's poor and low-income neighbourhoods, 'Karaoke' has come to provide a semblance of productive work. Karaoke work refers to the activities of youths co-opted into entertainment groups to provide a host of nightlife entertainment acts in numerous venues around the city. While distinct from karaoke as conventionally practised in up-market entertainment venues (with its arsenal of teleprompters and lyrical materials); here the karaoke work of the youths shows up as a range of stage acts, which include singing (both actual and lip singing or

mimicking), dancing, comedy and striptease by female group members.¹ In its expression, karaoke adopts some of the latest local, regional, and international musical genres and entertainment acts.

Table 1: Percent Distribution of Unemployed Persons Age 15-49 in 12 Months Preceding the Survey

Background Characteristic	Male	Female
Age		
15-19	13.3	32.1
20-24	5.6	15.4
25-29	1.1	7.6
30-34	0.8	5.9
35-39	0.7	4.1
40-44	0.3	4.0
45-49	1.8	4.0
Residence		
Urban	12.0	32.3
Rural	3.3	9.7
Regions		
Central 1	4.4	25.3
Central2	2.1	19.1
Kampala	12.3	37.7
East central	11.1	15.8
Eastern	0.2	2.6
North	3.4	4.7
Western	6.0	6.0

Source: UDHS (2007:44-45)

However, notwithstanding the opportunities karaoke work affords the youths to negotiate some livelihood, anecdotal evidence points to a number of risks youths face in the occupation. Thus, many are cheated and not paid for services rendered; working hours are known to be long, with managers lining up group members to perform at various venues in a night; in-group competition strains the youths who have to put on exceptional performances to earn the crowd's approval and the accompanying tips. Youths in karaoke groups are also susceptible to sexual harassment or abuse and to face risks of acquiring sexually transmitted infections (STIs) when working in spaces that bring them into contact with older and possibly

less well-meaning individuals. Finally, it has been suggested that karaoke group members (especially the females) mask their prostitution activities as karaoke performers and are stigmatized as prostitutes by family, friends, and the community, who see their work as decadent.

Yet, for youths facing prospects of prolonged unemployment because they lack skills and/or education, or because jobs are unavailable, Kampala's nightlife spaces appear to offer opportunities for negotiating some form of livelihood out of karaoke work. This chapter explores the agency karaoke work affords youths to negotiate their livelihoods in Kampala's nightlife entertainment spaces. The following two sections provide the study's methodology and the theoretical framework within which karaoke work and the livelihoods of urban youth can be conceived. The subsequent two sections present an analysis of the views of the youths on how karaoke work affords them opportunities to negotiate livelihoods by focusing on the production, regulation and consumption processes that underpin the karaoke phenomenon in Kampala. The chapter closes with a section synthesizing results and a conclusion.

Methodology

A case study approach was used to solicit the views of youths in two karaoke groups, namely VIP and Ocean Stars, on a range of issues pertinent to karaoke work using a discussion theme guide. Information on group members' attributes, work history and lived experiences in karaoke work was collected. In total, twenty-eight individuals in both groups were interviewed, five males and eight females from the Ocean Stars Group and eight males and seven females from the VIP group. These individuals comprised all youth performers in the groups. The average age of youths in the groups was 22 years, with females slightly younger (between 18 and 20) than their male counterparts (between 18 and 25).

The two groups differed slightly in the way they operated. The Ocean Stars group appeared more marginal, possessing less attractive attire (costumes) and banners. The group had operated in the karaoke business for less than three years in the city's more marginal nightlife spaces and was apt to employ more transient and younger youth. Finally, all youths in the group cited karaoke to be the main and possibly only productive work they undertook in the city.

On the other hand, the VIP group was a more longstanding group, having been in the karaoke business for over eight years and, as such, had seen a greater turnover of youth performers compared to the Ocean Stars group. Compared to their counterparts in the Ocean Stars group, VIP group members also appeared slightly older, especially the males, and were more self-provisioning with some possessing personal costumes and laptops on which music was played during rehearsals. Some youth in the group also claimed to be students and/or to hold other part-time jobs.

Theoretical Considerations

Following from Chatterton and Hollands (2002, 2003:5), Kampala's nightlife spaces can be conceptualized as an integrated 'circuit of culture' comprising the three processes of production, regulation and consumption. In this context, one needs to simultaneously explore who and what is involved in producing them (designing, marketing, selling, property markets, corporate strategies); who and what is involved in regulating them (laws and legislations, surveillance, entrance requirements, codes of conduct); and, who and what is involved in consuming them (lived experience, perceptions, stereotypes). Nightlife entertainment spaces are also understood to constitute a mixture of mainstream, residual and alternative spaces as shown in Table 2. This analytical framework provides a neat tool for mapping out spaces where karaoke might be undertaken in Kampala and to explore how the production, regulation and consumption processes of karaoke articulate in these spaces.²

Table 2: Types of Nightlife Spaces and their Modes of Analysis

	Mainstream	Residual	Alternative
Production	Corporate brand Profit-oriented Global/national	Community Need-oriented National/regional	Individual Experimental Local (global networks)
Regulation	Entrepreneurial Formal (CCFV, bouncers) and informal (style, price)	Stigmatized Formal (police)	Criminalized Informal (self-regulated)
Consumption	Profit-oriented Divided consumer– producer relations (brand/lifestyle)	Community-oriented Traditional consumer– producer relations (product)	Creative-oriented Interactive consumer– producer relations
Spatial location	Gentrified/up market Dominant centre	Down-market Under-developed centre	Alternative/resistant Margins

Source: Chatterton and Holland, 2002:6.

While in recent years Kampala's nightlife landscape has seen the proliferation of the mainstream that constitutes sanitized and overpriced entertainment venues frequented by the city's elite³; conceiving karaoke work and youth livelihoods within the 'mainstream' is inappropriate since karaoke as understood here is rarely undertaken in these spaces. However, the karaoke activities of the youth described

in this chapter take place in nightlife spaces that can be considered residual and/or alternative because they are situated in low-income neighbourhoods on the fringes of the city centre and/or venues in these spaces serve a less affluent clientele.

In varying degrees, for all involved in producing, regulating and consuming the activity (youth performers, venue owners/managers, venue patrons/clients, the larger community etc.), karaoke meets felt and material needs for income, leisure and entertainment, belonging (to a youth community or culture), skills acquisition, future prospects for work and education. In its expression, karaoke appears experimental, and employs creative entertainment content that transcends the national by embracing regional and global musical genres (reggae, rap and hip hop). In some cases the activity is stigmatized, especially where it degenerates into disorder or misbehaviour. Consequently, nightlife space managers have come to rely on informal (the application of various rights of admission rules) and formal (use of security guards and bouncers) methods to regulate behaviour in these spaces. It is also plausible that karaoke work represents expressions of resistance for youth excluded from the 'mainstream' to project new identities of consumption, which mirror those from which they are excluded.

Production and Consumption of Karaoke in Kampala's Nightlife Spaces

The Experience of a Karaoke Night Out

Over the last ten or so years, karaoke has taken root in many privately owned entertainment venues in Kampala where venue patrons and clients have come to appreciate its interactive forms as a mode of nightlife entertainment. Within the venues, karaoke has come to blur the division between its producers and consumers through the exchange of music, shared ideas and values. Different categories of patrons have come to meet their felt needs for certain genres of music, dance cultures, clothing styles, or sexual identity and/or to be more casual. At the same time, because karaoke tends to be performed in some of Kampala's more marginal neighbourhoods, its consumption has come to invariably reflect patrons' conscious identities and lifestyles.

The production of karaoke usually occurs in single-site music, club and bar venues. These are located in neighbourhoods that teem with hordes of the city's unemployed youth and others with varying forms of employment in the informal sector. The venues exhibit anti-aesthetic exteriors, although some have attractive interior decors and beguiling names like T-cozy, Chez Johnson, Mambo Jambo, Honey Pub and Club 24, among many others. Many are enclosed bar shades with a capacity to hold up to 300 individuals. The venues may also be partitioned to accommodate dancing space, several bar stands (counters), and a general sitting area where tables and chairs are arranged in a number of configurations to cater

to the ambience and comfort needs of different clients. Besides karaoke, clients also patronize these venues to watch English Premier League football games that are broadcast via satellite on a number of television screens in the venues.

Featuring prominently in these venues is a raised stage upon which karaoke is performed. In some of the venues this stage is fitted with all manner of lighting (flash and neon lights, dark-coloured fluorescent lights, etc.) to enhance stage performances. The venues are also equipped with the latest music sound systems, which blare out music at high decibels making simple conversation difficult: even the most marginal nightlife spaces are supported by state-of-the-art musical equipment. The managers also ensure that the venues are dimly lit through the use of dark-coloured fluorescent lights to ensure the privacy of clients. The venues also afford free entry to clients although it is common for them to charge fees ranging between Ugandan shillings 2000 and 5000 (US\$ 1-US\$ 2.60) on days karaoke is performed at the venues.

Venues usually use bouncers to keep the peace and ensure clients comply with entry requirements. A key requirement is that clients purchase a drink (a beer or soda) before they are granted entrance. This measure ensures that idlers are kept out and congestion is kept at a minimum. Some venues also buttress these security measures through the use of armed security guards hired from registered security firms. These are particularly valued by clients with vehicles who for a fee task these guards with overseeing their vehicles as the vandalization of vehicles and the stealing of car parts are common around these venues.

Karaoke performances begin around 9 pm with a comical curtain raiser act performed by a member of a karaoke group or a performer that is independently hired by the venue management. The opening performer normally rants over a diverse range of topical issues, which in the main revolve around sex and other controversial (political, cultural and social) issues of the day. A common subject is women and relationships. In particular, women are portrayed as opportunistic lovers (gold-diggers) and also the major carriers and transmitters of the HIV/AIDS virus. Women who constitute a substantial number of clients in these venues, in turn can be seen engaging the performer in animated gestures denoting objections to his assertions. Political and social debates of the day also feature prominently in these presentations. All in all, no hard feelings ensue from this good-natured interactive discourse between the performer and venue clients.

Having made his presentation, which lasts for about 20 minutes, the opening performer introduces the karaoke group and invites the in-house Disc Jockey (DJ) to commence with the musical programme he has previously worked out with the karaoke group. The first performers then appear on stage dressed in all manner of flashy costumes. By this time, the crowd is frenzied and some can be seen joining the youths on stage and engaging them in dance or throwing money

at favoured performers. A variety of musical genres is performed, which include the local and regional (including localized forms of Reggae and Hip hop, called Ragga and Lugaflow respectively), and Western (Hip-hop, Rhythm and Blues – R & B). Performances which last for about three hours have intermissions that see the performer in the curtain-raiser return to work up the crowd and allow the youths to rest or to rotate performances. At the show's close, the youths retire backstage, remove their costumes and later can be seen leaving the premises in pooled transport or individually, or to melt into the crowd and join in the merry-making. Post-performance, the in-house Dj takes over and the venue turns into a free for all dance fest till the early hours of the morning.

In a nutshell, nightlife spaces where the youth undertake their karaoke work form the basis of more localized nightlife production-consumption clusters, which are characterized by an independent ethos that provides a counterweight to the uniformity of consumption one is likely to observe in venues that serve an elite clientele. For example, the mainstream (elite nightlife spaces) are frequented by young corporates, university students and other fairly well-to-do people, who may desire to create a community of like-minded people in spaces imbued with certain styles and behaviours that are expected and accepted and enforced through door policies and technologies such as CCTV.

On the other hand, marginal nightlife spaces epitomize a more democratic form of popular culture, with the affordability of technologies (lighting systems, musical equipment, etc.) allowing the lived experience of a karaoke night out to be enhanced in these otherwise drab spaces. To echo *Hesmondhalgh* (1998), the affordability of technologies appear to make Kampala's residual and alternative nightlife spaces more alluring by countering the 'big-name' artist in the mainstream, whose valorisation to a large measure depends on a 'star system'.

The Value of Karaoke to the Youth

The karaoke work of the youth in Kampala is an upshot of what Biaya (2005; 216) termed the 'crisis of unemployment', which has affected African youth over the last two decades. Karaoke appears to allow youth to explore new means of affirming their identities, assert popular demands and develop the makeshift economy. To this end, 'nightlife spaces' should draw our attention to the role the youth play in using them to rework disparate signs, forms and materials and convey powerful counter messages, subaltern identities, and disruptive mimicry to demonstrate positive, assertive and authentic voices (Weiss 2005; Miller 1994; Friedman 1990; Hansen 1999; Heralut and Adesanmi 1997).

For karaoke performers, nightlife spaces are both places of work and public spaces, which for the youth embody the social crisis of neo-liberal economic reforms that have destroyed traditional, familial and ethnic solidarities. For the youth, these spaces also exemplify the broken promise of belonging to the class

of urban petty bourgeoisie suggested by current modes of education in Uganda. The spaces also typify the disappearance of the providential state and the increasingly extreme precariousness of living conditions (Biaya, 2005). Conceived as such, the spaces appear as sites of marginality and opportunity for young karaoke performers, although their work serves, as Weiss (2005; 108) would put it:

to promote (the spaces) as attractive, contemporary establishment(s) and also to demonstrate that (they) are of the public, (and) are hooked into a reality beyond even the here and now ...

It is in this light that the karaoke activities of the youth in Kampala's nightlife spaces need to be understood, with young – people both males and females – creating the makeshift economy that manifests as a means of survival, games, postures and attitudes of consumption and leisure.

All the youths in the karaoke groups claimed to have dropped out of school before completing their secondary education. This in the Ugandan context meant that all of them had no tangible technical skill to engage the formal labour market or create their own employment. In their majorities, the youths also claimed to have engaged with karaoke for two to three years. Thus, given their average age of 22 years and considering that all left school in or about grade 12 at about 16 years, this meant most had been out of school for about six years and to have suffered at least three years of sustained unemployment. One female member of the Ocean Stars group narrates:

I dropped out of school after I got pregnant. I was shunned by my family and sought all manner of employment to earn money and feed my child, all in vain. For a long time I had to depend on friends until one suggested I join a karaoke group where she performed. The work was initially stressful and I had to move between groups as work conditions in some groups were poor and payments delayed or not made at all. Am happy now in this group, where I have performed for two years and learnt a lot as a performer.

Thus, karaoke may for these youth constitute the 'makeshift economy' that provides a means of survival through the games, postures and attitudes of consumption and leisure it encapsulates. Youths in both groups, and in particular the females, saw their engagement with karaoke as the only productive activity open to them to legitimately earn a living in the city. Equally important was the opportunity the work afforded the youths to acquire skills and talents in the dramatic arts (that is, dancing and singing).

Youths in the Ocean Stars group claimed to perform at least six shows a week at different venues around the city. They also claimed that at any one time, their group had standing contracts with entertainment venues, which ranged in their duration from two to three months. On the other hand, youths in the better resourced VIP group claimed to undertake four performances at different venues

around the city in a week. Nevertheless, both groups also claimed to perform at more than one venue in a night. The VIP group also engaged the corporate sector when hired to perform at promotions for key companies in the brewery, tobacco and cosmetics sectors and at functions where agencies combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic distribute free condoms and disseminate information related to HIV/AIDS. These promotions were highly valued by the youths, who in many cases received free clothing (T-shirts and caps draped in company labels and insignia) and other products (beers, alcoholic spirits, cigarettes, etc).

However, despite slight differences in the groups' outlooks, wages earned by youths in both groups appeared competitive. In the Ocean Stars group, one youth earned on average Ugandan shilling 10,000 (US\$5) and 7,000 (US\$3.60) for weekend and weekday performances respectively; wages that mirrored those for each youth in the better-resourced V.I.P group at Ugandan shillings 10,000 (US\$5) and 8,000 (US\$4.10) for weekend and weekday performances respectively. Thus, on average, each youth earned Ugandan shillings 49,000 (US\$25.25) a week, or Ugandan shillings 196,000 (US\$101) monthly.

For youths facing few prospects of finding full-time employment, such income is not trivial. Youths in the VIP group all stated that they lived away from their parental homes in rented premises and student hostels. Money earned from karaoke work was critical to meeting their rental obligations, food, clothing and other basic needs. Nevertheless, while some youths in the group felt that given the alternatives a monthly take of close to 200,000 Ugandan shillings was sufficient, some felt it was not and that income gaps were bridged by the additional work that the group was able to procure during busy seasons (e.g., during the Christmas and Easter periods) and privately (such as at birthday parties).

For youths in the less resourced Ocean Stars group, managers claimed to cover some group members' costs, which in the VIP group were borne by individual group members. These included the costs of transport to and from entertainment venues, the costs of meals and, for the females, the costs of pooled housing as a security measure to avoid the dangers they face moving alone at night. However, while female group members did not directly claim to be abused or exploited by group managers, the fact that Ocean Stars Group managers claimed to have pooled housing always stocked with food, fuel and water – 'to ensure the girls are comfortable and feel well cared for' – pointed to some control managers wielded over these youths. Nevertheless, these subsidies, together with payment the youths received for their karaoke work, appeared lucrative despite, as shown subsequently, the stigma female performers faced in this line of work.

According to the VIP group manager, while it was desirable for karaoke groups to claim a share of revenues collected at venue gates from clients, such arrangements rarely worked and were fraught with difficulties. Most groups

therefore resorted to charging venue managers a flat fee. However, even under this arrangement they were still faced with some problems. The VIP manager, for example, claimed that,

(there is) ...too much exploitation by venue managers. The managers fluctuate (adjust) payments to the group. Sometimes managers stop us (from performing) without your awareness and this costs us and is a sign of disrespect

However, both group managers claimed to charge a flat fee of Ugandan shillings 150,000 (US\$77.32) for each performance. On the basis of information gathered from the two groups, Table 3 draws out the income positions for the groups on a weekly basis in Ugandan shillings.⁴ It is clear that karaoke work is lucrative for group owners, who can be expected to take in Ugandan shillings 256,750 (US\$132.35) every week or about Ugandan shillings 1,027,000 (US\$529.38) a month, which is 76% of the net pay of a university lecturer at a publicly-funded university in Uganda.

Table 3: Karaoke Groups' Weekly Income Statements

VIP		Ocean Stars	
Income	600000¹	Income	1,050,000²
Expenses		Expenses	
• Wage	(336,000) ³	• Wage	(539,000) ⁴
• Transport	(0)	• Transport	(140,000) ⁵
• Housing (Rent)	(0)	• Housing (Rent)	(37,500) ⁶
• Food/Fuel/Water	(0)	• Food/Fuel/Water	(84,000) ⁷
Net Income	264,000		249,500

1. 4days* 150,000/=
2. 7 days*150,000/=
3. 4days*12 persons*7,000/=
4. 7days*11 persons*7,000/=
5. 7days*20,000/=
6. 150,000/= /4 weeks
7. 7days*8 persons*1500/=

In addition, there does not appear to be great divergences in incomes earned between these groups even as they exhibit subtle differences in outlook as previously suggested. Nevertheless, these subtle differences explain why the VIP group has been able to transcend residual and alternative spaces and to attract business from

the corporate sector (the mainstream). At the same time, by mastering a range of musical genres (including Western Hip-hop and R & B, local and regional genres such as Raga and Lugaflow), the group has been able to tailor its performances to meet the particular musical tastes of clients in given venues and garner a loyal fan base. As one member of the group asserts, 'We are motivated by our fans who like our system.' The income figures given above thus mask what could be higher or additional earnings the VIP group receives from its corporate engagements; and for the youth individually, the substantial tips from adoring fans.

When asked what attributes one needed to join a karaoke group, the majority of the youths made prominent mention of: being able to dance and sing; to learn and improve on one's dancing and singing skills; reliability; commitment; discipline; respect; being considerate; and having love for one's work. Thus, beyond providing income for the youths, karaoke appeared to play a role in building their characters as focused and responsible individuals. For example, youths in the VIP group pointed out that their karaoke work made them self-confident, responsible, developed their leadership skills, and made them physically fit.

In its expression karaoke work is physically demanding and the youths, either individually or as a group, can be expected to commit 10 to 15 minutes in strenuous dance and song presentations, which the audience expects to be performed flawlessly. But attaining such standards of performance requires that the youths take their work seriously. Thus, VIP group members on average committed up to eight hours a week on rehearsals undertaken on Tuesdays and Thursdays at their centre of operations, T-Cozy Bar and Restaurant. Similarly, youths in the Ocean Stars group rehearsed for at least two hours every weekday at their centre of operation, Club 24, with the in-house DJ providing accompanying music. In all cases, the youths were expected to commit the necessary time to the rehearsals despite their other commitments. Absenteeism led to sanctions that included a group member being allocated no or less work and/or being paid less wages.

However, in both groups a sense of camaraderie appeared to exist, upon which the social capital that sustained the groups was based. Thus, beyond the sanctions group managers might impose for contravening set rules, the youths were more likely to conform to rules for the common good. Thus, one youth in the VIP group claimed, 'We act as a family, where everything is all about sharing.'

While group managers tended to allocate work to the youths based on how seriously they took their work (possibly based on the quality of their performances), even those assigned little or no work during an engagement were never completely left out. Thus, one Ocean Stars group member asserted:

... allocation of work depends on the seriousness in your performance. This improves performance through competition [among group members]. However, even though you do not present [are assigned no work] you may get money to eat [get paid]. No individuals are favoured.

Beyond the role karaoke plays in building the group's social capital, a key objective the youths pursue in the occupation is a desire to improve and develop what they call 'talents' as dancers and musicians. Karaoke work therefore provides a springboard for the youths to break into what in recent years has become a very lucrative music recording and open concert industry in Uganda. For example, female group members in the Ocean Stars group said:

We like the karaoke activity and we hope to improve our talents like dancing and singing to become celebrities such as Juliana Kanyomozi⁵ one day. Karaoke allows us to present ourselves as entertainers since our future lies in the entertainment industry.

These sentiments of the youths appear to echo the work of Weiss (2005: 107) in that in this case, karaoke work may project images (such as musical and dance styles, dress and personalities) that for the youths offer:

... a wider familiarity with not only the 'images' but also the material forms of success, as well as ... connection to persons who enjoy such success, in contrast with the declining real opportunities to enjoy these values and fully participate in the world they embody.

It appears then that karaoke eases the pain youths feel as marginalized people, with their karaoke work generating the future as an open prospect and knowable. Thus, for youths in tenuous employment as karaoke work, the profound gap between one's severely limited, or intractable present conditions and the limitless prospects of the future appear to be reconciled and eased by the lived experience of a karaoke performance.

However, this conception of the karaoke phenomenon as therapeutic masks other real benefits youths derive from it. First, the independent mode of karaoke production ensures that participation is more about 'active production' than 'passive consumption', which creates a fluid boundary between producers and consumers through the exchange of music, ideas, business deals and networks of reciprocity and patronage. For aspiring artists and those who wish to promote them, nightlife spaces create an 'authentic' outlet for the karaoke work of the youth and a meeting place for like-minded people. In fact, nightlife spaces in Kampala where karaoke is performed have become important scouting sites for those wishing to promote talented youths.

The development of skills and talents among the youths did not appear to be restricted to dancing and singing. In both groups, the existence of organizational structures meant individual group members could undertake additional tasks. For example, one male member in the VIP group was identified by other group members as the marketing manager with the responsibility of scouting for business and negotiating terms in the absence of the group manager.

Regulating Karaoke in Kampala's Nightlife Spaces

In the literature, residual and marginal nightlife spaces are said to offer the possibility of a less regulated, more fluid space defined by an absence or defiance of appropriate codes (Chatterton and Holland 2002). However, rather than being places of absolute freedom or disorder, marginal spaces and practices have their own modes of social ordering, rules and relations of power (Hetherington 1997). Thus, beyond normative rules such as health, licensing, noise control and others governments impose, rules are self-generated and communally agreed to demonstrate and envision less hierarchical ways of social and spatial ordering (Chatterton and Holland 2002). Among the most visible are entrance requirements, which are based around self-selection and sub-cultural knowledge. As well, underpinning such self-regulation is the geographical location of many residual and marginal spaces on the edge of central areas as a liminal twilight zone offering flexibility and anonymity.

However, a whole range of restrictive regulations have emerged to crack down on the unregulated nature of karaoke nightlife spaces in Kampala. In these spaces, nightlife has come to be viewed as deviant or abject and, in recent years, the spaces have been compelled to adhere to the National Environment Act, which has provisions setting noise limits in public spaces. The media has also fuelled moral panic, often stemming from the hedonistic nature of karaoke performances and the supposedly wayward nature of individuals who patronize these spaces. For instance, some of Kampala's residual and alternative nightlife spaces offer opportunities and avenues for infidelity, with married individuals using them to meet other partners. In addition, some of these spaces are known to be rendezvous sites for homosexuals who meet there with the tacit knowledge of establishment owners and venue clients and patrons.

Earlier, it was suggested that youths were bound to face a number of threats to personal security and health from their karaoke work. In both groups, however, the youths did not consider nightlife spaces to pose serious threats to their persons. Most were comfortable with existing security arrangements, especially the use of bouncers to control disruptive and drunk venue patrons. As youths in the VIP group asserted, 'We discipline ourselves and the bouncers keep the security at the place.'

Youths also saw their personal safety as the responsibility of the karaoke group managers who, as in the case with female group members in the Ocean Stars group, had made commitments to next of kin to ensure the personal safety of the girls. The girls asserted, 'Security-wise we are safe since managers commit themselves to ensure our safety by talking to our relatives.'

However, outside the venues, the youths still appeared to remain vulnerable to all kinds of threats to their personal safety. The youths in the VIP group claimed, 'Outside the venue everyone is on his or her own.'

Even here the youth appeared to draw solace from the fact that their groups provided them with identity cards (IDs) to mitigate the harassment they were likely to face from the police and other local security operatives, who might find them moving about at night from engagements. Thus, VIP members claimed to '... have ID cards to represent ourselves in case of trouble at night'.

On the other hand, the Ocean Stars group circumvented these problems through pooled transportation for its members and by informing local authorities of their presence in their jurisdictions. The Ocean Stars group manager thus asserted:

Sometimes police disturb us especially when we happen to be found walking in the night. That's why we use the same transport, inform local leaders the times when we are to present in their areas of control and the main issue they raise is making unnecessary noise, which we avoid.

The youths also face a host of threats to their health in nightlife spaces where karaoke is undertaken. Many are susceptible to temptation when clients approach them with all manner of propositions. In the VIP group, female members claimed to have clients who ask them out after shows and/or who offer money as an incentive to this end. On the other hand, male performers are approached by older women and in some cases men, who provide them with their phone contacts with a view to setting up sexual rendezvous. The youth thus claimed, '... clients normally con [target] girls to sleep around and for the boys they are given numbers from old women and men'.

Nevertheless, the youths are generally aware of the dangers of STIs and they appear to have devised a number of strategies to deflect any negative advances from clients. 'Detoothing' (youth slang for free riding) constitutes one such adoptive strategy, which in its crudest form sees a youth playing along with the client making the unwanted advances and extracting as much from him or her (in drinks and/or money), only for the youth not to keep his or her side of the bargain. But some youths do succumb and get themselves involved in all manner of relationships with clients, which has stigmatized their karaoke work. As one female member of the VIP group pointed out:

.... [youths] are ... conned ... this has made the karaoke activity stigmatized ... (because) ... clients involve group members in relationships. This has tarnished the karaoke activity especially when the same clients call us prostitutes after having an affair (with a group member).

Synthenzing the Results : Is Karaoke Valued Work or Decadence?

In this chapter I have explored a number of key questions, including who were the youth negotiating livelihoods out of karaoke work; what they negotiate for; and the agency nightlife spaces and karaoke work affords them to eke out a living in the urban milieu. As it turns out, Chatterton's and Holland's (2002) conceptions of residual and alternative spaces capture well Kampala's nightlife spaces and the karaoke activities of the youth undertaken therein, and offer insights on the agency the youth might exercise in earning a living in the spaces.

Karaoke has been shown to have value for the youths, not only in terms of incomes derived from it, but also as a springboard to future careers as professional entertainers. Its value in inculcating within the youths key beneficial attributes such as self-confidence, reliability, respect for others, discipline, hard work and leadership have also been noted. For the youth with very few opportunities to acquire these skills and attributes through formal and regular employment; karaoke and the spaces within which it is undertaken provide the perfect venue for their acquisition. Given that karaoke and the games and postures it encapsulates are by their nature interactive, the youths are pitted against a community of karaoke consumers bent on meeting their needs for different genres of musical entertainment. Borrowing a leaf from Foreman (2002:8), karaoke then becomes central for youth attempting to construct spaces of their own or a 'culture of compensation' or, according to Cashmore (1997:171), substituting for educational advancement and literacy.

Besides engendering interactive processes between the youth and karaoke consumers, which entail beneficial outcomes for the former, residual and alternative spaces are also shown to allow the youth to experiment and actualize themselves. To mirror Chatterton and Holland (2003; 210), the spaces 'in this sense are a source of creative innovation, revelling in a desire for novelty, conflict and dialogue'. For example, some of the musical and dance genres performed by the youth transcend the national and regional to encompass the global. Thus, for youth performing hip hop or rap, these genres cease to be viewed as expressions of African American culture and come to represent vehicles for global youth affiliation and a tool for reworking local identities. For older karaoke consumers, these novel, radical and possibly dangerous musical genres and their accompanying dress and speech codes would appear in the context of a karaoke performance to be appropriated, domesticated and rendered harmless.

The acquisition of an income was critical in motivating the youth to undertake karaoke work. Evidence has been presented to show that youths and group managers garnered appreciable amounts of income from the occupation. Groups appeared to be managed professionally, which allowed managers to earn incomes comparable to those of public servants in formal employment. The spaces also offered the youth a competitive environment and thus some agency to supplement their incomes with tips.

The venues and their managements also eased the karaoke production process for the youth by allowing them to access the venues and musical equipment for their rehearsals. Daytime rehearsals within these spaces also allowed what otherwise would have been idle youths to spend time in activities that they considered beneficial and thus to keep out of trouble. As places of work, the spaces also appeared to provide a safe environment for youths and their clients. The use of bouncers and armed security guards at venues was critical in ensuring the personal safety of the youth and in protecting clients' property. At the same time, karaoke appeared to possess in-built structures to ensure the safety of the youth and to legitimize their work in the eyes of the authorities.

But karaoke and the spaces where it is undertaken need not be overly romanticized. The spaces also pose real dangers to youths who face a double-edged sword when exercising agency to earn a living in these spaces. While they offer opportunities to youths to meet like-minded people, who in some cases may advance their prospects in their chosen lines of work, they are also places of debauchery, where less well-meaning people might congregate to prey on the youth. While youths have been shown to devise a number of mitigating strategies, many are drawn in and face serious risks of contracting STIs and engaging in unproductive relationships with clients. In particular, the latter has the effect of projecting these youths as prostitutes and to stigmatize their work.

Conclusion

It is clear that Kampala's residual and alternative nightlife spaces offer opportunities for the youth to eke out a living from their karaoke work. By their very nature as obscure entities, these spaces come to be frequented by those most likely to be excluded from the mainstream and who, as such, may wish to connect with it in ways that the games and postures of karaoke epitomize. For the youth, this scenario presents opportunities to meet this felt need and in the process negotiate livelihoods in the spaces by undertaking karaoke performances. Yet, even as these spaces pose challenges for the youth, their vivaciousness leads them to adopt mitigating strategies to overcome the challenges. More importantly, the spaces allow the youth to develop identities and ease their sense of marginality in ways that link them to a virtual world of opportunity and prospects of better future livelihoods.

Notes

1. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3874359.stm>. [last accessed: 16 February 2010] 'Uganda's dirty dances reveal all' BBC News online 8 July 2004.
2. However, Chatterton and Hollands (2002) use the framework of mainstream, residual, and alternative spaces to address processes of urban transformation in developed country settings by emphasizing the role corporate control plays in usurping and commercializing public space, segmenting and gentrifying markets, and marginalizing historic, alternative and creative local development.

3. Karaoke entertainment in its conventional sense, which may not apply in the African context, is the preserve of rich folk in Kampala and is enjoyed by them at only one venue in the up-market Garden City Mall. Yet, despite the proliferation of a nightlife entertainment scene that caters to the tastes of a small elite group (in the form of bars, restaurants and night clubs), its genesis is marginally related to wider economic, political, and socio-cultural changes as in developed countries. In the literature, these changes have variously been explained under such themes as Fordism, post-Fordism and neo-Fordism (see Kumar 1995; Amin 1994; Harvey 1989a; Lash and Urry, 1987); flexible specialization and accumulation (see Piore and Sable 1984; Harvey 1989b); the growing literature on (anti) globalization and corporations (see Monboiot 2000; Klein 2000); the move towards a service-based, cultural, and 'symbolic' economy (see Harvey 1989a; Jessop 1997; Burrows and Loader 1994) changes in the local/welfare state and the rise of the entrepreneurial city (see Hollands 2002; Warde 1994), and critiques of post-modern consumption and how it engenders processes of market segmentation, gentrification and branding (Chatterton and Hollands 2003).
4. That is, that Ocean Stars group maintains pooled accommodation for its female performers and provides transport to and from venues for all its performers while the VIP group does none of this.
5. Juliana Kanyomozi is a Ugandan-born local artist whose music has gained acceptance across the East Africa region, even though most of her songs are sung in a local vernacular that is mainly understood in Uganda.

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