

SPECIAL FEATURE

# Poetic Expressions of Night Work in Ja-Mnazi Afrika's "Riziki"

Wambua Muindi 

Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya

Email: [wambuamuindi20@gmail.com](mailto:wambuamuindi20@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This paper examines the song *Riziki*<sup>1</sup> (2005), composed and performed by Ja-Mnazi Afrika, which theorizes night work. Written and performed by the Kenyan musician Michael Otieno Ooko a.k.a Awillo Mike Ja'mnazi, the song appropriates the Swahili word "Riziki" which refers to a livelihood to complicate the idea and value of work, and particularly work by night. This way, the song's Swahili lyrics muse upon and animate the work process to an East African audience. The song narrates night work dynamics, with a temporal sensibility, and proffers dignity to work-by-night subcultures. Borrowing from performance analysis and close listening analytical approaches, this paper argues that the song communicates the stress and pressures of night work while simultaneously emphasizing how imperative the continued work is to secure people's livelihoods. Furthermore, the choice of language, for the most part, of the song in Kiswahili, an African language, and a language of trade in Eastern Africa is perhaps aware of the diversity of people and occupations included in night work. This way, the song complicates the cultural dynamic of night work to move beyond its association with the pleasure economy to locate work by night within capitalist work cultures.

**Keywords:** night work; Riziki; Ja-Mnazi Afrika; night economy; Swahili

## Introduction

*Mimi nalo jambo lanisumbua akili*  
*Ulimwengu umepasuka mahali*  
*Mungu alipanga usiku saa ya kulala*  
*Mbona walimwengu mumebadili mipango*  
*Usiku sasa imegeuka muchana*  
*Na muchana sasa nikama usiku*  
*Jamani eh eh eh*  
*Mi nashangaa eh*

There is something troubling my mind  
The world is split someplace  
God ordered night for sleep  
Why have humans changed things?  
Night has been turned day  
And day is as if night  
Attention  
I wonder

In 2005, “*Riziki*”<sup>2</sup>, a song by Kenyan band Ja-Mnazi Afrika, was released to national acclaim. *Riziki* is a Swahili word with different but related meanings, including but not limited to: daily bread, wages and providence. This article refers to *riziki* as meaning “livelihood.” The song probes the lengths to which social rhythms are disrupted as people seek to earn a living. The narrator in the song begins by expressing wonder at the idea of people having to work at all hours by invoking notions of order in contrast to religious suppositions that work and rest are designed for day and night, respectively. In doing so, the song raises questions about the relationship between work, night, and livelihood. It was inspired by a nation in political and economic transition and captures the myriad ways in which Kenya was experiencing growing pains as it emerged from a dictatorial regime under former President Daniel Moi.

At the time, Kenya had elected its first democratic government under Mwai Kibaki after 24 years of Moi’s autocratic one-party rule. Unlike his predecessor, Kibaki, a trained economist, was a progressive president. During his tenure, Kenya saw increased investment and a more than quadrupling of its economic growth rate<sup>3</sup>. His economic vision for the country culminated in the launch of Kenya Vision 2030 in October 2006. In terms of popular culture, the song also followed the successful duo Gidigidi and Majimaji’s hit “*Unbwogable*”<sup>4</sup>, meaning unbeatable/unshakeable, and which became a political anthem for the opposition, even though the song was originally apolitical, instead expressing the impracticalities of being young and in the city. The Kibaki-led National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government’s economic and development plan included the idea of a 24-hour economy as encapsulated in Kenya Vision 2030<sup>5</sup>. (The blueprint’s economic pillar included a National 24-Hour Steering Committee.) For instance, Kibaki operationalized Uchumi Supermarkets<sup>6</sup> to be open 24 hours. Investments were also made in mass electrification to provide lighting to markets at night to ensure their security and support Kibaki’s economic vision. This political environment, coupled with the socio-economic reorientation given the political regime change, contributed to “*Riziki*” becoming an immediate success because of the song’s explicit references to, and critique of, the idea of night work in the Kenyan public mind and memory<sup>7</sup>. To this day, the song remains popular and is frequently played on nightly radio talk shows.

Ja-Mnazi Afrika problematizes night work in their level of composition and sonic delivery since music cultures are not only forms of knowledge but also works of intellectual artistry. Working at night is under scrutiny in the poetry of Awillo Mike, the lyricist for Ja-Mnazi Afrika. The song is a dense poetic verse showcasing the reality of night work in contemporary modernity. The song is a sophisticated anthem that appropriates the Swahili oral poetry tradition. The song is largely composed and performed in Kiswahili, the national language in Kenya, which is also widely spoken in Eastern Africa and is a working language of the African Union. Importantly, the song can bypass the international suppression mechanisms of the music industry. It is in an African sensibility that domesticates the theorization of night work while fostering dialogue with other variant conversations and discourses around the night economy, as expressed in other forms of popular art like cartoons and comedy, with the song’s Swahili lyrics coming from a long tradition of intellection in the language.

Historiographically, whereas the song does not limit itself to a particular geography, the song alludes to Koinange, a street in Nairobi's Kenya that is synonymous with prostitution, using Koinange as an urban idiom for industries domiciled in the city. In this way, "*Riziki*" implicates the urban space, which the song then uses as a discursive context to complicate night work. In a sense then, to my mind, the song presents urban labor history from a postcolonial standpoint. For this reason, the song becomes critical in reflecting upon night work and from an African perspective.

The song begins by suggesting that there is something disturbing the narrator. He contends that the world is torn in terms of labor organization and stratification. *Mimi nalo jambo lanisumbua akili* (Something is troubling my mind). The problematic dynamic in society is that working at night is the norm and not the exception, but he notes that the dynamics produced by nocturnal labor are the challenge. Night work results from a capitalist logic which some believe needs to be eagerly embraced in the face of transformation, "progress," and economic growth, that includes attempts to make rent and earn for children's fees and other expenses, no matter what time of day or night.

"*Riziki*" also references the Bible to discuss how work is a social construct and undertaking, at least in a religious sense. In lyrics like "*Mungu alipanga usiku saa ya kulala*" (God ordered night for sleep), the song connotatively infers notions of order and simultaneously alludes to the idea of work as primed by a religious disposition in two ways. First, it invokes the imagery of the creation story in Genesis; second, religious activities like prayers and devotion also happen at night. This religious sensibility, and of a Judeo-Christian perspective, alludes to the colonial reality whose shadow defines postcolonial Kenya. This compounds the secular conception of work and time as reflected in the liminal anonymity of darkness, whose symbolism is skewed toward the ideals of the schism of day and night. To Libuše Dušková et al., the night represents almost a universally special, liminal or "out of the ordinary" temporal zone and night work as an outcome of industrial modernity.<sup>8</sup> Nightlife activity then implies the context of work. This comments on the social rhythm of work generally.

<i>Karo za watoto munatafuta usiku</i>	Children's fees, you seek by night
<i>Kodi za nyumba munatafuta usiku</i>	Rent arrears, you seek by night
<i>Biashara nyingi mwafanya usiku</i>	Many businesses, you do by night
<i>Chai kwa mkate sasa mwauza usiku</i>	Tea and bread, you sell at night
<i>Mahindi choma sasa mwauza usiku</i>	Roasted maize, you vend by night
<i>Malimali sasa mwauza usiku</i>	Housewares you sell by night
<i>Ata maombi mingi mwafanya usiku</i>	Even many prayers you do by night
<i>Koinange munatafuta usiku</i>	Koinange you seek by night
<i>Wake kwa waume shughuli zenu usiku</i>	Men and women, you errand by night
<i>Ata safari nyingi mwaenda usiku</i>	Even many travels, you do by night
<i>Biashara nyingi mwafanya usiku</i>	Many businesses, you do by night
<i>Kwa nini eh eh eh</i>	Why?
<i>Mi nashangaa eh</i>	I wonder!

The song catalogues several factor motives prompting work at night, reasons for work from the point of view of a narrator wondering why livelihood has to be sought

at night. Through the examples of seeking *karo*, fees, and *kodi*, to offset rent, the song marvels at the range of activity at night: ordinarily day jobs like selling, *chai kwa mkate* (tea and bread), *mahindi choma* (roasted maize), and *malimali* (housewares), as well as *maombi* (prayers), and *Koinange* (sex work). In so doing, the lyrics express a temporal supposition with the night as a workspace and workplace, and night as a space-time. The song illustrates occupations that are characteristically daytime activities; these increasingly became economic pressure points that Kibaki pushed which created a panic about financial well-being that led many people to believe they had to hustle by night.

The jobs the song identifies as encompassing the range of economic activity in the heart of night are occupations with little, if any, social safety nets. The workers are self-employed and small-scale sole proprietors. The song thus identifies night work as an occupational category marked by precarity and defines work at night as a bane. This is reflected in the health imperative in the song.

Work, then, has a social function that relates to other socioeconomic and political reasons. It is work for ends like fees and rent which are mundane. It is this social function of work that animates the song and relates the impact of night work on social life. From a gendered standpoint, night work is indiscriminate. The material reality is that people are equally fending for themselves. The song contains the lyric, “*wake kwa waume shughuli zenu usiku*” (women and men, you both work at night). This, of course, references nighttime work as being a practice that relates to both men and women. Night work then becomes a plight and struggle that does not discriminate in terms of gender. This illustrates the potential challenges of night work routines and ethic(s) for families, for instance, which potentially are destabilized.

And that in the providence matrix where one embraces this work shift, livelihood will probably be met. Its theorization goes beyond Sofia Graça's characterization of the nighttime economy as referring to the entertainment industry which operates during evening and night<sup>9</sup>. And yet, “*Riziki*” explores the night social world with the mention of *Koinange*, a street in Nairobi that is a euphemism for sex work. This spatial reference supposes that even with night work there are urban night workers and rural night workers, each with distinct challenges. Within contemporary capitalism, Robert Shaw supposes the nocturnality of night work and its challenges as important, such that urban night is different to rural night conceptually<sup>10</sup>.

[Chorus]

*Niliambiwa na babu yangu kweli zubaa zubaa utapata mwana si wako* \*3

My grandfather told me, idle around and find the child is not yours \*3

[Translation]<sup>11</sup>

*Nimeamini kilichosemwa na babu*

*Nimekubali kilichosemwa na babu*

*Mgaagaa na upwa hali wali mkavu*

I believe what grandfather said

I accept what grandfather said

A diligent person at the shore does not eat dry rice

*Lakini sasa mwapumzika saa ngapi*

*Asubuhi munatafuta riziki*

*Mchanakutwa munatafuta riziki*

*Ata majioni munatafuta riziki*

But now, when do you rest?

In the morning you seek livelihood

Through the day you seek livelihood

Evenings as well you seek livelihood

Usiku wa manane munatafuta riziki      Deep into the night you seek livelihood  
 Nambieni mwapumzika saa ngapi wenzangu      Tell me when you rest my fellows  
 Mi nashangaa      I wonder

The song invokes proverbial wisdom in the lyrics “*zubaa zubaa utapata mwana si wako*” (idle around and find the child is not yours) and “*mgaagaa na upwa hali wali mkavu*” (a diligent person at the shore does not eat dry rice) to complicate the reality of night work. The first saying confounds the narrator’s sense of wonder at the phenomena of night work that is refracted in the entire song. The second maxim seems to unnerve this wonder and supposes that seeking a living is an exercise in perpetuity. In this way, if the first proverbial intellection on night work characterizes this work ethic by night, the second invocation contends that the night work dynamic arises out of necessity.

“*Riziki*” challenges the system of night work just as much as it acquiesces with its material reality. In essence, night work is both a boon and a curse. This the song does by use of a proverbial contrast that is also a signifier of ways of knowing, which illustrates the shift to night work. This contrast is also a realistic look at what night work means as it highlights how work at night is not a happenstance but rather a reality.

However, even in this reality, the song uses a rhetorical question, “*Lakini sasa mwapumzika saa ngapi*” (But now, when do you rest?) to be critical of the work at night dynamic. The question of rest then becomes important in the conception of night work. If it is all work and no rest, then work regimes become defined by the reality of working at night and night economies, which then means pressure and perhaps creates a new “age of stress” as workers are forced to shift their work cultures to keep up with capitalist demands.

## Conclusion

“*Riziki*,” then, is an extended metaphor for night work and capitalism. The song is perhaps an idiom if not a metaphor for work. It is ostensibly critical of pervasive capitalism. The relationship between work and night defines the song; hence, the song qualifies as a critical site for understanding night work. The song is perhaps exhaustive in its theorization. It is epistemic, as philosophical as it is literal. It compounds the dynamics of the work, the nature of the work, the workers, and the imperative of such work. Thus, “*Riziki*” in recognition of music cultures as not only forms of knowledge but works of intellectual artistry, becomes useful in the exploration of the specificities of daily sustenance, mobility, the performance of religion, rest, and work.

## Notes

1. The author has opted to italicize the song’s name herein instead of having it in quotation marks since the song’s title is in Swahili.
2. “*Riziki* – Jamnazi Afrika.” YouTube, April 11, 2020, accessed 1 Feb, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAB1tjDoHvs>.
3. Mugwe D, “Kibaki’s Legacy on Economic Performance after 10 Years in Office,” *Business Daily*, Business Daily, Jan 3, 2013.
4. Joyce Nyairo, “Popular Music, Popular Politics: *Unbwogable* and the Idioms of Freedom in Kenyan Popular Music,” *African Affairs* 104, no. 415 (April 2005): 225–49.

5. This is Kenya's development blueprint covering 2008–2030.
6. Supermarkets founded by a Kenyan government parastatal.
7. Tom Michael Mboya, "Ethnicity and the Brokerage of Kenyan Popular Music: Categorizing 'Riziki' by Ja-Mnazi Afrika," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (February 2015): 205–15.
8. Gerlachlus Duijzings and Libuše Dušková, *Working at Night: The Temporal Organisation of Labour Across Political and Economic Regimes* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022).
9. Sofia Graça, "Night-Time Economy: Cooperation between Formal and Informal Social Control (Case Study of Margate)," *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles* 81, no. 2 (June 2008): 126–143.
10. Robert Shaw, "Geographies of Night Work," *Progress in Human Geography* 46, no. 5 (June 2022): 1149–64.
11. The author credits Elizabeth Kahindi, Honest Omondi, Kanana Ngaku, and Michael Ochieng—literature undergraduate students at the University of Nairobi, for helping with the translations.