Learning Objective: To gain insight on how language, identity and culture intertwine and change through learning about Sheng.

Background:
Sheng is a hybrid language that developed among youth in Nairobi perhaps as early at the 1960s. Grammatically inspired by Kiswahili, it draws on many other languages spoken in Kenya. Identified with youth, it is constantly evolving and can be locally specific. Many code switch between Sheng, Swahili, English and other languages and using each intentionally. Originating in the estates of Nairobi and specifically the Eastlands, its use is now widespread among elite, families and the media. It can be a marker of ‘exposure’ and has spread beyond Nairobi and even beyond Kenya. Some have been concerned that the use of Sheng is at the expense of literacy and fluency in Swahili, English and other Kenyan languages.

Watch
A range of videos about or using Sheng can be found online. Here is just a sampling:


Listen
*GHETTO RADIO 89.5 FM*, [http://www.ghettoradio.co.ke](http://www.ghettoradio.co.ke).
“In February 2008 the Ghetto Radio Foundation set up a radio operation in Nairobi, Kenya. The station transmits on 89.5FM to the wider area of Nairobi and has become one of the country’s most popular youth stations.”
Live stream: [http://www.thisisafrica.me/radioplayer/live/ghettoradio](http://www.thisisafrica.me/radioplayer/live/ghettoradio)

Read:
Read one or more of the following or select others from the bibliography below.


Discuss:

There are many points of discussion. Here are just two suggestions:

1. In what ways does Sheng signify the power of youth culture in Kenya?
2. Compare Sheng to Ebonics, Spanglish or other forms of American English
   - See Joshua Katz’ work on regional dialect variation in the continental US: http://www4.ncsu.edu/~jakatz2/project-dialect.html
   - With many maps: http://spark.rstudio.com/jkatz/SurveyMaps/

Sheng Bibliography


Swahili Language Resources

2. Online Swahili materials from the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages
   • http://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu/swahili/index.html
   • http://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu/mentored_swahili.html

Other links

• H-Swahili Network on Swahili Language and Culture http://www.h-net.org/~swahili/
• Swahili Links from Pennsylvania State University: http://complit.la.psu.edu/swahili/internet.html