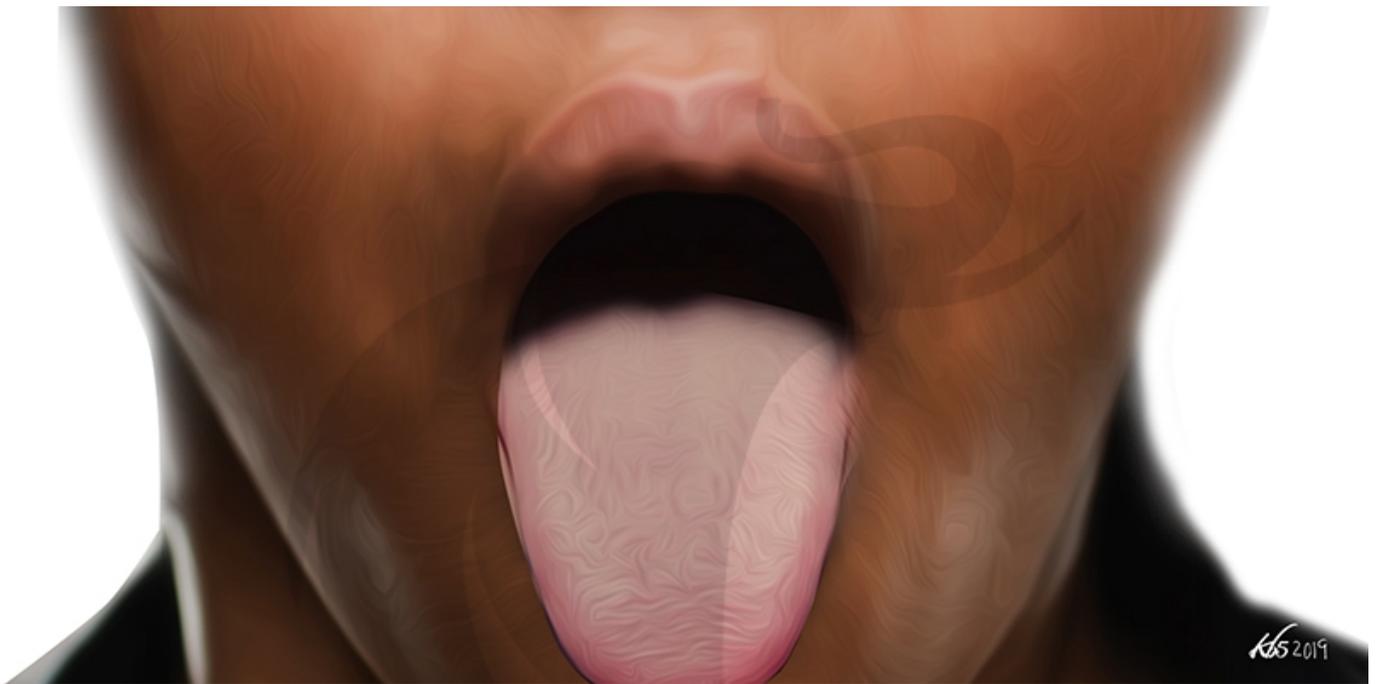




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# How Kenyan Gospel Pop Birthed the Odi-Pop Craze

By Dan Aceda



The current wave of Kenyan urban music, and by extension, youth culture, has left observers scratching their heads. Where did it come from, how did it travel so quickly, and how has it so completely taken over the airwaves? [Researchers Odipo Dev have already](#) given us part of the answer — that the Internet has been very significant in boosting this new genre which is being referred to as Odi-pop or Gengetone. Specifically, it is a question of how online algorithms work to push what is already popular.

As a musician and scholar of music, my own observation of the trends leads me to another conclusion that would enrich Odipo Dev's findings. In my view, it has been the huge popularity of what I am calling 'gospel pop' that cracked the door and held it open for Odi-pop to come through. In fact, the urban gospel scene in the second half of the 2000s was itself already a nascent version of this new sound.

This may seem bit ironical — that gospel music may have paved the way for a genre whose aesthetic that can [fairly be described as ratchet](#). But in my view, this was possible because Kenyan gospel pop of the early 2000s was only faintly related to religious or church music proper. Kenyan gospel pop is popular because it cuts across class, regional, ethnic and especially generational lines. It is loved equally by a four-year-old as it is by her 60-year-old grandmother, which is important to consider

when pop music is usually so strictly demarcated along generational lines. With this generation of gospel pop, the message was stripped down almost to its bones. It was simply music anyone could dance to. I see the new wave of ratchet Odi-pop as an extension of that philosophy of living one's best life as loudly as possible and wearing your politics/religion with pride.

For the sake of definitional simplicity, I am proposing the collective term "Odi-pop" to refer to all the sub styles of this new sound. I am aware of each group having named their style separately e.g Gengetone, Dabonge style and so on and my definition is not trying to replace that. For me this musical style is basically pop but with a common sound (hip-hop rap influence blended with Caribbean phrase and rhyme schemes, all constructed on an African rhythm base and performed in sing-along rap with heavy Kiswahili/Sheng inflections). My naming structure is borrowed from K-Pop.

Music or any kind of art, really, travels on a nonlinear path. This is why the conventional strategy for music marketers has been simple: spam the audience until they like it. It also means that the person with the loudest microphone controls content discovery as a whole. This is the reason why record labels would even go as far as to lock down distribution rights that were defined by geography, in effect controlling what an entire region would hear, and therefore effectively grow and maintain a market.

The Internet brought a disruption to this model, as Odipo Dev's article illuminated, and broke down the power of traditional gatekeepers. And in the Kenyan context the traditional gatekeepers have been: media, politicians and the church — pop culture's own axis of evil, you might say. The media with its own interests and relationships has for the longest time dictated what could be played, when it could be played. But these days there is so much Kenyan music on Youtube and Soundcloud for anyone who is looking for a different kind of sound.

Then there are the political elite. Politicians have always been alive to the power of music and have gone to great lengths to use it in their battle for hearts and minds. There's also an uncanny relationship between dictatorships and thriving musicians. It isn't always censorship — very often dictators encourage praise music, or at least uncontroversial music, frequently throwing money at anything that they believe will entrench love and adulation for them.

And finally the church, which was where these other two amplified their formal and informal censorship.

And so this explains the list of pop songs that did well in Kenya prior to the year 2000. They were all driven by a heavy dose of "message" and "meaning", and Kenya's politicians had managed, through the single broadcaster, to effectively limit the music to a specific list of themes. They replaced any local material that espoused other themes with foreign content. This explains why even today a song about sex written and performed by a Kenyan will struggle for airplay but one of the same theme by a foreigner will get tons of airplay with no questions asked.

It also fuels my claim about the effect of church music on Kenya's pop scene. You see the only popular music that was exempt from the informal censorship from above was church music. In church, musicians could basically do whatever they wanted provided that they had the support of their pastor. However, outside of Kenya, the pop industries were not shackled in this way and so were growing in diverse ways. The result was that there was a huge demand for pop culture in Kenya that was raw and sincere. This demand was first met by the revolutionary Ogopa deejays and stars who made hit songs that were not carrying any cultural messaging. It was music for the sake of music. It was pure pop. *Tumekuja kuwashika!*

Pop music is a lot more anthropological than people like to give credit for. And the effect of the Ogopa Deejays was jarring to the sociopolitical system not because it was new but because it was visible. In the preceding decades, the despotic nature of the state, the arrests, detentions and summons to State House during the period between the late 60s and early 90s had effectively killed multiple waves of pop music. It also materially altered the expression of pop music by determining what would end up on radio.

Critically, it also effectively created multiple markets in the running of the broadcast industry. "Authorised" pop culture would rule the airwaves while "restricted" pop culture was confined to stage performances. This is what led to what we have now: two separate pop worlds. One visible one (with chart toppers) and other with popular live performers whose exploits are largely off the record and invisible.

And so what was achieved by Gidi Gidi Maji Maji and their lexicon-altering smash hit *Unbwogable* in 2002, which in turn was being amplified in the mainstream by Ogopa deejays and FM radio stations, was effectively a cultural earthquake. For the first time, politicians and the church had lost control of pop culture and it was now running wild. The opinion of a guy called Nameless became a factor in households that were previously relying on the cultural reality provided by the likes of Archbishop Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki. Radio presenters of the era, Caroline Mutoko, Eve D' Souza and Tina Ogal were now defining a new feminism and urban identity. *Atoti* ( Wicky Mosh featuring GidiGidi Majimaji) was now a term of endearment. Newspapers introduced urban pop culture magazine pullouts and this new wave captured the attention of the whole country. It was deliberately visible and extremely loud.

In the mid-2000s the system fought back vigorously. In a bid to take back some control, the corporate budgets were opened for what was defined at the time as "family and wholesome" content and closed for any other content. Any music not categorized as "Christian" was shunned. All major events were headlined by gospel music stars, and they hoarded media coverage.

Non-Christian ( secular) music almost disappeared from view. It was a silent put down. You may not have been aware of it, but at this time there was a very deliberate push to replace Kenyan urban pop music with foreign content. Nigerians, Tanzanians, Ugandans, Namibians, anybody but Kenyans. Nonini and Calif records were villains where P-square from Nigeria and Mr Nice from Tanzania were darlings. The playlists were altered and the videos removed.

However, in an interesting twist of fate, the aftershocks of Ogopa's cultural earthquake were beginning to be felt in the gospel scene. The gospel stars were unwittingly amplifying the effect of the Ogopa Revolution. These band of artistes were more cool than they were Christian. Their themes were less theological and more existential. There was much less "come to Jesus" and a lot more "live happy and be free" - but within the confines of church. Importantly, this was the same area that non-Christian pop music had been focused on: the idea of gratification and happiness for today. And for me, it's a very short hop from the secular musician DNA:

*"Tunaweka shida zetu chini tunaweka mikono juu, banjuka tu"*

*(We put down our problems and raise our hands, let loose)*

To gospel musician Daddy Owen:

*"Mi napenda watoto, Mi napenda kuimba, Mi napenda kuenda church na kuomba, Mimi nitakata kata, Maboko likolo."*

*I love children, I love to sing, I love going to church and prayer, I will dance, Maboko likolo.*

In my mind, these two songs are almost identical philosophically. They are both pop songs but for different audiences, espousing a centrist view which made them accessible to both conservative and liberal audiences.

This is, in my view, the beginning of the sound that I have collectively called Odi-pop. It is a contemporary genre that is marked by urban, ahistorical, and accessible philosophy and idiom. It is a sound that is fundamentally localised hip hop, but draws from reggae and Caribbean music to build on its African rhythm base. The music is here to make you feel good. Right here right now. It rides on the language of now. It is very Michael Jackson-esque. These pop stars have more stage names and fewer actual names. They go out of their way to brand themselves as having no tribe, no politics and no history. It was just E-Sir. Or Nameless. And Now it's Willy Paul, Bahati, Miracle Baby, and Reckless.

In this way there isn't an ownership that could be linked to just one tribe, language or culture. For the first time in Kenya's pop culture we can, all of us, own a pop star in the exact same way. Ethic is for all of us. So is Khaligraph and so is the idea of Wamlambezi. Even the meaning is open to interpretation. You are allowed to translate it however you please. It can be a warm greeting, a chant at a sports event or it can be vulgar depending on your own politics.

The culture, as a product, is accessible to anyone. Any Kenyan could love Timeless Noel, Konkodi, Bruz Newton, or P-Unit because, after all, they represent an imaginary aspirational Kenyan that is free to love without encumbrance and in a language everybody can speak.

However, the most important part of the Odi-pop sound for me is that for the first time in my lifetime at least the pop scene is not referencing another context. It's 100% trying to create its own identity. The new guys are not trying to recreate or localize anymore. They are not interested in that. They are interested in making something new. They are as sincere as they could be. It's unapologetic.

To be honest I don't know how long the current acts will stay relevant. That's up to them and how they invest in the next few years. What I know is that the sound, Odi-pop and its philosophy has already endured a decade and there is no turning back. If we mark *Banjuka* by DNA as maybe the first track of this new philosophy and *Figa* by Ethic as the most recent then we can for the first time map a line between the pop releases across a decade. *Figa* is amplifying the wave created by *Vimbada* by Moji shortbabaa and Jabidii which amplified *Bazokizo* by Collo Majale which amplified the wave created by *Odi Dance* which amplified *Kamua leo* by Kidis, which amplified *You Guy* (P-Unit), which amplified *Toklezea* (Abbas) which amplified *Tichi* (Kenrazy) which amplified *Banjuka* (DNA). The artists are different. Their spaces are different but the philosophy is the same and their work is, for the first time in Kenya's history, all on record.

And this is important. Because what the Odi-pop has done, by amplifying each other, is they are slowly bringing the scene back to the path that leads to freedom. And if you add the influence of the Internet and how content discovery is happening today, then you can see another important effect of this cultural moment. The big microphone is now being held by the pop stars. It's the kind of dictatorship that thrust Bob Marley and reggae into world domination. It is a special kind of big voice that centers makers and doers, and people who imagine themselves to be more than they are, and who try to declare that as loudly as possible. Without apology.

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