



Khaligraph Jones and Emerging Hip Hop Futures in Kenya

By Richard Oduku



A talent emerged with a vociferous, shrill and piercing cry deep in the heart of Kayole on June 12, 1990. It was an uncertain time. Agitations for multiparty democracy clouded the air amidst arbitrary detentions, torture and killings. Still, a mother - freed from the listlessness of a third trimester - rocked a plump newborn. As the cries of Robert Ouko's assassination tapered, it was only fitting that the mother in Kayole thought it wise to name her new hope - Brian Ouko Robert - perhaps as a silent resistance against the dictatorial regime. I do not know. I have not asked. But I know we use names to resist erasure.

Brian Ouko Robert - aka Mr. Omollo aka Khaligraph Jones - was welcomed by a troubled country of barely 20 million people. Exactly 28 years later, this baby released a debut album, *Testimony 1990*, and give us a chance to look back not only at this baby who has now become a man, but at a country whose population, just like its troubles, has doubled. Let us talk about the music of this prodigious talent.

Testimony 1990

Testimony 1990 is a testimony of Khaligraph Jones's life, his troubles, and those of his country. Khaligraph is not an overnight celebrity. His success is not the product of the modern viral

phenomenon, where the gods of the internet choose to crown a new artist with a million views on Youtube for some mumble rap. He is not the product of accidental fame but of tenacity.

His interest in music began at an early age in elementary school. He attended Imara Primary School and Brucewood Secondary School, and at 13 his love of music was visible and palpable. It helped that his older brother loved music too. Together they released their first rap track in 2004.

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Khaligraph made his bones the hard way.

In 2009, The Channel O Emcee Africa tour, sponsored by Sprite, came calling in search of the premier freestyle MC. They dubbed it the Channel O MC Challenge. At the heart of the competition was the desire to initiate awareness of "street life" as a sociocultural context captured by local hip hop music. Khaligraph, then a 19-year-old lad, laced his gloves and threw himself into the ring.

Let us recount the day.

A Saturday night. June 6 2009. The venue is Club Clique. The finals for the Emcee Africa Kenya edition. Early that day, over 50 MCs flocked to Baricho Road to register for the competition. The fans were your typical pre-skinny-jeans hip hop crowd. Baggy jeans, hoods, Timbaland, bling bling - fake no less - and a gangsta attitude to boot. The judges: Mwafreeka, Abbas Kubaff aka Doobeez, and Nazizi. Three notable voices with sledgehammer disc tracks to their names.

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The judges have their ears tuned for isolating the dope from the whack rappers. During the auditions, Mwafreeka is reported to have told a hopeless contestant to say aloud how whack they were. This nitbit reminds me of my primary school teacher, Mr. Odede, who, when we could not get our mathematics right, admonished us, *en whole*, to shout, to the world how sheep we were. Sheep most were.

A line-up of 10 MCs is selected to battle for the top spot. They are: Point Blank. Long Jon. Lethal Dynamic. Oluchina. Khaligraph. Kip. Kimya. Bizzle. O.D. And one female MC, Xtatic. I lioness out to destroy the cabal of bloody manes.

It was simple: get to the stage and showcase your lyrical prowess, spitting spur-of-the-moment rhymes, either acapella or on beat boxing, or you could prompt the judges to give you a topic if you thought you had mad skills. Eliminations pitted Point Blank vs Khaligraph for the big prize = \$10,000. That is, 780,000 Kenya shillings. (A dollar was going for 78 Kenyan shillings in 2009. It goes for 100 Kenya shillings today. A weaker shilling.)

Point Blank floors Khaligraph. Everybody agrees. But this would mark the beginning of Khaligraph's ascendancy. In that list of 10 MCs, 10 years later, none has been as industrious as Khaligraph. None can challenge him to the throne of Kenya's top MC today. None dominates the airwaves like he does today. *Testimony 1990* is a testament of his focus, the fire lit that Saturday night in 2009.

It is a New Age album, warm and optimistic. It does not lament. It chronicles contemporary challenges besetting a young man in Nairobi. It is not belt out in broody lyricism, perhaps because *Testimony 1990* comes from an artist who has achieved remarkable success. It is not a chronicle of his status now, as an artist, but a sort of reflection of a past lived through, of battles won. It is unlike the legendary Kalamashaka with their gritty rhymes and the personal catastrophe of jumping a thousand hurdles and still not making it to the Promised Land.

The album opens with "Testimony" featuring Sagini, a quintessential recap of the spirit of the album, and "Blessings" - a track thanking God. The warmth and reflection is a manifestation of the prevailing mood in the hip hop world today. One can say most albums released in 2018 sailed in a sea of positivity. Warm dynamic performances packaged with the versatility of moods and styles. "No chance, featuring the immensely talented Fena Gitu, is a clean introspective lay of wisdom. It is a combination of rapping and singing, away from the old times when rappers laid two or three verses on a solo cut. Instead we have a fluency where rap is blended neatly with song, interacting much more than you'd find in the two-dimensional hook-led templates of old.

It is customary to catch an older cat being mentioned, or a style or voice aped, sometimes temporarily. It is paying homage when a rapper references an older rapper or quotes a line. It is a nod of influence. An acknowledgement that the old wordplay still lives, that it has been connected to the present. Not sure whether anybody realized it, but even in that track with Msupa S, Khaligraph pulled a little of Johnny Vigeti: that raspy voice. He does it again in "For Life". If you love *Mr Vigeti*, you can pick Khaligraph channeling him Vigeti from mid second verse.

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The production of some of the tracks is a nod to the prevailing styles ruling the market. "Gwala", like "Yego", is trap music, same as "Taking it all" with Timmy Blanco, same as "Don't Know" with KO. All nods to the South African contemporaries, that up here in East Africa, we can do it just like you do. "Beat It" channels the pop icon Michael Jackson. "Make Babies" is a typical Khaligraph lyrical flexing: just shouting from the rooftops that he can accelerate if he wants to. He channel's Eminem's flow towards the end.

"Instagram Girls" and "Superwoman" are storytelling tracks. "Aisee" with Ray C is a light danceable beat. Ray C was the sultry goddess of our teenage years. She peppered our adolescence with sexual provocation. As a playlist, the album, with its solid lyrical releases, reflects an artist who has grown and is comfortable with his voice, an artist who is ready to put Kenya's hip hop on the international map.

On the other hand, there are concerns over the lack of politically-conscious hip hop in Kenya.

Hip hop as a political force

Hip hop is inherently political. With its roots traced to the militant spoken word by groups such as The Last Poets and The Watts Prophets, hip hop has always delivered political missives from the front line. In the 1980s, hip hop chronicled and reacted to the policies of US President Ronald Reagan, which called for widespread tax cuts, decreased social spending, increased military spending and the deregulation of domestic markets. Reaganomics led to massive cuts to social programmes and widened income inequality, consequences which were particularly worse for

African American families.

Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five captured this devastation in “The Message” in 1982. Robert Hilburn of *Los Angeles Times* described the single as “a revolutionary seven-minute record that is a brilliant compact chronicle of the tension and despair of the ghetto life that rips the innocence of the American Dream.”

These hip hop forefathers opened the door for younger fiery voices. When Public Enemy came to the fore, they earned the moniker Black America’s CNN. Public enemy centered political and cultural consciousness in a sonic experimentation infused with skilled poetic rhymes. They were ferocious unlike anything that had been seen before.

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Life outcomes were no better in Kenya. The economy collapsed from a nominal GDP of USD 7.265 billion in 1980 to USD 6.135 billion in 1985. Even worse, Kenya became one of the first countries to sign a Structural Adjustment Programme loan with the World Bank. The trade liberalisation experience was a gross disappointment and threw the early 1990s into great uncertainty. But before the ship could be directed away from the high waves, Kamlesh Pattni, as the chief architect of what became known as the Goldenberg Scandal, in collaboration with the top operatives in the Moi government, including the president himself, raped the country, stealing billions from the public coffers. An ignominy that lost the country the equivalent of 10% of GDP.

The economic devastation created fertile ground for the emergence of one of the most influential hip hop acts in Kenya, Ukoo Flani, in 1995. The group’s music flourished as a form of protest - authentic, gritty, and startling in its boldness. Ukoo Flani historicised slum life, using Dandora as a poster child for the effects of endemic corruption, breakdown of public service delivery, rampant crime and police brutality, and immense suffering during the Moi dictatorship. Hip hop, belted out in Sheng - to escape the censor of the police state- became a tool for the disenfranchised young men in the sprawling ghettos to voice their dissatisfaction and dissent.

Over the past two decades, hip hop has oscillated from social and political commentary to easy-going party jams, or a mix of both. In America, subgenres such as gangsta rap brought news styles to socio-political commentary, as reminiscent in NWA’s “F**k the Police”. But this was clouded by portrayals of masculinity, sexuality, and materialism in ways that seemed anti-ethical to the messaging of the preceding decade. In Kenya, artists, particularly those in the Underground, continued to rail against urban violence and dysfunction, police brutality and extrajudicial killing of young men in slums.

Khaligraph’s music attempts to carry both social and political commentary and easy-going party jams. While a majority of his tracks are fashioned for the club, a few explore social and political themes. The track “Gaza” is a song about Nairobi’s notorious criminal gang by the same name. The track juxtaposes a dialogue between two people - a living gang member and a deceased one, with the threat of Hessa - Nairobi’s super cop - in the middle. The living gang member, as most are wont to be, is steeped in anger, crime and violence, spewing threats at Hessa for cutting down the gang friend, and vowing revenge. In slow, introspective storytelling, the dead gang member feeds the living member with sober, down-to-earth advice to let go of the idea of meting out revenge on the cop, or they’ll *eat copper* - Sheng’s euphemism for the rampant extrajudicial killings of young men

perceived to be members of criminal gangs.

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“Chali ya Ghetto” (2017) is a narrative of life in the ghetto, one that extols the virtues of hard work and focus. The central message is that fortitude is the only path ghetto youth have for getting out of the slums alive, for social mobility. Such tracks, however, do not detail the extent of systemic marginalisation that not only pushes young people to drugs and gang violence but also effectively imprisons 60% of Nairobi’s population in informal settlements.

The question of whether hip hop can become a political mobilising force beyond the restrictions of personal protest is an old one. Most rappers start their musical career with an outrage against a system of oppression. As their careers progress, most tone down their lyrics to gain mainstream approval. It is only those who persist in the Underground that model their entire career on social and political commentary. In the modern marketplace, post-2000s, mainstream hip hop, inspired by gangsta rap, features the symbols of crass materialism – from gold chains, souped-up cars, toxic displays of masculinity, and sexual objectification.

Thanks to the Kanye West era, which began with the *College Dropout* in 2004, hip hop has succeeded in breaking down the old impregnable wall between commercial and socially-conscious hip hop. As Common told *Fader* in 2016; “Kanye kind of brought in a thing where it was like, you can rap about getting money and ‘Jesus Walks’. You can be down with Jay Z and Mos Def. Kanye brought together those different worlds.” This is the seismic shift that made Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 album, “*To Pimp a Butterfly*” or Childish Gambino’s “*This is America*” possible.

These shifts have also been replayed in Kenya. The mixing of commercial success and socially-conscious hip hop is what has made it possible for a commercial artist such as King Kaka to release “*Wajinga Nyinyi*” (2019) – one of the most impactful political protest tracks in recent years. It is not that the track tells Kenyans what they don’t know; rather, King Kaka serialises what is discussed daily on social media, and what is splashed on the front pages of daily newspapers. The lyrics translate the dysfunctions of a nation – clothed daily in civil terms – into the raw, unadorned, unpretentious language of the streets. #WajingaNyinyi tells Kenyans to stop being stupid and start holding the system accountable.

Urban colonial identity

This is the music culture that Khaligraph grew into, one in which hip hop was broadcast news from the ghetto, the hood. Rappers repped their hoods. Ukoo Flani made Dandora the capital city of Kenya’s hip hop, decked it with rhymes depicting an unforgiving cityscape for adult males and a space of tough love as Zakah na Kah depicted in the eponymic “*Dandora L.o.v.e.*”

When Khaligraph came of age, he began to identify with Kayole. Kayole 1960. The origins of the estates and route numbers, and the pervasiveness of these bus routes in Kenyan hip hop relate to the vital role recorded music plays in the construction of personal and collective cultural memory. While these bus route numbers evoke nostalgia over the years when the city was efficiently managed, the carrying forward of this colonial heritage in modern hip hop imagination shows the extent to which our collective memory and identity bears the remnants of the colonial state.

The bus route numbers go back to pre-independence years. Overseas Transport Company of London

established the first local bus in Kenya in 1934, with a fleet of 13 buses plying 12 routes. The City Council of Nairobi, in 1966, awarded Kenya Bus Service (KBS) a monopoly franchise to run the country's first formal means of public transport. The heydays of KBS was a demand-driven, efficient and predictable transport system. Fares were regulated.

The design of route numbers was in three dimensions. Route numbers above 100 series were for peri-urban routes, routes below 100 were intra-urban and urban, with the exception of 1, 2, and 3 which were peri-urban. All peri-urban routes terminated at Machakos Bus Station and all buses ending with the 100 Series terminated at the Bus Station. The addition of a letter to a route number signified that there were shorter routes that did not reach the specific destination, or they deviated from the original route then later joined it. Other routes, such as 9 and 6, were circular routes. A vehicle heading to Eastleigh, number 9, would use route 6 when coming back to town. Some of these route numbers have changed, others remain. Route 1 used to be from the City Centre to Dagoretti Corner. Routes 61 and 60, plying the City Centre to Kayole, are no longer in operation, and were changed to Route 1960 and 1961. Hence Kayole 1960.

Nazizi, the First Lady, was the first of Kenya's MCs to chronicle the route number phenomenon in urban rap through the track "Kenyan Girl, Kenyan Boy", and the recent "Mat Za Ronga" by Tunji ft Khaligraph Jones follows that age-old feature of Nairobi's urban rap. Octopizzo, Khaligraph's longtime rival to Kenya's King of Rap throne, reps Namba 8 - Kibera.

Music marketplace

Over the past decade, there has been a resurgence of political themes in hip hop albums. Kendrick Lamar's vignettes capturing the African-American life is the poster political-hip-hop-album for the decade. Juliani's 2016 album *Mtaa Mentality* is a definitive entry for politically-conscious albums in Kenya.

For the most part, away from the pioneering hip hop albums of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Kenya's hip hop scene has been nothing but a graveyard of mix tapes which, while offering a glimpse of spirit and experimentation, deny listeners the beauty of intention, coherence, and completeness. Kenya is home to "superstar" musicians without music albums. Music singles, which had hitherto been known as a precursor to an album, have in most cases been the only output Kenyan fans have received from their musicians.

Given the predominantly club-banger focus of a music single, it is often difficult to chart the trajectory of a musician from the perspective of their thematic concerns. However, the album *Testimony 1990* is a condensed piece of work that offers us coherence, a singular thematic focus, and a snapshot of the career progress of the artist.

Sheng, as a practice of moving across languages, has always been the choice for urban youth to resist and to engage in socio-political commentary and protest. But with the breaking down of market boundaries through the dominance of a few US-based music streaming platforms, language is once again becoming a significant indicator for capturing the international market.

For young African artists, the future belongs to those who can blend local languages and the lingua franca with the dominant language of business, in this case English. It is the reason why Tanzania's Diamond Platnumz, while capturing the local East African market on the back of Swahili lyrics, resorts to English when doing collaborations with American artists such as Rick Ross and Omarion. Khaligraph is the evolution of that trend, and it will not be long before he begins hustling for that big collaboration with a major American artist.

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There is a new legion of internet-born artists, genre-bending productions and visuals, serving digital native fan bases with exciting single tracks. The Gengetone – perhaps the most significant development in Kenyan music in years – is already stealing the airwaves from maturing acts such as Khaligraph, Octopizzo, and King Kaka. The new wave is characterised by explicit content, with song lyrics promoting violence and misogyny, and videos promoting the sexual objectification of women.

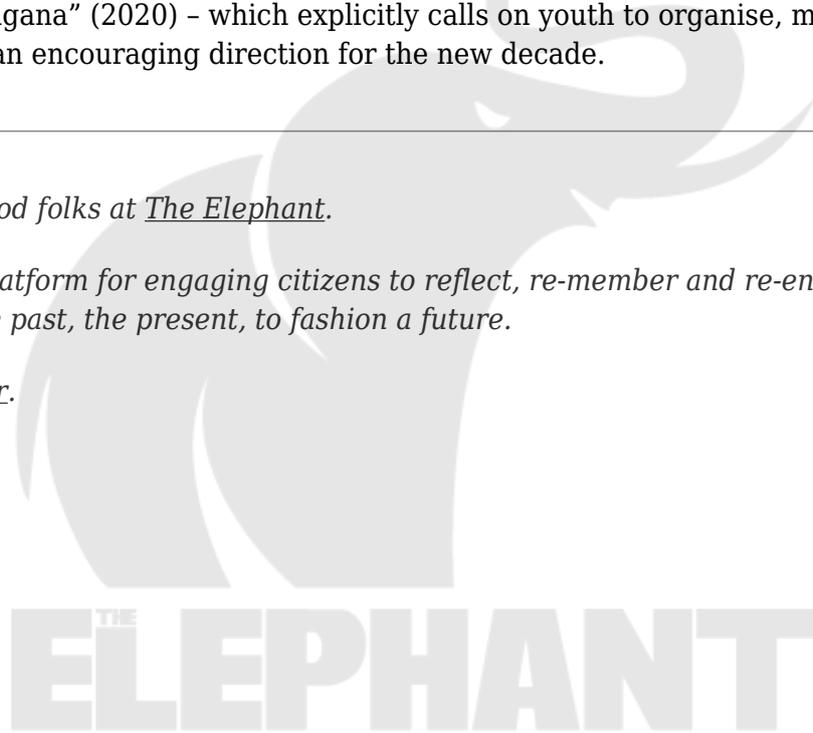
However, as writer Barbara Wanjala notes: “Kenyan artists have been experimenting to see what will capture the youth. The contemporary sound landscape runs the whole gamut, from songs that speak about debauchery to conscious lyricists rapping with conviction. Other artists straddle both worlds, producing output that has commercial appeal as well as tracks that are socially responsible.”

It remains to be seen whether, in addition to documenting, socio-politically conscious hip hop can engender political mobilisation and drive political change in Kenya. Perhaps Wakadinali’s “Kuna Siku Youths Wataungana” (2020) – which explicitly calls on youth to organise, mobilise, and take political action – is an encouraging direction for the new decade.

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