



Wajinga Nation: The Rising Popularity of Protest Music in Kenya

By Damaris Parsitau



In December 2019, Kennedy Ombima, better known by his stage name King Kaka, released a new song called *Wajinga Nyinyi* (You Fools) that caused ripples nationwide. This incredibly popular song not only sought to speak truth to power, but also highlighted the state of the nation – how it has been captured by endemic corruption, inept governance and noxious ethnic politics. *Wajinga Nyinyi* was not only bravely rendered, it trended for days, took the country by storm, and excited a deeply frustrated citizenry.

Since its release, it has spawned similar protest songs, with other artists releasing renditions of the song. Although other artists, such as Eric Wainana of *Nchi ya kitu kidogo fame* (A country of petty corruption), Charles Njagua aka Jaguar of *Kigeugeu* (hypocrisy), (the artist is today the Jubilee Party MP for Kamukunji constituency in Nairobi County), Gidi Gidi of the *Unbwogable* (Unbeatable) beat, among others, released popular “protest” songs a while ago, there was something different about *Wajinga Nyinyi* that caught the attention of Kenyans, especially the youth.

The song highlighted the Jubilee government’s multiple failures, empty promises and its “mortgaging” the country to China through reckless borrowing. Why did this song cause so much hue and cry, yet King Kaka did not speak about anything that we did not know already? What made this song so attention-grabbing and catchy?

First, the song captured a raft of issues that have sadly become a defining feature of our politics: theft, tribal politics, incompetent leadership, bad religion, bad church, rogue clergy, indecent public behaviour, lack of role models, lack of integrity, youth unemployment, drug and substance abuse, a compromised and ineffective judiciary, poor treatment of teachers and hospital staff, among other ills.

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Secondly, and more importantly, the song did not just rap away these issues, but it sought to directly engage Kenyans by calling them out for their apparent foolishness and squarely putting the blame on them. The song blamed Kenyans for perpetually voting in bad leaders based on tribal bigotry and money.

Third, the song urged Kenyans to elect competent leaders so that they can hold them to account through exercising their power of the ballot.

Fourthly, because the song was delivered in the language of the youth and by appropriating simple but popular narratives, it struck a chord and affected the conscience of Kenyan youth, the most disenfranchised and restless constituency.

"I think the song stirred not just our minds, but also our conscience and made us look really foolish," said Willis Odhiambo, a Nakuru County youth. "The leaders we elect through the politics of manipulation and 'mtu wetu' syndrome (the politics of our man) display a condescending attitude towards us the electorate as soon as they have been sworn in. They will then go on a looting spree so I think the song was a call out to all our elected leaders that it is no longer business as usual."

Odhiambo also said that the song was a wake-up call to the powers that be that "vitu kwa ground ni different" (on the ground, things are different). "The song is a passionate appeal to my generation to vote properly if we are to effect the desired change we so badly need."

Another youth, Grace Naliaka, said the song called for a non-violent youth revolution, "one that calls us to take our civic duties, to soul search on our future that has been stolen by the old geezers. This song pierced both our personal and collective conscience and for the first time, I thought very seriously about my civic duties. So for me, the song was about us the youth to see beyond tribe and elect leaders of integrity. We must refuse to whine and rap away our frustrations, but take control of our destiny by changing how we vote and who we vote for."

Naliaka observed that the independence generation had messed up the future of the millennials. "By belting out the lyrics, King Kaka had read the riot act to the inept corrupt-ridden Jubilee government."

I think the song was not just about speaking truth to power; it also called for deep introspection. Given that the Kenyan electoral psychology and sociology is a study in ethnic mobilisation, the lyrics pricked Kenyans where it mattered most.

In the book *It's Our Time to Eat* by Michela Wrong, Kenyan politics is characterised as the politics of tribe and belly politics through primitive accumulation of wealth, and by the looting of public coffers. As such, during every election cycle, the electorate goes out to elect leaders based on a tribal matrix.

The status of Kenyan youth, like many youth on the African continent, raises huge concerns for those who care about this large and significant constituency that happens to wield tremendous voting power. Africa is a young continent with a teeming youthful – but deeply frustrated and unemployed – population. Nearly 80 per cent of Kenya’s more than 40 million people are under the age of 35. Yet, a significant majority of the youth in Kenya operate in a hostile environment, where the dominant issues they grapple with include, but are not limited to, unemployment, poverty, unequal opportunities (economic and/or otherwise), ethnic bigotry, marginalisation, HIV/AIDS, drugs and substance abuse, mental health issues, crime and violence.

Coupled with the crippling unemployment is the fact that the average young person in Kenya is a victim of a gerontocratic economy and polity, where the tendency by the government is to give most public jobs to retirees and political cronies. King Kaka derides both President Uhuru Kenyatta and Parliament about this apparent gerontocracy when he says “youth ni Moody at 90 and Gikonyo at 80”.

Moody Awori, a veteran politician born in 1927 who served as Kenya’s ninth Vice President from 2003 to 2009, was recently appointed at the age of 91 to serve on the board of the Sports, Arts and Social Development Fund. He and others like Karuthi Gikonyo and many others who are in their sunset years keep being re-appointed to plump public jobs. The appointment of former Othaya MP Mary Wambui, 69, to chair the National Employment Authority, for example, angered many Kenyan youth, even though a court annulled her appointment on the grounds that she was not qualified for the job.

Decisions on public matters that affect youth are therefore made by people who are out of touch with the realities of young people in the 21st century. At best, the political elite pay lip service to the youth question, but more often than not, they tend to treat the youth as outsiders in the decision making process, as a group on permanent hold, waiting to be leaders of tomorrow – a tomorrow that has turned out to be a mirage. And if that tomorrow comes, it only does for the old and the frail, and the already very wealthy.

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In the political arena, the youth are, at worst, treated as objects to be manipulated and used or, at best, as junior partners. Often, decisions affecting them are made in their absence; their job is only to comply. The youth’s inability to access power at the centre has led to their exclusion and marginalisation. Because of this exclusion, there is a general sense of hopelessness, restlessness and uneasiness, leading to increased vulnerability.

The Jubilee Party government rode to power in 2013 with a promise to create millions of jobs for the youth. Seven years later, the poor youth have realised they have been played, that their role is to be coerced and manipulated by political henchmen.

The youth are not only perceived as malleable and vulnerable to ethnic machinations, but sadly, also to religious manipulation. It is a public secret that some Kenyan youth have been lured to join religion-inspired terror groups such as Al Shabaab. Their recruitment into these terror groups is often the result of unaddressed historical injustices and grievances, as well as the marginalisation of the youth and victimisation by the security agencies. In a situation where the youth feel neglected and unwanted, religious radicalisation becomes the norm and finds its niche among a terrorised lot

that has been denied opportunities.

Politicians eating the youth's future

According to Godwin Murunga, a Kenyan historian working for CODESRIA in Dakar, Senegal, the framing of the youth as a risky category is “problematic” because there is compelling evidence of the potential of youth to innovate outside of the state. Murunga says that Kenyan youth operate in an environment full of disparities, where progress and regression alternate in unpredictable ways. He says while there are certain segments of Kenyan society that benefit from the limited economic prosperity enjoyed in Kenya and East Africa, especially in the last one or so decades, these benefits are unevenly distributed.

Even as the Kenyan state has excluded the youth from governance and decision-making platforms, the political elites have continued to treat the youth and the general populace with arrogance and disdain. This is not surprising at all, given that the history of Kenya is one of pork-barrel politics, where the youth are suspended in time – they are told that they are the leaders of tomorrow, not of today. Hence money and resources meant for youth is squandered or redirected elsewhere.

These elites thrive on intimidation and threats to scare away anyone pointing a finger at them. The threat by Governor Anne Mumbi Waiguru to sue King Kaka is the latest example. (In his song, King Kaka wondered why Waiguru was still in office, given that she had presided over the loss of millions of shillings meant for the National Youth Service (NYS) when she was the Devolution Cabinet Secretary.

Tracy Namunyak from Kajiado County points out that state officials thrive in discrediting harassing, intimidating, silencing and issuing threats to their critics. Namunyak says Kenyans could be angry with Waiguru because “she ate our future”.

Rogue clerics who steal from the mouths of babes

Not only are youth manipulated by the political class, they are also manipulated by religious leaders. King Kaka criticises the Kenyan church and its clergy who wield tremendous power in this country and who seek to influence not just government policy, but also the citizenry through subtle coercion and threats of fire and brimstone in hell. The clergy, just like the political elite, is deeply condescending towards the Kenyan public and the youth.

Apostle James Maina Ng'ang'a of Neno Evangelism, who is the epitome of a (Pentecostal) cleric gone rogue, is mentioned in Kaka's lyrics. His arrogance, sense of entitlement, abusive language, and condescending attitude towards women and youth mirror how politicians treat Kenyans. The artist criticises the clergy and its apparent love of money and equates its greed to that of the political class.

Ng'ang'a is brash, rude and reckless. Just like the Kenyan politician, he treats his huge followers with callousness and disdain. Just like the politicians, religious leaders treat Kenyans with *madharau* (contempt). Ng'anga once asked a church member why she wore cheap sneakers and scolded another for her inability to raise Sh6,000 for her children's school fees. In one of his latest outbursts, he equated King Kaka to a tout.

A rogue pastor who mirrors Ng'ang'a is Gilbert Deya, who claims to have 36,000 followers in the UK. Deya established the Gilbert Deya Ministries International in 1997. His organisation claims that Deya is able to help infertile, post-menopausal women to conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit and special prayers. These outrageous claims turned out to be a child-trafficking racket.

In 2006, Deya was arrested in Edinburgh, Scotland (where he had moved to in a bid to hide from Interpol) on charges of kidnapping and trafficking of children. He protested his innocence, claiming that the miracles that God performed through him were beyond human understanding and that no man can explain them except God. When he was extradited to Kenya, he was detained for nine months at Kamiti Maximum Prison and then released in May 2018 on a Sh10 million bond.

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Self-proclaimed Prophet David Edward Owuor, who tells his followers that he is two in one (Elijah and Moses), could rightly be described as Kenya's spiritual president. Prophet Owuor is a man who loves pomp and power. He is authoritative and has cultivated a personality cult and mystique about him.

More importantly, he is condescending to other Kenyans, be they clergy or otherwise. He is a master of spiritual and emotional manipulation; he often threatens his followers with eternal damnation, death, earthquakes and floods. Prophet Owuor demands absolute adoration from his followers and has created a religious-political personality cult around himself. Any contrary opinion or critic of the mightiest of the mightiest attracts curses, death threats, road accidents and severe illnesses like cancer.

The clergy no longer speaks the language of social justice, of the poor and vulnerable. Religious leaders, just like politicians, treat the youth the same way politicians do. It would seem use-and-dump is their stated policy.

Patriarchy and bedroom politics

In a conservative country like Kenya, political and religious power is the preserve of men. Threats of violence - political, physical and verbal - are not uncommon in the Kenyan public sphere.

For Ng'ang'a, politics is his bedroom, where he has power over the youth and their mothers. He appropriates the patriarchal language of the Bible, colonialism and toxic masculinity. Women's bodies are sexualised and sex is used to sanctify men's control over women's bodies.

By stating to King Kaka that "your mother is my girlfriend", Ng'ang'a sees women's place as not just being in the kitchen, but also in his bedroom. If they are not in the kitchen or in the bedroom, then they are in his church, being exorcised of demons and spirit-husbands, who presumably rape women in Ng'ang'a's fantasies. Even in the underworld, male demons inhibit women bodies, raping them at will, while Ng'ang'a rapes them of their dignity through his toxic theologies of demonic deliverance.

The female body is a site of abuse where toxic theologies are constructed. Women's bodies are sites of violence, patriarchal control and surveillance. Women's body parts have also been used by Kenyan politicians and men to insult and abuse others. Nearly a decade since the promulgation of the new Kenyan constitution of 2010, MPs are yet to pass the two-thirds gender rule.

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In today's Kenya, religion has become indistinguishable from politics. In the last two general elections, we have witnessed tremendous cooption of the Kenyan clergy by the political class. The class fundraises colossal amounts of money for churches to win legitimation and respectability, while compromising the very clergy by stifling their voice.

Deputy President William Ruto, who has variously proclaimed himself to be a born again Christian, has caused quite a stir through his frequent church fund-raising activities, where he has donated humungous amounts of money to different churches. In many such events and during electioneering periods, politicians scramble for prayers and votes, mostly in churches. Images of President Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy being prayed for and anointed with special oil in churches have become the norm in Kenyan political, religious and social scenes.

The rise of protest music among youth

While the youth are being marginalised in the political arena and in church circles, they have turned to reclaiming the creative and performing arts to protest their exclusion. Through the power of hip-hop lyrics, contemporary songs and poetic music, the youth are seeking not just to contest their marginalisation, but to also challenge, educate, mobilise and organise - to hold the political class and government functionaries, as well as religious leaders, to account through popular entertainment and dramatised narratives.

Protest music has long been recognised as an art form used by the youth to not only fight for their rights and existence, but also to reclaim their voices and to directly appeal to the people's conscience. Robert Kyalunganyi, aka Bobi Wine, the MP for Kyaddondo East constituency in Kampala, Uganda, has used his talents as a musician to propel himself right into the centre of Ugandan politics. Today, the long-serving President Yoweri Museveni has to contend with Bobi's soaring popularity in politics and across social circles in Uganda. He has proved to be an irritating itch to Museveni.

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Bobi Wine has done this by giving the youth a practical medium and a new space to express disaffection with the current status quo in Uganda's political establishment. He offers a critique of power using a language that is accessible, simple and appealing to the youth constituency.

Popular music has the ability to not just prick the powers that be, but also to awaken the consciousness of the citizenry. The youth are carving out spaces for civic engagement outside of the state and church. They have been using social media as spaces for political and social mobilisation.

As the church and government aficionados' minds remain colonial and static, the youth are moving ahead to recreate and reclaim spaces for themselves. The church, stuck in its colonial framework, is no longer out to save souls and fight for the vulnerable. It doesn't speak the language of the downtrodden. Today it speaks the language of the oppressor and brutal governments. It is part and parcel of the predatory political class.

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My inquiry into the status of contemporary Kenyan protest music indignantly began with a hypothesis that this genre has gone mute in recent years. My agitation was fuelled after watching a documentary on the great artist of the American civil rights movement, Nina Simone hunched over her piano, singing *Mississippi Goddam*. The song was riveting, bold, defiant and *'in your face'*. Her song, sung in 1964 at the height of the American Civil rights campaign, was exceedingly bold. Nina was a rising star and a commercial success, but her musical career took a different tangent after the release of *Mississippi Goddam*. The song was banned from the air-waves, supposedly because of the cuss word, 'goddam', an unacceptable term for the time. However, that did not stop the song from becoming the Civil rights' anthem and receiving more resonance than the popular gospel turned protest song, *'We shall overcome'* mainstreamed by Pete Seegar.

Nina's song, spoke truth to power, the power of the white supremacist, segregationist intent on denying African Americans their human rights. In a sense, Nina committed commercial suicide in order to gain her political voice. The documentary led to my reflection on the role of music in political protest in Kenya, and left me wondering, when did the voice of protest music in Kenya fall silent?

Immediately after independence, there were "patriotic" songs composed to celebrate the newly attained *uhuru*. Musicians created songs reminding Kenyans of the independence struggle and the sacrifices that had resulted in self-rule. They also extolled the virtues of the main actors in this fight but slowly the music morphed into songs glorifying the first president, Jomo Kenyatta. As President Kenyatta consolidated power, the timbre of praise songs rose; the person of the president and the aspiration of the nation became one. It was the beginning of court poetry and a hero-worship culture.

The first major political shock to the national project was the assassination in 1965 of Pio Gama Pinto, the left-leaning journalist, politician, ex-detainee, freedom fighter and confidante of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. Pinto was a Specially Elected Member of the House of Representatives and an avowed socialist. His assassination followed the dissolution of KADU (Kenya African Democratic Union) that led to Kenya becoming a de facto one-party state.

The next major political event was the formation of Kenya People's Union (KPU) in 1966 that flung Kenya back to multi-party dispensation, but which, most importantly, signified the split in the original KANU (Kenya African National Union) and the beginning of the Kenyatta/Oginga-Odinga rivalry.

These events fermented the beginning of protest music in Kenya as artists began to respond to the political contestations. The state came down viciously on its critics and opponents, signalling the narrowing of democratic space. Artists began to speak truth to power.

In 1969, in an act of defiance, Abdilatif Abdulla, a poet and member of KPU, wrote the treatise *Kenya: Twendapi?* (Kenya, where are we heading to?), which earned him the notoriety of being Kenya's first post-independence political prisoner (1969-72). It was a bold attempt at speaking truth to power and revealed that the state was prepared to use all means to stifle commentary.

Speaking truth to power is described as a non-violent political tactic employed by dissidents against the received wisdom or propaganda of governments they regard as oppressive, authoritarian or an "ideocracy". Speaking that truth through music has the benefit of being able to inform, educate and mobilise through popular entertainment. The potency of music arises from its ability to mutate into contemporary popular culture and reach across the barriers of elitism that limit a novelist, an actor, a musician or any other type of artist.

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As the Kenyatta government progressively became more repressive, so did the intensity of the protest music. The manner that the state responded to protest music speaking truth to power offers us a window into understanding the current state of protest music.

Bitter independence waters

As the dream of independence began to fade, Ishmael Nga'nga of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) Gathaithi Church choir released a song, *Mai ni Maruru* (The waters are bitter), which likened the deferred dream-fruits of independence to the bitter waters spoken of in the Bible. The expected fruits of independence had been replaced by aggrandisement by the political elite. Though his song was couched in biblical and religious symbolism, the powerful heard it. Nga'nga lamented that, "*Men and women are quarrelling/ over small matters, telling each other/ "I did not want someone like you"/ Because the water is bitter/ When you go to the office seeking assistance/ You find an angry officer/ When you try to enter, he tells you he is 'busy'/ Because the water is bitter."*

Ishmael's song was banned by the Kenyatta government and the president is said to have retorted that the fruits of independent could not be equated to the proverbial bitter water that caused concern to the children of Israel. The state resorted to silencing its critics using the public broadcaster that was the only one available at this time. This approach was to become a standard way of ensuring that the voice of protest was not heard.

The culture of political assassinations, mysterious deaths and disappearances of politicians began to become commonplace. Argwings Kodhek died in a suspicious accident in January of 1969. A few months later, the charismatic politician Tom Mboya was assassinated. In 1972, Ronald Ngala died in a Christmas Day accident that baffled many. In 1975, the fiery Josiah Mwangi Kariuki (JM), who had served as Kenyatta's personal secretary, was murdered. Joseph Kamaru, a personal friend of JM and a popular Benga musician, used his music to protest the killing of the politician. Kamaru's song was banned by the Voice of Kenya (later known as the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) on June 20, 1975 and Kamaru is reported to have been arrested and, along with his collaborators, and whipped by the president himself. (This claim is, however, difficult to verify.)

Beyond the use of state machinery to limit access to audiences by shutting down the airwaves, physical threats and actual violence entered the repertoire of tools used by the state to ensure that criticism was curtailed. Kamaru is reported to have said that after releasing the song, he experienced very hard times because the song didn't go well with the ruling elite and he even started receiving death threats. He said, "I received threats that if I was not careful, my head would be picked from Ngong where Kariuki's lifeless body was found."

After President Moi came to power in 1978, Kamaru enjoyed a period of molly-coddling Moi and even earned himself an official state trip to Japan. Upon his return, he sang the *Safari ya Japan* collection in which he heaped praises on Moi. This dalliance did not last long. When Kamaru supported multipartyism, he fell out of favour with Moi.

State capture

In 1988, amid the infamous *mlolongo* queue-voting system championed by Moi, Kamaru released a song, *Mahoya ma Bururi* (Prayers of the Nation). During this time, the discontent with Moi's rule had reached boiling point levels. There was growing opposition to the state after the brutal 1986 crackdown on real and perceived dissidents, especially members of the Mwakenya movement.

Kamaru recalls that the song was an instant hit and created a lot of tension countrywide. He describes efforts by Moi to have him stop selling the Gikuyu version of the song. Moi went as far as giving Kamaru Sh800,000 to make a Kiswahili version of the song. Kamaru jumped at this offer and actually made the Kiswahili version, but was unsuccessful in his attempts to see Moi and to present him with his finished "homework". He concluded that it must have been Moi's way of trying to get him not to sell the song.

The state used its economic muscle to appropriate protest music by buying out artists and, in some cases, turning them into total pro-establishment praise-singers. The need for financial success and survival was enough incentive to silence voices of critics. When coercion did not work, the state was willing to “buy out” the artist speaking truth to power. Kamaru’s experience with Moi is instructive.

Daniel Owino Misiani, another musician who had used his art to consistently critique the political repression by the Kenyatta regime, especially the political assassinations, was imprisoned on various occasions for his lyrics, which were deemed offensive to the state. He was also threatened with deportation from Kenya on several occasions because he was born in Shirati, which is administratively in Tanzania. Kamaru and Owino were unique musicians in that even though their music could be taken off the air by the national broadcaster, they had built a strong ethnic fan base. Their records sold in the thousands and, therefore, their financial independence offered them a better chance of resisting the state capture of their protest music.

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The end of the Kenyatta presidency and ushering in of the Moi era gave some respite to the artists. However, this only lasted till the 1982 coup by the Air Force that was followed by state repression. The fact that university students, lecturers and intellectuals had supported the coup led Moi to clamp down on creatives.

As Moi’s regime became more repressive, and as the economy sank deeper into a black hole, Osumba Rateng’ released the song *Baba Otonglo* that detailed the economic hardships ordinary Kenyans were facing. In the song, a family is forced to adopt severe austerity measures, which were presented in a humorous manner, but which were painfully true. *Baba Otonglo* parodies the rigmarole surrounding the presentation of the annual budget in Parliament. Economic policies were singled out as sinking the ordinary Kenyan deeper and deeper into despair. He sings, “*Budget iko high, vyakula vimepanda, ukame umezidi, vitu vyote vimepanda*” (The budgeted cost of living is way too high, price of foodstuff has escalated, the drought has persisted, the cost of everything has risen.” The state responded to this song in the usual brutal fashion.

When the song was released, it was considered to have political undertones. The thin-skinned politicians lobbied to have the song pulled off the air. Osumba was visited by police and questioned. He detailed his experience in an interview. ‘Four policemen came to my house in Baba Dogo Estate, Nairobi and arrested me. They accused me of criticizing the Government and composing a song that incited people.’ To save his skin, Osumba insisted that the song was just a creative spin at the hard economic times. He escaped without charges being preferred against him.

Hip hop, Sheng and angry urban youth

The late 1980s and 90s marked a change in the socio-political landscape in Kenya. Among the most relevant change was the liberalisation of the airwaves and the resumption of political contest after the re-introduction of multi-party politics. Between 1980 and 2009, the population of Nairobi ballooned from 862,000 to about 3.4 million. According to a 2009 UN-Habitat, more than 34 per cent of Kenya’s total population lives in urban areas and of this, more than 71 per cent confined to informal settlements. Informal settlements in Nairobi, and other urban areas, are a consequence of failure of government policies and official indifference. Amnesty International has described the intricacies of the informal settlements in this way, “The experience of slum-dwellers starkly

illustrates that people living in poverty not only face deprivation, but are also strapped in poverty because they are excluded from the rest of the society, denied a say and threatened with violence and insecurity.”

Enter, Dandora and other marginalised urban settlements like Mathare, Majengo, Korogocho, Mukuru kwa Njenga and Kibera. Dandora, better known as, ‘D’ by the youthful musicians of this era became the code name for the Kenyan equivalent of the projects where Hip hop as protest music was born. The life and demographic profile in these inner cities mirrors the hip hop producing ghettos of the US. The hip hop story in Kenya is the story of Kalamashaka.

Kamaa, one of the founders of the Kalamashaka trio, describes how the group rose to express the tribulations of urban marginalisation and how the voice of this group and others like it were marginalised.

Kalamashaka was the most prominent of the pioneer Kenyan hip hop groups using Sheng to rap and infusing politics in their lyrics.

Kalamashaka began by rapping about the state of their existence in the urban ghettos of Nairobi dominated by serious social strife, depressed economies, ethnic tensions, state corruption, institutional failure, infrastructural collapse, crime, violence, police brutality and extrajudicial killings. Just like their American role-models, they were anti-establishment and explicitly political.

Kalamashaka made a mark in the music scene by their signature tune, ‘*Tafsiri Hii*’ (Translate This) which, by default, managed to get a lot of air-play when it was first produced. The song was an indictment of the prevailing inequality in Kenya and the disenfranchisement of the youth. Kamaa describes their lyrics as “gangsta and radical.” The use of Sheng, which at that time was struggling to shed off its identity as a street thug language and gain acceptance as a Kenyan patois was revolutionary because it immediately drew a generational as well as class line.

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The emerging Hip Hop musicians spoke truth to power, describing how the system had failed them. The lyrics were described as “full of rage.”

Hip hop Sheng was inspired by American Hip-hop music that the establishment had problems with because of the explicit lyrics and the apparent glorification of violence. The urban youth generation in the poorer settlements of Nairobi identified with Hip hop emerging from. The music was angry and retributive. Kalamashaka became the face of a movement that morphed into *Ukoo Fulani* - an angry and disenfranchised urban youth movement. Kalamashaka and *Ukoo Fulani* began to invoke the name, Mau Mau the liberation movement that remained banned in Kenya till 2002. This sent signals to the political status quo that the movement was potentially dangerous.

Market forces and political sycophancy

The response to the rising protest music signalled a totally new era in censorship. It was no longer the state that took it upon itself to ban music; commercial radio stations did this job for the state. Kamaa describes how radio presenters began to shut out these sounds from the air, effectively

driving them underground. The emergent commercial radio stations that were reliant on state and corporate goodwill and advertising effectively became agents of shutting down any anti-establishment voice. The use of Sheng was tolerated only to the extent that it allowed commercial interests to provide marketing information to the youth demographic. Any message that was aimed at raising social conscience was not acceptable.

Denied air time, and obviously not the kind of musicians who would be invited to perform at national celebrations, the economic marginalisation of this genre of music drove the artists deeper underground while their lyrics became angrier. Denial of air time meant that their voices were limited because they did not enjoy the base popularity that Owino Misiyani or Joseph Kamaru had.

The response to the rising protest music signalled a totally new era in censorship. It was no longer the state that took it upon itself to ban music; commercial radio stations did this job for the state. Kamaa describes how radio presenters began to shut out these sounds from the air, effectively driving them underground.

Commercialisation was the other factor that sunk youthful urban voices deeper into oblivion. Eric Musyoka, a producer, recalling his break-up with Kalamashaka, poignantly says, "I learnt that radical and hard stance does not help." This marked his transition from a producer of hip-hop to commercial music. So-called "market forces" conspired to lock out the voices that were not in line with the status quo.

Just as had happened to Nina Simone, the interests of the commercial oligarchs meant that raw talent and protest music could not secure time in recording studios. Barred from commercial airwaves and recording studios, protest music became a marginalised genre. Even though there were some who were speaking about vices such as corruption, only the less controversial numbers, like Eric Wainaina's *Nchi Ya Kitu Kidogo*, received acceptance and air time and were played at national celebrations. Though Eric spoke of the extent to which the cancer of corruption had metastasised in Kenya, he was not angry enough. Though he spoke of the fact that ordinary Kenyans are confronted with corruption in every facet of their lives, he did not squarely lay blame for this sorry state on the rulers. So whereas Eric's voice is broadcast loudly, that of the angry hip hop and reggae musicians, such as Mashifta, Kitu Sewer and Sarabi, are pushed away from the mainstream and into the underground; effectively muted.

Political sycophancy is also responsible for muting the voices of musicians speaking truth to power. Tom Mboya Angángá, better known as Atommy Sifa, had to flee into exile in Tanzania after he and a nondescript musician, Tedeja Kenya, produced a song in which they lampooned Raila Odinga for being responsible for the political and socio-economic woes bedeviling Luoland. Though there are no records that indicate that Raila Odinga himself threatened him with repercussions, the opposition leader's rabid supporters intimidated Atommy enough for him to fear for his life. Tede received few brickbats because, unlike Atommy, he was considered a non-entity and had little following through his music. When politics is highly personalised and ethnicised, those perceived to speak truth to the prevalent power are silenced through political patronage. However, when it suits the political class, they will use musicians who sing in ethnic languages to their advantage. For instance, the hip hop group Gidi Gidi Maji Maji's hit song *Unbwogable* (Unbeatable) became the rallying cry of Raila and other opposition politicians during the 2002 elections that ousted Moi's KANU party from power.

Musicians, like all professionals, depend on the power of the market to make ends meet and commercial considerations, as we saw in the case of Kamaru, can silence the truth. In Kenya, musicians face immense struggles because of a poor infrastructure supporting the music business.

Piracy and irregular payment of royalties for airplay makes it hard to be a commercial success. The market for live performances is low, with foreign artistes in higher demand and commanding better pay. An artist who hopes to speak truth to power gradually finds him or herself ground out of operation by penury. Artists like Owino Misiani and Kamaru could afford to be outspoken because they had a strong ethnic fan base that translated to a vibrant market. Their music being banned from the airwaves actually served to popularise their messages among ethnically-polarised constituencies. But they are more the exception than the norm.

The language used in protest music can also lead to marginalisation. The modern Kenyan musician, in an attempt to be more cosmopolitan, uses Kiswahili or English. These are not languages of political discourse in Kenya. Granted they may be used in public rallies, but the real political discussions happen in mother tongues. This explains why Moi was not comfortable with Kamaru's *Mahoya ma Bururi* in the Gikuyu language, but was willing to finance the Kiswahili version. Moi knew that the same song rendered in Kiswahili would suffer the same fate as Gabriel Omolo's, *Lunchtime* or Eric Wainaina's *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo*. The passion of political protest only works in the language of the masses, and outside the urban informal settlements, ethnic languages hold sway. Any song rendered in Kiswahili or English carries no threat of insurrection.

Language for protest assumes a deeper complexity in Kenya. Whereas Bob Marley used Jamaican English to sing political protest and Fela Kuti used Pidgin English, which is the language of the downtrodden in most of West Africa, there is no equivalent language of the masses in Kenya. For example, Juliani's song, *Utawala* (The administration) speaks of poor governance and impunity, but the moment he switches to rap and a hip hop style, he limits his audience. Hip hop and rap in Kenya are associated with crotch-grabbing African American wannabes who do not resonate with the ordinary citizens outside of the urban settlements. With time though, as urbanisation increases, and urban populations become a significant electoral demographic, this is likely to change.

The most successful musicians who have been able to speak truth to power are those who have a base, who speak in the language of that base and hence have a strong constituency. Failure to understand the true language of the ordinary citizen renders any political content irrelevant or innocuous. The powerful are not bothered by any message that will self-reduce to a touristy sing-song like *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo* because it will never mobilise political response. Even the hugely successful Sauti Sol's recent song and accompanying video, *Tujiangalie*, which critiques the current government's neglect of ordinary citizens' concerns, has failed to move the masses, perhaps because the band is associated more with feel-good songs than with anti-establishment music.

If Kenyan musicians are to regain the chagrin and attention of the establishment, they must speak the language of the masses. They must break social taboos, like Nina Simone did with *Mississippi Goddam*. She was able to express the anger of the African American in his everyday language. So must our musicians express the anger welling up because of grand corruption, huge national debts, state wastage and opulence, extrajudicial killings, over-taxation and miscarriage of justice.

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One could rightfully argue that protest music in Kenya is muted, not because artists are not

producing it, but because the genre has been effectively driven underground. It's vibrant in the digital repositories where the masses have little access.

In addition, the artists themselves have been marginalised by commercial interests keen on maintaining the status quo, so they struggle against all odds. The state no longer needs strong-arm tactics like detention, jail and threats because the media is doing the work of censorship for them. Civil society might support these artists, but as long as access to mass media is outside their grasp, these voices will remain muted.

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Playlist

1. [Monza - Mauritanie](#)
2. [Eric 1Key - Des espoirs d'un cynique](#)
3. [Bobi Wine - Time Bomb](#)
4. [Nash MC - Naandika](#)
5. [Xuman- Nothing New](#)

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