

Protest Music in Kenya: Why the Deafening Silence?

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 Misiani or Joseph Kamaru had.

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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.

Activism: Singing for Change

A Conversation with Musician and Artist Ndungi Githuku

Activism: Using Music to Change the World

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](#)