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## Kuvie's Perspective on Afrobeats and the Future of Ghanaian Popular Music

Submitted by *Ty-Juana Taylor* on March 28, 2016 - 8:31am



New popular genres constantly are popping up across the globe. While visiting and conducting research in West Africa I found myself being introduced to the growing *Azonto*[1] and *Afrobeats*[2] scenes in their infancy. Both genres are now disseminated across the continent (primarily in Anglophone West Africa) and in the Anglophone African diaspora.

Although it was Azonto dance competitions and YouTube videos that dominated the media in 2012, the more subtle presence and buzz around Afrobeats caught my attention. This is primarily because of the genre's name close affinity to the well-known genre Afrobeat. As the scene was fairly new I had to depend on the commentary from friends and musicians about the genre to get any information.

In order to get a better understanding of the musical and cultural nuances of Afrobeats I decided to interview an upcoming Ghanaian producer, Nestor Kuvie, who creates Afrobeats tracks along with various other styles and genres of African popular music. Through his story of becoming a producer, this article will offer not only his take on Afrobeats, but also some of the current trends in West African popular music, specifically Ghanaian.

### "It's not about me, it's about the music. So listen." - Nestor Kuvie

Nestor Semanu Kwame Ankuvie, a.k.a. Kuvie, was born in Sogakophe in the Volta Region in eastern Ghana. Raised along the coast of Accra in the Labadi Teshie regions, he quickly acclimated to the Ga traditions, culture, and language that surrounded him. As an Ewe dwelling in Ga land, from his youth Kuvie was able to coalesce elements of his culture with that of the culture surrounding him, along with the popular music he was exposed to through his family, friends, and the media.

Through fate, networking, and happenstance, I was introduced to and eventually befriended Kuvie, a young, eager producer in Accra, Ghana in 2012. Early on, we would eagerly "talk music" or chat about the current trends in music, and he would share his new musical creations with me. Within the short span of a few years Kuvie has developed into a well-known and highly desired musical genius in Ghana, working with virtually every musical star in the country and several well-known artists from Nigeria. For the sake of this interview, producer Nestor Kuvie graciously agreed to offer me, in addition to his own story, his account and perspective on 1) the growth of present-day Afrobeats, and 2) the trajectory in the popular music scene in Ghana.

### "What are your musical influences?"

When asked "What are your musical influences?" the producer replied with a long list of artists from various genres, both foreign and Ghanaian, including Bob Marley (reggae), Daddy Lumba, Nana Agyeman, and Rex Omar (highlife), and Jewel Aka and Cindy Thompson (Ghanaian gospel).

Although this was his musical soundscape at home, the music that sparked his in production



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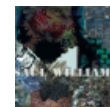
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originated from television. Watching the En Vogue video "Don't Let Go" was the first time Kuvie "experienced music turned into visuals." Later, after hearing Timbaland's [3] work on Aaliyah's single "Try Again," Kuvie developed "more interest in the sound rather than visual." Timbaland's beats were so impactful that only a few years later, at the age of 14, Kuvie began making his own beats in the computer lab at school. It was there that he created his first track with the free downloadable version of *Fruity Loops*. [4]

As he continued to hone his skill, he was encouraged to continue creating tracks by many, including Mara Bossman Damiba, a school colleague. Eventually, Emmanuel Nkasah (a colleague who informally introduced him to FL Studio) saw his potential and invested in the full version of *Fruity Loops* for the budding producer. Through the aid of individuals who saw his potential, he was networked and associated with several upcoming artists in the Ghanaian music industry, such as Ko-Jo Cue and Lady Jay, further connecting him with artists such as Klu and Dex Kwasi. Shortly thereafter, Kuvie began scoring major production credits with mainstream Ghanaian artists like E.L., Dex Kwasi, Pappy Kojo and Sarkodie. [5] In the beginning of 2015, he produced and released over five different tracks with several artists.

## "What is your recipe for production?"

After seeing him advance over just a few short years, I had to ask: "What is your recipe for production?" Kuvie professed that his recipe is hard work, diligence, skills, and his creative fusion of traditional musical elements with R&B and hip-hop. In many of his most recent works, one can hear an integration of not just musical styles between artists but also ethnic and cultural sharing as well. This is most evident in Kuvie's recent production: "Agbadza" by E.L.

E.L. - AGBADZA (Official Music Video)



"Agbadza," by E.L.

Although E.L. identifies as a hip-hop and Hiplife artist, [6] the above track is an example of Afrobeats. By using synthesized membranophones and idiophones to replicate the distinct Agbadza rhythm, [7] Kuvie overtly melds his Ewe roots with hip-hop through title and sound. This sound is then fused with a 1990s hip-hop sound through his use of the 808. [8] Although he does not use the traditional Ewe consort of drums [9] the Agbadza pattern is clear and discernable to its Ghanaian audience.

In addition to fusing popular music sounds with his indigenous soundscape, another component of Kuvie's recipe for productions is that he also strategically "selects artists that [he's] impressed with, either through their work, voice, and/or persona." Kuvie admires artists for their musical cadence, flow, and melodic contour. Similarly, he is drawn to the heavy southern American influence in the style of Dex Kwasi (raised in Texas), as heard in his track "Poke Out," further demonstrating how Kuvie views the musical process as a marriage between the artist and the producer.





"Poke Out," by Dex Kwasi

I was intrigued about Kuvie's thoughts on the current state and direction of African popular music, particularly in Ghana, which led me to ask him further about Afrobeats.

## **“What is Afrobeats?”**

Kuvie's initial response was to offer a description of his sound, not the label ascribed to it. In spite of the various labels used to characterize his tracks, he admitted that he prefers to label his work and much of what's on the market today as Afropop or afrodance. However, with much persistence he eventually answered when asked “What is Afrobeats?”

Kuvie described Afrobeats as a reflection of the times, where artists are currently in introspection and acceptance of African culture. While several of his tracks on Soundcloud are labeled as Afrobeats, he prefers to use the umbrella term Afropop to classify much of his music. Nevertheless, Kuvie does defend the popular use of the term Afrobeats, stating that “if it's African, it has a beat,” and therefore it is a musical expression and representation of African popular music.

He explains the genre to be a subgenre under the umbrella term Afropop, a category created and popularized during the 1960s with the international notoriety of popular African artists such as King Sunny Ade and Salif Keita. In spite of his definition, I continued to question this new genre's moniker—Afrobeats, as Afrobeat (sans 's') has an extensive history dating back to the 1970s in Nigeria.

Why have some contemporary African artists, most notably Wizkid with his track “Ojuelegba,” chosen to appropriate the term, knowing the rich history tied to its name? Kuvie offers that Afrobeat is not attributed just to one person (although Fela Kuti is its most acclaimed performer). Rather, the genre can be associated to a number of performers. He then mentions the importance of evaluating the texture of the sound in context with the texture of the time. For instance, contemporary artists are becoming more reflective and embracing their culture, which aligns with the philosophy behind Kuti's Afrobeat in that they are fusing elements of African American popular music with local musical elements.



"Ojuelegba," by Wizkid.

Essentially, Kuvie argued that the sentiment amongst a lot of contemporary African popular artists is that they incorporate aural traits of their heritage in the music, merging American hip-hop and/or contemporary R&B styles and sounds with indigenous rhythms, language, and/or pidgin language. Therefore, Afrobeats is more of a trend where several African popular artists have taken to incorporating indigenous elements in their hip-hop and R&B tracks, thereby showing how current-day Afrobeats actually bears much semblance to its predecessor Afrobeat.

### **“Where do you see the music industry in Ghana going in the next few years and where do you see yourself in its growth and development?”**

I concluded the interview asking “Where do you see the music industry in Ghana going in the next few years and where do you see yourself in its growth and development?” Kuvie stated that the market is now “interfusing culture. . . . Artists can share whatever they please lyrically more openly as they please, [as] the industry has become more accessible for the creators [since] the [label] structure has deteriorated.” He continued to add that artists are now experimenting with adding more African elements in their songs, such as pidgin language and traditional African musical features. Kuvie shed further light on the current atmosphere of the music industry in Ghana by stating that “there is no coherent system in place to track royalties for Ghanaian artists. . . . Radio stations [are the only ones making profits] because of payola [and] artists [only profit] from show endorsements and appearances.” As there is no lucrative industry shaping popular Ghanaian music, certain musical liberties are being taken in this era.

Ironically, as artists are not financially profiting from their artistry, the lack of funds encourages creativity and diverse projects that they put on the free market through websites such as Soundcloud. The process, in many cases, is genuinely about the music, which can be seen in the number of mixtapes, free downloads, and freely distributed singles online. In this age, Ghanaian artists are heavily using social media to disseminate their music and advertise their name. In this atmosphere Kuvie proclaims that his role in the current and future soundscape is to be a blender of musical cultures and sounds. He aspires to travel the continent, infusing the sights and sounds encountered into his productions, further expanding the idea of Afrobeats.

Based upon my conversation with Kuvie, in the case of Ghana, the Afrobeats scene has developed due to the lack of regulation in the system. Since many artists are financing themselves to release records and singles, they are free to channel the familiar in their performances. This strategy also connects the art to a more local audience. I will continue to watch the scene, perusing for whether Afrobeats develops into something new, or fades as many popular subgenres do. **[10]**

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Mitter, Siddhartha. 2016. "The Hip Hop Generation: Ghana's Hip Life and Ivory Coast's Coupé-Decalé." *Afropop*.  
<http://www.afropop.org/9369/the-hip-hop-generation-ghanas-hip-life-and-ivory-coasts-coupe-decale/>.  
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## Artists' Soundcloud sites

Dex Kwasi: <https://soundcloud.com/dexkwasi>

E.L.: <https://soundcloud.com/elrepgh>

Ko-Jo Cue: <https://soundcloud.com/ko-jo>

Kuvie: <https://soundcloud.com/kuvie>

Lady Jay: <https://soundcloud.com/ladyjaysings>

[1] Azonto refers to a Ghanaian popular music genre and dance style. To read more about this genre see Owusu (2012).

[2] Afrobeats (Afrobeatz) is less specific in its musical characteristics and origins. The Nigerian musician Wizkid is accredited for first using the term.

[3] Born Timothy Zachery Mosley, Timbaland is a rapper, songwriter, and music producer. His work became popular during the mid-1990s, while working primarily with R& B artists such as Ginuwine, Aaliyah, Missy Elliot, and Magoo. Today he is known for his projects with popular, hip-hop, and R&B artists.

[4] An anecdote of Kuvie's grade school experience with the computer lab and learning fruity loop: "We weren't allowed to use headphones in the computer lab. It got to the extent that I was banned from the computer lab and they put my name boldly on the door. The ban turned from three weeks to a month, a whole academic term to two academic terms. The only time I got a free pass to work in the lab was on the last week of school when we were free to do what we wanted. It finally got to a point where the lab supervisor said "you know what? This computer is for you."

[5] For these artists' Soundcloud sites, see list at the end of the article.

[6] For further information on Hiplife see Mitter (2016).

[7] Agbadza is traditionally a war dance from the Ewe people in the Volta region of Ghana, Benin, and Togo. Now, the dance and music is used recreationally for most gatherings.

[8] The Roland TR-808 is a programmable drum machine, introduced in the early 1980s. The machine became popular in hip-hop in the late 1980s and early 1990s because of its ability to produce extremely low bass-sound frequencies and its featuring unique artificial percussion sounds.

[9] The Ewe consort of drums features: Gankogui (iron bell); Atoke (banana bell); Atsimevu (master drum); Sogo (master and support drum); Kidi (support drum); Kagan (support drum); and Axatse (gourd rattle).

[10] Thank you Mr. Nestor Ankuvie for your time, thoughtful answers, and contribution to the music world. Those interested in his productions can see his other tracks on Soundcloud (<https://soundcloud.com/kuvie>). Questions addressed to Nestor Kuvie can be sent to [djkuvie@gmail.com](mailto:djkuvie@gmail.com).

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