

Hip-Hop in Africa

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Foreword

“African Hip-Hop Represent!”

Quentin Williams

There are few books written on African hip-hop that capture the form and function of the culture on the African continent. There are even fewer studies that make an authoritative statement on the linguistic and cultural diversity and practice of African hip-hop. And now and then a single study pushes the field of hip-hop studies into a critical direction so that it takes seriously the contribution of African hip-hop studies in not only expanding the field of hip-hop but better capturing the future of the culture on the African continent. Msia Clark's *Hip-Hop in Africa: Prophets of the City and Dustyfoot Philosophers* is such a study.

The question of the roots of African hip-hop starts with the use of local and European languages, representing the repressed and marginalized voices by enacting the principles of the fifth element of hip-hop, and projecting it as a culture that is inclusive, original, and diverse in genres and practices. In this excellent study by Clark, hip-hop in Africa is represented as multifarious, never as a monolith. The author challenges our perception that this culture in Africa is merely “imitating American culture.” But of course that is not the case because African hip-hop artists draw on a variety of ways of being and doing African hip-hop. And where they do sample American hip-hop

they do so for authenticity and to go against “locationists”, who seek to typify what they do. We cannot typify African hip-hop artists, Clark argues, because doing so “robs the African emcee of the power to self-identify as an African emcee.”

Clark’s study is a statement for advancing the practice of knowledge of self, the fifth element of hip-hop. Her study argues that hip-hop in the African continent has always focused on politically and socially conscious music: from South Africa’s Prophets of da City to Kwanza Unit in Tanzania to Das Primeiro in Angola. For decades, hip-hop culture has represented the frictions and flows of all its elements: all over Africa we hear and see the embodiment of the culture and read the narratives of celebration and discontent that critically reflect on the history of colonialism, the political structures that have arisen with apartheid, the social reengineering of Pan-African identities for groups and individuals, and the economic restructuring of previously destitute countries. Hip-hop in Africa has always accounted for the flows and the frictions that have come to make it a culture on this beautiful continent, and with an increasingly technological world structure in clouds (Google Drive, Dropbox) and new forms of music-sharing platforms, the variations of the culture in Africa has come to earn its place in the global hip-hop community.

This monograph by Clark powerfully demonstrates the strength of African hip-hop not only in how hip-hop artists represent the culture, but how it codes language to draw in its audience, how it discourses and criticizes neoliberal economic policies that African states and nations often adopt wholesale, often to the detriment of the population, and that has led to the politicization of hip-hop. As Clark puts it, “it is important to understand and further emphasize the historical and contemporary interconnectedness of the socioeconomic environments throughout urban Africa, and how that has manifested into the emergence of hip-hop artists as potential agents of change.”

The idea of hip-hop artists being agents of change has been around since the inception of the culture. And given this, there will always be friction when it comes to democracy for hip-hop artists in Africa. History has shown that African governments often treat their citizens with degrees of disdain, and hip-hop on the continent has

always engaged governments, often taking losses in the process. From the banning of Prophets of da City in apartheid South Africa to the recent imprisonment of Luaty Beirão (aka Ikonoklasta) in Angola, the costs for hip-hop artists in Africa are often high and unfair. But hip-hop artists who draw on the Fifth Element acknowledge that engagement with repressive state apparatuses (à la Althusser) are done so for the sake of social and democratic change. This engagement, or the production of hip-hop music that engages with the state, Clark describes, is also accomplished through “combat literature” (à la Fanon) or protest literature. That is, the production of hip-hop lyrics and rhymes that challenges the recolonization of social life by undemocratic means, such as corruption, violence, racialization, ethnic intolerance, and the criminalization of homosexuality.

This continues to be an admirable fight, but one often thwarted by hip-hop’s own hypocrisy. Consider for example that hip-hop has and will remain burdened by the gender and sexuality question, and it has yet to start an honest conversation about its gender roots and principles and about its future. It is obvious as hip-hop becomes more globalized it will need to be more inclusive about gender and sexuality, and assert its support for women and queer people marginalized by nations, governments, and states who legislate against their bodies and everyday lives. Clark’s study demonstrates that female African hip-hop artists know the rules of hip-hop and often “force a space for themselves in hip-hop communities” and at the same time “challenge prevailing ideas of femininity.” She argues throughout that while gender and sexual identity are represented differently in African hip-hop music, women who do hip-hop in Africa not only present their own “masculinities” but also open up a dialogue about gender and sexuality that is often only held by men. Clark describes how a female hip-hop artist may use braggadocio as a way to stake a claim to her position while at the same time doing so to highlight the struggles of women in and outside the hip-hop culture. Women active in African hip-hop focus on social problems such as violence against their body: this includes rape and sexual abuse; ideological oppression via patriarchy; issues related to the LGBTQI community, and so on. But women in African hip-hop are also critical of the politics of respectability and

particularly their place in hip-hop culture. As Clark argues, “Unlike in the United States, however, female emcees in Africa operate in cultural and historical landscapes in which images of female sexuality in the media have been minimal, and in society in which public expressions or displays are either forbidden or are rare.”

However, and this is Clark’s point, female hip-hop artists are still seen as objects of sexual desire, and this may compromise their agency in the practice of hip-hop culture, particularly in the face of the continued misogyny and sexism that plagues hip-hop generally. It is therefore imperative, as Clark goes on to discuss, that we emphasize that hip-hop spaces in Africa generally are contested spaces for female hip-hop artists; but those spaces are also contested by migrants, particularly hip-hop migrants.

Migration and the frictions that come with it are a pervasive theme in African hip-hop. Rap artists and graffiti artists, for example, have represented the challenges that come with leaving a home you have lived all your life in and the challenge of finding a new place, and feeling at home in that place. Clark asserts that African hip-hop artists represent, and put to lyrics and artwork, the transnational character of in- and out-migration on the continent. They “bring together Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism, in a way that challenges the classism found in Afropolitanism.” But in this bringing together, African hip-hop artists also demonstrate the pain and existential urgency that come with migration. Through their music, African hip-hop artists demonstrate that migration can be a challenge but, as Clark argues, “using hip-hop culture, with its roots in urban Black America, the artists are able to reemphasize African identities . . . [and they] often talk about where they are from, give stories of their hometown, and boast of coming from a certain city.”

Migration for hip-hop artists is often also an opportunity to open up new networks to expand the flow of hip-hop on the continent and beyond. Through such an opening up, new narratives of home and away evolve and the diaspora link becomes stronger. This is important to understand, as Clark aptly describes, because experiences of migration, alienation, and identity struggles are a continued theme in African hip-hop music.

The brilliance of Clark's study is in its analysis of language use by African hip-hop artists and how such language use is linked to hip-hop identities for authenticity. To her, hip-hop language, or as she cleverly puts it, "brkn lngwjz," points to new forms always being created by hip-hop artists.

For Clark, hip-hop language represents hybrid linguistic practices in the local African hip-hop context. Let's not get it twisted with language, because, as she argues, African hip-hop artists share in hip-hop cultural codes that allow them to represent their racialized identities on the African continent and by doing so bring us back to the connection between class, race, and culture. Questions of the dominance and hegemony of English on the African continent, and certainly other languages such as French and Portuguese, have been around since colonialism, and apartheid—for decades—and much ink has been spilled in critical op-eds, books, journal articles, poetry, and literature on those two issues. With calls for decolonization of not only the mind but the material reality of the historically marginalized people of Africa in this century, language has once again taken center stage, and it is through "the coded language used by African hip-hop artists," Clark claims, that we once again see the emphasis fall on the need to develop Pan-African identities. Hip-hop artists should be seen as critical language scholars, and for every artist, irrespective of which country in Africa they may find themselves in, language is central to representing a Pan-African identity. And depending on the language or language variety used, even if through "African and African American coded language and cultural symbols," such an identity does emerge.

In considering language, Clark raises an important question: Does it mean cultural appropriation takes place when African hip-hop artists mix African and African American linguistic codes to represent their identities? The answer to this is a carefully considered critical discussion of the distinctions we need to make between the "localization of art, styles, symbols, and practices between Africa and the African diaspora" and the wholesale adoption of American hip-hop. If this does happen, she asks, should we be talking about misappropriation? This clever analysis of misappropriation, as the reader

will no doubt discover, is more than just a rhetorical device Clark uses to lure the reader into her critical ambit. She argues that you cannot simply suggest that African youth deeply invested in hip-hop culture are just appropriating hip-hop culture from the United States willy-nilly. This would be a mistake at best, and at worst an ahistorical approach to the local development of hip-hop across various localities in Africa. We have to focus, as she argues, on the language choices of the artist because selecting a language is not only important for the listening audience but for the social statement the artist will make.

The reason is simple: the multilingual emcee of Africa is a “super emcee.” This powerful description of the linguistic biography of the multilingual emcee, as Clark quotes Chuck D, who coined the phrase “super emcee,” reminds us that when African hip-hop artists write, they draw on “more than one cultural system, using multiple languages, symbols, and cultural cues to compose songs that claim ownership of multiple cultural systems.” That is the norm for a multilingual emcee on the African continent.

There is of course no such thing as a monolingual emcee in Africa. This is because emcees are able to choose to rap in European languages or African languages. As Clark clearly demonstrates, emcees on the African continent may rap in Sheng, Swahili, Twi, Ewe, Wolof, Jola, and of course English and French. And though African hip-hop artists are fluent in European languages and choose to rap in those languages, they also do so in African languages—they take into account their target audience, the marketability of their music, how best to represent their political views, and how to strengthen their cultural connections. To best represent their Pan-African identity, they often code-switch between what H. Samy Alim (2007) has termed Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL) and an African or European language to identify with the global hip-hop community and to demonstrate their linguistic authenticity.

Not fully understanding this difference in code-switching, Clark argues, not only often leads to a misunderstanding of the multilingual situation of African hip-hop artists but also leads to the unfair and unreliable description that those artists are inauthentic because they only speak like, or rap like, African American rappers or produce music

that sounds too African American or generally American. Hardly. Clark hits back hard at this assertion, arguing that “one cannot appropriate from one’s own culture” and that we have to take seriously the “historical-cultural give-and-take that has gone on between the two communities.” The downside to the appropriation argument is the misappropriation one, and as Clark puts it powerfully: it happens “when one culture’s privilege allows it to incorrectly appropriate another culture in the creation or furtherance of harmful tropes and stereotypes. For example, when performing in blackface, White actors used their privilege to appropriate what they thought was African American culture, only to further negative tropes about the lazy, untrustworthy, and stupid African American.”

This powerful notion of misappropriation introduced by Clark pushes the focus on language and hip-hop performance and practice onto the localities where hip-hop is practiced in Africa. Misappropriation opens up on the racialized perceptions held not only by Africans about African Americans but also the other way around. The notion helps us tease open an often uncomfortable subject in inter- and cross-cultural communication studies: misunderstanding and politeness, or impoliteness across cultures. Clark argues convincingly that we cannot adopt a culture wholesale without adapting to it to local conditions. This means a fair amount of reworking and ultimately the production of new forms of hip-hop.

Clark’s book is a welcome contribution to the growing scholarship on hip-hop in the African continent. It should be of interest to scholarship in anthropology, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, musicology, and sociology. It opens up not only debate about hip-hop culture on the African continent, but it is also a decolonizing statement on the evolving forms, functions, and translanguality of African hip-hop in the twenty-first century.