

Globalization, Identity, and Youth Resistance: Kenya's Hip Hop Parliament

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Abstract: The Hip Hop Parliament is a youth-initiative comprised of underground hip hop MCs and artists that began in 2007 in Nairobi, Kenya. Representing itself as a collective conscious movement that has no boundaries and is open to participants from all over the world, the Hip Hop Parliament formed to offer youth a voice and a place from which to participate in the social, political, and cultural processes of Kenya. Drawing on hip hop culture and its mythologies of struggle, resistance, reclamation, and social consciousness, the Hip Hop Parliament released a Declaration as a means to present a unified front on a number of controversial issues concerning ethnicity, gender, respect for human life, reconciliation between communities, violence, youth culture, justice, peace, the use of SHENG as one of Kenya's "official" languages, the importance of good leadership and the responsibility to provide security, education, and health care available to all citizens regardless of economic circumstance. Given this context, in this article the authors begin to explore the following questions: What is the significance of the Hip Hop Parliament and its declaration as a movement / culture for youth in Kenya? How does hip hop, as an artistic form, work towards the expression of a contemporary Africa?

"We're not MPs, but MCs, members of the community"
(Hip Hop Parliament rapper Judge Franklin Milan).

Global hip hop culture offers listeners multiple narratives. Some are conventional and marked by capitalist ideas of success, privilege and power, while others, provide unique accounts of grass roots activism, political dissent, and innovative forms of resistance. As Imani Perry suggests, "To listen to hip hop is to enter a world of complexity and contradiction" (2004:1). Founded upon a mythological history of reclamation, resistance, and empowerment for marginalized African American and Latino youth in New York and more

specifically, the South Bronx, currently, hip hop is mediated through a twenty-first century American lens of capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormative privilege. And yet, in spite of this slick, sensationalized representation, hip hop culture has continued to evolve as a global culture signifying shared sensibilities, artistic practices, styles, and forms, simultaneously becoming “localized through a process of reinterpretation and redeployment” (Ntarangwi 2009:14). In a relatively short time span hip hop culture has been adopted and adapted by youth from around the world as a way to initiate dialogue, express lived experiences, tell collective stories, and enact youth agency. For Inuit youth living in Northern Canada for example, “Hip hop has become a place to begin to dialogue about the current crises within communities—fractures in relationships, social problems including drug addictions, depression, alcoholism, poverty, suicide, crime, cultural trauma, environmental degradation—and the ongoing legacies of colonialism” (Marsh 2009:126). Whether it is youth living in North Africa and the Middle East and the Arab Spring 2011 uprisings, Indigenous youth living in northern or western Canada, Palestinian youth living in the west bank and gaza, Maori youth from New Zealand, Turkish immigrants living in Germany, informed by global and local realities we bear witness to youth from around the world embracing hip hop and a global *hip hop politics* as a way to articulate dissent, challenge political leaders, and to enact change.¹ In this article we focus on one example of how hip hop has been employed as a strategy of political resistance and direct action by young people in Eastern Africa, more specifically those in Nairobi, Kenya—through what they have named the Hip Hop Parliament.

Beginning in 2007 following the disputed elections in Kenya which left at least 1400 dead and over 350,000 internally displaced citizens, the Hip Hop Parliament was formed in Nairobi. A youth-initiative comprised of over 60 underground hip hop MCs and artists, the Hip Hop Parliament represents itself as “a collective conscious movement that has no boundaries and is open to participants from all over the world” (Howden 2007). Formed to offer youth a voice and a place from which to participate in the social, political, and cultural processes of Kenya, the Hip Hop Parliament became a “forum for the artists to perform and recount what they had witnessed” (Kenya's Hip Hop Parliament 2009). Soon after forming, the Hip Hop Parliament released a *Declaration* that was “handed over to the United Nations during post-election talks on a unity government for Kenya.”² The declaration was a means to present a unified front on a number of controversial issues concerning ethnicity, gender, respect for human life, reconciliation between communities, violence, youth culture, justice, peace, the use of SHENG³ as one of Kenya's “official” languages, the importance of good leadership and the responsibility to provide security, education, and health care to all citizens regardless of economic circumstance.

Contrary to Indigenous radio stations that were disseminating hate narratives which resulted in spurring ethnic violence during the Kenya elections, (which was similar to what was happening on radio stations during the Rwanda Genocide), the Hip Hop Parliament promoted peace, unity, and collaboration.

Alongside the complex local issues embraced by this youth initiative, the Hip-Hop Parliament and the philosophy it espouses make an interesting and significant contribution toward current debates around contemporary African identity, globalization and youth culture. Integral to this dialogue is discussion of the Federation of Panafrican Filmmakers, as this was an earlier organized movement whose mandate included the goal of reclaiming African cultural identities. Given this context, in this work we begin to explore the following three questions: What is/was the significance of the Hip Hop Parliament and its declaration as a movement/culture for youth in Kenya? As a precursor to such a movement, how has the work building up to the creation of the Federation of Panafrican Filmmakers and other historical movements impacted the current youth mobilization movements in Nairobi? How does hip hop, as an artistic form, work towards the expression of a contemporary Africa?

Art and Culture as Tools of Liberation and Decolonization on the African Continent

Long before the rise of hip-hop culture in sub-Saharan Africa, writers and filmmakers, in particular, were resisting the colonizer's attempts to destroy their cultural values and were reminding their audiences, during liberation struggles, that "art must interpret all human experience, for anything against which the door is barred can cause trouble. Even if harmony is not achievable in the heterogeneity of human experience, the dangers of an open rupture are greatly lessened by giving to everyone his due in the same forum of social and cultural surveillance" (Achebe 1990:65). The representation of their own African experience, within world-wide expression of the human experience, was seen as a necessary chapter of decolonization, and for many, the use of local languages was paramount to retaining indigenous African identities and creating "authentic" expressions of "self."

One of the first organized movements to reclaim African cultural identities began with socially-committed filmmakers, including the Senegalese pioneer, Ousmane Sembène, who led discussions in 1966 in Dakar, at the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres that would lead eventually to the creation of the Federation of Panafrican Filmmakers. Consolidated in 1970 with a major mandate of promoting cinema as a tool of liberation and decolonization in the wake of

African independence, FEPACI worked hard to establish a viable film industry on the continent. Off-shoots include the promotion of Africa and African culture to the world as well as the elaboration and adoption of charters (the Algiers Charter of the African Filmmaker, 1975; and the Niamey Manifesto, 1982) intended to stimulate film policy and a growing industry, “while declaring film an historical necessity for the assertion of an African cultural identity” (Petty 1996:6). This is the historical climate which laid the groundwork for African media products to be promoted as educational tools and vehicles for consciousness-raising among Africans. In essence, Africans were imploring Africans to mobilize themselves and identify through continental similarities and were promoting ways of transnational education and understanding. Similarly today, those emcees involved in the Hip Hop Parliament are attempting to mobilize the millions of youth who live in Nairobi much like hip hop is “providing the rhythm of resistance in the Islamic world” (Wright 2011).

Young hip hop artists throughout Africa and the Middle East have created sites of resistance and new forms of political activism. In Senegal, young rappers were condemning the oppressive and extravagant regime of former president Abdoulaye Wade until he was finally replaced in the 2012 elections by Macky Sall. One of the most noteworthy examples of hip hop as a site of political pressure occurred in Tunisia when Hamada Ben Amor who raps under the name “El General,” posted a four minute video criticizing the regime of then President Zine al Abidine Ben Ali. The video went viral and was aired on news channels such as Al Jazeera (Wright, 2011). Weeks afterward, the tragic and now infamous self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi provoked an incredible wave of protest and resistance throughout Tunisia. El General released another song called “Tunisia Our Country” and was arrested for alleged treason but released after three days when the government thought his release would appease demonstrators. Only two weeks later, the government fell and the president fled the country (Wright 2011).

Hip Hop as an Artistic Form and the Rise of the Hip Hop Nation

Hip hop continues to be a constructive and contested space in which marginalized young people around the world “both resist and challenge social ideologies, practices, and structures that have caused and maintained their subordinate position” (Land and Stovall 2009:5). Because of hip hop’s accessibility, politics, and inclusion of multiple media arts practices (Marsh 2012), hip hop has become a culture for change and a site of resistance worldwide, which has generated a global identity. To speak of the *hip hop nation*, is to acknowledge

the “citizens of the global hip-hop cultural community,” and this citizenship “is defined not by conventional national or racial boundaries, but by a commitment to hip-hop’s multimedia *arts* culture, a culture that represents the social and political lives of its members” (Morgan and Bennett 2011:2). It is through its varied media arts practices that hip hop holds the interest of so many youth.

Hip hop’s creative landscapes are founded upon its multi-media arts practices and its understood *hip hop knowledge*—“the aesthetic, social, intellectual, and political identities, beliefs, behaviors, and values produced and embraced by its members, who generally think of hip hop as an identity, a worldview, and a way of life” (Morgan and Bennett 2011:2). And although there is an internationally recognized hip hop aesthetic, in his work on American hip hop Murray Forman suggests, “Youths who adhere to the styles, images, and values of hip-hop culture [...] have demonstrated unique capacities to construct different spaces, and, simultaneously, to construct spaces differently” (2002:3). Adaptations of hip hop culture by young people to include local cultural practices, sounds, vernacular, landscape, and politics demonstrate an interconnectivity between local and global discourses.

In the documentary film *Noise is My Voice* (2007), the audience is introduced to Angela Wainaina (aka Angel), one of the founding emcees of the Hip Hop Parliament. At one point, Angel discusses African hip hop in relation to the landscape on which she stands in the shot—a land of garbage, of desolation, of nothing-ness. To her this land is similar to the ghetto, an important signifier in the world of hip hop culture—a signifier of place, authenticity, and struggle. She makes the statement, “Inside it [the ghetto] there’s so much talent, so much potential, so much hope. This is the future of hip hop. The future of Africa lying inside the ghetto.... What people should do, what are leaders are supposed to be doing is digging in deep and getting that talent out... but they don’t do that. So what we hip hop artists are doing our best to dig deep and get the raw talent out. So that the place can look all beautiful again.”

According to Aurélia Ferrari, hip hop culture has by and large made its impact in Africa through music, and in Nairobi, in particular, hip-hop is perceived as a “protest movement” through which youth can express frustration at their continued oppression and marginalization (2007:109). Continuing on a long tradition of using songs to communicate political messages and demonstrate a collective defiance (Chimurenga in Zimbabwe and Mau Mau in Kenya), the Hip Hop Parliament embraces the cultural practices of hip hop (rapping, performance, graffiti art, dance, etc.) to peacefully resist. This philosophy can be seen immediately in their first statement in the Declaration: “We, the Hip Hop Parliament, believe that through our talent as Artists, and using the mic as our main tool, we shall disseminate a positive message to our country in our

efforts to participating resolving issues. Together, we stand united." Not unlike previous movements, the Hip Hop Parliament is drawing on creative media arts practices as a way to communicate, and to rally an incredibly large and young population. Continuing on in their fifth point of the Declaration, the Hip Hop Parliament make the claim that, "We, the Hip Hop Parliament MPs/MCs, will use our dope MCing skills to influence our peers in order to reduce the negative effects of tribalism by highlighting and appreciating the positive effects in our communities...."⁴ Through their hip hop skills the artists are taking responsibility for becoming role models and more significantly, assisting to disrupt deeply entrenched ethnic and tribal divisions. Further, the Declaration continues with, "We, the Hip Hop Parliament, will support and engage in various activities in our beloved country, in each and every 'hood, to promote reconciliation between our communities on the basis of hip hop culture. As hip hop is an umbrella for different sub-cultures, so shall the Hip Hop Parliament act as an umbrella under which artists from different tribes cooperate for this common movement."⁵ Throughout the Declaration, there is an emphasis on national pride, acceptance and respect of difference, and reconciliation as a strategy to resist the official power and governing institutions.

The Failure of "Nativism" and Fixed Identities

"Contemporary popular music in Kenya manifests itself as a merging of the local and the foreign; a creative modification of what is received from the past as well as other cultures" (Njogu 2007:xii). As Mwenda Ntarangwi (2009) argues in her book *East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization*, "East African hip hop and the processes that lead to its production, consumption, and circulation is for the most part predicated upon a global consciousness that uses expressive culture not only as a politico-economic space for youth but also as one that is uncontrollable by the institutions and powers that otherwise structure social discourse and identity within the confines of the nation-state" (17).

Today, via processes of globalization, young artists and groups such as the Hip Hop Parliament are surreptitiously drawing on the example of the FEPACI "fathers and mothers" to preserve African cultural heritage, but rather than looking solely inward (to the African continent) like their forebears, they are opening up the discussion and positing Africanity in a globalized, transnational context. In the post colonial and even post national struggles for better lives a new generation of youth living in contemporary African cities such as Nairobi is calling for peace and calling for an end to injustice, poverty, unemployment, violence and terrorism.

Also, Africa, as a space, began as an “*imaginaire*” rooted in the colonial ambitions of a wide range of nations, both internal and external to the continent. In this sense, Africa’s very inception has been uniquely shaped by globalization, long before the term became a popular catchphrase. It is not surprising, then, that the mediation of global influences like hip hop culture has always played a role in African concepts of nation and identity.

In his article, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” Cameroonian writer, Achille Mbembe argues, “attempts to define African identity in a neat and tidy way have so far failed. Further attempts are likely to meet the same fate as long as criticism of African imaginations of the self and the world remain trapped within a conception of identity as geography—in other words, of time as space” (2002: 271-272). More recently Mbembe has argued, along with many others that the pursuit of fixed, “authentic” African identities “is the source of cultural death” and just another form of colonization (2007).

“A Cultural and Social Movement with a Philosophy”
(Bluher 2001:77)

In recent years, Kenya has seen a massive migration of young people from all over Kenya into the city of Nairobi, “making its notorious slumlike the million-strong Kibera—the engines of the country’s burgeoning youth culture” (*BS Spirit Magazine*). Unfortunately, what has followed is the division of youth into sections divided along ethnic/ tribal lines. Attempting to challenge these kinds of divisions, the Hip Hop Parliament have declared, “The Hip Hop Parliament is comprised of MCs/MPs from different ethnic groups, backgrounds, and tribes, with different languages. But language is just a means of communication, and we do not accept its use as a source of discrimination. Thus, we, the Hip Hop Parliament, discourage tribalism and encourage the common use of SHENG as the official fourth language in Kenya. The Hip Hop Parliament appreciates and represents the richness of diversity in Kenya.”⁶

The language to which this declaration points is SHENG, is a mixture of Swahili, English, and tribal languages. According to Arno Kopecky, Sheng is largely a language of rebellion. Its story parallels the rise of a new generation, born into poverty and automatically at odds with authority. It crystallized in a young Kenya, barely twenty years old at the start of the 1980s, and hosting the fastest-growing population on the planet. Classrooms were exploding far beyond capacity, producing a half-educated generation with fading mother tongues and a mediocre grasp of Swahili and

English, the country's two official languages. Their young minds seized the material at hand and wove it into S(wa)h(ili)Eng(lish). (2008)

SHENG "has given Nairobi hip-hop its own distinctive, classless flavour" (Kenya's Hip Hop Parliament 2009). In one interview Angel explains, "When you speak English I can tell where you come from, what education you have. The same in Swahili...In Sheng there's no way to tell if you're from the slum, or where you are from" ("The Hip Hop Parliament" in *The Independent* March 11, 2010). To move away from the official languages is one way to connect with youth across the country. Angel argues, "Swahili with its lingering introductions is too formal for the youth. SHENG in contrast is a fast-moving language more suited to freestyling and breaking down barriers. And as such ideal for a forum like the Hip Hop Parliament." Reclaiming language or the creation of new language practices are significant strategies of resistance, reclamation, and protest. Drawing on Fanon's work, Morgan and Bennett argue, "an individual or group that "has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language [...] Mastery of language affords remarkable power'" (Fanon quoted in Morgan and Bennett 2011:17). Through the use of Sheng within hip hop, young people are communicating using a new language which speaks to the complexities of their lives, culturally, socially, and politically.

It is also important to remark that although it is problematic for hip hop artists to suggest that hip hop is unconditionally "positive" and performed only as a site of/ for resistance, these focused kinds of representations of hip hop are typical in an attempt to rally together a large group of diverse youth. Aware of the overarching clichés in hip hop culture, The Hip Hop Parliament promotes hip hop as "a "neutral" space in which tribal tensions are muted" with the hopes that hip hop will become "a starting point for an effort to come together" (Kenya's Hip Hop Parliament 2009). This is evident in many of the rappers' lyrics. For example, in emcee Tim Mwaura's work he speaks of dreams, division and a rationale for coming together:

I used to complain too much about the ghetto/
 I had dreams of moving out, get a wife and settl./
 The thought of another Rwandan genocide leaves us petrified/
 Listen to the politicians talking about revolution/
 They don't know we've gone through evolution.

To articulate the coming together of diverse groups of youth while simultaneously discussing historical atrocities lived so close, a shared desire for well being, peaceful existence, safety, security, and prosperity, are all important reasons for these diverse communities to unite in spite of their differences.

Conclusion

Similar to other youth cultures from around the world who are adopting and adapting global hip hop culture to address local concerns and to participate in political dialogue, the members of the Hip Hop Parliament in Kenya (along with their audiences) have come together to “symbolize unity regardless of ethnicity”⁷ both nationally and internationally. The Hip Hop Parliament “emphasize[s] the role of youth, [and] their agency in shaping their own experiences”⁸ within specific political, social, economic, and cultural contexts. Through the Hip Hop Parliament and their declarations, these young people “critique postcolonial realities of cultural colonization” (Ferrari 2007:14; Samper 2004). They narrate stories of resistance and change and the journeys taken to get to these new sites. 

Notes

1. For specific case studies where youth around the world are engaged in activism through hip hop see Marsh 2009, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Morgan 2009; Ntarangwi 2007; Bennet 2004; Mitchell 2001; Rose 2008; Forman 2002.

2. The Hip Hop Parliament Declaration can be found on numerous websites. For a full account go to http://jaluo.com/wangwach/200802/Muki_G022308.html.

3. According to Arno Kopecky, “Sheng is largely a language of rebellion. Its story parallels the rise of a new generation, born into poverty and automatically at odds with authority. It crystallized in a young Kenya, barely twenty years old at the start of the 1980s, and hosting the fastest-growing population on the planet. Classrooms were exploding far beyond capacity, producing a half-educated generation with fading mother tongues and a mediocre grasp of Swahili and English, the country’s two official languages. Their young minds seized the material at hand and wove it into Swahili)

Eng(lish)" (2008:18).

4. The Hip Hop Parliament Declaration can be found on numerous websites. For a full account go to http://jaluo.com/wangwach/200802/Muki_G022308.html.

5. The Hip Hop Parliament Declaration can be found on numerous websites. For a full account go to http://jaluo.com/wangwach/200802/Muki_G022308.html.

6. The Hip Hop Parliament Declaration can be found on numerous websites. For a full account go to http://jaluo.com/wangwach/200802/Muki_G022308.html.

7. Agnes Gitau in her article "Kenyan youth turn to music," "http://www.kenyalondonnews.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3269:kenyan-youth-turn-to-music&catid=55:role-model&Itemid=70

8. Agnes Gitau in her article "Kenyan youth turn to music," http://www.kenyalondonnews.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3269:kenyan-youth-turn-to-music&catid=55:role-model&Itemid=70.

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