AFRICAN CULTURE AND ITS PROJECTION IN THE WORLD

The Role of Urban Music in Social Change: The Revolution May Be Rapped

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Photography: "Music makes the pain fade", by Derrick Ofosu Boateng

On 9 October 2020, the Nigerian musician Davido shared a post on social media stating, “My people need me… #EndSarsNow”. At this precise moment, the artist’s over 20 million followers on Instagram and almost 10 million followers on Twitter received the message loud and clear that their idol had become actively involved in the protest against police brutality which was sweeping the nation. An uprising that would finally crystallise in two weeks of intense protests, during which people clamoured for a comprehensive overhaul of the country’s political system and which put the Nigerian Government against the ropes.

On 6 March 2021, rapper Dip Doundou Guiss, one of the golden boys of Senegalese hip-hop, posted a music video entitled #FreeSenegal, the slogan of a wave of demonstrations that had shaken the country during the previous three days. In the first day alone, the video, which explicitly supported the protests and revolt, was played one million times. The examples of Nigeria and Senegal clearly demonstrate the role of popular music and, in

particular, hip-hop in the processes of social transformation in Africa.

This phenomenon is not entirely new. Music has always been an important vehicle for political discourse in Africa [1]. Yet each era has its own particular features, players and tools. In the contemporary era, individuals such as Miriam Makeba, Fela Kuti and even the upbeat yet historical “Indépendance Cha Cha”, by Le Grand Kallé et l’African Jazz, have left their mark not only due to their musical genius, but because of their strong political stances. In recent decades, rap has provided this soundtrack.

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Male (and, to a lesser extent, female) rappers have assumed this role with one thing in common: barring a handful of exceptions, politically engaged hip-hop has been characterised by its opposition to the powers that be. The role of this form of musical rebel-rousing, however, has also undergone a transformation, and, in its most recent manifestations, the new scenario is marked by the intersection between this type of protest music and the reach and public profile that rappers receive from their command of social media.

A geography of diverse experiences

The most recent African cartography of nonconformist hip-hop charts dynamic and diverse paths which spread throughout the continent with particular experiences. Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, better known in Uganda as Bobi Wine, rarely traverses, stylistically, the border of rap. Rather, he falls under the ambiguous term afropop, which draws from numerous rhythms from reggae to afrobeat. Anything but orthodox, Bobi Wine moves like a fish in water within the space of urban cultures. Not without reason he has been dubbed “the president of the ghetto”, a moniker which became a portent when, in 2017, he was elected to Parliament. In four years, Wine has become the only candidate seemingly capable of threatening the absolute rule of Yoweri Museveni, the president for the past 35 years. He has been systematically arrested, has been the subject of attacks and is continuously harassed by both the army and law enforcement authorities. In his most recent political stand-off, he wore a helmet and bullet-proof vest as part of the election campaign, following several shootings. Yet he even managed to give this situation media value thanks to his mastery of the new reality of political communication.

In Kenya, unaccustomed to politically committed music, the collaboration between Sauti Sol and Nyashinski on the track “Tujiangalie”, which in Swahili means ‘self-criticism’, sent shock waves through the country in 2018. With “Tujiangalie”, Sauti Sol, previously viewed as a successful yet frivolous and insubstantial pop group, warned of the “disastrous” situation in which Kenya was mired, criticised political corruption and tribalism and turned the spotlight on the debt, social and economic inequalities and dangerous connections

between religion and power. “Tujiangalie” charted the way for Sauti Sol and Nyashinski towards a more political position, and since then, examples of politically engaged music in the country, particularly hip-hop, have multiplied [2].

For many African artists and activists, rap is a powerful awareness raising and political education tool. The Togolese rapper Elom20ce is a prime example of such endeavours. Elom Kossi Venceslas, the musician’s real name, has spent the past decade turning his rhymes into statements; far from simply dropping catchy slogans, he has always accompanied his criticisms with historical references or allusions to intellectuals, in attempts to construct and promote a pan-African cultural framework buttressed by ideas such as the struggle against corruption and the fight for equality, lending centre stage to the very citizens whose minds he is trying to open. Elom20ce transcends his facet as a musician and has promoted events such as film discussions and all manner of debates, not to mention a clothing line whose purpose is to convey the richness of local and popular values, in itself a political act within the context of Togo.

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In this case, this map of politically committed rap also includes other somewhat shadier territories. In Tanzania, the career of superstar Diamond Platnumz, the main standard bearer for the local Bongo Flava rhythm, has been more inconsistent. After authorities censured one of his songs for being “indecent” and prohibited him from performing in 2018, Nasibu Abdul Juma Issack, Diamond Platnumz’s real name, was, in 2020, one of the artists who provided the soundtrack to the election campaign of the controversial John Magufuli, whose administration is considered to have curtailed the Tanzanian people’s basic freedoms.

Hip-hop and citizens’ movements

However, the intersection between hip-hop and social transformation has proven particularly dynamic in terms of the citizens’ movements that have surfaced in different parts of the continent [3]. In the past decade, young people have seen how unemployment, instability and increases in the price of basic commodities can make survival difficult. The disaffection of these collectives with the political establishment as a result of corruption scandals and cases of preferential treatment that have increased inequality has become evident. And, lastly, a wave of restrictions on freedoms has spread throughout the continent, with media control, harassment against civil society, arrests of activists and the prohibition of demonstrations; while experts consider it a reduction of public space, activists view it as a betrayal of democracy. The confluence of these factors has fuelled discontent, and these outraged collectives have banded together to form movements which do not respond to the dynamics of mainstream society [4].

The list of artists associated with citizens' movements who have suffered repression is long. Names include Luaty Beirão, better known as Ikonoklasta, in Angola due to his involvement in Central 7311; the popular Cameroonian rapper Général Valsero, due to links with several organisations within the pro-democracy youth movement and for endorsing the opposition candidate Maurice Kamto; and the Congolese Martial Pa'nucci, one of the founders of the Ras-le-bol movement.

The popular uprising that, in 2014, forced Blaise Compaoré to resign and subsequently flee Burkina Faso, as well as the resistance to the attempted coup d'état which supposedly sought to restore him to power and thwart the transition to democracy in 2015, would be unthinkable without the role of the Balai Citoyen movement. And it is difficult to explain the emergence and consolidation of Balai Citoyen without the awareness raising activities of two of the movement's most visible faces: the rapper Smockey (Serge Bambara) and reggae musician Sams'K Le Jah (Karim Sama). During the Compaoré Government, and despite the restrictions imposed on public space, both, first separately and later as part of the activities of the embryonic Balai Citoyen, used their concerts to promote political discussion and equip their followers with critical minds and an active consciousness. This path to awareness through music served to coordinate the response to Blaise Compaoré's 2014 attempt to end the limitation of mandates set out in the Constitution and run for re-election. Even today, the movement continues to use concerts as a vehicle for spreading their message during the actions organised to promote coexistence in remote parts of the country and in their pro-democracy campaigns.

The golden boys of Senegalese rap are also politically active

However, the intimate relationship between hip-hop and citizens' movements is especially evident in Senegal. For over three decades, rap has served to give young urban Senegalese a voice. The first generation of rappers, in the early 90s, broke with several of the supposed social conventions. Prior to them it had been unthinkable for artists to talk about politics or question those in power; or for young people, irreverent musicians, to publicly contradict their elders, the politicians. From that point forth, protest became an inherent part of the Senegalese hip-hop scene. Urban musicians grew accustomed to criticising power and siding with the working classes and, in elections, the candidates. However, despite this long history and consolidated track record of nonconformity, even the elder statesmen of Senegalese rap acknowledge the next generation's role in going a step further. Aside from simply channelling complaints, they unified disaffected groups, organised them and led the protests, from the front line, in the streets [5].

Rappers were key players in the formation of Y'en a Marre in 2011. They were in the founding core, represented by Thiat and Kilifeu, the two members of the duo Keur Gui, when the movement was conceived, and were later joined by other fellow musicians, giving the collective its most widely used awareness raising and mobilisation tool. From that point forth, music has taken on all possible guises, adapting to the prohibitions imposed by authorities, including poetic guerrillas, travelling concerts and all the mechanisms required to get the message across. Rappers have placed the prestige that music has given them at

the service of the movement's principles and have used their songs and concerts to raise awareness among their young followers [6].

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From those early days until now, virtually all demonstrations organised by Y'en a Marre or any other of the coalitions of civil society organisations in which it has participated have featured a truck equipped with a powerful sound system and an MC on the microphone dropping slogans, maintaining the participants' morale and urging them to speak out, albeit against the rising cost of living or against the corruption scandals, to demand measures to stop the flood of young people forced to migrate amid precarious conditions or to protect democratic principles. In the past decade, music has been a constant feature of the civil campaigns promoted by Y'en a Marre. Outside the central core, some of the country's most famous rappers have appeared at one point or another in the music videos produced to accompany the calls to action, whether to foster projects to build community cohesion by cleaning and maintaining working class urban neighbourhoods or to encourage electoral participation through voter registration.

In any case, the most recent mass wave of protests that rocked the country in March 2021 illustrated some of the changes that have occurred in the movement, including the role of rappers, which remains key. Y'en a Marre, in partnership with several other civil society organisations, had organised a demonstration for 5 March in defence of democracy and in response to a series of episodes in which critical voices had apparently been harassed. Following various disagreements with law enforcement and judicial authorities, Ousmane Sonko, the opposition leader, was arrested on charges of sexual assaulting and threatening to kill a young woman. And within hours, fires broke out across the country's major cities. The spontaneous protests which cropped up soon devolved into clashes with the police and attacks on establishments, namely French supermarkets and petrol stations. The protest that the critical civil society has been preparing became completely overwhelmed by the events.

In the midst of this widespread protest, Y'en a Marre maintained the original call for action, despite being engulfed across the board by the popular uprising. In fact, Thiat, one of the movement's most prominent rappers and activists, was arrested in the streets of Dakar, while four other high-profile members of Y'en a Marre were apprehended in other places. Despite the chaos and disarray, hip-hop was once again in the centre. Three days after the protests began, Dip Doundou Guiss, one of the rappers in the country with the most followers, released a video that embraced the main slogan of the Free Senegal demonstrations and was extremely explicit. Amidst obvious scenes from the uprising, replete with images of people throwing stones, fires, barricades and Senegalese flags

fluttering in the wind, Dip Doundou Guiss left no room for interpretation. The opening verses went as follows: “Living in a tyrant’s country. Tired of talk, because you’re all the same. The hardest part is watching young people die.” He then affirmed: “You can’t stop us from protesting because you sold your country”, going on to add that: “Until you step down, we won’t give up the fight”. Within two days, all of the rappers from Senegal’s music industry had posted their own protest anthem, including a reunited Positive Black Soul (PBS), considered the trailblazers of politically engaged hip-hop three decades earlier [7].

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In this case, it was not just a small group of musicians, militants and activists preaching to the choir. The protests involved the crème de la crème of the country’s music industry, the veritable golden boys of Senegalese hip-hop, authors of songs that rack up millions of views and who have deals with multinationals. They spoke matter-of-factly about the protest, fuelled its epic nature and, through verses and images, turned the uprising into a much more normal, more acceptable event.

Nigeria’s powerful music industry and change

A similar change could be observed in the mass mobilisations triggered under the hashtag #EndSARS in Nigeria in October 2020. At the beginning of the month, a news story about an episode of police violence sparked a spontaneous protest against the assaults. In fact, it had been a recurring demand in the country. The SARS, aka the Special Anti-Theft Squad, was a division of the police that operated outside the law and had been granted special powers. In recent years, several civil society organisations had documented systematic accounts of abuse, assaults, robberies, harassment and even killings on the part of the agents; this gave rise to cyclical campaigns aimed at redirecting the situation. This time, the reaction that followed was spontaneous and quickly snowballed. First came the conversation in social media, in which citizens shared experiences and complaints; social organisations soon added their voice to the protests, with several prominent figures pledging their support. The rap group Folarin Falana, known as Falz and Runtown, the artistic name of Douglas Jack Agu, became involved from the outset. In fact, Falz had made a name for himself in recent years as a social activist, and it was not the first time that he had rallied behind campaigns against police brutality.

The support of this popular musician and actor helped to increase the scope of the demands and escalate the mobilisations. Given the sheer size of the online campaign, the most fervent supporters proposed taking the protest to the streets. On 8 October, Falz and Runtown were the most visible faces in a demonstration that had an unanticipated turnout

[8]. The following day, the superstar of Nigerian music, Davido, posted a tweet stating: “My people need me… #EndSarsNow”, after which he became deeply involved in the protest. The list of rappers and popular music celebrities rapidly increased. Artists such as Davido, Wizkid, Tiwa Savage, Burna Boy, Don Jazzy, Olamidé and Banky Wellington resolvedly began conveying the message condemning police brutality. To get a sense of the scope of their messages, these musicians, together with Falz, boast audiences in Instagram of over 87 million followers. Besides the sheer numbers, it is crucial not to forget the prestige these artists have in the eyes of many of their followers, as well as their international visibility.

Just three days later, Davido was called to a meeting with the head of the national police force on 12 October in Abuja. By all appearances, the purpose of the meeting was to negotiate an end to the protests. This bothered certain segments of the demonstrators, who recriminated the artist for his alleged representation of what were highly spontaneous movements. In fact, a few days later, Falz vehemently declared in an interview with Arise News: “We don’t have a leader, we don’t have one person who can sit around a table and negotiate (…). Some people call me, but I’m not a leader, there is no leader in this movement. We’re all activists” [9]. This episode also illustrates the limits of the role of rappers in these protests. Obviously, the role musicians play as social actors goes beyond their facet as artists; they help to convey the message, intensify the demands and normalise protests; however, they must be careful when taking it upon themselves to act as spokespeople for citizens who, despite being ready and willing to take action, are increasingly wary of ventriloquists following numerous episodes of manipulation.

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