

The Struggle for Hip Hop Authenticity and Against Commercialization in Tanzania

by

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Abstract

This paper looks at the ways in which concepts of authenticity and commodification are being debated in Tanzanian hip hop. These ideas have been a part of hip hop studies in the US and are increasingly surfacing in Africa as hip hop competes with pop music. In this paper ideas of hip hop authenticity and its commodification in Tanzania are discussed in relation to the confrontation between hip hop and Bongo Flava (pop music). Tanzania has become one of the latest of hip hop's communities to begin grappling with ideas of hip hop authenticity and the impact of commodification on hip hop culture. Linking themselves to a broader, global hip hop community, Tanzanian artists attempt to define "authentic" hip hop music and culture; and to establish mechanisms for the maintenance of hip hop "authenticity". The resulting attempts to classify artists and to establish boundaries occurs in the face of the increasing commercialization of urban youth music in Tanzania. Commercialization has led to the marginalization of hip hop in Tanzania and has forced hip hop artists to create and utilize alternative means to develop and produce "authentic" hip hop. These methods necessitate artists strengthening global hip hop linkages, engaging with social media, and finding alternative ways to market themselves.

Introduction

Hip hop music and culture has expanded globally and commercially. With that expansion there is a struggle to maintain authenticity within hip hop culture against the trends toward commercialization. This struggle is for the survival of “authentic” hip hop, which is being threatened by the popularity of pop culture versions of hip hop and fusions between hip hop and other genres. This research focuses on that struggle in Tanzania, home to one of Africa’s most important hip hop communities. Recognized by academics and hip hop aficionados alike, Tanzanian emcees have gained the respect of the international hip hop community for their skills, talent, and use of Swahili, a language known for its beautiful and complex poetry. Tanzania is also the home of Bongo Flava, a genre of pop fusion that includes rap and R&B sung primarily in Swahili. As Bongo Flava eclipsed hip hop in popularity, air play, and income generation, hip hop artists fought back. By distancing themselves from Bongo Flava and calling out those that promote or represent Bongo Flava, many hip hop artists have attempted to draw a line in the proverbial sand, in an attempt to draw clear distinctions between hip hop and Bongo Flava. In so doing, hip hop artists have called to the carpet Bongo Flava artists over questions of authenticity. In addition to calling out pop or mainstream rappers, hip hop artists in Tanzania have directed their anger at the media houses and their “commodification” of hip hop culture and transforming it into Bongo Flava, a pop music genre. This process of commodification has created a bastardized version of hip hop culture, devoid of real ties to “authentic” hip hop culture, but a product of the creators of popular culture.

Hip Hop Authenticity

Hip hop not deemed “authentic” is categorized as pop music, and a commodity. Theories of mass and popular culture allude to elitism in this trend. That popular music (Bongo Flava) is perceived to lack the refinement or complexity (i.e., authenticity) of “high culture” (in this case hip hop) it imitates, and is therefore not worthy of being taken seriously could be perceived as elitist (DiMaggio, 1977; Strinati, 2004; Storey, 2006). The criticisms of Bongo Flava, and the need to distinguish hip hop from Bongo Flava, centers not on a need to destroy popular music and culture, but on the perceived need to save hip hop music and culture. Critiques of the commodification of hip hop images and symbols are seen as a necessary part of the process. Distinguishing between elitism and self-preservation is important in understanding the need to define hip hop culture and critique music claiming to be hip hop.

Many scholars, and increasingly, hip hop heads, distinguish hip hop and Bongo Flava as two separate genres. The two are often, however, used synonymously (Englert, 2003; Stroeken, 2005). For example, an article that appeared on web based publication ArtMatters.Info defines Bongo Flava as “music that combines rap, hip-hop, R&B and traditional Tanzanian beats” (Quade, Martin, & Ondego, 2008, para. 2). The confusion can often be attributed to the histories of both genres as well as the blurred line that many artists straddle, often rapping over Bongo Flava tunes.

McLeod speaks to authenticity in American hip hop and many of McLeod’s assertions can be applied to the Tanzanian hip hop community. McLeod (1999) points to the irony that faces subculture groups that are defined by their opposition to the “establishment”, but later find themselves absorbed by the mainstream as they become more popular. Out of this growing popularity is a need to define “authenticity” and to clearly identify the boundaries of the subculture (McLeod, 1999; Haupt, 2008). In Tanzania many hip hop artists and hip hop heads are highlighting the boundaries of hip hop culture by reaffirming the lyrical traditions of hip hop, emphasizing the emcee’s role as storyteller, and celebrating the power of words. Doing this allows them to identify who they feel belongs and who does not. It also gives their movement definition and an identifiable goal, even if some of the specifics get lost in individual ambitions.

The calls for authenticity surround this battle and, based on the interviews for this article, frame the arguments on the various sides of the debate. Several artists, industry insiders and experts were interviewed for this project. The artists interviewed represent the diversity of performers in the hip hop and Bongo Flava music scenes. Some are at the peak of their fame, and others have transitioned into other aspects of the Tanzanian music scene. All of the artists are identified using their stage names. Other interviewees include individuals associated with the media in Tanzania and experts on hip hop and popular music in Tanzania.

Hip Hop Commodification

Hip hop authenticity is the rallying cry of Tanzanian hip hop artists in a battle for supremacy in the Tanzanian music industry. These calls for authenticity are closely related to discussions of the capitalist commodification of popular music in Tanzania, and beyond. In the United States capitalist structures have long been in place, and once hip hop became commercially viable, it was co-opted into that structure and turned into pop music. Aided by the passing of laws that would impact the US music industry; the mid-1990s also saw splits within the American hip hop community over hip hop’s commodification and the lack of authenticity in commercial rap.

This sentiment is represented in the differentiation between emcees and rappers among hip hop activists and scholars such as American hip hop legend KRS-One. During an interview for the 2004 film *The MC: Why We Do It* KRS-One states “an emcee is a representative of hip hop culture, a rapper is a representative of corporate interests” (Spirer, 2004). This statement reflects criticisms of commercial rap artists as not being authentically hip hop. He goes on to state “an emcee can be a rapper, but a rapper can never be an emcee”, meaning there are artists who are emcees (representatives of hip hop culture) that have the ability to perform commercial music (Spirer, 2004). However, an artist that is a rapper cannot be representative of hip hop culture. Sentiments such as these are part of an ongoing debate in hip hop communities, and arose once hip hop became a lucrative commodity.

In the late-1980s and early 1990s capitalist values were fully embraced in post-socialist Tanzania, and this would influence the rapid commodification of hip hop music and culture there in the mid-1990s. This commodification of hip hop culture in Tanzania led to the evolution of Bongo Flava. Calls for authenticity have now led to a struggle to prevent the further marginalization of “authentic” hip hop music and culture as Bongo Flava continues to dominate the youth music scene in Tanzania.

The commodification of hip hop culture refers to the ways in which that culture has been turned into a commodity (pop music) for consumption on the market. As a commodity the “product” is alienated from the culture that produced it (hip hop), though many consumers may be unable to distinguish the “authentic” culture from the commercial product claiming to represent it. Therefore, a concern for producers of pop music or pop rap is not skill, but rather marketability, having deep negative consequences on the culture that produced it (Anderson, 2005; Blair, 2004). The re-defined hip hop culture is then embraced by the mainstream, becoming a crucial element in shaping and defining youth culture. For example, some scholars point to the promotion of hyper-masculinity and aggression in commodified hip hop, via “gangsta rap”, as an influencing factor on the emergence and dominance of those traits among youth in the African American community (Haupt, 2008). In Tanzania, Bongo Flava takes consumers away from a hip hop culture based in Tanzanian realities and a desire to promote “local rather than foreign values, ideas, and language” (Perullo & Fenn, 2003, p. 33). The new Bongo Flava culture takes consumers towards a new hybrid culture that is based on “extravagant consumption” and consumer capitalism, ripe with imitations of American pop culture using Swahili and Tanzanian slang as forms of expression (Stroeken, 2005). This has led to the frustration on the part of many hip hop artists as they seek to maintain the essence of hip hop culture while at the same time gaining mainstream recognition.

Hip Hop, Bongo Flava & Authenticity

“Bongo” is a Swahili slang word for Dar es Salaam, and Bongo Flava refers to the style of music coming out of Dar es Salaam in particular, and Tanzania in general. Bongo Flava as a term came about in the late 1990s. These facts of the genre’s origins are among the few that are agreed upon by most scholars, as well as everyone interviewed for this article. Beyond that there are often contradictory ideas on what Bongo Flava was and is. In the early days, and to an extent today, Bongo Flava was thought to refer to Tanzanian hip hop. This was especially true in the minds of those outside of Tanzania, including Tanzanians in the Diaspora. In fact, Tanzania gained significant respect in the international hip hop community for labeling its own brand of hip hop. As such, Tanzania was listed among the top hip hop communities in Africa, often second only to Senegal (Englert, 2003; Suriano, 2007). Tanzanians had demanded artists rap in Swahili, helping to reaffirm pride in the language among the youth (Quade, Martin, & Ondego, 2008; Stroeken, 2005). The product became Bongo Flava.

At some point, perhaps simultaneously, Bongo Flava began being applied to all popular youth music being performed by Tanzanians in Swahili. Then a slight coup d’état occurred as R&B began to eclipse hip hop as the dominant sub-genre of Bongo Flava. Also around the same time, two radio stations emerged: Radio One and Clouds FM. These radio stations became involved in not only playing Bongo Flava, but also in helping to create stars. This was especially the case with Clouds FM, which is linked to the Tanzania House of Talent (THT), an organization that grooms youth for the entertainment industry. Once Bongo Flava became a cash machine, it was recognized that a certain formula proved more profitable than others. That formula includes dance tunes and songs about love, whether they are sung or rapped. Add lots of flash and a platform to showcase the new formula (radio and television) and Bongo Flava became a money making industry.

This shift to a more “pop”-style music led to a split within the hip hop community and a backlash by some hip hop artists who choose to separate themselves from Bongo Flava and identify only as hip hop artists. This question of authenticity is now a part of many discussions on hip hop. Much of Kembrew McLeod’s look at authenticity can be applied to hip hop in Tanzania. According to McLeod, authenticity includes “staying true to yourself...representing the underground and the street...and remembering hip hop’s cultural legacy” (Storey, 2006). Many of these ideas of authenticity have been expressed by Tanzanian hip hop artists, including all of the self-identified “hip hop artists” interviewed for this article.

Some measure authenticity by examining content and some examine skill in their measurement of authenticity. For some authenticity is about content. To be considered hip hop you need to stay true to the origins of hip hop as a tool of resistance and a voice of the people. For some authenticity is about skill, staying true to hip hop’s emphasis on lyrical skill and creativity, even if one is not overtly politically or socially conscious. Artists that honor hip hop’s origins are referred to as true emcees. For most, what is classified as “pop” rap is not true hip hop.

Tanzanian Artists on Hip Hop v. Bongo Flava

Hip hop pioneers and veterans in Tanzania have been the harshest critics of Bongo Flava. After almost 20 years as a hip hop artist, Sugu (Joseph Mbilinyi) claims the media houses (mainly Clouds FM & the Tanzania House of Talent) “hijacked” Bongo Flava from hip hop (Sugu, personal communication, August 10, 2010). Sugu feels the media houses have intentionally marginalized hip hop in favor of pop artists who claim to be rappers. Clouds FM, the primary target of Sugu’s venom, is a popular radio station in Tanzania and the Tanzania House of Talent (THT) is its “talent agency” that grooms young artists for the mainstream. In 2010 Sugu released a mixtape entitled “Anti Virus Mixtape Volume 1”, which was an attack directed at Clouds FM and the dominance of Bongo Flava over hip hop on the airwaves. Sugu even accused Clouds FM of influencing the music and artists that other radio stations played, locking out anyone who is critical of the music industry. Sugu contends that because Bongo flava was already an established brand (used to refer to Tanzanian hip hop) it allowed the media houses to label their music Bongo flava, and “penetrate the market” (Sugu, personal communication, August 10, 2010). He thought it unfortunate that established emcees did not speak up and protect Bongo flava until it was too late. Sugu’s solution: hip hop artists need to take Bongo flava back, instead of changing their music to conform to the more commercialized, Bongo Flava.

Sugu, who won a seat in Parliament in the 2010 election, has had one of the most public and intense battles with Clouds FM. Other emcees are just as critical of Bongo Flava, but see the solution in completely disassociating themselves from the genre. Some take this perspective because they feel Bongo Flava was never synonymous with hip hop. Others take the stance because they have little investment in the term Bongo Flava and see little point in trying to claim it. Saigon, a veteran emcee and once member of the group De-Plow-Matz, rejects the Bongo Flava label. According to Saigon, to be considered Bongo Flava, in Tanzanian hip hop culture, is synonymous with being weak (Saigon, personal communication, August 23, 2010). Saigon argues that once Bongo Flava became profitable, the people with money began “polluting” the music scene. This, he says, led to the promotion of more R&B and pop music, leaving hip hop artists without the access to capital to get their music heard (Saigon, personal communication, August 23, 2010). Saigon remains active in the Tanzanian hip hop community and is actively involved in promoting the culture via television and through performances.

Another old school emcee, Zavara (aka Rhymsen), a founding member of the group Kwanza Unit, also does not identify with Bongo Flava. Zavara was residing in Canada during the rise of Bongo Flava and returned to Tanzania in 2005 to find significant changes in the Tanzanian music scene. As a result, Zavara does not even acknowledge Bongo Flava as having anything to do with hip hop. For Zavara the struggle is to get hip hop artists and music heard; to develop the art form and to empower the artists (Zavara, personal communication, August 15, 2010).

Since his return to Tanzania, Zavara has been working in various ways within the hip hop community to champion the development of hip hop culture. Zavara pointed out that in the early years of hip hop's presence in Tanzania, the culture had aspects of all five of the elements of hip hop: DJ, emcee, graffiti, breakdancing, and knowledge. During a photo shoot Zavara pointed out areas in the city that displayed Tanzania's graffiti styles. In addition, Zavara says that in the early days, breakdancers (b-boys) and DJs were also a strong part of hip hop culture in Tanzania (Zavara, personal communication, August 15, 2010). Zavara's aim today is both to affirm the strength of hip hop culture in Tanzania, while reemphasizing the detachment of Bongo Flava from authentic hip hop.

The last of the Tanzanian "old school emcees" interviewed was Arusha-based emcee JCB. This artist also points to the difference between Bongo Flava and hip hop. Interviewed after his performance at the Clouds FM sponsored Fiesta concert series in Dar es Salaam, JCB acknowledged his past criticisms of the dominance of Bongo Flava on Clouds FM. He in fact seemed surprised that Clouds FM had brought him to Dar es Salaam to perform. JCB's criticism of Bongo Flava stems from the images pushed and celebrated by Bongo Flava artists. He sees the genre as being about flash, partying and women, while hip hop "is about what is going on in the streets, about reality" (JCB, personal communication, August 7, 2010). In this context, JCB stated that a lot of artists "think they are doing hip hop" but are really doing Bongo Flava (JCB, personal communication, August 7, 2010).

In addition to some of the hip hop veterans, some underground artists in Tanzania are also critical of Bongo Flava. During a 2009 interview with underground emcees Coin Moko of Viraka and Ehks B and Rage Prophetional of Rebels Sonz, all self-identified as hip hop artists and claimed the commercialization of Bongo Flava has led to the destruction of hip hop. Rage Prophetional, who was featured as a Sprite and Channel O's Emcee Africa finalist, says his inability to get his music produced by the big labels and heard on the radio is due to his refusal to go pop and, to a lesser degree, his mostly English lyrics (Rage Prophetional, personal communication, August 16, 2009). Rage Prophetional grew up in England and while he is fluent in Swahili, he feels comfortable rhyming in English. The rise of Bongo Flava in Tanzania, however, means that artists who perform primarily in English receive little attention from radio stations. For hip hop artists like Rage Prophetional, whose talent is undeniable, language becomes a barrier to getting mainstream acceptance.

There is also a difference between hip hop and Bongo Flava for hip hop emcee Fid Q, but it was tricky to get him to identify his place in the battle between the two genres. Fid Q is one of the few hip hop emcees in Tanzania to maintain significant radio and television exposure. He has gained a mainstream following and gets regular airplay. He is also a talented emcee who has earned respect in the hip hop community.

Fid Q, like Sugu, says that Bongo Flava was initially all hip hop. According to Fid Q a change occurred in the last 10 years and that today Bongo Flava is primarily for “singers” (Fid Q, personal communication, August 11, 2010). Often categorized with Bongo Flava artists, Fid Q is skilled at walking the line between mainstream artist and hip hop emcee. After dodging the question, when asked point blank if he considers himself a Bongo Flava artist he skillfully replied: “I am Bongo, so that’s my flava...but I am hip hop” (Fid Q, personal communication, August 11, 2010).

Others artists recognize a difference between hip hop and Bongo Flava but do not necessarily feel one is better than the other or that one has overtaken the other. Some artists, such as Godzilla, Mangwair, and Witnessz, recognize the financial benefits of performing Bongo Flava music and identify as Bongo Flava or a hybrid of hip hop and Bongo Flava. For many artists there is often an emphasis on Bongo Flava being a Tanzanian music genre, reflecting pride in having a youth music genre indigenous to Tanzania. There is also the perspective that hip hop is not indigenous to Tanzania, but has been imported from abroad. Nick Wapili identifies as a hip hop artist but emphasizes the difference between Bongo Flava and hip hop, saying that Bongo Flava has its own beat, its own style, while hip hop is universal, whether it is performed in English or Swahili (Nick Wapili, personal communication, August 7, 2010). For Nick Wapili, Bongo Flava is more specific to Tanzanian culture. Nick Wapili’s music reflects aspects of Bongo Flava, a more Bongo Flava/hip hop hybrid. Even though Nick Wapili embraces traditional or “authentic” hip hop culture, his crossovers into Bongo Flava leaves the artists on the borderline. Rapper Godzilla chooses to identify with the more profitable Bongo Flava. Referencing a difference between rappers and emcees, Godzilla says that he is a rapper, not an emcee (Godzilla, personal communication, August 7, 2010). Many within hip hop culture differentiate rappers and emcees, associating the former with commercial rap and the latter with hip hop culture. Godzilla expressed that an emcee is conscious and that since he is not a conscious artist, he is a rapper. Godzilla, proud to waive the Bongo Flava flag, states that hip hop talks about reality while with Bongo Flava artists can talk about anything, without needing to represent reality or stay true to any ideals (Godzilla, personal communication, August 7, 2010).

Other artists, such as Mangwair and Witnessz, point out that Bongo Flava refers to all Tanzanian youth music, including hip hop (Mangwair, personal communication, August 3, 2010; (Witnessz, personal communication, August 18, 2010). Both Mangwair and Witnessz are very talented and benefitted from a level of commercial success. Both were listed as artists I needed to meet by Tanzanian hip hop pioneers as KBC of Kwanza Unit (based in England) and Balozi, formerly of De-Plow-Matz (based in the US), while preparing the research for this article. Mangwair was a commercially successful artist, identified as both a hip hop and Bongo Flava artist and saw no contradiction in doing so since he felt Tanzanian hip hop remained a part of Bongo Flava. Mangwair was indeed a talented emcee, who was not politically or socially conscious, but was gifted lyrically. Mangwair passed away from a reported drug overdose in May 2013, but his signature style and recognizable voice made radio hits out of many of his songs.

Songs like “Mikasi”, “Demu Wangu” and “She’s Got a Gwan”, as well as “Kimya Kimya”, a Jay Moe song Mangwair is featured on, are all examples of Bongo Flava hits featuring Mangwair’s trademark lyrical style and voice. This blend has given the emcee both radio exposure and respect among many hip hop fans. In fact, several hip hop artists, including many interviewed for this article, attended the artist’s funeral.

Witnesz is one of the few female emcees to represent Bongo Flava, and not make the switch to the more profitable R&B. For many female Bongo Flava artists there is pressure to perform R&B, making them more marketable to fans. Witnesz embraces a dual Bongo Flava/hip hop identity. Unlike some of the other artists interviewed, however, Witnesz says that Bongo Flava does not hurt hip hop (Witnesz, personal communication, August 18, 2010).

It is not surprising that the artists who were least critical of Bongo Flava were also the most commercially successful. One hip hop group, Kikosi Cha Mizinga, critical of Bongo Flava and the radio stations favoring Bongo Flava lashed out recently. The group called out Clouds FM, which was seen promoting Bongo Flava at the expense of hip hop music. Kikosi Cha Mizinga publicly demanded the station no longer play their music. According to Ruben Ndege, a radio presenter at Clouds FM, realizing the popularity of Clouds FM, the group later changed their minds and asked to be put back in rotation at the radio station (Ndege, R., personal communication, August 22, 2010). These events may reflect both the frustration on the parts of some hip hop artists as well as the influence of Clouds FM.

The Line Between Hip Hop and Bongo Flava

Hip hop is not just about the music, hip hop is also a culture, a culture that holds values, a language, fashion, and a worldview. Aspects of this culture may change from place to place, as all hip hop is locally rooted, but there are certain aspects of hip hop culture that are both indelible and global. Globally authenticity and hip hop have become intertwined in a way that no self-identified hip hop artist wants to be seen as inauthentic, or pop. Again, there are several aspects of hip hop culture that are universally embraced, authenticity is one of them (McLeod, 1999; Ogbur, 2009). For many of the artists interviewed, hip hop cultural authenticity is about representing who you are, and not what the mainstream wants you to be. It is about being a storyteller, representing your community, neighborhood, the streets. It is also about acknowledging and respecting hip hop’s past. Identifying the authentic from the inauthentic is, however, problematic at times.

An example is Professor Jay, one of Tanzania’s most talented emcees. Professor Jay has been praised for some of his politically charged songs, like “Ndio Mzee”. “Ndio Mzee” (“Yes Sir”) is a humorous critique of the promises politicians make to get elected into office. The song was one of Professor Jay’s biggest hits. The song was so popular that it was even referenced during a campaign speech by then President Benjamin Mkapa in 2001 (Perullo, 2005).

Recently some have become critical of Professor Jay, as the artist has recently produced mainly love ballads, a signature style of Bongo Flava, moving away from his reputation as a hip hop lyricist and towards pop music. Professor Jay has been an emcee in Tanzania for over 15 years, so his recent inclusion of more Bongo Flava styled tracks provides an interesting test-case on the parameters of authenticity.

It is important to reemphasize the differing views on how to measure authentic hip hop when discussing the divide over Bongo Flava and the calls for authenticity. For some the issue is content: Zavara is a “hip hop purist” and comes from the perspective that hip hop is supposed to benefit the community and be culturally or socially motivated. Rap artist Godzilla’s assertion that he is a rapper and not an emcee (hip hop) indicates that he measures his own authenticity by the content of his lyrics.

For some the issue is skill: Rage Prophetical focuses more on skills. Rage Prophetical is not an overtly conscious artist, and believes skill should be the determinate of the amount of media exposure an artist gets and how authentically hip hop one is considered. Most who chose to distance themselves from Bongo Flava view the artists in that genre as “pop”, either because of their content or because they lack skills, or both. Several of these artists referred to Bongo Flava artists as “commercial”, “weak”, “flashy”. All, except perhaps the last of these, are labels few hip hop artists would embrace.

The Commodification of Hip Hop in Tanzania

The commodification of hip hop culture and redefining it as Bongo Flava is similar to the process of commodification of American hip hop culture. When an art form becomes a profitable commodity, there is often a decline in creativity as those in a position to benefit financially find a profitable formula and repeat that formula, creating a pop culture trend. In the United States the debate over the authenticity in hip hop arose in the mid-1990s. This was not long after the major record companies bought up most of the small hip hop labels, and began dominating the hip hop market (Kabbani, 1999; Hurt, 2006). Now most of the hip hop labels are no longer independent and are completely dependent on the majors, for whom the main concern is appealing to a pop audience, with little interest in hip hop cultural authenticity (Basu, 2005; Kabbani, 1999). During the same period, the United States Telecommunications Act of 1996 removed monopoly restrictions in the telecommunications field, allowing large corporations to dominate urban markets, and thus the music that was played (Rasmussen, 2006; Bednarski, 2003; Telecommunications Act of 1996, 1996). While commercialized hip hop dominates radio station playlists, an argument can be made that the “golden era” of hip hop (mid-1980s - mid-1990s) proved that a variety of hip hop could be profitable, from gangsta rap, to political rap, to “pop” rap. The corporations, however, have tended to prefer pushing particular formulas that were proven moneymakers, such as gansta rap or the bling era.

Given the capitalist structures and economic models within which these corporations operate, profit maximization is the singular goal. Whichever formula proves itself the most profitable, therefore, wins and is repeated until the market becomes over saturated. Theories of mass or popular culture may explain the behavior of these entertainment corporations, which “place a high value on predictability” and the avoidance risk, as normal (DiMaggio, 1977).

Hip Hop’s Commodification in Tanzania

The blame for hip hop's commercialization, therefore, often falls on record companies and radio stations, both of which have an enormous influence on what is hot, and who becomes a star. Like in the United States, in Tanzania some artists complain about the difficulty faced by hip hop artists who refuse to go pop. Record companies and production houses like Bongoland Records and Tanzania House of Talent are said to only produce artists that fit the pop formula that dominates Bongo Flava. This has given these media houses direct influence on the music produced and the creative decisions made by artists, many of whom desire a lifestyle portrayed in American hip hop videos and are therefore easily seduced by quick money (Perullo & Fenn, 2003; Perullo A. , 2005).

The Tanzania House of Talent (THT) is an organization founded by Ruge Mutahaba (general manager of Clouds FM) and is responsible for many of today’s Bongo Flava artists. THT takes young talent and grooms them for the mainstream, primarily to become Bongo Flava artists. The organization has been criticized by several hip hop artists but has been praised by the Tanzanian media and Western NGOs for its work with Tanzanian youth. One Western volunteer affiliated with THT is quoted as saying the “Tanzania House of Talent is considered one of the most revolutionary movements born out of the music and entertainment industry in East Africa” (Young, 2009). While THT has rightfully earned praise for its work, to call THT a “revolutionary” movement is a massive overstatement that minimizes the significance of the word “revolution”. The organization helps young aspiring artists, and many of them go on to earn a career in the entertainment industry, many becoming pop or commercial artists. In fact, many of the artists that get put in heavy rotation at Clouds FM are alumni of THT.

Like the American music industry, the Tanzanian music industry, whether it be THT, Bongoland Records, or Clouds FM, is focused on recreating a formula and gaining quick returns. The formula, like any pop formula, consists of a degree of escapism, but is always "short lived" (Rasmussen, 2006; Strinati, 2004). Clouds FM understandably draws the wrath of many artists, some of whom claim the station, one of the most popular in Tanzania, is destroying hip hop. The criticisms lodged at Clouds FM are similar to those that have been directed towards Clear Channel, an American corporation that owns several radio stations in urban markets.

Those criticisms are directed towards the pushing of pop music at the expense of creativity and authenticity. This commodification of music includes two important ingredients: manipulating public tastes through a heavy infusion of a corporate mentality into music radio, sprinkled with claims of corruption or payola. In the case of Clear Channel the company bought up over 1,200 US radio stations, created a monopoly, and changed their newly acquired stations to conform to a certain model (Rasmussen, 2006; Bednarski, 2003; Alstynne, 2003). Even many of the slogans sounded similar. Words like “Power”, “Hot”, “The Beat” & “Jams” often precede or follow the call numbers. Slogans like “home of hip hop & R&B” and “the people’s station” are also common. The restructuring of these radio stations included playing the same playlists in their stations across the country and limiting the discretion of the deejays to play a range of music and talent (Rasmussen, 2006; Alstynne, 2003). Tanzania’s Clouds FM has constructed a similar corporate model as Clear Channel, down to the slogan, “the people’s station”.

Clouds FM

The Clouds Media Group is the company behind Clouds FM as well as two nightclubs and two other radio stations (Choice FM and Coconut FM in Zanzibar). In addition, Clouds FM’s broadcast reaches most of Tanzania’s urban regions. In July 2010 Clouds FM launched Clouds TV, setting it up to compete with the 10 other local television stations in the country (Owere, 2010). By the following month Clouds TV announced it had signed a deal MTV Networks Africa to provide MTV content on the Clouds TV network (The Citizen, 2010). While this business model has brought Clouds FM financial success, it has meant the restriction of creativity and the increased likelihood that mediocre artists become stars while some talented artists are relegated to underground status.

A second important ingredient is payola, which is the financial structure that brings together the radio stations and the artists. In the US, the financial exchange occurs between radio stations and record labels (Rasmussen, 2006). In Tanzania, much of the money changes hands between the artists themselves and the radio or television stations. While almost everyone interviewed, including individuals at both Clouds FM and ITV (a private television station) admitted that payola is a problem, but most felt payola was not to blame for destroying hip hop in Tanzania. Several artists in Tanzania, however, complain that without paying the individuals at the radio and television stations, their music is unlikely to get played. With restricted options, many artists feel they have little choice but to pay their way on to the air.

With artists having to contend with market domination and payola, what makes the situation in Tanzania different than the US is that in America there is a strong network of independent radio stations, many supported by public and private funding. Some of these radio stations have shown that feature “underground” hip hop and are allowed the creativity to have diverse playlists. Tanzanian artists do not have these options. While a few of the artists interviewed have been throwing around the idea of starting a hip hop radio station, there has yet to be significant movement in this direction.

Individuals interviewed at Clouds FM defended the radio station, pointing out that the station is a business and plays artists that will be good for that business. Most felt it was not the responsibility of radio stations to “develop” hip hop, that radio stations were not NGOs or community service-based organizations, but were in business to increase their profits. On the Clouds FM website the stations states “our kind of music is from the main stream Hip Hop, R&B, Rock, Taarab, Soul, African beat from various west African countries” (Clouds Media Goup). The station does not mention Bongo Flava, but felt it was important to state that the brand of hip hop they play is “mainstream”.

Some at Clouds FM assert that it is the listeners and viewers themselves who dictate the direction of music in Tanzania, indicating that if Tanzanian fans wanted more hip hop, that is what would be played. An argument was made that Tanzanian youth prefer pop music and love ballads to hip hop music that some felt tends to be more abrasive. Tanzanian consumers are likely similar to other pop culture consumers, in that they are unaware of the differences between the authentic art form (hip hop) and its commercialized twin (Bongo Flava) (Strinati, 2004).

Many Tanzanians continues to listen to the radio and watch music videos to hear the latest youth music. Radio stations use this as justification for playing pop mostly music, and the role of the radio stations in directing consumer demand is never addressed. In accordance with capitalist economic structures, the music is deemed as a commodity at the mercy of the market. The role of corporate monopolies in manipulating consumer demand remains hidden behind claims of free-market capitalism.

The packaging of pop music is often elaborate and shiny. Music videos become four minute commercials and constant airplay turns mediocre songs into hits. Closer examinations of mass and pop culture reveal that through the gimmicks and flash of pop music, things that can often deceive the listener into thinking that they are listening to “something new and different”, when in actuality the verses on many pop (or Bongo Flava) songs are interchangeable (Strinati, 2004).

The documentary film *Before the Music Dies* looks at the destruction of music culture and creativity by the entertainment industry, in fact highlighting the difference between “a music fan and a popular culture fan” (Rasmussen, 2006). Pop culture and music are industry created, and short lived. Pop culture is a corporate construct that caters to the masses for profit maximization, ignoring sub-cultures often deemed not profitable. Theorist Paul DiMaggio points to a direct correlation between the degree of market domination and the degree of artist creativity and diversity (1977). In a market dominated by a few, “creative decision-making was relatively centralized and artists and producers had a minimum of autonomy” (DiMaggio, 1977, p. 3). While the market for pop music and culture is more profitable, there is a market for fans of diverse and creative music, in this case, hip hop. There is room for diversity in the industry, and this is being proven by independent labels and new media in markets outside of Tanzania.

Conclusion: The Re-Introduction of Tanzanian Hip Hop

The rejection of the Bongo Flava label solidifies both Bongo Flava and Tanzanian Hip Hop as distinct and different genres. While there is definitely cross-over, and there are definitely emcees that will continue to embrace the Bongo Flava label, Tanzanian Hip Hop seems to be forging ahead, declaring its independence from Bongo Flava. "Okoa hip hop" (“save hip hop”) is a slogan that recently popped up. Shani Omari, a professor at the University of Dar es Salaam and a researcher of hip hop in Tanzania says the slogan came about among artists trying to save hip hop from dying and disappearing from the music scene (Omari, S., personal communication, August 22, 2010). The slogan has been seen on t-shirts and in music videos. While not a widespread “movement”, the term “okoa hip hop” seems to encapsulate the sentiments of Tanzanian hip hop heads and emcees.

Regarding authenticity and commercialization, Tanzanian hip hop artists and fans continue to embrace their culture as a part of the global hip hop community. Many are using a variety of sources to collaborate with artists internationally. Some continue to battle the Bongo Flava machine while others maintain a safe distance. The Bongo Flava sound is currently produced for an East African market, and as long as it remains financially successful, little is likely to change in the short term and hip hop artists will continue to be financially marginalized.

Radio stations and record companies in Tanzania are profit seeking enterprises that have based much of their financial models on those of Western corporate structures and can no longer be relied upon to advance any music genre. These businesses, all emerging after the fall of socialism in Tanzania, are completely a product of a new predatory capitalist environment designed to commodify any product with the potential to earn capital. If, however, the trend taking place in the United States is any indication, there may be room for independent stations in Tanzania.

While Clear Channel still holds its monopoly, the numbers indicate a slight reduction in the past ten years in the number of hours people are listening to the radio (Alstyne, 2003). According to Alstyne, this could be a reflection of fan frustration (2003). It could also be a preference to listening to content using the variety of options that new media offers, such as mp3 files, podcasts, and internet radio.

For hip hop to remain a viable career option for Tanzanian artists some may chose to add commercial or club friendly tracks to their CDs. This has often proven successful for hip hop emcees in the United States. Some of these American artists have their certificates of “hip hop authenticity” and often have songs that have become club anthems, while their CDs include more hardcore or thought provoking lyrics. Some of these American artists include Ice Cube, Common, and Jadakiss. Few American artists, the exceptions including Kanye West and Lupe Fiasco, have turned socially conscious songs into radio and video top tens. Others American emcees, such as Mos Def, MF Doom, and The Coup, get little to no radio play on mainstream radio, but maintain strong fan bases and significant hip hop credibility. Across the continent in Ghana, where Hiplife emerged, a similar debate between “hip hop” and “Hiplife” is taking place. Much less contentious than the debate in Tanzania, many Ghanaian hip hop artists include both club friendly Hiplife tracks and more hardcore hip hop tracks on their albums. Hoping to market themselves to a wider audience, while also pleasing their hip hop fans, many Ghanaian artists find success in both the hip hop community and in the mainstream.

The international market may also be a source of opportunity for Tanzanian hip hop artists seeking more financial stability from their art. As it stands, Bongo Flava artists performing in the United States tend to perform at shows attended only by East Africans. Most do not find much of a non-East African following and therefore see limited profits from performing in the US. Causes relate to both quality and marketing. A search of “bongo flava” on YouTube will likely result in several videos featuring artists dancing to R&B rhythms, singing about love, in outfits that are poor attempts to imitate styles found on MTV.

The American market is a difficult place to find success for foreign artists performing the music of an American genre like R & B and hip hop. For those that find minimal to significant success in the American market, like K’Naan (Somalia), Awadi (Senegal), Daara J (Senegal), and Modenine (Nigeria), there is little doubt of their talent and originality. For these artists their financial success is evident in the international sales of their music (iTunes is critical), concert attendance (diversity and size of audience), and exposure (hip hop radio programs, podcasts, and new media). For Tanzanian hip hop (and Bongo Flava) artists to penetrate the international market, it will primarily take significant talent, followed by good marketing and networking.

The benefits of new media and the development of independent labels cannot be overestimated. The internet, internet radio, podcasting, and file sharing have proved an easier method for American fans and new artists to access each other (Rasmussen, 2006). The existence of independent labels has also given American artists opportunities to bypass corporate structures and maintain their artistic freedom. The international market could be a platform from which Tanzanian emcees could find some reward, as the “survival of the fittest” environment of the international market will separate the mediocre from the talented. Finding success abroad would increase the value of Tanzanian hip hop emcees in the Tanzanian music scene as well. As of yet there are no internationally known Bongo Flava or Tanzanian hip hop superstars. If a Tanzanian hip hop artist manages to reach international stardom, it will inevitably impact the value of Tanzanian hip hop artists and culture in Tanzania.

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