

# **“Chant Down the System ‘till Babylon Falls”: The Political Dimensions of Underground Hip Hop and Urban Grooves in Zimbabwe**

by

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## **Abstract**

In Harare, Zimbabwe’s capital and hub of cultural activity, two youth movements – Underground Hip Hop and Urban Grooves – are portrayed as, or lay claim to be, representing Hip hop. Yet, they espouse very different definitions of Hip hop. Although Urban Grooves is essentially an umbrella term for urban pop music that blends Afro-diasporic genres, mainly dancehall, r&b, and rap, with local elements, it has been described as Zimbabwean Hip hop since some Urban Groovers have adopted rapping, the fashion style, as well as the materialistic and misogynistic outlook of mainstream American rappers. In contrast, Underground Hip Hop artists perceive Hip hop as a counterculture in which rap is valued as a powerful voice to uplift, educate, and speak out against oppression. It is important to clearly differentiate between Underground Hip Hop and Urban Grooves, since the ‘Underground’ status of the Hip hop movement, on one side, and the emergence of Urban Grooves as a mainstream genre in early 2000, on the other, are tied up with specific state policies that aim to undermine protest music by promoting young artists to record pro-government or apolitical music. This has resulted in a mainstream/underground dichotomy that runs along political and ideological lines.

## Introduction

Since its arrival in the 1980s<sup>1</sup>, Hip hop<sup>2</sup> culture, especially the element of rap, has shaped youth culture in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital and major hub of cultural activity. Yet, in congruence with the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of Hip hop, two different youth movements in Zimbabwe have appropriated aspects of this culture and they differ vastly in regards to their perception of its definition and mission: Underground Hip hop and Urban Grooves. The former perceives Hip hop as a culture connected to a global Hip hop movement that is devoted to advocating Hip hop's original vision as the voice of the oppressed; whereas the latter, which dominates the contemporary urban youth music scene, can be best described as an umbrella term for a style of popular music that combines the local with the global: the rhythms and beats, generally digitally-produced, are taken from international music, predominantly dancehall, soul, rhythm & blues, and rap, yet, the young artists add a local flavor by singing or rapping in Shona or Ndebele, the two dominant national languages of Zimbabwe.

Since some elements of Hip hop, rapping and fashion style, are defining features of both movements, the dividing line between them is blurred. Indeed, many close-observers of the local music scene define Urban Grooves as Zimbabwean Hip hop. The "veteran music journalist" (Eyre & Mapfumo, 2001), Maxwell Sibanda, for instance, describes Urban Grooves as, "[...] a grouping of artists, especially youngsters, who call their music Urban Grooves but actually it is Hip hop" (Sibanda, personal interview, February 25, 2012). Similarly, Bere (2008) argues that Zimbabwean Hip hop, through a process of localization and popularization, has developed into Urban Grooves.

However, it is important to clearly differentiate between Underground Hip hop and Urban Grooves, since the 'underground' status of the Hip hop movement, on one side, and the emergence of Urban Grooves as a mainstream genre in early 2000, on the other, are tied up with specific political developments in Zimbabwe. The ZANU(PF) government, confronted with a fully-fledged political and economic crisis and the rise of a strong opposition movement at the turn of the century, embarked upon a large-scale propaganda project in an effort to assert their hegemony. Urban youth music, including rap, was targeted as one key factor to promulgate the state ideology. This move has led to the conclusion that Hip hop in Zimbabwe has been appropriated by the state. As Palmberg (2004) notes, "What is special for Zimbabwe is that Hip -hop and rap belong to the category of state-sponsored music" (p. 31).

Although it is undoubtedly true that rap music affiliated with Urban Grooves has lent itself to boost the state's narrative or at least acquiesces to it, this account offers a one-sided and limited portrayal of Hip hop in Zimbabwe. To equate Zimbabwean Hip hop with Urban Grooves is not only too simplistic because it ignores the generic nature of Urban Grooves, it also tends to overlook that the rappers amongst the Urban Groovers are not the only ones who spit rhymes and lay claim to representing Hip hop in Zimbabwe. There is a small, but vibrant Hip hop community, the Underground Hip Hop scene, that values rap for its uplifting, inspiring and socio-political message. Yet, this movement dwells in the underground and is less visible, while rappers affiliated with Urban Grooves dominate the airwaves. Socially and politically conscious Hip hop heads generally struggle to receive airplay in the mainstream media across the globe.<sup>3</sup> In Zimbabwe, however, the mainstream/underground split is connected to the fact that the ZANU(PF) government consciously promoted youngsters to record either apolitical or pro-government music, which eventually would become known as Urban Grooves, in order to connect with youth and to stifle any form of protest music, including 'conscious' Hip hop.

In order to illustrate this argument, this article, which is predominantly based upon interviews and lyric excerpts,<sup>4</sup> traces the trajectory of both movements and provides clear definitions. By doing so, I am going to illustrate Urban Grooves' assimilation into the state apparatus and Hip hop's movement into the 'underground', thus elucidating, in KRS-One's words, what it means to be Underground,<sup>5</sup> in the Zimbabwean context. Finally, since Urban Groovers, as well as Underground Hip Hop artists, have been attacked on the ground that they are mere copycats of their U.S. counterparts, issues surrounding the contradictory and complex field of the global versus the local are addressed.

## **The Pioneers of Zimbabwean Hip Hop**

When asked about the beginnings of Zimbabwean Hip hop, current underground emcees point to A Peace of Ebony (POE) and Shingirai Sabeta aka Mau Mau. Both have managed to break through the stranglehold international pop music possessed over the airwaves in the 90s and, based upon their originality and lyrical prowess, have left a lasting mark on the development of a local Hip hop scene.

POE, which consisted of the rappers Metaphysics, Tony Chihota aka the Chief, and later Laygwan Sharkie, as well as songstress Chiwoniso Maraire, released their album, entitled "From the Native Tongue", in 1992. Two of the album's songs hit the charts on Radio 3, now Power FM – the station especially popular amongst youth – thus turning POE into the first Zimbabwean Hip hop group frequently played on radio (Metaphysics, personal interview, March 16, 2012). As Aero50l, a local emcee and graffiti artist, states,

It [the album] was in the charts on Radio 3, that's how you got to hear anything. If you didn't make the charts, you probably would not be heard. And hearing a Zimbabwean Hip hop group on radio had an impact on Aero501:

I listened mainly to American and U.K. Hip hop on mix-tapes and on the radio. In regards to Zimbabwean Hip hop, POE definitely influenced me. It was probably the first time that you felt, yeah, someone else is doing something and it sounds dope (personal interview, February 20, 2012).

The impact of the group is also neatly summarized in the following statement by another emcee, Upmost:

For me, Hip hop started in '92 with POE. POE was on radio then, I think this is the first time I heard local Hip hop [...]. I remember "From the Native Tongue", because it was like, "Yo, I'm African" and that was cool. It touched home. The image was something I could relate to (personal interview, February 18, 2012).

As indicated by the statements of the two emcees, POE's status as pioneers of Zimbabwean Hip hop is further based on the fact that they infused African, or local, elements into Hip hop music.

POE's songs were marked, musically, by a fusion of Hip hop beats with the mbira, and lyrically, by a fusion of Shona and English, and sometimes even French. Yet, the group situated their artistic work within the aesthetic and ideological framework of Hip hop culture. In fact, the name of their album, "From the Native Tongue", establishes a direct link to the New York-based Native Tongues – a Hip hop collective with close ties to Afrika Bambaataa's Universal Zulu Nation that formed in the late 1980s (Saucier, 2011). The collective's goal was to confront the sexual exploitation and violence that had started to suffuse Hip hop culture with the emergence of Los Angeles *gangsta* rap (Torreano) and they "were known for their positive, good-natured Afrocentric lyrics" (Saucier, 2011).

As implied by POE's name itself, which, according to Metaphysics (2012), is an acronym denoting "A Positive Existence Allowing Cultural Expressions of Ebony" – the Zimbabwean group shares with the Native Tongues collective the emphasis on a positive, Afrocentric message. This is further captured in Metaphysics' response regarding the major influences on POE's music:

I guess it was the vibe coming out of the Native Tongues from the USA – Arrested Development and the dashiki-wearing era of Hip hop. It was like, wow, they're trying to look like we look, they are proud to represent themselves as much as we could be proud to show them that we appreciate their efforts, so why don't we just join the family and make it international? That was the energy behind it (Metaphysics, personal interview, March 26, 2012).

Yet, by adding a “From” to the “Native Tongue”, POE highlights that they are not simply imitating the style of their American compatriots, instead they position themselves as equal ‘family members’. Moreover, by emphasizing their place of origin, Africa, they lay their own claims of representing Hip hop. This is illustrated in a couple of lines Metaphysics, who was known then as Quilla, spits in the song “From the Native Tongue”:

Quilla spelt with a Q, I am here to record a style  
Hear the beats are going tribal tribal with a tribal vibe  
Coming from the motherland and I know it’s ethnic  
It’s my flavor coz that’s how I kept it [...]   
Though I don't comb my hair coz my dreads must be shaggy  
I wear jeans and they hang coz they baggy. (qtd. in Bere, 2008, p. 92)

By stating that he wears baggy jeans, the rapper indicates his affiliation to U.S. Hip hop culture. However, he also differentiates himself by emphasizing his different socio-cultural background in that he is “from the motherland”, a synonym denoting Africa, where the beats follow a different rhythm, infusing his rhymes with a different “style” and “flavor”. This lyric excerpt illustrates that POE, while clearly aligning themselves with a specific strand of U.S. Hip hop, simultaneously explore, play with, and re-appropriate aspects of the culture into their own local experience and imagination.<sup>6</sup>

Shingirai Sabeta aka Mau Mau, whose debut single “*Ndiani Mau Mau?*” (“Who is the Mau Mau?”) received generous airplay after its’ release in 1997, counts as another pioneer of Zimbabwean Hip hop. According to Comrade Fatso, who describes Mau Mau’s music as “conscious Shona rap,” the artist’s major contribution to Zimbabwean Hip hop rests on the fact that he has made it acceptable to rap in Shona (personal interview, March 8, 2012). Whereas Biko Mutsaurwa aka Godobori reveres the artist for the depth of his lyrics: “[h]is self-aware, conscious and revolutionary lyrics pointed to a new positive path for Hip hop to take” (Mutsaurwa, 2004, p. 13). Indeed, Mau Mau’s rhymes, as implied by choosing a name that is a direct reference to Kenya’s anti-colonial struggle, are renowned for his politically-explicit messages that are steeped in Black consciousness and Pan-Africanism. As Upmost states, “the rebellion in him woke up a lot of rebellion in me. I think the pan-African content in it. It made me think maybe I should stand for who I am. For who we are” (personal interview, February 18, 2012).

However, it was not until 2002 that the artist was able to compile and record his first album, “*Mfecane*”, that epitomizes his artistic dexterity. Although the lyrics of the album – which range from domestic violence, the social inequalities of post-apartheid South Africa, the wars that ravage the continent, to the corruption of African leaders – do not directly deal with the socio-political situation in Zimbabwe, the harsh condemnation of African leaders in general, insinuates a critique of President Mugabe and his greed for power. In an Interlude, entitled “We are in a state of war”, the Emcee proclaims:

We kicked the White man out, and the Black men took power but what’s really changed? Has anything really changed? Not anything, if anything things have gotten worse not better. Why? Because our Black leaders do have not the capability, they do not have the courage, they do not have the vision to lead Africa into a new, better millennium, because our Black leaders have become whores to the same love of money that the White master used to justify enslaving us, putting us in chains, putting us on the plantation and so now the very same Black leaders have become our new slave-masters.<sup>7</sup>

Zimbabwe’s president can easily be included in this wholesale attack against Black leaders, especially with regards to the country’s political developments over the past decade. This excerpt resonates with a line Munetsi raps in his song “Live from Zimbabwe”, released on the album *Ghetto Projects: From Day One* in 2006, “the second *Chimurenga*<sup>8</sup> did not really liberate us.”

Hence, Underground Hip hoppers identify artists as pioneers of their scene, who utilize rap to voice ideological standpoints and socio-political concerns. While both, POE and Mau Mau, are ‘keepin it real’– meaning in this context that they uphold Hip hop culture – they also succeed, mainly through language use and lyrical content, to localize their music.

### **The Localization of Pop Music: The Trajectory of Urban Grooves**

The release of the compilation CD “Urban Grooves Vol.1” by Delani Makhali’s Galaxy Records in 2002 marks the official birth of Urban Grooves (Bere, 2008). Indeed, the producer is widely credited with coining the name, as well as the sound of this style of music, which is marked by an attempt to localize different mainstream Western pop music genres, including rap, by adding local instruments to a digitally-produced beat and by singing or rapping in Shona or Ndebele. Indeed, the major aim of the artists who assembled at Delani’s studio was to develop “a new thing”. As EX-Q, one of the pioneering Urban Groovers, states:

When we started Urban Grooves we started to use computers. We kind of take the word urban to separate ourselves from the *sungura* guys so that people would say this is a new thing, this is a new genre or something like that. Urban Grooves is an umbrella term for the new urban sound (personal interview, March 13, 2012).

David Chifunyise's hit song, "*Tauya Naye*" ("We have come with her"), which was released on "The Future" – a compilation album produced by Delani in 2000 that counts as the direct precursor of "Urban Grooves Vol.1" (Bere, 2008) – is emblematic for the genre: the song, which is actually a rap rendition of a popular Shona wedding song, features the marimba, which accentuates a stark contrast to the (modern) beats that built the backdrop of the song (Veit-Wild, 2009).

However, the trajectory of the movement can be traced back to the late 1980s. Starting around that time, a number of young musicians, including Prince Tendai and Fortune Muparutsa, increasingly tampered with defining a distinct Zimbabwean urban pop sound by introducing digital-recording technology and by fusing different genres, such as soul, jazz, dancehall, r&b, and rap. Cindy, currently one of the most successful Urban Groovers, for instance, summarizes the origins of Urban Grooves as follows:

There were a couple of artists, years ago, like in the late 80s and the 90s, like Fortune Muparutsa and Prince Tendai, who are both late now, they used to sing an urban pop sound which was not very common here, because most people did the *sungura*, the jazz, and what have you. So those are the pioneers of Urban Grooves (personal interview, February 23, 2012).

Both artists, Fortune Muparutsa and Prince Tendai, dedicated their careers to developing a distinct Zimbabwean urban pop sound. While introducing 'classic' features of dancehall and rap, such as toasting, rapping and break-beats, Fortune Muparutsa simultaneously tried to add a unique local feel to his music, especially by singing in Shona (Bere, 2008).

Similarly Prince Tendai blended American pop with local elements. In order to mark the distinctive sound of his music, he even came up with a new term for it, 'Barbed-Wire', which is regarded as Urban Grooves' predecessor: "[t]his genre of music called 'Barbed Wire' is exclusive to Prince Tendai and it is greatly believed that it is Prince Tendai's music which gave birth to what is known as Urban Grooves music today" (Zindi, 2010).

Prince Tendai has also shaped the culture, especially in terms of lifestyle, surrounding Urban Grooves. Thomas Deve, Chairperson of the Adjudication Committee of the Zimbabwe Music Awards (ZIMA), refers to the early Urban Groovers – David Chifuniyise and Plaxedes Wenyika amongst others – as the “Prince Tendai Generation”:

Prince Tendai used to drive this big American car [...] and – like the Rusike Brothers, they were the ones who were shaping themselves after the Jackson family –they would speak in English, a certain type of English. They are from former Group A schools and Urban Groovers at one time or the other attracted kids from former Group A schools, you know, so you can actually see the trajectory. This is the background where they are coming from. So there is a trajectory, you can say, “this is the group.” Then out of that group a certain consolidation happened, in terms of similar artists who came on board, the Chifuniyise’s and so-forth, they are the ones who really pushed it. But it has a trajectory in terms of lifestyle and their understanding of local politics (Deve, personal interview, February 10, 2012).

Thus, the majority of youngsters who would ultimately define Urban Grooves can be linked to Prince Tendai on the basis of education and class. This is further bolstered by Bere’s (2008) observation that the artists who are featured on “The Future” all share a similar background:

[a]ll artists on “The Future” project were young people still in school, college or university. Almost all of them came from middle class suburbs, and went to former whites-only schools. There is, thus, an element of class in early urban grooves (p. 113).

The musician’s penchant for the flashy American lifestyle, as indicated by his choice of car, as well as speaking a “certain type of English,” are also distinguishing features of so-called *masalads* or *masalala* (“those who eat salad”) – a term denoting a sub-group of urban youth culture many Urban Groovers, based upon their social class, manner of speaking, and fashion style, are part of. According to Veit-Wild (2009), *masalala* are “[B]lack Zimbabwean youth from mostly well-to-do families, who imitate American Hip hop culture in dress, music taste, language and style of living [...]” (p. 687). Yet, *masalala* espouse the materialistic and consumerist outlook of mainstream American rap culture, as portrayed by such artists as Jay-Z, Kanye West and 50 Cent. In one of the songs released on his album, “Team Hombe”, Stunner, a famous Urban Groover who has been called Zimbabwe’s “King of Bling” (Yikiniko, 2011), likens himself to American mainstream rapper Jay-Z, while comparing his compatriot EX-Q to LL Cool J: “Ex-(Q) *uri sei*. One rapper *wandichiri kubigger*. *Dai tiri kuAmerica uri Cool J, ndiri Jigga*”<sup>9</sup> (qtd. in Bwititi, 2012).

Indeed, EX-Q became famous with a song celebrating *musalala* culture, entitled “*Ndiri Musalala*” (“I am Musalala”), in which he proudly proclaims that these youth reject the food, the music, and lifestyle associated with ‘traditional’ Zimbabwean culture and instead like to eat hamburgers, listen to rap, love to club and hang out in suburban malls.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Prince Tendai and Fortune Muparutsa were instrumental in conceptualizing Urban Grooves by establishing recording studios in the early 1990s. Zimbabwe’s established record companies, Gramma Records, Zimbabwe Music Company (ZMC) and Records and Tape Promotions (RTP) were, and still are, unwilling to sign and promote artists who stray away from Zimbabwe’s popular music genres – such as *sungura*, *museve*, and gospel – and experiment with creating a new urban pop sound by using digital technology (Eyre & Mapfumo, 2001). Thus, the emergence of new studios, such as Muparutsa’s Wheels of Fortune and Prince Tendai’s High Density Records, provided a rare space for young artists – who adopted, adapted or fused genres such as soul, dancehall, r&b and rap – to record their music in the 1990s. As Deve states,

If you look at the trajectory of Zimbabwean music in terms of the recording contracts, you either played what they called pure traditional Shona music, which is *sungura*, and there were particular recording companies, which promoted and produced that [...]. Then you go to new studios, [...], this is where the Urban Groovers largely were entertained by Prince Tendai and the likes (personal interview, February 10, 2012).

Fortune Muparutsa, for instance, aided in kick-starting the careers of a number of well-known Urban Groovers, including Alexio Kawara and Maskiri (Bere, 2008), while Mau Mau was one of the young artists who recorded their music at Prince Tendai’s studio – his first single was produced by High Density Records (Mutsaurwa, 2004).

The collaboration between the emcee and the godfather of Urban Grooves indicates that there was no clear-cut separation between rappers, who subscribe to Hip hop culture and are politically conscious, and other young musicians, who merely perceive rap as a pop music genre, used to entertain rather than educate. Indeed, all artists that turned to digital-music production and were influenced by the globally popular youth music genres of the time, regardless of their ideological standpoints, were confronted with the same reluctance of the music industry to produce, record, distribute, and air their music. As Biko Mutsaurwa states,

For everybody, not only for the Hip hop soldiers and warriors, people that are part of the culture and are aware of being part of it, but even for a rapper in general, or somebody that sang r&b, or somebody that was doing reggae or ragga, for those people to get airplay was difficult in the 90s in general because they would be perceived as producing inferior products to the American or Caribbean forms. [...] That's why most local music was [...] on the low (personal interview, February 9, 2012).

Yet, at the turn of the millennium, the music that eventually would become known as Urban Grooves embarked upon a triumphant conquest of the airwaves and established itself as a mainstream genre, while conscious Hip hop music appeared to have vanished. As FlowChyld, an emcee and poetess, points out:

Hip hop in general started in the 90s, with groups like POE, with Mau Mau. It was kind of cool cause these guys were kind of mainstream, but they were saying something. But then somehow in the late 90s it went down and there wasn't really any Hip hop going on in this country (personal interview, February 16, 2012).

What did happen was that the ZANU(PF) government, confronted with a fully-fledged economic and political crisis and the rise of a strong opposition movement in 2000, tightened state control over the airwaves and embarked upon a large-scale propaganda project, which also targeted urban youth music, including rap, in order to re-establish their hegemony.

### **“The Future” Arrives: Urban Grooves Enters the Mainstream**

In 2001, the government enacted the Broadcast Services Act (BSA) – one statute amongst many that were promulgated to tighten state control over media outlets since 2000 – which mandated a 75 per cent local content requirement (Hondura, n.d.). Officially hailed as “a drive to try and protect Zimbabwean culture from Western influence,” this quota, which was the brainchild of then-Minister of Information, Jonathan Moyo, specifically targeted Power FM – the teen station which used to dedicate the vast bulk of its airtime to Black Diaspora music – by forcing it to change its programming and turn into a platform for young, local artists (Zindi, 2010). This development, coupled with the introduction of state-sponsored music galas to which ‘government-friendly’ artists were invited to perform, kick-started the ascendancy of Urban Grooves. Pauline, former front woman of the Urban Grooves’ band M’Afrique, summarizes the tremendous impact the state’s policies had on the development of the movement:

When Moyo came through on the scene it was a slap in the face of a lot of people who said Urban Grooves would never make it. The local content quota was a big boost because people gave us an audience. We had the ears and eyes of the people. At last we didn't have to hustle anymore. This time was just amazing. This was a time when the national galas were starting, good money, good platform (Pauline, personal interview, March 13, 2012).

Similarly Tererai, another female Urban Groover, states,

largely we were so big back then [in the early 2000s] because there is a Minister, Jonathan Moyo, who implemented the idea that our radio should play a 100 per cent local content, so it kind of forced people to hear us and I guess it shocked them into realizing, “wow, these guys are actually onto something” (Tererai Muguadi, personal interview, February 18, 2012).

Thus, on one hand, the content quota finally offered young artists' with a platform to air their music and present it to the larger public. However, on the other hand, the local content quota effectually tightened government control in the realm of urban youth music since it meant that only musicians who openly endorsed the state's ideology, or at least acquiesced to it by being apolitical, benefitted from its sponsorship. Artists, who aim to spread a critical, socio-political message through their music – including Hip hop heads who utilize the culture to speak out against oppression – did not benefit from the state's newfound interest in furthering local music production. On the contrary, their music was banned (cf. Eyre & Mapfumo, 2001; Palmberg, 2004; Sibanda, 2004). Since the Zimbabwean Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), which largely enjoys a monopoly over the airwaves,<sup>11</sup> is nothing more than a mouthpiece of ZANU(PF), it is a cakewalk for the party to shape content in accordance with their interest (Eyre & Mapfumo, 2001).

In fact Galaxy Record's top artists – the label's cream crop in Pauline's words – who featured on “Urban Grooves Vol.1” were also involved in government-sponsored projects (Bere, 2008). Plaxedes Wenyika, for instance, was part of the Ruvhuvhuto Sisters, who sung the tracks on Moyo's 2003 album “Come to Victoria Falls Down in Zimbabwe” (Sibanda, 2004). Roy and Royce declined an invitation by the Media Institute for Southern African (MISA) to play at the Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2003, out of fear of losing government-sponsored opportunities (Palmberg, 2004). EX-Q, who was signed to Galaxy Records but was not featured on “Urban Grooves Vol.1”, suggests a close link between Urban Grooves and the government by stating:

We did a theme song for Science and Technology, or something like that, for the Ministry, they were launching this project, called “Southern Technology,” or something like that. So we had to do a theme song for the project and Delani made us do videos and stuff and we went everywhere the government wanted us to perform (personal interview, March 13, 2012).

While not all Urban Groovers have directly lent their voice to support government projects, they have acquiesced to it by singing about love, or other frivolous subjects, in order to ensure airplay on radio – the main reason the music is commonly described as “bubble-gum.”<sup>12</sup>

Moyo’s dismissal at the end of 2004 had an impact on the fledgling Urban Grooves scene – not only was the local content quota overturned, but some Urban Grooves songs, officially because of their misogynistic content, but unofficially because of the movement’s close link to Moyo, were banned from the airwaves (Nyamhangambiri). Notwithstanding, Urban Grooves songs have remained on the playlists of radio DJ’s, especially on Power FM. Deve poignantly captures the salience of the station as a platform for Urban Grooves in his remark: “[i]f Power FM would be shut today, Urban Grooves would die in this country” (Deve, personal interview, February 10, 2012).

Moreover, with or without Moyo, music that is critical of ZANU(PF) continues to be banned from the airwaves (Sibanda, 2008). Thus, Urban Groovers, in contrast to Underground emcees, stick to the general rule to refrain from any political topics in order to receive airplay. As Pauline notes with regards to the current music of her colleagues: “I find a lot of cheap lyrics going on. People don’t put much depth anymore. It is just about: Is it groovy? Can I move to it? Will it play on radio? How much money do I get?” (personal interview, March 13, 2012). While some Urban Groovers, such as EX-Q, claim that they are not interested in being political, others feel pressured into refraining from singing about certain topics in order to stay afloat in the music business. As one Urban Groover, who asked not to be identified, confided in an interview:

[p]olitics is making it hard for us. [...]. As an artist sometimes I want to sing and just say, every time I look out of my window I see poorly maintained roads and I see kids playing in dirty water they are going to get sick, or someone’s going to have an accident in that pothole. I want to say stuff like that but the minute you want to sing it, it’s like, so are you saying we do a bad job, so who do you think should do the job instead, who do you support? We must have a level of freedom of expression that has been stripped of us and it’s political. We do get limited in our self-expression to a great extent.

This quote indicates that young artists are very aware of what they can, or cannot, sing about, in order to reach the airwaves. Yet, if Urban Groovers do choose to introduce political statements into their lyrics, they come out in support of ZANU(PF).

Within a renewed frenzy of releasing propaganda songs in preparation for possible elections in 2010 (Sibanda, 2010), Sanii Makhhalima, Delani's brother, stepped up as music producer, releasing the first album of the Urban Grooves outfit Born Free Crew, entitled "Get Connected". The young musicians of the "Born Free Crew" situate themselves squarely within the ZANU(PF)'s hegemonic narrative by unabashedly celebrating Mugabe's presidency on their first album. It is worth quoting a 2010 *Herald* article by Tera Richmore about the release of the album at length, since, in addition to providing a concise summary of the lyrics, it provides insight into the extent to which the state's ideology is promoted by the young musicians as well as the state-sponsored press:

The album opens with the track Network, about the need for people to stay connected with their country as well as the leadership, with President Mugabe at the helm. "[...] *VaMugabe ndevedu/ Hatimbofa takavasiya*" (We will never abandon President Mugabe), are part of the lyrics. The track Diaspora is based on a speech made by the President in which he was talking about how some Zimbabweans turned their back on their motherland to settle in foreign lands. *Zviri Sei Sei?* is about the enormous sacrifices and contribution that were made by our heroes in liberating the country. In it, the so-called "born frees" are actually acknowledging the role that these people played for them to be where they are today: "*Nyika haina kuuya nepen nepaper, iropa remagamba/ usafunge kuti ndiri kunyepa*" (the country was not won through pen and paper, but came with the sacrifice of the heroes). In *Tshay'zandla (Rovai Maoko)*, His Excellency is celebrated and extolled.

The current Minister of Information, Webster Shamu, functioned as the executive producer of the group's second album, "*Nhaka Yedu/Our Heritage*," released in 2011. The president actually features on the song, "*Toita sei?*" (Richmore, 2011). Both of the two Born Free Crew's albums were embraced by the state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and have received massive airplay on radio and TV (Richmore, 2010; Richmore, 2011).

## **“Its Bigger Than Hip hop”<sup>13</sup>: Defiant Voices From the Underground**

While Urban Grooves moved center stage and conquered Power FM, a small group of emcees who espouse a very different definition and vision of Hip hop assembled. In contrast to rappers that are affiliated with Urban Grooves, who are preoccupied in their lyrics with their *swagga*, money and fame – as exemplified by Stunner’s hit song *Godo* (“Jealousy”) in which he boasts about his talent, success and wealth: “*Tambirai kure* this is big boy business. *Tazoita* Cash *wangu haina kana* weakness”<sup>14</sup> – these emcees rap about the social ills, inequalities, and the repressive political climate that has befallen Zimbabwe. Yet, by refusing to give up their understanding of Hip hop as a culture to uplift, inspire, and challenge the status quo, they simultaneously abandoned their chance to benefit from state sponsorship and receive airtime on the government-controlled media outlets. As Upmost describes the movement’s status:

[i]t’s a very quiet scene, unless you’re involved in it, meaning it is not in the mainstream. You don’t turn on the TV and see Hip hop and you don’t turn on the radio and hear Hip hop. You have to know where to find it (personal interview, February 18, 2012).

In Harare’s Underground circles, Hip hop is defined as a culture, a way of life that encompasses a universal set of values and is connected to a global Hip hop community, which Alim (2009) defines as a “multilingual, multi-ethnic “nation” with an international reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical givens of the present” (3). For Synik, for instance, “Hip hop is Hip hop, a global movement, more than just rap, it’s a culture. Hip hop for me is a voice; it’s a way for me and countless others to express themselves.” (personal interview, March 19, 2012). As implied by his statement, rap is only one element of Hip hop culture – which according to the Temple of Hip hop consists of nine elements: rapping, deejaying, graffiti art, break dancing, knowledge, language, hustling, and fashion<sup>15</sup> – and it is a voice, a powerful tool, that allows artists to express their viewpoints and to comment on their socio-political surroundings. Like ‘conscious’ rappers around the world, these emcees specifically stress the importance of ‘knowledge of self’, which Haupt (2008) describes as “the belief that you need to engage in a serious amount of critical introspection before you can make a meaningful contribution to your political and social context as an Hip hop artist, intellectual, or activist” (p. 144).

According to Asante , “[a]lthough West African in its derivation, Hip hop emerged in the Bronx in the mid-seventies as a form of aesthetic and sociopolitical rebellion against the flames of systemic oppression” (9) – and Zimbabwe’s Underground rappers are devoted to Hip hop’s original vision as the voice of the marginalized and oppressed.

As Outspoken raps: “I’m spittin’ cause oppression is a bitter cup we’re sippin’” (qtd. in McIlvaine, 2011). For Biko, Hip hop is an acronym standing for “Her Infinite Power Helping Oppressed People” and is in its essence a revolutionary tool to undermine the status quo. The emcee’s vision of Hip hop is reflected in his lyrics:

I don’t battle emcees, I battle with the government  
kidnap the MPs and burn down the parliament  
My punch lines will overthrow the president  
I’m a bulldozer going through impediments  
(Biko Mutsaurwa aka Godobori, personal interview, February 9, 2012).

Yet, while not all rappers are equally radical and politically explicit – a factor that has led Upmost to conclude that the Zimbabwean Underground scene encompasses two types of revolutionaries: those who embrace Malcolm X’s “by any means necessary” attitude and others, like himself, who are rather inspired by Martin Luther King’s spiritual approach – all of the rappers I interviewed stress the importance to raise awareness by addressing social ills and inequalities and to generate positive change through their music. This is captured in FlowChyld’s explanation regarding the difference between Hip hop and Urban Grooves:

Urban Grooves is Zimbabwean entertainers sort of trying to mimic the popular urban music from the West and bringing it to Zimbabwe. It’s more about entertainment, making people dance, having fun, sort of bubblegum music, really, whereas Hip hop is the very few people in the underground who are trying to push something that is more edgy. That’s saying something that is relevant. It’s less about entertaining than it is about educating, teaching, getting people to think, addressing social issues and stuff like that (personal interview, February 16, 2012).

The strong emphasis on a conscious, socio-political message in the Underground scene is linked to the fact that it grew out of the “House of Hunger Poetry Slams”. Named after the first novella of Zimbabwe’s rebel writer, Dambudzo Marechera, the spoken word event was initiated in 2004 by the Hip hop activist, Biko, the cultural activist, Comrade Fatso, and the poet and painter, Victor Mavedzenge at Harare’s Book Café – one of the few places in the country where a level of freedom of speech is maintained. The location, as well as the founders, fostered the growth of a group of young poets whose lyrics were radical, politically engaging and socially aware. After the poetry slams were running successfully for a about a year, Biko and others who are dedicated to Hip hop as a revolutionary tool, started to host another slam, the “*Toyitoyi Slams*,” which specifically focused on promoting conscious Hip hop. At the “*Toyitoyi Slams*,” like at the “House of Hunger Poetry Slams”, the importance of using art to inspire, protest, and educate was highlighted. As Biko remarks,

Within the slam, we were clear about what we defined as Hip hop. If it was not socially-aware, if it was *bling*, we would discourage it. By doing so, we felt we were nurturing a deeper aspect of rap music, we were reclaiming rap music to Hip hop culture (personal interview, February 9, 2012).

Biko, in fact, is a founding member of the *Toyitoyi* Artz Kollektive (TTAK), which is part of the Uhuru Network – an anarchist organization dedicated to the global struggle against all forms of capitalist oppression – the emcee established with other activists in 2004 (personal interview, February 9, 2012). A group of emcees started to assemble around the TTAK, including The Ghetto Projects, a collective that has its roots in Chitungwiza and whose membership list includes C-tha-Real, Hot Fudge aka Righteous, The Shadow Master, Munetsi, and Mark Blaze, as well as Dialektric Blue that consists of the two Harare-based emcees, Outspoken and Upmost (“Ghetto Projects”). In line with the political underpinnings of Uhuru Network, the young rappers affiliated with TTAK increasingly defined Hip hop as protest music with the key intention to challenge the status quo. As Biko states,

Within the [TTAK], we were beginning to understand Hip hop as a tool against oppression that might have manifested itself in the Bronx, but the spirit of resisting through culture, and even some of the elements, most of them we could trace back to our own African heritage (personal interview, February 9, 2012).

The influence of the rappers that have been affiliated with TTAK since its early inception, on other artists is reflected in Synik’s statement regarding his first encounters with the scene:

A lot of the stuff that was going on was going on at Book Café and Mannenberg. I remember the thing that Biko hosted at that time [the *Toyitoyi* slams], I remember, well, I thought I can spit, I am cool, but after seeing Biko and Dialektric Blue kicking some mad rhymes, after that I had to go back to the lab, I had to re-evaluate myself. The dudes really challenged me.<sup>16</sup>

The TTAK, by producing community radio mixtapes and organizing events, such as the Republic of Pungwe Festival in July 2011 and the Afrikan Hip hop Caravan (AHC) that lasted from February to April 2013, offers much-needed alternative platforms to Zimbabwe’s conscious Hip hop artists. In addition, the TTAK – in congruence with their perception of Hip hop as an international countercultural movement – interlinks the struggle of the local Underground scene with the ones faced by ‘conscious’ Hip hop activists from across Africa and abroad.

The AHC, for instance, is a collaborative project of numerous grassroots Hip hop collectives, including Soundz of the South (SOS) from Cape Town and Wasani Mtaani/Artists in the Hood from Nairobi. The key aim of the AHC, which is an annual event, is to strengthen the Underground Hip hop movement on the continent, as well as to establish links with like-minded artists and activists from all corners of the globe.<sup>17</sup>

In 2007, Comrade Fatso, together with Outspoken and Upmost, established Magamba Network – a spoken word and Hip hop organization, whose mission is, “to use arts and culture for social justice and democracy” (Comrade Fatso, personal interview, March 8, 2012). By organizing monthly Hip hop events – Mashoko and Peace in the Hood – the organization also offers a platform for emcees who due to their lyrical content are barred from reaching the airwaves. Hence, the network, albeit less radical than the TTAK, further strengthens the linkage between Harare’s Underground Hip hop scene, socio-political awareness and cultural resistance.

## Conclusion

The “Hip hop Wars,” the clash between underground and mainstream Hip hop that defines the U.S. scene, seem to be manifest in Zimbabwe as well (cf. Rose “Hip hop Wars”). As I have argued, the Underground emcees’ ideological perception of Hip hop differs vastly from the one adopted by rappers connected to Urban Grooves. Albeit artists from both movements have succeeded in tackling the challenges of localization, the rappers amongst the Urban Groovers make references to Jay-Z and LL Cool J and have adopted the misogynistic and materialistic outlook of American mainstream rap, while Underground emcees turn to so-called ‘conscious’ rappers, such as KRS-One and the Native Tongues Collective, as a source of inspiration and define Hip hop as a counterculture that emphasizes ‘knowledge of self’ and speaks out against oppression.

Moreover, although the experience of Zimbabwe’s Underground emcees – mainly with regards to being barred from reaching the airwaves – is similar to the struggles Hip hop heads are facing in other regions of the world, the meanings of the notions ‘mainstream’ and ‘underground’ in Zimbabwe are imbued with a different association, especially to the U.S. For one, the country’s music industry functions differently. The continued resistance of the country’s established record companies to produce anything but *sungura*, gospel, and *museve*, combined with the overall absence of major record labels, means that the vast majority of young artists are faced with the challenge of recording, distributing, and promoting their music independently. As Munetsi states in a personal interview, “in my perspective, almost everyone is Underground, because there is no Hip hop market to speak of in this place.”

Secondly, by stepping up as a promoter in the music scene at the beginning of the new millennium, by controlling the airwaves and by sponsoring some musicians, the state has incited a mainstream/underground dichotomy along political and ideological lines. Mainstream, in the Zimbabwean context, can thus be equated with receiving government support as well as plenty of airtime in the state-controlled media. Indeed, as I have shown, the emergence of Urban Grooves as a mainstream genre is intrinsically linked to the state's intensified propaganda efforts in order to defend against the threat of the rise of a strong opposition party and the economic crisis posed to their ruling hegemony at the turn of the century. The young artists that are connected to Urban Grooves have either benefitted from state sponsorship, regurgitated ZANU(PF)'s propaganda, or have refrained from any socially-relevant or politically-explicit topics in their lyrics. Underground Emcees in contrast, although some of them have managed to get one or two of their nonpolitical songs played on the radio, are largely shut out from the mainstream by refusing to reproduce state propaganda or being apolitical. On the contrary, they are upholding the original vision of Hip hop as the voice of the oppressed. This close link between Hip hop and political activism is strengthened by the two organizations – Uhuru Network and Magamba – that form the backbone of the scene.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> According to Metaphysics, break-dancing was the first element that caught the attention of youth and kick-started the development of a local rap scene in the 1980s (personal interview)

<sup>2</sup> The term “Hip hop” is spelled in many different ways. I have decided to adopt the Temple of Hip hop’s spelling to emphasize that I am referring to the culture, with all its elements, and not merely to the genre of rap (cf. [www.templeofhiphop.com](http://www.templeofhiphop.com)).

<sup>3</sup> In American Hip hop Studies, the commodification of Hip hop culture, which contributed to a mainstream/underground dichotomy, has been widely discussed (cf. Rose, 2008). Haupt (2008) outlines that ‘conscious’ Hip hop artists in South Africa and the U.S. experience similar difficulties to reach the airwaves in their country’s respective corporate controlled music industries. Yet, while in these two contexts major record labels function as gatekeepers, in Zimbabwe, the state has assumed this role.

<sup>4</sup> My research is predominantly based upon interviews that I conducted during two research trips to Harare – the first one from August to October 2011 and the second one from January to March 2012.

<sup>5</sup> KRS-One released a song, entitled “What does it mean to be Underground” on his album, *Krystyles*.

<sup>6</sup> Despite their early successes, POE split up in the mid-90s. Yet, the artists – who embarked upon different music projects – have continued to influence and inspire the Zimbabwean Hip hop scene with their music.

<sup>7</sup> I have transcribed these lines from the English Version of the album, “Coup d’Etat”, which was released by Mau Mau in the same year as the Shona album. I received soft copies of both of the albums from the artist himself.

<sup>8</sup> The second *Chimurenga* is a term that refers to Zimbabwe’s war of liberation lasting from 1966 to 1980.

<sup>9</sup> “Ex-Q, how are you, the one rapper I give props to, if this was America you'd be [LL] Cool J and I would be Jigga [Jay-Z].”

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<sup>10</sup> The lyrics of “*Ndiri Musalala*” can be found on [www.dairio.com](http://www.dairio.com)

<sup>11</sup> Recently, two privately owned radio stations, ZiFM Stereo and Star FM, received broadcasting licenses. However, these stations do not defy the party line. The owner of ZiFM Stereo, Supa Mandiwanzira, is a known ZANU(PF) functionary. In March 2013, Star FM indefinitely suspended a radio DJ for stating that Robert Mugabe’s father was born in Malawi.

<sup>12</sup> That Urban Grooves is “bubble-gum music,” because it focuses on entertainment and does not touch on conscious, socially relevant, or politically explicit topics has been stated by many people that I interviewed and talked to during my two research trips. An exception is the group Extra Large, who do comment on social issues such as the tedious relationship between landlords and tenants in some of their songs (Veit-Wild, 2009; Bere, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> This is a reference to Dead Prez’s song, “Its bigger than Hip hop.”

<sup>14</sup> “Stay away, this is big boy business. We’ve made cash and it has no weakness.”

<sup>15</sup> In his song, “Nine Elements”, KRS-One outlines the meaning of the nine elements in more detail.

<sup>16</sup> The Mannenberg used to be a club, located across the Book Café and run by the same management team, before it moved from Five Avenue to Samora Machel Avenue at the beginning of 2012.

<sup>17</sup> For more information, see <http://www.facebook.com/AfrikanHipHopCaravan>