**Africa Rising: Hip Hop, Politics, and Critical Resilience in Senegal**

The article is about the history and impact of hip-hop in Senegal, focusing on how it has been used as a tool for social and political change, as well as a means of empowering youth in disadvantaged areas. It discusses the development of hip-hop music in Senegal from the 1980s to present, exploring the significance of Senegalese hip hop in African studies, highlighting its role in cultural dialogue, social commentary, political engagement, the ongoing dialogue between African practitioners and the arts of the Black diaspora, and the Black radical tradition. Senegalese hip-hop reflects global resistance by incorporating ideas about Americanness and the politics of style, which are often tied to themes of resistance and empowerment. The genre draws from the transatlantic rhetorics of the Civil Rights, Négritude, and Black Power movements, which are historically rooted in struggles against oppression and for social justice. This infusion of global resistance narratives into local practices allows Senegalese hip-hop to serve as a platform for expressing dissent and advocating for change. By drawing on these global narratives, Senegalese hip-hop artists address local and global issues of inequality, injustice, and resistance, making their music a powerful tool for social commentary and activism.

Bamba Ndiaye, a Senegalese hip-hop researcher at Emory University, explained that hip-hop arrived in Dakar through middle- and upper-class citizens who were able to travel abroad to places like New York in the US and France (Ndiaye 2023). ​ By 2018, Senegal celebrated 30 years of hip-hop, known locally as "Rap Galsen.". The genre's development involved localization and adaptation, with early influences from U.S. and French hip-hop. ​French colonial history and Wolof-centric cultural policies that significantly shaped Senegalese hip-hop. ​ The genre emerged by blending local languages and cultural elements with global hip-hop influences, creating a unique and powerful medium for social and political commentary. ​Politically engaged hip-hop started when youth from working class neighborhoods made hip-hop also a way of expressing discontent, but also criticizing the regime that was in place, the socialist regime which was the ruling party in Senegal since its independence from France in the 1960s, until the year 2000.

The former French colony’s first twenty years of independence were marked by cultural policy that valued French humanism and Francophonie under President Leopold Sedar Senghor, so that, despite its diminished formal domination, France’s cultural legacy remained strong. Perhaps contradictorily, however, the French colonial policy of assimilating a select, elite urban population into French culture (and sometimes citizenship) meant that, conversely, to this day nonelite and rural Senegalese have never fully adopted the French language. Thus, unlike other West African countries formerly colonized by France, French is not a lingua franca in Senegal, despite its status as a national language. When Abdou Diouf succeeded Senghor as president in the early 1980s, he initiated a shift to Wolof-centric cultural policy that privileged indigenous African values over the assimilated French ones of Senghor while retaining French as the language of governance and education (Kringelbach 2013, 100). That same decade saw the Western imposition of structural adjustment programs, a surge in youth and student demonstrations against government corruption and intensifying transnational networks of Senegalese migrants.

French colonial history influenced Senegalese hip-hop in several ways:

1. **Cultural Legacy**: The French colonial policy of assimilating a select elite into French culture left a lasting impact on Senegal's cultural landscape. ​ This influence persisted even after independence, with French remaining the language of governance and education. ​ This duality allowed hip-hop artists to draw from both French and local cultural elements in their music. ​
2. **Language**: Despite French being a national language, it was not widely adopted by non-elite and rural populations. ​ This led to the prominence of Wolof in hip-hop, as artists sought to connect with a broader local audience while also incorporating French and English to reach international listeners. ​
3. **Urban Development**: Colonial urban planning, such as the creation of neighborhoods like Médina and SICAP, shaped the social and physical environment where hip-hop emerged. These areas became hubs for cultural exchange and the development of the hip-hop scene, with access to global media and influences. ​
4. **Social and Political Context**: The colonial history contributed to the socio-political landscape that hip-hop artists often critique in their lyrics. ​ Issues like government corruption, social inequality, and the legacy of colonialism are common themes in Senegalese hip-hop, reflecting the ongoing impact of colonial history on contemporary society. ​
5. **Transnational Connections**: The colonial relationship with France facilitated transnational connections, allowing for the flow of media, ideas, and people between Senegal and France. ​ This exchange played a crucial role in the initial introduction and subsequent evolution of hip-hop in Senegal. ​

Overall, French colonial history provided both a cultural framework and a set of socio-political issues that deeply influenced the development and themes of Senegalese hip-hop. ​However, Senegal's cultural policies shifted from French humanism under President Senghor to a Wolof-centric approach under President Diouf in the 1980s. ​ This period also saw the rise of youth demonstrations and transnational networks, which facilitated the spread of hip-hop. ​ Early Senegalese hip-hop was characterized by break-dancing and MCing, with localized lyrics and instrumentals. ​The hip-hop scene in Senegal split into two main movements: the international style, which incorporated R&B and reggae elements, and the hardcore style, which adhered strictly to U.S. hip-hop aesthetics and focused on local political issues. Despite these differences, both movements shared a commitment to social commentary and urban Wolof language.

​As Senegalese hip-hop’s international wave swelled, a countermovement grew in Dakar’s working-class neighborhoods, themselves a concrete legacy to colonial development. The French constructed the first of these, Médina, in the early twentieth century when, after a prolonged struggle with indigenous residents for the land in what is now the Plateau section of downtown Dakar, an outbreak of plague provided an excuse for them to forcibly relocate African inhabitants into the “hygienic” concrete fixtures in Médina (Bigon 2009). The urban population swelled in the mid-twentieth century, leading to the development of the SICAP (short for Société immobilière du Cap-Vert), which were constructed to accommodate a growing population of civil servants and military officials, beginning in the 1950s under colonial rule and extending to after independence in 1960 (Ndiaye 2011, 57). neighborhoods just beyond Médina, and eventually to the rise of banlieues, the overcrowded, underserviced working-class neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city (Vernière 1973).

The underground’s opening to singing and traditional music in the second decade of the twenty-first century was at once a process of localization typical both of hip-hop as a genre that has always centered on ideas of place (Forman 2002) and of popular music globalization more broadly. It was also, however, part of a conscious process of commercialization. By emphasizing the metric distinctions between hip-hop and indigenous musics, hip-hoppers were able to relocate hip-hop consciousness in their lyrical content while moving toward musical styles that appealed to broader national and foreign audiences. In a parallel vein, rappers spoke about the relationship between language, global intelligibility, and local relevance. They recognized Wolof’s necessity to their primary goal of reaching Senegalese audiences, even as some became more open to using French and English to extend their reach. The desire for internationalization had to do both with extending the range of their messages and with a need-based desire to benefit financially from their labor as artists. Ultimately, however, aesthetic considerations led many to continue to record almost exclusively in Wolof, prioritizing a skillful flow in their first language over a broader lyrical intelligibility. Here, the globality of hip-hop music exceeds that of the French (or English) language (Appert 2018).

By the 2000s, hip-hop had become a significant force in Senegalese politics, notably supporting opposition candidate Abdoulaye Wade in the 2000 presidential elections. ​ The genre continued to evolve, with newer generations blending traditional Senegalese music with contemporary hip-hop styles. ​In the 2010s, the lines between mainstream and underground hip-hop began to blur, with artists incorporating more singing and traditional instruments. ​ This trend reflected a broader process of localization and commercialization, aiming to appeal to both national and international audiences. ​

Senegalese rappers localized and adapted hip-hop by incorporating elements of their own culture and languages. ​ They started by producing original lyrics in Wolof, French, and English, often addressing local social and political issues. ​ They also integrated traditional Senegalese musical instruments and sounds into their hip-hop beats, creating a unique blend that resonated with local audiences. ​ This process of localization involved mixing indigenous and colonial languages, as well as incorporating familiar musical styles like reggae and R&B, which were already popular in Senegal. ​ This adaptation led to the creation of a distinctive Senegalese hip-hop style known as "Rap Galsen," ​a distinct genre that maintained the core elements of hip-hop while embedding it deeply within Senegalese cultural and social frameworks. ​

International and hardcore hip-hop, then, were nearly parallel movements. In retrospect, they give the impression of being consecutive because the working-class rappers who dubbed themselves “underground” had fewer resources to record and disseminate their music; were less visible in mainstream media; and produced music that, in its adherence to a strict U.S. hip-hop aesthetic, did not appeal to international audiences. But across categories, rappers shared an interest in social commentary; a reliance on an urban Wolof inflected with French; and, of course, an engagement with U.S. hip-hop styles.

All along, hip-hop continued its stylistic development. The generation of rappers that had come up under the hardcore’s tutelage formed their own groups and collectives. In the first decade of the new millennium, their sound continued to evolve in step with U.S. hip-hop norms while maintaining an emphasis on Wolof-language social critiques and a hardcore musical aesthetic that often alienated them from their elders in Senegalese society. This continuous intergenerational conflict—between adults who think rap is bad and the youth who hope to convince them that it is not—is the topic of hardcore group Keur Gui’s 2009 song “Guiss Guiss you Woro” (Opposing Views). Even so, hip-hoppers’ continued involvement in electoral politics aided in the broadening social acceptance of their musical activities.

But this trend has increasingly extended beyond the mainstream. A few underground hip-hop artists, notably Fata El Presidente, long ago shifted to rapping over the rhythms of Mbalax (Senegal’s preeminent popular genre, based in indigenous rhythms), to criticism from hardcore hip-hoppers. More recently, rapper M.A.S.S., known as part of the first generation of underground hip-hoppers, released several Mbalax-inspired tracks, including “Wodou Wodou” (Tie a Wrap) in 2017. In 2018, rapper and beatmaker Iss 814, who came up through the underground scene in the Guédiawaye banlieue, released “Noce” (“Dakar Trap #1,” reads the rest of the video’s title on YouTube), which similarly melds a synthesized xylophone with a trap beat. This points to how, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, this turn toward increased musical localization—itself a kind of internationalization—and linguistic openness has loosened the categories that previously governed Rap Galsen. Less and less are “underground” artists concerned with maintaining a strict distinction between hip-hop and other genres. They, too, increasingly draw on indigenous rhythms, now without necessarily altering them to fit hip-hop beats. They also experiment with contemporary Nigerian and Ghanaian popular styles. The result is that it is much harder to tell underground and mainstream hip-hop apart stylistically than it used to be.

Multidirectional and complex flows of people, power, and capital brought hip-hop to Senegal and Senegalese hip-hop to the world. Colonial influence on Senegalese culture and urban geography in turn influenced hip-hop, as I have outlined here, so that early divisions in the hip-hop community centered on a critique of certain kinds of internationalism as an embrace of colonialism and instead claimed black American music as a nonimperial medium of global connection. And so, we see in the history of Rap Galsen a consistent movement toward understandings of internationalism that have to do with musical style more than language, until a song’s potential for global impact is not limited to its embrace of colonial languages but may rely on its ability to tap into global circulations of African and African American musics. This was true when rappers in the 1990s positioned hip-hop as a global musical expression of racialized urban struggle in which they heard and participated in a diasporic resonance of experience, and it remains true as hip-hoppers increasingly turn toward the globally circulating Afrobeats of their West African neighbors. As Ndiaye states, “The rise of Senegalese hip-hop in the 1990s meant the emergence of a new political force that predominantly appealed to the younger generations. Emanating from the middle class of Dakar with a strong American influence, hip-hop quickly spread to the suburbs of Dakar and the other regions of Senegal where groups like Keur Gui Crew gave the music its particular “Senegaleseness” and used it as a means of social and political activism.” (Ndiaye 2023).

Hip-hop in Senegal is manifest in a number of registers, from graffiti to dance. The annual Kaay Fecc (“Come Dance”) festival evidences Senegalese innovation and play with hip-hop dance forms. The Dakarois smurfing scene, inspired by French versions of American hip-hop dance, has infused club dance styles in the city for two decades. Today, many young Dakarois people practice breakdance in the soft silt of the Dakar beaches and in national groupdance competitions, alongside dances taken from bhangra, salsa, and global dancehall bass. Freestyle hip-hop flourishes in the outer Senegalese suburbs of Ginaaw Rail, Thiaroye, and Rufisqe, where young people gather around boom boxes to improvise rhymes in the rapid-fire cadences of Wolof mixed with French, English, and Arabic phrases. Venues like Pikine’s Cafeteria host evening-long freestyle battles. Young Senegalese practitioners, already skilled and schooled in the deployment of the poetic word, activate regional culture to converse with hip-hop forms. The monthly Kool Grawoul party at a downtown beach features DJs from around the world, mixing hiphop from the Dakar plateau with French and Arabic-language rap, Tupac Shakur, zouk, kwaito, and mbalax. Bidew Bou Bess and Carlou D use the hip-hop form to declare their faith in the Sufi Islamic orders of which they

are devotees.

Currently, Senegalese artists are utilizing hip-hop music to promote peacebuilding since the 2024 elections. They stress the significance of human security and urge the government to prioritize reducing poverty, ensuring civil rights and enhancing food security. In a traditional male genre, many female artists are using rap to fight for political change. Through the power of music, they express their views on patriarchy, rape, domestic violence, menstruation, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, intergenerational conflict, and other issues affecting women and girls. Ultimately, the power of popular music, especially rap music, has transcended the barriers of entertainment and folklore to infiltrate African politics as an agent of change. Malal Almamy Talla alias "Fou Malade", a leader of an anti-government movement called the Y’en a Marre, or “I’m Fed Up” that arose in 2011 and was led by rappers and journalists to encourage young people to vote, has become a member of the new Senegalese President’s Economic, Social and Environmental Council. This is a move that signals that Hip-Hop is instrumental in bringing about awareness of and resistance to issues of oppression. But this is more complex than a simple invocation of hip hop as resistance. With its experiential transatlantic resonance, hip hop in Senegal may also serve as a model for solving problems facing other African nations through its aesthetic potential for voiced social action.

The case of Senegalese hip-hop demonstrates that through the power of music, present-day youths are successfully using their voices to stand up for their rights, pushing their governments to do what is necessary. These musical practices, already deeply influenced by the historical creativity of enslaved Senegambian peoples in the new world, spoke both to shared histories and an emerging global hip-hop solidarity. (Awadi, 2013). Early Senegalese hip-hop, in turn, incorporated sounds and styles popular in both the U.S. and in the growing European scene, infused them with themes of African migration and struggle, and breathed regional aesthetics into their sonic structures. The result was a spectrum of hip-hop practices, from streetside freestyle battles, to the incorporation of breakdance moves into traditional dance celebrations, to a thriving recording industry. Each of these represents one of many strains of Senegalese hip-hop that resonates variously with global movements and contributes to discourses on what hip-hop means to young people worldwide. Like their global counterparts, young Senegalese activate hip-hop to think through the connectivity of the African diaspora, the politics of the political stage and of the dancefloor, and the creative future of Third World youth. The Senegalese hip-hop community is keenly aware of the importance of its own representation in global discourses. To this end, Senegalese artists and cultural figures such as Keyti are filming documentaries about the scene, and Senegalese national television is heavy with hip-hop programming. The people of Senegal’s longstanding cultural investment in thinking critically about national self-representation amid changing global circumstances – beginning with revolutionary president Leopold Senghor’s leadership on the Negritude poetic movement in the 1960s – ensures the ongoing development of new forms and discourses in hip-hop. The world of Galsen positions itself at the cutting edge of, never as an echo to, new movements in global Black creativity.

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