

Call for papers for the journal *Politique africaine*

## **Political Polyphonies of Rap**

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This special issue of the journal *Politique africaine* responds to the remarkable expansion, since the 1980s, of rap music and other hybrid, hip-hop inspired musical genres (hiplife, bongo flava, kwaito, etc.) in Africa. Through a focus on this musical phenomenon, a key feature of African urban landscapes and youth discourse across the continent, the articles collected here will reflect on contemporary politics in Africa. Against presuppositions that tend to take the political aspect of rap for granted, we propose to consider how – through what manner of processes, actors and connections – the musical genres addressed here became a tool and a vector of politics. In a time of shifting modes of expression, control and engagement, what does an in-depth study of rap music teach us about emergent mechanisms of political participation and relationships to power? What kinds of continuities do we encounter, here, with a longer history of urban musical practices in Africa? And what does careful attention paid to these developments tell us about the social and political construction of youth on the continent?

Although, in its early days, it was an elite phenomenon, rap music in Africa has progressively become a key means of expression for disenfranchised urban youth. This to such an extent that Western media present it as an emblem of lower class youth and look to rappers as heralds speaking truth to power locally and internationally. The media coverage of the “Y’en a marre” movement in Senegal (Awénengo-Dalberto, 2011) and the “balai citoyen” in Burkina-Faso has played a significant role in constructing a representation of hip-hop youth as essentially anti-authoritarian, globally connected and politically subversive. Precisely because of the remarkable involvement of rap musicians in social and political upheavals, however, their message, of late, has acquired a certain legitimacy, resulting in considerable attention to their lyrics and pronouncements on the part of journalists and researchers seeking to make sense of developments on the ground.

In this setting, for some years now, scholars have been endeavouring to produce meticulous ethnographies of rap worlds in Africa, seeking to understand the context and significance of individual performances, as well as the multiple social repertoires and fields of action associated with these. While, in comparison to studies of North American and French rap, research on African rap was initially scarce, now it is booming. This is attested to by the publication of several (primarily English language) edited volumes and special issues (Saucier, 2011; Charry, 2012; Clark, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Focusing mainly on sociolinguistics and on issues of identity politics, these works have revealed the pertinence of rap music as a lens through which to analyse contemporary processes of globalization and transnationalisation, identity construction and invention of tradition. Apart from recent initiatives concerning questions of citizenship (Fredericks, 2014) or youth-related political policies, and a few rare publications (Havard, 2001; Moulard-Kouka, 2011; Aterianus-Owanga, 2012)

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<sup>1</sup> Since the 2000s, several French language studies have also been published, either focusing directly on rap (Auzanneau, 2001; Moulard-Kouka, 2008; Mbaye, 2011; Aterianus-Owanga, 2013) or employing rap music to shed new light on another subject (Havard, 2001; Miliani, 2008; Buire et Simetière, 2010; Fouquet, 2011: 497-504; Puig, 2012).

addressing related issues, few texts link in-depth research about rap music to an understanding of politics in Africa. The result is a blind spot regarding strategies and mechanisms of power associated with the realm of music. This is problematic, as close observation of the place rap music occupies in the political landscape(s) of the continent reveals approaches to power that can rarely be reduced to contestation alone. Thus, continuing on a long history of musicians' involvement in state-sponsored nationalist pursuits, in several countries rap has become a tool of propaganda, instrumentalised by the political class to gather crowds at election time (Aterianus-Owanga, 2011), and many a rapper entertains ambiguous relations with those who hold the reins of power (Turino, 2000 ; Askew, 2002 ; White, 2008).

This special issue proposes a dialogue with this field of research, taking into account both its hypotheses and its blind spots, in order to examine, through a transdisciplinary reflection, a political dimension that is often taken for granted, but rarely problematized in writings about rap in Africa. The goal is to question the mechanisms that underlie the politics of rap music and to consider the agents, the processes and the logics through which this genre of music has come to function as a "language of politics" on the continent (Martin, 1998). Addressing relationships and negotiations with power that rap musicians, cultural entrepreneurs and audiences bring to bear, the texts that make up the issue will serve to improve our knowledge of practices of power invented, reconfigured and reproduced by young generations of Africans. At the same time, they will offer an update on a subject that has long been at the centre of anthropologists' and political analysts' concerns: the link(s) between politics and popular arts in general, and popular music in particular (Barber, 1997; Martin, 2004; White, 2008; Askew, 2009).

Beginning with musical movements that emerged during the time of democratic transition(s) in the 1990s and extending into the present, with a focus on developments in the era of multiple "Springs", the texts collected here shall reflect on ways in which a "youth" category is being constructed through rap practice, the tools that this practice serves to elaborate in terms of agency, and conversely, the mechanisms of exclusion and domination that it sustains. How has rap music emerged as a "youth music" and what generational dynamics hidden behind this expression can be highlighted within the hip-hop movement? To what extent do these categories related to rap music give rise to power games/power issues? What kinds of solidarities of/among classes, regions, ethnicities or gender identities does this allow for?

The papers included in the issue will deal with the entire continent (potentially connected to diaspora mobilities), with an equal focus on Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone areas, in order to link spaces that, in the context of African music studies today, are often still considered separately. Thinking about the politics of rap beyond traditional dualisms of dissidence vs. party allegiance, the issue encourages scholars to examine the versatility and ambiguity that characterise youth political practises in contemporary Africa. Paying attention to multi-vocal forms of commitment and political expression found in rap and related musical genres, papers will branch out into an analysis of modes of participation, mobilisation, and legitimisation of domination (Hibou, 2006; Scott, 2008; Banégas et al., 2010; Siméant, 2013). These papers will extend the reflection on the entanglement between ordinary participation in forms of domination and veiled expressions of dissent or hidden texts of resistance (Scott, 2008; Bayart, Mbembé, Toulabor, 2008).

In order to carry out this theoretical project on the politics of rap, we propose to organise selected papers around four main potential topics:

1 The ethnography of rap music and its hidden aspects: Contributions might be based on long-term fieldwork focused on rappers' trajectories, on their performances and on their life stories. In addition to the musicological and sociolinguistic dimensions of creation in rap music, close attention paid to both the private and the public spaces that musicians occupy – within the family, circles of friends, gender relations, labour or religious contexts – will make possible an analysis of micro-politics associated with ordinary moments of daily life, and should, in the process, reveal facts that guide the practice and political commitments of given musicians. Beyond a focus on well-known artists, we welcome ethnographic takes on amateur rap, such as clash or verbal sparring practices in a street context, in classrooms or bars.

2 Rap industries and networks: A socio-anthropological approach of cultural brokers and musical industries will contribute to a better understanding of networking processes between the rap and political fields, and, moreover, shed much needed light on modes of institutionalisation within the cultural and musical landscapes. How have stakes of legitimization, recognition and/or social advancement within the music industry of given countries or regions, within networks and media contexts contributed to make rap a political issue? How do connections between rappers and religious leaders, cultural or patrimonial brokers, development agents, NGOs, world music entrepreneurs and other actors from the outside transform rap into a political issue? How are rap music's sonorities, texts and visual productions shaped by ideological connexions and acquaintances? To what extent do special relations observed within musical networks provide information about structures of power in contemporary African states, about mechanisms of clientelism or instrumentalisation, as well as strategies of resistance or agency on the part of youth actors?

3 Reception and social use of rap music: Beyond rappers' discourses and texts, papers will pay attention to diverse forms of audience appropriation, by ordinary listeners and spectators, media and scholars. How is rap music employed to drive a political message or instrumentalised to serve political speech? More broadly, what kinds of expressions of power lodge in ordinary practices of listening, dancing, fun and spectacle? The issue of corporeal techniques and encounters between bodies that play out in/around hip-hop music in Africa may shed interesting light on the politics of party(ing) and fun-making in Africa (Goerg, 1999; Biaya, 2000; Bayat, 2009).

4 Material culture and corporeity: continuing on the previous theme, we would welcome submissions that place an accent on postures, aesthetics and elements that speak to the ethos of rap music on the continent and that analyze how these relate to complex cultural politics, revealing dynamics of differentiation or, on the contrary, reproduction of older generations' codes. How do techniques of the self – choice of clothes, ego trip gestures, logics of consumption, dance moves – observed in African hip-hop genres speak to processes of subjectivation, differentiation and incorporation of political economies? Following on from precursor works about *matière à politique* [material(ity) of politics] in Africa (Bayart, Warnier, 2004), we seek to examine the role of materiality and corporeity as these impact ways in which youth actors relate to spaces of power. In this context, it should prove of interest to consider how rappers appropriate materials and body techniques sourced from diverse cultural origins, ranging from religious heritage and “traditional” symbols of power to globalized markets.

In sum, rather than reducing the politics of rap music to the sole arena of relationships with the powers that be, of vote and of partisan engagement, this special issue calls for an examination of expressions of power and political practices developed in linkage with other fields, such as gender, religion, development or processes of fun-making.

Provisional planning:

- May 15: CFP Deadline. Send paper proposals of a maximum of 7000 signs to Alice Aterianus-Owanga (aliceaterianus@yahoo.fr) and Sophie Moulard (sophiemoulard7@gmail.com)
- May 30: notification of selected submissions
- September 15: Send papers to the special issue editors (maximum 55 000 characters, including notes and spaces)
- March 2016: Publication of accepted papers.

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