

Global Hip Hop Studies
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ASLIGUL BERKTAY

Texas A&M International University

Senegal

ABSTRACT

In 2018, Senegalese hip hop celebrated its thirtieth anniversary as one of Africa's most vibrant hip hop scenes. Senegalese rap has asserted itself not only as an expedient form of urban art, but also as a socially, politically, and culturally powerful instrument of both persuasion and mobilization for the masses. From its privileged beginnings in Dakar's posh nightclubs and Catholic high schools, the genre soon asserted itself as quite distinct from hip hop in other parts of the world, and its popularity increasingly grew to wide segments of the Senegalese public. From the mid-1990s, the underprivileged segments of the society (especially those from the poor peripheral neighbourhoods of Dakar) became progressively vocal, using hip hop as an instrument to give voice to the economic and political predicaments of the people, particularly the youth. The production of the music became increasingly local, and its primary language the Senegalese lingua franca Wolof. What has given Senegalese rap both its personality and power, while enabling it to keep an international aura, has been its political engagement: from early on, Senegalese hip hop has been strongly penetrated by politics and the denunciation of the living conditions of the population, of political abuse and social inequality. This article examines 'hip hop galsen' over three decades, detailing its development as a successful genre grounded in local realities that gives voice to the concerns and predicaments of the Senegalese public. It concludes through an examination of recent changes, as evidenced in new musical influences, the several important female voices that can now be heard within a historically male-dominated genre, and the greater support and acceptance hip hop has recently enjoyed, equipping the current generation of Senegalese rappers with the promise of bringing it to the international stage.

KEYWORDS

rap
Dakar
West Africa
Wolof
youth
social change
political engagement
protest

PIONEERS OF SENEGALSE HIP HOP

Among the most visible pioneers of Senegalese hip hop was the band PBS founded in 1989 by Didier Sourou Awadi aka DJ Awadi and Amadou Barry aka Duggy-Tee. Several other artists and bands soon came to the scene, among them:

- Da Brains
- Daara J
- Donj, Keyti
- King & Kool
- Kool Koc-Sis
- Matador
- MBA
- Suprême Black
- Suprême Esprit
- Xuman

Other than notable exceptions Awadi, Daara J, Duggy-Tee, Keyti, Matador and Xuman – who became significant and durable performers of the genre – the rest gradually disappeared into anonymity.

POPULAR CONTEMPORARY HIP HOP ARTISTS

Among the artists and bands that make up the current generation of hip hop galsen are

- Akatsuki SN
- Akhlou Brick Paradise
- Dip Doundou Guiss
- Elzo Jamdong, Hakill
- Iss 814 Beats
- Jay 21
- Kruh Mandiou Mauri
- Magui.
- Mina la voilàe
- Moona
- Ngaaka Blindé
- Nix
- OMG
- Omzo Dollar
- One Lyrical
- Paco Briz
- Samba Peuzzi
- Taa! Bi

1. All translations from Wolof are made by the author and Lamine Ba.

Hip hop ‘Galsen’ (Senegal in verlan), with over 3000 collectives by 2000, is the second most popular musical genre in the country after mbalax – the highly percussive fusion-style dance music which brings together traditional Senegalese, other African, African diasporic and global pop music styles, and which has been popular in the country since the 1970s. In 2018, Senegalese hip hop celebrated its thirtieth anniversary as one of Africa’s most vibrant hip hop scenes (Appert 2016; Baker 2002; Benga 2002, 2013; Berktaý 2014; Charry 2012; Herson 2000; Lobeck 2002; Niang 2006; Niang and Niang 2020; Tang 2012). Concentrated in the capital Dakar but extending itself into every region of the country, hip hop has equipped tens of thousands of young people with an outlet for their creativity, giving voice to their dreams, self-identifications, as well as to their daily political, social, and economic struggles.

The reason hip hop became such a clear outlet for the voices and concerns of the youth resides in the power of the spoken word, orality having always been an integral part of Senegalese culture. Furthermore, as an art form based primarily on words and requiring comparatively few financial means for its production, rap remains more accessible to underprivileged youth. Senegalese rap has asserted itself not only as an expedient form of urban art, but also as a socially, politically and culturally powerful instrument of both persuasion and mobilization for the masses (Ba 2014; Diouf 2013; Diouf and Fredericks 2013; Fouquet 2013; Guèye 2013; Rabine 2013). These factors explain its resilience, as well as its capacity of self-transformation and renewal. Senegalese hip hop represents a microcosm of the country’s political life and of its social transformations. In the process, it also tells a story of awareness, of self-determination as a people, and of the limits of what is politically and socially acceptable.

Hip hop in Senegal took off in the 1980s, in direct conjunction with the growth and transformation of Dakar into a major African capital. Accordingly, one of its greatest paradoxes has been that, contrary to what took place in the United States and Europe, it was the most privileged members of Senegalese society who were the first to become interested in, adopt and promote the music, as well as its related forms of art and self-expression. This was because only those with certain privileges had access to the music in the first place. They had good command over the foreign languages in which the music was produced and could subscribe to music channels. They could travel themselves or knew people who could travel, buy records, movies, and VHS tapes full of rap videos during their trips. These, in turn, were shared, copied, and thus made available to the city as a whole. This first phase of the music remained essentially limited to this privileged segment of society and to its social milieu – the posh nightclubs and Catholic high schools of the capital, where the majority of the first Senegalese rap concerts took place. This was how Dakar became an African centre for hip hop, where the music and culture initially manifested themselves primarily in the formation of break-dance groups.

Accordingly, the majority of the country’s first rappers had their beginnings in dance. Initial hip hop recordings in Senegal were in European languages (mainly French and English), while the music resorted to much American-style mixing. After the great popularity that hip hop gained in a short time, its production was not able to follow at the same pace. Only in 1991 did the first maxi-single come out. The record *Teubeul Ma Teub* (‘Jump’ in Wolof, in reference to Kriss Kross)¹ by the little-known Senegalese rapper MC Lida who lived in Italy opened the way for the production of Senegalese rap. But the first

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rap album produced by a band actually based in Senegal was the 1992 album *Boul Falé* ('Don't mind', inciting young people to follow their own paths) by Positive Black Soul (PBS). A great number of albums followed soon after.

It is one of the fascinating idiosyncrasies of Senegalese hip hop that after its privileged beginnings, it took the emergence of bands originating from the less privileged neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the sprawling West African metropolis – constant recipients of economic migration within the country, such as Pikine or Thiaroye, for the genre to become truly popular with the general Senegalese public. From then on, rap music came to be a part of all neighbourhood celebrations, and hip hop culture to directly correspond to neighbourhood and community life. Today, Senegalese hip hop is primarily concentrated in the *banlieues* or underprivileged suburbs of Dakar, with many rappers stating their geographic and economic marginalization as among the main reasons for their engagement with the music.² Having been born or raised in Dakar's peripheral working-class neighbourhoods, and being constantly faced with issues related to drugs and insecurity, in addition to the lack of resources, infrastructure, and education, appear as important shapers of the music and of the social and political engagement of these artists (Berkday 2014).³ The Senegalese tendency to place the neighbourhood at the centre of the novel identity constructions of urban African youth constitutes an exception to the general continent-wide trend, while it also differs from the American spatial discourses present in rap music, by bringing Senegalese socio-economic and geographic divisions to the forefront. The *quartier* or neighbourhood replaces the nation in the re-imaginings of identity perpetuated by a Senegalese youth that is highly heterogeneous and very much in flux.

From the mid-1990s, the underprivileged segments of the society became increasingly vocal, using hip hop as an instrument to give voice to the economic and political predicaments of the people, especially the youth. The Senegalese reality and the daily lives of the common people became the subject matter of the music; the production became increasingly local; and its primary language became the Senegalese *lingua franca* Wolof. This also differs from the rap music produced in the rest of francophone Sub-Saharan Africa whose primary language remains French. It is due in large part to the high percentages of illiteracy and lack of education – especially in other languages – in a country where the ability to study continues to signify privilege. This makes Senegalese hip hop into a very strong sociocultural referent – a true instrument to relay the voices of the people and popular wisdom – through being accessible, translatable, and relatable for its listeners. The use of proverbs and culture-specific metaphors, as well as references to landmarks, Senegalese history, and local Islamic teachings all play important roles in grounding the music in Senegalese culture and making it an acceptable instrument of social change.

What has given Senegalese rap both its personality and power, while enabling it to keep an international aura, has been its political engagement to a greater extent than its artistic profusion. From its beginnings, Senegalese hip hop has been strongly penetrated by politics and the denunciation of the living conditions of the population, of political abuse and social inequality. Hip hop artists in Senegal have consequently felt and voiced the responsibility to convey the voices of the voiceless members of society (*les sans-voix*), clearly and openly accusing those that have governed and continue to govern both Senegal and Africa in general, for being the sources of much of the evil experienced by the population.⁴

2. Community-based organizations established in Dakar's underprivileged peripheral neighbourhoods have also been central to this process. Most significant among these are Africulturban (est. 2006) in Pikine and G Hip Hop (est. 2010) in Guédiawaye.
3. In the interviews that the author conducted with hip hop artists in 2012–13, they all referred to their connections to the suburb of Pikine as being central to their understandings of self and to their art.
4. Referring to the underprivileged and disenfranchised majority of the Senegalese population as 'voiceless' or *sans voix* is common to the discourse of most Senegalese rappers.

5. Senegalese rappers define their calling as a 'fight' or 'war' against the different European powers that have historically colonized the African continent, against corrupt politicians, and the system that continues to oppress the common people.

In the year 2000, over the course of the presidential elections, Senegalese rappers were strongly mobilized to incite the population, and especially those segments of society who were not used to voting, to exercise their electoral rights to get rid of the regime that had been in power for forty years. On the eve of 19 March of that year, Senegal experienced its first democratic transition through the election of the former President Abdoulaye Wade, who came to power with growing hopes for change, economic development, social equality, and democracy. To this end, he received the strong support of the public and especially the youth, who by then were desperate for political, and especially socio-economic, change. Among the young people who played a major role in bringing Wade to power, the rapidly growing hip hop community was among the most vocal and forceful. However, Wade's regime quickly came to be marked by corruption and nepotism, and his twelve-year stay in power also saw severe constraints of the freedom of the press and civil liberties (Berktaý 2014; Guèye 2013; Vengroff and Magala 2001).

Senegal went from being seen as the beacon of democracy in franco-phone West Africa to 'semi-democratic' at best. Wade's opponents and critics were severely censored, and several found themselves in prison. Among them, there were many journalists, but also hip hop artists such as Thiat and Kilifeu from the band Keur Gui from Kaolack, Simon and Fou Malade. When a massive demonstration took place on 23 June 2011 against the electoral changes proposed by Wade that would have guaranteed his re-election for a highly controversial third term, the riot police retaliated with tear gas and water cannons, and when it was not able to suppress the protests, the army was also brought in. In the events that ensued, several were killed, while significant numbers were arrested. Among them were Alioune Tine, president of the human rights organization RADDHO, and Cheikh Omar Cyrille Toure aka Thiat mentioned above, who was also one of the founders of the movement Y'en a Marre ('Fed Up'). As a result of the protests, Wade withdrew his proposition (Berktaý 2014; Guèye 2013).

Senegalese hip hop artists played an essential role in bringing politician Macky Sall from the Alliance for the Republic Party (APR) into presidency in the 2012 elections. While the apparent trigger for Y'en a Marre was the frustration that young Senegalese rappers felt with regard to the chronic power cuts that had become persistent since 2003, it was in fact the conformity, fatalism, and the resulting inaction on the part of the Senegalese public that led them to take action. The movement was founded in January 2011 by Thiat, and Mbessane Seck aka Kilifeu, both from the group Keur Gui, as well as the activist journalists Alioune Sané and Fadel Barro. It was later joined by other rap artists, including Malal Tall aka Fou Malade from the band Bat'hailions Blin-D. The movement extended itself to a full-blown opposition to Wade's government, and he soon paid the price for the political engagement of the very same rappers who had actively participated in the process of his initial election as head of state.

An important element of the movement's political efforts has been the verbal war rappers continue to wage through conscious and sharp lyrics and performances, as shown by the songs 'Diogoufi' ('Nothing has changed'), and 'Sai Sai au Cœur' ('They are rotten').⁵ The impact of these textual and performative agents has been all the more significant for being coupled with direct political activism and community-based organizing. Hip hop's involvement with politics continues to be an important shaper of the genre in Senegal, as was evident in the popular and violent agitations that erupted in March 2021 as a result of the arrest of Macky Sall's political opponent Ousmane Sonko, and the hip hop responses that it engendered (Bigué 2019).

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Senegalese hip hop is rightfully considered as one of the most important and prized musical genres in the country, and one of the most important hip hop scenes on the continent. The generation that first brought the genre to Senegal is leaving its place to another whose eyes are set on the international hip hop scene. These artists are continuing former musical trends, while also excelling in local applications of the hip hop sub-genre of drill, also deploying it in the development of the new Senegalese sub-genre of 'rappax' (a mix of rap and mbalax), currently enjoying great popularity. In what remained primarily a male-dominated genre until the last decade, several important female voices can now be heard. These artists succeed in claiming their space within both the male world of Senegalese hip hop and the highly traditional and patriarchal Senegalese society as a whole.

This new generation is operating within a much more developed hip hop scene and enjoying greater popularity not only with hip hop fans, but also with the general Senegalese public. Backed up by international sponsors such as Pepsi or Free, Senegalese hip hop artists are now able to earn greater sums of money. They also enjoy the support of the government that has dedicated significant funds to more than thirty youth associations operating throughout the country, including its remotest areas, in addition to that of community-based organizations. This support has manifested itself in major national events, such as the Galsen Hip Hop Awards (est. 2015), Festa 2H (2006–09) and Flow Up (est. 2013).

Over three decades, Senegalese hip hop has come a long way as a successful genre grounded in local realities that gives voice to the concerns and predicaments of the Senegalese public, and the current generation of Senegalese rappers hold the promise of bringing hip hop galsen to the international stage.



Figure 1: Gunman Xuman on stage at the Festival Guédiawaye By Rap, December 2022. Courtesy of Sidy Talla.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Asli Berktaý is a historian of Africa and the African diaspora and of the slave trade and the enslaved experience, as well as a scholar of critical race theory. She is an assistant professor of history in the Department of Humanities at Texas A&M International University. Before joining TAMU, Asli taught at Tulane University (New Orleans, USA); at Bosphorus University, Sabanci

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University, Bilgi University, and Mimar Sinan University (Istanbul, Turkey); and at NYU Shanghai and East China Normal University (Shanghai, China). The book she is currently working on analyses the testaments of freed Africans in nineteenth-century Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, from the perspective of identity and community formation. She has published book chapters and articles in journals such as *Third Text* and *Religions*.

Contact: Department of Humanities, Texas A&M International University, 5201 University Blvd., Laredo, TX 78041, USA.
E-mail: asligul.berktay@tamiu.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1357-3882>

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