

“Obiaa pɛ sɛ ɔkɔ international” Negotiating the Local and the Global in Ghanaian Hiplife Music

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*Obiaa pɛ sɛ ɔkɔ international
Eno ne answer?
Kwame, yɛfiri one ansa na yekɔ two
Wo nni ntaban, enso wo pɛ sɛ wotu.*

Everybody wants to become ‘international’
Is that the answer?
Kwame, we start from ‘one’ before we go to ‘two’
You don’t have wings, yet you want to fly.

(from: Obour feat. Okyeame Kwame & Richie, “The Game,” Family Tree Entertainment)

Introduction

Ghana’s soundscape is currently dominated by three major trends. The perhaps most pervasive of these, permeating public and private spaces, is gospel music. The gospel music industry has been fueled by the ever-growing number of charismatic churches that, in the words of one author, have “quite successfully colonized public space” (Meyer 2008: 84) over the past few decades. The rise of neo-Pentecostal Christianity in Ghana has fostered a distinctive Christian popular culture and aesthetics that incorporates both local and international styles (Carl 2012 and 2014b; Meyer 2008). The second major trend is highlife, Ghana’s classical form of popular dance band music, which prevailed throughout much of the twentieth century (Collins 1996). In contrast to dance band music up until the 1980s, highlife is nowadays often based on synthesized and computer-programmed sounds (Collins 2012). Since the late 1970s, highlife in its live-performed form has also entered Christian churches, so that in terms of musical style there are strong overlaps between gospel music and highlife (Carl 2014a; Collins 2004). Finally, the third trend in Ghanaian popular music, which is the focus of this article, is hiplife.

Hiplife first emerged in the 1990s as the Ghanaian variant of rap music. It fuses US-American forms of hip hop with a variety of local popular styles (Shipley 2009a and 2013; Osumare 2012). The name ‘hiplife’ is a compound of the words ‘hip hop’ and ‘highlife,’ which already points to the two major influences that constitute the genre. Its most marked feature are rapped lyrics in Twi, Fante, Ga, Ewe, Pidgin English and other local languages, which are performed over programmed beats, bass lines, and sampled loops. While in the inception of

the genre hiplife artists closely followed US-American performance models, in the mid-1990s they began to experiment with local musical and poetic forms in order to make their music more meaningful to Ghanaian audiences (Carl and Dankwa 2015; Osumare 2012). As a musical genre embedded in both local and wider transnational cultural flows, drawing on African and African-derived expressive forms, hiplife can more generally be thought of as part of the cultural formation Paul Gilroy (1993) characterized as the ‘Black Atlantic.’

In this article I examine hiplife’s “poetics of identity” (Krimms 2000), focusing specifically on more recent trends and musicians positioning themselves on the market by way of promoting their regional and local identities. A central figure in the localization of hiplife was Reggie Rockstone (Reginald Osei), who is credited with coining the term hiplife, which first appeared on his 1996 EP *Tsoo Boi* (Shipley 2013: 51-79). Returning to Ghana in 1994 from the UK where he grew up, Rockstone was among the first to develop a virtuosic and polyglot style of rap dominated by the Akan language.¹ His seamless code-switching between English, Pidgin and Twi became a model for many subsequent artists, who started to experiment with local beats and rhythms as well as proverbial and indirect forms of speech characteristic for traditional modes of communication (Carl and Dankwa 2015; Yankah 1989). Social critique, for instance, is not expressed directly but through indirect speech forms such as proverbs in traditional contexts. Similarly, communication with traditional authorities is also indirect and always channeled through a spokesperson or ‘linguist’ (*okyeame*) who mediates between different parties. While the process of localization made the inclusion of hiplife into the national canon possible, in a further development artists began highlighting their different regional identities more explicitly. Consequently, various artists in Ghana began to explore in their music national, regional, and local identities, so that it is possible now to speak of Ewe, Fante, or Ga rap respectively.

I argue that to understand hiplife’s poetics of identity, it is useful to conceptualize hiplife as social imaginary or public that “comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers” (Warner 2002: 120). Publics, following Michael Warner, are performative, involving “poetic world making” (114); they constitute “multicontextual spaces of circulation, organized not by a place or an institution but by the circulation of discourse” (119). Warner’s conception of publics as multicontextual spaces of circulation incorporates Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of

¹ Ghana is a multiethnic nation with an estimated sixty or more languages spoken. 47.5% of the population speak an Akan language as their mother tongue, including dialects like Asante Twi and Akuapem Twi, Mfantse, Nzema and Bono. The second-largest language group is Mole-Dagbani (16.6 %), followed by Ewe (13.9%) and Ga-Dangme (7.4%), each including a number of dialectal variants (Ghana Statistical Service 2012: 34).

‘addressivity,’ which points to the implicit conventions within expressive or artistic forms “which assign a position from which [every genre] expects to be received” (Bakhtin 1986: 98). Following this definition, I use the terms ‘genre’ and ‘public’ interchangeably. My discussion in the following is based on the analysis of songs as well as media discourses, assuming with Adam Krims that the poetics of identity of any musical genre is “partially – and crucially – a poetics of musical organization” (2000: 3). Needless to say that the linguistic dimension is one of the most important aspects of hiplife’s ‘poetic world making.’ In the next section I will first examine patterns of genre-making in hiplife more generally. I will, then, turn my attention to one upcoming artist in particular, Teephlow, and use him as a case in point to discuss issues of regional and local identity that are increasingly evident in hiplife, thus, contributing to the growing literature on hiplife music in Ghana in particular and African hip-hop more generally (e.g. Carl and Dankwa 2015; Charry 2012; Osumare 2012; Shipley 2009a, 2009b and 2013).

Playing the Game: Genre-Making and Hiplife’s ‘Poetics of Identity’

One of hiplife’s inherent qualities results from an intricate mix of artistic innovations on the one hand and the stress of continuity on the other. From its inception, one of the prime characteristics of the genre were intertextual allusions to existing expressive forms, most significantly cross-references to older highlife songs. A case in point is the opening verse of *Tsoo Boi* by Reggie Rockstone, which was re-released on his debut album *Makaa maka* (Rockstone 1997). Set over a hip hop beat and a simple two-measure bass line reminiscent of West Coast groups like Cypress Hill, Rockstone raps, for instance, “Adwoa, Adwoa, se mentumi anka no yie, kose, kose” (‘Adwoa, Adwoa [name], if I wasn’t able to say it well, sorry, sorry’). This line is a reference to the highlife classic *Adwoa* by A. B. Crentsil. Tellingly, Crentsil released a new version of the song *Adwoa* together with rapper Obour on the 2006 album *Best of the Lifes: Highlife Meets Hiplife* (Obour & Crentsil 2006), a production that underpinned the continuities connecting classical guitar band highlife with hiplife music (see also Osumare 2012: 168-70). This connection was further explored and celebrated in the course of Ghana’s fiftieth Independence Day festivities in the year 2007, where a concert under the theme “From Highlife to Hiplife” was staged on Accra’s Independence Square. As part of the countrywide celebrations of Ghana’s jubilee year, the

show officially acknowledged hiplife as a ‘Ghanaian’ genre, thus, incorporating it into the national canon (cf. Plageman 2013: 2-3).²

In another line of *Tsoo Boi* Rockstone raps, “Ako te brɔfo a, me nso mete Fante / Frɛ, meye Asante” (‘If the parrot understands English, then I, too, speak Fante / Call, I am Asante’). Again, listeners familiar with highlife music will recognize the allusion to guitarist George Darko’s *Ako te brɔfo*, a song originally released in 1983, which became extremely popular in Ghana and its diaspora because of its innovative sound (Carl 2014a). Darko’s song was recorded and produced in Berlin, Germany, and came to stand for a new development in Ghanaian popular music known as burger highlife. The term ‘burger’ in Ghanaian discourse, refers to somebody “who lives or has lived abroad and who adopted a specific habitus and style. [...] As a social type, the *burger* is associated with economic capital accumulated through travel and its public display” (Carl 2014a: 257). Rockstone, too, in his *Tsoo Boi* plays with this image and the sociocultural capital associated with international travel when he raps lines such as, “Mepe ntem akɔ me kurom akɔdi hene / Aburokyire abrantee, mentumi nni abeteɛ” (‘I quickly want to go to my hometown to become chief / As a young man from abroad, you don’t expect me to eat kokonte [a type of local food]’). Rockstone’s image as ‘aburokyire abrantee,’ a fashionable young cosmopolitan who has traveled and lived abroad, is further underlined by his decidedly American accent anytime he raps in English.

On the level of musical structure we find similar allusions to existing forms and genres. Again, Rockstone’s debut album might serve as a case in point. The title track *Makaa maka* (‘If I’ve said it, I said it’), for instance, sets out with the rhythmic pattern of *adowa* (figure 1), a traditional drumming type and dance associated with the Akan people in Ghana (see Younge 2011: 339). This rhythm is then overlaid by a classical hip hop beat that creates an additional layer in the polyrhythmic structure, pointing to hiplife’s identity as both traditionally Ghanaian and cosmopolitan at the same time (figure 2).



² Similar events on Independence Square were staged earlier in Ghana’s history. Perhaps most significant among these was the “Soul to Soul” concert in 1971. The show connected Ghana’s musical heritage and African American performers like Wilson Pickett and The Staple Singers, thus, stressing Ghana’s central position within the Black Atlantic world (Carl 2009: 89-96).

bi na ɔmmeyɛ ne yi ansa?” (‘I and all of you are to blame that hiplife is spoiled / We are all in Ghana waiting for manna / So, should some foreigner come and fix it for us before?’).

Part of the problem with hiplife, as far as Obour’s *The Game* is concerned, is a more general lack of professionalism and commitment on the part of artists and producers. In the rappers words as featured in the lyrics of his song:

Producer te Kantamanto, nnwom no watena so / Distribution ɛnkɔ so, promotion nso ɛnkɔ so / Wo to nnwom no a ɛmmɔ so / Studio engineers ahɔdɔɔ no nso pɛsɛ wɔ mixi / Afei nnwom no yɛ ɔmo n ɔnoaa ɛdiisi / Owie a ɔsɛ hiplife is dying

‘A producer in Kantamanto [part of Accra] has worked on the song / The distribution doesn’t go well, as does the promotion / You sing the song, but it doesn’t catch on / Different studio engineers want to remix it / Now, when the song gets worse, you start to ‘diss’ / And after everything you say that hiplife is dying’

This constant search for the identity of hiplife and the negotiation of genre boundaries in songs themselves is quite typical; explicit genre-making, we might say, is a constitutive feature of hiplife as a genre and its poetics of identity itself. Unsurprisingly, then, Obour’s *The Game* did not remain unanswered. In the song *Kaseɛbɔ* (‘News’) by another pioneer of hiplife, Obrafour, released in 2009 and featuring his Ghanaian rapper colleague Guru, the social imaginary of hiplife as a “multicontextual space of circulation” (Warner 2002: 119) is quite literally acted out and becomes, in effect, itself the point of reference. It is not only genre-immanent cross-references to other songs that feature in *Kaseɛbɔ*, but the intertextual circulation of discourses constitutive of publics is itself mimicked. Hiplife’s self-referentiality and reflexivity is thus taken to another level.

The music video to *Kaseɛbɔ* takes us into the studio of a radio station, while the chorus of the song announces, “Yɛkyeakyea mo nyinaa, yɛde kaseɛbɔ brɛbrɛ mo nyinaa” (‘We greet all of you, we are bringing you the news’). Featured Ghanaian artist Guru, posing as a radio presenter, starts rapping: “Ɔman dehyɛɛ, mekyea mo / Execution FM na woaso gu so / Nnɔnsia kaseɛbɔ mede rebɛrɛ mo / Mo somfo Guru na ɛde kaseɛbɔ yi brɛ mo” (‘Good people, I greet you / You are listening to Execution FM / It is the six o’clock news that I am bringing you / Your servant Guru brings you this news’). Guru announces that he has a surprise guest on phone whose latest track he is even using as his ringtone. His guest is, of course, Obrafour, about whom all sorts of rumors have been circulating. Guru asks him whether the rumors would be true and when his new album is coming out. Obrafour then comes in with his rap, mimicking a call-in radio show with their frequent technical problems due to bad phone connections: [Obrafour] “Hello? Hello?” / [Guru] “Yete won ka, wo deɛ kasa” (‘We can hear you, speak’) / [Obrafour] “Yiee, na m’ahoma yi / Koraa deen koraa ni? / Wote me nka? /

Metumi kasa? / Ei, sorry na m'ahoma no retwitwa" ('Yie, this my line / What at all is this? / Do you hear me? / Can I speak? / Ey, sorry, my line is cutting'). Finally, Obrafour responds to the rumors mentioned by Guru and a conversation unfolds. No, he had not been campaigning with Obama, neither did he stop rapping. He would be, as he explains, as vibrant as ever.

Obrafour's and Guru's dialogue is interspersed with short scenes and comments depicting the audience's reactions to and participation in their conversation. A woman following on radio, for instance, referring to Obrafour's rapping, says to her husband: "Ei, wei dee se mekaaε, n'ano ate paa o!" ('Ei, like I said, as for this one, he is very eloquent!'). At a later point Guru asks Obrafour about the song *The Game* and whether it would be true that hiplife, as that song claims, is dead. Again, an audience reaction is depicted, showing how a conversation between a group of three young men in the street unfolds: "Na hiplife awu, wosiee no wɔ Togo anaa Gabon? First no a, na studio yε one wɔ Nkran ha mpo, hiplife annwu, na nnde a studios dɔɔso? Sε nsem no ebinom reka a wonnwen ho. Boys no wɔn anom nsem asa" ('If hiplife is dead, was it buried in Togo or Gabon? At first, when there was only one studio in Accra, hiplife wasn't dead, so how much more now as studios abound? People don't think before they talk. The boys seem to have no words any more.').

The stylistic means illustrated above underscore the playfulness of hiplife's poetics of identity. Genre-making in hiplife is a reflexive and self-referential process, a form of rhetorical play akin to what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., described as signifyin(g). Signification, here, "is tropological; it is often characterized by pastiche; and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures, and their difference" (Gates 1983: 685-6). It seems that this is a more general quality of publics that, according to Warner, have an inherent formal tension, something Bakhtin (1986) referred to as the double-voicing of speech genres. "In publics, a double movement is always at work. Styles are mobilized, but they are also framed as styles. [...] Quite commonly the result can be a double-voiced hybrid. Differential deployment of style is essential to the way public discourse creates the consciousness of stranger sociability" (Warner 2002: 108).

"This is Fante Rap!"

On November 20, 2014, one of Cape Coast's major radio stations, Atlantic 100.5 FM, was playing the new track *Hosanna* by Teeplow, feat. Nature and Kwabena Kwabena.

Commenting on the music, the radio host enthusiastically announced, "wow, this is Fante

rap!” Produced by the prominent Ghanaian beat maker Hammer on his *Last 2* label, Teephlow, among a few others like Kofi Kinaata, has made a name for himself with his innovative, eloquent rapping in Fante. While Teephlow is from Cape Coast, Kofi Kinaata comes from Takoradi. Teephlow is particularly noted for his improvised freestyle raps and rapid code-switching between Fante and Pidgin English, emulating and aestheticizing the youth slang of the coastal towns and campuses of south-central Ghana.

In *Hosanna* Teephlow basically gives thanks to God for how far he has brought him, giving credit to those who helped him along the way. The musical structure of the track prominently features the *jamma* timeline (see figure 3). Right in the first verse Teephlow establishes his identity, which is directly linked to his regional origins, when he raps: “Yeah, *Last 2*, abi, you know / First of all yɛnfa ndaase / fa ma Nyame ɔwɔ soro ne asaase / ‘Cause mefi Cape Central” (‘First of all let us give thanks to God, Thou art in heaven and on earth, because I’m from Cape [Coast], Central [Region]’). As with hiplife more generally, it is a certain entrepreneurial spirit and the image of the self-made artists that is also celebrated in *Hosanna*, combined with a religious undertone that is more typical for charismatic Christianity. In this sense, the song combines two complementary discourses about self-making and success. As Shipley writes, “the parallel appeals of hip-hop and charisma in marketizing Africa reveal them as two sides of a moral argument about self-making. They represent opposing models for imagining success: the sacred and the profane” (2013: 76). Here, however, the sacred and the profane model do not stand in opposition, but rather complement and, indeed, are fused into each other.

As a former student of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, Teephlow’s background is quite typical for hiplife artists in general. In contrast to US American rap, which originated among disadvantaged Black youths in the urban ghettos, hiplife in Ghana rather emerged within the milieu of middle-class boarding schools and colleges, where students had access to technology and Western popular culture (Shipley 2009a). This is despite the fact that, particularly in the earlier phase of the genre, some hiplife groups in Ghana have been trying to coopt the ghetto or ‘gangsta’ image to market their music. In Teephlow’s case, references to his Fante background serve as identity markers and to brand his public persona. For his fans it seems particularly the local flair and language use that is attractive and which makes him unique among hiplife artists. This becomes obvious, for instance, in the reactions to a freestyle session on the Accra-based online station UrbanPhace TV, where people left comments like: “I just love the way he says words!!!! The

Fante rap is crazy,” or, “T Phlow u dey kill the fanti waaa” (‘Teephlow, you are really killing [i.e. mastering eloquently] the Fante’). Somebody else proclaimed, “teephlow is da king of fanti rap,” and yet another commenter held that “fanti rap is dope!”

It is particularly in the introductory sections and opening lines of songs that very specific identity markers are used which, we might say, serve as a form of branding. Consider, for instance, Teephlow’s 2013 release *Al Qaeda*, featuring his colleague Fante rapper Kopow. The track is a replica of the popular Ghanaian dance *alkayida* that went viral about two years ago – itself, of course, already a reference to and ironic comment on larger geopolitical developments. In the opening lines of Teephlow’s and Kopow’s version of *alkayida* the two announce: “Yedi asa fofor no aba, eye fresh / Wonim ne dzin, *alkayida* / Obama city, Fante configuration / Kopow on the beat, abi you know / Teephlow on the MIC” (‘We do the new dance that has come, it’s fresh / You know its name, *alkayida* / Obama city, Fante configuration’). Apart from the usage of the Fante dialect that is significant here, we find references like “Obama city” and “Fante configuration.” The first of these became a well-known expression after president Obama’s state visit to Ghana in 2009, in the course of which he also came to visit the castle in Cape Coast, which is among a number of coastal forts that played an inglorious role in the transatlantic slave trade. The fact that Obama chose to visit Cape Coast and no other city apart from the capital Accra during his short stay became a source of local pride, valorizing the otherwise rather insignificant and sleepy city of Cape Coast, as it were, as a place of international appeal. Through Obama’s visit, the city caught the attention of the international community for at least one day. The term “Fante configuration,” used to designate the collaboration between Teephlow and Kopow, on the other hand, plays with a reference to the historical Fante Confederation, a proto-nationalist alliance of the Fante kingdoms in the late nineteenth century in the then Gold Coast that played an important role in the evolution of Ghana as a modern nation-state. Such cross-references to the recent as well as more distant past play, as it turns out, a significant role in the making of Fante rap, adding to its local flair and setting it apart from other kinds of hiplife.

Drawing on this image, Teephlow’s colleague Kofi Kinaata released a song entitled *Fante Rap God* in 2014, trying to establish himself as the ultimate master of Fante rap. Kinaata is from the coastal city of Takoradi in Ghana’s Western Region, which in more recent times entered the national consciousness as the “oil and gas city.” Since the discovery of significant oil and gas reserves off the coast of Takoradi, the Ghanaian economy has been upgraded from

a highly indebted to a lower middle-income country, fostering the hope of economic prosperity in the near future. Even though many common people in Ghana are still waiting to participate in this unhoped-for economic boom, as a symbol, the city of Takoradi came to stand for the new Ghanaian dream as an oil-producing nation. Apart from references to the urban space of Takoradi, the poetics of identity in *Fante Rap God* also works primarily through the use of the Fante dialect, which more generally assumes the function of a style. A fan, in a comment to an upload of the song on YouTube expressed this very clearly, when he declared his admiration for the usage of the Fante dialect in Kinaata's song, but admitted at the same time that he himself does not even understand the language. Language, in this instance, becomes then more a matter of form than of content, and it might be argued that this is true for hiplife more generally.

Conclusion

In this article I have looked at different trends of localization in Ghanaian hiplife music. Hiplife emerged in the 1990s as local version of hip-hop. While at the outset, artists closely followed foreign performance models, from the mid-1990s onwards a process of localization set in that eventually established hiplife as a "Ghanaian genre." The integration of hiplife into the national canon was an important step in its further development and differentiation. Thus, in more recent times artists have started to explore regional and local identities in their music in order to position themselves on the market. A case in point is Fante rap, associated with upcoming artists like Teephlow or Kofi Kinaata, who have been impressing their audiences with their decidedly local styles. Overall, it seems that with the increasing internal differentiation of hiplife, references to its international predecessor, US-American hip hop, but also to local prototypes like highlife that were crucial in the initial establishment of hiplife as a national genre, have become less important. As a multi-contextual space of circulation, the social imaginary of hiplife is therefore becoming increasingly self-referential.

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Discography

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Abstract

In this article I explore hiplife music, the Ghanaian variant of rap. My discussion focuses particularly on how local and global stylistic elements that characterize the 'poetics of identity' of hiplife are utilized and manipulated by artists and producers in order to create hiplife's distinctive character and sound. Based on the analysis of selected songs, I examine how questions of identity are negotiated in hiplife along the nexus between the local, regional, national, and the global.

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