

From A-Town to ATL: The Politics of Translation in Global Hip Hop Culture

Holger Droessler

This article examines the linguistic and cultural tensions in global Hip Hop culture through an analysis of the performance of Gsann, an emcee from the Tanzanian Hip Hop crew X Plastaz, at the 2009 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Hip Hop Awards in Atlanta. Gsann's rhymes in Swahili, his emphasis on religion, and his global travels distinguished him from his African American colleagues in the cipa. At the same time, the decision by the BET producers to translate Gsann's Swahili rhymes into English has to be seen within the longer history of cultural and linguistic politics in Tanzania and the United States. Thrown into the primetime spectacle of the BET Awards, Gsann's African roots became quickly incorporated into American Hip Hop culture, dominated by African Americans. As this case study of an artist from Tanzania shows, Hip Hop's global journey has brought together artists from around the world without eliding their cultural and linguistic differences.

At the 2009 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Hip Hop Awards in Atlanta, Gsann, an emcee from Arusha, Tanzania, joined a cipa with such African American veterans as DJ Premier and KRS-1. Gsann's one-minute rap in Swahili made his African American colleagues nod their heads in agreement with his flow, although the content of his lyrics remained a mystery both to them and most of the viewers in front of the TV screens. Aware of the importance of language in Hip Hop, the BET producers sought to close the language gap and provided an English translation of Gsann's rhymes in subtitles.¹

Taking Gsann's appearance at the BET Awards as a case study, this article explores the fundamental tension between Hip Hop's local roots and global routes. Gsann's Swahili rap, I argue, represents a miniature example of the unifying and dividing forces at work in contemporary global Hip Hop culture. On the one hand, Gsann uses Swahili to reflect on local issues to Tanzania such as religion, but also on his global travels that have led him to Atlanta. On the other hand, the BET producers translated his Swahili rhymes into English to make them intelligible to viewers in the United States and around the world. If Gsann's rap was an act of cultural and linguistic self-assertion, it also became quickly incorporated into the commercial spectacle of American Hip Hop on primetime television. The artistic journey of a Tanzanian emcee – from A-Town (Arusha) to ATL (Atlanta) – deserves a more thorough contextualization than the BET subtitles were able to provide.

¹ The video is available on youtube: <[youtube.com/watch?v=TetSMSdxIqA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TetSMSdxIqA)> 1:34-2:18. Accessed Apr. 24, 2015.

Welcome to the Global Cipa

From ‘J-Hop’ in Tokyo to ‘Nederhop’ in Amsterdam and Aboriginal rap in Melbourne, Hip Hop has truly gone global – while staying firmly rooted in the local. Global Hip Hop today thrives in a creative tension between what historian Robin D. G. Kelley has called Hip Hop’s fundamental “ghettocentricity”² and the hybrid process of adapting globalized cultural practices to local needs, often referred to as “glocalization.”³ Mohammed Yunus Rafiq, one of the founding members of the X Plastaz, described his view of the glocal hybridity of Hip Hop in a roundtable discussion with other artists: “We can be tribal, and at the same time, we can also be global.”⁴

As Gsann’s fellow crew member notes, the local and the global need not to be mutually exclusive in Hip Hop – particularly in its everyday practice. By contrast, the local and the global can enter into a dialogue in what global Hip Hop scholars James G. Spady, H. Samy Alim, and Samir Meghelli have called the “global cipa.”⁵ This global cipa can be seen as the extension of community cipas on the micro level of Hip Hop culture: “In the same way that local Hip Hop artists build community and construct social organization through the rhyming practices involved in the cipa, Hip Hop communities worldwide interact with each other (through media and cultural flow, as well as embodied international travel) in ways that organize their participation in a mass-mediated, cultural movement.”⁶

As “an organic, highly charged, fluid circular arrangement of rhymer wherein participants exchange verses,” the cipa represents Hip Hop culture on its molecular level.⁷ The BET cipa – pre-recorded before the actual show in an empty factory building in Brooklyn – represents a conscious attempt to re-enact the atmosphere of an old-school cipa in the now antiquated visual aesthetics of black and white. The pre-produced snippet was then played on screens for the live audience at the awards ceremony in Atlanta. In other words, Gsann’s performance in the cipa was both spatially and temporally detached from the actual awards show, even though the

² Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1994), 212.

³ Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in: *Global Modernities*, edited by Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1995), 26.

⁴ Cristina Verán, “Native Tongues: Hip-Hop’s Global Indigenous Movement,” in: *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*, edited by Jeff Chang (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 281.

⁵ The English word “cipher” or “cypher” derives from the Arabic *ṣifr*, which means “zero” or “nothing.” Hip Hop practitioners appropriated the term “cipha” with its circular representation in the Arabic number “0” to describe the community circles among freestylers, b-girls, and weed smokers.

⁶ James G. Spady, H. Samy Alim, and Samir Meghelli, *The Global Cipa: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness* (Philadelphia, PA: Black History Museum Press, 2006), 11.

⁷ H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook, eds., *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 1.

viewers in front of the TV screens were made to believe that Hip Hop's past and present easily merged into one another.

The BET cipa, in sum, offers a highly mediated and meticulously orchestrated performance stage that Gsann and the other emcees are using to showcase much more than simply their rhyming skills. In an interview after the show, Gsann acknowledged that his rhymes were not improvised: "It was a written verse taken from a new track 'Safari Na Muzik.' I just crafted it to the beat of 'The Funky Drummer' by James Brown, backspun by DJ Premier."⁸ Beyond their mere verbal agility, the artists' membership in global Hip Hop culture is on display in the cipa.

God as the Captain of Gsann's Ship

Gsann's rap can be read as an act of self-positioning of a Tanzanian emcee in Hip Hop's cultural center. His rap shows both his self-awareness as an African emcee among African Americans and draws attention to the global map of contemporary Hip Hop culture. In his rhymes, Gsann brings a uniquely global perspective to the BET cipa, which sets him apart from the local ghettocentricity of the African American emcees. Here are Gsann's Swahili rhymes (in italics) and their English translation as it appeared on the television subtitles (with literal translations in parentheses, when applicable):

Ni safari na musiki
It's a journey with music

Tunakwenda hatufik
We are traveling, but we are not getting there

Japokuwa tuna dhik bado tumekaza 'buti'
Despite all the difficulties we persevere
(Despite difficulties, still we tighten our boots)

Toka TZ nyumbani mpaka 'cipha' BET
From our home in Tanzania to the BET cipa

Mungu ibariki, tupo siku pita dhiki
God bless, one day we will succeed
(God bless, we are at the day of overcoming difficulties)

Nikipata riziki, hata kidogo sikatai
If I just can sustain myself, I am alright

⁸ Thomas Gesthuizen, "Tanzanian Emcee in BET Hip Hop Awards Cipa," *AfricanHipHop.com*. Oct. 26, 2009. <<http://www.africanhiphop.com/tanzanian-emcee-in-bet-hip-hop-awards-cypher>>. Accessed July 31, 2014.

(If I get blessings, even a little bit, I won't refuse it)

Popote naingia, hata kama sina 'tai'

I'm entering every spot, even when I don't wear a tie

Popote nina 'chana', hata kama hapafai

I will rap everywhere, even if it's the wrong place
(I light fire anywhere, even if it's not a suitable place)

Na popote ninakwenda pale njisinidai

And wherever I go, I won't pretend to be someone I'm not

Safari na musiki, piga teke usiogope

On this journey with music, don't be afraid to kick
(The journey of music, kick it, don't be afraid)

Unaweza ukafika pia unaweza usifike

You may arrive, but then again you may not

Unaweza ukasifika pia unaweza usisifike

You may be praised and you may not

Ukaaibika usiaibike; na ukachemsha usichemshe

You may be embarrassed and you may mess it all up
(You may be embarrassed or you may not, you may be boiled or you may not)

Kiongozi na Mlinzi wa jahazi ni Mwenyezi

God is the captain and the protector of this ship

XPs, TZ, Uholanzi, Brixton, Brusses, na Stockholm, na Olso, na Gabon, na Brazil

X Plastaz, Tanzania, Holland, Brixton, Brussels, Stockholm, Oslo, Gabon, and
Brazil

Ni sisi na safari ya muziki ni asili.

It's us and the journey with music is the source.⁹

While Gsann does mention his home country of Tanzania twice, he goes on to index a set of localities in which global Hip Hop culture has taken root. Far from being arbitrary,

⁹ English subtitles by BET: <youtube.com/watch?v=TetSMSdxIqA> 1:34-2:18. Accessed Apr. 24, 2015. Swahili transcription and literal English translation by Lowell Brower, Nkatha Kabira, and John Mugane.

Gsann's mapping of countries and cities on three different continents recounts the actual global journey of the X Plastaz over the years leading up to 2009.

As part of their first tour abroad, the X Plastaz performed in the Netherlands in 2001 and 2002. While touring through the Netherlands, the group was introduced to a Dutch-Ethiopian DJ and producer, DJ Precise, with whom they went on to record songs for their first album *Maasai Hip Hop*, which was released by the German label OutHere Records in 2004. In 2003, they returned to Europe for a performance at the Coleur Café Festival in Brussels as well as two shows in London. After attracting attention from European audiences and DJs, the X Plastaz continued their global journey in 2005 to Brazil and Scandinavia participating at festivals in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador as well as in Oslo and Stockholm. The following year, the X Plastaz performed at the Gabao Hip Hop Festival in Libreville, Gabon—the first East African Hip Hop group to do so in French-speaking Africa. Over the years, the X Plastaz have performed alongside such American Hip Hop bands as The Roots and Public Enemy, as well as Senegalese world music superstar Youssou N'Dour. In his rhymes, Gsann proudly recalls this journey around the world, illuminating the truly global contours of today's Hip Hop culture.

The recurrent metaphor of the *journey* that frames Gsann's rap highlights both his individual journey from A-Town to ATL as well as the global flows of Hip Hop culture, in general. Using the metaphor of the journey—*safari* in Swahili—Gsann not only structures his rhyme flow, but, more importantly, also captures the spatial and cultural mobility of Hip Hop. Several verbs that Gsann uses help to reinforce the centrality of mobility and travel: "We are *traveling*, but we are not *getting* there," "I'm *entering* every spot," "wherever I *go*," "You may *arrive*," "God is the *captain* and the protector of this *ship*." The first and last of these examples are of particular interest. The line "We are traveling, but we are not getting there" invokes an unspecified subject in the plural—Gsann and his crew, Gsann and his fellow emcees in the cipa, or Gsann and the entire global Hip Hop community—that is "traveling," but "not getting there."

This tension between the act of communal travel and the failure to arrive at the desired destination can be read in different ways. On the most immediate level, Gsann could be referring to the global travels that he and his crew have completed over the last few years, without fully achieving the commercial and artistic success they were aiming for. On a more abstract level, the verse could also be understood as an analogy to life, in general, that keeps us on a continuous journey without the guarantee of safe arrival at the places we intend to go. Yet despite our awareness of the contingency of successful traveling, Gsann continues, "we persevere." This connection between the trope of mobility and the contingency of success resurfaces again when Gsann's staccato rhymes explore the competitive character of a cipa: "You may arrive, but then again you may not / You may be praised and you may not / You may be embarrassed and you may mess it all up."

The fundamental openness of success—in a Hip Hop cipa as in life—eventually dissolves into another set of metaphors of motion: "God is the *captain* and the protector of this *ship*." No matter how uncertain his life journeys appear to be, Gsann suggests, God's stewardship and protective hand will guide our way. The religious theme of the

concluding line, in particular, sets Gsann's rhymes apart from the more traditional battle rhymes of the other emcees. The verse powerfully foregrounds Gsann's belief in God and his inherent goodness. Gsann remains true to his earlier statement that he will not "pretend to be someone [he is] not" when he makes his religious faith explicit in a setting that does rely on something like divine inspiration, but traditionally is as far removed from the realm of the sacred word as Arusha is from Atlanta.

While religion does figure prominently in the music of many Hip Hop artists in the United States and has even sparked entire subgenres, verbal battles are rarely arenas where the confession of one's religious faith is deemed appropriate, let alone helpful to win the battle.¹⁰ As Gsann's emphasis on his religious beliefs illustrates, Hip Hop outside of the United States does not only adapt its musical grammar to local languages, but, perhaps even more importantly, also incorporates local issues and concerns. Religion is one of the most salient examples of Hip Hop culture's localization in Africa. Significantly, it is not only African Hip Hop artists who incorporate their spiritual concerns into their music, but African immigrants arriving in the United States, too, bring along their religious beliefs and are knitting networks of spiritual exchange across the Black Atlantic.¹¹

Gsann's presence within the core of an art form traditionally associated with African Americans cannot be understood without taking into account the crucial context of African immigration to the United States. The claims by some African Hip Hop artists that the cultural origins of Hip Hop do not lie in the North American inner city, but in the griot and rhythmic poetry traditions of Western and Eastern Africa, are paralleled by discussions about who counts as "black" in the age of Obama.¹² Just as recent African immigrants complicate monolithic notions of black solidarity in American society, creating new sites of conflict as well as cooperation among people of color, so does Gsann challenge the historically grown cultural hegemony of African American artists within Hip Hop culture. Like other African immigrants to the United States, Gsann (who was living in Chicago in 2009) brings new issues to American debates about race, class, gender, religion, and empire.

¹⁰ To be sure, there are also spiritual battle raps among adherents of the subgenre of explicitly religious Hip Hop, but none were present in Gsann's BET cipa. For examples of the burgeoning literature on the intersection of religion and Hip Hop, see Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996); Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003); Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Felicia M. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs, and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010).

¹¹ Jacob K. Olupona, and Regina Gemignani, eds., *African Immigrant Religions in America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007).

¹² Eric S. Charry, "A Capsule History of African Rap," in: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 3f. On emcees as modern griots, see Patricia Tang, "The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions," in: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 79-91.

The BET producers made sure to present Gsann's performance within the all-African American cipa as a "natural" extension of global Hip Hop culture. And yet, the fact that his rap was subtitled into English points to tensions within the linguistic contact zone of the cipa that reflect broader tensions between the African American community and newer waves of African immigrants. Just as some voices within the African American community are concerned about protecting their perceived discursive monopoly on such issues as the memory of slavery and the continuing reality of racism, the globalization of Hip Hop has complicated the neat narrative of its origins among African American inner-city youth in the late 1970s South Bronx. To these cultural gatekeepers, Hip Hop from Africa poses not only a conceptual, but, more importantly, also an identity problem. What does it mean, after all, for young urban African Americans when Canadian-Somali emcee K'Naan counters the glorification of violence in American gangsta rap by saying that "in my country, everyone is in that condition?"¹³ Gsann, it seems, is not the only African emcee with translation problems in the United States.

No less significantly, Gsann reintroduces the metaphor of the ship—*jahazi* in Swahili—in this age of global air travel. It should be obvious to all who are watching Gsann's performance that he has not arrived at the BET Hip Hop Awards in Atlanta by ship. Gsann's use of the metaphor, however, evokes a host of historical associations. As Paul Gilroy has suggested, the metaphor of the ship conjures up violent as well as liberating images for people in the African Diaspora. For Gilroy, the ship signifies, on the one hand, the violence and death of the Middle Passage that African slaves had to endure. On the other hand, it also denotes the transatlantic cultural flows that sustained slaves and continue to sustain their descendants across the Black Atlantic.¹⁴

The history of Gsann's land of birth, Tanzania, forces us to expand Gilroy's privileging of the Atlantic Ocean to incorporate the various economic, cultural, and linguistic influences that Arab, Indian, Chinese, and European ships have brought to the eastern seaboard of Africa. In Swahili, the word *jahazi* is generally used to describe a large sailing ship, traditionally used for trading goods across the Indian Ocean. These trading ships not only brought back goods, ideas, and people from other parts of the Indian Ocean world, but they also exported Swahili culture abroad. Seen in this light, Gsann's performance in the BET cipa parallels the historical role of the *jahazi* connecting Swahili cultures with faraway places.

Furthermore, Gsann's referencing of the *jahazi* provides a powerful semantic contact zone between his Tanzanian background and the cultural memory of his African American co-performers. However, Gsann does not make the physical violence and cultural repression that European ships brought to Tanzania explicit in his rhymes; an elision that further distinguishes him from the traditional battle rhymes of his

¹³ Alastair Pennycook, and Tony Mitchell, "Hip Hop as Dusty Foot Philosophy," in: *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*, edited by H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 31.

¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4.

African American colleagues.¹⁵ In Swahili, the term *jahazi* is usually not used to denote ships of European origin and the violence they brought with them. On the contrary, *jahazi* is an indigenous symbol and a source of pride among coastal Tanzanians. In the metaphor of the ship, then, Gsann's local *roots* in Tanzania connect with the global *routes* of contemporary Hip Hop culture.¹⁶ At the same time, Gsann's use of the metaphor also exposes the limits of cultural translation since the ship mobilizes different historical and cultural registers within his American and African audience. Even though it was not a ship that has transported Gsann physically into the BET cipa, the historical richness of the metaphor of the ship allows him to join the imagined community of African American Hip Hop.

The geographical as well as cultural mobility that Gsann foregrounds in his rap also reflects the broader cultural realities of East Africa, both past and present. For centuries, Tanzanians have been travelling both within their country and beyond looking for a better life. In their quest for opportunity, the ship has been one of the foremost modes of transportation for Gsann's migrating fellow countrymen. As historian Sidney Lemelle has noted, the concept of *msafiri* (traveler) continues to play an important role in Swahili folklore and popular culture.¹⁷ Thus, the pervasiveness of the theme of travel and mobility in Tanzanian culture grounds Gsann's metaphor of the ship in the concrete realities of his home country's past and present, lending his rhymes cultural authenticity.

Finally, the dynamics within the BET cipa deserve a closer analysis. It is noteworthy that there are no women among the participating emcees nor among the Hip Hop emcees in the background. While this absence could be justified given the underrepresentation of popular female Hip Hop artists today, some of the earliest pioneers in the United States were female emcees such as Roxanne Shante and Sister Souljah. Likewise in Tanzania, female artists such as Zay B and Nakaaya are breaking down long-standing gender prejudices with their powerful music, especially in urban centers.¹⁸ One of the members of the X Plastaz, Gsann's sister Dineh, is a skilled emcee in her own right and contributes a significant part to their mesmerizing stage performances.¹⁹ If the conscious re-enactment of the old-school cipa at the BET

¹⁵ This violent past becomes more explicit in Gsann's crew name. Echoing Malcolm Little's name change, the letter "X" in "X Plastaz" draws attention to the unknown numbers of African victims of slavery, Euro-American colonialism, and continued capitalist exploitation.

¹⁶ African linguist Katrina D. Thompson makes a similar point about the X Plastaz' attempt to occupy a place between their Tanzanian roots and international popularity. Cf. Katrina D. Thompson, "Reality and Representation in Maasai Hip-Hop," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 20:1 (2008): 39.

¹⁷ Sidney Lemelle, "'Ni Wapi Tunakwenda': Hip Hop Culture and the Children of Arusha," in: *The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture*, edited by Dipannita Basu, and Sidney Lemelle (London, UK: Pluto, 2006), 231.

¹⁸ Alex Perullo, "Imitation and Innovation in the Music, Dress, and Camps of Tanzanian Youth," in: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 207 n18.

¹⁹ Katrina D. Thompson, "Bongo Flava, Hip Hop and 'Local Maasai Flavors': Interviews with X Plastaz," in: *Native Tongues: The African Hip Hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 291.

Awards was aiming for historical accuracy, at least a few female emcees should have been included.

However, gender constructions are at play also in the lyrics of the emcees. Echoing on-going debates in the United States, there is a fierce debate raging in contemporary Tanzanian Hip Hop over the use of sexually explicit, if not outright misogynist, song lyrics. The centrality of Islam in most Swahili rap contrasts sharply with misogynist representations of women by some Tanzanian gangsta rappers such as Dully Sykes, whose 2001 release 'Nyambizi' (slang for a voluptuous woman), was too sexually explicit for Tanzanian radio stations to play.²⁰ Despite (or rather because) of this public outcry, Sykes sold quite a few singles of the song. Beyond religious concerns, most Tanzanian emcees also share a general didactic purpose on the microphone, which prompts them to tone down overly sexual and violent lyrics.

As Kenyan ethnomusicologist Mwenda Ntarangwi notes, the "most defining attribute of Hip Hop is its increased localization, where it not only represents local realities in local languages but also follows local structures and expectations of social decorum."²¹ Sexually explicit or overly violent Hip Hop lyrics are a case in point. In many East African countries where religion – particularly Pentecostal Christianity and Islam – plays a central role in ordering society the fact that some American Hip Hop artists liberally rap about sex, drugs, and violence, has triggered a heated debate about the limits of cultural translation. Some Tanzanian Hip Hop groups (including the X Plastaz) define their music in contrast to mainstream Hip Hop reaching their airwaves from the United States. Tanzanian emcee Dola Soul illustrates this representational gap when he says that "Hip Hop shouldn't be all about 'I shot your mom...' People are dying out there in the streets, people are executed in countries. We want to bring out messages in our rap and tell the people what is going on and how we can change the world to make it a better place to live in."²² X Plastaz' political project aims to avoid statements that denigrate women or glorify violence.²³

The refusal by many Tanzanian emcees to imitate gangsta rap rhetoric from the United States can be further traced back to the stylistic conventions of ancient Swahili poets. According to historian José Arturo Saavedra Casco, these ancient Swahili poets "believed that their works should contribute positive messages to the community through sophisticated prosodic rules and an elegant use of the language."²⁴ Pre-colonial Swahili poets incorporated local themes and social concerns into their works and participated – like Gsann centuries later – in composition contests (*mashindano*) that were staged during public festivities: "Contenders had to compose verses replying to

²⁰ Lemelle, "Hip Hop Culture and the Children of Arusha," 240.

²¹ Mwenda Ntarangwi, *East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 21.

²² Cit. in *ibid.*

²³ See, for instance, Katrina D. Thompson, "Bongo Flava, Hip Hop and 'Local Maasai Flavors': Interviews with X Plastaz," in: *Native Tongues: The African Hip Hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 274.

²⁴ José Arturo Saavedra Casco, "The Language of the Young People: Rap, Urban Culture, and Protest in Tanzania," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 41, no. 3 (2006): 235.

what their opponents previously said.”²⁵ The custom of reciting improvised verses at weddings and similar celebrations has survived until the present day. As this historical background shows, Gsann’s participation in the BET cipa is part of a long cultural tradition in Tanzania dating back to pre-colonial times.

The Politics of Translation: Swahili Rhymes in Atlanta

Gsann’s presence within the core of an art form traditionally associated with African Americans raises the question of translation. After his performance, Gsann reflected on his own positionality in the linguistic contact zone between English and Swahili:

Many people were blown away with what I did and asked me why I rhymed in Swahili, ‘cause they wanted to understand. I was just like “English is not my first language, I speak it, I love it, but you will be able to mess me up if I rhyme in English.” There were emcees from all over the world in one setting, and I was happy to represent for Africa. I wasn’t star struck, just glad to showcase what I did and could do with my American counterparts. I mean, think of it, we really have the same names, just one word changes, African American and African, do you understand what that means?²⁶

Unfortunately, Gsann has not directly commented on his involvement in the English subtitles, but it is likely that he was consulted by the BET producers.

Since the founding members of the X Plastaz, including Gsann, were born and raised in Arusha in northern Tanzania where Swahili is the dominant language of commerce and everyday life, Gsann’s use of Swahili is hardly surprising.²⁷ It was not until 1997 when Maasai singer Merege joined the crew that the X Plastaz started incorporating Maasai lyrics, musical traditions, and dressing styles into their performances.²⁸ Like in many other parts of the world, pioneering Tanzanian emcees, too, started introducing the new musical style of Hip Hop by rapping in English before adapting the American original to their local circumstances and linguistic particularities.²⁹ Some early innovators, such as Saleh J, then began to take the English rhymes they encountered on imported mixtapes and translated them into Swahili.³⁰ In contrast to the urban working-class origins of American Hip Hop, this original act of

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gesthuizen, “Tanzanian Emcee in BET Hip Hop Awards Cipa.”

²⁷ In a 2006 interview with applied linguist Katrina D. Thompson, Gsann said that Swahili is his first language before he learned Haya, Maa, and English. Katrina D. Thompson, “Bongo Flava, Hip Hop and ‘Local Maasai Flavors’: Interviews with X Plastaz,” in: *Native Tongues: The African Hip Hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 264.

²⁸ Alex Perullo, “Imitation and Innovation in the Music, Dress, and Camps of Tanzanian Youth,” in: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 190.

²⁹ Alex Perullo, *Live from Dar es Salaam: Popular Music and Tanzania’s Music Economy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 164f.

³⁰ Lemelle, “Hip Hop Culture and the Children of Arusha,” 236.

translation from English to Swahili was made possible by the fact that the majority of the early Tanzanian Hip Hop fans and practitioners came from middle-class backgrounds, understood English, and had the financial means to buy American records or even travel there.³¹ These Tanzanian Hip Hop pioneers served as the first generation of translators who paved the way for Hip Hop culture to take root in eastern Africa.

The use of Swahili, however, has also to be seen as a political move in the context of the role of Swahili in Tanzanian history and Tanzania's official policy of English-Swahili bilingualism. After independence in 1961, Tanzania's first prime minister Julius Nyerere promoted a socialist project known as *ujamaa* (family hood), which made Swahili the basis of national culture.³² Due to the long history of Swahili as the *lingua franca* of central and eastern Africa, the rhymes of the X Plastaz can today be understood throughout the region. This, at least, partly accounts for the regional success of *bongo flava* rap in Tanzania, both in its more party-oriented, sexually explicit, and commercial variants and the more socially conscious and politically informed Hip Hop of the X Plastaz.³³

And yet, Tanzanian emcees, like their counterparts across Africa, are confronted with a linguistic paradox, as ethnomusicologist Eric Charry has noted: "The more they shape the genre to reflect and express their own experience, the more they rely on African languages and the less their chances of being understood by an international audience."³⁴ Despite the exceptional status of Swahili as a language with more than a hundred times more non-native speakers than native speakers, the approximately 100 million Swahili speakers worldwide remain predominantly located in central and eastern Africa, even though recent emigration to North America has increased the Swahili-speaking diaspora outside of Africa.³⁵ Swahili Hip Hop groups can, thus, rely on a rather large audience in close proximity, but are confronted with a linguistic barrier beyond eastern Africa. The decision of the BET producers to provide English subtitles for Gsann's Swahili rhymes illustrates this language gap.

Seen in historical perspective, the English subtitles expose a tension between the political uses to which Swahili and English have been put over the course of Tanzanian history. On the one hand, the use of Swahili can be read as a political and cultural act of empowerment on the part of Tanzanian rappers. Over the course of the 1990s, "Swahili

³¹ Ibid.

³² For an overview of the history of Swahili, see Alamin M. Mazrui, and Ibrahim N. Shariff, *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994).

³³ Gsann clearly distances himself and his crew's music from *bongo flava*. Cf. Katrina D. Thompson, "Bongo Flava, Hip Hop and 'Local Maasai Flavors': Interviews with X Plastaz," in: *Native Tongues: The African Hip Hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 265. On *bongo flava*, see Koen Stroeken, "Immunizing Strategies: Hip-Hop and Critique in Tanzania," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 75, no. 4 (2005): 488-509.

³⁴ Eric S. Charry, "Music for an African Twenty-First Century," in: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 292.

³⁵ John M. Mugane, *The Story of Swahili: Identity and the Geopolitics of Language* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, forthcoming), iii.

became the more powerful language choice within the Hip Hop scene because of a desire among youth to build a national Hip Hop culture that promoted local rather than foreign values, ideas, and language.”³⁶ Even though not explicitly included in anthropologist Kelly M. Askew’s groundbreaking study of the relationship between music and Tanzanian national identity, Hip Hop played a vital part in performing the Tanzanian nation.³⁷ If, according to Askew, “the continual accommodation of foreign elements” is a “key Swahili trait,” then Tanzanian Hip Hop culture is one of the best illustrations for its inclusive character.³⁸

Over time, as ethnomusicologists Alex Perullo and John Fenn have noted, Tanzanian emcees have grown adept at using English to rap about the positive aspects of life – including their own skills – and Swahili to highlight the social problems in Tanzanian society.³⁹ Swahili’s historical development into a widely used language of economic, religious, and cultural exchange has made it highly malleable and adaptable to new influences.⁴⁰ In many ways similar to English, Swahili’s flexibility provides an ideal linguistic platform for a global, heterogeneous, and dynamic cultural practice such as Hip Hop. Indeed, Saleh J, the winner of the *Yo! Rap Bonanza*, held in Dar es Salaam in 1990, won this first national rap competition by rapping partly in Swahili.⁴¹

On the other hand, however, the English subtitles can be seen as an attempt to reclaim Gsann’s Swahili rhymes for a primarily American audience. English, after all, was not only the language of the former British colonizers of Tanzania, but also remains the dominant language of American Hip Hop and globalization. The act of translation from the original Swahili to English thus violently breaks up a cluster of cultural memories about language and power.⁴² If the use of African American Vernacular English by African American Hip Hop artists mobilizes a specific historical and cultural register in American society, the use of Swahili in Tanzanian Hip Hop conjures up the specters of European colonialism and American cultural hegemony. In a sense, every act of translation can be seen as an act of conquest.⁴³ While translating Hip Hop lyrics

³⁶ Alex Perullo, and John Fenn, “Language Ideologies, Choices, and Practices in Eastern African Hip Hop,” in: *Global Pop, Local Language*, edited by Harris M. Berger, and Michael Thomas Carroll (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 33.

³⁷ Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁹ Alex Perullo, and John Fenn, “Language Ideologies, Choices, and Practices in Eastern African Hip Hop,” in: *Global Pop, Local Language*, edited by Harris M. Berger, and Michael Thomas Carroll (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 20.

⁴⁰ Mugane, *Story of Swahili*, 17.

⁴¹ Eric S. Charry, “A Capsule History of African Rap,” in: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 15.

⁴² Alastair Pennycook, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 107.

⁴³ Among the first, Nietzsche described the practice of ancient Roman poets who translated Greek works as yet another Roman conquest: “In those days, indeed,” he wrote in *Gay Science* in 1882, “to translate meant to conquer [...] And all this was done with the very best conscience as a member of the Roman Empire without realizing that such action constituted theft.” Cit. in Rainer Schulte, and John

from outside of the United States into English necessarily does violence to the original language with its peculiar vocabulary, tempo, and style, the specific relationship between English and Swahili in Tanzanian history makes the BET subtitles a special case of linguistic re-conquest.

More specifically, the English subtitling hearkens back to the historical connections of the African American community with Swahili. As linguist John Mugane reminds us, Swahili has exerted considerable influence on the cultural imagination of African Americans, from Maulana Karenga's invented tradition of *Kwanzaa* to the late LeRoi Jones's name change to Amiri Baraka to the use of Swahili as a code language by African American street gangs.⁴⁴ Seen against this historical backdrop, the performance of a Tanzanian emcee freestyling in Swahili alongside African Americans highlights the complicated relationship between African and African American cultural production. If African Americans' long-standing fascination with Swahili represents a crucial context for Gsann's presence at the BET Hip Hop Awards, the decision to translate his Swahili rhymes into English can only partly be explained by concerns about the language barrier, but reveals more about the cultural politics between African and African American artists at large. Given the long-standing African American fascination with Swahili culture, it seems hardly a coincidence that the first African emcee to appear at the BET Hip Hop Awards raps in Swahili.

Significantly, Gsann's rap made use of the standard form of Swahili taught in Tanzanian schools. In contrast to the linguistic mix of various East African languages, Arabic, and English that other Tanzanian and Kenyan emcees use in their lyrics, Gsann refrains from inserting lexical markers in English that might help his audience better understand him. The idiosyncratic and highly dynamic mixture between Swahili and English, also known as "Swanglish," is prevalent among young urban Tanzanians, many of whom also participate in Hip Hop culture. As cultural historian Maria Suriano has shown, young Tanzanian Hip Hop artists "contribute to the spread of new slang terms, and 'Swanglish' words [...], while on the other hand [adopting] street language in their hits [...], and in this way [contribute] to its 'institutionalization'."⁴⁵ The X Plastaz do have recorded songs in which they creatively mix different languages (English, Swahili, and Maa) and linguistic codes (street Swahili, urban slang, and standard Swahili).

Given the group's linguistic diversity, Gsann's use of standard Swahili in the BET cipa stands out as a conscious act of cultural self-positioning. As he himself explained in an interview after the awards ceremony, Gsann is fluent in English as well as in the more urban forms of Swahili prevalent among east African Hip Hop practitioners, but in the cipa with African American emcees he chose to rap in Standard Swahili. In an earlier interview, Gsann had already stressed the importance of

Biguenet, eds., *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 69.

⁴⁴ Mugane, *Story of Swahili*, 145ff.

⁴⁵ Maria Suriano, "'Mimi Ni Msanii, Kioo Cha Jamii': Urban Youth Culture in Tanzania as Seen Through Bongo Flewa and Hip-Hop," *Swahili Forum* 14 (2007): 210.

language when performing abroad: “When we are in foreign countries we have to use extra energy in order to please and satisfy our fans” because most listeners could not understand Swahili.⁴⁶ This insistence on the use of a “pure” Swahili can be read as a reaction against BET’s attempt to protect the cultural hegemony of African Americans over the art form of Hip Hop.

Conclusion

To be sure, the inclusion of the non-American emcee Gsann within the commercial spectacle and cultural navel-gazing of the BET Hip Hop Awards attests to a growing awareness of Hip Hop’s global reach. But at the same time, Gsann’s self-awareness of his unlikely presence and peripheral position in Hip Hop’s cultural center allows him to successfully elude the centripetal force of American Hip Hop. Even though the BET producers probably welcomed Gsann’s rhymes in his exotic yet somewhat familiar native tongue of Swahili, rapping in English would certainly have helped Gsann to bring his message across to the worldwide audience watching the show. With his decision to use his native tongue of Swahili, Gsann marked off his own turf in the African American cipa and put his native Tanzania on the map of contemporary global Hip Hop culture.

Gsann’s use of Swahili combined with his emphasis on religion and his global travels disrupts the grand narrative of Hip Hop’s birth in the South Bronx and its subsequent diffusion throughout the world. Gsann’s rap uncovered the local roots of “African Hip Hop from the cradle of civilization: Arusha, Tanzania, East Africa,” as the X Plastaz’ website proudly proclaims. As this case study of an artist from Tanzania has shown, Hip Hop’s global journey has united Hip Hop artists around the world, but the linguistic conflicts of the past and the commercial imperatives of the present remain. If there is power in diversity, this power needs to be directed more forcefully against the homogenizing forces of the marketplace. The X Plastaz, for their part, are trying to resist the demands of the Tanzanian music industry and refuse to pay bribes to radio deejays and television hosts to play their songs.⁴⁷ Even though Gsann’s performance within the African American cipa was presented as a natural extension of American Hip Hop, the fact that his rap was translated into English raises broader questions about the contested politics of translation in global Hip Hop culture. The 2009 BET cipa, in the end, illustrates the creative ways in which a Tanzanian emcee made sense of his cultural and linguistic journey from A-Town to ATL.

⁴⁶ Katrina D. Thompson, “Bongo Flava, Hip Hop and ‘Local Maasai Flavors’: Interviews with X Plastaz,” in: *Native Tongues: The African Hip Hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 265.

⁴⁷ Katrina D. Thompson, “Bongo Flava, Hip Hop and ‘Local Maasai Flavors’: Interviews with X Plastaz,” in: *Native Tongues: The African Hip Hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 266.

Bibliography

- Alim, H. Samy, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook, eds. *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.
- Askew, Kelly M. *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Casco, José Arturo Saavedra. "The Language of the Young People: Rap, Urban Culture, and Protest in Tanzania." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 41, no. 3 (2006): 229-48.
- Charry, Eric S. "Music for an African Twenty-First Century." In: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry, 283-315. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- — — —. "A Capsule History of African Rap." In: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry, 1-25. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Dyson, Michael E. *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Gesthuizen, Thomas. "Tanzanian Emcee in BET Hip Hop Awards Cypher." *African Hip Hop.com*. October 26, 2009. <<http://www.africanhiphop.com/tanzanian-emcee-in-bet-hip-hop-awards-cypher>>.
- Hodge, Daniel White. *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs, and a Cultural Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1994.
- Lemelle, Sidney. "'Ni Wapi Tunakwenda': Hip Hop Culture and the Children of Arusha." In: *The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture*, edited by Dipannita Basu, and Sidney Lemelle, 230-54. London, UK: Pluto, 2006.
- Mazrui, Alamin M., and Ibrahim N. Shariff. *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African*

- People. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994.
- Mugane, John M. *The Story of Swahili: Identity and the Geopolitics of Language*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, forthcoming.
- Ntarangwi, Mwenda. *East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009.
- Olupona, Jacob K., and Regina Gemignani, eds. *African Immigrant Religions in America*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007.
- Miyakawa, Felicia M. *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Pennycook, Alastair. *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007.
- Pennycook, Alastair, and Tony Mitchell. "Hip Hop as Dusty Foot Philosophy." In: *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*, edited by H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook, 25-42. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.
- Perry, Imani. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Perullo, Alex. "Imitation and Innovation in the Music, Dress, and Camps of Tanzanian Youth." In: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry, 187-207. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- — — —. *Live from Dar es Salaam: Popular Music and Tanzania's Music Economy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- — — —, and John Fenn. "Language Ideologies, Choices, and Practices in Eastern African Hip Hop." In: *Global Pop, Local Language*, edited by Harris M. Berger, and Michael Thomas Carroll, 19-51. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003.
- Pinn, Anthony B., ed. *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003.
- Robertson, Roland. "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity." In: *Global Modernities*, edited by Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson, 25-44. London, UK: Sage Publications, 1995.

- Schulte, Rainer, and John Biguenet, eds. *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Spady, James G., H. Samy Alim, and Samir Meghelli. *Tha Global Cipha: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness*. Philadelphia, PA: Black History Museum Press, 2006.
- Stroeken, Koen. "Immunizing Strategies: Hip-Hop and Critique in Tanzania." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 75, no. 4 (2005): 488-509.
- Suriano, Maria. "'Mimi Ni Msanii, Kioo Cha Jamii': Urban Youth Culture in Tanzania as Seen Through Bongo Fleva and Hip-Hop." *Swahili Forum* 14 (2007): 207-23.
- Tang, Patricia. "The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions." In: *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric S. Charry, 79-91. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Thompson, Katrina D. "Bongo Flava, Hip Hop and 'Local Maasai Flavors': Interviews with X Plastaz." In: *Native Tongues: The African Hip Hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier, 253-297. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011.
- — — —. "Reality and Representation in Maasai Hip-Hop." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 20:1 (2008): 33-44.
- Verán, Cristina. "Native Tongues: Hip-Hop's Global Indigenous Movement." In: *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*, edited by Jeff Chang, 278-90. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2006.