

HIP HOP LIFE AND LIVELIHOOD IN NAIROBI

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Over 2014 I conducted research for my dissertation on hip hop in Nairobi, Kenya. Focused on young urban Kenyans from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds this research examines the daily social, discursive, and aesthetic practices hip hop musicians and producers deploy while pursuing a livelihood. In the last fifteen years or so “African youth” and their futures have been focal points of debates among development organizations, policy makers and scholars due to some staggering demographic and economic trends. In Kenya approximately 80 percent of the population is under the age of 35, and within that population the unemployment rate in urban areas is estimated to be 35-60 percent. In the lower income estates of Nairobi the outlook for employment is particularly grim. Nairobi is sometimes referred to by young Kenyans as *shamba la mawe* (farm of stones), meaning that earning a life from the city is akin to farming on rocky soil. Hip hop is one way that some young Kenyans try to squeeze a living out of these difficult conditions. With this research project I hope to contribute to contemporary debates about younger Kenyans by showing how hip hop is utilized as both a forum for expressing

grievances and strategy for combating the challenges they face in their daily lives.

Overall, Nairobi hip hop performers encourage and reinforce each other through social networks. But they also conflict with one another, as when one of the producers at a community studio disappeared with several hundred dollars worth of studio equipment, causing the studio to be shut down and many local artists to lose their music. As one member of the community said to me, “He was so shortsighted! He’ll make a little cash from selling the equipment, but what we were building here could have fed all of us for years.” The constant tension between “eating today” and trying to build a future is a major issue hip hoppers I’ve interviewed struggle with. Another rapper I interviewed complained that his wife’s family won’t accept their marriage - even after nine years and three children - because he still can’t afford to pay bride wealth. It is from ethnographic analysis of these types of encounters that I think the most interesting insights into the social worlds of Kenyan rappers can be made to speak to larger debates about African youth and their futures.

Throughout the course of this research and previous fieldwork

experiences I have spent hours sitting with these musicians and their friends on street corners, basketball courts, newspaper kiosks and numerous other locations where one can listen to the *sauti ya mitaa* (voice of the streets). As a musician I’ve been fortunate to work with very talented Kenyan rappers on a number of songs. These collaborative experiences have helped me to understand the process of how songs are made - from street to studio; from original concept to final mix. Analysis of the social worlds produced in and around the studios, and the other spaces that hip hoppers inhabit, adds another dimension to our understanding of how urban African youth are challenging adverse demographic and economic situations as they work to make a life through their art.

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