

“The Blueprint: The Gift and The Curse” of American Hip Hop Culture for Nigeria’s Millennial Youth

by

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Abstract

In the 21st century, young Nigerians frequently cite Jay-Z as their favorite artist. American hip-hop has provided a blueprint for the rest of the world to appropriate and build new cultural formations that manifest in music and identity. Yet, the subtitle of Jay-Z’s *Blueprint 2* album (“The Gift and The Curse”) is an apt description for the complexity of this relationship between African American culture and Nigerian youth identity, which also impacts Nigerian popular music.

Interestingly, Jay-Z’s infamous pronouncement to the effect that hip-hop has done more for race relations in the US than any other era is pertinent to Nigeria’s hip hop generation. Local artists inspired by collaborations and sampling that can be found in the most popular American hip hop have found ways to cross a deep ethnic divide to create hip hop tracks that draw from two distinct cultures, Igbo and Yoruba.

For all of the benefits that seem to have accrued as a result of the gift of American hip hop culture in Nigeria, there are also some issues related to cultural imperialism and its effect on local identity and creativity. Perhaps the most problematic effect of American hip hop is the fact that, inasmuch as this is a unique opportunity to build cultural bridges across the black Atlantic, no real ground has been gained in terms of holistic understandings of African-American history, identity, and culture by young Nigerians. The undermining character of pop culture is that often, surface elements are appropriated and enjoyed without a meaningful exploration of the context that engendered this musical experience. This paper examines the misinformation and miseducation that young Nigerian consumers have acquired about the African American experience as a result of their cursory and curious relationship with American hip hop. Using ethnomusicological analysis of Nigerian hip hop, as well as interviews with artists and young fans, this paper explores the extent to which American hip hop has been a gift and a curse for Nigerian artists and audiences in the twenty first century.

Y'all fell into the booby trap
I set the trap just to see dude react, an' now
An' now you can't leave
You opened the door, God, I'm at you annually
Jay-Z: The Blueprint 2

In the 21st century, young Nigerians frequently site Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, and Usher as their favorite artists. They have identified closely with American hip hop culture and have come to embody a certain style, a sense of what it is to be authentically “hip hop.” Much of what is now understood as R&B finds a home within the general definition of hip hop culture. It is rare to find an R&B star who has not collaborated in some way with a hip hop artist or at least imbibed a sound, beat, or swagger that is extracted from the art, actions, and demeanor of hip hop artists and their audiences. Young Nigerians aspire to acquire the essence of “cool,” which is tightly linked to the notion or perception of a contrived contemporary African American identity. American hip-hop has provided a blueprint for the rest of the world to appropriate and build new cultural formations that manifest in music and identity. Jeff Chang asserts that “hip hop culture has become one of the most far-reaching arts movements of the previous three decades.”¹ Perhaps more than any other African country, impressionable Nigerian youth have received hip hop and ingested it to such an extent that much of the indigenous pop music that is created there has the overwhelming taste of American hip hop.

Yet, the subtitle of Jay-Z's *Blueprint 2* album—"The Gift and The Curse"—is an apt description for the complexity of this relationship between African American culture and Nigerian youth identity, because, for better or worse, it severely impacts originality and creativity in Nigerian popular music and culture.

At an unprecedented level, these young Nigerian artists and audiences have unlimited access to media representations of African-American music and culture. For almost a decade, MTV's African network, MTV Base, has infused American culture through the collective consciousness of millions of youth in countries all over the continent like South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria. On its website, MTV Base states that it "is a 24-hour English language music television channel reaching 48.5 million African viewers in 10.5 million households in 48 countries in sub-Saharan Africa." As its mission, MTV base is "targeted at mass African youth, ...[with the aim of] celebrating the cultural vibrancy and creativity of African music and artists." This paper is aimed at challenging this stated mission by examining the effect of this imported music and culture on the authenticity and purity of Nigerian pop music, youth identity and other indigenous cultural expressions.

This is not the first generation that has felt an affinity for African American culture. The Nigerian hip hop generation follows earlier genre-generations (R&B, funk, disco, etc), which were influenced by waves of African American music from the 1950s all the way up to the millennium. However, because of the technological age, aided by conglomerates like MTV, the scope and influence of African American hip hop is wider and more complex. Hip hop scholar Bakari Kitwana affirms that the spread and nature of Black culture has changed "in the face of the pervasive and powerful technological advances and corporate growth."² On the one hand, the gift of American hip-hop brings Nigerian youth into a globalized space shared by youth all over the world. In particular, it allows them to find that intangible cultural connection that resonates across the Black Atlantic. The culture that Kitwana describes as being "national in scope" has morphed into an international phenomenon that has been used to buttress the formidable structures of capitalism, neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism.

Young Nigerians live in an environment that remains economically and politically challenging. Writing about the Nigerian economic crisis of the late 1980s and 1990s, Yunusa Zakari Ya'u explained that one of the social categories most affected by the crisis is the youth. The collapse of social services and the increasing commercialization of education have made it very difficult for many young people to remain in school. As a consequence, the number of school drop-outs is increasing. Simultaneous with this is a drastic decline in employment opportunities... In the process of adjusting and coping with the situation, the youth have undergone an identity transformation both at the level of consciousness and in their attempt to find a space in the new dispensation.³

Hip hop provides an outlet from hardships and a bridge of escape to another world that is both familiar and strange. In this intangible world of nifty wordplay, plush video sets, built around a (mis)conceived notion of a shared identity, there is a sense of belonging that is nurtured within this new Nigerian generation, which may be attributed to their enthusiastic, if voyeuristic, embrace of African American hip-hop culture brought about by the onslaught of imported images that have come through the internet and cable television. Musically, this gift has given Nigerian musicians a fresh format that allows them to continue to create hybrids out of a combination of hip-hop and indigenous genres like highlife and juju which originate within the cultural spaces of distinct ethnic groups like the Igbo⁴ and the Yoruba respectively. According to Christopher Waterman, “Juju was essentially by and for Yoruba people”⁵ and Michael Veal explains that highlife music was “most associated with the Eastern, Igbo region.”⁶ Nigerian hip hop breaks that tradition by appealing to a broad cross-section of Nigeria’s youth.

Interestingly, Jay-Z’s infamous (and problematic) statement made in *Men’s Health* magazine to the effect that hip-hop has done more for race relations in the US than any other time⁷ is pertinent to Nigeria’s hip hop generation. Local artists like Olu Maintain, Flavour, and Darey, inspired by collaborations and sampling that can be found in the most popular American hip hop recordings have found ways to cross hostile ethnic borders to create hip hop tracks that draw from both highlife and juju music. If Jay-Z’s assertion is due to the fact that White and Black audiences meet to enjoy hip hop, the same can be said for these previously deeply divided ethnic groups in Nigeria.

As a musical genre, Nigerian hip hop functions as a dynamic heterogeneous form of expression for young Nigerians. However, in its most tangible form—the imagery, language, and behavior—it functions as a purveyor of a new identity that resembles closely the African American culture from which it has drawn. As an ethnomusicologist I appreciate the concept that Alan Merriam advanced in *The Anthropology of Music* that we must be concerned with the cultural complex that includes the musical sound and the behavior. Herein lie the gift and the curse, respectively. Top Nigerian rapper, MI (Mr. Incredible) explains his influences. “As a rapper, to maximize yourself, you have to understand poetry. If you look at great rappers such as Jay Z, Tupac, Biggy... they always referenced poets. You have to know words; you have to study how people have used words in the past. You have to learn about the flow and rhythm of lyrics.”⁸ Another artist, Vector the Viper, proudly reflects on the artist that is often compared to him: “People see traits of one of the greats of hip hop (Jay Z) in me, and that is nice.”⁹ Inherent in these two views is the inevitable impulse to cite Jay-Z.

For all of the benefits that seem to have accrued as a result of the gift of American hip hop culture in Nigeria, there are also some serious and disturbing effects. Theories of globalization point to the reality for non-Western countries that are forced to participate in the “take and no give” economy of global “sharing.” Chinweizu’s *West and the Rest of Us* (1975) is an early study of this imbalance that comes as a result of globalization. Many studies after that have pointed to the fact that, among other things, local creativity is stifled by the suffocating preponderance of American or Western culture. Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* explained that when a group of people are overwhelmed by the values and influences of an occupying power, they lose their voice and retreat into a culture of silence.¹⁰ Musically, this has serious implications for most of the artists who find themselves pressured to compete with the music that is shipped in via MTV and the internet. This effect can be seen in simple occurrences like the names that artists adopt, such as 2face, M.I., Yung 6ix, Wiz Kid, and Flavour. These choices all have glaring similarities to African American hip hop artists. Eedris Abdulkareem once famously tried to generate non-existent “beef” with 50 Cent¹¹, a sentiment that was probably not mutual. When 50 Cent visited Nigeria in 2004, Abdulkareem stormed the tarmac and trespassed on the American rapper’s plane, with the hope that the promoters would spend as much money on him, a local artist. His reasoning was skewed and led most to believe that this beef was another attempt at imitating American artists and their famous feuds. Awkward affectations, imitated accents and images are similarly disturbing, from tattoos and skin-bleaching to cornrows and long straight weaves. Local female neo-soul artists like Nneka and Asa, as talented as they are, seem to be over-inspired by Erykah Badu and Jill Scott, while Nigerians Eva and Tonto Dikeh bear interesting resemblance to Beyonce and Rihanna. It is as if Freire’s concept of the “culture of silence” which befalls most oppressed groups of people has been filled with loud clamoring music and an uncomfortable identity from a foreign land.

Perhaps the most problematic effect of American hip hop is the fact that, in as much as this is a unique opportunity to build cultural bridges across the Black Atlantic, no real ground has been gained in terms of holistic understandings of African-American history, identity, and culture by young Nigerians (nor vice versa). An essential character of pop culture is that often, surface elements are acquired and enjoyed without a meaningful indepth exploration of the socio-cultural history that birthed this musical experience. This paper examines the misinformation and miseducation that young Nigerians have acquired about the African American experience as a result of their unbridled and indiscriminating relationship with American hip hop culture.

On the whole, this paper explores the extent to which American hip hop has been a gift and a curse for Nigerian artists and audiences in the twenty-first century. Using ethnomusicological analysis of rap songs, music videos, and interviews with artists and young fans, I will explore the impact of American hip hop culture on this generation of Nigerians, their creativity, identity, and culture.

Cultural Insurgency

For the sake of this article I would describe “cultural insurgency” as a low level, insidious, continuous bombardment of a community’s consciousness with the covert goal of gaining control of their tastes, choices, mores and beliefs in order to subvert and replace them with foreign options. Colonialism and imperialism produced clear power structures, a global hierarchical order that separates the winners from the losers, those players that were victorious and those that were vanquished. This enduring hierarchical order is apparent in any chart that is produced by the World Bank, IMF, UNICEF, or the World Health Organization. The West continues to steam ahead victoriously, its engines powered by the free human and natural resources that were carried back and forth across the Atlantic centuries earlier. The rest of the world continues to struggle, striving to one day be able to sail alongside the victors. The impact of this lopsided hegemonic structure is deeply embedded in contemporary global circumstances such that its waves have reached far beyond its first shores. Today African economies, political institutions and democracies, healthcare and educational systems have mostly bent to the will and direction of the West. Long after the independence movements of the 1950s and 60s, England, Western Europe, and the United States continue to lead while Africa follows, often in inconsequential sinking lifeboats, hoping for a wave of assistance or a hook up to the imposing cargo ships of the West to pull them along. This is not a new story. However, what is of most concern in this twenty first century is the spread of those imperialistic waves to the last bastion of hope, the last defense against an imposing fleet, for populating those life boats have always been proud people, sure of their identity and secure in the knowledge that their culture and heritage, rich and beautiful, would keep them buoyed. It is that same sense of collective identity and pride that attracted and inspired Garvey’s Back to Africa movement, DuBois’ exile to Ghana, Maulana Karenga’s creation of Kwanzaa; it is the same attribute that fueled the independence movements, which brought emancipation from western domination. In spite of that, half a century later, the power structure remains: first world on top, third world hopelessly on the bottom.

A study of contemporary youth identity allows us to wade into the rough waters that undergird this balance of power in the twenty-first century. There is a new tidal wave of oppressive dominance that further reinforces the positions of winners and losers. Following the 20th century trend of attacking Africa's natural resources like oil, diamonds, gold, and plutonium, the new target is the culture and identity of young impressionable Africans. Without the resilience of this vital attribute, the war is over, the domination of the west is unequivocal and irreversible. The weapons of warfare are no longer gunpowder, Bibles, Korans, salt, and cigarettes. Today's weapon comes in the unlikely guise of African American hip hop culture.

Great African thinkers and leaders have worried about the danger of cultural insurgency since independence. Ngugi wa Thiongo in *Decolonization of the Mind* dealt with implications on native language and identity; Nigerian philosopher Chinweizu in his seminal work *The West and the Rest of Us* exposed the reality of an unbalanced international political relationships; Senegalese President Leopold Sedar Senghor advocated for the problematic concept of negritude to guard against the erosion of pride and self-esteem; and Wole Soyinka tackled the effects of neocolonialism in his numerous plays and essays. These giants of African intellectualism were wary of the long lasting effects of colonialism on the language, psyche, and socio-economic status of the African. An overwhelming majority of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's songs were musical indictments and philosophical critiques of the effects of cultural and political imperialism. In his 1977 hit "Colonial Mentality," he summarizes the issue: "The thing wey black no good/Na foreign things them dey like/No be so? (*The thing that is African is no good/They prefer foreign things/Isn't that so?*)." None of these African leaders and intellectuals would have guessed that one of the tools of millennial imperialism would be African American popular culture.

Popular music is often accused of being harmless and shallow. But it would be dangerous to dismiss the effect and affect of popular culture. According to historical military strategist, Sun Tzi, "all warfare is based on deception" (42). The cultural insurgency into the psyche of an entire Nigerian generation adopts this strategy by presenting only one essentialized facet of African American identity and culture and pounding it relentlessly into the souls of young Nigerian folk, urging their own indigenous voices into a virtual "culture of silence."

Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic" concept (1993) diagnosed and deciphered the sharing of cultural mores between different points in the Diaspora. Music, he opined, was one facet that exemplified the relationship that still holds the intercultural and transnational formation of the Black Atlantic together: "The very least which this music and its history can offer us today is an analogy for comprehending the lines of affiliation and association which take the idea of the diaspora beyond its symbolic status."¹²

Indeed, several writers have written about the circling back of Black musical tropes to the motherland.¹³ A study of sound aesthetics certainly reinforces this notion of sharing. Appropriations of African American funk, soul, R&B, and hip hop have resulted in local popular musics that range from juju to afrobeat to highlife to Nigerian flavored hip hop.

The complications with this relationship between Nigerians and African American music and culture occur when considering that aspect of *music as culture* that is captured by behavior and image. In his writings on power, Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci suggested that hegemonic dominance in civil society is reinforced when the values and ideas of one group are imposed on the masses. This is the case with African American hip hop culture and identity in Nigeria. Instead of the bridges of inspiration and influence across the Black Atlantic that were once imagined as strengthening the Black world, one side is being used to overcome the other, almost like a cultural occupation. This shove towards cultural homogeneity is a far cry from the beauty in proud Black diversity that was exhibited during the FESTAC (Festival of African Culture) celebration of 1977.

“Festac signified that Black and African peoples had journeyed to Lagos to confirm and celebrate those cultural and spiritual values which bound them together despite their dispersal around the world.... Despite their diversity, despite their divergent lifestyles, despite their multiple languages, the very coming together of this vast congregation echoed a common desire to accept themselves as they were, to reject non-Black interpretations of them, to redefine reality in their own image and regain control over their destiny.”¹⁴

This idea of cultural insurgency with the spotlight on African American hip hop as culprit is conceivable because of the ways in which hip hop has operated in a globalized world and infiltrated Nigerian society. Cultural Studies scholar John Tomlinson explains that if we think of the significance of the spread of Western media into the cultural life of ‘developing societies’ it may be possible to think of this impact as a shift in the balance of forces in the ‘dialectic’ of culture-as-lived-experience and culture-as-representation: of people coming to draw more on media imagery in their constructions of reality.¹⁵

It is this shift that seems to have occurred in the last twenty years or so. It is no longer enough to speak of African American culture as influencing Nigerian music and culture. Instead, African American culture-as-representation now outweighs Nigerian “culture-as-lived-experience.”

In somewhat of a hyperbolic statement, economist, political scientist and communications scholar, Herbert Schiller asserts that “American power, expressed industrially, militarily, and culturally, has become the most potent force on earth [and] communications have become a decisive element in the extension of United States world power.”¹⁶ That much of the cultural force is based on Black music is unquestionable for as Paul Gilroy states, “Black music has become a truly global phenomenon.”¹⁷

Hip Hop’s Erosive Action on Nigerian Creativity and Identity

In this new millennium, globalization opens up a wide avenue for African American hip hop to plough through Nigerian youth identity because the very nature of globalization "alters the context of meaning construction . . . it affects people's sense of identity, the experience of place and of self in relation to place." (Tomlinson)¹⁸ As stated earlier, young Nigerians could experience and experiment with earlier genres of African American music while preserving their ethnic and national identities. Today, Nigerian rappers and R&B singers attempt to reaffirm their ethnicity in the form of the music they produce. While they spout a good deal of Americanisms (slang, accents, references), they also weave in phrases in Yoruba, Igbo, and pidgin English. The use of these indigenous languages maintains a sense of hybridity. However, language is not the sole purveyor of cultural identity. Behavior becomes an important indicator of the extent to which cultural insurgency has taken place. Cultural theorist Anthony Appiah writes that pride and identity are preserved when there is a balance between individuality and cultural heritage. “When we are asked—and ask ourselves—who we are, we are being asked *what* we are as well.”¹⁹ The “what” of identity is composed of more than language. It is the complex of culture – how we walk, talk, produce, live, and carry ourselves.

Today Nigerians’ relationship with hip hop is different from previous generations in a number of ways. First, more than ever before, thanks to technology and internet access, young Nigerians are submerged in African American hip hop and R&B, listening and appropriating what they acquire from MTV and speedy downloads. Second, mainstream music industry and media management mediates the final product that gets shipped across the Atlantic. In actuality, what is consumed in Nigeria is the contrived version of African American identity that has been condensed and packaged as an inauthentic representation of a complicated culture and identity.

Third and most importantly, by its very nature, hip hop is an all-encompassing phenomenon. Many adherents and scholars view it as a way of life. However, as mentioned above the version of hip hop culture that I shipped across the Atlantic is a construct of mainstream music management and by extension, mainstream audiences. Indeed, this version of American hip-hop culture has provided these young Nigerians with a blueprint for shedding the old skin of their indigenous selves in order to form new problematic identities.

To borrow a metaphor from the world of business and commerce, the combination of these three factors results in more of an acquisition than a merger in the sense that there is a complete take-over of the psyche of young Nigerians. Describing Nigeria's youth culture in 2008, Andrea Kirschner concluded that young Nigerians adopt "a style that is geared to that of Los Angeles-based rappers... [They are] embedded in a global youth culture."²⁰ A wider survey of the names of popular Nigerian artists reflects this: Wizkid (Wiz Khalifa), M.I (M1), Ice Prince (Ice Cube), Eva (Eve), D'Banj (Debarge), Don Jazzy (DJ Jazzy Jeff), Harry Song (Trey Songz), 2 Shot (Too Short), Iceberg Shady (Ice Cube/Slim Shady), and Mode Nine (Tech N9ne). It is unlikely that these are all coincidental name choices.

One of the most popular artists in Nigeria today is a young man, Chinedu Okoli, who goes simply by the name Flavour (another similarity here to African American artist, Flavor Flav). His most popular track is called "Nwa Baby". The remix of the song, subtitled "Ashawo," which means prostitute, should leave no mystery as to the content of the lyrics. An upbeat pulsating track that has millions of youtube views is catchy and reminiscent of highlife. In terms of sound, Flavour blends old and new to arrive at a hybrid sound. However, in complete opposition to this, his music video offers a stream of confusing images and the revelation of a mentality with which Fela Kuti would have taken issue.

Standing with his arms spread wide apart on top of a building that could be anywhere, Flavour sports Kanye West-style sunglasses, Lil Wayne style dreadlocks and skinny leather pants. He grinds up against his scantily-clad dancers with their dubiously light-toned skins and long straight weaves while they gyrate in a fashion that is closer to BET hip hop video girls than to his own native Igbo atilogu dancers. He clearly calls them "ashawos", a bold move that leaves nothing to the imagination. One does not have to guess where he gets these inspirations. Even though he is one of the few artists that does a good job of trying to weave local popular music with hip hop, like any other malleable young pop culture consumer, he imitates and adopts the visual tropes that come across the airwaves. This imitation runs the gamut from curious to ridiculous. The opening scene of his video for "Oyi" opens with him and his co-star, Tiwa Savage, standing in the snow, an unlikely setting for a Nigerian music video.

D'Banj, one of the most popular and arguably one of the more talented rappers/singers has catchy tunes and cleverly uses Pidgin English and Nigerian-specific references. If this were the sum of our experience with D'Banj, he might make for an example of effective hybridity. However, once again, the music video distracts from this argument as he imitates various aspects of the projected and imported African American behavior. For instance, the music video for "Fall in Love" starts with the rapper in a scene with his jealous woman who accuses him of cheating on her. She holds her hand up in the familiar "speak to the hand" gesture that one would easily find associated with African American behavior in the United States. We then see a close-up of D'Banj telling his listeners in a terribly imitated American accent, "Don't get it twisted, love is a beautiful thing."

Similarly, the singing group, P-Square, makes for an interesting study of contradictory identity. One of the most popular R&B/Rap groups in Nigeria, they mix Igbo, Pidgin English, and English in their lyrics. On their 2011 album, *The Invasion*, they collaborate with Rick Ross on the single "Beautiful Oyinye." In terms of the sonic quality of the track, while it sounds well produced, smooth and sophisticated, one immediately identifies it as Nigerian because of the language and because it bears certain aesthetic characteristics of an older highlife style. However, visual behavior tells a different story in the music video, which is shot on a white yacht somewhere unknown. Clad in clean white, the two brothers serenade two women whose physical appearance seems to have more resonance with Fela Kuti's concept of the superficial "Lady" than with the more natural "African woman."²¹ (P-Square's lyrics tell us that this is "the girl they want marry.") With tattoos, diamond earrings, sunglasses and dreadlocs/cornrows, one could mute the music and believe that this video belongs on the BET screen in the United States. The same analysis could be applied to another hit from the same 2011 album, "Chop My Money," a pulsating collaboration with Akon. Again, the music video results in a confusing idea of where Nigerian identity can be found in the forest of contrived African American hip hop/R&B tropes.

Another example of this identity crisis can be seen in the music video of Olu Maintain's (Olumide Edwards Adegbolu) 2005 hit "Yahooze." Like Flavour, his attempts to mix hip hop with a local musical dialect, in his case Juju, is overridden by the images in his videos. The video opens with Maintain standing wide legged in front of a Chrysler. The camera then zooms out to a row of cars, which include two Hummers, an Audi, a BMW, and a Volkswagen—one for each day of the week, he later informs us. He begins with Yoruba, calling out his boys to come and party, dance ("yahooze"). He has a cowboy hat perched on his head, a pair of blinged-out sunglasses, several rows of gold chains hanging from his neck and two large diamond earrings adorn his ears.

He is wearing a red satin shirt and tight pants with a prominent belt buckle, which he points out is in the form of a “one million dollar” note. We are then taken to a shot of a bar where Maintain tells the listeners/viewers that there is champagne, Hennessy, and Moët “for everyboday!” A third of the way into the video, he begins to rap: “Everybody/ Enough of busy/take it easy/ its all about the Benjamins, baby.” The fact that he uses the term “Benjamins” is a clear indication of the value he places on African American vernacular as well as American currency and therefore American economic superiority.

More recently, Olu Maintain’s hit single, N.A.W.T.I., exposes a continual unraveling from the shores of ethnicity/nationality as he seems lost in a sea of contrived African Americanness. Interestingly, although the acronym NAWTI stands for Natural African Women Totally Inspiring, the music video stars the African American socialite, Natalie Nunn, whose presence offers revised understandings of the image of the typical natural African woman. At one point in the music video, Maintain is nowhere to be found in a room full of voluptuous girls in panties and short shorts. One of them seems to be making love to the wall. Crunk feminists and Black feminists would have a field day with this video. They would also find issue with the female artists like Tonto Dike, Omotola, and Eva who seem to fashion themselves after Niki Minaj, Beyonce, Rihanna, and Eve. In addition to the visual embellishments, Nigerian rap is flavored liberally with words and expressions like “nigga,” “bitch,” “dirty south,” and “gettin’ high.” The extent to which these young Nigerian artists consume and mindlessly regurgitate what they see as authentic African American/hip hop imagery is disturbing and exemplifies the effectiveness of the cultural insurgency.

Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism can be applied here as it is a kind of “cultural hegemony that gives orientalism [or cultural imperialism] the durability and the strength” to reiterate and assure Western superiority. If the preceding examples are not enough proof of the reality and effect of cultural insurgency, we can turn to Nigeria’s newest generation of hip hop and R&B fans, many of whom step over the likes of Maintain, P-Square, and Flavour to go straight to the source. They voraciously consume African American hip hop and R&B. Many of these American artists are paid handsomely to travel to Nigeria and put on live shows for sold out audiences. Artists like Chris Brown and Rick Ross charge their adoring fans an average of \$300 per ticket. One young Nigerian informant I spoke with, Sope A., said that African American hip hop is the real thing. He and his friends follow the entire Young Money Cash Money Billionaires crew closely. Lil Wayne, he told me, is brilliant, even though he may not always understand what Lil Wayne raps about. When I asked what other things he and his friends do in their spare time, he insisted that hip hop was their primary preoccupation outside of school work.²²

Another young interviewee, Mitch U., told me that that Nigerian artists were “coming up” to the level of Americans. “I think Nigerian artists have a lot of potential and plenty to offer,” he said.²³ However, when I asked to see his ipod, I saw an overwhelming amount of music by American artists like Big Sean and Wiz Khalifa. This was a pattern with all my interviewees, I found a general sense of approval of Nigerian artists, but the attraction to African American artists was foremost.

Seun A., a 20-something year old Nigerian hip hop head who loves Lil Wayne and Nigerian hip hop said that Nigerian artists have copied African American music videos since the 1990s. He explained that this was the only way they could attract a wide audience, and he did not seem to mind the trend. “Once the beat is good, you have a few girls on the video, its all good,” he insisted. And then, as if for emphasis, he added, “The girls is what makes the music sell.” I asked him to consider the effects of this sort of imitation on this generation of young Nigerians. After a long moment, he admitted, “It misleads younger ones into the wrong direction.” Since the impetus for these images comes from these narrowly conceived African American music videos, I asked Seun (and others) what young Nigerians actually think of African Americans. This was Seun’s response: “They talk too much, they talk a lot of crap. They’re lazy. They steal. They smoke, they drink, and have very bad habits.”²⁴ Herein lies the contradiction. How does this young man define a people in such derogatory terms while at the same time strive to admire, enjoy, appropriate, and imitate their culture? This underscores the veracity of an effective cultural insurgency campaign as it imposes its hegemonic intentions while causing a confused consciousness in self-definition. One would hope that this stereotypical, uncomplimentary and unflattering perception of the African American is an unusual aberration, but this image was a common thread throughout my young Nigerian interviewees. The unfortunate image is produced by the same media outlets like MTV Base that are responsible for disseminating hip hop music across the African continent, spinning a distorted image of African American culture to an unsuspecting, desperate, and adoring people on the other side of the Atlantic.

Another place to see this erosion of Nigerian identity is on the African version of the “Big Brother” reality show. On this show, which is inspired by the Big Brother show that is shot in the US, young people are drawn from several African countries and made to live together in a house that is monitored by “big brother” cameras. Each week, one contestant is voted out of the house based on their popularity and favorability with the viewers. Obviously influenced by African American hip hop culture, most contestants are liberally tattooed and speak with cut-and-paste American slangs and accents. On a June 2012 episode, two of the contestants have a violent argument. The Ghanaian man accuses the Nigerian girl of spying on him in the bathroom. The two trade off insults laced liberally with the word “Nigga” and the refrain “What the fuck.”

Finally, she jumps up and taunts him: “Slap me now, bitch!” He obliges. In February 2013, two other contestants—again, a man and a woman—get into an altercation where the man threatens the young woman with “I will make you blacker!” He is held back from beating up the young woman. “I don’t give a shit!” he shouts. While other house members utter the go-to phrase: “What the fuck,” some of the jeans-sagging guys of the house instruct the man: “Yo, Rocky! Chill out man, chill out Bro. You don’t need this shit!” The show would be comical if it were not presented as a “reality show” where attitudes and actions are supposed to be perceived as real. The problems that arise from a critical view of shows like this range from low cultural self-esteem (threatening to make someone “blacker”) to a new form of misogyny where women are slapped and mishandled in ways that make Nelly’s “Tip Drill” seem tame. These scenes are snapshots capturing the extent and impact of the foreign occupation of hip hop culture. The wholesale consumption of this one-sided construct of African American culture by young Nigerians creates a chasm rather than a bridge across the Diaspora.

Conclusion

I conclude with a recent case that exemplifies and brings a new undercurrent to this cultural insurgency. In 2012, African American rapper, Rick Ross went to Nigeria and shot a version of his new music video “Hold Me Back.” The video, with the refrain, “These niggas aint gonna hold me back” is replete with images of Nigerian poverty, despair, and filth. It has caused widespread confusion among Nigerians who are both excited and exasperated. The exasperation comes from older Nigerians—those in their 30s and 40s—who told me that they were bothered by the video. Rotimi O. said,

Mr. Ross insults his hosts with this video, not so much by showcasing the reality of urban poverty in a troubled nation like Nigeria, but by failing to give the whole picture. A troubled nation yes, but one with a massively creative soul and an emerging middle class who are part of the global audience. Mr Ross seems in a hurry to forget that his show was a sell out with average tickets going for well above \$300.²⁵

In essence, what Ross has done is to replay the formula applied to African American hip hop, essentializing and overblowing one element of the culture. His music video stretches poverty across the Nigerian populace, bypassing the group of Nigerians who were able to afford his tickets. This critique notwithstanding, the reaction to Ross’ video is completely different from the younger generation—those in their late teens and 20s. Tomini O. said, “I thought it was cool. Let’s face facts.

The truth is that that is how Nigeria actually is.”²⁶ The Rick Ross case indicates that young Nigerians are not only affected in how they act and speak. This case shows that input from this African American star can affect how they think about their own country. Another informant, Nnemeka said “Maybe it even endeared him to me. Its made him gain more popularity here.” Kwesi, a young Ghanaian, said, “I don't really see the video as offensive coz those are the slums. It's not as if he edited the video and made Nigeria look bad. That's how it really is.”²⁷

In a rather scathing critique of Nigerian youth culture, communications scholar Luke Uka Uche opined that “Nigeria and some other Third World countries are undoubtedly faced with cultural conquest, via electronic media, by the industrialized Western societies that once colonized them. However, culture cannot be forcibly imposed on any group of people who are unwilling to be acculturated by foreign values.” My concern with views like Uche's is that they do not account for the subtle nature in which hegemony often thrives. As Gramsci theorized, dominance by one group over another does not always occur by force. Often it is slow and incessant, working the ideals and values of the dominating power into the psyche of the subordinate group. This is the case with Nigeria's hip hop generation.

This paper argues that the tool for the spread of this hegemonic dominance is cultural imperialism, or, as scholars like Fred Fejes would put it, –media imperialism – where one can trace out “the cultural impact of transnational media on third world societies.”²⁸ Uche's view of the current Nigerian culture as comprising a group of people who have willingly allowed this occupation is inadequate and erroneous. He goes on to advocate for “a sound national cultural policy” that is “effectively implemented and policed.”²⁹ And here again, I completely disagree. In a democratic, twenty-first century society where the effects of globalization run rampant, no amount of policing will stem the spread and dominance of African American culture on the psyche of the present generation.

One of my young informants, Sope, summarized the situation succinctly. “In the next five years no one will have an ounce of African culture in them,” he predicts proudly. Jay-Z's lyrics in *The Blueprint* have an ominous warning: “I set the trap just to see dude react, An' now you can't leave/ You opened the door/God, I'm at you annually.” The continuation of this cultural/psychic occupation seems inevitable.

It is pertinent and imperative to add though that all may not be lost, that there is always hope for redemption. Gramsci himself explained that opposition to oppressive power is possible and that it must come from the grassroots, from organic intellectuals who understand and situation and organize movements against the dominant force.

Each new phase of commercial hip hop and R&B in the US has produced a handful of socially-conscious MCs and singers, mostly underground, who provide an alternative discourse that empowers listeners rather than conform to mainstream commercial pressures from the industry. Some of these artists include Talib Kweli, The Roots, Common, Immortal Technique, Jean Grae, and Mos Def. Unfortunately, these artists are not regulars on MTV Base so young Nigerians are not likely to listen to them. However, the impetus for rebel music is not a novelty to West Africans, whose music is an integral and functional part of tradition. Therefore, in the midst of the takeover of the young Nigerian mind, there are a few artists, like Timi Dakolo and Dipo, that are attempting to forge an alternative path to reclaiming proud national/ethnic identity and self-esteem. Like their socially-conscious counterparts in the US, these artists are swimming bravely against the tide of dominant commercial hip hop culture.

This tide, the new version of cultural imperialism in the form of African American music and culture, has been both stealthy and seductive in its approach. It has crashed into the West African coast like a tidal wave. Like other waves before it, it has had a significant impact on the culture of an entire generation. But as it washes back into the Atlantic, it takes a crucial piece of Africa away with it.

Endnotes

¹ Jeff Chang, "It's a Hip Hop World," *Foreign Policy*. No. 163 (Nov. - Dec., 2007), 58-65

² Kitwana Bakari, *Hip Hop Generation* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003), 7.

³ Attahiru Jega, "The Youth, Economic Crisis and Identity Transformation: The Case of the Yandaba in Kano," in *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics Under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria* (Nordic Africa Institute, 2000), 161-162.

⁴ Although highlife originated in Ghana as early as the 1920s, it found its way to Eastern Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s.

⁵ Christopher Waterman, *Juju: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 113.

⁶ Michael Veal, *Fela The Life & Times of an African Musical Icon* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 56.

⁷ Anthony DeCurtis, "A Business Man, Not a Business, Man." *Men's Health* (May 21, 2010).

⁸ Chuks Nwanne. "A Date with Mr. Incredible." *Life Magazine, The Nigerian Guardian*. January 20, 2013.

⁹ Daniel Anazia. "Vector Ready for the Second Coming." *The Nigerian Guardian*. January 27, 2013.

¹⁰ Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Penguin, 1996)

¹¹ Ernest Omoarelojie, "Nigeria: Eedris Abdulkareem Vs. 50 Cent: My Story." On AllAfrica.com. (December 20, 2004).

¹² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), ix, 95.

¹³ Eric Charry, ed., *Hip Hop Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Alex Poinsett. "Festac 77" *Ebony*. May 1977. P40

¹⁵ John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: An Introduction* (London: Continuum, 1991), 64.

¹⁶ Herbert Schiller, *Mass Communication and American Empire* (Westview Press, 1992), 206-207.

¹⁷ Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic*, 96

¹⁸ John Tomlinson. *Globalization and Culture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 20.

¹⁹ Anthony Appiah. *The Ethics of Identity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), xiv.

²⁰ Andrea Kirschner. "Youth Terror or Terrorized Youth: Youth Violence in Nigeria: Redefining Spaces of Politics and Belonging." In *Engaging Terror: A Critical and Interdisciplinary Approach*. Edited By Marianne Vardalos, G.K. Letts, et al. (Boca Raton, Florida: Brown Walker Press. 2009), 381.

²¹ From Fela Anikulapo Kuti's 1972 song, "Lady" where he celebrates the beauty and grace of the natural African woman who is devoid of European external make-up and internal mentality.

²² Interview with Sope Adeagbo. September 12, 2012.

²³ Interview with Mitchell Uku. December 15, 2012.

²⁴ Interview with Seun Agbebi. December 15, 2012.

²⁵ Interview with Rotimi Olaniyan. November 2012.

²⁶ Interview with Tomini O. November 2012.

²⁷ Interview with Nnaemeka G. November 2012.

²⁸ Fred Frejes. "Media Imperialism, An Assessment," *Media, Culture and Society*. 1981. Vol 3:3. 281-9. 287

²⁹ Luke Uka Uche. *Mass Media, People, and Politics in Nigeria* (New Delhi: Ashok Mittal, 1989), 91.