Florian Carl and John Wesley Dankwa

HIPLIFE MUSIC AND RAP IN GHANA AS NARRATIVE AND MUSICAL GENRE

Introduction

Hiplife is one of the most vital genres of commercial music in contemporary Ghana. It is a form of popular culture that enjoys a substantive following, particularly among urban youths. In a sense, we could say that hiplife is an intrinsically urban genre, as it lends the Ghanaian urban experience an expressive form. Hiplife is also an essentially hybrid performance genre, stylistically diverse and expansive. It is explicitly open to new influences, just as the social condition of modern city life is open, constantly confronting urban dwellers with new and unexpected impulses. It has more generally been argued that this eclectic condition is

> constitutive of 'modernity' [not only] in Ghana: for 'modernity' [means] the power to select from and combine the conflicting and contradictory elements of social experience, rather than to endorse one homogeneous state at the expense of another (for example, 'Westernisation' at the expense of 'tradition'). (Barber 1997: 355)

It is in this sense that hiplife exemplifies the state of Ghanaian modernity, a modernity that, as we want to show, does not necessarily exclude the so-called "traditional," but represents an "integrative process involving conscious choices of inclusion and exclusion" (Cole 1997: 371). The orientation of hiplife as a performance genre towards the urban, and more specifically towards urban youths, is most immediately evident in its imagery, in which the cityscape of Accra and other Ghanaian urban environments feature prominently. At times, it is also a more unspecific, stylized "urban-ness" that provides the backdrop against which the performance of hiplife is staged.

In the following we want to outline the emergence of hiplife in Ghana, briefly reviewing its history in the light of the development of rap music in North America and its adaptation on the African continent. We will then examine a few recent examples of hiplife pieces in terms of stylistic traits and attempt to elucidate the characteristics of hiplife as a musical as well as verbal genre. Conceptually, we base our reflections on hiplife on what

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Adam Krims (2000) has called the "musical poetics" of rap music, or, the "poetics of identity." Generally speaking, Krims' focus on musical poetics tries to bridge a more formalistic, analytical approach with approaches that focus more on the contextual side of cultural production. As he writes:

> The 'musical poetics' of rap music [i.e. the particularity of its sounds] must be taken seriously, because they are taken seriously by many people in the course of its production and consumption. […] Identity in rap music indeed has its poetics, and […] the poetics is partially – and crucially – a poetics of musical organization. (Krims 2000: 3)

Krims' concern is particularly with the question of the ways cultural identities are deployed in musical form, and it is here that conceptions of style and genre are of paramount importance. In this regard, Krims' musical poetics is related to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "addressivity," which denotes the implicit conventions within expressive or artistic forms "which assign a position from which [every genre] expects to be received" (Bakhtin 1986: 98). Before we come back to these conceptual considerations, we first want to have a closer look at the emergence of hiplife music in Ghana.

The Emergence of Hiplife in Ghana

The term hiplife is a compound of the words "hip-hop" and "highlife." It is an appropriation of American rap music fused with West African highlife and other musical styles, such as reggae, dancehall and R&B. The roots of hiplife in Ghana are sometimes traced back as far as 1973 when the performer Gyedu Blay Ambolley released his hit record "Simigwado," an Afro-funk-inspired track that included a rap-like spoken-word performance in Fante. This song is believed by some to be the first instance of rap in Ghana (Shipley 2012; 2013: 39–40). As in rap more generally, such spoken word performances have their predecessors in the so-called "toasting" tradition of Jamaican deejays, one that goes back to the 1950s, as well as in African oral performance genres where speech and song are not principally distinct but can be better conceptualized along a continuum of modes of rhythmic expression, from speech, through forms of recitation and song, to gesture and body movement (see Agawu 1995: 27–30).

We should, however, note that constructions of rap music's supposedly African ancestry – expressed, for instance, in the notion that with the emergence of hip-hop in Africa in the 1980s, rap had finally "come home" – rather than being historically accurate, are, for the most part,

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ideologically motivated. Even a cursory glance at the history of rap in Africa shows that, particularly at the outset, it was African American performance modes that were adapted in literal form by young African artists. It was only later, in a second phase of the development of African rap in the 1990s, that these North American performance models were modified and indigenized, so that they could better speak to African audiences. As Eric Charry unambiguously writes:

> American rap was the source for African rap, and it was not necessarily the deep historical and cultural connections that caused Africans to embrace American rap. [...] The myriad traditions of public speaking, poetry, storytelling, epic recitation, chanting, and percussion performance in Africa that resemble in one way or another some stylistic element of modern-day rap […] may indeed have laid the groundwork centuries ago when they moved across the Atlantic. But African rap did not emerge from these homegrown traditions. (Charry 2012: 3–4)

A typical example for the early adaptation of African American performance models in the Ghanaian context is the song "Nightlife in Accra," which was released on Reggie Rockstone's 1997 debut album *Makaa maka* ("If I have said it, I've said it"; Rockstone 1997). The feeling of the background track is laid back; the tempo is a relatively slow 88 beats per minute. The song is only sparsely orchestrated, with an economical descending bass line, coinciding with the bass drum, and a few smooth chords, played by an electric piano, that are sustained for two measures each. The lyrics of this song are sung in English with occasional additions in Pidgin. What is more, both the rappers on this track, Reggie Rockstone and Cy Lover, as well as the female vocalist rendering the chorus and other guest vocalists, adopt a decisively US-American accent, adding to the overall characteristic of the song, which is clearly reminiscent of "old school" hip-hop. The lyrics of the chorus are as follows:

> Nightlife in Accra
> The capital A-C-C-R-A
> Hey! It's only Friday,
> Won't you imagine Saturday!

A significant difference between rap music in North America and its adapted forms in Africa is the sociocultural environment out of which its performance initially emerged. While in the North American context the beginnings of hip-hop culture are mostly associated with the lower classes of the urban ghettoes, in the African context it was rather middle and upper-

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class youths who first had access to rap music on recordings and through transnational travel (see Charry 2012). In Ghana, it was particularly middle-class boarding schools that first provided a fertile ground for the reception and performance of rap (Shipley 2012 and 2013).

Hiplife in a narrower sense emerged in the mid-1990s when artists such as Talking Drums and Native Funk Lords (NFL) started to experiment with localizing American hip-hop, adding lyrics in Pidgin English and local beats and drawing on an imagery that was more oriented towards African audiences. In the mid-1990s, Reggie Rockstone started to develop a more localized, polyglot style of rap dominated by the Akan language. Rockstone, a Ghanaian who grew up in Britain, is often referred to as the “godfather of hiplife.” He is particularly noted for his virtuosic rapping in Twi and his seamless code-switching between American English, pidgin English and Twi. This code-switching has become a model for many subsequent artists. It is, in fact, Rockstone, who is credited with coining the term “hiplife,” which was popularized through Rockstone’s first EP album *Tsoo Boi*, published in 1996 and then re-released 1997 on his debut album (Rockstone 1997).

While Rockstone popularized Akan rap and gave subsequent artists the confidence to use their local languages in hiplife, it was the generation that followed him which took the processes of indigenization in Ghanaian rap music to the next level. Thus, contemporary hiplife artists, such as Obrafour and Obour, are noted for their usage of deeply proverbial Akan language in their lyrics and for adapting traditional forms of poetry in their music.

Hiplife and the Adaptation of Traditional Verbal Genres

The language, imagery and metaphors adopted in hiplife music are in some instances very similar to certain forms of praise poetry found among Akan-speaking people in Ghana. Traditional speech-genres such as *apaeɛ* (recited praise poems), *amoma* (sung praise poetry), *nsuiɛ* (dirges) and *adawu* (recited appellations) are recited or sung during state occasions to celebrate chiefs and other important personalities. Such genres contain, for instance, mythical narratives about the superhuman powers of chiefs in times of war. Poetry, such as *apaeɛ*, praises the ability of chiefs to defend the lands and people under their jurisdiction. A typical example of *apaeɛ* looks like this:

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Akan:	English:
Bediako ee!	Bediako ee! [exclamation]
Apetipre mienu miɛnsa	The apetipre bird is of two, three species,
Bieko yɛfrɛ no Yirifi Ampasakyi;	One of them is Yirifi, Scarcely-absent-in-times-of-war,
Eno ne Yaw	That is Yaw.
Ɔrebɛtu a ɔpɛsɛpɛsɛ	When it is about to fly, its feathers stand on end,
ɔprɛprɛ mu	It shakes its plumes,
Nkɔka Yaw asɛm mmɛka me	Associate me not with matters pertaining to Yaw!

(Cited from Boadi 1989: 18; translation modified by the authors.)

In the above example, we can see that a particular person, Yaw (Bediako), is portrayed as a fierce warrior whose mere presence in the battlefield puts fear into his opponents. The *apetipre* bird here metaphorically stands for the chief. Though usually a rather small bird, it can spread its feathers in a way that makes it look bigger and that also indicates a mode of alertness or readiness to attack. Ever ready to fight – which is actually the literal meaning of the name Bediako – Yaw possesses such great prowess that nobody wants to encounter him.

An example of a hiplife song that emulates such traditional modes of praise poetry is Obour's "Atɛntɛbɛn," which was published on his album *Atumpan* in 2001 (Obour 2001). In this song, Obour announces his presence in the hiplife scene, praising himself as a mysterious person whose work surpasses all other artists who came before him. In a boastful manner, he tells his forerunners that what they could not do, he will do with ease.

Atɛntɛbɛn, nea moreyɛ no yɛbɛtumi ayɛ	Atɛntɛbɛn, what you are doing, we can do it better
Onua twɛn, yɛreba abɛyɛ	Brother wait, we are coming to do it
Ama na'ayɛ gyɛ	To do it more excellently

Obour significantly makes reference to traditional musical instruments like the bamboo flute *atɛntɛbɛn* as well as the "talking drums" *atumpan* in the title of his album and song. Both instruments are actually used to play appellations in the form of speech surrogates. Using hyperbolical effects in his lyrics, Obour stresses his capability of doing the impossible, just as we would find in *apaeɛ*. Let's examine the following portion of the song "Atɛntɛbɛn":

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Metumi bobɔ lorry kwan tesɛ kɛtɛ	I can fold the lorry road like a mat
M'anom' asɛm baako bubu dan	One word from my mouth can demolish a building
Wo fufuo ntoa yɛ me nkɔntɔmmoa	Your one ball of fufu is my morsel
To me tuo, mehu no sɛ mframa,	Shoot me with a gun, I'll blow the bullets like air
Mɛkye ma moa	I will catch and hold [them] tight
Mede me nse kɛkɛ we mpentoa	I chew broken bottles with my teeth
Me wie a mede me to asi mu	When I finish, I sit on the broken glass
na m'asa adonkwa	And dance *adonkwa*
Suro me, me ntɔ nko mpo na mese m'ada	Fear me, I don't doze, let alone sleep
Deɛ wontumi nsoa no mede	What you can't carry
me nsa baako bɛsɔ mu	I use one hand to hold it
Baabi a wo nante tehwe	Where you walk and fall
mede mmirika betwa mu	I will run and pass
Ɔboɔ, me ho yɛ huhuhuuhu	Obour, I am very terrific

Obour projects himself here as a supernatural being just like a chief would be in traditional *apaeɛ*. In contrast to the oral Akan genre, however, Obour engages in self-praise, which we wouldn't find in the oral tradition, where, for instance, the *abrafoɔ* (the executioners) in the palace shower praises on the chief. While the form of Obour's poetry is traditional Akan, the manner in which he is praising himself is very much in line with the hip-hop tradition, where forms of self-praise and the "dissing" of other artists as inferior are very literary devices.

There are traditional song genres in which the ridiculing of other people also commonly occurs. One such genre is war songs that have the intention of mocking the enemy and elevating the morale of one's own troops. Consider for instance the following example, which is an Asante war song, nowadays performed at festivals such as *Adae Keseɛ* and which ridicules the opponents of the Asantehene, the king of Asante, Osei Tutu II, calling them "stupid" and "old men."

Oyee, moyɛ dɛn ni a?	Oyee [exclamation], what are you doing?
Nkwaseafoɔ yi aa,	These stupid people,
Nkɔkorafoɔ, moyɛ dɛn ni a?	Old men, what are you doing?

A different example of a hiplife piece that employs modes of Akan oral tradition, which actually predates Obour's *Atɛntɛbɛn*, is Obrafour's

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"Kwame Nkrumah Apaeɛ," which was published on the 1999 album *Pae Mu Ka* ("To proclaim the truth"; Obrafour 1999). This is a song meant to celebrate the heroic deeds of Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah and others who laid down their lives for the country to gain independence from colonial rule. In the form of libation (apaeɛ), which is a traditional form of prayer, Obrafour recounts the demeanor of Nkrumah prior to his achievement of independence for Ghana as well as his quest for total liberation from colonial rule for the entire African continent.

Otweduampɔn Kwame Nsa (Wea o)	Otweduampɔn Kwame, drink
ɔsoro ne Asaase Yaa nsa (wea o)	Heaven and Mother Earth
Nananom nsamanfoɔ nsa	Ancestors, drink
Yɛyi Kwame Nkruma apaeɛ (Repeated)	We make Nkrumah's libation
[…]	
megyina ha ma Ghana	I stand here for Ghana
mefrɛ Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah	I call Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah
yɛbɔ wo din	we mention your name
wo deɛ woyɛ nten	as for you, you are straight
wode wo nyansa na ɛgyee	you use your wisdom to liberate
Ghana too hɔ bɛyɛɛ ɔhen	Ghana and you became the king
ewiem yɛɛ din	The sky was silent
abrɔfo akoma bɔɔ brim	the white men were terrified
firi sɛ wɔhunuu sɛ	because they saw that
woakokoɔduru dɔɔso te sɛ nwi	your courage was plentiful like hair
Dr. Kwame Nkrumah wo deɛ	Dr. Kwame Nkrumah your
nyansa te sɛ nsoroma	wisdom is like the star
Africaman nyinaa	the whole of the African continent
yɛgye wo to mu sɛ wonim nhoma	we believe in you that you are a scholar
Bapɔnmma, w'ani ate,	Great son, your eyes are open
Sabarima, w'ani afiri tesɛ abrɔnoma	Great warrior your eyes are open like the dove
W'adom ne wadaworoma	through your grace
wamma Ghana anya faahodie	you've let Ghana gain independence

The song is a typical example of a prayer as it is offered to ancestors in families during annual gatherings such as festivals, funerals, traditional marriage ceremonies, or, more generally, events of the life cycle. The good deeds of the ancestors are narrated in traditional prayers, just as Obrafour does in his song. In addition, the living are also advised to emulate the lives

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of the ancestors. In every libation-making, a curse is rained upon anybody who wishes evil upon the family, community or, in this case, country. Obrafour includes this aspect of the tradition form of prayer in the song as follows:

Nnipa bɔneni a ɛkaa ɔno nko ara	The bad person who left to him alone
Anka Ghana anim bɛgu ase deɛ	Ghana will be disgraced
Momma ne mmɔ ne tiri so	Let it go right on his head

As far as hiplife as a genre is concerned, another typical feature is its self-reference or, we might say, intertextuality. This feature has actually to do with the forms of addressivity that the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin identified and which can be seen as a constitutive feature of speech genres. As Bakhtin writes:

> Each epoch, each literary trend and literary-artistic style, each literary genre within an epoch or trend, is typified by its own special concepts of the addressee of the literary work, a special sense and understanding of its reader, listener, public, or people. […] Thus, addressivity, the quality of turning to someone, is a constitutive feature of the utterance; without it the utterance does not and cannot exist. (Bakhtin 1986: 98–99).

We have already mentioned a form of self-reference in the “dissing” of other artists, which is typical for hip-hop as a genre more generally, and where the addressee of an utterance is another artist. Such forms of addressivity presume prior knowledge of the audience and their familiarity with the genre, its predominant artists, their histories and their rivalries. In addition to “dissing,” another form of intertextuality is the negotiation of genre boundaries themselves in songs. A very good example for this practice is the song “Killing the Game” by Obour, released in 2009 and featuring his rapper colleague Okyeame Kwame. In the song Obour asks:

Hiplife yɛ nsɔhwɛ a nka yɛatreili	If hiplife were an exam, then we are all trailing
Nti na ama yɛaweili	that is why we are wailing
Yɛayɛ ara na ɛnnyɛ yie a	We are trying in vain, it’s not getting better
Na ɛfiri deɛn nti?	So what is the cause?

Because artists do not concentrate on their own, i.e. indigenous performance qualities, but rather want to “go international,” Obour argues in the song, hiplife as a genre is failing, as this excerpt illustrates:

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Obiara pɛ sɛ ɔkɔ international	Everyone wants to go international
Eno ne answer?	Is that the answer?
Kwame, yɛfiri one ansa na yɛakɔ two	Kwame, we count one before we count two
Wo nni ntaban, ɛnso wopɛ sɛ wo tu	You don't have wings but you want to fly

And towards the end of the song Obour continues:

Eyɛɛ deɛn na ma ɛnneɛma no baa saa?	Why did things go that way?
DJs, artist, producers,	DJs, artist, producers
Moama bibiara ayɛ basaa	You've made everything go down the drain
Etɔ da bi a na m'adwa saa	Sometimes I get mad
Anɔpa, awia ne anwumerɛ	Morning, afternoon and evening
Na yɛ da saa	We sleep always
Sɛ yɛnnae nso a na yɛte club we nsa	If we are not asleep we sit in a club to drink
Na yɛdi akɔneaba	And we go forth and come forth
Kakraa bi na wobɛnya a na asa	The little you get, it gets finished
Producer te Kantamanto	A producer sits in Kantamanto
Nnwom no watena so	He has worked on the song
Distribution ɛnkɔ so	The distribution doesn't go well
Promotion nso ɛnkɔ so	The promotion, too, doesn't go well
Woto nnwom no a ɛmmɔ so	When you sing the song it doesn't catch on
Studio engineers ahodoɔ	Various studio engineers
No nso pɛsɛ wɔ mixi	They want to mix the song
Afei nnwom no yɛ ɔmo	Then, when the song gets worse
na ɔnoaa ɛdiise	Then he starts to "diss"
Ɔwie a ɔse hiplife is dying	And when he's done he says hiplife is dying

Those familiar with hiplife will understand Obour's allusions in this song. As part of a growing international interest in non-mainstream hip-hop offshoots from parts of the world other than North America, in the mid-2000s a number of Ghanaian hiplife artists such as Samini and Sarkodie signed with international record labels. When Obour speaks about people who want to "go international," he is therefore directly referring to these artists.

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Not surprisingly, and further elaborating on such forms of cross-referencing and intertextuality, other artists have in turn reacted to Obour's "Killing the Game", turning the question of whether the genre is dead or alive on its head. Thus, Obrafour, in his song "Kaseɛbɔ" ("News"), raps the following lines:

Yɛse hiplife awu	They say hiplife has died
Na hiplife awu wosiee no	So, if hiplife is dead, was it buried
wɔ Togo anaa Gabon?	In Togo or Gabon?
First no a na studio yɛ	At first when there was only
one wɔ Nkran ha mpo	One studio here in Accra
Hiplife annwu, na nndɛ a studios dɔɔso	Hiplife didn't die [then], let alone now that studios are many
Sɛ nsɛm no ebinom reka a wonnwen ho	People don't think before they talk
Boys no wɔn anum nsɛm asa	The boys have no words again
Gyae ma wɔnkeka nkwaada nsɛm	Stop and let them continue with their
mfa wɔn ho nndi	Childish stories

Summary and Conclusion

Summarizing the characteristics of hiplife as a performance genre, Shipley writes:

> Hiplife has creatively intermingled three main influences: African diasporic popular expression; the legacy of proverb-based Akan-language performance genres; and the rapid development of commercial electronic media in Accra. Hiplife, then, is not characterized by a particular rhythm or lyrical flow but rather by a creative style for mixing diverse African and diasporic performance practices and signs. (Shipley 2012: 30)

It is, in our view, in this sense that hiplife can be understood in the light of what Adam Krims has called the poetics of identity. From this perspective, identity – that is, the identity of the genre and, through the way it addresses its audience, the identity of performers and consumers as well – is contained in the very form of the music. The lyrics of individual songs can vary greatly in terms of their narrative content – and we just looked at different examples. Beyond what we discussed above, other common topics in hiplife concern male-female or more generally human relationships, money problems, and almost any other issue that life in the modern world brings about. But in the musical and poetic form of hiplife, in its characteristics as a genre, we can also discern a kind of meta-

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narrative, and this narrative concerns the question of how to maintain one's local identity in a world of rapid globalization.

In this vein, the hiplife artist Tic Tac, for instance, told an interviewer:

> It's very important for me to do something different from urban American, or, urban black hip-hop, or whatever they call it. Because, I think that, as Tic Tac, you know – as an artist, I should have my unique style, you know. Even though I'm a rap artist, or hiplife artist you might call it, I still have my identity. And as an African, I'm not sure I can live without – not being an African. I always have to represent Africa, no matter what. That's where I come from. (Tic Tac 2008)

As we mentioned at the beginning, the identity of hiplife is urban and modern, but it is also specifically African, or, for that matter, Ghanaian. As we have been trying to show, it is not a monolithic identity in any purist sense, but one that represents a creative mix of conscious choices of inclusion and exclusion, and it is in this sense that it also reflects the creativity of all who are involved in the production and performance of hiplife.

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