

Fou(r)(l) letter words: Analyzing the use of modern-day dozens in African Hip hop music

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The dozens, or toasting, has always been a feature of hip hop music from its inception. The dozens are characterized by the use of, in many occasions, four-letter words and insulting phrases aimed at a real or perceived enemy. Toop calls this phenomenon the ‘toast’, a narrative form, rhyming stories told mostly among men. He describes these toasts as verbally ‘violent, scatological, obscene, misogynist...used for decades to while away time’. Hip hop, considered anti-establishment and protest in nature, has carved a niche by the defiant use of toasts, and it is now common to hear, in global hip hop music, what Celious describes as ‘the language of bitches and hoes’. In African hip hop, Githinji among other scholars have described these toasts as ‘ritualized genre of verbal duels...where one antagonist insults another or members of his or her family’.

In most cases, these toasts are done in English, in both global and local hip hop. However, use of local argot, like Kenya’s *Sheng* language, is also in wide use in delivering toasts and in tackling taboo subjects.

My paper begins an analysis of the use of toasts in African hip hop music. On one hand, there is the use of this ‘scatological, obscene, misogynist’ language, in English, that includes popular four-letter words that has given the label ‘*gangsta*’ to hiphop genres. These English words are now in common usage in African hiphop music, raising critical questions of cultural translocation from West to South and authenticity of the local form. On the other hand, there is the use of local argot, where these English words and phrases are translated and used in hiphop music. This presents interesting interpretations, considering the protest nature of hiphop, expressed mainly in its music, and the various publics it addresses in various languages.

Ultimately, my paper looks at the ambiguities raised in the use of popular four-letter words in African hiphop, especially English-slang words that have been popularized in American hiphop music and translocated to the African local space. Of key interest is the meanings made from the use of this language in the local space, and the relevance of their use. I also look on the flip side in the use of these four-letter words in local argot, and the meanings that may be derived from this as well.