

Cap, Jeans and Prayer Beads. Cosmopolitanism and its Opposite in Senegalese Hip Hop.

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All along the 20th century, popular and commercial music has been, for Senegal and for all colonial and post-colonial Africa, an important arena where national or local identities have been negotiated, (re)invented and arranged with transnational flows and trends toward cultural “extraversion” (in Bayart’s sense). In Senegal, particularly, the success of rap music and the birth of a local hip hop scene between the 80s and the 90s has overlapped with a period of turbulence and transformation and, in the imaginary, with the reconfiguration of youth as a prominent, though ambiguous, political actor.

By reversing the direction of the “Black Atlantic” processes (as theorized by Gilroy), Senegalese rap has served as a channel for new forms of urban cosmopolitanism: it has popularized new transnational identities based on the black diaspora, and set the United States, and particularly the African American cultural production, as major references for younger generations. At the same time, it has shaped discourses and struggles over authenticity, afrocentrism and national identity in Senegal.

Drawing from ethnographic material collected between 2005 and 2010, I will draw an analysis of how rap music and hip hop culture offer repertoires of cosmopolitanism that allow Senegalese youth to multiply their references and sources of inspiration, while not necessarily adopting an explicit cosmopolitan or hybrid attitude. I will focus particularly on the visual dimension of Senegalese hip hop (the changes it has produced in style and fashion, its recent video clip production, graffiti and the marking of urban landscapes), a dimension in which the practices of trans-cultural quotation are more evident and significant.