Gang Politics

The instrumentalization of urban counterculture in Conakry, Guinea

Abstract

Guinea's capital Conakry is the site of a remarkable politicization throughout the past five years. Strikes, rallies, riots, and demonstrations are frequent, vociferous, and plural in their concerns and effects. Youth gangs occupy a central role in them: not only do they initiate protests by being the first ones to take to the streets, ignite car tires or erect barricades; they also mobilize and organize the young population of their neighborhoods over which they exert a considerable influence. Economic incentives are doubtlessly pivotal for such political actions (many gangs use politics like a business) but do not rule out their substantially political character. Rather, money channels an often dramatic, indiscriminate and diffuse political rage of gang youths against the misery that surrounds them, and, not to forget, their dreams and hopes in the amelioration of their conditions.

This emotional and cognitive raw material of their protests is rooted in the cultural repertoire of global hip hop into which the self-proclaimed *ghetto youths* tap to craft their own social fields, urban spaces, and institutions, express and realize their desires of independence, and experiment with new forms of sociability and micro-political organization. While their counterculture distances them from the political elite on an abstract level, they practically become entangled in an inherently ambiguous two-directional instrumentalization. Theoretically, this confirms many authors' emphasis on youths' potential to break with a Mbembian postcolonial epistemology but also demonstrates that an affiliation with transnational cultures does not imply independence from the very tangible orders of urban every-day lives. Out of sheer necessity and lack of alternatives, gang youths become part of local politics, simultaneously undermining and stabilizing an increasingly complex order which which they urgently seek to frame and understand. This paper, analyzing the conflation of (self-)ordering by youths and the disorder of urban protest politics, draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from field research in 2009 and 2010. It attempts to link academic debates on urbanity and youth in Africa to emphasize the two aspects' interdependencies and shared political relevancy.

Introduction

During the past five years, Guinea traversed an extraordinarily tumultuous political period (see McGovern 2008; Engeler 2008; Philipps 2010a, 2010b). Governed by three different regimes and four acting presidents, the streets of the country's capital Conakry have become a principal site for political action. In this context, Conakry's youth gangs have become a political heavyweight. According to the Guinean sociologist Bano Barry, there is no mass demonstration, riot or political protest in Conakry, in which gangs do not play the principal role of mobilizing young people to take to the streets.[1] Gangs erect barricades and set car tires on fire to stop the traffic to cause the infrastructural chaos that indicates the beginning of upheavals. With their considerable influence in neighborhoods, they can mobilize and organize large shares of the young urban population to join any political, social, or cultural activity and movement. Guinean political actors are fully aware of this and employ gang youths for demonstrations against their opponents. While the instrumentalization of rather loosely organized youths has always occurred in Guinea during election periods since 1984, the 2007 revolts have rung in a new kind of protest politics featuring gangs as central elements.[2]

In this paper I am particularly concerned with the cultural foundations that youth gangs' political agency is based on. I start from a very basic observation: that there is a fundamental desire amongst urban gang youths to order and frame their inherently fluid and contradictory political environment, and second, that this framing is supposed to reflect onto them a position of significance and power. Amongst a large proportion of urban youth, this is achieved by drawing on the transnational cultural repertoire of hip hop. Rap lyrics and hip hop narratives fetched from global media elevate local urban youth from a social position of ubiquitous deficiency to a proud community of ghetto youth. The struggle for self-assertion, significance, and power links this hip hop cultural identification with the political sphere. Many gangs entertain elaborate dichotomous narratives that contrast the old, rich, corrupt elite and the young, poor ghetto youth and imply the necessity to fight the former by all means. All the more surprising is their support for the very same elites during political campaigns and demonstrations. How can we account for this paradoxical relationship? Is it plainly economic? Is it due to (misdirected?) political convictions? Or is it simply a nihilist violent expression of radical frustration?

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1 Interview with Dr. Bano Barry, Sonfonia, Conakry, March 19th 2010. I use the terms riots, protests, and demonstrations interchangeably since they have usually been strongly intertwined in Conakry.

2 Interview with Azoka Bah, Ratoma Ville, Conakry, March 23rd 2010.

Based on several months of field research amongst Conakry's street gangs in 2009 and 2010,[3] I hold that the answer is – just as the young people's daily environment – an inherently hybrid one and comprises various interrelated motives and factors. This paper focuses mainly on the *cultural* aspects that are relevant to account for gang politics in Conakry. To elucidate the social meaning, collective emotions, and cultural styles that play into gangs' engagement in political protests and mass events we will proceed as follows.

First, since the concept is stereotype-laden, we define a little more clearly what we mean by 'gangs'. Second, we offer an empirical example of gang politics in Conakry and analyze the role of economic incentives among urban youth when they supported then-president Dadis Camara whom they demonstrated against only one week later. Third, we will turn more specifically to the cultural background of ghetto youth and outline hip hop as the transnational background of gang youth in Conakry and as an ambivalent culture that intertwines a political agenda with a violent gangsta imagery. Fourth, we show how youth's identification with hip hop has first challenged micropolitical institutions such as the family and education system and later national macropolitics themselves. Fifth, an by a close-up analysis of the enmeshment of political protests, attitudes, cultural styles, and collective emotions, we point out that culture and political protest intertwine considerably. Yet, as much as gang youths share a *counter*culture, and as much as this counterculture distances them from the political elite on an abstract level, it does not keep them from becoming entangled in the same politics that they denounce. In fact, their genuine rage *against* politicians often provides the very collective-emotional basis for their manipulation and instrumentalization *by* politicians.

Gangs in Conakry

Youth gangs are to be interpreted as youth's ingenuous response to an urban context of scarce resources, little opportunities, and as organizational "efforts to upend social practices and local power regimes which they believe hold them back" (Simone 2008a: 83). They are the social institutions where young people – mostly men – experiment with new forms of sociability, create gang funds and insurances, engage in competitions over abandoned urban spaces, and where they form each others' opinions about the conditions in which they live. Far from the clichéd assumption that gangs are comprised of poor, excluded, delinquent young men, Conakry's gangs are highly

3 During my MA research in Conakry I recorded roughly 100 interviews with gang members and experts, carried out a number of surveys among the general population (n = 240) and followed various gangs through their day-to-day lives.

heterogeneous. Gangs may be made up of students from well-off families and poor illiterates who barely know who their parents are. A gang may be a small peer group of children or a highly organized institution of more than 400 young adults; some group a circle of friends, while others function like a criminal entity. Politically, certain gangs support politicians in whom they have trust, some use politics like a business, and many distance themselves from the political realm. Despite this diversity of gangs, we can assert that, contrary to Robert D. Kaplan's (1996: 16) notorious depiction of African urban youth as "out of school, unemployed, loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatened to ignite", Conakry's gangs represent some of the most institutionalized and rigidly organized collectives in Conakry's urban society.

Their internal order certainly facilitates their instrumentalization by political actors. Party militants generally have to convince only the gang leader to have hundreds of young supporters willing to wholeheartedly defend the party as long as there is sufficient remuneration. Yet, gangs are not to be understood as political only in terms of their actions in protests. Their political role concerns at least three different levels: their internal organization, their position within their social environments, *and* their role in political protests. There is much room for contradiction among these levels. A certain gang, for example, may internally conserve authoritarian orders but steadily fight and condemn the authoritarian state, deliberately and/or because they were paid. Another gang's political disengagement may be a consequence of its members' critical consciousness or political skepticism. It may thus be just as 'political' as other gangs' engagement in demonstrations, which, again, often bespeaks their bare economic needs but can by itself trigger actual political attitudes. To illustrate this latter point, let us turn to an incident of gang politics which I was able to observe in 2009: then-President Dadis Camara's youth rally in the neighborhood of Kaporo Rails.

An Example of Gang Politics: Dadis Camara's 2009 Youth Rally

Camara, the former president and leader of the military junta *Conseil National de la Démocratie et du Développement* (CNDD), had organized an encounter with gang youth when the critical voices increased regarding his unkept promise to rule out his candidacy in the presidential elections. Without any major ethnic group to vote for him, he had increasingly targeted the young population for support, or, at least, to avert their resistance. The event consisted of various speeches by young men and by an imam, two rap shows, a motorcycle performance (which left at least one person injured) and a speech by the president who explicitly declared his solidarity with the area's ghetto

youths and opposed their stigmatization by the general public ("S'ils vous appellent *bandits*, moi aussi je me réclame bandit!").[4]

Sam[5], one of the main gang representatives who had organized the event in response to the President's request, reported in an interview that his incentives were plainly economic. If he had a regular job, he said, he would not engage in politics which he sees as an entirely corrupt business. Yet, for the 250 million Francs Guinéens, which after all amounted to more than $50,000 and which were given to him and 36 other gang leaders, Sam convinced his friends to arrange the happening despite their fears that the military would kill them. His mobilization tactics were rather simple: "Allons, même s'ils vont nous tuer, c'est les cadres du pays, *man*, on te tues aujourd'hui ou demain, tu vas mourir, allons!"[6] The money was diligently shared amongst the involved local gang leaders from all five districts of Conakry.

That protests against Dadis Camara and the CNDD erupted only one week later (see Bah 2009; S. Diallo 2009) and comprised the very same youths that had just supported the president suggests that the incentive for gangs to be involved in politics is primarily economic. Yet, such a generalization may be too easy. Let us consider gang 'conseiller' Dre, who had been implicated as another organizer of the event and whom I had the chance to interview various times throughout. Right after Camara's speech, in which the president did *not* rule out his future presidential candidacy, Dre admired 'Dadis' for his honesty and his anti-ethnocentric attitude.

> Je dis, c'est quelqu'un, c'est quelqu'un, c'est un monsieur, il est patriote! Lui en personne il est patriote!! […] Et le chronogramme qu'il a promis encore, qu'il va respecter et il va le respecter, c'est quelqu'un il est honnête. Déjà, il y avait un esprit de racisme dans la tête des Guinéens. Dès qu'il venu au pouvoir, c'est ce qu'il a essayé d'abord d'effacer! Dès qu'il est monté quoi. […] l'idée-là, l'idée-là ça m'a beaucoup plu, le fait qu'il va effacer ça dans la tête des Guinéens, l'ethnocentrisme-là, il a effacé ça d'abord totalement! Il dit Guinéen est égale à Guinéen.

Dre's praise of the President as an honest man who will respect his promises and who has erased ethnocentrism from the minds of the Guinean people, especially in this length, detail, pathos, and emphasis, are unlikely to be simulated. Yet, however sincere it may have been, such political attitudes are highly situational. One week later, I watched television with Dre and his friends. Camara held a speech where he remained ambiguous again about whether or not he would run for president. Dre insulted the head of the state ("le maudit") and told me he was ready to kill the CNDD soldiers, to sacrifice his life for the sake of democracy and the lives of future generations since "ceci-là [Camara] veut encore que nos enfants-là mènent leurs vies comme nous." What this exemplifies is that political events are not to be discarded as mere facades during which gang

4 Observations by the author, Kaporo Rails, Conakry, August 20th 2009.
5 All names of gang members are changed.
6 Interview with Sam, Cosa, Conakry, March 31st 2010.

youths are only waiting to receive the money that was promised to them. Instead of advocating (with a subliminal admiration) that youths are either 'cleanly' political, or (with a defiant anti-romanticism) that they are simply corrupt and manipulated, the political and the economic should be thought of as interrelated.

Two aspects will illustrate this point. First, political actors allure gang youths not only with money but also with promises of future posts in the bureaucratic apparatus, the army, or the police. Triggering gang youths' dreams of wealth and power within the political realm, they create a considerable affinity between these very dissimilar institutions and cultures. Unlike rappers, who envision futures apart from the political system, many gang members who 'work' for political actors implicitly hope that their association with the *Big Men* will provide them with the means of establishing themselves as grown men. Politicians thus build on, respond to, and nourish the long-belied economic desires of youths. In exchange for their often very generous payments, the *Big Men* are likely to become embodiments of youth's highly naïve aspirations. In the head of their followers, the *Big Man's* success signifies the overcoming of poverty and powerlessness, as much as his defeat would correspond to their absolute failure to escape misery.

Second, the political and the economic are interrelated in political protests in the way that Simone (2008b) demonstrates with regard to the Cameroonian Bepanda Market. Here and there, "there is much room for dissimulation; much room for making things seem as if they are real when they are not, or making them real simply through the sheer mobilizing of money, interest, or support on the part of those schemed or part of making a scheme" (Simone 2008b: 22). While many instances of gangs' political support may simply be dissimulated, others may gain momentum through the mobilization of capital in the first instance, to be followed by emotions, identifications, hopes and aspirations.

Thus, while material incentives provide the central link between gangs and political demonstrations in the first place, they should by no means cover up their non-material dimensions (political, emotional, and cultural). As to the political dimension, it is safe to say that the large majority of ghetto youths identify politics as being at the heart of their problems and seek to challenge the status quo. They speak proudly about their involvement in the 2007 or the 2009 mass demonstrations, stressing the fierceness of youths who did not back down until President Conté had named an acceptable new prime minister in 2007,[7] or condemning the brutality and cowardice of

7 Interviews with Sam (Cosa, Conakry, March 31st 2010), with Dre (Kaporo Rails, Conakry, August 27th 2009), and with *Ghetto Mafia* (Kaporo Rails, Conakry, August 24th 2009).

the CNDD soldiers who fired into the crowd in 2009.[8] Protest is thus a much-valued bodily practice amongst gangs as long as it can be described as morally estimable.

The crux of the matter, however, is that due to a profound political disorientation in Conakry, who is to be fought for and who to be opposed can only rarely be discerned. Coalitions break and realign in spontaneous ways, and information remains notoriously ambiguous. Confronted with such uncertainties, there is always enough room for the young protesters to either heroize or denunciate certain political candidates, attributions and identifications which money and promises of a dignified personal future facilitate considerably.

Hip Hop Culture: Politics and Confrontation

Having discussed the economic incentives for urban youths to partake in gang politics, we will now turn to the significance of *culture*, loosely defined here in line with Geertz (1973: 5) as a *web of significance* or a *system of meaning*. Gangs share a cultural matrix that is largely structured by meanings imported from the symbolic repertoire of global hip hop.[9] Conakry's gang youths wear baggy pants and baseball caps, pose and gesticulate like rappers, talk in a street slang, perform complicated handshakes, and thereby break with "the representation of youth by adults" (Diouf 2005: 231). This cultural context is prototypically *glocal*: hip hop is a paradigmatic example of a *global* phenomenon that becomes appropriated to serve and accentuate *local* concerns (see Robertson 1994; Bucholtz 2002; Androutsopoulos 2003). For our analysis this implies that, after describing the global cultural context of gang youth, we explain why, when, and how certain aspects of the global cultural repertoire have been locally appropriated by Conakry's youths, thereby explicating how culture is part of social, economic, and political contexts. Third, we will explain how gang culture relates to political protests in Conakry.

There is today a vast and ever-growing academic literature on hip hop as a global phenomenon (see Remes 1999; Androutsopoulos 2003, 2009; Alridge and Stewart 2005; Weiss 2005; Hagedorn 2007; Alim et al. 2009). Witnessing its importance and political impacts in close to all parts of the world (see Ross 2008; Akwagyiram 2009; Wend 2010), Chang's title "It's a hip hop world" (2007) points

8 Various interviews and discussions with Dre in Kaporo Rails, Conakry, in 2009 and 2010.

9 Hip hop is usually defined in terms of its four elements of rapping, DJ-ing, breakdance, and graffiti (see Hagedorn 2008: 94); here, we will employ a broad definition that includes hip hop's interrelation with other musical genres and youth cultures (such as reggae or pop). While rap is the principal element of hip hop culture in Conakry (Dj-ing and graffiti are too costly today for most young Guineans; breakdance is made difficult by the lack of plain ground), hip hop nonetheless goes far beyond music. Clothing, gestures, languages, attitudes, etc. are deeply influenced by this culture. Interview with Alhoussein Kaba, Nongo, Conakry, April 1st 2010. See also "Le Rap en Guinée : interview de Marco Ibrahim".

at a social reality shaped and experienced by young people for whom "Hip Hop reflects the social, economic, political, and cultural realities and conditions of their lives, speaking to them in a language and manner they understand" (Alridge and Stewart 2005: 190). As to the case of Guinea, Marco Ibrahim contends that "la quasi-totalité des jeunes ici adhèrent au mouvement hip hop."10 At the same time, hip hop is of course no uniform culture. Neither is it a dichotomous one, as many analysts and observers seem to suggest when focusing on *either* the politically progressive *or* the destructively violent side of the hip hop coin – to either celebrate the genre's political impact (Menrath 2003; Pennycook and Mitchell 2009) or to warn of its destructive social effects (Oliver 2006; see also Newman 2009).

As to hip hop's global role, analyses of its positive potential are by far in the majority. Osumare (2007: 15), for example, argues that hip hop provides young people with a transnational cultural connection, a common perspective on their marginal statuses, which she subsumes under the label of *connective marginalities*. Youths across the world identify with this transnational culture in their local contexts to craft their specific understanding of their experiences of oppression, desire for rebellion, disadvantages and lacking prospects.

In this sense, hip hop culture lends a voice and a scene to those who have long been excluded from access to positively connoted identities (Menrath 2003). Rappers express and aestheticize their individual hardships, and, moreover, speak in the name of those who are usually represented negatively or not referred to at all – a generation, neighborhood or city of 'ghetto youth'. They further a feeling of community united in similar social-economic positions and strengthened in their self-attribution of worth and dignity (see Pennycook and Mitchell 2009). Their subcultural practices and discourses are shaped by a "sociopolitical perspective of poor vs. rich, powerless vs. powerful" that is being adopted from globally disseminated sounds and images:

> Youth actively compare their 'ghetto-lives' with those described by Bob Marley, Ice Cube, Lucky Dube, or Kool Moe Dee, artists seen on the occasional video or heard on cassettes. Marley's critique of Babylon in songs like "Them Belly Full" strikes a familiar chord among youth and the urban poor who recognize the poverty and everyday survival of those living in Kingston, Jamaica (Remes 1999: 14).[11]

Serving as discursive representatives of youths, local rappers publicize and disseminate their attitudes, convictions, hopes and frustrations. This representation is political insofar as it is an exercise of symbolic power (see Bourdieu 1989), crafting a group out of the social categories of poverty and youth. It positions this group within the broader urban society of Conakry, potentially

10 "Le Rap en Guinée : interview de Marco Ibrahim". For general information on Guinean hip hop, please visit the website www.fonike.info; see especially "Le Rap en Guinée : la scène HipHop".

11 Weiss (2005: 114) observed the same thing in Arusha, Tanzania where he "often heard young men describe their own hardships as being just like those endured by the rappers they admired, or discussing how Tanzanians were the same as 'Black-Americans' in their pain."

in opposition to the rich, old, corrupt elite who are portrayed as the cause of the young people's misery. There is thus a high potential that the problematization of youth's poverty, which resides at the heart of their cultural styles and practices, also triggers the voicing of frustrations and demands vis-à-vis the national political elite (Menrath 2003, Dimitriadis 2004).

On the other side of the spectrum, the icon of the *gangsta* offers a powerful character of identification. Personified by rappers like Tupac, Ice Cube, or Notorious B.I.G., this "larger than life character" (Dimitriadis 2004: 99) has inspired not only the names (such as *Harlem, Wu-Tang, Cash Money, Ghetto Mafia, Chamillionaire*) but the general postures of gang youths in Conakry. Talking about the young people of his neighborhood, one of my interviewees exclaimed: "Ils veulent tous être comme Tupac!"[12] There is considerably little literature on the gangsta in terms of its global dissemination. We will thus rely especially on the work of Dimitriadis (2004: 29) who defines the gangsta as "the violent outlaw, living his life outside of dominant cultural constraints, solving his problems through brute power and domination" and paradoxically embodying "such capitalist values as rugged individualism, rampant materialism, strength through physical force, and male domination, while he rejects the very legal structures defining that [U.S. American] culture". The gangsta character subversively turns the moral categories upside down by priding himself as being 'bad', an aggressive young black male, the nightmare of society, who deals crack, engages in drive-by shootings, hates women (except for when they represent sexual objects), embodies hardness and realness, and exhibits the capacity of getting what he wants against all odds (see Newman 2009, Oliver 2006). The ghetto, a place of misery and hardship forms the social and spatial background that pushes the gangsta to be merciless, violent and brutal (see Klein and Friedrich 2003). While the ghetto and the urgency of *hustling* implicitly critiques the social-political context in which the gangsta grows up, his explicit concerns typically relate to street battles with rival gangs and aspirations for personal wealth (see Dimitriadis 2004: 70). Gaining recognition in this context generally consists of *confrontation* of rivals, norms, morals, laws and law enforcers, providing, as Dimitriadis (2004: 29) has formulated, a "ready-made tool for teen rebellion".

Confronting Micropolitics

The following analysis will take the very tension between the political and the violent aspects of hip hop culture as a point of departure. Conakry's gang culture, just like hip hop, hovers between a political agenda against marginalization on the one hand and a celebration of confrontation on the other. Dimitriadis's (2004: 101) analysis of the "near-mythical" public figure of Tupac, who voiced

12 Interview with Mamadou, Prince, Hamdallaye, Conakry, March 31st 2010.

demands for social justice and at the same time brutally attacked rival 'niggaz', exemplifies the wide continuum of often paradoxical identifications that the hip hop cultural repertoire offers to youths across the globe. This is also the case for Conakrys young people.

As beneficiaries of Lansana Conté's liberalization policies and witnesses of an ever-increasing availability of foreign television channels, films, cassettes, and later CDs and the internet, youths are the main representatives of an enormous cultural change in the formerly enclosed country.[13] After Sékou Touré's death in 1984, the ideological politics of culture gave way to a liberal environment of self-organization and choice.

It was first and foremost the young population that took this opportunity to discover and identify with new cultural tastes with which they could distance themselves from their parents' generation. As Thomas Grovogui recalls: "si […] tu étais jeune, dans ta tête, tu te disais 'Ouais, ceux qui ont vécu Sékou, […] ceux qui ont vécu ce temps-là, *ya know*, c'est des vieux, c'était la dictature, n'ont pas bien vécu'" ultimately leading to the conclusion that "maintenant, c'est notre temps, faut que nous vivons notre époque!"[14] With television channels like MTV putting a rough end to the monopoly of the state-regulated *Radio-Télévision Guinéenne* (RTG) and disseminating images that were fundamentally new to Guineans, young people quickly picked up popular culture and relativized the established cultural styles that, until then, had generally remained unquestioned.

American hip hop was, and still is,[15] a welcome genre for Conakry's youths to distance themselves from an adult-dominated social environment (see Diop 2005; Diouf 1996, 2003, 2005). Grovogui's comment that "On voulait s'affirmer comme jeunesse, […] s'affirmer, à l'image des autres"[16] bespeaks the importance of the *visual* aspects of this culture. Since hip hop almost exclusively featured black people, it was easy to relate to. Numerous rap artists and groups became the idols of a large share of urban youth for whom it mattered little that the raps were in English: "Ce n'est pas ce qu'ils disent: C'est l'image"[17] (see also El-Kenz 1996: 55; Abbink 2005: 17; Dimitriadis 2004: 29). Films on VCR cassettes had a considerable impact on youths. The establishment of gangs often started as a playful imitation of scenes observed in French-dubbed movies like "Boyz'N'the Hood" or "Menace II society"; hip hop fashion was copied in its most intricate details.[18] Importantly,

13 Under Touré, the state-regulated and state-driven project of endogenous culture promotion had made Guinea one of the most thriving countries of African music, dance, and theatre.

14 Interview with Thomas Grovogui, Kipé, Conakry, April 6th 2010.

15 While the following paragraphs are written in past tense to convey the historical development of the cultural context of gang youths, most aspects hold true still today.

16 Interview with Thomas Grovogui, Kipé, Conakry, April 6th 2010.

17 Interview with Thomas Grovogui, Kipé, Conakry, April 6th 2010.

18 Slight alterations in fashion observed on television directly prompted changes in urban youths' clothing so that when "Tupac est sorti ce soir en habits jean complet, ouais, il faut que je m'habille comme lui." Young men competed over styles and creatively tailored their own outfits, printed and sewed letters on their jackets signifying their names, often identical to those of their idols. Certain peculiarities, such as the teenage rap duo Kris Kross's habit of

images of blacks made a profound impression on Guinean youngsters, creating idols that often stood in stark opposition to their own familial socialization. Movie scenes in which a son argued with his mother and father or even insulted them, "c'était une révolution! Attends, c'est un noir. Comme nous! Ben, parce qu'avant on pouvait dire, c'est des blancs, les blancs, ouais […] ils ont cette mentalité, mais encore, c'est un noir!"[19]

Being increasingly marked by an identification with young African-American outcasts, Conakry's young men and women clashed with their nearest micro-political orders of the family and the school where their practices and attitudes were largely seen as threats against the moral pillars of Guinean society. Youths' slang language, baggy pants and miniskirts, posing and rebellious attitudes, disrespect for traditions, demands for freedom and independence scandalized the adult world.20 Young men and women's sexual activity collided with strict taboos of under-age and premarital sexuality, which resulted in severe punishments by their parents.[21] Similarly, the youth culture's positive image of drug consumption (especially alcohol and marihuana) dissented from strict religious and social norms.[22] During discussions about their identification with global popular culture, the self-affirmation of the young vis-à-vis their elders became itself an issue of contention as it challenged the role of family hierarchies.[23] Various interviewees recall that it was common to actively provoke older brothers, fathers, or elders of the community and to openly question their moral frameworks.[24]

In schools, rebellion against teachers was equally widespread, sometimes because students would disagree with the teachers for the sheer interest in confrontation, but also because they openly denounced the teacher's practices of corruption and misconduct, teacher's disrespect towards students, young women's use of sex to obtain better grades, or the elevation of school fees (see Demonix 2005). The school also was the first object of political rap lyrics. The first album of the hp hop group *Kill Point* in 1992 included various lyrics that criticized the state of education in Guinean

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reversing their pants, found direct expression in the streets of Conakry in the early 1990s. Interview with Thomas Grovogui, Kipé, Conakry, April 6th 2010.

19 Interview with Thomas Grovogui, Kipé, Conakry, April 6th 2010.

20 Various interviews and conversations, for example with Quentin Kanyatsi and Monsieur Bah (driving from Mamou to Conakry, March 14th 2010); Sophine Diallo (Hamdallaye, Conakry, March 26th 2010); Rafik (Hamdallaye, Conakry, March 29th 2010); Dr. Bano Barry, Sonfonia, Conakry, March 10th and 19th 2010.

21 Interviews with Sophine Diallo (Hamdallaye, Conakry, March 26th 2010), Dre (Kaporo Rails, Conakry, August 27th 2009), and Master J. (Cosa, Conakry, April 3rd 2010).

22 A characterization of the *drogué* is, next to *bandit*, very common. Punishments for alcohol consumption are severe: Sofine Diallo, a young women living in Hamdallaye, was severely beaten by her father and her older brother when she was caught drinking beer; consequently she was prohibited to leave the house at night for half a year. Interview with Sofine Diallo, Hamdallaye, Conakry, March 26th 2010.

23 Various interviews and discussions, amongst others with Sofine Diallo (Hamdallaye, Conakry, March 26th 2010); with Rafik (Hamdallaye, Conakry, March 29th 2010); with Nestor Haba (Kipé, Conakry, April 2010), and Dre (Kaporo Rails, 2009 and 2010).

24 Interviews with Thomas Grovogui, Kipé, Conakry, April 6th 2010; discussion with Nestor Haba, Kipé, Conakry, March 31st 2010; group discussion with students of the Université Kofi Annan, Nongo, Conakry, April 1st 2010.

public schools.[25] At the same time, schools increasingly became the sites of clan fights and clan formations.[26] People were bullied, robbed, or stripped naked on their way from or to school; violence in schools was common (see Philipps forthcoming).

In sum, the micro-political contexts of youths, especially the family and the school, served youths as the primary external playing field to present their standpoints and face up to authorities. Their rebellious attitudes inspired by hip hop culture led to an increased inclination to challenge, question, provoke, and to break with the established orders. Self-assertion against all odds (in line with a gangsta attitude) and the political agenda of overcoming authoritarianism and corruption went hand in hand. This is equally true for the macro-political realm which urban youth increasingly targeted with its criticism, especially through rap lyrics.

Confronting Macropolitics

From the 1990s on, rap was played in bars, taxis, and clubs; concerts were held in major cities all over the country, but mostly in Conakry where the first rap groups like *Kill Point, Bil de Sam, Légitime Défense, Raisonnable Djeli, Méthodik,* and *Pape Soul* progressively established themselves and replaced American rappers as idols of their teenage fans.[27] The early years of Guinean rap music centered on live battle sessions where rappers improvised rhymes to defeat opponents through technical or lyrical superiority. Rappers were focused on their personal standing within the ghetto youth community based on competition, and did not care much about national politics: "c'était pas politique, on s'en foutait, c'était juste, c'était d'abord entre nous", "rival-rival, rivaux-rivaux, c'était ça." Yet, from the early 1990s onwards and especially since the imprisonment of former opposition leader and today's president Alpha Condé in 1998, rappers became increasingly political in their lyrics. Bands such as *Kill Point,*[28] *Demonix,*[29] or *Eli Kamano*[30] denounced the government's unwillingness to stick to their promise of democratization and the lack of respect for human rights, the regime's censorship of politically critical rap groups, and the RTG's monopoly on radio and television.[31] At a large 2009 concert at the Stade du 28 Septembre by reggae and former rap artist *Eli Kamano*, the singer performed his famous song "Messieurs les militaires,

25 Telephone interview with Nestor Haba, December 2010.
26 Discussion with Nestor Haba and Thomas Grovogui, Kipé, Conakry, April 2010.
27 As Thomas recalls, rappers in the late 1990s were convinced they had become superior to French and American rappers: "Il y avait plus rien à copier, […] on s'est dit qu'on est mieux qu'eux" (interview in Kipé, Conakry on April 6th 2010).
28 See "Pas de bain de sang/ Kill Point" (2007 [2000]).
29 See "ITV Demonix" (2007 [2005]).
30 See "elie kamano - koudeye- Guinee Conakry" (2008).
31 See Negazo, cited in "Le Rap en Guinée : la scène HipHop".

quittez le pouvoir" in front of scores of soldiers who guarded the concert in case of political unrest, finishing the song by naming Dadis Camara in line with the most notorious African dictators.[32]

Today, rap is a mainstream musical genre in Conakry,33 and its political criticism is increasingly public. Video clips like Sembedekke's song "Politician", which attacks the political elite as selfish and corrupt, run today on national television – not least because the music business is sufficiently affluent to pay the broadcasting fees. Since the privatization of radio stations in 2005, rap songs are played extensively and dominate public spaces. Despite its status as a mainstream culture, rap lyrics still address youth's poverty and despair, which, according to Marco Ibrahim,34 is why the young population identifies so strongly with it:

> cette jeunesse, vraiment, trouve son plaisir à écouter ces rappeurs là, car ils parlent la plupart du temps comme je l'ai dit, des problèmes qu'ils vivent tous les jours et surtout, ils disent ce que ces jeunes aimeraient entendre, […] ils oublient leurs problèmes et se disent qu'ils participent à un changement, qu'ils aspirent à un changement. […] Donc le rap a beaucoup d'impact sur cette jeunesse guinéenne et c'est ce qui fait que le mouvement est très fort.

Marginalized youth find consolation and encouragement in rap music. Given that they cannot change the conditions in which they live, rap lyrics have the power to valorize the young people's daily struggles (*la galère*) and convey their status. The young poor, or those who sympathize with them, may be proud of something that others tend to dismiss (Philipps 2010c). While there exists a considerable envy of the rich, gang youths also belittle and ridicule the *bourgeois* or *les fils de papa.* Stylistically, this identification with poverty can be observed by the ghetto youth's distaste for official shirts or suits, leather shoes and any form of clothing that distances them from the marginalized. Poverty thereby becomes aestheticized, a symbol for ghetto authenticity (Klein and Friedrich 2003), a gang cultural value intriguingly fabricated from prevalent economic shortages. As Weiss (2005: 115) argues

> From this perspective, the identification with the themes, signs, and images of global hip-hop - especially in the form of figures like Tupac who publicly insist on their own suffering - becomes a way of asserting the positive value of pain as a means of access to a wider world, indeed a world-wide community of affliction. In other words, pain becomes more than just the negative feeling of oppression, and more, even, than the foundation for a micropolitics of everyday encounters. The felt experience of pain, under these circumstances, becomes a way of situating the subject of pain in a powerful global order of meanings and relations. Popular cultural practices in a wide array of urban contexts serve to organize and realize what Foster describes as an imagined cosmopolitianism (Foster, 1999), in which media consumers understand themselves to be participants in a world-wide scene.

The class difference between ghetto youth and the rich is thus steadily performed and staged to partake in the global narrative of the ghetto (see Roth-Gordon 2009). Aside from gaining a feeling

32 Observations by Paul-André Wilton and Marie Weiller, Conakry, August 2009.
33 See "Le Rap en Guinée : la scène HipHop".
34 Cited in "Le Rap en Guinée : interview de Marco Ibrahim".

of meaningfulness, the narrative provides youth with "a means of both defining and confronting powerful sources of oppression, and of defining one's self in relation to such meaningful powers" (Weiss 2005: 107). While Weiss remains vague about these sources of oppression, Conakry's gang youths have increasingly identified their political leaders as the cause of their misery, translating the messages of rap lyrics into a sort of general ghetto vernacular. Even a twelve-year old boy whom I met at Bambéto in 2010, exclaimed that "la politique, c'est pourri" and that he did not believe in coming elections because "ils font jamais ce qu'ils disent."35 Similarly, Diabé Alpha from the Cosa district holds that "nos leaders sont des faux";36 gang member Dre claimed that the soldiers are "des femmes", and politicians "des *motherfuckers* [...], des bâtards".37

Cultural Styles and Collective Emotions

Since the fervor and agitation in such exclamations is not easily documented by text, it should be pointed out that this political opposition is not solely an intellectual affair but a substantially carnal one (see Wacquant 2005). The uproar of protesters, their wild gestures, rappers' screaming, the delirious dancing, and the young mob's running and chanting slogans are at the heart of the counterculture we address here. When comparing the visual documentations of the general strike38 with the bodily expressions of rappers in music videos,39 similarities can be witnessed to the point where the distinct categories of 'culture' and 'protest' become conflated. *Eli Kamano's* music video "Koudeye"40 for example pictures a small group of young men running through the streets denouncing political corruption in the very same way that people could be observed during the 2007 marches. The other way around, a young protester interviewed during the 2007 marches gesticulated as if he was a rapper on stage.41 This confirms Diouf (2003: 10) who argues that "[postures] and bodily gestures, like music and iconography, are part of [youth's] struggle against the dominant culture". The vociferous denunciation of politicians (as motherfuckers, bastards, weak and stupid illiterates, corrupt idiots), the throwing of stones and the ignition of car tires, but also the way in which gang members speak about politics in general, not only results from attitudes and reflected positions but bespeaks gang *cultural styles* (Ferguson 1999). Just like "knowing how to act tough on a street corner or how to 'sit like a lady' at a formal dinner" political protest action by

35 Conversation with Ibrahim, Bambéto, Conakry, April 2nd 2010.
36 Discussion with Cosa youths, Cosa, Conakry, March 23rd 2010.
37 Recorded conversation with Dre in Kaporo Rails, Conakry, April 4th 2010.
38 See "La Gréve Générale en Guinée à Conakry du Lundi 22 Janvier 2007" (n.d.)
39 For an overview, see "FONIKé" (2009 [2005]) and "FONIKé (en guise de manifeste)" (2009 [2008]).
40 See "elie kamano - koudeye- Guinee Conakry" (2008).
41 See "La Gréve Générale en Guinée à Conakry du Lundi 22 Janvier 2007" (n.d.)

gangs "entails a kind of knowing that is inseparable from doing; thus it [has] necessarily to do with performances and never with ideas alone" (Ferguson 1999: 98).

Performances thus bear in themselves political relevance. When gangs take to the street, burn tires, chant slogans, demand democracy, riot, scream, throw stones and run from the police, such actions shape what they feel, think, hope, and imagine, instead of being expressions of preconceived attitudes and cognitions. By performing protests as a "cultural style", a "skilled social action you do with your body, often with little conscious elaboration or awareness" (Ferguson 1999: 98), urban youth *become* martyrs for the *changement* (for instance), or tough gangstas who prevail even against the army, or the powerful and ruthless young generation that breaks rules and norms to take revenge on society. Whatever their often diverse and individually held self-identifications in protests, they become powerful actors instead of remaining passive victims of their conditions.

Pushing Ferguson's (1999: 97) argument further than he does, I argue that we do not have to remain analytically at the "performed surface of social life". Even if Conakry's "structurally 'loose' setting" indeed is ill-suited for a *habitus* or *identity* approach (see Ferguson 1999: 101), performances hint at what Emirbayer and Goldberg (2005: 472) have termed *collective emotions*.42 To name but a few, gang members' desire to be fearless, potent, masculine, often to the degree of a larger-than-life figure, their eagerness to confront and to challenge, their longing for change, their rage and *on-s'en-fous* attitude are constitutive for gangs as institutions as well as for their practices of political protest. They are expressed by slang, postures, attitudes, and form the power of gangs engaged in collective action. As Emirbayer and Goldberg (2005: 492) contend:

> emotional ties […] are a potential source of 'structural power' in their own right. Actors can enjoy emotional power without possessing significant resources or occupying a privileged social-structural or cultural position. Here, too, power is a matter of location within flows and investments of (psychical) energy; […] With such a conceptualization of power, we can investigate how actors, individual as well as collective, acquire their power positions within historically specific configurations of emotional ties […].

In line with this definition, gangs' power, which has become a pivotal force in political protests, is to be analyzed as based on their collective emotions that are expressed through cultural styles. This is not to say that gangs are overly emotional actors in contrast to NGOs, unions, or student formations. Conakry's gangs have not cultivated more collective emotions and cultural styles than

42 Emirbayer and Goldberg mean by collective emotions "(1) complexes of processes-in-relations that are (2) transpersonal in scope and that consist in (3) psychical investments, engagements, or cathexes, where these encompass (4) embodied perceptions and judgments as well as bodily states, forces, energies, or sensations. Configurations of such collective emotions may be organized in terms of internal logics that are irreducible to those of social-structural or cultural formations." They (2005: 473) contend that collective emotions provide an often untheorized basis for all kinds of institutions, both formal and informal, both powerful and dominated.

other groups or social categories, but *specific and politically disproportionally powerful ones* – first and foremost their disposition to confrontation.

Confrontation and Affinity

Historically, this disposition to confrontation escalated into severe gang conflicts during the early 2000s. At that time, certain neighborhoods like Prince, Hamdallaye, Koloma, Cosa, or Bambéto, were split up into gang territories that youths from rival gangs or territories did not dare pass. Still today, despite the considerable pacification, certain areas are avoided after nightfall in case one cannot be identified as an ally of the gangs of the quarter.43 The institutionalized violence that young people engaged in between 2000 and 2003 was much more severe. Gang members I interviewed on this era recall it with a mix of horror and surprise how such brutality could erupt. Former leader Master J. used to put razorblades on his gloves and provoke conflicts to then hit his enemies; he robbed people on the street, and together with his group, entered taxis, discos, and restaurants without paying, waiting to be admonished only to engage in brutal attacks.44 Often drugged45 and confronted with continuous violence and counterviolence, feelings of pity and compassion vanished and positioned gang youth "dans le cadre de faire du mal". Gang rivalries provoked fights where "on a failli de nous tuer". They predominately concerned the control over urban space which acquired a considerable symbolic value. The streets of a neighborhood represent a stage for the area's most powerful gangs who control 'their' territory against the intrusion of others. Gangs pride themselves and seek distinction by affirming themselves in a certain area. They tend to form relationships with the young women of their quarters, and obtain the admiration of the young boys whom they introduce into their group as soon as they reach a certain age. Some gangs establish their own vigilantes, and many interpret themselves as defenders of the neighborhood, especially against gangs from other districts.

While the significance of territorial control for clans may appear like a sub-cultural issue at first sight, it entails significant political implications. By controlling urban territory, gangs rival with the state which would normally claim power over the areas that are occupied by gangs. In cases where the state attempts to enter gang-controlled areas to exert power, gangs will interpret this as an intrusion, like they would interpret the attempt of other gangs to enter their territory. This was exemplified in 2007, when government forces moved into neighborhoods to capture demonstrators

43 Interview with Ams Keuche, Matoto, Conakry, April 6th 2010.
44 Interview with Master J., Cosa, Conakry, April 3rd 2010;
45 It was fashionable at that time to smoke a mix of marihuana and gunpowder which made consumers extremely aggressive and pain-resistant, sometimes also leading to heavy paranoia.

and were met with brutal resistance by the local gangs that defended 'their' territory (Philipps 2010d).46

Despite the enmity that may erupt over gang-state confrontations regarding territorial control, there may also be a Mbembian affinity between gangs and state forces (Mbembe 1992). Contrary to rap lyrics that suggest a constant opposition between gangs and the state, and inconsistent with El-Kenz's depiction of the police as "the enemy of the whole gang, and even of all the gangs in other districts" (1996: 44), Bano Barry argues that criminal gangs often envy, admire, and imitate the armed forces.[47] According to Barry, they, too, would like to have the police's authority to randomly extort bribes at road blocks, and soldiers' power to enter discotheques without paying for admission and drinks.48 Due to the obscure enrollment procedures for entering the armed forces (see International Crisis Group 2010, Philipps 2010b), gang members may moreover have peers who have made it into the army, police, or gendarmerie. It is not surprising that a major drug dealer is friends with a high-ranked official from the anti-drug commission.[49] Additionally, those in power (especially the young soldiers of the military junta that was in power from 2008 until 2010) share cultural styles with gang youths: they listen to rap music, wear shades, and smoke marihuana. The International Crisis Group (2009: 7) observed "a pro-CNDD youth movement meeting in Conakry on January 24, where nearly the whole crowd, gathered around a stage with a rap DJ, wore CNDD T-shirts."[50]

The borders established by an abstract hip hop discourse between the state and the ghetto are thus constantly blurred.[51] They may be re-organized in myriad ways: the president may be viewed as a *ghetto man* on one day, and symbolize *Babylon* a few weeks later. A politician may be celebrated as the new savior, but if he fails to pay his young followers for their passionate support, they quickly condemn him as a *motherfucker*. In their rage, they may riot out of pure frustration against the political elite and as the bearers of a piercing nihilism (see Dimitriadis 2004: 70; El-Kenz 1996: 51). As Diouf writes:

> The accusations of critics who claim that young Africans have no anchor-point, that they express themselves merely in order to destroy, and that they lack any positive mode of

46 Interviews and discussions with Thomas Grovogui in March and April 2010.
47 Interview with Bano Barry, Sonfonia, Conakry, March 10th 2010.
48 Interview with Master J., Cosa, Conakry, April 3rd 2010;
49 Personal observations, Cosa, Conakry, March 31st 2010.
50 Youths initially identified strongly with the military junta CNDD and their young new president, despite the massacres by the soldiers only two years prior to the change of government. As McGovern (2009) writes from Conakry in early 2009: "I live in a West African city where dark wraparound sunglasses have become very expensive, if you can find them at all. That is because young men are copying the major style statement of their new head of state."
51 For example, when I was caught by the police myself, Thomas' networks with high-ranked army and police officials helped me in both cases to leave without paying blatantly high bribes.

> expression, are not without merit. For many youths, idealism, nihilism, and sometimes even pure, childish naughtiness seem to coexist (Diouf 2003: 9).

Paradoxically, gangs' culturally motivated opposition to the political elite not only coexists with their instrumentalization; it provides the very basis for it. For instance, it is notable that politicians approach gangs for their services of political violence through middle men who are capable of performing the gangs' cultural styles. Aside from paying them, there are efforts to *substantially persuade* gang leaders by alluding to common narratives.[52] On the subjective level, gang actions are thus often directed against the "dominating and excluding transnational elite class" (Rodgers, cited in Bayat and Biekart 2009: 824). Yet, for the most part, this subjective perspective is influenced by a transnational culture of hip hop that may only insufficiently grasp the political reality in which gang youths find themselves.

Gang youths' considerations of politics are thus marked less by their careful observations of the political arena than by their attempts to position themselves in ways that reflect to them a sense of self-worth, power, and importance.53 Let us again consider Dre, who was amongst the most political-minded gang members I came across. Dre once claimed that "C'est facile de gouverner ce pays, tout ce qu'il faut, c'est de donner de l'eau, du courant, et à manger, c'est tout, les Guinéens sont tranquilles!".54 Dre's simplification of Guinean politics is not only a general point of view. It is a necessary precondition for his denunciation of corruption and blatant injustice, and thus for his self-understanding as a potential martyr for democracy. If he would interpret things as more complicated and view politicians as morally irreproachable, Dre would have no reason to fight, and would be bereft of his feeling of political importance and potency. To maintain this self-understanding and to engage in political actions, both to fulfill his convictions and to earn money, his constructs of specific political actors have to remain adaptable to spontaneous changes according to political conditions. Thereby, they lose any empirical value or guiding function. In this sense, gang youths' political engagement often appears like shadowboxing, an attack of basically unknown forces. To sum up, gang protests are practices that bespeak the *internal dynamics* of the gang counterculture at least as much as the political deficiencies they attack.55

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52 Interview with Dr. Bano Barry, Sonfonia, Conakry, March 19th 2010.

53 This is not to suggest the common dichotomy of reason and emotions. As Emirbayer and Goldberg (2005: 473 ff.) argue, both equally and simultaneously trigger an actor's agency.

54 Recorded conversation with Dre in Kaporo Rails, Conakry, April 4th 2010.

55 Mohammed Baldé of the local youth NGO 'Qui veut peux' even sees hip hop culture as a plainly cultural and not political practice. "C'est une jeunesse, qui se concentre uniquement sur la musique, [qui] n'arrive pas de toute façon à émerger, à trouver des actes concraires [concrètes?] posés pour son propre épanouissement [et qui] trouve son salut dans le rap, elle se lève pas pour s'impliquer dans le développement socio-économique de son pays." (Interviews with 'Qui veut peut' members, Conakry, March 28th 2010).

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