

## Rhyme, Reason, Rogue

### *Yoruba Popular Music and the Hip Hop Amoral Turn*

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**ABSTRACT** Popular culture is often othered in conservative theses as inferior and [or because it is] foreign. Scholarship and views on popular music in Nigeria have been sometimes inattentive to the extent that the popular musical forms have gone to entrench themselves as recognizable local forms. This article compares older popular forms that are now canonized—such as jùjú and highlife—with Nigerian Yoruba hip hop to show the peculiar historical factors that justify the latter’s cultural heterodoxy. The dominant hip hop morality that emerged is defiantly divergent from the earlier stress on formal education and legitimate industry. Importantly, hip hop performance in Yoruba has evolved a protocol of social criticism that first presents itself as acquiescent and/or reprobate. Also, existing conceptualization of hip hop acts as hidden [or even public] transcripts is complicated by the novel strategy of mimicry now found in the Yoruba form.

**KEYWORDS** Nigerian popular music, Yoruba hip hop, culture, critique

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### **INTRODUCTION: ROGUE, THE OUTSIDER**

As far back as 1985, communication scholar Luke Uka Uche expressed some anxiety that popular musical practice and consumption among Nigerian youth mimic the Western type privileged by the broadcast media, especially the FM radio stations that had begun to multiply at the time.<sup>1</sup> Even though the sonic and performative affinity between the Western and the African forms is one of the factors that endear the new popular music to young people, Uche considers selective sponsorship of the Western forms by the multinationals as a more formidable acculturative factor. Therefore, “the African youth craves for the Western and Western-influenced popular music because what is being marketed to them is theirs [only] in concept but Western in technological refinement.”<sup>2</sup> More significantly, corporate patronage and sponsorship determine ascendancy in popular performance space. And in that arena of exchange, the African performer and audience are in thrall to corporate manipulation. It is in the context of this imperialist cultural siege that African institutional intervention is considered imperative. For “when we talk of cultural imperialism and the endangering of local culture, we should as well be

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1. An earlier draft of the article was presented as guest lecture at Africa Department, INALCO, Paris on 10 December 2019.

2. Luke Uka Uche, “The Youth and the Music Culture: a Nigerian Case Study,” *Gazette* 37 (1986): 69.

equally concerned with and be talking about the structure, program priorities and orientation of the local electronic media establishments, in addition to cultural policies of the developing nations.”<sup>3</sup>

Ethnomusicologist Richard Okafor likewise describes the acculturative agency of modern popular music, concluding by fearing that “‘pop phenomenon’ . . . means that cultural intrusion from outside Nigeria has grown more menacing.”<sup>4</sup> A very significant point to note here is that like Uche, Okafor reckons the older neo-traditional popular forms such as jùjú and highlife as more consciously “uniquely Nigerian” than the more recent forms.<sup>5</sup> He also observes an interesting dimension of establishing musical acculturation through the cultivation and nurturing of not only generic models, but also by adoption and dependence on foreign musical instruments and technology. Finally, there is an unsettling countercultural consequence in which an antisocial demography is thrown up: “There is now a danger of young men wearing long hair and earrings, women being unconventionally dressed, the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, the craze for outlandish hairstyle, addiction to queer speech mannerisms and the rising tide of promiscuity associated with this so-called ‘pop phenomenon.’”<sup>6</sup>

It could be inferred from Uche and Okafor’s scheme of values that relatively older popular forms, such as highlife, jùjú, fújì, etc. have become canonical examples against which newer forms, such as reggae, dancehall and hip hop, are held to be countercultural and mediocre. The two works are united by the premise that the existing modern genres such as jùjú and highlife are more genuine African forms than the “Western-influenced popular music” or “pop phenomenon.” This position ignores not only the multilateral dimension of cultural production generally, but particularly the culturally catholic foundation of these older forms. Ethnomusicologists have actually pointed out that the process of distilling such forms—I take highlife as a model here—involved adopting considerable exotic musical forms. John Collins sees highlife as an African form on a return journey, “completing what can be considered as a centuries-old trans-Atlantic musical feedback cycle, i.e. African music taken to the Americas by slaves, transmuted there, and then brought back to Africa.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, there was a gradual process of artistic de-acculturation with varying ethnic national signatures from Ghana to Nigeria. Austin Emielu, for example, has written on how historical and socio-cultural experience inflected the Nigerian highlife music as an identifiable national type.<sup>8</sup> In relation to popular music in Nigeria, Bode Omojola describes the dialectic of adoption and domestication thus:

Following initial imposition of Western tradition on African societies, both the new Western culture and the indigenous African customs remain in a constant state of flux, resulting in cultural changes which challenge the “centre to periphery” evolutionist

3. Ibid., 75.

4. Richard Okafor, “Popular Music in Nigeria: Patronising Attitude or Benign Complacency?” *British Journal of Music Education* 15, no. 2 (July 1998): 181.

5. Ibid., 183.

6. Ibid., 187.

7. John Collins, “The Early History of West African Highlife Music,” *Popular Music* 8, no. 3 (1989): 221.

8. Austin ‘Maro Emielu, *Nigerian Highlife Music* (Lagos: CBAAC, 2013).

model. This pattern begins with forced imitation, leading eventually to assimilation of imitated traditions into traditional models, which, in spite of the initial imposition, often remain buoyant.<sup>9</sup>

Another factor that is overlooked in that discourse, especially when being critical of hip hop music, is the extent of the ground covered in the reinvention of hip hop as a Nigerian form.

In about four decades that popular culture has become a more legitimate field of scholarly inquiry, the discourse has been expectedly diverse. There is one strain that affirms the sentiment expressed by Uche and Okafor which emphasizes the alien socio-cultural baggage that Nigerian popular music, especially hip hop, tows from its American cradle. For example, Stephanie Shonekan sees certain aspects of hip hop practice in Nigeria as accessory to global imperialist agenda of “miseducating” the African youth.<sup>10</sup> Samson Uchenna Eze (2020) also writes that sexist sensibilities exuded in the contemporary Nigerian hip hop culture typified by the work of Wizkid (Ayodeji Ibrahim Balogun) are due to “adoption, adaptation and popularization of American hip hop music.”<sup>11</sup> But studies have also argued differently that there are tropes and differentiae that qualify Nigerian hip hop as an identifiable national form. Tope Omoniye points out that hip hop in Nigeria constitutes a genuine culturally specific experience that merits assessment as independent of an American source which criticism routinely assigns to it. More passionately, Emmanuel Adeniyi reckons that positive, creative Nigerian elements are copiously laid below the seemingly profane and immoral veneer of Nigerian Afrobeats: “hip hop plays positive roles in Nigerian society, and that negative representation of the music by some Nigerians is totalizing, as they neglect the functionality of the music genre within and outside the country.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, there have been middle-ground contributions that see hip hop practices as affirming at once what they denounce. Diekara Oloruntoba-Oju considers ambivalent the way that contemporary popular music practice in Nigeria both cleaves to and shows disenchantment with the state, for it “simultaneously resists state power, by using youth language, reflecting youth struggles and projecting State failures, but it simultaneously acquiesces with the same state power by endorsing the political elite and propagating the State’s agenda.”<sup>13</sup> Adopting a similar middle ground, Yomi Olusegun-Joseph re-examines the thesis that Nigerian hip hop text is sexist. For him, “the critical claims about the objectification of the female body by male artists are problematic. This is because most of these views rely on equally male-oriented readings of the NHHN [Nigerian Hip Hop Nation] which overlook female agency,

9. Bode Omojola, *Popular Music in Western Nigeria* (Ibadan: IFRA, 2006), 5.

10. Stephanie Shonekan, “The Blueprint: ‘the Gift and the Curse’ of American Hip Hop Culture for Nigeria’s Millennial Youth,” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 3 (2013).

11. Samson Uchenna Eze, “Sexism and Power Play in the Nigerian Contemporary Hip Hop Culture: the Music of Wizkid,” *Contemporary Music Review* 39, no. 1 (2020): 1.

12. Emmanuel Adeniyi, “Nigerian Afrobeats and Religious Stereotypes,” *Contemporary Music Review* 39, no. 1 (2020): 82.

13. Diekara Oloruntoba-Oju, “State Power, Modernist Identities and Conflict in Contemporary Nigerian Popular Music,” *Journal of African Literature Association* 13, no. 1 (2019): 14.

therefore silencing or veiling the corresponding commentaries of the female-artist in ‘singing her body.’<sup>14</sup> In other words, neither of the misogynist or feminist orientations is more dominant.

Therefore, three major positions have coalesced around the broad theme of culture, power and resistance in Nigerian contemporary popular music: one maintains it is an insidious alien culture come to culturally emasculate the youth (Uche, 1986; Okafor, 1998; Shonekan, 2013); another argues that in Nigeria, hip hop is a site of socio-cultural dissidence and contestation (Omoniyi, 2009; Akingbe and Onanuga, 2020); while the third observes there is no coherence in the way the form performatively engages the sociopolitical hegemony (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2019; Olusegun-Joseph, 2020). In this paper, I attempt to disaggregate a sub-form putatively called Yoruba hip hop. I begin by tracking the rebellion and disenchantment in Nigerian hip hop through a comparison with jùjú, a more orthodox older form, and reflecting on the different historical experiences they both responded to. The paper examines the expressive candor in the manner in which hip hop performance and practice, through mimic and defiance, responds to the socio-cultural mainstream, especially in the context of the predating forms having bypassed or differently engaged the same concept. Isolating the sub-form that largely employs Yoruba language, I show how critique is scripted as performance of the objectionable and argue that what is explicitly staged as acquiescence is actually dissent. Particularly by routing critique and dissent via embarrassingly patent mimicry, the Yoruba form compels a different scholarly understanding of hip hop acts as hidden transcripts.

#### JÙJÙ MUSIC AND THE ALLURE OF WEALTH

The early reception of jùjú was not without the social reservations that always attend novel forms. These reservations were further compounded by extant relative classification of the musical artist as a rogue among the Yoruba. This ambivalent social representation of the artist has been pointed out by Alaja-Browne and Waterman. The singer in this sense is as admired for his skills as he is considered a repulsive beggar. Some early jùjú musicians contended with the stigma by performing with their faces visored from recognition by baseball caps because “traditional Yoruba society did not consider the music profession to be respectable.”<sup>15</sup>

But right from those early days, the musician was inclined to performing for upper-class and upper middle-class patrons. As performance culture, including theater, gradually entered a commercial phase towards the middle of the century, jùjú would become dependent not only on the clientele who bought vinyl and other audio records, but also on the support of the emerging wealthy class. According to Karin Barber, there was a noticeable transition from an audience whose commitment to the artist was voluntary to a system of patronage that compelled payment before performance; instead of

14. Yomi Olusegun-Joseph, “Singing the Body: Postmodern Orality and the Female Body in the Nigerian Hip Hop Nation,” *Contemporary Music Review* 39, no.1 (2020): 133.

15. Afolabi Alaja-Browne, “The Origin and Development of Jùjú Music,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 17, no. 1&2 (1989): 58.

donations to the performer by an elated audience, the performance space became bounded, and admittance—via ticket or record purchase—was being sold. This did not lead to the disappearance of the wealthy and middle-class patrons but, indeed, reinforced their relevance. Apart from the continued practice of benefaction through donation or sponsorship, the emerging record companies were being run by magnates whose decision could deflect the artist's career significantly. It was in this climate that jùjú developed in the lead-up to the era of political independence and continued for two decades afterwards. It was therefore understandable that the jùjú artist affirmed upper and upper middle-class values. The strategy of avowal actually began from the artist's own nominal identification with those classes. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, many of the musicians would adopt names that gave them imaginary affiliation to both the traditional and the new elites: **Chief Commander** Ebenezer Obey, **King** Sunny Ade, **Emperor** 'Pick' Peters, **Admiral** Dele Abiodun et cetera.

Being in good terms with the patrons is as important to the jùjú artist as growing and sustaining an impressive fanbase. That relationship was maintained by regular positive invocation of the patron through praise, mentions and other means in the artist's performance. Fracture in this relationship could have untoward consequences for the artist. Sunny Ade (Sunday Adéḡeyè) would later become the best-known jùjú musician ever. His career had been threatened by a disagreement with the owner of his record company, Chief Bolarinwa Abioro; however, negotiating his way out of that crisis also involved convening an alternative alliance of wealthy patrons and supporters. A significant event in the career of Ebenezer Obey, another popular jùjú artist, shows the centrality of the patronage of the wealthy to the survival of the musicians and their art. That incident also illustrates the power of the audience as exegetes of a sort; that audience is so active that it could breathe another life into a song as soon as it was performed, so that what that song becomes sometimes contradicts the artist's own intent.<sup>16</sup> The artist's life, performances and song texts are read as different but coherent messages. As such, a song primarily considered an orthodox admonition on good behavior to a newly married woman may become assumed as innuendo to the artist's estranged wife or a reproach of his wayward daughter. And this audience is not limited to the Yoruba music; it has been shown elsewhere that a more contemporary form like hip hop is equally susceptible to such arrogation. In that post-performance meaning-making phase, Ebenezer Obey had once been framed as a musician jinxed by some powers so that every patron he praised suffered one misfortune after another. The claim was based on a few coincidences of those that had earlier been praised by the musicians experiencing some tragic turns, a myth that was kept alive until the end of the 1970s. Such coincidences include the sudden death of Henry Fájémirókuḡ, businessman and industrialist earlier praised in a 1973 song, "Adventure of Mr. Wise," and the arrest of Jimoh Èjìgbádéró, industrialist and real estate magnate praised in *Inter-Reformers a tun De*, for murder. Èjìgbádéró would later be charged in court, sentenced to death and executed in 1979.

16. Ayo Adeduntan, "Mouth with Which the King Curses: Abuse and Deparicularization of the Enemy in King Sunny Ade's Jùjú Music." *Research in African Literatures* 47, no. 4 (2016): 179-185.

Ebenezer Obey's performative pushback at this narrative foregrounds not only the wealthy patrons as the jùjú musician's lifeline, but also conceives of the relationship between the two as a kind of symbiosis. In a song text that is composed partly of plea and partly of reproach, the artist controverts the myth in circulation with a list of some of the patrons he has praised: Rẹmọ Carpet owner, Ọlọladé Wilmer Publicity, Adébutú Keshington "Face-to-Face," Bísí Edionseri "Cash Madam," Alhaji K.O. Arẹ and Alhaji Anímáshau. In that song, the mention of each of these personae and their businesses is attended immediately by the refrain "Kàkà k'ówọ ẹ lọlẹ, pípele ló n péle sii [Rather than diminish, his/her fortune continues to grow]". Obey then concludes that "K'éléré korin ki èniyàn 'ó ní kó torí ẹ lọlẹ/Ká nàwó f'ónílù iyẹn ó ẹ òkankan, k'Ólúwa má ba tiwa jé [Praise by a performer does not change a man's fortune to worse/Money given to a musical artist does no ill, may God not ruin us.]" Pleading desperately, he addresses the culpable demography, the myth-making audience: "Ìràwọ mi ó, k'áyé má bà'ràwọ mi jé/ ìràwọ mi ó k'áyé má pà'ràwọ mi dà [Oh people of this world, do not mar my star/ Oh people of this world do not change my good fortune to bad]". Obey's major frustration here is the peril of losing that patronage from the wealthy upper class, a likely consequence of that viral myth.

#### LANGUAGE, AUDIENCE AND (IM-/RE-)PAIRED PERFORMANCE CIRCUIT

The above background is meant to highlight the converse trajectory of the emergence and development of hip hop, compared to jùjú. In the meantime, some operational clarification is necessary in relation to hip hop. Because rap is the most patent component of hip hop, there is always a tendency towards convenient conflation of the two. *Black Noise*, the pioneer book-length work on hip hop culture, understandably focuses on rap music as the major expressive medium of hip hop. In that work, Tricia Rose nevertheless acknowledges hip hop as "a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community."<sup>17</sup> Aside from rap, Rose identifies graffiti and breakdancing as other constituent forms within hip hop. Djing, one of the most identified hip hop quartets, is not included in that list. Studies in hip hop would later call attention to more expressive sites in the culture, such as couture (Fleetwood 2005), informal conversation, computer-mediated interaction and broadcast shows (Androustopoulos 2011). Although rap is readily considered the musical component of hip hop, there seems to be more to being classified as hip hop musical artist than being a rapper. In other words, the convention of classification in this sense is that performers who are not rappers are considered as hip hop artistes. The criteria employed in such classification range from frequent featuring of rap by others in such artists' work to their deployment of hip hop-related performative elements, such as movement and

17. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 21.

gesture, costume and other signs. In her work on Nigerian hip hop for example, Stephanie Shonekan (2011; 2012) uses hip hop and rap interchangeably and also includes non-rappers, such as Daddy Showkey and 2Face, in her list. The classification I employ is a loose one in which the very instance of performance constitutes the first condition of a hip hop act; put in another way, I focus more on the specific instance of performance as hip hop, not essentially the musician. For example, while Wizkid (Ayodeji Ibrahim Balogun) is not a hip hop artiste through and through, his song “Ojúḗlégba,” in collaboration with Ghanaian rapper Sakordie (Michael Owusu Addo), is hip hop. I also favor hip hop above rap as an identifier of the musical form because of the multi-generic musical experimentation of many of the Nigerian hip hop artists.

Informal and scholarly observations that are critical of African hip hop are often premised on the latter’s exotic provenance. More than in the earlier position that considers foreign influence on African popular music overwhelming, there is a more specific linking of African hip hop to its American origin; and the ultimate position that often emerges after making that connection is that the African hip hop mimics the American original and is culturally quaint. Nigerian poet and scholar, Niyi Osundare, once adopted this sentiment in his criticism of certain inadequacies in the country’s literary scene. He writes:

There is *hip hop* hysteria in the present atmosphere: an exogeneist mentality that urges one to take leave of one’s very self and assume the borrowed, clinched mask of the foreign other. Many, many members of the new generation are doing to our literature what Islamic and Christian fundamentalists have done to our indigenous religion and cultural integrity.<sup>18</sup>

The position has received validation even within the otherwise sympathetic African hip hop discourse. Stephanie Shonekan (2013) considers hip hop practice in Nigeria a bad imitation of the African American form. She points out a strategy of “miseducation” initiated earlier in the transatlantic experience, and sustained in the imperialist and neoliberal present, as being responsible for the perverted appropriation of the African American culture in Nigeria. 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” are therefore an accessory to the larger agenda of “cultural insurgency” sponsored by the Western cultural capital.<sup>19</sup>

Sociolinguist Tope Omoniyi had earlier cautioned that such reading overlooks some key factors in the complex architecture of global hip hop. There is first a possible non sequitur based on the accepted “claim of a single origin for Hip Hop that is located in the

18. Cited in Sule E. Egya, *Nation, Power and Dissidence in Third Generation Nigerian Poetry in English* (Grahamstown: NISC, 2019), 29.

19. Stephanie Shonekan, “The Blueprint: ‘the Gift and the Curse’ of American Hip Hop Culture for Nigeria’s Millennial Youth,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no.3 (2013): 185.

Bronx [and which] has fed claims that the versions found outside of the United States are mere imitation art.”<sup>20</sup> In view of the identifiable indigenous West African cultural elements in the American hip hop, Omoniyi suggests a broader assessment similar to John Collins’s “feedback cycle” cited above, for “we may in fact be dealing with a case of reappropriation rather than an example of North American cultural imperialism spreading on the wings of globalization’s structure.”<sup>21</sup> Omoniyi continues that other significant issues elided in the “imitation model” are the shared experiences—such as marginalization of the young person of color—that have made hip hop transculturally coherent, and conversely how “Hip Hop communities outside the United States construct themselves as ‘real’ in their particular environments in order to narrate for themselves a history of participation in Hip Hop that privileges the local.”<sup>22</sup>

Using the local language is the most affirmative dimension of hip hop as a continental African form. There has been the realization that the local language is fundamental to evolving a genuine African hip hop since the early 1980s. American artist Afrika Bambaataa had told African rappers using a French medium:

No, rap in your own language and speak from your own social awareness. Rap about your own problems that are happening in your own country and whatever and talk about what you want to talk about.<sup>23</sup>

Today, there is hip hop music done in every major language of the continent. This is particularly true of Yoruba, the language spoken by the ethnic group in Southwest Nigeria. Hip hop in Yoruba appropriates the familiar and the opportune from the American example but noticeably evolves a type that shares more features with recognizable indigenous verbal art forms. Now, classifying the genre as Yoruba hip hop comes with the following qualification. There is no hip hop musical artist that performs entirely in Yoruba. This is corollary from the well-known post-colonial predicament of those born after the 1960s being mostly unable to use the indigenous language undiluted with English or pidgin. The hip hop artist, in addition to the need to address their audience in a familiar language, is also equally constrained by this predicament. So identifying an artist as a Yoruba hip hop performer relies on the relatively higher degree of Yoruba language texts in the hip hop performance compared with other languages, such as English and pidgin.

While it cannot be entirely classified Yoruba even in the sense described above, Ruggedman’s (Michael Ugochukwu Stephens) “Ruggedy Baba” represents the earliest Nigerian hip hop thesis on the imperative of adopting the local medium. In that song, there is a primary awareness that society is an active party in the definition of its popular

20. Tope Omoniyi, “‘So I Choose to Do Am Naija Style’: Hip Hop, Language, and Postcolonial Identities.” In *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*, eds. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim and Alastair Pennycook (New York: Routledge, 2009), 115.

21. *Ibid.*, 118.

22. *Ibid.*, 115.

23. James G. Spady, H. Sammy Alim and Samir Meghelli. *The Global Cippa: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness*. (Philadelphia: Black History Museum Press, 2009), 264.



music. Bode Omojola points out this factor in the way musical art is conceived in the African society where “the notion of value . . . does not depend on how complex or how simple a piece of music is” (2006, 4). Relevance and survival of a musical form depend largely on the extent of its legitimacy among the audience. Put differently, “each work of art sets out its own criteria for artistic valuation, *tied to the convention of its cultural and social environment*. A piece of music is judged to be of intrinsic excellence *not because it is structurally complex or because it is conceived for the elite*,” (my italics).<sup>24</sup>

Ruggedman’s song video advertises itself as Yoruba in two major ways, its overwhelming use of English and pidgin notwithstanding. The Yoruba refrain, performed by the featured singer, 9ice (Akande Abolore), deploys leitmotifs of indigenous Yoruba oríkí (praise), proverb and rhetoric of appeasement. There is also a more manifest visual framing of the song narrative as a scene of a Yoruba paramount ruler in court, unduly vexed by an irritable subordinate and being pacified by one of his ministers. The subject matter of “Ruggedy Baba” addresses the artistic quandary of either sustaining a hip hop practice that advances straight-laced composition and US English or adopting the local expressive media and nuances that make the performance more recognizable to the audience. The former option, named “hardcore” and favored by an elite of hip hop aficionados, alienates a large swathe of the local audience who are differently predisposed culturally. Ruggedman vents the artist’s exasperation at the impossibility of staying “hardcore” and surviving as an artist:

I’m tired of so-called hip hop heads  
 Whispering that I am not holding it down  
 Say[ing] I don [have] change[ed] from the way I be [was] before  
 Say[ing] now I dey spit for pidgin [I rap in pidgin]  
 Dem [They] prefer[ed] me when I been be [when I was] hardcore . . .  
 But that left me grounded like Nigeria Airways.

To many rap zealots, elements such as easily accessible language, blind verse, and overwhelming musicality compromise the quality of rap. A focus group of nine hip hop enthusiasts—five undergraduates and four graduate students of University of Ibadan—convened during research for this study unanimously agreed with this statement. Specifically on this account, seven of the respondents would not classify artists like Olamide (Olamide Adedeji) and Naira Marley (Azeez Adeshina Fashola) as hip hop artists. One specified that some of Olamide’s songs would pass while many are not vintage rap. One group member acknowledged that the musical practice of the two artists is hip hop, though not “real rap”; her classification relied on both performative and extra-performative aspects, such as the artist’s sartorial choices, carriage and use of graffiti. One may therefore infer that some of the creative reinvention of hip hop to fit the dominant Nigerian taste is aberrant to normative hip hop practice. Ruggedman’s becoming “tired of so-called hip hop heads/Whispering that I am not holding it down” responds to that

24. Bode Omojola, *Popular Music in Western Nigeria: Theme, Style and Patronage System* (Ibadan: IFRA, 2006), 4.

purist discourse. The artist is sensitive to the fact that local audiences are being increasingly cut off from the circuit of performance by the adoption of unfamiliar tropes they do not connect with easily. Apart from failing as an exercise in communication, the “hard-core” also comes with the unpleasant potential of being contextually ridiculous:

Our elders mock our shit  
Cos of our too much metaphorically out-of-space type shit  
When some rap  
Dem no know where we come from [The audience cannot figure out where we come  
from]  
Back then two rappers on stage was like seven throwing a tantrum  
We need to change that, put a face to our music.  
Let the world know where we come from.  
Ruggedman, therefore, considers imperative a cultural agenda in which the hip hop  
performers attune their art to evolve a peculiar Nigerian type because:  
From Nigeria, the world only knows jùjú, fuji and afrobeat  
But we all know hip hop is running the streets  
Wetin go [What will] make them know where your music comes from in the long run  
Na [Is] the fusion of grammar, your slang and your mother tongue.

#### PERFORMING DISSIDENCE IN THE TEETH OF POWER

In a major way, some Nigerian hip hop practices query many of the values promoted in the earlier popular musical imagination, such as the middle-class values identified in the jùjú example cited earlier. Disempowerment and adverse social conditions have been identified as foundational to the global hip hop consciousness. Andrew Ross and Damian Rivers (2018), citing Matthew Oware, write that “high rates of unemployment, extreme poverty and other social structural barriers” fed the discontent that hip hop was evolved to vent.<sup>25</sup> Halifu Osumare (2009) refers to the commonality of that social experience among the hip hop generation in the world as “connective marginalities,” a frame “encompassing the gamut of culture, class, historical oppression, and generation.”<sup>26</sup> In that sense, peculiar history and social climate determine the odds that are imagined in the hip hop texts and inflect hip hop’s terms of engagement with them. The way marginality is conceived in Nigerian hip hop is thereby determined by that imperative. In fact, the peculiarity could be said to have begun with the dispersal of hip hop to Africa being routed via an unlikely vector. As observed by Eric Charry (2012), the initial transmission to the continent was via video cassettes and transnational television broadcast to which mainly the middle class had access. In Africa therefore, hip hop’s “initial adherents . . . typically came from a socio-economic elite, those who had better access to, and stronger

25. Andrew S. Ross and Damian J. Rivers, *The Sociolinguistics of Hip-Hop as Critical Conscience: Dissatisfaction and Dissent* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–2.

26. Halifu Osumare, “Beat Streets in the Global Hood: Connective Marginalities of the Hip Hop Globe,” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 24, no. 1-2 (2009), 174.

interest in, foreign imports.”<sup>27</sup> This provenance encourages a hypothesis that Nigerian hip hop would, more naturally than jùjú, exude middle-class values. Although numerous examples would both validate and complicate such a hypothesis, there are nevertheless peculiar features of the Nigerian hip hop as a performance of dissent that point to a different paradigm of social classification. Tope Omoniye (2009) has observed a similar disjunctive constitution, compared to the North American experience, of the Nigerian hip hop practice. There is, he says, a noticeable middle-class citizenship implied in the manner that a hip hop practice he observed shows consciousness of the law. Nigerian rapper Vector’s (Olanrewaju Ogunmefun) hesitation in using graffiti (which would violate laws relating to unauthorized smearing of public and private property with paint), for example, reflects that consciousness: “This conformity with the law and conventional norm seems to depart from the known stereotype of North American practice” (Omoniye 2009).<sup>28</sup> Omoniye further points out the paradox of having rappers critical of the dominant order come from within the upper and middle classes:

Hip Hop has been deployed to articulate resistance to a dominant elite mainstream. But it is difficult to describe it as the property of the social underclass when we consider that some of its contemporary exponents come from privileged, educated, and upwardly mobile socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>29</sup>

Omoniye also says that one of the key denominators of the artists as middle class is formal education, especially up to the university level—or the capacity to acquire it. Now this otherwise significant understanding of the ironic entanglement of the artist with the class he contends with as a critic misses one key point: the artist’s discontent is not in spite of his formal education; it is because of it.

Probably, only Afrobeat, especially as practiced by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (who also defied the expectations of his privileged upper middle-class background), could be considered more strident than hip hop in the lyrical censure of Nigerian aristocracy. At the same time, it should be admitted that there are few hip hop performances that, in a manner similar to jùjú and fújì before them, celebrate governments and aristocrats. As can be seen from “Ruggedy Baba,” there is an underlay of bitterness against authority in almost every performative instance even when the subject is not entirely political. Ruggedman, while formulating a protocol for creating a truly Nigerian hip hop form, deploys figural hints of Nigerian official ineptitude and lethargy. He considers those who understand the need for a hip hop culture that the common Nigerian people can identify with but yet criticize the artist as “talk[ing] around the subject like our lawmakers.” He later employs a simile that compares the artist’s poverty due to lack of patronage to

27. Eric S. Charry, *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 4.

28. Tope Omoniye, “‘So I Choose to Do Am Naija Style’: Hip Hop, Language, and Postcolonial Identities.” In *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*, eds. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim and Alastair Pennycook (New York: Routledge, 2009), 123.

29. *Ibid.*, 125.

“grounded . . . Nigeria Airways,” a widely acknowledged monument of fiscal misappropriation and administrative incompetence in Nigeria.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, Nigerian hip hop’s engagement with the sociopolitical mainstream often manifests as apparent confrontation. Ruggedman’s lines cited above directly call out irresponsible governance and inept officialdom. Eedris Abdulkareem’s “Jagajaga” evinces more clearly not only the overt performance of dissent but post-performance animosities as well. “Jagajaga,” released in 2004, denounces the state. The song’s catalogue of miseries—poverty, insecurity and others—visited upon average Nigerians makes the attempts by the present government to create a positive image of the country look hollow. President Olusegun Obasanjo would show his outrage by openly abusing Eedris and causing the song to be banned from broadcast in Nigeria. Almost a decade later, Obasanjo would still smart sorely from Eedris’s lyrical barbs:

One of the worst problems Nigeria is facing is disbelief [sic]. Nigerians no longer believe in themselves; neither do they believe in their country. That takes me back to that song “Jagajaga.” How could a sane man dare to call his country “jagajaga [an entity in dire straits]?” It is the height of blasphemy. We are grooming our youths for tomorrow’s leadership and with such persons I do not think the country can move forward.<sup>31</sup>

Dissent, however, is not always framed as manifest dissatisfaction. Appreciating fully the value of Nigerian hip hop—especially the genre using Yoruba language—as a critique of the mainstream therefore should include consideration of signs that are not a patent disavowal.

According to James C. Scott (1990), dissent in social text is articulated in a variety of sublime ways. Scott recalls that dominance has always been perpetuated by “punishing” dissent, for “slaves and serfs ordinarily dare not contest the terms of their subordination openly. Behind the scenes, though, they are likely to create and defend a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relation may be voiced.”<sup>32</sup> “Punishment” of dissent in today’s context need not be as primordial as death, dungeon or banishment but may come in the form of sublime sanctions, such as loss of corporate endorsement and other forms of patronage. A major implication of this for the way that interaction between the dominant class and the subordinate class is framed is that signs are masked. In view of this, expressive forms like “rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater of the powerless” are better also understood in light of their deployment “as vehicles by which, among other things, they [the powerless] insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct.”<sup>33</sup>

30. Nigeria Airways, national commercial airline, is defunct.

31. Anonymous, “Obj Blasts Eedris’s ‘Jaga jaga’ Again,” *Daily Trust*, 1 September 2012, <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/obj-blasts-eedris-jaga-jaga-again.html>.

32. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), xi.

33. *Ibid.*, xiii.

Scott sees social relation in “power-laden situations” as constituted of two expressive domains: hidden and public transcripts. The hidden transcript “represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” especially in a situation where “the process of domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power.”<sup>34</sup> The mask that is impelled by the need to portray the “dominant elites as they would have themselves seen,” conversely, is the prime condition of the public transcript.<sup>35</sup> Scott employs “public transcript” to account for “the *open* interaction between subordinates and those who dominate,” (my italics).<sup>36</sup> As a social text, the public transcript is made deficient by what it hides since it “is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations.”<sup>37</sup> In a climate that discourages dissident action by surveillance and delegitimizes it by punishment, “an assessment of power relations read directly off the public transcript between the powerful and the weak may portray a deference and consent that are possibly only a tactic.”<sup>38</sup> It is in light of this that a wholesome reading of power and the performative requires equal focus on both transcripts. The hidden transcript, however, does not necessarily imply that the dissident imports of the subordinate’s action are concealed from sight. In many contexts, “the hidden transcript is typically expressed openly—albeit in disguised form,” creating thereby a performative consensus in which the dominant class also recognizes the hidden transcript but chooses to play along.<sup>39</sup> Scott admits there are “rare moments [and I think such moments are not so rare in Yoruba hip hop] of political electricity when, often for the first time in memory, the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power.”<sup>40</sup>

#### BEING IGBORO AND THE AMORALITY OF HUSTLE

The hip hop performance of Olamide (Olamide Adedeji) often gestures to mainstream and official values. This aspect recalls a similar tendency in jùjú, especially the orientation towards education on citizenship and public conduct. Jùjú and other popular Yoruba musical forms have readily enlisted themselves in creating awareness about government programs and policies, such as agriculture, economy, and family planning. In a similar manner, Olamide’s “I Love Lagos” advertises the glamor of Nigeria’s most populous and commercially busy state. The thematic purpose is more of a tourist attraction and promotion of a political persona than a radical cultural nationalist avowal of Lagos; there is a repeated line that identifies “Governor [Akinwumi] Ambode” as an architect of that rhapsodized mega-city. Olamide’s line in Phyno’s (Chibuzor Nelson Azubuike) “Fada Fada” also imagines the Governor as a benefactor come to adopt orphan Olamide. The

34. Ibid., xii

35. Ibid., 18.

36. Ibid., 2.

37. Ibid., 2.

38. Ibid., 3.

39. Ibid., xii–xiii.

40. Ibid., xiii.

artist has also benefitted from corporate endorsements. For example, he was commissioned by Sterling Bank to record a musical video to educate Nigerians on sanitation.

In Olamide's work, however, there is a constant return to the hip hop's foundational disenchantment with the mainstream in sublime terms. First, YBNL (Yahoo Boy No Laptop), one of Olamide's aliases, references "Yahoo" or Yahoo-Yahoo, a popular epithet in Nigeria for internet fraud. As do many other popular songs of the time, YBNL valorizes internet fraud. According to Suleman Lazarus (2018):

The online versions of . . . AFF [Advance Free Fraud] are locally known as "*yahoo-yahoo*" . . . "*Yahoo-yahoo*" is coined from the dominance of Yahoo emails, apps and instant messaging in perpetrator-victim communications during the mid-2000s . . . when there was an internet boom in Nigeria. The perpetrators of "*yahoo-yahoo*" are popularly called "*Yahoo-Boys*."<sup>41</sup>

Lazarus further shows that through patronage from Yahoo Boys and participation in Yahoo-Yahoo, hip hop practice in Nigeria and cyberfraud have become intricately enmeshed. Rationalization of Yahoo-Yahoo fraud in hip hop imaginary is at the foreground of the disempowerment of young Nigerian people in spite of their acquired skills and education. There is a need for some consideration of the social condition and history from which the hip hop beatification of the fraudster draws its rationale.

In May 2019, Chris Ngige, Nigeria's Minister of Labour and Employment, raised the alarm that the nation's unemployment rate was about to reach 33.5%. Earlier in 2014, an incident had drawn attention to the enormity of the unemployment situation (NAN 2019). That year, the Nigeria Immigration Service advertised about 4,000 vacant positions for which about 6,500,000 young people applied. During the recruitment exercise conducted at different centers nationwide, there were incidents of stampede leading to about 16 deaths and many injuries. For almost five decades, governments in Nigeria have not only been insensitive to the emergency of unemployment but have, more curiously, exacerbated it through bad policies and programs. In fact, the poverty that is collateral with that widespread unemployment shares the Nigerian space with cold, obscene ostentation by the politicians in power and their appointees and other beneficiaries. One illustration of the Nigerian predatory official disposition is the discovery that about 520 million Naira (1,444,000 USD) in application fees were extorted from the applicants for the immigration jobs (Ajijah and Isine 2014).

It is opportune to return to the earlier postponed conversation with Tope Omoniyi (2009) at this point. Defining middle-class/elite status with university education plays down a major index of the grave condition of disempowerment that many young Nigerians contend with. Their chances are not necessarily bright because of that education but because of a more significant factor—proximity to power. There are identifiable instances where that education constituted an encumbrance. A personal experience illustrates this

41. Suleman Lazarus, "Birds of a Feather Flock Together: the Nigerian Cyber Fraudster (Yahoo Boys) and Hip Hop Artists," *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law and Society* 18, no. 2 (2018): 64.

phenomenon. In 2018, two applicants approached the writer for reference letters to an institution that just advertised positions requiring qualifications varying from a college degree to Secondary School Certificate. The applicants asked that the letters not reflect their university qualifications and present status as graduate students. This request was informed by the apprehension that the few positions requiring university degrees would have been reserved for the applicants favored by those in power. These two people saw a better prospect in applying for less competitive positions that required just a Senior Secondary Certificate. Now the locus of the subordinate that Nigerian hip hop consciousness assumes is partly derived from that relative futility of legitimate skills and qualifications. Recent historical examples available seem to justify anything but that formal education is a sure pass to the middle class. In 2003 alone, two formally educated men became the governors of their respective states through the help of godfathers who had little or no formal education. The two men, Rashidi Ladoja of Oyo State and Chris Ngige of Anambra State, would later be removed at the pleasure of these godfathers. Many of the models of material success that are promoted in the Nigerian urban folklore are credited to politics, inheritance, entertainment, unabashed fraud, drug trafficking, etc. not education or professional skill. According to a finding by Lazarus and Okorie (2019), university graduate students preponderate among successful cyberfraudsters:

Yahoo-boys-digital (university-educated cyber-fraudsters) are not only more advanced than those who are non-university educated, they are also more difficult for law enforcement agents to criminalize because in the words of one respondent, “they [Yahoo-boys-digital] are always conducting their own research even more than law enforcement.”<sup>42</sup>

As such, there is an orientation towards a diversion of skills acquired in college to a career in fraud. In the emergent hip hop texts, therefore, the otherwise reprehensible “Yahoo-Yahoo” becomes normalized as exigent, while formal education is *othered* as not only ineffectual but opposed to the more “essential” *street* wisdom.

In global hip hop imagination, “the street” has always been a locus of the socio-economic disempowered. In Nigeria as well, it is the place of not only the “shoemakers and mechanics” that Ruggedman declares as his audience but also the unemployed and the destitute. “The street” is a cradle that Nigerian hip hop artists use to legitimate themselves. In 2010, rapper Tha Suspect declares in his song “Twale”:

If you feeling me  
As I'm feeling you  
Let me hear you say “Baba, Twale!” [Homage among the street toughs]  
I'm from the street  
I rep the street  
You know I'm from the street.

42. Suleman Lazarus and Geoffrey U. Okorie, “The Bifurcation of the Nigerian Cybercriminals: Narratives of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) Agents,” *Telematics and Informatics* 40 (2019): 21.

In the Yoruba hip hop imaginary, the street is reframed “ìgboro,” a word not entirely semantically removed from “the street” because it originally denoted “township” or “metropolis” as opposed to “inú ilé” [home] or “oko” [suburb]. The different inflection in Yoruba hip hop application, however, is that as “street,” “ìgboro” is not only the condition of socio-economic disempowerment, it is practice of defiance. The morality of the jùjú generation sanctions Western education and professional qualification. Qualifying as doctor, lawyer, pilot and engineer was the routine index of achievements in not only jùjú songs, but other contemporary forms, such as fújì, àpàlà and wákà. Latter twentieth-century realities have long stopped supporting this model. The new order—in which wealthy men without formal education have state governors removed, graduates hide their college degrees in order to secure a job, and success in the bureaucratic sector is no more contingent on training, competence and efficiency but strategic proximity to power—has been aptly named “the postcolonial incredible” by Tejumola Olaniyan (2004), a condition that necessitated Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s social and performative recalcitrance:

[T]he postcolonial Nigerian, and African, condition is an incredible one. The “incredible” inscribes that which cannot be believed; that which is too improbable, astonishing, and extraordinary to be believed. The incredible is not simply a breach but an outlandish infraction of “normality” and its limits.<sup>43</sup>

Nigerian hip hop plays up this systemic abasement of formal education and legitimate industry with a trope that compares education with fraud: “education na [is] scam.” The trope queries the normative equation of educational and professional qualification with achievement. The well-known morality relating to diligent study and honest hard work is considered a deception in the same way as fraud.<sup>44</sup> Now ìgboro, street of Yoruba hip hop, is located opposite to school “where people go to waste time.” Lil’ Kesh (Ololade Keshinro) declaims in his 2014 song, “Lyrically”: “Ìgboro lèmi, kí ló kàn mí pèlú ‘read your book’ [I am of ìgboro, I have no use of studies].” In the same manner and very curiously, ìgboro is opposite the middle class. This emplacement somehow also further complicates the normative definition of middle class. In that ìgboro-vs-middle-class opposition, material success is redefined in a manner that it is no longer a preserve of the rich middle class. In Kayswitch’s song “For Example,” the refrain “Èmi n’ìgboro, iwọ ajẹbutter” [I am ìgboro while you are upper middle class], repeated four times at every point, contrasts the artist with a foil who eats pizza instead of local food and who “s’Oyinbo bii Drake . . . [ati] Kendrick [speaks English like Drake and Kendrick].” The punch line, however, is that the imagined foil is nevertheless not as materially successful as the artist.

In ìgboro, the exigent negotiation of subordination and disempowerment is couched in the concept of “hustle.” Hustle (noun and intransitive verb) is the realm of the amoral where material ascendancy is possible through both legitimate and criminal means; at

43. Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music: Fela and his Rebel Art and Politics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 2.

44. For example, see song “School na Scam” by Zlatan and Gururu. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LN9jvUWLmo>



once, hustle involves honest hard work as well as the immoral ones: menial job, unskilled labor, gambling, “runz” [part-time female prostitution], “sugar-mummifying” [dating older women for money], Yahoo-Yahoo, etc. Nigerian hip hop has often struggled with the double-bind of giving expressive coverage to this reigning consciousness on the one hand and palliating its cold inhumanity on the other. There is some attempt in Olamide’s musical video “Voice of the Street” to visualize this grim paradox through alternation between a scene of violence and the sacred ambience of a cathedral with the votaries shedding tears of blood. The lyrics and visuals are tense with a keen understanding of a social environment that is rigged to thwart you, and the anxiety of how to retain one’s humanity as you confront it. But the artist-persona is swayed by a history—“Àti kékére ni mo tí ñ hustle bi omọ thirty-five [I began “hustle” as a little boy like a thirty-five-year-old]—against human sentiments. For him, the ultimate condition for remaining in circulation is that “Mo [ní láti] loyal sí hustle mi [I must be loyal to my hustle].”

As noted earlier, James Scott calls attention to the capacity of the awareness of power to compel performative criticism cautiously; the performer, apprehensive of censure while imaging the action of the dominant class, applies a veneer of reverence and submission. Therefore, “any analysis based exclusively on the public transcript is likely to conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, and even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination” (Scott 1990).<sup>45</sup> But hidden below that surface is a transcript of genuine disgust at and disavowal of crass impunity of the practice of power. Olamide’s 2019 song “Oil and Gas” feigns consent to dominion by troping Nigeria’s major foreign exchange earner, petroleum. There had been a prospect of ensuring national prosperity from oil wealth. But unfortunately, Nigeria’s perennial economic woes are paradoxically due to this resource: the concentration of the power to appropriate the profits accruing from oil in the hands of an insensitive oligarchy has meant that the larger population remains poor. Oil is translated “epo” in Yoruba. There is a pre-existing Yoruba proverb, “ọwọ epo ni omo aráyé ñ bá ni í lá; wọn kìí bá ni lá ọwọ èjẹ [people are more disposed to help lick an oily hand than a bloody one].” The regular import is to alert an addressee against fair-weather company; there are few instances of normative deployment of this metaphor in Yoruba hip hop.<sup>46</sup> Olamide, however, refracts the orthodox usage through comparison of “epo” in the Yoruba proverb with the widely coveted access to oil wealth. The lyrical index to petroleum is furtive: there is no single direct mention of it in the entire song text, even as “oil and gas” is used as the title so that the meaning is not lost. The politicians, political appointees and capitalists are characterized as having “oily hands” that the parched artist-persona prays to lick from:

Ọgá mi ẹnu gbẹ  
 Ọrẹ mi ẹnu gbẹ  
 Alayé ẹnu gbẹ  
 Owó wà l’ọwọ yín

45. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4.

46. See, for example, “No Fake Love” (2017) by Lil’ Kesh <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQV4icoAmLI>, and “Ọwọ Epo” (2019) by Zoko and Bond <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTJiVog6lb8>.

È jẹ k'á ba yín nọ  
Èpó wà lówọ yín  
È jẹ k'á ba yín la  
È lè nọ'wó yẹn tọn

[Master, my mouth is parched  
Friend, my mouth is parched  
Buddy, my mouth is parched  
You have a lot of money  
Let us spend with you  
There is oil in your hand  
Allow us lick from it

Only you cannot exhaust this immense wealth]

Olamide's reference to the unapologetic misappropriation of national resources concerns not only the usual beneficiaries such as elected officials and appointees, who are given access statutorily via periodic monetary allocation. There is also a well-known conduit through which Nigerian politicians with no positions in government can access public funds. During elections, they are paid by those in power to ensure that the latter are reelected. There was a brazen display of this form of transaction during the last presidential election in Nigeria. In February 2019, viral online photos show two bullion vans turning up at the home of Bola Tinubu, a prominent member of the political party in power. The most popular interpretation is that those vans conveyed the cash used to "facilitate" victory for the ruling party. The obscenity is not just in the brazenness of the conduct, but that it is being overlooked by the law, especially the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) (Akinkuotu 2019). Olamide's "Oil and Gas," while mentioning the names of politicians, businessmen and other beneficiaries of that "postcolonial incredible" in a manner that is at first celebratory, references this infraction:

Aṣiwájú ti bínú  
Wọ́n ní mí'ó mọ́ law  
Wọ́n ní ki n yé gbé Ghana-must-go bag wá sílé àwọn ní Bourdillon  
Ọmọ, bullion van  
Lọ́n fi gbé wá fun mí.  
[Asiwaju{Tinubu} is angry  
That I do not respect the law  
Coming to his house at Bordillon Street with a big bag to collect my handout  
Boy, bullion van  
That's what he'll rather use to bring me the money].

If the obscenity that these lines surreptitiously lay bare is lost on the audience, they are jeered into consciousness later in the song when bureaucracy and its corporate ally are shown as two institutions that are entrenched to fleece every Nigerian:

Èyìn lẹ n'ílẹ e yín  
Oó mọ Dáńgótè  
Cement ẹ nọ fi kọ'lé e yín, ọmọ àsè! . . .

Toó bá s̄onwó olú  
 Wáá sha s̄onwó toll-gate  
 [Though you {claim to} own your house,  
 You do not know Dangote  
 Your very house was built by his cement, you fool . . .  
 If you do not want to pay the head/ruler  
 You'll still end up paying the highway toll.

Aliko Dangote mentioned in the second line is the richest Nigerian. The near-monopoly that his businesses once enjoyed has resulted in the ubiquity of their products in Nigeria, ranging from construction materials to food. Olamide's rendering of this ubiquity as a taunt is designed to show the sublime but far-reaching extent of the capitalist sucker, enabled by official sanction, on the oblivious commonality. Through the ploy of pun, Olamide insinuates further that the aforementioned capitalist absorption and official levy system are components of the same thralldom, since "Toó bá s̄onwó olú/Wáá sha s̄onwó toll-gate [If you do not want to pay the head/You'll still end up paying the highway toll]." Yoruba "s̄onwó olú [pay the ruler or head]" puns "Sanwóolú," name of the Governor of Lagos, Nigeria's richest state in taxes, tolls and levies.

#### **NAIRA MARLEY: UNAPOLOGETIC YAHOO-YAHOO AS MIRROR OF POWER**

Naira Marley (Azeez Adeshina Fashola) is at once the most vilified and most followed Nigerian musical artist alive. The roguish valorizing of sexual license, drugs and psychedelia, and cyberfraud in his music has created a widespread animus towards him and his art. Naira Marley not only normalizes fraud, as do many of his contemporaries, but he also has been identified as a practicing Yahoo Boy. Conversely, a large following of youth population has merged into a cult called Marlians; they imitate the artist and try to live by all the principles promoted in his music. They are subsequently profiled as deviants and criminals in the public discourse, which disowned them. To them, however, the prime value of their countercultural identification is highlighting the systemic disenfranchisement of their generation in Nigeria, a condition that Osumare (2009) calls "connective marginalities." The cultural rebellion advanced by Naira Marley is placed within the existing Nigerian hip hop disillusionment described earlier. In the song "Bad Influence," the artist complains that "the government don't have nothing for us/Is like they tryna kill all of us" and that "we want school, they gave us prison/We want education, they taught us lesson." A columnist for a popular Nigerian online news publication who is sympathetic to Naira Marley and his followers writes that the Nigerian order does not only disempower young people, but also vilifies and punishes their attempts to thrive in spite of that disempowerment:

It does not matter if you are famous or successful as long as you are young, "you are not yet there"—as if there is a trophy that comes with age.

Our society is predatory on the young. It is a capital offence to own a Benz as a young person in Nigeria. You could be killed by police brigands, tortured or extorted to your

last nickel. It is consequential remissness to give off any vibe of success as a young person. In fact, there is an unquoted bounty on every successful young person. Our political, social and law enforcement systems are just abrasive towards young people who “are doing well.”<sup>47</sup>

Now the Marlian thesis is constructed as a countercultural reaction to the position described in the above sentiment. First, Naira Marley’s performance is signed as a subordinate and fugitive discourse in the way that his song texts sometimes avoid linear narrative coherence, as if composed in argot. A few Marlians contacted during this writing would show mischievous pleasure at the researcher’s inability to make sense of the texts; it could be inferred that their pleasure arose not only from the researcher’s lack of proficiency but his naiveté of expecting a linear lyrical coherence as in other musical texts. In “Soapy,” for example, there is an uncoordinated movement from one point to another among various themes, such as vainness of orthodox religion and spirituality, carceral sexual expression, personal triumph and other subjects. Many of the lines are also outright lost on any audience oblivious of their history or ignorant of the deployed idioms that are current among Naira Marley’s fans. This tentatively fits the hidden transcript variable that Scott says responds vengefully to power. According to Scott, the will to redress the abuse of domination is often unable to cross the threshold of fantasy, for “when the insult is but a variant of affronts suffered systematically by a whole race, class, or strata, then the fantasy can become a collective cultural product.”<sup>48</sup> Scott means that the presence of power is so formidable that the subordinate is precluded forever from articulating revenge in open terms; the cathartic option is to couch the dissident push-back, a fantasy, in a language known only to the subordinated community.

The most effective of the ways that Naira Marley constructs the disenchantment with the socio-cultural order is by creating and advertising lived and performative acts that are parallel to that order. This is a peculiar complication of the dimensions of power relation imagined by Scott. For example, as critique of a particular official or general social infraction, Naira Marley mimics each with an embarrassing variant and openly dares sanction. In May 2019, he released “Am I a Yahoo Boy?” a song that affirms cyberfraud via tongue-in-cheek denial of the practice. He would be arrested few days later by Nigeria’s Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) “in relation to advance fee fraud—internet related cases” (Aworinde 2019). The song’s affirmation of Yahoo-Yahoo is hidden in a cry of persecution and plea of innocence:

È rà mí, ẹ gbà mí o!  
Şé mo j’omọ Yahoo?  
[Help, save me people  
Do I look like a Yahoo Boy?]

47. Fredrick Nwabufo, “Naira Marley Irritates the Hypocrisy in All of Us,” *Sahara Reporters*, 8 August 2020, <http://saharareporters.com/2020/08/08/naira-marley-irritates-hypocrisy-all-us-fredrick-nwabufo>

48. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 9.

Through an ordinary alibi, the song insinuates the first parallel between Nigerian officialdom and practice of fraud:

Èmi ó mọ SARS  
SARS t'èmi mọ is Sarz on the Beat  
[I do not know SARS  
The only SARS I know is Sarz {a music producer} on the beat]

Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad [SARS] is a special unit of the police created to check armed robbery. The squad has however become notorious for going after young people suspected of involvement in internet scams. SARS men's ultimate aim is always the money that such young people pay them in order to be let off. By 2017, their harassment and extortion, especially of young males, had become so widespread that there was a nationwide call for their disbandment (Adepegba 2017). The proximate placement of SARS and Yahoo in the above lines therefore insinuates a parallel between the illegality of SARS men's extortion and illegality of cyberfraud; a parallel that becomes less hidden in view of public knowledge of it. In the event that the alibi created through that rhetorical question "Am I Yahoo Boy?" is taken literally as a declaration of innocence, a line affirms the artist persona's position thus: "Màgà tó ní sanwó mi sé/K'árin wa kó má dàrú [And the sucker {victim} that pays me/ May we never break up]."

In the open transcript of that performative pushback that justifies Yahoo-Yahoo as a parallel of the Nigerian mainstream, different sectors such as religion and politics are called out. In an intertextual echo of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's "Shuffling and Smiling," "Am I a Yahoo Boy?" openly declares, "Government na barawo/Bloggers na armed robbers/Imam dey gbaladun/Pastor na enjoyment [The government is a thief/Bloggers are armed robbers/Imams enjoy/Pastors do enjoy too]." The indictment of bloggers draws its rationale from a popular assumption that many of these writers extort money from celebrities through blackmail or publish untrue stories to attract traffic. As in the original text by Fela, the Christian and Muslim leaders' "enjoyment" is impeached by a well-known fact of widespread poverty among their followers. Unlike Africanist Fela, however, Naira Marley extends the censure to the indigenous institution: "Yahoo ni babaláwo/Olè l'everybody/Èni ilẹ̀ bá mọ̀ bá ọ́ ní bàráwó [The babalawo<sup>49</sup> is a fraudster/Everybody is a thief/But only he who is caught is named one]."

With lived acts that are more serious than parody, Naira Marley calls attention to the higher ground of the ordinarily controversial and objectionable compared to what the models of the Nigerian mainstream do. The song "Soapy," lyrically and through the stylized dance movements it prescribes, advises young men to masturbate if they are poor, single or in jail. This is repulsive to the mainstream Nigerian sensibility. Naira Marley, however, seeks post-performance justification for the song through comparison with rape. In 2019, Biodun Fatoyinbo, senior pastor of one of Nigeria's most popular Pentecostal churches, was accused of rape by a woman. He would later be acquitted by the court. In the following fever of accusation, recrimination, supports and condemnation, Naira

49. Yoruba Ifá priest and diviner.

Marley puts out a widely circulated message on the social media: “Say no to rape and yes to #Soapy.” In another scenario, Naira Marley violated the Covid-19 movement and assembly restriction order by performing live in the nation’s capital Abuja on 13 June 2020. He was arrested, prosecuted and fined by the court. As usual, however, this present subversion of the statute seeks correlation with the obscene practice of power in Nigeria. There are claims validated by proofs that Nigerian politicians and senior government appointees violated the restriction order without consequences. Naira Marley further highlights the validity of these claims through the Abuja escapade: to transport himself to that event, he succeeded in booking a chartered aircraft by impersonating the Attorney General and Minister of Justice whose surname he shares (Sulaimon 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Culture is often determined by both the need of the people and their contiguity to other cultures. Popular culture has always been a site where the indigenous and the local on the one hand, and the foreign on the other meld into genuine new local forms. The ways that the resulting new forms are constituted and composed are, therefore, dependent on the exigency of the time. In Nigeria, the climate in which the earlier popular musical forms like highlife and jùjú evolved avowed middle-class values and guaranteed relatively easy ascendancy to that class. As witness to a socio-economic system that rewarded labor and excellence, jùjú essentially attuned itself to middle-class values and profited from the patronage of the wealthy upper and middle classes. Hip hop music, prominent in Nigeria since the turn of the century, responds to different history and society. While this music and cultural form adopts the global baseline of expressing generational anxieties of youth and minorities, it has attuned itself to the cultural and expressive nuances of the Nigerian space. In also responding to the socio-cultural order, Yoruba hip hop specifically critiques mainstream Nigeria in terms that are at first legible as acquiescent, provocative and aberrant, rather than as critical. A keen attention to both the hidden and openly aberrant transcripts of Yoruba hip hop practice reveals its value as critique of Nigeria in a manner that differentiates it from all antedating forms. ■

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