

# Rap, graffiti and social media in South Africa today

Itunu Bodunrin

*Hip-hop in South Africa has been on a roller coaster ride since its emergence as a protest tool among non-white youths against apartheid in the early 1980s. Although the collapse of apartheid in the early 1990s opened up an era of commercialisation which ultimately suppressed its “protest” feature, it has again resurfaced reflecting the social hills of the post-apartheid era, such as class struggles and imbalances, corruption, HIV, violence, racism and poverty.*

The music culture of hip-hop began among the African American community in the Bronx, United States in the mid-1970s as a form of youth resistance against racial oppression. It incorporates elements such as rapping (oral), graffiti (visual), Dj-ing (aural) and break-dancing (physical). The graffiti element became synonymous with hip-hop in the early 1980s, when hip-hop gangs and street kids in the United States went around the neighborhood with spray cans tagging and scribbling their gang names on city walls.

But graffiti existed long before hip-hop began in many parts of the world. For instance, the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong was said to have used graffiti in the 1920s, for his slogans and paintings during his revolution (Morwe, 2010). In the same vein, graffiti preceded hip-hop in South Africa, where it was labelled “protest” or “resistant art”. Both were triggered by the need for resistance against the apartheid regimes (see Williamson, 2004).





Hip-hop culture began as rap in the Cape Flats<sup>1</sup> near the city of Cape Town as an underground movement in the early 1980s, when government repression and the banning of protesting organizations and individuals meant that people had to find new ways to express their grievances. The marginalized youth population at this time began by adapting the lyrics of the US hip-hop group, “The Public Enemy”, transforming their songs such as “Fight the Power” as a special re-

United States, the agenda of the graffiti artists of South Africa was to communicate messages using the walls of the city as galleries and notice boards (Williamson, 2004). A classic example of this is the *free Mandela* graffiti on many public walls in the late 1980s.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (2004) concludes that from the 1960s to early 1990s, hip-hop and in particular graffiti were used to transcend the youth’s horrendous experience



silience to fight their own revolution (Battersby, 2003).

Graffiti had long begun as a separate entity from hip-hop, with many singling out the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960 and the Soweto Uprising of 16 June 1976 as the main events that triggered a series of protests, protest art and the use of graffiti. In both events, the government’s attempts to constrain a peaceful protest through the use of police force led to sporadic shooting and killing scores of innocent defenseless Blacks (see Olzak and Olivier, 1998).

By the 1980s, following the arrest of many nationalist leaders, Cape Town in particular had become famous for trenchant art and subversive comments which appeared in virtually every public space in the city. Unlike the spraycan kids in the

and circumstance into an expressive form of art against the hostile apartheid forces that demean and dehumanize them. It became a radical and an alternative medium that challenged the status quo in the absence of the government-controlled mainstream media. The marginalized youths engaged in it to create and set their own rules and values to achieve success outside the white ruling class socially prescribed norms (See also Copland, 1985; Everatt et al., 1992; Nixon, 1994; Rosenberg, 2002).

Many post-apartheid writings have extensively focused on the crucial roles graffiti and hip-hop played in these years of struggle for liberation, however, very few little has been written on the present forms of these radical media forms in post-apartheid South Africa.





kids engaging in hip-hop and graffiti in many cities. By transcending the racial barrier, Jane Battersby (2003) concludes that hip-hop can be seen as a post-colonial (apartheid) text which reflects the new identities of South Africa's racial groups and communities.

The commodification and popularity of hip-hop in SA also means it is now backed by big organizations, government and NGOs to pursue their own agenda. For instance, rap is mainly sponsored by alcohol companies, while Coca-Cola has through its countrywide "Sprite Uncontainable"

organised competitions among graffiti artists in the country. The government and NGOs have pounced on the popularity and sentiments attached to graffiti to promote tourism as well as to foster public awareness campaigns.

It is not uncommon to find graffiti commissioned by the government and NGOs which supports awareness campaigns of social-cultural, political and public health issues such as HIV/AIDS, political apathy etc.

Such collaborations have helped to alleviate the negative perceptions attached to hip-hop since the apartheid years. Organisations such as the Grayscale Gallery have gone a step further by hosting SA's most celebrated graffiti artists. In an effort to try and change negative perceptions around graffiti, the organisation showcases significant roles played by graffiti in cities around the world (see <http://www.jhblive.com/reviews/51056>).

### Graffiti as vandalism

In spite of these many efforts aimed at giving hip-hop a positive outlook, the defiant act of scribbling trenchant and sometimes insignificant paintings on public walls persists. This has been interpreted as public nuisance and vandalization of properties, particularly by city councils who spend fortunes removing them. A Cape Town spokesperson, for instance, laments that "... graffiti is no longer what it used to be" (cited from Williamson, 2004). It is assumed that graffiti artists misuse their unlimited

### Complexity of today's hip-hop

The third page of the 3 September 2014 edition of the *Daily News* newspaper had the caption: "K.O Punch to SA Hip Hop of Old." An entire page was exclusively dedicated to hip-hop's rave of the moment, Ntokozo Mdluli popularly known as "K.O", whose hip-hop rap single *Caracara* had received over a million views on YouTube, eclipsing previous hip-hop songs and set to be voted the song of the year.

K.O boasted that his emergence into the SA hip-hop scene has perpetually led to the demise of the older kinds of hip-hop – protest deviant hip-hop and other forms such as *Kwaito* that surfaced in the wake of democracy in 1994. The song *Caracara* utilises street language, slang and beats to tell stories of old school partying patterns in most urban black townships.

Hip-hop has indeed undergone some sort of a rebirth since the emergence of Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected president in April 1994. The freedom of expression that came with democracy meant a commercialisation of musical forms and cultures, and hip-hop was not left out.

The same culture that was embedded in conflict, acted through resistance and evasion, and rooted in a conflictual ideology by youth to develop a critical common voice during apartheid, has in recent years evolved into a less defiant, aesthetic and popular urban youth culture of all races. For instance, it is not uncommon to see white



expression of freedom by indecently painting public walls for no known cause.

Thus the Cape Town city council in 2010 moved to enact a Graffiti By-law which makes graffiti an illegal act, punishable by lengthy jail terms. This sparked a lot of controversy over the role of graffiti in communities particularly in Cape Town where graffiti has been part and parcel of the city's history. It is even thought to be one of the reasons why it was nominated the best tourist destination in 2013 and the World Design Capital of 2014.

Activist Iliana Foutsitzis believes that banning graffiti in the city is tantamount to suppressing the voice of the poor in a democratic South Africa, because graffiti is the natural channel through which the underprivileged leave their names, impressions and a sense of creativity in society. Though associated with poverty, crews and drugs, Foutsitzis believes it should be unbanned because it is born out of creative minds and offers a splash of colour and boldness, a piece of self-prescribed integrity and pride of ownership which community members easily relate to.

This is comparable to protest rap, which has

also reared its head in recent times, but continues to be suppressed by the powers that be. Ngoan'a Nts'oana (2014) reveals that many hip-hop rap artists who use their music to critique social issues encountered mostly by working class South Africans today (such as unemployment, poverty, etc.), often face rejection from commercial radio stations and corporate sponsors who deem it unfit for their agenda.

Although many of such artists have used the social media platform such as YouTube to distribute their music, they nevertheless struggle to get attention and the commercial success of mainstream artists. This reiterates the importance of the mainstream media in the commercialisation of music cultures in developing countries such as South Africa, where the majority of the population are in the rural suburbs with limited access to the internet and social media (see [www.stassa.gov.za](http://www.stassa.gov.za)).

### **Social media and the culture protest**

The recently called-off protest/strike by the platinum mine workers that lasted for more than five months and severely affected the nation's



economy, has only reiterated the power of protest and who gets to speak and who gets to listen in post-apartheid South African politics. This is just one of the many service delivery protests that has characterised post-apartheid South Africa, as protest remains the traditional way of registering grievances.

Youth as the most vibrant population group are not left out in many of these protests. For instance, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (the writer's institution) has perennially dealt with student protest. The most recent one caused the university to halt its academic activities for about a week in September, 2014 due to a "rumored" fee increment in the oncoming section.

The cyberspace of social media is used to organise many of these protests. According to one of the Student Union executives in charge of mobilizing protests in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the protests were organised using platforms such as Facebook and Blackberry. "We prefer to protest by marching and dancing round the university campus for instantaneous response from the school authority," he says.

Hip-hop is a good example of radical, alternative media, which challenge the status quo. While some believe that social media compliment protest efforts (as seen in instances such as the Arab-spring), others believe social media are in fact the new hip-hop because they have replaced hip-hop as the main protest tool (see Simmons, 2010).

Despite the difficulties encountered in utilizing hip-hop as a protest tool in many urban cities in South Africa today, many marginalized youths in the peripheries continue to engage in rap as a means to create spaces to penetrate a public domain that often excludes them in favour of adults, while some rural communities with no access to mainstream media (radio, TV, internet etc.) also utilise graffiti to protest perceived injustice. Two significant cases are discussed below.

### **The Orange Farm Crisis**

Orange Farm is a township located a few kilometres outside Johannesburg, South Africa. It is an informal settlement whose original inhabitants were laid off farm workers who took up residency

in 1988. The settlement now includes modern amenities such as a library, a few paved roads, permanent housing for some, electricity in places, a clinic, an information centre with internet access, a multi-purpose community center and franchise supermarkets.

However, these improvements came with financial costs, which few citizens living in Orange Farm could not afford. Most notably the installment of pre-paid water meters denied much of the population of Orange Farm access to clean drinking water.

Residents therefore used graffiti to subvert the water and electricity privatization initiatives, by spraying various slogans in and around the area. The graffiti on the walls of Orange Farm articulate the requests of the people not to have pre-paid water meters – "Break The Meter – Enjoy the Water!", as an alternative call for "Free Water for All!" and in protest against electricity cutoffs. In this case graffiti is seen as a medium used by communities to voice out and express their frustrations and dissent (see Morwe, 2010).

### **The Khwe Bushmen youth's use of rap**

The Khwe Bushmen were hunter-gatherers originally from Namibia and Angola. They were wrenched from their homes in the 1960s during the border war and engaged by the South African Defence Force (SADF) in their fight against the nationalist movements in Namibia.

After the war, they were moved to South Africa, granted citizenship and resettled in a place called Platfontein in the outskirts of the city of Kimberley, Northern Cape Province. Due to their limited experience of living in a modern environment, the Khwe elderly struggle badly in their encounter with modernity and in the face of unemployment and perceived government neglect, the Khwe youths who seemed to have embraced modernity better utilised hip-hop rap as a way of voicing themselves as a people fully present in modern society. They use rap to reflect the socio-cultural and economic reality of the present struggles (see, Robbins, 2004; Bodunrin upcoming).

In this way, hip-hop in South Africa remains



a powerful tool of protest in the hands of marginalized groups, particularly those in townships with limited access to the mainstream media, while the increasing popularity of social media in the country may potentially bring back the old protest hip-hop culture among urban youth. ■

*Photo credits: Page 10 A graffiti depicting the famous killing of Hector Pieterse during the Soweto uprising in 1976. Page 11 Graffiti in a rural part of Cape Town by Faith47 - a famous graffiti artist who grew up during the Apartheid regime. Faith47 said "I wanted to highlight the inequalities, and install the feeling that it hasn't happened yet – people are quite aware that they are not all sharing in the country's wealth." Page 12 Graffiti used as protest tool during the Orange Farm Crisis protest (Morwe, 2010). Page 13 Hip-hop rap of old remains an important protest tool among immigrant Bushmen youth. Picture taken in a Do It Yourself (DIY) Bedroom studio by Thom Pierce (June, 2014).*

#### Note

1. The cape flats were apartheid designated rural settlements for non-whites. It has since been home to majority of the population of greater Cape Town ([http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cape\\_Flats](http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cape_Flats)).

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Itunu Bodunrin is currently completing his Masters dissertation at the Centre for Communication, Media and Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. His research interest lies in the Southern Kalahari Desert where he is investigating the emerging post-modern cultural patterns among Bushmen youths.

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