

## **Book Review**



Msia Kibona Clark, *Hip-Hop in Africa: Prophets of the City and Dustyfoot Philosophers*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018). pp. 312.

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Africa, no doubt, is home to various genres of music, and has seen a lot of borrowing and lending in cultural interactions that have had enormous impact on the continent. Several scholars have attempted to show the relationship between the African continent and musical genres such as reggae, hiplife, fuji, highlife, jùjú, and others. For example, Jesse Weaver Shipley demonstrates how Ghanaians blended hip-hop with highlife and made a unique genre known as “hiplife.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, John Collins’ biographical study of one of Africa’s most influential highlife musicians, E. T. Mensah, reminds us of the overarching effects that highlife music had on the socio-cultural formation of Ghanaians, in particular, and western Africa in general.<sup>2</sup> However, there is significantly less literature with an in-depth analytical framework that has attempted to demystify the multidimensional influence of the hip-hop genre in post-colonial Africa, examining youths in both rural and urban locales. Thus, in her effort to narrow the existing gap in knowledge, Msia Kibona Clark enriches this ethnomusicology lacuna through the African perspective. *Hip-Hop in Africa* is structured into six chapters, the majority of which possess pictorials of some popular hip-hop artists across Africa. In addition, the book contains a List of Illustrations, Foreword, Acknowledgments, Epilogue, Appendices, Notes, and a vast collection of reference materials for further study of hip-hop.

Clark’s conceptualization of the term “hip-hop,” and its origin in the United States and influence in Africa, is quite fascinating. In a bid to leave no stone unturned, Clark could not help but pull back and forth in a conscious attempt to elaborate on the historical connections between Blacks in Africa and African-Americans. The most potent point made is on the idea of hip-hop not just as a musical genre, but as a major aspect of cultural representation for both the aforementioned groups. As Clark notes, such representation cut across “in [the] reconstructing understandings of political institutions, social, gender, migration, and identity in Africa.”<sup>3</sup> Clark makes some strong arguments about how hip-hop must be understood within the milieu of entertainment and

as an instrument for the fight against social injustices committed by the elites against the people. Indeed, nothing can supersede the fact that African youths, not just in cities but also in far-flung rural settings, are taking up the hip-hop genre as a means of expressing the hardships they are often subjected to by their so-called “leaders.” Further expatiating the idea of representation, Clark shows how in spite of the economic and political challenges most hip-hop artists in Africa face, they remain undaunted in airing their views on diverse “social dissonance.”<sup>4</sup> As Clark asserts, hip-hop has become a more suitable way to present the real image of lived experiences in Africa. Through hip-hop culture, Africans construct for themselves an image of the kind of world they live in, rather than having non-Africans present such images. However, Clark’s position on the nexus between the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and the emergence of hip-hop in Africa may not be the case for all countries, especially Nigeria.<sup>5</sup>

Clark skillfully illustrates how hip-hop has become a vital tool in demanding proper socio-political representations. She presents instances from southern African countries, where hip-hop artists have demanded paradigm shifts on the questions of racial segregation, sexuality, and the African legal framework.<sup>6</sup> Clark further argues that in spite of the fact that hip-hop has become weaponized to demand a more organized government and a just society, such struggles are not devoid of gender issues among these artists. Taking the argument to another level, what Clark presents on the nexus between hip-hop as a musical genre and platform for gender rights is quite explicit. Though women artists/emcees in Africa are a more recent phenomenon, most of those in the game have seized many opportunities to speak against the repression of women. Clark, however, places more emphasis on the braggadocio used by these women artists. That notwithstanding, most women artists who promote gender equality try as much as possible to emphasize the importance of the unity of all sexes to social progress in Africa. They often do this by appealing to “Mama Africa.” Clark points to the fact that these efforts by women emcees are in most countries confronted by religious views and the more complicating issue of sexuality. Thus, women who are hip-hop emcees in Africa appear to be trapped in a dilemma of “representing their communities, womanhood, and hip-hop. . . [as] they navigate cultural environments in which they find support and [as well as] challenges.”<sup>7</sup>

Many African artists tied to different musical genres have expressed their views on the linkages between Africa and the outside world. These artists, from Nigeria, Ghana, and other countries, during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, used highlife, Afrobeat, and other genres to connect the dots. Clark argues that since the beginning of the 21st century, African hip-hop emcees have contributed to telling diasporic stories, especially as they had occurred in America and Europe. Beyond just telling stories of lived experience in non-African societies, most African artists in the diaspora ensure they portray Africa in their songs either through symbols, languages (i.e., vernacular), proverbs, or dance steps. These are done to show how closely knitted they remain to the African way of life.

In chapter six, Clark reiterates the essence of language in the understanding of cultural representation. Language, which is a signature of any culture, has been shown to have an indispensable role in how African emcees represent themselves and their people. Though hip-hop has its origin in the United States of America, African emcees continue to domesticate this foreign culture by using African languages. From West Africa to Southern Africa, East to Northern Africa, hip-hop has been infused with a good dose of indigenous languages that have helped transformed hip-hop into a sophisticated tool for representation.

In sum, Clark's text is outstanding in the sense that it has narrowed existing gaps in understanding hip-hop's role as not just as a musical genre for mere entertainment in Africa, but as a veritable and efficient tool employed by African emcees to agitate for better social rights and quality political representation. Clark's text proves quite germane in understanding the many challenges African hip-hop artists face in areas such as sexuality, human rights, and repression. That notwithstanding, the text is not devoid of certain shortcomings. First, one wonders why Clark left Africa's most populous country—Nigeria—in the dark. Except for a few passing mentions, no real scenario was discussed to show how Nigerian emcees, of which there are many, have represented the masses through their songs demanding that the Nigerian government live up to the expectations of the electorate. Clark's analysis of sexuality and feminism in hip-hop would also have benefited from a discussion of Nigeria, where countless such instances abound. Nevertheless, the text is recommended to Africans both in the diaspora and at home who are interested in understanding

the role of African hip-hop artists in the fight against oppressive regimes, inequality in gender relations, and the unending demand for good governance.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jesse Weaver Shipley, *Living the Hiplife: Celebrity and Entrepreneurship in Ghanaian Popular Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 1-329.

<sup>2</sup> John Collins, *E. T. Mensah: The King of Highlife*, London: Off the Record Press, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Msia Kibona Clark, *Hip-Hop in Africa: Prophets of the City and Dustyfoot Philosophers* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018), 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), in the case of Nigeria began to permeate the country during the military regime of Gen. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (1985-1993). The program was vehemently rejected by the Nigerian people, as most economists and stakeholders perceived such a program to not have the solution to Nigeria's economy malady. For more details, see Mary J. Osirim, "Barriers and Opportunities: The Role of Organizations in Nigerian Women's Quest for Empowerment," in *Subsaharan Africa in the 1990s: Challenges to Democracy and Development*, edited by Rukhsana A. Siddiqui (Westport, CT and London: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 168-169.

<sup>6</sup> Msia Kibona Clark, *Hip-Hop in Africa: Prophets of the City and Dustyfoot Philosophers*, 102-104.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.