**Hip hop as Civil Society: Activism and Escapism in Uganda’s hip hop scene**

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This chapter presents an analysis of the hip hop scene in contemporary Kampala, Uganda. I argue that popular music can function as a form of civil society with particular emphasis on the authoritarian state. I make this argument because hip hop in Uganda has first, emerged as a medium of activism, where issues are articulated on the basis of shared interests and collaborative action; and second, as a site for expressions of hedonism and escapism. This chapter will demonstrate how both enactments can be viewed as acts of resistance, and therefore, of protest against a specific backdrop of social, political and economic marginalisation. Furthermore, both enactments engage with concerns that encompass social and political issues. Through this, hip hop provides a discursive space for cultural expression, and facilitates the interaction and negotiation of these themes with a broader context through questions of identity, community and collective action, all concerns of civil society (Ramnarine 2011).

The chapter is informed by data gathered from field research undertaken between November 2014 and January 2016. I include ethnographic details of prominent musical events, such as the Annual Ugandan Hip Hop Summit, Hip Hop Mondays at Deuces, Galaxy Breakdance and Ghetto to Ghetto, the details of which I provide in a subsequent section. In addition, I share supporting data from interviews with well-known figures in Uganda’s hip hop scene, supplemented with phenomenological narratives to critically analyze this music scene, in performance and in social life.

Taking into consideration studies on the nature of associational life in Africa, where state-society-market relationships are overlapping, I first discuss hip hop as a medium of activism, and second, as a site of escapism, in order to reveal shared spaces that integrate both these qualities as acts of protest. My interrogation on the nature and forms of civil society includes discussions on civil society as analytical concept and critical tool, the dimensions of civil society in Africa and the oppositional in the contexts of marginalisation and authoritarianism. In this study, the state and its inadequacies can be implicated in the formation of both activism and escapism, making all such narratives, songs of protest. Building on this assertion is the nature of power and resistance in popular culture, where protest may be framed in terms of a diversity of social groups with a multiplicity of interests, each exercising a representation of difference within systems of domination (Fiske 2002). This will show how Ugandan hip hop, in musical and social life, is confrontational albeit in ways that do not seek to overtly defy but instead circumvent and transcend the inequities of everyday life in Uganda.

**Ugandan Hip Hop and the Informal Civil**

Uganda is a site characterized by extreme poverty, deeply contested resources, a history of civil conflict and dominant power structures in the form of a largely authoritarian regime that not only fails to mitigate these problems, but instead, actively fosters them through corruption, a lack of employment opportunities and basic infrastructure. (Dolan, 2011, Allen 1991, Lomo & Hovil 2004, Mamdani 1993, Finnström *2008 et al.*). It is a space defined by inequality, where engagement with political issues most easily takes place through means separate from institutions of the states, such as volunteer associations, citizen initiatives and popular protest, and equally, in political apathy and the subversion of official narratives. The state and its inadequacies can be implicated in the formation of social and economic marginalization, indicating that a focus on such spaces might could provide an insight into crucial concerns, themes and issues that shape subsequent and concurrent political engagement, in formal and informal ways.

Much scholarly work explores the complex and overlapping dimensions of social, economic and political spaces and relationships in sub-Saharan Africa. Interrogations of associational life show that while institutional relationships and formal structures appear insubstantial, these spheres of separation instead overlap and intersect, overlaying the official and the unofficial, the private and the public, the rural and urban (Rothchild and Chazan 1988, Obadare 2009, 2011, Diamond 1997, Bratton 1992, Ekeh 1975 *et al*.). This makes clear demarcations impossible, indicating that discussions on civil society focus not on bifurcations between state and society, for example, but rather on state-society relationships, and in spaces where the political is located beyond the states’ purview.

Comprehending the nature of civil society in Africa thus begins with the recognition that firstly, “much that is both interesting and transformative in the continent occurs outside or at the periphery of formal organisational life” (Maina 1998:137, cf. Van Rooy, ed. 2013). This challenges the assertion that civil society exists only in so far as there is “self-consciousness of its opposition to the state” (Bayart 1986:111 -117). For this reason, debates on civil society in Sub-Saharan Africa have shown it to be an elusive concept, both in definition and in practice, “recalcitrant in the face of classification” (Keane 2003:7). The term has been critiqued as an “effort to recalibrate worn out methodological tools and to find positive politics, amid conceptual confusion” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Mamdani (1996) suggests a move away from civil society as prescriptive measure, suggesting that the concept is best served as an analytical and historical tool, given that the emergence of civil society in Africa is not a recent phenomenon, but can be found in anti-colonial liberation movements (Mamdani 1996, Obadare 2006)

Providing a complete review of scholarship on civil society in Sub-Saharan Africa is beyond the remit of this chapter. However, I would like to draw attention to the conception of civil society as as an independent stratum of power, said to forge collective identities, build consensus, and construct platforms around moral, social and political values for citizen education and mobilisation (Azarya 1992). These capabilities can be linked to Habermas’ (1991) conception of civil society as an aspect of the public sphere that mobilises social and political action, through communication and interaction, between citizens pursing individual and collective interests. It has been described as a social formation beyond the purview of the state (Bratton 1989, 1994), as a “new cultural fabric”, with the capability of “restructuring identities, challenging existing monopolies of wealth and power, and even reinventing the terms of modernity itself” (Bayart 1996:120, *cf*. Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Tacit in these conceptions is civil society’s ability to provide a platform for resistance; in Uganda this occurs against a backdrop of authoritarianism which is both overweening in control over and shambolic in services towards citizens

The idea that civil society, can be conceived of as a new “cultural fabric” with the capability of “restructuring identities, challenging existing monopolies of wealth and power” (Bayart 1996:120, *cf*. Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), is useful when considering dimensions that hip hop culture takes in Uganda. I observed hip hop ‘heads’ in Uganda locate themselves in various ways through formations of hip hop identity and practices negotiated through the genre’s cultural influence and global popularity. In East Africa and elsewhere on the continent, hip hop has been the site of consolidation for cultural identity, with particular emphasis on young people, in a manner that is local, but equally in connection with global black cultures (Osumare 2007; Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2009; Ntarangwi 2009 *et al*). It has featured in dialogues on globalization, media and popular culture; its concerns and resistances, providing an insight into the ways and means that individuals and communities articulate and negotiate their social and economic realities. Hip hop’s cultural appeal and commercial success indicate both a localization of the genre and mainstream recognition. This extends far beyond its geographical roots in New York City in the 1970’s, with a popularity and influence that acknowledges the spaces of marginalization it emerged from (Rose 1994, Mitchell 2001, Chang 2006 *et al*).

The hip hop scene in Uganda, its dimensions and enactments, revealed one consistent preoccupation; that of the marginalisation of individuals and communities, in the form of social and economic hardship. This marginalisation is confronted through activism in the form of a ‘hip hop practice’ in service of community and society such as is described in the hip hop ideal of ‘knowledge of self’ (Chang 2006 *et al*) on the one hand, or on the other, through escapism in celebrations of conspicuous consumption and hedonism. These are both the “diverse categories of people who craft their everyday tactics of coping with, adapting to, and, in their various ways, resisting the established order” (Ferguson, 2003:281). Here, hip hop articulates the experiences of ordinary people forced to exist in tenuous social, political and economic conditions. In its commercial appeal and creative veracity, hip hop in Uganda exerts an assertive presence as “social fact” (Barber 1987), as it occupies one of Ekeh’s several ‘public spaces’, where market, state and society interpenetrate each other in complex ways and at different levels (1975).

The conception of civil society thus, as cultural fabric, a platform for social values and as a component of the public sphere in resistance to and in protest of marginalization provides us with ways to perceive of hip hop in Uganda as such. From this acknowledgment, one finds oppositional stances to entrenched social and political systems in Uganda, showing how, rather than an institutionalized civil society, formations of civil society can and will emerge from what at first seems the domain of the social, of leisure and pleasure, in what can be termed as the interstices of innumerable informal spaces (Rothchild and Chazan 1988).

**Hip Hop Identity and Community: Spaces of Activism**

I begin this discussion with the 12th B-Global Hiphop Summit in December 2014[[1]](#endnote-1). The summit is an annual occurrence, and is organized by Silas ‘Babaluku’. A well known figure in the Ugandan hip hop scene, he is founder of the Bavubuka Foundation, the longest running youth and hip hop organisation in Uganda, and pioneer of the Ugandan Lugaflow hip hop movement. Lugaflow began in the early 1990’s and comes from the Swahili Word “Lugha", which means Languages. Lugaflow shows a marked engagement with social and political issues, combining Ugandan languages as well as musical elements such as instruments and compositional forms within a global hip hop sound (Ntarangwi 2009).

This gathering aimed to “empower and educate the youth to lay foundations upon which their communities can grow, build and be transformed, through engagement and practice of the Hip Hop culture” (Facebook page). A diverse range of attendees included MC’s, musicians and activists, representing record labels, musical ensembles and breakdance crews. Happenings were meticulously filmed by a young man named Gilbert Frank Daniel, who describes himself as the “UG hip hop archivist”, and who was my first point of contact at Bavubuka when I began my field research.

In his speech at the Summit, Babaluku, described the Lugaflow ‘hip hop practice’, which I understood as being based on the hip hop ideal, knowledge of self. ‘Knowledge of Self’ is attributed to Afrika Bambaataa and his Universal Zulu Nation Organisation, established in 1975 in the Bronx (Chang 2006). ‘Knowledge of Self’ alludes to an understanding of one’s individual worth and place in a critical consciousness about the roots of racial oppression and exclusion. The practice is founded on an identity based on an association with hip hop, of substance and merit developed through reflection and knowledge on social, economic and political contexts. Led by Babaluku, discussions focused on perspectives through which individuals conceived of their identity as hip hop ‘practitioners’. The atmosphere was informal and interactions animated, with discussions punctuated by observations and cheers. The discussion itself followed some structure. Each individual introduced themselves and stated why they were at the summit; each articulated their views on how they saw the hip hop practice in contemporary Uganda and their roles as practitioners. Questions on the nature of this hip hop identity were interrogated through participants own experiences. Personal accounts as performers and activists, or in their words, as ‘practitioners’, led to the uses and meaning of hip hop identity and practice, showing how individuals participated in and supported their communities, aiming to better the circumstances of oneself and of society as a whole through hip hop.

Spyda MC, a rapper in his early twenties, said a hip hop practitioner is “a person, who is not shy about hip hop no matter how people try to demoralise, a brother.” Spyda runs the Ghetto to Ghetto Cypher project, along with MC Taye. Ghetto to Ghetto comprises of ‘guerilla’ musical events, with the duo rapping over recorded beats in some of the poorest areas of Kampala city. Audiences at these impromptu gigs are invited to participate in performance. According to Spyda and Taye, they decided to “freestyle anywhere”, to encourage dialogue on “the struggles and issues in daily life”. Aimed at “poor communities”, the intention is to “improve conditions” through discussion and expression. Like Spyda, Taye grew up in the ‘ghetto’. Taye is influenced by acts such as Mos Def, Common, De la Soul and KRS-One, and he conceived of a musical initiative called SLUM, or Social Lessons Useful for the Mind from which Ghetto to Ghetto emerged. Talking about his hip hop practice, he said, his “art is (his) language” and in this, “We have the tools which hip hop gave us”. Esther, a young woman who runs Galaxy Breakdance Project[[2]](#endnote-2), says hip hop “means being you, truly know who are, ready to share in your own expression”. She says a practitioner could be a “dancer, artist, photographer… anyone who practices any element of hip hop and believes.” She joined Galaxy in 2008, with the aim of providing free lessons on MCing, breakdance and graffiti to “disadvantaged kids from the slums”, and in doing so to “do something for the community.”

The mediation between individual participation and community engagement through hip hop is where civil society can be employed as a critical concept, analytical tool, and form of protest. Lewis (2001) suggests that individuals, groups, and associations are part of the political order when they participate in these processes. They are, moreover, a part of civil society when they seek to define, seek support for, or promote changes in the means by which social values are authoritatively allocated. This process of allocation finds voice in the articulations of hip hop practices in Uganda, drawing into focus conceptions of identity and community in the context of resistance to socio-economic hardship.

These reflections are important as they integrate a dialogue on the relationship between the individual and society in the specific context of marginalization and the means by which one negotiates this. The idea of a community is one that is first linked through shared socio-economic circumstances, in form of deprivation in the specific site of Kampala’s slums. Second, conceptions of ‘community’ here include those involved in hip hop who are performers, consumers and activists. Participation and support, in and of communities, takes form and enactment in initiatives driven by a socially aware, responsible hip hop ‘practice’. Members of the hip hop community I include here grew up and continue to live and work in these spaces. They credit the betterment of their own personal circumstances with encounters in hip hop, as expressed by Babaluku, that (through hip hop), “you know what you are standing for”. Such experiences in turn direct involvement with community outreach programmes as discussed previously. In this intersection of individual and community, according to Babaluku, the hip hop practice is one through which a person can find ways to say, “I own my turf …cats in the ghetto are like, I didn't go to school, but this is my story”. In many ways, the aims and objectives described here are not dissimilar to ‘activist interventions’ in the ghettos of South Africa and Brazil. Grassroots interventions are located within the domain of development practice, to “provide havens of safety and learning for poor children and youth; sites where an alternative socialisation and sense of place are fostered because of hip-hop’s fifth element – knowledge of self” (Pardue 2004, 429). Rather than a specific engagement with issues of race and violence, in Uganda too, the emphasis is on community building in resistance and protest to poverty and deprivation.

Habermas’ (1991) conception of civil society as an aspect of the public sphere that mobilises social and political action, through communication and interaction, between citizens pursing individual and collective interests is useful in the consideration of these activities as protest. The Hip Hop Summit occurred in the public domain, in space and in performance, as an event focused towards the resistance of problems and issues encountered in Uganda. The event and the promotional happenings were mobilised by the existence of social groups such as record labels, musical collectives and ensembles, activists involved in community outreach initiatives, and audiences amongst them and vice versa, and promoted online. These were social events that can only exist in the presence of musical practitioners and audiences, the separations of which shift during the course of these happenings. Dialogues encompassed in and developed through performances, brought participants together, in interaction and communication, linked through the articulation of shared concerns specifically, those on the means and ways in which those present could challenge the problems they faced on a daily basis.

From this, encounters with hip hop becomes as space where social values can be identified, as it includes discourses and enactments in the service of individual empowerment, community betterment and social progress in resistance to the harsh social and economic circumstances of everyday life in Uganda. The hip hop practice is rooted in an awareness of the difficulties which result from a lack of resources, poverty, unemployment and government corruption. These values and elements encompass conventional understandings of civil society as that which comprises of voluntaristic acts of engagements, informed by inclusion and agency. Similarly, the two themes of hip hop and marginalization are interrogated through articulations on the hip hop practice. The voluntary involvement in activities informed by these themes such as those described previously, satisfy conceptions of civil society as a process, punctuated by popular participation, engagement and commonly articulated interests (Lewis 2001). At the same time this practice, through performance, as entertainment and as activism, shows members, both collectively and individually, how to work towards the betterment of community and therefore, society. In thesecases, the hip hop practitioners present were able to represent the interests of those socially and economically marginalised as they too shared similar origins and concern, formed mainly by life in the ‘ghettoes’ of Kampala. The hip hop practice is thus, rooted in a resistance towards the lack of resources, poverty, unemployment and government corruption in Uganda.

Third, amongst those present at the hip hop summit visual representations of hip hop in terms of Bayart’s civil society as cultural fabric, is given place and expression in modes of attire and embellishment at the hip hop summit. T-shirts were emblazoned with legends such as ‘Power to the People’, and ‘Spoken Truth’, with graphics of sound-systems and urban cityscapes. Zulu Nation medallions and African print tunics, complemented trainers or “kicks”, as they were called. These articles of clothing and embellishment, signal first an involvement with hip hop culture and second, pride in an African identity. Of particular ubiquity are the Rastafarian colours of red, yellow and green which featured prominently on wristbands and on detailing on loose fitting denim, and several participants wore their hair in dreadlocks.

The adoption of elements associated with Rastafarianism in the local hip hop scene is an oppositional stance as the association with Rastafari encompasses the use of marijuana which is considered deviant in Uganda’s mainstream culture, which remains conservative and largely Christian. Furthermore, in discussions with individuals in the hip hop scene who expressed an involvement with Rastafari belief and practice, this involvement also represented a protest against political power structures, due to circumstances such as unemployment, poverty and corruption. The appeal of Rastafari is based on an opposition to racial prejudice and colonial subjugation historically associated with the movement. Such aspects of the oppositional found in social and musical life against the backdrop of marginalization are important and I will return to these in a subsequent section.

For the moment, continuing with a focus on social mobilisation, I would like to draw attention to the point that against the milieu of marginalization engendered by unemployment and poverty, hip hop provides a practical means towards using one’s skills to move beyond economic limitations, in turn informed by community improvement and social responsibility. To quote Babaluku’s speech at the Summit, “The word keeps you in motion continuing to be the best that you are…B-boys, MC’s, …you see him rapping and he (also) runs that market stand”. The hip hop community also becomes a space of economic empowerment, where hip hop can “dispense skills, bring communities together”.

The relationship between community betterment and economic independence is important as it draws into focus the preoccupation I encountered in the field, with marginalization tackled through the ‘hustle’, whether this was through social activism, as described previously or through commercial success. Civil society is often called into being to rectify the socio-economic relegation that occurs in sites described above, a situation exacerbated by the state’s inability to provide mitigation. The intersection of the domains of the social and the economic, and the means by which hip hop occupies these, provides a conception of civil society as relational and located with an overlap of borders between state and market (Ramnarine 2011), an understanding given cogency by the overlapping nature of associational life too. In many ways, these protests against marginalization in the hip hop scene I discuss finds consonance with Fiske’s (2002) conception of resistance which in in turn corresponds with two dominant kinds of social power. The first is semiotic power, or the power to construct meanings, pleasures, and social identities, and the second is social power or the power to construct a socioeconomic system. While the two may function in an autonomous manner, the hip hop scene in Uganda indicates a close relationship between the two. More to the point, this interaction provides space for the inclusion of the subversive and the oppositional, including those aspects which at first, might seem escapist. Rather than viewing these tendencies as those which are apathetic towards political and economic power structures, this points instead towards the implications of this form of protest on and in civil society. This, I interrogate in the following section.

**Escapism and Excess: The Site of the Oppositional**

In Uganda, engagements with hip hop as protest can be viewed through the frame of the oppositional in initiatives that call for community improvement and social responsibility, and in the critique of power structures implicated in the problems of unemployment, corruption and poverty. The hip hop scene incorporates the subversive in the identification of Rastafari and the use of marijuana as shown earlier, as well as in ‘ghetto fabulous’ narratives of conspicuous consumption. The latter, one finds amongst hip hop artists who have achieved a level of commercial popularity and celebrity in terms of mainstream success

Amongst these hip hop artists is Atlas da African., ‘The track Ahh-ahh-ahh’, is available to listen or download on Spotify and I-tunes (single, 2014, DEG), and is a successful collaboration with dancehall superstar Chameleone. The song/track uses the words ‘bling-bling’ as a hook, and lyrics that talks of “sunglasses and Advil” ostensibly to combat hangovers, references to parties in Kololo, an upmarket neighbourhood of restaurants, clubs, foreign embassies and the headquarters of large international aid organisations such as the UN, and mentions spending *pesa* in the casino. Atlas, in another track, alludes to experiences of criminality in North America, stating an involvement in activity for which he served jail time, alluding to sums of money owed or paid in the criminal underworld, travails which he was able to overcome through the eventual success as hip hop performer.

Atlas’ long-time collaborator and friend, Gasuza, a rapper, photographer and filmmaker, has had a career that includes a stretch at the iconic Def Jam records, in New York in the late 90’s. In our interviews, he says on many occasions, “I am hip hop”, providing anecdotes of encounters with celebrities, some at the height of their success and others at the cusp of it, such as when “Kanye West waited for days at the reception”, mixtape in hand, parties with Sean “Puffy” Combs when he was dating Jennifer Lopez, being in a rap ‘cipher’ with RZA of Wutang Clan, and a meeting with Tupac Shakur at a recording studio.

I include this here for these artists too, hip hop became a space for personal affirmation and validation, related to the genres commercial prominence and cultural influence in North America. These narratives are fashioned of encounters with hip hop in North America as a result of migrations in childhood engendered by war and displacement during the Amin years. So while in the preceding section, subjective associations with hip hop arose from an identification with the music scene as cultural space for community improvement and social responsibility; here, we find brought into focus perspectives of race, gender and socio-economic standing, situated against a wider context of displacement and insecurity. Hip hop became a means by which one could identify and articulate one’s place in relation to these problems, as members of a community and society. This is a negotiation between meaning, pleasure and social identity in interaction with hip hop as a socio-economic system.

Locally, in Uganda, these negotiations take forms of escapism and excess.Here too, preoccupations occur in the public sphere, and indicate an allocation of social values, albeit deviant to mainstream Ugandan society. Atlas is signed to the Deuces Entertainment Group. The label owns a popular venue of the same name, where he, along with other members of the labels’ roster, hosts ‘Hip hop Mondays’. Unlike the Summit, with its focus on socially conscious activism and teetotalism, these events are unabashed celebrations of conspicuous consumption, packed with revelers flamboyantly clad, in what one rapper termed, “fake-ass bling”, an example of which is a medallion with a reproduction of the signature Versace medusa logo. There are VIP tables for the stars with bottles of Black Label and Courvousier placed on slabs of ice. Hip hop is embodied in a commercially projected hedonism that flirts with the idea of a ‘gangsta’ criminality, fashioning a local hip hop celebrity culture of excess.

The place of these evocations of wealth and celebrity in Uganda point us towards aspects of protest. GNL Zamba, arguably Uganda’s most commercially successful hip hop artist, also credited with having the first sold out hip hop concert in Uganda, says, “(It is about) upliftment, encouragement to get money, but you understand where that longing comes from, a place of desperation.” (Interview, 4th December 2014). This is an important point. Such statements draw into focus issues of marginalization from which narratives of activism in one hand, and material excess, on the other, emerge from and the relationship they share. Hip hop’s distinctive identity and culture, in the encompassing of behaviors such as the use of marijuana, as stated previously and in material excess, serve as a clear protest against the deep conservatism of Ugandan society. This conservatism is in turn is reflected in the rigidity of political structures, and therefore is associated with the socio-economic relegation one finds in day to day life. From this perspective, protest may be framed in terms diversity, where social groups exercise a representation of difference within systems of domination (Fiske 1987).

The escapism evoked through conspicuous consumption and hedonism in Ugandan hip hop stands incongruously at its sites of enactment such as the Deuces nightclub, at the edges of which are hawkers attempt to make a living which is barely subsistence. These actions and behaviours remain in contrast to circumstances such as poverty which they seek to avoid. In this, they represent a clear social protest. This is because tendencies toward escapism through wealth and excess raise the crucial question of what is escaped from and why this is necessary (Fiske 1987). As I was told on many occasions, Uganda’s nightlife afforded an escape through music and revelry from the trials and tribulation encounters in every day life. Second, hip hop here is an exercise of power in the construction of meaning, pleasure and identity through acts of representation in protest of circumstances engendered by structures of authoritarianism. Escapism and apathy located in celebrations of excess are a direct response to dominant systems, setting the stage for critique, resistance and therefore, protest through social life and the meaning made out of this by those subordinated.

Against this backdrop, Fatton (1995) describes civil society as a potentially subversive space where new structures and norms can take hold. Focusing on celebrations of hedonism such as that evidenced in nightclubs, and in the narratives of escapism one finds here, I argue that such discourses interrogate societal norms and circumvent systems of domination through subversion as a form of protest (Mbembe 1992). Fatton, uses James C. Scott’s term “infrapolitics” or the “wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name”, to describe how subordinates create discourses of unconscious resistance that occur in social or ‘unofficial’ spaces, through norms and ways to indicate alienation from those in power. In this, these "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990:19), are potentially explosive as they constitute an invisible zone of resistance to domination. Here, Fatton ascribes this alternative infrapolitical episteme, particularly in authoritarian systems, to an emergence of civil society. This emergence, albeit disguised and circumspect, is nonetheless a tenacious protest, precisely because the terms of resistance here are embodied in escapism and an apparent apathy towards visible social and political issues, making them hard to gauge or be pinned down by structures of authority.

The formation of civil society as repressed and disguised is reinforced by the apparent lack of an overt political stance and commentary in hip hop in Uganda for the most part. The absence of a specific confrontational stance and explicit commentary on politics in the Ugandan hip hop scene, holds tacit in its lacuna, the acknowledgment that the state had failed in its provision of resources and opportunities for stability and growth. I frame it as such, as an awareness of these failures and disillusionment is expressed across all camps, ‘conscious’ or commercial. Atlas implicates the current regimes failures in the statement “our government is failing us”. GNL says, “Social services? Are you kidding me? You cannot ignore the political scene because it is going to shape economics, social things. Corruption is killing our dreams” (Interview, 4th December 2014). For the same reasons, Babaluku urges young people to not “depend on the government no more”, for employment and social services, and “a lot of young people in Uganda die in silence.” (Interview, 22nd December 2014).

There is no desire to confront the state head on, either through overt political commentary or direct civil protest. These behaviours are indicative of civil society in the authoritarian state. Sogge (1997). puts forth an argument to doubt the efficacy of an institutionalised civil society in spaces where first, poor public services and low wages if any, diminish the legitimacy of the state, and second, is the ambiguous distinction between the public and the private, meaning that informal social and political action is preferred over the formal. Crucially, forms of political activity here change form to avoid co-operation or capture, compromising and subverting the notion of an institutionalised civil society, relying instead on implicit forms of protest. In Uganda, this continues to be relevant. State power and institutions control practically all political life, and so, participation is replaced by depolitisation; strategies in the part of civil society take the form of withdrawal rather than confrontation (Makumbe 1998, Nyong’o 1992).

**Conclusion:**

Bratton (1989) and Makumbe (1998) argue that civil society in Africa should be conceived as counter-hegemonic and a social base where state institutions may be called into account, providing material and ideological sustenance to social movements for reform and change. In the Ugandan hip hop scene, themes and imagery can be considered counter-hegemonic as they provide a discursive space for the inclusion of marginalized social, political and economic narratives. However, problems arise around actual social movements for reform and change. At this point, the genre, its performances, its celebrities, what it represents and in its popularity, can be called a social movement. However, reform can only have come into being when some sort of widespread social change as been affected, which as of now is not the case, neither in the instance of significantly challenging social and economic inequality nor in the form of institutions capable of sustaining this.

Nevertheless, in the tendencies towards activism and escapism described in this chapter, one finds in the hip hop scene in Uganda a means to gauge how such preoccupations function as protest toward entrenched social and political systems. They reveal in stark relief the marginalization engendered by authoritarianism and the forms and nature resistance towards it takes in every day life. These forms of protest take the forms of individual participation and community engagement working in concert in the allocation of social values in the public sphere through hip hop. Hip hop is also an alternative infrapolitical space where potentially subversive new structures and norms can take hold. As an informal mobilization against entrenched social and political systems, the terms and dimensions of hip hop in Uganda point toward the formations of an informal civil society, rather than an institutionalized civil society. The hip hop scene, thus, instead of confrontation, seeks protest through circumvention, stealth and evasion. These capabilities are potent in the formation of resistances as their locations and forms shift, challenging co-optation or confrontation by the very systems of domination within which they operate and protest against.

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1. The Hip Hop Summit occurred over a period of 5 days, commencing on the 21st of December. This chapter first, includes data gathered during day 4, held at Jinja, on the 22nd of December. This event included formal discussions amongst attendees, statements from whom are quoted here. Second, observations and interviews are included from the final day at Sabrina’s pub in Kampala, the focus of which was performances on the 25th. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Galaxy Breakdance, founded by Alex Heskey, is non profit organization aimed towards young people in the poorest areas or ‘ghettos’ of Kampala. Forms of hip hop dance such as breakdancing are taught to young people free of cost as a means to provide confidence and skills. The initiative also holds an annual competition, which I observed as very popular that year. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)