

Senegal's rappers continue to 'cry from the heart' for a more just society

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American musicians were once integral to political activism. The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom is recognised as a seminal moment in American history and a triumph for nonviolent resistance. Harry Belafonte, then a 36-year-old superstar of music, television and film, was at the forefront, serving as a confidant to Martin Luther King and helping to bankroll the Black Freedom Movement. Today few American artists seem willing to take such an active role in political struggles.

But across the Atlantic musicians in many African countries are in the vanguard of popular struggles, not only providing a symbolic soundtrack but marching on the frontlines and leading social movements.

Take Nigeria, where Seun Kuti carries on the legacy of his father Fela by confronting the country's venal political elite. In Burkina Faso rappers helped overthrow Blaise Compaore.

In Africa's newest country, South Sudan, a new collective of musicians and artists, Ana Taban, has emerged as some of the few critics of the country's kleptocratic rulers. And in Tanzania, the legendary father of Swahili hip hop and opposition member of parliament sits in jail, Sugu, accused of insulting the country's increasingly autocratic president, John Magufuli.

One of the most notable examples of artists in the Belafonte mould is the musical collective Keur Gui in Dakar, Senegal. Already among the most popular within Senegal's lively hip hop scene, their profile grew exponentially in 2011 during the massive protests against President Abdoulaye Wade's attempt to steal a third presidential term.

Activism on a truck

In 2011 Keur Gui's lead rappers Thiat and Kilifeu joined other musicians and journalists to form the Y'en a Marre (Fed Up) movement to mobilise youth against Wade. During their campaign, Keur Gi recorded songs that became the *cri de cœur* (cry from the heart) of the broader movement.

Along with other musician-activists, the group toured the country in a flatbed truck with a built-in soundsystem playing in small towns and rural villages bringing their message to distant communities. This was essential in a country where the average age is just over 18 and 70% live in rural areas.

Thiat was arrested and detained following a rally in Dakar's Obélisque Square for allegedly calling the President a "liar" and saying that the then 85-year-old was too old to govern. Y'en a Marre's actions were crucial in ensuring Wade's defeat and his replacement by Macky Sall.

Rather than rest on their laurels, Keur Gui, especially the charismatic Thiat, have continued their activism. In Senegal where politicians have historically sought to legitimatise their governments by

co-opting popular musicians, Keur Gui was offered a share of the spoils of the new regime. They refused, insisting that their vision was never simply to change elected leaders.

Rather, their movement Y'en a Marre pushes for a vision of democratic transformation beyond the ballot box.

Inspired by legendary pan-Africanists like Amilcar Cabral, Thiat, who wears a simple woollen hat reminiscent of the one made famous by Cabral, has worked to organise and support other artist-led social movements in Africa including Balai Citoyen in Burkina Faso.

In 2014, the group released a follow up album featuring the single *Diogoufi* ("Nothing has changed").

Shot with the aesthetic sensibility of a film by the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene, the video begins with Thiat sitting outside a store as ordinary Senegalese try and fail to purchase basic goods. Over a mournful piano loop, Thiat offers a frustrated commentary (translations of the original Wolof and French lyrics were provided to me by Thiat) on the failure of the new political leadership to bring about change:

Same electoral promises

Same selling of our lands

The country's in total chaos

Its only two years and we're already fed up.

Through the 1980s Senegal once boasted a robust and diverse economy that posted impressive growth. But decades of austerity programmes have left the government indebted to foreign donors and largely incapable of providing much in the way of social services.

While cognisant of the role the international community has played in Senegal's impoverishment, Thiat's lens always remains sharply focused on the failings of the country's political elite:

A government pushed into power by accident

They fail in their duty

Lazy regime

No vision

Permanent mess

No solutions

Get out of here!

Kilifeu, whose gritty melodic cadence balances Thiat's straight delivery, echoes his calls for a new vision and new political leaders in his lacerating solo verses:

The leaders hang on to the power

In spite of the opposition of the population.

Politicians are all the same, no difference.

Only broken promises and lies.

We are fed up of your nonsense,

We really need change.

Cynical manoeuvres

The international community remains committed to a vision of democratic reform for Africa that centres on electoral competition over empowering ordinary people. Political elites circulate between political parties while engaging in cynical institutional manoeuvres that further entrench their power.

Even where regimes blatantly violate any notion of democratic process as in Rwanda, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo currently, diplomats insist that elections equate democracy going as far as telling protesters to “stand down” as a leading Congolese activist recently told me.

“There are no other options but elections,” they suggest. The truth is that we’ve failed to recognise the new political visions being articulated by young musicians and activists across the continent. Instead of lecturing them on how things should be, perhaps it is time for us to just listen.

This article is part of a series featuring Songs of Protest from across the world, genres and generations.

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P.S.

The Conversation

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