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# HOW HIPLIFE THEATRE WAS BORN IN GHANA

**WHEN WE ARRIVED IN THE GHANAIAN CAPITAL OF ACCRA, U.S. RAP ARTISTS, ESPECIALLY** 50 Cent and Tupac Shakur, were so popular they could be heard almost constantly on radios and boom boxes. Some Ghanaian rap groups emulated the dress and posture of their commercial U.S. counterparts, putting forth an “American” image while rhyming in English (a practice often called Ghanaian hip-hop). Other local rap artists rap predominantly in local languages, such as Twi or Fanti.

In the mid-1990s, Reggie Rockstone, a U.K.-born rap artist of Ghanaian descent, coined the term “hiplife” to highlight the uniqueness of Ghanaian rap artists rhyming in local languages. After 15 years of living abroad, Rockstone returned to Ghana and discovered a burgeoning hip-hop scene, but mostly in English. He started rapping in Twi and immediately developed a following. Considered “the godfather of hiplife,” Rockstone was encouraged by his father, a noted fashion designer, to “name” what he was doing. As he tells it, he “grab[bed] the ‘life’ from ‘highlife’ and the ‘hip’ from ‘hip-hop,’ and then put it together. Highlife, hiplife...sounds smooth and it go down real easy. So we started throwing it around. Hiplife. Highlife. Boom. Revolution right there.”

In doing so, Rockstone was riffing off the traditional Ghanaian cultural form called “highlife,” itself a mixture of Western instruments and traditional Ghanaian rhythms and languages. Rockstone explains that one of the important and powerful dynamics of hiplife is that, for young people from the poverty-stricken areas in Ghana, rhyming and getting into the music industry have kept many of them off the streets and from getting into crime. This was, in fact, Afrika Bambaataa’s motivation for forming the Universal Zulu Nation in the South Bronx in 1973. Bambaataa, a former Black Spade gang member, created a place for young people to meet and “battle” using their artistic skills instead of more lethal weapons. From its earliest incarnation, hip-hop has provided a positive and creative space for young people to gather, especially—but not exclusively—in urban areas that offered no formal alternatives to societal oppression. And it still does, especially when theatre and hip-hop’s modes of performance are engaged.

In 2006, I traveled to Ghana with 10 students and alumni from the department of undergraduate drama of New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. There we met with students from the University of Ghana, Legon (located in a suburb about seven-and-a-half miles from Accra) and spent four months working on various projects together under the umbrella of the NYU-in-Ghana program and the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative. Prior to our arrival, there was at least one instance of the term “hip-hop theatre” being used in Ghana: Choreographer Kobina Sam was invited by the National Theatre of Ghana to lead an experimental youth dance group, Dance Factory. The dancers traveled around Ghana performing dance-theatre pieces about HIV and AIDS, such as *AIDS Is Real* and *Living with AIDS*, and, wherever they went, wove local narratives into the shows. In 2003, Korkor Amarteifio, then director of programming of the National Theatre, asked Sam to create a show called *Hip Hop Theatre* for its Kiddafest. Sam’s production became a highly successful collaboration between dancers and rappers, fusing hip-hop dance with traditional Ghanaian dance styles and focusing on such pressing topics as AIDS prevention, teen pregnancy and poverty.

This page, rap musicians Reggie Rockstone, left, and Mensa perform in New York last March to commemorate Ghana’s independence; next page, left, New York



DANIEL BANKS



COURTESY OF JENKINS MACEDO

## YOUTH CULTURE IN THE WEST AFRICAN NATION TAKES THE REINS TO CREATE A NEW FORM OF EXPRESSION

BY DANIEL BANKS

Now a freelance producer and arts presenter, Amarteifio staunchly supports the power of this type of theatre. The Ghanaian entertainment press, Amarteifio explains, has reported a “slow death” of traditional theatre due to “lack of funding and of appropriate venues.” She offers a different perspective, however: “Most people will say that the traditional theatre—that tells stories about Ananse, the sly spider who always has one up on somebody, or stories about imaginary kingdoms with chiefs, queen mothers, rituals and taboos—no longer relates to their everyday life. However, people will flock to see Concert Party, which is comedy mixed with music from everyday life and staged with humor. They will fill the halls to see KSM, the Ghanaian stand-up comedian, do his act on the ‘returnees,’ as we call those who lived abroad for years and came back to settle in the country, or sometimes on politicians and their mannerisms.”

According to Amarteifio, Sam’s production of *Hip Hop Theatre* was a “huge hit, mainly because it, too, touched on real life and especially the life of the youth who, at the best of times, feel misunderstood.” She relates that it was enormously successful piece of “edu-tainment,” bringing a younger audience to the National Theatre for a performance that reflected their taste and interests. Such was the landscape of hiplife culture and hip-hop theatre when we arrived.

**ONE OF THE CLASSES I LED AT THE UNIVERSITY** of Ghana was a practicum that had two stages. Students would, first, explore making hip-hop theatre using a devised-theatre process, and then they would consider and practice how to teach this work to others, as well as how to facilitate dialogue about the issues raised by the work itself. The intention was always to move beyond the classroom, putting the pedagogical work on its feet in a community-outreach setting geared towards youth self-expression and self-empowerment. Within several weeks of arriving in Ghana, we visited Buduburam, at the time a United Nations High Commission for Refugees camp. Our contact in Buduburam was Jenkins Macedo, a volunteer with RESPECT Ghana, a nonprofit organization whose aim is “to create

positive change through linking refugee students with non-refugee students in Canada, the U.S., Europe and far East Asia.” According to Macedo, the camp housed more than 55,000 refugees: 65 percent from Liberia, 15 percent from Sierra Leone, 6 percent from Côte d’Ivoire and 4 percent from Togo. The camp has since been decommissioned and many of the Liberian residents repatriated to Liberia. Nevertheless, some 35,000 people still live on the land and, as of October ’08, were required to lease the land or buy it from the local government.

The camp was 25 square miles. Its members lived in overcrowded structures (mostly of their own construction) built from elemental materials. There was no running water and only minimal electricity. According to camp residents, when refugees arrived there, they needed to find or build their own accommodations with no official help, except from kinfolk or friends. The grounds are located 27 miles west of Accra. Due to traffic and road conditions, it takes at least 90 minutes to reach by private transportation and two or more hours by public transport. A strong survival spirit was evident in the camp, despite the challenges of the residents having no apparent way to earn money and pay for necessities. As a result of sheer ingenuity, two libraries were set up in the Buduburam camp, stocked out of donations solicited from around the world by the volunteer librarians.

Macedo asked us to lead hip-hop theatre workshops in Buduburam. We designed a program that would involve coming to the camp on six successive Fridays and working with 30 young people per session, with different sets of youth attending each week. We received funding from NYU and the U.S. Embassy in Accra to pay for writing materials, snacks and the rental fees of our workshop space, the Church of Christ in the camp’s Zone 8, a striking blue building standing brightly out of the rain-damaged dirt roads of the camp.

At the outset, the workshops consisted of warm-ups involving theatre games, songs, children’s rhymes, word and rhythm games, call-and-response, raps and tongue-twisters; basic beat-boxing; impro-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 90

University students and alumni participate in hip-hop theatre workshops at Buduburam; right, two students residing in the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana.

visational sound and movement character work; a sharing or story circle; free writing; a cipher, with people sharing their writing, poems and rhymes; and small-group composition work. Most of these youth did not know each other—they came from 10 separate schools, lived on different sides of the camp, and often came from different cultural or ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the camp experience united them. They confronted poverty, family challenges and the isolation of being refugees and outcasts within the larger Ghanaian national context, which is often prejudiced against them. Much of the writing and composition had to do with envisioning a better life for themselves, as well as unity as Liberians and across the one human “race.” Two powerful melodic hooks that came out of the self-directed work groups became

foundational themes in our ciphers—“We are all one people, no matter where we come from, no matter where we are,” and “Liberian brother, Liberian sister, let’s come together and find a better future.”

At the end of the workshop series, we used our remaining funds to rent the Liberian Dance Troupe’s rehearsal hall at the head of camp for an open mike-type celebration. Youth from the hip-hop theatre workshops performed their work alongside other local artists. Macedo describes the impact these workshops had on the participants: “There have been huge tran-



Refugees at the Buduburam camp preparing for repatriation.

JENKINS MACEDO

sitions in the camp, and the program played a significant role in the process of defining the youth in their current responsibilities to the community and themselves. Through the program, young people are now able to talk in public and communicate more effectively. We just need to reinforce the program with our constant support. They need it right now, as the camp is three times as difficult as before in 2006.”

As a result of the work in Buduburam, Danielle Levanas, an NYU and HHTI alumna, has founded an organization dedicated to helping former refugee Liberian children and teens reintegrate into Liberian society. Made up of Liberian youth still in Ghana, refugees who have recently been repatriated to Liberia, and Hip Hop Theatre Initiative members, the Liberia-based LYDIA (Liberian Youth Determination in Adversity) is named after a very talented youth participant and leader whose school fees the HHTI crew have been paying since we left Ghana. One of the projects LYDIA is supporting is “Youth House,” a center in Liberia for multiple arts and community-building activities, including hip-hop theatre workshops and AIDS awareness groups.

IN ACCRA, A UNIQUELY GHANAIAN form of hip-hop theatre, hiplife theatre, is beginning to flourish. Marcia Olivette, a University of Ghana student and an accomplished television soap-opera actress, had a chance to experience the Hip Hop Theatre workshops in Buduburam. She was so taken by the discussions with her peers about the value of hiplife—whether or not it was a culture like hip-hop, and whether it was derivative, original or a vibrant continuous mixture of the intertwined histories of the U.S. and Ghana—that she decided, before we had left,

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to form a hiplife theatre company. Olivette gathered a group of high school students with whom she created *Independence*, a hiplife theatre piece based on the 50th anniversary of Ghana's independence in 2007.

"To us Ghanaians, hiplife is another form of music for the youth," Olivette says. "With hiplife theatre being a new kind of theatre, it was enjoyed and accepted by a majority of the youth. It's a platform where you can use music to incite change in the society positively. I see hiplife theatre as a theatre for purpose. It can be done at any time—no need for studio work, costume, makeup—and, most important, no script is needed all the time. In *Independence*, the actor interacts with the audience and picks up the ideas from the comments being made by the audience. In Ghana the linguist (*okyeame*) plays an important role in our palaces, so I called my actor the *okyeame* to give it a kind of African setting where the *okyeame* steers affairs. To me, hiplife theatre can be effective and accepted if studied in our schools, because the larger society is made up of young people, and it's the youth who will be the future generation."

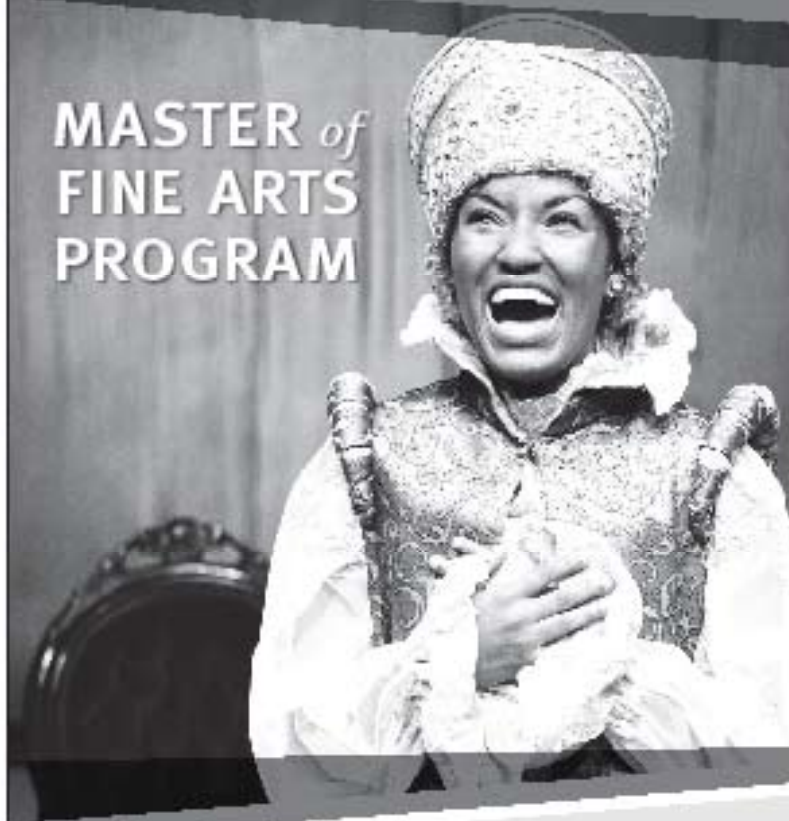
Olivette funded *Independence* herself and is working a day job in television production to raise money for her second show.

Hip-hop and hiplife are crucial and very visible components of youth culture in Ghana. Olivette, members of the RESPECT Ghana workshops and others who have participated in hip-hop theatre work have stepped into leadership roles and expressed a desire for further training in and experience with U.S.-style hip-hop theatre. Their wish is to share hip-hop and hiplife theatre more broadly in their own country and throughout Africa, training more artist-activists to use theatre to embody this generation's unique style and structures of storytelling. ☒

**Daniel Banks is a freelance director, a faculty member at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and the director of the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative. An expanded version of this article will appear in the anthology *Acting Together on the World Stage: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*, a collaborative project of Coexistence International at Brandeis University and Theatre Without Borders.**

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