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“It’s Bigger Than Hip Hop” : A Case Study of Africulturban Association as a Site of Social (Ex)change

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“It’s Bigger than Hip Hop”¹: A Case Study of Africulturban Association as a Site of Social (Ex)change

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¹ Dead Prez

A special thank you to everyone at Africulturban and especially to Amadou Fall Ba for teaching me to be an international hustler.

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Abstract

Africulturban is a non-profit organization that seeks to promote Senegalese urban culture, a highly popular, socially conscious, and youth-led movement that began in Dakar's impoverished suburbs. Situated in one of these underdeveloped areas, the association works to improve its community and develop urban culture into an industry that can support its artists. As a case study, this research firstly examines how Africulturban, as a young, grassroots organization, is run. It further aims to understand how urban culture may be used as a tool of social development by looking at the culture's specific characteristics that make it suitable to this task. The study then explores how Africulturban in particular takes advantage of these qualities on an international, national, local, and associational level. As a result of this analysis, I argue that Africulturban's main work lies not in creating direct *social change*, or quantifiable social and economic advancements, but rather in establishing avenues of *social exchange*, or relationships and lines of communication, that are necessary in order to lay the foundation for sustainable development.

Topic Codes: 101, 502

Introduction

Africulturban is a non-profit based in Pikine, Dakar's largest suburb, that seeks to promote urban culture² through a variety of cultural events for the public, free training programs for adults, and arts workshops for children. In addition to developing all urban cultural fields – rap, break dance, djing, mcing, audio/visual production, graffiti, slam, and street wear – the organization also works toward the advancement of the community it is situated in and the creation of a profitable urban culture industry. With over 3,000 hip-hop groups in Dakar alone, urban culture is a notable presence in Senegal, particularly among the country's urban youth. This hip-hop scene began in the 1980s in Dakar's suburbs, or "banlieues" as they are known locally, which suffer from poverty, high unemployment rates, and delinquency. The music and other urban art domains that came with it were a direct response to these difficult conditions, taking on a socially conscious nature that was meant to express the youth's struggles and call for change (*Democracy in Dakar*).

Founded by one of the first Senegalese rappers during a particularly difficult moment in the *banlieues'* history, Africulturban was born of this social and artistic context. Taking what hip-hoppers had started in addressing social problems through artistic expression, the organization sought to create infrastructure that would not only aid in the production of high-quality urban art, but also in the formation and professionalization of cultural actors. The hope was that, through this process, urban youth would have an economically profitable and personally fulfilling alternative to street life and delinquency (Africulturban 2011). Six years after its inception, Africulturban today continues to utilize the principles and qualities of urban

² "Urban culture" will be used interchangeably with "hip-hop culture," which is meant to include all of the aforementioned domains and not just hip-hop as a music genre.

culture in its attempts to develop not only the culture itself, but also the communities this culture was born from and thrives in.

The case study that follows is an attempt to understand this relationship between urban culture and social action through the work of Africulturban Association. My goal in this project was, firstly, to comprehend how a young, grassroots organization of this nature is run. This choice was as much for academic reasons as personal ones, as I hope to work for a non-profit in the future, particularly one that combines my love for the arts and my desire to bring about social improvement and equality. I thus decided to work closely with one organization in order to understand the logistics of putting humanitarian and artistic goals into practice. In addition to this organizational aspect, my study also explores how urban culture can be used as a means of social development, particularly among impoverished urban youth. I look at why hip-hop culture is especially suited to this task, as well as how Africulturban in particular mobilizes the culture for social ends. While this study is specific to one organization and one nation, I believe it might have value in other settings as well. Although we must take local realities into account, hip-hop culture is a worldwide phenomenon that has recently played a significant role in youth-led social and political movements, such as the Arab Spring. Thus, while this study specifically deals with urban culture in a Senegalese environment, its findings may be potentially useful in other developing nations and communities.

As a result of my study of Africulturban's work, I argue that urban culture can indeed be a viable tool for achieving social development, for it contains several qualities that are easily adaptable to development work. On an international level, it is a universally shared culture that can help to unite and facilitate dialogue between highly diverse parties. Nationally, Senegalese hip-hop is not only a large and popular movement, but also one known for its social

consciousness and political engagement. Locally, this hip-hop culture is a reality lived and loved by young, suburban Dakarais, and is thus something that can be mobilized for their benefit.

Finally, on an associational level, urban culture not only unifies those working in Africulturban, but also provides guiding principles for their efforts.

Indeed, Africulturban has recognized that urban culture has social values in addition to its artistic ones, and has thus continued hip-hop's task of merging the two. Specifically, I argue that the association's work is that of utilizing urban culture to create social (ex)change. By this, I mean that Africulturban is taking steps toward the creation of a.) *social change*, or the concrete development of professional and cultural infrastructure and, b.) *social exchange*, such as forums for artists and other community members to collaborate. However, the term "social (ex)change" is specifically meant to signify the achievement of social development *through* social and cultural exchange. What I mean to argue is that while Africulturban is putting certain tangible infrastructures in place, its main work lies in the creation of social and artistic exchanges that, I believe, are the framework for future development. Even if the results are not as quantifiable as one might normally look for, Africulturban's efforts are laying a necessary foundation for future change through its establishment of important relationships, lines of communication, and social support systems. Africulturban's approach, although it might lie outside our traditional conception of development work, should thus be supported as an innovative way to work toward social improvement.

Methodology

As this project was a case study to understand how Africulturban functions as an organization, I decided it was best to be present at the association as much as possible. I thus went to their office five days a week for a period of three weeks, spending approximately 25 to 35 hours a week there or at one of the organization's events. The office is located in the Leopold Sedar Senghor Cultural Complex in Pikine, Dakar's largest and one of its poorest suburbs. It is comprised of a conference room, the president's office, an office for other staff members (where I worked), a library (where the "Centre de documentation" is located), and a recording studio. There is also a large outdoor space with a restaurant, seating area, and stage where people gather for events. This communal area is constantly being redecorated with new graffiti art, and is always abuzz with lively discussions, hip-hop music, and the coming and goings of artists and others involved in the organization (mostly males in their 20s and 30s).

Although much of my time was spent in this space getting to know members of the organization, I was most often in the office with Africulturban's core staff. Here, I looked on at their work, observed their interactions, and sat in on meetings, during which I mostly listened, but also gave my opinion when asked. I worked most closely with Amadou Fall Ba, the general director of Africulturban, shadowing him at his meetings and having him explain his projects to me. I also interviewed most of the important staff members and many other people associated with the organization in order to understand not only their roles at Africulturban, but also their viewpoints, concerns, and philosophies regarding their work. I also attended Hip Hop Akademy classes (held in the conference room) and hip-hop education classes (held in schools and community centers) in order to observe first-hand how they are run. In addition to this primary research, I also conducted secondary research by reading all documents regarding the association

(both promotional and internal), using Africulturban's library (film and books), and finding Internet resources (scholarly and newspaper articles). My role during this time was thus that of participant observer and academic researcher.

Advantages

Going to Africulturban everyday was a great advantage because, even though it was time-consuming, this approach allowed me to see how the organization is run on a daily basis, how decisions are made, and how staff members interact. Luckily, everyone was extremely welcoming and open to my presence, allowing me to ask questions and look on at their work. Both my interviews with staff members and my informal conversations with artists, which happened on an almost daily basis, were invaluable to my understanding of the organization and urban culture more generally. Attending Hip Hop Akademy and hip-hop education classes was also highly informative, allowing me to observe how teachers approach their material as well as how students react. Furthermore, the organization's Centre de documentation, the only library in Senegal dedicated exclusively to urban culture, proved to be a convenient and somewhat useful resource. Finally, reading through the association's documents was helpful in understanding the overall design of Africulturban, its projects, and its philosophy (as well as how it chooses to present itself).

Difficulties and limitations

While people were generally generous with their time, staff members were often busy with their own projects. At times, it was hard for me to understand what they were doing, as it was often just an individual working on his/her computer. Furthermore, Africulturban's informal setting made it somewhat difficult for me to conduct interviews: music was often playing, people were walking in and out of the room, my interviewees would take phone calls, etc. While I

usually took notes, it was challenging to transcribe direct quotes or remember every detail.

Many of the informal conversations I had, while important in building relationships and gaining people's trust, often took a lot of time while not always being directly related to my project. One of the biggest difficulties I faced was not being able to find appropriate secondary sources, as there is very little material written on urban culture in Senegal. Thus, a majority of my information comes from interviews, observations, and Africulturban's own materials, which may slant the data. Finally, it should be noted that my interviewee pool might be potentially biased.

As I was conducting a case study, I thought it was best to talk to as many people involved directly in the organization as I could. While this approach was appropriate for the time frame I had, I think it would have been beneficial to talk to more people outside of the organization in order to gather a greater diversity of opinion regarding Africulturban and its work.

Overview of Africulturban Association

Context

The creation of Dakarois suburbs, or “banlieues,” began in the mid-1960s and was subsequently accelerated by a large rural exodus. These expansive, underdeveloped areas quickly became “urban monsters” where issues like poverty, prostitution, and inadequate housing all converged (*H.H.A. dossier*). Sustained by the over 50% unemployment rate in Senegal, these suburbs – particularly Thiaroye and Pikine – continue to be the most impoverished regions of Dakar, neighborhoods where many families only eat one meal a day and delinquency and high drop-out rates plague the youth (*Democracy*). It was in these troubled *banlieues* where hip-hop, a form of music that itself began in poor, urban areas, took root in Senegal. Started in the late 1970s in African-American ghettos, hip-hop arrived in Senegal in the 1980s predominately via the large number of citizens living in France and the United States, the two countries with the most developed urban culture scenes (*Fangafrika* 15). At first, Senegalese rappers did little more than mimic their American counterparts in style, content, and language, rapping mostly in English. It was not until the beginning of the 1990s when Rap Galsen³ began to take on its own, unique identity. Not only did the language change, with hip-hoppers beginning to rap in their native tongue of Wolof, but so too did the subject matter. Although Dakarois *banlieues* were seen to have much in common with African-American ghettos, Senegalese rappers began to realize that they were living different realities than their American peers, and thus needed to present material that reflected their specific experiences. Rather than discussing foreign topics, hip-hoppers began to rap about their lives, the problems they faced (particularly in the *banlieues*), and the changes they hoped to see. Thus, from early

³ Rap Galsen is the locally used term for Senegalese hip-hop, with “Galsen” coming from an inversion of “Senegal” (Thomas 4).

on, Rap Galsen was characterized by its socially conscious messages, which began to reach a wide audience with the national and international success of groups like Positive Black Soul (*Fangafrika* film). Senegalese hip-hop has, since then, always retained its socially and politically conscious nature in both lyrical content and the activism of its musicians. For example, hip-hoppers played a large role in the election of Abdoulaye Wade in 2000 and, most recently, in the “Y’en a marre” movement to protest his candidacy for a third term (Herson 28). Indeed, almost every rapper I spoke with, as well as other urban artists such as “graffeurs” (graffiti artists), stressed the need to be socially conscious, to alert the masses to injustices, and to demand change in their work. “If you know why you suffer,” says, for example, popular rap artist Didier Awadi, “if you have a good diagnosis then you can find the right medicine. Therefore, today our job is to give out the right information, make the right diagnosis within our society, so that others are aware” (*Democracy*).

Senegalese hip-hop has now grown to be the third largest urban culture movement in the world, mostly made up of young males (the oldest members being around 40, the youngest around 14) who have a minimal amount of education and no trade (*H.H.A. dossier*). Despite its popularity and the large number of urban artists in Senegal (particularly rappers, but also break dancers, *graffeurs*, etc.), hip-hop culture is not an economically profitable domain, as almost all of the young artists I spoke to reiterated. At the root of this issue is a lack of proper equipment, infrastructures, and training that is required for the production and distribution of high-quality urban culture products (Herson 30). In fact, there are almost no training programs in urban culture domains in Senegal, resulting in the quasi-inexistence of professional technicians. This situation, amplified by an absence of new technology and supportive infrastructures, has made it

extremely difficult for artists to realize their work and for hip-hop to develop into a viable industry.⁴

History of Africulturban

The convergence of these social and artistic conditions – the difficulties faced in Dakar's suburbs, the existence of a large, socially conscious hip-hop movement, and the lack of formal infrastructures for young urban actors – led to the creation of Africulturban Association in 2006. The organization was founded at this time by Babacar Niang (a.k.a. Matador) of the rap group WA BMG 44, one of the first rappers and slammers in Senegal. Growing up in the suburb of Thiaroye, Matador understood first-hand the struggles of those in the *banlieues* and, in his music, aimed to alert the government to this poverty and lack of infrastructure for young people (*Fangafrika*). His vision of formalizing the hip-hop movement in Senegal came from his time abroad, when he realized that artists in Europe have structures of training and support that artists in his own country do not, rather having to make it on their own. He explained that, “Nous avons vite compris avec l'expérience accumulée lors de nos voyages, qu'il fallait installer quelque chose qui fédère le mouvement. Il fallait structurer, former pour pouvoir penser demain voir des artistes du mouvement vivre de leur art”⁵ (Niang).

Matador returned from his sojourn in Europe to severe flooding in the *banlieues* that no one, politicians and artists alike, was acting to ameliorate. Along with the other founding members of Africulturban, the rapper organized solidarity concerts for the victims of this crisis. These events enabled Matador to pitch his larger vision to the mayor of Pikine, who

⁴ Even when rappers can get an album produced and distributed, people are often not willing to buy cds and piracy is widespread, particularly with increased access to the Internet (Fall interview).

⁵ “We quickly understood through the experiences gained from our travels that there needed to be something to unite the movement. It needed to be structured, developed in order to be able to see artists in the future living off of their art.”

subsequently helped him secure space in the Leopold Sedar Senghor Cultural Complex for free (Dia interview). It was here, in one small room with two-dozen volunteers and no equipment, that Africulturban was launched. The beginning proved difficult as, without any funding, the team was forced to ask their relatives for financial assistance or provide from their own pockets. This discouraged many people, some of who left the organization thinking it was “né mort”⁶ (Sall interview). In regard to this lack of finances, Matador explained that, “On avait simplement des idées. Mais je sais que la culture hip hop m'a appris qu'à partir de rien on pouvait atteindre le sommet. Je me suis basé sur les vraies valeurs de la culture hip hop pour développer l'Association Africulturban”⁷ (Niang). Thus, Africulturban persevered beyond its early difficulties and began organizing monthly concerts as well as the precursor to what is now one of the largest international hip-hop festivals in Africa. Since then, the organization slowly began growing, professionalizing itself, adding projects, and securing funding.

Structure

Currently, Africulturban is run by a core group of approximately six people who make important decisions, initiate projects, and execute a majority of planning and logistics. To give a better sense of how the responsibilities are divided, a list of staff members and their roles are as follows:

Babacar Niang (Matador): President

Amadou Fall Ba: General Director; Program Director, Festa2h

Moustapha Sall: Program Director, Hip Hop Academy

Omar Benkhatab Keita: Program Director, hip-hop education and Krefour Poétik

Moussa Cire Dia: Program Director, Jam Session; Stage Manager

Ndeye Fatou Thiam (Ina): Program Director, Centre de documentation

⁶ Literally, “born dead.”

⁷ “We only had ideas. But hip-hop culture had taught me that from nothing, one could reach the top. It was on the basis of the true values of hip-hop culture that I developed Africulturban Association.”

Most project ideas and plans of action come from Amadou Fall Ba, the general director, who gets approval from Matador and input from other members before commencing a project.

Although there is a chain of command that goes from Matador to Amadou to the other core staff to general members, there is a considerable amount of collaboration between all involved.

Anyone can call a meeting or propose a project that the group will discuss, give recommendations for, and help plan a course of action. For example, in a general staff meeting I attended, Amadou lead the team through their agenda and made sure they stayed on task. When it came time to talk about hip-hop education, though, the program's director took over, explaining what would happen at workshops the next day and asking the others' advice on a recommendation he had received from a partner school. Everyone discussed their options before deciding on a path together.

In addition to this core group, there are also many people who help execute projects, mainly young male urban artists. There are also 1,180 passive members of Africulturban, people who have paid a symbolic sum of 1,000 cfa to show their support for and interest in the organization. These are mostly rappers, although dancers, slammers, *graffeurs*, and others also take part (Sall interview).

While those working for Africulturban are unpaid, they no longer have to fund the association's projects themselves. Although adequate finances are always a concern, the organization now receives funding from a number of partners, mostly international NGOs and foreign embassies.⁸ Monetary support from local and national institutions is limited, and backing from private Senegalese businesses is almost non-existent. Although Africulturban has created good relationships with its partners over the years, securing funding is still a difficult and

⁸ For a full list of Africulturban's partners, please refer to the Appendix.

time-consuming process, with Amadou Fall Ba often spending his days writing grant applications. Furthermore, many of these partnerships are project-specific, meaning that an organization will give money for one specific activity rather than to the organization as a whole (Ba interview 2). While this dynamic makes it possible for the organization to execute its projects, it does not cover operating or labor costs, meaning that Africulturban's core staff continues to work full-time without salary. Fortunately, however, the association's most recent project has brought in sizable grants that have helped to financially stabilize the association. This project, a free training program in urban culture domains called Hip Hop Akademy, is funded by the U.S. embassy and the international non-profit, TrustAfrica. In addition to paying for equipment and the trainers' salaries, these grants have allowed Africulturban to provide its staff with small stipends and cover its operating costs (Ba interview 1).

Current Projects

In addition to its larger projects like Hip Hop Akademy, Africulturban is constantly putting on events in all urban culture domains that are always free and open to the public. The association also helps others to execute their projects, either through partnerships or by offering free advice to young artists who come to the organization for guidance. One of the association's ongoing activities is a weekly movie screening held in its events space. In partnership with the Spanish embassy of Dakar, the Cinerek program shows films from around the world that are related to urban culture and/or social issues, with screenings often being followed by discussion sessions. Another weekly occurrence is the meeting of Krefour Poétik, a slam poetry club that organizes performances and helps members develop their skills. Every month, Africulturban also hosts Jam Session, a night of live hip-hop where local underground artists are invited to perform. Annually, the association partners with the dance-oriented non-profit, Kaay Fecc, to

host a break dance competition called Urbanation B-Boy. The organization also organizes its own yearly international hip-hop festival, Festa2h, which will be discussed in greater length below, as will Africulturban's other main project, Hip Hop Akademy. The following section outlines the logistics and development of these projects; their purpose and significance, while touched upon here, will be discussed at greater length in the Results & Analysis section.

Festa2h

Festa2h, Africulturban's annual hip-hop and urban culture festival, was initiated in 2006 by Amadou Fall Ba, who had prior experience organizing small festivals with his rap group and those of his friends. With the association struggling to get started, Amadou realized they needed a large project in order to retain people, have something concrete to work on, and create a name for Africulturban. For the first edition, a single concert was planned but ended up being cancelled due to a power outage, leaving only a handful of artists' workshops as the main event (Ba interview 2). From these meager beginnings, Festa2h has over the years developed into one of the largest and most anticipated festivals of its kind in Africa. Last year's 6th edition saw the participation of 70 music groups (including artists from over two dozen countries), 15,000 spectators, and 100 workshop participants. Taking place over ten days in downtown Dakar, Rufisque, Pikine, and Ouakam, the festival covers all areas of urban culture with events such as film screenings, artists' workshops, break dance competitions, graffiti exhibitions, and large and small concerts (*Festa2h dossier*)

Clearly, this multi-venue, multi-event festival requires a great deal of logistical planning and finances. As soon as one year's festival is over, the Africulturban staff completes an evaluation in order to see what worked well and what needs to be changed for the following edition (a method of review that the organization uses after every significant project). After

choosing a direction for the next year, Amadou and his team decide which partners to work with, what funding to pursue, and which artists to invite. While the organization tends to work with the same countries it has in the past (due to its good connections and desire to maintain strong relationships with them), it tries to choose different artists for each festival. New artists are found via Internet research, networking, and word of mouth. The number one criteria for artists is that they produce high-quality work and will be enjoyed by a largely Senegalese audience, although staff members also take into account whether they share the same basic philosophy of Africulturban and Senegal's socially conscious hip-hop movement more generally (Ba interview 2).

The biggest hurdle in planning Festa2h, as with most of Africulturban's projects, is that of finding finances. Although all events take place in and around Dakar, the festival receives very little local or national support; in fact, 75% of its funding comes from abroad. While nations like Belgium and France do provide funds, it is often just to cover the expenses of the artists they send to Dakar, rather than to the festival itself (Ba interview 2). Despite these difficulties, Festa2h continues to grow due to its reputation as a well-organized and professional festival⁹, local and international appeal, and increased partnerships. This year, over 150 musical groups and 30,000 spectators are expected to attend, with the festival also enjoying full media coverage for the first time in its history (thanks to a partnership with Africa7). For the tenth edition in 2015, Africulturban hopes to expand the festival to multiple cities across Senegal and potentially Mauritania and the Gambia (*Festa2h dossier*).

⁹ One graffiti artist called Festa2h's organization "impeccable," saying it was the most-well run festival he had been to in South America, Europe, or Africa (Veronese interview).

Hip Hop Akademy

In November 2011, Africulturban formalized its commitment to the professionalization of urban culture actors with the inauguration of Hip Hop Akademy. Developed to address the lack of training in urban culture domains, this program provides free courses in several areas of urban culture: graphic design, djing, music production, audio/visual editing, marketing, management, and communication (*H.H.A. dossier*). Taught by experienced professionals (both Senegalese and foreign), these courses last between 1 to 3 months and are comprised of between 6 to 25 students, mostly young males in their 20s and 30s. The goal of this training is to increase the number of qualified urban culture technicians and the quality of their work. The results should not only be the continued development of urban culture and its artists, but also the establishment of hip-hop as a professional, economically viable industry (Sall interview). In the next three years, Hip Hop Akademy plans to add more courses, acquire space for a dj studio and practice room, and create paid administrative positions. By 2015, the organization hopes to consolidate Hip Hop Akademy and Africulturban into the “Centre des Cultures Urbaines,” as the two currently receive separate funding (*Planification Strategique*).

In addition to its training courses, Hip Hop Akademy is also comprised of the “Centre de documentation,” the first library in Africa dedicated exclusively to hip-hop and urban culture. This resource center is made up of audio, visual, and written material regarding all domains of hip-hop culture, with French-language books being bought from a partner in Belgium and English-language books being provided through the U.S. embassy (the main funder of Hip Hop Akademy). Although some journalists and students do utilize the library, it is mostly hip-hopsters who love their field, but often do not know much about its history and development, who take advantage of this resource. The center is meant to expand these cultural actors’

knowledge of hip-hop and help advance their work. By starting an archive project that will document all urban culture events in Senegal, the center also aims to map out the history of the movement for current and future generations. Indeed, today there is almost no material regarding Senegalese urban culture, a fact that Africulturban hopes will change as more artists use the library and feel the need to document their own experiences (Thiam interview).

A third and integral component of Hip Hop Akademy is its hip-hop education program, which provides free urban culture workshops to over 400 middle and high school students in the Dakarois suburbs. These workshops - in subjects such as djing, slam poetry, and graffiti – are taught by young, yet experienced urban artists (Keita interview). They usually last one afternoon in each school, with several schools coming together at the end of the program to share what students have learned. There are a few trainers, however, who work with the same group of children on a weekly basis, something they seem to prefer as it allows the students to get to know each other and actually develop their skills (O. Diop interview). The main goal of the program, however, is not to churn out artists, but rather to give these children hope and confidence for the future, as they often face difficult conditions at school and at home. Indeed, hip-hop education was formed as a reaction to the poor quality of suburban schools as well as the increasing amount of juvenile delinquency (prostitution, drug use, etc.). The hope is that by giving kids alternative activities and reaffirming their capacities and creativity, these workshops will liberate and motivate them in a way their traditional schooling does not (Keita interview).

Strengths and Weaknesses of Organization

Clearly, Africulturban has a number of projects, both large and small, that it works on simultaneously. This section will firstly address the qualities of this young association that allow it to be successful in these endeavors. It will then discuss where there is room for improvement

in the organization's work. Many of these strengths and weaknesses are reoccurring themes I noticed in several interviews, as well as in my own observations from being at Africulturban each day and seeing their projects in action.

Strengths

The driving force behind Africulturban's functioning as an organization is its highly dedicated and increasingly professional core staff. Although they are not paid, these six people come to the office almost every day of the week and often continue their work at home. Their strong work ethic, something I was constantly impressed by, reveals itself in the number and quality of the projects they are producing. These staff members have developed the proper management, logistical, and artistic skills needed for this work not only through their experience at Africulturban, but also through their pursuit of professionalization outside of the organization. For example, in addition to their almost full-time jobs, many of the staff members also attend school for training in management and marketing, and some are enrolled in Hip Hop Academy courses in order to improve their technical skills.

Apart from the personal qualifications of its members, the staff functions as a whole because of its collaborative and open nature. Several people I talked to, such as rapper Moustapha Mbaye, reiterated the idea that Africulturban is like a family where, "on sait qui est qui et qui fait quoi"¹⁰ (Mbaye interview). Even when problems arise, the staff is able to be truthful with one another and talk out the issue. The open and honest nature of the organization also extends beyond its internal functioning to its relationship with partners. For example, Babacar Diop, the director of a school that hosts hip-hop education workshops, said that the best part of working with Africulturban is that they are always available and open to discussion,

¹⁰ "We know who is who and who does what."

welcoming feedback and suggestions that may help improve their programs (B. Diop interview). Indeed, another reason for Africulturban's success is that it is respected by its partners, as well as by the communities and artists it works with, many of whom say that urban culture would not be as developed in Senegal as it is today if it weren't for Africulturban. This solid reputation, plus the good contacts and network it has created over the years, makes it easier for the organization to pitch its ideas, find funding and partners, and implement its programs without having to start from scratch each time. Part of the reason for this strong network is that Africulturban's work is popularly appealing and desirable. For example, children want to participate in hip-hop education workshops because they love and are a part of urban culture. At the same time, parents and schools desire these programs because it keeps kids off of the streets by giving them a productive, creative outlet (B. Diop interview). Thus, Africulturban's work appeals to various segments of the population because people both love urban culture and wish to see social projects in action.

Finally, one of Africulturban's greatest strengths is that there seems to be a unity of purpose and common philosophy among members, partners, and beneficiaries of the association. The organization specializes in urban culture and urban culture alone, a domain that all members know well and love. As one staff member put it, "Hip hop runs in our veins; it's what we know" (Dia interview). Beyond this passion for hip-hop culture, members tend to share the desire to better themselves, their communities, and their nation through urban culture. Literally every artist I spoke to, both Senegalese and foreign ones working with Africulturban, stressed the need to be socially conscious and active in their work. Whether organizing or performing, members try to implement the positive and peaceful qualities of hip-hop in their work, believing that, "au

travers l'hip-hop on peut changer Sénégal, changer le monde"¹¹ (Keita interview). This shared philosophy gives a certain cohesion to the organization, bringing together like-minded people who can strive for the same goals using the same values together.

Weaknesses

Despite its strong points, Africulturban faces certain difficulties that limit its functioning. The greatest barrier, as constantly reiterated by staff members, is that of funding. While the organization has been able to secure certain grants to pay for their projects, they are usually less than is needed to achieve the association's full vision for its projects. Furthermore, this aid is rarely continuous and guaranteed for the future, meaning that staff members (particularly Amadou Fall Ba) must spend countless hours seeking out new forms of funding and writing grant applications. It seems to me that this puts Africulturban in a precarious position moving into the future, as it hopes to expand its projects and reach in years to come. In order to be sustainable, the organization needs to find consistent and large amounts of funding that will make it able to pay its staff, fully cover its costs, and acquire the additional space and equipment it needs.¹²

Another issue of sustainability concerns Africulturban's operating structure. The large majority of projects are initiated and executed by core staff members, most of who have been working together since the start of the organization. While this means that the team functions well together, it also makes it harder to delegate responsibilities to others who might be able to contribute. Additionally, roles seem to be more tied to the person than to the position, which would make it extremely difficult to replace somebody if a team member were to leave. If

¹¹ "Through hip-hop, we can change Senegal, change the world."

¹² An alternative strategy might be to start charging for its events or finding other ways to bring in revenue, an issue that will be discussed in the Results & Analysis section.

Africulturban hopes to last well into the future, it should consider putting a clearer organizational structure and assignment of roles into place. This strategy might help to lighten the workload of the core staff, better utilize the association's other members, and allow for new people to enter the organization without disrupting its work. In fact, Africulturban could benefit overall from a clearer assignment of duties and a stricter organization. From my own experience as well as what trainers have told me, hip-hop education in particular tends to be somewhat disorganized, with classes starting late, equipment not being ready, etc. While some of these issues stem from external circumstances (i.e. children arriving late), Africulturban could try to better organize and prepare its team before arriving at a school.

Results and Analysis

This section will a.) examine the specific qualities and potentialities of urban culture that make it suited to development work and, b.) how Africulturban utilizes these qualities in order to create social change and exchange. As the organization in particular and urban culture in general work on many different scales, I have organized these results and their analyses by the level of their impact: international, national, and local. While the association tends to work mostly on the local level, all facets are important in order to gain a sense of the various potentialities of urban culture in nourishing social (ex)change, or development via the framework of interpersonal relationships and collaborations. The themes touched upon below should give a better sense of how and why urban culture can be used as a tool of development, and how Africulturban in particular attempts to do so.

International Level

One important characteristic that makes hip-hop culture suited to development work is that it is shared throughout the world and thus links diverse people and places. This quality was reiterated to me by a number of artists I spoke to, one of whom summed up the culture's universal appeal and power by saying, "Hip-hop, c'est l'argent du monde" (Mbaye interview).¹³ This universality allows young Senegalese hip-hoppers to be part of a global culture, of something bigger than their local context. For example, one aspiring young rapper named Amadou Kane said that, although he had barely left Dakar, let alone Senegal, hip-hop allowed him to be a global citizen (Kane interview). Indeed, many Galsen hip-hoppers feel that they can relate their own experiences to people all over the world, particularly those living in ghettos (an English term Senegalese hip-hoppers have themselves appropriated). Abdou Fall, a rapper and

¹³ "Hip-hop is the world's currency."

member of the urban culture group, Afia Boys Crew, said how difficult and dangerous growing up in the *banlieues* was, a situation he felt he shared with a lot of rappers around the world such as inner city African-Americans (Fall interview). This reoccurring sentiment reveals not only a certain global knowledge gained through hip-hop, but also a sense of solidarity and connection between diverse urban youth populations. As Ben Herson puts it in his article regarding hip-hop in Dakar: “Hip-hop is a way for those who live in ghetto or third world urban areas from Chaury to Compton to engage in a transnational dialogue that speaks not only to the ghetto of the Senegalese *nation-state* but to ghettos *everywhere*” (25). Senegalese hip-hoppers can thus use their art to tap into a global network of shared experiences, particularly ones that relate to their difficult living conditions, and to take part in an international conversation.

It is important to note that, although these hip-hoppers are part of a global culture, they also pride themselves on being distinctly Senegalese. While sharing a ghetto experience, they also recognize that they live different realities than rappers elsewhere, and thus must produce different art. Many rappers I spoke with personally or researched said how they used to mimic American hip-hop before realizing that misogynistic and violent lyrics did not properly reflect their Senegalese culture or Muslim religion. For example, rapper Djiby Daddy explained that they could not rap about these topics because, “We were born in this country. We are Muslim...we practice. We are messengers. Therefore there are things we cannot say to the young guys listening to us” (*Democracy*). So while they still take part in a worldwide culture, Senegalese urban actors also use this forum to express their unique cultural and social position. It seems, thus, that the universality of hip-hop is both a way to be a part of a global culture and a way to reaffirm and present one’s local culture, an idea which fits perfectly with the Senegalese baobab concept of being at once open to the world and rooted in one’s homeland.

Africulturban capitalizes on this dynamic of being at once global and distinctly local with its international hip-hop and urban culture festival, Festa2h. This yearly meeting serves as an international artistic and cultural exchange to the benefit of both foreign and local artists and audiences. On an international level, the festival allows for the meeting and collaboration of artists and cultural actors from around the world. One outcome of these encounters is that artists are often invited to contribute to others' projects (i.e. record a track for someone's album) or even work abroad (Veronese, Mane interviews). This possibility presents a concrete artistic and economic advancement to artists, thus representing a form of *social change* through which people can improve their careers and financial standing. However, the majority of Festa2h's results are not such tangible advances, but rather lay in the development of artists' products and networks vis-à-vis their international encounters. For example, urban artist Djibril Mane explained how the festival allowed him to not only meet a variety of people, but also to, "exchange ideas with them, to discuss, and to rethink our art together, and urban culture as a whole" (Mane interview). Thus, we may call Africulturban's festival a platform for *social exchange* that helps build relationships and lines of communication. These networks, it seems, are necessary for the development of urban culture not only as an artistic domain, but also as a viable international industry in which people from all over the world work together.

On a national and local level, these exchanges can also potentially benefit Senegal by bringing in cultural tourism and creating a name for the country on a global arts' stage. More evident still is that the festival benefits the local population by providing free cultural events to a largely Dakarais audience (although more foreigners have attended in recent years, the majority of festival attendees are still local citizens). Indeed, one thing that organizers pride Festa2h on is

its tendency to “deplacer vers la population”¹⁴ (Ba interview 2). Rather than being in one central location where people must travel to, Festa2h travels to the people by hosting events in several areas including downtown Dakar, Ouakam, Pikine, and Rufisque. In fact, one theme that was evident during my time with Africulturban was the association’s desire to decentralize and democratize culture by making it easily accessible and completely free for everyone, particularly suburban residents. As Amadou Fall Ba put it, “on se batte pour l’acces de la culture de la qualité pour tous”¹⁵ (Ba interview 2).

Urban culture is specifically suited to this goal of cultural accessibility because it is meant to be easily available to people as well as close to their lives. For example, slam originated from a desire to democratize poetry by taking it off the page and putting it into an oral and theatrical form that a larger audience could understand and enjoy (Sall interview). From my own observations, graffiti seems to share this democratizing quality, as it is created in public places so that people can not only watch the process, but also enjoy it on a daily basis once it is finished. For this reason, graffiti as well as other urban art forms seem to be more relevant and close to people’s lives than art that is not as publicly accessible. For example, graffiti artist Alexandre Veronese (a.k.a Kéto) explained that he could paint a Michelangelo-style piece on a wall in Dakar that would be beautiful, but so far removed from the reality here as to be irrelevant. Rather, he prefers to paint subjects that speak to the Senegalese and their lives, an apt example of how urban art moves toward the people rather than hovering above them (Veronese interview).

Urban culture’s decentralization and democratization of the arts is, as we have seen, a characteristic that Africulturban applies in its programs, particularly with Festa2h. By providing

¹⁴ “Move toward the population.”

¹⁵ “We are fighting for access to quality culture for all.”

completely free events in a variety of locations, the organization allows a wide range of the Dakarois population – whether rich or poor, living downtown or in the suburbs – to participate in this platform for international encounters and dialogue. Thus, the association takes a specific quality of urban culture to benefit the local population through *social exchange*. While its events might not produce actual, material equality among this population (what one might consider *social change*), Africulturban does aim to be equitable in its own work and is, perhaps, laying the framework for future equality. If, as Senegal's first president, Leopold Sedar Senghor, believed, culture is an integral part of development, than it first needs to be accessible to all, and especially to the most impoverished segment of the country's population. Africulturban's ability to equally provide access to culture and social exchange opportunities thus places it on the road to social development.

National level

A second characteristic of hip-hop culture is that, as a highly popular and youth-based movement, many young Senegalese love urban art and practice it as a hobby. Despite this popularity, however, there is almost no professional training available to them in these domains to improve the quality of their work and turn their hobbies into careers. As Moustapha Sall, the program director of Hip Hop Akademy explained, a majority of these young people are passionate about the arts but have trouble expressing themselves, and need guidance in the proper techniques and newest technology in order to do so (Sall interview). Africulturban seeks to fill this need by providing free training in urban culture fields through its Hip Hop Akademy program. The goal is not only to improve and professionalize urban culture *products* in Senegal, but also to improve and professionalize *people*. The idea is that the youth's passion for urban culture can be utilized to train them with professional skills that they can then turn into a career.

Renaud Lioult, a graphic design teacher for Hip Hop Akademy, said that, “Hip-hop is just a pretext to train people here; it’s a way to get them interested, but what they really need are actual, marketable skills” (Lioult interview). By providing people with expertise, Africulturban thus capitalizes on an interest in hip-hop in order to create *social change*. Hip Hop Akademy, in furnishing a road toward economic advancement, thus seems to be the project with the greatest potential for direct social development.

In order for Hip Hop Akademy to succeed in this endeavor, however, there needs to be a demand and a market for the urban culture professionals it trains. Thus, a larger goal, and perhaps future result, of the program is to develop hip-hop culture into an economically profitable industry. What seems contradictory here is that, although Africulturban seeks to foster urban culture as an industry, it does not charge for any of its events so that it may pay its artists or staff members. The association claims that this is because its own goal is not to make money, but rather, as we have seen in our discussion of Festa2h, to provide cultural events that are accessible to everyone. Amadou Fall Ba said that those living in the *banlieues* will not pay for a concert or other event, no matter how little it costs, and thus it is not only against their philosophy, but also impractical to charge (Ba interview 2).¹⁶ He further stressed that there are larger, more important steps that need to be taken in order to create an urban culture industry than simply charging for concerts. In particular, laws need to be put into place that would protect artists, who currently do not receive any benefits such as retirement, and their work (Ba interview 2).

¹⁶ Although this might be because people *cannot* pay for concerts, my impression from several interviews was also that people *would not* pay for events. A few people mentioned that the population does not think culture is something one pays for, while I have also heard that there is a low tendency to attend artistic events in general. I think the public’s perception of and behavior toward the art/culture realm in Senegal could be an interesting topic for further study.

For urban culture to become a viable industry, then, would require political action by the Senegalese government. Although it is clear that urban culture is a large force in Senegal, hip-hop in general and Africulturban in particular do not receive much support from the government and its Ministry of Culture. Many of the artists I spoke with believe that this lack of sustainment stems from the socially conscious and politically minded nature of Rap Galsen. Moustapha Sall, for example, explained how the government is afraid of rappers, especially in the context of the recent Y'en a marre movement¹⁷, because they recognize the power of hip-hop culture in engaging the youth and speaking out against the government (Sall interview). While this seems perfectly plausible, it also appears that hip-hop is not the only domain that lacks government support. In several recent newspaper articles, cultural actors in fields such as cinema and dance also expressed their discontent with the lack of aid from the Ministry of Culture (Absa; Diagne).¹⁸ The general consensus seems to be that there is no real cultural politics in Senegal, a developing country with more immediate concerns, and that the state should act to ameliorate this situation.

Whether it is because of hip-hop's radical and politically active nature or because of a lack of cultural politics in general, it is true that Africulturban receives very little support from the government. The association only works with the Ministry of Culture once a year for Festa2h, although its contribution tends to be inconsistent and difficult to secure (Ba interview 2). The prevailing sentiment within the organization is that, while they would like to see greater support from the government, they rather move forward on their own than wait for the state to act. I would say, in fact, that members of the organization do not have much faith in the

¹⁷ The youth-led movement to protest former president Abdoulaye Wade's candidacy for a third term in the 2012 elections.

¹⁸ The current publicity of this debate is due to the recent appointment of Youssou N'Dour as Minister of Culture.

government, and thus are unwilling to let its lack of aid be a stumbling block to the organization's work.

Despite this feeling toward the government, Africulturban does desire certain changes, namely the establishment of laws to protect and provide for artists, which would require political action. If the organization truly hopes to develop urban culture into an economically profitable industry, it must engage in dialogue with the government, an action that does not seem to be on the top of the association's priority list. Although, as we have seen, Africulturban is experienced in creating social exchange between artists and local populations, its weakness lies in initiating this type of dialogue with the authorities. While I respect Africulturban's independent nature, I believe that the association should take this type of exchange seriously if it hopes to achieve its long-term goals of developing a hip-hop industry that can gainfully employ urban youth.¹⁹

Local level

As we have seen, the youth of Dakar's *banlieues*, where Senegalese hip-hop was born and continues to thrive, live and love urban culture. Africulturban's hip-hop education program uses this popular culture in order to better students' lives, as most of them face difficult conditions of poverty and delinquency (prostitution, drug use, etc.). These challenges extend beyond the home and street and into schools themselves, a fact that Omar Benkhatab Keita, Africulturban's coordinator for hip-hop education, says propelled the organization to create a program specifically for middle and high school students (Keita interview). Through its urban arts workshops, the association hopes to encourage youth in these difficult neighborhoods, validate their intellectual and technical abilities, and promote personal confidence, responsibility,

¹⁹ If, in fact, the lack of government support applies to all artistic domains, Africulturban should also consider working with cultural actors across disciplines in order to negotiate with the government.

and consciousness so that children are more likely to stay in school and make good decisions (*H.H.A dossier*). One strategy, it seems, for achieving these goals is to provide youth with productive activities. Babacar Diop, the director of one of Africulturban's partner schools, explained how teachers and parents support hip-hop education because they rather have children in a safe place being constructive than roaming the dangerous streets (B. Diop interview). In addition to activities, the program also attempts to provide students with skills that can be used as hobbies and, perhaps in the future, careers. Students who attend ongoing workshops, as opposed to annual ones, have this chance to improve their ability in a field. For example, sitting in on a rap workshop taught by Sharif Ba, I noticed that one young girl was clearly more advanced than her peers. When I asked Sharif why this was so, he said that she had already completed workshops last year, giving her the chance to develop as a young rapper. This opportunity to gain and improve skills, plus the simple fact of having alternative activities to street life, represent the more concrete outcomes of hip-hop education that may be categorized as elements of *social change*.

Unfortunately, most of the children that Africulturban serves do not have the chance to attend workshops regularly or year after year, as the majority only receive one afternoon of training.²⁰ However, the main purpose of hip-hop education is not to train urban artists, but rather to give children confidence, a way to express themselves, and hope that another future is possible *through* urban art. As the director of a community center where Africulturban provides workshops explained, children must always bow to authority figures: parents at home, teachers at school, and gang leaders in the streets. It is only during these workshops that kids can freely

²⁰ Many instructors I spoke to wished they could teach students on a more regular basis in order to get to know them better and see them improve. Unfortunately, limited funds and trainers prevent Africulturban from providing more regular workshops (Keita interview).

express themselves without fear of recrimination (Gueye interview). This dynamic is visible, firstly, in how the classes are run. During my observations of several hip-hop education classes, trainers would only give their students a little orientation before letting them continue work on their own and collectively. For example, in Sharif Ba's rap workshop, the instructor began by giving students an assignment with a few guidelines. He then gave a short demonstration before letting them write their own individual verses. When they had finished, each student presented, with Sharif and the other students giving feedback and helping to improve the piece together. All of the teachers I shadowed, in fact, took this approach of allowing children freedom, stressing creativity, and facilitating collaborative work between students. According to Babacar Diop, one school's director, the results were evident: children were more open, confident, and better able to collaborate after Africulturban's workshops (B. Diop interview).

A second way in which these workshops encourage and positively guide children is by providing them with role models. As Omar Diop (a.k.a. Grafixx), a teacher of graffiti workshops, explained, there is often a disconnect between students and school instructors, who do not understand or value the urban culture and language that children in *banlieues* use (O. Diop interview). All of hip-hop education's instructors, in contrast, are young artists who are part of urban culture, allowing them to better relate to students and put them at ease. In addition, most of these teachers themselves grew up in the suburbs and have managed to become responsible and successful artists, a fact that demonstrates to children that there are other possibilities aside from street life. Thus, a large part of hip-hop education's impact stems simply from providing children with a figure that they can both relate to and look up to.

We see here that Africulturban is not providing social development to suburban children as one might normally construe it, such as building schools, providing meals, etc. To an extent,

the association is working toward more quantifiable *social change* by furnishing alternative activities that may stem delinquent behavior and teaching skills that may prove beneficial to children in the future. However, the greatest results of hip-hop education do not lie in providing tangible skills and activities, but rather in nourishing positive values (such as confidence and personal responsibility) and giving kids hope and motivation for the future. Thus, Africulturban's program is laying the foundation for future change through a method of *social exchange*: students interacting with instructors that serve as role models, children collaborating with each other, etc. Rather than teaching urban culture itself, the organization teaches *through* urban culture, taking advantage of its popularity and appeal in order to positively impact the youth. As graffiti teacher Kéto said, "Hip-hop is just a pretext, a way in with students so we can grab their attention and teach them other, more important things" (Veronese interview).

Conclusion

It is truly remarkable how, in just a few short decades since its birth, hip-hop culture has permeated the globe, fueled mainly by the passion and creativity of poor urban youth. As a worldwide phenomenon that tends to thrive best in underdeveloped communities, urban culture should not be considered a passing fad, but rather should be looked to for how it may benefit the areas and people that nourish it. As we have seen, there are qualities specific to urban culture that make it particularly suited to social development work. Aside from its universality that enables hip-hoppers from around the world to enter into dialogue with one another, hip-hop culture also tends to be extremely socially and politically oriented. This is particularly true in Senegal, where one would be hard pressed to find urban art that does not aim to increase consciousness and engagement with social issues. Many of these issues apply specifically to the difficult conditions in Dakar's *banlieues*, where Rap Galsen was born and continues to be most popular. Created in this context, Africulturban has itself benefitted from the popularity and principles of hip-hop culture, which has served as both a guiding philosophy and point of unity among its members.

While much of what the non-profit does involves promoting and expanding urban art, the goal is not, as Amadou Fall Ba says, "de faire l'art pour l'art, c'est de faire l'art pour le développement"²¹ (Ba interview 2). The bulk of the association's efforts, however, do not fit the typical mold of development work, since the results are often intangible and unquantifiable in regard to how they better people's lives. This is because Africulturban's greatest strength lies not in its creation of concrete *social change*, but rather in its production of *social exchange*. By furnishing forums for foreign and local artists and audiences to dialogue, connecting urban

²¹ The goal is not "to do art for art's sake, it's to do art for development."

culture actors, schools, and community centers, and developing mentor-like relationships between the current and incoming generations of urban artists, the organization is creating networks and lines of communication that are necessary for social improvement. In uniting the diverse parties needed to create change (although the government, I believe, has yet to be properly engaged), Africulturban is laying the foundation for development work that comes directly from the people it wishes to serve.

Moving past this foundation-building level, Africulturban has begun to work toward developing urban culture into a viable industry, namely by professionalizing people in these domains. However, while the Hip Hop Akademy program does seem to adequately train its students, it cannot guarantee that these future professionals will be able to make a career out of their skills, as hip-hop remains an unprofitable field. If the organization truly wants to use urban culture as a tool for economic independence, I believe, it must rethink its strategies for creating a sustainable hip-hop industry. One method might be to start charging for its cultural events,²² which would serve not only to finance the organization's more socially oriented projects, but also to teach the youth that they need to support hip-hop now if they hope to benefit from it in the future. In general, it seems, Africulturban needs more local support and funding, be it from the public, the government (as previously discussed), and/or local businesses. I believe that if the organization continues to rely on international funders without changing local dynamics, Africulturban will not be able to sustain itself as an organization and urban culture will not be able to financially support its artists. In short, if the goal is to create a Senegalese hip-hop industry, then it needs to come from within Senegal itself. The only way for this to happen is for

²² There are probably other business-model approaches that Africulturban could benefit from. An interesting topic for future study might be how Senegalese non-profits use or could use these approaches to be self-sustainable.

urban culture in general and Africulturban in particular to find the right balance between being socially minded and economically viable, for urban culture is indeed “bigger than hip-hop”: it is an art, a business, *and* a tool for social development.

Appendix: List of Africulturban's Partners

Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Senegal
National Assembly of Senegal
Cities of Pikine, Rufisque, and Dakar
Swiss Foundation for Pro Helvetica Culture
International Organization for Migrations
BMUK (Foreign Affairs Ministry of Austria)
Wallonie Bruxelles International
United States Embassy of Dakar
Spanish Embassy of Dakar
Canadian Embassy of Dakar
Centre Culturel Blaise Senghor
Swiss Embassy of Dakar
Cities of Osterreich and Linz (Austria)
Goethe Institut Dakar
Insitut Français of Dakar and Paris
Brakula (Germany)
FOMECCS/PECCS
Rosa (Denmark)
Nestlé Senegal
Radio Oxyjeunes FM
Septenio et Gobierno de Canarias
Association Kaay Fess
Senecartours et Fontaine
Ademas et La Cape
TrustAfrica
99 et Jolof For Life

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