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# Headlines in Rhyme: A Case Study on Le Journal Rappé as an Agent of Senegalese Sociopolitical Change

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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**Headlines in Rhyme: A Case Study on *Le Journal Rappé* as an Agent of Senegalese Sociopolitical Change**

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Hackel

A special thank you to Keyti and Xuman—for feeding me, for making sure I got home safely, and for teaching me how to “break barriers.”

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## Abstract

*Le Journal Rappé* is a weekly Senegalese television segment presented and created by “old-school” rappers Cheikh “Keyti” Sene and Makhtar “Xuman” Fall. Each Friday on the Senegalese television station 2S, the rappers take on the personas of broadcast journalists, delivering the week’s top headlines in rhyme—they literally rap the news. Since its initial inception on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013 as a YouTube venture, *Le Journal Rappé* has garnered both national and international praise. The program superficially serves as an alternative source of media, one that deviates from the mainstream in its format, entertainment value, and appeal to youth culture. On a more dermal level, however, *Le Journal Rappé* serves as *alternative* source of media, one that combats the superfluous, biased, and even corrupt state of Senegalese news distribution. As a case study, this research firstly tracks the development of *Le Journal Rappé* in a historical, political, and musical context. It then documents the creative process behind *Le Journal Rappé* (from here abbreviated as the “JTR”, *Journal Télévisé Rappé*), explains the future endeavors coupled with the JTR’s innovative use of internet platforms, and examines the national and international attention the program has received. I finally argue that, regardless of Keyti and Xuman’s intentions, the JTR serves as a vehicle to illuminate Senegalese societal values, to remedy current sociopolitical problems and corruption, and to expedite Senegal’s increasing sociopolitical progress.

*Key Words: Journalism, Music, Mass Communications*

## Introduction

When standing next to each other, Cheikh “Keyti” Sene and Makhtar “Xuman” Fall appear more as an ironic comedy duo than as two pioneers of the hip-hop movement in Senegal. As Xuman, with his dreadlocks swept back into a ponytail, towers over Keyti, a loving father with an affinity towards academia, it is difficult to image that they began their careers as warring rappers, spouting off braggadocio and insults at one other via their respective rap groups in the early 1990’s.

Since the apex of their musical careers, the nature of Keyti and Xuman’s relationship, and more importantly, the nature of hip-hop in Senegal has transformed dramatically over the transition into the new millennium. In the 1980’s, hip-hop emerged from Senegal’s impoverished suburbs, the “banlieus,” as not only a source of entertainment influenced by the American rap scene, but as a means to combat political and socioeconomic repression under the regime of former President Abdou Diouf. (*Democracy in Dakar*). The hip-hop movement, then spearheaded by the Boul Fall generation of rappers—the generation that grew up in this historical context—sought to illuminate the hypocrisy and corruption that pervaded the regime and ameliorate the political climate in Senegal. (*Herson 31*) Contemporary Senegalese hip-hop, however, has shied away from this politically conscious paradigm in order to match its American counterpart, a mainstream rap movement that advertizes frivolity, misogyny, and “gangster” life.

Keyti and Xuman, now deemed as “old-school rappers,” have banded together and channeled their clout and distance from the current hip-hop scene into a new phase of

their career: *The Journal Rappé*. The concept of “Le Journal Rappé” is simple while its objectives and goals are much more nuanced. While the segment is only five minutes long, Keyti and Xuman divide the airtime evenly. Xuman begins, rapping the headlines in French, while Keyti delivers his interpretation in Wolof, the native language of Senegal. Though the show touches upon myriad topics, ranging from international politics to rising pollution in Dakar, the nation’s capital, the crux of “Le Journal Rappé” is the music—the rap.

Since it’s inception as a YouTube video, both the Senegalese and international community have praised Keyti and Xuman’s endeavors to combat current media consumption. The rappers believe that, when it comes to media, what is important is not always visible. In Senegal, where news sources bombarded audiences with too much information, “Le Journal Rappé” strives to deliver a conscious and concise account of current events. By presenting their program each Friday, at the end of the week, they view their show as separate from the mainstream media race. They are not trying to break the news first, only trying to present a thoroughly researched and analyzed product, with a little bit of colored commentary and humor thrown into each segment. “Le Journal Rappé” also illuminates hard, pressing issues, ones that are often overshadowed by popular culture fluff or shrouded by political agendas and biases. The rappers unearth what really matters, the news that directly affects the Senegalese audience’s everyday lives.

By examining the past and current state of mainstream hip-hop and media distribution in Dakar, this study explores *Le Journal Rappé’s* emergence as an entertaining yet educational tool meant to mobilize political, societal, and technological

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advancement in Senegal. I will expel a brief overview of hip-hop in Senegal to contextualize *Le Journal Rappé*'s role in the larger musical and social movement. I will then examine the motivation behind the creation of *Le Journal Rappé*, as told from the perspective of Keyti and Xuman coupled with the shifting nature of Senegalese hip-hop and current media distribution. In order to provide insight into the actual creative process, I will document the production process of a typical episode of *Le Journal Rappé* to expose the nuanced decision making process, how the rappers and their team choose their steps carefully to subtly spread awareness to catalyze positive sociopolitical change.

While *Le Journal Rappé* is still considered a young staple of Senegalese popular culture, I argue that it's creative process and reception illuminates larger Senegalese societal ills, values, and potential for technological advancement. I will relay and analyze audience's reactions to *Le Journal Rappé* to gauge whether its reception aligns with the rapper's intentions and perspectives on the current sociopolitical climate. This paper finally aims to highlight the future potential of *Le Journal Rappé* as an outlet to strengthen freedom of speech in West Africa, and on a more national level, to spearhead Senegalese sociopolitical advancement.



### Methodology

I was fortunate enough to have direct contact with both Keyti and Xuman throughout my research and shadowed both rappers, together and apart, in order to document their creative process and thoroughly gauge their perspectives on the JTR. Over the course of three weeks, I spent time with the rappers in three significant contexts as both a participant and as an active observer. Although the JTR is currently on hiatus and gearing up for a second season, I did have the opportunity to shadow the rappers as they performed an extensive simulation of a mock episode. I also held interviews with both the rappers individually to supplement my direct observations, to clarify lingering questions, and, on a more personal level, to understand their individual histories. I even attended private meetings between the two rappers—a planning session for the second season of JTR and another for the forthcoming “first annual round-up” episode. During the latter, I was even able to shape the content of “the round-up” by pitching past JTR segments to include in their culminating episode. In order to gain some distance and contextualize the subject at hand, I also observed related cultural events with both Keyti and Xuman, such as the Music Actuaelle Conference at the Cervantes Institute and *No Stress*, a popular hip-hop radio show hosted by Xuman himself. Perhaps the most personally rewarding methodology was helping the rappers write JTR press material for an upcoming hip hop festival in Denmark. From this small task, I able to leverage my written communication skills to help advance the JTR’s international presence and solidify a mission statement behind the JTR

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Although I spent most of my time directly working with rappers, an important component of my research consisted of interviews with Senegalese college students, aspiring rappers, key members of the JTR production staff, and a journalist from French Radio International. These interviews provided insight into the extent to which the JTR impacts Senegalese sociopolitical change, its popularity among the youth, and critical reception from more traditional journalism sources. While some of these interviews were organized, others were extemporaneous, conducted by walking up to students around the University of Cheikh Anta Diop grounds. In addition to my primary research, I also consulted scholarly articles, contemporary newspaper articles, a documentary on the intersection of politics and hip-hop in Dakar, and past episodes of the JTR on YouTube to ground my research in a historical context.

### *Advantages:*

Having direct contact with Keyti and Xuman proved to be one of the most advantageous pieces of my research. They were always generous with their time and were willing to include me in their professional and personal lives. They also provided a wealth of connections throughout the hip-hop and media communities. Without their clout, I would have not been able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the JTR and make contact with the JTR production staff and journalists in Senegal.

At certain moments throughout my research process, examining a topic that no one had ever formally researched proved advantageous as well. I felt as if I explored uncharted territory and helped legitimize and publicize the importance of the JTR beyond its ostensible entertainment value. As the JTR's primary researcher, I felt as if I was in a

position of authority, the “expert,” to make claims based on my first-hand accounts since I had no other sources upon which I could rely.

### *Limitations*

Exploring uncharted territory, however, did come with significant limitations. Again, I had no other sources upon which I could rely. I often felt uncomfortable deeming myself as “an expert” on the subject since this was my first time conducting significant field research. It was difficult to find academic sources to support my argument since there is neither significant material on the JTR nor a wealth of general research on Senegalese hip-hop.

Initially, I approached this assignment as an essay in which I would recount my experiences as an intern working with the JTR. Since the JTR was on hiatus during my research period, however, this method was not possible. It also limited the amount of potential participant observation research I was able to conduct.

As for conducting interviews, I found that a biased sample pool might have confounded my research. Since the majority of interview connections stemmed from Keyti and Xuman’s recommendations, I only conducted interviews with proponents of the JTR. And even in my “random” interviews, it was impossible to find opponents of the JTR. The most contentious interviews I conducted were with students who had never heard of the JTR. As telling as this limitation was, I felt as if my interviews proved to be flat and repetitive.

### Situating *Le Journal Rappé* in its Historical, Political, and Musical Contexts

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, the initial hip-hop movement in Senegal grounded itself in the impoverished Dakar suburbs, "les banlieus" before permeating the city (*Democracy*). These "shantytowns," where the rising cost of living and lack of education were most ostensible, reflected the larger problems of Dakarois society often attributed to the neglectful government under President Abdou Diouf. In 1988, during Diouf's second term, a series massive schools strikes erupted so violently that "the entire year was marked invalid by the school system" (Herson 16). It is no coincidence that, with the abundance of free time coupled with a volatile government, the Boul Falle generation turned towards American hip-hop, "a method of expression that represents radical political and musical ideas which are used to create a separate social space for the youth" (Herson 1) to express frustration with the political climate.

At first, Senegalese hip-hop had a distinctly American influence, specifically in terms of physical style and language. In an interview in 2007, Xuman admits that, "we [the early rappers] were wearing nice, big chains, rhyming in English, and didn't really understand the sense [of the words]" (*Democracy*). It was during the school strikes of 1988 that Senegalese rap began to embody a more authentically Senegalese sound as youth would appropriate the B-sides of American hip-hop albums as instrumental tracks over which aspiring rappers would spit rhymes in Wolof (Herson 18).

During the same year, the Diouf regime created a series of new radio stations to

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entertain international guests during the world fair held in Dakar. The stations, which were essentially free from government regulation, were so overwhelmingly popular that the government decided to continue funding the stations after the fair had ended. Despite the corruption and rising poverty under the Diouf regime, the new stations created the façade of freedom of speech and unprecedented liberalization of media, which temporarily quelled political resentment (Herson 20). It also catalyzed the dissemination of rap music in Dakar.

With multiple autonomous radio stations, DJ's cultivated a thriving hip-hop culture where they were free to play distinctly Senegalese hip-hop. This popularization and freedom, however, led to a stylistic fissure between two distinct Senegalese hip-hop schools: the mbalax and the hard-core/underground rappers (Herson 20). While mxbala played lyrics laden with themes of love atop traditional Senegalese kora and sabar drum instrumentals, hard-core rappers exclusively wrote about hard-pressing political issues and retained the distinctly American break-beats.

Two of the frontrunners of the hard-core movement were two warring hip-hop collectives-- Rapadio and Pee Frois, the groups from which Keyti and Xuman began their respective careers. Before their collaboration, the two rappers "accused each other of not being 'real' hip-hop artists"( Hinshaw 2). Though they are now not only co-anchors but also neighbors in the Liberté Six Extension neighborhood of Dakar, Keyti, now 40 years old, moved to Dakar from Saint Louis after dropping out of university a year short of completing his masters degree in English. Though his familial relationships proved slightly tumultuous, Keyti always relied on his family for support throughout his musical career. Xuman, 39, on the other hand, comes from a family of Marabouts, the highest

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religious leaders of the Muslim faith. “I don’t think some of his family even supports him now” says Keyti of his co-creator (Sene Interview 1). Growing up in the Medina neighborhood of Dakar, Xuman’s interest in poetry and break-dancing at a young age lead him to pursue a rap-career immediately following his last year of high school. (Gueye 1).

Even throughout their contentious past, Xuman and Keyti harbored the same credo pertaining to hip hop as a means to social change, specifically during the 2000 election of Abdoulaye Wade, marking the end of Diouf’s three-term presidency. “Our goal [with our music] is to educate the youth,” Keyti declared in an interview conducted in 2007, years before the inception of *Le Journal Rappé (Democracy)*. In an interview conducted the same year, Xuman expressed similar sentiments, asserting that hip-hop in Senegal must be conscious. Unlike its American counterpart, Senegalese rap could never objectify women and glorify “gangster” life due to the strong religious influence that pervades Senegalese culture (*Democracy*).

Rapper Didier Awadi, a Senegalese hip-hop pioneer, deems this mentality as “musical activism” (*Democracy*), the idea that rappers can harness their clout to sway political elections through music. In 2000 elections, Wade earned the support of the Boule Fall generation and the musical activism movement. Young rappers placed Wade on a pedestal; they saw him as their only hope for political and social change in Senegal. With the rap community’s support, Wade earned 58.7% of the vote and personally thanked the rappers for their endorsement (*Democracy*).

Unfortunately, Wade quickly fell out of favor with the rap community. His regime was marked by rising prices on Senegalese staples, such as rice and oil, and more

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importantly unprecedented “crack-down” on freedom of speech and slander against the government. The rap community hoped that they would be able to ban together to influence the 2007 elections and vote Wade out of power. When Wade earned a 55.8% of all votes on the first round of elections, however, the once-promising future of Senegal now seemed bleak. (*Democracy*)

To help promote political change in 2011 elections, the rap community responded more feverishly than even with the founding of the “Y’en a marre”<sup>1</sup> movement, a collective of young rappers and journalist that helped protest Wade candidacy for a third term (Sladja 12). Although the movement was successful as the country elected the current president, Macky Sall, deception, corruption, and inexcusable biases still persist today, specifically in the way journalists disseminate news and allegedly inform the public sector.

Bineta Diange, a current journalist for French Radio International and also the first journalist to cover *Le Journal Rappé*, extrapolates upon the problems plaguing Senegal’s current media industry. Since 2006, there has been a boom of higher education journalism program throughout the country (Diange Interview). The influx of aspiring journalist, however, does not align with the number of allotted jobs, as well as funds, available. And while, relative to most West African countries, freedom of expression does exist in Senegal, most news sources give more attention “fluff” pieces and tabloid stories rather than pressing issues that effect Senegalese domestic policy and everyday life. “Pressing public policy is kept under wraps,” Keyti concedes. “For example, the government recently voted the President Macky Sall’s National Budget of 92 billion

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: “We’re fed up”

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CFA, which was smaller than Wade's [budget]. But then, the government reevaluated and increased the budget to 109 Billion CFA. And no one said anything about the change, but every knows when Vivienne<sup>2</sup> is having her birthday party" (Sene Interview 3)

Not only is *Le Journal Rappé* actively working to promote accurate news decimation, but Keyti and Xuman are striving to combat Senegal's social conservatism and, on a smaller scale, the resurgence of negative Western influence on Senegalese hip-hop culture. Xuman is critical of the way in which contemporary American hip-hop portrays African Americans. "The grandfathers of young, American rappers came to America as slaves, and they worked hard to get them certain rights. Now they're acting the opposite way of what are grandfathers fought for only fifty years ago. I can understand how you used to be a slave and now you free man, and I can understand, you can show people your successful lifestyle, but what I cannot understand the fact that sometimes you're acting like you forgot your real values." (Fall Interview 1). While America and Senegal do not share the same history, Xuman is worried about these abandoned values will negatively impact Senegalese hip-hop's formerly conscious social message. He recognizes the influence American popular culture has over Senegalese popular culture as he admits, "I'm really worried about [the future of Senegalese rap]. Even now, it's starting. Senegalese hip-hop used to be the music of consciousness, the music of knowledge, and now, the social content does not exist anymore. It's like being conscious makes you a 'has-been'" (Fall Interview 1). With their height of the musical careers in the past, Xuman and Keyti are trying to restore "consciousness" to the Senegalese sociopolitical and hip-hop scenes. The process, however, is not an easy one.

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<sup>2</sup> Vivienne Ndour is a Senegalese pop music star.



Equipped with a small technical staff and limited funds, they began the arduous in the Spring of 2013.

### The Creative Process

Though *Le Journal Rappé* seamlessly airs every Friday at 8:30 on 2S, the creative process can, at certain moments, seem tumultuous, uncertain, and a bit risky. Without fail, the rappers begin working on the proceeding episode the same day the preceding one airs. On Friday night, Keyti and Xuman anxiously await an email from a man named “Bambino,” a friend and a fan of the show, who scours the news to compile the week’s top headlines. “After the first three or four episodes,” Xuman admits, “it was difficult for myself and Keyti to read through the news each week and keep up with our schedules’ (Fall Interview 2) To save themselves time and energy, they delegated the task to Bambino; however, the rappers take it upon themselves to further investigate stories that make it to air. There is a certain finesse required to pick which news stories make the cut each week. The restrictive timeframe—approximately three minutes for each rapper’s respective French and Wolof editions-- force the rappers to follow a specific criterion to decide which headlines will later become rap lyrics.

Humor trumps all other standards. “If the subject has the potential for humor, that puts it at the top of list,” Keyti says. “After the rap component, humor is the second foundation of the show” (Sene Interview 2). Both of the rappers know, however, that, each week their writing tows a fine line between intelligent satire and offensive and potentially jeopardizing insults. Their aim is not to make fun of people, especially political figures, for the sake of bashing the government. Instead Xuman and Keyti try to

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bring more nuanced issues to the surface through the use of humor throughout each episode of the JTR.

Keyti and Xuman employ “punch lines” as their main sources of satire throughout each episode. In terms of rap, and more specifically the JTR, a punch line is a “beautiful, closing line” that cinches the end of a song or verse in relation to its original premise. “What makes a punch line beautiful,” Keyti concedes, “is when it is most unexpected or when you say something that people were thinking but didn’t think *you* had the balls to say” (Sene Interview 2). In episode 20, for example, while discussing Aminata Toureé’s recent political victory as Senegal’s newest prime minister, Keyti, rapping in Wolof, begins by praising “Mimi” for her tenacity as a feminist paving the way for Senegalese women in politics. After a few lines, however, he concludes the story with “Mais nak...sa guerfaz yi rek nga war sanzer passeukeu diplomatiquement quand même tu nous mets en danzer,” which approximately translates to “but you’re jeopardizing our diplomacy with your weaves” (*Le Journal Rappé Episode 20*)<sup>3</sup>

As an artist, Keyti does not get much pleasure out of attacking people, especially political figures, on physical appearances. In this specific case, however, he felt as if the insult was justified. It called attention to a detail that was on everyone’s mind—Toureé’s distracting, bizarre hairstyle—but also it jabbed at Senegalese standards of beauty pertaining to women and the extreme measures they take to conceal their natural hair. “[The joke] aligns with my convictions that African women should just keep their natural hair and be beautiful, and that’s the only reason why I did it” (Sene Interview 2).

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by Keyti.

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Witty insults and humor, however, are not only the only criteria the rappers account for when choosing material each week. They remain extremely conscious of the entertainment value of their product and scrupulously consider their audience's interests. They know they have the obligation to report the most popular stories in way that does not seem hackneyed or trite. In the first episode of the JTR, for example, Xuman and Keyti chose to cover a popular story about a fire in a Quranic school. To cut through the mainstream news sources, they chose to present the story in a different fashion, by highlighting the excessive media coverage itself. They approached the story from an ironic angle by noting the overly dramatic media buzz behind this isolated incident. "And that was the objective," says Keyti. "When I'm on social media sites, I see people writing that line—that there's always a drama that people have to latch onto—and that was the point. They remember. And that's only possible because of the humor and irony" (Sene Interview 2).

While the rappers strive to peak their audience's interests in their content choices, they also work to vary the show's format each week to maintain their viewership. Keyti and Xuman cover approximately four stories each week and choose their content based on their previous news stories. "If we've talked about politics for three weeks, on the fourth week, we'll talk about something else. We don't want people to assume there's a format" (Sene Interview 2) According to the rappers, the only staples of the show are the beats and the rap. There is, however, a bit more continuity in the writing and recording processes than in show's content. On Saturday night, the rappers solidify the news four stories at hand. Although the writing timeframe seems volatile, their roles remain fixed. Xuman writes and performs the French segment while Keyti takes charge of the Wolof.

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“We talked about everything except who was doing which part. I was directly writing in French and Keyti was directly writing in wolof,” Xuman notes. (Fall Interview 2) Keyti adds, “It was really obvious. He knows I’m better than him in Wolof. I knew I couldn’t write the French part like he’s doing it.” (Sene Interview 1). Between Saturday night and Monday morning—the typical first day of filming the week’s episode—the rappers begin writing their respective verses. They admit, however, that most days, they write verses once they get into the studio, sometimes even minutes before they record the audio track on Sunday.

Relative to most Western and Senegalese television studios, however, the word “studio” seems inappropriate to describe Level Studios, the JTR’s production headquarters. Founded by former rapper and current graphic designer, Mustapha “Mass” Diop, Level Studios resembles a house like many others lining the streets of Dakar’s Nord Froie’s neighborhood. The space is fully equipped with a kitchen, a salon, even a coffee table. Only a long, bleak room lined with six iMac computers hints at some sort of technological production activity. At one end of the room, there is just enough space to set up a collapsible green screen, on which the background graphics will be projected, a chair, and a circular table, which will serve as a Xuman and Keyti’s anchor desk. The space itself is narrow and linear, making it an ironically ideal size for a team of five—two rappers, a “beat-maker,”<sup>4</sup> a cameraman, and a video editor—to collaborate and produce an internationally recognized television program.

The mastermind behind the audio track is an up-and-coming Senegalese music producer and self-proclaimed “first beat maker in Senegal,” 25-year-old Abdul Mbackey.

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<sup>4</sup> A “beat-maker,” more formally known as a “producer,” creates the instrumentals for hip-hop tracks.

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Better known as “No Face Undacova,” Mbackey has worked with Xuman and Keyti since the show’s inception, creating a total of 50 beats over the course of the show’s six-month run. “Every week, I make two beats,” says No Face, “and they pick one” (Mbackey Interview). In the early stages of the JTR, the rappers initially thought they would use the same beat—the same instrumental track—for every four episodes. No Face quickly declined the pitch, claiming it would be too easy. Instead, he creates his beats, using only his Dell laptop, a beat-making software system called *Logic*, and the recording equipment at level studios.

While he is still considered an amateur relative to his veteran counterparts, Xuman and Keyti chose No Face for his keen eye—or ear—for sound and for his unparalleled, spry work ethic. When it comes to picking which tracks to lay under the rappers’ lyrics, No Face’s choices are deliberate. “The type of beat depends on the shows theme,” No Face recounts. “If the topic is sad, if there is a war, I will make an ‘sad’ beat.” While his descriptions are vague, perhaps because of the language barrier, his meticulous craftsmanship is evident, specifically in discerning between the beats backing the French and the Wolof portions. Relative to French’s airy, flowing syllables, Wolof relies on much more raw and harsher sounds. Keyti’s voice is also considerably deeper than Xuman’s. While making beats for the JTR, No Face considers these minute subtitles. He changes the beats accordingly, dropping the tone and pacing of Xuman’s track to match Keyti’s darker sound.

His talent and natural insight powers his work ethic. When discussing his career, it is evident that No Face’s ego fuels his drive. Even Keyti notes, “He’s definitely full of himself, but he’s eager to learn. Other producers here, they might be good. but they won’t

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go outside of the studio. They won't come to you. From the beginning, we could see this would require different ways of working" (Sene Interview 2) That different style requires flexibility. Though No Face's ego and his goal—"to be international" seems to drive most of his work, he's proved to be reliable and flexible, especially when it comes to incessant retakes that sometimes hinder the recording process.

In an isolated room leading to the kitchen at Level Studios, Xuman first steps up to the microphone while No Face sits with across the table armed with his laptop. No Face plays the beat aloud before Xuman slips on a pair of Dre "Beats" headphones. Xuman snaps along to the instrumentals, trying to align the words with the rhythms before he records. He then receives a cue from No Face as the track plays through his headphones and begins to rap the text he has just written a few minutes earlier, reading seamlessly off of his iPhone. He's rapping about the water shortage plaguing Dakar when suddenly, he stumbles over his words and needs to stop. As No Face resets his equipment, Xuman collects himself and begins again.

Xuman does about five retakes before Keyti steps up to the microphone and begins the process again—in Wolof. The three artists spend about an hour in the studio, perfecting each take in order to obtain less than six minutes worth of material that No Face will "mix" on Sunday night before the first day of filming. According to No Face, the mixing process, the art of manipulating the sounds to enhance the track for distribution, takes about three hours. He will stay up until three in the morning most Sunday nights to perfect the track for Monday's filming session.

On Monday, the rappers settle back into Level Studios, now dressed in suits and ties, and ready to film the week's episode. Xuman, again, takes the stage first, sitting

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behind this anchor desk in front of the green screen. The recorded track blares through the room as Xuman raps the lyrics, now typed on large pieces of paper that serve as his “anchorman notes.” As he raps, he stares directly into the camera, a simple Cannon 5D, operated by 27-year-old director Nazir Six. Nazir works directly for Level Studios as a camera man, but when his boss, Mass, the director of level studios, asked him to exclusively work on the JTR, he knew it was an opportunity he couldn’t forego. He admits, however, that it took awhile for the creative team to figure out the most effective filming techniques. “In the beginning, we only had one light to work with, and rappers couldn’t memorize the entire text in one sitting” Nazir says (Nazir Interview) By the third episode, they devised a system so the rappers would not have to commit each line to memory. Now Nazir films using a “start-and-stop” process. As Nazir sets the camera in focus, Xuman reviews a few lines and raps about three measures while Nazir films. After those three measures, Nazir cuts the film, gives Xuman a chance to review the next batch of lines, and continues filming. “I do about three takes for each section, and the last one is usually the best one,” Nazir comments (Nazir Interview). Though Nazir’s job, at times, seems to follow a specific protocol, he does get to incorporate his own filming flare and eye for what he calls “ambience.” In episode four, when Keyti discusses the rising prices of electricity, the studio goes dark and the music cuts out. It’s Nazir’s stylistic choice meant to poke fun at the incessant problems with Senelec, the electricity provider in Senegal. Nazir suggested the comedic bit, thinking it would “make the problem real.” Nazir adds, “That would never happen in the ‘official’ news. It made our news original while addressing the reality of the situation” (Nazir Interview).

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The group usually films Monday through Wednesday before sending it to Amar, Level Studio's in-house film editor, who layers the audio track and vocal recording over the film and pieces together the polished takes into a single video formatted for television. The rappers are supposed to send it off to 2S, the station that broadcasts the JTR, by Thursday afternoon. Due to time constraints, however, the deadline does not always hold. Xuman admits, "We usually get it there on Friday on a USB flash drive" (Fall Interview 2). Regardless of the volatile timeframe, a staple of the JTR is the show's final tagline. Each week, Keyti ends the show, always signing off with a line most Senegalese hip-hop aficionados will recognize. Keyti signs off by rapping, "Yeah, we're getting down, we're getting down. With some good news. With trustworthy news."<sup>5</sup> The tagline is an appropriated line from Rapadio's, Keyti's former hip-hop group, 1998 hit song "Xibaru Underground." "What's funny is that this line was never supposed to be in the video, but after the first episode, it just came to my mind and I added it at the end." (Sene Interview 1) Though it may seem like a banal line, the connotations of the lyrics pack a punch and cinch the purpose of the JTR in a line that audiences will remember. "With Rapadio, the line was meant to signify that we, the rappers, were bringing news from the underground, the truth." (Sene Interview 1). Now the line is a staple of the show, adding continuity to the format but also leaving the audience with something they can remember.

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by Keyti



### The Future of Le Journal Rappé

The last episode of the first season of the JTR aired on Friday, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Although the show has been on hiatus, both Keyti and Xuman have not stopped preparing for the second season, which is set to launch in March 2014. Upon entering the second season, Keyti and Xuman are harnessing their hindsight to remedy some of the hindrances they encountered during the first season, specifically those concerning time and money. Each member of the JTR team I interviewed pegged “time” and “a demanding schedule” as one of the biggest challenges while working on the JTR. And while Keyti and Xuman could potentially augment their staff, they neither have the monetary means support a larger team nor the funds to improve their product in the future.

In order to create a bigger budget, Keyti and Xuman are looking towards external sources for local and corporate support. Their first fundraising initiative will begin in December with an event at the Daniel Serrano Theater in downtown Dakar at which they will present a special “round-up” episode, an exclusive compilation of the season’s highlights. Attendees will have to pay a certain entrance fee, but once inside the theater, the rappers will accept additional donations in exchange for the exclusive viewing. Though this event may seem insignificant in terms of generating revenue, Keyti and Xuman’s rationale behind the fundraiser is two fold. The main purpose of the evening is

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to raise money but, more importantly, the rappers strive to maintain the original goal driving the JTR: they want to raise social awareness.

I was fortunate enough to attend a “round-up episode” planning session between Keyti and Xuman. The two rappers sat with their laptops, meticulously watching each episode and extracting the “highlights.” The final episode, which will run much longer than their weekly episodes, will discuss topics ranging from politics to sports to public health to international news. While brainstorming, some news stories sparked discussion, such as whether or not to include a segment on Hissene Habré’s arrest. “Is this international enough to make it into our ‘international category,’” asked Xuman of his co-anchor. Other new stories, such as Barack Obama’s visit to Senegal, the new anti-smoking campaign, and the imprisonment of Karim Wade were “shoes-ins.” Other news stories, such as the “decision upon law that forbids celebrities or politicians to finically ‘godfather’ public events” or “the strikes at University de Cheik Anta Diop” (Fall Interview 3) did not seem as obviously pressing. According to the rappers, however, it was necessary to include these stories in the final episode. “Both are issues no one is talking about,” Keyti explains. “We want to remind people that the ‘godfather’ law is coming back on the table.” As for the strikes at Cheik Anta Diop, Keyti notes that, “No one is talking about the fact that Senegalese college students are literally one semester behind the rest of the world now, and we’re all going to have to suffer the repercussions.”

With these subtle yet deliberate strategies, the rappers hope to achieve generate enough money to continue illuminating these issues. They know that each choice they make must be deliberate, made with the audience in mind. They also know, however, their real motivation is to make money; they each have families they must support. “But

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making money,” Keyti admits, “goes with morals” (Sene Interivew 1). With their morals at the forefront of their monetary pursuits, Keyti and Xuman sought an external source to help fortify the JTR’s second season: Google.

As musicians, Keyti and Xuman know how to generate a profit, but as businessmen selling their product via YouTube, they’re navigating uncharted territory. “I can sell my music, no problem. I know the traditional way of making money out of the music. I know that I can play a show, and make money, but this is something new, something different. Less than five years ago, you could release CDs, sell it to the market, get money out of it, but now its more about creating the buzz to be everywhere at the same time. It’s not about making the music, it’s about how you can sell the music. And this is the most difficult part because people didn’t teach us how to do it” (Fall Interview 3). Initially, Google was supposed to fill that void and teach not just Keyti and Xuman but artists from all over Africa to help generate a larger African presence on YouTube, the Google-owned video sharing platform.

Google decided to solicit African production companies who were already producing videos –not necessarily of the highest quality but of the highest quantity—and offered said companies a partnership with Google as a “premium account” holders. The premium account status offered these companies money for equipment, professional training, and most importantly, the opportunity to monetize or to place advertisements on their content. The goal was that if Google gave these companies money upfront, approximately ten million CFA, the advertisements would generate the initial fund as well as provide surplus funds to continue production. The premium account holders

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would allegedly serve as “umbrellas companies,” under which smaller media ventures would fall. The premium account channel would essentially be responsible for all of its smaller channels, providing them with the security from Google as well as “community managers,” a professional staff member trained to manage all social media accounts and generate traffic for the smaller channels.

Google originally selected rapper, DJ Awadi’s production company, Sancara, to pioneer the premium account model in Senegal with the JTR YouTube channel, officially labeled as “JT Rappé” as one of its subsidiary channels. As a channel reporting to Sanacara, the JTR could allegedly reap all the benefits of the premium account status minus the ability to monetize their videos. Initially, the benefits seemed to outweigh the limitations, and Keyti and Xuman decided to report to Sancara, signing a two-year contract and binding them with their parent company.

After a few months working with the premium account system, however, the African production companies did not meet Google’s original expectations. Instead of generating more quality content, Google found that most companies were not managing their subsidiary channels well, not generating a sufficient amount of traffic, and only wanted the money in advance. To remedy the situation in hopes to reach their original goals, Google dropped the premium account model and opened monetization to all African channels associated with Google.<sup>6</sup>

Because of Sancara’s original contract, the JTR, however, remains tied to Sancara for at least another year. And, unfortunately, Keyti and Xuman have experienced, from a first-hand perspective, the shortcomings of Google’s premium model, specifically in

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<sup>6</sup> Details of Google Africa Initiative recounted by Keyti.

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terms of the alleged community manager provided by Sancara. Although they are new to this new business platform, the rappers do know that, “You need a strategy to get people interested in your project.” (Fall Interview 3). And perhaps because of their built-in fan base as both JTR front men and former rappers, they might be more equipped to generate traffic and, therefore, revenue without an external community manager. Keyti notes that, “the community manager, when he is posting something, 500 people view it. When I’m posting something or when Xuman is posting something, you’ve got 1200 or 1300 views. When I’m posting something on the JTR page, I’m sharing it on my page, which doubles the amount of people who see it. We’re touching more people” (Sene Interview 3). Although Keyti and Xuman are bound to Sancara for at least another year, the rappers are already making strides to monetize their own content with their constant goal of social justice, not only in Senegal but also across West Africa.

The rappers are currently in the process of receiving exclusive partnership and, more importantly, direct funding from Google. “They want us to keep this program going because that’s also one of the challenges of producing content here [in Senegal]” (Sene Interview 1). The director of Google Africa, Joseph Mucheru, was one of the initial proponents of the JTR. “We initially told him about the project, and a year after we launched, he approached us,” Keyti recounts with pride. During one of the meetings between the rappers and Mucheru, Keyti remembers, “He told me and Xuman, ‘I’m giving you this money because there are tons people coming to me, talking about projects, trying to get Google involved, and I don’t hear from those people. You’re [Keyti and Xuman]

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one of the very few who told me about your project, and one year after, you did it without Google. You didn't wait for us to come in; you started your project.”<sup>7</sup>

Due to their contract restraints with Sancara, Google is not an official partner of JTR's current content. The rappers, however, are planning on launching another Google supported YouTube channel that will serve as a platform for what Keyti and Xuman hope to be a series of international “Journal Rappés” across West Africa and other developing nations, where the fight for freedom of speech is a pressing issue. The rappers have inspired two concurrent “Journal Rappé” programs airing in Jamaica and Vietnam, but they hope to eventually extend the progress to Senegal's bordering countries such as Mali and Mauritania. “Freedom of speech is easy here in Senegal,” Keyti admits, “but one of our main goals is to take the JTR into neighboring countries, train people, maybe give them a camera and equipment, and hold training sessions.” (Sene Interview 1). The rappers know that their goals are lofty ones, but with Google's help, however, this international fight for freedom of speech has the strong potential to become a reality.

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<sup>7</sup> Details of “Google” conversation, again, recounted by Keyti.

## Results and Analysis

This section will analyze the reactions to *Le Journal Rapp * through three different paradigms. I first will examine more traditional medias' responses to the JTR, both on a national and international level. By drawing upon a series of informal interviews with a perceived audience, I will attempt to characterize the main audience of the JTR and compare their demographics and reactions with those of the rapper's perceived audience and effect of the JTR. Based on these analyses, I hope to reveal in my conclusion how the JTR reflects larger, perhaps tacit, Senegalese values and how the JTR either fortifies or combats these values with the intentions to strengthen national sociopolitical development.

### *The Mainstream International and National Media's Reaction*

When I asked four out of the five JTR staff members if they had expected any international buzz surrounding *Le Journal Rapp *, no one expressed more surprise than Keyti and Xuman. It seemed unfathomable that, only after a few months of programming, the JTR would garner attention from MTV, the BCC, Canal Plus, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*. The unexpected media attention, however, established an unforeseen legitimacy for the JTR within the international and national media

communities, which perhaps steered the rapper's product away from their original intentions. During an interview with Global Voices online in May 2013, only a month after the JTR's debut, Xuman explicitly stated that his goal for the JTR was "to give our version of the news—a reality different from what the media imposes" (Geuey 1) *The New York Times*, however, raises the program to a different stature in terms of influence and entertainment value, equating the JTR with the American television show *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, (Lau 1) a satirical, news report hosted by comedian, Jon Stewart, aimed at younger audiences seeking entertainment and, as a by-product, information. *Africa is a Country*, a blog dedicated to "challenging and destabilizing" as well as "celebrating" contemporary African media, deems the JTR's mission as "a new assault on the usual communication channels between those who govern and those who are governed" (Endeau 1). While the blog holds less clout than *The New York Times*, its opinion of the JTR renders a sense of duality within the program's intentions that seems more earnest than *The New York Times*' perception. Keyti and Xuman are not only trying criticize the news they are presenting; they are also more subtly criticizing the way in which mainstream media sources in Senegal present the news, the actual art of broadcasting.

Bienta Diange, the French Radio International correspondent noticed this nuance the first time she stumbled upon an episode of the JTR via her personal Facebook page. "At first, I thought it was a joke," she admits. After verifying with Xuman himself that the JTR was, in fact, his newest media venture, she began to notice the quality of the work and how it could correspond to—and even supplement—her career. "They help me pick up on things I would have never covered, like the anti-tobacco campaign. I didn't even



think to talk about that, but after seeing it on *Le Journal Rappé*, I realized how important the story was” (Diange Interview)<sup>8</sup>. Diange also knows that these rappers are at advantage relative to professional journalists. “They have the advantage of distance,” Diange says. Their reporting style, constantly tinted with sarcasm and satyr, keeps them at a remove from the allegedly “unbiased” perspective of their mainstream counterparts. Their entire credo is built upon this distance among themselves, the incessant media race, and the consciously mocking tone with which they report on contentious current and political events.

This mocking tone, however, manifests itself in more visible protocols on screen. Diange notes, “they’re making fun of journalists by imitating them” (Diange Interview). Keyti and Xuman tinge their program with subtle traces of professional broadcast journalism standards, such as a series of international “breaking news” headlines scrolling across the foot of the screen or their suit-and-tie ensembles. At certain points throughout any given episode, the camera will subtly pan away from the rapper’s faces to expose a stack of papers—the actual text—clutched between their hands that is meant to appear as a broadcaster’s notes. These subtleties only fortify the JTR’s clout as a legitimate news source, a label to which Keyti does not necessarily subscribe. “I didn’t realize we were informants,” he acknowledges. “Its up [the audience] to realize what’s going on and further explore on ‘professional sources.’” He even seems shocked that “some people are really taking it seriously, that this is where they’re getting informed” (Sene Interview 2). Taking into account Keyti’s perspective, a discrepancy surfaces; is the goal of the JTR to inform or entertain the masses?

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<sup>8</sup> Translated by Jessica Hackel

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2S fortifies the duality that drives the show's appeal by airing the JTR directly after *Le Journal*, the traditional nightly news broadcast each Friday. Perhaps they see it as an extension of the traditional format but with an alternative twist. They might be trying strategically appeal to a different audience, one that is not exclusively associated with either traditional "boring" news or the youth movement associated hip-hop. Perhaps they are trying to engender a different audience, one that represents a broader age spectrum and cannot be readily categorized into the incessantly warring "older" versus "younger" generations.

### *The Audience*

Both Keyti and Xuman have conjured up images of their target audience. Keyti believes that the majority of JTR viewers fall into a highly specific demographic, one that is "young, fans of rap, and quite educated" (Sene Interview 1) while Xuman adds that the JTR reaches those "who don't pay attention to news but listen to music" (Geuye 1). While they do not specifically try to cater to the youth, the nature of their product, specifically the rap component, has always resonated well with the young people. Aspiring rappers "Du Killa" and "Mezo," both in their early twenties and living in the Mermoz neighborhood of Dakar, recognize how the JTR is slowly changing the attitudes the old generation holds towards hip-hop. Du Killa looks to Keyti and Xuman as pioneers of this "evolution," noting that, "as opposed to the past, rap is now credible. In the past, people criticized rap." He adds, "People said it was something negative, that rappers were 'bandits' and wore baggy clothes," as Du Killa points to his low-hanging jeans and floppy t-shirt, as if Xuman and Keyti are legitimatizing his style through their work. (Touré and

Geuye Interview) Mezo follows up the comment by noting that he and his parents, who are also fans of the show, watch the JTR together every Friday on 2S.

Mezo, however, is one of the very few members of the rappers' perceived demographic who watches the JTR live rather than on YouTube. Keyti explains, "We know our TV audience is different from our Internet audience," specifically that YouTube caters to the youth's incessant preoccupation with the Internet as means for entertainment and information. Mohamed Diallo, a twenty-one year old business student at Dakar's Institut Africain de Management exclusively watches each episode online. He, however, praises the show not for its innovative use of technology, but rather for its language.

"These guys are daring to denounce the government. The language is direct. It's truthful and forces the government to look at what they're doing and change," Diallo recounts in almost a preaching tone (Diallo Interview) His friend, Falliou Fall, a twenty three-year-old management student, attributes this frankness to the rap itself. "The rap allows them to speak directly, like Anglophones" (Falliou Fall Interview). I initially did not understand the equation between hip-hop and English until Fall explained, "In Senegal, we're used to slanting the truth and 'beating around the bush,' but I find that in English, people speak bluntly and directly." He even deems the content "too blunt for adults."

(Falliou Fall Interview) Bamba Gaye, another twenty-three-year-old management student working towards in his Master in Business Administration, holds the same sentiments as his classmate, yet he justifies the rappers' candid approach. "I think they're speaking to the youth. Rap is the language of the youth. The bluntness keeps it at a 'ground level' with words that we [the youth] use all the time" (Geuye Interview 1) To cinch his

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sentiments together, Gaye touches upon a buzzword, one that both Keyti and Xuman have kept at the forefront of their project: conscious.

Throughout each episode, the rappers strategically pick news stories that will make people conscious of the unseen, the hidden, or the unknown to not only change the way Senegalese society thinks but, more importantly, acts. Geuye expresses this same sentiment, saying, “[Keyti and Xuman] force both the government and the population to open their eyes. In order to change, it’s necessary to realize what’s going on in the government, and at the same time, it’s necessary for the government to listen and find solutions to our problems before it’s too late.” When asked to extrapolate upon the phrase--“too late”—Geuye stopped short of saying revolution and only continued that insist that “there are problems here in Senegal.” Geuye did, however, explain his perception of the JTR’s international and social media presence. He first encountered the JTR through his brother, a nineteen-year-old hip-hop fan currently living in France. Geuye’s brother had posted a link to the JTR’s YouTube channel on his personal Twitter account. “When I clicked on the link,” Geuye recounts, “I thought to myself, ‘He’s in France. I’m in Senegal. And we’re getting the same news’” (Geuye Interview 1). He then expanded upon the JTR’s international impact, specifically among the Senegalese expatriate community. “In foreign countries, the Senegalese stick together in a group, and if something touches one member, it touches all members.” The JTR, therefore, renders a different power for these communities. It fosters a unique sense of connection among Senegalese who are seeking out pieces of their culture abroad that serve as both a source of entertainment and information from their country.

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Through most of my interviews, I found that most students' perceptions of the JTR, specifically its intended goals and effects, aligned with the rappers' collective philosophy. One discrepancy between the rappers' and the public's opinions, however, consistently arose, namely the potential inclusion of an English section to accompany the French and Wolof editions. Among the interviewees, everyone unanimously agreed that the rappers should include an English section to garner a stronger international following. Though Geuye admits that an additional English edition would pander to American and Anglophone audiences, "who do not share the same reality as Senegalese," he does concede that an English edition would "not diminish any piece of the JTR" but rather strengthen its international clout. Keyti, however, disagrees. "It's an issue of time," he admits. "An English edition would be too much, make [the JTR] too long, and not interesting. The challenge is to keep it to five minutes, say what we've got to say, and keep it short and entertaining" (Sene Interview 2). To maintain their success, the rappers know they must tailor their show to appease short attention spans. Six minutes seems to perfectly accommodate the amount of information in conjunction with the repetition of said information in two languages all while retaining the show's youthful audience each week.

It was difficult, however, to find much diversity among the JTR's audience. Out of the twelve interviews with college-aged students I conducted, six of the interviewees were female. And out of the six females, two had heard of the JTR while only one, who did not want to share her personal information, avidly watched the show. Her perceptions of the show—its potential for positive, social change, its innovative format, its youthful appeal—aligned with those of her male counterparts. When I asked her why she thought

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more girls did not watch the JTR, she was not surprised to know she was one of the few who did. She added, “Most girls just don’t like rap.” When I informed Keyti and Xuman that it was difficult to gauge the female opinion on the JTR, the rappers were not surprised to hear about this gender discrepancy. “It’s a reflection of Senegalese gender roles,” Keyti explains (Sene Interview 3). “We have a tendency to compartmentalize people here in Senegal. If you’re girl, you’re supposed to be docile. You’re supposed to like Vivienne, and John Seck, and Rihanna—not rap.” Keyti and Xuman never intended to exclude members of a potential audience, namely female viewers, but they are aware of how their content and their business model defies many traditional Senegalese values and forties others.

Conclusion:

*Understanding Senegalese Cultural Values and Progress through Le Journal Rappé*

Du Killa, the aspiring rapper from Mermoz, doles out perhaps the most interesting audience perspective on the JTR. He claims, “Rappers were doing *Le Journal Rappé* before *Le Journal Rappé*.” Since its inception during the 1980’s, the Senegalese hip-hop movement has continuously strived to increase consciousness and civic engagement to ameliorate Senegalese sociopolitical conditions. The JTR has now further legitimized the hip-hop movement, leveraging Internet technology, music, critical journalism, and tenacity as a vehicle for Senegalese empowerment and advancement. Keyti and Xuman have navigated uncharted territory, trying to bring sensitive issues, such as homosexuality and government corruption, to the forefront of Senegalese media through hip-hop, a culture that has garnered negative press, has also thrived off of solidarity or “mbokk,” the Senegalese cultural value of family and kinship. Keyti, however, proposes a darker take on this tenant that calls for an extreme devotion to a cohesive collective. “I might be wrong, but here, the community is annihilating your personality. You don’t exist as an individual. To step out of the line takes courage and desire to express own personality If

you do that, you're considered selfish" (Sene Interview 2). Perhaps Keyti and Xuman's desire to push the limits to, as Keyti says, "step out of the line," has fueled *Le Journal Rappé's* overwhelming success with the international community.

To account for the JTR's national success, however, the rappers have not abandoned all Senegalese cultural values. Instead, they are consciously towing an uncharted middle ground; somewhere that combines Western individualistic ideology and Senegalese tradition. They strive to bring contentious issues into the limelight that will provoke debate as a means to progress. "Whether we're talking about religion or sexuality, want to talk about the subjects not through euphemisms but through serious debate," Keyti confirms. "We're trying to put some revolutionary ideas on the table not create a clash but to create that dialogue" (Sene Interview 2) With each episode, Keyti and Xuman hope to break down more barriers put up by antiquated traditions. They hope that *Le Journal Rappé* will foster a culture that, in their opinion, can critique politics and current affairs in order to demand quality work and support from their government. They want, however, to foster this culture not on Western terms but Senegalese terms. They have put themselves in a position of agency, as the catalysts that can push, from an internal Senegalese perspective, a more liberal agenda for Senegal.



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