

Creativity and Authenticity in an Emerging Naija's Youth Hip Hop Culture

Idom T. Inyabri²⁰, Eyo O. Mensah²¹, Kaka Ochagu²²

Abstract

Since the last quarter of the 20th century, hip hop has become a cultural means of self-expression, entertainment, and empowerment for youths throughout the world. The creative manipulation of verbal and non-verbal codes has been the main vehicle through which the enormous hip hop cultural industry has been sustained and revitalized. This study investigates the creative ingenuity of a group of Naija (Nigerian) youths in Calabar, south-eastern Nigeria, in the creation of a peculiar hip hop brand in the Nigerian Hip Hop Nation (NHHN). Particularly, the study works through Appadurai's (1996, 2002) theory on migration and the electronic media as agents of modernity to apprehend the emergence and development of hip hop in Nigeria through the example of Calabar hip hop exponents. This article also derives discursive insight from Alim's (2009) idea of style as a major non-verbal linguistic vector of hip hop to identify and interrogate the creative ingenuity of the Nigerian youths here examined. Our study concludes that through the formation of a creative bond and the manipulation verbal and performance codes from their cultural space these Nigerian youths have established a peculiar brand of hip hop and are contributing to the transnational, multi-vocal Global Hip Hop Nation.

Keywords

Naija Hip Hop, Calabar; Electronic Media, Migration, Identity, Style, Youth; Creativity, Authenticity, Postcolonialism, Poststructuralism.

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²⁰ PhD, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria

²¹ PhD (Corresponding Author), Department of Linguistics, University of Calabar, Nigeria, ORCID: 0000-0001-5838-0462, e-mail: eyomensah2004@yahoo.com

²² PhD, Department of General Studies, College of Health Technology, Calabar, Nigeria

Introduction

For a better appreciation of the socio-cultural space within which the brand of hip hop we are concerned with thrives, it would be important to capture its geographical and demographic features. This in turn will also facilitate an appreciation of the socio-cultural motifs that are creatively forged by hip hop exponents (headz) in Calabar, Cross River State – South-eastern Nigeria - to assert themselves. Having served as Nigeria’s colonial capital of the British Southern Protectorate (Imbua 2008), Calabar was at different times, as determined by the politics of state creation in post-independence Nigeria, the administrative headquarters of Nigeria’s South Eastern State and Cross River State respectively. Being a coastal town, Calabar was one of the first ports through which European adventurers made incursion into Nigeria from the 16th century (Nair 1972). Today, Calabar is a city that consists of two major towns namely, Calabar Municipality and Calabar South, which are Local Government Areas themselves. These two Local Government Areas make Calabar one sprawling metropolis that has attracted people from different ethnicities and races. Apart from the three main indigenous ethnic groups namely, the Efik, Qua and Efut, who claim Calabar as aboriginal homeland, the city is home to many other indigenous peoples of Cross River origin. Other Nigerians such as the Ibibio, Anang, Oron, Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Ijaw among many others have equally found home in Calabar, where the dominant language spoken is Efik, while English and Nigerian Pidgin are also dominant languages that facilitate interactions among the multi ethnic/racial population of Calabar. Seen as a dominantly civil service town, distinguished by its amiable people and culinary delight, Calabar as capital of Cross River State, is also generally perceived as an easy-going city. This is because it is devoid of the hustle and bustle of commercial centres such as Aba (eastern Nigeria), Lagos (western Nigeria), Port-Harcourt (South-eastern Nigeria) and Kano (North-eastern Nigeria). Calabar is also popularly called “The Canaan City”, and is metaphorically reputed as a land flowing with milk and honey (Fuller 1996; Henshaw 2010). This aphorism depicts the enormous socio-economic opportunities for the growing population in the city.

Building on these social demography and the city’s pre-colonial and colonial legacies, Calabar gained more visibility in the millennium through the political ingenuity of Governor Donald Duke, the second democratically elected governor of a new Cross River State, who packaged the whole state through his tourism policy that logically made Calabar the tourism hub of the state. The famous Carnival Calabar, popular reputed as “Africa’s biggest Street Party” (Carlson 2010: 42) is, arguably, Nigeria’s biggest tourism event, preceded yearly by a month long festival activities (tagged Calabar Festival), which feature musical shows, comedy, dance, shopping, international pageantry and fashion shows during the Christmas season. Given their business and entertainment potentials, the Calabar Festival and Carnival Calabar attract hundreds of tourists within and outside Nigeria. With the patronage of global digital media, especially DSTV, Calabar and her people are repackaged and globally positioned, at least within the Christmas season. However, before the hype inaugurated by Donald Duke’s tourism policy in the millennium, Calabar had always had an active social life with vibrant cultural activities, some of which have been youth based. Apart from the dominant Ekpe cult, held in custody by the elders but cherished by the youths, there are many other indigenous masquerade cults and folk performance associations, which are completely youth driven. A remarkable youth cult and masquerade performance with an intriguing cosmopolitan character in Calabar is the Agaba cult and masquerade association. According to Author (2012: 388), Agaba is a hybrid form of play/dance that combines traditional masquerade society with a number of performative genres. Though Agaba is a confederate youth-based cult that has been

developed by urban youths all through the south-eastern region of Nigeria, in Calabar it has habituated multiple cultural filiations in the form of dance styles, naming, musical instrumentation, communication codes, ritual systems and masks to evolve a peculiar Agaba flavour. But it is important to note that the spiritual, linguistic and visual embodiments of Agaba are intriguing cultural heritage of the diverse interactions and inter-group influences of the different ethnic nationalities who have met in Calabar urban for decades namely, Igbo (from eastern Nigeria), Ibibio, Oron, Anang and Ijaw (from Nigeria's Niger-Delta region). However, the emphasis in Agaba has shifted from purely performance and display to marketing and money-making through masquerade spectacle, cultural clubs and renting of masks and costumes as a new way to financially sustain its members (Fenton 2016).

Although the government administered Cultural Centre in the '80s and '90s provided the multi-ethnic Calabar youths with spaces to express their talents with regard to entertainment and mimicry of North American shows and music, the Calabar Festival and Carnival Calabar with their global media presence provided Calabar youths with an unprecedented bigger digitalized stage with which they began to make new contacts, experiments and project a new and more creative image of themselves. That image, as we would show, has been catalysed by the emergence of hip hop, through which Calabar youths are negating the stereotypes of a sleepy, civil service oriented, marginal and less enterprising people. It is within this media-saturated, tourism-defined and multiple interactive contexts that hip hop in Calabar is creatively propagated and sustained by a number of ambitious hip hop artists, most prominent among whom are groups such as Okpo Recordz (consisting Lucifer and G-Cubes), rapper Upper X, Spiderman, Jonny Cage, Ice Boxx, 8-Miles, producers Dr Ritzy and Fresh R and the internationally acclaimed award winning Inya'nya, who for reason of his fame is seen as patron by some Calabar hip hop artists.

Over the years, it was common to hear the mass media projecting Lagos as the melting pot of Nigeria's hip hop cultural industry. Only those who can break-through the Lagos market are believed to be successful. In this regard it becomes necessary to underscore the point that for Calabar hip hop artists as it is for hip hop artists in Nigeria generally, the market / industry and the art / culture of hip hop are intricately connected; confirming the fact that in "[hip hop] entrepreneurial spirit aligns music-making with self-making" (Shirpley 2013). While aspiring youths strive towards stardom, they are ultimately conscious of the entrepreneurial value and capital that come from developing a brand around themselves. The point has been made somewhere else of the fact that Naija hip hop artists have become brand promoters for mobile telephone companies as well as many other corporate business, which in turn have motivated these young Nigerians to establish their own businesses in commerce, entertainment and agriculture (Author 2022). Thus, it is this image of the star as a big man or "maga" in popular Naija parlance that fires the young hip hop artist in Calabar to be ingenuous even in music-making. No research has investigated the creative agency of any hip hop group that operates at the periphery of Lagos and no study has explored how some marginalised youths within the margins of Lagos use the tool of hip hop to assert themselves within their social world. The present study aims to fill this gap. This article examines the ways in which young men in Nigeria engage in hip hop as a mode of expression, engagement and entertainment from the account of Appadurai's (1996, 2002) theory of electronic mediation and migration as co-constitutive agencies of modernity. It demonstrates the role of hip hop as an art form, way of life and commercialised product based on the nuanced perspectives of a few case studies of local hip hop exponents.

1. A background on Naija hip hop music

Nigerian Hip Hop music, popular called Naija Hip Hop, is a youth-based cultural brand that emerged in the early 1990s. Coming after the American disco and soul music influenced by popular music of Chris Mba, Chris Okotie, Onyeka Onwenu, and Felix Liberty among others in the 1980s. Naija hip hop is modelled after the dominant American Hip Hop music that became a major imported entertainment for young people in the 1990s. Though American hip hop provides Naija hip hop with its form (Shonekan 2012), the fact that this music genre has been able to fuse into itself the qualities of other precursor popular music genres such as West African High Life, Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s Afro Beats, Fuji, Akpala, Juju and many other indigenous traditional music brands has made it a typical hybrid art form (Shonekan 2012 & author, 2022). From early practitioners such as Junior and Pretty, Daddy Showkey, Zaki Azeez and many others, Naija hip hop music has developed from a rustic experimental genre to become a sophisticated part of the complex Naija hip hop culture that includes graffiti, MCing, dance, rap, and fashion.

Apart from the cultural motifs that have characterised this brand of youth-based music, it is important to note that the socio-political and economic antecedents of the 80s and 90s have also come together to define this music genre. Earlier studies (author 2008 and Omoniyi 2009) have shown that the Structural Adjustment Programme inaugurated by the Nigerian government in the 80s, as part of its economic revitalization strategy, plunged the country into deep economic straits which resulted in wide scale poverty and desperation. The brain drain and massive migration that attended the (SAP) economy virtually eroded the middle class and installed a social system of greed, high crime rate and superstition. It was within the circumstance of abject poverty, dictatorship, dilapidated social facilities, lack of social insurance, mutual distrust and impunity that the generation of youths who are now the exponents of Naija hip hop were born. Bequeathed a culture of lack and impunity, yet sensitive of this social circumstance, these youth have factored their situation into productive cultural endeavours, part of which include hip hop music along with the blossoming Nollywood film industry and Stand-up comedy among many other forms popular culture genres that leverage on the new media. Therefore, at the core of Naija Hip Hop, is a youth-based cultural politics that speaks of injustices, dispossession and marginalization of the Nigeria generally. The platform of hip hop has proven to be a tool through which young people in Nigeria speak truth to power and playfully create a world of their desire. It is worthy of note that emerging Calabar Hip Hop, shares some salient features with American Hip Hop (or rap) as a genre of popular music. The rhythmic style of both brands of music is accompanied by rapping, chant and rhythmic speech, and the stylistic elements include MCing, DJing, and graffiti writing. The American rap styles that are yet to be incorporated into Calabar hip hop include turntable, scratching and breakdancing. While the precursors of American rap music constitute Blues, Jazz, combined rhythm with spoken words to create rap-vibes (Morgan & Bennett 2011), the precursor of Calabar Hip Hop has been traced to the old masquerade tradition of the Efik people. Significantly, poverty and lack of acceptance of the genre outside ghetto neighbourhood in America have been responsible for the slow pace of the development of this genre of music especially in the electronic media during the early stage of its birth (Dyson 2007). Conversely, the factor of poverty has been the bolster and creative impulse for participants in this study to recreate and transform a masquerade culture into a hip hop tradition. This piece of evidence has shown how similar and different Naija hip hop, more broadly, has been from American Hip Hop. This needs to be properly contextualised before making connections to global hip hop.

Deriving from earlier studies on Nigerian Hip Hop (author 2013) we use the term “Naija” as a youth nomenclature for the Nigerian nation. The name, which probably emerged in the 1990s,

encapsulates the character and cultural identity of the Nigerian postcolony in all its desperation, creative ingenuity and resilience. In popular parlance, the name functions as a signifier for the Nigerian citizen and the nation state at the same time. Therefore, we find it apt to use the term in this study to further characterise and strengthen the identity of hip hop in Nigeria as a youth-based cultural form. That identity is further given expression in the Nigerian hip hop National Language (HHNL) which is an multi-ethnic, multi-lingual code consisting of strands of the multiple indigenous Nigerian languages with Nigerian Pidgin (NP) as its common denominator (Omoniyi 2009). It is the peculiar manner through which the Calabar youth, located at the margins of Nigeria's Hip Hop culture have contributed to this diverging Hip Hop National Language in Nigeria and in turn complexify the embodiment that Alim (2009) refers to as the Global Hip Hop Nation that we interrogate in this paper.\

2. Scholarship on Naija Hip Hop

It is important to note that more than any other youth cultural genre in Nigeria, hip hop seems to be attracting much more scholarly attention. In this regard, author (2016) like Tope Omoniyi (2009) gives us a deep theoretical insight to the emergence and development of Nigerian Hip Hop,. Author (2013), Adedeji (2013) and Okuyade (2009) have engaged Nigerian hip hop as a postcolonial art that is socially relevant. In the same vein Laidi (2012) critically concentrates on examining multilingualism, a defining feature of Nigerian Hip Hop, as the main reason for the music's appeal across the Nigerian populace. About the transnational quality of the music in Nigeria it is, perhaps, Shonekan (2012) that more deeply interrogates the cultural genre as a hybrid form.

Facing the controversy on the relationship between deviant behaviour and hip hop music, Lazarus (2018) engages the interrelationship between hip hop artist and "cyber-fraudsters" known as "Yahoo-boys" in Nigeria. Perhaps the most recent major study on Nigerian Hip Hop Nation is the special issue on Nigerian popular music in the journal *Contemporary Music Review* (2020) in which many of the essays concentrate on Nigerian Hip Hop,. Although the essays on hip hop in that volume present us with interesting dimensions to the study of Nigerian hip hop, their authors have prioritized perspectives on the socio-cultural and political implication of hip hop in Nigeria. Intriguing insights to this can be gleaned in Akingbe and Onanuga's (2020) intertextual study entitled, "Voicing Protest: Performance, cross-cultural revolt in Gambino's 'This is America' and Falz's 'This is Nigeria'". Though this slant of functionality has inflections in other papers, three essays by Adeniyi (2020), Olusegun-Joseph (2020) and Eze (2020) focus on the representations of women in Nigerian Hip Hop. While Olusegun-Joseph's essay is interested in the ambivalent signification of women in Nigerian hip hop as a postmodern practice, Adeniyi and Eze seem to be in conversation with each other over the moralist/ethical representation of women in Nigerian Hip Hop,. As if to provide practical prove of the manner in which youth linguistic creativity has impact on society, Onanuga and Onanuga (2020) show that the linguistic creativity of hip hop artists has influence on the "intersections of [Nigerian Hip Hop] music and youth behaviour within the Nigerian environment" especially among Nigerian University students. In this way, the authors seem to have extended scholarship on Nigerian Hip Hop (youth) linguistic creativity that we find in author (2016). While these intellectual precedence have properly provided scholarship on the quality of the hip hop in Nigeria, there is the need to begin to interrogate the sub-regional, local and transnational varieties of hip hop in Nigeria in order to trace the cultural idioms that have come together to give form to that bigger polyglot phenomenon called the Nigerian Hip Hop Nation (NHHN) as a distinctive genre in the Global Hip Hop

Nation (GHHN). This study zeros in on Calabar hip hop exponent in this direction in order to foreground the creative striving and ingenuity of this particular group of youths at the fringes of globalization, yet contributing to a multilingual art form.

3. Theoretical Positions

Our apprehension of the emergence and the socio-cultural strategies through which Calabar hip hop has been sustained in the Nigerian Hip Hop Nation could be succinctly comprehended within Arjun Appadurai's (1996) theory of electronic mediation and migration as co-constitutive agencies that have, more than any other force, determined individual striving, (collective) imagination and the politics of representation in the world today. For Appadurai, though the joint forces of migration and media are not entirely new in human history, the manner in which they have connected in what he refers to as the “postelectronic world” has radicalised socio-cultural phenomena, the imagination, inter-personal relations and the very idea of nationhood. Indeed, migration has been an agency for the spread, experience and formation of different forms of modernities. As Appadurai would have it, the movement of relatives, friends and associates from north America to the southern hemisphere and vice versa has brought images, through audio-visual cassettes, magazines and even oral narratives, to localities that had been hitherto remote from such metropolis. The coincidence of electronic media (telephones, radio, television) and migration have not only facilitated the spread and experience of the modern but they have on their own constituted agencies through which individuals and groups re-imagine and represent themselves. Intriguingly, the proliferation and availability of electronic media have not only made images from far afield available to different localities, they have tremendously narrowed the gap between the two poles of diaspora/metropolis and home/localities. More significant to us in this study is the fact that the agencies of electronic media have even radicalised the phenomenon of the imagination. Given their availability, liberality and functionality, electronic media have decentred creativity, taken it away from the control of a closed circle of elites to the domain of the ordinary and the populace. In this popular domain the electronic media have engendered more radical and democratized imagination and creativity than has been hitherto witnessed. It is this limitless/borderless capacity of new technology that hip hop scholars credit the growth and spread of hip hop around the world (Terkourafi 2009).

For us, the circumstance that surrounds the emergence of Calabar Hip Hop in the Nigerian Hip Hop Nation bears testimony to Appadurai's deft thinking on the interplay of migration and the electronic media as vectors of globalization and modernity. Indeed, as we will show, the wave of migration within the Nigerian postcolony, the phenomenal proliferation of digital media and their accessories (compact disc player, cell phones, personal computers, software and satellite television) and the astute thinking of the Donald Duke administration (1999-2007) in exploiting the resources of the media for its tourism politics in the millennium have offered Calabar youths new resources for self-expression, representation and empowerment. The constellation of cultural forces from the Igbo, Ibibio, Oron, Anang, Efik and Ijaw youths that gave birth to masquerade cult performances such as Agaba, have been appropriated by Calabar youths in the millennium to articulate new forms of youth based cultural politics through hip hop. Therefore, the imagination that manifests in this example of Nigerian Hip Hop, can be described as truly “heteroglossic” (Bakhtin 1981), “translational” (Bhabha, 1994) and deterritorialized (Appadurai 1996). This is because it bears the tensions and cultural motifs that arise from the consilience of different cultural motifs from within the postcolony and the diaspora. Calabar youths have utilized the cultural mosaic of hip hop as creative tool

to express specific identities and negotiate spaces in the highly competitive Nigerian Hip Hop Nation with its cultural capital in the mega city of Lagos.

However, equally important to this discourse is the language through which these Nigerian youths in this study have harnessed the ramifications of the cultural forces around them in recreating themselves and negotiating spaces in the Nigerian/Global Hip Hop Nation. The radical multi-modal, individualized yet creatively connected nature of that language is best appreciated through Alim's (2009) exquisite appropriation of, among other linguistic anthropologists, Blommaert's "Sociolinguistics of globalization" in developing what he has in turn theorised as "Hip Hop Linguistics (HHLx)" Defining this form of global socio-linguistics, Alim (2009:5) says it is:

an interdisciplinary study of Hip Hop Language practices in a global context, with particular attention to the global social and linguistic processes" that birthed it in the US and the dynamic ways in which that language is appropriated, performed, transformed and reconfigured as an agency in diverse Hip Hop cultures.

In this paradigm "language is viewed as culture", and beyond its abstract structural sense, it is seen as part of the cultural currency/tool in the globalizing process. It is in this context of language as culture that we shall be discussing the appropriation and manifestation of style/stylization in the agencies of dance, pose, graffiti and fashion as linguistic forms by Calabar youths within the diverse "politico-linguistic context" of Global Hip Hop Nation (Alim 2009) to perform their idiosyncrasies and stamp their presence in the Nigerian Hip Hop nation and in the global Hip Hop community.

4. Methodology

This work arises from a longitudinal ethnographic study that adopts participant observations, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations as the main elicitation techniques. For a period of six years we have been following a circle of hip hop artists, MCs, DJs, producers and studio managers with whom we had engaged as participants in this study. They were (N=20) young men within the age bracket of 20-34 who were selected through purposive sampling technique. The socio-demographic characteristics of participants such as gender, educational background, occupation, marital status, ethnicity and religious affiliation were documented. All participants were males. 4 participants (20%) were university graduate 12 (60%) participants were high school graduate, and 4 (20%) of them did not advance education beyond the primary school level. Beyond their engagement with hip hop community, all participants have other jobs in night clubs, broadcast industries and as sale persons. Others get patronage from parents, public spirited individual, government and cultural connoisseurs. Only 2 (10%) participants were married. The rest were bachelors. All participants see themselves as Calabar boys by virtue of their prolonged residence and acculturation even if their indigenous ethnic groups included: Biase, Yakurr, Ibibio, Oron, Efik and Igbo. All participants reported to be Christians by religious affiliation. The research was approved by the ethical committee of the University of Calabar, and participants gave informed consents for all interviews and recordings.

Participant observations enabled the researchers to assume the role of subjective participants and objective observers in their community of practice. Spradley (1980) notes that participant observations aim to gain close and intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals and their practices through intensive involvement with their natural environment over an extensive

period of time. Through this approach, we understudied and observed behaviour, investigated social or linguistic phenomena in greater depth in a natural setting, and recorded hip hop sessions in live shows. This method helped us to access the thought processes of the young people we are understudying and to appreciate better and more intimately how they make meaning through their cultural production and consumption.

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants the freedom of self-expression given the benefit of open-ended questions. This approach enabled questions to be adapted or changed based on participants' answer (McLeod 2004). It afforded the researchers an opportunity to dig deep into participants' socio-historical engagements with hip hop. The approach also offered participants an opportunity to share their opinions, ideas and perspectives on some of their experiences that facilitated the creation of their Hip Hop brand. This collaboration was pertinent to understand reactions and perceptions of participants about the kind of situations they faced that prompted them into this enterprise. We asked questions on the social networks that they relied on in making decisions to create their own brand of hip hop, and the issues they have to deal with in making these moves. Questions were also asked on what they would do differently if they were to initiate these efforts anew.

Metalinguistic conversations or small talks helped the researchers to gain other contextual information which were hidden in the previous modes of enquiry. Driessen and Jansen (2013) describe this approach as “the hidden core and the engine of ethnographic research”. Questions were generated on the spur of the moment, and researchers gained knowledge about the different elements of their subcultural capital such as music, rap, graffiti, DJing, and MCing. We also elicited responses on how they negotiate authenticity, and aspects of the fusion of their local brand with the global hip hop culture. We found out the persistent theme of their music and how they related with their music in terms of content and language. It was from these interactions that we encountered cultural texts in the street in an intertextual, postmodern and postcolonial context in order to engage the disparate cultural forces that defined Nigeria's hip hop creativity and also tease out the cultural heritage that the unstable, equally multiform popular texts bequeath us. Moreso, because of the convergences in themes and experiences as elicited from the testimonies of our interviewees, we have decided to foreground the perspective of Ephraim (AKA Lucifer) whose interesting narratives of growth in hip hop we find more formidable and expressive of the generally temper of his peers in the industry in Calabar. It is for this reason that we have chosen to negotiate our discussion through his story. Finally, it is important to add that data collected were coded, transcribed and checked (for accuracy). It was also categorised into relevant themes of participants' experiences and productions. The descriptive and analytical approaches were adopted in data interpretation and discussion.

5. Results

5.1 Articulating a Naija project identity and negotiating spaces in global hip hop nation

In this article, our concept of a Naija (Nigerian) hip hop Nation is derived from the now established concept of a Global Hip Hop Nation (GHHN), which is itself an appropriation of Benedict Anderson's (1991) theory of the “imagined community”. For hip hop scholars, the Global Hip Hop Nation (GHHN) is a multi-ethnic, multiracial, trans-cultural, multilingual community of multiple players (Alim 2003; Higgins 2009) – producers, musicians, rappers, dancers, DJs, MCs, marketers, fans among many others – who may not know one another but are bound by the principles of the hip hop culture or what Anderson (1991), in reference to the

bond that ties nations together, refers to as “the image of their communion”. This image in the hip hop nation is constituted by a peculiar youth politics, ideology, an African American sounding system and a passion for the pursuit of style. Indeed style/stylization as a major linguistic code for hip hop exponents is the main conduit through which other idioms are systematized to establish a formidable identity and cultural capital in that creative “translocal style community” (Alim 2009:104). Located in this global imagined nation is the Nigerian Hip Hop Nation (NHHN) which has been defined as a multilingual, multiethnic nation “with Nigerian Pidgin as a common denominator” (Omoniyi 2009:12). Yet, we must add here that this Nigerian Hip Hop Nation (NHHN) bears the angst and collective experiences of the multicultural peoples who have been yoked together by colonialism. Therefore, Calabar hip hop, is a formidable “style community” within the Nigerian / Global Hip Hop Nation defined by the cosmopolitan afro-diasporic and heterogeneous ethnic cultures that have formed the Calabar city.

As players in the Naija (Nigerian) Hip Hop Nation, Calabar Hip Hop exponents have asserted their membership of that nation by recognizing and engaging in an aggressive creative competition that is characteristic of the entire Global Hip Hop Nation (GHHN). This competition, which is part of the strategies by hip hop practitioners to establish a peculiar “project identity” (Keissling and Mous 2004) through the exploitation of idiosyncratic indigenous socio-cultural idioms in the construction of what they themselves have referred to as “keeping it real” has been the motivation that has sustained Calabar Hip Hop within the Naija/Global Hip Hop Nation. Given the background of their marginality and the collective psychology of Naija hip hop artists to make it big by launching into the Lagos market, their closest access to global fame, Calabar Hip Hop artists have adopted several strategies that have not only kept the art thriving in their locale but have intriguingly, contributed motifs into the bigger Naija / Global Hip Hop Culture. In the sections that follow we proceed by discussing two major categories under which these Nigerian youths in the Calabar Hip Hop community have tenaciously distinguish themselves, thereby making a creative impact in the Nigerian Hip Hop Nation. We do this through the lens of Lucifer, an articulate member and a driving force of OkpoRecordz, which is one of the most visible hip hop crews in Calabar, Nigeria.

5.2 “I Rep’ Calabar”: Hip Hop Nationalism in Calabar

Hip hop is a cultural phenomenon that thrives on in-grouping and the establishment of socio-cultural bonds through shared vision, codes and performances. This bond is perhaps indexed by what Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) have described as a “community of practice”, which constitutes a group of people bonding “around mutual engagement in an endeavour” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). Hip hop practioners have variously identified their “communities of practice” by group names such as Family, Crew, Niggas, Buddy or Hood. These terms are indicative of their members’ shared values and commitment to the group’s vision or sub-cultural practices. Although patriotism to hip hop crews has sometimes degenerated to inter-group violence in some climes, the commitment to crew practices has been more creatively productive than deprecating. Working against the circumstance of economic lack, technical deficit, poor promotional and marketing infrastructure Calabar Hip Hop exponents have displayed a deep sense of love for and commitment to Calabar, its people and culture. This corroborates the claim by Decker (1993) that self-expression within hip hop is closely tied to the concept of locality and a representation of one’s own geographical area or place. Over the years, our conversations with youths who have promoted hip hop in

Calabar reveals a stubborn determination “to make it” (be successful) in spite of their obvious limitations and the bluff of Lagos based hip hop artists, who for Calabar Hip Hop youths should mentor and lift struggling and talented artists in peripheral regions such as Calabar to the hip hop headquarters in Lagos.

The story of the Okpo Recordz Crew, as told by Ephraim, AKA Lucifer, reveals a lot with regards to how Calabar youths are tenacious and creative in establishing a hip hop culture and business in their own domain of practice. Starting up as a dancer in his secondary school days, Ephraim left Calabar after secondary school to Lagos, where he hoped to connect with big players in the hip hop industry. But around 2004 he returned to Calabar on hearing of the fame and accomplishments of Inya’nya, which gave him more conviction that he could make it back home in Calabar. On his return to Calabar Lucifer “hooked up” with his “nigger” Upper X with whom they started a project with the aim of encouraging the youth. Because, as he said:

Nobody believed in us [...], no body think that you can make it through music. Moreover, people were [...] like [...] nothing good could come out of Calabar. So we decided to encourage ourselves. We even used our school fees to promote some of the music we even did. We decided to build our own market [...], to build our own love. (interviewed 6/5/17)

Insisting that they needed to develop a home grown brand, Lucifer went on to say that:

Other people have their own markets [...], the East Coast (the Igbo) have their own, the West Coast, (the Yoruba) have their own [...] what about us in the south-south [...]? We need to create our own market..., our own love. So we decided to come with this thing called ‘keep the change’ which is meant to develop our talent and promote our own project in the Akwa-Cross region (Akwa Ibom and Cross River States). Then in 2013/2014 we created ‘OkpoRecordz’ which now is our major umbrella which we used and had our major hit track ‘Chi Chum Chin’, a Collabo with Jony Cage and Ice Boxx. So, OkpoRecordz now encourages talents from Football, theatre, entertainment, music [...] whatever [...], bring it together, as far as you are Akwa-Cross (interviewed 6/5/17).

The narrative of Lucifer co-articulates with that of that of Ice Boxx, a Calabar rapper, who began professional rapping around 2010/2011, and has done some free-style with internationally acclaimed Naija rapper M.I. along with his own crew Ice Prince and Jessy Jags on the Carnival Calabar stage. Regretting the poor mobility of the numerous Calabar hip hop artists, in spite of their obvious creative promise, Ice Boxx avers that he will continue to “rep’ Calabar” (represent Calabar), because he believes “they (Calabar artists) have what it takes to make them excel” (interviewed April 2017). It is with the same resolve but, perhaps with more entrepreneurial zeal to surmount the obvious challenges around his generation, that Ralph AKA Fresh R (CEO of the Calabar based Junk House Studio) got determined, as early as 2004 to establish a recording studio that will tap the dispersed creativity of upcoming artists in Calabar. Telling how he started, Fresh R says though he was a student at the university of Calabar, he began to save money until he could buy his first laptop and convinced his parents to give him a little space in their family garage where, with the collaboration of some friends he started recording his friends’ early attempts at rap. Presently,

by dint of hard work and creativity, Fresh R runs a studio that records hip hop and youth interactive programmes for local Frequency Modulation (FM) radio stations in Calabar. “M-e-n” he told us, “my ultimate dream is to establish the first urban and lifestyle TV station east of the (River) Niger... and it can be done”! (Interviewed in March 2013).

Although we have not seen such a television station established by Fresh R, he is, with young men like Emmanuel Duke (Duke of the Air-Waves), a major voice in the Cross River State urban lifestyle radio programming and one of the most notable young On Air Personality (OAP) in the State, where Calabar is metropolitan capital. However, the testimonies of Lucifer and other young hip hop exponents in Calabar as seen above are discourse sites in which we can uncouple a lot of sensibilities. In it we perceive an expression of the antinomies that are characteristic of Nigeria’s trouble federation since British colonialism. That sense of territoriality behind the urge to build “our own market, our own love... in the south-south” speaks volumes of the manner in which the youths are invariably building on a divisive politics/geography that political elites have established in the postcolony. For non-Nigerians, the geographical delineation (south-south) may be an awkward and perhaps meaningless description, but for these young people, as it is for every other Nigerian, south-south is a description of the minorities that make up the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. While the description may not make maximal geographical sense, ignoring it in Nigeria’s crisis laden federalism is at much political risk.

On the other hand, though their testimonies are unreserved confessions of the same impulse that might have motivated Timaya, a bigger artist from Bayelsa (south-south Nigeria), who by sheer tenacity and hard work excelled in his music and broke into the Lagos hip hop circle. Timaya, who calls himself the “Egberi Papa I (One) of Bayelsa” is arguably the biggest hip hop dance music maker in the same region as the young, aspiring and self-motivating hip hop exponents in Calabar. In much of his music, Timaya unashamedly expresses the impulse to conquer the bane of poverty and the desire to break through “the Lagos market”. This psychology has also remained the main catalyst in the sustenance the hip hop culture in the region generally and Calabar in particular. What is more revealing in the testimonies of Lucifer and Fresh R, is the realization of the fact that they can exploit the digital technology of the late modern period to re-imagine themselves, assume a voice and galvanise their peers into a community of practice. Through the acquisition and manipulation of new digital devices, evidenced in the conversation of Fresh R they imagine a new reality and a future for themselves. Notice how Fresh R thinks he would be the first to establish an urban lifestyle television station in his sub-region in Nigeria. In this way these Nigerian youths are bringing into reality—the capacity of new digital technology to incarnate a new future. But within their testimonies, especially in the resolve of Lucifer to reach out to like-minds, we see the consciousness to create a crew, a “community of practice” through which they can perpetrate their own love, a metaphoric expression of their style, politics and identity. More so, one observes that even if Lucifer and his friends are deliberately imagining a local image for themselves that identity is given global relevance by grafting local to the international through the lexemes of Global Hip Hop National language evidence in the use of American terms such as “east coast”, “west coast”, and “crew” among others.

5.3 “Street Credibility”: From Folk Arena to Hip Hop Fame

The narrative of the emergence and development of hip hop in Nigeria generally is a testimony of the industry and resilience of youths growing up in a chequered and dispossessed nation. These upward mobile youths are daily confronted with the realities of duress and enduring personal hardship occasioned by socio-political uncertainties and economic marginalisation which are shaped by the structure of the Nigerian state (Ligtvoet 2018). The dispossession and strive which the generation of Nigerian youth born from the 1970s through the 1980s have had to live with has pushed them to desperate limits and tasked them to devise means of survival. Described generally as part of Africa’s “lost generation” (O’Brien 2006) the youth who are using Hip Hop as a veritable means for self-expression, subjectivity and economic empowerment have exploited the principles of the art, as perfected in the diaspora, to work out their survival from the street. It is in praise of the sheer wit and industry of the Nigerian youth to survive by the street in a depressed neo-liberal, neo-colonial economy that 9ice (pronounced “Nice”), in his hit track (featuring 2Face) entitled “Street Credibility”, sings:

My brain drain [is] working all day
I’m made on the streets
Originality work for me
Why I no go blow (Why wouldn’t I succeed) (Youtube.com).

Calabar Hip Hop producers have shown great dexterity and wit in the manner in which they have exploited their folk idioms to consolidate their art, entertain their home audience and *keep it real* or authenticate their presence in the Naija/Global Hip Hop Nation. A few examples of this ingenuity will help us to illustrate this point. Arising from their ideology to evolve a home-grown hip hop culture, the OkpoRecordz crew appropriated and adapted the name of an iconic local itinerant masquerade known as “Okpo Record” (“Okpo” in Efik/Ibibio slang stands for male). The masquerade, which is a creation of the street, is a performance that belongs to an indigenous popular satiric comic repertoire. In its mimicry of modernity, the folk Okpo Record is usually a bearded male persona, who wears tattered oversized coat and a tie upon equally oversized trousers and a weather-beaten pair of shoes. To display the luxurious living of local nouveau riche, the masquerade carries a radio cassette player from which he plays and dances ludicrously to any contemporary tune. Patronage for the masquerade comes from his local street audience who may toss in money or offer gifts of food items in appreciation of his comic acts.

In giving us the reason behind their appropriation of the name for their crew, Lucifer projects a logic that is at once intriguing as it is also ideologically loaded:

For us now, there is a masquerade before, before [some time ago / in the past] in Calabar called “Okpo Record”. You see, there is *Okpo* meaning man in Calabar language [Efik] and there is *Record*, meaning music. We take the name for ourselves and people are now saying “why of all names do you take the name of a masquerade”? And we say “No...!, We are now the new *Okpo...*, the new men, the new OkpoRecordz with Music”. We take our music, go to the studio, put it in a CD (Compact Disc) and then bring it out to you in the street to dance. You who say Okpo is stupid... now you, who is wise, dance to Okpo’s sweet melody from the studio... *abi* [don’t you agree with me]. (authors’ interview 6/5/17)

If one reflects carefully on Lucifer's reason one would appreciate an ideologically guided appropriation and transformation of a folk performance for the needs of a new postmodern world. It is indeed instructive that in adopting a name for themselves, the OkpoRecordz crew, has survived a dying art, one which Lucifer, through his Nigerian Pidgin (NP), says existed "before, before (some time ago)". In this way they have creatively transformed a dying art and enliven it with new meaning and character for a new age. His logic is also indicative of the transformation of an artistic agency as can be seen in his emphasis on *newness* in his speech above. The old (folk) Okpo Record was a singular male masquerade, who only makes caricature of an electronic form of modernity for his survival. Though the new OkpoRecordz still retains the masculine characterization, Lucifer insists that it is now a collective style community, made up of a number of young men. More so, the agency has changed, while the old Okpo uses the record of other artists on cassette tapes, the new Okpo produces their own record for the same audience who are now dependent on a new fast pace digital media, the Compact Disc (CD), Ipods, and Youtube.

Importantly, we need to underscore the power of (re)naming in the enterprise of the Okporecordz crew. Indeed, Lucifer's conversation testifies to the centrality of naming as a powerful tool of identification in hip hop style community (Alim, 2009; Omoniyi, 2009). In bringing newness to their society as a whole, Lucifer's crew had to reconstruct the syntax of a name rooted in traditional/indigenous grammar. In that grammar, the individual lexemes "Okpo" (noun) and "Record" (qualifier) belong to two different speech classes. Thus, the farcical male (masquerade) character (Okpo) is indexed by the radio (record). Radicalizing the folk name, Lucifer's crew displayed an ideological purchase into a new poststructuralist grammar in which semantic import is realised through the contravention of syntactic rules. It is in this perspective that the collapse of the two lexemes into one word "OkpoRecordz" makes sense as a nominal. Although Lucifer's crew may, in some contexts, interchangeably use the name as different words (Okpo Recordz), the use of the "z" is in conformity with the hip hop sounding practice, where "s" is stylised as "z". Hence, in the graphology of Lucifer's crew, we have a radical shift from the folk to the postmodern age. Yet, all these still pay credence to Alim's (2009) theory of style as an idiom in the corpus of hip hop's linguistic "mobile matrices". Within these mobile matrices, "style, practices (graffiti, dance, clothes...), ideologies, knowledges, and aesthetics..." travel across the globe, are appropriated and re-contextualised/"remixed" to suite local purposes. This is what manifests in OkpoRecordz search of an identity in the Nigerian hip hop nation.

In a music project that is aimed at addressing gang violence and crime at street corners, the OkpoRecordz crew seized the space of a long wall in a usually quiet but vulnerable street corner in Calabar to make a creative statement through graffiti. Entitled "Welcome to Bateba" after the street Bateba in Calabar South Local Government Area, the music project is a mix tape single that berates the government for its failure to provide electric power which should ensure relative security for the street. But what is interesting for us at this point is the iconic artistic representation of an OkpoRecordz personality in the graffiti on the concrete fence of Bateba. Here, again, these hip hop artists use the agency of their counter-culture to make positive reconstructive statements on their society. Their appropriation and transformation of the folk idiom for the exigencies of their own time is an affirmation of the dynamics of the imagination in their generation. At this time the forces of the electronic/digital media and migration do not only liberate the imagination but make it a collective phenomenon, empowering the common folk for the expression of the everyday. But more significantly, by

deriving ideological verve from a folk form to articulate a postmodern identity, the OkpoRecordz crew has demonstrated that in spite of living in a postmodern time, they can express their identity by being rooted in indigenous traditions. Here-in lies part of their own strategy of establishing their authenticity within the Nigerian hip hop nation.

However, it is not only in their name that the OkpoRecordz crew has shown their creative ingenuity and authenticity. The group boasts of having created the dance style called “Skwinik”, which is now popular around the Akwa-Cross (Akwa Ibom & Cross River states) axis. Although some young people contest OkpoRecordz’s claim of having created the Skwinik dance style, there is no doubt that the group has established and made the dance style very popular among youths in the region by their music track that goes by the same name. Attempting to trace the origin of the dance style Sylver Maxwell, a Calabar professional dancer, agree’s that Skwinik just started in the streets of Calabar South. As the coinage, which does not have any lexical meaning in any of the Cross River languages, would suggest the dance performance is only imitative of the movement of a cripple (interviewed April 2018). As Sylver would suggest the dance is imitative of a cripple and the phonemes of the coinage is an ideophone of a cripple’s mobile challenge which is replicated in the song by OkpoRecordz.

Do you think you can dance?
Can you dance until you pick pin?
Skwinik skwinik skwinik ...

For a generation to whom dance is not just for pleasure, but an agency of performing belonging, collective identity and a professional tool for negotiating spaces in the Global Hip Hop Nation, taking credit for evolving a dance style is a mark of distinction. This explains OkpoRecordz’s contestation for the copyright of the dance style. What more, dance in Naija hip hop, as it is for hip hop culture in all other parts of the world, is a cultural equipment that sells music and popularizes an artist or a crew. We can see this in the association of “Galala” with Daddy Showkey’s and Baba Fryo’s music, “Suwo” with the music of the duo Mad Melon and Captain Black, “Shakiti Bobo” with music of Olamide and “Leg-work/Gbese!” with the music of Burna Boy.

Perhaps less controversial but even more popular is “Etighi”, another dance style that has its origin from the streets of Calabar South and is associated with hip hop in Calabar. Identified by an alternate raising of the heels and hips, Etighi gained prominence and traction in Nigeria and indeed globally after internationally acclaimed Naija Hip Hop musician Inya’nya popularised it in his music “Kukere”. In Lagos, at the height of its vogue in Nigeria, Etighi became known as “Two-steps”, which speaks volume of the manner in which style as performance code travels across cultural spaces, gets appropriated and re-appropriated in context. Today, Etighi, which derives its name from the Efik name for Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) like “Skwinik” remains Calabar’s gift to Nigeria, if not to the Global Hip Hop Nation as a whole.-Here again, we have another instance of how style as an idiom is exploited to re-imagine the folk/local and connect it with the global. Indeed, herein lays the essence of authenticity, which is the ultimate quest for hip hop artists round the globe (Terkuorafi 2010:5). Calabar youth have effectively signed their membership of the Global Hip Hop Nation by a localization process that infuses the idiom of “local practices such as music, dance, story-telling, painting and masquerading” to their own practice of an international art

form (Pennycook and Mitchell 2009: 27). From these accounts, we can say that the ultimate purpose of Calabar hip hop is to function as a source of economic empowerment; to remove these artists from the claws of poverty with its accompanying social vices like gang violence and drug use and abuse. Some of the participants are on the verge of making prosperous career thus transform themselves as successful entrepreneurs that can provide wealth for their families. Hip hop is also an art form that enables artist to experience themselves eloquently through their music. They create beautiful art in their songs, relate their personal experiences, ridicule and expose social vices and generate topical issues for the society to reflect on. In this respect, proponent of local hip hop also see their engagement with this genre as a way of life.

6. Conclusion

The transformations that hip hop has witnessed all over the world is a proof of its adaptability as a cultural tool expressed through different idioms. Perhaps no other cultural production is so readily available and adaptable than hip hop has proven to be through the late 20th and 21st century. It is easy to extol the grandeur of hip hop as a global phenomenon and even easier to ignore the different cultural filiations that have contributed to its global repertoire. In this article we have given attention to its emergence and dynamics among a group of (Calabar) youths in Nigeria from the account of Appadurai's (1996, 2001) notion of cultural flow in which hip hop flows have been seen to create, reproduce and transform geographic spaces. More importantly, we have also identified different strategies through which this youth have habituated hip hop in their cultural space. By these cultural dynamics we have argued that Calabar youths have been able to negotiate spaces for themselves in the Naija hip hop nation and created an industry / market for themselves. By all standards Calabar and its youths are located at the periphery of global cultural attention. So also, are their cultural productions, which can be easily suffocated and glossed over by dominant cultural studies that look at the big story from dominant culture players. By interrogating how the creative industry of Calabar youths in the Naija hip hop nation connects to the larger firmament of Global hip hop, we have drawn attention to the cultural filiations that have inadvertently re-enforced and characterised it in the millennium. For us, it is important that scholars of cultural studies begin to attend to the intricate ways in which marginal voices such as those of the Calabar hip hop community in Nigeria evolve strategies of self-expression and respond to the pressures of globalization

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