Jay Rutledge

Unplugged Urban Africa

For an Africa Without Drums

67 percent of all Africans live in cities. But whereas every Bushman has had his picture taken hundreds of times and adorns photo albums worldwide, urban Africa is virtually unknown in these parts. Conventional cultural concepts categorize culture according to strict regional criteria of 'tradition' and 'ethnic affiliation.' The 'impure' urban part of Africa, which is the most *plugged in* and has already taken the step into the new Media Age, doesn't fit into this picture.

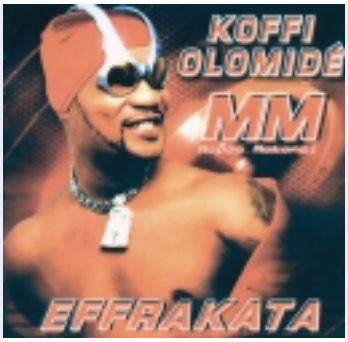
Globalization does not proceed everywhere simultaneously or in a straight line, and it is precisely in the metropoles that immense social contradictions between a traditional Africa and the emerging modern one arise, collide with one another, bring about new forms of coexistence or completely uncouple from each other. In the urban centers of Africa today, there are Internet cafés on every street corner. Nevertheless, communications medium No. 1 is still radio.

Radio Jekafo in Mali

Mali's most popular radio program is the summary of international news that is broadcast every afternoon in the country's respective languages. The introduction in the early '90s of free radio in Mali was essential to the processes of democratization in this West African land. Daily newspapers, on the other hand, play a rather subsidiary role since a good 70 percent of the population is illiterate. The Internet even further catalyzes the non-simultaneity of globalization since it demands not only financial investment but also education.

But Internet, radio, TV and music can be regarded not only as emancipatory but also as gigantic wish-machines. The frequently invoked consequences of the Internet—democratization, freer access to information, etc., the “lines of development ... thought to move only higher and higher”—shift the discussion away from the real context to democratic projections and dreams of an enlightened—naturally, Westernized—world. September 11th showed one thing for sure: the world has many realities, and these resist being reduced to a single one. People search the Internet not only for information; rather, they are trying to satisfy their needs, whereby the Internet does not so much lead to real closeness as simply provide better access to what is being sought. In doing so, it tends, among other things, to aggravate differences rather than to reconcile them. What is purported to be “Internet ubiquity” (being able to always be everywhere at the same time) merely legitimizes these projections that much more. This has not brought about any essential change in our image of Africa and Africa’s view of us. The Internet just makes it more convenient to find what one seeks. Africa was and still is—just as Europe is for Africa—a giant shimmering surface for projections. Africa’s fervent reflection of modernity—the dream of “making it to prosperous Europe” that animates the minds of African youths to this day—also pervades popular culture. While the West is celebrated in Africa, the West celebrates Africa’s tradition. The mutual fascination confounds both sides and gives rise to misunderstandings. To smooth over the contradictions, myths are invented.
Ibrahim Sylla, probably the most influential producer in West Africa, gets it right when he talks about the differences with respect to music:

Ali Farka Touré album cover



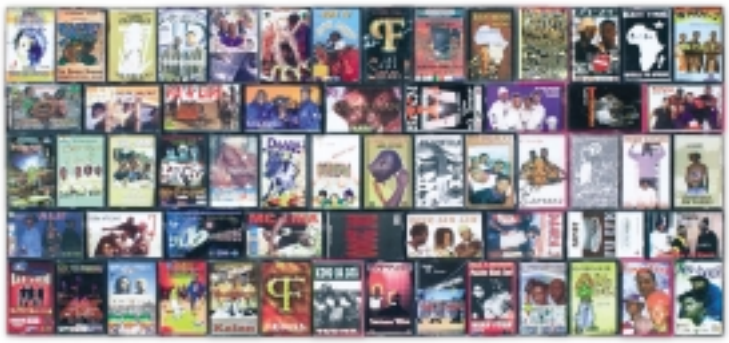
Koffi Olomide popstar aus dem kongo album cover

> “What people like Ali Farka Touré do is get a guitar ... plink, plink ... play a little blues like John Lee Hooker. There are thousands of ‘em in Africa, these people are on every street in Africa. There are enough of them, the people in Africa have no need of this. Take a mike, like on *Kulanjan,* [an acoustic album by Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabate], a guitar, an ngoni, sing la-la-la and you’ve got it. Go to a wedding or a baptism anywhere in Dakar, Bamako, Conakry, in Abidjan, it’s everywhere. Mory Kante recently said in an interview that there’s somebody doing that under every baobab tree. We don’t need anything like this. We have to develop Africa. Sure, that’s the African perspective—we have to modernize, open up; that’s how we can make a name for ourselves. You Whites may not like it, but that’s what we in Africa need.”

The West satisfies its need for tradition by turning to a self-made African export market that exists parallel to the local pop market. This reflects the preconceptions and wishes of Europeans, but urban Africa remains *unplugged.* So let's plug it in.

Africa Raps

Grandmaster Flash went over big-time in Senegal just like in Europe, and launched a hiphop movement in Africa too. No matter how narrow the lines of communication were—friends who brought records back from Europe, magazines, poorly bootlegged cassettes—African youth was quick to get the picture that something new was taking off. And hiphop is no exception there. International music trends have always played a major role in Africa—for instance, funk à la James Brown, or salsa in the '50s and '60s. Even Youssou Ndour sang in Spanish in his early days.



Band with cassette covers—hiphop

The development of rap was going on at about the same time as, for example, the German hiphop scene was emerging. Today there are about 2,000 Bands in Dakar alone; at least a hundred of them have a cassette on the market. Dakar is definitely the hiphop capital of West Africa, but by no means an isolated case. In the meantime, there's been hiphop coming out of Ruanda and Nigeria, or Massai rap from Tanzania (www.xplastaz.com, also see www.africanhiphop.com). Although their music reflects trends in French, American and Jamaican hiphop and ragga, the actual power of rap in Senegal lies in its politically emancipatory dimension.

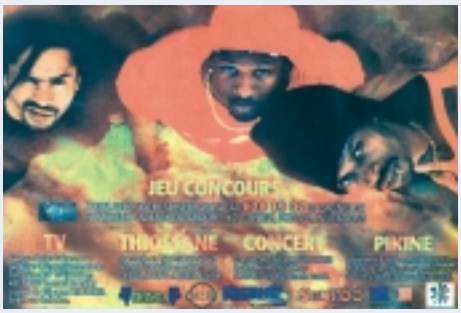
Cassette Cover Politichien

Over 70% of Senegal's population is under 30 and has grown up with rap. That's why the politicians have been positively toadying to get in rappers' good graces, but most of them still refuse to play at campaign appearances. The international language of hiphop encounters a totally different culture in Senegal than in the US. Many rappers come from the student milieu and find in rap a possibility to rebel against traditional, conservative society upon which Islam has had a strong impact and which is characterized by clear lines of authority and hierarchies.

BMG 44

BMG 44: "A marabout is a kind of spiritual leader. Here in Senegal, 97% or 95% of the people are Muslims. And what happened here during the 2000 election campaign was that there were a lot of marabouts who told their students that they had to vote for incumbent President Abdou Dioff. But the younger people in particular didn't want him anymore. Our generation says to these important marabouts that they should concentrate on religion and not on politics, because, for us, politics is something where there are always big promises being made and never kept. Religion is the truth, the light. We don't want the two to mix."

On the other hand, there are bands like Flamm J that attack mbalax (pop music in Senegal), which they say is "against the religion," and corrupts young girls who dance to it too erotically."
That a young person publicly attacks the president of a country in which he is not even permitted to criticize his own father was long a scandal. But that's normal in Senegal nowadays. In African countries like Mali and Niger in which the hiphop movement is still in its infancy, you still come across lyrics like: "il faut que on laisse plus de place a la jeunesse" (Kaidan Gaskia / Niger)—a demand ultimately addressed to the parental generation to let young people have their say.
The bands consider themselves first and foremost hiphoppers, part of an international urban youth culture. That their records here (at least the two that have made it onto the shelves of German record stores) usually end up in the Africa section (and not in the hiphop bins) expresses this paradox in a nutshell and really pisses these bands off. In the words of Xuman (rapper of the group Pee Froiss), they feel like they're "not taken seriously as hiphoppers, and instead confined to the role of Africans." Whoever wants to get plugged in has to bring along a drum and a regional line of argumentation.



Pee Froiss

Pee Froiss is one of the few bands with international experience. Xuman, the head of the group, is a key figure in the movement, and not only as a rapper. He now also hosts two rap programs on Radio Walfajiri: one featuring local productions and one international rap. BMG 44 is a hardcore band of the old school from the suburbs of Dakar Thiaroye, and consists of two Muslims and a Christian. In a recent number entitled "Def Si Yaw," they attacked by name a marabout who took money from a politician during the 2000 election campaign and, in return, called upon his talibe (students) to vote for that particular party. Until now, such a thing was taboo in Senegal. BMG 44 is thus taking issue with the omnipresent intermeshing of Islam and politics there.

Zouglou: La Voix Magic de la Rue

What is called hiphop in Dakar is *zouglou* in Abidjan—a sort of *Radio Trottoir,* the commentary of the streets. The website of zouglou pioneer Didier Bilé contains the following text concerning the political consequences of the movement:

> "The explosive setting (student strikes, police troops storming into student housing, etc.) coincided with the birth of a multi-party system in Africa. It was here that Didier Bilé, then a student, met with immediate success. His group, Les Parents du Campus Ambiance, sold more than 90,000 copies of their first album throughout the Ivory Coast. Didier became a spearhead of the Zouglou phenomenon which rapidly spread to all the neighboring countries in west Africa. At the end of 1993, the Ivory Coast government offered Didier a scholarship to continue his studies in France because they were afraid that he would be won over by the opposition party."

Zouglou came out of the student milieu in Abidjan's Youpougon neighborhood in the early '90s. The word zouglou can be approximately translated as 'gathered up like garbage.' It emerged at a time when political life in the Ivory Coast was still dominated by the corrupt politics of then-President Houphouet-Boigny, whose most notorious claim to fame was the scale-model replica of Rome's St. Peter's Basilica he had built in his home town as his personal mausoleum. Zouglou's humorous, biting tales from everyday life and social commentary quickly became the soundtrack of the student protests of the day. And even now, zouglou, along with mapouka and reggae—attributable to the success of African superstar Alpha Blondy—remains the country's most popular music.

St. Peter's Basilica (Yamoussoukro)

Magic System is currently one of the best-known zouglou bands. Their 1999 release *1er Gaou* was probably West Africa's biggest hit in recent years. *1er Gaou* not only made the group famous overnight; it also proceeded to focus international attention on zouglou. The song has to do with a musician out on a date with his girlfriend in the Rue Princess, the nightlife district of Youpougon. After his money runs out, the girl ditches him. Sometime afterwards, he brings out his record and becomes a big star. Then, when the girl asks about getting together with him again, he answers her in song: "Premier Gaou n'est pas Gaou, c'est deuxieme Gaou qui est Gnata." Meaning, more or less: The mistake (Gaou) of getting involved with you in the first place was nothing, but whoever makes the same mistake twice is an idiot (Gnata). Group members like to embellish their autographs with their motto: *Gaoutiquement, ne sois jamais Gnata.*

Magic System

The band is a classic example of the fact that a lot of Africa's popular music does not make it to this part of the world or it exists only in a parallel African market that Europeans usually have no idea about. The very name Magic System is hardly compatible with the expectations of European consumers of world music. Their 'classic modern' keyboard sounds and the 'chic' Fubu T-shirts they usually wear on stage are rarely something that Europeans can identify with. In Paris, they are celebrated by Africans in Zenith or in Bercy; African parallel-universe superstars like Koffi Olomide cover their songs. In Germany, the album did not come out until 2001—two years after it was released in Africa—and did not even sell 500 copies. Other zouglou bands are unknown in these parts. Magic System has never appeared in Germany or Austria.

Nothing but Percussion and a Message

Interview with Magic System (Dakar Feb. 2001)

Asalfo (lead singer): Why Magic System? What can I say, there are over 450 zouglou groups in the Ivory Coast. To make it big there, we had to do something magical.

Q: What's zouglou all about?

Asalfo: We play zouglou, a music style that was invented in Abidjan by young students. Zouglou talks about politics and problems of everyday life. We're exposing things that don't work right in this country. The basis of this music is the rhythm, the percussion; all the rest of the instruments were only added later. I mean, this music got started with nothing but percussion and a message.

Q: Maybe you could give an example....

Asalfo: "Secret d'africain" has to do with somebody who tells his friend that he's flying to France the next day, but he asks him not to tell anyone else because he doesn't have his papers yet. But the friend then goes and tells his girlfriend and a little while later the whole neighborhood is in on it. Unfortunately, the would-be traveler borrowed money from a lot of different people to pay for his trip. The next day, the whole neighborhood is gathered at the airport and he's not going anywhere anymore.

Q: What are you guys up to now?

Asalfo: We're trying to put together a real orchestra. But that's pretty difficult and very expensive in Abidjan. You have to buy everything—a set of drums, guitars, everything, a whole orchestra. So, at the moment we're negotiating with the government to get them to buy the equipment for us so that we can stay in the business and can rehearse. You can't always just borrow a guitar from somebody when you have a concert. And using canned music doesn't really cut it anymore. Anyway, the major festivals in Germany, Italy and France don't want any bands that can't perform live with a full line-up.

Q: And where does it go from here?

Asalfo: We sold 1.5 million copies of *1er Gaou.* We could say: "Good, now we're stars. Everyone in Africa knows us." But we all still live in the same neighborhood with our parents. We haven't changed at all, and that's why the people like us. If we would now try to live like the rich and famous, move to Cocody, live in bourgeois style in an air-conditioned house, drive a car to rehearsal, then we wouldn't be able to see the real problems of the people anymore. You have to be with the poor people in the ghetto to know what's going on, and to be able to then go on and sing about it.

South Africa

Kwaito: Don't Call Me Kaffir

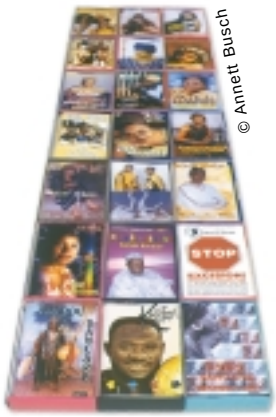
Despite the repeated claims of an affinity between, for example, techno and traditional African music, there is still hardly an electronic music scene in Africa. Fusions of electronic club music and traditional Africa music that have recently become fashionable have thus far primarily been projects of European DJs and sound-twiddlers. (For instance: Afrobeat) Many of the current Afro-electro projects are rather conservative in their choice of samples. Despite their highly modern working methods, what gets blended with the electronic tracks are mainly traditional, almost stereotypical conceptions of Africa. Modern urban music rarely finds a place.

One of the few exceptions comes from South Africa, though this is by no means a coincidence since South Africa is, after all, Africa's most modern state. There, in the '90s, house, hiphop, ragga and traditional popular Township rhythms gave rise to South Africa's own club music—Kwaito, the first Black post-Apartheid musical style from South Africa. Since then, this Black voice of the Townships has become one of the country's most commercially successful musical genres. (Photo 14: Arthur) To this day, Kwaito remains completely unknown in Europe—on one hand, because it's incompatible with world music; on the other, because English-speaking South Africa is tied to the English-language market. The English market favors a relatively narrowly defined style of British pop music and marginalizes other musi-

cal developments such as British hiphop, which is only slowly garnering attention, or other niche markets like pop from the former colonies. This phenomenon can be traced all the way back to British colonial policies. In contrast to the French who nurtured local music, England pursued from the very outset a policy that left local music to its own devices. A Kwaito music scene has developed in England in recent years. For a South African public in East London that is over 95% Black, South Africans living in England organize concerts featuring the superstars of the South African scene like Arthur, the King of Kwaito—who had the first big Kwaito hit with "Don't Call me Kaffir"—Bongo Maffin, M'Du, and Mandoza. The English mainstream has hardly acknowledged this parallel scene up to now, or just hasn't gotten the word yet. For them, South Africa is not gangster Kwaito, but rather Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Nelson Mandela.

No Techno in Mali

Whereas South Africa is one of the continent's most modern states, Mali represents one of the less urbanized and poorer countries in the program of *Unplugged Urban Africa.* While an urban culture of metropoles has been emerging worldwide, the major cultural differences are increasingly to be found in urban-rural disparities. Even as one Internet café after another opens in Bamako, Mali's capital, the effects of these new electronic media are hardly able to penetrate into rural regions. Musician Techno Issa is a perfect example of the encounter of Mali's rural world with these new media.



© Annett Busch

Cassette covers from Mali

Issa Bagayogo grew up in the tiny village of Korin as one of 15 children of his father's four wives. In 1991, the millet farmer moved to the city to pursue his dream of a better life. Even as a boy, he had entertained the other young people at village festivals with his *kamele n'goni* (a type of lute, the strolling guitar of Mali so to speak), so he wanted to try to make it as a musician in the city. He recorded two cassettes but both were flops and Issa, like so many others in Bamako, had to get by working at occasional jobs. Like a good 70 percent of Mali's population, Issa is illiterate. The next chapter of his career began when French sound engineer Yves Wernert was working on digitizing the archive of the Mali K7 record company and discovered Issa's old recordings. Disgusted with the run-of-the-mill commercial productions that occupied his working days in Mali, Wernert got the idea of recording an experimental album with Issa. Following months of rehearsal and, finally, three days in the studio, as well as computerized post-production, Issa got to hear the recordings, but after a few minutes, he fled in fear from the French sound engineer. Because what he then heard—material that had been electronically reprocessed using copy-and-paste techniques on the computer—was not what he had played, his first reaction was that the engineer was trying to bewitch him. *Sya,* the resulting album, exploded onto the Mali scene and Issa Bagayogo turned into the local pop star Techno Issa.

His music did indeed work with electronic beats at the beginning, but a more fitting description of it is Wassoullou music (from southern Mali) produced in modern style.

Issa at a rehearsal

Virtually no one in Mali is familiar with—much less likes—techno itself. The word "techno," though, has something magic about it that in Mali sounds like getting connected to the wide, wide world. Three years later and following the international success of his second CD, *Timbuktu,* Issa began at age 40 to learn French last year—interview coaching in Mali. In the meantime, Techno Issa has been touring the US and Europe, and is being celebrated in the international press as a pioneer of the Afro-electro genre.

One of Issa Bagayogo's opening acts is Djigui, a traditional musician who embodies Mali's rural music in its pure form from the southern part of the country (the region surrounding Koutiala); he is evocative of Issa Bagayogo's origins and the yawning gap between the city and the country in Mali. Djigui is a solo act. He plays m'bolon—a kind of traditional bass consisting of a calabash and a wooden pole on which three strings have been strung—and sings songs that urge on the peasant farmers as they go about the harvest. Last year, he was in France for the first time.

Yves Wernert: "Why do the people in Mali like this new music? Because we take music from Mali, nothing complicated. I like simple things because I think that this is what pleases the people. We listen very carefully to what the artist does in order to understand what stage he is at in his musical development, and then I try to embed the music within a kind of modern setting. In going about this, I never change the texts or the melodies. And at least 80% of the melody and the structure of the song is decided by the artist. Then maybe I tinker a little bit with the intro and the ending, but I don't change the music and I don't suggest any songs. It's like this—the musicians give me their ideas and then I exploit them. In doing so, my leitmotif is succinctness and understandability, and the people like that. (...) My original idea was actually to make an Issa Bagayogo ragga album. But then it took a long time before we finally decided to go ahead with the project and longer still to even find Issa. In the music scene, he was a complete unknown. All we knew was that he hung out with a bunch of shady characters. Then, Moussa, our studio guitarist, recognized him among the minibus drivers, which is not such good company here in Mali. They drink beer, take drugs ... And then he suggested to him that they make an album. They rehearsed here for almost two months in the shadow of a tree ... Issa doesn't speak French. Sure, we had a lot of fun, but we really couldn't carry on a conversation. Then we recorded the album in two or three days, 10 songs in all. The last one was *Sya,* the album's title track, which Issa didn't even want to play at first because, for him, it wasn't finished yet. But I liked *Sya*. So I said that Moussa and he should simply play. It was like a session and I recorded it. At the end, I took the most interesting material and copied it to the computer. Then I worked on it for an entire night, and by the next day the piece was pretty much in the form it is now on the CD. When I then played it for Issa, he turned around and ran away. He thought I was a sorcerer. I don't know if he

understood how I recorded the song, but suddenly he was confronted by a real piece of music like you hear on the radio. It was a big surprise for him."

Issa Bagayogo: "Life is like bridges that you have to cross. When I went to the city to make my cassette and it didn't work out, people in my hometown went around telling everyone that I was going to end up on drugs and had gone nuts. Even my wife left me. I had been married to my wife Tara for 11 years, and then she left me because she though that I was too poor and crazy. We even had a child together. After that, life was really hard for me. And then when I brought out my album, my wife called me and wanted me to come back to her. But I said no. Now she's married to somebody else, but he's even poorer than I was then."

Djigui

Djigui: "My name is Djigui Traoré and I live 15 kilometers from Koutiala, a region in which there are many traditional instruments. The m'bolon was not played in my family; there, they play balafon and tamani. I sing for the agricultural laborers to motivate them to work, or at funerals. But the time in which that was done is over now. Today, I still sometimes play at festivals so that the people can amuse themselves ... Once I was in France and played a concert. It was called Africolor, in Paris. Others were there too, and I also earned a little money ... (about his first visit to Europe) I arrived in Paris at 6 in the morning. They brought me to a house in which there was a machine that brought me up, and up there you could eat. There were even telephones. Then I rode down again to the concert. It was a great surprise. I lived across from a large statue. Every day I looked at it from out of my window. I liked it very much. And at the airport, there was a sort of band that takes people along. There you can see very clearly how advanced the French are."

Translated from the German by Mel Greenwald

Urban Africa Club at Ars Electronica 2002

BMG 44 / Pee Froiss (Senegal)

Sat, Sept 7	*Brucknerhaus*
Sun, Sept 8	*Stadtwerkstatt*
Thu, Sept 12	*Posthof*

Zola (South Africa)

Mon, Sept 9	*Stadtwerkstatt*

Techno Issa / Djigui (Mali)

Tue, Sept 10	*Brucknerhaus and Stadtwerkstatt*

Magic System (Côte d'Ivoire)

Wed, Sept 11	*Stadtwerkstatt*

Curated by Jay Rutledge. Supported by Bureau de la musique française.