

# **SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE**

**A Comparative Study of Senegalese Taasu and US American Rap Music**

**Iye Echa**

**A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts**

**Written under the supervision of Dr Barbara Titus**

**Faculty of Humanities**

**University of Utrecht**

**January 2014**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Definition of terms.....	3
Introduction .....	4
1. CHAPTER ONE.....	8
Description of Taasu and Rap .....	8
Senegalese Taasu .....	9
Praise Poetry: The Foundation Of Taasu.....	12
Taasu Rhythm.....	16
Rap Music: A Carthetic Outlet And An Entertainment Genre.....	18
Rap Styles .....	24
Remarks on Rap Research.....	28
Closing.....	29
2. CHAPTER TWO.....	31
Theoretical Foundation.....	31
Mimicry .....	32
A Tradition Invented .....	41
3. CHAPTER THREE.....	48
Music Analysis .....	48
Lyrical Content.....	51
Use of Rhythm.....	54
Social Role.....	58
Continuity Claim .....	61
Rappers As Modern Griots.....	64
Africanized Hip-hop Identity.....	67
CONCLUSION .....	71
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	77

## Definition of terms

Taasu: Taasu is a form of praise poetry performed by Wolof women during family events such as naming ceremonies.<sup>1</sup>

Taasukat: Those who perform taasu music are called ‘taasukat,’ or poet. The term is gender neutral and has no singular or plural form. <sup>2</sup>

Rhythm: The pattern of music’s movement in time. Or a particular pattern of short and long durations.<sup>3</sup>

Rhythm Section: In a jazz ensemble, the group of instruments that keeps the beat and fills in the background.<sup>4</sup>

Meter: Recurring patterns of strong and weak beats, dividing musical time into regularly recurring units of equal duration.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Lisa McNee, *Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women's Autobiographical Discourses*, (New York: State University of New York press, 2000), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Burkholder, Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), A16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., A11.

## Introduction

Hip-hop or rap has become a global phenomenon. A genre that began in the United States, rap has spread to every cranny of the globe. In Africa, rap is gaining prominence and stories of rap being similar to African musical practices are emerging. This thesis investigates how and why rap and taasu have been linked to each other. This thesis is not about the influence of rap on the African continent, but rather an attempt towards a comparative study of two unique genres: Senegalese *taasu* and US American rap. Taasu is the poetic practice of Senegalese women.<sup>6</sup> Before outlining how I intend to proceed with this thesis, I will explain how I came about this topic.

In February 2013, I was part of a research team of Utrecht University that visited Senegal to study the linguistic properties of Senegalese drum practice known as the sabar. While in Senegal, I investigated the involvement of Senegalese youth and children in sabar practices. As part of our research, we conducted various interviews and did some experimental testing. In brief, I was a privileged witness to the rich music practice of Senegal. During one of our sessions, a Senegalese griot musician started a discussion about Senegalese taasu and its similarity to rap. I was surprised to learn that there is an ‘ancient’ Senegalese musical practice that resembles rap music. During the remainder of our time in Senegal, I took it upon myself to interview some Senegalese musicians about taasu and learn as much as I could about the subject. This thesis is a continuation of that effort.

In Senegal, some rappers and griot musicians claim that taasu is the predecessor of rap. Also, both styles are similar in that they recite poems to a beat. This thesis plans to investigate these claims by comparing both genres and examining areas of convergence and divergence. It is not a study of the history of hip-hop or taasu culture per se- although a description of both genres will be given. The intention of this thesis is not to pronounce a verdict of whether both genres are similar or different. This is a question that we cannot answer because of the limited scope of this thesis. Although rap is well known, there is still much we do not yet know about taasu to arrive at such a conclusion. During the course of our discussion, I will limit myself to only those convergences and differences Senegalese musicians refer to: rhythm, use of vulgar language and the social roles of both genres.

An extensive collection of rap music research has surfaced in recent times and this material contrasts sharply with the scarce body of work on taasu- mostly primary sources in academic archives. Due to the relatively small body of work on taasu, this thesis makes extensive use of Lisa McNee’s literary study *Senegalese Women’s Autobiographical Discourse* (2000). McNee’s book lays the foundation for uncovering the socio-cultural foundation of taasu.

---

<sup>6</sup> Those who perform taasu are known as ‘taasukat.’ We shall revisit this definition later in chapter two of this thesis. In chapter two we will also explain the different associations of the term.

While it is an important source, the problem is that, it lacks a detailed description of taasu as a music genre. For instance, information about the music and performance practices are absent from her book. I will also discuss the socio-cultural background of taasu and then move on to an examination of the sounding aspects of the genre. To remedy some of the difficulties in assessing credible material on taasu, I relied on three other sources. These are: my experience in Senegal, interviews conducted by myself and those of other scholars and finally your hearing of it.

During my visit to Senegal, I did interview griot musicians there and also witnessed a demonstration of taasu. I will dwell on this experience from time to time during this thesis.<sup>7</sup> My interviews will be supported by interviews conducted by other scholars. For instance, the PhD scholar Damon Sajnani interviewed over a hundred Senegalese musicians who dissociate themselves from ‘the rappers as modern griot’ analogy. Although Sajnani’s work does focus on this analogy, his work is valuable to this thesis because it features quotations from Senegalese musicians that express disagreement about the link of rap to taasu. So, it appears that there are two camps of Senegalese musicians: those that link rap to taasu and those that disagree with this link.

This study is motivated on the one hand by the lack of sufficient scholarly works on taasu and secondly by my desire to learn, investigate and contribute to the scarce body of work on the subject. I am optimistic that this research project will contribute to raising awareness of the taasu practice and inspire other researchers to venture into the field.

One of the most significant current discussions in the discourse about rap is the link that has been made with Africa. A typical description of rap always aligns the genre with ancient African ‘traditions’ or practices. Scholars such as: David Toop (1984) and more recently, Patricia Tang (2012), Sheryl Keyes (2002), Catherine Appert (2011) and Damon Sajnani (2013) have all written studies about the connection that rap and taasu supposedly have. In his book *The Rap Attack* Toop writes that the practice of wordsmith could be traced “all the way to the griots of Nigeria and Gambia.”<sup>8</sup> It appears that, in recent times, a majority of the studies have been devoted to either affirming or disproving this claim. What is striking is that I am not aware of any studies dedicated to the comparison between taasu and rap based on the claims of Senegalese musicians. This thesis is aimed at doing just that. There are of course scholars who highlight African elements in US American rap. Sheryl Keyes is a good example, for her work investigates Africanisms in rap. Patricia Tang, on the other hand, implicitly raises the question of the similarity between rap and taasu in her article “Rappers as Modern Griot, Reclaiming Ancient Traditions.” Her study focusses on how Senegalese

---

<sup>7</sup> While I claim to have experienced taasu in Senegal, I am aware of the limitation of my experience. To begin, my visit to Senegal was for a short period of approximately three weeks. I do not claim that in this short time, I was able to witness enough taasu to be an authority on the genre. With this in mind, I have used scholarly studies to bridge the gap between my field work and scholarly writings on taasu.

<sup>8</sup> David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-hop*, London: Pluto Press Limited (1984), 19.

rappers have used Africanism (particularly griotism) through various symbolic, linguistic, textual, and musical means to assert their Hip-hop authenticity.<sup>9</sup> Appert's work "Rappin' Griots: Producing the Local in Senegalese Hip-hop," addresses the issue of rapper as modern griot.<sup>10</sup> Sajnani's work is also along the lines of critiquing the trope of rappers as modern griots. While the rapper as modern griot analogy has been discussed in Toop's book, this thesis takes a roundabout fashion to discuss how Senegalese musicians have linked rap to taasu thereby continuing the trope. It critically examines other assertions by comparing taasu and rap to discover areas of similarities and dissimilarities. In doing so, we can learn about these two genres. More importantly, with such knowledge we can understand better why Senegalese musicians link these two genres.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. In chapter one, I will describe both taasu and rap genres. In this chapter, I will focus on the musical characteristics of both genres, their history and social roles. The way taasu's sounding aspects (its musical characteristics, history and social roles) are discussed in this thesis is in respect to how these aspects are positioned in themselves and not based on objective knowledge. Furthermore, after chapter one, the reader can already begin to notice similarities and dissimilarities between these genres. The second aspect of this chapter deals with criticism of the way taasu and rap have been researched so far. For taasu, I criticise the lack of musical description of the features of the music; most especially the kind of rhythm used and the lack of description of the performance practice in taasu. I argue that the literature fails to describe the use of sabar drumming in taasu even though there is evidence that suggest the interdependency of both taasu and sabar music. On the other hand, early research in rap tended to focus on its social role whereas, I argue that or some rap music is an entertainment genre and also a means of livelihood.

The second chapter focuses on the theoretical foundation or lens through which to look at the problem. The main questions/issues addressed in this chapter are: a), whether the question of rap being similar to taasu can be answered using Homi K. Bhabha's mimicry and b), a deconstruction of the term 'tradition' (both invented and oral). The central argument of Bhabha's mimicry discussed in chapter two is that a counterfeit copy and never an exact reproduction is achieved when the colonized tries to copy the colonizer's behaviour and cultural habits. Using this theory, I argue that both Senegalese musicians and US American rappers have a complicated relationship.<sup>11</sup> Since the ambivalence of mimicry creates a duality, in this thesis this duality is explained in the way rap and taasu have been linked to each other. Furthermore, I will argue that the copying of cultural elements found in Africa into rap is an aspect of mimicry. Also, I will discuss the behaviour of Senegalese musicians as mimicry (displaying duality and ambivalence) based on the double articulation of mimicry. Bhabha

---

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Tang, "The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions," in *Hip-hop Africa : New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric Charry, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012), 79.

<sup>10</sup> Cathrine Appert, "Rappin' Griots: Producing the Local in Senegalese Hip-Hop," In *Native Tongues: An African Hip-hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier, 3–22. (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> The reader should bear in mind that Bhabha's mimicry concept is complex and a brief summary here will not do justice to the ways he explains mimicry.

describes the double articulation of mimicry in terms of the colonized and colonizer both playing a role. I will attempt to show in this thesis how we can use his double articulation to describe the situation of Senegalese and US American rappers. When it comes to the first element, I will argue that Senegalese musicians' claim that rap is similar to taasu could be viewed as mimicry. Just like the colonized in Bhabha's mimicry who loves and hates the colonizer, Senegalese musicians copy US American rap and at the same time assert their Hip-hop authenticity by claiming that rap is a continuation of taasu. The second aspect relates to the relationships between US American rappers and their African doubles. I will show that mimicry is at play through the influence of Afrocentrism on US American rappers who have appropriated elements of African music and culture into rap music.

The second issue discussed is a deconstruction of the term 'tradition.' This is necessary because Senegalese musicians use the term 'tradition' to validate taasu as an old practice. For this purpose, I will use Eric Hobsbawm's theory of the invention of tradition to argue that taasu itself is invented. Moreover, this thesis then replaces the term tradition with 'practice.' So, instead of referring to taasu as the Senegalese verbal tradition, I refer to it as Senegalese cultural practice.

In chapter three I will examine those aspects of taasu and rap that Senegalese musicians refer to that connect both genres. By doing so, I limit the discussion to aspects such as: rhythm, vulgar language in their lyrics and their social role. Of course there are other aspects such as poetic rhyming schemes and the use of metaphors that could have been discussed. But I choose to develop an in-depth discussion with the limited time I have and to also base my study on the claims that have been made by Senegalese musicians rather than my own observations and claims. Lastly, I will deconstruct the claim by Senegalese rappers that the slaves taken from Senegal to the United States continued the tradition of taasu which became rap. This I do by briefly exploring some scholarly studies on the mixing of cultures in US America. My conclusions are based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources as well as of extant recordings of both taasu and rap that I have transcribed and analyzed.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Description of Taasu and Rap

The rappers in the United States of America and the griot musicians in Senegal may be thousands of miles apart but their music displays striking similarities. This chapter focuses on taasu and rap. Taasu has been described as an exchange of a gift that a person gives and also expects in return. Rap has been described as a cathartic outlet used by US American youths to fight the marginalisation experienced by poor communities in the United State.

The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of both genres. This is necessary as an opener to the discussion on the similarity and dissimilarity between taasu and rap. So that the reader is introduced to how these two genres have been described by scholars. I intend to begin by situating the United States of America and Senegal geographically. I will let the reader know about the land area, population, religion and culture of the two countries. After situating both countries, I will proceed to give an overview of both genres. I will emphasise two aspects of these genres: their repertoire (lyrics or poetry) and their respective social roles. For instance, Hip-hop or rap is an outlet to fight injustice, so the discussion will focus on this aspect. Taasu has two important characteristics: it is both praise poetry and gift exchange. While I will discuss praise poetry only briefly, the greater part of the discussion is focused on taasu as an exchange because in my opinion the latter is unique to the taasukat. While praise poetry is practiced by both griots and griottes, taasukat receive rewards from their peers after a performance in quite a unique way. The comparison of both practices will be addressed in chapter three.

Also, during this overview, I will discuss briefly sabar music's relation to taasu and also explain the complex caste system prevalent in Senegalese society. This relation is important because taasu and sabar depend on each other. Furthermore, I will show in this chapter that there is still a lack of in-depth knowledge of the musical properties of taasu music: especially the role of rhythm in taasu. Scholars have been more drawn to the socio-political aspects of rap (violence and police brutality) whereas I will argue that rap music today is more of an entertainment genre.

Three reasons guide my decision to emphasize rhythm in my discussion of taasu.<sup>12</sup> Firstly, Senegalese rappers link rap to taasu claiming that both genres recite poems to a drum beat or music. If this claim is to be taken seriously, then, it is imperative that this research investigates and explains the rhythms of both genres. While the place of rhythm in rap is clear,

---

<sup>12</sup> The way I define rhythm is in terms of the pattern of music's movement in time. Or a particular pattern of music's movement in short and long durations. While meter is recurring patterns of strong and weak beats, dividing musical time into regularly recurring units of equal duration.

that of taasu is uncertain. For instance, McNee mentions just a few occasions of rhythm being used in taasu performances. What is striking is that no further explanation is provided of the kind of rhythm that accompanied the taasu musicians. Secondly, in order to understand the reason why rappers link taasu to rap it is crucial to determine the points of convergence and divergence between the two genres. Above all, since rhythm is said to have a pivotal role in African and in US African-American musics, it is then of paramount importance to include it in my discussion.

## Senegalese Taasu

The activities of griots have greatly influenced Senegalese culture. Griots are known as artisans, praise-singers, instruments makers, musicians, counsellors, dancers, acrobats and entertainers. From Senegal to Niger, one is likely to encounter griots descendants across these regions of West Africa. Griots are found among the Malinke, Bambara, Fulbe, Wolof, Tukulor and Soninke peoples.<sup>13</sup> As very creative people, griots endeared themselves to the ruling or aristocrat class and served at the king's court as custodians of the history of families of nobles. As attendants of kings, warlords, nobles, scholars and very influential people in society, griots received favours from their benefactors. These favours could be food, clothes, horses, cattle, jewellery and even slaves.<sup>14</sup> There is a misconception that griot artisans are generally men. Griottes have always existed alongside their male counterparts. The patriarchal system, gender bias on the part of researchers and noble informants alike, share a portion of the blame for the relatively limited knowledge about griottes.<sup>15</sup> The griots that this work seeks to explore are those of Senegal.

The Republic of Senegal is situated on the westernmost end of the African continent. Senegal shares its borders with four countries: Mauritania to the North, Mali to the East, and Guinea and Guinea Bissau to the South. Gambia (another country in West Africa) is almost completely embedded inside Senegal (see Figure 1). Senegal is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the west. It occupies a total area of 196, 722 sq km more than four times the size of the Netherlands. The population of Senegal is estimated to be slightly above 13 million (July 2013 census). Senegal has a tropical climate; hot and humid. The raining season begins in May and ends in November and the dry season (dominated by a hot, dry, harmattan wind) is from December to April. Languages spoken in Senegal are; French (official language), Wolof, Pular, Jola and Mandinka. Religion in Senegal is divided into three categories with Moslims the largest with 94%, Christians (mostly Catholics) 4% and Indigenous beliefs 1%. Senegal

---

<sup>13</sup> Cornelia Panzacchi, "The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1994), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Hale, "Griottes: Female Voices from West Africa," *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Women as Oral Artists (Autumn, 1994), 72.

gained independence from France in 1960 and its first president was the famous poet Léopold Sédar Senghor. The capital of Senegal is Dakar.

(Fig.1)<sup>16</sup>



Among the Wolof-speaking people of Senegal, griots are called géwél. Most scholars have alluded to the complex caste system in griot and Wolof societies. Some of the scholars who have written about the caste system in Wolof societies are: Judith Irvine in her work “When Is Genealogy History? Wolof Genealogies in Comparative Perspective,” Cornelia Panzacchi in “The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal,” Emil Magel in “The Role of the ‘Gewel’ in Wolof Society: The Professional Image of Lamin Jeng,” Fiona McLaughlin in “Islam and Popular Music in Senegal: The Emergence of a ‘New Tradition,’” and Patricia Tang in her book *Masters of the Sabar: Wolof Griot Percussionists of Senegal*. The number of castes discussed by these scholars varies greatly. For instance, Irvine discusses eight principal castes, whereas McLaughlin speaks of two main social groups, the casted and the non-casted.<sup>17</sup> McLaughlin prefers to use the term non-casted because she argues that referring to non-casted géérs as nobles is misleading because only a small proportion of géérs comes from noble families.<sup>18</sup> Irvine’s classification is more elaborate and I choose to adopt her description of the caste system. She groups Wolof society into eight principal castes:

---

<sup>16</sup>Map of Senegal. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Factbook.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sg.html>

<sup>17</sup> Fiona McLaughlin, “Islam and Popular Music in Senegal: The Emergence of a ‘New Tradition,’” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (1997), 562.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

There are eight principal castes: géér ("nobles," who are farmers, administrators, religious leaders-often divided into subcastes); ceddo (formerly; soldiers and police); jaam ("slaves" and weavers); tegg (smiths); wude (leatherworkers); géwél (praise singers, genealogists, musicians-a kind of griot, or speech specialist); raab (another kind of griot); and fat-ndënd (drumkeepers, also called jaam-u gewel, "griots'slaves").<sup>19</sup>

The eight principal castes can be further broken down into smaller units such as the nobles (aristocratic and influential people in the group) and the griots (which included the fat-ndënd, the *gewel* and the *raab*).<sup>20</sup> The caste system was officially abolished in the 1960s after Senegal gained independence from France.<sup>21</sup> In reality the caste system is still practiced. The majority of the works I consulted (mostly written after Senegal gained independence) have entries about the caste system in Senegal. When the musics of Senegal are discussed, there is always a reference to the caste systems and sabar music, which will be discussed shortly, is no exception. It is uncertain why caste plays such an important role. Perhaps the ethnic divisions in Senegal account for this phenomenon.<sup>22</sup>

The first music one might encounter in the streets of Senegal is sabar. You can often see well-dressed people carrying their sabar drums as they walk the streets. Sabar musicians entertain people during wrestling competitions or during political or social ceremonies. So, what is sabar? It is a single-headed drum made from the trunk of a mahogany tree, wound at one end with a goatskin head and held with pegs. It is a membranophone which is usually played with one hand and a stick. The composition of a sabar ensemble varies from a small ensemble of six musicians to a large ensemble of twelve drummers playing numerous complex polyrhythmic metres.<sup>23</sup> Wolof griots are regarded as masters of sabar.<sup>24</sup> Sabar drumming has a connection with taasu in the sense that rhythmic phrases called *bákks* were derived from the spoken word. The drums 'speak' through rhythmic representations of utterances from speech.<sup>25</sup> This link between sabar and taasu is an important point for discussion later on in this thesis because it is evidence of the use of rhythm in taasu.

Oral accounts of the history of sabar music are many and some are told in the form of legends stressing the importance of the drums. The account of one Macheikh Mbaye (a wolof geer) says that the Wolof learned to play the sabar from the Serer who took it from the Soosé.<sup>26</sup> However, there are also written accounts of sabar practice even though they have not been archived. What has survived are accounts from travellers and oral sources from griots

---

<sup>19</sup> Judith T. Irvine, "When Is Genealogy History? Wolof Genealogies in Comparative Perspective," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Nov., 1978), 653.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Tang, *Masters of the Sabar: Wolof Griot Percussionists of Senegal*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> The importance of caste in Senegalese society is an interesting topic. But it is also a huge topic which unfortunately cannot be discussed in-depth here.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 31.

themselves. The earliest mention of sabar was by the explorer Ibn Battuta in 1352. Other written accounts are said to have been entered in 1637, 1685, 1686 and beyond. La Courbe (a trader) also gave a vivid account of sabar practices during his “Premier voyage du Sieur de La Courbe fait á la Coste d’Afrique en 1685,” which appeared in print in 1913. During his travels along the Senegal River to trade with the local village chiefs, La Courbe described a performance of sabar music. The drums were played with one hand and a stick and were accompanied by singers and dancers.<sup>27</sup>

Earlier on, I mentioned that praise poetry and gift exchange are both characteristics of taasu. In the following section, I will first provide a description of praise poetry because the practices of griots and griottes are described as praise poetry. So, by describing praise poetry, it becomes clear where taasu is situated with other cultures with similar verbal practices. We will then proceed to discuss taasu as gift exchange. The discussion will further show that taasu is not just praise poetry. Taasu is different because it is a gift a taasukat gives and in turn receives.

## **Praise Poetry: The Foundation Of Taasu**

To discuss praise poetry, I will now turn to the literary scholar Thomas A. Hale whose research in West Africa brought to light the flourishing, hitherto unknown, world of the female wordsmiths (griottes). He describes praise singing as the most audible form of griot’s participation in public or social events.<sup>28</sup> Praise singing is usually about the works and qualities of someone. It can also be used to insult or damage the reputation of a person. Praise singing can also be a narrative of the past (like epics) or the present. It is also important to state that praise singing is not an invention of the griots because it can be found all over Africa. For example, the Yoruba in south-western Nigeria have a complex form of praise singing called oriki and other evidence of praise singing has also been traced to Ghana among the *jamu*.<sup>29</sup> The Zulus’ in South Africa also have the *Izibongo* self-praise practice.

Taasu is a form of praise poetry performed by Wolof women during family events such as naming ceremonies. The meaning of taasu can be broken down as follows: ‘taas’ means to associate or cause to participate. It also means the praise name declaimed by a dancer. Finally, it means to sing one’s slogan or praises before dancing.<sup>30</sup> Context plays a key role in taasu performance. For instance, it is only during the presence of an audience that a performance of taasu is said to have existed. With the coming of television and radio, taasu performed via the

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas A. Hale, *Griots and Griottes*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 115.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>30</sup> Lisa McNee, *Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women's Autobiographical Discourses*, (New York: State University of New York press, 2000), 25-27.

mass media has been frowned upon and regarded by some Senegalese as not taasu because of the absence of an audience. Taasukat have been clever enough to say that when they broadcast live on television or radio, they dedicate their performances to the people of Senegal listening to them.<sup>31</sup> Audience participation is important during a performance because the audience are not just spectators but collaborators. They help repeat the refrain and interpret the meaning of the poem.<sup>32</sup> Taasu is widely regarded a female genre mainly because its performance takes place during ‘women ceremonies’ or ceremonies that women play an active role in such as; naming ceremonies, baptisms and weddings. This is not to say that men are barred from performing taasu but there is a gender demarcation between women and men in Wolof societies. It can be argued that it is this demarcation that has helped secure taasu in the hands of women.<sup>33</sup>

McNee explains that taasu is an exchange of a socio-economic nature. This exchange occurs in two ways. The first way can be compared to praise singing because an immediate reward is expected. The taasukat receive gifts from their patrons when they perform. The second aspect of the exchange occurs during the performance. For instance, one woman’s taasu can provoke a reaction from another woman in the audience who might respond with a taasu. This kind of support a woman receives from a mate (usually a friend) has social relevance. When a woman’s taasu is supported by another she is respected. The one who gains this respect is then obliged to repeat the favour when the opportunity arises.<sup>34</sup>

Taasu is in most cases improvised. The poem can be short or long depending on the circumstances. During a performance, the performer adds new lines to the poem and the performance can last as long as the performer can keep the audience interested. Taasu poems can be used in different contexts and take on different meanings. Both professional and amateur taasu musicians can perform in the same ceremonies. These ceremonies can be the naming ceremony of a child known as *ngente* or at a ceremony called *he ceet* when a bride leaves her parents to join her husband in matrimony.<sup>35</sup> Informally, taasu can be performed at any occasion. For instance, young girls perform taasu when they play together. Young girls (between the ages of nine and fifteen) are known to perform erotic taasu which, as McNee claims, can be a form of sex education since no formal sex education training for girls exists.<sup>36</sup>

The general notion is that taasu is reserved for the artisans (*g w l* caste) but McNee claims that some women of the noble castes are also quite capable.<sup>37</sup> Also, women residents in rural areas have more performance experience than those residing in urban areas. Caste, as was

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>33</sup> The discussion on why taasu is a feminine genre is an interesting area to investigate but since that will take this paper in a different direction, I have avoided it entirely. My informants during my field trip to Senegal mentioned that some men do perform a kind of taasu known as *kebetu* (which is a male version of taasu). It is unclear what this *kebetu* is or how it differs from taasu and McNee does not discuss it in her book.

<sup>34</sup> McNee, *Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women's Autobiographical Discourses*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

discussed at the beginning of this chapter, plays an important role in Senegalese societies and a discourse of Senegalese music without any reference to the caste system will be incomplete. In general, women of géwél castes are more likely to perform taasú in public which invariably makes them better performers than those from noble castes. Although it is true that women of the géwél and Laobé castes can be regarded as masters of taasú.<sup>38</sup>

Figure 2 and three below are two taasú with contrasting meanings and purposes.<sup>39</sup> The reason for choosing these two taasú is to introduce the discussion of the social role of taasukat which will be discussed in great detail in chapter three. The claim by scholars such as Sajani 2013; Panzacchi 1994; and Ebron 2002 is that taasukat always act out of selfish interests. These two taasú in my view agree and disagree with that claim.

Figure 2.

Faatu J.	Faatu J.
Jabar ju la xállal sa kér	The woman who clears (tidies) her house
Ba sa njaboot dekk	So that her family (has room to) live there
Moo ma genal	Pleases me more
Ku la xállal sa ker	Than she who clears her house
ba sa njaboot tuxu	of her family (so that her family moves out)

Chorus:

Faatu J.	Faatu J.
Jabar ju la xállal sa kér	The woman who clears her house
Ba sa njaboot dekk	To make room for her family
Kooka jarna fas u Naar	That one is worth an Arab horse
Jar na naaru góor	She's worth a stallion
Jar na oto	And deserves a car
Waaye, jabar ju la xállal sa ker	But a woman who clears her house
Bas sa njaboot tuxu	So that the family leaves
Kooku jarna yat u kel	That one deserves a wooden club
Jar na door ba dee	She deserves to be beaten to death

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 35.

Chorus:

Ewaay jabar na la jig	Oh, may you have a wife who brings you luck
Jabar bu la jigee	With the woman who suits your destiny
Loo yóotu jot ko	Whatever you attempt will succeed
Jabar na la jig	May your wife improve your fate
Jabar bu la jigul	If your wife brings you no luck
Loo sákkeet ca la	Whatever you build will fall
Jabar na la jig	May your wife bring you luck

This taasuu was performed at a baptism in Louga in 1993. This taasuu shows the emphasis put on public reputation and social relationships. This type of taasuu is used when a woman refuses to share food with her extended family (e.g. her husband's sisters). The taasuu is used to humiliate Faatu but also to teach her to behave correctly. McNee mentions that taasuu of this nature, with its trivial and scandalous connotations, is not suitable in such a ceremony because the head of the household is a religious leader. But because the women wanted to settle their affairs with Faatu, they disobeyed protocol.<sup>40</sup> The taasuu has a chorus and a verse; the chorus repeats the verse with some minor changes. McNee does not discuss the actual performance of a taasuu in depth but I would imagine that the audience already knew the taasuu and could join in during the performance.

The above taasuu supports the claim that taasukat act out of self interest. For instance, McNee claims that taasuu such as the above is used to humiliate Faatu for refusing to share food. Secondly, the taasukat disregarded protocol and performed the taasuu because they wanted to prove a point to Faatu. However, the content of the taasuu in Figure 3 renders a different picture of taasukat. It shows us that they can also be sympathetic to the plight of suffering people around them. The poem warns people not to travel to Mauritania because of the conflict there.

Figure 3 below shows another fragment. The theme in this taasuu is different when compared to the taasuu above. I chose this taasuu because it demonstrates that taasukat also include in their poems issues of conflicts (like war) and not only issues that concern women. This taasuu reflects the performer's experiences during the ethnic cleansing in Mauritania in 1989.<sup>41</sup>

Figure 3.

Waay Gànnàar duma fa dox di	Oh, Mauritania, I will not go
-----------------------------	-------------------------------

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 13.

Dee	there to die
Ni siggi dee	If you raise your head, you die
Taxaw dee	stand, you die
Gestu dee	look, you die
Foo yengu mu dig dee	wherever you move, death promises to come
Dee gaanga Gànnaar	death is in Mauritania
Gànnaar дума fa dox di dee	mauritania! I will not go there to die

## Taasu Rhythm

Lisa McNee is an authority on the subject of taasu. Her book written in the year 2000 is still a gold mine. As a female researcher, she was able to enter into the private world of the taasukat, a feat that would have been difficult for a male researcher. On the other hand, I will criticise her work for one reason; the absence of a discussion on the musical properties of taasu (especially its rhythm). Knowledge of the place of rhythm in taasu is important because Senegalese rappers make reference to rap and taasu as poetry recited to a beat.

I am aware that McNee is not a musicologist or an anthropologist but a literary scholar. So, she could be exonerated for the lack of musical descriptions in her book. However, from an ethnomusicologist's point of view, some form of explanation of the kind of harmony, melody and rhythm used by these women while performing would have enhanced her book. In *Masters of the Sabar*, Tang mentions that sabar musicians learned their rhythmic phrases from listening to taasu.<sup>42</sup> I suspect that sabar music and taasu have a connection that McNee's book does not discuss. McNee does mention that taasu musicians performed with drummers and dancers but she does not describe them. It is vital that information about the role of rhythm in taasu is verified because it will aid the discourse to clarify the allegations by Senegalese musicians such as this: that rap and taasu are said to be similar because they both recite poems to beats. From my experience of visiting Senegal and from the demonstration by male Senegalese musicians of what taasu sounds like, there was frequent reference to the sabar for rhythmic support.<sup>43</sup> It is confusing that sabar musicians or sabar providing the rhythm for the taasu musicians are often not mentioned in other literatures. I have searched the literature and the internet without much success. For instance, in his blog titled *The Ethnolyric Blog* posted on November 14, 2010, Ali Colleen Neef described taasu but not the sabar musicians:

---

<sup>42</sup> See footnote 14.

<sup>43</sup> I have already mentioned in this chapter that taasu and sabar depend on each other. For instance, sabar drumming has been derived from rhythmic speech patterns in taasu. On the other hand, taasu performances are often accompanied by sabar drums.

The powerful word play and voicecraft of *tassou* is primarily the domain of regional women called *tassoukats*, whose work as griots includes narrating the marriages, rites of passage, infant naming ceremonies of neighbors and leaders; announcing community events door-to-door; MCing community events and soireés; and performing their *tassou* onstage as popular recording artists, often with a full backing band and dancers.

Aissata Sidikou-Morton is a scholar of the verbal art of women (mainly of West Africa) and a former student of Thomas Hale. In “Revealing Things Revealed: Zamu and Taasu as Poetic Expression,” she compares *taasu* and the Songhay-Zarma *zamu* of Niger and examines how these two musical practices address issues that concern women and negotiate power.

*Zamu* and *taasu* are not only meant for an audience of many people. They can be sung by one person and directed to another person. The person to whom they are directed could be a baby girl or boy, in the case of the *zamu*. Both *zamu* and *taasu* can be sung for one’s daughter or son, a good brother, sister, good in-laws, or any person who is acknowledged by society either because of his or her qualities such as generosity, talent, good morals. *Zamu* and *taasu*, therefore, are dedicated to praise and to exalt but at the same time they can be created to belittle, slander, or destroy a name or life. All qualities can be combined in one single *zamu* or *taasu*. In some cases, they develop one single theme or issue. But some *zamu* and *taasu* do not need to refer to a name. They can be composed in accordance to height, look or anything that is tied to the day to day life of the Songhay-Zarma and Lebu woman. They integrate them into the dynamics of their existence. *Zamu* and *taasu* can be sung for a collective purpose.<sup>44</sup>

At first glance, the above quotation seems irrelevant in the discussion about the role of rhythm in *taasu* performances. But there is more to the above quotation. The fact that *Zamu* and *taasu* are dedicated to a child, brother and sister or the referral to single persons suggests that this kind of song or poem is perhaps more often suited for a smaller gathering. This kind of gathering is perhaps small (or private) and only seldom are *Zamu* and *taasu* performed in public for a bigger audience. For instance, a bigger audience is expected during a political campaign because there is often a need for a bigger celebration and only then drummers and dancers are required. Another big occasion might be during a recording session. Usually musicians want to present a record that is easily marketable. In addition, perhaps the frequent omission of the role of rhythm in *taasu* could result from the very nature of *taasu* being improvised. *Taasu* poems are sometimes spontaneously performed without any rhythmic accompaniment. Perhaps this explains why drummers are not usually needed or why scholars do not see the need to include rhythm as part of its practice.

---

<sup>44</sup> Aissata Sidikou-Morton, “Revealing Things Revealed: Zamu and Taasu as Poetic Expression,” In *Carmel Tracks; Critical Perspectives on Sahelian Literatures*, eds. Deborah Boyd-Buggs & Joyce Hope Scott, (Asmara: Africa World Press, 2003), 202.

Furthermore, it is a mistake to totally rule out the use of rhythm during taasu performances. I will now give an account of my visit to Senegal when a sabar musician tried to demonstrate to me how taasu is performed. My informant learnt to perform in the taasu style by listening to his mother, who is a taasukat. The encounter with this informant took place on two occasions. During the first encounter, he performed the poems with the help of some sabar players accompanying him on the sabar. However, during the second encounter, he was without the sabar but instead kept the rhythm by clapping his hands. The latter is very popular in Africa (and I suppose in most other cultures too because I have witnessed it here also in the Netherlands during a birthday ceremony when people sing the birthday song *Lang zal ze leven*). As a young boy, I witnessed on several occasions that during an age group meeting at our home, the women began singing and clapped their hands.

To conclude this discussion of the use of rhythm, I turn to a musical example to demonstrate that rhythm (and sabar drumming in particular) is a regular albeit neglected feature of taasu. On commercial recordings by the famous taasukat Aby Ngana Diop sabar drummers can be heard playing not just in the background but contributing a call and response rhythmic performance. Diop is the first *taasukat* who started recording her performances in the early 1990s. One of her famous recordings is *Thioissanou-Ngewel: Liital* (1994) and in this record there is extensive use of sabar drumming.<sup>45</sup> One of the pieces she performed that became popular is “Dieleul.” “Dieleul” means “Take It.” In an interview posted on *Hip Deep*, Patricia Tang mentions that with “Dieleul” one can experience firsthand the relationship between taasu and sabar drumming. The sabar musicians that featured on this album are from the Mbaye family (the same family Tang worked with while in Senegal). She reported that the *bakk* (musical phrase) played on this track is continually used by Sabar musicians. Here we see how sabar musicians learn from taasu while at the same time contributing to taasu’s performance.

Thus far, this chapter has explained and criticised the way taasu has been researched. I will now turn to the second subject of our discussion which is American rap. I will begin with a description of the history of rap starting with the Bronx in New York and proceed to discuss the key innovators in rap together with their innovations. Then I will briefly describe types of rap and finish the discussion with my critique of the way rap has been researched and written about.

## Rap Music: A Cathartic Outlet And An Entertainment Genre

---

<sup>45</sup> Diop, Aby Ngana, “Thioissanou-Ngewel: Liital,” *Dakar: Midi Musique*, 1994. Audio clips from this album is also available on YouTube.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrJUyH1qATA>

The United States is a culturally diverse country. With such cultural diversity, it is no wonder US American popular music reflects a cross-fertilization of styles. A nation of immigrants, US Americans have used their diversity to create a musical laboratory.<sup>46</sup> The influence of American musics is arguably one of the most flourishing in recent times, since American music can be heard in every corner of the globe and has influenced countless other cultures just as it was influenced by others. In essence, it has been a journey of give and take and the story of rap is no different.

The United States is located in North America, bordering both the North Atlantic Ocean and the North Pacific Ocean and situated between Canada and Mexico. The United States has a total mass of 9, 826,675 sq km about half the size of Russia and about three-tenths the size of Africa. It is about half the size of South America (slightly larger than Brazil and China) and twice the size of the European Union.<sup>47</sup> US America has a population of 316, 668, 567 as of July 2013. The ethnic groups in America as of 2007 estimate divides the population into:- white 79.96%, black 12.85%, Asian 4.43%, Amerindian and Alaska native 0.97%, native Hawaiian and other Pacific islander 0.18%, two or more races 1.61%. Languages spoken in the United States are; English, Spanish, Indo-European, Asian and Pacific island and other unclassified languages. The religions in US America are: Protestant (the highest percentage of the population), followed by Roman Catholic, Mormon, other Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Muslim, Other or unspecified and Unaffiliated.<sup>48</sup>

The diverse heritage of the founders of Hip-hop or rap music is a reflection of the diversity described above. Hip-hop had a very humble beginning in the small, densely populated area of the Bronx in New York City.<sup>49</sup> The South Bronx had a very bad image in the 70s with abandoned buildings, stripped, burned and rotting. Crime rate was high and gangsters ruled the streets. But before the South Bronx became a shadow of itself, that area had been home to an ethnically mixed and diverse neighbourhood where as one resident put it “everybody knew each other...”<sup>50</sup> However, there was a mass exodus of the middle-class to the North Bronx due to the massive highway construction. This broke established communities apart and also helped spark a process of urban decay. Before the Bronx became a homestead for gangsters, it resembled a constituency with apartment buildings. What differentiated it from other neighbourhoods in New York was its rent control system. Rent controls were usually a family affair that were passed down. In 1959, the then Park Commissioner Robert Moses approved the building of an expressway through the Bronx.<sup>51</sup> With this construction came the

---

<sup>46</sup> Larry Starr and Waterman Christopher, “American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3,” *U. S. Department Of State Bureau Of International Information Programs*, (2008), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. Factbook.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> I will use the term Hip-hop or rap interchangeably, although rap is a movement within hip-hop the movement.

<sup>50</sup> Hall Trish, “A South Bronx Very Different from the Cliche,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 1999. Accessed October 25, 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Hager Steven, *Hip-hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti*, (New York: St. Martin's Press 1984), 1-3.

destruction of the community and the Bronx later fell into the hands of gangsters who became landlords but never improved any of the facilities.

Three disc jockeys or DJs have been credited with the early beginnings of Hip-hop and rap. We can even call these DJs Hip-hop celebrities because their voices are in almost every important book written on the subject. The DJs are; Kool Herc (his real name is Clive Campbell), Grandmaster Flash (Joseph Saddler) and Afrika Bambaataa (Kevin Donovan). The historian Tricia Rose (sometimes referred to as the Diva of Hip-hop because of her extensive study of and writings on the subject) divides the territories of the DJs as follows; “Kool Herc’s territory was the west Bronx, Afrika Bambaataa dominated the Bronx River East, DJ Breakout’s territory was the north of Bronx and lastly Grandmaster Flash controlled the southern and central sections.”<sup>52</sup> Since DJ Breakout is not frequently mentioned for his role in the creation of Hip-hop or rap, I suspect that he was a minor figure. He (Breakout) mentioned in an interview that he was highly influenced by what Bambaataa and Herc were doing at the time.<sup>53</sup>

The story of the beginnings of Hip-hop or rap starts with Disc jockey Cool Herc who immigrated from Jamaica to the United States in 1976 and settled in the West Bronx.<sup>54</sup> DJ Cool Herc realized that the New York black crowd would not dance to reggae so he started talking over the Latin-tinged funk to get the crowd to dance. He would recite phrases like “Rock on my mellow! This is the joint!”<sup>55</sup> DJ Herc says that the words used by the rappers originate from the neighbourhood. In his own words, “it’s like we were talking to a friend of ours out there in the crowd.”<sup>56</sup> Herc was also credited for creating “break-beat” or “b-beat.”<sup>57</sup> Break-beat is simply an extension of instrumental breaks in a song to create room for endless percussion-like rhythms. Often, these rhythms are syncopated and use polyrhythms. Herc realized that he could repeat these breaks while he spoke to the crowd. So, he bought several copies of the same records that had these breaks and would play them simultaneously while being extra mindful of their precise timing so that he could cut from one deck to the other, thereby extending the length of the breaks. It was sometimes difficult for Herc to focus on the timing while also speaking to the crowd, so he hired MCs who would dance in front of the deck bouncing lines off each other and “rap” was born.<sup>58</sup> While some DJs who were impressed by what Herc was doing at the time merely replicated his techniques, others were just as creative and invented new techniques of dee-jaying like “scratching.”

---

<sup>52</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (Hannover & London: University Press of New England, 1994), 53.

<sup>53</sup> Troy Smith, “An Interview with DJ’s Breakout and Baron and their Funky MC’s,” *OldSchoolhiphop.com* dedicated to Hip-hop prior to 1986, July 1<sup>st</sup> 2011. Accessed September 20, 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Dick Hebdige, “Rap and Hip-hop: The New York Connection,” In *That’s the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, eds. Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony (New York: Routledge, 2004), 257.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> George Nelson, “Hip-hop’s Founding Father Speak the Truth,” In *That’s the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, eds. Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 57.

<sup>57</sup> Hebdige, “Rap and Hip-hop: The New York Connection,” 257-258.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Scratching is a technique that involves two vinyl records playing the same song at the same time. While the songs play, the DJ uses his hands to move the record creating a forward and backward motion. DJs use this technique to create a distinctive sound that sometimes alters the rhythm. DJ Grandmaster Flash is credited with perfecting this technique although, Grandmaster Wizard Theodore (who was only thirteen at the time) is said to have invented the technique of scratching.<sup>59</sup>

Hip-hop as a cultural form seeks to replicate the experience of marginalization and oppression of US African-American and Caribbean history, identity and community.<sup>60</sup> Hip-hop has a long tradition that also involves Puerto Rican youths.<sup>61</sup> Charlie Chase as a member of the Cold Crush Brothers (a predominantly black group) came up with the look rap is known for today; the leather and stud look.<sup>62</sup> Hip-hop culture involves graffiti, break dance, dress, language and rap.<sup>63</sup> I will briefly describe the key elements of Hip-hop culture.<sup>64</sup> The role of dance in Hip-hop is ignored by most scholars, instead, they search for meaning in rap lyrics.<sup>65</sup> I would suspect that while most scholars researching this subject of rap would have had music education or related training or experience, hardly would they have had dance lessons or are professional dancers. This might be the reason why dance is not discussed in literature.

Another element of Hip-hop culture is the mode of dressing. The dress culture in Hip-hop is traced to the influence of Afrocentrism popularised by Molefi Kete Asante beginning in the 1980s.<sup>66</sup> So what is Afrocentrism? The African-American culture scholar Gerald Early defined Afrocentrism “as a cultural and political movement whose mainly African American adherent regard themselves and all other blacks as syncretic Africans and believe that their worldview should positively reflect traditional African values.”<sup>67</sup> Early also describes Afrocentrism in a broader sense: scholarship or assumption that exhibits a white or

---

<sup>59</sup> Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 53.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Most of the accounts about Puerto Rican youth’s contribution to hip-hop have been about their involvement with graffiti. While that may be true, they also did contribute to the creation of rap through DJ Charlie Chase.

<sup>62</sup> Juan Flores, “Puerto Rocks: Rap, Roots and Amnesia,” In *That’s the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, eds. Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 81.

<sup>63</sup> Hebdige, “Rap and Hip-hop: The New York Connection,” 256.

<sup>64</sup> Not much information about dance in hip-hop is contained in the literature that I have come across.

<sup>65</sup> Greg Dimitriadis, “Hip-hop: From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative,” *Popular Music*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (May, 1996), 180.

<sup>66</sup> Gaglo Pero Dagbovie, “‘Of All Our Studies, History Is Best Qualified to Reward Our Research’: Black History’s Relevance to the Hip-hop Generation,” *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 90, No. 3, The History of Hip-hop(Summer, 2005), 305.

<sup>67</sup> Gerald Early, “Afrocentrism,” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*, 2013. Accessed December 26 2013. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/766312/Afrocentrism>>.

Eurocentric bias in support of white or Eurocentric political or social hegemony.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, that African or non-white world view have been suppressed by the Western world and that “African peoples can come to a full self-determination and full humanity only when they are permitted first to overthrow and denounce white or Eurocentric premises and secondly when they can fully realize and articulate their view and consciousness through their own self-creation.”<sup>69</sup> The tenet of Afrocentrism demands that African culture must be treated as original, unique, and distinct. It does not need a European connection, legitimization, and imprimatur to make it legitimate.<sup>70</sup> The Eurocentric view gives the impression that Africa is a dark continent and that the inhabitants are cannibals, savages, inferior, backward and without a history. This mindset permeated Europe and other parts of the world including US America. So it became imperative that black people in the United States would use the advantage of education and history to free themselves from this backward mentality created by Eurocentrism. So having defined what Afrocentrism is, it also crucial to emphasize that Afrocentrism is not anti-white and that it is not a form of racism.

Afrocentrism has various movements or facets.<sup>71</sup> Afrocentrism can be traced to earlier forms of black nationalist thought, the black aesthetics of the 1970s, black power of the 1960s, Pan-Africanism and Ethiopianism (especially the teachings of Jamaican Marcus Garvey who promoted the idea of an African diaspora and called for a separate state for US African Americans).<sup>72</sup> In his Detriot speech delivered on November 10, 1963, the Pan-Africanist Malcom X said:

The Black man has no self-confidence; he has no confidence in his own race because the white man (European) destroyed you and my past; he destroyed our knowledge of our culture and by having destroyed it, now we don't know of any achievement, any accomplishment and as long as you can be convinced that you never did anything, you can never do anything.

Malcom X's speech was a call for African people to use the weapons of history and education to begin to write their own story, their own history and to begin to make sense of the world around them and their unique contributions to it.<sup>73</sup> Other important figures in the Afrocentric movement are: W.E.B. Du Bois, Léopold Senghor, Maulana Karenga.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Gerald Early, “Afrocentrism: From Senstaionalism to Measured Deliberation,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 5 (Autumn, 1994), 86.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Linus A. Hoskins, “Eurocentrism vs. Afrocentrism: A Geopolitical Linkage Analysis,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Special Issue: The Image of Africa in German Society (Dec., 1992), 251.

<sup>71</sup> The aim is not to discuss all the movements or facets of Afrocentrism because this will require more research than just a brief description as is done here.

<sup>72</sup> Early, “Afrocentrism,” 86.

<sup>73</sup> Linus A. Hoskins, “Eurocentrism vs. Afrocentrism: A Geopolitical Linkage Analysis,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Special Issue: The Image of Africa in German Society (Dec., 1992), 249.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

In the 1980s, Hip-hop musicians were highly influenced by the Afrocentric movement. For instance, Molefe Kete Asante and a host of other black thinkers routinely lectured in major colleges and Universities to spread the teachings of Afrocentrism. Also, during this period, African medallions, ankh pendants, and afrocentric gears became the norm and Hip-hop musicians willingly adopted these gears as black historical memorabilia.<sup>75</sup> Hip-hop musicians were also influenced by the teachings of the Pan-Africanist Malcom X. For instance, in the 1990s, Malcom X was resurrected by Boogie Down Production's album *By All Means Necessary* (1988) and by Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X*. In the 1990s, X hats, T-shirts with Malcolm and other black leaders, and other sorts of black historical memorabilia were popular and fashionable.<sup>76</sup>

Graffiti, another aspect of Hip-hop culture, is not just about self-expression. According to Rose, "Graffiti artists spray painted murals and name 'tags' on trains, trucks and playgrounds, claiming territories and inscribing their otherwise contained identities on public property."<sup>77</sup> In *The Rap Attack* the music scholar David Toop claims that Hip-hop (or rap) is rooted in the West African practice of storytelling. In US America, however, the terminologies used to refer to these practices are;- "toasting," "signifying" and the "dozens." The West African cultural practices re-echoed in US African-American music emphasise the importance of 'good talkers.'<sup>78</sup> Toops claims will be discussed in more detail in Chapter three.

Finally, Afrika Bambaataa is a pioneering figure in the youth development of Hip-hop. Bambaataa a former gang member of The Black Spades formed the Zulu Nation<sup>79</sup> after watching the film *Zulu* about the war between the Zulus and the British.<sup>80</sup> The Zulu Nation is dedicated to the fight for peace and survival. It was established after Bambaataa's visit to Africa; the communities he visited inspired him to stop the violence and create a community in his own neighbourhood. The Zulu Nation consisted of break-dancers and rappers alike and was popular among the youths from the Bronx to Manhattan and many other cities.

Before we turn to the topic of gangster rap, it is imperative to discuss women's participation in rap. I will only give a brief summary of female rappers because the discourse on women's participation in rap is broad and beyond the scope of this chapter. Although, rap is male dominated, women have always played a significant role as artists. Female rappers use the medium to tell stories of their encounter in a male dominated and sometimes violent environment where drug dealing is rampant and women are looked upon as sex objects. They also rap about some black men's failure to provide for their family.<sup>81</sup> Famous female rappers include; Roxanne Shante (first female rapper) Queen Latifah, Salt N Pepa (first female rap

---

<sup>75</sup> Dagbovie, "'Of All Our Studies, History Is Best Qualified to Reward Our Research,' 305.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 53.

<sup>78</sup> Toop David, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-hop*, (London: Pluto Press Limited 1984),32. I will discuss more on the West African story telling tradition in the next chapter.

<sup>79</sup> David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-hop*, (London: Pluto Press Limited 1984),57.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>81</sup> Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 4.

group). Today, there is a long list of female rappers, but the popular ones are; Eve, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, Lauryn Hill, MC Lyte and Missy Elliot.

Now that we have discussed the history and the key figures in the development of rap, let us turn to a discussion of the popular rap styles with some examples.

## Rap Styles

The four most popular rap styles are; Gangsta (Tupac, AMG and Snoop Doggy Dogg or “Snoop Lion” as he is called now), Hip-hop (the Fugees and Heavy D), Political (public enemy and KRS One) and Commercial (M C Hammer and Vanilla Ice).<sup>82</sup> Hip-hop rap is a mosaic of jazz, rhythm and blues, and rap music, while political rap pertains to black power struggles and criticism of the police, government and organized establishments.

Scholars have contrasting opinions about the distinction between political and gangsta rap. This is because political messages are also contained in gangsta rap. For instance, the US American scholar and activist Clarence Lusane claims that gangsta rap is the carrier of rap’s political pedagogy.<sup>83</sup> In contrast to gangsta, political and Hip-hop rap, commercial rap appeals to both US African American and European American populations. Below are the lyrics of the first one minute and eighteen seconds of “Rappers Delight” released in 1979 by the Sugar Hill Gang.<sup>84</sup> What distinguished this rap from the disco of the day was its use of light guitars, funky bass line, hi-hat drumming and handclaps.<sup>85</sup>

Figure 4.

*I said, a Hip-hop the hippie the hippie  
To the hip Hip-hop, a you don't stop  
The rock it to the bang, bang boogie  
Say up jumped the boogie*

*To the rhythm of the boogie, the beat  
Now what you hear is not a test I'm rappin' to the beat*

---

<sup>82</sup> Pamela D. Hall, “The relationship between types of rap music and memory in African American children,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 28(6), (1998), 802-803.

<sup>83</sup> Clarence Lusane, “Rap, Race and Politics,” In *That’s the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, eds. Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 410.

<sup>84</sup> “Sugarhill Gang-Rapper's Delight Lyrics,” YouTube video, 7:10, posted by “BradderzMusic,” Retrieved September 25, 2013.

<sup>85</sup> David Samuels, “The Rap on Rap: ‘The Black Music’ that Isn’t Either,” In *That’s the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, eds. Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 177.

*And me, the groove and my friends  
Are gonna try to move your feet*

*See I am Wonder Mike and I like to say hello  
To the black, to the white, the red and the brown  
The purple and yellow  
But first I gotta bang, bang the boogie to the boogie  
Say up jump the boogie to the bang bang boogie*

*Let's rock, you don't stop  
Rock the riddle that will make your body rock  
Well so far you've heard my voice  
But I brought two friends along  
And next on the mike is my man Hank  
Come on, Hank, sing that song*

Most gangsta raps contain graphic and derogatory language, advocates violence and the use of drugs and down-plays the importance of women.<sup>86</sup> In the late 1980s and early 1990s gangsta rap lyrics were known for their violent lyrics. They protested police brutality and highlighted violence as the norm in black communities.<sup>87</sup>

Jon Pareles (American journalist and the chief popular-music critic in the arts section of the New York Times) has written several articles about rap and gangster rap in particular. In one of his articles, he describes gangsta rap as follows:

Gangster rappers write rhymes about inner-city violence, sometimes as cautionary tales, sometimes as fantasies and sometimes as chronicles without comment. The genre also calls for a detailed put-down (with threats of violence) of anyone the rappers dislike, and at least a song or two per album about sexual exploits. With its jumble of brilliance and stupidity, of conscience and crassness, of vivid storytelling and unexamined conventions, gangster rap is as profoundly mixed as any pulp genre in American culture... Like other African-American musical and literary forms, gangster rap almost always carries multiple meanings simultaneously; its writers mix storytelling, mock-documentaries, political lessons, irony and self-promotion in unpredictable proportions, often defying simple summaries.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Jeanita, "Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America's Culture of Violence in Context," 176.

<sup>88</sup> Pareles Jon, "POP VIEW: Gangster Rap: Life and Music in the Combat Zone," *New York Times*, October 07, 1990, accessed September 20, 2013.

For some perspective on the contents of gangsta rap we turn to “The Geto Boys” from Houston. The group was attacked for their "Mind of a Lunatic," a gore-splattered song written from the point of view of a psychotic rapist and killer. Figure 5 shows the lyrics of the song:<sup>89</sup>

Figure 5.

1. *I sit alone in my four-cornered room*
2. *staring at candles*
3. *Dreamin' of people I've dismantled*
4. *I close my eyes and in the circle*
5. *appears the images of sons of*
6. *bitches I've murdered . . .*
7. *Once I attack I'm like a pit on a rage*
8. *that's going for guts*
9. *Boys used to die when I full of that fry*
10. *I be ebbing when I'm high I say*
11. . . . *just let the bullets fly*
12. *Like I said before, Scarface is my identity*
13. *I'm a homicidal maniac with suicide tendencies*
14. *I'm on the violent tip as you'll get a grip.*

The lyrics from “Geto Boys” above display the anguish, fear, grief, depression of a youth who only thinks of violence while under the influence of drugs as depicted in line ten: ‘I be ebbing when I’m high I say.’ The tone of the lyrics is harsh and violence against women is visible in line six where he referred to women as ‘bitches.’ Although in formal spoken English, a bitch is a female dog, rappers use this word to refer to women who are annoying and whine excessively. The entire section of the lyrics quoted is ‘covered in blood.’ This lyric is an example of the violence gangsta rap ‘represents’ and also the reason why policy makers, institutions and parents fight for rap to be banned in US America because of its influence on children. Gangster rappers are themselves the victim of the violence they preach. The lives of these gangstas also end in violent fashion. Tupac Amaru Shakur (popularly known as Tupac) is an example. I was a young boy in 1996 and in my third year of high school when the news of the death of Tupac was broadcast all over the world. I was deeply saddened because Tupac was like a hero to my friends and I back in Nigeria. I even owned a T-Shirt of Tupac with the inscription “All Eyez on Me” which was the title of his fourth album. What I can remember from my high school days was that we had a passionate literature teacher who made us memorise lots of poems. Apart from reciting poems from the school curriculum, Tupac’s

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

lyrics provided an opportunity to practice a different kind of poem; the lyrics of rappers. Since rap was popular, anyone who could reproduce Tupac's rap verbatim was envied. Tupac was a popular gangster musician who was assassinated one night after leaving the Mike Tyson-Bruce Seldon prizefight. The story was that "a Cadillac pulled up alongside the BMW in which he was riding and he was shot four times."<sup>90</sup> Tupac's lyrics epitomized violence and it is not surprising that he died a violent death. Pareles noted that some of Tupac's raps glamorized the life of the "player," a high-living macho gangster while in other raps, he portrayed the life of a gangster as full of desperation, self-destructive existence of fear and sudden death. "Tupac described gangsterism as a vicious cycle, a grimly inevitable response to racism, ghetto poverty and police brutality."<sup>91</sup>

Since we are still on the topic of hip-hop, let us briefly discuss hip-hop in Senegal. The ethnomusicology Patricia Tang writes that Senegalese rap or hip-hop started in the late 1980s. Just like their US American counterparts, Senegalese youths found in hip-hop a medium to express their dissatisfaction and frustrations with the social, economic and political problems of the time.<sup>92</sup> Before rap, *mbalax* (Senegalese popular music) was the only dominant musical genre. Senegalese rap has been greatly influenced by American Hip-hop although the rappers use their native Wolof tongue (along with French and English). Their raps cover various topics such as crime, corruption, HIV/AIDS, poverty and ethnic strife. Senegalese rappers seem to have a remarkable influence on the political scene in Senegal. For instance, in the year 2000, Senegalese rappers were at the forefront in the election of President Abdoulaye Wade.<sup>93</sup> Ironically, it was also the rappers in 2011 who prevented Wade from changing the constitution to ensure his third term in office.<sup>94</sup> The list of popular Senegalese rappers is endless, the popular ones are; Didier Awadi, Amadou Barry (aka Doug-E-Tee), and Positive Black Soul.<sup>95</sup>

Although Senegalese rappers sometimes use the French language in their rap lyrics, it is not exactly clear how much French culture has influenced Senegalese Hip-hop. Also, scholars have been drawn to the link made between US American rappers and griots in Senegal. This link seems to suggest that rappers are modern day griots because like griots, rappers are wordsmiths.<sup>96</sup> Secondly, although rap music is now global, the US America rap music scene seems to be the model for all other rap music cultures.

---

<sup>90</sup> Jon Pareles, "Tupac Shakur, 25, Rapper Who Personified Violence, Dies," *New York Times*, September 14, 1996, accessed September 20, 2013.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Patricia Tang, "The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions." in *Hip-hop Africa : New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric Charry. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012), 83.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Adam Nossiter, "In Blunt and Sometime Crude Rap, a Strong Political Voice Emerges" *The New York Times*, September 18, 2011. Accessed December 27, 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Tang, "The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions,"83.

<sup>96</sup> We will discuss the claim that rappers are modern griots in chapter three.

## Remarks on Rap Research

Scholars vary in the way they choose to view and describe rap as a genre. The majority of scholars (especially those consulted during the writing of this thesis) seem to focus their research on socio-political aspects. It is not as if they entirely neglected the entertainment aspect of the genre but their work seems to focus more on the movement or resistance that characterized earlier rap. (Rose 1994; Dyson 2004; Toop 2004; Richardson and Scott 2002; and Keyes 1996). Perhaps a few examples will suffice. Michael Eric Dyson is known for his pioneering explorations of rap music both in academia and beyond. For him, “Rap is a form of profound musical, cultural and social creativity. It expresses the desire of young black people to reclaim their history, reactivate forms of black radicalism and contests the powers of despair and economic depression that presently besiege the black community”<sup>97</sup> Rose calls rap “a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America.”<sup>98</sup> Adam Krims is the only scholar (among the pioneers that started writing scholarly works about rap) to have a contrary opinion on how to situate rap. A scholar in recent music history and an authority on hip-hop, Krims, in his book *Rap music and the poetics of identity* is sceptical about the emphasis on rap music as resistance. Instead, he relates rap music to its cultural and economic dominance all over the world.<sup>99</sup> He says: “Instead of projecting rap music as resistance, I emphasize the cultural and, for that matter, economic dominance of the rap music industry worldwide and its multiple cultural and political effects. Such is the form in which a great many people know it and make it part of their lives: as recorded (and only occasionally live), mass produced and distributed popular culture.”<sup>100</sup> Krims’ claim is compelling because most of today’s mainstream rap has moved away from preaching about marginalisation. Today, the rap music industry is a multi-billion dollar revenue maker for the big conglomerates and rap musicians alike. For example, in 1999 Americans purchased over \$1.5 billion worth of rap and the figure rose to about \$1.8 billion in 2000.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, rap music has become mainstream popular music and many of the musicians have stopped preaching about marginalization, and now only speak about women, cars and wealth. For Afrika Bambaataa, since the beginning of 1979 when the first rap record was produced (referring to the Sugar Hill Gang “Rapper’s Delight) the excitement was disappearing from the music. “We didn’t have the parties, everyone would go out and buy the records...the community created by the hip-hop scene is gone. The ‘us’ syndrome is gone and now what is

---

<sup>97</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, “The Culture of Hip-hop,” In *That’s the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, eds. Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony, (New York: Routledge, 2004),75.

<sup>98</sup> Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 2.

<sup>99</sup> Adam Krims, *Rap music and the poetics of identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Jeanita, “Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America’s Culture of Violence in Context,” 177.

popular is the ‘I’ syndrome and disrespect for women.”<sup>102</sup> While DJ Flash contributed by saying that: “Some people think that in order to cut a hit record you have to be disrespectful, that hip-hop has a large influence on people and people can actually do what you say.”<sup>103</sup>

Finally, with the kind of mass appeal rap has today, it is no wonder that Krims thinks that rap should be viewed as an entertainment genre. However, it would be difficult for American scholars to ignore the resistance aspect. Moreover, it was the socio-economic situation that contributed and shaped what we know today as rap.

## Closing

In the following chapter we will discuss Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry. It will enable us to explain the implications of the call of Afrocentrism to US American rappers to embrace their past. For instance, how the US African-American rappers have formed a relationship with their African past (or African doubles) by virtue of their skin colour and their history through slavery. In musical terms, though, the relationship US African American rappers have with Africa is arguably more visible through how they have responded to the call of Afrocentrism. Afrocentrism did not only criticize Eurocentric views of Africa as a dark continent and the inhabitants as savages but also called for rappers to embrace their ‘Africanness.’ US African American rappers are not Africans. These musicians are citizens of the United States, speak with US American accent and have a different culture to Africans in Africa. But African American rappers still love their African roots, they are attracted to African culture and they have adapted elements of African cultures as was shown in this chapter about rap music.

Furthermore, one aspect of the discourse on rap and taasu that surfaces time and again is the role played by binaries; male/female, long verses (in rap lyrics) versus short reoccurring refrains in taasu and lastly, public and private performance spaces. In rap we find a male dominated genre whereas taasu is basically a female genre in Senegal. Similarly, the binary of public and private space seems to surface in the description of both genres. This binary is particularly interesting in the performance spaces of these two genres. For example, taasu is predominantly performed during naming ceremonies, marriages and in women meetings whereas, rap is publicly performed at parties, in concert halls, clubs and even recorded to be sold to a mass audience. Only in the 1990s, taasu’s first record was made for a mass audience whereas rap’s first record was done in the late 70s. These binaries present more doubts about the assertion made by Senegalese rappers that rap and taasu are similar or that one genre originated from the other. So far, only two areas of convergence between rap and taasu have been discovered from the literature. Firstly, rap has some Afro-diasporic influences which I

---

<sup>102</sup> Nelson, “Hip-hop’s Founding Father Speak the Truth,” 60.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 62.

will revisit in detail in chapter three and secondly, both genres have a similar medium of choice which is words.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Theoretical Foundation

Senegalese musicians employ various ways to suggest that taasu is the predecessor of rap. They refer to taasu as being centuries old for instance. As such, they claim that taasu is the ‘origin’ of the practice of reciting poems to a beat.<sup>104</sup> These musicians use the word ‘tradition’ to suggest that taasu is an old practice that is intertwined with Senegalese culture.

The aim of this chapter is to lay the foundation that will critically examine the claims outlined above. Many lenses have been applied to the problem, each focusing on a different aspect. For example, Homi Bhabha’s mimicry addresses the problem from a postcolonial point of view, while I apply Eric Hobsbawm’s invented tradition theory to give a historical and deconstructivist perspective. I will begin by exploring Homi Bhabha’s work on colonial influence and the problem of reproduction. In his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” Bhabha describes mimicry using various concepts: a difference that is almost the same but not quite, ambivalence, menace and camouflage. I will first explain these concepts and then apply them to the topic of sameness and difference between taasu and rap.

Furthermore, it is imperative to deconstruct the notion of ‘tradition’ which has become especially problematic in a scholarly context. The reader needs to know why I have decided to partially neglect the argument by some Senegalese musicians that taasu is the predecessor of rap. These musicians claim that because taasu is Senegalese/Wolof traditional music practiced from long ago, it is enough to suggest that it is the ‘origin’ of rap. I will revisit Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of invented tradition and will explain how traditions were invented in colonial Africa. I shall also discuss the problem associated with dependence on oral sources as the primary medium of data collection. This is imperative because this thesis makes extensive use of quotations from interviews given by Senegalese musicians. Also, with regard to Senegalese music, manuscript sources are scarce or in some cases non-existent. So in the end, I connected Senegalese musicians’ use of words such as ‘roots,’ ‘origin,’ ‘source’ and ‘tradition’ to Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence.

---

<sup>104</sup> Some of these claims were recorded during an interview I conducted with some of the musicians. Others can be found in interviews online, music lyrics and in scholarly works discussed later in this thesis.

## Mimicry

Homi Bhabha discusses mimicry in “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” in 1994.<sup>105</sup> In this essay, Bhabha uses various concepts to describe mimicry such as: a difference that is almost the same but not quite, ambivalence, menace and camouflage. These concepts could be viewed as interrelated because Bhabha uses them to explain the behaviour of the colonizer and the colonized. In the following paragraphs we shall attempt to explain these concepts.

“Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.”<sup>106</sup> Before I attempt to explain this quotation, it is important to briefly state why imitation or copying became an issue in colonial societies. For instance, in any colonial situation there is the powerful colonizer on the one hand and the colonized with less power and influence on the other. The colonizer uses his power to subdue the colonized and in some cases impose his culture on the colonized. But also, the colonized might willingly adopt some of the culture of the colonizer. The colonized might copy the master’s dress code (suit and tie) for instance. If the colonized copies the master’s language, they might speak with the master’s accent and use similar mannerisms.

The colonized might imitate the colonizer for several reasons. They might be attracted by the colonizer’s authority and the respect it commands, or the wealth of the colonizer or as a way of coping with colonial domination. They might also copy the colonizer because they think that by so doing they (the colonized) might have access to the power of the colonizer. Bhabha uses mimicry to explain that after all the imitation or copying is carried out, there is still a difference between the subject and the object, the self and the other (a difference that is almost the same but not quite). Copying the colonizer also leaves the colonized in a confused state and creates identity problem for the colonized.

It is important to mention that one of the difficulties in comprehending Bhabha’s mimicry is the fluidity of the use of the term ‘Self’ and ‘Other.’ It can be confusing because the terms can be used interchangeably. For instance, if the colonized is described as the reformed, recognizable ‘Other’ the colonizer is the ‘Self.’ But the same ‘Other’ can be used for the colonizer, who for the colonized signifies authority and power. This fluidity of terms is the slippage or ambivalence inherent to the discourse on mimicry. It is then important that the

---

<sup>105</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October*, Vol. 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984), 126. Homi Bhabha is a literary scholar who is also an avid writer on postcolonial issues and debates. Bhabha’s mimicry was first delivered in a lecture organized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for the MLA in New York, December 1983. In 1994, Bhabha’s writings were made into a collection and presented in *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

reader is aware of this 'self' and 'other' fluidity and tries to understand the context in which it is used.

The concept of 'a difference that is almost the same but not quite' also brings to the surface the problem of hybridity. The latter creates difficulty in distinguishing the copy from the original. Bhabha turns to Sigmund Freud to explain the issue of 'a difference that is almost the same but not quite.'<sup>107</sup> Freud narrates the example of people with mixed race origin who are neither white nor black although they display attributes of both races. The disadvantage for such persons is that they are caught in-between the races and never enjoy the privileges of being in one race, and as a result, are excluded from either society.<sup>108</sup> "The 'desire' of mimicry which is Freud's *striking feature* of mimicry that reveals so little but makes such a big difference, is not merely that impossibility of the Other which repeatedly resists signification."<sup>109</sup> It is not exactly clear what the striking feature is in the mixed race example. Let us assume that it is their physical characteristics or cultural dilemma in the case of a child with African and Western blood. The *striking feature* in the mixed race example could be that of the colour of the skin which automatically distinguishes people of mixed race from their parents and other single race people. But it could also be the result of having a mixed cultural standpoint (European and African). However, the point is that people of mixed race are human beings and apart from the colour differences or culture, they lack no other physical attributes of a human person. But because of the colour of their skin or culture (not white not black) mixed race people are viewed by some people in society as lacking a cultural standpoint. They are a product of mimicry because they are brought up in two different cultures and display characteristics of both cultures and this makes it difficult to define who they are. This example is similar to the experience of some colonized people who through the imitation of their masters are alienated from their community because they are seen to resemble the colonizer more than their own people. The danger of the colonized imitating the colonizer creates confusion for the colonizer who then realizes that copying the language, accent or clothing style of the colonizer will not automatically make him superior or to acquire the same status as the oppressor but rather might leave him traumatized. He might even become an object of fear for his people because they can no longer trust him.

Furthermore, Bhabha adds that the desire of mimicry may not have an object, but it has strategic objectives which he calls the *metonymy of presence*. For Bhabha the *metonymy of presence* are inappropriate signifiers of colonial discourse; they are the product of contradictory and multiple belief.<sup>110</sup> The difference between being English and being Anglicised is a case in point. To be Anglicised does not make one English; to be colonized by the British does not make one a citizen of the United Kingdom.

Bhabha also links the idea of mimicry to ambivalence (characterized by uncertainty and fluctuation): "In order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>110</sup> Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," 130.

excess, its difference.”<sup>111</sup> Perhaps this characteristic of mimicry to continually produce its excess and difference is what makes it effective. Since the imitation is always distinct from the original, a difference no matter how subtle is expected from a reproduction. For instance, if one is viewing a painting, one is not bothered about difference unless one is shown a reproduction of that particular painting. We might become judgemental of the second painting, and we might then be interested in what differentiates the one from the ‘Other.’ For one painting to be a mimic or an imitation, we must be able to distinguish unique features present in the original painting that are absent from the fake. But we must also be able to distinguish features that are similar in both paintings. The ambivalence of mimicry requires a similarity and a dissimilarity; it relies on resemblance and, on one painting resembling the other but also remaining different. Similarly, in the ambivalence of mimicry in the colonial context, the colonized becomes like the colonizer but at the same time remains different. The colonial subject then exists as a ‘partial’ presence which Bhabha describes as being ‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual.’<sup>112</sup> The colonial subject is partial because it is neither the product of their culture nor of the colonial masters. They have attributes of both cultures and this duality or double articulation makes them incomplete or virtual. Bhabha gives an Indian example of the ambivalent world of the “not quite/not white.” This example shows how hybridity produces new forms of knowledge, new modes of differentiation and new sites of power. The bible is regarded as a holy book but not to the Indians who decided to use it as ordinary paper for their domestic uses as sanitary or wrapping papers.<sup>113</sup> The story was that the English colonizers tried to evangelize the Indians and gave the Indians Bibles but the Indians were sceptical of the word of God sent to them via the English: “How can the word of God come from the flesh-eating mouths of the English?” The Indian example highlights the psycho-analytical dimension of mimicry, a double vision, a duality of desire and rejection. How can it be the European book, when we believe it is God’s gift to us.<sup>114</sup> The point in this example is not that the Indians question whether the Bible was divinely inspired or not. They are sceptical that the ‘Holy Book’ translated into the native language will diminish its value. Furthermore, that the translation of the Bible into the many languages of India creates a mimic, hybridized word of God, whose authority is now doubled (reproduced in translation) but also less than it was having being separated from the English language it arrived with.

Bhabha also argues that mimicry as ambivalence is both a sign of the ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate.’<sup>115</sup> As a sign of the ‘appropriate’ “mimicry is a sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power.”<sup>116</sup> For instance the colonial masters divided the African continent into nation states so that they could easily control the inhabitants and prevent encroachment by other nations with similar colonial interests. This is how the colonial masters appropriated Africa. The sign of the ‘inappropriate’ “ is a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>114</sup> Childs and Williams, “An introduction to post-colonial theory,” 135.

<sup>115</sup> Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” 126.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.” For instance, colonized peoples in British colonies speak the English language and adopt other cultural activities deemed English but these peoples are not regarded as citizens of the United Kingdom. This is what Bhabha refers to as the inappropriate, a difference or recalcitrance.

Furthermore, Bhabha argues that: “Mimicry is a representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal (not quite, not black not white) and thus the sign of a double articulation: a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power.”<sup>117</sup> Let us explain further how Bhabha views the concept of double articulation with regard to mimicry. The double articulation of mimicry is “a desire that reverses ‘in part’ the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence.”<sup>118</sup> In the paragraphs above, we explained how the colonized through copying the ways of the colonizer becomes a mimic person. The aspect of mimicry involving the colonized is just one aspect of the double articulation of mimicry. There is also a second aspect in which the desire reverses. This time, instead of the colonized being the subject of mimicry, the colonizer takes centre stage. Bhabha calls this stage a gaze of otherness, whereby the observer becomes the observed, whereby the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined.<sup>119</sup>

According to Bhabha, the double articulation of mimicry through its repetition of partial presence articulates issues of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial history.<sup>120</sup> The double articulation of mimicry reveals a duality of not only master/servant but of hate/love. On the one hand, the colonizer and master is loved by the colonized and in some cases the colonized looks up to the colonizer as their model. On the other hand, because of the double dealings of the colonizer who is viewed as both saviour and oppressor, the colonized hates the colonizer. There is also another aspect of double articulation that pertains to the displacing gaze of the colonizer. But since the displacing gaze touches on yet another important aspect of mimicry which is menace, I will proceed to discuss mimicry as menace and then give examples of how the displacing gaze of mimicry affects the colonizer.

Mimicry as menace is the threat posed by the return of the displacing gaze of the disciplined. When we try to copy or reproduce something, be it art, sport, or technology, the result is that, what is reproduced is often not a correct representation of the original. Even more disturbing is that what is reproduced then becomes a threat to the original. This is the kind of situation in which colonizers find themselves. The displacing gaze referred here is that of their disciplinary doubles (the colonized). Bhabha then adds that it is this “conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ mimicry as camouflage portrays that is its threats.”<sup>121</sup> He

---

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

adds: “Ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from mimicry—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite.”<sup>122</sup> The menace comes from ‘partial’ resemblance and a revulsion at kinship. But even more striking is the notion that the menace of mimicry stems from the understanding that within the differences constructed by colonial discourse, to resemble is to threaten the basis of power and discrimination.<sup>123</sup> An example might be useful to clarify how the basis of power can be threatened by the menace of mimicry. In Naipaul’s novel *Guerillas* Jane and Roche travel to the Caribbean Island to reform the natives there but their presence is greeted with suspicion and mockery.<sup>124</sup> The natives are suspicious of the visitors in their midst because they understand that “the Europeans could do one thing and say something quite different...Europeans wanted gold and slaves...but at the same time they wanted statues put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves.”<sup>125</sup> In this example, the ‘doer’ image is mocked and their civilizing mission threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double. This second example from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* shows again how the menace of mimicry threatens the colonizer. The protagonist Marlow seems to have marvelled at the ‘uncivilized’ ways of the natives in the Congo and wonders: “the thought of their humanity -like yours- the thought of their kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly.” In both examples the colonizer is disturbed by the colonizer. In the first the native people’s mockery threatens the colonizer attitude that Jane and Roche travelled to the Caribbean with. In the case of Marlow, it is the humanity of natives, the fact that they like him share the same humanity.

Bhabha’s mimicry is supported by a host of psychoanalytic writings especially those of Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon. He uses “Fanon’s psychoanalytical model in *Black Sins, White Masks* from Fanon’s ‘Algeria Unveiled’ to illustrate the idea of camouflage.”<sup>126</sup> The central idea in Fanon’s work that Bhabha draws from is the idea of the veil, masks and covers used by Algerian women to hide their identity and to sneak in weapons. The veil acts as a camouflage (because any attempt to unveil a woman can steer up violence) and gives the women the freedom to act out their revolutionary activities.<sup>127</sup> Bhabha expands on the notion of Lacan’s mimicry later on in his essay by making the connection to the notion of ambivalence, camouflage and menace. Perhaps to show the centrality of Lacan’s thought to his discussion, Bhabha begins his discussion on mimicry with a quotation from Jacques Lacan *The Line and Light of the Gaze*:

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage .... It is not a question of harmonizing with

---

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>123</sup> Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams, “An introduction to post-colonial theory,” (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), 132.

<sup>124</sup> Sanjiv Kumar, “Bhabha’s Notion of ‘Mimicry’ And ‘Ambivalence’ in V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in The River*, *Researchers World*, Journal of Arts, Science and Commerce, (Vol. II, Issue 4, Oct. 2011), 119.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled- exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.<sup>128</sup>

The kind of camouflage that mimicry exerts Bhabha calls “Identity effects” in the play of power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no ‘itself.’<sup>129</sup> What Bhabha means by “identity effects” is that the colonized copies the colonizer to an extent that the colonized becomes disorientated. If we use the example of Salim, the hero of Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*, what Bhabha means by identity effects becomes clear. Salim expresses this ‘identity effects’ when he asserts that he wanted to sever the ties with ‘self’ in order to move to the ‘other.’ He says: “I wanted to break away. To break away from my family and community also meant breaking away from my unspoken commitment...”<sup>130</sup> This break away that Salim so desperately needs is fuelled by his adoration of the ‘Other’ that for him not only signifies power but wealth. That is why Bhabha says that “mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its otherness, that which it disavows.”<sup>131</sup>

So far the discussion has been on the content of Bhabha’s essay on mimicry. We shall discuss how the wider community perceived his work. In the past scholars critiqued Bhabha’s use of English and his use of concepts. I shall briefly examine some of these criticisms.

Critics of Bhabha’s mimicry theory are appalled by his writing style, his dense prose and his frequent movement from concept to concept.<sup>132</sup> He moves from mimicry to ambivalence, from camouflage to menace. Bhabha says of Fanon that it is the “complex, ambivalent psychical signs and symptoms of the colonial discussion that drive him from one conceptual scheme to another”<sup>133</sup> Perhaps one can say the same of Bhabha’s style of writing. The anthropologist Nicholas Thomas criticises Bhabha’s arguments as follows: “its construction in universalized psychoanalytic terms... conveys a truth about discourse as such, rather than one about colonialism.”<sup>134</sup> However, the different concepts Bhabha uses to describe mimicry caught my attention. Bhabha’s discourse on mimicry is not limited to colonial discourse alone. The debate on sameness and difference in taasu and rap can benefit from the concepts that Bhabha uses, most especially in the order that he uses them; from mimicry to ambivalence, from camouflage to menace. In the following paragraphs, I will show how Bhabha’s mimicry can be applied.

Before we proceed to apply Bhabha’s theory, it will be useful to summarise some of the important aspects of his theory. In brief, mimicry is a mode of colonial discourse that relies on resemblance (on the colonized becoming like the colonizer) and difference (that both the colonizer and the colonized remain different). Mimicry is ambivalent because it requires a

---

<sup>128</sup> Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” 125.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

<sup>130</sup> Kumar, “Bhabha’s Notion of ‘Mimicry’ And ‘Ambivalence’ in V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in The River*, 119.

<sup>131</sup> Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” 132.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 143.

similarity and a dissimilarity ‘a difference that is almost the same but not quite.’ Mimicry exerts a double vision whereby the observer becomes the observed and in this duality there is the dichotomy of ‘self’ versus ‘other’ and a love versus hate relationship. Also, mimicry is a camouflage because it brings up issues of identity effects and causes disorientation of its subject. Lastly, that colonial authority repeatedly turns from mimicry (a difference that is almost nothing but not quite) to menace (a difference that is almost total but not quite). That as menace mimicry threatens the basis of power and discrimination.

In my application of Bhabha’s mimicry, the concepts (mimicry, ambivalence, double articulation, menace and camouflage) are treated as interrelated. They are not treated as single concepts by Bhabha but as interrelated. For instance, we could argue that mimicry as ambivalence is the anchor of Bhabha’s concept while the other concepts like menace, the double articulation of mimicry and camouflage can be viewed as aspects of the duality or multiplicity of the ambivalence of mimicry. The reason is because ambivalence described as similarity and difference encapsulates all other of his concepts. We will now proceed to show how mimicry informs the discussion in this thesis. I will begin by quoting Senegalese musicians who claim that taasu is predecessor of rap.

In her article “The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions” Tang argues that the desire to link rap to taasu by griots and rappers is not new. However, it was in the 1990s that Senegalese rappers and griots claimed that taasu was the ‘true’ predecessor of rap.”<sup>135</sup> Mimicry, I will argue, has been deployed by Senegalese musicians (knowingly or unknowingly) to describe the relationship between taasu and rap. Rap is viewed as a reproduction of taasu; it is similar (because words are recited to a beat) and dissimilar (because rap uses a different kind of beat) to taasu. Below is a statement from Senegalese rapper Didier Awadi in an interview and quoted by Patricia Tang as follows:<sup>136</sup>

What I think personally, is that rap is American music. Ok. Second, like all black music, it has its roots in Africa...We have taken American rap and created our own rap-we made it African. Thus it’s clear. On the other hand, there are similar forms that exist here-taasu...all of this has existed for centuries, and it’s the same principle, speaking a text over a beat...only the beat is created by women playing calabashes or by drums...but this has existed for a long time. That’s why people make the connection so quickly; they say rap is basically just taasu over big beats, but it’s actually a bit different, because even if you perform taasu over a beat, it’s different from rapping over a beat....Thus rap has its roots in taasu; the roots are African, but I think it ends there. We like to make the connection a lot, but to be honest....<sup>137</sup>

In the quotation above, Awadi speaks of rap as US American music with its roots in Africa to suggest the ambivalent nature of rap. His statement is marked by ambivalence because, as Bhabha says; “ambivalence is derided and also desired like the colonial fantasy to be in ‘two

---

<sup>135</sup> Tang, “The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions.” 86.

<sup>136</sup> The interview was with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and quoted in Tang’s essay “The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions,” 86.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

places at once,' to be colonizer and colonized."<sup>138</sup> For Awadi, taasu and rap are both similar (desired) and dissimilar (derided). Awadi's utterances illustrates ambivalence as desired when he says that rap and taasu are basically just taasu over big beats. That rap and taasu have the same principle of speaking a text over a beat. However, Awadi's statement epitomizes ambivalence as derided when he asserts that "if you perform taasu over a beat, it's different from rapping over a beat." Awadi seems to have contradicted his earlier statement that rap is basically just taasu over big beats. By affirming a similarity and dissimilarity at the same time Awadi is like the colonial fantasy that is in two places at once, to be colonized and colonizer. Furthermore, mimicry as ambivalence is a double articulation, the sign of the 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' as we discussed earlier. I have interpreted Awadi's assertion as ambivalent because it 'appropriates' the Other (in this case rap) as it visualises power (the supremacy of taasu). I will argue that since mimicry allows for the fixing of the colonial subject (appropriate) Awadi fixes taasu by categorising both genres as similar. But on the other hand, he intensifies the surveillance, by creating a difference with the assertion that both genres are also different.

Mimicry as menace comes from 'partial' resemblance and a revulsion at kinship. But even more striking is the notion that the menace of mimicry stems from the understanding that within the differences constructed by colonial discourse, to resemble is to threaten the basis of power and discrimination.<sup>139</sup> Is rap then a menace and a threat to taasu? According to Awadi, rap is similar to taasu, although, we do not at this stage know if the resemblance is 'partial' or 'complete'. Bhabha says that mimicry as menace comes from 'partial' resemblance, so in order to fully discuss rap as menace, we will first have to discuss the characteristics of both taasu and rap which will be done in chapter three. We need to know how both genres are similar and how they differ so that we can ascertain if one is a threat to the other. Awadi describes perceived similarities and dissimilarities between taasu and rap which will be discussed later in chapter three. If rap is basically taasu, as Awadi claims that 'people' say<sup>140</sup>, is he then implying that rap is taasu camouflaged? If so, rap then, is a form of resemblance and an imitation. If the imitation must always remain distinct from the 'original' what then constitutes the properties of the original?<sup>141</sup> These questions will surface again later. Awadi did not explicitly call rap a menace but his assertion that similar forms of rap (referring to taasu) had existed for centuries in Senegal supports the claim that rap is a menace.

I have used the quotation in Awadi's interview to introduce us to an example of how Senegalese musicians who link rap to taasu frame their case. In the paragraphs above I have explored some of the contents of the above quotation. The reader should bear in mind that we have only just begun our exploration of the link made between taasu and rap and its application to Bhabha's mimicry. Some of the issues and how they connect to Bhabha's

---

<sup>138</sup> Childs and Williams, "An introduction to post-colonial theory," 124.

<sup>139</sup> Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams, "An introduction to post-colonial theory," (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), 132.

<sup>140</sup> People here can mean those Senegalese musicians who link rap to taasu. However, it is important to note that there are also Senegalese rappers and musicians who deny any link between taasu and rap and we will discuss those in chapter three.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

mimicry will become clear as we go along and also in chapter three. For instance, Bhabha's idea of the double articulation of mimicry is one of his concepts that inform the discourse in this thesis because it helps us to understand the relationships between Senegalese musicians and their US counterparts. It helps us to understand if their relationship is characterised by the hate/love duality that characterizes colonial mimicry. This relationship will be discussed in chapter three.

Bhabha uses Freud's *striking feature* of mimicry to explain what he calls *metonymy of presence*. To recapitulate, Freud argues that mixed race people are caught in-between the races and never enjoy the privileges of being in one race, and as a result, are excluded from either society.<sup>142</sup> The 'desire' of mimicry which is Freud's *striking feature* reveals so little but makes such a big difference, is not merely that impossibility of the Other which repeatedly resists signification.<sup>143</sup> It is also the aim of this thesis to investigate the striking feature of rap and taasu since in order to examine what links and separates the two genres. This striking feature is not yet known. Awadi says that both genres recite text to a beat but this example does not explain the difference that Freud is talking about. Perhaps in chapter three when both genres are compared we can reach a consensus about the nature of the striking feature. Furthermore, Bhabha adds that the desire of mimicry may not have an object, but it has a strategic objectives which he calls the *metonymy of presence*. For Bhabha *metonymy of presence* are the inappropriate signifiers of colonial discourse; they are the product of contradictory and multiple belief.<sup>144</sup> According to Awadi, "they say rap is basically just taasu over big beats, but it's actually a bit different, because even if you perform taasu over a beat, it's different from rapping over a beat...Thus rap has its root in taasu." This quotation exemplifies what Bhabha calls a *metonymy of presence* because they are contradictory and uses inappropriate signifiers. The term 'basically' 'difference' and 'root' in one sentence is ambivalent. It is difficult to understand how rap is 'basically' taasu, 'different' from taasu and also has its root in taasu. If he wanted to say that rap and taasu are different but that they also have areas of convergence then his point will be better understood.

So far, what is obvious in the discussion is the use of binaries: sameness and difference, similar and dissimilar, griots and US Americans, rap and taasu. The binaries as I have tried to show above can be connected to mimicry as ambivalence. These binaries highlight the ambiguous nature of the debate on rap and taasu. Although I have begun to demonstrate that mimicry is a useful concept in the pursuit of answers concerning the topic of this work, it is difficult to move ahead without first deconstructing the claims resulting from the use of such words as: 'roots,' 'origin,' 'source' and 'tradition' to describe rap and taasu. What does Awadi mean when he says that rap has its roots in taasu? Is he like other Senegalese rappers suggesting that rap is a continuation of taasu. Moreover, in the interviews conducted with griot musicians, taasu was often referred to as 'traditional' music. But to generalize that taasu is a 'traditional' music is problematic as will be shown in the sections below.

---

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>144</sup> Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," 130.

## A Tradition Invented

Tradition is a fluid concept with a multitude of meanings and interpretations. What is common among the ways people use tradition is a reference to the past. In religion (the Catholic faith for instance), especially from the apostolic concept of the Rule of faith,<sup>145</sup> tradition is understood to mean a category of inheritance: “It is a deposit of faith that requires to be preserved against false claimants on behalf of rightful heirs.”<sup>146</sup> This claim of tradition as inheritance is supported by the musicologist Charles Seeger in “Music as a Tradition of Communication Discipline and Play”: “Tradition, I shall understand its referent to be a way of doing something inherited, cultivated and transmitted by successive generations of individual carriers of a culture.”<sup>147</sup> Music scholars use tradition to refer to techniques that have been handed down from different periods to the present time. The ways of notating music is an example of a tradition that has been passed on from centuries. What is striking in this discourse about the past is that a definitive account of the past does not exist. The ethnomusicologist Caroline Bithell writing on “The Past in music” argues that “we can project a multitude of meanings and interpretations. We are free to choose the face of the past in which we recognize our own present or future.”<sup>148</sup> I will add that this kind of flexibility to shape the past leaves us with problems as will be discussed in due course.

The use of tradition to argue or refer to a practice that has no factual reference is problematic. In Africa for instance, the concept of tradition has been manipulated as I will show. Scholars view the use of tradition as a weak foundation for an argument about the validity of a practice especially when such use is not backed by sufficient historical or factual accounts. To further illustrate the problem of tradition, I turn to Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Invention of Tradition* and

---

<sup>145</sup> Pope, Hugh, “The Rule of Faith,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909. 5 Jul. 2013<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05766b.htm>>. The rule of faith is explained as follows: “The word *rule* (Latin *regula*, Gr. *kanon*) means a standard by which something can be tested, and the rule of faith means something extrinsic to our faith, and serving as its norm or measure. Since faith is Divine and infallible, the rule of faith must be also Divine and infallible; and since faith is supernatural assent to Divine truths upon Divine authority, the ultimate or remote rule of faith must be the truthfulness of God in revealing Himself. But since Divine revelation is contained in the written books and unwritten traditions (Vatican Council, I, ii), the Bible and Divine tradition must be the rule of our faith; since, however, these are only silent witnesses and cannot interpret themselves, they are commonly termed “proximate but inanimate rules of faith”. Unless, then, the Bible and tradition are to be profitless, we must look for some proximate rule which shall be animate or living.”

<sup>146</sup> Gerald Bruns, “What is Tradition?” *New Literary History*, 22:1 (1991:Winter), 3.

<sup>147</sup> Seeger, Charles, “Music as a Tradition of Communication Discipline and Play,” *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Sep., 1962), 159.

<sup>148</sup> Bithell, Caroline, “The Past in Music: Introduction,” *Ethnomusicology Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 1, The Past in Music (Jun., 2006), 5.

Terrence Ranger's article in this volume. This volume published in 1983, is a collection of articles that examines how tradition has been manipulated and invented. The discussion is interdisciplinary in that instances of the invention of tradition presented touch on issues of politics, history, anthropology and music. It also features examples of invented traditions in Europe, Asia, America and Africa.

Hobsbawm argues that invented traditions aid humans to relate with the past and that invented traditions use history to support, legitimate and enhance group cohesion.<sup>149</sup> I shall first of all examine what Hobsbawm calls an invented tradition. He defines invented tradition as follows:

Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. They normally try to establish continuity with a suitable historic past<sup>150</sup>

Hobsbawm then distinguishes between invented tradition, custom, convention and routine:

“What distinguishes tradition (including invented tradition) from ‘custom’ which dominates so-called ‘traditional’ societies is that tradition is unaltered; meaning that the past, real or invented, to which they refer imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition.... Custom on the other hand is not fixed and does not reflect a historical fact. Conventions and routines are not invented traditions because their functions and justifications are technical rather than ideological....They are designed to facilitate readily definable practical operation and are readily modified or abandoned to meet changing practical needs.”<sup>151</sup>

I will underline four facets of Hobsbawm's theory to bring out how the latter might be applied to the taasu case. Firstly, *invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices*: This supposes that invented tradition must be habitual, recognizable, timely and unique. Secondly, *invented tradition is normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules*: Rules can be formal or informal depending on the situation. It must be known by the parties involved for them to be applied. Depending on the situation, rules can be fixed or flexible; meaning that those who make the rules can make adjustments to the rules depending on the situation at hand. Thirdly, *invented traditions are of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and notions of behaviour by repetition*: What this implies is that, invented tradition should have a purpose. The purpose can be to teach morals, teach history or force people to be subject of an authority. By repetition, invented tradition should have a standard form that is immediately recognizable. Finally, *invented tradition automatically implies continuity with the past*: For a tradition to be called invented, it must have historical reference to a time, date

---

<sup>149</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Ranger Terrence, “Introduction: The Invention of Tradition,” *In The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger Terrence. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 34.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

and period. If invented tradition must always relate to a distant past, does it not suppose a continuum that invariably might extend to infinity? If one is to trace all traditions to a certain period in history I foresee a continuity that never ends. In this respect, Hobsbawm argues that the historic past in question should not be lengthy, stretching back into the assumed mist of time but what matters is the reference to a certain date.<sup>152</sup> Does it then mean that cultures with oral tradition with no idea of a fixed period or date have not invented their traditions? Hobsbawm answered this question with the claim that what distinguishes invented tradition from custom is the fact of its invariance (its fixity to the past).<sup>153</sup>

At this stage, it becomes imperative to ask: Do rap and taasu fit Hobsbawm's parameters described above of what constitutes an invented tradition? The claim I can make at this stage is because US American rap is a new art form, it might be easier to trace its history when compared to taasu. It is always a daunting tasking to trace the history of a practice whether African, Asian, American or European. Since Africa is our case study, it might be useful to explain how some of its practices might have been invented. To fully explain this problem, I now turn to Terrence Ranger's article in the volume "The Invention of tradition in Colonial Africa."

Terrence Ranger claims that Europeans invented traditions to modernize Africa in two ways: through British style education and through redefined relationship between leader and led. "One way was the acceptance of the idea that some Africans become members of the governing class of colonial Africa and hence the extension to such Africans of training in a neo-traditional context."<sup>154</sup> The first way was actualized through the introduction of British-style education (King's colleges in British colonies). To explain fully the first way, I will use the example of British colonial activity in Buganda (a kingdom within Uganda). In Buganda, the British built British-style elementary and secondary schools of a neo-traditional kind. Their aim was the adaptation of English style schools to the African scene.<sup>155</sup> But these schools were not planned for the Buganda aristocracy (even though the school is called King's College) but they were targeted at the peasant class. The intention according to the Anglican missionary Bishop Tucker was to uplift the peasants in Buganda community so that the ruling class would have a sense of responsibility towards them.<sup>156</sup> So in this King's College, the British emphasized discipline of work and games in a boarding school setting to build strong characters. They planned the commissioning of the newly built King's College which was built on the coronation hill of the Buganda Kings to take place during the coronation ceremony of a king. The plan was simple, if the coronation ceremony takes place on the coronation hill, the ceremonies will be held at the King's College chapel. Although some of the traditional ceremonies were held, the coronation ceremony followed the British-

---

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Terrence Ranger, "Introduction: The Invention of Tradition," In *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger Terrence, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 598.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ranger, "Introduction: The Invention of Tradition," 598.

style coronation service.<sup>157</sup> The second way the British used invented tradition in the African context was through redefined relationship between leader and led.”<sup>158</sup> The second took place through regimental hierarchical ‘tradition’ that created roles such as officers and “footmen” (man/master relationship). What this hierarchical structure means is that Europeans commanded and Africans followed.

The hierarchical structure created by the Europeans was also used by Africans in various ways. For example, men made use of invented tradition to subordinate women. This was done through men’s constant appeal to ‘tradition’ and the manipulation of custom.<sup>159</sup> What I find most interesting about Ranger’s example of the invention of tradition in post-colonial Africa was his example of how women used unionism to fight the dominance of men. The quotation below illustrates this:

Women had two possible means of asserting themselves against male-dominated custom. They might turn to missionary Christianity and its notions of female rights and duties, or they might seek to use the counter-propositions available within African culture. Sometimes women sought to develop rites of female initiation, which had in the past constituted a balance to male ritual influence in the microcosm. Sometimes they sought to draw on twentieth-century forms of regional cultic association and on macrocosmic prophet movements in order to challenge the constraints of the bounded society of invented custom.<sup>160</sup>

The above mentioned quotation is interesting because praise-singing has also been used by women to fight the injustices of men. Apart from praise singing, women have used the medium to protest bad treatment from their male counterparts in Niamey (capital of Niger) as the quotation below from the lyrics of a griotte Weybi Karma suggests:

Stop crying, bride,  
Stop crying, and listen to me.  
If your mother-in-law abuses you,  
Just cry, but don't say anything.  
If your sisters or brothers-in-law abuse you,  
Just cry, but don't say anything.  
If your husband's mother abuses you,  
But leaving your house is not a crime.<sup>161</sup>

In chapter one I explained the relation between taasu and praise singing, stating that taasu itself is a kind of praise singing. The example in Niamey where praise singing was invented by oppressed women to fight against oppression helps us relate that taasu too may have been invented at some point in history. But we lack the historical facts to support this claim. It is a

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 599.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 598.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 606-611.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 610.

<sup>161</sup> Thomas Hale, “Griottes: Female Voices from West Africa,” *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Women as Oral Artists (Autumn, 1994), 81-82.

dangerous place to thread in this early stage of the discussion because we have not mentioned historical dates or periods.

Furthermore, when carrying out ethnographic research in Africa and anywhere in the world where there is a lack of historical documents, the second best method is through interviews with the local musicians. Since the voices of Senegalese musicians form a greater part of this thesis, there is a need to discuss (even if only briefly) issues of orality. Similarly, another goal of this thesis is to show how historical facts are often present-time inventions, which does not imply that these facts are 'abused'; they are merely constructed. Also, this kind of present-time inventions of historical facts happens in oral and written cultures. To do this, we do not need too much dependence on historical facts because we can learn from the actual music or recording. We are also interested in the social circumstances of both genres and also the way *taasu* and rap have been discussed and how Senegalese musicians and some scholars refer to *taasu* as an ancient art-form. For instance, Senegalese rappers allege that *taasu* is the predecessor of rap and this claim has mostly been transmitted orally through interviews and this is how opinion on *taasu* and rap has been formed. Also, the opinions of Senegalese musicians who dissociate themselves from the claim also form an opinion on the subject. So, when the two opinions are viewed, discussed and critiqued, it could be argued that we are also engaged in the process of inventing a tradition because we are forming our opinions on the subject and these opinions are being documented. We do not know how future generations who might read about our stance will be influenced by our critique on this subject of the similarity between *taasu* and rap.

Scholars differ in the way they talk about oral tradition. Some of them argue that the discourse on how to use oral sources has been polarized by philosophical and moral arguments and that scientific approaches are given elitist status.<sup>162</sup> Scholars seek a middle ground by adopting an approach that favours both oral tradition and archaeological data. The anthropologist Wesley Berdanini advocates an approach that allows for evaluation and critical analysis of information transmitted and this approach seem to be consistent with the general view about the reliability of oral tradition anchored more strongly in the fallibility of memory.<sup>163</sup> Memory, argues Martin Klein, is highly selective and prone to a distortion of the message.<sup>164</sup> Memory is selective in that it chooses its stories and the content of the message.<sup>165</sup> Like many others, Klein advocates that memory should be used with caution. He calls for the use of as many informants as possible and the sceptical scrutiny of interview data.<sup>166</sup>

---

<sup>162</sup> See Thomson 2007,

<sup>163</sup> Wesley Bernardini, "Identity as History: Hopi Clans and the Curation of Oral Tradition," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Winter, 2008), 484-485.

<sup>164</sup> Martin Klein A, "Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery," *History in Africa*, Vol. 16 (1989), 210.

<sup>165</sup> For practical examples of the problems associated with memory, see Boston (1969) and Day (1972).

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

In the case of taasu for example, manuscript sources are rare. The history of the tradition has been passed orally from one generation to the next. As the tradition is passed on, so are the myth and legends accompanying the tradition. A possible solution is to use oral sources in conjunction with an analysis of the musical features of the music. For example, an internal coherence can be achieved by studying the elements of the music: rhythm, melody, harmony and lyrics. Scholars such as Thomas Hale have used this approach to discover the politics and cultural implications of the lyrics used in poetic traditions.

So far, I have deconstructed the use of the term ‘tradition.’ In the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate how our discussion on ‘invented tradition’ relates to Bhabha’s concept of mimicry already discussed.

There are many instances of the ambivalence of mimicry at play in the discourse on invented tradition that I would like to discuss briefly. The first instance of mimicry is the sign of the ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate.’ The ‘appropriate’ is a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline perpetuated on the colonized by the colonizer with the aim of acquiring power. The ‘inappropriate’ is a difference or recalcitrance which can be a threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.<sup>167</sup> While describing invented traditions, Hobsbawm argues that “invented tradition uses history to support, legitimate and enhance group cohesion.”<sup>168</sup> This quotation resembles Bhabha’s notion of the ‘appropriate’ because both highlight the desire (be it by the colonizer or any institution) to reform, regulate and control with the aim of acquiring power. Rangers’ example of how the Anglican missionaries introduced British style primary and secondary schools in Africa is an example of the appropriate because underlying the creation of such schools is the aim to spread British style education and religion as well as create mimic men. By mimic men, I that mean the British created versions of otherness as Bhabha would say. They wanted to control the Buganda native rulers but instead of using colonial force they used Buganda people to fight the battle for them. They did so by equipping the peasants in the Buganda community with education to act as a threat to the native rulers. This is an example of how colonial strategy disoriented communities in Africa through mimicry. Another example is the building of the Anglican chapel on the coronation hill of the Buganda king. That is how, the missionaries tricked the Buganda people into using the King’s College chapel. During the coronation ceremony, the missionaries ensured that the service followed the British coronation service for kings while also leaving room for the Buganda ritual for the coronation of a king. By so doing, the coronation ceremony of the Buganda people was compromised. A new version of the coronation service was created that neither the Buganda people nor the British could lay sole claim to.

Furthermore, the British introduced the system of hierarchy in order to teach the Africans the difference between master and man, officers and footmen. This teaching by the missionaries allowed them easy control of the colonized. My point is that the colonizer’s teachings had

---

<sup>167</sup> Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” 126.

<sup>168</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Ranger Terrence, “Introduction: The Invention of Tradition,” *In The Invention of Tradition*, 34.

another effect. It disoriented the colonized in such a way that they in turn started creating their own versions of otherness in order to regulate and reform power for their own use. For instance, when the teachings were appropriated at home, the man became the master while the woman became his subordinate.

In the next chapter, we will continue with our investigation and application of Bhabha's mimicry by examining some of the comments made by Senegalese musicians linking rap to *taasu*. The claim that rap's 'origin' is in the West African traditions of storytelling will also be revisited. We will do so by examining the specific attributes these musicians refer to and comparing their assumptions with the music and scholarly views on the subject.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Music Analysis

In chapter one, we described both taasu and rap as the foundation on which to base our comparison. Chapter two contains the theoretical foundations of this thesis. The main questions and issues addressed in this chapter are: a), an analysis of the alleged link between rap and taasu through the examination of both music genres; b) a discussion of the claim that taasu was continued in the United States by slaves taken from Senegal (known as the continuity claim) (c) a discussion of the analogy of the rapper as a modern griot and d) an examination of the reasons Senegalese musicians have to link rap to taasu. I connected the four topics to Homi Bhabha's mimicry as ambivalence, requiring a similarity and a dissimilarity.

The first section of this chapter will examine taasu and rap under three sub headings: lyrical content, use of rhythm and social roles. In the sub-section lyrical content, I will examine the claim that both rap and taasu are similar because both use vulgar language and explicit talk of women and sex. To investigate their use of vulgar language, I will examine a taasu poem and a rap lyrics. In the subsection on the use of rhythm, I will show that although taasu and rap may employ backing rhythm sections, the kind of rhythm or beat used in both styles are different. To enable me to compare the two styles, I will transcribe a taasu and a rap rhythm. The final item to be discussed under similarity and differences is the social roles binding both genres. I shall review scholarly articles and interviews conducted by scholars on this subject.

It is a fact that when people move, cultures interact and a kind of mixing, a 'melting pot' of cultures, values and identities occurs. So it is not out of place for Senegalese musicians to claim that the slaves taken to the United States brought with them the taasu tradition which then became rap. However, I shall argue against the continuity claim put forward by some Senegalese musicians based on the reason that; slavery took place a long time ago and we cannot conclusively demonstrate what group of people and cultures mixed at a certain point in time. I will begin the discussion of the continuity claim in this chapter, but the discussion will continue in subsequent chapters.

In the second section of this chapter, I will revisit the rapper as modern griot trope. Scholarly discussion on the trope begins with David Toop's study *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-hop* in which he claims that rap music's origin is in the West African traditions of 'signifying,' 'toasting' and the 'dozens.' I believe that revisiting the trope will enhance the discussion in this chapter because the trope suggests similarity between rappers and griots.

Finally, I will discuss why Senegalese musicians' claim that rap is similar to taasu. What is intriguing is that the Senegalese musicians who might not have been aware of Toop's book

make such claims. Most studies argue that Senegalese musicians link rap to taasu in order to assert their hip-hop authenticity. I will argue that this claim of Hip-hop authenticity is problematic. For Bhabha they have neither Senegalese authenticity nor US American Hip-hop authenticity. They are caught-up between the two and their many facets disorientates them.

The structural analysis of music has in recent times been subject to critique by many scholars: McClary (1985), Cusick (1994) and Tomlinson (1993), to mention just a few. Advocates of ‘New Musicology’ criticise close reading of music under the term musicological. Rather, scholars advocate a way to write about music that displays a deep understanding of the social circumstances that surround the music. For instance, the musicologist Lawrence Kramer had posited that a close reading of notes and the locating of the context in them should be encouraged.<sup>169</sup> Reacting to Kramer, Tomlinson suggests we should become more sensitive to realms of musical culture-making beyond the knowledge of individual, subjective agency, and thirdly, that we should be aware that categories such as “work” and “art” are cultural constructions of modernist ideology and finally that we should begin to interrogate our love of the music we study.<sup>170</sup> I will argue that in our case, perhaps, there is a need for some attention to be paid to close reading of works of taasu music. It has become increasingly difficult to ignore some of the claims linking rap to taasu without relying on this kind of analysis. Taasu is still a relatively unknown genre and analysis might offer some form of depth to the discourse.

In this section, I shall discuss some of the comments linking rap to taasu. We will do so by examining the musical features that the Senegalese musicians refer to and compare them with rap. It is important to remind our readers that there are also objections to the claim linking rap to taasu, objections made by Senegalese rappers and musicians. These objections will be discussed later in this chapter. I will introduce the exploration of the similarities between rap and taasu by quoting some of the statements or claims that have been made linking both genres.

1. I introduce this quotation from the Senegalese rapper called Didier Awadi discussed in chapter one just to remind the reader.<sup>171</sup>

What I think personally, is that rap is American music. Ok. Second, like all black music, it has its roots in Africa...We have taken American rap and created our own rap-we made it African. Thus it's clear. On the other hand, there are similar forms that exist here-taasu...all of this has existed for centuries, and it's the same principle, speaking a text over a beat...only the beat is created by women playing calabashes or by drums...but this has existed for a long time. That's why people make the connection so quickly; they say rap is basically just taasu over big beats, but it's actually a bit different, because even if you

---

<sup>169</sup> Gary Tomlinson, “Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicology: A Response to Lawrence Kramer,” *Current Musicology* 64, ( pp. 18-24 and 36-40, 1993), 21.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 21-24.

<sup>171</sup> The interview was with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and quoted in Tangs’ essay “The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions,” 86.

perform taasu over a beat, it's different from rapping over a beat....Thus rap has its roots in taasu; the roots are African, but I think it ends there. We like to make the connection a lot, but to be honest....<sup>172</sup>

2. The group Gokh-Bi System (pronounced Go-Bee), which started in 1995 in the slums of Dakar (Senegal) has emerged as one of the leaders of hip-hop in Senegal. The group is also known for their claim that taasu is the predecessor of rap and they are so convinced about this assertion that they even made a song with the aim of enlightening the masses.

Our new album "Rap Tassu" will enlighten people about the origins of rap music. For centuries in Senegal, we've had a style of early hip-hop called tassu which sounds like drumming and clapping against a chant. It's basically the music that stayed in the spirit of American-Africans that evolved into the rap music we hear today, so in essence Hip-hop returns home through "Rap Tassu."<sup>173</sup>

Below are the lyrics of the second verse and chorus of GBS from their album "Rap Tassu."<sup>174</sup>

Back in 1969  
when Abiodun and Omar from the Last Poets brought the  
Talk singing  
mark the birth of a new movement.  
Gokh-Bi is back now to show the world how Hip-hop was  
born in Africa  
Today we'll talk about the real in rap  
Grandpa use to call it "tassu" now it grows until it  
became a nation,  
a culture, a way of life.  
Rap is the evolution of Tassu which was a music to show  
skills and a message at the same time.  
Rap, break dance, Graffiti, Djing are all now part of it.  
Now the little poor down on the corner can speak his  
mind and show his talent.  
Now the Ghetto has a voice.

Chorus

---

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Gokh-Bi System, "Gokh-Bi System: RAP TASSU - Hip-Hop Returns Home," *Artist Website*, Gokh-Bi System. Accessed December 9, 2013. <http://www.gokhbisystem.com/bio.html>.

<sup>174</sup> Gokh-Bi System, *Rap Tassu*. AMU Music 2009.

Hip-hop is my visa  
Hip-hop is my life  
Music is my way life  
Back to the basics, Rap Tassu  
Back to the basics

After examining the quotes of Senegalese musicians above, three factors or elements stand out. These are; the content of the lyrics of both rap and taas, the rhythm or beat used by both genres, and the role played by both genres in their respective societies. These are the three areas that the comparison will be based on.

## Lyrical Content

When Senegalese rappers claim that rap and taas are similar, they refer to the content of their lyrics, among other things, as the following quote by a Senegalese rapper G-Lee Bagdad suggests:

“Taasu and rap have similarities, especially with the rap that [is a bit obscene]...because taas speaks of obscenities as well, taas is vulgar, it talks about women, you know, explicit sex, most of the time they’re talking about stuff like that. So there is a similarity with that side”<sup>175</sup>

We shall examine this claim by comparing a taas poem from Senegal with a rap lyric. I chose this particular taas because it is the only taas that I came across that has elements of obscene language. My aim is to give the reader an opportunity to compare how obscene language is used in taas with rap. The taas is taken from Mbengue Mariama Ndoye’s 1981 doctoral thesis, “Introduction à la littérature orale leboue: Analyse ethno-sociologique et expression littéraire,” and quoted by Sidikou-Morton.<sup>176</sup> The taas was actually recorded in the Lebu language but originally came from Tekrou in the Senegal valley. There is no way to know the circumstances surrounding the performance of these poems or for what purpose the poem was written.<sup>177</sup>

### *Fig. 3.1*

---

<sup>175</sup> Damon Sajjani, “Troubling the Trope of “Rapper as Modern Griot,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.6, no.3, (September 2013), 161.

<sup>176</sup> Sidikou-Morton, “Revealing Things Revealed: Zamu and Taasu as Poetic Expression,” 226. The reason why I selected this taas is because in the first stanza there is reference to vulgar language with the first two lines: “You are small in the arena, so small” and Go and borrow an underwear to presentable.”

<sup>177</sup> The taas here might be flawed especially the French language. However, it is the only source that comes close in terms of the use of vulgar language. Since this taas was already translated, we do not know if there could be vulgar language that is metaphorically implied but is not displayed in the translations.

Tu es petite dans l'arène toute minuscule  
Va et emprunte un dessous pour  
être présentable ou rentre et bois  
De la tisane pour être présentable.

Gin Panna Mbaye l'oeuf  
n'affronte pas la pierre  
Le vautour n'est pas  
reconnaissant, l'enfant de  
l'èpervier ne l'est pas non plus.  
Si l'èpervier l'était, quand on  
ramasse du bois mort pour l'âne,  
il aurait le plus gros fagot.  
L'èpervier est reconnaissant, son enfant aussi  
l'èpervier a volé jusqu'à  
l'épuisement mais n'a rien vu, il  
est reconnaissant.

A bas le mauvais œil, au diable la  
Mauvaise langue, que Dieu nous  
Préserve de l'esprit retors.  
Toi enfant, là où tu combats tu  
viens  
Sors victorieux, ailleurs je ne sais pas

Quand tu as une cérémonie

You are small in the arena, so small  
Go and borrow an underwear to  
be presentable or go back home  
and drink some tea to be fit to be seen.

Gin Panna Mbaye, the egg  
does not not confront the stone  
The vulture is not  
grateful, nor is the chick  
of the hawk  
If the hawk were,  
when wood is gathered for the donkey,  
it would get the biggest faggot.

The hawk is grateful, its chick too  
The hawk has flown to  
exhaustion but has seen nothing  
it is grateful.

Down with the evil eye, to hell  
with the bad tongue, may God  
Preserve us against the twisted mind.  
You child, where you fight you will  
come  
out victorious, elsewhere I do not know.

When you have a ceremony I

J'accours, mon semblable y vient,	rush to come, my peers come too,
Demande-moi pourquoi?	Ask me why?
Tu es enclin à donner et tu ne	You are inclined to give and you
Changes jamais d'humeur	never change your mood.

The taasus above touches on various topics: ranging from problems that may confront women, to the naming ceremony of a child or a generous patron. For instance, the first stanza 'you are small in arena, so small' talks about a helpless woman who is in the gaze of everyone in the arena.<sup>178</sup> In the poem in Fig. 3.1 the line 'go and borrow underwear' constitutes a link to obscenity. This line also suggests that the writer and everyone around could see that the woman was without underwear. Apart from the first taasus, the remaining two taasus cannot be said to use obscene language. The third stanza is like a prayer for a little child and the fourth is a eulogy for a generous patron. The claim that taasus uses vulgar and obscene language was briefly acknowledged by McNee in her use of the term erotic taasus. I did mention in chapter two that taasus could be a form of sex education for young girls since Wolof society does not have initiation ceremonies for girls and the subject is not taught in schools. Erotic taasus provides young girls and married women with an outlet for the release of sexual tensions.<sup>179</sup> Unfortunately, McNee did not include fragments of erotic taasus as part of her book.

The use of obscene language in rap is not something new. Since we are comparing taasus and rap, it is imperative that I also include examples of the use of vulgar and obscene language in rap. Rappers with exclusive sexual content in their lyrics are: Lil' Kim's "How Many Licks," Slick Rick's "Adults Only," Necro "Who's Ya Daddy?" and Akinyele's "Put it in Your Mouth." Below are the first six lines of Lil' Kim's lyrics on her album *The Notorious K.I.M.* In the song, Kim boasts of the number of men she has had sex with. I have transcribed only the first six lines of her lyrics as can be seen below.

I've been a lot of places, seen a lot of faces  
 Ah hell I even fuck with different races  
 A white dude-his name was John  
 He had a Queen Bee Rules tattoo on his arm, uh  
 He asked me if I'd be his date for the prom

---

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 216

<sup>179</sup> McNee, "Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women's Autobiographical Discourses," 43.

And he'd buy me a horse, a Porsche and a farm.

The lyrics are self explanatory and do not require a detailed explanation. Also, while it is true that both taasu and rap may use vulgar language in their lyrics, I would argue that it is fallacious to say that these genres are similar because of the content of their lyrics or choice words. Other musical styles or genres can also claim similarity with rap on account of the use of vulgar language or explicit sex. For instance, rock music also uses vulgar language but that does not mean that rock is similar to rap.

## Use of Rhythm

The second area I wish to discuss is the use of rhythm. The question whether this use of rhythm connects rap to taasu as claimed by Senegalese musicians. I want to show by means of examples that while both genres might recite poetry to a beat, the kind of beats used differentiates these two styles instead of uniting them. To show these differences, I have transcribed a taasu rhythm and a rap beat. Even though, the differences can be seen visually (just by viewing the score), I encourage the reader to listen to the music being described especially in the case of taasu.<sup>180</sup>

The taasu song to be used for the analysis is the first 50 seconds of Aby Gana Diop's "Ndadje."<sup>181</sup> Diop is one of the famous professional taasukat and the first to record commercial taasu. On this track one hears the frequent use of the up-beat structure. If we count the beat as a continuous 4/4 stream, then 1 and 3 are the strong or down-beats while 2 and 4 are the weak or up-beats. In a 2/2 rhythm however, the 1 is the strong beat while the 2 is weak. In the transcription in Figure 3.1 the rhythm is depicted as 2/4. It could be a fast 6/8 or any other time feel for that matter. The reader will benefit more if the transcription is studied together with the actual recordings. Rhythmically speaking, easily identifiable features of the song "ndadje" are: sabar drum ensemble, a constant percussion up-beat sound, a metronomic tambourine and a kick drum sound.

*Ndadje* begins with an introductory phrase played on the sabar. Figure 3.1 shows the 7 bar introduction played in a triplet fashion. What follows the introduction are short repeated phrases beginning from bar 7 and lasting for a total of 17 bars until bar 23. This repeated

---

<sup>180</sup> See the bibliography for the link to the YouTube videos. The reason why I emphasize the difference in the beat is because Senegalese musicians did not mention particular elements of the beat that makes taasu and rap similar. I think the point Senegalese musicians want to make would have been clearer if mention was made to a specific element of the rhythm that makes both genres similar. For instance, under lyrical content discussed above, Senegalese musicians refer to the use of vulgar language in the lyrics of both rap and taasu, which makes their claim concrete. So, not having a concrete example or point of reference makes our exploration difficult.

<sup>181</sup> I was informed by a Senegalese that "Ndadje" means 'gathering' or 'to gather.'

phrase functions like a metronome to the sabar players.<sup>182</sup> The tambourine joins in from bar 18 and the song begins from bar 23 with the sabar ensemble. The up-beat bass drum is introduced in bar 23 and plays a repetitive up beat loop throughout the song.

Figure 3.2 shows the drum loop of Dr Dre’s “Nuthin’ but a ‘G’ Thang” taken from his 1992 album titled “The Chronic.” The entire rhythm section of this track can be said to be a drum loop that is 2 bars long. The core of the rhythm section comprises;- kick drum, snare, tambourine and cymbals. The kick drum is constantly on measure 1 which is the down beat and the snare on the weak beats 2 and 4. The tambourine is a constant 16 note loop.

Figure 3.1: The opening fifty seconds of Aby Gana Diop’s “Ndadje”

The musical score for the opening of "Ndadje" is presented in five staves, all in 2/4 time. The first staff, labeled "sabar", begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It features a series of eighth notes, with several groups of three notes marked with a "3" below them, indicating triplets. The second staff, "sabar 2", is empty. The third staff, "tamborine", is empty. The fourth staff, "Bass drum", is empty. The fifth staff, "Metronome", is empty until the final measure, where it contains a quarter note followed by a quarter rest.

<sup>182</sup> The term metronome is Eurocentric, notwithstanding, the context that I have used to explain that maintaining a correct tempo is vital in sabar music. When Sabar musicians play, they usually start by introducing the tempo in which they wish to start a song. They could also introduce the metronome during a pause so as to remain in sync with the tempo of a song.



The image shows a musical score for the drum loop of Dr Dre's "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang". It consists of five staves, all in bass clef. The first staff is empty. The second staff contains a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a triplet of eighth notes. The third staff has a sparse pattern of eighth notes and rests. The fourth staff has a pattern of eighth notes and rests. The fifth staff is empty.

Figure 3.2: The drum loop of Dr Dre's "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang"

1

The image shows a musical score for the drum loop of Dr Dre's "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang". It consists of four staves, all in bass clef and 4/4 time. The first staff is labeled "Kick Drum" and shows a pattern of eighth notes. The second staff is labeled "Snare drum" and shows a pattern of eighth notes. The third staff is labeled "Tamborine" and shows a continuous eighth-note pattern. The fourth staff is labeled "Cymbal" and shows a pattern of eighth notes.

One central dichotomy between taasu and rap rhythms in both songs is that of live performance versus looped drum performance. This is rather well established in the recordings and also to some extent in the score. For instance, the introduction of *ndadje* was played by a solo drummer before the other instrumentalist joined in and also a call and response measure from bar 13-23 can be heard. Other instances of call and response can be heard around 4:50 in the recording. During the short call and response, the taasukat Diop initiates the call while the drummers and the backing singers respond to the call in unison. There is also another call and response repeat around 5:13. However, in the rap song we hear a 2 bar repeated loop throughout the song. The use of drum loops is synonymous with rap music.

Another difference between taasu and rap is the use of syncopation which puts emphasis on unaccented beats in a song. While there are also instances of syncopation in ‘Nuthin’ but a ‘G’ Thang’ there is even more use of syncopated rhythms in *ndadje*. In the taasu, the kick drum is played on the up-beat as can be seen from measure twenty six onwards. Whereas the kick drum in the rap song places more emphasis on the down or strong beat which is beat one. The snare on the other hand is on the up-beat. There is not much to be said about the use of syncopation in rap rhythm because once the main drum loop has been established, it is then reproduced and glued as a single drum loop.

It can be argued that while both genres recite their poetry with the aid of rhythmic support, these rhythms are distinct and in fact incomparable. The rhythmic distinction is so glaring that it will be impossible for a taasu beat to fit a rap song and vice versa. That is why Awadi’s assertion that rap is basically just taasu over big beats is problematic. What Awadi means by big beats is not clear. Does he mean that rap has big beats because rap is usually played on huge loud speakers or is he referring to the compressed drums and bass guitar sound that drives rap music? One would think that if any genre qualifies as using big beats it would be taasu because of the sabar ensemble (as in the case of Diop’s recordings).

What is also striking is that Senegalese rappers link rap and taasu by using the continuity argument. This argument claims some form of continuity from taasu to rap. For instance, GBS claims that for centuries in Senegal, taasu, a style of early hip-hop had existed which sounds like drumming and clapping against a chant. Again, this assertion is problematic because as we discussed in chapter two, the origin of rap includes musical elements from disco, reggae and funk. The closest association rap has with taasu as reported by most scholars is its link with the West African practices of ‘signifying’ and the ‘dozens’ which will be discussed later in this chapter.

## Social Role

Rap and taasu are very distinct in terms of their social roles, that is, how the societies in which these genres thrive view their social impact. Rappers want us to believe that their social role is with the people, the marginalized poor, the-voiceless youths and to protest police brutality on the streets of the United States.<sup>183</sup> It is no wonder that those rappers that have made fortunes from the music business have been accused by hip-hop aficionados of “selling their soul to the devil.” Jay-Z, Kanye West, Rihanna and Taylor Swift are a few examples of rappers who have been accused by hip-hop fans of being puppets of the

---

<sup>183</sup> Some level of scepticism is required here especially when dealing with the social role of rappers because the lines between what constitutes raps social role and rap as an entertainment genre is increasingly blurred. I am not certain if both go hand in hand or whether they have a separate path.

illuminati.<sup>184</sup> The so called underground hip-hop movement is a counter movement to ‘keep it real.’ The rappers who engage in this kind of rap have decided against going commercial and so choose to use music to encourage people to make good choices in life as one rapper from Harlem called Vast pointed out.

To me, glorifying materialism using hip-hop culture is wrong, I would love to be a king, chilling on a mountain in Africa and riding giraffes all day. But what hurts me is when I catch my 10-year old sister running around the house singing, ‘Money, cash.’ When I hear her singing I say, ‘Yo, you’re brain warping yourself.’ There used to be a time when hip-hop was about head lifting.<sup>185</sup>

The social role of rap is quite different to that of taasus because taasukats are part of the political establishment. Taasukats sing the praises of the aristocrat in society. Taasukats take sides with the politicians during political rallies and drum support for them. They are rewarded for their support of politicians with gifts so they are in allegiance with the politicians and not the poor of the community. They are known to act out of self-interest and not for the society at large.<sup>186</sup> We already discussed taasus as an exchange in chapter two in which a woman who receives a taasus is expected to return the same at the appropriate time. The exchange in taasus again highlights the role of taasus as a practice performed with some expected reward. That is why McNee calls it ‘a selfish gift.’ Taasus musicians are not protest musicians, even though they might use words to bring about some kind of change in their favour. The Faatu J chorus discussed in chapter two is an example of this. To reprimand Faatu J for refusing to share her food with her relations a taasus was performed containing harsh words:

---

<sup>184</sup> John Dean, “Rappers Aren’t Limited To Being The Tool Of One Secret Society,” *Noisey Music by Vice*. Accessed October 20, 2013. [http://noisey.vice.com/en\\_au/blog/rappers-arent-limited-to-being-the-tool-of-one-secret-society](http://noisey.vice.com/en_au/blog/rappers-arent-limited-to-being-the-tool-of-one-secret-society). The word illuminati is used to refer to successful rappers, but in the past was used to refer to the Bavarian eighteenth-century secret society with power and influence. If a rapper is accused of being an illuminati, he or she is viewed as successful and would have compromised in one way or the other.

<sup>185</sup> David Gonzalez, “Underground, Creative Rap is Thriving,” *New York Times*, April 07, 1999. Accessed October 20, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/07/nyregion/about-new-york-underground-creative-rap-is-thriving.html>. “I would love to be a king, chilling on a mountain in Africa and riding giraffes all day.” In the context of the US African-American cultural link to Africa this sentence could be viewed as mimicry. This is an example of the ambivalence that Bhabha casts in psychoanalytical terms: of desire and rejection, a relationship of hate and love. We shall discuss this topic of the ambivalence of mimicry later on in this chapter.

<sup>186</sup> The belief that taasukats act out of self interest and not for society is questionable. As I did show in chapter one when I compared two taasus, taasukats may also act for the greater good of society. The taasus that was composed to warn people of the conflict in Mauritania is an example.

Faatu J.	Faatu J.
Jabar ju la xállal sa kér	The woman who clears her house
Ba sa njaboot dekk	To make room for her family
Kooka jarna fas u Naar	That one is worth an Arab horse
Jar na naaru góor	She's worth a stallion
Jar na oto	And deserves a car
Waaye, jabar ju la xállal sa ker	But a woman who clears her house
Bas sa njaboot tuxu	So that the family leaves
Kooku jarna yat u kel	That one deserves a wooden club
Jar na door ba dee	She deserves to be beaten to death

I will now give two other examples of this type of self-interest, that is, the manipulative nature of griots. For instance, the anthropologists Cornelia Panzacchi-describes how the griots of Senegal may turn up at the home of a nobleman or woman in expensive cars to secure donations.<sup>187</sup> This act of showmanship aims at pressing the nobleman or woman to lavish them with expensive gifts. The griots are known to be insatiable in this respect.<sup>188</sup> What is even more striking is that they think they have the rights to demand these gifts.

Many people of non-griot descent confirmed to me that, though *gewel* are very important as far as history and the cultural heritage are concerned, nowadays they have made themselves a nuisance by constantly asking for money. On the other hand, I met several young men of griot origin who made it clear that they believed that it was right for them to ask *geer* regularly for money, even when they were not in any special need. They justified this on the grounds that it was their traditional privilege to do so.<sup>189</sup>

I have also experienced the manipulative nature of the griots. I was once present at a small celebration in a small township of Pikine that lies to the east of Dakar. During this gathering, *sabar* musicians and a *taasukat* performed for us. When *taasukat* sing the praise of people, we were told by our Senegalese assistants that it is customary for people to give them money as gifts. So, before attending this function my colleagues and I made sure we had cash with us to avoid embarrassing ourselves. I noticed that when the *taasukat*

---

<sup>187</sup> Cornelia Panzacchi, "The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1994), 194.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

performed the praise of those present and did not get any gift she kept on repeating the names of the people present until she got her reward. To make matters worse, those present at the occasion who had not performed also demanded gifts from us. After all, their colleagues had received gifts. They persuaded us to give them some money by asking us to allow them to perform for us for a reward.<sup>190</sup>

## Continuity Claim

Some Senegalese rappers claim that rap is a continuity of taasu. They allege that the slaves that were taken from Senegal to the United States of America brought with them the taasu tradition. Thus, for them, rap is a continuation of Senegalese taasu. One of the limitations of this way of thinking is that it fails to take into account that most of what remains of slavery is untraceable. Slavery took place a long time ago and even if one is to trace the history of the slaves brought to US America, there is no guarantee of finding any useful information. It is true that there have been studies about African cultural practices found in diasporic areas. But some of these diasporic cultures with African antecedents are still practiced today or have been adequately documented. Why do they assume that rap was developed from taasu? This is an important question although we cannot give a clear answer just yet, as this will be done later in this chapter. What we shall do in the following paragraphs is to briefly explain why the continuity claim linking taasu to rap is problematic.

It is well established that West and East African derivatives and retentions of black musical cultures musics still survive in diasporic areas.<sup>191</sup> African music got to these areas through the slaves that were stationed in these areas. The United States of America also has a huge population of slave settlers. My hypothesis is that, if African derivatives can survive in areas of the Americas such as Cuba and Brazil for example, then it is highly probable that they can also persist in US America. Over the years, many scholars have devoted time to the study of the relationship between US American culture and African culture. According to the cross-cultural studies scholar Joseph E. Holloway, the name ‘Africanisms’ is coined to label cultural and linguistic properties or elements that both US American and African cultures share.<sup>192</sup> The music scholar Richard A. Waterman, in his work "On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy" argues that the key to

---

<sup>190</sup> It is not my intention to question the character of Senegalese griots. The reason for bringing up this example is to show that griots can be manipulative if the situation suits them. This example is not peculiar to Senegal alone. Furthermore, it will be naive to think that only griots request money from visitors. I am aware that for many poor people in Africa and maybe other developing nations, foreigners especially if they were whites are regarded as rich and generous, and the people fill the need to ask for financial help.

<sup>191</sup> See Waterman 1963; Oliver 1970; Kaufman and Guckin 1979; Nketia 1974; Wilson 1974 and Maultsby 1990.

<sup>192</sup> Joseph Holloway, "The Origins of African-American Culture," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, Indiana University Press, (1990),1.

understanding the problem of musical Africanisms in the United States is understanding “that music is an aspect of culture and functions as one.”<sup>193</sup> The musical style of a society does not just consist of a collection of tunes (which can lead us to some knowledge about the values of a culture) but are transmitted through actual behaviour like the value-system underlying culture.<sup>194</sup> This is why the social roles of both taasu and rap are important as a distinguishing factor between the two genres. The discussion so far has shown that both societies (US America and Senegal) place a different emphasis on the role of music in society. For instance, while rap is viewed as a medium to fight social injustice, in taasu praise singing is viewed as a selfish practice.

Furthermore, a scholar of African-American music Wilson Olly in his work "The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American Music and West African Music" quoted extensively Melville J. Herskovits; *The New World Negro: Selected papers in Afro-American Studies*. Herskovits was the first to identify the cultural zones of the Africans that came to America. Slaves were sought after for specific skill or traits according to the wishes of their master.<sup>195</sup> Also, Holloway reports that “between 1670 and 1700 Wolof speaking slaves were the majority of slaves imported into America (South Carolina to be precise).<sup>196</sup> These were perhaps the first Africans whose cultural elements and language were assimilated by and retained within the developing culture of America.”<sup>197</sup> Holloway did not specifically mention the type of musical element that was adapted. However, it is interesting to learn that Wolofs were specifically mentioned in this study, which is the first glimpse of their presence in the United States of America.

The process of identifying elements of African musics that have been assimilated or acculturated is not as simple as Olly argues. He focused on the retention and adaptation of West African musical practices in Afro-American music and made use of the criteria given by Waterman as the characteristics of West African music which include: Call and response, organizational procedures, dominance of a percussive approach to music, off-beat phrasing of melodic accents, metronomic sense and polymeter or multi-meter (defined as the simultaneous use of two or more meters).<sup>198</sup> That we could use social reasons to explain the absence of one of Waterman’s criteria in a musical style. For example, because drums were outlawed, the cultural propensity for cultural rhythms was fulfilled by new practices.<sup>199</sup> Olly quotes Herskovits who posited that “considering the dynamics of acculturation between two

---

<sup>193</sup> Richard Waterman, “On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy,” *Ethnomusicology*, (1963), 85.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Olly Wilson, “The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American Music and West African Music,” *Black Perspective in Music*, (Spring1974), 3.

<sup>196</sup> Holloway, “The Origins of African-American Culture,” 4.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 14-15.

<sup>198</sup> Wilson, “The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American Music and West African Music,” 5.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 8.

cultures, only those elements of a foreign culture which are compatible with the original culture will be adapted.”<sup>200</sup> In essence, the perceived elements from Senegalese music perceived in US American rap are the elements compatible with US American musical style. But how can we be certain of this?

So far, we have interrogated the alleged similarity between taasu and rap by looking at three aspects: lyrical content, use of rhythm and social roles. One could argue that the argument thus far holds that both genres are different, although they share some minor similarities. It may well be that the similarities that both genres share are as a result of coincidence, but that again will be jumping to a conclusion. Furthermore, there has not been any evidence so far to suggest that some form of continuity exists in US American rap that is linked to Senegalese taasu. Continuity as used in this thesis can mean two things. The first is that specific elements of taasu-for instance its rhythm or lyrics-that have been borrowed by rap. The second is whether the slaves taken from the Senegalese slave island of Goree to the United States carried and preserved the taasu practice that was later developed into rap. In chapter two, we discussed how rap was developed and it was evident that the creators of rap did not appropriate taasu musical practices. Although, it may seem that the only way to explain the presence of a similar use of vulgar language and sexual contents in rap lyric is to suggest that it occurred as a result of coincidence. But the evidence provided in this thesis is inconclusive. We can only speculate that the presence of similar forms is a result of coincidence.

How can we explain the result of our comparison of rap and taasu in terms of mimicry? The argument thus far holds that both genres are different although they share some minor similarities. Could this minor similarity be that *striking feature* of mimicry that Bhabha talks about? “The ‘desire’ of mimicry which is Freud’s *striking feature* of mimicry that reveals so little but makes such a big difference, is not merely that impossibility of the Other which repeatedly resists signification.”<sup>201</sup> One could argue that reciting of a poem to a beat, the use of vulgar language as well as the continuity claim already discussed could be categorized as the *striking feature* of the debate between rap and taasu. This is because the characteristic of the *striking feature* of mimicry is that it reveals so little but makes such a big difference. The Senegalese rappers who link taasu to rap hold on to these three aspects but, as I have argued these three aspects of the similarities do not paint a convincing picture of the link between taasu and rap.

When we view the continuity claim in terms of mimicry, we are confronted with the sign of the inappropriate, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategy function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.<sup>202</sup> The fact that slavery took some African people to the United States and the descendants of the slaves created rap music does not qualify rap as African or Senegalese. In other words, mimicry as a sign of the

---

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>201</sup> Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” 130.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 126.

‘inappropriate’ does not comply with the logic of reasoning; it always resists authority and only strives for being different.

Furthermore, we can argue that the perceived sameness and difference between rap and taasu is an effective strategy of mimicry. As a subject of a difference that is almost the same and not quite, rap and taasu have remained elusive in this thesis. Through the double vision of similarity and dissimilarity, sameness and difference, rap and taasu thrive in disrupting any effort of categorisation.

To a large extent, the voices of Senegalese musicians denouncing the claim that rap is similar to taasu have been missing from my argument. Perhaps an introduction of their voices together with scholarly critique will further benefit our discussion. To do so, I will proceed to discuss the trope of the rapper as a modern griot.

## Rappers As Modern Griots

It is common to find in scholarly writings a description of rappers as modern griots. Metaphorically, rappers are not just compared to the griots found in West-African but their art form is said to bear some kind of resemblance to cultural practices found in Africa. What is also common among most scholars is that they attribute this association of rappers with griots to David Toop’s 1984 book *The Rap Attack*.<sup>203</sup> We will begin our exploration by first describing what is contained in Toop’s book, then we will proceed by describing the problems associated with this analogy between rappers and modern griot.

In *The Rap Attack*, Toop discusses three practices found in US America called ‘signifying,’ ‘toasting and ‘the dozens.’ Toasts are rhyming stories told among men. Toasts stories can be of a violent, atrocious and obscene nature and have been used for decades among people incarcerated in prisons to alleviate boredom. Signifying or ‘signifying monkey’ is a trickster game. “The monkey is a trickster who taunts the lion, despite its size and strength, and out-wits it with verbal skill.”<sup>204</sup> The dozens is a game of words whereby two contestants engage in a battle of words until one surrenders.<sup>205</sup> This description matches what we call “yabing” in Nigeria. The word “yab” is used in pidgin English;-a creole language spoken in parts of West Africa which is usually a mixture of English words and the local language of the area. In pidgin, to *yab* could mean among many other things ‘to insult’ ‘disrespect’ or ‘disgrace’ a person depending on the circumstance. Toop traces the practice of signifying, toasts and the dozens all the way to the griots of Nigeria and Gambia.<sup>206</sup> It is uncertain if Toop wanted

---

<sup>203</sup> David Toop is a musician, writer and actively involved in the British music scene as producer, magazine editor and record owner.

<sup>204</sup> David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-hop*, (London: Pluto Press Limited 1984), 29.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 32-33.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 19.

to make the connection to *yabing*. But he seems to be rather interested in highlighting instances of signifying and the dozen in African cultures. For instance, he quotes the sociologist Ruth Finnegan in her book *Oral Literature in Africa* where she describes poetry and music used as social weapons among the Yoruba when two women quarrel by singing abusive songs at each other.<sup>207</sup> Toop subsequently links rap to the griots:

Although at least some of the origins of this rich material (referring to toasts, signifying and the dozens) could be traced to the Bible or British folk songs, it had clear roots in West Africa... In the savannah belt of West Africa this social pressure is embodied by the caste of musicians known as griots. The griot is a professional singer, in the past often associated with a village but now an increasingly independent 'gun for hire' who combines the functions of living history book and news paper with vocal and instrumental virtuosity.

Many scholars have commented on this issue of rappers as modern griots, among them; Patricia Tang 2012; Catherine Appert 2011; Cheryl Keyes 2002 and Damon Sajnani 2012. The work of the ethnomusicologist Cheryl Keyes titled "At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus" explores the Africanisms found in rap music. Keyes writes about the spiritual realm and phenomenal world called the "Crossroads" as a West and Central African concept whereby musicians will trade their guitars with the spirits so as to enhance their talent.<sup>208</sup> Another feature discussed by Keyes is the use of inner and outer time very similar to the idea of syncopated rhythm. Also, it is claimed that rappers adopted the African gesture of libation used by rappers such as Geto Boys and Tupac Shakur. The rappers would pour beer on the ground in recognition of the dead. Moreover, the idea of 'coolness' is copied from the Yoruba character objectifying proper custom.<sup>209</sup> The rappers show their ability to remain calm and show decorum without sweating profusely on stage. Keyes work highlights the complexity inherent to the analogy of rappers as griots. Keyes mentions so many influences of US American rappers that the analogy seems to be indirectly criticised. One might ask, if rappers are griots what about the many references to the Yorubas of Nigeria in the work of both Keyes and Toop?

More recent literature critically examines this rapper as griot trope. The work of the PhD scholar Damon Sajnani is worth considering especially because of the unique approach he brings to the discourse. Sajnani's work titled "Troubling the Trope of 'Rappers as Modern Griot'" examines the rapper as griot analogy more extensively. He interviewed more than hundred Senegalese rappers, together with participant observation. He concluded that

---

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>208</sup> Cheryl Keyes L, "At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus," *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Spring - Summer, 1996), 234.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 234-241.

rappers in Senegal dissociate themselves from the rappers as griot analogy.<sup>210</sup> Sajnani criticises Toop's rappers as griots analogy. For him, griots association with nobles (as clients) contradict hip-hop's 'de facto stance' as social criticism. Also, as 'hired gun' griots contradicts hip-hop's avowed commitment to 'keep it real.'<sup>211</sup> Senegalese rappers unanimously agree that the difference between rap and taasus lies in the social role of rap to bring the grievances of the people to the leaders known as *revindication*. *Revindication* is a French word that means "to forcefully claim or demand a right."<sup>212</sup> Below are two quotes from Sajnani's work that disagree not only with the rappers as modern griot analogy but also disprove that there are similarities between taasus and rap. The first two quotes are from the Senegalese rapper Matador (co-founder of Dakar's Hip-hop Academy) and the third is from an author called Books. In the first quote Matador rejects the rapper as griot analogy. According to Matador:

The role of the griot in society is to guard history and to repeat this to the coming generation. And the rapper, he's implicated and interested in current events, political and cultural. So, it's not the same period. ...Some say the rapper is the modern griot but I disagree. We do not praise sing, that is the role of the griot. Our role is to create balance in society, to raise consciousness, say what is happening below. The rapper is an educator but more than this the rapper is an activist.<sup>213</sup>

The second quote from Matador is a response to the similarities between taasus and rap. He says:

There are many aspects that are similar, arts often resemble one another. But I say taasus has remained taasus, and I've never seen a rapper do taasus. There are similarities but ...these are not the same thing. Us, we knew taasus before we knew rap, and we did not do taasus, we chose to do rap. I can't criticize the system with taasus, saying it does not work.<sup>214</sup>

Books is in agreement with Matador in that he sees a contrast between the two styles. He gives extra information about the differences of rap and taasus linking them to the social roles already discussed. According to Books:

For example, there may be similarities with taasus, but there is a difference, taasus is for ambiance and all that. There are very successful taasus performers, they drive big cars and live in fancy houses, but they do not engage in the music industry to achieve this. They praise sing for millionaires and take their part. Rap has a revolutionary element to it. It is a revolutionary music. This does not mean that every song and every moment of an artist's life must be *revindication*...but the world needs to know the

---

<sup>210</sup> Sajnani, "Troubling the Trope of "Rapper as Modern Griot," 159. Sajnani is currently a PhD candidate in African American Studies at North-western University located in the United States. He is also a hip-hop artist and the leader of the Dope Poet Society. As an academic, his research interests involve Africana philosophy, postcolonial theory, race, geopolitics, social justice and hip-hop studies.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

truth... As rappers, we must speak the truth.<sup>215</sup>

The voices of Senegalese rappers quoted above show a different picture. Firstly, they suggest that there are two camps; one in favour of and the other against the analogy. Secondly, for the first time in this thesis we hear the voices of Senegalese musicians opposing the claim that rap is similar to taasu. Central to the entire discourse is the question why scholars and Senegalese rappers alike have tried to link rap to taasu. What the quotations and perhaps the criticisms against the rappers as modern griot analogy bring to the surface is the question of intent. The response to the question of intent is that Senegalese musicians use the trope to assert their hip-hop authenticity. In the following section, we will examine this issue of intent which has been linked to asserting hip-hop authenticity in more detail.

## **Africanized Hip-hop Identity**

We have so far argued that the rapper as griot trope as well as the alleged connection between rap and taasu are both problematic. What remains to be done is to explain why these assumptions or claims have been made. In chapter two, we discussed US American based Afro-centricity stating how it influenced the aesthetics of hip-hop music and musicians. However, West African hip-hop musicians have also appropriated the trope as a way of asserting their hip-hop authenticity. Senegalese rap is not just a copy of US American rap because it has also fused in elements of Senegalese music practice.

Scholars have addressed how West African artists have appropriated the rapper as modern griot analogy (Tang 2012; Sajnani 2013; Appert 2011). Tang argues that “by invoking griotness, Senegalese Hip-hop artists construct a complex, new Africanized identity that draws upon American rap but then gains greater legitimacy through its roots in a historic African practices. They then reclaim this tradition as their own, having the best of both worlds.”<sup>216</sup> The ethnomusicologist Catherine M. Appert on the other hand, bases her idea of the rapper as modern griot on three claims; the sampling of traditional instruments in Senegalese rap, similarities between taasu and rap and their commonalities in terms of social function.<sup>217</sup> These three claims have come under severe scrutiny from Sajnani. He claims that the indigenizing strategy of sampling local instrumentation is not only used by Senegalese rappers but by rappers all over the world. On the issue of taasu and rap, Sajnani sees their aesthetic resemblance as a matter of coincidence and lastly that the social function

---

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Patricia Tang, “The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions,” In *HipHop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, 190.

<sup>217</sup> Appert Cathrine, “Rappin’ Griots: Producing the Local in Senegalese Hip-Hop,” In *Native Tongues: An African Hip-hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier, 3–22, Trenton, (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2011), 10. Sajnani, “Troubling the Trope of “Rapper as Modern Griot,” 163-168.

is perhaps what separates the two (griots and rappers) with the notion of the *revindication* already discussed.

The key problem with Tang's claim that by invoking griotness Senegalese Hip-hop artistes enjoy the best of both worlds is that it undermines what Bhabha describes as the 'identity effects' of mimicry. In chapter two we discussed Bhabha's notion of mimicry as camouflage. We learnt from Lacan's theory of camouflage that the kind of camouflage that mimicry exerts is its many facets which Bhabha calls its "Identity effects." Bhabha says that the "identity effects" in the play of power is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself.'<sup>218</sup> What he means by "identity effects" is that the colonized copies the colonizer to an extent that the colonized becomes disorientated. So for Bhabha, neither does mimicry give the colonized any advantage over the colonizer nor does it give the colonized greater legitimacy. To grossly simplify matters, by mimicking the colonizer, the colonized gains nothing. We can say the same for those Senegalese musicians who use griotness to gain Hip-hop authenticity. For Bhabha they have neither Senegalese authenticity nor US American Hip-hop authenticity, they are caught-up between the two and their many facets create for them identity effects that 'deauthorizes' and disorientates. So instead of having the best of both worlds as Tang claims, we could say that Senegalese musicians gain nothing but instead lose themselves in the process.

We will now show how mimicry can be applied to Senegalese rappers who link rap to *taasu*. "Mimicry repeats colonial authority as a presence that is 'partial,' both incomplete and virtual, and so disturbs the power and difference on which that authority is based. Bhabha speaks of the process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed. This is menacing precisely because the observer's 'essence' and 'authenticity,' are alienated: the surveilling look is returned as the gaze of the partial imitator, and alternative knowledges of the norms of colonialism are produced."<sup>219</sup> In our discussion of Bhabha's mimicry in chapter two, we also established that mimicry involves two parties: the colonized and the colonizer. Also, that their relationship is viewed as mimicry because of the duality or double articulation involved. The duality of almost the same but not quite addresses both the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha's mimicry highlights the duality of the character of the colonized who on the one hand admires the colonizer for what he has and on the other hand reprimands his character as the oppressor. Similarly, it addresses the colonizer who claims to have a superior culture but on the other hand envies the colonized because the colonizer sees traces of *himself* in the colonized.

On account of fusing African elements into their rap, Senegalese rappers (who link rap to *taasu*) display the kind of double vision discussed by Bhabha. For those Senegalese musicians who link *taasu* to rap, the double articulation can be explained in two ways. On

---

<sup>218</sup> Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," 130.

<sup>219</sup> Childs and Williams, "An introduction to post-colonial theory," 131.

the one hand, their case is similar to the colonizer who sees traces of himself in the colonized and on the other, their behaviour could be likened to the colonized who loves and hates the colonizer. But we can also use the double articulation to explain the behaviour of US African American rappers who copy elements of African culture into rap. In the following paragraphs, we shall apply Bhabha's double articulation to the situation of both Senegalese and US American rappers.

In the first instance of the double articulation mentioned above, Senegalese musicians who link rap to taasu are like the colonized who hates and loves the colonizer. Senegalese musicians show their love for rap because they believe that rap is an extension of themselves (of taasu). The development of rap has inevitably put the spotlight on taasu. Rap being linked to taasu will bring pride to the Senegalese. But this place in the limelight that taasu should be enjoying alongside rap in reality has not been actualized. Moreover, instead of taasu being linked to rap to bring unity, it has succeeded in dividing the Senegalese into two camps (those that support the link and those against it). This is why I believe that there is now a reason for the hate and the envy. I will take the liberty to explain the hate and envy even further. Senegalese musicians who link rap to taasu are likened to the colonizer. For them, rap creates a double vision and is a menace. Rap resembles taasu in that it recites music to a beat and uses vulgar language. It is a menace because it is poetry like taasu but different because rap uses 'big beat.' So this love/hate duality creates a constant battle of the self and the 'other.' This is what Bhabha calls the "identity effects" of mimicry which we have already discussed above. The identity effect of mimicry causes disorientation of the subjects. We have already seen in this chapter that there are two camps of Senegalese musicians; those who support the link of rap to taasu and those who deny any such link. The sameness and difference of taasu and rap has brought about a split of Senegalese rappers. The ambivalence of mimicry in this case is effective because it has succeeded in producing its slippage, its excess and its difference.<sup>220</sup> Senegalese musicians or rappers who would have been a united front have now been divided. This is the destructive power of mimicry.

The double articulation of mimicry can also be used to explain the influence of Afrocentrism on Hip-hop musicians. In chapter one, we described Afrocentrism as the call for all African peoples to refuse the Eurocentric labelling of the West. Also that African people should write their own history and champion their own course. We also noted that Afrocentrism influenced US African American rappers to adopt elements of Africanness into Hip-hop such as dressing and other sorts of black historical memorabilia. I have argued that the behaviour of US African Americans who are on one hand enchanted by African cultures and on the other hand want to remain US African Americans is an example of the double articulation of mimicry. They have displayed their love for Africa by adopting elements of African culture into their rap but at the same time African Americans do not seem themselves as Africans. These musicians are citizens of the United States, speak with an US American accent and have a different culture to Africans in Africa. To show that US African

---

<sup>220</sup> Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," 126.

Americans do not see themselves as Africans, I will re-introduce the quotation from the US African American rapper Vast. “I would love to be a king, chilling on a mountain in Africa and riding giraffes all day.”<sup>221</sup> We all know that the people in Africa do not go about riding giraffes or that the majority of Africans are kings and live on a mountain.

So far in this chapter, we have discussed and compared taasu and rap by examining their musical properties. We have also applied Bhabha’s mimicry extensively in this chapter. Another fundamental question discussed in this chapter is why Senegalese musicians link rap to taasu. Scholars such as Sajani 2013 and Tang 2012 have reported that Senegalese rappers assert and give credit to their local hip-hop by linking it to the griots verbal practice. I have acknowledged the contributions of these scholars. Finally, in this chapter, I have looked even deeper than previous chapters to ascertain areas of similarities between taasu and rap. The answers to the claim are becoming much clearer than appeared at first, that the two styles although different may still share some similarities.

---

<sup>221</sup> David Gonzalez, “Underground, Creative Rap is Thriving,” *New York Times*, April 07, 1999. Accessed October 20, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/07/nyregion/about-new-york-underground-creative-rap-is-thriving.html>

## CONCLUSION

The desire for understanding may signify a need for reciprocal exchange across disciplines, cultures, aesthetics and languages. This thesis is the fruit of such boundary crossings. In this thesis we have searched for answers to explain the complex behaviour of two genres (taasu and rap), from two geographical locations through postcolonial lenses. We have borrowed the idea of mimicry as described by Homi K. Bhabha in his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” to explain the link between rap and taasu. We have also seen that as Bhabha describes, *mimicry is a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence* requiring similarity and dissimilarity. The title of this thesis *Sameness and Difference*, attempts to encapsulate this notion. This duality of sameness and difference is the pact that makes Bhabha’s mimicry applicable to rap and taasu as our summary of the discourse to follow shows.

This thesis has given an account of, and the reasons for, the widespread claim of similarity between Senegalese taasu and US American rap. I would like to conclude the discussion in this thesis by highlighting the importance of Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of mimicry to the entire discourse. In chapter two, I suggested that the claim linking rap to taasu could be another form of mimicry. As we progressed, I suggested that Bhabha’s mimicry and its description of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized could be applied to our discourse on taasu and rap in two ways. The first way that mimicry was applied was in respect of the behaviour of Senegalese musicians who link rap to taasu. Secondly, we discussed the relationship of mimicry in terms of US African American rappers adaptation of elements of African music and culture into rap. In the following paragraphs, I will explain how this thesis showed that both instances (the Senegalese and US American scenarios) are examples of mimicry.

Mimicry has been established throughout this thesis to display a form of double vision; love versus hate and between a self and an ‘other.’ The double articulation of mimicry reveals a duality of not only master/servant but of hate/love. On the one hand the colonizer and master is loved by the colonized and in some cases the colonized looks up to the colonizer as their model. On the other hand, because of the double dealings of the colonizer who is viewed as both saviour and oppressor, the colonized hates the colonizer. This double articulation of mimicry is contextualized in the behaviour of Senegalese and US African American rappers. For African American rappers, their relationship with Africa is arguably more visible through their adoption of the teachings of Afrocentrism. Afrocentrism criticizes Eurocentric views of Africa as a dark continent and the that the inhabitants savages and called for rappers to embrace their ‘Africanness.’<sup>222</sup> The rappers responded by adapting elements of African culture to rap which we discussed in chapter two. I have argued that the behaviour of US African Americans who are on one hand enchanted by African cultures and on the other hand want to remain US African Americans is an example of the double articulation of mimicry.

---

<sup>222</sup> Afrocentrism was discussed in detail in chapter two.

The second aspect of the double articulation of mimicry applies to Senegalese musicians who link *taasu* to rap. Senegalese musicians who believe that through slavery they have a relationship with US African Americans exert a duality of self and other. These groups of Senegalese rappers may be enchanted by rap music on the one hand but are suspicious of rap music, which they believe is *taasu* with big beats. What is visible is a love/hate relationship. Why would they (Senegalese musicians) copy an art form from the United States when they have a similar form which according to them precedes rap? There is a constant battle between the self (in our case Senegalese musicians and the *taasu* genre) and the other (US African American musicians and rap). I have argued that the behaviour of those Senegalese rappers who link rap to *taasu* can be likened to the situation of the colonized who sees *himself* in the colonizer.

My summary of the significance of mimicry to the discourse in this thesis is as follows:

1. Mimicry is a phenomenon in our day to day discourse. It is not only applicable to post-colonial discourse alone. This thesis has shown that mimicry is a concept that transcends the instance of the relationships of the colonizer and the colonized. It has shown that mimicry can be applied to situations where ambivalence is prevalent. It strives in an environment where the question of sameness and difference as well as power relations is relevant. This question of power relations is exemplified by the ambivalence of mimicry as both a sign of the 'appropriate' and the 'inappropriate.' As a sign of the 'appropriate' "mimicry is a sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform and, regulation and discipline which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power."<sup>223</sup> The sign of the 'inappropriate' "is a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers."<sup>224</sup> The example of the 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' lends itself more easily in this thesis. For instance, in chapter two, I interpreted Awadi's assertion as being an ambivalence because it 'appropriates' the Other (in this case rap) as it visualises power (the supremacy of *taasu*). I argued that since mimicry allows for the fixing of the colonial subject (to appropriate) that Awadi's claim of similarity could be viewed as forcefully fixing *taasu* by linking *taasu* to rap. But on the other hand and contradictory to his earlier stance that *taasu* and rap are similar, Awadi intensifies the surveillance, by creating a difference with the assertion that both genres are also different. In other words, Awadi inappropriates, casts a difference that I argued is recalcitrance.
2. The similarities of both genres in that both recite a poem to a beat and their use of vulgar language discussed in this thesis highlights Freud's concept of the *striking feature* which Bhabha borrowed to explain the *metonymy of presence* (an erratic, eccentric strategy of authority in colonial discourse).<sup>225</sup> This is because the

---

<sup>223</sup> Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," 126.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 131.

characteristic of the *striking feature* of mimicry reveals so little but it makes such a big difference. Such that for Senegalese musicians who link rap to taasu the aforementioned similarities does seem adequate to claim that taasu is the origin of rap (almost the same but not quite). But the musicians miss an important aspect and one that this thesis has shown differentiates both genres. We showed that both genres are different by virtue of their social role in their respective societies. While rap is used to fight marginalization and police brutality, taasu is praise poetry and taasukat side with the ruling class.

3. We connected the continuity claim by Senegalese musicians who link rap to taasu to the sign of the inappropriate. Senegalese musicians who link taasu to rap claim that the slaves taken from Senegal to US America continued in the taasu tradition. I argued in this thesis that the fact that slavery took some African people to the United States and the descendants of the slaves created rap music does not qualify rap as being African or Senegalese. In other words, mimicry as a sign of the 'inappropriate' does not comply with the logic of reasoning put forward by the continuity claim, it always resists authority and only strives in being different.
4. Mimicry produces 'identity effects' on the subject. What this means is that the effect of mimicry deauthorises or disorients its subject. So that the argument by Patricia Tang that by invoking griotness, Senegalese Hip-hop artists construct a complex, new Africanized identity that draws upon US American rap but then gains greater legitimacy through its roots in historic African practice (taasu) as problematic. I argued that from the perspective of the identity effects of mimicry, copying another does not give any advantage to the one who copies. Senegalese rappers copying their American counterparts does not mean that they then enjoy the best of both worlds as claimed by Tang. For Bhabha the result of such copying is identity effects which cause disorientation and mimic men in the process.
5. Bhabha says that: "the effect of mimicry is camouflage...It is not a question of harmonization with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare."<sup>226</sup> As camouflage mimicry hides itself and becomes incomprehensible. I argued that we can say the same about rap and taasu. As a subject of a difference that is almost the same and not quite, rap and taasu have remained elusive in this thesis. Similarly, through the double vision of similarity and dissimilarity, sameness and difference, rap and taasu thrive in disrupting any effort of categorisation.

Taasu, an art form of Senegalese women, incorporates praise singing during ceremonies that women take active part in such as: marriage, the naming of a child and more recently during political rallies to drum up support for politicians. Rap on the other hand, the art-form that began in the Bronx area of New York City, has several elements. As a music genre, rap was used to entertain and on the political front, rap became a cathartic outlet for the youth of US America to voice their disagreement of government policies and the marginalization of the

---

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 125.

poor. In recent times, rap music has become popular in most African countries including Senegal. This rise in popularity has also given birth to claims and counter claims about rap music as being similar to taas. This claim of similarity has been investigated in this thesis by analysing the music of both genres, as well as reviewing and comparing literature on the subject of taas and rap. Also, this thesis used the claims made by Senegalese musicians as a starting point of the investigation. Let us briefly describe our findings.

During my discussion with Senegalese musicians, I realized that the musicians frequently use the term 'tradition' to mean that taas has been practiced for centuries. Aware that tradition could pose a problem in situating taas and possibly rap music, I then proceeded to deconstruct the frequent use of tradition by scholars and non scholars alike as a way to establish the validity of a cultural practice. Using the critical work of E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger titled *The Invention of Tradition*, we argued that traditions are invented. As such the concept of tradition is a problematic one. I used the invented tradition argument to state that this thesis will not regard any such claim of tradition. Similarly, the discourse on invented tradition was connected to Bhabha's mimicry most notably his idea of ambivalence of mimicry as both a sign of the 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate.' I argued that the sign of the 'appropriate' could be likened to what Hobsbawm argues that "invented tradition use history to support, legitimate and enhance group cohesion."<sup>227</sup> I gave examples in colonial Africa where appropriation had taken place in the past. For instance, the Anglican missionaries working in Buganda (Uganda) introduced British-style primary and secondary schools with the aim to educate the native peasant (but not the children of the Kings), so that the peasants are equipped to demand accountability from their Kings.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the claim that US American rap is similar to Senegalese taas. However, this study also examined the claim that taas is the predecessor of rap and also investigated why Senegalese musicians link rap to taas. The claim that taas is the predecessor of rap was given a secondary role in this research mainly because the volume of work needed for such a research is beyond the scope of this thesis. I also discussed in this thesis the trope portraying US American rappers as modern griots. The critique of the trope portraying rappers as modern griot recently gained momentum through the work of scholars such as Tang (2012) and Sajnani (2013). They are among many scholars rejecting the similarities between taas and rap by highlighting the difference in their social roles.

When I compared the musical and social features of both taas and rap, I discovered that what unites the two genres is not as convincing as what separates them. It is true that both genres recite a poem to a beat and that vulgar language may occur in their lyrics. In this thesis, I have argued that this similarity is only coincidental: there is no evidence to suggest that some form of continuity exists in the United States that is linked to Senegalese taas. But there was also no evidence to suggest that taas was not persevered in rap. I have also argued that the claim

---

<sup>227</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Ranger Terrence, "Introduction: The Invention of Tradition," *In The Invention of Tradition*, 34.

that both genres are similar because of the presence of vulgar language in their lyrics is problematic.<sup>228</sup>

I have argued that both genres are different: firstly, by virtue of their social roles and secondly, in their musical properties comparisons that is: the kind of rhythm (or beat) used. Taasukat are different when compared to rappers because they sing the praises of the noble class in Senegalese society. Senegalese taasu is predominantly in the domain of women whereas rap is a male-dominated genre. We also established that taasukats are often act out of self-interest and not for the community as a whole. In contrast, rappers by virtue of their social role act as the voice of the voiceless. They use their art to protest police brutality and the marginalization of the poor. Senegalese rappers who disassociate themselves from the similarity claim point to this cathartic characteristic of rap (*revindication*) as the main element that distinguishes rap from taasu.

Furthermore, other significant findings are that;

1. The similarity between taasu and rap can be located mostly in their lyrical content;-
2. Their rhythms show evidence of divergence rather than convergence. The area of convergence is that both genres make use of syncopated rhythms, although taasu rhythm displays a more syncopated percussion rhythm. Both genres are different rhythmically in that taasu rhythm shows elements of a composed rhythm with variations. Rap rhythm in contrast uses looped repeated measures all through a song;-
3. Both genres have different social roles;-
4. The majority of Senegalese rappers oppose the claim that rappers are modern griots.

The evidence from this study suggests Senegalese musicians claim a similarity between rap and taasu because they wish to assert their hip-hop authenticity instead of enlightening the world about taasu practice. Moreover, if the griots are correct in pointing out that rap is from taasu, other African nations might begin to say the same about cultural practices found elsewhere. I am not disputing the fact that there are diasporic musical traditions with influences from Africa. When such a connection between African traditions in the diaspora is discovered, they should be followed by academic researches. Already, a spate of research exists recounting West and Central African derivatives and retentions of black musical culture in general (see Waterman 1963; Oliver 1970; Kaufman and Guckin 1979; Nketia 1974; Wilson 1974; Maultsby 1990).<sup>229</sup>

---

<sup>228</sup> We can argue that the similarities between the two genres such as: the use of vulgar language and the reciting of poetry to a beat are evidence to suggest that taasu was preserved in rap. The problem with such a way of thinking is that it diminishes the claim of coincidence already discussed. Moreover, we will need more similarity to be present before such evidence can be taken seriously.

<sup>229</sup> Keyes, Cheryl L, "At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus," *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Spring - Summer, 1996), 224.

The current findings add to a growing body of literature on taasu on one hand and the ongoing debate of rappers as modern griot on the other. This study produced results which collaborated the findings of previous studies in the fields. What makes it unique, though, is that I have paid close attention to the claim made by Senegalese musicians by examining the musical properties of both taasu and rap. I see my research as a starting point for a comparison between the two genres. Hopefully, this study will encourage more discussion on the taasu subject and also encourage further scholarly research on taasu.

Finally, a number of important limitations need to be considered. First, the lack of substantial previous research on the subject of taasu made it difficult to carry out this research. As was pointed out several times in this thesis, the lack of extensive research on taasu affected the quality of musicological discourse contained in this work. Apart from Lisa McNee's book *Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women's Autobiographical Discourses* there was no other critical source on the topic of taasu to rely on. To remedy this difficulty in assessing the scholarly work on taasu, I relied to a great extent on my observation during my recent field trip to Senegal. The problem with such dependence is that, the opportunity to evaluate some of my observations made while in Senegal with other studies was lacking in this thesis. For instance, my discussion and comparison of taasu and rap's lyrical content, use of rhythm and their social roles would have benefited from other scholarly examples. Also, an explanation of the role of the audience during a taasu's performance is missing from this thesis because the literature does not tell us much about this.

This research has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. The need for scholarly research on the musical properties of taasu, is at the top of the agenda. What would have been important to learn about the audience is whether the taasu performed is improvised at the spur of the moment or whether taasukat always draw from an existing body of repertoire. It will be interesting (scholarly speaking) to learn about important performers, songs and composers in the genre. Furthermore, the voices of Senegalese scholars, historians and culture custodians are missing in this thesis to a great extent in the literature. It will be worthwhile to the discussion to match the voices of the aforementioned class of people in Senegalese society with the voices of the musicians.

It is a pity that the private world of the taasukats is still shrouded in mystery. It would be encouraging if more female researchers investigated taasu because the fact that they are female would enable taasukats to be more open about many areas (such as the erotic aspect of their poems).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alan P. Merriam, "African Music." In *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*, edited by William Bascom and Melville Herskovits (Chicago, 1958), pp. 49-86.
- Appert, Cathrine. "Rappin' Griots: Producing the Local in Senegalese Hip-Hop." In *Native Tongues: An African Hip-hop Reader*, edited by P. Khalil Saucier, 3-22. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2011.
- Bernardini, Wesley. "Identity as History: Hopi Clans and the Curation of Oral Tradition." *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Winter, 2008), pp. 483-509.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October*, Vol. 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984).
- Bithell, Caroline. "The Past in Music: Introduction." *Ethnomusicology Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 1, The Past in Music (Jun., 2006), pp. 3-16.
- Boston, J. S. "Oral Tradition and the History of Igala." *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1969), pp. 29-43.
- Bruns, Gerald L. "What is Tradition?" *New Literary History*, 22:1 (1991:Winter) p.1.
- Burkholder Peter J, Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca. *A History of Western Music seventh edition*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008.
- Charry, Eric. *Hip-hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Childs, Peter and R. J. Patrick Williams. "An introduction to post-colonial theory." London: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- Cornelia Panzacchi. "The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1994), pp. 190-210.
- Cusick, Suzanne. "On a Lesbian Relation With Music: A Serious Effort not to Think Straight." In Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Dagbovie, Pero Gaglo. "'Of All Our Studies, History Is Best Qualified to Reward Our Research': Black History's Relevance to the Hip-hop Generation." *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 90, No. 3, The History of Hip-hop(Summer, 2005), pp. 299-323.
- Day, Gordon M. "Oral Tradition as Complement." *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Spring, 1972), pp. 99-108.

- Dean, John. "Rappers Aren't Limited To Being The Tool Of One Secret Society." *Noisey Music by Vice*. Accessed October 20, 2013.  
[http://noisey.vice.com/en\\_au/blog/rappers-arent-limited-to-being-the-tool-of-one-secret-society](http://noisey.vice.com/en_au/blog/rappers-arent-limited-to-being-the-tool-of-one-secret-society).
- Dimitriadis, Greg. "Hip-hop: From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative." *Popular Music*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (May, 1996), pp. 179-194.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. "The Culture of Hip-hop." In *That's the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, 68-76. Edited by Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Early, Gerald. "Afrocentrism: From Senstaionalism to Measured Deliberation." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 5 (Autumn, 1994) , pp. 86-88.
- . "Afrocentrism," *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2013. Accessed December 26, 2013.  
 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/766312/Afrocentrism>>.
- Ebron, Paulla A. *Performing Africa*. Princeton University Press. 2002.
- Flores, Juan. "Puerto Rocks: Rap, Roots and Amnesia." In *That's the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, 77-96. Edited by Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Forman, Murray & Mark Anthony Neal (eds.). *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. Routledge: New York, 2012.
- French, Howard W. "Goree Island Journal; The Evil That Was Done Senegal: A Guided Tour." *New York Times*, March 06, 1998. Accessed October 22, 2013.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/03/06/world/goree-island-journal-the-evil-that-was-done-senegal-a-guided-tour.html>
- Frith, Simon. "Music and Identity." In *Questions of cultural identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, 108-127. London: Sage Publications, 1996.
- George, Nelson. "Hip-hop's Founding Father Speak the Truth." In *That's the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, 50-63. Edited by Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Gokh-Bi System. "Gokh-Bi System: RAP TASSU - Hip-Hop Returns Home." *Artist Website. Gokh-Bi System*. Accessed December 9, 2013. <http://www.gokhbisystem.com/bio.html>.
- Gonzalez, David. "Underground, Creative Rap is Thriving," *New York Times*, April 07, 1999. Accessed October 20, 2013.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/07/nyregion/about-new-york-underground-creative-rap-is-thriving.html>

- Hager, Steven. *Hip-hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.
- Hale, Thomas, A. *Griots and Griottes*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1998.
- . "Griottes: Female Voices from West Africa." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Women as Oral Artists (Autumn, 1994), pp. 71-91.
- Hall, Pamela D. The relationship between types of rap music and memory in African American children. *Journal of Black Studies*, 28(6), (1998), pp. 802-814.
- Hall, Stuart. "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Hall Stuart and Paul du Gay. London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1996.
- Hall, Trish. "A South Bronx Very Different from the Cliche." *The New York Times*, February 19, 1999. Accessed October 25, 2013.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/14/realestate/a-south-bronx-very-different-from-the-cliche.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>
- Hebdige, Dick. "Rap and Hip-hop: The New York Connection." In *That's the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, 256-257. Edited by Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger Terrence. "Introduction: The Invention of Tradition." In *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger Terrence. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Holloway, Joseph. "The Origins of African-American Culture." In *Africanisms in American Culture*, Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Hoskins, A. Linus. "Eurocentrism vs. Afrocentrism: A Geopolitical Linkage Analysis." *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Special Issue: The Image of Africa in German Society (Dec., 1992), pp. 247-257.
- Irvine, Judith T. "When Is Genealogy History? Wolof Genealogies in Comparative Perspective." *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Nov., 1978), pp. 651-674.
- Judy, R. A. T. "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity." *boundary 2*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994), pp. 211-230.
- Kaufman, Frederick and John Guckin. *The African Roots of Jazz*. New York: Alfred Publishing Company, 1979.
- Keyes, Cheryl L. "At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus." *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Spring - Summer, 1996), pp. 223-248.
- Klein, Martin A. "Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery." *History in Africa*, Vol. 16 (1989), pp. 209-217.

- Krims, Adam. *Rap music and the poetics of identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Kumar, Sanjiv. "Bhabha's Notion of 'Mimicry' And 'Ambivalence' in V.S. Naipaul's A Bend in The River." *Researchers World, Journal of Arts, Science and Commerce*, Vol. II, Issue 4, Oct. 2011.
- Lusane, Clarence. "Rap, Race and Politics." In *That's the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, 403-416. Edited by Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Magel, Emil A. "The Role of the 'Gewel' in Wolof Society: The Professional Image of Lamin Jeng." *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Summer, 1981), pp. 183-191.
- Map of Senegal. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Factbook.  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sg.html>
- Maultsby, Portia K. "Africanisms in African-American Music." In *Africanisms in American Culture*, edited by Joseph E. Holloway, 185-210. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990.
- McClary, Susan. "Afterword." In Jacques Attali, *Noise*, trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.
- McLaughlin, Fiona. "Islam and Popular Music in Senegal: The Emergence of a 'New Tradition.'" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (1997), pp. 560-581.
- McNee, Lisa. *Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women's Autobiographical Discourses*. State University of New York press, Albany, New York, 2000.
- Neef, Ali Colleen. "Tassou: The Ancient Spoken Word of African Women." *Ethnolyrical Blog*, November 14, 2010. <http://www.ethnolyrical.org/?p=505>
- Nketia, J.H. Kwabena. "African Roots of Music in the Americas: An African View." *Black Perspective in Music* 2:82-88, 1974.
- Nossiter, Adam. "In Blunt and Sometime Crude Rap, a Strong Political Voice Emerges." *The New York Times*, September 18, 2011. Accessed December 27, 2013.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/world/africa/senegal-rappers-emerge-as-political-force.html?pagewanted=all>
- Oliver, Paul. *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues*. New York: Stein and Day, 1970.

- Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Translated by Harriet De Onís. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Panzacchi, Cornelia. "The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1994), pp. 190-210.
- Pareles, Jon. "POP VIEW: Gangster Rap: Life and Music in the Combat Zone," *New York Times*, October 07, 1990, accessed September 20, 2013.
- . "Rapping, Living and Dying a Gangsta Life," *New York Times*, March 10, 1997, accessed September 20, 2013.
- . "Tupac Shakur, 25, Rapper Who Personified Violence, Dies," *New York Times*, September 14, 1996, accessed September 20, 2013.
- Pope, Hugh. "The Rule of Faith." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol.5. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909. 5 July 2013.  
<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05766b.htm>>.
- Richardson, Jeanita W. and Kim A. "Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America's Culture of Violence in Context." *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 71, No. 3, Juvenile Justice: Children of Color in the United States (Summer, 2002), pp. 175-192.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 1994.
- Said, Edward. *A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*. Edited by Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom. London: University of California Press, 2010.
- Sajnani, Damon. "Troubling the Trope of 'Rapper as Modern Griot.'" *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.6, no.3, September 2013.
- Samuels, David. "The Rap on Rap: 'The Black Music' that Isn't Either." In *That's the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, 168-176. Edited by Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Seeger, Charles. "Music as a Tradition of Communication Discipline and Play." *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Sep., 1962), pp. 156-163.
- Shear, Michael D. "Obama Looks to History and Future in Senegal." *New York Times*, June 27, 2013. Accessed October 22, 2013.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/28/world/africa/obama-africa-tour.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/28/world/africa/obama-africa-tour.html?_r=0)
- Sidikou-Morton Aissata. "Revealing Things Revealed: Zamu and Taasu as Poetic Expression." In *Carmel Tracks; Critical Perspectives on Sahelian Literatures*, 193-228. Edited by Deborah Boyd-Buggs & Joyce Hope Scott. Asmara: Africa World Press, 2003.

- Starr, Larry and Waterman Christopher. "American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3." *U. S. Department Of State Bureau Of International Information Programs*, 2008.  
[http://photos.state.gov/libraries/korea/49271/dwoa\\_120909/american\\_popular\\_music.pdf](http://photos.state.gov/libraries/korea/49271/dwoa_120909/american_popular_music.pdf)
- Tang, Patricia. *Masters of the Sabar: Wolof Griot Percussionists of Senegal*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2007.
- . "Mbalax Fever: The Story of Popular Music in Senegal." In *Hip Deep Blog*, <http://www.afropop.org/wp/10964/patricia-tang-on-mbalax/>
- . "Rhythmic Transformations in Senegalese Sabar." *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 52. No. 1 (Winter, 2008), pp. 85-97.
- . "The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions." In *HipHop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric Charry, 79–91. *Indiana University Press*, 2012.
- Terrence, Ranger. "Introduction: "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa." In *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger Terrence. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Thomson, Alistair. "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History." *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter - Spring, 2007), pp. 49-70.
- Tomlinson, Gary. "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicology: A Response to Lawrence Kramer." *Current Musicology* 64, pp. 18-24 and 36-40, 1993.
- Toop, David. "Uptown Throwdown." In *That's the Joint: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, 267-284. Edited by Forman, Murray and Neal, Mark Anthony. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- . *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-hop*. London: Pluto Press Limited, 1984.
- Troy, Smith. "An Interview with DJ's Breakout and Baron and their Funky MC's." *OldSchoolhiphop.com* dedicated to Hip-hop prior to 1986, July 1<sup>st</sup> 2011. Accessed September 20, 2013.  
<http://www.oldschoolhiphop.com/interviews/breakbaronfunky.htm>
- Waterman, Richard. "On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy." *Ethnomusicology*, (1963) 7:83-87.
- Wilson, Olly. "The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American Music and West African Music." *Black Perspective in Music*, (Spring 1974):3-22.

Wright, Donald R. "Requiem for the Use of Oral Tradition to Reconstruct the Pre-colonial History of the Lower Gambia." *History in Africa*, Vol. 18 (1991), pp. 399-408.

## DISCOGRAPHY

Diop, Aby Ngana. *Thioissanou-Ngewel: Liital*. Dakar: Midi Musique, 1994.

Gokh-Bi System. *Rap Tassu*. AMU Music 2009.

Guewell, Fatou. *Kara*. Dakar: Wings, 1992.

Thiam, Assane. *Mame*. Saprom, 1993.

"Lil' Kim How Many Licks ft Sisqo," YouTube video, 3:53, posted by "igotyoudancing," Retrieved October 20, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dy468aoZADo>.

"Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg - Nuthin' But A G Thang," YouTube video, 3:54, posted by "DJSmile4" Retrieved October 20, 2013. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_qkP8SvHvaU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qkP8SvHvaU).

"Akinyele-Put it in Your Mouth," YouTube video, 3:22, posted by "ShamrockHipHop2," Retrieved October 20, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaIW0URYK8o>.

"Necro - Who's Ya Daddy? (off The SEXORCIST album)" YouTube video, 5:08, posted by "bababaloona" Retrieved October 20, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiDFVxxiS9E>.

"Slick Rick - Adults Only," YouTube video, 4:16, posted by "Khakupa Cantole" Retrieved October 20, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keshkCzCEVE>.

"Aby gana diop ndadje," YouTube video, 5:25, posted by "borom ndakarou" Retrieved October 19, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zIRvxzSMkk&list=WL93912409903857FE>.

"Sugarhill Gang-Rapper's Delight Lyrics," YouTube video, 7:10, posted by "BradderzMusic," Retrieved September 25, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjE4Vxe5-Ak>