Anthology Vol. 2: Chapter 2 Summary

YOUTH LEADING YOUTH: Hip Hop and Hiplife Theatre in Ghana and South Africa

by Daniel Banks

Context

Daniel Banks' chapter begins with a moving description of "the delirium of sound" that is the Hip Hop Cipher. Banks references Wole Soyinka and Victor Turner in analyzing how the Cipher's supportive circle of singing and dancing actualizes both individualistic expression and community-building. In expressing his belief that Hip Hop Theatre is a means of youth leadership training and empowerment, Banks says the Cipher is, "a place for people to demonstrate and practice their skills, a place to enact self-definition and theorize one's own existence in the presence of community."

Banks goes on to discuss the complex development of Hip Hop, from the 1970s in the Bronx in New York City with Universal Zulu Nation founder Afrika Bambaataa, to its international status of today as evidenced in news articles, books and films based on Hip Hop experiences. He presents the origins of Hip Hop as a generative and creative alternative activity to street violence, noting, for example, Nelson George's description of Zulu Nation as "a collective of DJ's, breakers, graffiti artists, and homeboys that filled the fraternal role gangs play in urban culture while de-emphasizing crime and fighting." The founding ethics of Hip Hop are inclusion, cooperation, collaboration, and community.

Banks sets up a clear distinction between the commercialized rap recording industry based on consumerism and exploitation, and the worldwide politically conscious form supporting non-violent self-expression, justice, and healing. He addresses Hip Hop's multiethnic constituency and origins, as well as its African aesthetics and cultural retentions.

Hip Hop Theatre

Hip Hop Theatre fuses the key elements of Hip Hop—DJ'ing/Turntablism, Emcee'ing/Rapping, Dancing, Writing/Aerosol Art, and Human Beat-boxing—with the conventions of theatre, keeping at its core the original ethics supporting the voice of individuals and the specific needs of the community (youth empowerment and social change). Banks lists varied examples of successful Hip Hop Theater productions, and explains their influences such as the Black Arts Movement and the legacy of the West African storyteller.

International Teaching and Practice: Ghana

Banks begins his descriptions of his work in Ghana by including an interview he did with

Ghanaian Hip Hop icon, Reggie Rockstone, in order to give a picture of the development of the unique Ghanaian style Rockstone calls "Hiplife." Hiplife is characterized by rapping and rhyming in local languages. The styles and textures of Hiplife were working to shape and reshape the landscape of Hip Hop culture in Ghana when Banks and his students arrived in 2006. The theater projects they would work on would listen to, learn from, and innovate within this simultaneously localized and global-based tradition.

Banks then moves into a description and analysis of the Hip Hop Theatre projects he led in both Ghana and South Africa. Many projects share similar characteristics: the ability to transcend cultural boundaries within the Hip Hop Nation, the creation of artful collaborations to resist dominant power structures, and also practitioners' struggles to escape the long shadow of the rap record industry's images of violence and misogyny.

For example, Banks details his work in Buduburam, the refugee camp, where Liberians are a majority. He quotes volunteer, Jenkins Macedo, who describes the dire conditions at the camps, as well as the strong survivor spirit. Macedo speaks to the impact made by a workshop he requested Banks take on with his students as co-leaders. As with all of the projects included in the chapter, they used the methodology they began to develop at NYU, which consists of eight activities, including word and rhythm exercises, beat-boxing practice, improvisational exercises, individual writing time, and a final sharing circle. But these projects also drew heavily on the experiences, skills, and style of the local participants.

This conversational interweaving of local and national Hip Hop practices becomes symbolically embodied in the final performance at the Buduburam camp. During the performance, the electricity cut out so the beginning Cipher was performed in the dark with audience members holding up their cell phones to light the stage. After the NYU program concluded, the energy that these lights symbolized remained lit. Macedo concludes, "As a result of this training and program, some of the students...were able to be writers for the local newspaper, some write poems, while others plan and participate in talent shows, plays, drama...most of the young people that participated in the program are no longer afraid to showcase their skills and are more than willing to help others develop such skills as well."

International Teaching and Practice: South Africa
Banks begins his segment on his work in South Africa with an excerpt from a text by Emile Jansen, founder of the Hip Hop group, Black Noise. The theme for this section can be seen in Jansen's statement, "My Hip Hop is this energy that is subconsciously linked to the very essence of Humanity." While directing a workshop of the HHT play *Blurring Shine*, Banks is impressed with the participants knowledge of "grassroots" Hip Hop artists, in addition to the hyped US names. In this production and a following lab, the final presentations were marked by after-performance discussions that lasted longer than the actual shows. The content centered on the form of Hip Hop itself, and thus echoed many other forums Banks has attended: is Hip Hop a fad, would it be appropriated by the powerful?

In these and other workshops Banks describes, participants from different gangs, social classes, or walks of life formed strong bonds and went on to further collaborations, answering an ethical concern of Banks' that short sessions without strong follow-through could do more harm than good. The statements Banks includes from several participants from a three-day workshop at the Sibikwa Community Theatre in the East Rand are indicative of a bonding through a revealing of commonalities:

> For me it was empowering at a completely different level. I understand it was Hip Hop; but for me it was just human; and that's more important to me than all the names we fix to it. It was human, it was an encounter with a human experience, with other people's thoughts, about themselves, about the spaces in which they find themselves.

In the circle of a final workshop that Banks shares, the group openly expressed their fears, which often revolved around issues of class and gender. A few men shed tears while expressing life frustrations and the group brought this material to their compositions, an extraordinary experience in this male-dominated cultural context. The experience of gender dynamics elicited strong responses from the female participants as well, "Women need to persevere! We fight for our voices to be heard and you have to be 150% more dedicated, determined, and resilient than the next man because when you come into a space where you are the minority, the only way to rise is to exhibit quiet confidence like a skilled Samurai with sharpened sword and tough skin."

Hip Hop Theatre and Peacebuilding
Banks ends his chapter by discussing Hip Hop in the context of peacebuilding. He highlights commonalities of methodology in his projects, including young people assuming leadership roles in using their developed skills to teach others, creating supportive psychic spaces with attention to non Euro-centric authority structures, and a reliance on local knowledge and values. The peacebuilding outcomes of this work are, for Banks, best expressed by the image of the Cipher. They include an understanding that many truths can occupy the same space, that contradictions can coexist, and that a person can be a strong individual and part of a collective simultaneously.

Banks' suggestions for the future include training more teams of youth facilitators, and sending them, as well as masters of Hip Hop performance, on international teaching tours. Banks believes that by instructing youth within the methodologies of HHT while integrating local skills, these youth can connect to one another and develop the confidence to challenge the issues that pervade their lives, thus fulfilling Hip Hop's innate "declaration of peace."

Banks concludes, "There is something about Hip Hop Theatre's particular relevance, and resonance, to youth today that better situates its possibility for growth, conflict resolution, and the imagining of futures more than any other art form or interactive technique I have encountered. Perhaps it is the shared reliance on improvisation--a necessary element

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both in Hip Hop performance skills and for overcoming marginalization in day to day living."

More from "Youth Leading Youth":

- Banks includes information on how an integral aspect of Hip Hop, emceeing, developed into the more well known solo rap performance, and how the rapper's skill and popularity was exploited by the music industry.

- Introducing the section on Ghana, Banks describes a performance that fused traditional Ghanaian styles of dance with contemporary Hip Hop and composed the narrative around issues of HIV and AIDS.

- Banks focuses several times on the sustainability issues and believes they can be addressed by discussing with workshop participants future action-steps and creating leadership roles within the group. He provides a successful example in the story of one of his University of Ghana students, Marcia Olivette, who initiates her own teaching program in Hiplife theatre in Ghana.