
The Afrikan Hiphop Caravan: Building a Revolutionary Counterculture

Biko Mutsaurwa

Biko Mutsaurwa is a leading Shona poet, Hip Hop artist and community activist. He is the founder of UHURU Network, an educational trust that uses cultural activism and popular education to advance the struggle for freedom of expression and social justice in Zimbabwe. He is also one of the initiators of the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan. In this article, he provides a brief outline of the lessons to be learned from a decade of Hip Hop activism on the African continent. In addition to providing a short historical overview of the roots of the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan, he outlines the vision of the project: the creation of a coherent Afrikan Hiphop Movement based upon a strategic orientation towards social movements of the working class and the oppressed.

A Brief History: Building Counterculture

Over the last decade the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan has been building connections across borders on the continent and beyond. Yet few people, even some in Afrikan Hiphop circles, have a good grasp of the beliefs, motivations and purposes behind this Movement. Often times with an emerging Movement, it is not until the time hatches – producing concrete and visible results – that people begin to give it a name and tell its’ story. Thus, in the following paragraphs, I will trace the origins and aims of the project.

In 2004, an affinity group of student activists, Hip Hop activists and socialists established Uhuru Network, based in Harare, as a decentralised platform where members of the Toyitoyi Arts Collective, Imani Media Collective, Impilo Permaculture Collective and Ruzivo Study Circle met and forged theoretical and tactical unity. As a social movement, emerging from the concrete struggles of working people in Zimbabwe against the Economic Structural Adjustment Programs (ESAPs) of the ZANU-PF dictatorship, the Network was from the start decidedly anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarianist. The organisation actively participated in actions for social and economic justice within the social movements. Students had a campaign against the privatisation of education; trade unionists were constantly on strike demanding a living wage; the communities were being ravaged by HIV/Aids, hunger and poverty; and young unemployed people in working class communities were rioting. The economy spiraled out of control, whilst the police filled prisons with tortured dissidents. Under these conditions, the Toyitoyi Arts Collective embarked on a path of Hip Hop Activism: one that was oriented towards active participation in the social movements of the working-class.

It was clear then, as it is now, that Hip Hop emerged in the South Bronx as a working-class culture of Afrikan youth in America. In its early days, Hip Hop counterposed itself to the mainstream culture of the middle and upper classes in America. The absorption of this radical working-class culture into the mainstream was a

systematic exercise aimed at commodifying the culture and ridding it of its revolutionary potency. In Zimbabwe then, urban grooves rap – urban pop music that fuses Afrodiasporic genres, including rap, with local elements (see Kellerer, this volume) – was being used to propagate the ideas of the ruling-class. This process was aided by state-control of airplay on radio. Artists churned out depoliticized songs or overtly pro-ruling party propaganda. It was the stated aim of the collective to restore Hip Hop's original mission: to uplift oppressed people.

In 2005, Uhuru Network convened the Uhuru Youth Camp at the Southern African Social Forum in Harare. The Southern Afrikan Social Forum Charter opposed neoliberal capitalism, dictatorship and authoritarianism. It embraced horizontal organising based on principles of direct participatory democracy. Indymedia activists from South Africa, housing activists from the Anti-Eviction Committee in Cape Town, libertarian socialists from Zabalaza, and cultural activists from Sounds of Edutainment and Imbawula Trust were in attendance. This gathering sought to establish a common set of organising principles and to forge organic links amongst participating collectives. In this space, consensus was generated on building Hip Hop Activism and orienting Hip Hop culture towards the people's struggles for social justice.

In 2006, the collectives were joined by cultural activists from the Community Networking Forum in Cape Town during the Cultural Activist Network meeting at the Khanya College Winter School in Johannesburg and deliberated on developing a common regional program in Southern Afrika. The cultural activists from the Community Networking Forum subsequently established Soundz of the South, based in Cape Town, as a collective inspired by the ideas of decentralized, horizontal organising against neoliberal capitalism based on theoretical and tactical unity within the movement. It was agreed that collectives would collaborate in working towards Imbawula Trust's *Fire On the Mountain Festival*, set to be held in Johannesburg the next year.

In November 2007, cultural activists from Uhuru Network in Zimbabwe, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau in Kenya, and Blackbox Imprint in Johannesburg joined Imbawula Trust in Johannesburg to organise communities around the *Fire On the Mountain Festival*. The Festival embraced socially conscious street art, Hip Hop music, breakdancing, graffiti, as well as extreme sports. Within it were spaces for ideological conversations and strategising. Activists discussed and embraced the Hip Hop Declaration of Peace and adopted it as a guiding document for the movement. The Fourteenth Principle in the Hiphop Declaration of Peace encourages Hiphoppas to eliminate poverty, speak out against injustice and shape a more caring society and a more peaceful world. The collectives resolved to set up a regional network, which was to be called the Frontline Movement. Frontline was mandated with organising an annual regional learning journey that would forge organic links amongst collectives, create more opportunities for theoretical discussions and practical collaborations, act as a coordinating platform and catalyse the emergence of a revolutionary Afrikan Hiphop Movement. The Frontline Movement suffered serious setbacks over the next two years

due to increased state repression in Zimbabwe and Kenya, the global capitalist crisis and activist burn-out.

In the aftermath of Frontline work, Uhuru Network and Soundz of the South participated in gatherings and direct actions in Nairobi, Dakar and Cairo during the Afrikan Social Forum activities. Cross-border interventions and organising ultimately led to the establishment of the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan. The Afrikan Hiphop Caravan was established as an organizing platform that would pick up the work of coordinating collectives from where the Frontline Movement had left. Collectives in the Caravan acknowledged their common organising experience in the Frontline Movement and the Afrikan Social Forum, and thus upheld the Afrikan Social Forum Charter. As Hiphop Activists they also upheld The Hiphop Declaration of Peace. These documents combined provided the founding principles of the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan.

In March of 2012, during a meeting in Harare, Uhuru Network (Harare), Sankara Studios (Dakar) and Soundz of the South (Cape Town), resolved to jointly convene the first Afrikan Hiphop Caravan. They drew up a draft concept paper, which was circulated amongst ex-Frontline collectives. Imbawula Trust (Johannesburg), Wasanii Mtaani (Nairobi), and A Well Fed Kenya (Nairobi) were some of the collectives that supported the Caravan. When the call was extended to the diaspora, Global Fam (Portland, Oregon), and Breathe In Break Out (Halle, Germany) decided to come aboard.

From February 2013 to April 2013, the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan, with the theme "Get The Caravan Moving," set out on its first learning journey across the continent, convening a week of events centering on Hiphop Symposia and Hiphop Slams in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Harare, Nairobi, Dakar and Tunis.

Strategies and Motives: the Organising Principles of the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan

The collectives that built the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan have based organising on two central themes: 1) the organisation of Hip Hop activists into a coherent movement and 2) the interaction with and active participation of Hip Hop activists within working-class social movements. The Afrikan Hiphop Caravan advocates an Afrikan Hiphop Movement against capitalism and authoritarianism based on common ideological belief. The Afrikan Hiphop Caravan interacts in ideas with the broader Hip Hop circles and other social movements, but does not seek to speak for, represent or recruit all Hip Hop activists nor activists in other social movements. The organising principle of the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan is theoretical and tactical unity. This does not mean a rigid, all-encompassing ideological hegemony within the organisation, but rather that the organisation brings its members together to develop a common strategy towards building a revolutionary Afrikan Hiphop Movement. This work can only occur in a Movement with a high degree of trust, commitment and political unity.

Theoretical and tactical unity is not something imposed, but it is an ideal that the collectives strive for and have developed out of a process of critical thinking, strategising, action and evaluation. It is a concept born out of necessity as the collectives

realised that a successful revolution requires a strategy and dedicated work. Of course the way particular collectives have implemented the strategy differs to some degrees due to local circumstances and different approaches. Revolutionary strategy and ideological discussions within the Movement have allowed the members and collectives who make up the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan to constantly be engaging themselves in the process of revolutionary theory and practice. Since 2005, collectives within the Frontline Movement met annually to deliberate on the state of the culture and collectives' interventions in the social movements. In these gatherings ideological questions were raised as collectives sought to build unity based on an agreed vision. The outcome of these gatherings was a number of theoretical papers being circulated amongst the collectives and increased dialogue and debate on political ideologies. Then, by taking their discussions, reflections and conclusions into media forms, such as mixtapes and documentaries, collectives created more discussion and gained more influence within Hip Hop and other social movements.

The Broader Framework: Hip Hop Activism in Support of the Working-Class Struggle

In an effort to deepen roots in the working-class struggles on the continent, the day-to-day work of collectives in the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan has been focused around working within the social movements. Social movements that collectives have engaged are movements of oppressed people that seek not only social change, but a breakdown of existing structures of oppression. The social movements the collectives sought out are those that had the potential to counterpose oppressed people's own collective power and vision, and to build counter power against capitalism and the state.

The Afrikan Hiphop Caravan encourages participating collectives to be horizontal, participant-led and democratic in structure as much as possible. Participating collectives agree that an orientation towards direct action and, more importantly, the creation of conditions that transform the participants into self-conscious thinkers and organisers amongst their peers, is the immediate strategic objective of the project. Afrikan Hiphop Caravan collectives have been involved in labour, working class student and community organising. The Caravan aims to act as a catalyst for action and ideas within the Movement. The vision that inspires the Caravan is of free, popular and horizontal communities created by the people across Afrika and beyond.

As a countercultural movement, the Caravan is in opposition to mainstream cultural mores. In fact, it is opposed to mainstream popular culture. Mainstream culture is seen as manipulated through state and corporate control of popular media in order to establish ideological dominance. The Afrikan Hiphop Caravan, on the contrary, expresses the ethos, aspirations, and dreams of a generation of Afrikan people in this present time. It aims to grow a critical mass in order to trigger drastic cultural and political change across Afrika and beyond. The Afrikan Hiphop Caravan is explicitly political. Yet, it does not engage in party politics and it stands against all forms of authoritarianism. Currently, the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan is engaged in strengthening

connections amongst collectives in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Bulawayo, Harare, Arusha, Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Lome, Dakar and Tunis.

Outlook and Goals: the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan in 2014 and Beyond

Conversations that emerged in the aftermath of the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan 2013 have centered on the need to build an active network of Hip Hop activists who are engaged in working people's day-to-day struggles for social and economic justice across Afrika. The deliberations are ongoing within collectives, but consensus has been built on "Hiphop as a Social Movement" being the theme for the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan in 2014. The Caravan in 2014 is expected to move from Cape Town to Cairo through Harare, Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Lome, Dakar and Tunis. Key issues challenging working class communities in Afrika this coming year are the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the continent as well as the dictatorships of some Afrikan states. By engaging these matters in Hip Hop Conferences and Hip Hop Slams, the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan seeks to strengthen solidarity ties amongst collectives in the Afrikan Hiphop Movement and enhance the relevance of Hip Hop Activism to the working people's struggle for social, economic and political liberation. It will be interesting to watch the African Hiphop Caravan unfold itself as a social movement in 2014 and note how the interaction between various shades of Black Nationalism, Marxism and Anarchism, if at all, leads to the emergence of a coherent movement of Hip Hop activists across the continent and beyond, that dialogues with and actively participates in, the concrete struggles of working people's social movements. More so, in an era where Hip Hop has unveiled its potential for mobilisation in the social service delivery protests in Cape Town, as well as demonstrations for democracy and an end to dictatorship in Zimbabwe, Angola, Kenya, Senegal, Tunisia and Egypt. These struggles against the manifestations of neoliberal capitalism and dictatorship on the continent have provided a base for theoretical and tactical unity in the Afrikan Hiphop Movement. The question we ask ourselves is: Will the ideological diversity of collectives and the varied contextual nuances of each Afrikan city stand in our way as we seek out coherence in the movement?

Another big challenge for the emerging Movement is the ideological onslaught of imperialism through mainstream rap and its ancillary industries. The ascendancy of rap into mainstream imperial culture has accelerated consumerism and apathy amongst young Afrikan people, especially those in urban areas. The commodification of cultural resistance has had its own share of damage to movement building, as activists get disillusioned and succumb to poverty and the market forces of the capitalist cultural industries.

Furthermore, as working people's social movements have become more and more oriented towards direct action or people's power, the Afrikan states have increased repression on those who dissent and this has thinned the ranks of the movement with a number of activists being detained, tortured and even murdered. Another dire consequence has been activist burn out. How will the Afrikan Hiphop Movement seek to swell its ranks in the face of state hostility and reprisals? Most states

have censored artists out of existence and continue to impose restrictions on the people's freedom of speech, association, assembly and expression.

The collectives within the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan are arguing that by swimming in the milieu of working people's social movements, the strength of the Caravan is amplified and the impact multiplied. They also proffer the Caravan's decentralised and horizontal organisational structure as a check against dogma and therefore a form of insurance for the continued existence of a diverse but unified federation of Hip Hop activists. Only time will tell where the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan takes Hip Hop activism.