
Diekara Oloruntoba-Oju
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria
Email: dekkyoju@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines how West African popular music engages youth identity within the contestant relations of globalization and State power. Focusing on Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Senegalese contexts, it looks at how popular music engages with the politics of resistance and compliance. It examines how, on the one hand, the music attempts to transcend social barriers of identity which are constructed both by external – often economic – forces of globalization and internal – often political – workings of State power but, on the other hand, falls victim of what Theodor Adorno describes as the “stigmata of capitalism” thereby paradoxically constructing legitimacy within the very frames it seeks to resist.

Keywords: Youth Identity, Resistance, Compliance, Power, Popular Music, West Africa

Introduction

Identity – the construction of self – is marked by diverse and changing factors of space and time. This continuous, contingent and performative nature of identity as it plays out for young continental Africans in North America, was explored by Awad Ibrahim, in his compelling work, *The Rhizome of Blackness: A Critical Ethnography of Hip-Hop Culture, Language, Identity, and the Politics of Becoming*. Invoking Butler, Ibrahim observes that identity is a moving state of “forever becoming” (Ibrahim 2014: 13). Individuals and groups negotiate through several factors, external and local, of place and time to frame themselves. Following this trajectory, young people in Africa navigate through the continued weight of colonial history, internal and external social conflicts of power, to frame self in perpetuity. If identity is ‘in a constant state of flow, deterritorialisation, and multiplicity’ (Ibrahim 2014: 3) then, to speak about it would require a constant re-examination of its effects and modes of expression as reflected by the politics of contestation by individuals and groups around and against the configurations of power.

The changing realities of youth expression in Africa offer considerable insight into questions around agency and power within youthspheres. Youth expression, as defined by the multifarious activities that young people participate in either as brokers or keen observers help to understand the ways in which these people continuously reconstruct their identities. Popular music, for instance, has contributed immensely to reflecting youth identities in West Africa (Ugor 2015; Niang 2015). Karin Barber (1997: 1) aptly refers to it as the ‘most protean, adaptable, transferable of arts, and the only one to make noticeable impact on
popular audiences outside Africa’. In more recent times, even with the growing visibility of other art forms within global spaces, popular music remains arguably the most popular and influential of art forms. Additionally, with new technologies at their disposal, young people have been able to use popular music to contest mobility and visibility within global and local spaces, resisting the framings of power and asserting their right to define their identities. I have argued elsewhere about the implicit expressions of resistance in popular music in Nigeria, exploring the ways in which Nigerian music reflects youth identities. (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2018). Here, beyond that, I explore more active ways in which contemporary West African popular music lyrically and performatively reacts to the global and local workings of power, exposing and rejecting the framings of youth identity by a western dominant and by the state. Drawing from the examples of Awadi Didier, Fokn Bois, Falz of Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria respectively, I explore themes and strategies of resistance directed at western power and the state in popular music texts. Examining this dimension of resistance, however, does not give a full picture of the complex relationship between identity and power. This paper, therefore, also examines the relationship between popular music and capital, exploring the resulting dependency on the very structures of power it seeks to resist. This two-pronged analysis of complicity and resistance is crucial to understand the complex multimodal nature of power as it relates to contemporary realities of youth agency as seen through the lens of popular music in West Africa and to examine the paradoxes within which identity formation is constantly entwined (Butler 2004).

More than examining popular music as a context for articulating young people’s survival or identification, this article is aimed at investigating narratives of resistance that are actively imbued in popular music, in terms of lyrics and form. Thus, the artists and songs explored here are more selective than sweeping. The songs here have texts, which I have identified as purposefully subversive. Since the article also seeks to articulate the paradoxes of power, I have selected three West African popular artists, who are both locally and globally acclaimed and who either enable or have been enabled by the very structures they seek to resist. This paper is structured into four major parts. The first part is the introduction, which generally highlights the central arguments of the paper. The second section explores resistant themes and contextualises them within the frame of youth narratives. It is further divided into two subsections, the first of which reflects on resistant themes against western power in the music of Senegal’s Didier Awadi and Ghana’s Fokn Bois. The second subsection focuses on resistance against state power as reflected by Nigeria’s Falz. The third part explores the politics of production and consumption in which the popular music industry is enmeshed and how the selected artists are necessarily implicated. The fourth and final part is the conclusion, which briefly summarises the central issues engaged in the paper.

2. Génération Consciente: Youth Identity and Popular Music in West Africa

  *Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be.* (Michel Foucault 1983)
Consistent with social and political realities of globalisation in both global and local contexts, young people in Africa have been at the receiving end of obdurate experiences of crisis. In spite of growing and insightful conversation around new possibilities of agency especially as enabled by new technologies and media, young people still encounter a great deal of challenges in terms of mobility in a precarious and uncertain modern age. Thus, young people, even when they are able to connect through new media and enjoy an alternative sense of belonging and mobility, still experience harsh realities, often socio-economic of exclusion offline, and which are sometimes carried over online (Iwilade 2013). As Honwana (2012) succinctly puts it ‘contradictions of modernity’ continue to reflect within youthscapes. Young people thus remain trapped in spite of and sometimes, within the devices of modernity that enable them. This reality of being trapped often conceptualised as ‘waithood’ (Honwana 2012) reflects the various challenges young people face in their prolonged phase of transition and is marked by insecurity, instability, and immobility. In Africa where the effects of neoliberalism are so dire for the majority (Ugor 2013), many young people are ‘stuck in the compound’ (Hansen, cited in Hansen 2012). Suffering a dual catastrophe of global and local immobility largely as a result of the inherently exploitative structures of neoliberal globalisation and state failure, African youth have to strive through their experiences of marginality and develop counter discursive ways to assert space and identity. (Ugor 2015; Ayezulano 2015). In order to reconstruct space within such toxic climates of exclusion, young people often engage in violence (Akpan and Akpabio 2003), perform hybridity within alternative spaces (Iwilade 2013), appropriate art (Niang 2015) and participate in other such forms of negotiation.

As an art form, which allows not only expression but also representation within diverse and broad spaces, popular music is a context where young people can actively contest their marginality and showcase their identities. The availability of and accessibility to new technologies have also made music a more enabling art form. The burgeoning scene of popular music in West Africa reflects youth rejection of the configurations and interpellations of their identities by the powers that be. From themes of continued colonial oppression to state complicity to youth potentiality, West African popular music, as the ensuing sections will show, rejects the framings of power, exposes its oppressiveness and reframes youth narratives. Beyond this representative role, popular music in West Africa has also been appropriated for social mobilisation among young people, as a tool to sensitise people and organise them towards resistant action (Niang 2015). The role of popular music as agency for young people can, therefore, not be underestimated.

### 2.1 Western Power and the Black Presidents of Senegal and Ghana

The assumption that the wave of independence in Africa around the 1960s and the subsequent entrance into the neoliberal capitalist market of the globalised age would necessarily give it freedom, autonomy and a dominant place within the global economy was illusory or puerile at best (Ugor 2015). As Wilson (2011) posits, when global and local knowledges meet, it is hardly a balanced relationship and the local has to exist in partial servitude to the global. The
rhetoric of an interconnected world, then, remains largely hinged on hierarchies of power, which are constructed as dictated by economic, often western, realities.

The façade of freedom, steeped within realities of moribund economies, abject dependency and continued servitude has been a cause of growing disillusionment and attendant outrage among young people who form a great percentage of those who bear most of the brunt of the actualities of western domination. Awadi Didier, Senegalese rapper and one of the most popular musicians in francophone West Africa reflects this outrage through his music. In his 2010 album, *Présidents D’Afrique* (African Presidents), Didier mixes excerpts from speeches by Black/African leaders and visionaries including, among others, Burkina Faso’s Thomas Sankara, South Africa’s Nelson Mandela, Senegal’s own Cheikh Anta Diop, as they emphasized the urgent task of liberation struggles. In a track, *Génération Consciente* (Conscious Generation) on another album, *Ma Revolution*, in his own words, he raps:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On est consciente</th>
<th>We are conscious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Génération consciente</td>
<td>A conscious generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Est-ce tu sais</td>
<td>Do you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu’ils dirigent meme ton opinion</td>
<td>that they control even your opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecoute la radio</td>
<td>Listen to radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyse bien tous des allusions</td>
<td>Carefully unravel its illusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Est-ce que tu sais</td>
<td>Do you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qu’ils manipulent au niveau de l’image</td>
<td>that they control images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leur télé c’est du bluff</td>
<td>their televised media is a bluff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que de marquage</td>
<td>as well as a surveillance system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>do you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the CFA franc is not your currency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colonial currency nothing more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not your currency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cette histoire de Rebellion</td>
<td>This story of rebellion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c’est un alibi</td>
<td>Is an alibi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voir comment on arme</td>
<td>See how they armed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The West’s enduring hold on the African continent is mirrored here. Noting the effects of images and media generally, Didier calls to question the permeation of cognitive domains, which seem independent, by the West. As Foucault notes in ‘The Will to Knowledge’, knowledge and discourse ‘take shape in technical ensembles, in institutions, in behavioral schemes, in types of transmission and dissemination, in pedagogical forms that both impose and maintain them.’ (Foucault 1997:12, my emphasis). Thus media tools serve, for western power, as instruments for shaping the mindsets of people to taste, as propaganda. The warning about the dangers of systems, which he refers to as tactics of ‘bluff’ and ‘surveillance’ is particularly instructive for young people who are the most vulnerable to such systems since, as was noted earlier, they depend on these spaces for agency. There is also an apparent connection between this fact of propaganda and its effects reflected in the third segment above. Through tactics of cognitive manipulation, the west is able to reconstruct narratives to suit their own economic needs.

In tune with the theme of economic exploitation, Didier reflects, also, on the CFA franc, which is a shared currency of francophone African States and, which Syllo (2017:1) defines as ‘a colonial currency, born of France’s need to foster economic integration among the colonies under its administration, and thus control their resources, economic structures and political systems.’ The subject of ‘colonial currency’ has been raised continuously by intellectuals and activists for whom it represents French imperialist domination and counteracts any visions of true freedom and real economic progress. Only last year, French-Benin Republican activist, Kémi Séba, was expelled from Senegal, his home since 2011, for burning a 5,000 CFA note in a public act of protest, during which he stated that nations should have a right to choose their own currency and determine their political realities (Jeune Afrique, 2017). Although the song above predates the events of last year, those events reflect the continued relevance of the CFA question in terms of economic liberation and identity formation for people in francophone Africa. Responding to the injustice done to Séba, Didier notes in a press conference on a forum for the Organisation des Jeunesses Panafricanistes (Pan African Youth Organisation) that he has carried the same message of liberation from imperial power across other African countries in music and that the generation must through their different means continue to do so (Dakarmidi Tv 2017).

The line ‘did you know’, repeated throughout the track with galvanizing force at the beginning of each narrative sequence further reflects an emphasis on knowledge, which plays a dual and crucial role here. Within the dialectics of oppressive colonial power, knowledge serves as tool to confuse its subjects, to manipulate their views, and to perpetuate mixed messages of liberation and economic gain. It is also the tool that the generation must have in
order to resist and free itself from the control of western power. Thus, Didier’s invocation of a generation consciente is instructive. It reflects an image of youth, who no longer recognise themselves within the frames of being a ‘lost generation’ but are conscious and aware of the issues responsible for their marginality. The song, therefore, critiques western power structures while, simultaneously constructing the ‘consciente’ identity of young people.

Apart from these dimensions of political and economic domination by the West, which Didier’s music so poignantly explores, there is an equally distressing psychological dimension of displacement, which pervades youthscapes in Africa. While the effects of this dimension are unique, it is connected to political and economic issues and is equally reflective of the imbalances of power in global spaces. In Frantz Fanon’s important work *Black Skins White Masks*, he reflects on the psychological effect of white dominance on the black man. This ‘psychopathology’ of the black man, according to Fanon, is triggered by a cultural reality, which is pervaded by whiteness and marked by a ‘collapse of (the black man’s) ego’ where he then feels the need to perform whiteness in the ‘white world’ since that is the only admissible identity therein. (Fanon 2008:119). While Fanon was referring here to a psychological conflict of identity for the black migrant, it may well be argued that within the contemporary rhetoric of globalisation, the ‘white world’ is everywhere and young people in Africa continue to feel the need to perform ‘white masks’ through bodily practices and general behavioural patterns. In spite of the tremendous evidence to reflect these practices, there are counter dimensions of resistance, which are reflected by popular music and are of interest here. On the level of language, for instance, there is an observable general insistence on the use of indigenous languages or creolised forms at least. Thus, West African popular rappers and singers often render their music in Twi, Wolof, Igbo, Yoruba, to which they also fuse indigenous forms of music like Fuji and Highlife. This reflects an insistence of mirroring indigenous realities, in their hybridity and malleability as young people experience them through contemporary music cultures. Beyond the use of indigenous languages, there are examples of more categorical rejections of whiteness thematically embedded in popular songs. For instance, Ghanaian duo Fokn Bois, comprising of the artists Mensa and Wanlov the Kubulor, articulates in the song *Want to Be White*, a more radically Pan African rejection of white dominance:

> Now I just wan bleach my body like white rice  
> Now I just want to bleach my skin like white rice  
> Ignoring the cries of  
> (what if your skin fries)  
> For the best skin toner  
> I will pay any price  
> The only black rappers who want to be white  
> We dream to be white, nice to be white  
> …
I want a silk skin
That looks like it’s got some milk in
White like Rumplestilskin
With a little pink in like a chicken
...
Travel round Africa with my NGO
Pat kids on the head for London Gold
...
And stop baffing
Because blacks only baff to be white
And no longer bathe
Because black people only bathe to be white
...
Stop telling them Jesus is black of course
We love melanin-free skin and flat buttocks

The artists satirically explore the allure of whiteness, equating the white skin with innate and subhuman things (see rice, milk and chicken above). The juxtaposition of the undesirability of the white body with the blind desire for it reflects, in typical satirical fashion, the absurdity of such desire. From pigmentation to hygiene to form, the white body is used as an object of ridicule in direct opposition to the superior status that is generally conferred on it. The third segment articulates the hypocrisy of a white saviour complex, which is recognisable in the entwined link between humanitarianism and profit making embedded in schemes of aid directed at Africa, placing Africa and its black body contrastively against and permanently subservient to the ‘glory’ of whiteness. This critique kills two birds with a stone: it exposes the absurdity of the psychological ‘desire to be white’, simultaneously linking this to the economic and political implications of such subservience. Beyond text, the body serves as a context through which the expression of identity can be mapped (Butler 1997; Ibrahim 2014). It is interesting, then, to note in this regard how the artist Wanlov, who is incidentally mixed race, uses his body performatively as an instrument of resistance. Wanlov often, as part of his artistic expression, uses his body as aesthetic and performative canvas. In his single, *My Toto*, for instance, he wears nothing but bum shorts, performing a sensual dance more typical of female dancers in mainstream music videos. He notes complementarily on the YouTube upload of the song ‘not all the time naked women, sometimes naked me’ (Wanlov 2017), thus transgressing the gendered limits of his body. Similarly, in *Want to White*, as in many of his other videos, he wears free form dreadlocks in tune with Afro-Caribbean hair practices and ties a Ghanaian print wrapper, establishing thereby a sense of blackness and Africanity as opposed to the superior image of whiteness the song seeks to deconstruct.

The examples of Senegal’s Awadi Didier and Ghana’s Fokn Bois project similar attitudes of resistance to that of Nigeria’s, Afrobeat maestro and self-proclaimed black president, Fela
Anikulapo Kuti who in Sola Olorunyomi’s words ‘expressed authenticity in cultural terms’ (2005:83). For these contemporary ‘black presidents’, similarly, resisting western power means constructing and expressing African youth identities, their energies and abilities, through lyrical and bodily practices while simultaneously rejecting the framings of western power.

2.2 State Power and Youth Disillusionment in West Africa

Apart from the obvious negative impacts of western power, African states have also contributed immensely to the youth crisis. In addition to the reality of immobility within global spaces, the inability to move freely across borders or to belong socially even after having moved, young people in Africa also face the tenebrous conditions of local displacement largely as a result of the ‘failures of governance and statehood’ (Iwilade 2013:1058). This displacement, beyond its strict physical migratory sense is also marked by affect, an emotional displacement as a result of economic marginalisation, social immobility and political exclusion. The incessant experience of this restriction and apparent rejection leads ultimately to youth disillusionment with the state and its institutions. This disillusionment is directly linked, as Awadi Didier reflects in his song Ce qu’ils disent (What they say) featuring Wyclef Jean, to the dissonance between the promises, typically to solicit support, of the ruling elite and their continued failure to uphold those promises.

As Amy Niang (2015) shows in her compelling article, artistic expression is one the major ways, which the youth in West Africa have used to defy and subvert the stifling oppressiveness of political power, ‘to do away with waffling, the cult of personality, empty rhetoric and deceptive promises now associated with the postcolonial ruling elite’ (p. 149). In some cases, popular music even succeeded, as a radical artistic instrument, in changing political landscapes. In 2011, for instance, the Y’en a Marre (“Enough is enough”) movement in Senegal comprising mostly of young people, appropriated Hip-hop to express outrage over the failures of the government of the then incumbent president Abdoulaye Wade and to mobilise mass action against his re-election (Sajnani 2013; Gueye 2013; Bryson 2014). The attempt by the government to discredit the youth group and the subsequent loss of the elections show that not only does popular music have the capacity to lead to the kind of mobilisation that may shift socio-political landscapes but also that the state is aware of this threatening potentiality.

A more recent example of an anti-establishment popular song is ‘This is Nigeria’ by the Nigerian artist, Falz. A cover for the original track ‘This is America’ by black American artist Donald Glover, which was banned by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) shortly after its release on the pretext of its ‘vulgarity’, the song serves as a social commentary on the failures of the Nigerian state:

This is Nigeria

Never Ending Recession
When looters and stealers and killers
Are still contesting election o
Politician wey tiff The politician who steals
some million and billion
E no dey go prison o Does not get imprisoned for it
…
This in Nigeria
No electricity daily o
Your people are still working multiple jobs
And they talk say we lazy o Yet we are called lazy
…
Yahoo yahoo don tear everywhere now Cyber crime has pervaded our
society
And we act like it’s so cool
…
This is Nigeria
Look at my nation o
SARS stop you for road If SARS operatives stop you in
transit
Any explanation
you go talk am for station o You’ll have to defend yourself at
the police station
(Sir, I’m… Sir look I’m sorry, I’m just a student…)

Falz shows, here, the apparent continuity between state failure and youth crisis. The failure of successive governments, over time, to deliver to the people has contributed immensely to the social displacement of young people. In the first segment, the image of the pervasive corruption and indemnity of those who participate in electoral and governing processes is projected, reflecting failures of both electoral and judiciary institutions. The deployment of the adverbial 'still' subtly hints at the perpetual hold of established order brokered by the same set and kind of people. As a result of their corruption apathy and incompetence and the attendant economic and social crisis in Nigeria, the masses have to strive on their own to make ends meet, hence the point about 'working multiple jobs’, and the ensuing rejection of the claim that young people are lazy. ‘Lazy’ is used as a reference point to recent comments by the Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari in a Commonwealth event that implied young
people in Nigeria were not ready to work but wanted instead to enjoy free benefits without effort. The incendiary comments caused a lot of outrage, especially amongst youth, who, actively engaging the issue on social media platforms with the hashtag #LazyNigerianYouth, pointed out the reductiveness of such comments especially in the context in which it was rendered.

As Falz shows here, then, young people, who have to struggle on their own in spite of the obvious failures of government, are far from being lazy. The subsequent point about cyber crime, which Adeniran (2008:368) describes as a “growing sub-culture among the youth.” is, however, an inflected gaze on the category of youth in which he subtly condemns the normalisation of cyber crime among young people but doing so with the implicit understanding of this as an effect of the Nigerian crisis. There is, again, a link between this and the final segment above which reflects the pre-criminalisation of young people by the state. The reference to SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) officials also plays on recent youth anxiety over the violent activities of the law enforcement agents, who harass young people for time to time just for suspecting their criminality. In the final line above, he role-plays as Student struggling desperately to defend himself to an officer, who is trying to take him in, by invoking his identity as ‘just a student’. But as the actions in the music video show, real notions of guilt or innocence are irrelevant in such situations as the corrupt operatives, in line with the general atmosphere of corruption, only care about using power for personal gain.

Generally, the song reflects the contradictions of a failed state, brokered by corrupt and inept leaders, whose continuing inaction has lead to the disillusionment of the youth. This disillusionment has forced them to develop alternative means, which are sometimes negative, to negotiate their marginality. Similarly, the link between State failure, youth disillusionment and counter action, is reflected by Ghana’s Wanlov in the song Never Go Change. He shows therein that the oppression of the masses will never change since those in power continue to live apathetically in lavish, away from the abject misery of the people. As a reaction to this, in his own words, he suggests ‘we for kill them all/we for chop off dem a head and spill dem a blood on the wall/cos they never go change o’ (we should kill them all/ we should chop their heads off and spill their blood on the wall/ because they will never change). Thus, he establishes the connection between youth disillusionment borne out of the reality of perpetual suffering within unchanging structures of power and violent action. Indeed, suggesting violence itself as an act of subversion

The foregoing sections show how popular music resists the configurations of youth identity by power globally and locally. In spite of these examples, however, it would be misleading to extrapolate that there are parallel models of resistance in an organised or foundational way. Modes and themes of expression differ across regions and are often contingent upon contextual subjectivities. There are also a rich number of artists whose music experiments with a diverse range of forms and themes and who count as popular. Consequently, West African music is broad and extensive in terms of narratival content and artistic execution. Regardless of this, there are examples, cross regionally, of music that, however tangentially, reflect resistance and aim to transcend the constrictive forces of power.
3. The Popular Music Industry and the Burden of Capital(ism)

For all the evidence of potential subversion in popular music in West Africa, it would be careless; indeed, dangerous to assume that resistance is all it represents. Popular music, as agency for identity formation, should be understood differentially depending on the conditions for its formation. Consequently, the dialectics of resistance embedded within contemporary expressions of popular music in West Africa must be understood within the context of broader questions around the paradoxical but intricate relationship between resistant agency and power. How does popular music attain its legitimacy? What role does capital play in its production and dissemination? What connection is there between capital and global and local power structures? What does this reflect about the link between youth agency and power?

In his introduction to a selection of Theodor Adorno’s essays: *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, J.M Bernstein examines the continued relevance of Adorno’s work on the capitalist nature of popular— in his terms ‘mass’— culture. He notes that the optimistic spirit among its supporters who believe that popular culture has the democratic potential of integrating publics and transcending old barriers of esoteric art naively ignores the reality that popular culture maintains old capitalist order, that it ‘has become openly, and defiantly, an industry obeying the same rules of production as any other producer of commodities.’ (Bernstein, 1991:9). Consequently, capital and profit making play a crucial role—the dominant role— within contemporary projects of the culture industry.

As totalizing and damning as this assessment may seem, there are firm signs of its viability in the context of West African popular music. The burgeoning of the scene of popular music in Africa, its appropriation of new technologies for production and mass dissemination, and participation in global markets of culture commodification characterise the capitalist dimension that marks the contemporary politics of culture. Shipley (2009:633) notes that rise of hip-hop in many African countries aligned with shift of interest from collectivity to ‘individuated modes of wealth accumulation’. The dominance of themes of personal financial achievement reflects this perspectival shift. Many West African artists showcase the cultural lifestyles that emphasise the importance of money, fame and similar effects of individual financial achievement. Even for an artist such as Falz who, as has been shown here, critically condemns the preponderance of cybercrime, which is a symptom of the obsessive spirit of capital accumulation, the importance of money and financial status forms part of his artistic topoi. For instance, in his multilingual song *Le Vrai Bahd Guy*, in which he medleys Yoruba, French, English, and Pidgin lyrics, he sings to a woman who rejects him because she does not know who he is and for whom he must construct his identity and showcase his status. He sings ‘elle m’a demandé quel est le problem/mon problem est simple/oui, c’est trop d’argent’ (she asked me what the problem is/ my problem is simple/ it’s too much money). In an interview with the BBC, following the success of ‘This is Nigeria’, when asked if he would continue to reflect socio-political themes in his music, Falz carefully noted that he was an artist with the primary task to produce art and entertain. (BBC News Africa, 2018). Art is thus posited strategically apart from social change, reflecting the fact that themes of social change are only incidental or subsidiary to the politics of cultural production.
Hence, popular music in West Africa, for all its compelling expression of resistance to power structures, carries the capitalist burden of capital and profit making, establishing therein a link with the very idioms of power it seeks to resist. On these terms, popular music itself becomes a site of power, paradoxically, legitimising other sites of power, which it rejects. If, as Shipley (2009:633) notes ‘state, corporate, and international organisations increasingly appropriated popular culture for institutional legitimacy’, then the reverse case is also true. In an interactive and symbiotic way, popular music benefits from western and state structures of power often in a way that is linked to capital. In Nigeria, for instance, the Lagos State government has contributed immensely to the funding of cultural projects and especially to music. Earlier in the year, the state government was nominated at the Headies, the biggest national music awards, to the category of *Industry Brand Supporter*, thus, establishing its place as a contending financial force in the music market.

International structures of power have played an equally compelling role in giving platform to popular music. Ghana’s Fokn Bois, enjoy towering international acclaim because they have been able to, as an interviewer put it ‘penetrate the international market’ (Tv3 Network 2013). It is also important to note that unlike for other mainstream Ghanaian rappers, Sarkodie, for instance, who almost exclusively use indigenous languages, their use of pidgin has a strategically expansionist potential since it is more adaptable to non-indigenous spaces. In this regard, the appropriation of African bodily practices, like Wanlov’s dreadlocks, mentioned above is also contradictory. Even though at face value such practices seem to reflect radical notions of blackness or indigeneity, they are also implicated in the commodifying attitudes of the age. Consequently, in contemporary times, dreadlocks and similar bodily practices of culture are often appropriated and advocated for by the middle class, thus signifying class more than race or roots. The hold of capital as it flows through western structures of power is, similarly, evident even in the Senegalese popular music scene where social activism is considered inextricably bound to music and themes of profiteering are radically suppressed (Sajnani 2013). In a 2010 interview, following the release of *Presidents d’Afrique*, in response to a question about the contradiction between his political stance and his financial relationship with advertising agencies and multinationals, Awadi Didier notes:

‘*Malheureusement je peux pas encore dire je snobe les publicitaires. Au contraire je suis obligé encore de consolider certains acquis. Et j’ai pas honte de le dire qu’on a pris de l’argent chez ces gens pour investir dans nos projets à nous. Beaucoup de gens ont trouvé ça bizarre mais moi ça ne me absolument gène pas parce que je sais que si je fais pas ça, beaucoup ne vivront pas*’ (Awadi Didier 2010, Thomas Sankara Net)

‘Unfortunately, I still cannot claim to snob advertising agencies. On the contrary, I remain obliged to secure financial sustainability. And I am not ashamed to admit that we took money from these people to invest in our projects. Many people find this strange but as for me, I remain absolutely undisturbed by the fact because I know that if I don’t do as much, many people would not live’ (my translation)
In more recent times, Awadi has himself, been involved in entrepreneurial activity. Speaking recently on radio interview about combining both artistic and entrepreneurial roles, he notes, similar to his position above, that the entrepreneurial role is an inescapable necessity to the artistic project, stating that: ‘on n’a pas le choix’ (we don’t have a choice) (Vibe Radio Senegal 2018). The contradiction between the concessions of these artists towards capitalism and their resistant positions is apparent. While on the one hand, they use popular music to reject the oppressive workings of western and state power, they acquiesce on the other hand to the hegemonic structures by seeking financial legitimacy therein or by participating in the very structures and practices of profiteering that they condemn.

**Conclusion**

This article shows how the formation of youth identity through popular music in West Africa is muddled in contradictions. Against the tenebrous reality of youth marginalisation in the face of neoliberal globalisation –in which youth identity is already pre-authored by power– popular music serves as artistic and political agency for young people to resist structures of western and state power and to reflect and reformulate their identities. Counteractively, however, as the comment of Senegalese artist, Awadi, reflects, capital is an unassailable necessity to the survival of the music agency and popular artists must dance to its tune and seek legitimacy from its brokers, re-enabling thereby, the very structures of power that they seek to resist. Thus, West African popular music as youth agency is intricately steeped in a paradoxical interplay of resistance and compliance.

**About the Author**

Diekara Oloruntoba-Oju is a budding novelist and researcher. She holds a BA in German and French from the Department of Foreign Languages at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria and has conducted research in popular music and cyber literature in Nigeria. Her research interests include youth culture, identity, urban aesthetics, performance practice, and artistic agency in Africa.

**References**


Ndongo Samba Sylla. 2017. The CFA Franc: French Monetary Imperialism in Africa


Discography


