

Is Kwaito South African Hip Hop?

Why the answer matters and who it matters to

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Introduction

Black youth in Soweto are proud to be South African. Lukas and his friends talk township *tsotsitaal* (gangster slang), wear street credible clothes replete with *spottis* (floppy sun hat turned into an icon of street culture), listen to kwaito music and hang out on the streets in *All Stars* (cheap canvas shoes, sometimes known as three-fives, because they cost R35¹). On a Saturday night they attend street bashes where they dance to a raucous beat – a mix of slowed down European house with African urban rhythms and sounds liberally sampled into the mix. The dancing is sexual, the lyrics raw². Is this the South African version of hip hop? Lukas would argue not. Mandla, wearing a KRS-One t-shirt agrees with him loudly, but others, especially the media aren't convinced.

This paper will examine the reasons why kwaito is considered an indigenous form of hip hop by some and a spectacular vernacular³ by others. Using Stuart Hall's (Hall, 1997) concept of the "circuit of culture" it will analyse kwaito culture in five localities of meaning, namely representation, production, consumption, identity and resistance. By interpreting or "reading" (Du Gay, 1997) some of the cultural artifacts associated with

¹ At the moment \$1 equals roughly R8, although a better equivalency in terms of buying power would be to equate \$1 with R4.

² Maria McCloy calls many of kwaito's lyrics "vulgar" – in an interview with the BBC <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/rhythms/southafrica.shtml>. I would describe rap lyrics from the US as sexual, violent and political. Examples of sexual lyrics include Ice Cube's "Make it Ruff, Make it Smooth", 2 Pac's "Still Ballin'" and Dr Dre's "Fuck You". Violent lyrics include B.G.'s "Hottest of the Hot", 50 Cent's "What Up Gangsta", while Eminem's "White America" and Public Enemy's "Don't Believe the Hype" and "Rebel Without a Pause" are primarily political.

³ Phrase borrowed from Robyn Kelley's book by the same name about hip hop (Kelley, 1997).

kwaito street culture, this paper will answer this primary question. It will also document the ambivalent relationship between young South Africans and the various dominant groups against which they rail; define what constitutes a culture as opposed to musical taste or a style, and finally will consider the importance of identity to style, especially in the context of the South African racial taxonomy and political history.

The five cultural artifacts which will be examined include the *spotti*, *All Stars*, the kwaito music industry, the Virgin/Earthworks CD *Kwaito: South African hip hop* and the South African television series *Yizo Yizo*. Paraphrasing Du Gay et al (1977) “To study... [Kwaito] culturally one should at least explore how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use” (p. 3).

The kwaito music industry

No one is quite sure of the origins of the word *kwaito*. Some say it means “cool” or “angry” from the Afrikaans *kwaai*, or that it is named after a legendary Soweto gang of the fifties – the Amakwaitos. In its nascent form, kwaito has been called D’Gong, S’Ghubu, or simply Local. Kwaito is in fact the de facto pop music of South Africa by virtue of the fact that black youth comprising 80% of the country’s population, are united in their enthusiastic support⁴ of it. There are some signs that kwaito has begun to crossover into coloured and white youth markets, but not in large numbers. If Hebdige’s analysis (1979) is to be believed, white youth will eventually begin to appropriate it, but will be late adopters,

⁴ Yfm, is a kwaito radio station started 6 years ago, and has a listenership of 1.5 million a week. It is the largest regional radio station in the country. Source: <http://www.yworld.co.za/pebble.asp?reid=336>. According to the Case (2000) youth survey, it is the favourite musical genre of black South Africa youth.

and most likely kwaito will already have begun to be replaced by a new street style, when they do. Already South Africa has a rising white kwaito star in Lekgoa (seSotho for ‘white man’). The parallels with Eminem and American hip hop are unavoidable.

The kwaito music industry is described predominantly by two types of people: the first international and non-youth culture journalists, and the second, local producers and artists. Mostly these two groups agree on what kwaito is: a fusion of slowed down European house music played at 90bpm rather than 130 bpm, with a liberal sampling of world music styles such as reggae, soul and ragga. Kwaito artists and producers⁵ add more detail to the description however and include piano, percussion, bubblegum (South African disco), *mbaqanga* (stomping jive), *kwela* (penny whistle), and the South African gospel style known as *iscathamiya*. In addition, South African artists are quick to maintain continuity with the past and cite older black South African musicians like Brenda Fassie, Yvonne Chaka Chaka and Chicco as influences.

Billboard magazine calls kwaito a South African innovation, “aggressive township music” (Williamson, 2002), “a genuine world-fusion vibe” (Vleck, 2002), although adding that kwaito is influenced by hip hop, but much in the same way that other world music styles have influenced each other e.g. ragga, bhangra and ska. Journalists from Newsweek, CNN, The Economist and local South African newspaper, the Financial Mail however invariably begin an article on kwaito by comparing it to hop hop, essentially saying it is the same as hip hop but uses indigenous languages. South African producers and artists have a different take on kwaito though and while they say that kwaito is comparable to hip hop, what they mean is that kwaito, like hip hop has become more than music. It has become an

⁵ From numerous articles on Rage: South African Street Culture website www.rage.co.za.

entire youth sub culture, and provides youth with the means for creating an identity, establishing new societal norms and economic opportunities. In an interview with the Financial Mail, Gabi Le Roux, producer for kwaito icon Mandoza says kwaito “has become to SA what hip hop is to American youngsters. It's not just a genre of music, it's a lifestyle” (Pile, 2001). Kwaito “is about showcasing our African-ness, about showing off our continent, our culture and our country” says Thandiswa of Bongo Muffin (Pan, 2000). After so many years of oppression and denigration, it's exactly what South African kids need. The distinction between hip hop and kwaito is important to South African youth, who oppose “imported pop music fads” (Swink, 2003) but who were forced to listen to mainly US music because there was no contemporary local dance music in the early nineties.

According to many kwaito artists the *mpantsula* style has been a major influence on kwaito. The clothes, dance and even tough gangster attitude from the fifties (which persisted through the eighties and even now has some expression in the eastern townships of Johannesburg amongst older people), is evident in kwaito. Junior, of the group Boom Shaka, says: “The mpantsula era was like the breakdance era whereby it was the only culture we could relate to, it was what everybody wanted to be. It was like the B-Boy of South Africa... it's the only culture we can relate to that's ours, that's local” (Rage, Issue 2). Junior makes four very important points. First he asserts strongly that kwaito has South African roots and South African history. Second, that kwaito is historically South African, not historically American. Third, he draws a strong distinction between the America hip hop mode of dressing and the kwaito mode. In hip hop baggies are de rigueur, in South African “townships they call you a punk if you're into the baggy pants and all of that”

(Rage, Issue 2). Finally he makes a strong case that mpantsula style has evolved into kwaito style thereby affirming the continuity and uniqueness of black history in South Africa.

But why is the origin of kwaito important to South African black youth? In contrast to those who write about the demise of the nation state (Giddens, 2002; Suarez-Orozco, 2001), Gilroy (1993) writes about the growing Afri-centricity (evidenced by music styles in particular) in the US and Britain, but I would argue that Afri-centricity is strong and re-emerging in Africa itself. Africans are desperately seeking their own renaissance, both politically⁶ and culturally. While Gilroy connects it with a “new found fervour for purity”, I would argue it is the pent up frustration of having being made to be subservient through decades of colonisation and deprivation that is finally finding expression in the emergence of a dominant youth culture. Just as “hip hop culture emerged as source of alternative identity formation and social status for youth in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished” (Rose, 1994, p. 78), so too has kwaito emerged and is in the process of establishing itself as a unique youth sub culture, creating an identity for young post apartheid black South Africans.

Identities in transition

Not satisfied to simply capitulate to the hegemony of the US, the cultural and political nation state is not dissolving. Instead it is re-emerging as an important phenomenon as youth renegotiate their national identities. Are youth from all over the globe in fact colonising the grooves, styles and techniques of dominant music and

⁶ The Organization for African Unity’s July 2001 New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and the formation of the African Union (lead by South African president Thabo Mbeki) are indicators of an African renaissance.

producing a new identity? This is certainly true in South Africa, where since 27 April 1994 there has been a serious commitment to local music and style, in opposition to the “colonisation of mind and identities” which has been rampant in the world (Hebdige, 1979; Liechty, 1995). After interviewing numerous young South Africans, Leggett, Moller and Richards (1997) conclude that “South Africa is a country in search of an identity” (p. 97), and kwaito is beginning to fulfill the need for a new identity – one based largely on authenticity and materialism. Which is why kwaito’s relationship to hip hop is so important as South African youth “build... culture out of remembered fragments” (Potter, 1995, p. 7) and prove Hebdige (1979) right when he says that “the material which is continually being transformed into culture can never be completely ‘raw’. It is always mediated: inflected by the historical context in which it is encountered; posited upon a specific ideological field which gives it a particular life and particular meanings” (p. 80). South African young black people have been denied a history by the legacy of apartheid. Older black South Africans have played a part in the struggle for liberation, but younger South Africans experience theoretical freedom without the privileges of a shared culture or access to the economic benefits of a free country.

Fusion, eclecticism and hybridity

That there are many functional and structural similarities between kwaito music and hip hop music is in no doubt, but there are also important differences, in both history and substance. Like hip hop, kwaito does not want to “have its histories obscured” (Potter, 1995, p. 146), which can so easily be done by producing a genealogy of music styles and attributing not just influences but originations, “since the whole point of vernacular art

forms is that they come from a particular place at a particular time, and are sites not only of invention and creativity, but of history and resistance” (p. 145).

Like hip hop, kwaito music is performed to pre-recorded backing tapes. The dance routines that have emerged to compensate for the lack of a band, have become one of the most compelling features of kwaito (Stephens, 2000, p. 269), but with its overtly sexual dancing and objectification of women as sexual objects, it has courted controversy. Like much rap in hip hop, kwaito lyrics are often filled with misogyny, sex, money and some violence. South African youth however do not think that it is nearly as ‘bad’ as American hip hop. And after reading some rap lyrics on the internet, I am of the opinion that they are mostly right (see footnote 1 for examples). Unlike some elements of hip hop, kwaito music does not glorify murder and violence “perhaps because life for the average young black South African is much more dangerous than it is for the average young black American, songs glorifying murder do not sell well... The threat of violence in South Africa is omnipresent. People do not like to be reminded of it” (Economist, 2000). When young women are asked about the misogyny in kwaito they maintain that they try not to listen to the lyrics, which they find degrading, but which they say, simply reflects the sexism inherent in South African society (Stephens, 2000, p. 270). On the other hand, like hip hop, kwaito has also been harnessed as edutainment in the service of social interventions against violence, AIDS, rape and substance abuse by groups like Bongo Muffin, TKZee and Trompies.

Like rap and many types of music, kwaito makes use of liberal sampling of music, over which lyrics are spoken or chanted, which clouds “the distinction between ‘consumption’ and ‘production’... with profound implications for questions of audience

and authenticity” (Potter, 1995, p. 53). Like rap⁷ music, kwaito is the style and music of the streets. Both employ call-response in their singing, but this similarity can be explained by understanding some of the history of South African music. The music of the seventies was the mournful and aggressive chants of freedom songs. Black (and sometimes coloured) South African youth grew up with the chants and *toyi toying*⁸ of people marching towards freedom. The call response style was a staple of these freedom songs. In 1994, when freedom songs were put to rest in the ballot box, call response re-emerged in the feisty music of kwaito. Call-response is not borrowed from hip hop, rather it emerged along a different pathway. Unlike hip hop, kwaito lyrics⁹ are fairly straight forward and do not employ the signifying characteristic of hip hop music

Is kwaito eclectic, fusion, hybrid? Yes. Is it original? Not technically, but since meaning is constructed and produced (Du Gay, 1997) it can be argued that kwaito has an unique meaning and role in the lives of young black South Africans, indeed for all South Africans, since it re-arranges the hierarchy of dominance, by including those who have been previously excluded and by shifting the balance of economic power.

The commodification of meaning

Lyotard (1996) asserts that eclecticism and fusion of tastes is all about making money. He is joined by Stephens (2000) and others in his critique: “As a musical hybrid,

⁷ Call response is not unique to rap music though, Kelley maintains that rap music borrowed call response from go-go music (Kelley, 1997, p. 59).

⁸ Toy toying is a slow rhythmic like dance-march, where participants hop from side to side in a controlled yet deliberate fashion. It was the chosen way for people to march through the streets of South Africa in protest to the apartheid regime.

⁹ Unlike US rap lyrics kwaito lyrics are not available on the web and even if they were, I must confess that they would be inaccessible to me as a white South African, since they are in a multiplicity of South African languages in whom I have little literacy.

kwaito is mediated in the same ways as Western and international popular music to fulfill a *commercial demand* that has resulted from changes in channels of media and communication technology, synchronous with the changing socio-political environment” (p. 257). Stephens argues that economic factors make it necessary for traditional or indigenous music to become diversified, more understandable and hence more marketable to a larger audience. It seems a pity that South African youth are building their identity on such an ephemeral base. Of course, perhaps an economic identity is critical to a group who have long been excluded from the market. Or is it yet another irony?

In many ways the emergence of Kwaito can be compared to the production of a local, hip teen culture magazine in Kathmandu, where “local merchants project their dreams of a local ‘youth culture’” (Liechty, 1995 p.174), and whose producers stand to make huge sums of money in the process. Economically kwaito is the biggest thing that has happened to black empowerment since the end of apartheid. The \$130 million dollar a year industry is almost entirely black – artists, record labels, production companies, clubs, and Yfm, an almost exclusively kwaito radio station. Says Newsweek, “the [kwaito] industry offers a way out of the township and into the money” (Pan, 2000, p. 72).

There are more ways in which kwaito is “complicit with consumerism” (Rose, 1994). Many kwaito groups are manufactured by music producers who bring artists, singers and dancers together and train them to fill niches. There is an almost exclusive domination of the genre by a very small number of producers. Established artists like Oscar, Arthur and M’du form and reform groups and find new talent. Arthur has 15 bands which he has founded and who are currently recording. Large corporations such as Pepsi and Vodacom have colonised kwaito artists in the marketing of their products, and the image of success

for many young black South Africans is the kwaito star with their Sandton homes and fleet of German cars, an image not recently occupied by the white oppressor. Dolby astutely comments that identities are constructed through commodities and that “race and racial identity, is no longer tied to apartheid driven cultural absolutes, but instead rotates around the axes of political and social change” (Dolby, 2001, p. 63). Yet according to young black South Africans, kwaito is avowedly apolitical. New York based South African journalist Mark Gevisser, comments “If [young black South Africans] have any kind of oppositional identity, it is generational rather than political” (Gevisser, 1999). But the difference is subtle.

The politics of kwaito

Unlike some genres of hip hop rap music, kwaito claims to be apolitical and young South Africans say they like it that way. They are tired of politics, the beat is what its all about. But there are many ways in which Kwaito is in fact an act of politics. South African youth from the 1970s to the 1990s have been at the forefront of the political struggle to topple apartheid. After the South African democratic elections in 1994, kwaito emerged in welcome relief and with it a drive for economic prosperity, a fact which “disturbed black South Africans over 30, who grew up on protest songs, [and who] found kwaito’s apolitical materialism disturbing” (Economist, 2000). A local kwaito radio station manager captures the drive “There's no young person in this country who didn't start the millennium thinking: How am I going to get fucking rich?” (Economist, 2000).

This drive for prosperity however is a political act. It is an attempt to reclaim that which was stolen and to rebuild a country ravaged by separatism, inequality and injustice –

but the rebuilding is occurring on the terms of previously discriminated against youth, who while making concessions to all of South African 'race' groups, is firmly positioning themselves as the dominant group in the pantheon of groups. The kwaito industry wields a lot of control, (and demonstrates resistance), not only financially but by the manner in which it employs language, a site where opposition is both found and contested.

Unlike hip hop, kwaito does not try "to speak loudly but privately, to tell America [read South Africa] about herself in a language that leaves her puzzled" (Alim, in press, p 9). Kwaito is apolitical. South African youth are tired of political struggle (they assert). Now they just want to have fun, make money and develop their own unique identity.

Language

An interesting feature of kwaito music is the multiplicity of languages used - everything from Zulu, Sotho and *tsotsitaal* (township slang) finds a place in kwaito. Everything that is except English, which has historical significance. When kwaito artists sing and chant in indigenous South African languages, they reverse the cultural hegemony of English. If white South Africans want to be part of this new street culture, they have to finally do something about their tacit refusal to learn indigenous languages. The language of kwaito makes white people feel uncomfortable, out of place and perhaps even second rate citizens at a township bash. They know neither the moves, dress code nor the (street) language that is kwaito. It's an ironic reversal from apartheid days. Ironically Afrikaans is incorporated into *tsotsitaal*. In 1976 the beginning of the uprising against the apartheid regime was specifically a protest against having to use Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in township schools. Students protested this injustice and marched through the

streets of Soweto on 16 June 1976. By the end of the day dozens of young dead bodies littered the unpaved streets. The fact that Afrikaans is now a staple of township slang is extremely ironic. Could this be a way of reclaiming the past through language? The almost exclusive use of indigenous languages in musical styles, certainly reclaims space in South African youth culture for black South Africans, while excluding white South Africans who mostly speak English, and who have resisted learning indigenous languages.

The use of indigenous language has also carved a unique space for kwaito in opposition to the hegemony of American hip hop. It is one of the most important ways in which kwaito is considered 'local'. However as the lure of international exposure has gained momentum, kwaito artists are increasingly writing their lyrics in English in order to capture mainstream markets (read European and America). Giroux's (1992) comment that "language is situated in an ongoing struggle over issues of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 221) highlights both how white South Africans are excluded from kwaito (and street culture) by language but also how ironically, the temptation of making money will most likely also result in their inclusion, and future domination of the industry, if Hebdige's analysis is to be believed.

The Virgin/Earthworks Kwaito CD

The CD *Kwaito: South African hip hop (Earthworks/Virgin)*, serves as an important cultural artifact when considering language. Not only do many of the artists use English lyrics¹⁰ on the CD (which was made exclusively for the international market) but the

¹⁰ Bongo Muffin now produces most of its lyrics in English, a conscious effort to break in the world music market (Vleck, 2002, p. 20).

compilation includes many other black South African musicians who are not kwaito artists, but with whom an international audience would have some familiarity. Finally, the very fact that it is subtitled “South African hip hop” can only be seen as an attempt to locate the album in a known genre, presumably in order to facilitate sales.

South African hip hop

Two strong arguments remain for distinguishing kwaito from hip hop. The first is the existence of a small but influential hip hop culture in South Africa located primarily in Cape Town amongst coloured youth. Coloured kids have historically, and continue to embrace the culture of the US. Why is this so? In a series of street interviews, I asked a 18 year old coloured guy what the rainbow nation meant to him. His response was acidic: “Rainbow nation? It means nothing. This is not a rainbow nation. The black man is at the top. The white man is at the bottom and the coloureds are nowhere. The ‘whites only’ signs are down, but racism is in everyone's heart (Zaynu, personal communication, 21 February 1996, Cape Town, South Africa). But not only do coloured kids embrace US music and culture, but they use their affiliation to disparage kwaito music, an example of how music and meaning are contested across racial lines.

Style

Kwaito style is distinctive and one in which “dress, appearance, language, ritual occasions, styles of interaction, music... form a unity... which then defines the group’s public identity” (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1997, p. 110). There is also an inherent resistance to youth style (Hebdige, 1979). The irony with hip hop however, is that urban

street wear have been taken over by huge fashion houses and are now so over priced, kids go to all sorts of lengths to be able to buy them. As Hebdige (1979) argues “Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions” (p. 96), since “once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise” (p. 96). The kwaito industry has resisted this domination. Two local kwaito fashion labels have emerged, Loxion Kulcha and Woola Seven. At present they are still in the hands of black business entrepreneurs.

Reading the *spotti*

Another form of resistance is the employment of bricolage, a practice where “things are put to use in ways for which they are not intended” (Gelder & Thornton, 1997, p. 88). The *spotti*, a floppy sun hat, is a mainstay of South African urban street wear, that has been given new meaning, along with new colours, price tags and attitude. A typical unbranded *spotti* retails for around \$2. It is culturally significant for two reasons: for that which it parodies and because of what it is not. Essentially the *spotti* is a cricket fielding hat – a symbol both of British colonisation and a sport of the (previously) dominant¹¹ upper class white elite. Using the *spotti* as an icon of kwaito culture, serves to “to take the piss out of the image” (Clarke et al., 1997, p. 109) of the previous settlers. It is also noticeably and

¹¹ Clarke et al tell us that “It is at the intersection between the located parent cultures and the mediating dominant culture that youth sub cultures arise” (Clarke et al., 1997) p. 107, but post apartheid black youth have a complicated relationship with the dominant culture --is it the white group in whose hands the country is still largely to be found or in the ruling and emerging black middle class who are at once the parent culture and the dominant culture?

unmistakably not the ubiquitous American baseball cap — which is an almost a global icon of youth culture. Another way in which South African youth are attempting to distance themselves from, and challenge the hegemony of American culture.

Ironically it is the kwaito clubs in the middle class areas which ban both *spottis* and *All Stars* (sneakers), a form of regulation which can only be interpreted as the attempt of the moneyed classes to control kwaito and perhaps make it more respectable by regulating the dress of those who follow it (at least into these upmarket clubs).

The Birmingham school of contemporary cultural studies (Du Gay, 1997; Gelder & Thornton, 1997; Hall, 1997; Hall & Jefferson, 1993; Hebdige, 1979) tells us that meaning does not arise directly from an object but from the way the object is represented. The *spotti* is a good example of just such an object. Their comments on the importance of studying the production of an artifact is equally instructive – how the object is produced both technically¹² and culturally provides clues to the nature of the culture being studied.

All Stars

All Stars are low top, canvas shoes which are a staple of kwaito street culture. Although originally produced by American manufacturer Converse, All Stars are arguably more part of South African street culture than that of the US. While All Stars are present in Boston shops, I have yet to see any young people actually wearing them. In the case of All Stars, their production is informative. Local South African companies have been making imitation All Stars for many years and consequently they cost a fraction of the price in

¹² Studying the technical production of the spotti would also be interesting since it exists as an element of sportswear, as branded and as non branded apparel. Who benefits from its mass production and how does branding affect its consumption are interesting avenues of exploration.

South Africa than in the US (compare \$4 to \$37). I would argue that All Stars are more South African than American, since they are more popular and ubiquitous than All Stars in the US. No South African I know, would even know that they are an America brand. All Stars have assumed an identity of authenticity in South Africa, but which is being contested by the US, who are attempting to lure kwaito stars into wearing hip hop street wear.

Rage journalist, Maria McCloy (undated, Issue 16) in an interview with Trompies tells of how the group arrived at an interview wearing typical kwaito street wear: *spottis*, *All Stars*, loud shirts and checked pants. In the middle of the interview, just before she is about to take some pictures they rush off and change their clothes into “caps, jeans, tracksuits and shoes from American label Fubu... these guys transform into something that now looks more Bronx, New York than Meadowlands, Soweto”. They respond by saying its all about colonialism – the US is trying to colonise another commercial market, South Africa, yet they (Trompies) are using Fubu to build personal ‘infrastructure’ - money and corporate respect to facilitate being signed with major labels in the future. At the end of the day kwaito is about ‘headspace’ they say, not just clothes. Rose’s (1994) comment about hip hop “clothing and consumption rituals testify[ing] to the power of consumption as a means of cultural expression” applies as much to kwaito as it does to hip hop, which “forges local identities for teenagers who understand their limited access to traditional avenues of social status attainment” (p.80).

The South African television series Yizo Yizo

Hebdige (1979) has repeatedly pointed out that the media plays an important role in mediating culture by playing back a picture of what youth look like or ought to look like.

The South African television series *Yizo Yizo*¹³ is one example by which the nascent kwaito street culture was fast tracked. Not only was clothing style impressed on young viewers but the sound track to the series, now in its third season, was unmistakably kwaito. In addition to graphically describing the school and home culture which the majority of South African youth inhabit, *Yizo Yizo* also became a major showcase for kwaito music. Music and visual media collaborated to establish kwaito as the soundtrack to young urban lives in South Africa.

The verdict - hybrid nation or spectacular vernacular?

A vernacular is the everyday, indigenous, contemporary or ‘slang’ language of a country or part of a country. Kwaito music is both the vernacular style and language of South African’s black youth. It is spectacular because of its departure from traditional South African black, pop or traditional African music, as well as due to its runaway popularity, success and potential for black economic empowerment. Kwaito serves as a spectacular vernacular in providing a new identity for black South African youth, and excludes both elders and white kids from this new headspace.

So is kwaito South African hip hop? From the evidence collected for this paper, it seems that the scales are tipped toward kwaito being a spectacular vernacular and not an indigenous version of American hip hop, although it serves much the same purpose as hip hop in providing a base for identity and empowerment as does hip hop. The similarities and journey of the two cultures are educative in itself.

¹³ *Yizo Yizo* is township slang for “the way it” is or “this is it” or even “what’s happening?”.

This paper has shown clearly how kwaito as a street culture, together with many of its artefacts can be clearly read or interpreted, and how it is shaping the identity of a generation of young South Africans (of all races) by their inclusion, exclusion or opposition to it. While there are many parallels with the function that hip hop plays in the lives of urban black Americans, kwaito *is* a local style, one which meets the need of young black South Africans for a coherent, unique identity as they await “a better life for all” (broadcast speech, Nelson Mandela, 1994). But the music is just a commercial industry after all, and there are tell tale signs, that the uniqueness and the authenticity of kwaito is being eroded. Black hip hop groups are beginning to emerge, in spite of “genre pressure” (www.rage.co.za); Mendoza’s latest album admits to having a few hip hop tracks and strong hip hop influence (www.mendoza.co.za); graffiti is beginning to appear in black neighbourhoods in imitation of US tagging and US hip hop groups are beginning to sample (or is it cannibalise?) South African kwaito songs¹⁴.

Finally why it matters and who it matters to are singularly the most important questions this paper has raised. South African youth, and purveyors of youth culture alike in South Africa, are not oblivious to the hegemonic forces attempting to shape consumption pan-globally. In many instances kwaito seems to be indiscriminately swayed by these forces, but as Hebdige (1979) notes: “As the music and the various subcultures it supports or reproduces assume rigid and identifiable patters, so new sub cultures are created which demand or produce corresponding mutations in musical form” (p. 69). Hip hop culture has been evolving for over thirty years. Kwaito on the other hand, although simmering for the

¹⁴ Kwaito super group TKZee has been featured on the South African release of Puff Daddy’s (P. Diddy) single P.E. 2000 (Williamson, 1999).

last decade, has only recently debuted with the dismantling of apartheid South Africa. The way in which it evolves and shapes contemporary South African youth culture will be worth watching. How is kwaito redrawing the lines of racial segregation? How might it be redressing the past? What does it mean when kwaito stars redress for public photo shoots? What does it mean for girls to ignore the misogynist lyrics of kwaito music? These and other questions are ignored at our peril.

Epilogue: Further research

In many respects this research paper has been limited by my physical location. Were I in South Africa, I would be able to deeply investigate how kwaito is (dis)located between local and US influences. Ethnographic research would have enabled me to talk to youth about the meaning they find in kwaito, as well as observe the (life) style that accompanies the music. It is clear that ethnographic study amongst South African youth is urgently needed if youth practitioners, and youth themselves, are to begin to understand the cultural forces shaping, regulating, representing, and consuming their lives. That kwaito is an important player in South African life, is undisputed, however the way in which South African youth of all ethnic backgrounds, resist and embrace its meaning and influence, makes it a rich site for further exploration.

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