

Hip Hop is Alive and Well in East Africa

Written by Davey D ID3276

Tuesday, 30 January 2007 23:59 -

Don't Sleep - Hip Hop is Alive and Well in East Africa: Kenyan & Tanzanian Pioneers Speak Out. By Davey D

If you don't believe rap music has the power to influence and shape opinions on a political tip, you may wanna sit down and talk with Kenyan rap stars Kama of the East African pioneering group Kalamashaka, MC Kah of the 24 man Wu-Tang like supergroup Ukoo Flani Mau Mau and Rhymeson aka Ra of the Tanzanian pioneering group Kwanza Unit. On a recent trip to Nairobi we sat down with these local hip hop and rap artists and discovered that there were some interesting parallels between themselves and popular political rap groups here in the US like Public Enemy and dead prez.

MC Kah explained that many of Kenya's early rappers who first emerged in the early 90s, started off being political. Part of it was due to the influence of their American counterparts like KRS-One and Public Enemy, but an even more telling influence is the fact that many are the grandchildren of the revolutionary freedom fighters the Mau Mau which fought against British colonialist and helped secure Kenya's independence. Kah noted that the revolutionary spirit of the Mau Mau has been passed down and that they are a continuum of that legacy of fighting oppression.

"Our harsh living conditions and government oppression" made us be political with our raps", explained Kama. He elaborated by explaining that a trip through any of Nairobi sprawling slums like Kibera, Korogocho or Dandora would make it difficult for one to rap about anything other than social or political issues. "Dandora Burning" the classic album put out by Ukoo Flani Mau Mau is a strong testament to that. It is considered by many to be the East African equivalent to Public Enemy's It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back".

Having visited both Kibera which houses more than one million people and Korogocho, Kama's words ring true. Kibera was by far more poverty stricken, downtrodden and disparaging than any American ghetto. Words simply cannot describe what I saw, but to put it simply it was disturbing to the point of tears. People living on top of one another on top of garbage dumps surrounded by human waste, is what I bore witness. It was paralyzing as I am still trying to process everything I saw.

Kah explained that one of the biggest challenges he and Ukoo Flani Mau Mau face is the

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Kenyan government putting pressure on local radio stations to refrain from playing any of their political songs. The group's commitment has been to use Hip Hop specifically to deliver messages to the people and expose government corruption. He noted that over the past few years the airwaves have been flooded with styles of music called genge and kapuka which contain mindless raunchy lyrics.

There has also been an increase in American jiggy bling bling style raps. Kah went into more detail by explaining how America's materialistic bling bling raps which have been highlighted by multi-national media corporations were being used as a weapon of sorts designed to distract the masses and undermine political thought. One of those expensive diamonds found in the mouths of popular American artists or a just a few of the many bills they are so fond of throwing at video camera could take care of several families in Kibera or Korogocho for years.

Kama noted that they have attempted to counter the crackdowns by strategically putting a stigma on anyone who mimics American rap stars. If you show up trying to be the next 50 Cent or P-Diddy, then you're likely to be branded a sellout or a capitalist rich boy who can afford to fly off to New York and come back and be like the oppressor. It is with this thought in mind that many of the Kenyan artists have made a strong push for artists to stop rapping in English and start flowing in Swahili or other native languages.

Both Kah and Kama noted that the crackdown on political Hip Hop in Kenya is no different then the crackdown on message raps that took place in the early 90s when groups like Public Enemy and X-Clan found themselves being replaced by gangster rap. Kama said it is no coincident that what took place in the US follow suit in Kenya just a few years later. He saw the move to silence political voices as a way for those in power to remain in control. He noted that cultural expression is one of the most powerful ways to deliver a message.

Tanzanian pioneer Rhymeson noted that Cointel-Pro and the Illuminated are hard at work in both the US and in Africa and hence he was not surprised about the parallel situations. He went into detail and broke down the political history of East Africa and its connection and influence to the Black Power movements in the US. He noted that the Mau Mau Rebellion influenced the Black Panthers and that in later years more than 300 Panthers came to Tanzania to seek asylum. He went into detail about how the CIA worked to set many of them up by sending them guns and other weapons so that they would be deported. However, many of them stayed and set of up hugh Cultural center. Among those still living in Tanzania are former political prisoner and 2Pac's Godfather Geronimo "JiJaga" Pratt and Mzee Pete O"Neal

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Kama noted that he and many of the rappers from Ukoo Flani Mau Mau got to spend time with Pratt and the other Panthers in Tanzania at the center and were greatly influenced by them and their courage. Kama said meeting 2Pac's (Tupac) Godfather was a dream come true and it touched him greatly. He along with Rhymeson underscored the rich relationship between the freedom struggles in the US and East Africa and how important it is for more African Americans to ignore the negative stigma attached to Africa and come back home where they will be welcome.

Kah pointed out some ongoing developments that will hopefully change the tide of the Government crackdown on political music.. For starters, residents in the slum of Korogocho demonstrated and eventually won a license to start their own community oriented radio station called Koch FM. During last weeks World Social Forum in Nairobi a number of popular Hip Hop artists from Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa, The UK Senegal, Canada and Kenya came together and formed a collective called the Ndugu International Committee. They held a press conference where they read off a number of pledges including their plan to bring forth Afrikan Centered conscious Hip Hop to the forefront as a way to aid the ongoing liberation struggle. Hip Hop being used as a tool for social change is in full gear in East Africa.

Listen to the interview below:

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