

Hip Hop Artists from Around the World Unite in Nairobi

Written by Davey D ID3297

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On the third day of the World Social Forum in Nairobi, Kenya a beautiful thing took place. Many of the Hip Hop artists from several countries had grown frustrated with the way things were unfolding and decided to meet and form an organization that would both connect our collective struggles and be a pro-active step to prevent any other social forums and political gatherings from being hijacked. The organization formed was called the The Undugu International Committee (meaning togetherness) and among its first orders of business was to lay the ground work for an African World Social Forum where issues specifically impacting us throughout the Diaspora could be addressed. Why beg and fight organizers when you can do things yourself?

Many were disturbed, touched and inspired by the food court protests lead by the youth of the Korogocho slums earlier that week and wanted to keep the energy going and build off the momentum. It was a great opportunity for all us compare notes about activism and activities in other parts of the world and to establish common ground for which to build upon. Hence many in attendance took advantage to seize the moment and bring folks together while we were all in one place.

Another key order of business was to start laying groundwork to make Conscious Afrocentric Hip Hop be the order of the day and bring it to the fore front of the liberation struggle. As I mentioned in earlier posts, American Hip Hop has been exported all around the world as a way to undermine Revolutionary thoughts and movements. The bling bling "I'm balling mentality may work in the states, but it seems sad and utterly ridiculous when you see it in the context of world politics. As was often described, we come off as being aligned with the oppressor.

I found out as we were meeting that making a trip to Kenya is hard enough for those who live in Canada, the US and even the UK. We came to discover that it was even harder for Africans in neighboring countries to get to this place. One of the brothers from the group Ukoo Flani Mau Mau explained that getting through the borders of various countries is challenging. Africa doesn't have some sort of interstate type highway or rail line, so travel from one country to another often has to be done by air and that can get to be pretty expensive.

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For me it was great seeing all these folks from all over come together and unite around the shared expressions we associate with Hip Hop. When everyone was all assembled in one room gearing up for a press conference there were several things that immediately stood out. First you realize that no matter what anyone says, Hip Hop is African. There was a certain vibe in the air. A certain spirit that supported an unspoken, natural, unspoken language that you could literally feel. When you saw the brothers from different countries dance and when you heard them spitting in their respective languages during the cipher, you felt a surging energy that literally connected one another. You felt like what was being done had happened before. It's hard to describe but you felt upbeat and ready to roll. Words do it no justice, but you could feel things were moving.

As I saw cats building, I kept thinking of the Kool Herc story of Hip Hop's beginnings where we had our first break beats, turntables and cats like Coke La Rock spitting their first rhymes in the early 1970s in a Bronx park somewhere. And while that story is accurate and an important part of Hip Hop's history, while standing amongst folks here in the Motherland it was obvious that what Herc was doing in '73 came from another place. We know he was influenced by his upbringing in Jamaica, but what influenced Jamaicans was right here in Africa-home to the Real Hip Hop. There wasn't any one thing said or one gesture made that indicated that. It was the overall vibe that you felt. The entire time I kept thinking to myself, when it comes to Hip Hop, all we did in America was re-awaken, manifest and give a name to oral, dance and music expressions that have always been inside us for a very long time. Author Black Dot in his book Hip Hop Decoded breaks this concept down to the very last compound, where he essentially notes that what we call Hip Hop came before us. In fact giving it a name may have actually placed limits on what was and is natural occurring expressions.

One of the magical things I clearly saw was just how much Hip Hop expressions are tools of communication-The universality manifested itself when I saw these brothers from Brazil and Kenya start dancing with one another. The key phrase here is "dance with" not "dance against". Here I saw two cats that never met or saw each other in their life, start off doing Capoeira. The moves were fluid and effortless. This was going on while people were ciphering and another cat was keeping the beat by beat boxing.

The dancing seemed to hit a high note so to speak and then suddenly the brother from Kenya started strutting and popping doing serious double time moves that were just sick. I seen a lot of cats get down over the years, but his movements were jaw dropping. It wasn't like he went and watched a video tape and was mimicking, he was bringing something extra to the table.

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He pretended he was kicking a soccer ball where he would isolate different parts of his leg to highlight how he was handling the imaginary ball. He was so sick with his moves that you honestly thought a ball was there. He then gestured and kicks this ball to the Brazilian cat who pretended he swallowed the ball and started isolating muscles in his stomach; chest and shoulders and then he spit the ball out and came up with some nice moves of his own as he started strutting and isolating various leg muscles. Keep in mind both men are playing soccer with this imaginary ball they are strutting and hitting the beat.

Then the Brazilian cat switches up and goes from strutting and doing soccer moves to strutting and doing moves associated with basketball. His Kenyan counterpart matches him and the pair dance for another 10 -15 minutes. It was definitely a Hip Hop moment I won't forget anytime soon.

As the afternoon progressed and more artists from other countries came around I noticed that there was a familiarity folks had with one another. Brazilians were familiar with the artists from Senegal, who in turn were familiar with cats from the UK or Canada, who in turn were familiar with the Kenyans and Tanzanians who in turn were familiar with the cats from South Africa etc. The odd one out was seemingly America. There wasn't no hatred or anything like that. It just seemed like over the years folks from around the planet have been breaking bread with each other while we in the states have been caught up in our own thing which far too often include petty, frivolous beefs or us trying to navigate the mine field of the corporate dominated music biz.

It was here in Africa, that I realized just how isolated we are as US citizens. It was something I first heard this from Michael Franti of Spearhead after he came back from a trip overseas to Palestine. What I felt underscored what Chuck D from Public Enemy has been attempting to alert us about for years. Everytime I see Chuck he's emphatically telling anyone who will listen to get a passport and escape from the two thousand by three thousand box called America. He noted that there's a lot of activity passing us by and that because of mass media which has distracted us and literally have many of us addicted we have been caught up in some sort of matrix. He notes that many of us do not realize how suffocating and stifling things are until we actually get up, leave and take a look around.

My boy Sol Guy out of Canada who manages Somalian rapper Knaan, also hip me to these global conversations a couple of years ago. Like Chuck he too has preached the importance of us getting out and traveling beyond our borders. He told me about these global collabs that folks were doing for a project called The African Way where the US was not involved. He noted back then that people were starting to see us as Babylon. Our outlook and collective unwillingness to

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be apart of these conversations was having us come across as arrogant and aligned with the oppressor. In recent years thanks to Colin Powell, Condi Rice being the face for our crazy foreign policy or 'sell out Black preachers publicly supporting George Bush for a few crumbs, we as African Americans have gone from being lauded to being questioned and in many circles ridiculed. Why we align ourselves with George Bush and his policies has been a conversation I've had with folks damn near everytime I been overseas since he's been in office. I had it Scotland during the G8 Summit. I had it in London the day of the July 7th bombings when I happened to be in town. I've had this convo in Beirut and I definitely had this conversation in Nairobi, more times then I care to recount.

I recall covering the bombings in London near one of the sites at Edgware and being jammed up by a bunch of young cats who I wanted to interview. They wanted to know why I was even bothering to cover the event and saw me as being part of this big Media Machine that tells lies. They doubted I would be sincere and accurately cover the event. No amount of reasoning seemed to penetrate. It didn't matter that I was Black. They simply saw me as part of a country who's foreign policies has caused chaos around the planet. It didn't help that I along with them saw first hand how fellow reporters that I was traveling with from some of the mainstream news agencies completely flipped their stories to fit a political agenda being put forth by the administration.

That day when we interviewed Londoners almost everyone we came across rejected the notion that Al-Queda had anything to do with the bombings. Most blamed it on policies being put forth by prime Minister Tony Blair and President Bush. I have at least an hours worth of interviews where person after person echoed this. Now I played my reports on air, but my fellow journalists went inside a nearby hotel and sought out American tourists who were down to parrot the Bush line about Al-Queda being the responsible party. It was these sound clips that eventually made the airwaves. It was an eye opening experience to see news being blatantly manipulated. There was no shame in these reporters game. I asked one woman why she was giving equal weight and air time to the Al-Queda theory when the overwhelming majority of people interviewed that day in London thought otherwise. She said point blank that people in the UK are stupid and out of touch. It's typical of us here in the states to see everyone as beneath us.

With respect to this isolation within Hip Hop, you can see it manifest itself when you do something simple like ask even the most diehard fan here in the US to name off ten artists North or South of our borders. Most would be hard pressed to name more then 5. Yet we are quick to note that Hip Hop is worldwide.

What I saw at this Nairobi gathering was everyone being up on the Hip Hop scenes in other

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parts of the world including ours. I asked some folks about this and I was told-information is paramount. Having knowledge of everything around both on a political as well as social tip is important for survival. Us as Americans being blissfully ignorant to what is taking place in other parts of the world, especially on this Hip Hop tip reminded me of the days when NYC came across as arrogant and unaccepting of anything outside of its 5 boroughs. Over time you saw that cats from other parts of the country started building with each other and basically began to ignore the opinions of folks from the Big Apple. It was no longer important to get NYC approval. Cats from Cali started building with cats in Kansas City who in turn started creating alliances with folks in St Louis who in turn started building bridges with cats in Texas.

Nowadays cats in NY complain about how they are being forced fed material from the South and that a lot of local talent in the Apple can't get any shine. It's not so much its regional dominance but instead it's a corporate agenda playing itself out. Well overall the US corporate agenda is playing itself out on the world stage and it ain't good. Bush's policy of keeping us isolated has trickled down in all sorts of areas including Hip Hop.

Yes, of course folks know about Snoop ,Lil Jon, 50 Cent and Ja Rule. In fact Snoop has a syndicated radio show that comes on out in Nairobi, but for the most part we as Americans get known because our music and culture is being force fed around the world via our over the top media. CNN, FOX and various video channels like BET or MTV are all seen and heard around the planet. So the average cat overseas gets to see a Black woman like Condi Rice or a brother like Colin Powell lying about why we went to war. Or when I was there in Nairobi, you saw Condi explaining why were over there bombing Somalia. That wasn't a good look. Then you turn on Viacom owned BET or MTV and see rappers flashing their ice and and sporting their super expensive grillz talking about how much they're balling while folks who are living in extreme poverty where food and water are scare are watching this bullshit. Its s sad state affairs that we all have to re-evaluate.

Well anyway, we've talked about all this before. The important thing was cats coming together to try and create some sort of alliance and seeing Hip Hop as the important bridge between cultures. In 1967 Martin Luther King gave a speech to radio announcers and he pointed out how the radio announcer and soul music had a bigger conquest around the world then Alexander the Great. He talked about how Soul music and its accompanying dances were important cultural bridges that created a common language. This is happening with Hip Hop.

When I was in Nairobi I heard people like Rhymeson of Tanzania and Kamal from Kalamashaka note similar sentiments with respect to Hip Hop. I'm not sure if it was Rhymeson who said it, but it was said that Hip Hop could be the new Pan Africa. Seeing everyone come together to break

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bread that afternoon underscored that point and made me understand why those in power are attacking it with such vehemence

Afrikan Peoples" Declaration of Liberation

World Social Forum - Nairobi, Kenya 01/23/07

As the host people of this year's World Social Forum, we, as Afrikans from Kenya, the entire Afrikan continent, and the diaspora abroad are indeed honored by the presence of activists and revolutionaries from throughout the world who are struggling to defeat racism and imperialism.

However, while we stand in solidarity with the principles of the Forum and many of the struggles highlighted, we as Afrikans from around the world are first and foremost committed to the liberation of Afrikan people at home and abroad.

While Afrikan people are not the only oppressed people in the world, we can find no other people whose oppression is so universal and vital to the continuation of racism and imperialism.

We, as a collective body, Over-stand that the centuries of oppression has created a crisis in our community - most importantly the cultural crisis.

We, as a collective body, Over-stand that Afrikan people cannot develop economically and politically until we re-establish our cultural foundation and sustain ourselves based upon our values.

We, as Afrikans, Over-stand that economics and politics do not exist apart from the cultural principles and practices of the people.

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Unfortunately, however, we feel that despite the fact that the World Social Forum is in Afrika, it has not done a sufficient enough job of addressing the particular issues and needs of Afrika and Afrikan people.

The Forum has also kept the masses of Afrikan people from fully participating in its activities by charging high prices for admission, food, and water.

Thus, we resolve that we **MUST** organize a separate Afrikan Peoples World Forum immediately before participating in any other World Social Forum.

We must create a separate space to discuss issues such as how to rebuild the Afrikan family, how to rebuild mutual respect and relationships between Afrikan women, men, and children, how to get reparations related to the holocaust of enslavement, how to re-establish Afrikan intellectual independence, and how to bring Afrikan-centered conscious Hip Hop to the forefront of our liberation struggle.

These, and other issues will and must be discussed and resolved in our upcoming Afrikan Peoples World Forum.

This statement is a call for active unity and support from Afrikans on the continent and abroad.

This statement is a call for Afrikans throughout the world to know their past and reclaim their historical greatness for today!!!

In Love and Struggle,

The Undugu International Committee, which consist of sisters and brothers from the following nations:

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Azania (South Afrika)

Canada

Ethiopia

Kenya

Mexico

Tanzania

Zimbabwe

Brazil

Senegal

United Kingdom

United States of America

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