



# **LIVING THE** **Hiplife**

**Celebrity and  
Entrepreneurship  
in Ghanaian  
Popular Music**

**JESSE WEAVER SHIPLEY**

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Duke University Press  
Durham and London 2013

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Heather Hensley

Typeset in Chaparral Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shipley, Jesse Weaver.

Living the hiplife : celebrity and entrepreneurship in  
Ghanaian popular music / Jesse Weaver Shipley.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8223-5352-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5366-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Rap (Music)—Ghana. 2. Rap musicians—Ghana.  
3. Popular music—Ghana. 4. Hip-hop—Ghana. 5. Ghana—  
Songs and music. I. Title.

ML3503.G4S55 2013

781.6309667—dc23 2012034575

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the support of  
The Office of the Provost at Haverford College, which provided  
funds toward the publication of this book.

**DEDICATION**

Thorne Shipley



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book goes out to all the people who listened and talked, shook their heads and smirked. I am grateful for the input and ideas of so many different people in multiple locales. Research for this book has been generously funded and supported by Fulbright-IIE; Wenner Gren Foundation; University of Chicago; Bard College; Haverford College; Museum for African Art in New York; Third World Newsreel; British Council of Ghana; Carter G. Woodson Institute for African American and African Studies at University of Virginia; School of Performing Arts at University of Ghana, Legon; National Theatre of Ghana; International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD); Bokoore African Popular Music Archives Foundation (BAPMAF).

I must thank many people for countless contributions large and small. I thank, in Chicago: Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, Beth Povinelli, Andrew Apter, Nancy Munn, Michael Silverstein, Susan Gal, Ralph Austen, Liz Garland, Jen Higgins, Laurie Frederick, Barney Bate, Jane Guyer, Paul Liffman, Anne Balay, Anne Chien. In Virginia: George Mentore, Hanan Sabea, Wende Marshall, Jemima Pierre, Scott Saul, Joseph Miller, Reginald Butler, and Michelle Kisliuk. In Annandale: Chinua Achebe, Diana Brown, Mario Bick, Laura Kunreuther, Yuka Suzuki, Tom Keenan, John Ryle, Peter Hutton, Helon Habila, Patricia Pforte, and Ali Feser. In Johannesburg: Jyoti Mistry, Dzino, Thuli Skosana, Maria McCloy, Shizeeda Osman, Eric Worby, and Achille Mbembe. In New Brunswick: Michael Warner, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Sareeta Amrute. In Philadelphia: Laurie Hart, Maris Gillette, Zolani Ngwane, John Jackson, Linda Gerstein, Kim Benston, Israel Burshatin, Koffi Anyinefa, Susanna Wing, Andrew Friedman, Linda Bell, and Kathy McGee. In circulation: Michael Hanchard, Tina Campt, Marina Peterson, Alex Dent, Anne Maria Makhulu, Ruti Talmor, Hylton White, Binyavanga Wainaina, Tom Burke, Candice Lowe, Bayo Holsey, Rosalind Morris, Jim Smith, Harvey Neptune, Kamari Clarke,

Ben Talton, Lisa Binder, Stephanie Newell, Ato Quayson, Tyrone Simpson, Roy Grinker, Charlie Piot, Brian Larkin, Paul Kockelman, Saskia Koebschall, Jason Lee, and M One of Dead Prez. With Duke University: Ken Wissoker, Leigh Barnwell, Susan Albury, Bonnie Perkel, and Debbie Masi (Westchester Publishing Services). In and out of Accra: Reggie Rockstone Ossei, Panji Anoff, Rab Bakari, John Collins, Willie Anku (late), Esi Sutherland-Addy, Mohammed Ben Abdallah, J. H. K. Nketia, Farouk Abdallah, Aminata Abdallah, Kofi Anyidoho, Africanus Aveh, Yaw Asare (late), Esi Ansah, Nana Aqua Anyidoho, David Donkor, Kwesi Brown, Judith Nketia, Cynthia Delali Noviewoo, Akramah Cofie, Habib Iddrisu, Kelvin Asare Williams, Dhoruba Bin Wahad, Gavin Webb, John Akomfrah, Gyedu Blay Ambolley, Sidney, DJ Black, Grey, Nkonyaa, Kochoko, M3nsa Ansah, Wanlov, Lazy, Prodigal, Promzy, Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi, Hashim Haruna, Obour, Ronny, Bright, DJ Ronny Boateng, D-Black, Okyeame Kwame, Zela Limann Ossei, Phoebe Ossei, Ricci Ossei, Felicity Antwi, Diana Afi Kofitiah, Samuel Otoo (Ghana Boy), Birte Hege Owusu-Addo, Paa Kwesi Holdbrook-Smith, Nate Plageman, Eric Don Arthur, Korkor Amarteifio, Gibril, Blitz the Ambassador, M.anifest, Mzbel, Abrewa Nana, Eddie Blay, Kweku T, Ben Angmor Abadji, Jeff Cobbah, George Mensah Britton, and Akoto. I must thank William Loren Katz, Giles Weaver, Burke Shipley, and Virginia Shipley. And, finally, my deepest gratitude to Tabettha Ewing.

An earlier version of the opening section of chapter 5 appeared in “Creativity and the Limits of Political Agency,” in *Creativity in Crisis: After Afro-Pessimism*, edited by Anne Maria Makhulu, Stephen Jackson, and Beth Buggenhagen (University of California Press, 2010). An earlier version of the second part of chapter 5 and reworked introductory material appeared in “Aesthetic of the Entrepreneur: Afro-Cosmopolitan Rap and Moral Circulation in Accra, Ghana,” *Anthropological Quarterly* (2009). An earlier version of historical sections from chapters 2 and 3 appeared in “The Birth of Ghanaian Hiplife: From Black Styles to Proverbial Speech in African Hip Hop,” in *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, edited by Eric Charry (Indiana University Press, 2012).

Throughout the book I follow my informants’ informal descriptions in using “Akan” and “Twi” somewhat interchangeably to refer to related, mutually intelligible languages, of which Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, and Fante are the most prevalent. If speakers or musicians specify, this is indicated. Likewise in transcribing and translating lyrics I

follow the notion that in this musical oral form the notion of definitive translation is less important than the ways in which participants are themselves a part of translations. I, therefore, have sought out translations that reflect this and used English language orthography as this is the way that most participants write and text Akan languages despite its inability to capture certain elements. At times I use pseudonyms in reference to interviewees to protect them from embarrassment or conflict.



## INTRODUCTION

### **Aesthetics and Aspiration**

We are listening to bling music,  
which thumps and talks about hip  
and hop, gold and going places.

There is no past, everything is sampled.

—BINYAVANGA WAINAINA, *One Day*  
*I Will Write about This Place*

#### ***Don't Go There***

For several years, Nescafé, an affiliate of Nestlé Corporation in Ghana, sponsored a series of regional competitions for amateur hiplife musicians. Aspiring musicians performed while music industry judges assessed their star potential.<sup>1</sup> In mid-2004 each of the nation's ten regions held preliminary competitions; the winners went to the national finals in Ghana's capital, Accra. Reggie Rockstone, considered by many to be the originator of hiplife music, was mentoring a young group of rap artists called the Mobile Boys and entered them in the competition.

The Mobile Boys—Grey, Kochoko, Nkonyaa, and Bedsheet—all in their twenties, have stories that are common to a generation of disenfranchised youths in Ghana and across the continent. They reflect patterns of rural-to-urban migration of youths seeking work and inspiration, success, and pleasure in the city just as those before them have. They take small jobs and hustle, and rely on friends for support and lodging. Grey (Thomas Antwi) explains, “I couldn't finish school because my

mother didn't have money for school fees. . . . I don't know my father, but he never supported me so I don't worry about him. I used to play football but when I hurt my knee, I put all my energy into making it as a musician. That is my hope."<sup>2</sup> The first time he heard them rap, Reggie was struck by their lyrical talent. "These kids would hang around the neighborhood . . . some of them sleeping in a nearby abandoned building. . . . When I heard them, I was blown away. I mean they could flow. I decided to invest in developing them as a group."<sup>3</sup> For several years Reggie supported the boys, giving them a place to stay and providing recording time at his studio. He hoped his investment would lead to their success, which in turn would reflect well upon him.

Reggie recalls they were known in Accra's hip-hop "underground scene . . . But to put out an album that is going to sell is not easy, even for me or other well-known stars." He laments that while private radio was central to promoting early hiplife artists, stations increasingly demanded "payola," illicit cash payments from artists and producers to play songs. Unknown artists struggle to reach mainstream audiences. Making connections with leading musicians, producers, and corporate sponsors is a way in. Finding such a famous patron as Reggie appeared to be a path to success for the aspiring rappers.

To give the rappers exposure, Rockstone featured them on his 2003 "Mobile Phone Song." Each rapper's verse tells humorous tales of romance, lying, and hustling, all made possible by using a mobile phone. It reflected a funny saying circulating in Accra: "Everyone with a cell phone is a liar," which links mobile technology to the power of creative speaking. After the song was released and people saw the group with Reggie or backing him up at shows, they would shout, "Hey, that's the Mobile Phone Boys," and the name stuck.

The Nescafé competition was a way for the company to rebrand itself for youth markets. As one radio executive explains, promoting undiscovered artists gives them a good public image and does "something useful for the community." The winners would be thrust into the public eye, receiving a recording contract, music videos, a house for a year, and ten million cedis cash. The Mobile Boys, with their polished lyrical skills, easily won the Accra regional competition and looked forward to the national finals, held the night of September 17, 2004, on an outdoor stage at Kwame Nkrumah Circle. A popular venue known to local audiences, this stage often hosted events such as massive all-night charismatic church services and healing sessions, as well as popular concert party

variety theatre shows sponsored by Unilever, and football skills competitions sponsored by Guinness. The Nescafé event was well publicized and free, attracting a slightly rowdy crowd of several thousand people, dominated by teenagers and young adults, with boys outnumbering girls. Workers carrying small tankards on their backs served Nescafé drinks to the crowd.

The Mobile Boys' performance proved a crowd favorite, garnering huge cheers. "We thought we had won," recalls Grey. After the various groups performed, the show's MC, K.O.D. of Radio Gold, announced that the group Praye from Kumasi had won. Crowd members shouted their disappointment and screamed for the Mobile Boys. Grey explains, "Praye's music is more local dance beats. They don't really rap. . . . But they are nice guys. Their name . . . refers to an Asante proverb, 'If you take one broom straw out of the broom it will break, but together it is strong.' It refers to strength in unity." Reggie was angry and mounted the stage with the Mobile Boys in tow. Taking the mike from K.O.D., he shouted to the crowd, "if you no think Mobile Boys win make some fucking noise!" He tossed the mike to the ground and left. Reggie later explained to me that he did not think the competition was fair. "I had a call from a friend of mine. It turns out they already knew who they wanted to win and I wasn't informed. . . . They could have . . . pulled me aside and said, hey Reg, don't go there because we got this planned."

Although the Mobile Boys lost amid accusations of competition fixing, several months later Nescafé contacted them. Kochoko explains, "It's shocking to us after that bogus competition. Nescafé asked us to do an advertisement. It's unbelievable. . . . We did it for them and it's on the air." They adapted the lyrics of their song "Don't Go There" to promote Nescafé. According to Grey, "The song is about . . . showing respect. . . . If something is important to me, then you should not destroy it. 'Don't go there.' We just rewrote a verse." The Mobile Boys sang the track mostly in the Akan language with only the hook in English.

When the Mobile Boys get their Nescafé. Don't go there. Nescafé.  
Kochoko, Grey, Nkonyaa love the taste. Don't go there. Nescafé.  
All the security guards drink it to stay awake. Don't go there.  
There are three and one in a sachet. Don't go there.  
The taste! It's already got milk and sugar in it. One sachet per cup.  
N to the E to the S to the C to the A to the F to the E. Nescafé, hey!<sup>4</sup>

For the Mobile Boys, getting paid to adapt one song was small compensation for the frustration at watching another group garnering the fame and support they felt they had earned. The hopes and frustrations of this competition demonstrate this book's concern with various processes of mediation and circulation that are central to this musical genre's social significance. In a more abstract sense, this competition shows how performers struggle to convert musical value into sustained celebrity-status and economic value. I trace how an aesthetic of hiplife emerges as artists make pleasurable music amid the tensions of contemporary urban Ghana's political and economic transformation. Hiplife is a symbolic realm through which youths on the margins reimagine themselves as socially authoritative, free-thinking public speakers. At the same time, corporate, state, and media institutions attempt to harness youth styles—and their images of self-expression—for other purposes, demonstrating the potentials and hazards of the free market.

### *Making Music, Making Value*

This book examines the sociohistorical emergence of Ghana's hiplife music as a new genre and its centrality to changing ideas of Ghanaian identity. It follows how hiplife makes and transforms various kinds of value—aesthetic, moral, linguistic, and economic. Hiplife is a popular music genre that fuses hip-hop sampling, beatmaking, and rap lyrical flow with older forms of highlife music, Akan storytelling, and proverbial oratory. Like highlife before it, hiplife is musically eclectic. It is defined less by a specific rhythm or orchestration than by techniques that blend black diasporic music and style into established local performance genres. Throughout the twentieth century, black diasporic popular culture has had a particularly potent influence on Ghanaian aesthetics. Hip-hop, in particular, appeals to young Ghanaians through its emphasis on the liberatory potential of black male speaking. Young Ghanaian rappers infuse the direct bravado of hip-hop with traditional respectful oratory and familiar highlife rhythms, legitimizing it in the eyes of a broader Ghanaian public. In this sense, artists have made themselves into mediators of foreignness, transforming new fashions for local consumption.

I argue that this musical genre produces an aesthetic and moral configuration that celebrates entrepreneurship. Hiplife's entrepreneurial spirit aligns music-making with self-making, as unknown hiplife artists strive to transform themselves into influential stars. The specific

aesthetic practices that make linguistic and bodily transformations in the musical realm are the same values that make a good entrepreneur. This book follows the story of how celebrity becomes a form of value production central to both music and entrepreneurship. Tensions and controversies around hiplife reveal the cultural implications of free-market transformations that have dominated Ghanaian society over the past two decades. New electronic and digital circulations are central to this development, as is the role of artists and producers as social mediators.

Young male hiplife musicians who rise to fame represent a new kind of Ghanaian celebrity for the neoliberal era, and complicate simplistic dichotomies between state and market. Celebrity artists mediate value for an evolving Ghanaian society. Hiplife stars are public emblems of entrepreneurial success, converting musical pleasure and images of leisure and success into celebrity. Fame, in turn, becomes a form of currency, transforming ephemeral signs of social status into material value. Artists initially seek success through informal music circulations. Subsequently, corporate and media interests appropriate artistic celebrity to brand products for an emerging Ghanaian market. The state also tries to use new market-oriented tastes to gain public support. As aspiring artists recognize that their success hinges upon fashioning an image of celebrity—and that financial support for music comes primarily from corporate sponsorship and market recognition—they increasingly create personal brands, striving to be made into corporate icons for mobile service providers, drinks, and household goods. In the context of the free market, the freedom of personal expression itself becomes a disciplinary practice that organizes power and value.

Drawing on sociolinguistic approaches, I emphasize how musical meaning is actively made and contested in lived social contexts of production, circulation, and reception. Taking an actor-centered approach, this book is particularly concerned with how performers claim authoritative public stances by linking disparate performance registers, and how audiences, who tend toward conservative interpretations, try to make sense of innovative signs within established performance structures. In the process, culturally specific notions of circulation and mediation call into being new Ghanaian moral publics. Performers and audiences rely on the referential aspects of songs, styles, and performances to connect musical aesthetics to moral qualities and to the potentials of economic value production. Thus, I use aesthetics to refer to

a set of changing principles and contexts through which participants structure affect and taste. In practical ways actors draw on these values to interpret familiar signs, adopt stances, and introduce new signs, in the process amending the principles of interpretation. By making young musicians into national icons emboldened with the power to make economic and moral value, hiplife provides youths with transformative possibilities, but also reveals the limits of social mobility. Though my focus is on the sociohistorical specificity of hiplife, this African urban genre has broader implications for global music amid technological and corporate changes that have provided new opportunities for musicians to reach audiences but also new forms of constraint. Hiplife musicians cultivate bodily and linguistic aesthetics to make and circulate music through changing electronic production and digital distribution networks representing broader changes in music industries across the globe.

### *Circulation in the City*

In 1980s Accra, hip-hop became popular among a handful of elite, internationally oriented youths. At clubs and school concerts, enthusiasts imitated American styles of rapping, DJing, and break dancing. Youth interest in hip-hop styles reflected changing generational tastes as their parents' highlife, soul, and R&B seemed outdated. In contrast black American rap stars represented a new Afro-cosmopolitan swagger that they could emulate.

After several years of protosocialist military governance, Ghana was transitioning toward privatized, liberal rule. Ghana's 1992 democratic constitution mandated state privatization, initiating the rapid proliferation of private radio, television, advertising, and production media. With rising business opportunities, numerous Ghanaians—many with experience in media industries—returned from self-imposed economic exile in Europe and America. Young adults from villages across the country also increasingly came to Accra as the capital city promised new opportunities for work and pleasure.

Reggie Rockstone was one of those who returned from abroad to Accra and began rapping in Twi over heavy hip-hop beats and samples of Ghanaian highlife and Nigerian Afrobeat. Born Reginald Asante Ossei in London to Ghanaian parents, he attended Accra's prestigious Achimota College for secondary school, though he spent most of his time break dancing. Moving to London in the mid-1980s after finish-

ing school, he recalls being “bitten by the hip-hop bug” and honing his English-language rap skills in the nascent London hip-hop scene. When he returned to Accra in 1994, he was surprised at how local rap was focused on imitating American styles. “Some kids didn’t even understand English that well. They were just copying the flow. . . . To make hip-hop local [we had to rap] in local languages and address issues that were important to my people here.” Reggie is credited as the originator of hiplife, coining the term to describe his blend of the nostalgic sounds of old Accra with hip-hop’s new bravado. He explains, “I took the ‘hip’ from hip-hop and the ‘life’ from highlife. . . . At first people thought [rap] was foreign. . . . Including the highlife sound [made] the older crowd listen. . . . I had to blend languages and styles, mix it up so local people would respect the music.”<sup>5</sup>

Reggie’s music both made it cool to rap in Ghanaian languages and made hip-hop acceptable to a broad Ghanaian public. His successful, innovative blend relied upon his unique fluency in local and foreign musical forms developed through a life of frequent movement between Ghana, London, and the United States. His music established a pattern for musical transformation that subsequent artists used to further develop hiplife as a local, blended genre. It inspired a generation of younger artists, without direct access to transnational travel, to reinterpret hip-hop for local audience tastes.

I first met Reggie in 1997 when he performed at the Pan African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST) in Cape Coast, Ghana. His presence as a headlining performer confounded how visitors and locals alike understood what constituted African music. The state-run festival was established in 1992 to show cultural “connections among black peoples” and to use African performance and art to unite Africans from the continent and the diaspora.<sup>6</sup> For state organizers and private sponsors, this semiannual festival was a chance to encourage African diasporic peoples to visit and establish long-term connections with Ghana. The weeklong program in 1997 featured traditional dance troupes from across Africa, contemporary African theatre, diasporic musical groups, an academic conference, and an arts and crafts fair. Reggie, wearing military fatigues, performed to a large crowd of youths at the Cape Coast Centre for National Culture, next to stalls selling traditional carvings, cloth, and leather goods. Contrasting with other artists at the event, Reggie was a new kind of Ghanaian celebrity. He confounded institutional ideas of Pan-Africanism in favor of the tastes of young

irreverent, commercial-oriented audiences. “Reggie is hot. . . . They need us more than we need them,” his manager, Paa K, quipped to me outside the PANAFEST offices while negotiating Reggie’s appearance fee. Many African diasporic attendees were uncertain how to interpret his music. “This isn’t African,” one commented. “Is he from Ghana or what?” Another stated, “I didn’t come all the way here to listen to American music.”

The following year my sense of the growing and unique significance of hip-hop in Ghana was solidified. One Saturday I was backstage at the National Theatre of Ghana chatting with actors. We were struck by the fact that, while only a small audience was watching their play by an important Ghanaian playwright in the main auditorium, hundreds of energized teenagers were behind the theater rehearsing for an upcoming rap competition. The National Theatre was hosting Kiddafest, a youth variety show meant to celebrate Ghanaian culture. Due to popular demand, organizers had recently agreed to include a rap segment, as long as performers rapped in what they referred to as “local” African languages and used nonprofane lyrics that told morally positive stories. At the time, I was studying modern stage theatre and I was struck by how youth interest in hip-hop was changing official state notions of what constituted African culture. Interest in hip-hop had spread from elite urban students to mass urban and rural youths as evidenced by the diverse rap performers coming to compete at the theater. While critics saw the music as un-African, morally corrupt, and foreign, as rap gained local recognition, audiences increasingly identified it as an African genre.

Hip-hop’s particular aesthetics of cutting, mixing, and sampling provided a vast array of techniques for synthesizing various melodies, lyrics, languages, and rhythms. Over time, excitement about new generic blends unexpectedly inspired youth interest in older performance genres as beatmakers manipulated electronic production technology to replicate highlife rhythms and rappers sought out traditional proverbs to enrich their lyrics. Rappers experimented with adapting lyrical flows to suit “local” languages. They used various languages, Akuapim Twi, Asante Twi, Fante, Ga, Ewe, Hausa, Dagbane, and Pidgin English, instead of copying American English styles. While English is Ghana’s official national language, dominating institutional and civil contexts, and Ga is the language indigenous to Accra, the capital city is defined by its multilingualism. While some rappers used other languages, most blended Akon languages, the country’s lingua franca, with some Pidgin and English.<sup>7</sup>

While Accra's vibrant live music scene of the 1970s had been devastated by a decade of economic and political instability, hiplife's use of new technology led to a new age of public music. Cheap beatmaking software and computer-based production technology allowed young artists to experiment and record music in home studios when musical instruments and professional recording facilities were difficult to find. The rise of numerous private radio stations was also crucial to hiplife's rise, as radio DJs needed new music to fill the airwaves and reach the youth market.

By 1999 a critical mass of local hiplife hits flooded Accra's airwaves and clubs. Hiplife provided a sound track for urban youths. Hiplife lyrics and fashions celebrated youth possibilities with an African urban élan and reflected Accra's renewed vibrancy. Layers of overlapping local music played from taxis, markets, drinking spots, Internet cafés, and compound houses. DJs at parties, clubs, and funerals played a blend of hiplife, highlife, and gospel along with American R&B and pop tunes. New local music created a feeling of national belonging. As one market trader commented to me in 1998, "We want to hear our own Ghanaian music. Songs that we understand and speak to us, not some foreign stories."<sup>8</sup>

Accra's jumbled soundscape has been dominated by three main genres: gospel, highlife, and hiplife. Each genre represents a competing social imaginary through its associated fashions, sounds, and social spaces. The popularity of gospel signifies the increasing power of neo-Pentecostalism across the country, while highlife represents an older, specifically Ghanaian way of narrating daily struggle and urban-rural relations. Hiplife stands out through its celebration of newness and emphasis on individual bravado. For some youths, gospel and highlife are, as Grey explained, "too local" and "too slow."<sup>9</sup> Hiplife provides symbolic access to Afro-cosmopolitan worlds and its forms of performative power. As Scooby Selah of hiplife group TH4 Kwages explained, it also is a "real" reflection of daily life. "Hiplife is the way that we do things . . . in Accra. It shows how we live. It is our life."<sup>10</sup>

As the music's popularity grew and stylistic variations arose, reflexive debates about what constituted the genre and its social significance also spread. Hiplife provides youths with a way to narrate life in Accra. As a historical center of trade between Africa and the West, Accra is a city that faces two directions: toward rural West African life and the urban metropolises of Europe and America. Hiplife, and reflexive discussions

about it, reflect the cultural and economic movements of mobile youths within Ghana. It also reflects the increasingly transnational nature of Ghanaian nationhood, connecting Ghanaians in London, New York, and around the world through Internet file sharing and social networking. Hiplife songs address current moral and social dilemmas: the pleasures and perils of nightlife; hopes of international travel; ambivalence toward young women's skimpy dress; consequences of young men's desires for wealth and sexual conquest; frustrations of political corruption; and dreams of becoming a star musician. The music's digital circulation amplifies and speeds up public debates around current issues. In producing, circulating, and consuming music, young artists and listeners forge a dispersed, national public and become narrators of moral nationhood at home and abroad.

When I began researching hiplife, I focused on analyzing live concerts. Over time I realized, that for fans and artists, the public relevance of this musical performance genre lay primarily in its electronic circulations. Presence at live shows seemed to be confirmation of a mobile electronic network, rather than an end in itself. I began to increasingly follow circuits of musical production and reception through recording studios, radio stations, urban markets, and cyberspaces, tracing how electronic tracks took on meaning and shaped social interactions. I got to know producers, rappers, DJs, media people, and beatmakers as they traveled and performed in and outside of Ghana. I traced the political and commercial appropriations of music and networks of mobile file sharing. I gathered life histories of performers—both famous and unknown—to understand the music's relevance across social classes and cultural-linguistic groups.

In 2003 Reggie Rockstone and I began collaborating on filming the story of hiplife. Over the following decade I shot video of interviews, recording sessions with celebrity and struggling artists, live shows, radio sessions, street events, and scenes of music in daily life, eventually making two feature documentaries and numerous shorts and music videos.<sup>11</sup> The process of filming hundreds of hours of footage and editing it in conjunction with feedback from hiplifers has informed my understandings of the music as a form of self-representation. At times my camera gave me anonymity in the midst of a highly mediatized landscape. At other times my camera's presence reoriented the nature of a performance or conversation. These moments were instructive in revealing the structures of events and how artists wanted to present

themselves for public consumption. Participating in hiplife networks as a filmmaker has allowed me to understand the intertwined relationships between music making and marketing, and the importance of narration and public image to artistic success.

Hiplife musical production and consumption align youth interests with market-based forms of value and the promises and anxieties of entrepreneurship. The free market's valorization of entrepreneurial skills is reflected in artistic styles that focus on individual virtuosity. In Ghana, as ideologies of private ownership and individual business aspiration overtook notions of state and collective progress, as they have in much of the liberalizing world, youths invested their hopes for prosperity in market-based practices (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Hip-hop's ethos celebrating the black male hustler suited the state's new free market-oriented focus on the entrepreneur as ideal citizen. Neoliberalism entails "myths of the citizen as consumer and markets as sovereign entities" (Giroux 2008, 140). Hiplife posits the musician as agentive self-fashioning subject striving for individual success and mobility. Private media technologies emphasize personal freedoms: specifically the right to free expression and to shape oneself and market tastes through consumer choice—though this idea of freedom also constrains subjects as they are increasingly beholden to market logic.

### *Mediation, Circulation, and Control*

Theories of mediation and circulation give insight into how hiplife participants use various semiotic registers and technological forms in their performative self-fashioning (Samuels et al. 2010; Stokes 2004; Meintjes 2003). Hiplife is rooted in skills of mediation in various ways: Music mediates stylistic transformations, which in turn mediate moral and social debates. Electronic technologies mediate new publics and speech communities. DJs and producers mediate artistic fame. Beatmakers and rappers mediate among competing musical and linguistic registers. Artists mediate the interplay between aesthetic and economic value (figure 1).

Recent theories of circulation revive older anthropological interests in how exchange practices produce social relations and subjectivities by structuring relational obligations (Mauss 2000). Following Malinowski, anthropologists have focused on circulation, arguing that meaning and place are produced in the processes and mediations of movement. That is to say, the idea of stasis is made through motion; and circulation is "a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and



**FIGURE 1** Fan takes mobile phone picture with Reggie Rockstone. Photograph by the author.

constraint” (Lee and LiPuma 2002, 192). Electronic technologies provide new channels for exchange and obligation, restructuring relations through new forms of potential and constraint (Brennan 2010; Peterson 2010; Larkin 2008; Engelke 2007; Eisenlohr 2006; Hirschkind 2006). In particular, the reflexive aspects of technologies of mediation and movement shape the ways that new community affiliations coalesce (Mazzarella 2004; Tsing 2004; Gaonkar 2002; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000).

Across performance genres, debates about meaning drive social circulation through the power and pleasure of interpretation. Ghanaian dance, music, and oratory display a high degree of reflexivity. Ghanaian popular aesthetics tend to value precise control of language and bodily movement; audiences are sensitive to subtle actions of performers and scrutinize them. In many traditions of oral mediation, the performers’ job is explicitly to arbitrate between different worlds and different registers (Anyidoho 1983). For example, in Akan courts, the chief’s political and legal relationships with his subjects are mediated through an Okyeame, a wise spokesperson who uses proverbs to translate and embellish the public speech acts of the chief (Yankah 1995). The Okyeame also mediates potentially dangerous speech from visitors directed to the chief to protect him from harmful intent. In Akan languages, words are efficacious and potentially dangerous (Obeng 1997; Anyidoho 1983). Language is understood to be performative; that is,

participants recognize that language is not only referential but shapes the world it is describing. Language use takes on morally good or bad positions. Respect and authority are given to those who skillfully contain and poetically direct the social power of speech (Yankah 1995, 16, 125). In this sense, elegance and indirection are highly valued. Speaking authority is associated with proverbial speech (*bu me be*), metaphoric speech (*kasakwan*), indirection and innuendo (*akutia*), and rumor (*konkonsa*) (Yankah 1995).

Yet in many traditional contexts youths are not supposed to speak publicly, let alone use proverbial, formal oratory.<sup>12</sup> Young rap lyricists, and by association their audiences, appropriate the public authority of traditional court orators in contexts previously inaccessible to them. Songs take on the formal features of proverbial speech as morality tales for a Ghanaian citizenry. Lyrical hooks become detachable, highly mobile catchphrases that move across publics orally, electronically, and digitally. New communities of belonging are mediated through audience interpretations and embellishments of music as it circulates. Hiplife songs become socially relevant through their transportability as proverb-like speech fragments. They connect dispersed publics through circulatory practices honed in traditional forms of oratory and refashioned for electronic modalities.

Hiplife's aesthetic value, then, is judged through an artist's ability to blend elegant, respectful language with innovative referential practices. Following Reggie's example, rappers established a formula that combined personal deictics—first-person forms of address and signs that focus audience attention on an individual artist's attitude, dress, and verbal skill—and the use of traditional music and proverb-like statements that gave words and rhythms authority by deferring authorship to a traditional cultural collective. Audiences celebrated young rappers who referenced established oral and musical registers as new mediators of traditional wisdom. This, in turn, gave them the authority to introduce stylistic innovations. In this sense, successful performers structure an interaction, by assuming "an authoritative voice . . . which is grounded at least in part in the knowledge, ability, and right to control the re-centering of valued texts," reconnecting them in new ways (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 77). In valorizing the skills of blending and mediating disparate styles, this genre marks its practitioners as mediators situated between the modern West and the rural traditional village.

In hiplife's poly-linguistic lyricism, audiences enjoy the uncertainties of translation rather than seek definitive interpretations of songs.

Song makers become famous for their use of obscure proverbs or morally controversial lyrics as they drive controversy and deliberation. Translation, according to Walter Benjamin (1969), is always incomplete, an active process of fragmentation and transformation. Especially in a society that values proverbial speech, debates, and disagreements about lyrical meaning are crucial to a song's elegance, authority, and mobility.

### *Diaspora and the Productivity of Disjuncture*

Why does hip-hop provoke strong, polarizing reactions? In scholarship and popular media, African hip-hop is often either romanticized or demonized. Proponents see the global spread of hip-hop as part of an international movement in which musical connections represent historical unity and facilitate political and social transformations (Osumare 2007). But critics argue that hip-hop promotes American and commercial "contamination" of Africa's "pure" music traditions. In the first guise, hip-hop is posited as something intrinsically African. In the second, it is foreign and threatens to disrupt the radical difference that Africa represents as a site of cultural origin. Debates about origins and connections are themselves productive aspects of the development of hiplife in Ghana. Examinations of African popular culture argue that popular pastiche aesthetics reflect Africans' alternative experience of modernity as embodied critical agency (Cole 2001; Barber 1997; Waterman 1990). Indeed, Hanchard (1999) posits that Afro-modernity emerges through shared black experiences of violence and exclusion that lead to horizontal, non-state-based affiliations. Hiplife is an example of how black youths in the "global shadows" transform value, turning marginality and disconnection into a form of moral public recognition. Notions of diasporic disjuncture and return shape how young urban Africans self-consciously use diasporic culture to forge something new.

Reflexive debates about the stylistic elements that constitute the music and the moral, cultural, and racial requirements of authentic hip-hop have been central to the genre since its inception. Hip-hop-related musical genres in various locales promote reflection on community belonging. The music's irreverent techniques for remixing older styles lead to discussions of musical influence and connections, and in the process discussions of social and moral issues (cf. Saada-Ophir 2006; Stavrias 2005). The music's malleability and reflexive tendencies also lead to its easy transportability to new contexts as youths can use local sounds to make something new while claiming membership in a global

community of successful, outspoken artists. They can sound unique but be part of something bigger, be radical, and be controversial while striving for official recognition.

Since hip-hop's emergence in the 1970s as an eclectic musical and social style pioneered by mostly black and Caribbean New York youths, it has evolved into a global force of youth-oriented morality and commerce. Its four main elements—rapping/MCing, DJing, graffiti writing, break dancing/B-boying—evolved through a self-conscious aesthetics of improvisation, rebellion, creativity, and humor. The hip-hop sound provided an atmosphere that encouraged eclectic influences. DJs extended break beats, cutting back and forth between two turntables with copies of the same record. Developing this new kind of sonic environment allowed MCs to rap, improvise and toast, and layer other sounds over a looped beat. It was both endlessly repeatable and changeable to suit audience tastes. As its popularity spread from DJ and MC performances at parties and clubs in predominantly black urban communities, its aesthetic was reified as a representation of black community for internal and external contemplation and consumption. Early hip-hop celebrated oral dexterity in freestyle rap battles and ciphers. The music became established through radio play and record label attention, shifting from underground party music to musical expressions of post-civil rights black consciousness. At the same time, as packaged representations of African American life, hip-hop was appropriated by mainstream commodity culture.

Two main strands of hip-hop emerged that reflected the tension between the music's racial politics and commodification: socially conscious music and gangster rap (cf. Forman and Neal 2011). As with many diasporic forms, politically conscious hip-hop relied on an idealized image of Africa as a place of symbolic origin, for example, the imagery of Afrika Bambaataa and the Universal Zulu Nation. Even as controversies about violent lyrics emerged in the 1980s, hip-hop began to be accepted as a mainstream musical form, popular with middle-class white suburban listeners. Its growing record sales relied on re-packaging old tropes of romanticized black creativity, violence, and hypersexuality (Rose 2008; Dyson 1993). The rapper, as an icon of masculine agency able to re-create himself through an elegant control of language, embodied the contradictory legacy of public representations of black culture: the threat of a violent black male gangster and the potential of a creative antihero struggling against racial oppression

(DeGenova 1995b; Dent 1992). As hip-hop became central to American popular culture in the era of privatization, the image of the black gangster transformed into that of the black business entrepreneur, with the ubiquitous idea of hustling blurring the line between official and illicit forms of value production.

Hip-hop's remixing techniques and its ability to blend radical politics, thuglife, and commercial marketability gave it an unusual portability (cf. Fernandes 2011; Alim et al. 2008; Watkins 2005). By the early 1990s youths across Africa and around the world began adapting hip-hop practices and symbols in decidedly local, expressive terms (Charry 2012; Perullo 2011; 2005; Ntarangwi 2009; Weiss 2009; Haupt 2008; Fernandes 2006; Mitchell 2001). Youths recontextualized signs of black diasporic, masculine self-fashioning to mark racial, ethnic, linguistic, and class differences under a variety of conditions—from impoverished North Africans in Paris's banlieues to alienated Japanese bourgeois youths to disenfranchised Brazilian favela dwellers (Caldeira 2006; Condry 2006; Durand 2003; Cornyetz 1994). Hip-hop in many locales valorizes the disenfranchised, usually male, microphone-wielding speaker. Through rap, an MC enunciates the possibilities of a public stance from which he has been previously excluded in race and class terms (Jackson 2005).

Hip-hop-related subgenres across Africa strive for national and linguistic specificity while claiming membership in a global hip-hop community, with New York—and Paris for some Francophone artists—as its symbolic center. For the most part, African hip-hop artists focus on national audiences while presupposing intimate links to a broader Pan-African hip-hop imaginary. As artists struggle to make hip-hop locally relevant by deploying national cultural and linguistic signs, connections among artists across Africa have been harder to forge. In Senegal, youths used hip-hop bravado as a code of moral responsibility linking African American rebellion and French protest, with traditions of griot performance, Islamic moral discourse, and Wolof language use. During the 2000 presidential elections, hip-hop artists helped sway young voters bringing Abdoulaye Wade to power with a referendum tied to generational change (Herson 2007). In 2011–2012, when President Wade tried to stay in power despite growing public dissatisfaction, rappers used their public platform to give local protests international exposure. In Tunisia in 2011, rapper El General helped inspire public outcry at state oppression and corruption that led to the populist ousting of

the government. Across Africa critics protested that hip-hop was foreign and morally corrupting, but many youths saw it as a way to reinvigorate traditional forms of respect, morality, and language use that were neglected by society at large. Hip-hop in Kenya and bongo flava in Tanzania, Naija pop in Nigeria and kwaito and hip-hop in South Africa have all re-created large internal markets and have helped develop music industries in the context of state privatization, celebrating local expressive traditions in self-consciously creative, modern forms.

Hiplife incites moral outrage among its critics, who see it as disrespectful. But unlike Senegalese hip-hop artists, who are directly engaged in politics, Ghanaian hiplife practitioners are often more interested in earning respectability than in making political interventions. Musical variations across Africa demonstrate different ways that African youths re-deploy hip-hop's dominant image of young black male voicing geared toward capitalist accumulation and consumption. Hip-hop in the United States—as both counterculture and mainstream corporate product—provides “not only an ‘explicit focus on consumption’” but “an alternative means of attaining status for urban African American and Latino youths who face unemployment, racism, and marginalization in a post-industrial economy” (Tricia Rose in Maira 2000, 333). For African youths, hip-hop promotes desires for the bodily and material markers of capitalist consumption and accumulation, though it does so through black images of protest and authority. Where Africa is marginalized within global political economy, hip-hop marks a path to cosmopolitanism, as well as a counternarrative critique of racial-economic inequality that underlies it.

Hip-hop is increasingly a way in for visitors to Africa. While some come to Africa seeking difference, others seek connections. Hip-hop serves both purposes. A growing number of American students on study-abroad programs and “alternative” travelers across the continent are captivated by the familiar difference of “local” hip-hop. A number of alternative Web sites and independent record labels promote Afropop and hip-hop as forms of global modern connection.<sup>13</sup> Multinational corporations also have recognized the potential of African hip-hop for branding and connecting youth markets around the world. For example, Coca-Cola adapted “Wavin’ Flag,” a song by Canadian-based Somali rapper K’naan, as its anthem for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Its lyrics called for freedom through sport as the first football World Cup held in Africa was promoted in the language of Pan-African unity. In

addition, the U.S. government has promoted hip-hop in Africa to counteract the “potential of Islamic fundamentalists to make inroads on the continent” by showing a “positive image of America.”<sup>14</sup> These examples of appropriation show the potential of hip-hop to simultaneously articulate with various local and global circulating discourses.

Recent studies show how African American, Caribbean, and black British music deploy techniques of mixing, copying, and amplifying as embodied expressions of histories of oppression and violence against black peoples from the slave trade to colonialism to corporate extraction (Veal 2007). Diasporic urban black youths create electronic sonic aesthetics that reflect their ongoing experiences of displacement and raise political and moral issues in the language of Pan-African obligation. Sonic metaphors of disjuncture and mobility provide both a form of belonging and an embodied history of diasporic dispersion (Gilroy 1993).<sup>15</sup>

While scholars and popular audiences recognize that diasporic music is built upon African musical forms, when African artists incorporate diasporic styles, they are criticized for copying something foreign or being culturally inauthentic. Indeed, some scholars from both Africa and the United States continue to critique serious intellectual inquiry on African hip-hop as an inappropriate way to understand African locales. Hip-hop in Africa, which claims both African and diasporic origins, unsettles the predisposition to define Africa through radical difference, especially in relation to performance and public culture (Holsey 2008; Kapchan 2007; Silverstein 2004; Ebron 2002). It raises questions about the historical relationships between Africa and global blackness and the directions of influence (cf. Shepperson 1960).

### *Value, Semiotics, and the Body*

Value—moral, linguistic, aesthetic, economic—is actively made in all sorts of social action (Graeber 2001). I use a social theory of value to explain how hiplife, as a form of cultural production, transforms value among these realms. Qualities associated with hiplife include celebrity, success, hipness, linguistic dexterity, confidence, mobility, and control. Hiplife artists struggle to convert their labor into value in a number of ways: fusing disparate musical registers into a new genre; making traditional styles cool and foreign ones local; turning musical talent into public recognition, recognition into fame, and fame into money. In these transformations, actors align themselves with established social virtues

as a way to gain acceptance for new forms of value (Guyer 2004, 18–20). For example, Reggie Rockstone shaped local music because he was adept at aligning himself with both hip-hop swagger—he was cool—and with established local styles, which made people pay attention to his eclectic music and fashion.

Social actors fashion themselves in relation to established aesthetic principles that emerge through sociohistorically specific types of production and labor. According to Terence Turner (1984), Marx's theory of value shows that production is not solely a material process but mediates between social practice and cultural meaning. Marx's notion of production is not limited to commodity manufacturing and abstracting labor, but defines a symbolic process in which social actors fashion themselves and, in the process, produce and transform the material conditions of society. For Marx value is the "transformation of the dynamic content of productive activity into the category of meaning" (Turner 1984, 7). For example, Turner's (2007) research on Kayapo "social skin" shows that dress and adornment are cultural practices that reinforce and challenge social hierarchies and produce value through displays of the body. In this sense, "labor must be understood in terms of cultural forms of consciousness, not economics" (Turner 1984, 7). Electronic music production and digital media change the relationship between labor, economic value, and aesthetics. Unknown artists refashion themselves as public figures by taking advantage of the circuits of value conversion that electronic musical labor allows.

The value transformations Munn (1986) describes among Gawan traders provide an interesting comparison to the ways in which Ghanaian musicians try to make names for themselves through digital music circulation, travel, and publicity. In both locales, actors associate themselves with positive qualities and virtues that bring fame, which in turn produce new forms of value. Munn's use of Peirce's notion of *qualisign*—which refers to a quality that works as a sign—shows how moral virtues are assessed in aesthetic terms, which then determine how labor is converted into economic value. For musicians in Ghana and traders in Gawa, value is made in symbolic processes focused on the body.

For Gawans, Munn argues, value transformations rely on an actor's ability to symbolically extend his or her relevance across social space-time.<sup>16</sup> Through social action a core set of virtues or qualities is assessed in relation to positive and negative moral polarities. Social practices

that reflect qualities of expansiveness, outwardness, and collective simultaneity extend spacetime, whereas activities that focus on interiority, heaviness, and personal consumption reflect negative values and compress spacetime. For example, individuals who exchange shells or are successful in gardening and travel make a name for themselves, gain personal fame, and in the process accrue value for their group. In contrast, excess personal consumption reflects selfishness and brings negative valuations associated with witchcraft. In successfully exchanging Kula shells across other islands, Gawans transform themselves at home. Here fame is produced in an “externalizing process involving the separation of internal elements of Gawa . . . and their transaction into the inter-island world” (Munn 1986, 6). In this process, the self is transformed through its outward projection in objects and values and the return of these values as fame. These exchanges are shaped by communal assessments that positively value the successful exteriorization and spreading of one’s name “overseas” and negatively value the inverse failure to circulate.

Munn and Turner are concerned with socially normative processes through which actors aspire to fame and recognition within established cultural systems and circuits of exchange. Conversely, black expressive genres in a variety of contexts show how marginalized groups invert dominant value polarities, remaking community affiliations under conditions of political-economic change. As Hebdige’s ([1979] 1996) examination of British punk and ska shows, disenfranchised youths try to invert normative aesthetic values by remaking their bodies through dissonant and initially unappealing pastiches. Here fashioning the body is a way of projecting identity into the world and remaking value for those excluded from society’s main circuits of exchange and social reproduction.

As these new systems of moral-aesthetic valuation gain public recognition, the terms of personal and bodily freedom are drawn into consumer-oriented marketplaces of taste. As some economists, in fact recognize, free-market economies are not simply places of exchange but are themselves productive of value (LiPuma and Lee 2004). In making music, hiplife artists associate themselves with virtues of travel, translation, and celebrity to remake themselves as entrepreneurs who can transform aesthetic value into economic value. In this transformation aspiring musicians try to make themselves into celebrities. In understanding how fame is made, Peirce’s notion of an indexical icon is useful

as it demonstrates how signs work in multiple ways to simultaneously link various symbolic registers. Achieving celebrity status entails garnering attention to the body of the artist. An indexical icon is a sign that works by both pointing toward other signs (indexical) and by resembling signs (iconic). The indexical and iconic aspects of signification, then, link bodily aesthetics to broader moral, linguistic, and social virtues.<sup>17</sup>

### *Working for Fame*

To return to my opening story: Young musicians like the Mobile Boys become astute social analysts in their struggles to find success and make a name for themselves. In assessing the social landscape, they searched for avenues to transform themselves from unknown artists into celebrities. The Mobile Boys recognized that private radio was crucial to hiplife's initial popularity but that rapid technological changes provided new opportunities for making and circulating music.

After Praye won the Nescafé competition, they became one of the most popular hiplife groups through the financial support, professional music videos, studio production, and publicity that they received. They produced party tracks with danceable highlife-oriented electronic beats and catchy, easily repeated Akan-language hooks; quite a different brand of hiplife from the Mobile Boys' undanceable hard-core hip-hop beats and elaborate rap lyrics. Praye's look was fresh and flashy, in contrast to the Mobile Boys' tough street image. In a cover photo for Ghana Music .com in 2009, Praye posed with gold lamé jackets and designer sunglasses conveying an image of success. Their track, "Angelina," was a major hit in 2008 and 2009; digital copies of the song and its video—which intercuts scantily clad women dancing with the group at a club—circulated widely on the Internet and played in African nightclubs from the Bronx to London to Accra.

Music people explain fame, each with their own formula. DJ Ronny Boateng, who spins for Ghanaians in New York, feels artists need to cater to audience tastes. "I like Praye because they have a beat, the old time feel. . . . Ghanaian audiences want to dance. . . . The Mobile Boys are great rappers but . . . as a DJ it does not please the crowd. . . . It needs to be marketable."<sup>18</sup>

Praye's music and look were tailored and marketed for mass appeal. The Mobile Boys were frustrated watching artists like Praye become popular while they struggled to gain recognition even with their underground following and Rockstone's patronage (figure 2). Nkonyaa (Johnny