

Hiplife Music in Ghana: Postcolonial Performances of the Good Life

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This article examines how common-sense ideas of development are reinforced in Ghanaian popular culture. Specifically, using Sarkodie as a case study, I analyze how he constructs a successful entrepreneurial branded self, which then becomes an index of a “good life.” I also use participant observations and interviews conducted in Accra. I argue that hiplife artists’ success and their performances of success not only underscore their desire to access the good life but also to create distance from notions of poverty and “backwardness” associated with underdevelopment. Nonetheless, the images of success in mainstream hiplife do not necessarily reflect the everyday realities of most Ghanaians, and are, at times, deemed inauthentic. These misrepresentations may reinforce the fallacy of developmentalism.

Keywords: postcolonial, decolonial, Ghana, postdevelopment, hiplife, hip-hop

Sarkodie is arguably one of the most successful hiplife artists of his generation. In 2017, the self-crowned King of Ghanaian rap’s *Highest* album was launched at the plush West Hills Mall. One of the largest malls in Ghana, located in Weija, just outside the capital city, off the busy Accra–Cape Coast highway. From a cinema complex to international retail chains like South Africa’s Shoprite, this latest shrine of consumer culture also offers Ghanaians access to modern retailing and its attendant infrastructure. During the *Highest* launch, the mall was inundated with hundreds of fashionably dressed Sarkodie fans, mostly young men. The noisy atmosphere created by these youths reflected the excitement generated by the presence of the hiplife king. In typical Sarkodie entrepreneurial spirit, he sold branded merchandise: mugs, towels, wristbands, T-shirts, and his wife, Tracy Sarkcess’s, drink, Sobolo. The hot album signing room was guarded by macho men who only admitted fans with purchased branded items displayed at the entrance of the door. Well-known artists like Patapaa, Kwesi Arthur, B4bonah, and Medikal squeezed through the massive crowd at the entrance to perform. In the signing room, fans, some drenched in sweat, jostled each other to get closer to the stage, as the heavily built security men attempted to calm them down. Yet there were many more who could not enter—perhaps because they did not or could not purchase the merchandise—standing outside and peering through the window, trying to catch a glimpse of their favorite artist. Some fans’ self-fashioning resembled Sarkodie: They sported his iconic haircut and black shades, while others wore T-shirts that bore his image (see Figure 1.). As the songs of the album blared through the speakers, the fans ecstatically rapped along.

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Figure 1. Sarkodie fans at the 2017 Highest album launch in Accra. Photo by author.



Figure 2. Sarkodie poses with a fan at the 2017 Highest album launch in Accra. Photo by author.

Hiplife and its stars, like Sarkodie, have come to represent how to successfully inhabit a postcolonial space, and as such, they circulate ideas about what it means to live the good life. Indeed, hiplife has become a site where the dream of a good life is reinscribed (Osumare, 2012). Its artists often depend on visual forms of self-representation such as dress, photography, and, importantly, music videos to construct these images of success. These stars have become one of the frames through which Ghanaian youths (particularly young men) come to understand what it means to live in a “developed” society.

In this article, I trace how common-sense ideas of development are channeled through popular culture in Ghana. Specifically, my analysis examines how mainstream male hiplife musicians construct an entrepreneurial branded self, which then becomes an index of the good life promised by development (A. Hearn, 2008). As a case study, I examine the media interviews, songs, and music videos of Sarkodie, a successful artist with an astute entrepreneurial sense. In 2013 and 2017, Channel O and *Forbes Africa* ranked Sarkodie in the Top 10 Most Bankable African Artists because of his brand value, number of endorsements, social media presence, earnings, bookings, and popularity. I also use participant observations and interviews with fans, musicians, music video directors and other professionals involved in the hiplife music scene conducted in 2015–17.

Employing hip-hop braggadocio, mainstream hiplife artists have become priests, evangelizing the gospel of materialist success within the logic of the free market. They serve as reassurances that success under the current economic model is achievable. Nonetheless, these youths (often men) must also negotiate upward social mobility despite the current socioeconomic conditions to attain some level of economic security. Additionally, their success, and, more importantly, their performances of success underscore not only their desire to access the good life but also to create distance from notions of poverty and “backwardness” associated with underdevelopment. These performances of success project several ideas: Entrepreneurship leads to the production of material wealth, which then grants you access to the “good life.” Nonetheless, the images of success in mainstream hiplife do not necessarily reflect the everyday realities of most Ghanaians and are, at times, deemed inauthentic. The most visible example of this is the recent trend by hiplife artists to shoot music videos in economically advanced countries, such as the U.S., UK, U.A.E, and South Africa.

It is my contention that cultural productions such as hiplife reflect the broader operation of development discourse in postcolonial societies like Ghana. My article builds on growing hiplife scholarship (Oduro-Frimpong, 2009; Osumare, 2012; Shipley, 2012) to examine hiplife’s celebration of entrepreneurial self-branding as an articulation of the development apparatus’ construction of Ghana as underdeveloped. To desire to live in a developed society means first accepting your condition as being underdeveloped (Esteva, 2012). As such, this analysis can be regarded as a postdevelopment study of cultural production (Escobar 2011; Esteva, 2012). I also argue that the performance of success not only projects aspirations but also counters stereotypical narratives about Africa and its people. Development discourse becomes a framework that shapes how people see themselves (read: underdeveloped) and influences their aspirations (read: to be developed).

Developing the Good Life

In 2016, I set out to ask Ghanaians involved in the creative industry their ideas about development. The responses varied: “Ghana is not developed” it is “in between” and it is “developed.” The problems

advanced were poor infrastructure (roads, transportation), inability to access basic needs (food, potable water), and, most prominently, bad political leadership. Some described the urban areas as developed and use of “modern” technology as a sign of modernization. Notably, several advanced the idea of situating development locally and noted that when measured via the apparatus of development, then you could say Ghana is underdeveloped. This awareness of the imposition of what development was expected to be was present in some of the responses. And as one participant noted, “I think that every country has its own way of development in relation to their cultural values” (Personal Communication July 21, 2016). Additionally, the U.S. was often invoked as either a source of mimicry or contrast.

One cannot discuss Africa’s “underdevelopment” without reference to chattel slavery and colonialism (see Hickel, 2017; Rodney, 1989). Colonialism refers to the “political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Today, the global power structure, what Anibal Quijano (2007) calls *coloniality*, ensures that the power relations that were established during colonialism are reproduced for the benefit of Western Europe and North America. It continues to “define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Coloniality emerges from the conquests of the Americas, and it is undergirded by two axes of power: hierarchized social classification based on race and the “new structure of control of labor and its resources and products” (Quijano, 2007, p. 534). Thus, in Ghana, British coloniality lives in various institutions—such as the nuclear family, church, education, and governance—and continues to shape people’s aspirations and how they see themselves.

Importantly, coloniality is implicated in the discourse of development that sustains the Euro-American global world order. Just as European colonial civilizing narratives constructed Africa as primitive to facilitate its domination and exploitation, the current development discourse makes similar claims that uphold Euro-America as an ideal model of development—what Dussel (1993) calls the “fallacy of developmentalism.” As Escobar (2011) argues, development discourse, approximately produced from 1945 to 1955, has “an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over the Third World” (p. 9). In turn, the deployment of this apparatus meant that numerous countries began to see themselves as underdeveloped and embarked on the process of “un-underdeveloping” themselves. They subjected their nations to all manner of social, political, and economic interventions. As he argues, in the early post-World War II period, mass poverty was “discovered” in Asia, Africa, and South America and was pivotal to the transformation of global culture and political economy. Poor countries came to be defined in relation to wealth standards in more industrialized countries. For instance, the annual per capita income became an ideal measuring device, and when it was deployed in 1948 by the World Bank, which defined a country with a per capita income below \$100 as poor, two-thirds of the world instantly were rendered poor. Hence, these countries, the “heterogeneous global majority,” were sent to the back of the development queue (Esteva, 2012). This heralded a shift in the conception and management of poverty, and the only solution was development via economic growth.

In this way, neoliberal policies have now been largely advanced as one of the latest vehicles to attain development. Since the 1970s, several countries, including Ghana, have embraced (sometimes through coercion) the process of neoliberalization, characterized by privatization, deregulation, and the

withdrawal of state welfare (see Konadu-Agyemang, 2000). The International Monetary Fund and World Bank's structural adjustment program liberalized the economy and established Ghana as a "neoliberal pacesetter" on the African continent (Chalfin, 2010, p. 6). Yet, as Hickel (2017) declared, structural adjustment in Africa proved to be "the greatest single cause of impoverishment in the 20th century" (p. 149). Here, I must also note Slobodian's (2018) argument that "decolonization . . . was central to the emergence of the neoliberal model of world governance" (p. 5). He argues that Geneva School neoliberals opposed decolonization and its push for national autonomy because "they believed that after empire, nations must remain embedded in an international institutional order that safeguarded capital and protected its right to move throughout the world" (Slobodian, 2018, p. 9).

One of the core tenets of neoliberalism is the notion that a free market and free trade will guarantee individual freedom (see Harvey, 2005). According to Rose (1999), under this logic, citizens become "entrepreneurialized," and thus they see themselves as self-reliant and do not require state assistance. Neoliberalization meant that the state would reconfigure all aspects of national policy to allow the creation and maintenance of the free market (Rose, 1999). However, Slobodian (2018) suggests that Geneva neoliberals were focused not so much on the "market per se but on redesigning states, laws, and other institutions to protect the market" (p. 6). In turn, social behavior had to be transformed to align with this new economic system. The function of the state was to facilitate the empowerment of "entrepreneurial subjects of choice in the quest for self-realization" (Rose, 1999, p. 142). Thus, under this logic, the state is not looked at to answer to the needs of society—for instance, in terms of health, education, and security. Instead, it is the individual's duty as a good citizen to strive to improve his or her economic status.

In competing for limited resources to attain economic well-being, promotion becomes key to producing the entrepreneurial self. A. M. V. Hearn's (2010) notion of the "branded self," a "promotional skin," describes an "entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody" the dominant cultural and economic values of the society (p. 68). Importantly, the branded self is a site of value extraction, and its production involves a purposeful construction of a "meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narratives and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries" (A. Hearn, 2008, p. 198).

In Ghana, the branded self takes on a particular valence. Image brands produced may also reflect the aspirational dimension associated with living in a space defined as underdeveloped. Because self-branding involves labor, to live in the "undignified" condition (Esteva, 2012) of underdevelopment means that one is always laboring to attain development and partake in the good life. Indeed, just as nation branding is being pursued by the Brand Ghana Office to attract foreign direct investment for development, citizens are also called on to improve themselves and become a developed people.¹

I have been describing the position that neoliberalism has become the latest vehicle to promise development. Although it partly explains the celebration of entrepreneurship within the current free market logic, it does not tell us why Europe and North America are regarded as models that all other

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/brand-ghana-strategises-to-attract-investment.html>

cultures must emulate. Instead, this fallacy of developmentalism is reproduced in the discourses of development such as the discredited modernization theory. Nonetheless, concerns about how to attain development have become central not only to the Ghanaian state but also to its citizenry. To be sure, this is not to argue that all Ghanaians regard the nation as underdeveloped. However, it appears development discourse has become important to understandings of global inequality and the country's so-called underdevelopment. To this end, aesthetic expressions such as hiplife become a site where the project toward development is enacted, while at the same time reinforcing the developmentalist fallacy. Here, one may suggest that the "positive" images captured in the performances of success are also intended to counter stereotypical narratives about Africa and its people. However, these "positive" images risk simply constructing Ghanaian versions of "Western" things.

Hiplife Music

In 2016, the hiplife song "Fale Fale" received an honorary award in the category Best Music for Development at the prestigious annual Vodafone Ghana Music Awards. Gasmilla's song addressed the deplorable conditions of plastic-polluted beaches. The video for the song "Fale Fale" ends with a quote: "Clean your environment when you have to, not when you need to. That's responsibility" (Gasmilla, 2015, 4.53). For the organizers, Charter House, this category is used to award songs or videos, sometimes connected to projects, that advance social development. It is unsurprising that this award show has a category specifically for development songs, because this is keeping pace with the national imperative to attain development. Indeed, music directly aimed at developmental projects is not uncommon. A recent example is UNICEF Ghana's use of the 2015 song "Wash Wana Hands" to encourage hand washing as part of its campaign to prevent cholera and Ebola. It was sung in nine languages and featured several hiplife artists. Before these recent efforts, after Ghanaian independence in 1957, President Nkrumah transformed the British colonial propaganda outlet, the Gold Coast Film Unit, into the Ghana Film Industry Corporation. It was mandated to "use film to educate and modernize the masses, to define and celebrate traditional values, to develop a unifying national consciousness and to counter stereotypical representations of Africa and Africans abroad" (Garritano, 2013, p. 47). Collins (2005) notes that when commercial and popular entertainment were integrated into Nkrumah's national policy, it was related to "national identity, [but] today it is in connection with national economic prosperity" (p. 38).

To begin to discuss hiplife, it is helpful to examine hip-hop's early presence in Ghana. Hip-hop was initially popular among Ghanaian elites who could travel, had the technology, and could access U.S. media and English-language idioms (Shiple, 2009). This is consistent throughout Africa, where young elites were the early adopters of U.S. hip-hop (Charry, 2012), in contrast to its marginalized origins in the South Bronx, in New York, United States. Eventually, as hip-hop began to be embraced widely in Ghana, Shiple (2009) suggests it no longer represented an aesthetic of U.S. African American resistance, but one that symbolized some kind of elite status. The stylistic fashion—the baggy pants, trainers, Timberland boots, baseball caps—became popular aesthetic choices that allowed young people in Accra to identify with the plight of U.S. African Americans while drawing on this self-fashioning as cultural capital reflecting cosmopolitan ideals rooted in U.S. consumerism. To be sure, Clark (2018) has suggested that although "hip-hop culture is a culture of the colonized, or the oppressed" (p. 74), its often commercialized, depoliticized exported variant

can be read as "a product of the 'colonizer'" (p. 74). This is because it is often involved in promoting consumerism that invariably upholds U.S. capitalism.

Hiplife emerged from Jamaican ragga and U.S. hip-hop, which were popular in Ghana in the 1990s. It also incorporates various elements from Ghanaian highlife. Like its successor, highlife is a transcultural form that blends traditional (not to be construed as "tribal music") and foreign music that began in the 1920s (Collins, 2005). The coinage "highlife" has origins in the local elite ballroom dance orchestras (Collins, 2005). Thus, within the history of highlife, we observe that not only is the practice of reappropriation not new, but the term itself reflects elite status accorded to European popular music forms at the time.

Several factors facilitated hiplife's growth, among them, the liberalization of the Ghanaian economy, return to civilian rule in 1992, and the constitution that ensured the establishment of private media institutions and Ghanaians returning from abroad (see Shipley, 2012). Some of the Ghanaian returnees had acquired skills in broadcasting and electronic media, and they were influenced by their exposure to U.S. African American music. One of the prominent figures of hiplife was Reggie Rockstone, a London, UK, "returnee" who had also travelled to New York, U.S. Rockstone, "the first Ghanaian celebrity of the neoliberal era," coined the term "hiplife" (Shipley, 2012, p. 105). He observes that in Ghana he was perceived as a U.S. American who performed in Twi.² Subsequently, Rockstone became a template for the younger generation of artists, like Sarkodie, to emulate.

Hiplife songs often draw on a number of themes: Young men are warned to stay away from frivolous lifestyles and invest in their future; women are instructed to dress decently, and men are asked to guard against women who will spend their money; songs address desires for musical and economic success as well as political corruption and the pitfalls of material wealth. Some of these hiplife themes led the older generation to perceive hiplife as another corrupting influence of Western culture. However, hiplife has not only become a site to earn a living but also a vehicle to contribute to national discourse. Osumare's (2012) notion of "connective marginalities" argues that the marginalized status of youth in many societies makes hip-hop music and culture a source of collective agency. For instance, Sarkodie's 2015 song "Dumsor" critiqued the government's seemingly lackadaisical handling of a three-year-old electricity crisis in Ghana.

Hiplife artists model the entrepreneurial self after what Manthia Diawara (2009) described in U.S. hip-hop as "homeboy cosmopolitanism." Homeboy cosmopolitanism is a method that young Black men in the U.S. use to escape the scourges of racism and its restrictions on Black bodies (p. 239). For Diawara, hip-hop practices "an aesthetic of resistance which disarticulates the meaning of stereotypes through what [he calls] the parodic reclaiming of the stereotype" (p. 245). Practices of homeboy activism center "mobility and consumption" as core elements in the pursuit of the "black good life" (p. 273). He contends that the global popularity of commercial hip-hop worldwide is an index of poor people's desire to live the good life.

To some degree, hiplife artists perpetuate what Dyer and McDonald (1998) describes as "the myth of success" (p. 42). That is, with talent and hard work, all can attain success regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances. Mainstream hiplife artists perform conspicuous consumption, which implies

² Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3241007.stm>

that money is worth possessing, and what you earn grants you access to the good life. Stars as successes sustain the notion that selling your labor power on the marketplace is meaningful and rewarding.

Beyond the discussions above, a prominent feature worth highlighting is the gendered nature of hiplife music. There are few women in hiplife, but some current artists include Abena Rockstar, and Eno Barony, who, in 2018, became the first woman rapper to be nominated for best rapper of the year, at the Ghana Music Awards. Her 2017 song "Fear No Man" challenges well-known men in the hiplife scene while she debunks the sexist assertions about women artists in hiplife. To be sure, most hiplife songs are about men's experiences as subjects in a postcolonial space. This male-dominated genre, like its U.S. counterpart, hip-hop music, has been criticized for its misogyny and portrayal of women. Ghanaian women in hiplife music are also depicted as objects of men's desire, whose appearance highlights male success (Shipley, 2012). Conversely, there are also several songs that portray women as threats to male success.

Case Study: Sarkodie

Sarkodie, originally known as Michael Owusu-Addo, is undoubtedly one of the biggest names in hiplife music. He has also established himself as an entrepreneur par excellence in the Ghanaian music scene. Indeed, hiplife pioneer Reggie Rockstone recognized this, stating, "I love Sarkodie's business savviness" (Clark, 2019, 27.57). This savviness is evidenced in his high-level corporate endorsements, big-budget music videos, domestic and international concerts, his modes of self-fashioning, and, now, his speaking engagements about his successful career. In 2014, he founded his record label, SarkCess Music (an obvious riff of the term "success"). In 2012, he won the "Best International Act: Africa" at the Black Entertainment Television awards in the U.S. In that same year, his video "Illuminati," directed by GYO Gyimah of Phamous Philms, won "Best Hip-pop Video of the Year" and three other awards at the 4syte Music Video Awards in Ghana. In 2017, his video "Overdose," directed by David Nichol-Sey, of North Productions, won overall Best Video at the 4syte Music Video Awards.

Sarkodie comes from a relatively modest background compared with some of the first-generation artists who came from relatively upper to middle-class backgrounds. He grew up in Tema and Mile Seven in the Greater Accra region. Earlier in his underground career, he participated in the rap competition "Kasahare Level," on Adom FM, a local language radio station. He raps primarily in Twi, pidgin English, and now, increasingly, in English to appeal to transnational audiences. Below, I discuss how he constructs and performs success to secure economic security.

Working Hard, Becoming Successful

I loved the name. When I was growing up my dad had . . . like two friends, all with the name Sarkodie. Each and every one was wealthy, everyone was rich. And outside that, I met a couple of Sarkodies elsewhere and they were all kind of rich. I was like—. . . coincidental or like does that name have an effect on your life. (Oware, 2016, 9.24)

The vignette above highlights Sarkodie's motivation for his chosen stage name or his "performance persona." Immediately, one observes concerns with securing material wealth and escaping the scourges of

economic oppression to access the good life. Here, I want to focus on how he describes his rise to success. The way he recounts this story in his songs, videos, and media interviews illustrate how his hard work and talents eventually lead to his economic success. I describe this as the "hustler's rhetoric."

Sarkodie draws on rags-to-riches motif in narrating his musical success story. In an interview on Hot 97, a well-known U.S. hip-hop radio station, he stated, "I think I have the beginning of almost every true hustler" (OfficialSarkodie, 2015c, 0.28).

He believes in working hard and perfecting his craft to attain success. He claims he does not want to rely on gimmicks, like flying to the Grammys (in the U.S.) and taking pictures with stars. He wants "to earn it . . . the hard way . . . which is like [starting] from [the] ground and [working] hard towards that end" (KSM, 2015, 14.32). Further, he states,

I wasn't looking at being an artist, I was looking at sharing my story. It started from that, and then I realized you can make money from it. So, that is where I had to switch from being just a little boy on the streets to turn professional. (OfficialSarkodie, 2015c, 1.06)

This decision to turn his talent for rapping into a means of earning a living marks the beginnings of his commercialized aesthetic and underscores his ability to turn his talent for rapping into economic value.

Additionally, in his numerous autobiographical songs, like "Illuminati" (OfficialSarkodie, 2013), he refers to his success as a "blessing," highlighting how material items are regarded as gifts from God. In an interview with Nayoka Oware (2016), he indicates that even though he was confident he would succeed, he did not know to what extent. For Sarkodie, "that's up to God" who "shows the way" and "[paves] the way for whoever" (Oware, 2016, 7.18). This view is congruent with the gospel of success thesis, which is prevalent in a significant number of charismatic Christian churches in Ghana. People who subscribe to this theology believe that material wealth and health comes to faithful believers of the word of God. As the hustlers rhetoric describes material success as the outcome of hard work, the prosperity gospel cautions that hard work and talent may not necessarily guarantee you success unless you are deemed faithful to receive it from God. "God bless our hustle," painted across my friend's shirt, captures this perspective succinctly. In a way, this narrative seems to explain why all those who work hard are not necessarily successful. Thus, it becomes complicit in erasing the structural dimensions of income inequality and poverty.

After attaining a level of success, Sarkodie recounts how his fans have critiqued him for his materialistic songs. He states,

My fans actually made me know where I am . . . because I was talking about money too much. . . . I realized that it was true because I was always saying, "do you know how much I have" and "the car I am going to buy. . . ." When you start, from nowhere to somewhere. You just want to brag a little bit. Allow me to do that, but that doesn't mean I am all about that. (KSM, 2015, 16.10)

As observed, “bragging” is a deliberate approach Sarkodie uses to celebrate his success and (re)produce his brand. However, he adds that there is more to him than that, and this is evidenced in his advocacy on behalf of other artists. In another interview on the *Delay Show* (DELAY TV, 2015), he notes that bragging is about “competition,” his promotional skin must signal his talent and success not only to his fans but other hiplife artists. Bradley (2017) points out that rap is inherently combative, and MCs use braggadocio to elevate themselves over other rappers (p. 187). Yet he suggests that rap’s braggadocio is not just about the stereotypical markers of masculine success (material, virility, physical strength) but also about “poetry, eloquence, and artistry” (p. 189).

Nonetheless, Sarkodie perpetuates the myth that everyone can attain success irrespective of their social and economic circumstances. He embodies the ethic of the entrepreneurial self. He is self-reliant (except for counting on God), and by dint of hard work he has been able to achieve success—largely portrayed as material. His concern with securing economic well-being, and perhaps, access to the good life, presents a vision of what a developed life is expected to look like. This aspiration for upward social mobility can be regarded as an instance of the socioeconomic imperatives of the nation to become developed. As state policy has been reconfigured in a way that grants primacy to the “free market,” citizens are encouraged to become entrepreneurs to secure economic well-being to access the good life. Recently, the government through the Ministry for Business Development launched a Schools Entrepreneurship Initiative (SEI) to be a vehicle to develop entrepreneurial skills for senior secondary schools.³

Sarkodie also endeavors to live the good life like Diawara’s (2009) figure of the “homeboy.” For instance, he regards Jay Z, the multimillionaire U.S. hip-hop artist and businessman, as one of his role models. The figure of the “homeboy” remains a prominent reference for hiplife artists, not only in terms of dress/style but also in ways of speaking (Oduro-Frimpong, 2009). However, this must be understood within the context of how they appropriate foreign resources and deploy them locally to symbolize, what one of my coparticipants described as the “American aesthetic.” As noted, early adoption of U.S. hip-hop styles of dress in Ghana, for instance, were used to appeal to an elite status that was also associated with notions of cosmopolitanism.

Performing Success

The performance of success serves to validate the work of the artist. In hiplife, it appears difficult to define musical success without conflating it with economic success. In a society that is increasingly defining success as material, if you are not making enough money to perform conspicuous consumption, then you are not working hard enough, or you lack talent. However, the performance of success does not necessarily require that the said success be attained. In other words, you can deploy symbols of wealth without necessarily being wealthy to attract more wealth (Shiple, 2012). This is perhaps also because artists’ income primarily come from performance fees and endorsements, rather than direct sales of songs or albums. However, today, streaming services appear to be offering decent regular income for artists.

³ Retrieved from <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/business/Government-to-train-10-000-SHS-students-annually-in-entrepreneurship-669216>

One of the ways Sarkodie performs his success is through his fashion. Unsurprisingly, his dress style partly draws on the U.S. hip-hop aesthetic—the hoodies and jackets that are not necessarily suited for Ghanaian climate. It was this aesthetic that the rapper Manifest was referring to in his 2016 song “God MC,” directed at Sarkodie. Manifest raps, “Tell the fashion police they can make an arrest/These boys copying the West looking a mess” (M.anifest, 2017, 1.22). The doubleness of the latter line underscores, not only what is perceived as a mimicry of the U.S. hip-hop aesthetic but literally, Sarkodie’s adornment of a destroyed shirt from Kanye West’s expensive Yeezy fashion line. Sarkodie’s response was to ridicule Manifest for his “Afrocentric” fashion aesthetic. For Sarkodie, Manifest was talented, but not financially successful, and thus could only afford clothes made in Ghana. Lastly, his Afrocentric jibe seemed to reflect the notion in Ghana that consuming local is “backward,” and consuming foreign highlights “elite” status, or, in the local parlance, “your eye open.”

Sarkodie’s success is further marked by high-budget music videos, particularly those shot in foreign countries. His video for the song “Illuminati” (OfficialSarkodie, 2013) was shot in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and made the headlines because it was purported to have cost USD\$90,000.⁴ The song, performed in Twi, English, and pidgin English, is essentially Sarkodie’s response to rumors that he had joined the illuminati (a secret society) because of his newfound wealth. In the song he rejects these allegations, affirms his Christianity, and states that his wealth is a product of his hard work and God’s blessings. The video ends with the quote: “Don’t judge a man negatively by his success we all have 24hours in a day”(OfficialSarkodie, 2013, 2.49). This further reinforces the myth of success.

For Sarkodie, “Illuminati” (OfficialSarkodie, 2013) not only highlighted his elevated status but also the elevated value of his brand. In the song, he raps: “Baileys fo contacti me, omo pe commercial/half a milli, for me, never/ afei diee oma double up/next time, better” (OfficialSarkodie, 2013, 1.16). Here, he explains that Baileys have contacted him to be featured in a commercial; they seem to offer him a million (currency is unstated), he refuses, and they double the offer. Sarkodie’s brand attracts large crowds, and event promoters will have to match the price required to use his name. The video also features Sarkodie involved in a diamond transaction with Emirati’s. He promotes his Sark clothing; the belt and shoes appear prominently enough to be easily noticed. Later in an interview on the *Delay Show* (DELAY TV, 2015), he indicated that he did the video to build his brand. He noted, “I was doing it for my own CV and I am not looking at just Ghana, I am looking [to] moving out” (9.40). He then goes on to say that, when they are playing it on BBC, a “White person might even look at it and say this is a nice video” (9.44). Apart from shooting in Dubai, he has also shot videos in South Africa, the UK, and the U.S. The musicians and directors I interviewed stated that they shot videos in foreign locations, typically more advanced countries, due to the availability of props like luxury cars, the professional music video industry, and the scenery. One hiplife musician noted, “Sometimes you want the environment to look like . . . you are in abroad” (Personal communication, July 9, 2015). In Ghana, “abroad” typically means the West. Another director recalls working for an artist who wanted his location to look like “Yankee.” They ended up shooting in one of the gated communities in the country’s capital, Accra. Hiplife music videos tend to be set in urban locations. As

⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.ameyawdebrah.com/here-we-go-sarkodies-illuminati-video-cost-90000-dollars/>

such, shooting in foreign countries may reinforce common-sense ideas that equate development to urbanization and Westernization.

Music videos are important promotional tools hiplife artists use to sell their song and showcase themselves. Indeed, as one of the Ghanaian artist I interviewed stated: “[A music video] is the best advertisement you can do for your music and for who you are and what you represent . . . it is especially powerful nowadays, in this age of Instagram, YouTube, etc.” (Personal communication, June 27, 2015). Another artist also noted: “To push your brand for the mileage [because] the visibility counts, radio is not a big fan of rap music, it supports more dance. Visibility is the main factor” (Personal communication, June 12, 2015). Hiplife artists often self-fund their music videos, and they are considered expensive investments. Artist Kirani Ayat launched a fundraiser to auction his brand of shirts on Facebook to raise money to shoot the video for his song “Dodo.”

Music videos also serve as a platform for hiplife artists to indicate their social rank within the music industry and Ghanaian society at large (Vernallis, 2004). In fact, I would argue that as a hiplife musician, your ability to afford a music video and promote it is a sign of status, let alone one shot internationally or with a prominent director. Some Ghanaian television stations require artists to pay to have their music videos aired. As artists become famous and wealthy, their music video settings tend to reflect their new status. However, the settings also reflect the musical genre, and this might explain why it appears that mainstream U.S. hip-hop video aesthetics of conspicuous consumption are prominent. Here, I must note that the music video directors I interviewed in Accra informed me that most of the work they did was for hiplife artists and now increasingly Afrobeats (often men). I believe this speaks to the centrality of visual performances in hiplife. Indeed, I would argue that hiplife more than any genre in Ghana has pushed the creative development of the music video scene.

Notwithstanding, most of my coparticipants regarded music video performances of conspicuous consumption as inauthentic because they did not reflect the lived experience of many Ghanaians. They believed that most artists could not afford the lifestyles they were performing. As such, they claimed the artists were merely copying the “American aesthetic,” “emulating blindly,” and as one music producer argued, “You can’t act American more than an American, it doesn’t make sense” (Personal Communication, August 4, 2016). For them, the flashy display was not the “authentic” Ghanaian experience, even though some Ghanaians live like that. But as the music producer noted, “Sometimes you need to sell hope” (Personal Communication, August 4, 2016). Nonetheless, their understanding of flashy symbols included women, which also seemed to reflect very masculinist ideas of success.

Brand Sarkodie

As the discussion above shows, Sarkodie draws on his “nowhere to somewhere” story (a prominent motif in U.S. hip-hop) to highlight how he attained success through pure talent and hard work, and of course, God’s blessings. Subsequently, the fruits of his labor—objects of conspicuous consumption and mobility—are validated through his performance of success. Taken together, both practices are strategies for self-branding.

In 2013, he was named the brand ambassador for Fanmilk (an ice-cream company in Ghana) and in 2012, for Samsung, West Africa. In an interview on the KSM (2015) show, he was asked about his affiliation with Samsung and stated, "It was more of promoting the brand Sarkodie itself, taking it to the next level, and [Samsung] is an international brand and makes it much . . . easier to reach out to people outside Ghana" (2.30). He recognized that due to Samsung's international presence, he could leverage that visibility to increase the value of his brand. Indeed, he recounts: "When they were launching the Note 2, I went with them to [South Africa] to launch it. It's a good platform [for] me. So, it's more of like just picking moves not basically the money aspect of it" (2.40). The launch of the Samsung Note 2 phone in South Africa placed him on an international platform. This endorsement deal also meant that the Samsung Galaxy Pocket and Chief Hero would be customized with his wallpapers, signature, and unreleased songs.

The relationship among corporations (see Osumare, 2012), particularly mobile service providers, and hiplife artists reveal a double commodification of the branded self. First, the brand generates value for the telecommunication companies by calling attention to its products and services. Secondly, value is also extracted when artists release music and videos exclusively on telecom networks. Subscribers will have to pay for Internet data to stream music from these platforms. For instance, Sarkodie exclusively released his highly anticipated song "New Guy" (OfficialSarkodie, 2015a) featuring the U.S. hip-hop artist Ace Hood on music streaming platform, Deezer, which the telecoms company, Tigo, offers special data packages. Osumare (2012), has argued that hiplife artists have become complicit in what she calls "corporate colonialism" by priming Ghanaian youth tastes for "global consumer products" (p. 189).

Indeed, Sarkodie appears committed to building his brand so that it continues to appreciate. He asserts,

What I did after . . . the endorsement deals was more of investing in my own self. Just to make the brand worth more money. [Because] I would like to be a brand just like Samsung. I wouldn't like to always endorse brands . . . there will be a time where people will also have to endorse Sarkodie as well. So I wanted to make it a household name, not just limited to music . . . that is what I have been working towards since last year. So if you saw my videos you know the change in my videos and everything. (KSM, 2015, 3.25)

As the above excerpt demonstrates, he is astute about the utility of his brand and recognizes the value of his fame. He notes that as an underground rapper he could "say anything"; now, anything he says can be taken seriously and scrutinized. As such, he is careful not to "hurt the brand" Sarkodie. Currently, due to his fame and success, his song-writing process is also a business decision. He notes that "you cannot even say certain brands or you cannot even say 'big ups to Omo, Coca Cola.' I cannot even use that to rap because now they would need to at least put something down for me to say it for them" (KSM, 2015, 5.13). To this end, his creative process is indeed commodified, which paradoxically also serves as a marker of his success.

Beyond Sarkodie's domestic success, he is also interested in internationalizing his brand. Apart from endorsements from international corporations like Samsung, he does this through international collaborations and international concerts in Africa, Europe, and North America. In fact, he has been one of

the foremost artists endeavoring to place hiplife in the Global North. In August, 2015, he performed to a sold out audience at the Apollo Theater in New York, U.S. To make African hip-hop global, he has called for greater collaboration among African artists and has collaborated with a number of other African artists Banky W (Nigeria), AKA (South Africa), and Viviane Chidid (Senegal).

True to internationalizing his brand, he collaborated with the U.S. rapper Ace Hood. This collaboration garnered a lot of media attention in Ghana, fueled not only by the idea of a Ghanaian–U.S. collaboration but also by the allegation that Sarkodie had paid \$25,000 to Ace Hood. Sarkodie would later thank the media for the hype generated by their coverage of the controversy. Thus, the Ghanaian public anticipated the song together with its music video, which were recorded and shot in Miami, Florida, United States.

In Sarkodie's documentary about this collaboration, he further demonstrates his entrepreneurial self-branding impulse. Touching on the issue of language, he recalls that people told him to rap in English, but he stayed true to himself and continued to use Twi. In an interview on France 24, he claimed that he used his native language because he believes music has to do with emotions and "that is the best way to express myself" (OfficialSarkodie, 2015b, 2.18). Later, he indicates that even though U.S. audiences do not understand, they can still enjoy it because of his rap delivery. He notes, "I came to the understanding that because you guys don't know what I am talking about it has to be presented well. And that comes with delivery and timing" (OfficialSarkodie, 2015c, 2.27). Indeed, he demonstrates an acute awareness of the language barrier; however, he deliberately crafts his music under the assumption that his rap delivery will appeal to transnational audiences. This calculated commercialized move will allow his music and brand to circulate internationally.

Another insight about Sarkodie's self-branding is worth highlighting here. Appearing on the *Delay Show* (DELAY TV, 2015), the interviewer enquired why some musicians could not maintain their popularity. He noted that because hip-hop is the preference of young people, once the rappers grow, old they cannot relate to their newer, younger audiences. He claimed that "singers can do it till they die but rappers it's more like you need to start thinking about alternatives with time" (5:30). He is well aware the precarity and lifespan of a rapper in Ghana may not be long, and as such, you have to invest in other alternatives to secure economic well-being. Perhaps, this line of thinking has influenced his decision to draw on his celebrity brand to establish his own clothing line and the recording label.

Beyond using his celebrity brand to generate economic value, he also leverages it to speak on social issues, promote young upcoming artists across various genres, and advocate for the Ghanaian music scene. In 2015, Charter House dubiously advertised Sarkodie as a performer at the Ghana Music Awards, without his permission or knowledge. Subsequently, he tweeted, "Charter House is trying to play smart. I just want my profession to be respected where am from. . . . And they should stop acting like we not that important" (Aglanu, 2015, para. 5). In a country where artists in all fields are often underpaid and undervalued, Sarkodie's actions sought to demand respect and recognition for musical work in Ghana. Indeed, hiplife has become a significant source of youth agency and provides opportunities for upward social mobility.

As noted, he also leverages his brand to generate visibility for other young artists. As such, he collaborates with a lot of local Ghanaian artists, both known and upcoming. He has worked with Samini, Jupiter, Stoneboy, and some upcoming artists like Kwesi Arthur, B4bonah, and more. By way of promotion, he features these songs on his social media profiles. This is premised on the notion that when people see that Sarkodie is featured in the song, they are likely to listen to it. With these gestures, he demonstrates a desire to share his success, if you will, with other artists. Here, the brand appears not to be directly used for economic gains; however, these practices still allow him to circulate and associate his image with the latest and talented upcoming artists.

Social media is used as a tool to generate income and (re)produce his brand. Broadly speaking, it has become a powerful and affordable vehicle hiplife artists use to circulate their music and image to cultivate an audience. Sarkodie observed that the previous generation of Ghanaian rappers were unable to “move to the next level” because they did not have the technological avenues like HulkShare and Twitter to distribute their music. To this end, it is safe to argue that the current technological climate in Ghana largely powered by transnational telecommunication companies played a part in his success.

To attain a celebrity brand, hiplife musicians produce music to amass a following—in effect, they produce an audience. Their music must be able to attract eyeballs and ears first through their rapping skills; however, that may not be enough: They must also work to promote themselves and their music. This is done so that they can attract corporate endorsers, a major source of income, that may want to reach the particular demographics the artist’s brand attracts. As Jaspreet Singh, a Samsung official, comments on the partnership with Sarkodie, “We are very excited about this partnership because we want to connect with our customers musically and we find in Sarkodie all the values we stand for and work tirelessly to achieve” (GNA, 2012, para. 3). However, it appears that to attain celebrity brand in hiplife, artistic skills are necessary but not sufficient. Take, for example, the Ghanaian rapper D-Black, who was nominated by BET for the “Best International: Africa” award in 2011, when he was not well known in Ghana, and some notable entertainers like DJ Black have observed that he cannot really rap well. However, he is well known for his business savviness.

Sarkodie can be regarded as a performer who seeks the good life by submitting to capital while refusing to be defined by stereotypes about developing nations and their peoples. The performance of success operates to construct the entrepreneurial branded self, an identity that lives a good life by overcoming exploitative economic structures. Although Sarkodie’s artistry, undoubtedly, contributed to his rise in popularity. His fame was organized through strategic decisions that produce and circulate his brand. It is against this backdrop that he commercializes his artistry and leverages it to attract corporate endorsements. In fact, I argue that the commodification of his artistry is the harbinger of his successful entrée into the Ghanaian music scene. Sarkodie’s commodification process entails publicity, promotion, and advertising; it involves his purposeful writing of his songs; collaborations with other artists in Africa and beyond; rapping dexterity to appeal to transnational audiences and through promotional tools, particularly music videos. Thus, through rapping and commercializing processes undergirded by the dominant cultural and economic logic, the self is turned into a brand that facilitates the attainment of fame. Nonetheless, he appears to also use his brand, through collaborations, to increase visibility for upcoming local Ghanaian artists and to occasionally speak on national problems. The power of his brand

is channeled toward nondirect economic actions; however, this still allows his brand to circulate while it reflects his values.

Conclusion

In this article, I have suggested that hiplife reflects the broader operation of development discourse in postcolonial Ghana. It is a key site where common-sense ideas about what it means to be developed are circulated. As such, I have argued that mainstream hiplife musicians like Sarkodie construct an entrepreneurial branded self as a way to access the good life. The performances of success underscore their aspiration to create distance from notions of poverty and backwardness, which have been associated with underdevelopment. In effect, they may also be constructing a counterdiscourse to the long-held perceptions of Africa as a place of negation. Although we may observe that these aesthetic performances project imaginations of a “developed” society they also reinscribe Ghana as an underdeveloped space—that is, within the current framework of development discourse. However, some audiences are intensely aware of this performance of success because they recognize that even these performers may not live this life.

Additionally, my interviews in Accra revealed a complex understanding of the construction of Ghana as underdeveloped and what it means to be developed. I believe these contestations speaks to the potential for hiplife to be used, not simply as an attempt to create Ghanaian versions of Western ways of life. Or, to follow the oft-cited affirmation in Ghana: “We too can do it,” which implies setting the limits of creative expression within the boundaries of Western’ standards. To be sure, hiplife presents a space that can be mobilized to move young Ghanaians toward alternative futures. As subjects living in a postcolonial space, we must have a conscious understanding of how imperialism continues to shape our understanding of ourselves and our society. This is a necessary precondition if we are to attempt to construct a society that is truly organized to benefit all those who reside in it.

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