

Jakarlo with 'BackWay': New trends, old traditions, youth and clandestine migration within The Gambia

Abstract.

Clandestine migration is an increasingly popular phenomenon amongst young people across Africa. The influence on young people from The Gambia to travel clandestinely via the "BackWay", is linked to the 'exotification' and 'homogenisation' of 'African Popular Culture'. Through the artworks of participants from the ArtFarm, artist and farmers collective and discussions with young people from the Abuko Youth Association, the chapter explores the ways that old traditions are held onto and have taken on new forms within the youth landscape of The Gambia. Participants reveal the significance of 'Jakarlo' and "BackWay", which are practices that young people in The Gambia currently, participate. This biographical case study is drawn from a larger qualitative study of 50 young people who are supported by Kori, a London based charity delivering global youth work across Africa. Although the chapter focuses on the observations made of ten Gambian young people aged 11-35, its arguments are informed by the larger sample.

As a means to validate that which is 'emerging' amongst young people, 'popular culture' has to be explored beyond definitions which draw upon that which is selected and featured in fashion, music, and film industries as seen and promoted by 'mainstream media'¹. The arguments aim to stimulate mindfulness on the impact that 'popular culture' ideologies, which are circulated in the media, have on swaying the desires and decisions of those who are young and impressionable to leave The Gambia. It intends to reveal and add to the existing debates on 'homogenisation' and 'clandestine migration' as a direct link to what is currently popular and emerging among Gambian youth.

Key Words: 'BackWay', Jakarlo, Homogenisation, exotification, Clandestine Migration

Introduction

"There is nothing that global post-modernism loves better than a certain kind of difference: a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic, as we say in England, a bit of the other - which in the United Kingdom has a sexual as well as an ethnic connotation" (Hall,1993:23).

There is a long history that documents a fascination with the 'exotic'. Historical and contemporary representations of how black people have been exoticised in the media can be referenced through a number of eras including Hip Hop, Blaxploitation and Negrophillia. As reflected in the case of Saartje Bartman, a Khoi-San woman from Cape Town, South

Africa. She became known by the racist name - Hottentot Venus. In 1810 Baartman was placed on exhibition in London Piccadilly and Paris “where she made a lasting impact not only in popular culture but natural science” (Linfors, 2014:11). Linfors states; “The fact that Hottentot Venus was one of fifty-two images selected to convey the flavour of London life in 1811 attests to her high popularity. She had danced her way into the mainstream of popular culture in the metropolis” (Linfors, 2014:44). However, Saarjite was said to have signed a contract with her employers a free black man ‘Hendrik Cesars’ and ‘William Dunlop’ a white Scottish doctor from the cape slave lodge (Crais and Skully, 2009). Despite her position having either signed forcefully, willingly or not signed at all, it is unquestionable that Baartman’s employers recognised her profitability from the audience she attracted. What was evident is as Hall states the European publics “deep fascination with difference – sexual difference, cultural difference, racial difference and above all ethnic difference” (Hall in Wallace and Dent, 1998:23).

As a result of the exhibitions with Saarjite Baartman, French culture was already accustomed to the female black body and therefore welcomed Josephine Baker. This was a mark of the 1920s, an era which experienced a growth in the presence of black people in the media. Josephine Baker and Nancy Cunrad became prominent personalities, associated with a time that contributed, challenged and contradicted a fascination with black culture (Barson et al, 2010:182; Straw, 2000).

The 1970s saw a merge with Africa the Orient and Romania where Blaxploitation films held black men and women as villain, heroin, hero and freak as can be seen in films Black Caesar, Cleopatra Jones and Blacula. Watkins (1998) states that a ‘crucial trait’ of Blaxploitation film was its level of ‘context dependency’. He explains this to mean;

“Films that seek to cash in on timely and sensational subject matter that grips public attention...The Ghetto action film cycle was both timely and sensational. The cycle’s most poignant, popular and problematic themes were based on the social and economic dislocation of poor inner-city youth” (Watkins, 1998:175).

The shift in a fascination with the black body has occurred with the deterioration of America’s inner city and it is what Watkins (1998) refers to as Hollywood’s ‘decisive turn’ to a ‘ghetto-theme’. ‘Urban’ and ‘ghetto’ are re occurring themes featured in the media which have come to form part of the exotification cycle. Patterson (2016:174) suggests an ‘exotic touch’ is ‘occasionally’ played out in Hip Hop subculture which has continued to form part of a “production strategy that has its roots in a commercial film industry, committed to reinvigorate theatrical film going, and maintain its economic vitality in a competitive global cultural marketplace” (Watkins, 1998:175).

As the cyclic theme of ghetto life and the sexualised bodies of people of African heritage continue to capture the minds of the masses, Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic, an exhibition held at Tate Liverpool in 2010, traced the impact of Black Atlantic

culture on modernism. According to Hobson (2013), there may be some visibility of a mandate "for African American Women's silence about their intimate lives in response to historical over exposure of black female bodies in public spaces" (Hobson, 2013:59). However, consideration ought to be given as to whether, "because of these 'imposed silences', contemporary writers and artists who wish to articulate sexual histories, especially as they relate to Baartman's story, perhaps have the best success when they mirror in artistic form, the silences and ellipses that construct the difficult subject of black female sexuality" (Hobson, 2013:59) and male sexuality. The Afro Modern exhibition references Black life in the diaspora and challenges the historical and the present manifestations of exhibitionism, exploitation and processes of othering. The works of participating contemporary artists such as Tracey Rose and her 2001 piece titled 'Venus Baartman' offer a contemporary response to how the black body has been positioned and represented in colonial imagery, modernist art and mass media (Barson et al, 2010).

However, contemporary representations of 'African culture' found in mass and social media, not only speak to the old and new processes of exotification and homogenisation. Sociological themes that exist within 'Black', 'African' and 'Afro Caribbean' culture have become commodified. Therefore, the sociological theme 'ghetto', through music and fashion has become a major attraction to young people across the globe.

The following illustrates content from social media, blogs and websites categorised under the key term 'African Popular Culture'. The aim is to reveal not only what is current or how exotification continues in aspects of 'black' or 'African popular culture', but how homogenisation creates new identities that shape the perceptions and desires of young people. More specifically we will see how the commodification of 'African' or 'Black' culture has come to influence clandestine migration and ideas of 'making life in the West' by taking the journey "BackWay".

Blogging Africa: 'African Pop Culture'

To gain insight into the current forms of popular culture amongst young people across Africa, a key search term, 'African popular culture' was used to gather an overview of what is considered to be African and popular, both The Gambia and the UK google results gave a similar insight into how 'African popular culture' is defined and classified in mainstream media. Initial search results read;

African 'pop culture': What is trending for 2016?
What will the 'pop culture buzz' be in Africa in 2016?²

Amongst the text offered in various publications and blog posts, there is a vast bank of digital archives that house an array of images taken from public performances, music videos and online movies produced and watched by those in Africa and the Diaspora. There are

varied fashion houses that promote African and Afro European style and images of celebrity artists who represent icons of 'African popular culture' as well as newspaper reports that read;

"Africa Business Report took a look at the emerging trends, speaking to Major League DJs Bandile and Banele Mbere, talent manager Refiloe Ramogase, and poet, performer and presenter Lebo Mashile³"

The above headlines are just a few that highlight an increasing trend in aspects of African culture which are considered to be popular. There is something striking about the varying representations of 'Africanness' that are visible and accessible across media and social media platforms. The varying Afro-centred networks such as Afro-Punk, Afro Pop, Afrofuturism and Afro Goth⁴, speak to the complexity of African identity formation. This is because the multiple strands of cultural heritage that shape what is currently visible as 'Africanness' in 'African Pop Culture', are becoming increasingly difficult to trace. Despite the breaking of links that create connections to cultural routes, then if as Pollitzer argues, that "tracing connections through folk tales is difficult if not impossible" (Pollitzer, 2005:159). How are we to trace 'Africanness' as it occurs in contemporary forms of media? However, 'Okayafrica' a blog which features 'The Roots of...'⁵ a short film series about the African lineage of guests like Erykah Badu and Q-Tip, has partnered with African Ancestry⁶ to offer three types of blood tests to determine the ethnic and geographical origin of one's maternal or paternal lineage. Okayafrica suggest the significance of such a test as a means to gain insight into the respective histories that are alive and accessible within individuals who have come to symbolise 'African popular culture'. As there is much performed 'Africanness', by this I mean that which does not always directly link to traditions found in specific African countries and cultures, what dominates the main stage are re formatted ideas of what it means to be 'African', which is made accessible by mainstream and social media as definitions of 'African popular culture'.

Similarly the blog titled Trends in 'African popular culture'⁷ stated how "fascinating and joyous African culture is spreading throughout the world". The post states that as a result of social media it is easy to access the latest fashion, music, movie and beauty trends that are emerging from across the continent and in the African diaspora. The blog notes the Logan Dashiki Hoodie, worn by Rhinna, from the house of Rubi as an example of 'African popular culture' in the main media spaces of the west, which are filtered through to the African diaspora via appropriation. Karen born in Barbados, who was previously a French citizen is the designer of this Dashiki. However, the now American citizen appropriates the male African tradition of Dashiki wearing which has once again become popular via the music industry. The fact that the majority of the prints found on the Dashiki originate from the Netherlands, where Indonesian labourers produced Indonesian Dutch wax prints as expressed by Yinka Shonibare (2014) is an interesting observation that speaks to processes of homogenisation. However considering that the design of this 'new' Dashiki has been

produced by, an American and French citizen born to a Ghanaian mother and Togolese father, who is currently living in Toronto Canada, is both something to be celebrated and consider critically in the context of homogenised cultural formation. This process of homogenisation is what was expressed by Ugbam et al (2014) when he stated that;

“The effects of globalization on various aspects of the life of developing nations has always been controversial. Of recent, emphasis has been on the impact of globalization on African culture. There is the fear that ultimately, globalization aims at cultural homogenization and moreover, that the culture that will emerge at the end of the day will be predominantly American, thus Americanization” Ugbam et al (2014).

The A-Z of popular African dance, produced by a Dakar dance centre called ‘Dance Hall’ which was founded by Mariama Toure, presents us with an example of a dance movement, who despite being directly linked to Africa through geographical location, showcases a mode of ‘African popular culture’ operating through a global lens that shapes processes of European and Americanization. Filmed in Senegal the dancers of the Dance Hall are set against a backdrop of American style graffiti walls. The Dance Hall’s website offers residence of Dakar sessions such as ‘Dance Until you Drop’ Hip Hop, Dancehall, modern afro, House dance, Belly dance, Salsa, Kizomba, and Zumba. This tells us of the global influences that help to shape contemporary ‘African popular culture’, which go beyond experiences which are often seen through a single lens and story. Chimmamanda Ungozi speaks of the ‘danger of a single story’⁸ as being composed of many ‘overlapping stories’ that shaped her ‘authentic’ cultural voice. And Fela Kuti the pioneer of fusing traditional Youroba, Jazz and funk music into what is now known as Afro Beats (Olorunyomi, 2013:2; Piko, 2013), speaks about understanding what it was to be African after having travelled to the west. Leading us to ask would Afro Beat have formed had Fela not gone to America. At the same time we are encouraged to bear in mind that it is through a reassembling and fusing of cultural ties that new forms of youth culture emerge. If we consider the music genres RnB and Hip Hop to be subsets of ‘African popular culture’, although they currently reside in the category of Afro American or Black Culture in the context of the US and UK, we begin to think through the multimodal aspect of identity formation, ‘self-representation’ and ‘exoticisation’ (Gray, 1995). When the music industry recently announced the Nigerian American artist Jidenna for “Best New Artist” at the Soul Train Music Awards, it is suggested that there may be no exoticised ‘African’ category. However, this complex breaking and reassembling of cultural links can be seen in the 2015 MOBO (Music Of Black Origin) awards, which features Fuse ODG as winner of the best African act. The nominees were Davido, Wizkid, AKS, and Shatta Wale a Reggae Dance Hall artists, who won ‘Best African Act’ at the 2016 Nigerian Entertainment awards⁹. Considering these entries, it is interesting to observe that MOBO and NEA, have ensured a seemingly inclusive category however, the category ‘Best African Act’ runs the risk of re exoticising African culture. Perhaps a stronger demonstration of global inclusion, would be to place the nominees such as Fuse ODG in the respective

categories such as Hip Hop simply because of the fact that Fuse ODG's biography states he is a Ghanaian, English Hip Hop artist. Similarly Davido, is an American born Nigerian recording artist whose music video Skeewu has been filmed in the UK to reflect the Grime scene. The point is that what seems to represent the 'African popular culture' of youth from respective African countries, houses a strong visible presence of the US and Europe. As bloggers for the sites pop matters¹⁰ state; "Contemporary South African popular music reveals a myriad of artists searching for an identity in a country still recovering from racial hatred; and a youth looking to the past in order to make sense of the present" (Fink, 2011). Similarly there are young people in The Gambia aspiring to be like the very artists searching for an identity from within Europe and America.

The process sees a cyclic motion of young people in rural and urban Africa re-appropriating what they see from European and US nominated popular artists whose work reveals a fusion of varying cultural ties. They are cyclic because the production of work from within these music genres, see African retentions at play. These are examples of how traditions are recycled and reformed from a bricolage of different cultural signifiers. The speed, at which new forms of youth culture emerge, is largely due to social media fuelling an ideal. Many young people share the view that once they are able to get to any of these leading countries, they too will be able to access the same wealth as seen in the lifestyles projected in the 'mainstream'.

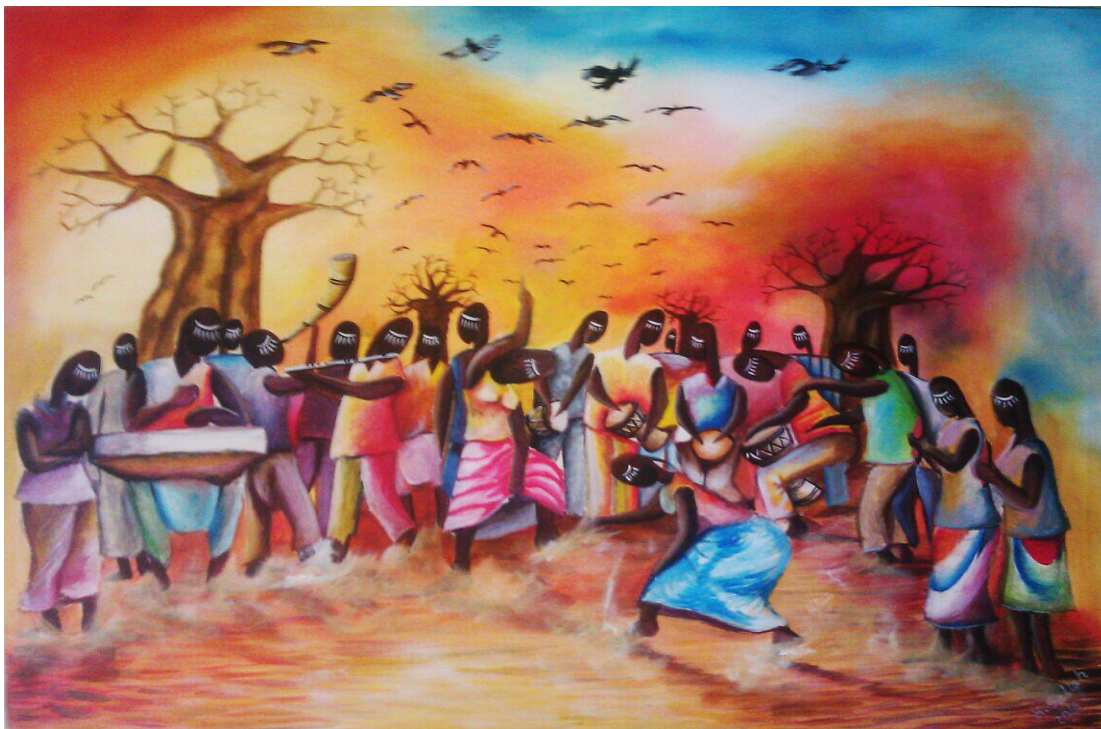
Although it is necessary to celebrate and highlight emerging forms of culture from across Africa which are 'popular', there is something striking about the historically mixed nature of cultural practices from African youth, which have resulted in a bundling of moment's that have come to form a generic descriptor and banner being 'African popular culture'. This homogenised global referencing runs the risk of distorting and silencing what is really emerging and popular within the urban landscape of youth living in respective African countries. Therefor the 'pop culture buzz' coming from the practices that occur within current and every day African youth culture - at home, remain unnoticed and affect the young people's perspective of pride for their country. This is the reason we will draw upon the artworks of the artists of ArtFarm to begin a discussion on Jakarlo (face to face) – a confrontation of old and new cultural practices which reveal what is becoming increasingly popular amongst young people of the Gambia.

Having acknowledge the various representations of black people in the diaspora as key propagators of forms of 'African popular culture', the following section charts some of the ways in which young people of The Gambia choose to stay home, perform, document and disseminate the historical and contemporary cultural practices of their time. I illustrate some of the thoughts and concerns which are embedded amongst a youth culture that is not placed into neat compartments or made visible as that which is popular in main mass media spaces.

Visual Voices: making sense of Jakarlo and 'BackWay'

The aim of involvement with Kori¹¹, the North London based charity that supports the development of young people, during this trip was to offer ArtFarm collective, a group who promote art enterprise and farming, a workshop that would encourage its members to consider creative ways in which they could generate an income from their work that goes beyond tourist only sales. 'Visual Voices' facilitated the sharing of pedagogical practice in the communities of the participants. Here, they offered the meanings given to some of the historical and contemporary symbols in their work. The program encouraged them to consider formal aspects of art training, as a means to articulate the concepts and techniques that they have independently developed and have used for many years in the production of their own art, and education programs. However what emerged from their discussions about their work, was that they are surrounded by young people faced with the challenge of having to make a conscious choice to either gain access to the 'privileges' of their idols who appear in the public media domain via Europe and the US, or stay home and capture the spirit of their country through their art.

The works below offer ideas from the ArtFarm collective about their patriotism. The works have been produced by those who have decided to stay home and contribute to their families.



"Jamba Dogo" Keba Salah – Acrylic on canvas 2015

The Mandinka phrase, "Jamba Dongo" dancing leaf, nature or the leaf dancing is the spirit and title of Keba Salah's painting. As he spoke about the construction of his composition, his decision on the choice of colour pallet and his focus on how movement is captured as

seen in the floating dust beneath the brightly clothed, people's feet. He explained that whilst painting the cultural dance which often took place during local festivals for male circumcision or after a fruitful harvest, he is inspired by listening to the Spirit of Nature albums. When Keba was asked why it is important for this type of work to be produced? he stated the reason behind his efforts to capture such moments is due to the preservation of dying traditions. "...I'm exposing it because most of these traditions are dying bit by bit." For Keba the canvas assists in the same way a diary or journal does to the writer or the camera to the photographer. As he like other members of ArtFarm are capturing stories and narratives from the past as a means to log historical tributes in order to make sense of and shape their identities throughout their functioning in their everyday lives.

Originating from the sub group cassa from the Jola tribe the "Kumpo Dance" is also a festival where traditions of protection and initiation rituals occur. Its popularity was found in the Fonyi district of the Casamance region of Senegal. Omar Corr who is the author of the painting is very much aware of the significance of the central character in his work. The brisk fine brushstrokes that form palm tree fibres convey movement of the Kumpo referencing the speed at which he travels supported by the drummers who entrance Kumpo and the dancing women. The Kumpo's purpose explains Omar is to make sure the people of the community are in a good place and continue living in a positive community spirit. Omar builds on Keba's point stating that;

"We paint our traditions as soon, no one will know about their importance because they are disappearing from inside our culture. I hope to achieve many things by painting my tradition, I paint to show or depict the key sections, actions and reasons of the traditions of my people in visual forms. If I have only stories of my people's traditions, it is not enough to communicate and preserve what happens in the paintings. So some of these values will serve as visual evidence and support the preservation of tradition in my community. I am painting in the present day with a good idea of how to depict the past. The availability of technology such as photography and the digital also enable a perfect transmission of my tradition in a visual form which travels far and wide across the planet for who so ever is interested in the painting will enjoy and appreciate and even use the stories which are in the paintings. I also love to paint my tradition to hear other people's views and opinions" (Omar Corr, 2016).

Both Keba and Omar share their sentiment on the importance of cultural preservation and the need to remain connected to their past. In the case of the visual voices of artists, their desire to archive is heard in their painting of contemporary representations of old and new.



"Kumpo Dance" Omar Corr – Acrylic on canvas 2015

The work references the idea of maintaining practices and tradition through the visual. It is what Hal Foster describes in his work as 'An Archival Impulse' (2004) where the function of archival art is to "make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" (Foster, 2004). Likewise Omar argues that;

"Traditions are very important as they help us to know that we are part of a history, it connects us to our past, it defines who we are today, and taking care of our traditions will preserve and define our identity. They help us to see very deeply the beliefs, habits, principles and values of our founding fathers and ancestors. They also transmute values, stories and ways of life from one generation to the next. Traditions help us to reinforce, strengthen and maintain the relationships with people in our families and in our community" (Omar Corr, 2016).

Yet the art work does more than just document the significance of tradition it generates new material that is, "found yet constructed, factual and fictive, public yet private" (Foster, 2004). These historical and cultural events have been captured, held and transposed into the present moment through 'African visual history' (Njogu, 2005: 145). However there is a 'partial synchronisation' (Hall, 1993) of history which is documented in the work and resembles the moments in everyday life captured by the Afro Modern artists such as; Jacob

Lawrence's 1964 *Street to Mbari*, Edward Burra's and Palmer Hayden's 1934 and 1936 *Harlem and Midsummer Night in Harlem* paintings, Tarsila Do Amaral's 1924 *Hill of the Shantytown* and Pefro Figari's 1921 *Candombe* (Barson et al, 2010: 108-11). As the works represent life across the 'Black Atlantic' they also present a set of cultural negotiations as Hall (1998) suggests;

"These forms are the product of partial synchronisation, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recording and transcoding, of critical significations of signifying. Always these forms are impure... Thus, they must always be heard, not simply as the recovery of a lost dialogue bearing clues for production of new music (because there is never any going back to the old in a simple way), but as what they are - adaptations moulded to the mixed contradictory hybrid spaces of popular culture" (Hall in Wallace and Dent, 1998:474).

The hybrid spaces found in The Gambia have been shaped partially through a synchronisation of multiple traditions and cultural negotiations. Some of which according to Omar are hinged upon the idea of a lack of strength or shift in how youth identities are constructed.

"it is very important that we keep sensitising the young ones about the past because we are so weak in tradition we are very very weakI think this is because of time we spend on movies, which will not help us - following this Western life - we change a lot in our original life. Kids for example are innocent. They know nothing, what they see is what they apply, it's what they will think, it's our generation so it's better we tell them what to use or where to go so they will grow in the right direction" (Omar Corr, 2016).

Omar's perception of a 'weakness' in traditional knowledge as a result of 'following this Western life' hints at the identity politics at play in the formation of new Gambian youth cultures and ideologies.

Jakarlo with 'BackWay'

The work of the artists of ArtFarm likewise contribute to what Hall (1984) refers to, which is the way culture will never be the same, as it constantly draws upon its past and reformats its future in a way that goes through a recycling of new and old synchronisations of life. The works present a constant unification with history, as a means to give meaning to that which is experienced in the present.

Kandeh who expressed his mission of being an artist farmer stated; “I will work today as an artists and tomorrow as a farmer until the meaning of ArtFarm is understood and all dictionaries, recognises that farmers are artists and artists are famers” (Kandeh,2016). Where he too references Foster’s (2004) idea of ‘An Archival Impulse’ he embraces a similar ethos to that of his colleagues and friends Kebba and Omar where he is dedicated to developing and nurturing his country in order to document, archive and disseminate what’s taking place within it. Recently Kandeh completed a piece titled “The Network”, the painting references the multifaceted yet fragmented nature of life for a young person in the Gambia. The rectangular canvas is divided into two. The upper section houses two people who he states signify love, unity and companionship. They intersect a naked body which for Kandeh speaks to the many bodies and souls that have been lost or held captive during efforts to leave and go to the other side via the ‘BackWay’.

He reveals concepts of, belonging, suffering, connection and disconnection and at the same time makes an effort to retain traditions of home illustrated through architectural symbols of, community, village and compound against a developing city scape. In line with the work of Aaron Douglas’s 1936 paintings titled ‘Into Bondage’ and ‘Aspiration’ and just as striking as Frank Bowling’s 1964 piece



titled 'Mirror' (Barson et al, 2010), Kande's piece 'The Network' also embodies the concept of 'double consciousness' (Gilroy,1993). He too "negotiates, on one hand an image of an idealised African past as a source of pride, to be recovered and made accessible in the present, and on the other hand a modernity that was contested, yet offered a focus for aspiration" (Barson et al, 2010:10). The Network is in fact – Jackarlo, a face to face or confrontation with the past, present and future which similar to Bowling's work, "weaves together Europe, the Americas and Africa" (Martin in Barson et al, 2010:51).

Kande articulates an alternative reality that is alive within the youth of The Gambia's 'African popular culture'. One that does not ignore the changes, developments and transitions also found in the everyday life or popular culture of urban Gambian youth. In an effort to demonstrate what Kande meant by 'confrontation' we visited Sanchaba, the neighbouring village to his studio in Kerr Serign, where more than 100 young people formed the audience of Jackarlo.

JAKARLO

Jackarlo is the Mandinka word for face to face or a confrontation which Kande used to explain a pre wrestling performance – a confrontation. The opponents meet face to face teasing and jeering each other through dance. The MC announces the opponents; the drummer begins to play at which point opposing teams compete in moving their bodies to the rhythm of the drummer. As seen in the collection of photographs taken during the research, we see young people in the Gambia, who also have an 'authentic' 'popular culture' that needs to be heard.

Image Commentary - In image number 1. The MC holds the crowd to attention, whilst image number 2 sees the people or Jackarlo stand at arrest, then from various moments of a peoples history, we see how their bodies launch into song whilst the drummer touches his skin and the performance begins (image 3). For some as in image number 4 their eyes are cast under a spell with a yellow glow, then through dance moves resembling Jamaica's twenty-first century, 'winni bounce' these Gambian youth, share and evoke what their parents taught them. As I notice the African cultural retentions that are alive within both contemporary Jamaican and Gambian youth cultures, the Drummer stands to attention, right arm masking his heart whilst the left enables his fingers to make the sound of a snake, rattling on the skin of his drum (image 5). His head held high he closes his eyes and absorbs the atmosphere, one that brings the past with the present, and the present with the past, through a cyclic motion of changes that occur amongst the young people present. Some of these changes are seen in their choice of fashion. The drummer wearing a woolly scarf and knitted jumper speaks to the influence of western ideas of being. Similarly the young girl standing directly behind the drummer boasts long weave, a hoodi, gold chain and a red Nike Air Jordan baseball cap. The children also demonstrate change as they look on in this photo. Leaning to the right of the drummer sees a girl of roughly 12 years of age, documenting the event using her camera phone. The two standing behind her, cast their eyes down to her

screen. One of the smallest children to the right of this photo, like the photographer in the same image boasts a beautiful series of cornrows in their hair and a dress with what appears to be 'traditional' African print. Meantime the little boy in yellow notices a stranger present.

Like the dancers and people portrayed in Omar and Kebab's paintings Jamba Dogo and the Kumpo Dance as seen in image number 6, these moving feet do so in honour of the past.



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

Therefore like black popular culture, 'African popular culture', "strictly speaking, ethnographically speaking, there are no pure forms at all" (Hall, 1993:110). As in the case of the wrestlers who continue after these festivities in the actual tournament, there are references to the sports origin that the era of Spartacus and arguments that the more recent WWF are key contributors. However according to 'This is Africa'¹² news report, the sport originated from the people of Senegal, who still hold on to aspects of wrestling spirituality, where participants pour a substance over themselves as a form of protection. Likewise there are no pure forms of 'African popular culture'. This is because young people who are represented as leaders or trend setters in 'African popular culture' in the diaspora as well as the young person, who has never left home, are both direct and indirect products of globalisation. Direct because of their lived experience of life in the US or Europe which informs their work and in direct due to the consumption and acquisition of style, taste and attitudes shaped by those who come from abroad, those who have left home and returned and also through TV and virtual spaces such as social media. What is occurring here is the shaping and fusion of multiple identities as experienced virtually and trans globally. In other words expressions of what it is to have reached Europe through the acquisition of new clothes and city scape selfies found on Facebook, snap chat and other social media sites, form part of the hybridization of culture and identity formation process.

When trying to make sense of this notion of identity that is often simultaneously explored and expressed through visual culture and vice versa, we ought to explore incomplete processes of representation. This flow of visual culture is not static as there is always

someone feeding the minds of the most impressionable. In other words the young person who wants a better life will be more likely to achieve their goals by any means necessary. Stuart Hall (1994) states, "Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation. Having already opened up a dialogue, and investigation, on the subject of cultural identity and representation Hall reminds us that; "We all write and speak from a particular place in time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always in context, positioned" (Hall, 1994:222 in Seidler, 2010). Likewise through Jakarlo which occurs within a 'differential space' (Leary,2016) a space temporarily appropriated for meeting 'face to face', we are able to see expressions of young people who carry this repositioning with a very vivid presence of Europe, America and Africa, as migrants without motion, engaging each other in their cultural expressions.

The space that the young people occupy who participate in Jakarlo, can be considered as what Henry (2006) when referring to the practices of British DJ's, calls the evaluation of 'alternative public arenas' as a site of belonging as being "evaluable through a specific lens, the young people's engagement becomes a starting point for practical assessment of what it means to be excluded or included from the wider public arena" (Henry, 2006). This Jakarlo – confrontation, which sees participants who have either returned from "BackWay" or are considering its long journey, partly exists because as Henry (2006) states; "the role that black cultural creativity plays in the formation and utilisation of alternative public space represents a direct challenge to forms of whiteness that are often unacknowledged and remain unchallenged"(Henry,2006:92 in Melyon-Reinette).

'BACKWAY'

I was informed that many of the young people attending the Jackarlo event, would have either returned from or contemplated leaving The Gambia clandestinely via "BackWay". It became necessary to understand what it meant for young people such as those participating in the annual street performance - 'Jakarlo' to leave the Gambia via the "BackWay". This journey "BackWay", is a term used in The Gambia that has come to define the dangerous route of more than 5,000 kilometres across the Sahara and Mediterranean for a better life. It means traveling illegally, crossing countries without visas and passports. Young people on routes from West Africa go through the desert to Libya, from Libya they board overloaded boats in hope that they will make it alive to Italy and the rest of Europe. They all know that there are risks to be faced, that might cost them their lives, but they go or want to go because they have seen others succeed (Strand Jagne, 2014; Gatti, 2013). Despite efforts reported by Sheriff Janko (2012) through programmes such as "Operation No Back Way to Europe", where a 20 year old 'school dropout' now earns half of what a government

minister in the region would earn having joined the programme and becoming one of 50 young farmers, today young people are plotting strategies to leave.

These journeys hold perceptions of the West as utopia, which inevitably result in a tension that the young people's peers, siblings, and parents are left to grapple with. Where we often hear news stories of the damaging impact that migrants are having on the British economy, through news reports on the 'migrant crises'¹³ we seldom hear about how families become traumatised by not only the pressure to send money to pay Rebels who are holding their children hostage, but the loss of their child. Fully aware of one's limited life expectancy, young people who chose this journey also meet a confrontation (Jakarlo) with their own process of identification and dis-identification as he or she takes the route to Europe "BackWay" he or she will at some point denounce being Gambian. However;

"Given the diversity, size, and complex cultures that, at the very least, constitute an admixture of traditional, modern, Western, and Eastern religious traditions, it is rather difficult, if not impossible, to look to a single comprehensive work through which to study Africa so as to contextualize its popular cultural practices" (Agwuele, 2009).

During an early conversation with the ArtFarm Collective, artists Omar Core, Pa Doullo Kande, and Kebba Selah and farmers Mohammed, Matar and Omar spoke of their experiences framed around the notion of cultural identification and dis-identification. During the discussion of their work they explained what it meant to be a young man coming of age in The Gambia.

"We are the ones who are trying to encourage the young people of Africa through the arts and farming that there are ways to sustain yourself and be satisfied in your own country...many of our brothers are of the view that going 'BackWay' is the only way to achieve success. They think that they will be able to have the life like the superstars Shatta Wale, Davido or Fuse ODG."

What is interesting about the idea of going 'BackWay' to achieve success is the process through which this thinking is stimulated. Facebook features many profiles of young men who have either made it to Europe creating an impression of success by their mere arrival in the country. Is what I was told by the compound security guard and plumber, Lamin when he told me that; "most of my friends are in Europe, they made it safely and I talk to them all the time on FaceBook". The arrival to Europe has become a signifier of success and speaks to a sort of initiation into manhood, as I was told by a member of the Abuku Youth Association that; "The boys who have gone 'BackWay' and returned are seen as tough, they will find they have more girlfriends and even more friends due to the journey they have taken." There is a sense of bravado that increases their status as a result of having survived the journey. Anderson (2014) reminds us that;

“Among Soninke villagers of Mali and Senegal-whose life cycles have long been structured around the rhythms of labour migration –young immobile men are taunted by women for being ‘stuck like glue’; in neighbouring Gambia, their brethren experience a state of nerves as they hear the tall tales of success brought back by visiting emigrants. As in other postcolonial regions, access to foreign land has become a source of increased polarization, with Europe rendered as a repository of wealth and transformative power” (Anderson, 2014:19).

It is no surprise that young people choose this route to ‘success’ and what they experience is described by Andersson (2014) who states; “The boarder is as tall as a fence and as deep as the sea, yet across it migrants and refugees keep coming, this is the latest phase in the tragic spectacle of “illegal” migration from Africa to Europe” (Andersson,2014:1). Albahari (2015,183) notes that the Italian Ministry of Labour has estimated that in light of its aging citizenry, the country is in need of at least ‘100,00 additional workers per year’. This may explain a countries true objective, with regards to their stake in the ‘migrant crisis’.

Upon gathering information we learned of the theatrical production “‘BackWay’, The desperate route to Babylon’ which was staged at the Ebujan Theatre in Banjul. On route to the theatre, Lamin our taxi driver, who is also a marketing major, recently left a large printing operation in Kenya to become a taxi driver in Banjul, said;

“I tried to go ‘BackWay’ several times, and having lost thousands of Dalasi I had to listen to my mother who said I must stay and make my life here” (Field notes, 2016).

He went on to explain that as a result of his mother expressing her concern for his safety, following her instructions they pooled together to purchase a taxi, which he has been running in The Gambia for over a year.

What exists is that despite the safety brought to some 142,000 in the Italian ports originating from Syria, and Eritrea followed by citizens of Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, the Gambia, Pakistan, Senegal and Egypt, we are given a wider perspective on how many people are involved in journeys to the West. Crimes of Peace by Maurizio Albhari (2015) articulates what is taking place and what families have to battle with to keep their children alive at any cost. “Over 250,500 people are known to have died whilst trying to reach Europe since 2000 over 3,072 died or were missing in the Mediterranean, making 2014 the deadliest year on record” (Albhari, 2015:6).

Today I have received news that Lamin, the young man who spoke much of his Facebook friends in Europe, who learnt and practiced in patois, the Jamaican parable “Mi likkle but mi tallawah, who taught me how to count to five in Mandinka and said amongst wanting to be a good construction worker, he wanted to visit Jamaica – is one of 3,900 people to have died trying to reach Europe in 2016.

What we see is how clandestine migration is becoming an increased popular form of African youth genocide.

Conclusion

The artists who were observed participants during the Kori vessel programme, spoke about the ways they make efforts to preserve their traditions via painting and farming. The study has drawn upon the artist participants as observers of their own lives. The way they choose to position themselves socially has been explored through discussions which occurred during critiques of their work. The artworks and the narratives they share, act as a means to assemble their social worlds through a process of creative production. They offer a means to access what function and role such works play in their daily lives, as well as how young people are producers and documenters of their own culture.

Urban and rural youth in The Gambia, are producers of a culture that is rarely featured in the mainstream. Therefore media representations place pressure on the development and growth of young people who have become less interested in investing in themselves and their country from within The Gambia. The young people of ArtFarm and Abuku Youth Association have demonstrated a concern about acquiring materialistic lifestyles that falsely symbolise wealth and comfort. However, historically African culture is known to have played a central role in the hub of entertainment. Through the works of some young people of The Gambia who have decided to stay home and document their country as they see it through their eyes, they share that Post-colonial legacies of forced labour and labour migration, exists today as clandestine migration and is a popular practice in The Gambia known as “BackWay”. The increase in clandestine migration amongst young people has a direct relationship to African youth genocide. The formation of clandestine migration is partly sustained through the continuous production of homogenised identities that have come to symbolise and inform young people’s decisions to go - ‘BackWay’.

Jakarlo a space which houses old traditions provides a platform where those who are leaving meet face to face in a confrontation with those who have returned. I am mindful that a discussion ought to be had that unpacks some of the ways in which the popular culture of those in Africa (Gambia) are emerging from the inspiration of those in the African diaspora of the U.K. and US. Lost within the ‘African popular culture’ banner there is also a large number of young people who are in tuned and influenced by those mainstream public characters that represent ‘Africanness’ and ‘African Success’. “Today, very few of us

Africans are from, in and connected to only one place, and it is the multiplicity of our experiences and influences that make up the vibrant and multi-layered landscape that define African identity in the contemporary world” (Bisschoff,2012).

The varying talents that make their way to the main stage should go noticed but we ought to equally recognise and not to ignore that which is popular in the lives of ordinary African youth culture spaces, as they both share the common thread of being African with complexed and contradictory forms of culture which is popular amongst them.

The merging of cultural boundaries can be seen in the ways that those who have a direct lived experience with countries exercising ‘world power’, as well as through the everyday practices by those who engage with such countries virtually and via mass media. This results in some young people engaged in the process of recycling old traditions of past historical practices into new ways of coping.

Through the accounts shared by ArtFarm we have been able to access how media portrayals of a ‘homogenised’ and diasporic ‘African popular culture’ ‘shape the imaged identity of African urban and rural youth. Where there is a confrontation of old traditions and contemporary life as in the case of Jakarło. Here, participants, dancers, wrestles, drummers and bystanders offer an alternative understanding of what it means to be young and coming of age in The Gambia.

The young men of ArtFarm and those from Abuku Youth Association, reveal that they are always in Jakarło – a place of confrontation, with preserving their past and building their identities. However we must bear in mind that which points to the changing flux of culture where varying aspects of history confront the present and is manifested in the day to day lives of young people. The art works of ArtFarm bear evidence of the process of popular youth practices in the documenting of historic and current day conceptualisations of life as a means to contribute to self-sufficiency and provide a means to enhance their country, village and community. What we see is as Bisschoff comments, “Contemporary popular culture and arts in Africa is always a negotiation between the past and the present, between tradition and modernity, and is very much embedded in the search for African identities in today’s globalised, pluralised world” (Bisschoff ,2012). The narratives have offered an opportunity to learn more about what the artists and farmers of ArtFarm have shared during the ‘Visual Voices’ workshops. Through extensive conversations about the conceptual developments and techniques used to develop their paintings, a number of striking points occurred from the narratives told through the artist’s work. The visual narratives produced by the artists reflect the everyday life, practices and culture of The Gambian people. More importantly the representation we see in mainstream media, which we embrace, as ‘African popular culture’, ignores the contribution from those who have never left their countries, rendering them unnoticed.

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¹ Main Stream Media in this context refers primarily to content propagated through the Europe and the US media

² News report on what's trending in African Popular Culture <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-35168109>

³ BBC News <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-35168109>

⁴ Blog post <http://afritorial.com/black-smoke-the-afro-goth-sub-culture/>

⁵ African Ancestry film project <http://www.okayafrica.com/video/erykah-badu-family-history-african-ancestry/>

⁶ Blog post <http://www.africanancestry.com/home/>

⁷ Blog post <http://www.africaontheblog.com/trends-african-pop-culture/>

⁸ Blog post https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

⁹ Blog post <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/entertainment/Shatta-Wale-wins-Best-African-Act-at-NEA-awards-2016-467671>

¹⁰ Blog post <http://www.popmatters.com/post/149902-but-is-it-art-a-look-at-pop-culture-in-south-african-music/>

¹¹ Kori community organisation <http://www.kori.org.uk>

¹² The history of Gambian wrestling <http://allafrica.com/stories/201408011311.html>

¹³ Migrant Crisis <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/immigration/index.html>