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Illinois Wesleyan University International Student Exemplifies Global Hip-Hop Trends

Erin Wetherille
Illinois Wesleyan University

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CONTACT: Erin Wetherille
Laura Sahn
Carlie Bliss

Illinois Wesleyan University International Student Exemplifies Global Hip-Hop Trends

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — When asked to describe the music of Africa, most people probably envision images of drums and spiritually inspired singing. Traditionally, that may have been true. Today, however, Africans are more likely to hear the heavy bass beats and controversial lyrics of Jay-Z, Run DMC, and Eminem when they turn on the radio.

Debo Olaosebikan, a sophomore Illinois Wesleyan University student from Lagos, Nigeria, grew up listening to and memorizing the words of well-known American hip-hop artists. Inspired by their music, Olaosebikan now spends his spare time recording original hip-hop and rap music, a talent he has cultivated since he began attending Illinois Wesleyan University as a 16-year-old student in 2002.

Olaosebikan, a physics major, began experimenting with rap when he was still living in Nigeria. “I was always writing, and I found myself writing poetry,” he said. “Rap is like the last form of poetry, but it is easier for people to understand.” Olaosebikan has found hip-hop music to be a therapeutic way to reflect on his life and express his opinions about social and political issues.

Combined with beats and rhythms influenced by American hip-hop and his African roots, Olaosebikan’s original lyrics are in both English and his native language, Yoruba. The themes vary, but social issues—like the problem of AIDS in Africa—predominate. His song “Africa” includes the lyrics: “Dances of hope in ecstasy’s hands / Memory spans / Centuries in time beyond my years / I was born in fear / Met this child with the star’s twinkle... Wars and sickness plague him now / An old man livin ain’t practical / His wife’s initials are A-I-D-S his name is Africa...”

Hip-hop and rap have been a major genre in American music since the early 1980’s. Originating as an art form by African-Americans on the streets of New York, hip-hop spread from the streets to the mainstream media, and now has a presence in cultures around the world.

“American culture is pervasive, as much as Americans may not know,” said Olaosebikan, whose influences include hip-hop artists Notorious B.I.G., DMX, Nas, and Tupac. American television, movies, and music are available and promoted worldwide, especially to young people who tend to listen to the popular songs on the radio.

“In terms of American music, rap was one of the first forms that I started liking,” said Olaosebikan. “It’s the predominant music in Nigeria these days.”

Illinois Wesleyan Assistant Professor of Anthropology Rebecca Gearhart, who teaches a world music course during the University’s May Term, is not surprised that Olaosebikan is inspired by American hip-hop because, “rap is becoming a way that Africans are expressing themselves,” she said. However, Gearhart said that this infiltration of American music does not mean that traditional African music has disappeared, and she notes that in many societies, traditional music and Western music are both prevalent and influence each other.

For additional information about Olaosebikan’s music, contact Sherry Wallace at the Office of University Communications at (309) 556-3181 or (309) 556-3792.