10.3 Rapping in the Greek-Cypriot dialect: readings beyond the words

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× Abstract

This paper aims to discuss Greek-Cypriot dialect hip-hop from a three-fold framework of dissent, by using the pillars of language, market, and society. Acknowledging the ways in which the development of DIY cultures and the possibilities brought by technology and social media has allowed Greek-Cypriot hip-hop artists to keep "keepin' it real" by rapping in their own daily vernacular, it discusses how this vernacular is bound by language ideologies; "guarantees" a miniscule market for the Greek-Cypriot rappers; and raises issues pertinent to authenticity and implicit (and, sometimes, explicit) rebellion. In contrast with other local music styles that feature lyrics in Greek or English and often aim at larger audiences outside Cyprus, Greek-Cypriot dialect hip-hop takes an inward turn, that defies both a wider local, as well as a global, market.

Keywords: hip-hop, local music, Greek-Cypriot dialect, dissent.

1. Introduction

Cyprus is a small island. For that, there is no doubt. In fact, it is a small island with a contested national history that is reflected in its linguistic situation. It is also reflected in its media structure, its school system, its everyday politics and, of course, in one way or another, in its daily soundtrack. That soundtrack is a collage of sounds and styles, mainstream and underground, locally and internationally produced. Amidst this polyphonic environment, Greek-Cypriot dialect (henceforth GCD) hip-hop holds a place that invites for further consideration, due to reasons explored in what follows. In this presentation, we will discuss its place in the Greek-Cypriot scape, and its inherent relationship to dissent, by touching on a three-fold nexus that involves language ideologies, the music market, and the local society at large – a triangle that serves as the contextual backbone of this paper.

The beginning of Greek-Cypriot dialect hip-hop can be traced back to the first half of the 1990s, with Vaomenoi Esso (literally, Locked at Home), followed by artists like Hajimike (more musically inclined towards reggae), and by groups like HCH. Quite a few more names can be listed here regarding the initial phases of GCD hip-hop, although the available discography is not representative of the actual activity (for a more detailed account, see Stylianou, 2010; information can also be found in a HCH interview, 2006). Although initially developing at almost clandestine conditions due to the local audience not being adequately familiar with hip-hop, let alone with a hip-hop "made in Cyprus", the scene kept growing and is still growing to the day. This can be attributed to the DIY ethos that surrounds the style, the increasing accessibility of technology and, ultimately, from the mid-00s onwards, to the power of social media that opened possibilities for interaction and dissemination – both among artists, between artists and followers, as well as between followers of the style. It is important to acknowledge the role played by alternative ways of production and dissemination in allowing local hip-hop artists to keep "keepin' it real" by rapping in their daily vernacular, and reaching an

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audience, too. Currently, a Facebook page named HIP HOP Cyprus counts 2400 members (Hip Hop Cyprus). More recently, a parallel Facebook group was created, that is dedicated to rap and hip hop and has a more politically oriented character. In the group description we read:

> *This group is created in an Antifascist spirit and the Admins are responsible to keep this character. Our goal is, in these hard and confused times, to preserve the timeless socio-political values of Hip Hop that were laid down during its birth and during its evolution. Peace, Love and Unity. Simple words, but with such deep meanings, that we seem to forget in the new 20's … Our goal is to develop an organic education and relationship around this kind of music we love and we represent …* (Ραππόσπιτο - *Rap Evi - Rap Home).*

Looking more closely on the way the representatives of the genre make use of social media and alternative spaces of communication, promotion and dissemination is significant because, despite its seeming longevity in the island, GCD hip-hop is a music scene that remains underground. One of the main arguments made in this paper is that this underground position is unlikely to change (at least in the foreseeable future) due to linguistic, market, and societal standards that exist in the Republic of Cyprus (henceforth RoC), that render its "mainstream-ization" process impossible. The fact that GCD hip-hop has a "by definition" underground status corroborates to its consideration as a music style with inherently resistant qualities, even though its "contained" resistance is not always actively expressed. Indeed, not all GCD hip-hop songs deal with issues pertaining to politics or social critique, but by their mere existence, they do *enact* resistance in terms of the three pillars discussed here. We shall now turn to a more detailed consideration of the reasons why this is the case, starting with the issue of language use.

2. Frameworks of resistance

2.1 Challenging the language ideologies

In its history that spans many centuries, Cyprus has been under a long string of colonizers including Phoenicians, Egyptians, Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Frankish, Venetians, Ottoman, and British. Not long after 1960, when the island was proclaimed an independent country for the first time in long centuries, Cyprus experienced a Greek military coup against President Makarios III that led to events that culminated to its geographical division by the Turkish Invasion. The invasion "finalized" the geographical separation of the island's two major populations, the Greek speaking (78%) and the Turkish speaking (18%) Cypriots (Tsiplakou, 2006), that had already begun in the 1960s due to inter-ethnic strife.

The interconnection of language with the historical and political situation of the island, along with the language ideologies that surround it, has been discussed widely from various perspectives (Papadakis, 2003, 2003b; Tsiplakou, 2006; Pavlou, 2006; Papapavlou & Sophocleous, 2009; Georgiou, 2010, 2011; Hadjioannou et *al.*, 2011 etc.). It is a relationship complex, not only due to the population separation, but also due to the relationship of each major population with the other, as well as the affinity of each to a 'mother land', namely Greece and Turkey. To lay the foundational framework for the discussion here, it is important to note that, by constitution, the official languages of the island are Greek and Turkish. However, after the ensued geographical separation, Turkish has only been rarely present in RoC.

Furthermore, it is significant to emphasize that, whereas the official language used in formal outlets, written communication, and the education system is Standard Modern Greek (henceforth SMG), the language of everyday life is almost exclusively GCD. The main paradox that arises is that, while GCD is the language used in the everyday life of the people, it is considered inappropriate for dealing with serious matters, fact that often leads to identity crises and embarrassment of one's everyday linguistic medium. For this reason, children in RoC learn from an early age to code-switch according to the social context they are found in, that makes one idiom more appropriate than the other (Papapavlou & Sophocleous, 2009).

Placing this tension within the cultural context, Stylianou states that "[…] the fact that its [Cyprus'] people oscillate between identification with the dialect and feeling embarrassed about it has had a stultifying effect not only on the arts in Cyprus but also on popular culture and indeed on Cypriot identity itself" (2010, p. 207). Being a heavily word reliant art form, and, not least one that is associated with truth and the representation of the local experience, rapping presents itself as a most appropriate vehicle to explore this situation. Its

presence in GCD hip-hop, where the everyday vernacular of the people is combined with an international musical idiom, raises social and political issues, even without uttering them. As Hajimichael puts it,

> *for those who see beyond the cliché of just wanting to sound like a "peasant" in order to gain some laughs, their [the GCD rappers'] choice is deliberately political and can be seen as a form of resistance to a formal language establishment (school, colleges, universities, media) which is dominant and oppressive to Cypriot identity and expression (2014, p. 51)*

Extending on that, one can see GCD hip-hop as a creative outlet that, through making use of the everyday vernacular in the public domain, challenges the evaluation judgements and ideologies attached to the linguistic variation itself.

In his chapter, Stylianou (2010) explores the different linguistic approaches of local hip-hop representatives in terms of lyric-writing, and makes specific mention on their different points of view as to what language they choose to use for speaking their truth. Most of the rappers interviewed, whether using GCD, SMG or English in their songs, refer to their preferred language in ideological and market potential terms, reflecting on the general linguistic situation in Cyprus. That this tension unfolds around hip-hop is most appropriate. Writes, Stylianou (2010):

> *Hip hop presents a rare instance where Cypriot artists are forced to confront Cyprus's language situation head on in a way that many other arts or genres of music do not require. Hip hop demands honest and uncontrived expression and this is, I think, where the conflict lies in Cypriot rap. (2010, p. 207)*

The situation is, of course, more complex than the space and time allow to explore here. Nonetheless, the main argument of this paper, that the usage of GCD lyrics in hip-hop songs created in Cyprus is an act of resistance (even if not necessarily a conscious one), can further be strengthened by the position of this music style in the music market, itself a product and a mediator of the ideologies extant in the island, linguistic and more.

2.2 Defying the market

The music sphere of RoC is flooded with songs in Greek and English. This is true not only in terms of the music that is promoted and broadcasted by the official media, but also of the music that is created by the local musicians themselves. Although a closer look at the musical output of the country shows an increased use of GCD in genres of popular music such as hip hop, metal, and world music, most local music production features lyrics in SMG and, when it comes to underground currents, in English. This can be attributed to the association of GCD with lack of refinement and sense of inferiority, as well as its earlier connections with parody and comedy, that make it harder for cultural outputs in the dialect to be taken seriously (for more detailed discussions see Georgiou, 2010 and Hadjioannou et *al*., 2011). Such tendencies not only contribute to rendering GCD an implausible linguistic element for lyric writing, but also to making its usage in songs an element that musicians and audiences alike are not accustomed to. In this framework, one can see how GCD hip-hop's minimum market potential becomes one of the factors that make it a music style that is "by default" defiant. A closer look at the landscape of RoC music market and industry will help us shed more light on this side of the argument.

It is widely accepted that RoC lacks a local music industry (Skoutella, 2011) and that "the closest thing to a record label, All Records, was more accurately a distribution company that dabbled in home-grown releases from time to time," (Stylianou, 2010, p. 203). At the same time, the Greek-Cypriot media have, to their largest extent, been historically dependent on their Greek equivalent (Skoutella, 2011). These dynamics have led to a perennial "migration" of Greek-Cypriot artists to Greece in search of a career that would be "pan-hellenic", a trend of which the start Hajimichael places chronologically in the 1970s and which is evident to the day (Hajimichael, 2016). In the face of that, it can be understood that the resurgence of an underground prolificness in terms of local music production (regardless of language) bypasses what has been seen as the expected route for "making it in the music industry" and predisposes the possibility for the creation of what can be considered a local popular music heritage (for a discussion of the notion, see Brandellero & Jansen, 2014). The underground local creations cover many and diverse music genres, use mainly SMG and English in their lyrics, and are promoted to wider audiences through various online platforms and social

media. Nevertheless, GCD hip-hop continues to exhibit a lack of market potential, even with the possibilities provided by the current dissemination channels.

A closer look at the situation might be illuminating. The population of the area of Cyprus that is controlled by RoC and which largely represents the Greek-speaking segment, was estimated at the end of 2019 as 888,000 (Cyprus Statistics). Furthermore, due to a significant number of expats, Greek-Cypriot speaking communities also exist abroad in countries like England, Africa, Australia, etc. In fact, it has been suggested that the number of Greek-speaking Cypriots who live abroad is equal to the ones who live in the island itself (Britanica). To understand the limited market potential scope of GCD rappers (although a matter that could benefit from some substantive quantitative and qualitative investigation) one has to consider that, of the less than two million Greek-Cypriot speakers of every age, background, and musical taste that live around the world, the ones inclined to hip-hop in general are unlikely to be a majority, and of those, it is more likely that only a few would be open to hip-hop in Greek-Cypriot dialect, due to the reasons discussed above.

Nonetheless, the scene of GCD hip-hop appears to be alive, robust, and actively growing to the day. If one considers how unlikely it is for the representatives of the genre to be making a living from their art (or, from their rap), one can claim that the fact alone that they are putting in the effort and taking up the expenses of equipment and production despite having almost no outlets for their work, is a sign of defiance – a sneer at the ideas of profit and commercialization that define the system as we know it, and to which the society of RoC is anything but immune.

This is another indication of how "keeping it real" in this way is an enactment of resistance, even in its least politically vocal form. To put it crudely, it seems that GCD popular music in general "does not sell" (at least yet) and neither does GCD hip-hop. The fact that the mainstream channels that promote and broadcast music in RoC, due to various reasons that space does not allow us to expound on here, do not seem eager to feature it at all, does not help in its popularization, leaving it reliant on the underground channels itself has created. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that after almost 30 years of existence in the country, GCD hip-hop still sounds "foreign" to local ears.

2.3 Provoking the society

To say that hip hop in GCD sounds "foreign" to local ears presents a certain kind of ironic paradox, considering that the dialect is the language used in the everyday communication of the Greek-speaking Cypriots. Nonetheless, it is a true statement, due to the position that GCD had and still has in the official public sphere, including the official music sphere.

This is what creates the ground for discussion of this music style from the perspective taken here. Language and society are closely intertwined, and how a linguistic idiom is conceived in certain contexts assigns its usage in these contexts a significance that might had not been the immediate purpose of the user. Similarly, with language, institutions (including economy, media, and the cultural industries) are significant elements of a society. It can be therefore suggested that any creative product that challenges these elements, is by extension challenging the societal norms at large, albeit not necessarily in a volitional or explicit way. What we are rather looking at here is a social provocation that does not come as an active form of resistance (although some of it does), but as a creative exploration of different aspects of membership in the society; as a re-negotiation of GCD rappers' relationship with the language and the materialistic ideals that characterize the modern Western societies, including Cyprus.

The persistence of GCD hip-hop practitioners to use the dialect in their lyrics can be seen more as a statement concerning the legitimacy of the dialect and less as a rejection of SMG as the language of the official public sphere. After all, there are cases of artists that are switching between the two idioms, whereas various collaborations between rappers that use different language for their lyrics is not uncommon.

Hip-hop as a genre has been associated with the representation of local experience, a significant characteristic for its "keepin' it real" ethos. It is also connected to "the articulation of a collective local identity rendered in local language" (Jin, 2014, p. 281). Due to the immediacy of using the everyday vernacular, GCD hip-hop presents and expresses the particularities of the Greek-Cypriot experience, and it does so by creating an alternative public sphere based on the everyday language of communication of the people, combined with the affective medium of music. As Pennycook writes, "The language choices hip-hop artists make are similarly about viewing themselves as social agents who force the public to be more inclusive about what

constitutes legitimate perspectives on language" (Pennycook, 2007, p. 113). In any linguistic communication, it is not only the semantic meaning of the words that is taken into account, but the linguistic idiom in which it is expressed. How the linguistic formation itself is perceived, entails evaluation judgments and ideologies, and adds another layer of interpretation.

Ultimately, since hip-hop is the music genre that is mostly connected with the notion of truthful expression, it is only reasonable that rappers would be more confident in "speaking their truth" in the linguistic idiom that accompanies their everyday life. That, in the case of GCD hip-hop, this choice also constitutes an "inward turn", which defies a wider local, as well as global, market, is also important, since both these parameters raise issues pertinent to authenticity and truthfulness, in terms of the music genre in general, as well as in terms of the artists' experience.

With its "keepin' it real" ideology, and its association with truthfulness and local experience, GCD hip-hop reflects a *particularity* of Greek-Cypriot experience that has not as of yet been given the "mic". Absent but for rare occasions from the "official" popular music sphere of the island, GCD hip-hop presents itself as a "slap on the face" of what have perennially been considered the appropriate languages for popular music-making in RoC – that is, SMG and English. That this fact constitutes the genre anti-commercial by nature is also a slap on the face of the consumeristic and profit-driven society that RoC is.

To put it in a different way, by communicating their thoughts in the everyday vernacular of the people, GCD hip-hoppers are displaying resistance to the norms of songwriting, to the norms of appropriate language for the public sphere, and to the norms that want popular music to be a commercial product.

3. Discussion

As it has been discussed in the beginning, the language situation in Cyprus, and by extension, the language ideologies extant in the island, is closely linked to the political situation, the historical narratives, the relationship between the two major communities of the island, and a continuous will on the part of Greek Cypriots to remain closely attached to Greece (Ioannidou & Sophocleous 2010, Hadjioannou et *al.* 2011). The near omnipresence of SMG in formal communication at all levels, including education, press and media, government courts etc., creates spaces from where GCD is, but in few instances, excluded. And it is the obvious "absence" of GCD in these areas that makes the disruption caused by its presence even more visible. This has been proven recently with the protests of "Ως Δαμέ" (literally "up to here" in Greek-Cypriot dialect), who chose to use the dialect as their main linguistic idiom, both for their name, as well as for the expression of the majority of their positions. Interestingly enough, one of the most vocal responses the protest group received had to do with the name itself, due to its "incorrect" spelling. Ironically, with the GCD not having been codified and not being taught at schools, one could say that the accusations of misspelling had been unjust. Nonetheless, this has been another instance in which GCD has been brought to the public sphere, opening dialogues for re-consideration of its position in the country ("Ως δαμέ", 2021). That during the protests of "Ως δαμέ", performances of GCD hip-hop had taken place, and more specifically from one of the most popular local rappers, JULIO, who is politically outspoken in his songs and his lifestyle, is no coincidence.[2] That important part of what he raps about has to do with the profit-driven politics of the ones "in charge", and how this affects the people of Cyprus, is no coincidence either. He says:

> *"Golden-green washing machine
> *for that passport
> *some suffer
> *some have made their stakes golden
> *and claim they became poorer"[3]

Rather, it is a fact that brings together everything that has been discussed above, albeit doing it in the most

2. One can watch JULIO performing his song "Το Θηρίον" ("The Beast") outside the presidential residence on 27 March 2021 on Ως δαμέ Facebook page (posted on April 4, 2021). Retrieved from https://fb.watch/v/1zw9iQHg7/

3. Original in GCD: "Χρυσοπράσινο πλυντήριο/για τζείν' το διαβατήριο/άλλοι περνούν μαρτύριο/άλλοι εχρυσώσαν τα παλλούτζια τους/τζαι λεν μας φτωσιυνίσκουν."

obvious and straightforward way: using GCD in combination with a hip-hop beat, speaking of the Greek-Cypriot experience, expressing dissent towards the profit-making drive of politicians, and doing it through a genre that is in itself anti-commercial by default.

The purpose of this paper was neither to over-romanticize the use of GCD in hip-hop, and nor to treat it as a music style that is to be seen as an active resistance, although many representatives of the genre are writing politically infused songs. The perspective used here is rather treating GCD hip-hop as a music style that has grown organically from the blending of an international musical idiom with the local experience and the genuine expression of that local experience through the mother tongue. That this blending is going against the norms of what is expected or what is considered acceptable, while also being anti-commercial; provide it with certain elements of defiance. And this, in this case, make GCD hip-hop "resistant by default", even when resistance is not intended.

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