

No Need to Be a Mathematic to Know Who You Can Count On

Rap Music as a Tool of Denunciation

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For twenty years, Conakry-based artist, writer, and composer Ams Keuche has been using rap music to denounce social inequalities and the politics that create and perpetuate them. Being part of the second generation of Guinean rappers, he claims to have one foot in the old school and one in the new. Reflecting the country's linguistic diversity, his songs mix the languages spoken in Guinea:

"The official language here is French, but apart from that everyone speaks their own language. To get the message across, so that all of the communities have access, you have to sing in Susu, in Maninka, in Fulani, and sometimes in Baga. And in French, and a little bit in English.

Rap music is a way of conveying messages because young people listen to it, and young people are those most often marginalized, most often targeted. When there are protests, most of those who end up in jail are young people."

Ams Keuche spends part of his time in the ghetto – a source of inspiration and a place of circulating ideas. In Conakry, ghetto refers to a specific social space, and the word is not used in the same way the word as in other regions:

"Each neighbourhood here has its ghetto. It's a place where young people get together. Sometimes it's several places in the same neighbourhood. The ghetto is a place where young people get together to smoke, but it's also a place to find inspiration, to give each other ideas. It allows you to try things out, to be inspired, to see the reality of how people are living. It's said that this is where the real people live, the people at the bottom of the social scale, the people who are really marginalized. So when I go there, it allows me to see certain realities that you can't find in Guinea's more well-off milieus. It forces me to see things differently.

It's this anger that really pushed me to make music. Before that, I didn't think I was going to make music. I'd been to university, so I said to myself: 'I'll wear a suit and tie, I'll work in an office.' But while spending time with certain friends who were in this ghetto, I saw the depths, I saw the injustice, how people were living there, and all this really pushed me to spotlight what I was seeing, what I was feeling.

Sometimes, when artists get together, we do free-styles, we play beats, we sing. We criticize things, we talk about our musical projects, and so on, we talk politics, we talk about social issues, about things that aren't acceptable, we talk about the rumours that are going round town. That's what it is, the ghetto."

His texts accompany the protests of Conakry's inhabitants against the entrenched poverty that impacts their everyday lives, as well as against the related actions of the government. These militant sounds are not played on the radio; they circulate on YouTube and at concerts, in defiance of the censors.

"I denounce social inequality, arbitrary incarceration, police and military violence, high food prices, the squandering of our riches, by the same people, the same each time, the government changes but the big bosses are always the same people, so they have plenty of time for their manipulations. People say Guinea is a rich country, that kind of thing, but the population doesn't benefit. It's only those in government who benefit, who drive the big cars, whose children go to prestigious schools, either in Guinea or in the West. Only those who are ministers or company directors or who work in the government are well-off. The rest of the population doesn't have a chance."



Mon ghetto mon château, 2023

Aloukhi alo won na barama
 Bba lairi birin finkari noun sirene khoui sonkhö ma
 Brigandage noun braccage mou gnonma
 Taimoui é khörökhökhö köñö töräi fan doul khötökhi
 Mou boré gbé gbé bara ekha kaidi ma nökhö
 Söré, sairiyalé khanamou guéli,
 Ghetto gningué n'dé nan naki
 Mou weed nan toun yi takhoun ma,
 I ya rabi khanamou i ra gnon manai alo crado
 Hé bro aloukhi alo won na rideau nan khambira
 M'ma Ghetto na Rouge ana Jaune ana Vert Ariyan na
 nara khali wakhati n'dé a to maniyai Yakhan nama ra
 É bara mou tou toun khan Mur kanké,
 khakhili ra gnairai dé mou moubai
 Moumou fakhamoukhi lairi birin mou tanan guéli,
 Allah kha yafa mou boré ma tourti nékhé bakhi mou yi

Feels like we're living in the ring
 Gunshots and sirens all of the time
 Banditry, robbery, all kind of scenes
 Times are hard but the hurting goes on
 Many brothers have messed up
 So it's police justice or prison,
 one of the colours of my ghetto
 Weed's the only thing we share freely,
 open your eyes or you'll end up in the gutter
 Hey bro, it feels like we're living behind the curtain
 My ghetto's red, it's gold, it's green,
 it's paradise even if it often looks like hell
 With our backs against the wall,
 we know better where we stand
 Misunderstood, it's always us in jail.
 Peace to the brothers the street took from us

Écoute, 2022

Ghetto knowledge, we know everything's wrong
 You want to fuck the system, but the system is what?
 Is it the white-collar butchers or these whites
 with their talk of development?
 Or a murderous state that kills off my people
 and squanders our assets?
 From bauxite for Fria to Simandou iron,
 my toxic questions go unanswered
 From Sékou Conté CNDD to Condé CNRD,²
 i no need to be a mathematician to know
 who you can count on, hey.

Le savoir du ghetto on sait que rien ne va
 On veut niquer le système, mais le système c'est quoi?
 Est-ce ces bourreaux au col blanc ou ces blancs
 qui nous collent leur parole de développement?
 Ou un État d'assassins qui massacre
 les miens en dilapidant nos biens?
 De la bauxite de Fria au fer de Simandou mes
 questions toxiques, dont j'ignore le dessous
 De Sékou Conté CNDD Condé CNRD,²
 pas besoin d'être mathématicien pour savoir
 sur qui compter, Hé.

La jungle, 2012

C'est là que j'suis né c'est là que j'ai grandi
C'est ici que j'ai vu naître une loi, celle du plus fort
Ici le faible a tort devant celui qui roule sur de l'or
Ici c'est la pagaille on nage dans le libertinage
Ici, chacun fait ce qu'il veut
ou il veut quand il veut
Et comme par magie personne ne réagit
Peuple de Guinée où es-tu? Agi!
Mon pays est devenu une jungle,
Nous sommes des gibiers devant un état de braconniers
C'est pas possible regarde les hommes en treillis
se tromper de cible
Tirer, des innocents tués, les temps sont durs
On pense plus à ses poches qu'à ses proches
Tu veux le changement, change man
Croise-pas tes bras même si l'État nous ment, tu veux
vivre où ça ? Ici?
Là où les droits de l'homme sont violés, Là où on voit
ses rêves s'envolés, là où ...

On est dans la jungle ici
C'est la loi du plus fort ici
On est dans la jungle ici
C'est la loi du plus fort ici

A tofé kōnō I ma yi gbaifé
Bé bara fa lou alo Woula kouï
Birin wama a boré yi bōfé
Gettho Doumé mou bognai mou sakhi
Crazy soldiers é ta soukhoui

Ce que tu pensais tout bas écoute le tout haut,
Combien de coupables sont relâchés?
Combien d'innocents emprisonnés?
Combien sont marginalisés?
Combien ignorent leur droit?
Combien d'hors la loi?
Combien? Combien?

This is where I was born, where I grew up
Here I saw a law emerge, the law of the strongest
Here the weak are wrong, not those who roll in gold
It's messed up here, we're drowning in depravity
Here people do what they want
where they want when they want
And, as if by magic, there's no reaction
People of Guinea, where are you? Do something!
My country's become a jungle,
We're game hunted by state poachers
It can't be true, look at the men in combat gear
hitting the wrong targets
Shooting, killing innocent people, times are hard
People thinking more about cash than about community
You want change, then change, man.
Don't just stand there, even if the state lies to us. You
want to live? Where? Here?
Where human rights are violated, where we see our
dreams blown away, where ...

We're in the jungle here
It's the law of the strongest
We're in the jungle here
It's the law of the strongest

Your eyes are open but you can't see
It's become a jungle here
People want to devour one another
Ghetto kids have no peace in their hearts
The crazy soldiers have taken the city hostage

What you were thinking to yourself, hear it said out loud:
How many guilty men are released?
How many innocents imprisoned?
How many are marginalized?
How many don't know their rights?
How many above the law?
How many? How many?

A tofé kōnō l ma yi gbaifé	Your eyes are open but you can't see
[...]	[...]
On est dans la jungle ici	We're in the jungle here
[...]	[...]
C'est les mêmes qui usent les mêmes ruses c'est les mêmes qui abusent	It's the same people using the same tricks, the same abuse
Ici on n'embauche pas, les jeunes diplômés sont là ils ne bossent pas	No one's hiring here, skilled young people are here, but not working
Alors on nique leur système et sa police, Brûle leur ministère de l'injustice,	So we fuck their system and its police Burn down their ministry of injustice
J'appelle à l'unité bien qu'il y ait impunité	I call for unity in the face of impunity
On a pas oublié les victimes du 2 et 3 février	We haven't forgotten the victims of February 2nd and 3rd
On a pas oublié les victimes du 22 Janvier	We haven't forgotten the victims of January 22nd
On pense encore à ceux du 28 septembre ...³	We still think of those of September 28th ...³
Les politiques à la messe que de fausses promesses	Politicians preaching, nothing but false promises
Où est passée la presse?	What happened to the press?
Au Campus les étudiants se battent pour monter dans les bus ...	On campus, students fight for a place on the bus ...
On est dans la jungle ici	We're in the jungle here
C'est la loi du plus fort ici	It's the law of the strongest
On est dans la jungle ici	We're in the jungle here
C'est la loi du plus fort ici	It's the law of the strongest

Endnotes

- 1 Interview with Ams Keuche, 1 May 2023.
- 2 List of presidents who have ruled the country since independence in 1958: Sékou Touré, president of Guinea from independence until his death in 1984. He was succeeded by Lansana Conté who ruled until his own death in 2008, after which the CNDD (National Council for Democracy and Development, a military junta) took power, ruling until the election of Alpha Condé, who was president of the republic from 2010 until 2021. He was deposed following a military coup by members of the CNRD (National Unity Committee for Development) led by Mamady Doumbouya.
- 3 On 2 and 3 February 1996, soldiers unsatisfied with their pay called for the resignation of the defence minister, mutinied, and sought to oust President Lansana Conté. The attempted coup failed but many people were killed and a purge of the army followed. In January and February 2007, following the announcement of a general strike by the unions, major demonstrations against the economic policy and authoritarianism of the Conté regime were suppressed by force, with 22 January costing the most lives. On 28 September 2009, following a demonstration opposing the candidacy of Moussa Camara, the head of the military junta in power since the coup of 2008, soldiers opened fire on the crowd and committed sexual crimes in the *Stade du 28 Septembre*, a stadium in Conakry. During the following days, many opposition figures were detained, tortured, and assassinated. The trial of those involved in the massacre of 28 September 2009 began on 28 September 2022.

Listen to the music

[youtube.com/@amskeuche6143](https://www.youtube.com/@amskeuche6143)