

The Made Niggaz Saloon



I was exhausted as I felt my feet throbbing from all the walking that we had done that day. Five of us from the University of Maryland and USAID sat at a little Mizungu (foreigner/outsider/those believed to have money/"white" folk) hideaway, tucked in the middle of Butare - the college town and second largest city in the jungle that is Rwanda. The restaurant and bar was something of a café, brothel, five star motel, lottery spot, cell phone distribution point, major dining establishment and meeting place for the powerful, aspiring, traveled and the lost.

We sat outside, ordered some beer and appetizers, relaxing into the twilight. The scene was the same as always: scattered individuals walked by, guards stood in between the roadside and the entrance to the restaurant, buses stopped next door every hour or so and taxis waited for the lazy, scared and/or drunk Mizungus trying to get home.

As one of the people at the table began to discuss the latest insight into Rwandan politics, I was completely distracted by a sign across the street. Now, Rwandan advertising is a bit odd: most people cannot read and thus many if not all the signs are for Mizungus or elites, the images are boldly colored – frequently they are drawn with cartoons – and the phrases/jingles are quite funny - normally. This time I was not amused. As I sat there, basking in my mixed feelings about being in the motherland, sitting at a café in Africa with four white people, protected/guarded by black soldiers with machine guns at the premier establishment in the city which was run by a white Belgian, I was shocked to see a store called the "Made Niggaz

Saloon.” Yeah, you heard me. Ok, truth be told, I had seen some other saloons or salons: “The Nigga Boyz Hair Salon,” “Niggaz on the cut”, “Head Niggaz”, “Niggaz 'R US”, “Jungle Niggaz” (which seemed kinda redundant in Rwanda) and “Niggaz on the Prowl” but these observations were always made at about 60-70 miles an hour - screaming down the road from one place to another. This one, however, was upfront and personal.

Seemingly none of my associates noticed or cared to notice - likely dismissing it with the thought that “Niggaz here too.” Alternatively, they did not feel comfortable discussing this with me. I was struck though to realize that Niggaz were in rural East Africa. I felt betrayed, somehow embarrassed, curious and a little outraged. One second I was sitting there, visiting Rwanda trying to represent - my family, my people, DC and then I had to see this thing. No matter how far you go, it comes with you - “world Nigga law” as Mos Def would say. I immediately thought of a line from the film Malcolm X that appeared to capture the moment pretty well, appropriately modified to fit the context: “we had a perfect trip until some Niggaz showed up and destroyed the whole thing.”

No longer interested in my spaghetti bolognese and beer, I excused myself, walked across the street between machine guns, 14 children calling out “my friend”, one cow, one jeep, 10 baskets, a bus and a man with no legs dragging himself across the street. What the hell were these brothaz thinking? What the hell were these brothaz doing? I just had to check it out.

As I walked up to the store, I could see the sign in greater detail. It was straight old school ghetto, like the cover of some bad rap album or fake velvet poster. Under the title, two brothers kneeled down with parts in their fades, fat laces and a little gold chair in between them that they pointed to. The message was clear. If one wanted to get made, then they would go in, sit down and be brothered.

Stepping up, two B-boys on either side stood up with Zig-Zag patterns shaved into their headz, fat laces and matching kangaroo jackets. They appeared to be surprised at my presence - looking at me from the side, trying to figure out who I was. I smiled and stepped in like a Clint Eastwood film. As my feet touched the interior everything kind of stopped with a screeching noise, like when Eddie Murphy walked into the Western bar in *48 hours*. There we were: me, five people getting shaved/cut/shaped, five barbers, eight people waiting, one cassette DJ and 11 Hip-Hop posters from the '80s (Tupac, Public Enemy, Run DMC and Kwame - the polka dot rapper). I stood there in my B-boy stance, trying to take it all in and what was at first an awkward moment of silence and posturing, dissolved after I identified myself with “I am Chris from New York, what's up with you Niggaz?” Actually, I was serious about the question. There was no pause in between “what's up” and the rest of the sentence. Nevertheless, they all laughed, the music started and we greeted each other in the middle of the dance floor - I mean shop.

As DJ Innocent put on “Friends, how many of us have them,” two brothers brought me a chair, one brought me a coke and three brought a series of questions: “how big is New York compared to Butare”, “why are you here” and “do you have any music with you”? I told them there are probably 1000 Butares that could fit into “the City.” I was there to study Rwanda and learn about its wonderful history never admit ones true purpose to someone who calls themselves a

Nigga with sharp objects all over the place. And, finally, no I did not bring any music; something that I would never do again.

The next 30 minutes were a blur as they showed me haircuts they had, haircuts they were getting, haircuts they saw in old rap magazines from France and Belgium. They had a copy of the Source - the black Hip-Hop magazine, which they treated like the Holy Grail. DJ Innocent had to put on "Rappers Delight" to signify the occasion. Several of the brothers started busting moves - old ones. The head Nigga walked me around the store to point out the posters as well as other artifacts: afro picks, laces and hoodies.

Near to fainting from all the visual stimuli, I sat down in an empty chair on the left side of the store. One of the barbers stepped beside me. Someone brought me another coke. Another pulled up a chair and several others sat around me on the floor. It was like the "Chronicles of Riddick" and I had fallen into the chair of the king, holding court. The faces of the brothers merged with those on the wall: Tupac, Biggy, Kwame (yeah, the polka dot guy), Rakim, Too Short and Fat Joe who stood out because it would have taken about five of the Rwandans to equal one of him.

Somewhat overwhelmed by the African time warp, it then hit me why it all seemed so familiar: this was no hair salon. This was my room from 1985 - somehow migrated to Rwanda and spread out over the space. I felt Sankofa-ed with a twist sent back to a time long past through some portal. All that was missing was the Prince "Controversy" album cover on the wall; this is the subject of another story however.

At some point, the growing entourage stopped pointing and talking to ask if they were saying things by their right names. At that moment, I became the "ghetto authenticator" - a Hip-Hop aficionado, come to their salon to give them the boogie down stamp of approval. My bonafies as a professor had nothing to do with it. They brought out object after object, to hear the American label. It kept coming as there was seemingly an endless stream of gear emerging from the back room. For a second, I came out of my fog, remembering where I was. Under a Shante Moore mix, I heard a radio station with someone talking angrily. Not Hip-Hop. Real stuff. Realer than real. This only lasted for a second because after the people in the back saw me, the door was closed and I was back to authenticating.

All the buzzing and movement stopped, however, when I remembered why I had come into the store. "I have a problem," I said. They all stopped mid-pop to hear me. It was a KRS edutainment moment as I felt Malcolm, the Furious 5, Busy Bee, Cold Crush and SPoony-G course through me. "You know that the word Niggaz is derived from Niggers which is an insult from whites?" They did not. "The 'az' replacing the 'er' was an attempt to shift the emphasis and actually empower the user but I think that the experiment failed. Niggaz are now distortions, creations, parodies of the true state of Africans in America. There might have been some true gangstas at some point and the hostility, the anger, the frustration in the music taps a certain aspect of the reality that blacks are subject to but what Hip-Hop has become, what you have on - the wall, what you look at, listen to and take in here is what a warped version of Hip-Hop has created."

They didn't hear me. They couldn't. I could not get across to them how one-dimensional the music they had was, how they missed Hip-Hop and how Hip-Hop missed them, needed them (desperately). I couldn't tell them that they didn't need Niggaz over here - at least not the Niggaz they thought they needed. I couldn't tell them there were really no Niggaz at all, just Niggers and those that tried to survive and, yes, overcome or overthrow – depending upon the brotha that you were talking to. I was saddened that all that made it over there were haircuts, some pictures, some really, really small medallions and corny rap songs - not even whole tapes but mixes at that. They had no graffiti, no break dancing, no Malcolm, no Baraka, no red, no black, no green.

They looked at me, perplexed. A few started to whisper and look at each other. DJ Innocent, who had stopped playing music, frantically searched for something to change the mood. One brother walked up, B-Boy stride and said, “You don't like our shop?” Trying to be honest but sensing the tension, “I said no, I love what you have here. In fact, you’ve brought me a strange ray of hope. Mos Def said once that “the Invisible Man got the whole world watching” and you all have shown that. The reference was lost. They were still in the 80's maybe the late 70's and barely. “I just don't like what you have named your store.” “But, we are Niggaz,” they replied. “The Made Niggaz,” several chimed in.

As if on cue, one of my colleagues from across the street walked in and in a second, the place transitioned into something else, somewhere else. The Niggaz's went back to their corners, the eyes glazed over. Hair cutting resumed, the dancing was replaced with sitting, and DJ Innocent turned his back and put up his hoodie. The openness, excitement and smiles that I saw just seconds ago turned to the then standard Rwandan scowl. We wear the mask that grins and lies in Rwanda too.

My associates told me they had finished and were about to walk back to the hotel - something you did not want to do alone. We were also leaving the next morning and I had to pack. I tried to say goodbye to the brothers in the saloon but once again I could see that I was Mizungued. On the way out, DJ Innocent had evidently found what he was looking for. As I pushed the swinging doors to exit, I heard Run DMC saying, “It's like that and that's the way it is.” Ain't it the truth, I thought. Ain't it the truth?

I left thinking I needed to construct a Hip-Hop educational packet with some African American history to help. Fuck the Red Cross. These brothers needed some Kool Herc and Funk Master Flex - stat! They needed the Klan (X not the Ku). The repackaged Zulus.

Of course, just as I thought of it, driving by a few dozen kids sifting through trash, the stupidity of the whole thing came back to me. What these brothers and sisters really needed was something more basic: some food, a place to live, some regular education with readin', ritin' and rithmetic' - The same stuff that all brothers and sisters need.

As we pulled away, I realized that no matter how far you go, you always home - kinda. Keep your heads up brothaz.