Hip Hop Spirituality: Expanding the Tent

Judith Corbett Carter
Berkeley College

Abstract

Hip hop continues to spread globally and has gained popularity in the Middle East and North Africa. It is an art form that allows marginalized youths to speak about specific issues regarding their circumstances. Sociopolitical Arabic hip hop has received much media attention and is the focus of this paper. While Arab hip hop is not explicitly religious, lyrics that speak to struggle and suffering can be linked to hip hop spirituality. At the heart of hip hop spirituality is the concern for human struggle and suffering with the understanding that oppression is evil. In this paper I will examine hip hop spirituality from the Arabic hip hop perspective as it relates to Islamic Liberation Ideology and 'expand the tents' ofhip hop spirituality theory beyond the borders of the United States.

Keywords:hip hop, spirituality, liberation, Arabic hip hop, Islamic Liberation

Mainstream hip hop continues to be criticized for its profane, misogynistic, violent, and materialistic images (Canada, 2011; Pinn, 2003). Pond, (2010) writes "Despite intense criticism and attempts to discredit and eradicate hip hop music…hip hop not only survived but has influenced a generation…"(p.522 & 523). The focus of this paper is hip hop spirituality theory with the goal of 'expanding its tents' beyond the borders of the United States. The phrase 'expand its tents' is borrowed from Isaiah 54:2 and refers to the enlargement of the church. In this paper 'expanding tents' means a broad expression of hip hop spirituality that is deeply connected to liberation. Liberation, says Clay (2010), is "opposition to dominance, disempowerment, and violence practiced by marginalized groups …," (p.309) with the goal of social change.

Hip hop is a community where life's complexities and existential contradictions are often explored. It is where sacred and profane expressions coexist and describe positive and negative experiences (Dyson, 2002; Hodge, 2010; Pinn, 2003; Perry, 2004; Rose, 1994). Perry says, "Violence, sexuality, spirituality….all form part of the discursive space" (p.6). Hodge (2010) writes, "[Hip hop] allows everyday life, language, and culture to be given fair examination. There is nothing too sacred to talk about or deal with" (p. 25). Hip hop that exposes injustice is considered political and socially conscious and is often associated with hip hop spirituality. Hip hop spirituality portrays God of "the streets" and Jesus as a 'social critic and revolutionary' (Cheng, 2009; Dyson, 2001, Spencer, 1991). Hip hop's offensive and profane elements also reflect deep religious truths that challenge traditional Judaic Christian perspectives (Dyson, 2001; Pinn, 2003; Zanfagna, 2006). Hip hop artists, according to Zanfanga (2006), "…[push] the limits of excess and hedonism…to reach their own spiritual truths.(p.7)". The seemingly conflicted representations of spirituality reflect the complexity of faith as it relates to the human struggle (Dyson 2001; Pinn, 2003).

Many hip hop spirituality scholars use a Christian theological for understanding the religious and theological significance of hip hop. However, Miller (2013) calls for scholars to, "push [and] persist beyond the dogmatic and institutional confines of Christian analysis and constricting theological categories (p. 14)."

Hip hop spirituality in the context of Middle East and North African Arabic hip hop is related to Islamic Liberation Ideology. The connection between hip hop and Islam in the U. S. has been explored by scholars such as Aidi (2004), Miyakawa (2005), and Pinn (2003) to name a few. However, hip hop is rejected by orthodox Muslims because of its profane elements. Nevertheless, the exploration of Arab hip hop as religious or spiritual phenomena offers a broader perspective of Islamic faith. Asen (2010) sees the connection between hip hop and Muslim in this manner,

,,,shahada, from the Arabic for 'to bear witness/testify', evokes not only the Muslim profession of faith, but an expression of personal knowledge and belief, which can also take the form of art…Hip hop is a multi-faceted form of personal expression that serves to bear witness to one's unique view of the world...[that] can inspire others, and, in numbers, and lead to change.

Arabic hip hop is noted for its "defiant political rhythms" (Wright, 2011) that protest injustice and oppression call for political, social, and economic change (Ghosh, 2011; Gross, McMurray, &Swedenburg, 1994; Shonekan, 2010; Soysal, 2004). Using Islamic Liberation theory to analyze Arabic hip hop will broaden the theoretical framework for understanding hip hop spirituality and invite a multidisciplinary approach to examining pop culture that can broadly engage religious themes.

Spirituality and Hip Hop

Hip hop is a contemporary song form that began as a Black cultural expression and creative identity similar to other forms of Black music such as blues and jazz that can be traced to West Africa (Cones, 1997; Dyson, 2001; Jones, 1963; Rose, 1994; Pinn, 2003). Hip hop origins and purpose challenge status quo and is a revolutionary cultural force (Asante, 2008, as quoted in Vito, 2011). In its earliest stages, hip hop was an outlet for disenfranchised youth of color (Vito, 2011). Hip hop spirituality is a street spirituality that recognizes God in everydayness (Spencer, 1991; Wicks, 1995). Dyson (2001) describes it as an 'irreverent theology' because it questions the existence of human suffering and oppression, particularly among African Americans (Dyson, 2001; Hodge, 2010). Hip hop spirituality, as defined by (Hodge, 2010),

…a study of the Godhead… in the urban context, with the goal of better understanding God's rich and complex love for everyone…and the revelation of God through the liberation of the oppressed from the oppressor. (p. 21)
Hip hop spirituality's emphasis on liberation of the oppressed is connected to liberation theology (Dyson, 2001; Gutiérrez, 1988; Hodge, 2010). Further, it combines liberation theology and the work of Paulo Freire (1970) with the civil rights and Black Power movements. Cone's "Black Theology" theory, is defined as analyze[s] the black man's condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people to destroy white racism (p. 117). Cone writes, "When a poor person is denied his humanity, stripped of his self-respect, and humiliated through unjust, political and economic arrangements, he is a victim of a system repudiated by the gospel." (p. 47). This theological perspective views sin as a social, political, and economical oppression of the poor. Themes of racism and oppression are reflected in hip hop lyrics such as Kanye's *Jesus Walks* and Tupac and Outlawz' Black Jesus). Public Enemy, Immortal Technique, Dead Prez, TalibKweli, MosDef and others are also known for lyrics that challenge injustice in America. Muslim American hip hop artists such as YasiinBey (aka MosDef) and Q-Tip often incorporate elements of their faith by speaking out against oppression. Five Percenters, a quasi-Muslim movement, are known for their conscious raising, Black positivity music, known as 'God hop', that is infused with spiritual messages (Miyakawa, 2005). Mobb Depp and Wu Tang Clan are known to infuse Five Percent theology in their music. While Five Percenters' polytheism, and glorification of alcohol and drug use are highly criticized and considered morally unacceptable, they have had a significant impact on youth and hip hop culture, especially in New York City (Aidi, 2004). The language of Islamic hip hop is not limited to Black American Muslims. Arab American hip hop artist such as Aman, and Latino Muslim artist such as NajeelahNur use their music and faith to speak out against injustice (Aidi, 2004).

Faith linked to activism and movements of resistance is the guiding principle of Black Theology, Muslim Revivalism, Liberation Theology (Shariati, 2007; Yadegari, 2001). Some theorists also associate the fight for justice and equality with hip hop spirituality, according to some theorists (Dyson, 2001; Hodge, 2010). Islam is a liberating religion and fighting inequality and injustice is a religious obligation (Shariati, 1978; Bensaada, n.d.). Ideally, "Islam was both an ideology and social revolution which intended to construct a Classlessand   free society on the basis of equality and justice and in which live enlightened, responsible and free people." (Rahnema, 2000: 236)

Shairati (1978), a Liberation Theologian, was an advocate of the politically repressed, socially alienated, and economically disadvantaged. He promoted justice and equality and used Islam ideology to mobilize the masses for national liberation (Torbat, 2009). He theorized that only an awakened and reformed collective can bring about social change (Shariati, 1978). Arabic hip hop is a form of resistance that is connected to Shariati's Islamic Liberation Theology. Arabic hip hop is being used as a tool to challenge the dominant oppressive political forces and awaken the consciousness of the people with hopes of social change.

Arabic Hip Hop & Liberation

Middle East and North African hip hop is used as a tool to respond to oppression similar to Rai, which began in the early 1900's in the urban centers of western Algeria by migrants from the countryside (McMurray &Swendenburg, 1991). Algerian migrants developed Rai as a response to oppression of European settlers (Gross, McMurray &Swendenburg, 1994). Rai musicians sang about social issues and mixed sacred and profane lyrics that were condemned by the Algerian government (Gross, et. al., 1994). It became popular among Algerian youth and an artist, Khaled's, song became the theme behind the 1980's revolution (Lawrence, 2002). Rai music provided an opening for other musical genres such as rap, techno, and reggae and paved the way for female performers.

Arabic hip hop often draws attention to local issues specific to the Arab world (Kahf, 2007). According to Moore (2004), Arabic hip hop artists "[speak for] a generation disenchanted with what they see as endless violence, economic hopelessness and ineffectual leaders with hopes of transforming their societies." An example of this is the Palestinian group DAM. Their first hit *Min Irhabi* (translated: *Who is the Terrorist*) DAM raises issues of government corruption, violence, and injustice. They also speak of discrimination and oppression that is linked to their racial/ethnic and religious identity. Despite being heavily censored and at risk for incarceration for expressing political, Palestinian and other Arabic hip hop artists take continue speak out against injustice with hopes of bringing about change. Their resistance is an example to others that they do not have to accept oppression—they can fight back. However, spoken word via hip hop is not enough to change a society. Social revolution requires an awakened consciousness as well as action.

Hamada Ben Amor, aka El Général, a Tunisian rapper, posted *RaisLebled* via social media. The song criticized the president and spoke out against youth unemployment and government corruption shortly before a Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, 26 years old, set himself on fire to protest the desperate economic conditions and police mistreatment (Honwana, 2011). A couple hours after Bouazizi's self-immolation, several hundred people protested against poverty, youth unemployment, and police brutality (Ryan, 2011). *RaisLebled, " RaisLebled* awakened other Arabic communities and became the rallying cry in Tunisia as well as Egypt, Algeria, Libya, and Morocco with hopes for social change (Ghosh, 2011;Peisner, 2011, Wright, 2011).

Morocco is a country that is slow to change and reluctant to embrace new ideas. Music and mixing of the sexes is still forbidden, but Moroccan female MC's are performing and drawing international attention. Tigress Flow, Moroccan female rappers, music represent a sense of independence and freedom not experienced by most Muslim women. They use their music to advocate for the rights of Moroccan women. It is the intersection of feminism and hip hop can be seen as Gold (2012) suggests, "… where voices can be heard, and used to effect change in the face of a dominant society that wishes to silence them." Soultana, the lead rapper of Tigress Flow, expresses outrage in "SawtNssa" (Women's Voices), and she takes a stance against institutional oppression of women and speaks of the failure of Moroccan society to care for women and their children who are not supported by husbands/fathers. In addition, she talks of the hypocrisy of those who condemn prostitutes, but fail penalize the men who patronize prostitution. Sexual violence, literacy, and child labor are some of the gender equality issues in Morocco. Soultana's music represents resistance to severe injustice and domination by men. Her lyrics and music challenge gender identity, sexuality, tradition, and more with hopes of changes that will lead to a more equal and just society.

Conclusion

Hip hop spirituality is a liberating force that can be identified in music in the United States, Middle East and North Africa. Islam is influencing hip hop directly and indirectly in the U. S. and in other parts of the world. Arabic hip hop artists' message of social justice can ignite the imaginations of the people so that they are empowered and begin fighting for justice and equality. This fight for human rights is a reflection of spirituality and example of faith in action. Arabic hip hop has enabled young women to express solidarity with young men in their critique of and struggle against mainstream society with hopes of social change. It is a space for young women and men to express their struggle and fight for a voice within the community. These artists indirectly impact socio political issues by nurturing, nourishing and evoking the consciousness of the oppressed through their music. In some cases such as the Jasmine Spring, hip hop served as an inspirational force to the masses as they began to fight for their own freedom (Brueggemann, 2001). The extent to which Arabic hip hop influenced change in people's consciousness is unknown, but artists have played a significant role in the social revolution.

Music as a tool fight oppression has been effective in uniting people who are in the struggle for liberation; but much more movement is needed in order to bring about social, economic, and political unity. As governments have been overturned, little is known about the future of Middle East and Northern African countries with regards to social changes that will benefit the oppressed, however, Arabic hip hop, will continue to be a significant spiritual and social influence to youths.

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