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Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures

Music: Hip Hop, Spoken Word and Rap: United States of America

Introduction

Islam has long been a driving force in histories of rap music and hip hop culture, in large part because of the religion's strong roots in Black communities in the United States. Since its inception in the urban landscapes of the Bronx and other New York neighborhoods in the early 1970s, various forms of Islamic ideology and discourse have deeply informed the construction and evolution of hip hop, concurrently as musical genre, political ideology, and global cultural phenomenon.

In the evolution of these trajectories of meaning, women – both Muslim and non-Muslim – have played critical roles in forging the intersections between hip hop and Islam, while Islamically-influenced discourse has continually informed performances of gender and sexuality within hip hop culture. Yet just as contributions of female artists and Islam's presence in hip hop are severely under-documented, the significance of Islamic notions of gender and sexuality and the involvement of Muslim women have been overlooked in a diverse array of scholarly fields and areas of research, including hip hop studies, gender studies, religious and Islamic studies, and race and ethnic studies.

Such omissions are increasingly problematic in the post-9/11 world, which has witnessed the rise of the "Islamic rap" – a term that is discussed more later – and the rising visibility of Muslim female hip hop artists, both in the United States and worldwide. In large part, this increase is attributable to the desire of Muslim youth worldwide to simultaneously counteract misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims in the Western media and develop forms of cultural and political expression that reflect their religious beliefs.

For female Muslim artists, hip hop has also provided a cultural milieu for the critique of the orientalization of Muslim women and gender inequality within and outside Muslim communities, as well as a means of contributing to larger political critiques of Islamophobia and the War on Terror. In this way, participation in hip hop culture is a discursive terrain which allows Muslim women to express what miriam cooke has called the "multiple critique" of Islamic feminism: "a multilayered discourse that allows them to engage with and criticize the various individuals, institutions, and systems that limit and oppress them while making sure that they are not caught in their own rhetoric" (cooke 2000, 100).

Thus, this entry tracks a historical genealogy of the multiple critiques of Muslim women in hip hop culture, beginning with an overview of how Islam has shaped larger discourses of gender within hip hop culture, looking specifically at the development of Islamic ideology in African American communities and Black culture from the 1970s to the 1990s. It then turns to an overview of rise of the "Islamic Rap" in the contemporary post-9/11 hip hop scene, and highlights a number of Muslim female rappers, spoken word artists, DJ's, and producers. While the entry's primary focus is on the United States, it also pays close attention to the emergence of Muslim women in hip hop worldwide as an integral part of what H. Samy Alim has called the "transglobal hip hop umma" – a worldwide Islamic network connected through the multifaceted cultures of hip

hop (Alim 2005, 265).

Historical context

To fully contextualize both Islam's significance in hip hop and the contributions of Muslim women to the genre, it is necessary to first consider the history of Islam in Black America alongside existing discussions concerning women in hip hop. In addition, it is also helpful to reference discussions regarding the permissibility of musical performance, and in particular, women's musical performance in Islam.

With regard to Islam's history in the United States, Islam has long been associated with a politics of antiracism and social protest in Black American communities, a connection that may be traced back over 400 years. Scholar Sylviane Diouf has documented that upward of 30 percent of African slaves in the United States were Sunni Muslims from West Africa, and that the Islam of African Muslim slaves was "well organized and a galvanizing force ... the catalyst of revolt and insubordination" (Diouf 1998, 3). While early forms of orthodox African Sunni Islam had mostly vanished by the end of the nineteenth century, obliterated by the forced separation of Black families by white slave masters who punished Muslim slaves for attempting to practice their religion, Islamic religious practices still "left traces [and] contributed to the culture and history of [the American] continents" (Diouf 1998, 179). Indeed, such "traces" – in particular, as a "galvanizing force" in Black American communities – arguably enabled Islam's reemergence and steady spread amongst Black American communities throughout the twentieth century, during which Islam became the fastest growing religion in Black America through organizations such as the Moorish Science Temple (MST), the Nation of Islam (NOI), the Ahmadiyyat Movement in Islam (AMI), the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths, and Imam Warith Deen Muhammad's American Society of Muslims.

Yet the practices of what some scholars have called the "proto-Islamic" nature of early groups such as the MST and the NOI bore little resemblance to the orthodox Islam practiced by West African slaves. Blended with elements of Christian mysticism and freemasonry, and in the case of the NOI, steeped in philosophies of Black nationalism, these early twentieth century incarnations of Islam strongly appealed to African American migrants to expanding industrial centers in the northern United States such as Chicago, Detroit and New York. In the broadest sense, the various manifestations of Islam in groups like the MST, NOI and AMI – while very different – shared a common theme: all rejected pervasive white supremacist Christian ideologies of Black inferiority, and provided ethical, moral, and spiritual frameworks for individual and community uplift. As Black American Islamic studies scholar Sherman Jackson has argued, the basis of Black American Islam is the "thoroughly American phenomenon of 'Black Religion,' essentially a pragmatic, folk-oriented, holy protest against anti-black racism" (Jackson 2005, 4).

Of the Islamic organizations named here, the NOI is the best known, and has had a significant impact on hip hop culture, and the broader sphere of Black popular culture. The organization's most famous minister, Malcolm X, was for a long time a cultural icon of the hip hop generation, in particular following the release of director Spike Lee's 1992 film *Malcolm X*. Indeed, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Black nationalist discourses of Islam experienced a widespread resurgence in the United States as a result of Lee's film and the injection of references to NOI terminology by artists such as Paris and, most notably, Public Enemy – often called the greatest hip hop act of all time.

Yet another offshoot of Islam, the Five Percent Nation, has in many ways had the largest impact on hip hop culture, in terms of the volume of its presence amongst hip hop artists themselves and its impact upon the genre's terminology, symbols, and ideology. Even more so than the NOI, Five Percent views have been deemed by mainstream Muslims as heretical; the basic premise of the organization is that 85 percent of people are without knowledge, 10 percent are bloodsuckers of the poor who have knowledge and power but use it to abuse the 85 percent,

and the 5 percent are the poor righteous teachers who preach the divinity of the Black man who is God manifest and will save the 85 percent from destruction. Despite their position outside Islam's mainstream, however, as journalist Naeem Mohaimen writes, "From the very beginning, the 5 Percenter sect was particularly skilled at creating iconography that appealed to inner-city youth ... Rappers, beatboxers, and DJs became preachers, spreading the theology at the speed of music" (Mohaimen 2008).

From the late 1980s on, rappers who were members of (or affiliated to) the Five Percenters were extremely influential in hip hop, both in terms of commercial success and critical acclaim. Amongst these artists are Rakim Allah (of Eric B and Rakim), Big Daddy Kane, Poor Righteous Teachers, Busta Rhymes, Leaders of the New School, Guru, Pete Rock, Mobb Deep, Queen Latifah, Erykah Badu, and members of the groups Wu Tang Clan and Digable Planets.

As a result, the presence of women within Five Percent and NOI – and thus, certain discourses of Islamic ideology – has come to have a measurable impact on representations of gender relations both within and beyond Black American communities. Despite the fact that Five Percent and NOI teachings have often been considered to represent inauthentic forms of Islam by orthodox (mainly Sunni) Muslims, "Islamic" archetypes of dominant, powerful male heads-of-households and modest, submissive, nurturing women have long been explicitly and implicitly present in the sphere of hip hop culture.

For example, in Five Percent doctrine, Black men are considered Gods, and thus all receive the surname "Allah" to indicate their divine status, while Black women are thought to be one step short of the divine, referred to as Earths or Queens. Concerning women's status in the organization, cultural anthropologist Ted Swedenburg writes:

Just as the Earth revolves around the sun, woman is subordinate to man. A Queen or Earth must cover three-quarters of her body, just as three-quarters of the earth is covered by water, and so Five Percent women wear head covering and long-loose-fitting garments. A female Five Percenter is known as a "Muslim," unlike the male "God," because she witnesses to the fact that her man is Allah (Swedenburg 1997).

Swedenburg concludes, "although Five Percenters tend to treat women with respect," eschewing much of the degrading language referring to women (e.g. "bitch," "ho," etc.) that is common throughout hip hop, "their orientation creates little space for female Five Percent rap performers or the articulation of women's issues" (Swedenburg 1997).

While women are afforded esteem for their roles as mothers, wives, and nurturers of men and children, they are also repeatedly encouraged to defer to the voices and opinions of men. As rappers Brand Nubian put it in their 2003 song, "Love Me or Leave Me Alone": "I ain't down for a honey who don't wanna submit/Always throwin' a fit, wanna talk a lot of shit ... /See I'm not the kind to let a woman run it." Thus, while women might not have been as ruthlessly subjected to sexual objectification as in the works of non-Five Percent artists, such lyrics demonstrate how women should be seen (and appreciated, perhaps), but not heard.

Whereas during this period, Black women were often portrayed in the media and popular culture as domineering and overly assertive in terms of their professional and economic goals, such discursive logics within hip hop served, in a sense, to put Black women in their place, encouraging women to take a backseat to their male counterparts in their roles as artists, as well as in contexts of domestic relationships. In 1990, a book written by female NOI follower Shahrazad Ali entitled *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman* was a bestseller that sold over a million copies, and, as hip hop scholar Bakari Kitwana describes it, "lauded the self-sacrificing helpmeet women of yesteryear and condemned the 'everywoman' of the 1990s," thus setting off a firestorm of debate in Black communities concerning growing antagonisms between Black men and women (Kitwana 2003, 89). Thus, it is reasonable to say that a reactionary, and deeply conservative form of Islamic ideology lay at the heart of what

Kitwana has called “the new war of the sexes” in Black Americans of the “hip hop generation,” those born between 1965 and 1984 and who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s (Kitwana 2003, 85).

In recent years, a number of texts have emerged warning of the danger of constructing Islam as advancing essentialist – and ultimately oppressive – gender roles, especially in regard to Black women’s choices to accept Islamic identities within the United States (see Karim 2006a, 2006b, Rouse 2004). For some, such as historian Ula Taylor, gender discourses such as those of the NOI and Five Percent revealed “a patriarchal movement designed to return the ‘so-called Negro’ to his glorious ancient past” by asserting a “rhetoric of love, protection, and respect” for women that ultimately “helped camouflage gender inequalities” (Taylor 1998, 182–3). Others, however, such as Jamillah Karim, point out that Black American Muslim women in many cases did not view such prescribed gender roles as degrading, but rather as a means “for African American men and women to reclaim the different but equal roles that God gave originally in order to restore stable families” that had been destroyed through slavery and the harsh realities of urban existence (Karim 2006a, 26).

While both perspectives reflect the diverse realities of Black Muslim women’s lives in the United States, within the realm of hip hop, where the emphasis is on self-aggrandizement, braggadocio, and commanding respect, attributes of modesty and submission fundamentally impede the ability of female MCs to take “control of the mic,” i.e. to have their voices heard within the hip hop community and beyond. As Tricia Rose points out in her groundbreaking text *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, the voices of young black women have long been “relegated to the margins of public discourse” (Rose 1994, 146).

Indeed, women have continually struggled for their concerns to be voiced in hip hop; however, for the handful of women who have achieved success in the medium, hip hop has come to represent “a relatively safe free-play zone where they creatively address questions of sexual power, the reality of truncated economic opportunity, and the pain of racism and sexism” (Rose 1994, 146). In addition, while hip hop’s discursive sphere has served as an effective public arena for the critique of patriarchy and rejection of the submissive roles described here, it is also critical to note, as Rose states, that female rappers have constructed their narratives as “part of a dialogic process ... [in which] black women rappers are in dialogue with one another, black men, black women, and dominant American culture as they struggle to define themselves against a confining and treacherous social environment” (Rose 1994, 148).

As shown by miriam cooke’s notion of “multiple critique,” Black female rappers have always worked to simultaneously engage and critique the individuals and institutions around them, while remaining an integral part of the “hip hop community.” In doing so, they have constructed spaces of agency, albeit ambivalent, that simultaneously resist and maintain the various hierarchies of power in which they craft their narratives.

The rise of Islamic rap/The emerging Muslim women of hip hop

The “dialogic process” of Muslim women in hip hop is necessarily even more complex, as it involves not only the types of dialogues already referred to (with men, other women, and dominant culture), but a continual engagement with Islamic institutions, scriptures (in particular the Qu’rān and ḥadīth) and religious practices as constituted through local, national and transnational networks.

A central tension within the dialogic process of Muslim women in relation to hip hop, and indeed all forms of musical performance, is what is often called the “problem” of music in Islamic societies (Weiss 2007, 188). Islamic scholars have long debated the status of music as ḥalāl (permissible) or ḥarām (forbidden) because

musical performance by people of either gender tends to be associated with a relaxing of morals. This loosening of morals ... often causes a breakdown in proper public demeanor of

both the listeners and the performers, either spiritually or in an embodied way ... When women are involved in performance, it is commonly assumed that they themselves are not pious ... it is reasonable to say that a basic assumption about female performers in Islamic communities is that they are immoral to some degree (Weiss 2007, 188).

It is difficult to state definitively whether or not the associations between immorality and musical performance are the central reason why there has been such a dearth of Muslim women performers in hip hop both in the United States and beyond. However, Muslim men have long figured prominently in hip hop culture; in addition to the NOI and Five Percent performers already mentioned, Sunni Muslim artists such as Mos Def, Q-Tip, Ali Shaheed Muhammad of A Tribe Called Quest and Lupe Fiasco are among the most well-known and respected artists in hip hop. Yet until very recently, there were very few (if any) practicing Muslim female hip hop artists, though Islamically-influenced artists such as Erykah Badu, and the Fugee's Lauryn Hill often used Islamic references in their work.

Thus, while Muslim male artists in hip hop's mainstream have seemingly been able to reconcile practices of Islam with their roles as artists and performers, women have had difficulty integrating their identities as Muslims and artists. For example, in a 2009 interview, rapper Eve – who has at times been erroneously labeled as a Muslim female hip hop artist – stated that issues of lifestyle and performance ultimately prevented her from adopting the faith, saying, “I have studied Islam for about a year with the intention of converting, but I didn't have the right mentors. I didn't want to be a hypocrite to the religion. I love music and those things could not go together” (Safdar 2009).

In the wake of the events of 11 September 2001 and the increasing visibility of Islam and Muslims in the United States and Europe, new intersections are being forged between Islam and hip hop that are responding to and transforming such racial and gender dynamics. Specifically, a growing trend of “Islamic hip hop” has been spreading amongst Muslim American youth and Muslim youth across Europe who are increasingly looking to their faith to find forms of cultural acceptance and community. Journalist Peter Mandaville writes that Muslim youth are “searching for music that reflects their own experiences with alienation, racism, and silenced political consciousness,” and hip hop, with its antiracist social legacy and roots in urban Black America, seems to provide an ideal cultural vehicle to express such views (Mandaville 2010).

In the United States, this development is taking place in the face of growing diversity within Muslim American communities; whereas “Muslims” in the United States were mostly African Americans prior to the 1970s, post-1965 immigration shifts have transformed “Muslim America” into the most diverse religious community in the United States. While exact statistics are not known, a 2007 Pew Research Center survey stated that the Muslim American community's members hail from over 68 countries, and over 65 percent of the estimated 5 to 8 million Muslims living and working in the United States are from the Middle East and South Asia. This change has engendered various tensions between Black and “immigrant” communities over issues of resources, representation, religious practice, and leadership, including those concerning the role of women in Islam (see Jackson 2005, Karim 2005 and 2008, McCloud 2006, Wadud 2003).

In addition, young Muslim women in the United States and Europe have come of age in an era in which discourses of second (and third) wave feminism are an inescapable part of popular culture and politics, a fact that has spurred many to challenge traditional notions of women's servility and submission in Islam. Instead of rejecting Islam, however, many are seeking alternative interpretations of the faith that emphasize the religion's teachings on women's rights and gender justice. This trend should also be contextualized within the larger discourse of Islamic feminism and feminist interpretations of Islam (see Barlas 2002, cooke 2000, Wadud 1999 and 2003).

Hip hop, thus, has become a lingua franca of sorts through which young Muslim Americans facilitate intra-ethnic and cross-cultural discussions, with many seizing upon the Black American history of Islam as a legacy within which to root and link their struggles. For Muslim American women, it is also a discursive terrain upon which they may enact multiple critiques that express the distinct nature of their subject positionings in relation to traditional interpretations of Islam, gender relations within their specific racial-ethnic communities, Western feminist discourse, etc. For some, though not all, their work as hip hop artists functions as a form of da'wa, or the preaching of Islam.

In the decade following 11 September 2001, the number of Muslim artists working within hip hop has grown exponentially; within the United States, these include artists such as Washington D.C.'s Native Deen and Bay Area hip hop collective Remarkable Current, featuring DJ and producer Anas Canon, rappers Tyson, Kumasi, and Doc Zhivago, and spoken word artist and rapper Baraka Blue. Female hip hop artists such as African American rapper Miss Undastood, Bay Area based spoken word artists Calligraphy of Thought (of South Asian descent), and Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad have garnered critical acclaim for work showcasing their critiques of the War on Terror and narratives addressing the realities of being a Muslim woman in America.

A critically-acclaimed 2009 documentary which aired on public television, *New Muslim Cool*, told the story of Jason Hamza Perez, a Puerto Rican rapper with the Islamic hip hop group, M-Team (short for Mujahideen Team), while another 2009 documentary, *Deen Tight*, explored the phenomenon of hip hop in Muslim cultures, focusing on the struggles of Muslim hip hop artists trying "to find a balance between their culture and their religion," i.e. between the racialized cultural identities in the West, and "traditional" interpretations of Islam that deem hip hop *ḥarām*.

Two Muslim American women were amongst the various artists interviewed for *Deen Tight*: Latina spoken word artist and vocalist Liza Garza and DJ Raichous, who is Asian American. Both are converts to the religion, and a trailer for the film finds them expressing the deep cultural affiliations they had with hip hop culture prior to their conversions. "This is part of my blood," says Garza of her poetry and performance in one scene of the film. "My mother was doing this, my grandmother was doing this, my great-great grandmother was doing this. It's very, very heavy." When asked by the interviewer, "It's [your poetry and performance] something you can't part with?" Garza replies emphatically, shaking her head, "No, no. NO." DJ Raichous speaks of trying to learn "the skeletons of the religion and apply it to a different body," i.e. to infuse her work as a DJ with her religious faith. Thus, through the voices of Garza and DJ Raichous, one sees the ways in which Muslim women are engaged in a burgeoning dialogic that connects their participation in hip hop culture to longstanding debates over the roles of culture and religious practice in Islam, discussions that are intimately tied to discourses of gender. In this process, hip hop becomes a means to reinterpret and reconfigure Islamic practices in relation to socially progressive values they view as fundamental to hip hop culture.

Other artists, such as Palestinian Muslim American poet Suheir Hammad, are much more political in their work. Hammad, who grew up in Brooklyn and was heavily influenced by New York's hip hop scene, made her debut on hip hop mogul Russell Simmons's Def Poetry Jam just months following the 9/11 attacks. Sharing a poem entitled "First Writing Since," Hammad conveyed her pain over the attacks, while harshly critiquing the nation's xenophobic response with lines like:

one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers. one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in. one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed. one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people. or that a people represent an evil. or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page... if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip... (Hammad 2001)

Emphasizing the presence of Arabs and Muslims in the United States and linking the pain of New Yorkers following the attacks to that of Palestinians struggling under Israeli occupation in the West Bank, Hammad conveys the rage, grief, and ambivalence of Muslim and Arab women living the United States in post-9/11 America.

In Europe, acts such as the United Kingdom's Poetic Pilgrimage, France's Diam's, and a number of artists featured on a 2008 compilation entitled *Sisterhood: Western Muslim Female Rappers, Singers, and Poetesses* also advance powerful critiques of the War on Terror. Diam's, who raps in French, is of French and Greek-Cypriot origins, and converted to Islam in 2009. She is a fierce critic of the far right in France, and has released a number of songs condemning the xenophobia and racism directed toward immigrant, and in particular Muslim, communities in France.

Poetic Pilgrimage consists of Muneera Rashida and Sukina Abdul Noor, both the children of Jamaican immigrants. Though they initially gained acclaim in the London poetry circuit and Muslim hip hop circles in the United Kingdom following their formation in 2002, they have since gained a transnational following, touring across Europe and North America, and recently joined Remarkable Current's roster of artists in the United States. In their poem "Ode to Those Who Give a Damn," the women connect their histories as Black Muslim women to Muslim women worldwide:

I am a slave awaiting emancipation day
 I'm a believer preparing my soul for Judgement Day
 I'm a wife of a prisoner in Guantanamo Bay
 Fighting for his Freedom til my dying day
 You see, he's innocent regardless what they try and say
 I'm Betty Shabazz with Malcolm dying on my knees
 Watching his life force slowly deplete
 Knowing soon I'll be left alone to raise my seeds
 Their father martyred for the cause just so we could be free.

At the close of the poem, they proclaim their identities as Muslim women as a political-religious stance that provides them the strength and agency to confront unjust hierarchies of power, saying:

But you'll see my
 Hijaab tied tight
 Black glove fist raised high
 Chanting the war cry "No Justice, No peace"
 Till the day I lose life (Noor and Rashida 2009).

DJ and producer Deeyah, born in Norway of Pakistani Muslim descent, brought together the various female Muslim artists on the 2009 compilation mixtape *Sisterhood*, a project of, as its press statement reads, "previously unreleased songs written by young up-and-coming female Muslim rappers, singers, and poetesses from the UK, Europe, and the US." Discussing her reasons for putting together the project, Deeyah states:

Hopefully this can help create platforms to have [Muslim women's] voices and opinions heard

as both artists and Muslim women living in Western societies. Female Muslim artists face a tough time. There's very little support for them, many of them have been actively discouraged – even by their own communities – from expressing their thoughts and dreams through music. But they are not alone as this compilation proves ... they have something to say and deserve to be heard (Deeyah 2008).

As an emergent genre, Islamic hip hop is challenging traditional interpretations of Islam, building bridges across racial and ethnic divisions in Muslim communities, linking the issues of Muslims worldwide to the antiracist struggles of Black Americans, and providing new discursive terrains upon which Muslim women are expressing the multiple dialogic processes that shape their lives. As the examples given in this entry demonstrate, the number of Muslim women working within hip hop culture is steadily on the rise, constituting a fundamental part of the construction of a burgeoning global Muslim youth identity and culture.

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Citation:

Chan-Malik, Sylvia. "Music: Hip Hop, Spoken Word and Rap: United States of America." *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*. General Editor Suad Joseph . Brill, 2011. Brill Online. University of California UC Santa Cruz CDL. 23 November 2011
<http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=ewic_COM-0701>

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