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Hip Hop of the Gods

Genius, a rapper in the Wu Tang Clan, is one of numerous hip hop adherents of the Five Percent Nation whose beliefs are often reflected in his lyrics. (Tibor Bozi/Corbis Images).

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Islamic themes and Arabic terms increasingly thread the colorful fabric that is hip hop. Self-proclaimed Muslim rap artists -- whether adhering to the Nation of Islam, the Five Percent Nation, or traditional Sunni Islam - proudly announce their faith and include "Islamic" messages of social justice in their lyrics.

Islamic motifs have long flavored hip hop. Many old school fans will also recall the video of Eric B and Rakim's "Know the Ledge," which featured images of the Iranian leader Khomeini and hundreds of Muslims bowing in prayer, as Rakim boasted, "In control of many, like Ayatollah Khomeini." In the mid-80s Afrika Bambaataa, Big Daddy Kane and Paris all gave praises to the Nation of Islam in rhyme, and in 1988 Public Enemy loudly asserted, "Farrakhan's a prophet who I think you ought to listen to."

"No other religion has affected hip hop like Islam," writes Adisa Banjoko in his forthcoming book, *The Light from the East: The Story of Islamic Influence in Hip Hop Culture*, a revealing collection of interviews with Muslim hip hop artists. "If you have ever listened to the lyrics of The World Famous Supreme Team, Public Enemy, Ice Cube, A Tribe Called Quest, Kam, Gang Starr, Da Lench Mob and many other groups like them, you have been listening to Islamically influenced Hip Hop."

"One of the earliest cats that were Muslim was Kool Moe Dee -- who was al-Islam [Sunni]," Banjoko continues. "Daddy O from Stetsasonic was into Sufism. One of the first rap cuts with a clearly Islamic message was Eric B and Rakim's 'Move the Crowd.' In the video, Rakim is on a stage speaking to what looks like a congregation. Other Muslim rappers are Q-Tip, Everlast, the Intelligent Hoodlum, Encore, Divine Styler, Mos Def. One of the most prominent DJs in Europe, DJ David -- winner of the 1990 World Championship -- is Muslim. As is Fabel, the dancer. Nas's father was al-Islam, but he [Nas] is a Five Percenter. "

Most "Islamic" references in hip hop are to the belief systems of the Nation of Islam or Five Percent Nation, a splinter group of the NOI. Rap artists in the Nation of Islam include MC Ren, Shorty from Da Lench Mob, K-Solo, Daddy O from Stetsasonic, Ice Cube and Jeru the Damaja. NOI theology finds expression in Ice Cube's "Death Certificate," Paris' "The Devil Made Me Do It," and Da Lench Mob's "Guerillas in the Mist." Similarly, the Chicago rapper Common makes frequent reference to NOI and Five Percent ideas in his rhymes; on the song "The 6th Sense," for example, he raps, "Some say I'm too deep, I'm in too deep to sleep/Through me, Muhammad will forever speak."

The Nation of Islam has been heavily involved in the hip hop community, sponsoring peace summits, brokering truces during the East Coast-West Coast war, and providing security for artists and events. Just last week rap mogul Russell Simmons, commenting on Sean "P-Diddy" Combs and Jay Z's run-ins with the law, told the hip hop journalist Davey D that "many of the problems that artists have been going through are related to altercations or racial profiling incidents that could've been prevented with effective security teams." Simmons says he is in the process of working with senior members of the Nation of Islam to establish a responsible and effective security force for hip hop artists.

"Hip hop is revolutionary. When it came out in the 1970s, it was not the norm. It was the voice of a downtrodden people -- people in poor areas strongly influenced by NOI and Five Percent ideas," says Shukriy (also known as "Fabel"), a Sunni Muslim hip hop activist, producer and choreographer whose crew performed in the movie *Beat Street*. "When people are in a rough situation, they gravitate towards a spiritual understanding of the world - it helps them get by. That's why many people in the ghetto moved to Islam.... The 1970s was an age of gangs. There were outlaw gangs with flying colors - people wanted to belong to something and so many joined the NOI and Five Percenters. The Five Percent were considered cool. I remember in high school they wore kufis with tassels and buttoned their shirts all the way up. I was actually a Five Percenter for a couple of months.... Some rappers are actually looking for a better way to live. Some rappers who claim to be Islamically influenced are more consistent than others, whereas some may not have a proper understanding of Islamic morals and values at all."

As followers of Sunni Islam ("al-Islam" in hip hop parlance), Q-Tip (Fareed Kamal) and Mos Def are in the minority, but are among the most highly acclaimed hip hop artists, lauded as representatives of hip hop's school of "conscious rap." Though Q-Tip has come under fire for his use of scantily-clad "booty girls" in his "Vibrant Thing" video, Mos Def, who appeared on MTV's *The Lyricist Lounge*, and in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, is hailed as a keeper of the "positivity" flame.

In an interview with Beliefnet, a website covering religious issues, Mos Def, whose 1999 album *Black on Both Sides* opens with a Muslim prayer,

described his mission as a Muslim artist. "I'm just trying to do the best I can with what it is I have and begging Allah to help me," he said. "It's about speaking out against oppression wherever you can. If that's gonna be in Bosnia or Kosovo or Chechnya or places where Muslims are being persecuted, or if it's gonna be in Sierra Leone or Colombia -- you know, if people's basic human rights are being abused and violated, then Islam has an interest in speaking out against it, because we're charged to be the leaders of humanity."

While the requirements of "official" membership in the religion are unclear, Five Percenter (including Busta Rhymes, all members of the Wu Tang Clan, Gang Starr, Mobb Deep, Pete Rock and CL Smooth, and Digable Planets) are the most visible "Islamic" rappers, and their lyrics -- punctuated with numerology, cryptic "scientific" epigrams, and at times pejorative references to women and whites (as "white devils" or "cave-dwellers") -- have aroused the most interest and controversy.

The Five Percent Nation (or The Nation of Gods and Earths) is an offshoot of the NOI that was founded in 1964 by Clarence "Pudding" 13X, who broke with Elijah Muhammad, changed his name to "Allah," and refashioned the theology of the Nation of Islam. He taught that the black man was God and that his proper name is "Allah," that 85 percent of the masses are ignorant and will never know the truth, that 10 percent of the people know the truth but use it to exploit and manipulate the 85 percent, and that only 5 percent of humanity understand the "true divine nature of the black man who is God or Allah."

Based in the "Allah School in Mecca" on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard just off 125th Street in Harlem since 1967, the Five Percent Nation spread through New York state to American cities on both coasts. In Five Percent theology, Manhattan (particularly Harlem) is known as "Mecca," Brooklyn is "Medina," Queens is "the Desert," the Bronx is "Pelan" and New Jersey is "the New Jerusalem."

Rap lyrics are laced with Five Percenter references (for example, on "Rawhide," Method Man rhymes, "I fear for the 85 who don't got a clue"), and numerous hip hop expressions and slang derive directly from Five Percent Nation terminology. The expressions "Word is bond," "Break it down," "Peace," "droppin' science" and "represent" all come from Five Percenter ideology.

While hip hop in general has long been a male-dominated genre, Islam has had an impact on some female hip hoppers as well. R&B songstress Erykah Badu, whose music is strongly influenced by hip hop, often weaves Five Percent concepts into her music, perhaps most notably on her smash hit "On & On": "If we were made in his image then call us by our names/Most intellects do not believe in God, but they fear us just the same." Rap diva Eve has also expressed an affinity for Sunni Islam. "Islam is peace," she told the music website nation.com. "I've been through Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baptist church thing. Catholicism couldn't do it.... I got into Islam because of a friend of mine who lived across the street. I liked praying and learning. I don't know hardly enough about the Koran, but when I say the prayers, I feel peace."

Five Percent and NOI preaching in depressed urban areas helps to explain the Islamic influence on the ghetto-centric youth culture that is hip hop. "In the sprawling Brownsville ghetto in central Brooklyn, the 'righteous' ideology of the Five Percent Nation has become a dominant, pervasive and potentially permanent feature of the black adolescent subculture," says

Yusuf Nurreddine, a doctoral candidate who is working on a dissertation on the Five Percent Nation. "If the spiral of urban poverty and decay continues unabated, all of the inner-city neighborhoods might succumb to the Five Percent Nation in domino-like fashion."

Five Percent concepts are often circulated as "lessons" that are printed in Xeroxed pamphlets and passed from hand to hand in urban neighborhoods. Now, through its inclusion in hip hop rhymes, Five Percent rhetoric and philosophy has found an even more effective means of dissemination, beamed from "Mecca" and "Medina" to the American heartland and beyond.

Five Percent belief has always put a premium on rhetorical skills. Clarence 13X was apparently called "Pudding" because of his oratorical talents -- "his rap was so smooth and sweet that people would swallow his words like pudding." As Nureddine says, "The fascinating, even mesmerizing, appeal of the movement to the youth comes from the Five Percenters' eloquent and spell-binding usage of African American inner-city slang. Using the potency and vitality of the black dialect they open up new avenues of logic and thinking, or original ways of perceiving the world. For example, a Five Percenter will 'break down' [analyze] the word 'knowledge' -- it means 'know the ledge.' A man who has knowledge of self knows his strengths as well as his limitations, he knows how far to go." Hence, Rakim's song "Know the Ledge:" "Living on shaky ground, too close to the edge/ Let's see if I know the ledge."

Tensions exist between all three of the "Islamic" persuasions in hip hop. The Nation of Islam leadership has long resented the breakaway Five Percent Nation, and the relationship between the two organizations has been strained. Many traditional Sunni Muslims see Five Percenters as blasphemous heretics, and take serious issue with adherents of Islam who call themselves "Gods" and do not follow traditional Islamic dietary laws. In turn, Five Percenters break down the term "Sunni Muslim" to mean "Soon to be Muslim."

"Both Rakim and Wu Tang Clan did St. Ides commercials. No other Islamic sect in the world accepts drinking alcohol. Yet Brand Nubian are known to smoke weed by the pound and drink like fish," says Banjoko, himself a Sunni Muslim. "Poor Righteous Teachers seem to be the only group from the Five Percent that shuns drugs, alcohol and foul lifestyles.... All the talk about spaceships [a recurring image in Five Percent discourse] doesn't help either. The Five Percent Nation really hurt al-Islam because of their inability to hold on to any theological concept consistently -- not to mention their violence and misogyny, which hurts all true believers. But although they ruin the script, Five Percenters are the best rappers...legendary flowmasters."

First published: April 27, 2001

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