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THE INFLUENCE OF RAP IN THE ARAB SPRING

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ABSTRACT: Throughout history, music has been influential in social, religious, and political disputes. In the early 21st century, change in the established order can be found in expressing the need for reform halfway around the world in the Middle East’s Arab Spring. Rap artists such as El General (Tunisia), GAB (Libya), and Omar Offendum (Syria) used their talents to both spark and encourage protestors during the early days of the Middle Eastern protests that began in late 2010; these protests have since been coined “The Arab Spring.” The energy that could have been used to wield guns and bombs was instead poured into protest music that these and other artists produced during this time period. The relatively Western genre of rap music became integral in peaceful citizens protests happening all over the Middle East. Important to the fields of both communications and music, this research shows the relevance of rap music in dissenting communication of the 21st century, specifically in the Arab world. This research was conducted using news and scholarly articles, personal interviews, and musical examples from the countries of Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen. The research specifically examines the role of rap in the protests of the Arab Spring, why and how rap became a major medium for the protests, and the effect rap has had in peaceful conflict resolution throughout the world.
In the spring of 2011, multiple uprisings rocked the Arab world. In a total of fifteen countries, people staged revolts – some stronger than others – against their governments. These countries included Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. In the midst of these protests, music was prevalent. For the purposes of this paper, I will be including examples from Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen. This paper will discuss rap music—the genre most commonly used in the protests. This relatively new and almost exclusively Western genre appeared in some of the most unexpected places of the world, and in many ways it supported the revolution. Both the role of rap music during the protests in 2011, and the potential future of the genre will be examined.

Although the terms hip-hop and rap are frequently used synonymously, rap is the music that falls under the broader umbrella of hip-hop. Hip-hop itself is a culture, which includes deejaying, graffiti art, and break dancing as well as rap ("Hip-hop" 2012). It is necessary to make this distinction in terminology, because this paper will be exclusively discussing rap, not other aspects of hip-hop.

Since the genre is seen as more Western than Arab (rap originated in the United States), rap artists in the Arab world have not been publicly or culturally accepted, and for the most part the genre has been forced underground (Asen 2011; Peisner). In going public with the genre, as well as with the dissenting anti-government content, musicians risked their lives in order to support the protests in their countries.

Music in part took the place of violence during the uprisings. Rap was the most popular form of music to directly support the protests, but there were other, more traditional artists as well. These genres included Rai (the popular music genre originating in Algeria), metal, and more traditional folkloric music (Peisner). In a personal interview, Ibrahim, a student from Yemen, claimed that the chanting and drumming gave people something to do in Yemen’s Al-Tahrir square when they gathered and waited for the next wave of protests. Music kept the energy of the crowds up (even though everyone was exhausted from camping in a cramped square) and formed a sense of unity through a collective voice.

Although non-violent, there is a great amount of energy found in the lyrics of these protest songs. These scathing lyrics (originally in Arabic) from Tunisian rapper El General were meant for the late Tunisian dictator Ben Ali and have plenty of energy and expressive anger behind them:

Mr. President your people are dead
many people eat from garbage
and you see what is happening in the country
misery everywhere and people who have not found a place to sleep
I am speaking in name of the people who are suffering
and were put under the feet.


The energy that could have been used to wield guns and bombs was instead poured
into the music that surrounded the protest gatherings.

We know that rap played a major role in the protests, but why this specific
genre of music instead of another? Did the music of the Arab Spring have a reflect-
tive or effective role in the protests? Included in this paper will be a discussion of
why rap music was the most popular genre within the protests, and also if it was
used to incite change before and during the main protests (effective), or if music
was used as a tool to record, comment on, and export to the rest of the world what
was happening (reflective). The final piece to be discussed is how hip-hop music
is bringing people together in a different way; as a diplomatic tool used by the U.S.
State Department. Can this independent genre be morphed into a governmental
tool for diplomacy, and will it work as well to bring people together as in the Arab
Spring?

Why Rap Music

In order to understand why rap music became significant in the Arab
Spring, it is important to understand how it became significant to begin with.
Rap originated within African American communities in New York City in the
late 1970s. However, according to Afrika Bambaataa (Perkins 1996), rap music has
roots in African culture, Western scat singing, Jamaican cutting and mixing of mu-
sic, and verbal jousting popular in urban African-American populations (“Rap”
2012). Rap borrowed many traits from musical traditions of other cultures, but
it is accepted that creolization of rap music took place in the United States (Perry
creolization as “The hybridization of a culture as it absorbs and transforms forces
from outside; the production of new local forms in response to globalization.” This
hybridization of musical cultures occurred in the United States to form the genre
of rap.

Clive “DJ Kool Herc” Campbell, Afrika Bambaataa, and other well-known
elders within the hip-hop community generally agree that hip-hop culture began in
the South Bronx of New York City in the 1970s (Perkins 1996). Stricken by poverty,
drug usage, and crime, this area of the city was written off by nearly everyone but
the people who were forced to live there (mostly due to economic status). It was out
of this struggle that hip-hop culture was born. As a broader cultural movement,
hip-hop includes four major categories: deejaying, rapping, graffiti art, and break dancing ("Rap" 2012). It was the deejay that first ruled the rap scene, making beats and paving the way for the poetry of the lyricist (Perkins 1996). People rapped about their experiences and the direness of their situations. They rapped about the injustice they endured due to being African while living in America. It is important to note that this movement grew not from professional artists, but from amateurs. The main performers were youth, as was the target audience. Anyone who could keep half a beat could rhyme poetry and be heard. Freestyle—rapping lyrics instantly on the spot—became a brand new medium. Freely shared mix tapes began to rise in popularity above the use of record companies (Peddie 2006) making this new genre easy to produce and distribute.

Since rap was a genre accepted and created by youth when it first began, it fit right in with the largely youth-driven protests taking place in the Middle East. Using the brief history of the genre, I have concluded three main reasons why rap became the main genre of the Arab Spring protests:

1. Rap is the music of struggle. The historical roots of rap (originating in a tough New York City area) lent it to embodying the monumental struggles of the Arab people. This is a genre that has universal appeal for social struggles.
2. Rap carries with it an attitude of self-confidence. There is a proud confidence in the rhymes of a rapper, and that confidence is especially important in times of turmoil and persecution. Some early forms of freestyle rap were simply narcissistic boasting contests, and a simple Google search will prove that there is still a decent circuit of rap "battlers" today. This is certainly an example of an attitude of confidence and assertiveness in rap. Music journalist Andy Morgan agrees, saying, "Hip-hop is always something where plain speaking and blunt-speaking, is hard-wired into the genre" (Hebblethwaite 2011).
3. Rap is easy to create with limited resources. In the words of rapper The Narcycist, "All you really need is a microphone and a pair of headphones to record and then a good engineer to mix it. It doesn't take much to create" (Kouddous 2011). Even in the poorest and most oppressed communities, a group of people can get their hands on these simple tools. When recording instruments are not available, rap lends itself to be verbally passed down, since poetry is the core structure.

Although it has been called the “common global genre of western culture” (Neal et al. 2011), in the last twenty years rap has made an impact in many different parts of the world, arguably due to the three reasons listed above. In the 1990s civil war in Sierra Leone, rap music found a home with the youth there. Many of the youth, deciding to "put down the gun and pick up the mic" were former child
soldiers who are now rapping for peace. Rap not only gives them an identity but a political voice (Haaken 2012).

Rap and hip-hop culture have also found a place within the territories of Palestine. Long-standing hostility between Palestinians and Israelis continues into the 21st century. Unfortunately, much of this hostility has taken a violent form (Musallam). Da Arab MC’s (DAM), a famous rap group within the Palestinian territories, is a fine example of how rap music can peacefully support violent ideas. After the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in the United States, DAM began to get fed up with the Western stereotypes of Arab people. Angry about mistreatment in Israel and bad reputations in North America, the group released their song “Who’s the Terrorist” (“Meen Erhabi” in Arabic) in 2002. The track spoke of pain, injustice, and death among the Palestinian people and gained popularity almost instantly (Salloum, Araj, & Zaiter 2009). Instead of wielding guns and hand grenades as many of their fellow citizens had done, they wrote a rap. The song reached more listeners than one weapon ever could have, making DAM and their mission known both to Israelis and Palestinians, and, after translations, rekindling awareness among youth on a global level.

Recently, DAM worked together with the global group UN Women to produce a public service music video titled “If I Could Go Back in Time.” The video is aimed at mobilizing Arab youth to stand up against “honor killings,” the murder of young women (usually at the hands of a close family member) to protect the dignity and reputation of the family after she is suspected of infidelity or not agreeing to a family’s choice in arranged marriage (“Palestinian hip hop group DAM raises awareness…powerful music video” 2012). The United Nations estimates that 5000 women and girls are victims of honor killings every year (“Ending Violence against Women and Girls” 2000), and DAM plans to utilize their influence on youth culture to bring an end to that.

Middle Eastern rappers such as El General from Tunisia and Deeb and Arabian Knightz from Egypt were too oppressed to speak out about the injustice in their countries—until the fall of 2010 when the protests began in Tunisia. The Arab Spring became a perfect medium to showcase honest, heart-felt rap to the masses. It is discernable why Arab rap became a major player in these uprisings; however, is this music being used to have an effect on the protests, or as a tool to reflect upon them?

The Relationship Between Rap and Social Change

It is important to examine the causal relationship between music and social change in the Arab world. The findings from this research concluded that rap both affected the Arab revolutions and also presented a reflective quality. First discussed
will be how rap affected the protests of the Arab Spring, and then the reflective nature will be discussed. Examples of songs and artists from the Arab world will be used to make a case for each.

Hamada Ben-Amor, who goes by the stage name El General, is a rap artist from Tunisia and seemingly had a direct effect on the protests in his country. Ben-Amor grew up in Sfax, a city just south of Tunis. On November 7, 2010, when El General was just 21 years old, he posted his song “Rayes Lebeled” to internet sites YouTube and Facebook. Loosely translated, the song title in English is “President of the Country.” Television companies Tunivision and Al Jazeera picked up the song as well (Peisner 2011). As Andy Morgan wrote in an article for the Observer, “Within hours [of its release] the song had lit up the bleak and fearful horizon like an incendiary bomb.” El General’s MySpace page and mobile phone were disconnected, and the song was promptly banned by Tunisian government officials. However, these actions by the Tunisian government were in vain. The spark had been lit, and it was only a matter of time until the fire began to grow.

El General released his song to the Internet world a little over a month before fruit vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17th after being unfairly treated by police. It was this event that is credited with sparking the Arab uprisings, and shortly after, protests began against dictator Ben Ali in Tunisia. Although the distribution of “Rayes Lebeled” was not cited as the starting point of the widespread Tunisian protests, El General was confident in his influence. In an interview with David Peisner for Spin Magazine in 2011, El General spoke of why the song was successful: “I conveyed a message that’s never been conveyed before. I’m the first to have conveyed that message directly to the president. No one dared do that before.” When Peisner suggested that timing may have been a factor, El General immediately defended himself, saying that he posted the song before Bouazizi set himself on fire. “What if you’d posted it a year earlier?” Peisner questioned. “Probably the revolution would’ve started a year ago,” the artist replied (Peisner 2011).

This was big talk for an artist who was confined to the underground sphere prior to the protests and the release of “Rayes Lebeled.” El General seemed confident that his song not only added fuel to the revolutionary fire, but also was the catalyst that began it. On December 22, 2010, he released another song supporting the protests, this one titled “Tounes Bladna” (“Tunisia our Country”). The song quickly became another anthem for the protestors and was sung throughout the mobs of angry protestors. It seems that El General as well as other rappers including Lak3y (Tunisia), Arabian Knightz (Egypt), and GAB (Libya) wrote and released songs that had a major impact on the Arab uprisings, both in their home countries and elsewhere.

GAB, a rap group from Libya, released their song “Libya Bleeds Just Like.
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Us” in May of 2010, months before Qaddafi fell (Stack 2012). After the bulk of the violence ended (nearly a year later) the band was finally able to get back together again and work on a music video for the project, a sort of public service announcement to the rebels who had still not laid down their guns over four months after Qaddafi fell from power. This group and their hit song appeared to have an effect on the uprisings since they wrote the song long before the bulk of the protests began. The group is still working to have an effect on Libyan society today (as of January 2012) by fitting public service announcements into their music videos.

Examples of the reflective quality that rap added to the uprisings come from Arab artists who no longer live in their home countries. Omar Offendum, a Syrian rapper who moved to America with his family when he was just a child, is one such example. On his recent album, SyrianAmericana, Offendum has many tracks that talk about the revolutions and the continued violence in Syria. His lyrics are powerful, and his message is one of justice and peace. Since he did not live in Syria during the Arab Spring revolutions, his message is one that reflects upon the events happening there, and reflections upon his personal feelings evoked by those events. Through his reflections, his music is incredibly powerful to the listener. Since his lyrics are mostly in English, it creates awareness of the events of the revolution in a whole new audience base outside the Arab world.

Just as with any popular movement, the Arab rap “protest” movement had a bandwagon effect. According to David Peisner of SPIN Magazine, there was a bandwagon effect in Tunisia, following the fall of dictator Ben Ali. “Everyone had to get their protest songs out on YouTube,” Peisner recalls. This is another way music has become reflective in the uprisings. According to Peisner there is a slight bit of animosity between those artists who put themselves out on the front lines of the protests during the actual uprisings, and those who wrote songs congratulating the country after Ben Ali fell. However, he later puts a positive spin on the bandwagon effect. “These are legitimate points of view that had been stifled forever” (Peisner). He has a point. The bandwagon is an example of exactly what the original protesters were fighting for: freedom of speech. The fact that artists now feel comfortable enough to voice their opinions through song is a huge testament to what the original protesting artists were able to accomplish.

Western Stigma and Hip-Hop Diplomacy

Creolized in the Western world, rap has a decidedly Western stigma in other parts of the world, making its acceptance potentially more difficult. A Palestinian exchange student with whom I spoke explained that the older generation in his country does not support rap, partially because of the Western stigma. The younger generation of Palestinians enjoys it because it was the music that supported
the revolutions. Ibrahim, an exchange student from Yemen, noted that people in his country prefer a message behind their rap music. According to him, people don't care about the beats and sound as much as they care about the message. Message rap is a brand new idea because talking about the government was prohibited in old regimes. In the words of Ibrahim,

People started rapping against the government and against the system. People will always remember that this was the thing that got them together. To young people, hip-hop has a message; a message that will remind people of the revolution, remind people that we were oppressed at one time and people gave their lives so that we could be successful (Al-Hajiby).

It appears that rap will continue to find an audience (in Yemen at least) as long as it continues to remind people of the revolution.

Whether this Western stigma is positive or negative is unclear. The U.S. State Department however has recently begun using it as a tool in their favor. This branch of U.S. Government is actively seeking out “Music Abroad Artists” to serve a diplomatic purpose through the performing of Western music (“American Music Abroad”). Hip-hop artists such as Toni Blackman are traveling around the world to spread music and good tidings from the United States. In 2001, Blackman became the first U.S. Government sponsored rapper when she went on her first tour in Senegal (Dwyer). In a radio interview with National Public Radio, Blackman explains her role as an ambassador and talks about her tours to hostile areas, such as Indonesia in 2006. She talks about how she and her band mates had to be escorted by security guards and local police for fear of their security and sometimes their lives. It is difficult to imagine these hip-hop artists even having an audience in such a seemingly unfriendly environment, but as Blackman recalls, the scene was much different than one might expect. “Once you get there, the crowd goes crazy,” she says. “They give you so much love.” She has further insight on why this happened, “I believe hip-hop can be used as a tool to connect us and the emotional connection that we established in a day or just two days [in Indonesia] was phenomenal” (“Hip Hop Takes on a Diplomatic Role with the State Department”).

Those words bring us to the most important piece of this diplomacy effort. Rap can bring people together, even people with such different worldviews as residents of Indonesia and the United States. Not only has rap been used as a tool to assemble the protesters in the Arab Spring, it is also being used to build positive relations with the United States. Hip-hop, and its role of bringing people together in the protest realm, is likened to the folk music of the 1960s in the United States. “Both are oral traditions, rooted in community-driven narratives, and both are beloved for expressing the pleasures and struggles of everyday people” (Andrews
When rap music first began in the United States, it was the soundtrack for African American marginalized youth. However, disenchanted white suburban youth were quickly drawn to the "socially rebellious" genre as well, propelling it into the mainstream media (Perkins 1996). This is an example of the crossover effect, which occurs when a genre of music appeals to an audience group different from the audience it was first attempting to reach (Perkins 1996). Another crossover effect is beginning for rap on a global scale. Once a primarily Western genre of music, rap is now gathering an international fan base. This global crossover is paving the way for rap to become a common musical language of the world, one that can bring people together from all different backgrounds. The globalization of the genre will allow it to transcend the romanticism of a new revolution in the Arab world and become successful in an eventual post-protest era.

It is clear that rap has succeeded in bringing people together in the Arab Spring. Time will tell whether or not the U.S. State Department will have such success.

Conclusion

The primarily Western genre of rap music has found a niche within the Arab Spring protests of 2011. This is especially interesting because the genre is not native to this part of the world. It is music of struggle, attitude, and simplicity, and suited the parameters of the freedom protests. For artists and fans alike, rap has served as an alternative form of dissent as opposed to violence. Rap has both affected the revolutions and reflected upon them, and has helped bring people together under a common goal. Up to this point, it has been unable to be silenced since the Arab uprisings began. Rap has been successful in bringing people together in the Arab revolutions and in U.S. State Department tours, and no one can predict the size of its future impact in the Middle East and around the world.
Works Cited


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