



# HIP-HOP, BLACK ISLAMIC NATIONALISM AND THE QUEST OF AFRO-AMERICAN EMPOWERMENT

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Black Islam is a racial nationalist recasting of Islam, used as a creed of black empowerment in a quest for African American independence. Originating in the industrial inner-cities during the Depression, its leading organization, the Nation of Islam (NOI), was long at the margins of black aspiration despite renowned spokespersons like Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan. With the 1995 Million Man March it made an historic breakthrough, a development that can be related to the conditions of present-day black America.

The Presidency of Ronald Reagan was part of a white backlash that reversed the trend towards bridging the gap between black and white America that had commenced with the Civil Rights Era. Reaganomics was in short a massive redistribution of wealth from the poorer to the richer, as shown by the fact that the top upper class of less than one percent of the population increased its share of Americas' total assets, from 24 to almost 50 percent. The Reagan Revolution made the United States the most unequal country in the industrial world, with grim consequences for African America. Fifty percent of all black children are raised in poverty. Single mothers, many of them teenagers, head a majority of black families. Dubbed "welfare queens" they were targeted by the Reagan/Bush administrations' cutback policies. The average black family has less than one tenth in assets compared with the average white family.

The levels of black unemployment, under-employment, share of low-income jobs, poverty, illiteracy, drug use and crime skyrocketed.

Around one million blacks found themselves somewhere in the criminal justice system. The hyper-segregated black inner cities, home to roughly one third of the black population, turned into war zones. Statistics show that a black male was more in danger at home than he would have been as a soldier during the Vietnam War. In sum, the policies resulted in a situation in which blacks in the US became the only Western population with a declining life expectancy rate - a man in Bangladesh is more likely to reach 65 than a black male in the inner-city.

Minister Louis Farrakhan, the present leader of the Nation of Islam, urge American blacks to stop wining about racist injustices, as this leads nowhere. Had the administration been interested in solving the problems of its black citizens it would have done so way back. Liberation will only come from within. By reaching back to his roots, the black man will reconnect with his true, divine nature, and start acting according to his inherent creative

power that is of God and is God. Embarking on the blackosophic path of racial gnosis, the black man will break the mental chains that keep him stuck at the bottom of society, to arise as a Nation of Gods, mastering his own destiny. This is the true meaning of Islam, which if you break it down stands for I-Self-Lord-Am-Master.

The United States is condemned as Babylon the Great, bastion of the devil, whose global supremacy now is at its predestined end. Despite the apocalyptic orientation, black Islam is a religion of action, and the Nation has gained respect through its practical approach to problems produced but not solved by American society. Organised as a self-proclaimed administration of an independent state, ruled from the Black House in Chicago, the Nation has minister led departments for economy, trade, foreign relations, justice, education, medical and health care and defence. A nationalised economy provides an infrastructure and helps finance other projects such as private schools, HIV clinics, and rehabilitation programs for drug addicts and criminals. Soldiers of the Islamic Army are employed as security at various housing projects and the Nation has been instrumental in implementing a peace process in gang land black America. For the first time in this century, violent black crime is dropping, which in part can be explained by the impact of black Islam and the spirit of the Million Man March.

Observed from the perspective of civilising theory, the Nation can be described as a movement of auto-civilising that ultimately will adjust a segment of the African American community to the norms of the dominant culture of American society. Although the Nation is frequently portrayed as un-American, much of its Original Islamic ideals proves compatible with those of conservative, white, middle-class Americans:

The black-man-is-God thesis can be seen as an extreme version of a very American positive thinking, fully in line with its can-do orientation. Black Islam hails traditional family values, loyalty to the Nation and obedience to God. They applaud the decent, hard-working, God-fearing heterosexual, who should be neatly dressed, polite, modest, law-abiding and respectful to authorities. Its members are non-smoking, non-drinking, clean-living moralists who encourage self-help, mistrust social welfare, and value a God-centered education with emphasis on discipline and learning.

From a critical perspective, the Nation has a number of troubling features: reflecting the failure of democracy to ensure a decent living, the Nation suggests a theocratic alternative. God, not the nation's citizens, elected Farrakhan, who, according to the NOI Constitution appoint and discharge his ministers largely by will. The Nation has a militarized chain of command and does not approve of any internal dissident.

Black Islam is a racist and homophobic creed and has during the eighties developed a pronounced anti-Jewish sentiment. Politically, it has adopted elements of both the right and the left. With its authoritarian conception of race as an organism and with its morally conservative and socially progressive agenda, it can be seen as a black Islamic third positionist movement, that is, a leftist leaning black National Socialism. Some critics portray the Nation as a black Ku Klux Klan, and it has in fact developed a discreet network with white racial separatists.

The comparison is nonetheless false, a-historical and lacks a power perspective. White racism developed as an ideology of dominion, black racism developed as an ideology of empowerment. If the Nation suddenly would come into power in America, its creed might transform into an ideology of dominion, but that's a strictly hypothetical scenario. The difference between black and white organised racism is also reflected in action. The Nation of Islam has, to the best of my knowledge, not been lynching any white spokespersons, not been burning any white churches or bombed any school buses with white children. What violence there has been has largely been kept within the confines of the black community or in self-defence against the police.

Beside Farrakhan's personal charisma and its constructive community service, perhaps nothing has been as instrumental in spreading the gospel of black Islam as the raptivist faction of the hiphop culture. Originating as a genuine street beat in Harlem and the Bronx in the 1970's, rap music is a translation of the black urban youth experience. During the eighties, its popularity skyrocketed and the genre is presently a multi-billion industry, exploited also by outside producers and company executives. Expanding further it soon proved global in reach, and I got an interesting collection of localized rap music from Tai Pei over Karachi to Tripoli, where the meaning of its call for social justice and fight the power differ according to context.

Rap music is rhythmically moving postmodern bricolages, with samplings from various sound sources, from older hits to sermons, sirens or political speeches, frequently overlaid with explicit lyrics. This very explicitness frequently has been denounced as obscene and immoral, and certainly, there are many rap artists who confine their message to ego-boosting descriptions of sex, drugs, violence and easy money. This glorification of self-destruction is criticised not only from mainstream white America but also by spokespersons in the black community, including the raptivist category of the hiphop culture, which is the category of main concern here.

Most of the more influential message rap artists are either members or sympathisers of the Nation of Islam or other, related, black Islamic organisations, such as the Moors or the Nation of Gods and Earths. This include renown stars like Public Enemy, Brand Nubian, Poor Righteous Teachers, Lakim Shabazz, Paris, KAM, Ice Cube, Queen Latifah, Sister Souljah, Prince Akeem, KRS-One, Professor Griff, Big Daddy Kane, Mister Cee, Paris, Skinny Boys and Afrika Bambaataa, to name but a few. They all preach black Islam and address issues like police brutality, gang violence, and social injustice. Aiming at reversing self-destructive patterns among black youth, rappers call for community up-building and black liberation.

Rap lyrics frequently include quotations from black Muslim teachings, or make implicit allusions, using metaphors unintelligible to those unfamiliar with black Islamic beliefs, like "dead niggaz" (non-Muslim blacks), "Yacub's crew (whites) or "cave bitch" (white female). Ironically, raptivist is popular also among white youth, who might be unaware of the fact that they dance to their own destruction - a situation described by Ice Cube on his Lethal Injection album. It opens with a scene where a generic white man impatiently waits for Dr. Cube to give him a lethal injection, much like the way his white fans line up to by their annual hit of his funky anger. Dr. Cube then approaches the white man with a pistol, saying, "You want me to blow your head off, you gullible muthaphukka? And you're actually gonna pay me for it? Brace yourself!" and then BAM he puts a bullet in his head.

Everyone is obviously not that content. The FBI has condemned rap lyrics that "encourage violence against and disrespect for the law enforcement officer". Police organizations, such as the Fraternal Organization of Cops, called for a boycott of Warner Brothers during a ranging controversy over Ice T - who is not a black Muslim, but still a raptivist - and his "Cop Killer", a song dedicated to the LAPD, due to its record of police brutality (81 killings in proven police-misconduct cases only in 1991 when Ice T wrote his tune). The album was eventually withdrawn.

Jewish organisations unsuccessfully tried to persuade CBS to stop the Public Enemy single "Welcome to the Terrordome", but managed in getting the video banned from the Canadian channel Much Music. The Anti-Defamation League listed Public Enemy, Professor Griff and Ice Cube on their widely circulated report Black Demagogues and Extremists, President Bill Clinton publicly denounced Sister Souljah as a black racist and war monger, and the Simon Wiesenthal Center called for a boycott of Ice Cube's album Death Certificate.

To some extent, the reactions are understandable. To call a white woman "cave bitch", to

name a white "Lucifer, the devil, a snake"; to brand Jews "bloodsuckers of the poor", or to shout, "Fuck the Police", might seem offensive to the target - and this is as intentional as black Muslims believe American inequality to be. Rap is revolutionary music, carrying a message of 'either we gonna have justice or you better get ready, 'cause we gonna fight the powers that be and call down the consuming flames of Armageddon'. But to think that one can clear away the problem by banning the rappers or doing away with Minister Farrakhan is to be blind to the roots of the matter. Black Islam is not so much a problem as it is a symptom of increasing social problems tearing American society a part. Remove Farrakhan or the rappers and you'll probably find them replaced by other voices produced by the same social conditions that produced them. Black Islam is basically a consequence of the black experience, it is a social product, stamped with a "Made in the US", and if one really wanna rid it from American society, one need to address the real problems that black Islamic nationalism is a product of.