

Globalization of Hip-Hop:
The art is taken out of America to Japan, Cuba, Germany, and countries abroad

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Introduction

Hip-hop'sⁱ infiltration of the global scene has shown itself by becoming popular even in countries that are extremely anti-American. The growth of hip-hop on the global scale can be attributed to international conditions that promote teen-protest or otherwise similar to New York's South Bronx in the 1970s. On investigating countries that have teenage and youth mainstream and/or underground following of hip-hop, such as Japan, Germany, Cuba, Russia, and France, we become more aware of the cultures that foster expression in this way. Many Times when hip-hop experiences growth in a new country or area, the early partakers take the culturally accepted parts of American hip-hop as a base, and then transform this into an expression of their own. This can be shown through Japanese graffiti, many of their characters and symbols, such as the dragon, are used to shown crew/gang dominance, (similar to American gang graffiti).

With American culture having a growing influence on the international realm, it can be seen that the popularity of American hip-hop can have a profound effect on the rest of the world. Hip-hop can be easily adapted in some ways, (graffiti, and break-dancing), and in other ways it must be adapted to conform to the culture; you would not spin English popular songs in an environment that does not know anything about the singer or the song. There are many similarities and differences in international hip-

hop, in this paper I will try to show an in-depth analysis of these variations.

Hip-hop Background

The African-American movements, starting with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, gave some influence to the start of hip-hop. The Renaissance was thought of as the start of black expression. In this time period blacks wanted to change perceptions about differences and use knowledge to gain acceptance. This gave hip-hop a base that it needed to start; in the Renaissance the majority of the poets, singers, and artists were around the same age as the beginning participants in hip-hop. The civil rights movement, of course, gave minorities the rights to have equal protection under the law. The Black Power movement went away from the previous searching for acceptance, and towards establishing a sense of identity that did not need approval from the majority. This is prevalent in hip-hop's early music as most artist told stories of growing up in inner city areas that were less than appealing; these areas were glorified homes of street activity to many of them. Once again the average age of a Black Pantherⁱⁱ was 19 years old.

Upon the death of the leader of the Black Power movement, Malcolm X, there was an emergence of talent known as the Black Arts Movement. This movement provided much of the jazz that is in many hip-hop songs. With this as a backdrop we go to the South Bronx; the late 1970s South Bronx is undoubtedly known as the birthplace of hip-hop. The musical start (DJs and MCs) had worldly

orientation, with its three founders having Caribbean origins. The Other elements, graffiti and break-dancing, were not strictly American as the most well known tagger in the beginning was a Greek boy named Demetrius (Taki 183), and most break-dancers were of Puerto Rican heritage.

Early Conditions

In the South Bronx at that time there were many issues that plagued the area and its inhabitants. Across the nation cities and urban areas were losing “social services [while] information service corporations were beginning to replace industrial factories and corporate developers were buying up real estate to be converted into luxury housing (Rose, 27).” Without education and technical skills, former employees at industrial plants around the country would not be employed or be able to afford housing. The end result was a wider separation between the upper and lower income brackets. In fact “between 1978 and 1986 the people in the bottom 20 percent... experienced an absolute decline [while] the top 20 percent experienced most of the economic growth. Blacks and Hispanics disproportionately occupied this bottom fifth (Rose, 28).” The South Bronx was notably the United States biggest failure, and evinced many signs of desolation. The Cross-Bronx expressway tore a streak through the Bronx, displacing businesses and leading to suburban flight. This migration was from the South Bronx to boroughs, which had better housing and more profitable places to have a business. Suburban flight was also an effect of the

enforcement of the already outlawed segregation practices. With integration of schools, some parents moved to areas where blacks and other minorities could not afford to live. Other factors leading to utter destruction of the area were the increases of personal and business taxes, rent controls (price ceilings), and subsidies paid to welfare recipients for moving to the South Bronx area. All of these issues further led to the decline of the South Bronx. The factors were influenced by racial discrimination along with socio-economic issues and of course greed. The situation in the 1970 South Bronx was the origin of the hip-hop mindset, where the youth felt a need for expression while the outside world and the government that should be representing and protecting their community, instead left them feeling ignored and even taken advantage of. Even the movies of the time (*Fort Apache*ⁱⁱⁱ and *Wolfen*^{iv}) exploited their situation while the community felt as though they hadn't “been introduced to one soul who actually lives in the South Bronx [or] heard one voice speaking its own language” continuing even to say that Black and Hispanic neighborhoods were depicted “drained of life, energy and vitality (Rose, 33).” Hip-hop is the voice from the youth who were too tough to cry for help, and too mad to ask. The early practitioners did everything aggressively, tagging, breaking, scratching, and rhyming, but still made it look easy as if to say ‘we don't need or want help.’

Hip-Hop's Position Today

The hip-hop that was birthed in the most rundown of rundown city areas in New York, has enjoyed more success than even some of the earliest contributors would have thought. Nationwide, hip-hop has developed and expanded from the South Bronx to other parts of the city, to other cities, states, coasts, and regions. Hip-hop has grown to become the second highest grossing musical genre in the United States. Obviously it has grown outside of its original audience of mainly minorities, to having many concerts and record sales targeted to the mid-to-upper class white majority. It is clear that hip-hop can have success not only across cultural lines but possibly also overseas. This is because in music, fashion, and other ways “blacks have been the pacesetters for American style, defining what’s ‘cool, fresh,’ and who’s got it going on. Rap has led this global charge (Perkins, 259).”

Global Hip-Hop

With the exponential growth that it has experienced both in the US and abroad, hip-hop can be examined for styles and themes prevalent in each culture. Whether it is Japan, where the hip-hop youth take styles such as leather jackets, designer sneakers, and wild haircuts as showing that they are “openly admiring the rebellion that rap presents (Perkins, 259),” or Spain where hip-hop culture stays true to the element of Graffiti, a much overlooked (old-school) practice remains as “subways and streets are heavily tagged in the tradition of New York in the ‘70s (George, 203)” in either case hip-hop can’t stop and

won’t stop. As the industry gave less money to artists for selling CDs, artists began to tour both in the United States and overseas. From touring hip-hop (as with other American music) has been spread across the globe. With the lifestyles being highly associated with popular areas and entertainment, “hip-hop youth culture... is inspired by the Bronx, Harlem and the NBA (National Basketball League) (Kaya 49).” In addition to the respect given to American rap artists, countries often have emulators that adapt hip-hop to better fit their cultures.

Berlin, Germany

In Berlin the social classes are as separated as here in the United States. The minority in Germany is the Turkish migrants, and *Sicher in Kreuzberg*, by Ayhan Kaya, focuses in on this minority’s youth culture, and their propensity to involve themselves in hip-hop culture. Her findings report similar conditions/factors affecting Turkish-Germans as those that affected youth in 1970s South Bronx. In talking about the situation in Germany, Kaya states that the Turks are “unwanted as workers, underfunded as students, and wanted only by the police and courts,” she continues saying that the “minority youth recently seem to be subject to a state of structural outsiderism (Kaya, 48).” This closely resembles the American problems plaguing urban areas, which lack adequate education, resources, and career opportunities. As Bikari Kitwana states in his book *The Hip Hop Generation*, American youth have been harassed to the point of brutality by the police, “incidents of

police brutality escalated in Black and Latino urban communities... [and the numerous] incidents of young Blacks killed and beaten by police under questionable circumstances abound (Kitwana, 39).” Without fulfillment from the overarching culture, rebellion remains the most feasible option, but also the most dangerous. Most rebellion is illegal (i.e. drug selling and gangs). Hip-hop is often the best way to protest through the elements, Graffiti, Dee-jaying, Emceeing, and Break-dancing, all of which can incorporate the aggression and competition that is essential to suppressed teens looking to express themselves.

“Young people, in general, are socially conscious and critical of the increasing discrimination, segregation, exclusion, and racism in society. Consciousness of a shared position of subordination in society is expressed via the words of rap music, graffiti on the city walls, paintings and drawings in a way that branches out into new and growing social movements against racism and enforced ethnic boundaries (Kaya, 49).”

The statement made in this quote reiterates the movements in the 1960s that fought for civil rights and equal protection under the law. Once again the older generation may provide backing, as in the cases of the Civil Rights and Harlem Renaissance, but most times it is the youth that makes most of the impact in the movements. This is due to the tendency of the parent generation to

become complacent toward the adverse situations that have grown to be commonplace. This is a sad situation, but even worse is when youth do not feel that they have enough influence, or drive, to make a better future for themselves. The truth in the quote speaks universally of the minority youth that break from the mold to create new expressions that speak to the larger culture saying ‘this is who I am.’

Hip-hop’s first element, graffiti, was introduced in Germany along with the other elements before the Berlin Wall came down. In “American discos [where American soldiers brought] DJing, [and] Break-dancing,” Turks were exposed to hip-hop. As they grew into the culture they emulated the elements, including graffiti. Kaya states that the motivations for tagging are expression, group integration, distinction, and even as a proof of existence (I write therefore I am). In this context the Turkish youth “localize their power in graffiti and street fights providing them with a sense of recognition by the public (Kaya, 167).” Graffiti writers are even called ‘spray warriors’ who have a position opposed to the police and authorities. One interesting point came from one of Kaya’s interviews with a former tagger who was caught by the police after completing a piece. He was surprised as they reprimanded him, but did not beat him or tell his parents. After this incident he stopped but said if he had been beaten he would have continued, much more than he used to. His statement speaks to the spirit of rebellion, especially the increase in graffiti that would have come after

a police beating. You could even go as far as to connect his testimony to the statement made by Lee Quinones in the movie *Wild Style*, “you gotta go out and paint and be called an outlaw at the same time.” In this way the shocked graffiti writer, who went unbeaten, quit because the police did not address him as an outlaw. Once it became mundane, graffiti was no longer useful as a method of resistance.

The break-dancing aspect of hip-hop is analyzed in its German context, with the place being a situation of hosting (dominance) for the Turkish youth, the dance being both a substitution for fighting, and another source of standing apart. The dance ultimately creates “sublimation of fight into dance, of conflict into contest, of desperation into style and a sense of self-respect (Kaya, 169)”

Another way that American hip-hop culture has affected the Turks is the emergence of ‘cool’ style. This basically is explained as the tendency of youth to react calmly, or even non-affected, by situations. Cool is also defined as a swagger and sense of style that was taken from hip-hop tendencies to disengage themselves with the environment and “rationally evaluate others’ actions (Kaya, 170). Cool style embraces actions, dress, mannerisms, and speech. It is an outright rebellion against the older culture’s uptight and restrictive way of doing things. The adoption of the word ‘cool’ and other American slang words speak to the power of the transferability of US culture. The Germans have even picked up the prefix ‘un’ (uncool) to have an

antonym for the youth’s positive mode of style. This is the interesting portion of Kaya’s book, where she forgoes the elements of Dee-jaying and Emceeing and introduces an outsider’s look at hip-hop culture in adding ‘cool’ style as an element. When reading this chapter I was surprised that being cool and wearing baggy clothes takes precedence (internationally) over two of the most visible aspects of the culture.

Global Hip-Hop Hardship

Suppressed people have almost always been easy to find in Cuba. The Spanish-speaking Island has its issues that came with the fall of the Soviet Union, United States trade embargos, and Communism’s enforcement by Fidel Castro, but the youth still rebel through rap. One of their most popular groups, Anonimo Consejo, is also one of the most controversial. The group’s two members were influenced by hip-hop as teens when their makeshift radio picked up a Miami radio station playing Public Enemy. In Cuba, the society tries to ignore color, but the two dark-skinned members have noticed a contradiction where “all white people are saints and all blacks are delinquents [and] the stigma of being a young black man in Cuba wears on their nerves (Wunderlich).” Once again the presence of racism and discrimination weighs on the minds of the youth. The group took hold to P.E.’s lyrics promoting blackness and conscious thought, because there was nothing like this anywhere in Cuba, it was completely antisocial. Consejo formats their rap as a speaking medium over Cuban beats.

One concertgoer went even as far as to say "This music is not for dancing. It's for listening... And for Cubans, believe me, it takes a lot to keep us from dancing (Wunderlich)." The group has to be careful that their lyrics are not too controversial, or risk being arrested or possibly starting a riot, two events that would not please Castro. The problem for the group is that there is only one hip-hop promoter in Cuba, and this leads to the thought that the music will be state censored or state friendly. This would be the equivalent of the American music industry's current control of the content that will come out, with the focus in Cuba being less on profit and more on protecting the image of a happy society.

An American, born of Cambodian heritage, was surprised to find out that he was their superstar rap figure. Prach Ly had never lived in Cambodia nor had he released a CD there. The CD he made in America was just for himself and friends, but it found its way onto the Internet and the rest is history. His rap was about the hardship that his family endured escaping from the country during the time of genocide that claimed one of every four citizens.^{vi} Prach said, "I lost aunts and uncles and [my family] barely made it... The CD "was personal. I had to let it out. It was building up for so long." Cambodians who heard his music were mesmerized and one pop star said about his songs, "I've never heard any music carry information like this... I've never written a song about politics or society (Piore, 62)." This album is also noted in Piore's article as a possible educational tool that

would express the hardships of the time because most parents find it too difficult to talk about. Once again the power of hip-hop to convey a message that other forms of music, oftentimes, fall short of expressing.

Conclusion

From Germany to Africa, from Cambodia to Cuba, hip-hop elements can be found as an undying symbol of the rebellious youth saying we will not sit in acceptance of the current situation. Whether the medium used is paint, dance, or rap, hip-hop gives a way of defining a clear identification of oneself as a knowledgeable youth. The trends of hip-hop have continued worldwide since its early inception in 1970s New York.

Ethnomusicologist David Badagnani puts it best with his research stating that "many other oppressed or minority people around the world have recognized a very strong parallel between their social situations and that of black Americans.... Any time people do rap in any foreign countries they have an acknowledged indebtedness to black-American culture (Osumare, 117)." Even in places where the government or elders far overpower the youth in influence rap continues to remain as a voice that will not be quieted.

Authors Biography

Terry Williams, a junior in George Mason University's School of Management. Currently pursuing a Decision Sciences and Management Information Systems Degree with a minor in Information Technology. I have been an avid fan of hip-hop as an art form since about 1988, and the topic was chosen because I have lost most of my interest in hip-hop because of over commercialization. The international hip-hop scene has caught some of my focus because in many countries the culture is at, or progressing toward, the stage where I believe is the equivalent of the American hip-hop peak.

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ⁱ Hip-hop is a wide-ranging term that basically refers to the elements known as emceeing, dee-jaying, break-dancing, and graffiti.

ⁱⁱ The Black Power Movement's noteworthy group

ⁱⁱⁱ Fort Apache, the Bronx, Dir. Daniel Petrie (HBO Studios, 1981).

^{iv} Wolfen, Dir. Michael Wadleigh, (Warner Home Video, 1981).

^v Wild Style, Dir. Charlie Ahearn (Rhino Video, 1983).

^{vi} Prach Ly's CD was unnamed and refers to the Khmer Rouge period (pronounced Kh-maai) where Red Cambodians or "Khmer Rouge" controlled the country which they renamed "Democratic Kampuchea" between 1975 and 1978. Under the Khmer Rouge, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians died from execution, forced labor, disease and starvation. Number of deaths cannot be pinpointed but estimates range from 700 thousand to 1.7 million.

(information obtained from:

<http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/cambear1.htm> author- *Sophal Ear*- Document compiled by Dr S D Stein Last update March 15, 2002)