

SOCIO, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RAP CULTURE ON AFRICAN AMERICANS

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ABSTRACT: *Rap music is a derivative of the oral form of literature, which is man's original medium of self-expression and artistic creativity. Rap music is a highly prolific component of a popular culture which has served as a means of expressing the plight of the black man in a predominantly prejudiced white society. Rap music came as a result of the elongated measure of exposure to slavery, segregation and prejudice. In order to air their mind, different forms of literature were employed, one of which is Rap music which has been identified as (Rhythm and Blues). This work takes a look into the socio, economic and political significances of Rap culture on African-Americans and how it enhances their lives.*

KEYWORDS: Rap, culture, slavery, political, economic.

INTRODUCTION

African-Americans Rap culture is a very significant and important aspect of the life and literature of the African-Americans. This is because rap came as a result of the elongated measure of exposure to slavery, segregation and prejudice. According to Brain Davids, the literature of a people is unarguably the vehicle for projecting the experiences and feelings of the people concerned. African-Americans literature has always been regarded as the literature of slavery, protest, and the undying quest for equality, Brain Davids (2003:43) in the book, *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery* further asserts that:

The connection before America Anti-Slavery Movement and idea of colonization were extraordinary complete and have seldom been explained with sufficient Clarity by historians

It is apposite to note here that the African-American rap culture which will be discussed in this work revolves round the virtual usage of the oral medium of communication to express the feelings and perceptions of the African-Americans. The societies in which they find themselves also tend to have a kind of influence on them. The oral mediums of the African-Americans include Blues, Jazz and Rap. There are also ballads, work song/ spade songs, gospel and spirituals. These help to define the nature of orality in African-Americans culture. A glance into the history of African-Americans reveals that they descendant of those that were taken away as slaves to the new world by white slavers. Prior to their being taken away, the oral mode of communication remained the dominant mode and the major means of relating messages in their

native Africa societies. African history, medicine, science and philosophy has been taught and handed down to generations through the word of mouth, which also includes myths, folktales and legends. The rap culture, as an oral mode of expression, reveals that orality as a mode of literature cannot be taken away from the African-Americans.

According to Cheryl L. Keyes in his book. Rap Music and Street Consciousness (2004:22)

Poetic Speech remains paramount to AfricaAmerican to African peoples in the new world circumcising the everyday experience. Essentially, the communicative system that evolve among the African (in America) stemmed from their captivity and their will to survive.

Oral literature defines the true African-Americans. It is the means through which various shade and style of African-Americans life is explored. Rap culture in this sense, tries to tell us of the recurrent nature of orality in the life and experience of the African-Americans.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

African-Americans are the descendant of former slaves in the United States of America whose ancestors has been transported from Africa to the new world. The nature of the suffering that they passed through has in no small measure escalated the acute level of rapid quest for equality and freedom. African-American literature from the colonial period to the present day represents the journey of determination and unrelenting quest for a brighter day that brings about a desired future. In fact it is a journey from slavery to freedom. African-American literature reflect every aspect of the life of the African-American, social, political, historical and more importantly, cultural events tend to constantly shape their literature. The poets, story writer, novelist and orators tend to try utilizing the oral and written medium to express themselves in every facet of life.

Initially the African-Americans had little or no education since their primary duty was to work for their masters. The importance of education was not in any way ascribed to them. The literatures we find written by them during the slave period were those that were undertaken by great icons like Paul Laurence Dunbar, Phyllis, Wheatly, (1773-1839), Luay Terry. These and some others were those African-Americans status in the United State. The theme of slavery versus freedom tend to be an issue of the interplay of life and death as some of them had to be wasted on various occasion in their fight for emancipation.

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

African-American literature is an outcome of the history of the black people's presence on the American continent today. The literature of the African-American cannot be fully separated from the experience of slavery and racism which characterized their lives as a community of people

whose social, economic and political privileges were tied up with the evil of race and colour. The Harlem renaissance is the period of literary awakening among predominantly, the black race in the Harlem region, New York. Alain Locke referred to it as “spiritual coming of age”. It was the period in which the blacks have their “first chances for group expression and self-determination”. According to him the Harlem Renaissance transformed social disillusionment to race pride.

The advent was the year between World War 1 and the great Depression in the United States when almost 750,000 African-American left the south for urban areas in the north to take up advantage of the prosperity. It was not publicly recognize not until about March 1929, though there had been traces of the awareness or the need for the (black) African-American artist and intellectual to define themselves in modern terms during the 1920's in America (Oloruntoba Oju, 1994:137). An account of his earlier traces is given by Arna Bontemps (1997:2) when he states *It would not be far-fetched to say that poem by a ghetto boy, appearing in De Witt Clinton High School literary magazine in January 1921, was the first clear signal. The mapie had discovered and opened his*

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he had become its associate editor, as well as a frequent contributor, and the poem he offered in this issue was titled “I have a rendezvous with life (with apologies to Alan Seeger)”

It was discovered that the poem began to give currency among the people, especially the coming from a brown boy from the depths of black Harlem given an affirmative answer to the melancholy acceptance of death by a disenchanted American expatriate fighting in a French regiment. The poem eventually became a piece being in place including schools and congregations. Another proclamation in literature followed six month later with the publication of another poem titled “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” the poem was written by Langston Hughes (another black youth) and published in The Crisis, which is the popular organ of the National Association for the advancement of colored (NAACP). The two poems “I have a Rendezvous with life” and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes respectively ‘caused the eyes both the black and the white intellectuals to blink in sense that both of the teenagers could at least wake up a renaissance given the time and the place.’

Later African (black) magazine and newspaper began to be in the lime light. Example of such are Charles Johnson’s opportunity magazine and W.E.B Due Bois’s the crisis, journal. Writings of Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen were launched. Egbuwalo (2014:27) quoting the account given by Akinyele in Falaye (ed) 2003: 103) says what later culminated to Harlem renaissance was the Nergo renaissance which started around 1809. Harlem was then regarded as the first and most famous of the ghettos in 1925. R.T. Akinyele in his paper titled

“African Renaissance Blacks and the *American Queen*” in Muiyiwa Falaye (ed) 2003:113) has this on record:

Indeed, Harlem attracted Negroes from all across America, from West Indies and Africa to an extent that James Johnson described it as the culture capital of the Negro World (Combs 1972:155)

He submits that writer and artist celebrated their African heritage through poems, art, music and novels. He further identifies the following literary works with this period. The New Negro: An interpretation by Alan Locke (1923) Harlem shadows by Mikey (1922) Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston and James Weldon Johnson are listed as other literary icons of the period. It should be noted that the event that characterized the Harlem renaissance culminated into African culture by adopting ‘African names and African style of dressing’.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RAP CULTURE ON AFRICAN AMERICANS

Becky Blanchard, (2015:1) Quoting musician Davey D says, Keep in mind when brother start flexing the verbal skills it always reflects what’s going on politically, socially and economically.

Rap as an economic and social enterprise has attracted so much attention in the American society, especially in the context of the African American populace. It is estimated that rap artists are amongst the richest in the United State of America. Thanks to the nature of negative and obnoxious aspect of rap which include gangster rap. Rap artists have at one time or the other been involved in a major saga and pandemonium such that integrity of this enviable culture is been called to question. In any instance of these troubles guns and other violent weapons were used. An article in Ebony Magazine (2003:52) on Curtis Jackson’s (50cent) reveal that he was nine times in the course of gangsterism and gangster rap.

50cent operated profitable drug houses that netted him 150,000dollars a month and true to a gangster form he wore priceless Jewelry Drove a fleet of expensive cars and systematically Set up or robbed his crack dealing competitor Without basking a sweat.

It is said that his debut album titled “get rich or die trying” went triple the platinum chart within the first month of its release, smashing the long established music industry records. The rap industry has also emerge as one most profitable and rewarding musical sect of all times. According to Kelvin Chappell (2012:20) in his book; The Travail or Rappers: the 1990’s were a significant decade for bringing rap music into known prominence.

According to the billboard chart the rapping enterprise is presently estimated at over a hundred billion dollars. Rap has served as a means of employment and job creation for quite number of blacks both within and outside the United States of America. The economic significant and the Hard Rock bands Aerosmith collaborated on a version of the song “Walk the Way”. They succeeded in creating a new audience that served as the melting point of rap music and introduce it to the rest of the world. Their audience was created from the sub-urban middle class rock fans. By the end of the 1980’s MTV (Music Television) has created a programme solely dedicated to Rap. Sean Puffy Comber in another towering figure in African American rap culture. His singles “missing you” released top honour his late friend Christopher Wallace, also known as (Biggie Smalls) one of the many unfortunate victims of violence in Rap, went ahead to top the chart within two (2) weeks of his release, Chris Waltermann writes that:

The 1990’s were a significant decade for bringing rap music into main stream Mc Hammer (late known simply as Hammer) went to the top of the chart in 1990 with “Please Hammer Don’t Hir EM”- which sold 13million copies in its first year and became the bestselling rap album of all time.....

Electronic rap music or techno also became more widely popular during the 1990’s. The genre first emerged in the 1970’s. Some aspect of techno were influenced by rap and rock music, others by experimental art music, jazz and world music and still others by black popular music, including funk and rap. Although techno produced few commercial hits running into billions of dollars during the decade, the recordings of musical groups such as the prodigy, orbital and Moby make in-roads into the charts during the late 1990’s. Techno recordings were increasingly licensed as the track sound for technology-oriented television commercials and films.

The popularity of attentive rock exploded during the 1990’s featuring bands as diverse as R.E.M., Nine Inch Nails, Red Hot Chill Peppers Rage against the Machine, and the Dave Mathews Band.

The genre spawned a number of sub styles such as the grunge of Seattle-based group, Nirvana sound garden and pearl jam. This attracted a wild range of audience such that shows were organized to celebrate the influx of different rap stars. There was also the phenomenon of group rapping this has actually been in vogue during the times of Run DMS and public enemy. According to Murray Forman (2002:1)

In this description west communicates the irony that even a well-dressed professional and prominent intellectual of Africa American Heritage must confront all the common system of racism of American society.

Forman further states that more than any other group, Nirvana was responsible for the commercial breakthrough of “alternative rock” in the early 1990’s between 1991 and 1994,

Nirvana – a group made up of singer and guitarist Kurt Cobain, Krist Novoselic and Drummer Dave Grohl released two multiplatinum albums (Nevermind and In Utero) and moved alternative rock's blend of hard core punk and heavy metal act of specialty records store and into the commercial mainstream. Cobain's stunning 1994 suicide was widely viewed as at least partly attributable to the pressure faced by alternative rap musicians who achieve commercial success and then face accusations of "selling out" of trying to manage their fame on a densely populated region in the face of share violence. Murray Forman (2001:1) opines that: In the late 1980's large segment of rap became highly politicized, resulting in the most overt social agenda in popular music since the urban folk movement of the 1960's. Groups like Public Enemy came to prominence with their second album "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back" (1988) and the theme song "Fight the Power" from the motion picture "Do the Right Thing" (1989), by African-American film maker Spike Lee, proclaiming the importance of rap in black American culture. Public Enemy's lead rapper Chuck D, referred to it as the "black CNN" (Cable News Network).

During the mid- 1980's rap moved from the fringes of the African music industry as white musicians began to embrace the new style. In 1986, rap reached the top ten on the billboard pop charts with "You Gotta Fight for Your Right to Party" by the Beastie Boys and "Walk This Way" by Run DMC and Aerosmith known for incorporating rock music into its raps, Run DMC became one of the first rap group to be featured regularly on MTV (Music Television) also during the mid-1980's the first female rap group of consequence Salt-N-Pepa, released the singles "The Show Stopper" (1985) and "Push It" (1987), "Push It" reached the top 20 on billboard's pop charts.

Gangster Rap is another feature that came alongside political rap that has rocked the boat of the rap industry. Gangster rap has to do with the creation of bitter enmity between rap groups and regions such that there is the use of violence and thuggery if the need arises. Major rap figures include the late Tupac Shakur, Sean Puffy Combs, Christopher Wallace and Mase. Gangster rap, attempts to depict an outlaw life style of drugs, and gang violence in inner – city America. In 1988, Straight Outta Compton, the first major album of gangster rap, was released by the southern California rap group, Niggaz With Attitudes (N.W.A). Songs from the album generated an extraordinary level of controversy of their violence image and inspired protests from a number of organizations including the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation). However, attempts of censor gangster rap only served to publicize the music and make it more attractive to both black and white youths.

N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitudes) became a platform for launching the solo careers of some of the most influential rappers and rap producers in the gangster style. Including Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, Easy E. Kitwana (2009:5), in his book, Generation Bibliography, suggests that some factors have shaped this generation's worldview. One is rap music, which has given black youth culture unprecedented international visibility while providing the medium by which a capitalism in the 1980's and 1990's which has led to increased income disparities that have hit black Americans

disproportionally hard. Third is the persistence of segregation and inequality in wages and salaries, housing, electoral politics, and other segments of society. A fourth factor is the wide spread mistrust of and cynicism about the criminal justice system. A fifth involves the way in which young blacks are portrayed in the main steam media, particularly in reporting on crime. Finally there is the validity of relatively high unemployment rate and incarceration, gang activity, gun homicide, suicide, and AIDs. Kitwana suggest that the implications of these factors remain studied or understood by scholars, journalists, or policy – makers. Further, he argues that an enormous division exists between the hip hop generation and the preceding generation, which has influenced decisively by the black church and civic rights and Black power movements.

United States cable television network (CNN) established in 1980 present videos of musicians and singers performing new rap music. MTV won a wide following among rock – music fans worldwide and greatly affected the popular music business on cables; there is little likelihood of being exposed to such music.

The social political and relational sect of rap brought various shades or reaction amongst African-Americans in the United States of America. It is said that young ones became engrossed in the rapping medium Jeff Chang gave an instance of young lad of nineteen years who had much interest in rap. The boy named O'shea Jackson said all he wanted to do is rap. According to Jeff chang (2005:299)

All he ever wanted to do in life was rap, And looked like he might be able to make something of it Arizons had been hell – hot, dry and boring. Still, his architectural drafting degree from the phoenix institute of technology might get moms and pops of his back for a few months and within that time perhaps he could write a few lyrics, rhymes and make records, cash some checks and soon make his way out of the folks house.

A young chap sees rap as a way to make some money and perhaps make his way out of poverty. This is probably one of the extended reasons why rap was embraced in Black America. Murray Forman (2001:1) reveal that:

A detailed and consciously defined special awareness is one of the key factors distinguishing rap music and hip hop from many other culture and sub cultural youth formations currently vying for popular attention. In hip hop space is a dominant concern occupying a central role in the definition of untrue meaning and practice.

There was the ground-breaking search for raw talents and veterans in rap. This produced talents greats like kid frost, Ice T and the Khakis.

In New York, there was a call; for the creation of more rappers and different shades of rap. In the early 1980's one prominent node on the Los Angeles hip hop map down town club called Radio.

It was modeled after Rooy's "Wheels of Steel" night and presided over local rap. Kingpin Ice T and other prominent figures in Los Angeles. It is apt to note here that the lyrics of rap have been greatly criticized by some veterans of the black race. They see the lyrics of rap as been derogatory and embarrassing to the black race. The words utilized by young black rappers in clubs and some public places were not in any way encouraging.

Discussing the social and economic significant of rap, rap is seen as not just a brilliant and distinct phenomenon; rappers in America are amongst the richest. Rap has helped to change the life of quite a lot of African-Americans, although there have been cases of violence and drugs. Rap has been utilized to make political demands by African-Americans. They group, public enemy exploded this fact in their second album it takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back (1998).

Gangster rap has to do with the act of creating bitter enmity between rap groups. This has brought about great killings recurrent enmity in the nits of rappers. One incident worth of mention in the sect of rap was the fued between Christopher Wallace (Notorious Big) and Tupac Amaru Shakur (2pac) which ended in the death of both rappers. Other forms of biff and enmity are that of Curtis Jackson (50cent) and NAZ and among others.

In conclusion, going by the critical and unprejudiced look into the nature of rap and it impact in America, especially the African-American community, one cannot but conclude that rap has truly bless the way of life of African-Americans, politically socially and economically. We can look at both side which are the positive and negative sides but the fact is that rap has helped to advance the course of blacks not only in America but the world all over including Africa and Asia.

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