

## Islam in the Mix: Lessons of the Five Percent

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*I was raised like a Muslim  
Prayin'to the East*

*--Gangstarr, "Who'sGonna*

*Take the Weight" (Step in the  
Arena)*

Consider the opening segment from a recording called "Allahu Akbar" by rap artists Brand Nubian. One possible interpretation of this song, which juxtaposes the opening of the Islamic call to prayer (*idhân*) and hip-hop beats, is that it suggests affinities between African-American and Middle Eastern Islamic culture. In fact, this paper is part of a larger project which includes an investigation of such connections.<sup>1</sup> But the reality is far more complicated than one of simple "affinity." Let me introduce a few complications at the outset.

First, at the level of musical style. The cut "Allahu Akbar" is quite untypical of what I am going to label here, for the sake of convenience, Islamic rap. Although a remarkable number of prominent US rappers identify themselves as Muslims, it is extremely rare for them to throw musical samples from the Arabo-Islamic world into the mix. Orthodox Muslims consider setting the call to prayer (*idhân*) to music and drums *harâm*, forbidden, and many Muslims would be shocked by Brand Nubian's "Allahu Akbar".<sup>2</sup> Technically, one "chants" or "recites" (*tilâwa*) the call to prayer, one does not "sing" (*ghanniya*) it; "recitation" and "music" are seen as distinct categories which should be kept separate.

Second, a complication at the level of doctrine. The Islamic "sect"/group to which Brand Nubian belong, known by outsiders as the Five Percent Nation of Islam, by insiders as the Nation of Gods and Earths, hold beliefs so far removed from mainstream Islamic teachings as to be virtually unrecognizable as Islamic to a majority of Muslims. For example, the chant "allahu akbar" ("God is Greatest") in the context of this Brand Nubian song means something very different than in mainstream Islamic beliefs. God/Allah, for Five Percenters, is not the Divinity as conventionally defined by the monotheistic faiths. God is the black man. For orthodox Muslims, this is *shirk*, un-Islamic polytheism.

I will return to the question of possible "Middle East connections" later, after a rather long detour. I want first to establish the significance of the subject under discussion. Islamic rap is no marginal cultural phenomenon, but has firmly implanted itself at the *center* of US mass culture. One week last September, for instance, *three* of the Top Ten albums on the Billboard charts were by rap groups with Islamic affiliations. Occupying the #1 position was Nas's album *It Was Written*. At the time, his video single "If I Ruled the World" (recorded with Lauryn Hill of the Fugees) was in heavy rotation on MTV, and since then, "Street Dreams" has aired frequently on MTV. Nas is an avowed Five Percenter. At #7 were the Fugees, whose album *The Source* had spent many weeks at #1 and by September had gone platinum, with sales of over 4 million units. The Fugees are not just a massive commercial phenomenon but are highly acclaimed by critics as well, some of whom regard the Fugees as the salvation of rap while others see them as the new face of alternative rock.<sup>3</sup> If the Fugees are not in fact Five Percent members, there are several indications that they are very close to it.<sup>4</sup> Their chart-topping numbers include several references to Islam, such as my personal favorite, from their hit "Fu-gee-la":

*I'm a true champion  
Like, Farrakhan  
Reads his Daily Qur'an  
It's a phenomenon,  
Lyrics fast like Ramadan.*<sup>5</sup>

Finally, at #10 was A Tribe Called Quest's *Beats, Rhymes and Life*. Tribe, a critically respected rap group, is considered to be on the "positivity" tip. Two of its members, Q-Tip (who has contributed to the pages of the *Village Voice*) and Ali Shaheed Muhammad, are Sunni (orthodox) Muslims.

And there are many, many more. Among the commercially successful and critically hailed rappers who belong to the Nation of Gods and Earths are: Rakim (Allah) of Eric B and Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, Poor Righteous Teachers, Busta Rhymes, Leaders of the New School, The Guru of the group Gangstarr, Pete Rock and CL Smooth, and Mobb Deep (whose latest release entered the Billboard charts at #6 on December 1, 1996). All members of the group, Wu Tang Clan, belong to the Five Percent Nation, including those whose solo work has sold in the millions: Method Man, Ol' Dirty Bastard, Raekwon, and most recently, Ghost Face Killer, whose album *Ironman* charted at #2 in November [sales?]). The Grammy Award-winning Digable Planets are also part of the Five Percent orbit,<sup>6</sup> and the Digables' second release *Blowout Comb* is loaded with Five-Percent references. In fact, *many* more noted rappers belong to Five Percent Nation than to Minister Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam (NOI). (The two groups are closely related ideologically.) Prominent rappers who are NOI members or sympathizers include Ice Cube, Public Enemy, Kam, Professor Griff, and Paris. Jeru the Damaja, whose second album, *Wrath of the Math*, hit the Top Ten album charts in November, belongs to another Islamic sect, Ausar Auset, which is close to Five Percent Nation. Only a handful of significant rappers belong to more orthodox US strands of Islam (Warith Deen Muhammad's American Muslim Mission, or, the Sunnis). The Roots, whose album *Illadelph Halflife* also crashed the Top Ten this November, have Sunni and 5% members.

Despite all the Grammy Awards, the tens of millions of units sold, and the Fugees' high-profile references to Farrakhan / Ramadan / Qur'an, this Islamic infiltration of the cultural mainstream has, surprisingly, gone virtually without comment, whether from the popular media or the academy. This general silence with regard to Islamic rap is even true of the most acute African-American or Afro-British criticism of the hip-hop scene (for instance, Tricia Rose, Paul Gilroy, Russell A. Potter, Greg Tate).<sup>7</sup> An example of such avoidance is an important and much-cited essay by Black British critic Paul Gilroy, entitled "It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At...The Dialectics of Diasporic Identification." The title cites a line from Eric B. and Rakim's rap song, "In the Ghetto." According to Gilroy, the song "directly inspired the production" of the essay (1991:3), and Gilroy adds that rapper Rakim has produced "the most complex and exciting poetry to emerge from the Hip Hop movement" (1991: 3). Gilroy invokes the lyrics of Rakim Allah here in what is a very compelling argument against what he calls ethnic absolutism/racial essentialism and in favor of "fractal patterns of cultural and political affiliation" (1991: 14). "It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at" would appear to encapsulate the argument that what really matters is not biology or origin but politics and affiliation. Yet Gilroy makes no mention of other lines from the same song that are arguably essentialist and absolutist Five Percent allusions. For instance, Rakim mentions those who "lived in the caves" (the white men), the Original Asiatic Black man ("they couldn't cave me in / cause I'm the Asian"), the "third eye" (the mind, in 5% terminology), and he states, "From knowledge to born back to knowledge precise," another occult Five Percent reference.<sup>8</sup>

What are we to make of this almost willed avoidance? I want to focus my speculations here on scholarly evasions, but perhaps they are relevant to the media as well. One factor for this avoidance appears to be a blind spot afflicting scholars working in the fields of Cultural Studies and popular culture when it comes to the question of religion, and especially Islam (see Mahmood 1996). Many "progressive" academics are heavily invested in the "oppositional" quality of African-American rap and are therefore perhaps made uncomfortable by the possibility that "Islam" could be a vehicle of resistance.<sup>9</sup> Many scholars, for instance, have written about the group Public Enemy (PE), widely regarded as having produced some of the most incisive political rap, but there has been little attention to PE's Islamic sympathies, even though the group's lyrics, the subject of intensive study and citation, make very overt references to NOI doctrine.<sup>10</sup> The other reason for the lack of critical attention to Islam in rap is that many Islamic references are either not obvious or simply occult. The cultural critic interested in rap but who has not bothered to study the beliefs of Nation of Islam or the Nation of Gods and Earths will, of course, not catch the allusions.<sup>11</sup> Chuck D of Public Enemy's oft-cited claim that rap music is "CNN for black people," a vehicle to convey the crisis-ridden reality of the urban black community, must therefore be

problematized. Although the appalling conditions of the Post-Fordist ghetto are a significant theme of the best rap music (including of course, Islamic rap), rap's messages are not *merely* about the "real," about "authenticity." Islamic rap's lyrical illegibility is not just a question of signifyin(g), of rappers playing Black word games that white outsiders cannot comprehend (see Potter 1995:81-85). For although Five Percenters are a familiar presence in Black urban communities, African-Americans often do not fully understand Five Percent messages either (see d to tha j 1992:10; James 1992:16). Full comprehension is only possible for the initiate, and many allusions appear to be aimed specifically *at* insiders.

What I want to do now is introduce some significant Five Percent beliefs which are articulated by rappers, to convey a sense of the heterogeneity of Five Percent hip-hop, and then return to the question of possible Middle Eastern affiliations. I should say that my account of the Five Percenters teachings is based primarily on an investigation of written sources, some of them primary, and includes items I have located on the Five Percent homepage (<http://metalab.unc.edu/nge/>) and on various internet bulletin boards and discussion groups.

*Praises are due to Allah, that's me*

*--Poor Righteous Teachers, "Butt Naked Booty Bless" (Holy Intellect)*

The Five Percent Nation was founded by Clarence 13X, who joined the NOI Temple No. 7 in Harlem in the early 1950s (when it was led by Malcolm X) and became a lieutenant in the Fruit of Islam (the NOI security force) and a student minister. In the early sixties Clarence began to question the NOI doctrine that God had appeared in Detroit in 1930 in the person of Master Farad Muhammad (pronounced Fa-rád). (It was Farad who passed on his teachings to his messenger, Elijah Muhammad.) Clarence 13X reportedly began to doubt that Farad was God, since the NOI taught that the Original (Black) Man was Allah (see Lincoln 1994:69), and Farad looked white (see photo in ???). (Farad, as we will discuss later, was probably an Arab). Clarence 13X began to teach that the black man *collectively* was God. He was reprimanded in 1963, left the NOI along with a few followers, changed his name from Clarence 13X to Allah, and began preaching to the youth on the streets of Harlem.



Father Allah, as his followers came to call him, taught that the 5% are those black men with "knowledge of self." This 5% knows their divinity, and uses that knowledge to release the hidden resources of black man. Once a man has tapped his hidden talents, he is a God. Most members refer to themselves as Gods rather than Five Percenters, reserving the latter term for those who have only begun studying the knowledge.

*Why? That's most asked by 85*

*--Ladybug Mecca of Digable Planets*

*I fear for the 85 who don't got a clue*

*--Method Man, on Ol' Dirty Bastard's "Rawhide" (Return to the 36 Chambers: The DirtyVersion)*

The 85% are those *without* the knowledge, the mentally blind, deaf and dumb who are bent on self-destruction. The 10% are the bloodsuckers of the poor, those who have knowledge and power but who use it to mystify and abuse the 85%. The 10% include the "grafted" white devil (created, according to Farad's teaching, by the evil scientist Yacub approximately 6000 years ago<sup>12</sup>) as well as the orthodox Muslims and Christian preachers who preach that god is a "spook" or a "mystery god."

*To hear my people been lost for over 400 years  
And they tried this mystery God  
And all they got was hard times*

*--Brand Nubian, "Ain't No Mystery" (In God We Trust)*

The 5% are the poor righteous teachers who preach the divinity of (black) man, the god who is "manifest" (not a spook, not a mystery god) and who will save the 85% from destruction.<sup>13</sup>

Father Allah's other signal contribution besides his theological innovations with regard to the divinity of the black man was that he took the doctrine of Master Farad and Elijah Muhammad to the street. In particular, he disseminated Farad Muhammad's secret teachings, known as the "Lost-Found Muslim Lessons," which are arranged in question-and-answer format (and seem to have been modeled on the catechism of the Masons).<sup>14</sup> At the time, NOI members were not allowed to discuss the tradition with outsiders and were supposed to keep it a complete secret. In the early '60s, the NOI Temple hierarchy monopolized the lessons and guarded them from the rank and file. Father Allah also developed his own system of teachings, known as the Supreme Mathematics and the Supreme Alphabets (Prince-A-Cuba 1990: 9-10). The "divine sciences" of Supreme Mathematics and Alphabets are sets of principles, attached to numerals and to the letters of the alphabet, which serve as the keys to divine knowledge. For Five Percenters, the "science of Supreme Mathematics is the key to understanding man's relationship to the universe" ("What We Teach"). Islam, for the Nation of Gods and Earths, is a mathematics-based science, a way of life and not a religion, not a set of beliefs ("Why We Are Not Muslims"). Prince-A-Cuba's description of Farad's lessons applies equally well to those of Father Allah: they were "an esoteric ritual containing keys for recognition between fellow members; a cohesive world view; and a tradition that could be explained only to initiates" (1992).

Father Allah focused his recruitment efforts on the youth of Harlem, and eventually branched out to other East Coast cities. Although Father Allah was gunned down in 1969 by unknown assassins,<sup>15</sup> his movement lived on under a collective leadership. The organization's membership, mainly recruited from

among urban Black youth, has continued to grow and to spread, reaching West Coast cities in 1987-88. Young Five Percenters are renowned for their tremendous oral skills, gained through intensive drilling in the lessons and through street preaching. Therefore they are amazingly loquacious when "droppin' science" or teaching 5% lessons.

*I drop science like a scientist<sup>16</sup>  
My melody's in code*

--Eric B. and Rakim, "My Melody" (Paid in Full)

No doubt the verbal proficiency that Gods gain by memorizing the lessons and taking their ministry to the street are important factors for their rise to preeminence in the rap world.

Let me now "sample" just a few rap manifestations of Five Percent teachings.

**1. Simply Mathematical.** Five Percent rap is full of numerology, based on Father Allah's Supreme Mathematics. For Five Percenters, "the science of Supreme Mathematics is the key to understanding man's relationship to the universe" ("What We Teach"). Of great significance to the Gods, for instance, is the number 7.

*I'm God  
G is the seventh letter made*

--Eric B. and Rakim, "No Competition" (Follow the Leader)

Seven is the number of perfection. It stands for the seventh letter of the alphabet, G, and for God. (Five Percenters originated the homeboy expression, "'sup [what's up], G?"; originally "G" stood for God, not gangsta.) According to Jah-Z-Allah, keeper of the 5% website, "The God sees in cycles of 7 colors of the rainbow and hears in 7 cycles of notes on the musical scale."<sup>17</sup> According to Farad's lessons, the Original (Black) Man has 7 1/2 ounces of brain, the (white) devil, only 6 ounces (Farad, Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2). The flag of the Five Percenters, known as the Universal Flag of Islam, contains a 7 (symbol of God) surrounded by a crescent moon (signifying the black woman) and a star (signifying the child).

*Now I'm rolling with the seven and the crescent  
Puffin' some expression  
Manifestin' today's lesson*

--Digable Planets, "9th Wonder" (Blowout Comb)

**2. Break it down.** Five Percenters are extremely adept at the "breaking down" of words, in order to arrive at their true, esoteric meaning, in accordance with Master Farad's and Father Allah's lessons. For instance, from Pete Rock and CL Smooth:

*Libraries, broken down as lies buried...  
Television tell a lie vision*

-- "Anger in the Nation" (Mecca and the Soul Brother)

--Or, the Roots:

*U-n-i- verse - you and I verse.*

-- "UNInverse at War" (Illadelph Halflife)

--Buckshot (of Black Moon): all we need is Jesus, which means Jes- us, or "Just Us," to save ourselves.

--The name of rapper AZ, short for Asiatic, which broken down is Age and Attic, broken down again is age = body and attic = mind.

--Or from Brand Nubian:

*You got to know the ledge of wise and dome  
And understand your culture of freedom*

-- "All For One" (One For All)

--According to Father Allah's Supreme Mathematics,

Knowledge is the Foundation of all in Existence. It is the Original [Asiatic Black] Man, who 'knows the ledge' or the boundaries of himself and knows that there is 'no ledge' or no ending to his circumference...Wisdom is your Wise Words, Ways and Actions...Wisdom is developed from the knowledge of Self, which allow[s] One to Wise or Speak Intelligently from the Dome or the Mind.

--Or:

*I be the universal, the Biochemical  
Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head is the physical  
That keeps rhymin' until it's unbearable*

--The Genius, "True Fresh MC" (Words From the Genius)

Allah, a.k.a. Arm Leg Leg Arm Head, is the Black Man from Asia (Supreme Alphabet).

In fact, many 5% terms, such as "droppin' science," "'sup G?" and "let me break it down for ya" have achieved such common currency within the hip-hop community that they have lost their original resonance, at least for fans who know nothing of Islam in rap. Even the expression "word" has a 5% origin: Gods uttered "word" in response to someone who had stated a profound truth (Nuruddin 1994: 127). The greeting "peace," heard throughout the hip-hop world, was originally a word of greeting for the Moorish Science Temple, an Islamic predecessor of the 5% Nation (Fauset 1957: 507).]

Other 5% manifestations in rap demonstrate a great deal of heterogeneity of belief, due no doubt to the fact that, unlike the NOI, the Nation of Gods and Earth is not organized according to a strict hierarchy, but has a collective leadership. Some 5% rappers, in line with their brothers in the NOI, oppose the consumption of alcohol and marijuana:

*Stay off the drugs if ya wanna be down with this posse*

--Poor Righteous Teachers, "144K" (Black Business)

But others are well-known for advocating the consumption of Moët and blunts (Brand Nubian, Nas, and especially the Wu Tang Clan).

*I drink Moët with Medusa  
Give em shotguns in hell  
From the spliff that I lift and inhale*

--Nas, "It Ain't Hard to Tell" (Illmatic)

*I got, fat bags of skunk  
I got, White Owl blunts  
And I'm about to go get lifted*

--Wu Tang Clan, "Method Man" (Enter the Wu-Tang [36 Chambers])

Lord Jammar of Brand Nubian explains, "See, in the Five Percent Nation, each man is the sole controller of his own universe. If you're the god of your universe, you set up your own laws" (Ahearn 1991:57).<sup>18</sup>

As for gender, the Five Percenters are less likely to deploy the "bitch/ho" schema of representing women that is favored, as is so well known, by so-called gangsta rappers. Yet 5% rap remains an overwhelmingly male activity; the only female rappers in this orbit are Lady Mecca of the Digable Planets, Lauryn Hill of the Fugees, and a very minor character in the Wu Tang roster, vocalist Blue Raspberry; recently these have been joined by the new R&B sensation who has been compared to Billie Holliday, Erykah Badu. According to Five Percent beliefs, only a man can achieve the level of perfection symbolized by a 7, whereas a woman can only reach a 6. Gods refer to Women members as Earths, or Queens.

*Peace to all the Queens  
Submitting to the sevens*

-- Poor Righteous Teachers, "Can I Start This" (Holy Intellect).

Just as Earth revolves around the sun, woman is subordinate to man.<sup>19</sup> A Queen or "Earth," must cover 3/4 of her body, just as 3/4 of the earth is covered by water, and so 5% women wear head coverings and long loose-fitting garments. A female Five Percenter is known as a "muslim," unlike the male God, because she witnesses to the fact that her man is Allah (Nuruddin 1994: 128). According to Sincere Allah Merciful God, "God is not a Muslim. God does not submit" ("Why We Are Not Muslims"). So although Five Percenters tend to treat women with respect, their orientation creates little space for female 5% rap performers or the articulation of women's issues.<sup>20</sup>

*Girls girls these are the details  
I like sophisticated liberated females  
Dutch treat I have no qualms with it...  
Because with all due respect  
I wanna stick it to you*

--Gang Starr, "Conscience Be Free" (No More Mr. Nice Guy)

*I ain't down for a honey who don't wanna submit...  
See I'm not the kind to let a woman run it*



--Brand Nubian, *"Love Me or Leave Me Alone" (In God We Trust)*

But again, there is variability, as Digable Planets have recorded one song against right-to-lifers (whom the Digables call fascists) and in favor of abortion rights ("La Femme Fétal") and refer positively to Black feminist theorist bell hooks in the song "Dog It."<sup>21</sup>

Homosexuality also comes in for its share of bashing in 5% rap, no less than in other rap varieties. Yet despite homophobic lyrics, Five-Percenters, particularly members of the Wu Tang Clan, have been rap leaders with regard to participation in AIDS benefits, some of them sponsored by gay organizations. Five-Percent rappers Mobb Deep, Pete Rock and the Wu Tang all participated in the album, *America is Dying Slowly*,<sup>22</sup> released in June 1996, whose proceeds go to fight AIDS. In November 1995, Method Man along with rappers Queen Latifah and KRS-One, plus funksters Kool and the Gang,<sup>23</sup> performed at an AIDS Dance-a-thon staged by New York's Gay Men's Health Crises Center that raised \$1.1 million for the AIDS battle.<sup>24</sup> Raekwon and Ghost Face Killer of the Wu performed in February 1996 at another AIDS benefit at the Roxy Total, New York.<sup>25</sup>

As for the subject of the white devils (referred to variously in 5% lyrics as snakes, serpents, the Yacub crew, skunks, cave dwellers, etc.) here too 5% rappers express a variety of opinion. Brand Nubian and Poor Righteous Teachers represent the hardline position. Wise Intelligent of Poor Righteous Teachers has asserted, "All the prophets have tried to reform white man, but he cannot be reformed. White man continued to do devilishment" (Ahearn 1991: 76), and "the potency of melanin in the black man makes him naturally rhythmic" (Eure and Spady 1991:74).

*Most definitely Poor Righteous Teachers never be down  
We're with the kings and crowns not clowns  
No blue eyes and blonde hair is over here*

--Poor Righteous Teachers, *"Word from the Wise" (Holy Intellect)*

*I'm makin' devils cower to the Caucus Mountains*

--Wu Tang Clan, *"Da Mystery of Chessboxin'", Enter the Wu-Tang*

*And yo the devil's got assassination squads  
Want to kill niggaz cuz they're scared of God*

--Gang Starr, *"Tonz O' Gunz" (Hard to Earn)*

Other 5% rappers have more nuanced views. Lakim Shabazz, for instance, asserts, "I don't feel that every white person is the devil...But the majority of the ones I've come across are sort of devilish to me 'cause I feel it's in their nature" (Ahearn 1991: 76); Rakim also claims (despite his references to the cave man, mentioned above) not to be prejudiced against or hate whites as a group (Ahearn 1991:76; James 1992:17). Nas, too, appears to occupy the less dogmatic pole:

*It'll be paradise life relaxin'  
Black, Latino, and Anglo-Saxon*

--*"If I Ruled the World" (It Was Written)*

This moderation of ethnic absolutism may be influenced by recent moves within the Nation of Islam, in

which the devil is regarded as an evil characteristic that is also *within* the black man, not *just* a characteristic of the white.

A quick comparison of the Wu Tang Clan and the Digable Planets is another way to suggest something of the range of 5% rap. The Wu's sound mix, produced by member RZA, is hard, abrasive, uncompromising, and often, unsettling. Check out "Wu-Tang Clan Ain't Nothin' Ta F'Wit":



*[Tiger style]*  
*[Tiger style] Tiger style*  
 Yo, huh, huh  
 Wu-Tang Clan Ain't Nuttin Ta Fuck Wit  
 Wu-Tang Clan Ain't Nuttin Ta Fuck Wit  
 Wu-Tang Clan Ain't Nuttin Ta Fuck Wit  
 There's no place to hide once I step inside the room  
 Dr. Doom, prepare for the boom  
 BAM! Aw, MAN! I SLAM  
 JAM, that's freedom like Tarzan  
 I be tossin, enforcin, my style is awesome  
 I'm causin more Family Feud's than Richard Dawson  
 And the survey said -- ya dead  
 Fatal Flying Guillotine chops off your fuckin head  
 .....  
 Now why try and test, the Rebel INS?  
 Blessed since the birth, I earth-slam your best  
 Cause I bake the cake, then take the cake  
 And eat it, too, with my crew while we head state to state!

The lyrics blend 5% concerns with the imagery and tenets of kung fu (borrowed from Hong Kong cinema). More recently, on Clan member Raekwon's solo album the Wu rappers appeared under the guise of the "Wu Gambinos," and each member has taken a second nickname that refers to 1930's gangsters. Yet for all their manifestation of toughness, the Wu Tang also articulate, according to Greg Tate, "pain, confusion and alienation," as well as "a cry for help" (1996).<sup>26</sup>

*But he carried on, with the same old stuff*  
*With Stephanie, like a whammy, he pressed his luck*  
*Both tried to be down with O.P.P.*  
*Ain't nuttin' wrong but he got caught with the H.I.V. now*  
*No life to live, doc says two more years*

*So after the laughter, I guess comes the tears*

-- "Tearz," *Enter the Wu-Tang*

The Wu Tang do not foreground "politics" in their lyrics, perhaps opting to keep such concerns occult, but the group has played a benefit concert to raise money for political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal.<sup>27</sup>

The Digable Planets 1994 release *Blowout Comb*, by contrast, wears its politics on the sleeve, as it were (the cover is a Black Panther tribute). The lyrics on *Blowout Comb* mix 5% concerns with Black Panther-inspired Black nationalist-and-revolutionary Marxist ideology and imagery. (There were already hints of this orientation on the Digables' 1993 Grammy winner, *Reachin' [A New Refutation of Time and Space]* but they mostly went unnoticed).<sup>28</sup> The Digables voice their complex, Islamo-Afrocentric-Maoist revolutionism in a smooth, mellow rapping style, and the raps float in over a funky and seductive jazz- and R&B-inflected musical mix.

For instance, "Dog It":

*Lost my leather jacket  
Go acid disappear in the wiss?  
In the mist with the fist  
Proletariat Cadillac steerin it  
.....panther cool  
Now I'm makin' bacon  
Still sayin' what up As-salaam alaykum  
Fresh joints we make em like water  
I raise every day for the masses  
I poke my fist right up right against the fascists...  
In my vein lives bell hooks*

Or, "Dial 7":

*Warfare for the projects....  
On an onslaught we plague you...  
Cannot get to...  
I die fightin  
[???] got the devils that get smoked*

Digable lyrics, rapping styles, and musical mixes are therefore in marked contrast to those of the Wu.

I would like to return now to the question of the relation of 5% ideology to the type of Islamic teachings that one encounters in the Middle East. I would argue, first of all, that the Middle East and Islam function as powerful images of non-Western civilization with which Five Percenters, like NOI members, can identify. The Islamic Middle East also serves as a *location* in which to root an Afro-American narrative of civilized origin that antedates the civilized West. But the Middle East and Islam rarely appear as contemporary or historical realities in 5% rap. The precedence of image over reality is demonstrated by the fact that the Gods' rap lyrics rarely allude to or embrace actual social movements or events in the Islamo-Middle Eastern world. And, as we have seen, *musical* allusions to the Middle East (such as in Brand Nubian's "Allahu Akbar") are equally rare. Somewhat unusual therefore is Method Man's song "P.L.O. Style," which articulates a militant approach to everyday survival in the ghetto that suggests parallels to Palestinian political struggles, and includes the line, "Iranian thoughts and cover like an Arabian." At the same time, these Islamo-Arab references are mixed (in the same song) with talk of

drinking and lookin' for 'hos.<sup>29</sup>

As for the deep sources of 5% (as well as NOI beliefs), here too there is a remarkable heterogeneity, even when it comes to direct Middle East/Islamic influences. For instance, Noble Drew Ali, whose Moorish Science Temple is a direct predecessor of the Nation of Islam, traveled to Egypt, where he claims to have been initiated into the ancient Eastern mysteries. Noble Drew taught that blacks were "Asiatics" and specifically Moors, whose ancestors lived in Morocco before their forcible transportation to North America. But Noble Drew was equally influenced by non-Islamic sources. His prophecy, called *The Circle Seven Koran*, is nearly half based on an apocryphon, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* by "Levi" H. Dowling, an account of Christ's journey and stay in India from his adolescence until the age of 30 (Wilson 1993: 21). Another significant influence on Noble Drew was Masonry, from whom he seems to have adapted, among other things, the Moorish initiation rites, catechistic forms of teachings, esoteric traditions, and the practice of wearing the fez (Wilson 1993: 26). Noble Drew and the NOI also appear to have drawn on Masonic numerology, especially the importance of the numeral 7 (Rashad 1994: 66).

The belief that the alphabet and numerology are esoteric keys to wisdom also probably have their deeper origins in Islamic Sufi traditions (and perhaps the Jewish Kabbala) (Nuruddin 1994: 122).<sup>30</sup> The concern with occult sciences and the mystery of numbers is shared as well by Isma'ili Shi'ites and the Druze sect, an esoteric offshoot from mainstream Shi'ism. Druze teaching additionally involves secrecy and the revelation of doctrine in stages to initiates; such parallels with the NOI led sociologist Morroe Berger to conjecture that Master Farad, the "God" of the NOI, was a Druze or an Isma'ili (Rashad 1994: 77). This idea is not farfetched, for there is good evidence suggesting that Farad was an Arab from Greater Syria (Lebanon, Syria, Palestine or Transjordan), including: the one extant photo of Farad; the fact that he was a peddler (a very common occupation for Arab Druze immigrants in the midwest during the thirties); and Farad's own claims to his followers that he came from Mecca.<sup>31</sup> A final deep source are the Jehovah's Witnesses. Both Farad and Elijah Muhammad encouraged followers to read the books of Jehovah's Witnesses' leader Joseph Rutherford, and Adib Rashad has demonstrated the parallels in eschatology between the NOI and the Witnesses (1994:181-184).

As for the Five Percent notions that Black man is God, these are consonant with Gnostic tendencies that one encounters in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, especially in Sufi and Shi'ite spheres (including Isma'ilism and the Druze). In such conceptions, God is conceived as a spirit, a spirit that is manifested in man and only in man. For the Druze, the founder al-Hakim is God in person; for Isma'ilis, the imams are embodiments of divine light, and they show the divine potential of man. For NOI and 5%-ers, Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and Father Allah represent the fullness of God in Man, to which men can aspire. The 5%-ers and NOI have simply given this Gnostic tendency an Afrocentric twist.

In terms of thinking about the 5% Nation and its relation to Islamic peoples and beliefs, which have been circulating in North America, unobserved, on the margins, ever since the beginnings of the European invasion of this continent, I find helpful Peter Lamborn Wilson's notion of "sacred drift." Wilson describes sacred drift as a process whereby Islamic heretical cultures of resistance (and in some cases, orthodox Islamic tenets) are carried into the West, by Western heretics, transformed, and incorporated into our own cultures of resistance, our own heresies. This circulation of heresies requires, Wilson argues, a strategy of tact, even silence, but communicativeness is not ruled out (Wilson 1993:5, 7). Apocryphal texts also play an important role in these dynamics. "In the world of apocrypha," Wilson observes,

the Images of established religion and canonical texts acquire a kind of mutability, a tendency to drift, to reflect the subjectivities of the (often anonymous) visionaries who sift through fragments in order to produce more fragments... (1993:22).

My feeling is that to judge 5% (or NOI) beliefs in relation to a baseline of Islamic orthodoxy,<sup>32</sup> and then to condemn these beliefs as un-Islamic, is not very useful here. (This is the frequent charge of various orthodox Muslims [Blacks included] in the US against 5%-ers and especially the NOI.) I think that is more helpful to regard the Nation of Gods and Earths as our own, Western heresy. A Western heresy that asserts: the divinity of the black man, as against white images of Jesus; that the black man, not the white man, is the original man, and that white man is the biological descendant of the black; that the white man is, by nature and practice, devilish and primitive and the black, civilized; that white teaching, based on technology, is simply "tricknology," and that Black science, based on mathematics, is a superior form of understanding; that Armageddon is coming soon, that the wicked rule of the white man is about to end, and that the global majority non-whites will soon come to power.<sup>33</sup>

What is also interesting here is the fact that these heretical, esoteric teachings have been propelled, from their heretofore obscured places of origin, to the center of global culture. If Moorish Science and NOI emerged during the Fordist era of massive black migration to the industrial cities of the Midwest and the Northeast, the next wave, Islamic rap, belongs to the post-Fordist era of global restructuring, de-industrialization, and crack economies. As Islamic rappers infiltrate the Top Ten, as Minister Farrakhan brings a million men together for the purpose of atonement, we need to begin to acknowledge "Islamic" and Middle Eastern presences in our midst. The study of such phenomena will require a serious intellectual engagement with the difficult issue, for secular academics, of "religion" and spirituality, and an engagement that dispenses with labels like fundamentalism, extremism, ethnic absolutism, irrationalism, myth, racism, etc. (see Asad 1993; Pimienta-Bey 1995).

Another pitfall, I would add, would be to adopt a position of fear, shock and horror that certain 5%-er beliefs--for instance, the divinity of the black man and the devilish nature of the white man--are popular today among black youth. In some ways, I am rather ambivalent about bringing these views and their significance into visibility, given the hysterically hostile media and government reaction to Louis Farrakhan as well as the abysmal mainstream scapegoating of Black urban youth. If we think that some of these doctrines are problematic or heretical, we need to try to understand them, to engage them, and to try to work to change conditions that produce them.

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### **Recordings:**

Brand Nubian, *In God We Trust*  
\_\_\_\_\_ *One For All*

Digable Planets, *Blowout Comb*  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Reachin' (A New Refutation of Time and Space)*

Eric B and Rakim, *Follow the Leader*  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Paid in Full*

The Fugees, *The Source*, 1996

Gang Starr, *Step in the Arena*, Chrysallis 1990  
\_\_\_\_\_ *No More Mr. Nice Guy*  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Hard to Earn*

The Genius, *Words From the Genius*

Method Man, *Tical*, Def Jam 1996.

Nas, *Illmatic*  
\_\_\_\_\_ *It Was Written*

Ol' Dirty Bastard, *Return to the 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version*. Elektra 1995.

Pete Rock and CL Smooth, *Mecca and the Soul Brother*

Poor Righteous Teachers, *Black Business*. Profile Records, 1993

\_\_\_\_\_, *Holy Intellect*,

Wu Tang Clan, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. RCA, 1993.

## Endnotes

- (1) The book manuscript is tentatively entitled, *Sounds from the Interzone*.
- (2) Not that "singing" the *idhân* is entirely unprecedented in the Arab world. Recently, Lebanese singers Marcel Khalifeh and Sabah Fakhry have come under attack for putting parts of the *idhân* to music.
- (3) See the cover of *Rolling Stone*, September 15, 1996, which features a photo of The Fugees, and reads, "Are the Fugees the Future of Rock and Roll?" The cover article (Foege 1996) makes no mention of the Fugees' relationship to Islam.
- (4) The usually reliable Five Percent homepage (<http://metalab.unc.edu/nge/>) lists The Fugees as members of the Nation of Gods and Earth, but I have been unable to verify this claim. A rumor circulated on HipHop-L in May and June 1996 that the Fugees' Lauryn Hill had stated, "I'd rather have my children starve than white people buy my album," and that over 30,000 Fugees albums had been returned in response. The rumor seems to have had no foundation; some claim it was started by a caller to Howard Stern. The rumor, however, may be connected to claims about the Fugees' Five Percent affiliation. If Fugees are not in fact Five Percenters, there are a number of indications that they are very close to the Five Percent Nation. For instance, rapper Wise Intelligent of the Poor Righteous Teachers has performed with the Fugees in concert and the Fugees have also toured with the group Poor Righteous Teachers (Host 1996.) Poor Righteous Teachers are one of the more doctrinaire Five Percent rap groups.
- (5) Amazingly, this song also hit the Top Twenty in Israel.
- (6) According to an article in *Vibe*, 1994, Digables' rapper C-Knowledge (a.k.a. Doodlebug), was reportedly once close to (but not a member of) the Five Percent Nation. Even the name, Knowledge, has an occult significance in Five Percent teachings; see below.
- (7) The major academic exception is the work of Jeffrey Decker (1993).
- (8) "Born" means coming into mental existence through Allah's Mathematics. "All Things go from Knowledge to Born When dealing with Knowledge of Self..." (Supreme Mathematics). For a discussion of "knowledge" and "mathematics," see below.
- (9) My own earlier work on rap is certainly susceptible to such a criticism; see Swedenburg 1989 and 1992.
- (10) These lyrics from "Party for Your Right to Fight," on *It Takes A Nation of Millions* (1988), PE's best and most-analyzed album, are pure Nation of Islam ideology:

It was your so called government / That made this occur / Like the grafted devils they were... Word from the honorable Elijah Muhammed / Know who you are to be Black... To those that disagree it causes static / For the original Black Asiatic man / Cream of the earth / And was here first / And some devils prevent this from being known / But you check out the books they own / Even masons they know it / But refuse to show it, yo / But it's proven and fact.

Public Enemy's first album, *Yo! Bumrush the Show* (1987), contains the song, "Rightstarter (Message To A Black Man)," an invocation of Elijah Muhammad's famous book, *Message To A Black Man*. "White Man's Heaven is a Black Man's Hell," from *Muse-Sick-N-Hour-Message* (1994), is a tribute to a calypso number of the same name, recorded by Louis Farrakhan as an NOI anthem in the late 1950's (Lincoln 1994:108). For other examples, see Decker (1993:64).

(11) For example, Tim Brennan (1994: 675) erroneously refers to the Five Percent Nation as a "crew," or production unit, comparable to the Lench Mob (who have worked with Ice Cube) and the Bomb Squad (Public Enemy).

(12) "Drop the bomb on the Yacub crew," Brand Nubian, "Drop the Bomb" (*One for All*). "The paleface,



devil race, Caucasoid germ / Grafted, from original, black man's sperm / Thin-blooded weak, grafted-brain punk / Your power's a third of mine, you drunk funky skunk," Shabbaz The Disciple, "Death Be The Penalty."

(13) The origin of these categories (5%, 10%, 85%) are Master Farad's teachings; see Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2.

(14) On the Masonic origins of the Moorish Science Temple, a direct predecessor of the Nation of Islam, see Wilson 1992: 26.

(15) According to Prince-A-Cuba, "The reported motive [for the killing of Father Allah] within [NOI] Temple circles was [Farad's] dissemination of the Lessons [of Farad]" (1990: 10).

(16) Note the fact that "drop science" also sounds like "drop signs."

(17) Jah-Z-Allah, Today's Mathematics, April 7, 1995, posted on alt.rap, April 11, 1995. "It's calm -- prepare, for the storm, of the seven," Shabbaz The Disciple, "Death Be The Penalty."

(18) Grand Puba said "How are you going to tell a civilized person how to live" (see K. Orr post).

(19) Seven, the number of perfection, signifies God. Only men can attain the level of perfection that 7 signifies, whereas women can only achieve 6.

(20) Speaking of his girlfriend, Ghost Face Killer (of the Wu) says, "Yeah, I got a girl. We live together n' shit, but I'm God, man, and God gonna do whateva he gonna do, regardless. She gotta understand that shit" (Dee Tee 1996: 40).

(21) George Clinton blames sexism in rap on the fact that Five Percenters bring "customs...from another [Arab] culture" to the traditional black "bitch, ho" mentality, which by itself, was "just fun and games." Mixed together, they produce misogyny (Reid 1993: 46).

(22) The initials of the album are: AIDS.

(23) Incidentally, most of Kool and the Gang's members belong to the NOI.

(24) Electronic Urban Report [Eur@Afrinet.Net], November 29, 1995.

(25) Posting to hiphop-1, February 29, 1996, by grandblk@grove.ufl.edu. Wu Tang Clan have also recorded a song that stresses the dangers of contracting HIV by not practicing safe sex ("Tearz", *Enter the 36 Chambers*).

(26) For instance: "Life's a bitch and then you die / That's why we get high" Nas, "Life's A Bitch" (Illmatic)

(27) Posting to hiphop-1, February 29, 1996, by doriandb@umich.edu.

(28) Yet Tim Brennan dismisses Diggable Planets as the "shamelessly second-order sound of radio- or candy-rap" (1994: 682).

(29) Probably the most overt references to the contemporary Middle East are articulated by Professor Griff and the Lost Asiatic Disciples on *Pawns in the Game*. Griff is an NOI member.

(30) The notion of the unity of man and God perhaps has Sufi origins as well.

(31) Elijah Muhammad was also well-versed in and frequently quoted Biblical scripture. The Moorish Science Temple revolves around Jesus, as the primary prophet and chief guide for spiritual understanding (Pimienta-Bey 1995:184).

(32) But for a helpful comparison of Nation of Islam and orthodox Muslim doctrine, written from a position of orthodoxy, see El-Amin 1991.

(33) For a powerful rap example, PE's "Countdown to Armageddon," on *It Takes A Nation of Millions*.