

## Brussels: Islam, Hip Hop

### 1. Intro on Islamic Hip hop in the UK

#### *Introduction*

In my lecture today I am going to talk about Hip Hop within the Islamic cultural sphere in the UK. I need to stress that the hip hop genres I am looking at have emerged mainly within an Islamic environment. I do not talk about hip hop artists who happen to be Muslim (religious/observant or not), but those for whom their religious identity is central for their art form and importantly, who perform regularly within Islamic spaces/environments. These are artists who are mainly underground artists, without contracts with record labels. They produce their own music, often their music is exclusively available online, diffused through social media. In that sense while some enjoy more visibility than others, and while some have gone during their careers a bit more towards the mainstream than other, they are most often still very much connected to the grassroots of the Muslim community, they are indeed quite grassroots.

In this talk today, after briefly contextualizing hip hop within the broader Muslim cultural or music scene, I will particularly discuss how Islamic hip hop in Britain is closely connected to an effort by Afro-diasporic Muslims to create a particular form of a Black Islamic cultural expression. Then in the later part of this talk I will examine how this Afro-diasporic Islamic cultural expression has contributed to strengthening a British Muslim identity by re-thinking the contours and solidarities implied in that term.

*Fashioning a Black British Muslim Culture and Identity through Hip Hop:  
Justifying Islamic Hip*

For the past twenty something years or so, we have witnessed an exponential growth of an Islamic culture industry. In the United Kingdom as elsewhere, Islamic devotional music (*nasheed*) has become the music genre par excellence for religious Muslims. This devotional music was initially performed mainly a cappella or accompanied exclusively by hand drums), but has for the last ten years began to experiment with very different musical styles, blending various genres like pop, folk, and rap. In the UK, the particular development of the British Islamic music scene to one where hip hop as a genre has become solidly included, has been largely the work of African-diasporic Muslims, and especially Afro-Caribbean Muslims. The latter have played a significant role in the formation of an Islamic hip-hop scene in the United Kingdom.

Islamic hip-hop is probably the most contested of the music genres that comprise the Islamic popular culture scene. While the legitimacy of music and more particularly of musical instruments is generally argued over within Islamic theological debates, it is around hip-hop, a music culture conceived by many religious Muslims as most opposed to an Islamic ethos, that debates have often crystallized among British Muslims. According to many hip-hop musicians themselves, this is especially due to hip hop culture's general notoriety (associated with sexual promiscuity, drugs, and violence), but the "ethnoreligious hegemonies of Arab and South Asian communities" that render it more difficult to "engage Black expressive cultures as Muslims" (Abdul Khabeer 2016: 3).

Yet, Islamic hip-hop in Britain precisely emerged out of a desire to challenge these hegemonies. As several Muslim hip-hop artists of Afro-Caribbean background told me, in

the same way that Muslims all over the world have had initially adapted their pre-Islamic local cultural traditions to the requirements of the new religion, they today claim the right to do so as well. Becoming Muslim, for these artists, did not consist in adopting anything Arabic or Indo-Pakistani as the “authentic” Islamic way, but it meant for them to creatively and responsibly select those elements from their own culture that do not clash with the virtues and norms of their new faith, while at the same time not excluding artistic inspiration from the global Muslim heritage. This artistic ambition has given rise to a variety of styles within what is often glossed under the umbrella of “Islamic hip hop”, a term that the artists sometimes contest for various reasons, but that I use here for simplicity’s sake.

Particular important performers in the field I am studying were Mecca II Medina, a Rap Duo created in the mid- 90s that does not perform anymore today, consisting of a British Jamaican, Ismael Lea South, and a British Nigerian man, Rakin Fetuga, who can be easily called the *pioneers* of Islamic HipHop in Britain. They really started the movement and have consistently worked to build this scene, helping younger artist to emerge. **Here a clip by M2M**, a very early piece “Life after Death” (1:06-1:36)

Also important are Pearls of Islam, two sisters of Afro-Caribbean descent (parents from Guyana and Jamaica), who describe their music as a “Mix of nasheed, rap, poetry and spoken word” singing in Arabic and English. They also have been around since quite a while, since 2005 or so. **Here a clip** (0:10-1:43); *I also let you listen their own introduction to the song....*

Equally significant is Poetic Pilgrimage (one half is here with us!!!), who define their group as a “Hip Hop and Spoken Word Duo,” and who have enjoyed a lot of success not only in the UK but also in Europe and more globally. **Here a clip:** Land Far away, where they actually also work in clearly their Raggae influences, bring in some Patois. **(0:00- 0:46)** But they also do a lot of spoken poetry pieces.

A very interesting case to mention here is Ahmed Ikhlas, who performs what he calls “Jamaican Nasheed” rapping almost exclusively pious lyrics in Patois, in a clear Raggae style, but mainly without instruments, voice only – at times with some drums. **Here a clip entitled:** yowm al-jumma. **(0:00-1:05)**

A rather recent performer is Khaled Siddique, who does mainly nasheeds, but occasionally mixes them with raps. He had a huge success last year with his song **Festival** –an Eid Anthem, written as he himself said, because he felt that as Afro-Caribbean Muslims they did not have their own traditional songs marking the Islamic calendar. And he felt this gap and wanted to do a piece that really reflects this Afro-Caribbean heritage. **Clip: (0:00-1:20).** You see the success (over a million views, which is big for these often underground artists, though he is really breaking into the international nasheed scene, which is a scene by itself..)

Just by going through these four exemplary cases, we see how Afro-Caribbean performers have worked to integrate in unique ways their “musical heritage” to create their

own styles of Islamic oriented music. Collectively, their musical work has reshaped significantly the British Muslim soundscape.

What is interesting to consider in the case of Islamic hip hop, is that, given its contested nature in the broader Islamic scene, the artists generally operate an authentication process that serves to prove hip hop as a legitimate and authentic form of Islamic expression. This authentication process builds on *two distinct* but interconnected narratives. **First**, a *genealogy* is established that *links African American music traditions to Islam*. **Second**, *'authentic' hip hop* is thoroughly *disconnected* from contemporary *mainstream* commercial hip hop. I'll describe this narrative in a second more in detail, but it is important to stress that, for Muslims of African descent in Britain, this two-fold narrative serves not only to re-affirm their strong connection to the Black Atlantic, meaning this connection between Africa and the dispersed African diaspora, but also to embed this Black diaspora within the imaginary of a transnational Muslim community (*umma*). Thereby these artists challenge the often regionalist and ethnocentric understandings of the established members of their new religious community, laying bare some of their implicit racist assumptions. As a relatively recent newcomer community to Islam, British Afro-Caribbean Muslims are a minority vis-a-vis the dominant and institutionally established South Asian Muslim community, and from its beginnings the former has struggled with questions of legitimacy and authenticity. These issues are even more relevant to a hip-hop scene that intends to be situated *within* the boundaries of *normative* Islam, thus also requiring a process of religious authentication.

Let me look a bit more thoroughly into this narrative of authentication: The **first** argument is about genealogy of music traditions: This narrative highlights the Muslim origins of a large number of African slaves brought to the Americas (scholars say between 15-30% of Africans have been of Muslim faith) and from there establishes a link between black (post-)slave music traditions and Islamic traditions. Evidence for the genealogy includes the *common oral traditions* built on *melodic prose*, as prevalent in Qur'anic recitation, Islamic poetry, and the West-African Griot traditions. Hip-hop, the artists claim, more than any other music genre, builds on that tradition. The artists who are actively involved in the construction of such a genealogy, however, do not undertake this endeavor independently but do it with the support of a certain group of Islamic scholars, mainly African American but also African Muslim scholars who regularly travel to or live in Great Britain and who have emphasized and authenticated the Black American Muslim narrative. These scholars and preachers are also regularly present at Islamic hip-hop events to defend the legitimacy of music and hip-hop. This is something quite typical for Islamic entertainment events in the UK, that you have at least one Muslim scholar who will give a talk, somehow related to the theme of the event....

What is *extremely important* here to stress in regard to this particular narrative is that it clearly defines hip hop in terms of a *spoken word arts form*. Hip hop as a genre is a particular blend of a spoken art form with catching rhythmic style and funky beats. Within the mainstream, hip hop is produced primarily for the night club experience, therefore danceability being one of its prime objectives. The sensual dance style instigated by hip

hop sound is notably achieved through the amplified bass and its repetitive beats that often lead to drown the vocals.

According to the Muslim Hip hop artists I worked with, again, it is **not** so much the beats, but the **spoken word art**, which proves Hip hop's correspondence with the sonic-linguistic practices of Islam's pronounced oral tradition. For all these artists reconciling Islam with Hip hop means notably to *re-focus on the spoken arts form, to bring the words and the voice into the center*. Where these artists, however, strongly diverge, is in regard to their usage of instrumentation. Here, the discussion closely follows the opposed lines established in the classical age of Islam. The "no-music" rappers, who either follow themselves the more restrictive interpretations that proclaim the illegitimacy of music instruments (with the exception of drums) or (just acknowledge that many Muslims do and want to address them too as their audience ) prefer to call their rhymes simply as a *form of "poetry" or spoken word*. But even those artists who use instrumentation, generally easily go back and forth between more typical hip hop/rap and spoken poetry pieces, which points to the close connection/proximity they establish between these two performance style [– they identify both as being styles within the same genre. (!!)]

Interestingly, it is this focus of hip hop as a spoken word or spoken poetry genre that has triggered a quickly thriving spoken poetry scene in the broader British Muslim community. It is a quickly growing scene in which are involved Muslims of all different ethnic backgrounds – but still has to be seen as growing out of the Islamic hip hop scene.

**Mizan the Poet**, A South Asian British Muslim who was very much encouraged by Mecca 2 Medina, mentioned before, to perform his written poetry and has in recent

years become quite successful in the scene with his very political texts: **(clip 0:00-0:55)**

**PREVENT (critique of government agenda)**

**Ibrahim Sincere:** a man of Somali background, he talks in his poetry often about growing up around drugs, gangs, about finding his faith, about racism, etc... **(0:10-0:45)**

**And here another beautiful spoken poetry by Sukinah: 0:00-0:32**

Now after discussing the **first narrative** that serves to authenticate hip hop within an Islamic context, the centrality of spoken word, I come to the **second narrative** that operates to *authenticate hip hop* as a legitimate Islamic arts form, and that is, the idea of *'authentic' hip hop* as thoroughly disconnected from contemporary mainstream commercial hip hop.

British Muslim hip-hop artists, as their African-American counterparts, regularly point out that the origins of hip-hop are political, conscious, engaged, and that they are reflective not only of a black consciousness but also of an Islamic identity. They connect their own artistic projects to this genealogy of hip-hop in which many of the early hip hop pioneers belonged to the Five Percenters, were members of the Nation of Islam, or Sunni Muslims who have introduced many Islamic references into the hip-hop jargon. While they see this genealogy upheld by some African-American hip-hop artists such as Mos Def or Talib Kweli, they acknowledge that contemporary mainstream hip-hop has somehow deviated from this path. Their own engagement in Islamic hip-hop is thus seen as holding true to *'authentic' hip-hop* traditions by purifying corrupted-because-commodified hip-

hop, renewing its initial conscious messages and reconnecting it to its Islamic identity and ethics.

The complex genealogical argument that these artists formulate is well-expressed in this statement by Sukina, a Muslim convert of Jamaican origin and member of the female rap duo Poetic Pilgrimage:

I don't regard Hip-hop as that contemporary art form that you see on TV. I look at it as coming from West African griots, right through the plantation, and that social commentary, and that is what Hip-hop is to me, so I would never take the opinion that music is *haram*. Within the history of Hip-hop you will always find, like in the US, people who are Muslim or who are strongly influenced by Islam, because I think Islam always played a role, it wasn't just a faith it was about black consciousness, the faith is affiliated with African American history, African American identity. But, unlike in the US, there is no kind of Hip-hop scene in the UK, which is very conscious. In the US, there are many Hip-hop artists, like Mos Def, Brother Ali, with Jurassic Five, so many rappers who are Muslim. So, here in the UK, we have quite a task ahead of us.

This is an extremely important argument that the Muslim hip hop artists I worked with bring forward. It gives hip hop an ethical quality; and thereby hip hop as a spoken

word arts form thus becomes uniquely apt to communicate ethical messages to their audiences. By stressing its ethical nature, then, hip hop partakes in the broader moral-pedagogical project that characterizes Islamic artists in general, who conceive of their arts as educational and inspiring, when addressed to the Muslim community, to help build, strengthen and improve the community, and when addressed to the mainstream, to correct misconceptions about Islam and Muslims and to fight Islamophobia, xenophobia and racism. As such, hip hop songs tackle a vast array of topics: from social ills of which the community suffers, such as drug consumption and criminality (the youth), critiques of patriarchal practices within Muslim communities that are falsely justified as Islamic. There are stringent critiques of the War on Terror, British and Western imperial politics, Third World Solidarity, Black Liberation (as a Muslim issue) solidarity with Palestine, and so on.

Through these two above mentioned narratives that legitimate hip hop within an Islamic cultural space, Black-diasporic Muslims not only succeeded to gain increasingly recognition within this cultural space dominated hitherto by South Asian (and to a lesser extend Middle Eastern) Muslims, but it also fostered the emergence of a *more multi-ethnic urban culture scene* where British Muslim youth from diverse backgrounds seem more and more to find a means of expressing themselves. This progressive inclusion of hip hop into Muslim events has further been facilitated by the availability of public funding in the UK for Muslim cultural events especially in the period between 2007-2011. Smaller and bigger Muslim organizations as well as municipalities who had received public funding coming out of a number of social cohesion and preventing extremism policies as well as municipalities who set up neighborhood events have contributed to give Muslim hip hop

artists more visibility within the British Muslim community and beyond. Events which have given a platform to Islamic hip hop often shifted the emphasis from issues of blackness to one of “urban” youth as a generic term for uniting Muslim youth, who share issues around class and a history of post-colonial migration, anti-Muslim racism, etc....

*Hip hop and the Redefinition of the “British Muslim”*

In my last part of this talk I want to address more particularly the topic of British Muslim hip hop and the performance of citizenship. As I just mentioned, part of the visibility of Islamic hip hop stemmed from the availability of public or government funding for a number of events that promoted Muslim hip hop artists. And this is at least partially due to the fact that hip hop has come to be seen as something of an *authentic* expression of British Muslim youth, with the emphasis here on *British* (it’s in English, it’s a ‘Western’ arts form born in global cities). This is important because much of the public discourses and policies in Britain in regards to Muslim communities (especially the social cohesion and the preventing extremism agendas) were based on the assumption that the issues facing these communities could be solved with promoting a British identity among them – in other words, they assumed a lack of British identity among Muslims in Britain. Preventing Extremism policies (policies that have been put in place since the London bombings in 2005, when the UK discovered “homegrown terrorism”) in particular were concerned with *Muslims’ sentiment of belonging to a global community (the umma ) – a notion that questions the nation-state’s exclusivist claims*. One of the central objectives in the ideological approach of Prevent, then, was the *construction of a specific British Muslim identity*. Subsequent Prevent programs as well as the evolving political discourses around

it signify a much more assertive demand from Muslims to demonstrate patriotism and love for a nation that is less and less defined through references to multicultural difference but through an increasingly homogeneous group identity (“shared British values”). In these political discourses, Muslims are perceived as the eternal outsiders, having never fully arrived, a potential threat where everyone is individually required to prove the opposite. Such a discursive framing of Muslims in the nation makes particular affective/emotional demands on Muslims, and the cultural scene I am studying has to engage with these demands as well.

These demands elicit among Muslims, continuous debates over the meaning of what is British Islam and who are “British Muslims,” which for the hip hop scene I am studying poses more particularly the question of how do these different meanings of the term translate into the their cultural activities. So, how do hip hop artists who had been viewed at least for a couple of years as particularly *apt* to represent a British Muslim identity actually perform and construct this identity? This is the question I want to address in the last pages.

What is important in this context to recall is that all the Muslim cultural practitioners, whether hip hop artists or artists, as well as their promoters do believe in the importance of building a British Muslim culture that is “comfortably British and confidently Muslim,” to quote the core slogan of British Muslim TV, a private TV channel thoroughly committed to this cultural project.

While the Muslim culture practitioners, including the hip hop scene share therefore with Prevent discourses the understanding of the importance of strengthening a British Muslim identity, for them it is much less about loyalty than about belonging, less about

proving shared values but about finding one's own place within Britain – this is why the slogan quoted above says so aptly “comfortably” rather than “proudly.” Such an understanding of Britishness is of course heir to a longer history of contestation of Britain as a white nation. The claim for a *revised, cosmopolitan notion of Britishness* is a claim at least forty years old, articulated by post-colonial, racialized minorities in Britain who have struggled for equality and inclusion (in the 60s and 70s Afro-Caribbean and South Asian anti-racist activists have fought quite successfully together). This history of struggle has significantly inspired and nourished British Muslims' ideas around the cultural project they want to partake in promoting. In this sense, the hip hop artists' support for Britishness is connected to a history that precedes Preventing Extremism discourses. The desire to contribute to the building of a British Muslim cultural project stems from the need to enable and empower Muslims to feel at home and to feel represented in a diversified British cultural landscape, and to have their own narratives represented. And hip hop is central to this particular endeavor.

At the same time, the artists generally also claim Britishness as affirming and celebrating global connections – in line with the above mentioned revised Britishness; if for my interlocutors the British Muslim cultural project, and more particular hip hop aspires to indigenize Islam, it also transcends and exceeds, from its inception on, the confines of the nation-state – although in quite different ways than Prevent discourses depict it. For the artists, being a British Muslim already means being international and pluri-cultural. Those who want to promote this cultural project connect it to a variety of different cultural traditions, to a global Muslim cultural heritage as much as to various European or Western

cultural traditions and of course to global popular culture. And again, as we see, hip hop is central here as it reflects these different connections so well.

Thus a broad transnational cultural space becomes rooted in Britain through its diverse members of the community, with their multitude of migration stories, different roots and routes that potentially become the stories and routes of all British Muslims... All they are supposed to find a place in that. Yet, this heritage is not just about celebrating the past, but about particular futures, enabled by different forms of solidarities, including political ones.

There is an extremely interesting debate in the scene I am studying on the relevance of “British Muslim culture”, how it should or should not be defined, with an important conversation about the complex relation between religion and culture. And significantly, in this debate it becomes clear that the cultural project should not only defy an increasingly narrow defined Britishness that sees in the term “British Muslim” some kind of potential oxymoron, but must equally challenge what my interlocutors call Salafi-Islam with its mono-cultural and anti-arts stance. I cannot go into this debate today, but rather want to pay attention to how Muslim hip hop artists perform and enact in their work that much debated British Muslimness.

I am going to discuss now one particular piece here that highlights well the interlinking of localization and transnational connections. It is the most recent video clip by Poetic Pilgrimage. As it seems to me, this video exposes in interesting and multi-layered ways this particular global imaginary reflected in the British Muslim cultural project, in its visuals as well as in its lyrics....

**CLIP: Bigger than:** I will show it in its entirety

This is a fascinating video clip. I cannot do it full justice here so my remarks are fragmentary rather than comprehensive .... Shot in the streets of London but especially in the studio of British Moroccan Artist Hassan Hajjaj. Hajjaj's work is inspired by his North African heritage but also by West African culture (he importantly situates in his arts North and West Africa as a shared cultural space) and furthermore by London's club, hip hop and reggae scenes. In the video we see his arts, his installations and photography, portraiture and interior design, Orientalist images, African textiles, utensils and other objects, tins and cans that represent modern consumption practices in North and West Africa ... but PP themselves become objects of arts through their dress that fits into the style Hajjaj creates.

Muneera and Sukeena, have a particular relation to the regions that Hajjaj reworks in his art; as followers of the Tijaniyya Sufi order, which is importantly rooted in North and West African countries, they have travelled extensively to Morocco and Senegal. PP, like Hajjaj, are inspired by urban culture, by hip hop and reggae. For Muneera and Sukina this is even more significant given their Jamaican roots. In the video, they walk through the streets in London, omnipresent there is graffiti, one of the significant special markers of urban black culture. So, we see here an important performance of locality, of urban spaces as the spaces of belonging, it is a London where both are at home today (even if born and raised in Bristol), with an aesthetics that is permeated with a post-colonial presence. And in the lyrics, of course, there is a constant reference to urban black culture, notably to Hip hop and all the hip hop icons.

In that song they clearly indicate a return to their active rhyme spitting, truth telling, an activism that, as they say, is based on their Muslim faith: “*taking my tips from sacred texts, taking sacred trips with the rhymes I spit*”... And they sing with self-confidence, with defiance, also in a clear political sense “the spirit of resistance, the sound of revolution” and identifying with people globally who are oppressed, “the voice of the weak whose life ain’t cheap”. But clearly this political opposition is non-violent, through words rather than weapons: “a war of no weapons, from griots to beatbox.... Mobilize the disenfranchised.” Here also indicating Hip hop’s connection to West African music (*griots to beatbox*)

Their song is a story of empowerment, in the tradition of Black emancipation, but one that is embedded into a broader global perspective, “those racialized, imperialized over-sexualized”.... It is a broader post-colonial and intersectional solidarity that has become more and more embedded within a British Muslim cultural narrative, also due to the particular effort of Afro-diasporic Muslim artists who regularly had to challenge South-Asian and Middle-Eastern centric perspectives.

Muslim hip hop songs like this one by Poetic Pilgrimage challenge, again and again, the passive patriotism required from Muslims, who are considered not only to not belong but seen as a potential and latent threat to the nation. The artists do not reject belonging to Britain but reject the assumption that a strong feeling of belonging to the global *umma* is incommensurable with a feeling of Britishness. Their Britishness most evidently materializes in a very concrete and embodied neighborhood belonging, with the particular intimate knowledges and the local solidarities that emerge from there. A sense of citizenship is articulated through a care for those living around them but also through a broader sense of a right and a duty to speak about the current affairs of the country and the

world – that the culture practitioners often connected also to Muslim ideas of the *maslaha*, the common good. And this sense of duty to speak out about the state of the world, about injustices wherever they happen, is connected to a particular enactment of belonging to the umma that goes along with an interesting redrawing of its cartography.

Here, Great Britain and its diasporic neighborhoods are thoroughly rooted within that cartography, but at the same time, the global solidarities that trouble Prevent discourses so much are *not* severed. The hip hop artists enlarge the space of the umma more thoroughly, connecting its “peripheries” not conventionally imagined to be relevant to its center, such as sub-Saharan Africa but also what I call the “Islamic Black Atlantic” (a term inspired by a particular understanding of the dispersion of African through slavery and colonialism across the two sides of the Atlantic, thereby also including those who are understood to have been lost to the umma (African-descendants in the western hemisphere as descendants of Muslims). Here, connections are established through corresponding suffering, inflicted through the violence of colonialism, enslavement and neocolonial imperialist politics but also through patriarchy. The umma continues to be imagined through ethical connections and obligations across time and space. But we see here a moral space imagined through the umma that is neither essentialist nor exclusive. It is a moral geography that cultivates a particular ethical sensibility that allows to feel solidarity and compassion with suffering wherever it is experienced and to speak out against injustice wherever it is seen.

So, to conclude, we see that Islamic hip hop in the UK contributes quite centrally to the promotion a British Muslim cultural scene that reimagines the Muslim umma in new ways – within a Muslim community dominated by South Asian and Middle Eastern community, it has struggled to make a visible and audible space for African and Afro-

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May11, 2017

Diasporic identities. With its attentiveness to racial oppression and to Black empowerment, the umma is furthermore imagined in much broader ways than it has hitherto been. And because hip hop is so much part of the urban landscape of post-colonial Britain, it has indeed given British Islam a quite articulate face – however not in the way political discourses imagine it – true to the origins of conscious hip hop, Islamic hip hop in Britain does seem quite unwilling to allow itself to be fully domesticated.

Thank you very much.