# Keepin' It Real: Arabic Rap and the Re-Creation of Hip Hop's Founding Myth

Igor Johannsen

In the context of the so called Arab Spring, the role and function of "popular culture" generally, and hip hop specifically, have been scrutinized by a row of scholars and journalists. Connecting the respective cultural practices and products with the founding myth of hip hop as it materialized in the USA, Arabic rap is not only able to authenticate its products and performances, but it additionally sustains the relevance of social, political, and economic marginality for these respective cultural practices. This article explores a selection of decisive features of the founding myth of hip hop that are actualized through their representation in the Middle East and North Africa.

Keywords: Hip Hop; Cultural Heritage; Popular Culture; Arab Spring; Cultural Practice

**Intro**

Hip means to know,
It's a form of intelligence,
To be hip is to be update and relevant.
Hop is a form of movement.
You can't just observe a hop,
You gotta hop up and do it.

KRS One ft. Marley Marl, "Hip Hop Lives (I Come Back)" 2007

In the course of the uprisings and revolutions of 2011, Arabic rap became more aware of its social and political potential. The events and discourses of the so called Arab Spring were conducive to, on the one hand, the freedom to produce cultural products and commodities in an environment freed from direct censorship and, on the other hand, the possibility for rappers to relate to a revolutionary setting and contribute to the accompanying discourses. The cultural production of the Arab hip hop-community today is vast. Thousands of MCs are disseminating their voice to local, regional and global audiences. By way of its founding myth and narrative, hip hop-culture provides significant tools to artists and local hip hop-communities in respective societies through the structure of its practices and its ability to equip would-be revolutionaries with signs, symbols and codes. This is the frame

for the discussion attempted in this article about the performance and re-creation of the narrative and myth of hip hop-culture's founding era in an Arabic and Middle Eastern context.

Thus, I explore the founding myth of hip hop-culture and the preservation of decisive features of its cultural heritage—understood as intangible and consisting of social norms, aesthetic beliefs, traditions and the oral history of hip hop—in the Middle East and North Africa. In this endeavor, "myth" is not understood as a fictitious tale, rather, it is understood as "lived reality" creating a normative thrust, whose authenticity is created through repetitive performance (Klein and Friedrich 62). Concomitantly, I understand the "heritage" of hip hop as a constructed narrative that is realized through a concentration on specific aspects of the structure of the culture and a selected historiography of its recorded lyrical material. Claiming to represent "real" hip hop and being true to its credentials involves the "authentic" performance of the practices of the culture. "Real" and "authentic," however, must be understood as floating signifiers, who adjust their meaning to coincide with altered spatiality—both socially as well as geographical—and changed temporality. The reification of a specific intangible cultural heritage through the use of cultural practices is, congruously, a deeply social and cultural endeavor with no claims to objectivity or factual, measurable truth. Instead of questioning claims of objectivity or authenticity, I will thus present examples of conscious identity constructions that are able to tap into a widely diffused and believed myth of the ability of hip hop to "speak truth to power."

In what way and to what effect, then, is the myth and narrative of the hip hop-generation[1] connected to the struggles of contemporary Arabic societies, whose hip hop-communities are now at the forefront of representing one of the more recent examples of the global spread of hip hop-practices and aesthetics? What artistic content is being produced, and how does the "cultural heritage" of hip hop manifest itself in and through these cultural products? In answering these questions, I will, on the one hand, compare the signification of socio-economic, political and societal factors that are deemed constitutive for the hip hop-generation of the USA with those of the Arabic hip hop-community. On the other hand, lyrical and aesthetic aspects of hip hop-practices in the Arabic context shall serve as examples for the reification of hip hop as a means for providing a voice to the voiceless, spreading knowledge and for preserving the revolutionary zeal in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011. The first part of this paper is concerned with the political legacy of hip hop and with its potential revolutionary quality and rebellious posture. In the second part, the prominence of "the local" in hip hop-culture will be assessed as a crucial aspect for authenticating and, by that measure, validating cultural practices. Hip hop-culture is conventionally understood as being comprised of four elements: DJing, MCing or rapping, graffiti and breakdance. To these four some add a fifth, knowledge or "overstanding,"[2] as the one element that holds the other together and that is crucial for being perceived as "authentic." Here, I will concentrate specifically on the cultural practice of rapping. The rapper epitomizes the orator, lyricist and historicist of hip hop-communities across the globe. In understanding the Arabic-speaking hip hop-community as one tribe of the Global Hip Hop Nation (GHHN), I will not include in my discussion any other linguistic identifications. I am, however, aware of their existence in the respective societies. Additionally, my treatment of the issues presented is in no way exhaustive; rather, by presenting select examples, my aim is to highlight transregional modes of re-creation of cultural practices along with a set of presumed, or performed, normative implications.

### Revolution and Rebellion in Hip Hop

My people wake up, why you sleepin?
Don't give up, not that easy!
Not for Morsy, not for Sisi,
None of them really cares if you're eatin.

MC Amin feat. Sphinx, "Batel" ("Deception") 2013[3]

In several societies experiencing uprisings, revolutions and civil unrest in the so called Arab Spring, practitioners used the cultural practices of hip hop to formulate critique, describe the socio-economic hardships that led to the widely felt discontent and add their voice to the discourses concerned with the reasons for and the events around the uprisings and revolutions. In doing so, the hip hop-communities in the Middle East and North Africa were able to connect their activities to the founding myth and narrative of global hip hop-culture. From its beginning in the urban ghettos of the USA, hip hop provided artistic means to engage in public deliberation about the social, political and economic situation of its practitioners, which initially consisted of mostly African American youth of New York in the 1970s (Rose 2).

More than a decade after the peak of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1960s, the African American population in the USA was still confronted with rampant racism and the labeling of the "Black male" as the archetypal criminal. After the end of segregation, incarceration had become the new model for the subjugation of African Americans. The inner city, where crime and drug abuse had fused with everyday violence, came to be seen as an arena for harsh containment policies by state security institutions. The setting was characterized by an immense and expanding proportion of young African Americans who were governed by comparatively old, white people (Chang 387). The socio-economic situation was dire, with poor housing and infrastructure, economic deprivation, and scarcity of job opportunities. In the words of hip hop-historian Jeff Chang: "If blues culture had developed under conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip hop-culture would arise from the conditions of no work" (13).

According to its founding myth, hip hop provided means to confront these harsh conditions of life in the postindustrial city as an ethnic minority, excluded from economic growth and ignored by state institutions and services (Taylor 116-18). The cultural practices contained in hip hop-culture enabled communities to gain agency and a voice, tackling issues directly relating to their personal and communal life-worlds (Mikos 66-67). They fostered artistic creativity and were able to create a form of competitiveness on the basis of lyrical, musical, or artistic skills instead of physical or material power. Competing with one another by way of these practices has been delineated since their genesis according to their perceived authenticity, the ability to perform a viable representation of social, political, and/or religious/spiritual experiences or life-worlds relevant to the respective hip hop-community. Being a recurrent term in hip hop-culture, I understand "[r]epresentation [a]s the production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language" (Hall 17). The practice of rapping is, understood in this way, a quest for meaning, for overstanding. This pertains especially to the local—the "hood" or "street" and its people—but also to the wider political or religious perspective and the connections between the local and the global as well as between the particular and the universal. Accordingly, the rapper functions as a conjunction between the world—or his/her representation of it—and his/her community, epitomizing a form of "organic intellectual" (Abrams).

Accordingly, and as with all culture, the signs and symbols, codes and aesthetics as well as the language employed in hip hop are quintessentially about making

sense of oneself and the world. Language, as the central tool in the practice of the orators and lyricists of hip hop, is combined with beats and samples of pre-recorded music to generate a thrust that is cognitively relevant as well as rhythmically or musically appealing. The lyrics, delivered in rhyme-schemes of sometimes astonishing complexity, are designed to not only appeal to the audience or community, but additionally, to create an aesthetic experience through the "flow" achieved by the combination of language and rhythm.

With the "fifth Element" of hip hop—knowledge—rap was acquiring the function of "Black America's CNN," according to the rapper and member of the famous group Public Enemy, Chuck D (Chang 251). Rapping made it possible "[…] to express what the official language of politics […] [was] incapable of translating" (Daulatzai xxvi) and to spread knowledge about the circumstances of the community through an independent media network, i.e. the "streets." The famous hip hop-proverb "each one teach one" has carried the revolutionary idea of self-esteem and self-reliance of the African American community in the USA since the 1970s. Rap and hip hop by that measure, constitute an excellent example of the claim that

"[m]usic has provided an affective form of communication that has not simply been subjective, intuitive and irrational, but which has been used to produce forms of 'counter-rationality' which in turn have created affiliations, alliances and understanding amongst dispersed and diverse groups of people." (Negus 222)
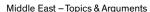
Some of the features that are conducive to the emergence and relevance of hip hop in the US are comparable to the situation of large parts of the population in the Middle East and North Africa: The scarcity of jobs, the demographics of an overwhelmingly young population and the conditions of living under the scrutiny of security institutions and the police in an environment of socioeconomic despair (Dhillon and Yousef). Against this background, the founding myth of hip hop was able to provide a connection to a revolutionary outlook and the respective vocabulary. Hip hop's cultural practices could provide a stage for the unheard, a home for the displaced, and a social community. Facing the powers that were, hip hop offered a language of empowerment, self-reliance, pride, and meaning. Putting the immediate social surrounding in the center and reflecting on its economic, political and religious/spiritual situation and discourse, rap was a way to artistically encounter the "real world," and in doing

so, empower oneself and one's community. This rebellious attitude, which is inherent in the founding myth and history of hip hop, is a defining appeal for its adherents and was preserved when the culture spread globally:

"Although hip hop originated among African American communities in the United States of America as an expression of their struggle against racial oppression and economic disparity, rap music and hip hop-culture is combined with linguistic, musical and political contexts to become a vehicle for youth protest and resistance around the world." (Williams 67)

Standing out in the early debates about the dangers of rap music in the US, the song "Fuck tha Police" by the group N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitudes) sparked controversy in the late 1980s. Accusing the group and its song for glorifying violence against police and motivating listeners to defy the authority of state security, the FBI wrote a concerned letter to Ruthless Records, the publisher. Additionally, the group was banned from performing on several occasions and even arrested off stage after defying police restrictions regarding the performance of this song. In spite of radio stations banning their album *Straight Outta Compton*, it went triple platinum and is now among the most influential hip

hop-albums ever made. Tapping into this legacy and referencing the Tunisian security institutions, the rapper Weld El 15 claimed in a 2013 production that policemen are dogs ("Boulicia Kleb"). The reaction by the state was even harsher in this instance: The rapper was charged and imprisoned and only released after the application of extensive public pressure (Amara; Wandler). Other songs and videos, for example "Prisoner" by the Arabian Knightz or "Kazeboon" ("Liars") by Revolution Records, share this critical perspective on state security by showing street clashes and violence perpetrated by uniformed state employees. Thereby, a core theme of the hip hop-narrative was easily appropriated by the Arab hip hop-community, who could directly identify with the view of the police as being "just another gang" and an active agent in the "War against Youth" (Chang 387-89).

In December 2010, the Tunisian rapper Hamada Ben Amor, better known by his stage name El General, released his song "Rais LeBled" ("Head of State") on the video-platform YouTube. In this song, he accuses former president Ben Ali of ignoring the miserable situation of the Tunisian people. He speaks about hunger, death, and poverty and holds the head of state accountable for this misery, addressing him in direct speech. In the course of the events of 2011 and the overthrow of the regime of President Ben Ali, this song was part of the "revolutionary soundtrack" and resounded throughout the entire region. In academia and European and North American media, the rapper was deemed a decisive driving force behind the events with *Time Magazine* adding him to the list of the 100 most influential people of 2011 ("The 2011 Time 100").

By addressing the head of state directly in his lyrics, El General not only represents himself as a speaker for his fellow Tunisians, but he also simultaneously cites a prominent theme of hip hop-culture: the depiction of political and social problems by using the lyrical form of an open letter to the government or the head of state. In collaboration with The Outlawz, the song "Dear Mr. President" by the hip hop-icon 2Pac was released posthumously in 1999. LL Cool J and Wyclef Jean added the international perspective in 2008. In their song "Dear Mr. President," again written like an open letter, they connected the struggles of the poor and neglected parts of the population of the USA with the hardships of people in the Middle East in the time of the "War on Terror" as well as with the conditions of immigrants trying to reach the USA.

The "blackness" of hip hop's formative period, signifying the marginality that is crucial to understand its founding myth and narrative, is replaced with "Arabness" (Zein) through the artistic and performative alignment of the respective social and political sphere. While the effects of economic constrains, lack of resources and police violence can be compared more or less directly between African American New Yorkers in the 1970s and the young generation of many Arab societies, the issue of marginality is additionally perceived through a global perspective. Being part of the ethnic and linguistic majority in society, Arabic rap is still able to point to the legacy of colonialism and poor governance in order to argue that "Arab" and "Arabic" indicate a form of global marginality.

### The Local in the Global and the Globally Local

And still I see no changes; can't a brother get a little peace?
There's war on the streets and war in the Middle East.
Instead of war on poverty
They got a war on drugs so the police can bother me.

2Pac, "Changes" 1998

With hip hop, we witness a global culture, where certain products, codes, practices,

words and styles are visible throughout different local hip hop-communities, and which are often combined with strong references to the founding generation and the idols of hip hop in the US. The work of the Wu Tang Clan, Nas, NWA or 2Pac[4] are supposedly known to every hip hop-adherent; additionally, certain figures of speech and a given set of vocabulary is used globally (Androutsopoulos 56-59). The founders of hip hop and the principles circumscribing its practices since its genesis are appreciated, embraced and cited in hip hop-communities the world over thus enabling us to speak of a shared cultural heritage. All of these communities together constitute the global network, the "imagined community" (Anderson) of the "Global Hip Hop Nation" (Alim 3).

The decisive local character of the cultural practices was instrumental for their global diffusion. This element has enabled local scenes to not only become part of a global cultural community with its codes and conventions but to also do so by connecting respective codes and conventions to the local sphere and society (Pennycook and Mitchell 30-35). Among other things, "[h]ip hop was shaping a language that allowed young people to negotiate a political voice *for themselves in their societies*" (Fernandes, *Close to the Edge* 4, emphasis added). Some allude to Ronald

Robertson and speak of the inherently "glocal" quality of hip hop (Klein and Friedrich 10), others hint at the rather fluid and changing relationship between the global and the local. The global and the local in this context are not to be understood as fixed entities but rather as references to the widespread diffusion of the cultural practices and the representation of physical places (nation, town, neighborhood etc.) in and through these practices (Negus 183).

The embedding of one's own artistic performance into a local context in meaningful ways is indispensable for gaining respect in that respective hip hop-community (Klein and Friedrich 23). The rapper performs a representation of the "hood" or "street" in his/her rhymes by referencing the living conditions or life-worlds of the social, economic and political environment in his immediate surroundings. The spatial dimension functions concurrently with the social dimension in hip hop-culture. The Egyptian rapper Deeb takes up this theme in his song "Masrah Deeb" ("Deeb's Stage"), in which he describes the urban setting in Cairo as his material and social stage. In the same manner, the MC Sphinx of the Arabian Knightz, another Egyptian crew, embraces his city by rapping: "Unlike anyone else I live what I write - still got the streets of Cairo up under my

Nikes" in the song "Fokkak" ("Relax", or "Loosen Up"). Connecting the geographical dimension with an immediate social and political twist, the Egyptian MC Amin, in his song "El Thawra Mustamera" ("The Revolution Continues"), describes the fans of the football team Al Ahly from Cairo as his family, denouncing their alleged role in the riots around a match against El Masry in Port Said leaving at least 73 killed (Kirkpatrick).

This locality, signifying spatial rootedness and social embeddedness, can itself be conducive to specific inter-regional connections or points of reference. A central theme elaborated on in hip hop-culture in the USA concerns the history of African American movements for equal rights and a positive identity construction. The principles and teachings of the Nation of Islam[5] and the speeches of Malcolm X ranked prominently in these references,[6] exemplifying not only the connection between the hip hop-generation and Black Nationalism together with the Islamic faith, but also the linking of the struggles of African Americans in the US with their ancestral homeland in Africa and Asia (Daulatzai 41-44). Hip hop by that measure contributed to a discourse, in which the fight against state racism was only one battlefield in the fight against the global supremacy of the white man, epito-

mized especially by the European colonization of Africa and the Middle East and the reverberations thereof. The understanding of racism as qualitatively equivalent, both inside the US and abroad, allowed for a more comprehensive critique and the possibility to position oneself outside of the national consensus that was so replete with assuring white, male dominance (Daulatzai 7, 29, 37). Instead of being a national minority, African Americans could claim to represent the global majority.

Additionally, the influences of the Black Power movement led many hip hoppers of the founding generation to embrace the religion of Islam or a form of religiosity associated with Islam. "[…] hip hop culture […] became a space in which Black radicalism, Islam, and the politics of the Muslim Third World have had a powerful impact on the lyrical imaginations, sonic landscapes and political visions […]" (xxviii). With religion, especially Islam, figuring prominently in the political discourses around the events of 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa, this aspect of the hip hop-myth resonated through the cultural practices of local hip hop-communities; albeit in a way that responded to local public discourses and the connected political agendas like the rise of Islamist parties in several countries and the inter-regional discourse between the "West" and the "East."

As most of the Arab rappers see themselves as Muslims and use this identity marker in their artistic production, this feature of the heritage of hip hop-culture is quite naturally appropriated by a considerable portion of Arabic rap. In the Middle East and North Africa, we find a host of artists engaged in reflecting on their religious credentials through their lyrics. The aforementioned El General, through his revolutionary anthem heralded in Europe as a speaker of his generation, released the track "Allahu Akbar" ("God is Great") shortly after the revolution in which he describes his wish to fight and die for Islam. The Syrian group Black Bannerz refers in its name to the banners of the Abbasids reminiscent of a period in history where the Caliphate represented prowess and progress; the members of the group call themselves Holy War and S.O.T.A (Slave Of The Almighty). Furthermore, the ascent to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2012 motivated the production of the song "Makshoufeen" ("The Exposed") by the MCs Rush and MC Amin from Cairo and Mansoura respectively. In it, the rappers accuse those groups of abusing Islam for petty political goals instead of honoring its true credentials.

### Conclusion: Arab Rap Representin'

Hip hop ain't dead!
It never died!
It just moved to the Middle East
where the struggle is still alive

Arabian Knightz, "Uknighted" 2012

The above quote refers to the song and album *Hip Hop is Dead* by the US-artist Nas from 2006. The lyrics of the song harshly criticize the state of hip hop-culture in the USA during the time of its release. Referencing artists and ideals connected to the formative period of hip hop, Nas laments the commercialization and standardization of rap music. The loss of the artistic and cultural core of the practices of hip hop in this environment leads him to the conclusion that hip hop died. In effect, then, Arabian Knightz and the other 26 artists featured on the song "Uknighted," who in great majority live in or originate from Arabic countries, reclaim hip hop and perform a re-animation of its lost heritage. The quote indirectly approves of Nas' diagnosis and concludes by revealing the reason for the perceived "death" of hip hop in the USA: The essential ingredient for "real" hip hop and cause for its re-location to the "Middle East" is "the struggle." For hip hop to live, its prac-

**Igor Johannsen**

is a research fellow in the research network "Re-Configurations: History, Remembrance and Transformation Processes in the Middle East and North Africa" at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS) at the University of Marburg, Germany. He received his Magister Artium in Islamic Studies, History and Political Science from the University of Hamburg in 2011. Igor Johannsen is a doctoral candidate at the Department for Arabic Language and Culture at the CNMS. His main fields of interest are hip hop-culture, cultural theory, Arabic history and philosophy, and the political geography of the Middle East and Islam.

titioners must be involved in some kind of social or political "struggle."

Through their inclusion in a sizeable community and the contents of their lyrics, the Arabic hip hop-community is changing the face of the GHHN, and is compellingly stressing the revolutionary core of its practices and values once again. The actualization of the founding myth of hip hop has thus been accomplished compellingly in Arabic-speaking contexts since 2011. The uprisings and revolutions had the effect of propelling the artistic production and political content onto history's stage, and thereby, making the work of the artists visible to a larger audience and their lyrics more relevant to their political and societal setting. Stressing this role of Arabic rap "re-presenting" hip hop, Sujatha Fernandes, Professor of Political Economy and Sociology at the University of Sidney, refers to Arabic as being the new "lingua franca" of the GHHN ("Mixtape").

## Notes

[1] According to journalist and activist Bakari Kitwana, this hip-hop-generation is constituted of Afro-Americans born between 1965 and 1984 (Chang 2).

[2] "Overstanding" alludes to a form of deeper understanding, of being able to sufficiently comprehend one's social and material surroundings.

[3] All artists and songs in this article are indicated by names only. This is done due to the availability of these songs via platforms like YouTube, Soundcloud, Facebook or MySpace and their appearances on several platforms and compilations. Additionally, Arabic rap is often distributed independently via the internet and consequently without a publisher and a corresponding single or album release. The transliteration follows the spelling used by the artists themselves and do not correspond to the usual transliteration rules. If no translator is indicated, the English version is the original.

[4] All of these MCs and groups are icons for the global hip hop-nation and are, or were, decisive driving forces for hip hop-culture in general. Wu Tang Clan and Nas are still very much active in representing their art.

[5] The Nation of Islam is an African American religious community and political movement that was founded in 1930 in Detroit by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad.

[6] The speeches of Malcolm X were sampled in hip hop-productions numerous times. One prominent example is the song "Who's Gonna Take the Weight" by Gang Starr on their Album *Step in the Arena* (1990). In the song and the accompanied video, the rapper assures his identity as Muslim and the connection between racism in the USA and the struggles of the Blacks in South Africa and the colonized and war-torn peoples of the Muslim Third World. Another example is Public Enemy, who featured samples of Malcolm X's speeches in several productions and who show their own emblem beside a picture of Malcolm X in the video for their famous song "Fight the Power," in which they themselves are depicted as leaders of a political movement.

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