

Martin A. M. Gansinger

Radical religious thought in Black popular music

**FIVE PERCENTERS AND
BOBO SHANTI IN RAP AND REGGAE**



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Dedicated to Loubna and Ahmed-Nouri

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About the author

Dr. Martin Abdel Matin Gansinger (born 1979 in Austria) studied Communication Science and Political Science at the University of Vienna and passed both with distinction. His Master's thesis discusses recursive patterns of cultural, social, and political resistance in various forms of Black American musical expression and the potential of Hip Hop as an alternative communication-structure for the compensation of dysfunctional representation through mainstream-media. He furthermore analyzed the conditions of communication and interaction in regard to the practice of collective improvisation as a musical method and its correspondence to the concept of the Ideal Speech Situation as introduced by Habermas – as well as its efficiency in the context of Intercultural Communication – to attain a Doctor's degree in Communication Science. Next to being an editor and journalist for *jazzzeit* magazine and Vienna-based radio station orange 94.0 from 2005-2009 he has been working as a PR-coordinator for the internationally awarded, independent label JazzWerkstatt Records. Martin Abdel Matin Gansinger conducted several long-term field studies abroad, receiving financial funding through the University of Vienna's research scholarship. He spent a year in Ghana in coordination with the Vienna Institute for Development and Cooperation and Prof. John Collins from the University of Ghana/Accra, researching Intercultural Communication processes in the context of transfusional West African music styles – including an extended stay at the local compound of the Jamaica-based Bobo Shanti Mansion, one of the strictest subdivisions of the Rastafarian faith, and allowance to their communal Nyahbinghi ceremonies. Further field research aiming at extemporaneous communication techniques and its use in traditional knowledge systems has been done in Fez/Morocco and the convent of the Naqshbandi Sufi order in Lefke/Cyprus where he is working and residing since 2009. He is currently holding the position of an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Communication at Girne American University, teaching Undergraduate-, Master-, and PhD-classes as well as appointed Head of Department of Radio, TV & Cinema. In 2017, Martin A. M. Gansinger initiated *immediate. Currents in Communication, Culture and Philosophy*.

Introduction

Popular music has always drawn part of its attracting powers from referring to religiously connotated sources, obscure movements or charismatic characters in content and symbolism (Till, 2010). One only needs to think about The Beatles' association with Indian gurus, Led Zeppelin's fascination with occultist Aleister Crowley, countless Rock bands' claimed affiliation with the Church of Satan or Rap-millionaire Jay-Z's lucrative play with Illuminati symbolism (Gosa, 2011, p. 8). Providing the listener with seemingly meaningful context beyond the plain musical content seems to help to sell that extra bunch of records.

While in a lot of cases, this displayed affiliation stays mainly on the surface of things and seems to serve simple marketing agendas, some artists openly commit themselves – or even fully dedicate their artistic output – to the cause of certain quasi-religious movements. If the Wu-Tang Clan as one of the most influential Rap groups of the 1990s – at the peak of their popularity, and probably the one of Hip Hop as a genre as well – decided to fill the seven minutes of the first track (Wu-Tang Clan, 1997a) on their highly anticipated new album with a preacher-style sermon performed by Five Percenter ideologist Popa Wu (Killmann, 2014), it can be considered a fundamental statement, underlining the crucial commitment of the artists towards its primary ideological influence.

What might be in coherence with the character of the Five Percent Nation as a missionary movement – employing newspapers and websites or street academy activities (Knight, 2013, p. 96) – comes across a lot more ambivalent in the case of Reggae/Dancehall artists like Sizzla Kalonji, Capleton or Lutan Fyah – who openly demonstrate their affiliation with the Bobo Shanti Order, a rather reclusive branch of the Rastafarian faith, organized around strict communal services (Barnett, 2002, p. 58) and quite clear in its rejective stance towards Reggae music (Kamimoto, 2015, p. 47).

However, one of the main questions that has to be asked is concerning the possible reasons for the fact that two highly commercially successful, globally relevant and influential musical styles of the last decades (Savishinsky, 1994a; Mitchell, 2001; Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2008) being tied to rather obscure mythologies of somehow radical religious character that affiliated artists pledge open allegiance to. Are these ideologies simply being instrumentalized by musicians looking for increased attention by adding some outstanding attitude and identity on a competitive market – or are they in turn being used and exploited for promotional purposes? In any case, it is nothing else but astonishing that a considerable audience of listeners would happily vibe to rather harsh and violent musical enforcements of Mosaic law, delivered by preachy, self-styled prophets – or even more obscure, Islam-inspired Black supremacy conceptions, circulating around the idea that the creation of the Caucasian race is resulting from an evil experiment of a mad scientist (Smith, 1998, p. 539).

Contextual Framework

The inflationary use of the term ‘radical’ by news media outlets within the last few years – and its tendency of it being attached to Islamic routine and common practice such as the wearing of headscarfs, prayer hats, beards, traditional clothes or the simple act of prayer itself as indications for extremist thought and behavior – is asking for a closer consideration about the connotation of the word in the context of this discussion. Here, unlike the more hysterical and polarizing depictions in news media, the term is used neither as a positive nor as a negative evaluation but simply refers to the relatively strict adherence to rather restrictive concepts and beliefs. Therefore, it applies to the strong emphasis of the Bobo Shanti Rasta Mansion on the Old Testament and a strict schedule of commune-oriented practices such as the honoring of the Sabbath or regular fasting – which clearly sets it apart from more moderate and less regulative Rastafarian branches like the Twelve Tribes of Israel (Rubenstein & Suarez, 1994; Chevannes, 1994, p. 171).

In case of the Five Percent Nation – founded 1964 in Harlem – the radical aspect is given by a crude creation mythology based on reversed racism that is somehow shared with other Black nationalist movements (Isma’ilis, 2014; McCloud, 2014) such as the Nation of Islam (Essien-Udom, 1962; Tinaz, 1996; Tinaz, 2000; Tinaz, 2001; Bowen, 2013) or the Nuwaubian Nation (Bailey, 2006; Palmer, 2010; Finley, Guillory, & Page, Jr., 2014) but certainly sets it apart from orthodox Islam (Swedenburg, 1996, p. 2; Knight, 2013, p. 91). One just needs to consider that the body of its founder – Clarence 13X Smith, a former member of the Nation of Islam, referred to by his followers as *Father Allah* – was cremated after his assassination in 1969 (Knight, 2013), while orthodox Islam strictly requires the corpse to be buried in the soil. Similarly, despite considerable references to Biblical texts – especially the *Psalms of David* in the Old Testament (Murrell, 2000) – and adherence to orthodox rites, Semaj (2013, p. 107) pointed to *the Rasta tradition of ‘let the dead bury their dead’ and the absence of rites of passage as (o)ne major sign in the stagnation of the Rasta culture* (p. 106), with

funerals for dead Rastas *being facilitated at the church of their parents or the one they had abandoned when they answered the calling of Rastafari* (p. 107). He furthermore stressed the absence of either original or religious rituals for marriage, *which is either by common-law unions, the laws of the state (Babylon) or a series of casual, undefined relationships* (p. 106), as well as missing ceremonies for birth and the naming of children.

Although the Bobo Shanti Order – also known as Bobo Ashanti or the Ethiopian African Black International Congress Church of Salvation (EABIC), founded 1958 in Kingston by Prince Emmanuel Charles Edwards, today referred to as King Emmanuel I or *Dada* by his followers – is strongly based on religious concepts and traditions, the Five Percent Nation as well as the Rastafari ideology as a whole tend to stick to a self-definition that puts more emphasis on cultural or ethnical aspects and occasionally show efforts to distance themselves from institutionalized religion (Washington, 2014, p. 86; Gibbs, 2003, p. 91). Nevertheless, they might still be classified as quasi-religious movements – with even less orthodox Rasta denominations than the Bobo Shanti being based on strict adherence to varying divine conceptions (Hannah, 1981; Rubenstein & Suarez, 1994; Barnett, 2005) or at least attributing a strong inherent spiritual aspect to their lifestyle and belief system (Huhtala, 2015) by frequently using the term ‘faith’ to describe it (Taylor, 2005). As pointed out by Zips (2006, p. 135), *(t)he Bobo Ashanti state and church are not separated which is demonstrated by the double functions of the political decision makers as priests of the Melchizedec Righteous Kingdom*. On the other hand, the Nation of Islam has been attested state-religious character by Essien-Udom (1962) and the Five Percenters conception of each (Black) man being God was defined as a *highly innovative and idiosyncretic religious expression* (Gibbs, 2003, p. 91). In coherence with this individual approach of self-realization, his acknowledgment of strong gnostic influences in Five Percenter teachings led Knight (2013, p. 232) to categorize it as *some sort of indigenous African American Sufism*, in accordance with O’Connor (1998). Nevertheless, Knight also suggested a relativation of that very claim at the same time, noting that Clarence 13X Smith had clearly positioned himself as anti-religion – as contrary to the conception of classical Sufism (Knight, 2013, p. 232):

It is easy to imagine parallels with medieval saints such as Ibn-al-Arabi, who saw man as reflecting the divine, or al-Hallaj, who famously called himself by one of Allah's 99 Names (al-Haqq, the 'Truth'). While not always off the mark, it's a naive assumption that Five Percenters approach 'God' with mysticism. Sufi themes of divine union or Manifesting God's Attributes represent a closeness to the mystery god whose existence is denied in the 120.

In this context it is necessary to note that *the 120* at the end of the above quote refers to *the 120 degrees*, the core teachings of the Five Percenters. Even though more based on esoteric than exoteric principles (Gray, 2014), both groups classify as offsprings from a broader religiously connotated ideology and while the Five Percent Nation tends to be less regulated, more moderate and individually-oriented in reference to the Nation of Islam as its core inspiration, it still classifies as being termed as radical and extremist in more than one aspect. Media comparisons of Five Percenters to the Hitler Youth in the 1960s (Knight, 2013, p. 122) and an infamous appearance of the Wu-Tang Clan on the Arsenio Hall Show in 1994 with Ol' Dirty Bastard – Five Percenter name Unique Aason Allah (Knight, 2013, p. 184) – provocatively shouting '*the Black Man is God!*' (2013, p. 182) in the face of a mainstream American audience might serve as evidence for the widespread consideration of the group as radical in the public eye. The Bobo Shanti on their behalf have been termed as *Reggae Mullahs* or *Jamaican Taliban* by critics and other artists (Midnite, 2001; DancehalDopeBoi, 2013) who put the religion-based, judgmental views and rigid lifestyle in context with the general attitude of Islamic fundamentalists. Another case of portraying the Five Percent Nation as a sort of hidden *fifth column*, comprised of radical and militant Islamists, could be observed at the occasion of the attempt to link the Washington sniper-shootings of 2002 to the direct influence of affiliated artists like Wu-Tang's Method Man or Killarmy (Swedenburg, 2002; Aidi, 2004; Knight, 2013, p. 185; Hassell, 2015). For the purpose of this discussion the name *Five Percent Nation* will be used to address the group, since the later on established and simultaneously employed *Nation of the Gods and Earths* does not seem to be fully accepted in the somewhat fragmented movement (Knight, 2013, p. 200).

In regard to a conceptual perspective, the following discussion draws heavily from a comparative analysis of the Nation of Islam and the Rastafari philosophy (Barnett, 2006), which can be considered as the respective roots from which the Five Percenters and the Bobo Shanti emerged. Soumahoro (2007) provided a less complex approach of portraying shared elements of Rastafarianism and the Nation of Islam that demonstrates their attempt to challenge Christianity as the theological reference system for the identified oppressive power structures they claim to oppose. Due to a formative and consistent impact on Hip Hop as the most influential cultural movement in terms of music production, aesthetics, fashion, and rentability throughout the last decades, quite considerable attention is given to the Five Percenters from a scholarly perspective.

Aptly placed in the *Journal of Gang Research*, Corbiscello's (1998) slightly judgmental approach focused mainly on controversial aspects of crime- and race-related matters throughout the history of the group, with brief captures of major personalities, symbolism and doctrine. O'Connor (2006) provided an insightful account on theological aspects of the Five Percenters and its status as a kind of alternative religion emerging out of the Islamic African-American community but does not cover its ties to Hip Hop in detail. Swedenburg (1996) authored one of the first attempts that presented samples of doctrine reflected in lyrics of affiliated artists and explored the application of Middle Eastern Islamic culture as an African-American tool for cultural resistance in Islamic Rap. A similar angle has been chosen by Aidi (2004) and Alim (2006), who portrayed different layers of Islamic influence on US-Hip Hop, from Sunni Islam to the Nation of Islam and Five Percenters.

Miyakawa's (2005) extensive and detailed attempt to analyze the reflection of Five Percenters in Hip Hop culture from a musicologist's point of view – aiming at traceable references in lyrical content, rhythmical patterns, symbolism in artwork and even hidden numerology in the order the tracks are assembled for an album – has been criticized by Knight (2013, p. 227) for not considering a field research approach in order to capture first-hand views of the movement. Assuming that they would not tolerate