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Giving Silence a Voice: Exploring Religion, Spirituality, and Rap Music as a Medium for Mindfulness

Brian Thompson
bthomp12@lesley.edu

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Melissa Jean

Abstract

Mindfulness has become increasingly popular in the modern world as a way to find balance in one's everyday life. A challenge affecting the growth of mindfulness as it continues to gain recognition is the relationship between mindfulness and traditional religious frameworks. Music is an important area of interest in this discussion as research has revealed changes in trends towards contemporary music in favor of classic songs and hymns as markers of personal truth, and the embodiment of celebration and significant events. Rap music has a deep cultural connection and has been used throughout history to depict the lives of the people who participate in the genre. Rap songs can be found expressing ideas of both the religious and secular world suggesting a unique ability to exists with significance across domains. Therefore, the creation of a rap album may potentially serve as an effective method to discuss mindfulness within both the religious and secular realms and help to create mutual understandings of mindfulness through use of a shared medium as well as contribute to the growth of mindfulness through the introduction of mindfulness into new communities.

Keywords: mindfulness, religion, spirituality, music, rap

Table of Contents

Page

Giving Silence a Voice:

Exploring Religion, Spirituality, and Rap Music as a Medium for Mindfulness

In a time when technology and instant gratification have become the norm, mindfulness has grown as a buzzword often associated with self-fulfillment and understanding. From self-help books and phone applications to features in popular magazines and news networks, mindfulness has gained a reputation as a tool one can use to help manage the feelings and experiences of their day to day life.

A challenge facing the growth of mindfulness in the public sphere, is the relationship between mindfulness and religion. Religion, often a source of guiding principles, is closely linked to our sense of identity and how we come to understand our relationship to the world. Studies suggest that there has been a repositioning of younger generations from traditional religious frameworks towards more independent and self-defined forms of spiritual significance, thus leading to labels such as "new age" or "spiritual." The movement to seek meaning beyond the framework of traditional religion has opened the doors for new forms of spiritual understanding and expression. However, it's possible that the search to define personal experience outside of the religious context overlooks understandings of where these two areas may overlap.

Research suggests that music plays an essential part in the development of new spiritual identities and ideologies (De Nora, 2000). The genre of Rap music has a history steeped in creative expression and use as a vehicle for change. If music effects our development of spiritual

ideologies, it may be possible that the creation of a rap album can effectively express

mindfulness concepts in a way relevant to both those who associate with ideas of organized

religion and those who identify with a personal spirituality by offering a creative medium and

new ways to experience religious concepts. By discussing mindfulness outside the traditional

framework and providing alternative ways to conceptualize mindfulness, new understandings

can be created, providing the opportunity to enter new communities and modify existing beliefs

as mindfulness continues to gain recognition.

Mindfulness, Religion, and Spirituality

The concept of mindfulness has its origins in the Buddhist tradition and comes from the

Pali word "sati" meaning "to remember" (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). When referred to as

a mode of consciousness, mindfulness signifies a presence of mind or awareness (Brown, Ryan,

& Creswell, 2007). As mindfulness enters the secular world of belief and methodology, a more

common definition of mindfulness, used throughout the academic community and coined by Jon

Kabat-Zinn is, "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and

non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4).

Within the last decade, the mindfulness culture has established itself in some of the most

powerful and influential institutions in the United States. Major corporations such as Google,

Target, and General Mills, all offer their employees courses in mindfulness and meditation.

Growth in popularity has resulted in increased research into the subject of mindfulness and

scientific studies focusing on clinical applications of meditation, brain imaging, and

neuroplasticity (McMahan, 2017). Combined with widespread media coverage, and sometimes

inflated claims of success, mindfulness has begun to create waves of enthusiasm as a cure to

societal ailments.

How we categorize a practice affects how it is perceived in the social sphere. Words like religious, secular, or superstitious can carry high stakes as they are often associated with concepts of self and personal understandings. The differences between religion and the secular has helped create what has been called a religious-secular binary, a way of constituting knowledge, subjectivity, meaning, power, and practice- that increasingly pervades modern societies (McMahan, 2017). This discourse determines what counts as secular, religious, and what is marginalized as superstition, as well as what is recognized as a legitimate exercise of religion and what does not and has in part affected public perception of mindfulness as it's ties to religion are sometimes questioned by those unfamiliar with the concept.

Recognizing dissociation from Buddhism as a contributing factor to the growth of mindfulness in the United States, it becomes challenging to discuss the origins of mainstream mindfulness practice while maintaining an attitude of separation from religion. For example, contemporary mindfulness has been defined as "all forms of mindfulness programs that are not explicitly based in Buddhist practice (Puser, 2015). However, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), is the most established, popular, and researched clinical program that uses mindfulness as its foundation and has been cited to derive much of its approaches from Buddhist practices (Puser, 2015). This is due, in part, to MBSR often being presented as a wholly secular, medical, scientific and evidence-based program devoid of any religious affiliations. Such representations have in turn allowed the opportunity for MBSR to extend its social reach, but at the possible risk of conflicting origin stories.

A trend on the rise associated with a religious re-positioning of younger generations and the growth of the individualism of self-fulfillment is the identification of oneself as spiritual rather than religious (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Research into this shift in ideology has also

suggested a decline in participation of institutional religious activities, as well as a growing

market for books, magazines, and other media and services that explore different approaches to

personal spirituality (Lynch, 2006).

In the West, spirituality formed an alternative to organized religion bringing with it an

exploration into new practices drawn from many sources and believed to enable spiritual seekers

to contact their inner depths, and experience spirituality within other aspects of their personal

lives- their bodies, their emotions, and their relationships (Heelas,2006). Though many

researchers have worked to define and conceptualize the terms religiousness and spirituality,

both remain diverse in their definitions. Varying definitions presents a challenge to researchers

when trying to explore what differentiates the two words. Definitions of religiousness have

ranged from subscription to institutionalized beliefs or doctrines to a system of beliefs in a divine

or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such a power

(Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Definitions for spiritual are just as diverse, ranging from a subjective

experience of the sacred to the vast realm of human potential dealing with ultimate purposes,

with higher entities, with God, with love, with compassion, with purpose (Vaughn,1991). For

this paper, the following will be used as working definitions: "Religion- a system of beliefs in a

divine or superhuman power, and the practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such

a power" (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975, p.1); "Spirituality- a transcendent dimension within

human experience…discovered in moments in which the individual questions the meaning of

personal existence and attempts to place the self within a broader ontological context"

(Shafranske and Gorsuch, 1984, p.231).

Music: Seeking New Gods

With an increasing amount of research suggesting that traditional religion may not be meeting the needs of younger generations, new Gods, myths, and forms of spiritual identification are being sought out by those seeking more self-fulfilled forms of understanding. This "awakening", as these ideas of spirituality have been called, blend the sacred with the secular by combining pop culture with the mystery of divinity. With the merging of the sacred and the secular, music has been identified as a source of spiritual fulfillment helping to fill the voids left by religion in the modern day by moving the experience of the sacred beyond the traditions of religious practice (Bass, 2012; Lynch, 2006; Sylvan, 2002).

A concern when exploring the relationship between contemporary music and religious change is the role popular music plays as a resource to simulate alternative spiritual identities and ideologies to traditional understandings of religion (Lynch, 2006). In the book Music in Everyday Life, Tia Denora explores three areas that help to develop a rich account of how popular music aids in the process of religious identity formations and meaning building. Denora's work first points to the diverse social settings in which people listen to music. Popular music is actively and passively consumed in a wide range of locations both public (i.e., bars shops and restaurants) and privatized spaces (i.e., the use of mp3 players) (De Nora, 2000). Where a person listens to music helps shape the nature of the listening experience both regarding the physical experience and the involved social relations (actual, imagined or remembered) in which the listening takes place.

The aesthetic and affective aspects of the experience of listening to music are just as important as the location. Denora argues that it is the aesthetic and emotional qualities of music that make it a useful tool in managing one's identity and environment. If so, then it may not be so much the lyrical content of the music that is viewed as important, but rather the entire

aesthetic and experience of listening to a piece of music in a specific setting, with particular people, at a particular time, so on a so forth (De Nora, 2000). This idea helps to pose an important question regarding the formation of religious and spiritual identity and ones affect. Is it possible that the process of religious identity formation through popular music is just as much a process of learning to feel about one's self and the world, as it is one learning to think about the world in certain ways?

A third area that Denora works to address is the aural qualities of music. Though closely related to musical experience and location, Denora argues that music is primarily an aural medium giving music the ability to occupy not only social but also psychological spaces in ways that may induce physiological effects on its listeners (De Nora, 2000). This area of interest deals more closely with our feelings regarding our experience with music and helps pose essential questions regarding religious and spiritual identity formations by comparing music to other mediums such as film, tv, or websites.

As studies begin to look more closely at the ties between the formation of spiritual identity and music, researchers have looked at how these ties affect the creation, expansion, and genres of music in the mainstream. Since the 1960s, there has been a growing number of popular music scenes that have made use of nature-based, esoteric, and subversive religious ideas and symbolism. A few examples include the heavy metal fandoms in North America, Scandinavia, and Israel, or various forms of electronic music focused around the Bay Area, Ibiza, Goa, and Phuket (Lynch, 2006). Though these music scenes are localized, the music itself extends a global reach and creates cultural conditions in which alternative religious identities and ideologies are transmitted across national boundaries — in turn, forming the possibility of a new alternative, transnational religious networks.

Graham St John (2003), further examines the relationship between popular music and alternative spirituality. Focusing on the genre of psytrance music and culture, St John uses this genre to provide evidence of the influence alternative spiritualities have on the production of psytrance music, on the organization of psytrance dance events, and on the spiritual interpretations of the scene (Lynch, 2006). Techno-shamanism, the idea that a rave (a large overnight dance party featuring techno music and usually involving the taking of mind-altering drugs) is a sacralized tribal gathering, Paganism, as well as expectations regarding the new millennium as being a time of spiritual transformation, are all examples of narratives used by psytrance dance event's organizers and various media surrounding the psytrance culture (Lynch, 2006). Further supporting the idea that alternative spiritualities influence the music scene is the chosen time and location for these events. Examples such as the solstice parties at Stonehedge, the full moon parties of Goa and the Bay Area, or the global parties celebrating Earth Healing day, all suggest some connection to alternative spiritual ideology (Lynch, 2006).

Beyond Words: The Secular Hymn

According to Diane Butler Bass, author and scholar specializing in American religion and culture, the general distinction between the concepts of "spirituality" and "religiosity" reflects a public rejection of traditional, organized religious experience. Bass argues that the word "spiritual" is typically associated with private thoughts and individualized experience, while the idea of being "religious" has become associated with the public participation in formal rituals and acceptance of denominational doctrine (Thomsen, Randle, & Lewis, 2016). This difference in identification has led to the development of what is called the secular hymn, a song whose meaning has become so highly individualistic and nuanced, that it is less dependent on the

cognitive content than on the combined aesthetic effects of personal needs, setting context, aural quality, and emotion.

Historically, music has been an important component of religious practice, identification, and expression, and has served as the basis for a variety of theological expression including celebration, protest, and argument (Lynch 2006). Protest songs of the early 1940s and 1950s, which often drew from 19th and early 20th-century black spirituals helped to define the personal experience of minorities, the poor, and eventually the young in a changing and turbulent America. As these protest songs continued to build in popularity, their use helped to influence the music of future generations and played an essential role in the progressive, civil rights, labor, and anti-war movements. Songs such as "We Shall Overcome," and "If I Had a Hammer," have helped to create "space" where the religious and spiritual traditions of justice, equality, peace, and reconciliation can be explored and analyzed (Thomsen et al., 2016).

The melody associated with "We Shall Overcome," dates back to 18th century Europe and was first heard on southern plantations in the United States in the early 19th century, where it was known by the hymn "I'll be alright." The song continued to travel and eventually mixed lyrically with the gospel song, "I'll Overcome Someday, eventually becoming "I Will Overcome" in the 1940s. In 1945, After a group of black workers staged a strike at the American Tobacco plant in Charleston, South Carolina, the "I" was changed to "We" as the song became the rallying cry of their movement (Thomsen et al., 2016), Over the next several years, "We Shall Overcome" became the soundtrack to the labor and fledging civil rights movements. It was at this time that folksinger Pete Seeger became familiar with the song and eventually added his lyrics, making "We Shall Overcome," a protest song that traveled across decades, state lines, gender and race (Thomsen et al., 2016).

The continued attention gained by "We Shall Overcome" in the late 1940s, inspired Seeger and his partner Lee Hays to write, "The Hammer Song," now known as "If I Had a Hammer." First performed by Seeger and Hays in June 1949, in New York City, at a dinner honoring the leaders of the communist party, it wasn't until 1962, when Peter, Paul, and Mary rereleased the song that it would become a top 10 hit. "The Hammer Song" transformed into a symbol of the civil rights movement on August 28, 1963, after the trio performed the song at the Civil Rights March on Washington, where Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream Speech" (Lynskey, 2011).

The period between the 1960s and 1970s provided a prosperous time for the emergence of what would be called secular hymns. The young adults of the time, known as the baby boomer generation, rejected the post-war materialism of their parents, protesting "wars, greediness, hypocrisy, pollution, bigotry, technology, and the Establishment (Thomsen et al., 2016). As a result, many turned to nontraditional non-western spiritual philosophies and religious acts. In turn inspiring pop music of the time (i.e. The Beatles Let it Be, Paul Simon A Bridge Over Troubled Water, and John Lenon Imagine) to become infused with Eastern Spirituality, a sense of "mystical otherness," and a rejection of tradition cultural, political, and religious values (Thomsen et al., 2016).

Around the same time as the development of "spiritually" infused music, traditional religious music was also beginning to take new forms. In 1967, The Christian World Liberation Front emerged in the heart of a hippie movement unfolding in San Francisco. Unlike the traditional church, The Christian World Liberation appeared more casual, likened to a coffee house and quickly becoming a place for "dissident" youth (Thomsen et al., 2016). Similarly, in California and New York, Arthur Blessit, Chuck Smith, and Scott Ross, would bring a twist to

traditional religious practices through actions such as conducting late-night gospels, baptizing

people in the ocean at Corona del Mar beach, and converting an old barn into a "Christian"

community nicknamed the "Love Inn". These grassroots activities would merge into what has

become known as the "Jesus Movement," with its variety of music merging the rhythms and

beats of folk, pop, country, black gospel, and blues (Thomsen et al., 2016). Over time, this music

would become the foundation for what is known today as Contemporary Christian Music (CCM)

and would change how this generation viewed God, organized religion, and the nature of

spiritual and personal worship.

   Though similar in appearance, the secular hymn differs from CCM. A secular hymn may

begin as pop or folk music but ultimately transcends the original version of the creator as it takes

on new "spiritual" meanings and uses in contemporary culture. In addition, the secular hymn is

music that is not inherently religious but leaves its listeners with a sense of having experienced

the inexplicable, nonrational, and potentially overwhelming feeling of making a connection with

a higher and gracious power (i.e., the supernatural) that is different than what is felt during our

daily lives (Thomsen et al., 2016). These perceived feelings suggest that a secular hymn has

qualities that lead it to be interpreted differently depending on the listener.

   In a study completed by Thomsen, Randle, and Lewis (2016), researchers helped to

identify markers of secular hymns by offering the following criteria: 1) secular hymns transcend

generations and remain popular through covers over a long period; 2) secular hymns have a

primary theme around redemption and deliverance; 3) secular hymns, though not religious in

intent, allows the listener to feel that he or she is experiencing the numinous by creating an

affective state that parallels a spiritual or religious state of mind; 4) secular hymns make

references to or use of metaphors relating to vertical positions of up or down or metaphors that

refer to light and dark; 5) secular hymns transcendence their original meaning and transform to represent something entirely new or is now used by audiences in public setting for purposes that could include something with deeper meaning (e.g., national grieving, reflection, mourning, or celebration); 6) secular hymns have been used as an individual's background or backdrop to personal celebrations and significant life events such as weddings, bar mitzvahs, funerals, anniversaries, etc.

As the criteria describe, songs considered secular hymns become larger ideas than the song itself and speak to a longing for connection and understanding. A secular hymns ability to maintain social relevance is accomplished through the popularity of the original recording as well as interpretations of other artists and the continued use outside of traditional music distribution (Thomsen et al., 2016). The cover song is an important mechanism aiding in music's ability to transcend generations, through constant rejuvenation, ability to transcend genres, and introduction to new audiences who may have never heard the original. This continuous engagement and desire to re-experience a piece suggests some personal relationship.

A notable example meeting the proposed criterion is the song Hallelujah. Originally performed by Leonard Cohen, and covered by many other artists over the years, the song has been criticized for having dark and gloomy lyrics. However, it is the song itself that serves as an offering of hope and perseverance in the face of a challenging world. Hallelujah paints a picture of the human experience- the fact that we will be hurt, tested and challenged. According to Cohen, the word "hallelujah" simply meant to embrace and accept "the whole mess," that though the world was broken there was still "Hallelujah" (Light, 2012). In this way, Cohen brings a sense of deeper connection into the secular or ordinary world by recognizing that which could be considered sacred in the perceived normality's of one's everyday experience.

The numinous creates an emotional state, or "holy" state that, while seemingly irrational and at times inexpressible, can uplift the individual and fills them with feelings of goodness, peace, and tranquility (Otto, 1960). Helping create this experience is the often ambiguous and malleable lyrics found in most secular hymns. The ambiguity used in these songs allows for selective interpretations by the listeners that can create at least the illusion of the numinous. For example, the lyrics from "Bridge Over Troubled Water" (Simon & Garfunkel, 1970):

I'll take your part

When darkness comes

And pain is all around

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will lay me down

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will lay me down.

It can be argued that some listeners may interpret this as a Messianic-like promise of deliverance, while others may only take the words as an assurance of support from a friend. In either case, the commitment is a powerful and uplifting gesture without being overtly religious.

According to Meier and Robinson (2004), symbolic references to "vertical position" are often used in mainstream culture to suggest perceived feelings of good and bad. Those things associated with "high" or "up" are good, while items that are "low" or "down" are associated with bad. Also, these references can either be made literally, through synonyms for "high" and "low" or metaphorically through imagery such as mountains, skies, heaven, and hell. Like

vertical position, references that contrast light and dark, or brightness and dullness are often used. An example of a secular hymn in which references to both vertical position and light and dark are used is the song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." These include "way above the chimney tops, "skies are blue," and "wish upon a star." Similar ideas were used in Paul McCartney's song "Let it Be," including "in my hour of darkness" and "shine on till tomorrow" (Meier, Robinson, & Clore, 2004).

While the first four criteria are related to aspects of the song themselves, the final two criteria are related to how listeners experience the song, and the songs use in public and personal settings. For example, secular hymns played a vital role in the national mourning following the September 11th Terrorist attacks on the Trade Center Towers in New York City. Ten days after the attack, 22 musicians collaborated to host "America: A Tribute to Heroes," a benefit concert which raised $160 million in support of the New York Fire Department (Pegley & Fast, 2007). Many potential secular hymns, such as Neil Young's cover of John Lennon's "Imagine" and Paul Simons rendition of "Bridge Over Troubled Water," were performed during the show (Thomsen et al., 2016). Also, as with the general shift away from religion towards spirituality, a change to popular music in favor of more traditional songs and hymns may reflect younger generations ideas of perceived cultural relevancy. As new understanding and interpretations of life and its complexities are formed, pop-based secular hymns are beginning to replace many of the functions historically served in traditional cultures by religions

Rap or Raap: The Origins and Evolution of Rap Music

Something equally as fluid as the definitions of spirituality and religiousness is the definitions, sounds, and trends within hip-hop culture and rap music. The story of hip-hop and rap music often places the genre's origins in South Bronx New York during the late 1960s and

early 1970s (Washington, 2018). However, the terms "rap" and "hip-hop" have been traced to

origins in West African divinity, many years before the emergence of what can be considered

modern rap music. Over time, the development of Rap and Hip-Hop culture has changed in its

understandings and expression so much that the genre today exhibits little to no evidence of

African continuity (Washington, 2014). This change can be likened to spirituality and religious

identity. In both cases of evolution, public perceptions of the concepts have helped to shape their

understandings, and like spirituality and religion, raps development has created new forms of

expression within the genre as it reflects varying ideologies.

As a form of cultural expression, Hip-Hop culture encapsulates many of the principles,

values, thoughts, beliefs, and ways of being exhibited by people of African and Latino ancestry.

Verbal improvisation, call-and-response, and a belief in the cathartic nature of musical vibration

are some of the Afro-Caribbean principles that are seen within Hip-Hop culture (Washington,

2018) In addition, other musical genres tracing their origins to black cultures, such as jazz, the

blues, funk, soul, and R&B, have all impacted the development of Hip-Hop culture and rap

music.

The period between the 1960s and the 1970s marked deceleration in the manufacturing

industry. This "deindustrialization" had significant socioeconomic repercussion on Black and

Latino working-class Bronx residents (Washington, 2018). For some time, manufacturing jobs

were able to allow large numbers of Americans with limited education to achieve moderate

economic prosperity. However, deindustrialization led to the rise of unemployment rates and

economic despair. Also, economic austerity measures in the Bronx retracted much needed social

services programs (Washington, 2018). The surge of Hip-Hop culture, in this context, came

about as a result of frustration and insufferable chronic poverty and attendant violence by young

Black and Latino men and women. Hip-Hop was a way for these youth to communicate and express their feelings and desire to unify their communities that had fallen apart due to violent conflict over sparse economic resources. Hip-Hop culture used Rap music to bring definition, value, and appreciation to the social isolation, financial hardships, political demoralization and cultural exploitation endured by most ghetto poor communities (Hodge, 2015).

The youth during this generation were witness to the decline of urban social structure and the fall of many great urban leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Huey Newton. Black middle-class mantras such as "Work, hard, and your dreams will come true" no longer seemed to apply and ultimately had significant effects on social institutions concerning anything labeled or defined as "absolute" (Hodge, 2015). Urban youth began to see the "old way" of life was not working for older generations and that this new world was filled with double standards, empty promises, and destroyed social structure (Hodge, 2015).

During the time between the 1980s and 1990s, many American cities began to degenerate due to an epidemic of crack cocaine use. People of color had little to no recourse and faced a society that viewed them as thugs, pimps, and societal rejects (Washington, 2018). It was this culture that inspired artists to write music that reflected the lives of the urban youth, such as Melle Mel's (1980) famous song, "The Message":

Broken glass everywhere

People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care

I can't take the smell, can't take the noise

Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice

Rats in the front room, roaches in the back

Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat

I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far

'cuz a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

[CHORUS]

Don't push me' cuz I'm close to the edge

I'm trying not to lose my head

Run DMC is another example of a rap group influenced by the reality of their environment. In their song "Hard Times," the group offers the following advice:

Hard times can take you on a natural trip

So keep your balance, and don't you slip

Hard time is nothing new on me

I'm gonna use my strong mentality

These artists are only a few of many who, through the use of their music and vernacular, brought hope to a broken population. The music offered by these artists signify two central ideas 1) worth, value, and meaning to the suffering, social isolation, and pain often experienced by non-dominant groups, and 2), a message of hope that someone in the world knows their struggle and that the person experiencing such issues is not alone (Hodge, 2015). In this context, Rap music can be likened to the shift from "religious" to "spiritual" self-identification, as new ideologies influenced the music of the time.

"Hep" or "hip," in the Wolof language of West Africa, means to have knowledge or insight; to open one's eyes, to be aware of what is going on" (Washington, 2014). To be a "hip-hopper" then, was to be an individual with knowledge of important social, cultural, and political issues that they share with others through the verbal artistry of rap to inspire sociopolitical evolution (Washington, 2014). The act of "rapping," as known in popular culture, also has its origins in the Wolof language and culture. In the Wolof tradition, Raap are considered important and potent Gods "of the sea and waters" to whom hymns are sung (Washington, 2014).

Music is an integral part of the Wolof tradition and culture. Griots are individuals, who, through the use of music, serve as a keeper of the Wolof culture. Through the employment of song and musical instruments, the griots act as storytellers who maintain the tradition of oral history (Washington, 2014). The griot can be considered the predecessor to the modern day "rapper" and is essential to the conversation of rap music and its relationship to traditional spiritual practice.

During the time of international slave trade, many enslaved Africans were made to cross the Atlantic Ocean to the "New World" on a trip that has become known as the "Middle Passage." Considering Raap's place within the Wolof tradition as a God of the sea and waters, it can be said that Raap ensured African ancestors' survival through a human-made trial across the ocean. In turn, encouraging subsequent ancestors to continue the practice of the griot or "rap" thereby helping to communicate, document, and spread knowledge of ancient and modern struggles, trials, and accomplishments. (Washington, 2014). However, where Raap was once recognized as a deity to whom reverence was offered, religious oppression made it unsafe to give praise to African Gods. As a result, the God, Raap, became rapping Gods, whose lyrics serve the divine purpose of creating more raps and in turn more Raap (Washington, 2014). Tracing the

journey of Raap through the Middle Passage to African America, Raap, and the Wolof Gods can

be seen through both African American rap music and the African American people themselves,

most notably those known as the Five Percenters (Washington, 2014).

The Five Percenters, also known as the Five Percent Nation or the Nation of Gods,

though influenced by several sources including Wolof Rap, Pan-African organizations,

philosophies, and philosophers, such as Rastafari and Sun Ra, and holy tomes such as the

Qur'an, and the Bible, is most significantly influenced by the Nation of Islam (Washington,

2014). W.D. Fard, the founder of the Nation of Islam, and Elijah Muhammad, the organization's

famous leader, taught their followers that Africana people are divine. God, or Allah, was not

seen as an entity but rather a divine collective that included contemporary Africana people. God

is not restricted to any culture, individual, or era, and thus God is always present and limitless in

the potential of the self (Washington, 2014).

The name Five Percenters comes from what is one of Fard and Muhammad's most

important lessons, "Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 2" which asserts that three types of people

inhabit the world: the 85%, the 10% and the 5% (Washington, 2014). According to this lesson,

the 85% is represented by most of the population. Those categorized in this group are said to be

uncivilized, poison animal eaters, slaves from mental death and power, and people who do not

know the Living God or their divine origin in this world, thus making them easily led in the

wrong direction but hard to lead in the right direction (Washington, 2014). The 10% is

comprised of the rich who take advantage of the 85%, teaching them to believe that the

Almighty, True, Living God is fictional and cannot be seen with the physical eye (Washington,

2014). Lastly, the 5% is made up of the righteous teachers, who do not believe the teachings of

the 10%, are wise and know who the Living God is and teach that the Living God is the son of

man, the supreme being, and teach freedom, justice, and equality to all the human family of the planet Earth (Washington, 2014). "Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No.2," offers a simple yet insightful hierarchy that helps to create a redefinition and reconceptualization of God. Rather than an invisible entity, the "True and Living God" is a multitude of teachers who, as a result of their enlightenment are charged with challenging the ten percenters and enlightening the eighty-five percent of their divine origins, thereby creating even more Gods (Washington, 2014).

A group whose music reflected African American divinity, is X Clan. The group's name derives from the African God Esu Elegbara, a frequently invoked God in African culture. The "X" in X Clan is a reference to the home of Elegbara, the God who resides at the literal and metaphysical crossroads of existence (Washington, 2014). Other examples of X Clans ties to their African origins include symbolism such as the ankh, the Kemetic key of life and symbol of the mysteries of the universe, as well as use of the colors red, black, and green, the color of the Pan-African flag of liberation. In the song "Grand Verbalizer, What Time Is It?" Brother J, one of the group's rappers, proclaims that X Clan is ever journeying "To the East" with the goal of "teaching Gods to be / What it was, what it is, and again shall be" a reference to the five percenters charge to enlightening the eighty-five percenters. By incorporating the ideas of the five percenters with traditional African spiritual systems, science, and cosmology, X Clan embodies the teachings of Fard and Muhammad and works to expand upon the lessons of its predecessors.

In addition to acknowledging the divinity of Africana people, music considered to embody the principles of the five percenters also serves to encourage the people into recognizing that society is trying to convince the people otherwise. For example, the reggae classic "Get Up,

Stand Up" by Bob Marley and Peter Tosh urges its listeners to manifest their destinies and

recognize that they are being manipulated:-.

Most people think

Great God will come from the skies

Take away everything

And make everybody feel high

But if you know what life is worth

You will look for yours on earth

And now you see the light

You stand up for your rights. Jah!

We sick an' tired of-a your ism-skism game

Dyin' 'n' goin' to heaven in-a Jesus' name, Lord

We know when we understand:

Almighty God is a living man

You can fool some people sometimes

But you can't fool all the people all the time

So now we see the light (What you gonna do?)

We gonna stand up for our rights! (Yeah, yeah, yeah!)

It can be argued that this song's message highlights an important belief within the worldview of the Five Percenters, that they are not a religious organization but a way of life; that way being I.S.L.A.M, an acronym that can be translated as "I Self Lord Am Master." As such, the very concept of religion is antithetical and opposed to divinity, the idea being if you rely on anything other than yourself, you will always have the same difficulties (Washington, 2014).

The story of rap's origins, from both the perspective of Bronx New York and its roots in West Africa, help to reinforce the relationship between music and identity. Though similar in sound and style when speaking about rap in a general sense, because of nuances and identification, the genre can exist in both the secular and traditional spiritual realms depending on the experience of the listener. In turn, affecting the understood meaning of music in some cases. For example, a traditional greeting between five percenters was "Peace, God," meant to serve as a recognition of one's divinity. Because of hip-hop's global influence, the phrase has become so common that it was shortened to "Peace, G," and as a result has become often associated with "gangster" and "gangster rap" (Washington, 2014). Another example is the word "sun," which to the Five Percenters is a term of respect and recognition for the Africana man. Once more, through the influence of hip-hop, "sun" eventually became confused with the biological affiliation "son," often suggesting some superiority over another individual (Washington, 2014).

By the turn of the new millennium, American rap music started to take new forms as it reached out into the suburbs and across the oceans. Where hip hop artist once represented a sense of unity and a voice for the people, commercial expansion lead to hip hop performances becoming shaped by company demands and driven by capitalist aspirations. With the reach of hip-hop culture now global, what was once considered unique to urban city environments now

occupied new space in the material and digital world. Within the United States, the south and more rural environments had begun to extend its influence in the American hip-hop market thanks to artists such as, Outkast, T.I., Lil' Wayne and others who helped to bring new sounds and traditions into the realm of hip-hop music. There are two key differences when comparing rap music from urban cities such as New York and those represented in southern rap music (-i.e., Atlanta, Houston, and New Orleans). First, musically and aesthetically, southern rap music does not embody the same rugged and raw boom-bap defined in New York or the gangster heroism of Los Angels. Instead, southern rap possesses a more regional sound and visual style. Second, southern rap is defined by its southern-ness as opposed to it's urban-ness, celebrating southern regional pride with the same energy used to celebrate the artist's individual cities (Jeffries, 2014).

Occurring around the same time as the growth of southern rap music was a shift in rap music's consumer demographics. By the new millennium, suburban American white male teens were established as hip-hop's main market in the eyes of record executives (Watkins, 2005). This shift led to a change in lyrical content as urban artist felt pressure from record companies to appease their suburban base. The lyrical content of popular rap music began to reflect a shift towards a less politically charged and more frivolous and objectionable range of topics (Lena, 2006).

The evolution of hip-hop and rap music through the 2000s moved the genre from live performance art to a staple of consumer culture built on commoditized musical recordings. Also, "urban style" opened the door to questions concerning why young white men like rap music. Researchers have pointed to youth frustrations and economic alienation as critical factors to the increased interest of rap music by white teens (Kitwana, 2005). Other researchers have argued that hip-hop culture and rap music offers a performance-driven escape for bored and white

suburban youth looking to dress in a more dangerous and edgy form of manhood (Patterson,

1999). The dissimilarity between white kids' hip-hop affiliation and that of black youth is that

white consumers can underdress themselves and remove the racialized and racist hip-hop stigma

whenever they choose, while black consumers cannot. Also, white fans describe their affinity for

hip-hop and rap music in markedly deracialized terms and do not report using hip-hop as a way

to cope with racism and racial stigma (Jeffries, 2014). However, this does not suggest an

inauthentic fandom but instead demonstrates that hip-hop culture can mean different things to the

various groups that use it and that hip-hop identity comes with different costs and benefits.

Two white mainstream rappers who help to portray how the landscape of rap music is

continuing to develop and change are Machine Gun Kelly and Mac Miller (1992-2018). Machine

Gun Kelly, was born in Houston and traveled the world with his missionary parents until settling

in the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights in his early teens (Jeffries, 2014). Possessing a rapid-

fire, aggressive and hypermasculine rap style, Machine Gun Kelly compulsively represents the

city of Cleveland, though only having moved there when he was 14 and spending most of his life

in the suburbs. There is nothing ironic or self-conscious about his style of music and use of black

vernacular and social signifiers. Kelly gives the impression that he is authentically urban and a

member of Cleveland's authentic hip-hop culture.

Like Kelly, Mac Miller, another urban white rapper is an individual who also employed

black racial signifiers and vernacular in his social and musical performances. Unlike Kelly,

however, Miller did not strive for traditional "urban" creditability through the enactment of a

stereotypical imposing of hip-hop black masculinity. Instead Miller, often combined and

contrasted black audio and visual signifiers with relatively non-threatening musical content

(Jeffries, 2014). Unlike Kelly, who's persona matched the ideas of "urban rappers," Miller's use

of humor and irony acts as a way to distance himself from the stigmatized ideas of rap and hip-hop culture. The comparison of Machine Gun Kelly and Mac Miller helps to demonstrate how old ideologies regarding the purpose of rap music as social commentary and its representation of urban life, may be outdated as the genre of rap music and hip-hop culture continues to change over time, possibly reflecting new meanings and modes of relationship.

Though rap music remains one of the most popular forms of contemporary youth media, it is also one of the most controversial. Rap music and hip-hop culture have endured a considerable amount of criticism regarding concerns about explicit and illegal content of individual songs and the potential impact this may have on youth exposed to this content. Also, though explicit and illegal content may warrant concern for continued discretion, raps potential for the promotion of prosocial ideas is often overlooked. For example, there is a subgenre of rap called radical rap that advocates positive self-identity and self-development (Abduk-Adil, 2014). With these type of contradicting messages existing within the genre of rap music, it is essential that social scientists and other researchers interested in the topic of rap music and its influence consider all perspectives of the genre, recognizing its deeper complexities beyond simply "good" or "bad" and its potential utilization as a cultural tool.

Time and global recognition may have influenced the meaning and use of rap music, but the genres ability to extend globally may be of benefit. Supporting the idea that music plays an important part in our development of spiritual identity, as well as the evidence suggesting that it may be the aesthetic experience of music that is essential, rap music as a genre appears to be a capable medium for exploring a variety of subject matter thus making it a viable option to express concepts of mindfulness and meditation.

Discussion

As trend towards self-defined spirituality in favor of traditional religious practice continues to rise, music, and more specifically the genre of rap music, appear to be an effective conduit to express the concept and message of mindfulness for both those who identify with traditional religious frameworks and those who do not. As research suggests music may have aural qualities helping to create meaning beyond the lyrics, the use of sound and rhythm to express a personal relationship with traditional mindfulness may resonate with a more sensory experience of understanding, in turn, helping to create new meanings and new metaphors to express perceived perceptions.

Music offers an ability to discuss mindfulness but not define it for another individual. Using lyrics and music to express perspectives and life experiences of a traditional meditation practitioner may potentially lead to new experiences with mindfulness that exist beyond the lyrics of a song itself as the words are understood to be the perspective of the artist and not a definition for the listener. In addition, offering mindfulness concepts and ideas through a popular medium such as rap music offers the opportunity for mindfulness to be communicated to new audiences. In this way, rap music can serve as an introduction to mindfulness concepts without defining the experience for another individual. Also, as research suggests, the aural qualities of music aid in the meaning created by its listener. If this is so, it may be possible that though someone listening to a song about life and mindfulness practice may not necessarily resonate with the lyrics in terms of conceptual understanding, the music, rhythms, and emotion conveyed may be enough to create some sense of connection between the listener and the song. In turn, offering the possibility for the lyrics to be listened to more closely and the possibility that the listener may explore the expressed ideas for themselves, ultimately expanding the knowledge of

mindfulness and its expression. But beyond the concept of words, the aural qualities of music can help to bring about understandings of mindfulness that exist in the realm of experience as music can help mindfulness to be felt rather than explained.

Rap music as a medium for mindfulness also has potential benefit for those who view mindfulness and meditation from a more traditional framework such as Buddhism. Recognizing the existence of dukkha and an effort to bring liberation to all beings, rap music can be seen as an extension of that aim and a form of interpersonal practice. For example, Insight Dialogue, a well-known interpersonal practice, involves speaking, listening, and pausing into present-moment awareness with the intention to deepen and extend our capacity to remain centered and awake during moments of mutual contact (Kramer, 2007). It could be argued that in writing the lyrics to a rap song, the artist is engaging in asynchronous dialogue with the listener and the conversation is had each time the song is heard. Therefore, engagement in mindfulness during a song's creation aids in the liberation of all beings through a constant reflection of one's intentions and purpose of the words and sounds used to create the piece.

In both the case of the creator and the listener, rap music serves as a vessel which can embody mindfulness not only in word and concept, but also a more profound sense of feeling as the words, sounds, and rhythms create a sense of personal identification. It is this broader sense of feeling that is consistent amongst both those who call themselves religious and those who identify as spiritual, and it may be from this nonverbal realm where mutual understandings of mindfulness can not only be found but also continue to grow as those feelings are continued to be expressed in new ways.

Conclusion

Perceptions of mindfulness and meditation as a religious practice, may, at least in part, affect an individual's decision as to whether they want to learn about mindfulness and engage in mindfulness practice. As the development of alternative spiritual identification continues to move from traditional norms, music has revealed itself to a be a tool capable of having a profound effect on the development of one's sense of spiritual identity, expanding the music's meaning and significance beyond the words themselves. As mindfulness has been described as an open, unbiased awareness of, and attention to, inner experience and manifest action, using music as a medium to express mindfulness topics may help to inspire genuine exploration into concepts once viewed as undesirable due to previous associations, by offering the idea of mindfulness outside of what is considered a traditional framework.

Rap music and the two narratives regarding the genre's origins, as well as exploring the genres evolution over time, helps to illustrate music's ability to simultaneously exist in both the traditional spiritual (religious) and the secular realms. This quality suggests that rap music may be a useful genre for the expression of mindfulness concepts and practices. Whether the lyrics spoken are found to be specifically relatable (i.e., prior knowledge of lyrical content) or perceived to be relatable (i.e., the experience of an individualized sense of significance), the existence of the music itself offers the opportunity for individuals to explore what mindfulness means to them as an individual. As mindfulness practice often suggests an open awareness to both inner and outward experience, it can be argued that it is not the song itself but the experience of listening to the song that can both help to define mindfulness and function as a mindfulness practice itself.

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