

Rap and Preaching

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Rap is a contemporary expression of African American music that is having a significant impact upon the North American cultural scene. Its influence is felt not only in music, but also in economics (entrepreneurism) and politics (debates over ethnical values). It blasts forth both as an appraisal and critique of contemporary cultural values. Moreover, it is both a reflection of modern commercialism and critique of consumerism. Rap has become a multidimensional style of streetwise communication that is found primarily among poor, underprivileged African Americans. Nevertheless, frustrated middle-class Euro-American youth are among its largest consumers. Now, as a profitable and valued commodity within our society, it has affected all socioeconomic levels. As a postmodern art form it can be either melodious and soothing or disjointed and abrasive with the turn of a single phrase or note. As a genre of contemporary popular music, it expresses the frustrations and aspiration of the so-called hip-hop and/or “X” generation, black, white, and in-between the color spectrum. In fact, it has transcended its African American origins in the ghetto communities of the United States to become an international phenomenon. Not only is it here to stay, but it is constantly undergoing changes and transformation as it moves from one locale to another on the cross-cultural terrain.

We would not readily associate rap with preaching. Certainly scripture is the primary resource of sermon preparation and delivery. In order to make the biblical message relevant, we do use some illustrations or examples from the contemporary cultural setting. If we consider ourselves to be literate, we might even cite a book or two that we have read recently in order to amplify a point we want to make during the course of the sermon delivery. But rap — as a resource for preaching? That is a very different matter. It could be like asking what Jerusalem has to do with Babylon. Indeed, some would consider some forms of rap to be totally anathema, or at least, directly the opposite of preaching the gospel. Maybe so, but the purpose of this essay is to propose that rap, even in its most shocking and disturbing forms, can be a resource for theological reflection and preaching. The outline that I shall follow will include: an overview of the African American oral and musical traditions; two typologies of the different styles of rap that have emerged during the past decade; and conclude with some reflections on how it can be viewed as a resource for contemporary preaching.

The African American Oral and Musical Traditions

Rap has its roots in the African and African American oral styles of communication. African storytelling, dance, and music (especially with the omnipresent drum) are combined in its distant descendant. Within the Americas (Canada, United States, Latin and South America), the offspring of African slaves have always employed talking, movement, and singing as the most effective modes of expression, protest, and resistance against slavery and racial oppression. But even more than this, oral communication became the means by which they retained and/or reshaped their individual and communal identities within a new context. Since they were slaves, they were prohibited from mastering the literary craft of Western civilization. In other

words, they were not given the privilege of being educated in the literary styles of communication that would have been expected of their Euro-Americas counterparts (initially for the privileged class and eventually democratized for all “white people”). In the wake of this formidable obstacle to African Americas literacy, slaves developed an alternative form of communication (and literacy). Once they acquired the basic rudiments of the colonial tongue (Spanish, French, English), they transformed these words into their own vernacular language systems. Within the United States, this included the blending of so-called standard English with a nonstandard dialect.

Once African Americans began to develop their own language systems, they also began to fashion words, rhythms, and gestures that spoke to their frustrations and aspirations. Their physical, psychological, and spiritual anxieties and liberative visions were transformed into symbolic, poetic, and dramatic modes of expression via preaching, singing, and dancing. The basic form of this communication took the shape of the “call-response” where the speaker and hearer engaged in an (improvisational) dialogue that bore witness to their common experiences as a people. Likewise, singing and dancing became extended speech modes. In other words, song and dance also told a story. They were intended to carry a message just as assuredly as call-response speech. Eventually, African American speech assumed a multiplicity of forms via talking, preaching, signifying, doin’ the dozens, dissing. So too, its musical counterpart emerged via the spirituals, slave work songs, ballads, rhythm and blues, jazz, rock and roll, gospel, and yes, rap.

African American communication has grown out of the soil of Western oppression. By this, I mean that it has been cultivated under the aegis of racial prejudice and domination within a frame of reference that both informs and supercedes the particular history of the United States. This larger canopy has inevitably located it, like its people, between drama, tragedy, and humor. In response to the weight of racial oppression, the drama of enslavement and quest for liberation and equality has become the motif for most of its oral expression, including its art forms. As an expression of African American sensibilities, tragedy and humor emerge within the full range of their reality.

African American communication also reflects and echoes the peculiar internal sense of both despair and hope, which is the paradox of their existence. Unlike its Euro-American counterpart, it is experienced both individually and corporately (read ethnically). Within this juggernaut, African American people have produced art forms that bear testimony to their deepest anxieties and highest aspirations. As I have already mentioned, these words, songs, and movements have arisen from a tradition that probably reaches back to African roots. But they also have been most definitely shaped by the context of the Americas experience itself via slavery, segregation, and economic impoverishment.

Rap then, as seen along this trajectory, is yet another expression of African American communication. On a broader canvas, its form and content is both ethnically specific and multiculturally applicable. I think this accounts, in part, for both its notoriety and popularity on the contemporary cultural terrain. Now let’s turn to consider some of the different styles of rap.

The Different Styles of Rap

“Rap” suggests talking. Indeed, it is talking set to music (or with musical

instruments talking in the background). In the African American vernacular tradition, to rap is to talk with a certain style, confidence, and finesse. Rap, in this context, means to speak with a certain coolness that conveys having one's reality in order or "together." Politicians are rappers, and so are lovers; both are masters of persuasion. Of course, preachers are rappers too (as messengers of truth and/or deceit). Contemporary rap incorporates these connotations. But it is also very different, in that it has evolved into a term that is not only ethnically specific, but also universally recognized. It draws from a tradition of linguistic expressions that have been transmitted over generations (consciously and unconsciously). At the same time, it is innovative (which is endemic of the tradition itself, that is, improvisational), giving birth to new words and expressions that hold contemporary relevance for its audience.

There are several categories or varieties of rap. For this typology, I am relying on the works of two other African American theologians: Anthony B. Pinn and Garth KASIMU Baker-Fletcher. Both of these colleagues have done extensive research into the rap culture, and I commend their writings to the present reader (see "Suggested Readings" below).

According to Anthony B. Pinn, rap flows from a continuum of cultural resistance and protest that can be found in "nitty gritty" blues and other so-called secular songs (125-6). More specifically, it arose from the hip-hop culture of New York City's Bronx during the 1970s. This was the decade of break dancing and singing that expressed countercultural attitudes toward Republican conservatism and the beginning social welfare cutbacks. A decade later, on the West coast, another form of movement and singing emerged that gave birth to the notorious form of rap. While indebted to East coast musical forms, "gangsta" rap quickly became the trendsetter. Pinn recognizes three forms of rap on the contemporary scene: status, gangsta, and progressive. The first is very competitive. It combines rap with dance in order to expose the flaws of one's competitor while elevating one's own "status" (125). The second one issues forth as a protest against the racist underpinnings of "law and order." It encourages resistance in order to maintain a sense of self-worth and importance. At the same time, it can promote self-destructive behavior and intracommunal aggression (127). The third strives to overcome the existential hardships and contradictions of gangsta rap (and its underlying causes) via political and cultural education among African American people (129-130).

In a somewhat similar typology, Garth KASIMU Baker-Fletcher delineates five forms of rap: gangsta, revolutionary, sexual play, crossover, and inspirational. The first is outrageous and provocative. It is often contradictory in its commentary of racial and economic oppression. At times it is extremely critical of capitalistic values. But then, it also valorizes "making money" above everything and everybody else. It is based primarily in the West Coast (Los Angeles). Representative artists include: Snoop Doggy Dogg, Eazy E, Ice-T, Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur/Makaveli. The second type is "Africentric in content and insurrectionary in intent." It calls for the destruction of the dominant powers that control the U.S. Its artists include: Sister Souljah, Public Enemy, Arrested Development, (and sometimes gangsta rappers like) Ice-T, Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur/Makaveli. The "sexual play" form of rap expresses "sexual pleasure, sensual acts, and romantic desires." It can be playful (erotic tease) or exploitive (lurid and/or misogynist). Its playful variety includes the works of artist like Salt-N-Pepper and Heavy D. Its more exploitive version can be found in the lyrics of 2-Live Crew and

D.R.S. (Dirty Rotten Scoundrels). The fourth type is the “crossover” rapper. According to Baker-Fletcher, it is thoroughly apolitical. In lieu of instigating the emergence of social consciousness, it emphasizes partying, having a good time, and “innocuous subject matter.” The Fresh Prince and LL Cool J are its primary representatives. And finally, “inspirational” rap has emerged, in part, as reaction against the excesses of gangsta rap. Thus, it is streetwise (or “hip”), yet critical of destructive behavior. Moreover, it seeks to direct and inspire young people in a different direction, one that tries to combine entertainment with social awareness. Candidates for this more recent genre would include Queen Latifah and various Christian rappers such as MC R.G., LA J (137-138).

As the above descriptions suggest, rap has evolved into a wide range of cultural expressions from within the African American ghetto. Like its historical antecedents (spirituals, ballads, blues, gospel, etc.), it covers a full spectrum of drama, tragedy, and humor as they are found within African American reality. Ironically, the protest dimension that is inherent in much of rap has fueled its own success in becoming a major force on the music scene. At a deeper level, rap has been appropriated into the mainstream. It is as though the real problems it points to are overshadowed by its flash into and disappearance from our collective conscience. And yet, it remains a significant window into the lives of those who live on the underside of this society. Furthermore, for the present, its mark is felt nationally and internationally.

Rap as a Model for Preaching

I find the typologies of Pinn and Baker-Fletcher informative as they attempt to chart out the pluriform expressions of rap. As African American theologians, both provide positive and critical assessments of rap that demonstrate the seriousness with which they interpret it theologically. For both, rap constitutes a complex network of lyrical articulations that call for intensive interpretation in lieu of shock, cynicism, or dismissal by persons who live outside the pale of the context from which rap has arisen. They would argue that the astute theologian, preacher, and layperson would do well to plummet the depths of these lyrics, in both their innocuous and disturbing forms. I would agree with them. One has to be careful, though, not to fall into an all too typical, liberal disposition; that is, (pseudo) cross-cultural voyeurism. This will not do. If one takes rap lyrics not merely as artistic amusement, but as expressions of depth dimensions in African American life, especially among its youth, then one has to attend to the paradox of despair and hope that is found in them. And further, one has to realize that although rap is an art form, it speaks about or re-presents a reality that is not fantasy. The joy and pain, ecstasy and anguish, play and death that are alluded to in rap points to real people who remain among the most abused, neglected, despised, and marginalized people on earth. In other words, the oppression of the African American underclass remains stringent and torturous. The pervasiveness of drugs, violence, and death, for example, continue to function as a microcosmic commentary on the global crisis we face. Perhaps this is another clue to both the notoriety and popularity of rap: it reminds us that we are still living in the global ghetto.

Preaching always presents the challenge of connecting the biblical story of God’s love, power, and justice with the contemporary context. The minister, as exegete and cultural critic is forever negotiating between the contours and chasms of the biblical text and the text of culture. Since the former has been canonized, it is somewhat more

contained and manageable. The latter, however, is always changing from moment to moment and situation to situation. This complex relationship between a stabilized text and destabilized context could tempt the contemporary preacher-theologian to remain within the safety zones of the familiar scriptural texts and the relative tranquility of bourgeoisie. By so doing, however, we allow ourselves to make only the most superficial references to the pain that exists beyond stained glass windows and ivory towers, thus compromising the power we should have as engaging cultural critics. The power we possess most immediately is that of courageous and compassionate rhetoric and concerted social engagement. The first step, that of speech, opens up our most readily available resource for engaging in theological rap.

As theological “rappers,” we can pattern our work in ways that are analogous to these artists. This does not mean we have to mimic either their style or the specific content of their messages. But it does mean that we look out unto the world with a definitive Christian realism. To evoke Martin Luther King, Jr., we can cultivate the kind of “tough mind” and “tender heart” that refuses to flinch at the terror around us. Instead, we must step forward to speak our words, ones we hope also contain God’s words, into that chasm between despair and hope. Then maybe we can become bridge builders (“ambassadors for Christ”) to the extent that we are willing to dare the risk of exposing our own fears and weaknesses against overwhelming circumstances. By stepping more boldly into the dread of our culture, we might even recover the meaning of the type of exorcism that Jesus performed (and Paul reflected on) against the individual and corporate expressions of “powers and principalities.”

This brings us to the next step, that of liberating praxis. Speech or proclamation and action or social liturgy go hand in hand. As we “rap” our understanding of God’s love, power, and justice toward the world, we are called to also participate in its healing, reconciliation, and liberation from individual and corporate forms of oppression through our deeds. This is why I call it “social liturgy.” The words and rituals that take place within the sanctuary should break forth into the streets. Once they are there, we will find ourselves compelled to develop a language that is both faithful to our theological foundations and relevant for a particular cultural context. If we want to do more than espouse pious statements that carry little weight where the deepest pains are presently being felt, thanks be to God we will not be able to escape this necessary challenge.

Suggested Reading

- Garth KASIMU Baker-Fletcher, *Xodus: An African American Male Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).
Michael Eric Dyson, *Reflecting Black: African American Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*.
Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).