

YOUTH IN THE ARAB WORLD

May 2010

“Scratch the Past – This is OUR Soundtrack: Hip Hop in Lebanon”

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Background Paper

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The Series includes papers and analytical texts that were written during a consultative process undertaken by UNICEF MENA-RO and AUB-IFI to inform the themes explored and discussed in the report “A Generation on the Move: Insights into the Conditions, Aspirations and Activism of Arab Youth” between 2009 and 2011.

The papers discuss issues explored throughout the different chapters of the report, or brief youth situation analysis in specific countries. Methodologies used include reviews of existing literature, quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation.

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“Scratch the Past – This is OUR Soundtrack: Hip hop in Lebanon”

*I'm throwing ink on paper, because I'm lost in my tears
I'm sticking a pen in the ground, to find my roots
I'm scratching on time, to regain my rights
I'm tearing up the nation that suppressed my childhood
(Rayess Bek, “Khartech Aal Zamann/Scratch on the past”)*

*Open your ears to hear with your eyes
(Kita3 Beirut, “Fi 3alam/There are People”)*

In Lebanon's cultural politics of music, hip hop emerges as an instrument for contesting inherited forms of meaning by socializing alternative discourse - with its own ideological terms, creative yearnings and lexicon of ideas - into the public sphere. Perhaps only a small interruption against the repetitive, exacting beats of the social order, but this is not about volume or even flow. It is about testing the limits and pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable. Hip hop in Lebanon emerges as a space of possibility, where political bargaining and moral contestation are summoned in defense of the self, and in defense of real and imagined communities. Here, rappers situate themselves in relation to others based on their own laws of cultural capital, not the classifying norms of the dominant social arrangement. And in a country where the inclination to categorize - based on sect, family, religion, political affiliation and social status - is instant and pervasive, this freedom to forge unique identities that defy stereotypes and promote dialogue is significant. Yet - musical genres, as Adorno said, carry the contradictory tendencies of society as a whole (1976: p.69). There are a range of hip hop 'territories' in Lebanon, and they often coalesce at the juncture where youth demand a new definition of group solidarity: they disavow the sectarian-communal mechanisms of the political and social system, and they refuse conventional forms of identity branding. But amending what rappers profess with how they interact in the creation of a distinct hip hop community, or in this case, communities, reveals some of these young people remain haphazardly caught up in redefining a system they often loudly reject. Still, we cannot ignore the complex processes of how youth in Lebanon are working out 'who' and 'how' they want to be in the language of a hybrid, glocal form such as hip hop.

My life in Lebanon is like a separating line

(Rayess Bek, “Schizophrenia”)

The drawing up of territorial-communal boundaries lends provocative nuance to this study. Hip hop culture has an 'in-built element of competition' that has 'traditionally been staged within geographical boundaries that demarcate turf and territory among various crews, cliques, and posses' (Forman, 2004: p. 203). Rappers often emphasize and organize themselves around spatial alliances in defense of themes and imagery belonging to the 'hood'. This spatial inheritance of hip hop culture could proffer huge implications when invoked in a country like Lebanon. Communal loyalties, charted geographically and mobilized by confessional sentiment, are the basic form of social support and political affiliation in Lebanon. In an elaborate spectacle, the Lebanese have nurtured an aesthetic for formulating sectarian identity in a way reminiscent of gang-like partitioning: flags, checkpoints, color schemes, architecture, symbols and graffiti all serve to mediate the ways people locate, experience, and understand their place and identity in the country. They serve as a pervasive reminder of the 'separate, exclusive and self-sufficient spaces' that evolved during the civil war, and that are now coded into everyday life (Khalaf, 2006: p.114). Yet, in their search to mark themselves out as different from the 'other'; these young people are not retreating to the kind of strongholds of boundary-making and territorial rigidity that left an indelible mark on their parent's generation. Most hip hoppers do not draw on geography; rather, ideological formations of social protest play the principal marker of emphasis and antagonism.

Overwhelming, in fact, the country's sectarian system and its religious fabric is the repeated victim of vehement criticisms from the country's hip hoppers. 'Everything revolves around religion,' producer and rapper MC Zoog, said. 'Religion here is racism. You use it to divide and contrast people.'¹ As for Double A the Preacherman: 'We don't want religion to be in hip hop. There is no space for hate in music.'²

*They say in Lebanon the religions are married
But I was never invited to the wedding
I've seen them fighting since I was 15
(Rayess Bek, "Schizophrenia")*

*The presidents are using religion to light up smoke
The blood of Muslims and Christians is painted on walls
(Kimewe from 7 Ta2aT, "El Mot Jekon/Death is Coming to You")*

*I'll pay with my blood to defend my people,
But I won't put up with religious segregation
So let me Live
(Zeinedin featuring Ramcess, "Leave me Alone")*

*Battling because of opposing political factions
Using religion to defend our physical actions
Afraid the urge to fight has become inborn
Unsure of what we're fighting against, and what we're fighting for
(Venus, "Enough Talk")*

*I was found between a lot of savage characters
They're using religion to get their way
(RGB, "Ya Wled Loubnen/Hey, Chlidren of Lebanon")*

*They all support sectarianism: Muslims, Christians
Let's keep this up, and maybe we'll repeat the civil war
(Rayess Bek, "La Min?/For Who?")*

1 Ghazi Abdel Baki, Forward Records. Interview.

2 Double A the Preacherman, rapper. Interview

'We feel jailed by religion,' members of the group State of Mind from Saida said. 'The whole system, it puts us all in adversity, one against the other. We are born into this adversity because we are born into a sectarian system. So as an artist, our first goal, our first aim is to be beyond all this. Just give arts to anyone who can think and never put our name on a color or sect.'³ Malikah says she feels like one of the roles in her music is to 'tell younger generations about the mistakes of sectarianism'. Rapper Zeinedin believes 'hip hop is all about tolerance, that's why we don't get involved in sectarian politics. How could we talk about being true to yourself, if we are obsessed with sects?' Lebanese hip hop 'reminds us that music needs to be rethought in a communal sense.'⁴

Let's sing together

Let's let go of sectarianism

So our goal is to join the people together

So we can harvest unity (7 Ta2aT, "Yalla, Rkedou!/Let's go, Run!")

'We hate sectarianism when it divides us,' members of the rap group 7 Ta2aT from Tripoli say. These boys express a particularly powerful sense of solidarity with one another. They echo Zeinedin's sentiment, telling me: 'The most key thing is tolerance. We might fight and argue, but at the end of the day we are all friends, brothers.' The members say they are not involved in the politics of sectarianism but 'we understand how others are dragged into it... You need to belong to a party or group just to survive; your only reason is to see your family live... There is a tribal attitude here.' The night before one of my interviews with the group, the boys told me a fight had broken out between some kids from different neighborhoods over a soccer game. But what first involved children, they told me, escalated into a battle of one neighborhood versus the other, with one person ending up dead. As Khalaf points out, confessionalism is both emblem and armor in the country: 'a viable medium for asserting presence and securing vital needs and benefits. Without it, groups are literally rootless, nameless and voiceless' (Khalaf, 2003: p. 30). But instead of firmly rooting themselves in the 'cult of sectarianism,' the guys in 7 Ta2aT are their own support structure. They don't have much, but they have each other. 'If someone wants to start a fight, we can defend ourselves – but that won't happen.' It is in this way that members of 7 Ta2aT have converted traditional confessional sentiments into their own arena of social and emotional support. This is their imagined, and in many ways real, community.

But 7 Ta2aT's community is not the same as the one Fareeq el Atrash belongs to. I-Voice is different from Touffar. The same goes for Zeinedin and Bolo-B. Ramcess does not cover the same ground as Malikah or Double A the Preacherman. Making dramatic the hegemonic structure that underscores the inability on the part of these young people to form a singular, cohesive community, rapper H2z says: 'We rappers are deeply connected and somehow different.' Bourdieu's notion of habitus has key explanatory power for elaborating why hip hop is 'like everything in Lebanon... everything is divided.' Habitus is an acquired set of subjective dispositions, attitudes or habits which objectively manifest themselves in particular conditions (Bourdieu, 1977: 95). Here, agency is a given, but so is the mediation of structural restriction. Cultural practices are gripped by habitus – those unconscious preferences that explain why individual actions are not always deliberate. Then, when action is calculated – the concept explains why the individual fails to achieve his/her desired result. And so the brutal irony is: Lebanon's hip hoppers are in many ways loosely held together by a stiff rejection of the worldview that encourages sectarian and by extension - communal enclaves of solidarity. And yet, in their failure to reach out across communal - and by extension sectarian borders – they reproduce the system they are bent on rejecting. Bourdieu's habitus helps us to explain not what they do, but what hip hoppers in Lebanon do not do that gives credence to the behaviors of the generation before them. When asked why hip hoppers in Lebanon have not been successful at forming a community, some responses were:

"This is the Lebanese problem... they can't come together."

"Rappers are afraid of each other... they don't want to work together."

"The vision [to work together as a community] doesn't exist. They don't see that if they joined hands they could have a bigger impact."

"Between each other they have problems... they have their own agendas... own conflicts."

"Hip hop is like everything in Lebanon... everything is divided."

3 Zeid Hamdan, musician and producer. Interview.

4 John Nasr, Fareeq el Atrash. Interview.

"It is fear of the other eating you up. They are afraid to work together because they could be beat by another in competition."

"Here everyone has their own network and they want to keep it to themselves."

"We are not connected... no one wants to share."

"This is a culture of survival."

To have control over spatial practices is to have control over what is or is not acceptable behavior. What may have started out as a 'geography of fear' for their parent's generation is simply now a geography of difference. The greatest danger of habitus 'is that it naturalizes itself and the cultural rules, agendas and values that make it possible' (Bourdieu, 1977). Social relations have to be reproduced and reaffirmed in interactions across territorial borders if these young people are to fully realize their goals. Or else, they must face the disarming paradox of their lyrics:

*How are you planning on building a future if the past keeps on repeating itself?
(Fareeq el Atrash, "Terikhna bi lebnen/Our History in Lebanon")*

*You lived the war, but I'm living the consequences
(Rayess Bek, "Baye3 Manem /Dream Seller")*

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