1-1-2016

Rap music and youth cultures in Iran: serious or light?

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Citation

Shahabi, M., & Golpoush-Nezhad, E. (2016). "Rap Music and Youth Cultures in Iran: Serious or Light?". In *Youth, Space and Time*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004324589_013

CHAPTER 9

Rap Music and Youth Cultures in Iran: Serious or Light?

Mahmood Shahabi and Elham Golpoush-Nezhad

Introduction

This chapter explores the underground Persian rap culture in Iran. It aims to understand what a rapping experience in Iran is like and how Iranian rappers make sense of it. In this chapter we will discuss six reasons why Iranian young people tend to like rap culture. We also categorise Iranian rappers based on a number of criteria, and then introduce two different types of rappers in Iran, namely "serious" and "light" rappers. Serious rappers are mostly preoccupied with social, political and cultural issues, whereas light rappers mainly strive for fame, leisure and wealth.

These two different kinds of rappers were identified during our ethnographic study in which the subjects' own accounts of, and reasons for, their actions and reactions to social, political and cultural issues were explored. The study is based on engaged participation observation and also interviews with 29 male and female rappers, both first generation (founders of Persian rap) and second generation rappers, including street rappers. This ethnographic research was conducted in some of the main cities of Iran: Tehran, Mashhad, Babolsar, and Karaj, during 2009–2011. The field work was carried out in various studios, home recording places as well as the rappers' homes and family gatherings and in some cases parks and other public spaces. To interview the Iranian rappers living outside the country, we used Skype.

Background

Mashhad, Tehran and a few other big cities in Iran are currently home to a small but vibrant rap community. Rap in Iran has some different characteristics if compared to American hip-hop rap culture. In this chapter we identify some elements which indicate the uniqueness of rap culture as it has emerged in Iran. Although there are many expressive elements of hip-hop culture the only one practiced in Iran is rapping itself, which has turned into a culture in

 | DOI 10.1163/9789004324589_013

its own right. While hip-hop culture in western or other countries is a visual musical culture, acted out through breakdancing, graffiti and fashion, along with the genre of rap (Gelder, 2007), this is not the case in Iran. For example, although there are a few rappers doing graffiti, it's not a part of the culture (Personal field notes, 2010). Therefore in this chapter, we use the specific term "Persian rap" instead of the generic term "hip-hop".

Due to Iran's specific social, economic and political conditions and the government's complete control over both private and public spaces, it is difficult to establish any independent public space. This would reveal the vast gap between the mainstream culture promoted by dominant discourse and unofficial underground culture moving under the layers of society, pointing to profound conflict between the official public arena and any unofficial public spaces. This conflict has characterised Iranian society since the revolution of 1979 (Keddie, 2003). Ever since those drastic and profound political, economic and cultural changes some people have tended to favour unofficial political and cultural subcultures, sometimes opposite to the accepted values of the Islamic Republic government. These subcultures have already been studied in general (see Shahabi, 2006). In recent years more specific elements of Iranian youth subcultures have been studied, including "party-going subculture" (Yousefi, 2007), and "car culture" among Tehrani youth (Houshangi, 2009). However, when it comes to the youth music culture of post-revolution Iran, to the best of our knowledge no academic study has been done so far on music-based subculture in general, or on underground rap subculture in particular.

Rap music in Iran is very young. Most music had been banned for a long time and it was only in 1995 when the Islamic Culture and guidance Ministry announced that pop music was allowed that things changed. Rap culture emerged in Iran in 1997 when a boy named Mohsen Sabbah made a recording and broadcast it through the internet. After a while he and his friend, Soroush Hichkas (known as the father of Persian rap), together recorded some songs they called rap, which were actually translations of American Gangsta rap songs. Later on, Hichkas set up a group named *Samet* (mute) and started to write some "texts" (the term for the lyrics of rap songs among Iranian rappers), again following the American Gangsta rappers of the 1970s.

After 1995, lots of studios were developing new material under ministry supervision. Cultural life became more flexible than in the initial years after the Islamic revolution. Rap music was included at the end of some serials like *The Accused Escaped* (2000), movies, and even shows like *Oxygen* (1999), a very popular chat show with a wide ranging audience on national TV. There was also the officially endorsed release of a pop album called *Eskenas* (money) by Shahkar Binesh-Pajouh, who has been described as "Iran's self-styled rapping

aristocrat" (Harrison, 2004). He used rap music mixed with Persian classical poetry in order to criticise poverty, unemployment, and the "chi-chi" women of Tehran wearing too much make-up under their chiffon headscarves. "I am criticising the *nouveaux riches* who have no taste", says Shahkar. Moreover,

> If a guy is driving a BMW without having the culture that goes with driving a BMW, he is still a village man, but he just has more money than before.
>
> SHAHKAR, cited in HARRISON, 2004

As Persian rap music turned critical of the status quo, the Iranian government couldn't cope with the new subculture founded beneath the official city layers. By the year 2005, the beginning of Ahmadinejad's presidency, these subcultures were strictly suppressed. As commentator Mardomak reports in 2008, Mohammad Saffar Harandi – the Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance – called on all the country's security bodies to counteract the "unhealthy music flow":

> Unhealthy music flows like rap have made music a tool to reach out their damaging goals. Fortunately the police and security bodies are fully equipped to fight these groups. www.mardomak.ir

Now however, new technology opens up new opportunities. Unofficial rap music is produced every day by any interested person in a home studio and is spread out through the internet and may be shown on satellite TV channels all over the world. For those who have no access to the internet or satellite TV channels, Bluetooth comes to the rescue. It is therefore important to clarify the nature of this popular rap genre.

According to mainstream culture, Iranian rappers are deviants and anti-Islamic figures (Ferani, 2010). This is primarily because they don't use the metaphors, similes and literary allegories common in Iranian poetry. Rap uses free articulation and a totally different literature is referred to in its lyrics. The phenomenon illustrates significant changes in modern Iran. The particular lives of urban young people lead them to use the most familiar and everyday language they know to express their feelings. Mainstream discourse has continued to attempt to suppress the rappers by labelling them "deviants", "Satanic", or even "the great Satan's spies". These criticisms have been made even in newspapers like *Hamshahri* (2008), and *Keyhan* (2009) and in TV programs. For example a programme called *Shock* (2007) induced a moral panic about rappers. The programme attempted to link rappers to

Satanism through interviewing some paid rappers, mostly drug addicted ones (Field notes, 2010). The *Shock* hosts then talked about the false actions of rappers, how they are deviant and of course a threat to Islamic society. On the other hand the media out of the country depicted rappers as "resisting youth", "the youth voice", "the Iranian youth voice", and so on (Manoto, 2011; VOA 2008).

In summary, Iranian rappers have been represented in terms of both fear and hope. Certainly attention has been paid to the Iranian rappers' ability to bring a change to the society, a potential recognised by their critics and admirers alike. Yet in all these controversies, rappers themselves have received little direct involvement in the interview and research process. We have tried to rectify this, in the study presented in this chapter.

Methods

In this study, a variety of techniques were used to access Persian rappers in Iran and abroad. Since rapping is considered illegal, we had to find rappers through friends or accidentally in public places or parks, through the internet, and Skype. Furthermore they would guide us to others they knew of, following the snowball method of sampling. Given the legal implications, it was impossible for us to make recordings, so as Thornton (1996) aptly puts it, we had to take any minute and opportunity to escape from the environment and put notes down. The second author has befriended a lot of Iranian rappers in three years (2009–2011) and she observed and interviewed 29 rappers (male and female) in Tehran and other cities of Iran (Babolsar, Karaj, Mashhad) as well as three street rap groups in parks. All the data have been analysed thematically and in an interpretive phenomenological way characteristic of ethnographic research (Jones & Watt, 2010).

As Bennett maintains, the most important matter of concern is the researcher's "insider knowledge" of the group being studied. The ethnographer should report on his/her feelings when communicating about the researched group (Bennett, 2002). As Muggleton and Weinzierl put it, to get to the actors' subjective meanings and their lifestyles, the researcher needs to have an intimate interaction with them. Following Max Weber, social research should be conducted by studying an "individual meaningful act" (Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003, 33). To put it in another way, to understand an individual action, one should take into consideration the concept the individual has in mind of his/her actions. Therefore in this chapter we have tried to examine the Iranian rap subculture and individual rappers' conceptions of their cultural acts from the

inside and from the point of view of un-official discourse. Obviously looking at them from the outside, applying official discourse has already (mis)led social commentators and social workers in the country to some unreal presuppositions and categorisations, thereby hiding the important identity these young people are looking for in rap.

Findings

Being a Rapper

Our first interesting observation in the research was the way Persian rappers thought of themselves or their activity. For example, when we asked "Why rap? Why not pop?", or "why this text not another?" we got almost the same answers every time. One typical response was: "well, pop costs, rap doesn't". Other common responses were: "what the hell else to sing?", and "there is no one there to tell you sing this, sing that, for rap". The preoccupation with sentimental romance was deplored, for example, "pop is all about the damned love, how many times can you sing about that?", and perhaps more critically, "can you speak about your lost virginity in a pop song?". Some rappers understood themselves to be a mere imitating rapper when they were asked about the origin of rap. That is, they believed themselves to be following the themes and notions of American Gangsta rap with no innovation at all. Conversely, some others considered rap to be a global phenomenon which they themselves turned into Persian form and added some Persian essence to it.

Our second observation regarding the rap community in Iran was the attitude some of the illegal studio owners (Eshagh, Alireza, Mansoor) showed towards rap and rappers in Iran. They were mostly young men of the upper middle class who look down on rap and rappers in Iran, believing them, for example, to be "some alcoholic, drug addicts willing to be famous enough to have as many girl friends as they want." They didn't take rappers seriously. They thought the rappers are not serious about what they do. The owners believe rappers are only looking for a place to spend time and have something to drink. Most of these owners are just making money out of the rappers. It seems that such studio owners do not recognise rap as a kind of music with an independent existence. They were most interested in profit. They were involved in rap culture due to the financial benefits the young rappers brought to them. Their dismissive conception of rap and rappers seems similar to the dominant Iranian discourse about rappers, understanding them to be delinquent subcultures; as a form of Satanism spreading the immoralities of western modern culture to Iranian Islamic culture. That is, the same fear expressed elsewhere in the world

when it comes to the "moral milieu" of American "little worlds" (Gelder, 2004). From this state of judgement, no one could understand the inner perspective of the "rap artist", let alone their insights and self-concepts of rap. In this regard this chapter aims to clarify the firsthand feelings of being a rapper, of any kind, in Iran.

A Typology of Iranian Rappers and Their Objectives

As outlined above, most reports written on rap in Iran have focused on rap pathology. Almost all accounts categorised rappers according to a thematic content analysis of their song lyrics (Nazer Fasihi, 2008; Khademi, 2010). More insightfully, Kowsari (2009) has summarised the themes of Iranian rap songs in terms of social, political and cultural criticism. He claims that Iranian rappers are not willing to remain underground and welcome any opportunity to go to the surface, to the public arena. He believes the only reason for rappers to remain underground is because they are banned by the Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry. However, Sedaghat-Pishe (2010) believes some of those involved in underground music are happy to remain so. Thus, one way to categorise Iranian rappers is according to their preference for underground or public lives.

Another way to categorise them is to look at them chronologically. By this criteria, we can talk about first generation (or founders of Persian rap) and second generation (Persian rap followers). Pioneers of Persian rap include Soroush Hichkas, Yas, Tataloo, Hossein Tohi, ZedBazi, Saloomeh, Felakat, 0111, Reza Pishroo, Eblis and Bahram. Among the second generation we can name Farinaz, Atousa, Mehran, Sasi Mankan, Milad, Hossein Mokhte, Alishams, Shahin Najafi, and street rapper groups. A third way to categorise Iranian rappers is to divide them according to their place of activity: inside or outside the country. It is worth mentioning that many of the rappers examined in this research are still living in Iran and remain as rappers, despite all the barriers. We have also interviewed Iranian rappers now living out of country but who influenced rap culture in Iran while they were inside the country. We have not interviewed Persian rappers who started their rap activity while living abroad.

When we started the research on rappers in Iran we were looking for valid criteria with which to categorise rappers, for instance, through symbols and semiotics (Hebdige, 1979), or kinds of resistance (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Cohen, 1972; Willis, 1977) or leisure time patterns (Bennett, 2002; Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003). Yet, bearing in mind all the different types we observed among these young artists, we came to the conclusion that classifying individual rappers

based on their concerns and aims seemed the most logical. Studying closely as observing outsider (first author) and participating insider (second author), respectively, we realised how complex, diversified and complicated rap cultures are in Iran. Since different artists bring different concerns and aims to bear, this seemed the most fruitful point of analysis. After thematically analysing the interviews along these lines, we extracted six important objectives for rapping in Iran. We explain them in turn and in detail.

1 *Expressing Emotions*

To be in Iran and to rap is one of the most challenging activities youth participate in; by doing so, young rappers, like Nana, seek to reveal their emotions and lived experiences. Some of the Iranian rappers called themselves the "revolution generation", a term originally used to refer to children born after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, but now used satirically in recent years by young people. It is an ironic term because as a generation they feel they never had the chance to talk about what they like, or what they dislike, or what they need. They cannot talk openly about even their natural human needs like sex and finding a partner, nor even the quest for money. In rap they simply seek to share their experiences with others and to engage with all the complexities they have been facing since childhood. Yas is a main figure in this regard. He explains his objectives in rapping:

> I started writing songs. By and by I was thinking to myself, when I can write, I definitely can sing it. I sing about things we've always seen and felt, like a child begging on the street or a girl running away from the family. I like my audience get to know what misery these children and girls are going through.
>
> YAS, male, 30, serious rapper, Iran

As discussed earlier in the chapter, some rappers wish to open up about things natural to human beings. Talking about such things has been always restricted and harshly treated by the mainstream culture. They may suffer this judgement even from their own families. They try to express their anxiety, hate and anger in the text they write by using words that are not only irregular, but also taboo and discarded in the official discourse in the country. Speaking frankly, the rappers feel free to talk about anything in their text. This is the likely reason teens and young adults in Iran are attracted to the new culture.

In the wide range of rappers we interviewed there are some who consider their singing a way to tell, for example, the story of the nation; they describe themselves national historians: Griots (Stapleton, 1998). Nakisa, a street rapper,

believes himself to be the one to "wake people up". He had this to say to the second author,

> Look I say whatever I see, in my text. For example, [have] you been out on the street after 12 am? Seen what happens to the young? Have you seen those injecting drugs on the corners? Have you seen a girl of your age hop in a car and take off? We cry for them by our texts.
>
> NAKISA, male, 25, serious street rapper, Iran

Although rap music and hip-hop culture has been considered a conspicuous outpouring of "liberating" and "radical" ideas and expressions of what young people need (Peoples, 2008), this has been primarily from a masculine viewpoint. Performance by a female rapper has always been a matter of debate (Peoples, 2008; Khan, 2009). Sharing feelings and emotions with others in rap is totally different again for Iranian female rappers, since they, on the one hand, have to express themselves in the masculine environment of rap culture, and on the other, resist the existing legal ban on females singing.

2 *Resistance and Opposition*

Male and female rappers in Iran have adopted different objectives of resistance in their rap lives; each gender explains their specific different social experiences and aims. Yet, one mutual objective is fighting censorship. This has been the main theme of many rap songs produced in Iran by artists who feel uncomfortable about censorship in different aspects of Iranian everyday life. They are concerned with the important issue of "self-censorship", both verbal and non-verbal. For example, Saloomeh, a female rapper who now lives in Europe, affirmed that she broke the laws made for controlling the "body" and "language" in order to talk about experiences and feelings that are rendered invisible. Another rapper, Mojrem (the Criminal), stated that:

> Rap has given us such fine space that I can say the words I have been always told not to say, for example … [swearing, unable to be translated].
>
> MOJREM, male, 25, serious street rapper, Iran

Shahin Najafi, a political singer and former sociology student who left for Germany in 2007, summed it up as follows,

> It [censorship] is a way to exert your power on people's minds better, it is part of a broader process of planning for the people who should be constrained in order to make your progress [to clasp to power and keep it under your wings] possible. Two things are essential to control the

> people: keeping the people in need of their essential necessities of everyday life, and censorship.
>
> NAJAFI, male, 31, serious rapper, outside Iran

He added that his version of rapping is aimed at exploding taboos. However, this kind of explosion sometimes might prove self-suicidal. Shahin Najafi now lives in hiding in Germany. He has been called the Salman Rushdie of music after more than 100 people joined an online campaign to "execute" him after the release of a song on May 7, 2012, in which it is claimed he mocked and satirised the Iranian government and one of the 12 imams or religious figures revered by Shia Muslims. This has not been without consequences for other rappers, even for non-political rappers. Since then the Iranian Police crackdown on rappers has been intensified and many of them have been arrested.

A second objective sought by Iranian rappers is fighting patriarchal values, which we think is unique to Iranian rapping. Shahin Najafi is one of those feminist male rappers who believe Iranian women are oppressed by the laws that support male domination. He suggests women remain "women" in so masculine a thing as rap:

> Unfortunately in the mainstream culture in Iran men won't accept the woman as a "woman". You cannot define art as mono-gendered. That's because art is not a subject of gender. It is the uniqueness and nakedness of art that makes it neutral, equal for man and woman.
>
> NAJAFI, male, 31, serious rapper, outside Iran

Female rappers believe in the protest nature of rap music which gives them the right to sing, as Saloomeh says,

> It is said American hip-hop is masculine and also it is often asked "how many female rap singers have you seen around the world?" But well, don't they say that rap is the voice of the voiceless? Well in Iran we, the women are the voiceless.
>
> SALOOMEH, female, 25, serious rapper, outside Iran

Despite the invisible role of girls in subcultures from the 1960s on (McRobbie & Garber, 1997) and in rap music in particular (Khabeer, 2007; Khan, 2009) Iranian female rappers have created a marginal subculture of their own within the marginal rap culture in the country. They can be categorised in two groups: those who find rap to be a source of protest, and those who seek fame and fun in it. The former includes rappers opposed to all sexual and gendered boundaries and harassment structurally assigned to them on the basis of

"normative conceptions of femininity", (see O'Brien et al., 2009). This category also includes those who are politically against the government. Notably, there is some notion of resistance to the stereotyped gaze of patriarchal society on women among all rappers of this group. These rappers believe they are acting and speaking independently for the whole society of women in Iran. Female rappers in this category not only don't depend on men to be famous or to record a song, but also co-operate on equal terms with some male rappers in taking political stances. In the latter category though, there are female rappers, who merely seek fame and fortune in rapping. They are more concerned with the fun that comes with rapping. For example, when asked about why she chose to be a rapper, Azade said,

> Boys, sex, drinking, money, this is what I call rap.
>
> AZADE, female, 24, serious rapper, Iran

The third objective we characterise as resistance is direct political opposition. If one can describe the culture shaped around hip-hop as inherently marginal to the mainstream, then we can talk about what Rose (1994) calls the centre of the margin. This margin has its own space, its own "dynamics" and "can create its own narratives" (Khan 2009, 233). Early attempts at political rapping in Iran began in 2005 (Kowsari, 2009) and political rap continues up to the present. It can be argued that political rap grew from the time of political changes in Iran which was the end of the reformist administration. Hichkas, known as the father of Persian rap, points out that the early rappers "didn't know that music and rap could be a device to talk about political matters and economic unjustice". Once they realised, rappers followed different political directions. They can be categorised in three groups:

Fuming Rappers

These rappers are infuriated by the government and the repressions, they think it imposes on youth. While the Birmingham school critics believed youth participation in subcultures to be a form of resistance toward the parent class culture (Clarke et al., 1976), Iranian rappers resent the economic, social and cultural problems of modern Iran. They express this in a kind of articulate violence. Being furious is a common feature of these rappers as Bahram, a political rap singer, now in Israel, enthusiastically explained,

> Look this is the anger stored in all of us; we all know that the government is to blame for all this.
>
> BAHRAM, male, 26, serious rapper, outside Iran

However, among resisting rappers, both female and male, this approach to rap music is not much endorsed. Shaya, a feminist female rapper, describes fuming rappers as the ones to blame because of their lack of willingness to accept their faults,

> You know I think they, fuming rappers, don't even know why they are rapping. They think they are the best and they should sit and wait for democracy to come to them. But it is not like that. You should fight for it not just say something to bring anguish to yourself and the ones you love with no result to come. Everything needs a plan to get to… actually they don't plan for freedom they just want others to deliver freedom to them.
>
> SHAYA, female, 24, serious rapper, Iran

Protesting Rappers

Stapleton (1998, 221) argues the political landscape of hip-hop culture to be one of "protest". She believes that "protest music is characterised by objections to injustices and oppressions inflicted on certain individuals and groups". Similarly, resisting "dominant elites" and "members of dominant groups" is the key feature of rapping for this group of individual rappers in Iran. As Mojrem puts it, they are opposing present injustices, only some of which "the government is to be scolded for". Hichkas believes;

> Most of the problem in Iran is because of the people. You cannot always blame the governments for the problems people cause because of their irresponsibility and lack of tact. We are saying that this government does something cruel to people. But if they act for the good of the people why should we be mad at them? We only want our freedom back, that's the thing.
>
> HICHKAS, male, 27, serious rapper, Iran

The fuming rappers, according to some of the protesting rappers, do not love their country. As Shaya explains,

> It seems that they just want to have a good reason to take refuge in other countries. If you are working for the people you stay with them.
>
> SHAYA, 24, female street rapper, Iran

Imitating Rappers

Another kind of resisting rapper in Iran is the imitating rapper. They believe that rap and hip-hop are not Iranian things, so they should remain true to the

original essence of the music. That is to be a real rapper as they see it. Shayan, a street rapper, introduced himself as a follower of Shakur by imitating his appearance, manners and ways of behaving. He had seen Shakur on CDs and movies made about him. The distinctive baggy clothing of hip-hop singers is considered a "cultural invasion" in Iran according to the dominant discourse and a wearer may be sentenced to punishment. Street rappers are the only active rappers in Iran who insist on wearing such clothing in public. They thereby show their resistant identity as a rapper both to "alarm people about the fact of their existence and to be different from the ordinary people" (Mojrem, male, 25, serious street rapper, Iran). Although these street rappers are not famous, because their poverty doesn't let them record any songs, they are the ones shown on national TV to (mis)represent rap culture in Iran. As Shayan clearly denotes, they are,

> There to be found [us]. We don't like those stupid well-born assholes. We are on the floor risking our lives. This is us, the rappers, not them.
>
> SHAYAN, male, 25, serious street rapper, Iran

As the discussion so far reveals, some of the concerns of different kinds of rappers connect with each other. As an example, Hichkas, Shaya, Najafi and Nana (a female rapper), are all aware of social problems and at the same time protest politically. As Najafi enlightens us:

> Iranian modern life is a chaos in which you can't point to a specific matter as the problematic one. I can't talk about politics and leave the poverty alone. I can't talk about freedom and take women for granted in it. Everything is tied up together.
>
> NAJAFI, male, 31, serious rapper, outside Iran

This point is manifest for young female rappers. Nana, widely recognised as a female rapper, thinks silence towards what has been imposed is a kind of death sentence,

> [You should fight them back], an eye for an eye strategy. Injustice is injustice whether it is towards women or all the people in the country. You should say something to defend yourself. Rap is always there to give you the courage you never had.
>
> NANA, female, 24, serious street rapper, Iran

The fourth major objective among the rappers we studied is to combat sociocultural problems through rapping using lyrics related to social problems. They

are concerned about problems like poverty, prostitution and drug addiction. For example,

> We have to save our people, they deserve a better life. We shouldn't see poverty and prostitution in the streets. Why are our young people getting addicted? Why are our people indifferent and don't care about these problems?
>
> YAS, male, 30, serious rapper, Iran

The fifth objective among rappers committed to resistance is to fight dullness in everyday life. They want to be distinct and special, not like everybody else. Shervin, a male rapper said,

> We don't want a repetitive life, we don't like to be like others, and we don't want to go to study, or to go to work, or to get married.
>
> SHERVIN, male, 26, serious street rapper, Iran

Nakisa, a male rapper, looks down on the way his mother has been living, for example,

> She has to clean the house every day, help my newly-married sister to cook new meals for her husband, and wash and iron my father's clothes. It is not a good life, no fun, no excitement.
>
> NAKISA, male, 25, serious rapper, Iran

3 *Making Money*

Earning money was found to be one of the ultimate goals for young males in becoming a rapper, but not for females. In Iran, female singing is forbidden by the religious laws and culturally it is not accepted easily by the people. Thus, female rappers can only hope to be known among audiences of rap. They cannot perform even in an underground setting for fear of arrest. Also they can't sing at weddings like male rappers do, not least because their themes are not much suited to a party. The pioneers of Persian rap music, Hichkas, Yas, Bahram, and Salome, didn't care about the money-making aspect of rapping, as implied earlier in the chapter. But the second generation of rap singers seems to take this opportunity seriously. In a way, it identifies their rap "career".

In terms of Iranian money-making, hip-hop is an "economic potentiality" (Peoples, 2008) similar to its American counterpart, but in a different way. As Kowsari (2009) puts it, Iranian rap music doesn't have any marketplace in or out of the country except for concerts held in neighbouring countries, to which

of course a lot of fans come from Iran to take part. Toméh explains the different money-raising ways for rappers in Iran:

> Well, they [the police] take [arrest] us if we have a concert. So we sell our not-so-good lyrics to newcomers in rap. Or, we charge those not famous girl or boy rappers who want to be famous because they are singing with us. There is another way too: singing for parties and wedding ceremonies.
>
> TOMÉH, male, 20, light rapper, Iran

Generally these are common ways of earning money among male rappers in Iran. But it is very different for females. As Shaya explains:

> It is not because rap is for men, it's not and they know it well. It is because our culture cannot accept it. There is nothing a girl can do to escape from it. I can change my looks, I can change my way of talking, I can rebel against the traditions but I can't force them to accept me as a person or a singer to pay money to. They don't spend money on me or any other girl rappers. That's it.
>
> SHAYA, female 24, serious rapper, Iran

To some rappers rapping is a "job". The majority of those who hold that opinion that we interviewed say they think nothing of rap and believe it to be "all bullshit" or "not a gentleman's job". Some say they actually don't care if they are rapping or singing a pop or a folk song, "as long as it makes me money, I'm in" says Mokhte (Out of My Mind). He separated himself or any similar rapper from the ones he named "real rappers". "We don't have anything to say, we sing and take our money, we rap but we're not rappers… Hichkas is a rapper. He wants a good thing and he sings for it, not me" (Mokhte, male, light rapper, Iran). They can make quite a lot of money if they hit the road of fame. While this is similar to their well-known counterparts in the US, they operate in an illegal underground setting in Iran.

4 *Fame and Reputation*

The aim of becoming famous is a common ambition that attracts Iranian youth to Persian rap as a postmodern form of American hip-hop (Peoples, 2008), despite all the threats and limitations imposed by the dominant power of the state over them. Tataloo, a pioneer of Iranian rap, believes most of the young people involved in rap culture in Iran are looking for a reputation either good and bad,

> Some of these rappers just want to be known. It doesn't matter that people think they are good people or bad people; it's enough for them that people point their fingers at them and show them to each other. Some of them want to have as many girl friends as they can by rapping. They are all idiots.
>
> TATALOO, male, 26, light rapper, Iran

5 *Leisure and Fun*

The aim of having fun is an initial reason some rappers started rapping and ended up by earning money. These rappers wished to spend their spare time following the "fashion" of rapping. Leisure and fun options are limited for young people in Iran. In other words not having alternative entertainments and fun has led a lot of rappers to choose rapping as a form of free entertainment. Young rappers can spend time expressing themselves among peers with little money.

6 *Social Recognition*

Some active rappers in Iran change their styles, lyrics and even in some cases their friends, just to be accepted. Although there is no market for rap in Iran, these rappers try to make a market of their own. Tataloo is one of the rappers who grants the audience more – he believes,

> I can't sing "To Ey Pari Kojaee".[1] I should sing a song according to the age of my audience. I choose the topics my audience would like. We try to choose the moments people try to say something but they can't. For example they are happy, sad and… Satisfying people is not a hard thing.
>
> TATALOO, male, 26, light rapper, Iran

By the same token, Sasi Mankan was also very careful not to lose his market,

> You have to be very careful about what you are singing; you have to know how to please your audience even when you are using swearing and bad language.
>
> SASI MANKAN, male, a very famous light rapper, Iran

Some of these rappers define an "Other" from whom they want social recognition, usually Los Angeles-based Iranian singers, ordinary people and other

1 A very famous classic Iranian song.

rappers who matter to them. Practically gaining acceptance from these groups is something important in their lives. However, our observations perhaps unexpectedly show a number of the rappers who try to gain the acceptance of others are also concerned to change something in people's minds, which is also a form of social recognition.

There is another aspect of recognition that these rappers mention and that is freedom of speech, which means they don't follow a regular or standard way of speech or diction. They try to express whatever they are not allowed to say, and say it loudly using some odd words and taboo phrases. For example, the members of a street rap group explained that,

> We say whatever we can't say. We say these words and want to make the assholes vanish from the earth.
>
> SYRUS, ALIREZA and PAYAM, all male rappers, aged 17, Iran

Tataloo believes that rapping means freedom: "if I say shut the hell up, nobody minds, because they expect me to be like this. But if Dariush [a political Iranian pop singer] does this no one would ever listen to him." Yas goes further and tries to reach his social aim which is protesting against poverty and prostitution. He said: 'I think I can positively influence people'.

Serious and Light Rappers

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned reasons, meanings and motives attached to Persian rap music, we come to our final categorisation of Iranian rappers: serious versus light rappers. A serious rapper in Iran is one who defines a specific and sometimes different identity for him/herself in the society. We can define Yas, Shahin Najafi, Bahram, Bi Bak, Hichkas and Salome and the street rappers, as serious rappers. In this case an "Other" is implicitly defined by the rapper and he/she sings in reference to this "Other-making". For example, for Yas the "Other" is western countries whose policies or enmities towards Islamic world lead to atrocities in Palestine or the release of anti-Iranian Hollywood movies like *The 300*.

> I feel sad whenever I leave Iran. Iranians are the most genius people in the world, but they have been always victims of the colonial countries. Look at what they [the West] are doing in Gaza in Palestine, I hope, someday, they will pay for what they have done over there. I like people around

> the world, but I am an Iranian and remain Iranian and sing for Iranians. If I go to America, nothing will be left for singing.
>
> YAS, male, 30, serious rapper, Iran

For Najafi, the "Others" are those in power,

> I address the people who are witnessing all atrocities but keep silent. I address all men who practice their mastery through secluding women, and also all women who comply with this.
>
> NAJAFI, male, 31, serious rapper, outside Iran

Female rappers have their own Other; male rappers and the whole society (patriarchal society). For street rappers, all Iranians living the good life with no intention to help the poor constitute this Other. Serious rappers define a goal to protest against and try to fight for it through rapping.

In contrast, light rappers don't define a "self" or "me as the rapper". In fact, the light rappers lack an independent and fixed identity; the self is always the subject of redefinition. In other words, rapping is just a way among other ways to reach their goals of fun and money. The Other for this group of rappers is mostly non-rapper young people. Nazy (a light female rapper, 20, Iran) believes that all non-rapper girls are boring; only rapper girls are "cool" and "brave".

Rap Lifestyle among Serious and Light Rappers

Lifestyles of rap practitioners depend on whether they are serious or light rappers. The lifestyle is totally different for the first group (serious rappers) from that endorsed by mainstream Iranian culture.

Serious Rappers

Through a sort of conspicuous cussedness, serious rappers exaggerate their style of dressing, behaviour, speech, and lyrics to challenge the negative representations made by the official culture about them. They may go to extremes on some provocative issues in the presence of their father, older brother and peers, although they may not really believe that much in what they say. For instance, serious rapper Felakat departs from gatherings with family and friends using the excuse that he cannot stand it any longer without drugs. He escapes to his room, mocking the shocked family and friends, but then starts reading a novel or a poem.

The situation is tougher for serious rapper girls who regard rap as a real lifestyle. They may try to establish their own identity by revealing their open sexual relationships. Nana explains her aim clearly,

> Let them think that it is doomsday. Let them pray and pray… all my life I have heard, "don't talk to the neighbour's boy", "why did you look at that boy?", "girls should be self-possessed". Let them see if you do wanna be that kind of girl nothing would be changed.
>
> NANA, female, 24, serious rapper, Iran

There are some rappers who pay no attention to the pathological viewpoints of mainstream culture on rap, but act out their own rap lifestyle. According to Shahin,

> Our life is rap. It is the only thing that makes us happy. The way I dress – baggy clothes – shows I am free. We are not like others who work all the time and wait for the night to sleep with the girl. We want to say that life is not just that thing. There should be some excitement; we should give ourselves a shot to be free. We like to think that we are changing something.
>
> SHAHIN, male, 24, serious street rapper, Iran

Although these serious rappers claim to have a different lifestyle, it seems that there is no strict rule for shaping this unique identity. In fact because of the restrictions they face within the society they have to be flexible about the rules of the subculture they represent. A very good example is the way rappers dress in Iran. A group of street rappers mentioned that there is no rule for clothing for rappers; "you wear whatever you like". And while they make fun of those who don't wear baggy clothes and label them as "*zakhar*" – a rapper who doesn't show up in public in his/her baggy clothes – it is not a rule to them, just like it is not a rule in western hip-hop to do breakdancing. The risk of being stripped of these kinds of clothes by the authorities is one of the strongest reasons for this flexibility. Shahin clarifies this situation,

> We wear baggy clothes but if there is a possibility of being busted we wear other clothes but still different to show who we are. We don't work we don't wanna work because living a job in this country is equal to a dog's life.
>
> SHAHIN, male, 24, serious street rapper, Iran

In addition to clothes, consuming drugs and drinking are other factors important in defining the lifestyle of rappers in Iran. Some rappers consider consuming drugs and drinking as inseparable from rap identity. So not consuming drugs and drinking will represent a rapper as false, leading to cold treatment and in some cases exclusion from the group. This way of living is believed to characterise a true rapper for some serious rappers such as Hichkas. "From the outset", Hichkas says, "we knew rap along with crystal [ice]". As we explained in the beginning of this chapter, Iranian rappers imitated American Gangsta rappers. Here a covert influence of the American style of rappers can be traced. The use of drugs has become part of rapping although perhaps not the main purpose of rapping which can be resistance or other motivations. At the same time there is another group of serious rappers who started to rap with the presupposed intention of resisting through rap, such as Salomeh, Shahin Najafi and Bahram. They may also consume drugs but it's not so much part of their lifestyle. Yet neither of these two groups of serious rappers see any contradiction between their so-called "deviant" lifestyle and the socio-political nature of their rapping. Many see their deviant lifestyle as a way to challenge the hegemonic discourse in Iran.

In sum, serious rappers are very committed to their lifestyle; they are not quick to change or modify their rap lifestyle even when requested to do so by those whom they like or love very much, such as parents and partners, even if they get exiled or imprisoned. In terms of class position, serious rappers mainly come from the lower classes and practice consuming drugs and drinking.

Light Rappers

In marked contrast, the lifestyle of light rappers is not that distinct from conventional culture. They are ready to change their rap lifestyle. For example, Reza Pishro, a male light rapper, stopped rapping after he got married and Tataloo also adjusted himself to what his partner wanted him to do. These rappers respect the social norms and the expectations of their significant others. They rarely drink alcohol or take drugs. For example, Tataloo believes that: "no one could ever tell me not to go to parties, because I do nothing wrong, I don't drink, I don't use any drugs".

They still keep their religious beliefs. For example, Hossein Tohi, one of the pioneers of Persian rap, released a song called *Agha Joon* (My Dear Saint) in which he gave homage to Imam Hossein, the third Shia Imam. This song proved popular among Iranian young people. To take another example, during our interview, Amir Qiamat, a male rapper who teaches English language in private institutes in Tehran, like many religious people in Iran repeatedly used

phrases like "God willing" or "whatever God wishes, it will happen", or "nothing will happen without God's will". Razim, another male rapper, told us: "I am fearful of God, and don't do anything against his will". Most male light rappers believe a girl should not become a rapper and should not smoke cigarettes, let alone drink or use drugs at parties.

The light rappers also consider rap as part of their lives. But they try to adjust their lifestyle with the mainstream culture, for example they are careful about the lyrics they write and are always aware of the audience's ideas about their works. They mainly belong to the upper middle class.

Conclusion

After hip-hop made its first debut in the United States, it became a worldwide phenomenon, influencing music in all corners of the globe, even China (see Khan, 2009) and Iran. However, it was not taken up the same way everywhere. As we have tried to show in this chapter, Iranian rap music cannot be described as a derivative outgrowth of the African-American hip-hop scene. As Tony Mitchell's edited collection (2001) *Global noise* demonstrated, the global reach of hip-hop has had many different ramifications throughout the world. In some places it has promoted Marxist politics. In the hands of Basque separatist rappers a punk rock hip-hop syncretic genre has been used to espouse their nationalist cause. French rap artists of Moroccan and Algerian heritage have challenged social issues in France today and questioned France's role within the Algerian civil war (Mitchell, 2001).

As hip-hop scholar Durand argues, hip-hop is an idealised limited community around which part of contemporary youth, both urban and multi-ethnic in nature, can identify itself, protest, contest, propose, act, and create (Durand, 2002). In Europe, rap music has played a large role in expressing the feelings, thoughts, and desires of minority communities. For example, Swedenburgh (2001) has pointed out that Islamic hip-hop in Europe is fighting Islamaphobia. Among Muslim countries there is evidence of the existence of a vibrant community of rappers, for example, in Turkey (see Solomon, 2005) or in Egypt. However, rap culture in every society has its own distinct or unique characteristics. In Egypt, for example, Egyptian hip-hop is distinct from other genres around the world, not only in terms of the traditional musical instruments played, but also in terms of limits on the un-Islamic elements present in hip-hop such as the objectification of women. Moreover, many observers confirm Egyptian hip-hop took a revolutionary position during the 2011 Egyptian revolution against President Hosni Mubarak. Elsewhere in the so-called "Arab Spring" hip-hop and rap may be playing a similar role.

Therefore, while African-American hip-hop has changed a lot during the past years and is nowadays criticised because of its commercialisation and its objectification of women in music video clips and songs, it is wrong to conclude that rap culture in other socio-cultural contexts has had, or will have, the same meaning or fate. Our observations on the Iranian rap community do not confirm such generalisations.

The experience of rapping in Iran confirms Mitchell's observation that "rap music and hip-hop culture has in many cases become a vehicle of various forms of youth culture" (Mitchell 2001, 10). We go further to claim that even in the same cultural environment in a country like Iran, various versions or brands of the same youth cultural form, in this case rap culture, co-exist whether in peace or unease, and compete for public attention. The socially critical genre created by the Iranian serious rappers confirms Rose's observation that "oppressed people use language, dance and music to mock that in power" (1994, 100). It also confirms Abdel-Alim's observations in Europe, where he sees Muslim hip-hop as able to: "within the hip-hop cultural movement … create a counter hegemonic discourse that threatens the ruling class and their ideas" (2006, 46).

Moreover, the experience of rapping in Iran is another example of the dialectic between the global and the local, or what Robertson (1992) terms "glocalisation". As Bennett (1999) has already shown, "hip-hop in Newcastle, England, and Frankfurt, Germany, is used to handle very different local sociocultural issues". Jenkins (2004) points out "how the process of appropriation and recontextualization of mediated imagery across cultures often leads to metamorphoses of meanings that make these meanings both unpredictable and contradictory in relation to their origin of broadcasting" (Cited in Kjeldgaard & Askegaard 2006, 233–4).

In relation to our study, the light genre created by the Iranian light rappers is similar to what Abdel-Alim calls Islamic hip-hop in the context of European Muslim hip-hop. Abdel-Alim, argues "I use the term Islamic rather than Muslim to distinguish a genre of hip-hop music and culture created by American Muslims that seeks to comply with Islamic religious standards and practices" (Abdel-Alim 2006, 46). Therefore, in regard to the meaning of Persian rap culture, just like the meaning of many other issues among Iranian people, there is a divide among Iranian rappers themselves. This divide at the micro level of music subculture is in parallel to a similar divide at the macro level of Iranian society.

Our study of Persian rap shows how young people as cultural consumers can appropriate the symbolic resources produced by global consumer culture for their own expressive purposes. It significantly demonstrates how global genres such as hip-hop acquire distinctive meanings within the context of a

given society where young people's discourses of identity are concerned. In Iran, hip-hop youth culture has been translated, appropriated and creolised to fit into local social structures and issues, in a context where it is technically illegal.

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