

Islamic Themes in US Hip-Hop Culture

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ANDERS ACKFELDT

Anders Ackfeldt's *Islamic Themes in US Hip-Hop Culture* represents yet another welcome example of the increasing scholarly attention being paid to the representation of Islam in popular culture. Combining his expertise in the history of religions and Islamic Studies with a range of tools stemming from Media Studies and social semiotics, Ackfeldt produces a multi-layered investigation into the Islamic symbolism and Muslim identities in U.S. hip-hop. Ackfeldt's book portrays the religion as a creative resource for the articulation of social, cultural, and political expressions, especially among Black American artists.

Ackfeldt argues that hip-hop's non-doctrinal interpretation of Islam as an individually interpreted semiotic resource aligns with broader currents in religious studies that emphasize non-institutional and performative approaches to religion. This approach resonates with scholarship on Islam's role in the cultural production of Black Americans, particularly the work of authors such as Su'ad Abdul Khabeer and Hisham Aidi. Ackfeldt's engagement with the topic from the perspective of Islamic Studies is especially refreshing, adding a much-needed theological dimension to an otherwise well-developed body of literature.

Accordingly, while the study's originality lies primarily in its interdisciplinary scope, many of its theoretical insights and empirical observations will be familiar to scholars of hip-hop.

The book unfolds across eight chapters. The introduction lays the foundation by outlining Ackfeldt's theoretical orientation in social semiotics, establishing Islam not as a monolithic religious identity, but rather as a polyvalent field of signs embedded in cultural production. Following a comprehensive literature review, a discussion regarding the historical presence of Islam in the African American experience outlines the transition from enslaved West African Muslims to the rise of phenomena like the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), the Nation of Islam (NOI), and the Five Percent Nation. In particular, the author emphasizes the influence of these proto-Islamic movements on Islam's reception among Black American communities prior to the emergence of hip-hop.

The central chapters provide case studies of hip-hop artists and groups who incorporate Islamic themes—most notably Five Percenter artists like Eric B. & Rakim, Wu-Tang Clan, and Public Enemy. Ackfeldt's analysis addresses these artists' (who are typically not orthodox adherents to the Muslim faith) creative incorporation of Islamic themes in terms of names, imagery, and symbolism. Ackfeldt argues that these references are not to be viewed as dogmatic statements, and instead situates them within a wider aesthetic and epistemological grammar. Subsequent chapters analyze the political and cultural climate after 9/11 and focus on the identity formation of Muslim artists amid a substantial rise of Islamophobia.

The book makes a strong point by emphasizing the functional role of Islamic symbolism throughout different media and cultural platforms. Ackfeldt's use of social semiotics specifically succeeds in demonstrating the contingent and context-specific reappropriation of Islamic themes for cultural and political purposes, and highlights the wide range of diversity and nuance in Islam's representation in hip-hop.

However, given the authors expertise in Islamic Studies, the book could have benefited from a deeper engagement with the metaphysical and esoteric dimensions of the proto-Islamic movements it references. While Ackfeldt—who is particularly interested in non-Muslim

appropriations of Islamic imagery—correctly notes that the MSTA’s *Circle Seven Koran* is derived from esoteric sources such as Levi Dowling’s *Aquarian Gospel* and the anonymously authored *Unto Thee I Grant*, he does not pursue the implications of this observation. The *Circle Seven Koran*, which represents the constitutional reference for all of the later manifestations of Black American Islam, clearly draws from early 20th-century esotericism, including Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, Freemasonry, as well as Taoist works like *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, which stresses endocrine alchemy and the spiritual regulation of vital energy. Yet these foundational influences receive no sustained analysis. This lack of contextualization can be found in other parts of the book that reference relevant esoteric currents without exploring them in detail.

This is especially notable in the case of the Five Percent Nation, whose teachings—often reduced to rhetorical or subcultural posturing—are in fact grounded in a structured cosmology deeply resonant with Islamic mysticism (Sufism), Gnosticism, and Hermetic philosophy. Their systems of *Supreme Mathematics* and *Supreme Alphabet*, their central axiom that “the Black man is God,” and their focus on “knowledge of self” reflect a metaphysical orientation toward divine immanence, gnosis, and cosmic order. These teachings align with Sufi doctrines of the *Perfect Human* (*al-insān al-kāmil*), as well as Pythagorean number mysticism (the *Tetractys*), Neoplatonic emanationism, and Hermetic concepts of microcosmic divinity. Such philosophical continuities deserve closer scrutiny.

Ackfeldt’s central argument of Islamic themes as functional, non-doctrinal, creative reformulations could have provided a base for moving the discussion toward an analysis on the influence of Black American Freemasonry, particularly the Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AEAONMS), which in many ways provided a blue print for early Black American Islam. Also referred to as the Black Shriners, the Masonic lodge anticipated much of the regalia, symbolism, rituals, and cosmology of the MSTA, which later spawned orders such as the *Noble Order of the Moorish Sufis*, founded by Rafi Sharif Ali Bey in 1957. These genealogies reverberate through the Nation of Islam, the Five Percent Nation, and the later Nuwaubian Nation, founded by Malachi

Z. York—formerly known as Imam Isa al-Haadi al-Mahdi. York’s early teachings drew from Shaykh Daoud Ahmad Faisal, a representative of the Alawiyya Sufi Order, who arrived in the U.S. in 1907 and established the Islamic Propagation Center in Brooklyn in 1928. Despite the clear relevance of these esoteric and initiatory lineages to the hip-hop expressions Ackfeldt explores, they are absent from the analysis.

Ackfeldt’s expertise as a scholar in the history of religions could have provided an opportunity to incorporate a cross-cultural religious contextualization of the theological dimension of Black divinity. As a matter of fact, the Five Percenters’ central assertion that “the Black man is God” begs to be analyzed against the background of historical traditions that equal Blackness with fertility, divinity, cosmic origins—even dark matter? The Black Madonna of European Catholicism, the black Osiris of ancient Kemet, blackened statues of Apollo, Jupiter, and Roman emperors, as well as the veneration of sacred black stones—from the temple of Aphrodite in Cyprus to the *al-ḥajar al-aswad* at the Ka’ba—are not incidental. These elements form part of a perennial metaphysical system in which darkness signifies the unknowable, the primordial, the source, and the sacred—*al-nūr al-aswad*, the black light, in Sufism, or *botzina de-kardinuta*, the lamp of darkness, in the Zohar. While these patterns hardly align with orthodox Islamic belief, they are essential for a proper understanding of the cosmological conception that informs the reinterpretation of the religion in the context of Black American communities and hip-hop. A respective consideration would shift the discussion of Five Percenters from aspects of subversive statements and aesthetic expressions towards a theological interpretation.

It is this arguably rather cautious analytical scope which limits the broader intellectual contribution of this well-structured interdisciplinary effort. Much of the historical and cultural content—the artists discussed, the ideological influences traced, and the religious movements profiled—have been well documented in previous literature. However, Ackfeldt’s employment of methodologies grounded in Islamic Studies reveals new aspects of this familiar material. His training in semiotics and religious studies permits new analytical framing, though not necessarily new empirical discoveries. In consequence, the book is highly recommended

to scholars and students of Islamic Studies who are eager to explore Islam's role in the context of contemporary cultural production. For those familiar with hip-hop studies and Black American Islam, Ackfeldt's book provides more of a comprehensive synthesis rather than new empirical discoveries. Nevertheless, the book is a valuable resource—clear in prose, methodologically sound, and well-suited for interdisciplinary dialogue, particularly in academic settings that aim to bridge the study of religion with media and culture.

In summary, *Islamic Themes in US Hip-Hop Culture* represents an important addition to the study of Islam's growing representation in artistic expression. It explores important questions regarding identity formations, symbolism, and hybrid religious interpretations. The book provides a compelling model for analyzing the employment of Islamic symbolism in secular or syncretic cultural idioms. Yet, by privileging the semiotic signifier over the metaphysical signified, the book leaves some of the most fertile terrain—particularly that of Islamic esotericism, initiatory systems, and perennialist philosophy—largely unexamined. It is, however, this specific aspect that probably best explains the continuous and increasing representation of Islam in hip-hop. And while researchers from the fields of musicology, sociology, or cultural studies will not necessarily engage with these complexities, an Islamic Studies approach would have provided an opportunity to advance the discussion in this regard. Ackfeldt's effort brings us to the threshold of that deeper inquiry—without quite passing through.

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