

## Historical Sources of Rap: The African-American “Oral Tradition”

I want to identify a number of **cultural sources** that rap has drawn from and to thereby say a little bit about the linguistic tradition of which rap is the most recent chapter. We cannot fully review this history—unfortunately we do not have time for that—but only sketch a few African and African-American **speech genres** which rappers have, in one way or another, taken up and transformed, genres that are really distinctly African or African-American, not part of mainstream American culture.

The first genre is **West-African**, and as much as it is a genre, it is also a **profession**. The profession is called **griot**, which can be translated as **news-singer** or **ard** or **rhapsode**. Griots were (and continue to be) the **oral historians** of West-African societies, and they also deliver **news**. They do so by travelling from village to village and **singing** the news, the history of the “tribe”, or traditional folk-tales, accompanying themselves by various string instruments. The profession of the griot is a **family-trade**: the skills—and the knowledge, i.e., the history—is passed on from generation to generation (typically from father to son) within a griot family. Let me quote the griot Foday Musa Suso from Mali:

I come from a griot family, the Suso family. We have been griots from the beginning of the Malian empire, for 800 years. Wherever you go in West Africa... you find the griots. We are the keepers of Mandingo history. ... A griot is an oral historian. Griots were trusted court advisors to the kings of West Africa from the 12th century to the 20th. Every griot wanted a griot to recite the history of the kingdom, and to pass it down from father to son. History wasn't written down—everything was memorized and recited or sung.

Even if you don't play an instrument, you are respected because of your knowledge. Your words are enough. ... Griots are travelling families. You cannot be a griot and stay in one place. Even today, you see griots travelling with their koras, moving between cities and towns. The griots are walking libraries, with knowledge of the past, present and future of our people. ... There is so much history. Some of our songs last two days. ... Telling two hundred years of history takes a long time.

Some **rappers** are also **oral historians**. They preserve the history of the civil rights struggle, of African-American leaders as well as of prior genres of African-American music (for example, **funk**). By doing that—and by communicating this body of knowledge to a largely teenage audience—they have in fact **revived** the memory of these struggles and

passed it on to a new generation: they have served as **educators**, in other words. And they have also spread the news about current struggles, about poverty, depression, and family problems across the African-American community. In the words of Chuck D. of Public Enemy, “rap is like the underground Cable News Network of the African-American community”.

Another source, not related to the content of rap, but to the form—that is, to the very method of **speaking to a beat**—is the tradition of the African-American church, that is, the distinct musical delivery of the African-American preacher. We notice a number of features:

1. the **merging of speaking and music**: the distinction between these seemingly different practices collapses; what the speaker—and what is also true of rappers—is **both music and talk**. And, as a result of that,

2. The pastor **moves** in a rhythmic fashion—he might even dance, as we all do to music that has a beat.

3. The preacher constantly **interacts with his audience** which **talks back** to him—at specific points in his sermon, typically the end of a line; this form of interaction (which you will find in few white churches, with some exceptions as I will point out later) is known as **call-and-response**.

4. (and finally), the preacher does not receive the **beat** to which he preaches from a drum-machine or a beat-box, but he generates it himself. He does this by speaking in a particular fashion:

- (a) he **parses** or **phrases** his sentences in a rhythmic fashion;

- (b) he uses a feature known in poetics as **parallelism**: he delivers one line that has particular syntactic and prosodic features, and then he constructs the next line in exactly the same syntactic and prosodic fashion. This is what generates the rhythm or the beat: as soon as you construct a line that matches the previous one, you have rhythm, and now the audience can anticipate the rhythmic features of the next line and the next line until there is a break and a new rhythmic patterns is established.

But these musical features of speaking—**rhythmic parsing, parallelism, construction of lists**—were not entirely restricted to the church. We heard a segment from the documentary *When We Were Kings* about Muhammad Ali’s world-championship fight against George Foreman in Zaire (now renamed Congo, the country in which a civil war is raging as I speak). Muhammad Ali was not only a phenomenal boxer, but also a phenomenal speaker, and it was his speaking ability along with his personal courage and musical boxing style which endeared him to so many people. Notice the parallelism and lists in Ali’s speaking.

Another traditional African-American speech genre, never practiced in the church, but on the street, is known as **playing the dozens**. These are ritualized verbal duels, and they do in fact have counterparts in other cultures, for example in Turkey and Lebanon. When you play the dozens, you make an **insult** (often a **sexual insult**) of your opponent's **mother**, and your opponent, if he does not want to appear **lame**, must come back with an insult of **your** mother (or some other relative), a come-back which is the better the more it **parallels** the syntax of the opening move. Here is an example from a study by the sociolinguist William Labov:

(1) Your mother got funky drawers.

Your mother got braces between her legs.

Also:

(2) Your mother eat cockroaches.

Your mother eat **fried dick-heads**.

Your mother **suck** fried dick-heads.

Your mother eat **cold** dick-heads. (=she's so sloppy she doesn't even fry them)

Sometimes, perhaps even more often, the game and the insult are only insinuated, for example, when someone calls you a name and you respond simply by saying **Your mother**. (Note this game also explains a scene in *Style Wars*-which made some of you laugh because you know the cultural background, when one kid complains that another was **talkin' 'bout his mother**.)

The dozens, too, have become part of the wider culture. When my son (who is white) went to elementary school here, he would sometimes come home and say things like: "You're mother's so fat she needs her own zip-code."

**Rappers** don't exactly play the dozens, but when they **battle**, they also **ritually insult one another**. We will see a lot of that later.

Yet another African-American speech genre that reappears in rap are the **toasts**. Toasts are rhymed folk-tales about various **mythical folk-heroes**. The most famous ones are **Staggolee**, a gangster (who is actually based on a real person), **Shane** who by his wit survived the sinking of the Titanic, and—to me the most interesting one—the **Signifying Monkey** (which apparently was brought to America by the slaves from West-Africa); it may originally have been a **Yoruba** figure. The signifying monkey always does one thing: he tells the lion that the elephant has insulted him (the lion, or vice versa), which makes the lion get into a fight with the elephant. He gets bruised and beaten and comes back to beat up the monkey. Sometimes the monkey escapes onto the tree, sometimes he gets beaten, but he always comes back to signify some more: he just can't repress his linguistic wit.

The signifying monkey is an embodiment of the poor man's values and dreams: he is weak and only has his speaking skills to survive on, and he uses it to play the powers of the jungle against one another. These folk-tales also make a statement about how African-Americans see their own culture-specific speaking skills: for, the **lion's problem** is that he does not realize that the monkey is only **signifying**—he takes him literally. He is culture-blind. He does not understand that this is play. So if you said to me “Your mother.” and I said in response: “Yes? What about her?”, I would also demonstrate that I don't know what signifying is.

[Signifying Monkey]

As for the toasts, some rap-pieces are constructed in a similar form; As for signifying, you will find a lot of that—listen to **Big Daddy Kane** or L.L. Cool J. (short for “Ladies love cool James). Or, if you want to know more about signifying, you can also watch Eddie Murphy's movies.