

Griots, Rappers and Deejays

Orality

There is within the myriad expressive cultures of the African diaspora, acknowledgment of the functional role that the rhythmic voice plays as the conveyor of experiential reality, based on what has been, what is, and what is to come. Indeed the 'spoken word' that currently manifests as rapping in the USA and deejaying in Jamaica are rooted in the Jali or the more commonly known griot traditions, which can be traced back for millennia and are commonplace across West Africa. However there is much controversy and debate around the appropriateness of the term 'griot' to describe this oral culture, as the suggestion is that it is of French origin and does not do justice to their 'multi-functional' roles and Hale suggests often reduces them to 'praise singers' or bards. In a fundamental sense griots are the mouthpiece of the community they serve and the knowledge system they represent is in many ways unique to their cultural group. They utilize various musical and oral techniques accompanied by drums and other instruments, the most common being the Kora which is harp-like and the name Jali is associated with traditional Kora players.

Griots are hereditary chroniclers of their people's history and the main keepers of folkways, mores, genealogies and all knowledge that make it possible to convey a sense of human worth to current and forthcoming generations. That is why they are regarded as far more than presenters of the spoken word, for they harmonise and assist in the strengthening of the community spiritually, culturally and psychologically, providing counsel and guidance grounded in ancestral wisdom. As such griots traditionally belong to a lineage of trained musicians, orators and profound lyricists and their usage of orality is central to the historical

continuity of their cultures, because much of the history they learn and disseminate may never be written down.

The role of the voice is central to what Smitherman states are the 'communicative modalities' that are intergenerationally transmitted via African oral traditions and nowadays numerous rappers and deejays use the orality of the griot tradition to transmit a collective awareness, because according to Sidran 'the message is the medium'. For instance, the Los Angeles hip-hop group Freestyle Fellowship released an album in 1993 entitled 'innercity Griots' where they presented their African-Centred message over Jazz-Hip Hop beats to critical acclaim. Similarly the Jamaican Deejay the 'Warlord, Bounty Killer' who is renowned for promoting badness in his songs, also performs conscious lyrics as the 'Poor People Governor, Babatunde', which in Yoruba means 'father returns'.

Resistant cultures

The usage of oral culture to resist and transcend white racism has been a constant in the history of the enslaved African across the diaspora and remains a source of reaffirmation that is rooted in an African conception of the plurality of 'being'. This notion of plurality is crucial to understanding how the griot tradition provided the enslaved and their descendants with a template for survival premised upon the idea that 'I am because we are, because we are therefore I am'. This is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian 'I think therefore I am' which underpins various forms of elitism, as it suggests that to be African recognises a dependence on other Africans for a notion of self that is fundamentally reliant on being a part of a community. An awareness of this notion of a plurality of 'being' perhaps also explains why there is such an emphasis on antiphonic exchanges in African music on the continent and

throughout the diaspora, and the reliance on what for many seems to be a monotonous or overly repetitive rhythm. One explanation is that there is a crucial difference in the perceptions of how information is communicated and received, across time and space, between oral and literate cultures, although the notion of the 'primarily oral African' denies the history of KMT (Ancient Egypt) and other scribal African societies.

African chattel "slaves" were deemed to be primarily oral people by their European masters and mistresses, which meant that public displays of cultural expression were generally performed through song and dance. These performances were generally regarded as non-threatening or novelty forms of child-like expression, yet for the enslaved they were a way to challenge the Eurocentric depiction of the African as the European's antithesis, as the performances enabled them to transmit counter ideologies. Moreover, this perspective is crucial to understanding the significant role oral culture has played in the physiological and psychological survival of the African person, for it provides a key to unlocking the 'mysteries' which surround the 'continuity/creativity debate'. In this sense the usage of the voice in rapping and deejaying represents the 'continuity' and the eclectic mix of languages and musical styles in Hip-Hop and Reggae music denote the 'creativity' that makes the tangible link with the griot tradition.

Orality in action

Rappers and deejays often communicate a message across the 'Black Atlantic' that is rooted in the enslavement past, yet is instantly recognisable to those who deem themselves to be still enslaved, because the radicalism that is witnessed in their lyricism is not unique when placed in its proper historical context. Consequently, Eurocentric ideas and philosophies are resisted and the sites where that resistance takes place, Davis suggests, become 'structural

creating philosophies' which are the dna of African centred speech and social commentary. They appear to be hermetically sealed but erudition offers an insight, especially when viewed as a form of transcultural dialogue that currently manifests in much rap and reggae lyricism. The point here is the recognition of language as a cultural artefact that invariably carries with it a notion of the incorporation of divergent traditions, because the enslaved had to recreate their worlds from what they passed on orally, in line with what they experienced within the confines of the master's world. This is because language like any other cultural artefact is not static or resistant to change, which is why the griot tradition continues in myriad ways in the very heart of Western societies.

Further Reading

Clarke, S. (1980). *Jah Music*. Heineman Educational Books: London.

Davis, G. (1989). *I Got the word in me and I can sing it, you know: A study of the performed African American Sermon*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Freestyle Fellowship. (1993). *Innercity Griots*. California, USA: 4th & B'way Records.

Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.

Hale, T. A. (1997). *From the Griot of Roots to the Roots of Griot: A New Look at the Origins of a Controversial African Term for Bard*. *Oral Tradition*, 12/2, pp249-278.

Henry, W. A. (2006). *What The Deejay Said: A Critique From The Street!* London: Learning By Choice Publications.

Sidran, B. (1995). *Black talk*. Scotland: Payback Press.

Smitherman, G. (1986). *Talkin' and Testifyin': Language of Black America*. Detroit, USA: Wayne State University Press.