Chapter 9

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

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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
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