

Society and Culture

BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL: THE MEANING OF THE BANLIEUE, NATION, RELIGION AND TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY IN FRENCH MUSLIM RAP

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Abstract

Regarding current trends in popular culture and especially in rap music, the case of France is especially interesting, considering that French rap artists often are children or grandchildren of immigrants and/or from Muslim background. Many of them are very critical concerning French policies and France's colonial history or denounce the living conditions in the banlieues (suburbs), discriminations against migrants, racism, xenophobia or Islamophobia. This is often combined with references to Islamic religion and/or a self-presentation of the rappers as Muslim citizens and goes in many cases along with declarations of solidarity with Muslims in other parts of the world, especially in Palestine.

In this sense, local, national and historical belongings (the Banlieue, France, the Maghreb,...) and a transnational, global Muslim identity (the Umma) interact and converge. However, this phenomenon is not found only in rap music; it rather reflects general contemporary socio-political processes in France, and Western Europe. On this basis, the present paper aims to take a closer look at selected lyrics of French Muslim rappers and analyse them in the wider context of ongoing debates on integration, Islam, laicism and multiculturalism.

Keywords: *Muslims in France, integration, identity, protest, rap, Islam, Palestine*

I. Introduction¹

In contemporary youth and popular culture, politically conscious rap plays an important role as an artistic expression of social protest as well as an identity marker and a means of differentiation. In this context, the case of France is especially interesting, considering that French rap artists often are children or grandchildren of immigrants mostly from former French colonies and/or from Muslim background. Many of them have grown up in poor *banlieues* (suburbs) of large French cities and use their upbringing in this difficult environment as a source

¹ This article is mainly based on my PhD thesis: "Umkämpfter Raum." *Palästina-Solidarität, Antizionismus und Antisemitismus unter MuslimInnen im zeitgenössischen Frankreich* (Universität Salzburg: 2016).

of inspiration. In their music, they often denounce French policy and social problems such as racism, discrimination or Islamophobia.

At the same time, many of them present themselves as proud “banlieusards”, and put emphasis on their origins, their religion and identity as Muslims. Often, this goes along with declarations of solidarity with Muslims in other parts of the world, as for instance in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Myanmar or especially in Palestine.

In this sense, local, national and historical belongings (the Banlieue, France, the Maghreb,...), and a global Muslim identity (the *Umma*) interact and converge. However, this phenomenon cannot not only be found in rap music, it rather reflects general contemporary socio-political processes in France, and Western Europe. On this basis, the present paper aims to take a closer look at selected lyrics of French Muslim rappers² and analyse them in their wider socio-political context.

II. French rap between social protest, republicanism and Islamic religion

Historically, rap music has existed in France since the early 1980s – after being dominated by US-American musicians,³ a specifically *French rap* has developed since the 1990s, and was to some extent even promoted by public cultural funding.⁴ This has to be seen in the general context of promotion of French music culture by the state.⁵ Today, France is one of the largest producers and consumers of rap music in the world.⁶ Subsequently, rap culture is relatively widely spread in French media (besides the TV and radio domain especially on the Internet).⁷ This is not only of relevance considering the commercial aspects of rap but also with regard to

² For this purpose, solely songs of French rappers who are well-known on a national level and whose albums and songs are successfully sold and therefore “heard” by a certain number of people were selected. Nevertheless methodologically, the question how widespread a song effectively is, is hard to answer – given that, besides sales figures of albums and the presence on music channels or on radio stations, the number of legal and illegal downloads, of “clicks” on YouTube and similar platforms etc. ought to be considered as well.

³ Julien Barret, *Le rap ou l'artisanat de la rime* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), p. 11.

⁴ Dietmar Hüser, “Sex & crime & rap music – Amerika-Bilder und Französisch-Sein in einer globalen Weltordnung,” Eva Kimminich, ed., *Rap – more than words* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), S 76, and Dietmar Hüser and Linda Schüssler, “Klänge aus Algerien, Botschaften für Frankreich – Der Rai-Beur als Musik französischer Jugendlicher aus maghrebinischen Migrationskontexten,” Dietmar Hüser, ed., *Frankreichs Empire schlägt zurück. Gesellschaftswandel, Kolonialdebatten und Migrationskulturen im frühen 21. Jahrhundert* (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2010), S 318. See also Mary Breatnach and Eric Sterenfeld, “From Messiaen to MC Solaar: music in France in the second half of the twentieth century,” William Kidd and Siân Reynolds, eds., *Contemporary French Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 251 and Pierre Mayol, “The Policy of the City and Cultural Action,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 27, no. 2-3 (2002), pp. 225-228.

⁵ Hüser and Schüssler, *Klänge aus Algerien*, 318; Hisham Aidi, *Rebel Music. Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 2014), S 208.

⁶ Susanne Stemmler, “Rap-Musik und Hip-Hop-Kulturen in romanischen Sprachwelten: Einleitung und Perspektiven der Forschung,” Susanne Stemmler and Timo Skrandies, eds., *Hip-Hop und Rap in romanischen Sprachwelten. Stationen einer globalen Musikkultur* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), S 16, and Samira Hassa, “*Kiff my zikmu*: Symbolic Dimensions of Arabic, English and Verlan in French Rap Texts,” Marina Terkourafi, ed., *Languages of Global Hip-Hop* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 44.

⁷ Stemmler, *Rap-Musik und Hip-Hop-Kulturen*, S 15.

its role as “carrier” and medium of certain ideas, thought patterns or also resentments. However, it must be taken into consideration in this context that (at least the so-called “conscious”) rap is an artistic expression of rebellion and social protest,⁸ often using stylistic devices such as provocations, exaggerations or a relatively “dirty” language.⁹ Thus, to some extent, this can be seen an essential part of the aesthetics of rap music. At the same time, it allows the musicians to point out their own disappointments, frustrations as well as expectations. Significantly, the American philologist Samira Hassa describes rap thus as “a sort of refuge in which a marginalized group or minority can express freely who they are, what they suffer from, and their dreams and hopes.”¹⁰

a) Rapping for multiculturalism and against Islamophobia

This is especially important considering that in France, rap artists are very often, as mentioned before, children or grandchildren of immigrants mostly from former French colonies in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹ Many rappers have grown up in poor *banlieues* of large cities like Paris, Marseille, Lyon and Strasbourg and are marked by their experiences in this specific environment: As a result of the great waves of immigration in the 1960s big dwelling houses with modest, cheap apartments were constructed at the outskirts or *banlieues* of big cities to house as many immigrants as possible. Beside the “practical” aspects of this urban planning, the creation of these so-called *cités* or *cités-HLM* also resulted in problems such as “ghettoisation,” urban violence and from time to time youth revolts. Many French suburbs gradually have turned out to be sites of separation and exclusion since the 1980s, accompanied by high unemployment rates among the inhabitants, pauperisation, criminality as well as experiences of discrimination and racism among the migrant or Muslim population.¹² Accordingly, many musicians denounce in their music (their own experiences of) exclusion in the *banlieues*, racism, discrimination and especially since 9/11 an increasing Islamophobia.¹³ In this context it is also interesting that several musicians have converted to Islam since the

⁸ See e. g. Barbara Lebrun, *Protest Music in France. Production, Identity and Audiences* (Surrey: Routledge, 2009), p. 4 and Dietmar Hüser, *RAPublikanische Synthese. Eine französische Zeitgeschichte populärer Musik und politischer Kultur* (Köln: Böhlau, 2004), S 11.

⁹ Georges Lapassade and Philippe Rousselot, *Le rap ou la fureur de dire. Essai* (Paris: Loris Talmart, 1990), p. 122.

¹⁰ Hassa, *Kiff my zikmu*, p. 44.

¹¹ More precisely, about 90% of all French rappers are of immigrant descent, which is the highest percentage in Europe in comparison to ca. 60% in Germany, ca. 30% in Spain or only 4% in Italy. Arno Scholz, “Kulturelle Hybridität und Strategien der Appropriation an Beispielen des romanischen Rap,” Eva Kimminich, ed., *Rap – more than words* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 55.

¹² See e.g. Robert S. Leiken, *Europe’s angry Muslims. The revolt of the second generation* (New York: OUP USA, 2012), pp. 44-47; Michel Wieviorka, *L’antisémitisme est-il de retour?* (Paris: Larousse, 2008), p. 81; Dietmar Hüser, “Plurales Frankreich in der unteilbaren Republik. Einwüfe und Auswüchse zwischen Vorstadt-Krawallen und Kolonial-Debatten,” Deutsch-Französisches Institut, ed., *Frankreich Jahrbuch 2006. Politik und Kommunikation* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007), S 17.

¹³ Hisham Aidi, “Let us be moors. Islam, Race and Connected Histories,” *Middle East Report* 229 (2003), p. 47 and Hassa, *Kiff my zikmu*, p. 45.

late 1990s and especially since 9/11.¹⁴ According to Samira Hassa French rap has, thus, gradually developed to an “oral, visual and artistic expression of the struggle and resistance of the immigrant youth of France.”¹⁵

At the same time, many musicians deal in their texts with multiculturalism in France and their countries of origin in a very positive way,¹⁶ reflected sometimes in quite romanticized or idealized images of the latter.¹⁷ This multicultural character of French rap, combined with a certain pride of being different and/or of migration background, is – for example – significantly expressed in the song *Citoyen du monde* (citizen of the world), released in 2008 by the French-Tunisian rapper Tunisiano:¹⁸

<p>Mes origines / Mes couleurs / Je les ai pas choisies, N’essayez pas d’me changer / Prenez moi comme je suis. (...) / Ma culture vaut de l’or, Vaut de l’or !! (...) Je suis fils d’Algérie. Fille de Tunis !! / Parfum d’épices, / Jasmin et tulipes / Fils des Comores Fille du Mali !! / (...) Fierté, famille. / Nous sommes ceux que nous sommes.</p>	<p>My origin / My colors / I have not chosen them / Don’t try to change me / Accept me as I am (...) / My culture is worth a mint, / worth a mint!! (...) / I am a son of Algeria, a daughter of Tunis!! / Smell of spices, Jasmin and tulips / son of the Comoros, daughter of Mali!! / (...) Pride, family, / We are what we are.</p>
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Similarly the female rapper Diam’s – who is of Cypriot background and has converted to Islam several years ago – sings in *L’Honneur d’un Peuple* (The people’s honor, 2009) concerning France:¹⁹

<p>(...) ce pays c’est des Ritals des Noirs des Arabes (...) Ce pays c’est des portugais (...) Guadeloupéens, Martiniquais (...) / Ce pays c’est tout un tas de couleurs, tout un tas de cultures, tout un tas de couleurs, tout un tas</p>	<p>(...) this country are Italians, black people, Arabs, (...) this country are Portuguese people (...) people from Guadeloupe, Martinique (...) / This country is an amount of colours, an amount of cultures, an amount of</p>
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¹⁴ Eva Kimminich, “Rassismus und RAPublikanismus – Islamismus oder Weltbürger‘tum? Geschichte, Wahrnehmung und Funktionsmechanismus des französischen Rap,” Karin Bock, ed., *Hip-Hop meets Academia. Globale Spuren eines lokalen Kulturphänomens* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), S 66. In this context it is striking that many young people living in French *banlieues* have converted to Islam in the last years – this is also due to the work of several Islamic (welfare) organisations which have increasingly gained influence in poor suburbs. Eva Kimminich, “Ton-Macht-Musik – Populäre Rap-Lieder und die französische Gesellschaft,” Dietmar Hüser, ed., *Frankreichs Empire schlägt zurück. Gesellschaftswandel, Kolonialdebatten und Migrationskulturen im frühen 21. Jahrhundert* (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2010), S 342.

¹⁵ Hassa, *Kiff my zikmu*, p. 46.

¹⁶ Ibid., 44 and Mairéad Seery, “Tout finit par des chansons? Developments in French Popular Music,” Frédéric Royall, ed., *Contemporary French Cultures and Societies* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 199.

¹⁷ Hüser and Schüssler, *Klänge aus Algerien*, S 311.

¹⁸ Tunisiano, “Citoyen du monde” (2008); lyrics available on

[//www.lyricsmania.com/citoyen_du_monde_lyrics_tunisiano.html](http://www.lyricsmania.com/citoyen_du_monde_lyrics_tunisiano.html).

¹⁹ Diam’s, “L’Honneur d’un peuple” (2009); lyrics available on <http://rapgenius.com/Diams-lhonneur-dunpeuple-lyrics>.

de futurs / Ce pays c'est une banlieue qui aimerait qu'on la regarde, qui fait péter les pétards quand on l'a traite de racaille.²⁰ future / This country is a *banlieue* who wants to get attention; who huffs if it is treated like rabble.

In turn, the central motif of the *banlieue*, often called “ghetto” in the lyrics, is also essential in *Désillusion du ghetto* (2008), released by the Franco-Algerian rapper Kenza Farah. In the song, the artist deals with the “abandoned and forgotten” *banlieue* youth and expresses her wish to escape, together with her “brothers and sisters” all this misery:²¹

(...) On fait partie de l'histoire tout en vivant dans l'oubli / (...) On a tous le même rêve, celui de sortir du ghetto / Désillusion du ghetto / Le bonheur a mis son veto / On veut s'enfuir du ghetto (...) / On veut s'évader de ces murs de béton. (...) We are part of the history, even though we are forgotten / (...) We share all the same dream, we want to leave the ghetto / disillusion of the ghetto / Fortune has exercised its right of veto / We want to escape the ghetto (...) / We want to escape these concrete walls.

Declaring her solidarity with all the “children of the concrete walls,” suffering all the same fate and sharing the same dream of escape, Kenza Farah refers to a kind of (constructed) collective “*banlieue* identity,” which can be found as motif in various French rap lyrics. However, it is striking in this context that many rap artists present themselves, via their music, as proud *banlieusards*, criticising the social grievances in French suburbs but aiming, at the same time, to give a more positive image of their inhabitants. As for instance the German historian Dietmar Hüser points out, the *banlieue* fulfils thus a dual function in French rap: on the one hand it gives reason to complaints and social criticism, on the other hand it serves as kind of counter-concept to stereotypical ideas of a failed, solely violent and “not integrable” suburban youth.²²

b) “History-re-telling,” integration, and the Umma

Besides the (vehement) criticism of grievances and social imbalances in contemporary France, several rap musicians also deal with crucial, silent aspects of French History and use their music as a medium to remind France of its colonial past.²³ Thus, they explicitly raise issues such as the role of France in transatlantic slave trade, colonial crimes in North Africa or torture during the Algerian war. The Romance philologist Eva Kimminich speaks in this con-

²⁰ Allusion to the *banlieue* riots in autumn 2005, when the former French interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy called the revolting young people “racaille” (“rabble”).

²¹ Kenza Farah, “Désillusion du ghetto” (2008); lyrics available on http://www.paroles-musique.com/parolesKenza_Farah-Desillusion_Du_Ghetto-lyrics.p48957.

²² Hüser, *Sex & crime & rap music*, p. 87.

²³ Joan Gross, David McMurray, and Ted Swedenburg, “Arab Noise and Ramadan Nights: Rai, Rap, and Franco-Maghrebi Identities,” *Diaspora* 3, no. 1 (1994), p. 20 and Hassa, *Kiff my zikmu*, p. 45.

text of a so-called “History-re-telling” of French rap, questioning French historiography and trying to get belated recognition in favour of their own ancestors, their history and suffering.²⁴ For instance, this is clearly reflected in *Fils du colonisé* (Son of a colonized), a song released in 2008 by the duo Médine (a French Muslim rapper with Algerian roots) and Monsieur R. (whose family emigrated from Congo to France). In the first couplet, Médine alludes to the torture that was executed by the French Army during the Algerian war (1954-1962) as well to a tragic incident on 17 October 1961 in Paris.²⁵ On this day, about 30.000 Algerians demonstrated peacefully (following a call by FLN) against a curfew for Algerian people imposed by the Parisian police prefect Maurice Papon. During the police operation against the demonstration about 300 Algerian protesters were killed by the French police and their bodies were thrown into the Seine. The incident which is closely related to the Algerian War was kept under silence for years in France and was only examined in recent years.²⁶

<p>Général Massu déguise les crimes en suicides Dans leurs cellules, électrocutés, jusqu'à l'homicide / Ainsi mon histoire, une si belle histoire / Et les donneurs de leçons sont placés faces à leur miroir / Leurs propres reflets reflè- tent leur fausse probité (...) Pareillement au Tiers-Monde, j'ai le cancer du colon / Remplit nos poumons avec l'eau de la Seine / Nous jette depuis les ponts (...)</p>	<p>General Massu²⁷ disguises the crimes as suicides / They have been tortured in their cells by electrical shocks culminating in intentional killing / This is my history, such a beautiful history / And those who give lessons are confronted with their mirror / Their own mirror images reflect their false probity / Like in the third world, the colon cancer grows in me / fills our lungs with water of the Seine / throws us from the bridge (...)</p>
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Nevertheless, it also has to be taken into consideration that the perspective of the “History-re-telling” of French rap itself is often relatively one-sided – thus, the lyrics are marked by a strong “victim-perpetrator dichotomy” and a quite dualistic world view, clearly differentiating between “good” and “bad.” This is especially significant in the lyrics of *Lettre à la République* (Letter to the Republic) released in 2012 by the well-known French Muslim rapper Kery James:²⁸

²⁴ Kimminich, *Ton-Macht-Musik*, S 339.

²⁵ Médine and Monsieur R., “Fils du colonisé” (2008); lyrics available on <http://rapgenius.com/Medine-fils-decolonise-lyrics>. Furthermore, Médine dealt already in 2006 in his song “17 octobre” with the incident of 1961.

²⁶ See for instance Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison and Nils Andersson, *Le 17 octobre 1961. Un crime d'État à Paris* (Paris: La Dispute, 2001).

²⁷ The French general Jacques Massu admitted in 2001 in an interview with *Le Monde* that he had tortured Algerian soldiers during the Algerian war. Henry Frank Carey, *Reaping What You Sow. A Comparative Examination of Torture Reform in the United States, France, Argentina, and Israel* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), p. 146.

²⁸ Kery James, “Lettre à la République” (2012); lyrics available on <http://rapgenius.com/Kery-james-lettre-a-la-republique-lyrics>.

<p>A tous ces racistes à la tolérance hypocrite Qui ont bâti leur nation sur le sang / Main- tenant s'érigent en donneurs de leçons / Pilleurs de richesses, tueurs d'africains / Colonisateurs, tortionnaires d'algériens / Ce passé colonial c'est le vôtre / C'est vous qui avez choisi de lier votre histoire à la nôtre / Maintenant vous devez assumer / L'odeur du sang vous poursuit même si vous vous parfumez / Nous les Arabes et les Noirs / On est pas là par hasard (...) J'n'ai pas peur de l'écrire : La France est isla- mophobe / D'ailleurs plus personne ne se cache dans la France des xénophobes (...)</p>	<p>To all those racists with a hypocritical toler- ance / Who built their nation on blood / Now setting themselves up as sermonizer / Wealth Looters, Africans' murderers / Colonizers, Al- gerians' torturers / This colonial past is yours / You are those who chose to tie your history to ours / Now you must take responsibility / The smell of blood is chasing you, even though you wear perfume / We, Arabs and Blacks / We are not here by accident (...) I am not scared to write it down: France is Is- lamophobic / Besides, nobody is hiding any- more in this xenophobic France (...)</p>
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As the lyrics suggest, the song is characterised by strong resentments both towards the historical and the contemporary France and is less a letter than a vehement indictment directed to the Republic. K. James accuses France of hypocrisy, dishonour, of betrayal of its own values, of discrimination, racism, Islamophobia, social inequality and misery in the *banlieues* as well as of colonial crimes and their distortion and disguise nowadays. Accordingly, the lyrics express a bitter disappointment concerning the republican values of France and its ideal of the “one and indivisible” nation. Whereas France is portrayed as being full of guilt towards its immigrants and Muslim population, the latter represent innocence and absolute victimhood. This is accompanied by a certain self-victimization of Kery James as an immigrant and Muslim “betrayed” by the Republic, respectively as its “unloved child.” Finally, this creates a clear dichotomy between “Arabs and Blacks” and “the” French people who still have the “smell of blood” of colonialism on them and continue a “colonial” racist way of thinking.

However, and despite the many points of criticism, it is, in general, striking that most of the French rap musicians emphasize at the same time their French citizenship and present themselves rather as conscious, critical, worried or angry citizens than as anti-French. They often refer to French Republican symbols such as *Marianne* or to Republican ideals such as the much vaunted *égalité, liberté, fraternité*. On this account, Dietmar Hüser also speaks of “RAPublicanism”²⁹ – according to him, French rap lyrics do not only contrast the universal republican values of France with social reality, but “reinvigorate” and “reclaim” them constantly. Accordingly, the vehement criticism of French policy and social reality should rather be seen as a sign of integration – or a desire for integration – than a rejection of France itself.³⁰

Furthermore, this question of integration is also interesting concerning linguistic aspects. It is striking that rap songs are almost exclusively in *French*. In addition, several Arabic

²⁹ Hüser, *Sex & crime & rap music*, p. 90.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

expressions and phrases can be found.³¹ According to Samira Hassa this “code-switching” also plays “the role of an identity construction tool and an identity marker”³² – thus, the use of Arabic can be seen, as she argues, as a simultaneous identification with France *and* the Maghreb.³³ Furthermore, Arabic (religiously connoted) terms allow the respective artists to express their affiliation to Islamic religion and to clearly present themselves as *Muslim* rappers. Here, terms such as *halal* and *haram*, *Allah*, *kouffar* (“unbelievers”) or expressions such as *hak'allah* (“I swear in the name of God”) or *Inch'allah* (“God willing”) are quite recent.³⁴

Beside the aspect of self-presentation as *Muslim* rappers, references to Islamic religion also allow their recipients to identify with them or their lyrics and create perhaps some sense of community and belonging. This is not only relevant concerning possibilities for identification as French Muslim but also in a more global sense. Eva Kimminich for instance speaks in this context of the creation of a transcultural “deterritorialized community,”³⁵ Samy Alim uses the term “transglobal Hip Hop *Umma*.”³⁶ Accordingly, many French-Muslim rappers refer in their lyrics to universal “Islamic values” and/or declare their solidarity with their “Muslim brothers and sisters” in Palestine, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Myanmar and elsewhere. Rap as a global culture and the idea of the *Umma* as a global Muslim community interlink here and constitute at the same time a new, “fashionable” and “cool” approach to Islam.³⁷

Nevertheless, and although Islamic influenced rap is certainly a part of Islamic youth culture, it remains a controversial issue within Muslim communities. Generally, it is disputed in Islamic theology whether music – or what kind of music – should be considered as *halal* or *haram* and therefore be prohibited. While some Islamic scholars reject music in all forms, regarding it as distracting from religion, others only refuse the use of drums or wind instruments (which are believed to resemble the voice of Satan) or musical entertainment.³⁸ In contrast, others – especially many young, believing Muslims – emphasize that music can deliberately be chosen as an explicit means of expressing one’s faith and can therefore be regarded as *halal*. As Maruta Herding argues, especially with regard to British, German, and French “Islamic rap,” this concerns above all the *intention* behind the respective music:

³¹ Stemmler, *Rap-Musik und Hip-Hop-Kulturen*, S 17.

³² Hassa, *Kiff my zikmu*, p. 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁴ Cf. e.g. Hassa, *Kiff my zikmu*, p. 52; Mathias Vicherat, “Au commencement était le verbe: Aspects d’une analyse textuelle du rap en France,” Susanne Stemmler and Timo Skrandies, eds., *Hip-Hop und Rap in romanischen Sprachwelten. Stationen einer globalen Musikkultur* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), S 100, and Rupa Huq, *Beyond subculture: pop, youth and identity in a postcolonial world* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 121.

³⁵ Kimminich, *Ton-Macht-Musik*, S 332; Seery, *Developments in French Popular Music*, p. 198.

³⁶ Samy Alim, “A New Research Agenda. Exploring The Transglobal Hip Hop *Umma*,” Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds., *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), pp. 264-274.

³⁷ Aidi, “Let us be moors,” p. 50.

³⁸ Maruta Herding, *Inventing the Muslim Cool. Islamic Youth Culture in Western Europe* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013), p. 93.

Justifying making music with the “right intentions” is a very common approach, and the emphasis placed on the lyrics is therefore strong. If the music is concerned with the remembrance of Allah and the Prophet, the argument that music distracts from religion becomes invalid. Rap music in particular lends itself to this purpose, because it emphasised the words more than the music.³⁹

Furthermore, “Islam music” can also be justified – as Herding continues – regarding the topics which are usually *not* covered in the songs:

sexual reference, love stories (unless clearly relating to marriage), vulgarity, strong language, references to alcohol, drugs or crime, partying or having fun as end in itself. Some or all of this would be expected in hip-hop and any other youth cultural music scene, and their absence is a clear trait of contemporary Islamic music. Adhering to these rules – using hip-hop in a *halal* manner and disconnecting it from sex, drugs and violence – makes the prohibition less convincing.⁴⁰

However, the clear distinction between a “moral,” only religious-oriented, “*halal*” rap and a more “typical,” “dirty” rap does not always seem that easy. After all, aspects of the above-mentioned topics can also be found in the lyrics of rappers who declare themselves as Muslims. Contrarily, they can be missing in the music of non-Muslim rappers as well.

c) Solidarity with Palestine, anti-Zionism and the question of image cultivation

At the same time it is striking that references to Islamic religion often go along with clearly political statements. In other words, there seems to be a certain “set” of topics which *should be* covered in the songs, especially in those of Muslim rappers. Beside the vehement criticism of racism, Islamophobia, social injustice, colonial crimes or contemporary wars, this particularly concerns pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist statements. Even though some musicians also bring up comprehensible points of criticism of Israeli politics (such as Jewish settlements in Palestinian areas or the death of innocent civilians during military operations), this doesn’t hide the fact that their point of view remains, to a large extent, one-sided, biased and simplifying. Israel is mostly portrayed, or even demonized, as a hard-line, inflexible occupying or colonial power, as a “heartless” and “bloodthirsty” aggressor and “murderer” of innocent people. Sometimes it is even compared to Nazi-Germany and accused of committing a genocide against the Palestinians. In contrast, the Palestinians are generally described as oppressed, colonised people struggling (quite peacefully) for independence. The problem of Palestinian terrorism or especially the terrorist actions of Hamas, however, are either not mentioned or even glorified as brave resistance. In turn, the “Western World” respectively the United States and the Western media, are in some songs reproached for unconditionally supporting Israel while ignoring the Palestinians fate.

For instance, these tendencies are clearly reflected in the song *Jetueur de pierres* (Stone Thrower) released in 2003 by the French rap group Sniper. In this musical allusion to the sec-

³⁹ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

ond Intifada Sniper directly addresses both to Israel and the Palestinians as in the following passage:⁴¹

<p>Voilà le résultat / D'une puissance colonisatrice / Aidés de l'Occident / Ils ont tué et chassé / (...) Laxiste, le monde laisse faire et se défile / Pendant que tu tues des civils / Et les appelle terroristes / (...) Jeteur de pierres / Le monde sait que ton pays est en guerre / Pas d'aide humanitaire / Vu que les colons te volent tes terres (...)</p>	<p>This is the result / Of a colonist power / With the help of the West / They killed and chased people away / (...) The world is slack, let it happen and cops out / While you are killing civilians / And calling them terrorists / (...) Stone Thrower / The world knows that your country is at war / No humanitarian aid / Given that the colonists are stealing your land (...).</p>
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Generally, the song includes a strong moral component and clearly takes side with the Palestinians without minding Israeli views. Rather, the lyrics portray Israel as solely responsible for the Arab-Israeli conflict, as the “guilty” oppressor and perpetrator having “poisoned” every chance for peace since its founding in 1948. But instead of admitting its “guilt,” the Israeli state presents itself, according to Sniper, as a permanent “victim” and “whitewashes” all its “crimes.” Therefore, it would be impossible, especially in France, to criticise Israel without being accused of anti-Semitism: “Contredis les sionistes et tu passes pour un antisémite en deux secondes”⁴² (“If you disagree with the Zionists, you’ll be considered as an anti-Semite within two seconds.”). This statement inevitably arises the question *who* is exactly meant by Zionists, considering that in anti-Semitic discourses “Zionist” often is used as a synonym for “Jew” in general, accompanied by the idea of a kind of powerful “Zionist censorship”. Nevertheless, Sniper interestingly concludes his song with the following “unifying” message, disclaiming deliberately any intention of inappropriate partiality or of anti-Semitism: “Dire Inchallah, bonjour, shalom et salam (...) / Si à tes yeux on prend position, comprend bien / Qu’on parle pas en tant que musulman rien qu’en tant qu’être humain”⁴³ (“To say Inchallah, bonjour, shalom and salam (...) / If in your eyes we take sides, you should understand / That we don’t speak as Muslims, only as human beings”).

In contrast to the vehement criticism of Israel, the Palestinians are in many songs – as indicated above – idealized and romanticised as faultless, upright, admirable people of (Muslim) martyrs. Sounding quite sentimentally, such lyrics aim above all at the emotions of the listeners and appeal to their compassion and conscience. Kery James for instance expresses in his song *Avec le coeur et la raison* (With the heart and the mind, 2009) all his respect and

⁴¹ Sniper, “Jeteur de pierres” (2003); lyrics available on <http://musique.ados.fr/Sniper/Jeteur-De-Pierre-t35541.html>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

affection to the Palestinian people and turns it in a literal “declaration of love” (in French and in Arabic):⁴⁴

<p>Malgré tout ce qu'ils subissent / Les Palestiniens résistent, les Palestiniens existent / J'ai rarement vu un peuple si courageux / Sa fierté brille comme le soleil même par temps orageux (...) / Hozn fi Qalbi / Hozn fi Qalbi / 'Aandi hozn fi qalbi / Lemma ou fakar fi falastine / 'Aandi lorfa fi qalbi / Wa ana nhabekom / Wa ana nhabekom.</p>	<p>Despite every suffering / The Palestinians resist, the Palestinians exist / I've rarely seen such brave people before / Their pride beams like the sun even in stormy times (...) / There is such a sadness in my heart / There is such a sadness in my heart / When I think of Palestine / There is fear in my heart / And I love you / And I love you.</p>
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A similar strategy of emotionalization can be observed in Médine's song *Gaza Soccer Beach*, released shortly after the beginning of the Israeli Operation “Protective Edge” in the Gaza Strip (in July of 2014). As the title suggests, the song is an allusion to the football World Cup (in 2014 in Brazil) as well as to the death of four Palestinian children, playing football at a beach in Gaza and being killed during the Israeli operation. In his song, Médine constantly transfers the Israel-Gaza conflict into metaphors of football and competition describing it as a cruel and lethal “match.” Furthermore, he tells the incident from the perspective of the Palestinian children and thereby expresses a strong identification with the Palestinian people:⁴⁵

<p>Chacun son camp et la balle au centre / Leur tenue bleue et blanche porte l'étoile à six branches / Dernier vainqueur de la coupe d'immonde / On leur tient tête avec nos joueurs de 3ème division / Mes frères et moi, et mon cousin aussi (...) / Ô Gaza Soccer Beach, Gaza Soccer Beach (...) / Où les tirs se poursuivent même quand l'arbitre siffle (...) / On joue la coupe du monde sous l'œil des journalistes (...) / Un premier tir non cadré fait valser la défense / Doublé d'une frappe aérienne qui leur fauchera les jambes (...) / Nos quatre Neymar nous quittent sur le brancard / (...) J'crois pas qu'on fera le match retour / A moins qu'au Paradis il y ait des stades de foot (...) / Stop au sionisme, stop à l'oligarchie (...) / Stop les colonies, stop le blocus de l'économie / Stop</p>	<p>Each team is on its own side with the ball at the centre / Their blue and white outfit wears the six-pointed star / Last winner of the vile cup / We stand up to them with our 3rd division players / My brothers and myself and my cousin as well (...) / Oh Gaza Soccer Beach, Gaza Soccer Beach (...) / Where strikes go on even when the referee whistles (...) / Where the world cup is being played in front of journalist's eyes (...) / A first shot off target makes the defence crumble / Followed by an aerial strike that will mow down their legs / Our four Neymar leave us on the stretcher / (...) I don't think we will play the return leg / Unless there are football pinches in paradise (...) / Stop Zionism, stop oligarchy (...) / Stop settlements, stop economic blockade / Stop hypocrisy, stop missiles from the protec-</p>
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⁴⁴ Kery James, “Avec le coeur et la raison” (2009); lyrics available on <http://rapgenius.com/Kery-james-avec-lecoeur-et-la-raison-lyrics>.

⁴⁵ Médine, “Gaza Soccer Beach” (2014); lyrics available on <http://genius.com/3479658>.

à l'hypocrisie, stop aux tirs de missiles de la bordure protectrice / Gaza Soccer Beach, Gaza Soccer Beach / La dernière plage de martyre (...).

...ive edge / Oh Gaza Soccer Beach, Gaza Soccer Beach / The last beach of martyrs (...).

Gaza Soccer Beach / La dernière plage de martyre (...).

Using this football imagery, Médine does not only accuse Israel of killing innocent people respectively children in a highly “unfair match” but – similarly to Sniper – also the “world public” and media of watching it as simple spectators. In contrast, the Palestinians are, once again, portrayed as brave players at the “soccer beach of martyrs,” having no chance against the Israeli superiority. Thus, on the one hand, Médine strongly emotionalises the conflict by using affecting images; on the other hand, his song includes a clearly political appeal against Israeli settlements, the blockade of the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military strike and finally against Zionism itself.

Surely, one-sided and biased narratives are also due to stylistic characteristics of rap music in general and a kind of stylistic device. Nevertheless, they inevitably spread and reinforce a problematical and simplifying view on the Middle East conflict. However, in a way, vehemently declared solidarity with Palestine and anti-Israeli positions seem to be – similarly to anti-Islamophobic or anti-racist positions – *expected* from Muslim rappers. This is closely related to the general question what “sells” in rap and what kind of statements are rather unwanted among its listeners. Thus, besides the socio-critical and community-enhancing components of rap, strategies of image cultivation and “self-promotion” of the rap artists have to be taken into consideration as well. First of all, this concerns the creation of an image as politically conscious Muslim “*banlieue* rapper”. Contrary to social scientists such as Dietmar Hüser or Eva Kimminich, cited above, the French literary scholar Jules Barret takes thus a more critical look at contemporary trends in French rap, and argues that rappers criticize France’s history and present grievances less to change society but more to make money out of it.⁴⁶ According to him, this has to be seen in the context of a general “commercialization” of the “*banlieue* image” per se: young French people of the middle and upper classes are sometimes imitating the “*banlieue*” clothing style and language or listening to “*banlieue* music” to distinguish themselves from their bourgeois parental home.⁴⁷ At the same time rap sells among the “*banlieue* youth” as well and seems to have to “fulfil,” therefore, certain specific criteria. In turn – and to close the circle – this is also related to declared solidarity with Palestine: in this context it is noteworthy that since the year 2000 and the outbreak of the second Intifada in Israel “pro-Palestinism,” anti-Zionism and sometimes also crude anti-Semitism have been relatively widespread in France, especially in certain *banlieues*.⁴⁸ Thus finally, rap music clearly reflects this contemporary tendency and contributes, to some extent, to the

⁴⁶ Barret, *Le rap*, p. 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁸ See for instance Michel Wieviorka, *La tentation antisémite. Haine des Juifs dans la France d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2005); *ibid.*, *L'antisémitisme est-il de retour?*; Didier Lapeyronnie, *Ghetto urbain. Ségrégation, violence, pauvreté en France aujourd'hui* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2008); Dominique Reynié, *L'antisémitisme dans l'opinion publique française. Nouveaux éclairages* (Paris: Fondation pour l'innovation politique, 2014).

propagation of present ideas and resentments. On the contrary, there are hardly any pro-Israeli statements in French rap and probably, they would rather harm a rapper's image instead of promoting it.

III. Conclusion

As shown above, many French rappers are very critical concerning French policies and France's colonial history or denounce the living conditions in the *banlieues*, discriminations against migrants, racism, xenophobia or Islamophobia. This is often combined with references to Islamic religion and/or a self-presentation of the rappers as *Muslim* citizens.

However, it is noteworthy as well that the "History-re-telling" and socio-political criticism of many songs are characterized by a rather undifferentiated, illusive black and white world view (expressed in the dichotomy between "the Western World" or an Islamophobic France and its "Muslim victims" or especially condensed in the dichotomy between "the Israeli perpetrators" and "the Palestinian victims"). These dualistic concepts of "right" and "wrong," "good" and "bad," or of "victim" and "perpetrator" are certainly not limited to rap lyrics but rather reflect – in an exaggerated way – generally existing discourses among parts of the French society. As on the example of different French rappers could be demonstrated, musicians seem to be very aware of these circumstances and eager to reach their audience (especially young people with as well as without Muslim background) via issues which are apparently "in demand." Thus, presenting oneself as voices of the disadvantaged (Muslim) "*banlieue* youth" and of Muslim victims worldwide as well as being historically and politically conscious seems to be quite "saleable" as well.

Thus finally, only certain aspects of "the local," "the national" and "the global" form the "subject pool" from which French Muslim rappers choose the material for their songs. In other words, these aspects could be seen as kind of common topoi, excluding other possible versions of a song: Reaching from the local *banlieues* of Paris to the global *Umma*, they fit perfectly together, at least in the logics of the songs; however, they constantly recreate a quite narrow world view that does – despite all the criticism in in it – not allow much "in between" or "on beyond." For instance, this becomes more than clear considering the fact that it is even hard to imagine, that a Muslim rapper would or could release a pro-Israeli, Zionist rap song, declaring his solidarity with the Israeli people. However, the questions remain open: why actually not?