Maroc-Hop
Music and Youth Identities

MIRIAM GAZZAH

Two musical forms highly popular among youths of Moroccan origin in the Netherlands, "Moroc-hop," and *shaabi*, permit youths to express specific and multiple identities in local contexts. Whereas these youths are often identified primarily as "Muslims" in the debates on integration and minority issues, they identify themselves according to very different categories.

Dutch-Moroccan hip-hop, or "Maroc-hop," was put on the musical map in the Netherlands in 2002 with the release of the hit-record, "K*tmarokkanen" ("F*king Moroccans") by the 25 year old Dutch-Moroccan rapper, Raymzter. He wrote the song in reaction to a Dutch politician's remark that was accidentally picked up by a microphone and aired on national television in which he referred to Moroccan youths as "those f*king Moroccans." The enormous success of Raymzter's rap cleared the way for other rappers of Moroccan origin who have been active in the production of a growing hip-hop musical scene. In addition to hip-hop, a vibrant subculture has been constructed around Arab/Moroccan popular folk music known as *shaabi* and which includes dance events, websites, and magazines. Maroc-hop and shaabi contribute in different ways to the construction of identity of Dutch-Moroccan youths within the specific context of contemporary Dutch society. While shaabi music gets used as a way to reinforce elements of an ethnic past and celebrates a Moroccan identity, Maroc-hop is infused with angst and is becoming an important means for youths to voice their frustrations with Dutch society.

Shaabi music

The word shaabi is the Arabic word denoting "of the people," and refers, when desribing music, to "popular" music. In the specific context of Morocco, shaabi represents a category of music consisting of different genres from different regions including, for instance, *reggada* music from Oujda and Berkane, and *rewaffa* music from the Rif. Various factors contribute to the popularity of shaabi music in the Netherlands: its musical composition, its lyrics, its availability, and, more especially, the events organized around it.

> Maroc-hop [creates] links with American or global hip-hop culture and [creates] alliances with a local ethnic community.

Shaabi music is readily available in the many Moroccan music shops in major cities of the Netherlands. Dance events are also key to shaabi's popularity among mainly second generation Dutch-Moroccans aged between 18-30. Organizers of these events attempt to create a Moroccan and Arab-Islamic environment by providing, for example, Moroccan food and the famous mint tea, stands where people can sell Moroccan and Arab music, books on Islam, or jewellery. At most occasions there is no alcohol sold and people who are intoxicated are refused entrance. Dance parties, festivals, and concerts of famous shaabi artists such as Najat Aatabou, Senhaji, or Daoudi which can attract crowds of up to 3000, occur regularly.

Different types of shaabi events take place, among which are women-only parties, or "*Hafla Annisa*." Mothers, friends, daughters, children, aunts, and nieces find in these women-parties a space where they can enjoy themselves, dance, sing, and interact with other women without any kind of male interference. Although the main attraction of these gatherings is the performance of shaabi music by both female and male musicians, the ingredients of these parties are somewhat different from the regular shaabi events. For example, there might be a fashion show demonstrating the newest Moroccan fashion or a workshop on how to apply henna.

Why does this music mobilize such large crowds of young people? If you ask young Moroccans why they go to these parties or listen to shaabi music, the answer often includes phrases such as, "I feel Moroccan when I hear this music. It evokes a sense of solidarity with other visitors."[1] Thus, these events satisfy a desire to be in, or return, to Morocco, even though it is only for a short time. Shaabi parties, in other words, represent a celebration of Moroccan identity.

The actual musical performance does not appear to be the central concern of the audience. The audience is usually more caught up in interacting with each other and often dance with their backs to the performers, seemingly not interested in what is happening on stage, but more concerned with becoming absorbed in the atmosphere and losing oneself in the moment. The performance of the artist thereby becomes part of the background while the performance of the crowd moves to the foreground. This losing oneself in the atmosphere of dancing enhances the feeling of solidarity. Shaabi musical events therefore enable youth to create a kind of coherent Dutch-Moroccan community. The emphasis here is on "coherent," because outside the context of concerts and dance events, one can hardly speak of a unified and coherent community. The Dutch-Moroccan community is quite heterogeneous with the majority representing Berbers from the Rif, and the others a mix of mainly Arab speaking peoples from different regions. Historically the Berber speaking population has had a strained relationship with the Arab population. When Dutch-Moroccan youths come together in these musical contexts, internal differences seem to temporarily disappear.

Shaabi music also allows young people to incorporate elements of their parents' culture into their own youth cultures. Shaabi, a traditional musical genre, is infused with nostalgia for Morocco. In such a way shaabi music plays a significant role in the assertion and preservation of a Moroccan identity among Moroccan-Dutch youths, some of whom have never even been to Morocco. By means of music and events, these youths can express an identity that focuses more on being Moroccan in the Netherlands than on being Moroccan in Morocco. Additionally, they can glorify part of the culture of their parents without actual interference of their parents, and thereby retain their authonomy and independence.

Maroc-hop

Hip-hop music occupies another important arena of popular music for Moroccan youths in the Netherlands, yet with a distinctly different history and effect. Hip-hop is an eclectic music known for its bricolage of sounds, beats, and text fragments. It originated in African American neighbourhoods in New York when, in the 1970s, youths started the genre by rapping over drumbeats. Hip-hop often incorporates bits and pieces from other songs, films, TV programmes, commercials, and street sounds, a technique referred to as "sampling."[2] Nowadays hip-hop can be divided into several sub-genres: the so-called "boast rap" which thrives on materialism, and "message rap" which is characterized by social engagement and social criticism. Minority groups worldwide have found in "message rap" a vehicle to articulate frustration about their oftentimes difficult position in society.

The type of hip-hop that has been growing among Dutch-Moroccans can be called "Maroc-hop," since it has appropriated and adapted many elements from American hip-hop culture in specifically local ways. The emphasis on self-definition, for example, whereby the artist chooses a stage name that defines his role and persona, is emblematic of general hip-hop.[3] Many hip-hop scholars consider these names to be a tool for marginalized youths to create prestige and status. They argue that most hip-hoppers come from lower class communities and have limited access to legitimate forms of status attainment in society and

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Dutch Moroccan Hip-hop group Mo-squad, The Hague, April 2005

consequently resort to taking on new identities and names that enable them to obtain "street credibility" or "prestige from below."[4]

Rappers usually choose names that relate to their coolness, power, street smart, or supreme qualities as a rapper such as Ali Bouali (Ali B.), Brainpower, or Ladies Love Cool James (LL Cool J). Sometimes names relate to local neighbourhoods or cities (Den Haag Connections/ The Hague Connections). Also, some artists choose self-mocking names or names that implicitly comment on society. For example, Ali B. chose this name referring to the way Dutch media speak about criminal suspects by reporting a first name and last initial, mocking the stereotypes about Moroccan youths as criminals.

Self-definition in Maroc-hop is based both on creating links with American or global hip-hop culture and on creating alliances with a local ethnic community. Many rappers have adopted an American style of self-naming, using abbreviations and American hip-hop terms, for example MC (i.e. Master of Ceremony) Berber. On the other hand, others have deliberately decided to maintain their "Moroccan" names, affirming an alliance with their ethnic background. For example, Soussi-B, refers to the southern Moroccan Souss region. Yes-R is a wordplay on the Arabic name Yasser. Equally interesting is that these stage names often refer to hometowns of the rappers, signifying a connection with a Moroccan and a Dutch background.

The messages

Among the recurrent themes of Maroc-hop are racism, Dutch politics, the war in Iraq, 9/11, and the Israel-Palestine conflict, revealing a considerable political consciousness. Many rap bands have written songs about Bush and Sharon in especially angry terms. In the repertoire of underground bands whose music largely circulates on the Internet such as Nieuwe Allochtoonse Generatie (New Foreign Generation) and The Hague Connections, several tracks blame Bush, Sharon, and the Jewish people in general for the misery of the Arab world. These songs reveal a strong identification with the Arab and Palestinian people and with Muslims in general. Islam is passionately defended by rappers who lash out at everyone who "attacks" Islam in whatever form. Moreover, there are many songs dealing with local topics such as Dutch politicians Pim Fortuyn and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Both Fortuyn (murdered 6 May 2002 by an animal rights activist) and Hirsi Ali are known for their critical attitude towards Islam. Other rappers try to invalidate stereotypes about Moroccan youth, such as Ali B.'s song "Geweigerd.nl" ("Refused.nl") criticizing the policy of many Dutch discotheques to refuse entrance of groups of young Moroccans. Others have a more humorous way of addressing social issues, as illustrated in Samiro's rap, "Couscous." This song hilariously tackles stereotypes harboured by both the Moroccan and Dutch communities of each other. In the below verse (translated to English from the original Dutch), Samiro sings in a broken Dutch accent typical of a Moroccan migrant:

He is fed up and only wants couscous
No French fries with chicken and no applesauce either (typical Dutch food)
He is fed up and only wants to eat couscous
They say: low fat, but that is just an excuse
I do not like French fries or Brussels sprouts (typical Dutch food)
That is not good for me and I will never eat it again
My friend invited me over for a fondue Bourguignon
Afterwards I spent the night on the toilet
Me, stomach-ache and nauseous, me shout: oh, no!
I have to buy couscous, thank you very much, yes please

A great deal of Maroc-hop's repertoire could thus be seen as a reaction to the exclusion of Moroccans in public debates about Islam, particularly since 11 September 2001. It represents an "artistic," if sometimes blunt, contribution to the debates. Maroc-hop, however, does not limit itself to political topics. Many songs glorify sex, violence, crime, drugs, love, and women. Rather than present themselves primarily as "Muslim," or "Moroccan," these rappers invoke identities based on local areas and "boast and brag" about their group of friends, their rap crew, and their rap qualities ("flow"). Members of this music culture, in other words, exhibit a strong identification with their Dutch context. Maroc-hop has attracted a growing audience because of its ability to offer its listeners a repertoire of identities as a hip-hopper, a foreigner, a Muslim, a young Moroccan, or just a young person in the Netherlands. Maroc-hop can simultaneously support, strengthen, and deny all of these identities, offering listeners the choice to select whichever identities suit the mood or the times.

Miriam Gazzah is a Ph.D. candidate at ISIM.
Email: M.Gazzah@isim.nl

Notes

1. From interview fragments conducted with shaabi concert-visitors by the author, summer 2004.
2. T. Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 2-3.
3. *Ibid.*, 36.
4. *Ibid.*