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**ISLAMIC HIP-HOP vs. ISLAMOPHOBIA:
AKI NAWAZ, NATACHA ATLAS, AKHENATON**

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Akhenaton: 100% Mètèque

Akhenaton, rapper and chief spokesperson for Marseille rap group [IAM](#),²⁹ was born Philippe Fragione, son of immigrants from the region of Calabria in South Italy, who settled in Marseille. When IAM burst onto the French rap scene³⁰ with its 1991 release ...*De la Planète Mars*, one of its most notable features was what André Prévos dubs its "pharaohism." Four of the group's six members go by ancient Egyptian names (Imhotep, DJ Kheops, Divin Kephren, and of course Akhenaton), and IAM's lyrics are full of references to ancient Egyptian civilization. Prévos argues astutely that "pharaohism" permitted IAM to assert connections to the contemporary Arab world in an indirect, coded way: "The concept [of pharaohism] underlines Arabic origins while bypassing negative representations of North African countries gripped by Islamic fundamentalism and economic uncertainties" (1996:721).³¹ The jacket of IAM's enormously successful second CD (*L'ombre est lumière*, 1993)³² even asserts that in ancient times, Egypt was connected to Marseille, but the continents subsequently drifted apart. I would take issue, however, with Prévos's claim that IAM's "pharaohism" is an original development that demonstrates French rap's growing independence from US hip-hop hegemony (Prévos 1996:719, 721-722). According to Akhenaton, the name IAM (standing for Imperial Asiatic Men)³³ was chosen after he read

Senegalese writer Cheikh Anta Diop, one of Afrocentrism's leading theorists, who spurred a pre-existing interest in the Asiatic Middle East as the origin of the monotheistic religions and in Egypt as the (Black) cradle of civilization. "Egyptianism," in fact, is a long-standing theme of Afro-centric thought, dating back to the nineteenth century (see Gilroy 1993: 60, 208-209). I would argue that the real ingenuity of IAM's "pharaohism" is that it gives "Egyptianist" Afrocentricity a Mediterranean inflection, asserting a kind of "Black Mediterranean."

And more precisely, a Black/*Islamic* Mediterranean. From IAM's beginnings, Akhenaton's fascination for ancient Egypt and the Middle East was largely religiously-motivated; he consciously took his stage name from the first *monotheistic* pharaoh. Although Akhenaton only formally converted to Islam in 1993, IAM was already making positive references to Islam on ...*De la planète Mars* in 1991:

Allahu akbar, protége-nous des ténèbres absolues...

Comme a dit King Raz à qui je dis salaam

Ulemas nous sommes, âmes de l'Islam

(Allahu akbar, protect us from absolute darkness

Like King Raz said to whom I say salaam [peace, an Islamic greeting]

Ulemas [Islamic learned men] we are, souls of Islam)

[...]

According to Akhenaton, the process by which he arrived at Islam was a lengthy one. His mother used to read the Bible to him as a child, stressing its "oriental" dimensions (Jorif 1995:25). Almost all his friends in polyglot Marseille are Muslims; their celebrations of Ramadan made him want to learn more about the religion. He found in Islam an attitude that was very rational and scientific, but most importantly, mystical (Péguillan 1995). It is Islam's mystical dimension that Akhenaton finds most appealing, that he stresses in interviews (Cachin 1995:22; Robert 1995:26; Dufresne 1991:151), and that emerges most clearly from the lyrics of IAM and Akhenaton's solo work.³⁴ While clearly Akhenaton's mystical tendency is, in part, a product of personal predilection, it is significant that, given an atmosphere of intense French hostility toward immigrants who, even more so than in Britain,

are figured chiefly as "Muslim," he chooses to espouse a "spiritual" as opposed to a "political" Islam. In interviews, he underlines that his Islam makes a separation between religion and politics--in unstated opposition, for instance, to the FIS, the Islamist political opposition in Algeria. On the song, "J'aurai pu croire" ("I could have believed," on *Ombre est lumière*), IAM takes both Saddam Hussein and Iran's ayatollahs to task for their hypocritical politicization of religion.

Saddam tu ne me feras pas croire à moi
Que tu fais la prière en dehors des caméras
Sais-tu au moins qu'exhiber dans tous les coins
Est interdit par notre livre saint le Qur'an?
Et tu blasphème et blasphème et blasphème...
(Saddam you don't make me believe in you
When you pray in front of cameras
Do you at least know that to display [your portrait] everywhere
Is forbidden by our holy book the Qur'an?
And you blaspheme and blaspheme and blaspheme)

Akhenaton stresses that the Islam he espouses is tolerant and characterized by a mystical beauty, and that he is neither a "fundamentalist" (*intégriste*) nor a provocateur (Péguillan 1995). At a time when Le-Penist right-wing extremists are railing about the threat of an "Islamic invasion" and winning local elections, when FIS "terror" cells have been operating inside France, and when the mainstream press frequently depicts rap music itself as incendiary (exemplified in the harsh actions taken against hip-hop groups like NTM; Prévos 1997), it is little wonder that Akhenaton publicly advocates a transcendental and non-confrontational brand of Islam.

But while he stresses its "spirituality," Akhenaton's Islam is in fact neither quietist nor apolitical. Promoting "Islam" in fact is part of IAM's general effort to widen the space of tolerance for Arabo-Islamic culture in France, through its lyrical subject matter, its deployment of Arabic words and expressions, and its musical mixes which are splattered with Middle Eastern rhythms and samples of Arabic songs.³⁵ For Akhenaton/Philippe Fragione, moreover, Islam represents a re-connection to his Italian "roots," a "return" that he

invests with an anti-racist inflection. Here again, Akhenaton demonstrates his creativity in putting forward a vision of a pan-Mediterranean Black -Islamic culture, a position that resonates with the reality of polyethnic Marseille.³⁶

In interviews that appeared around the release of his solo album, *Mètèque et mat*, released in 1995, Akhenaton discussed his conversion to Islam and its relation to his Italian heritage. Although the fact is little known, he says, Sicily was an Islamic state in the tenth century, and southern Italians have Arab blood, although they have forgotten this fact (Cachin 1995:21; Jorif 1995:25).³⁷ The barbarian Lombards invaded from the north, carried out an inquisition and massacres against the Muslims and forcibly converted them to Christianity (Jorif 1995:25). (Akhenaton here both refigures Gramsci's "Southern Question" as an "Arab-Islamic Question" and reverses hegemonic Italian notions regarding Northern Italian "superiority," expressed most recently by the Northern League.)³⁸ He goes on to assert that one still sees churches in the south that were originally mosques. He also claims that some Muslim sects in Italy practiced *taqiya* (dissimulation), and that therefore some (secret) Muslim groups continue to exist in Sicily today (Jorif 1995:25).³⁹ Commenting on how his solo album investigates his Italian roots, Akhenaton asserts:

I realized that on the one hand, like all humanity, our cradle was African, on the other hand that the Arab race was present and influential in our blood and our customs...*Mètèque et mat*, it's that: the idea that my roots as an Italian from the South are in symbiosis with two others. (Robert 1995:24)

The cover of *Mètèque et mat* offers a brilliant visualization of Akhenaton's efforts to yoke together these various cultural strands (African, Italian, Arabo-Islamic). A sepia-toned photograph shows a middle-aged Italian seated behind a chess board, whose king piece is an Egyptian pharaoh. The design that surrounds the name, Akhenaton, is Islamic, and the courtyard of the house that spreads out behind the chess player appears both Italian and Arab. The title of the CD, moreover, is a brilliant, multi-layered pun. *Mètèque et mat* rhymes with *echech et mat*, the expression for "checkmate." *Mètèque* means "wog," and so, the literal translation of the title is "wog-mate." Furthermore, the word *mat* comes from the Arabic *mât*,

meaning "to die," and, contrary to normal French rules, and following the Arabic origins, the "t" is pronounced (the English "checkmate" carries the same Arabic etymology).⁴⁰

Akhenaton clearly regards Islam as a kind of potential but occulted cultural bridge linking Italian communities, the products of earlier waves of immigration to France, to Maghrebi-Islamic communities, the more recent arrivals. When he converted to Islam, Akhenaton says, his own family was very tolerant, and he realized then that Catholicism and Islam are closely-related religions. Besides common cultural roots, Italians and Arabs share similar experiences as immigrants, as Akhenaton stresses in interviews and on his solo CD. Both are *métèques* or "wogs," in the view of dominant French culture. Both groups have suffered from racism, and many "*métèques*" responded by attempting to integrate so quickly into French life that they forgot their own culture (Péguillan 1995). On the song "L'Americano," Akhenaton notes the assimilationist tendency among Italian immigrants and pokes fun at the "*types aux origine truquées*" (guys with "doctored" origins), immigrants who changed their last names from Malano to the frenchified Malan (Cachin 1995:21), just as some assimilated Arabs changed their names from Boubaker to Bob. As a result of such cultural losses?hence the nostalgia-drenched sepia of the CD cover and booklet?Italians have forgotten their traditions. Arabs meanwhile have become so frenchified that those living in state-funded high-rise apartment blocks (the dreaded HLMs) don't know their own neighbors (Cachin 1995:22). "*Car mat est le métèque / Fascinés par le mirage des idéaux de modernité*" (For checkmated [dead] is the *métèque* / Fascinated by the mirage of modernity's ideals), raps Akhenaton on "Métèques et mat. "People of the "south" (African, Arab, Italian), Akhenaton asserts, are losing their characteristic hospitality and are assuming a posture of aggressiveness. When the south loses its culture, Akhenaton warns, it becomes vulnerable to Americanization (FLX 1995:57). The *métèques*, therefore, need to reinvent community life and to develop a sense of personal responsibility (Cachin 1995:22). But such a common effort can only succeed if Italians remember why they immigrated to France: to escape fascism and repression. "I'm one of those who Hitler called the niggers of Europe" (*Je suis un de ceux qu'Hitler nommait nègres de l'Europe*), he chants on "Métèque et mat." Akhenaton is "pissed off" that Italians have been involved in racist murders, and that many

Italians are voting for Le Pen, forgetting their own past sufferings (Cachin 1995:21; Péguillan 1995).

Akhenaton asserts that IAM is "anti-political," in the sense of wanting nothing to do with the state: "*On ne me traitera pas de soumis à ce putain d'état*" (They won't call me submissive to this whore of a state, from "Non soumis à l'état,"*De la planète Mars*). But he goes on to say that the group is "political" only insofar as it actively opposes Le Pen and his National Front's racist politics. IAM, whose members are variously of Madagascan, Senegalese, Spanish *pied noir*, Algerian, Spanish, and Italian background, advocates a multi-ethnic anti-racism, one that reflects the diverse nature of Marseille and the *banlieues*, the suburban zones of the "immigrants" and lower-class in France.⁴¹ Although the French *banlieues* are multi-ethnic, they are heavily "racialized" in official discourse. And the symbol of all that is "other" in France is, most centrally, the young, "immigrant" Arab-Muslim, the *zonard* of the *banlieue* (see Bazin 1995:116).⁴² Unlike in the US, where racial/ethnic difference is structured around the polarity black/white, in France, the principle opposition is between white native and immigrant Arab other. Since the main thrust of racism in France is anti-Arab and anti-Islamic, IAM's successful insertion of Islam and Middle Eastern music into the space of popular culture (as with Fun[^]Da[^]Mental and Transglobal Underground) is ultimately political. IAM is also critical of "global" racism. The song, "Tam tam de l'Afrique" (...*De la planète Mars*), for instance, decries the West's enslavement of Africans. In interviews, IAM has also disparaged the West's war against Iraq, stressing that the conflict originated from disputed "boundaries" drawn by the colonial powers, and in the song, "J'aurai pu croire," it blasts the US conduct in the 1991 Gulf War:

Ils on intervenu au Kuwait pour le pétrole et l'argent
Les droits de l'homme ont rien à cirer au pays du Klan
(They intervened in Kuwait for oil and money

The rights of man have nothing to polish [?] for the country of the Klan)

"Le soldat" (from *Ombre est lumière*) exposes the horrors of war from the point of view of a soldier, no doubt referring to the Gulf War, to which France contributed troops. On the song, "J'aurai pu croire" (*Ombre est lumière*), IAM takes Israel to task for its repression of

Palestinians, mentioning, among other examples, the 1982 massacres at Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon, and says:

Mais balles contre cailloux, canons à pierres
Excursions frontières, je ne puis me taire
Le David d'enfant est devenu Goliath
(But bullets against pebbles, cannons against stones
Border raids, I can't shut up
The child David has become Goliath)

As in Britain, Muslims in France experience such instances of Western imperialism in the Middle East *as racism*. It should be noted as well that the anti-Arab hysteria that erupted in France during the 1991 Gulf War, in which anti-Saddam fever intersected with deep-seated antagonism toward domestic Arabs, was a particularly horrible experience for Maghrebis in France (see Gross et al 1996: 146-147; Ben Jelloun 1991).

IAM's 1997 album, *[L'école du micro d'argent](#)*, represents a more political move on the part of the group. Full of vignettes on daily life in urban France, *L'école* presents a much darker view than 1994's *Ombre est lumière*, which contained its share of danceable and humorous numbers. The shift was prompted by the increasing influence in the south of Le Pen's fascistic Front Nationale (FN), as exemplified by the 1995 murder of Ibrahim Ali, a Comoran teenager who belonged to B Vice, a hip-hop group close to IAM, by an FN activist, and by the election of FN mayors in several urban centers in the south (Davet 1997). It was IAM's "sound architect" Imhotep (née Pascal Perez), who was most instrumental in pushing the group in a more overtly political direction. Imhotep/Pascal was born in Algiers in 1960, to a pied-noir family of Spanish origin, who were close to the Arabs, despised by the rightist colon terrorist organization, the OAS, and supported the left when they moved to France in the wake of Algerian independence. According to Imhotep, *L'école du micro d'argent* represented an effort to rekindle the spirit of revolt in France, against the FN and against racist immigration laws, as well as to educate the youth ("Lutter contre..." 1997). In particular, IAM is working to encourage young people to vote, so as to turn back the FN electoral tide. IAM also participated in a counter-demonstration organized on the occasion of Jean-Marie Le Pen's visit to Marseille (de Monicault 1997) and contributed to the rap single,

"11'30 contre les lois racistes," produced at the initiative of Madj (of rap group Assassin) and in collaboration with the grassroots anti-racist organization MIB (Mouvement de l'immigration et des banlieues). The single, aimed at raising the consciousness of youth regarding racist immigration laws, had netted 500,000 francs for MIB by October 1997 ("Rap: les producteurs..." 1997; Fara C. 1997).

Finally, I want to mention IAM's connections to US hip-hop, and especially "Islamic" rappers. Although Akhenaton's Islamic orientation is mystical and not "political," he is well-versed in the teachings of Muslim Black Americans. He was influenced in this regard partly by his mother, who Akhenaton describes as having a rather "revolutionary" tendency and as someone who read Angela Davis. As a teenager, Akhenaton spent summers visiting relatives in the US, where he read the works of leading African Americans such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Elijah Muhammad. Having been exposed to Nation of Islam teachings, he is critical of what he calls the "home-made" religions of the US (Dufresne 1991:151), which he distinguishes from the more "authentic" Islam practiced in France. Other IAM members of the group equally understand the gap between the Islam of Black North Americans and the Islam of French Maghrebis and Africans. According to Imhotep, a Muslim in Marseille would find Black American Islamist discourse "bonkers." IAM's dancer and some-time rapper, Algerian Malek Sultan, discusses the Five Percent Nation of Islam, whose members style themselves Gods,⁴³ noting that the celebrated US rapper Rakim is a member. Malek Sultan regards their beliefs be a "sacrilege" (*profanation*) (Dufresne 1991: 151). Yet, while IAM marks the distinction between the local, more "orthodox" Islam and the Black nationalist Islam of the US, it is nonetheless heavily influenced by US "Islamic" rap styles. Of the three groups under consideration here, IAM is the most prototypically hip-hop, and its musical style is the closest to US rap?although, as Akhenaton is careful to note, IAM's sound is slower, uses Oriental music and rhythms, etc. (Dufresne 1991:15). Asked in 1995 by music magazine *L'Affiche* to list his ten favorite albums (Cachin 1995:22), Akhenaton's choices were all US rap releases. Five of his favorites were by artists who belong to the Five Percent Nation (Raekwon, Eric B & Rakim, Wu-Tang Clan, Nas, and Mobb Deep); a sixth was by A Tribe Called Quest, two of whose members are orthodox ("Sunni") Muslims. Akhenaton has elsewhere expressed his admiration for Raekwon of the

Wu-Tang Clan (FLX 1995: 54). Moreover, US rap group Sunz of Man, who belong to the Wu-Tang "family" and are also Five-Percenter, guest on "La Saga," a cut from IAM's third album, *L'école du micro d'argent* (1997), throwing in some recognizably "Islamic" raps:

'Bout to take it to another chamber
From Medina to Marseille...
Never ate ham, never gave a damn
Television tells lies to your vision
So, beware of the trick-nology set off to fool the mind

Medina, in Five-Percent argot, stands for Brooklyn. Not eating ham is a reference to Five-Percent and NOI injunctions against the consumption of pork, a ban shared by orthodox Muslims. Describing television as something which "tells lies to your vision" is typical Five-Percent word-play; "tricknology" is an NOI term for deceitful "white" teachings. The IAM album on which "La Saga" appears, moreover, can be seen as a kind of artistic tribute, or analogue at least, to the influential vision of the Wu Tang Clan, Five Percent rappers whose work is heavily invested with samples from karate films and references to the ideology of Oriental martial arts, and who call their native Staten Island "Shaolin."⁴⁴ The cover of *L'école du micro d'argent* features armored Chinese warriors, and raps on the album feature numerous references to martial arts, Taoist philosophy (IAM's other lead rapper, Shurik'N Chang-ti, is a Taoist), and even to the monks of Shaolin.

Although IAM's second release *Ombre est lumière* was, in Tony Mitchell's judgment, "in many ways the unacknowledged masterpiece of Francophone rap" (1996:41), it seems to have had no impact on the US market, and therefore the group's latest release *L'école du micro d'argent* is almost impossible to obtain here. IAM's collaboration with Sunz of Man and the group's links to other Five Percent rappers, especially the Wu Tang Clan, have gone virtually unnoticed in the US. Nonetheless, they bear testimony to a kind of "Transglobal Islamic Underground" of cultural flows and affinities that exist despite deep-seated differences over the nature of "Islam."

Conclusion

I want to conclude by arguing for the importance of paying close attention to popular cultural manifestations of "Islam" in Europe, given the ethnic, political and cultural importance of "Islam" to youth of Islamic background in Britain and France. While we should by no means ignore Islam's "religious" appeal to these youth, we also must situate that appeal in relation to ethnic, political and cultural factors, which in many instances may carry more weight than the "religious." Through such a focus, we will also expand our understanding of the extremely heterogeneous nature of "Islam" in Europe, and shift attention away from a single-minded focus on issues (such as the "veil," female genital mutilation, halal diets, etc.) that often have contributed to stereotyping rather than to an understanding of Muslims. Cultural-political interventions like those of Aki Nawaz, Natacha Atlas and Akhenaton are likely to continue to be of critical importance for young Muslims, as part of larger efforts to create new "spaces" for multi-faceted Islamic identities and as weapons in the battles against racist violence and Islamophobic discrimination. There are similar manifestations elsewhere in Europe: for instance, a high-profile German rap group called Cartel, composed of three Turkish "immigrants," plus a German and a Cuban, who have injected Turkish music styles into rap and have addressed anti-Turkish racism (Robins and Morley 1996; Soysal 1997:521, 527).⁴⁵ And 1996 saw the release of French rapper Yazid's album *Je suis l'arabe* (I am the Arab), a militant assertion of Arab issues and Arab identity. On "Je suis l'arabe," Yazid raps:

Je suis l'Arabe, stopper l'oppression est ma mission....
Le pays de laïcité ne tolère pas l'Islam
Le chômage ravage, on parle d'immigration
Et lorsque la banlieue s'enflamme, on parle de l'intégration
(I'm the Arab, stopping oppression is my mission..
The country of secularism doesn't tolerate Islam
Unemployment ravages, they talk of immigration
And when the banlieue burns, they talk of integration)

On another cut, "Islam," Yazid defends and explains his religion. Yazid asserts both his ethnic and his religious identity much more forcefully than has been seen before in French rap.

We have not witnessed the emergence of such popular cultural phenomena in the US, where "Islamic" hip-hop has chiefly been a Black nationalist articulation and where Muslims have not been "ethnicized." But perhaps a portent of the future is a new figure in New York City's "illbient" and Asian club scene, a young woman DJ whose mother is an Egyptian Copt and who goes by the stage name Mutamassik. Mutamassik has recorded remixes, which drop in samples from Egyptian pop, for the latest Arto Lindsay releases (*Mundo Civilizado* and *Hyper Civilizado*). Although not a Muslim, Mutamassik attempts to re-vision Western stereotypes about Islam and the Middle East. Styling herself as the Egyptian Breakbeat Assassin, the "audio terrorist" (Owen 1997: 32), she tells journalists her name means "fanatic" in Arabic (whereas the usual translation of mutamassik in Egyptian Arabic is someone who clings tenaciously to their beliefs), explaining that she is "playing on that stereotypical fear of Arabs" (Ali 1997).

Illbient Islam, anyone?

[. . .]