

CHAPTER 2

STUDYING TUPAC: LEARNING THE ICON

In this chapter, I will introduce the scope and structure of the book. Further, this section will deal with the arrangement and/organization of the book.

As stated prior, I did not care for Tupac in my early years as a Christian. I was a fan of his in my young years, but when I became a Christian I lost my culture and identity. While doing field research for my Masters degree, I was interviewing urban youth. The name Tupac was the single name that kept coming to the surface. Youth continually told me that he was their “mentor” and “prophet.” It became clear to me that Tupac needed a second look and a broader study completed than that done by Michael Eric Dyson (2001).

There are significant theological issues that arise from Tupac’s life that push me to ask deeper questions. How do we contend with Jesus and the F word in the same sentence? Does God deal with the profane? Did God design language, and if so, what about its profanity? Is Tupac “saved?”

Introduction: Tupac

I shall not fear no man but God
Though I walk through the valley of death

I shed so many tears (if I should die before I wake)

Please God walk with me (grab a nigga and take me to Heaven)¹

Every culture has its icons. Here in America, there are many icons: Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, John F. Kennedy, John Wayne, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Johnny Carson, Michael Jackson and many others like them have etched their own philosophy on our lives in one way or another. Tupac is an American icon too.

He was iconic in his style, life, language, and messages. Tupac lived the life he talked about² and was true to his word. Further, Michael Eric Dyson, in the documentary *Tupac VS.* (Peters 2001), discusses how Tupac's music was like Gospel music; he lived the life he talked about in his music. If you are a gospel singer, this is great, but if you are a rapper, then it becomes a problem, being further complicated if you are a gangsta rapper. Moreover, Tupac was one of the few rappers who put meaning and passion to every one of his songs. Most artists have two-three tracks they really work on, and the rest of the album is just filler music. But Tupac put heart and soul into every song. More importantly, each one of his songs told a story and had purpose.³

Michael Eric Dyson states,

Tupac is perhaps the representative figure of his generation. In his haunting voice can be heard the buoyant hopefulness and the desperate hopelessness that mark the outer perimeters of the Hip Hop culture he eagerly embraced, as well as the lives of the millions of youth who admired and adored him (2001: 13).

Further, as one young man put it to me, "This was the realest nigga you could find. I mean, he was a pastor to me. He helped me through some deep shit in my life" (Hodge 2003: Interview 9 "Miguel").

¹ Tupac, "So Many Tears" from the album "All Eyez on Me" (1995).

² For a deeper understanding of this see *Tupac Vs.* (Peters 2001).

³ See Appendix A for a pictorial view of Tupac.

Michael Datcher, Kwame Alexander, and Mutulu Shakur further state that, “Tupac Amaru Shakur was ours. He presented himself to our generation like a gift offering. No ribbons, no bows, no paper. He came in a plain box and he came opened” (1997: Introduction). Tupac was relevant to many, and gave voice to a generation that for years had been underrepresented: the Hip Hop generation.

This Hip Hop Generation concept was developed by Bakari Kitwana (2003: 3-25) in which he parallels the Hip Hop generation with Generation X. He argues that Generation X is predominantly White, male, and upper middle class. For Kitwana, the Hip Hop generation represents the same generation, but is more contextual for the urban culture. Further, to date, Tupac’s album sales topple sixty-five million and continue to grow.⁴

For me, as a follower of Christ and missiology, I am compelled to study and understand Tupac’s theological message. What makes Tupac have a theological message as compared to 50 Cent? Tupac was one of the first rappers to conjoin the profane and the sacred. Tupac’s scandalous union of these two concepts made him into a controversial figure for some, but also made him a hero for others.

This union intrigues me. As a result, a theology of the profane emerges. Tupac embodied both the theological and the profane, while still embodying a Christ-like image that permeated many of his songs. This is one reason why so many young people loved him. More importantly, Tupac was a man of his word, he was credible. When he spoke of ‘hood violence, you knew he had lived it, “been there, and done that.” Teresa Reed states:

Tupac’s experiences afforded him the credentials to preach about the social decay that gave rise to his tragic and famous persona. While Marvin Gaye could sing about war, he had never actually been on a battlefield, on the front line, in the direct line of fire. Tupac, on the other hand, had been there. His

⁴ As seen from Billboard archives and www.allmusic.com.

descriptions of ghetto life are so disarmingly graphic because they are often his accounts of situations he knew of first hand (2003: 156).

Tupac had lived a life that matched the life of his listener. Even if the listener was White and lived in the suburbs, he could still relate to certain elements—be it the party, the money, or the women.

Tupac argued for a spiritual revolution and for community building (Dyson 2002: 204-206). Tupac was concerned with ‘hood matters and for ‘hood youth—Black, Latino, White, Asian, and women. In that same vein, many women loved Tupac. Tupac was both a father and sex image to them (Ardis 2004; Dyson 2001: 21-46; and Reed 2003: 151-152). Tupac clearly defined the different elements of women, for him there were three types of women; (1) a woman, (2) a Ho, and (3) a bitch. Many women would come to agree with him and define women in these three categories themselves.

Tupac was also concerned with social justice and for bettering the community as a whole, righting social injustices, bettering the person, helping the young and gaining wisdom from the older generation.⁵ Tupac connected with people and gave to people out of his heart. This was evident in his connection to the audience and how the audience would respond to him during a concert or in public. To take this a step further, Tupac would frequent clubs without security and would just be “hanging out.” This was something that made him an even more popular figure—someone who was powerful and popular, but could “hang” with the normal people.

I did not know this about Tupac. I, along with many others, was fooled by the media’s analysis of Tupac. I fell into the public raging rapids of fear that floods the mind with images of a thug, a murderer, and hooligan. As I have developed an understanding of Tupac’s life, I have found that his life was much deeper and connected to God than I

⁵ This is seen in his giving amounts and his own fan letters (Sims 1999). Tupac was a community activist, but many did not know this because the media typically followed Tupac only when he was in trouble.

had ever imagined. But many have not taken the time to study to understand the person. Rather, many have torn down the person. This is one of the primary reasons why I have chosen to study the theological message of Tupac for a stronger evangelism within the ‘hood.

The Book Structure

The thrust of this book is an overview of Tupac Shakur’s spiritual and missiological gospel message. The data for this book was gathered using a variety of methods focused on Tupac’s life, music, poetry, and writings. This book utilizes the ethnolifehistory method and uses qualitative content analysis, as well as case studies to bring validity and reliability to the study.

Ethnolifehistory is an excellent method to study the life of a person. First, the method is narrative, based on stories in the urban context. By examining the story, how that story is shaped by different events in culture and then observing the major cultural eras, we are able to grasp a deeper understanding of that culture—or in this case, a person. Tupac told stories and his life was a story. By using this method, we will be able to better see the deeper meanings that underlie Tupac’s life.

Second, this methodology combines other methodologies and is by nature more well rounded. It can utilize interviews, active interviews, case studies, ethnographic data, and even surveys. It has both a qualitative and quantitative quality to it. In the urban context, the story is what matters. Ethnolifehistory allows for that to happen, and allows the person’s life to be seen in all aspects—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Lastly, I like developing new concepts. This method is new, and I plan to use it again for further research. I adapted this method from ethnohistory that observes cultures and their major eras (Tippett 1973; 1980). However, this method focuses on the culture and not the individual person. I was able to adapt this, and make it relevant for the urban

context.⁶ I have also adapted it to fit this book so that every part of Tupac flows out of the different eras within his own life.

This book is largely centered around Judeo Christian philosophies and mantras. While Tupac himself embodied theologies from The Nation of Islam, the Five Percent Nation, and Rastafarianism time did not allow me to engage further into these theologies. However, Tupac was connected to those faiths as well and it deserves noting. Please understand I mean no disrespect to these faiths or am I ignoring their rich traditions and histories. I am simply focusing on one particular faith tradition.

The book is divided into parts. A diagram will begin each part, to enable the reader to follow the process. Part I—Setting Up tha Stage: Approaching the Study of Tupac. I began this process by setting the stage with my own story, and the major eras in my life. Every book has a personal element. In this case, I will be using my own story to set up the study and to help the reader see how I came to this topic. This section will detail the book structure and give the skeletal dynamics of my research project.

Part II—Hip Hop Culture and the ‘Hood⁷: The Context for Tupac. In this section, I will be discussing the broad context in which Tupac operated. Hip Hop culture, rap music, Black popular culture, and Thug Life will be discussed in this section. This will have two different views: macro and micro. Hip Hop and Black popular culture will be the macro, while Tupac’s own view will be the micro.

Part III—All Eyez on Him: Tupac’s Life. This section will deal with Tupac’s life, his eras⁸, how his life was shaped by outside forces, that eventually led to his death. I will

⁶ I will further this explanation in Chapter 3.

⁷ Throughout this book I use non-standard spelling for some words to reflect their pronunciation and emphasize their use both from Tupac and Hip Hoppers.

⁸ The different life stages that can last for months or years. For the purpose of this book, Tupac’s eras lasted years; they consisted of significant life stages and seasons.

also be analyzing certain major eras in Tupac's life, providing insight into both their societal and theological meaning. This section will present the major findings from my research in this section.

Part IV—Hermeneutical Shiznit: Tupac's Theological Message. In this section, I examine Tupac's message by drawing from his music and poetry. This section offers new theory to the field of missiology. Further, I will provide practical insights into new evangelical methods, appropriate for the 'hood, developed from Tupac's life. It will also provide the conclusions and recommendations from my research.

Purpose and Goals

The purpose of this research is to explore the missiological significance of Tupac Shakur in order to better reach Hip Hop youth.⁹ Tupac's theological message deserves to be studied in order to gain a broader understanding and provide new direction for evangelism in the 21st century in the urban context.

The goals of this book are to utilize my understanding of Tupac's lyrical messages to reach Hip Hop youth and to present an evangelistic tool for the urban and multicultural church as a whole.

Significance

Personally, I believe this research will better serve theological studies as the field develops for the 21st century. A stronger understanding of Tupac will help urban youth workers serve the young people they are ministering to.

⁹ These can be a variety of ethnicities and from different socioeconomic status'. This term is not limited to just Black or ghetto youth. Hip Hop youth are a vast and growing population that embodies an ample variety of ideologies, ethnicities, lifestyles, and pedagogies.

Missiologically speaking, little to no work is being done from an “insiders” perspective on Hip Hop culture, particularly on the life of Tupac. Ultimately, there will be a theology of the profane that can benefit urban missions as a whole, as well as the Christian academic community.

As a researcher, I am biased towards Hip Hop music, postmodernism, and inner city youth. Questioning authority is a trademark of my life. These all compose my biases that influence this particular research project.

Central Research Issue

The central research issue is to explore Tupac Shakur's missiological message within his music and life. The main research questions this book seeks to answer are:

1. What was Tupac's life about?
2. How do urban youth identify with and view Hip Hop culture as it relates to Tupac?
3. What is the theological and societal framework for Black Popular Culture in which Tupac operated within?
4. What is Tupac's theological message?
5. What was Tupac's gospel message?

This book will focus on the life of one person: Tupac Shakur. Further, this project is concerned with Tupac's life within each era and how it relates back to culture for a broader understanding of theology within the urban context.

I am limiting my study to one of Hip Hop's better-known artists, Tupac Shakur. While Hip Hop encompasses a variety of cities, Los Angeles is the scope of study when looking at popular culture.

This book is not an in-depth study of the ethnomusicological aspects of Tupac's music. Rather, it focuses more on a missiological perspective within an urban context. Ethnomusicology brings new concepts and dimensions to the discussion.

Black popular culture will remain at the center of the main culture studied for Tupac; which is not limited to just Black people—Asians, Latinos, and Whites are included in this culture as well. Blacks, Whites, and Latinos will also be a focus in this study.

While many other youth listen to rap music and Tupac, the nature of this study will delimit youth from ages 15-22 in the inner city.

Definition of Terms

Since the study of Hip Hop culture is relatively new in theological institutions, it is necessary to define some key terms that will be used in this book. I have laid out some of the more relevant terms that I will be using so that the reader is aware of the language being used. The urban context has a language all its own. Therefore, I will define exactly what I am discussing in this book.

- Tupac Shakur: is defined as, the ghetto theologian and renowned Hip Hop artist that passed away on September 9, 1996 from gunshot wounds. His songs and life inspired many to see him as a saint, prophet, and ghetto messiah that would provide insight for many. Tupac, in his lyrics, presented many different messages about who Jesus was, the personhood of Jesus, new directions for the church, and a new understanding of the cross and suffering. Tupac's death only heightened his fame and made him into a martyr of Hip Hop culture and urban community. His is the central figure of this study.
- Inner city youth culture: is the youth culture that represents the "ghetto" or neighborhoods that have been traditionally impoverished, oppressed, and typically within city limits. It is the lifestyle and worldview that exists within these ghetto enclaves that comprises inner city youth culture. Now, This term is rapidly changing and is in flux, however, Edward Soja (2000), Bakari Kitwana (2005), and Andreana Clay (2003: 1346-1350) argue that the 'hood is rapidly changing geographic locations into a suburban setting. Soja (2000)

argues that within the next fifteen years there will be fundamental geographic upheaval of the ghetto to what we now know as suburbia (Soja 2000: 396-405). In other words, what we think of as “urban” now—inner city, ‘hood—will soon be associated with geographical regions that resemble the suburbs.

- The Urban Postmodern: can take on many different meanings. For the purpose of this study it refers to the culture of people that resemble the characteristics of Postmodernity: communal, holding no absolute truths, meta-narrative related, and the acute ability to question authority all within an urban context.
- Theology of the Profane: In an attempt to gain an understanding of the profane, or that which is negative, foul, perverse, irreverent, sacrilegious, and blasphemous there must be a biblical perspective in which to gain a deeper theological, spiritual, and saintly message from these “profane” issues.
- The Niggaz: This is a contested word, but it was part of Tupac’s vocabulary. Moreover, it is in the vocabulary of many urban youth. This term, as it is used in the literature, identifies a class and socioeconomic position. A Nigga, as described by Boyd (2002) Kelley (1994), is a person from the working class generation of Blacks; the blue-collar and street dwelling person that also represents Tupac’s Thug Life image: the downtrodden and marginalized. For Tupac it also meant, Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished. This term can also supersede racial arenas and be used to solely describe class and socioeconomic positions.
- Thug Life: (The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everyone). The Thug, for Tupac and in this study, did not mean the literal definition of the word. Thug for him meant the marginalized, the gang member, the pregnant teen mom, and/or the person that does not “appear” to be the normal. Tupac gave the ‘hood a new “Gospel” message within the Thug Life mantra. This “Gospel” message was about hope, vision, and acceptance. Tupac also emphasized that Heaven does accept you as you are through Christ, despite what the traditional church may state. This is the theological discussion I will have at the conclusion of my book based on the research findings on Tupac.
- Hip Hop Youth: this is a variety of ethnicities that encompasses many different backgrounds. While Hip Hop is global and is in almost all levels of society in the United States, I am primarily concerned with youth that are from an inner city background and who are involved in Hip Hop culture; ages ranging from thirteen to twenty.
- Urban and Multicultural Church: this church could encompass the Black church, the Pentecostal church, the Latin Church, and/or multicultural urban emergent churches.

- **Ghetto Saint:** I will be using this term to focus on part of Tupac's character. Now, I am not suggesting that Tupac was a "model" Christian for everyone. However, he did present an image of a person who had aspirations of a Holy life and Holy virtues as they related to the 'hood. In other words, Tupac was a saint in that he was able to articulate different theological matters such as death, love, and salvation. Tupac also aspired to live a virtuous life, even though he did not succeed at it many times. In his heart, he was aspiring to live a better life and be an example for others to follow. This was seen in both his music and his poetry which connected deeply to people. The Catholic Church defines saint as, "holy people and human people who lived extraordinary lives. Each saint the Church honors responded to God's invitation to use his or her unique gifts. God calls each one of us to be a saint."¹⁰ Based on this definition, I will argue that Tupac was a saint within a Hip Hop context.
- **Natural Theologian.** Michael Eric Dyson refers to "Natural Law Theologians" (2001: 210-211), a person from the street that fashions themselves after the Old Testament creed of death, life, God, and love (Dyson 2001: 211-212). However, I use this term to refer to Tupac as an unrefined, organic, grassroots, pre-evangelistic type of 'hood preacher that can begin conversations about God with hard core Hip Hoppers in which most traditional pastors cannot. Tupac was just that.
- **Tupac's Spirituality:** This term refers to Tupac's spiritual connections. In other words, Tupac's everyday association with God, life, the search for meaning, love, and salvation as seen in his music, poetry, and interviews.

This is the grounds for this study. In the next chapter, I will be discussing my methods that will be utilized in this study.

¹⁰ Taken from <http://www.americancatholic.org/Features/SaintofDay/default.asp> Last accessed on Tuesday December 19, 2006.