COMMENTARY

Dapping: The overlooked Black celebration that has a long, life-saving history

Tracing the history of the dap, from Africa to Americana

By RANN MILLER

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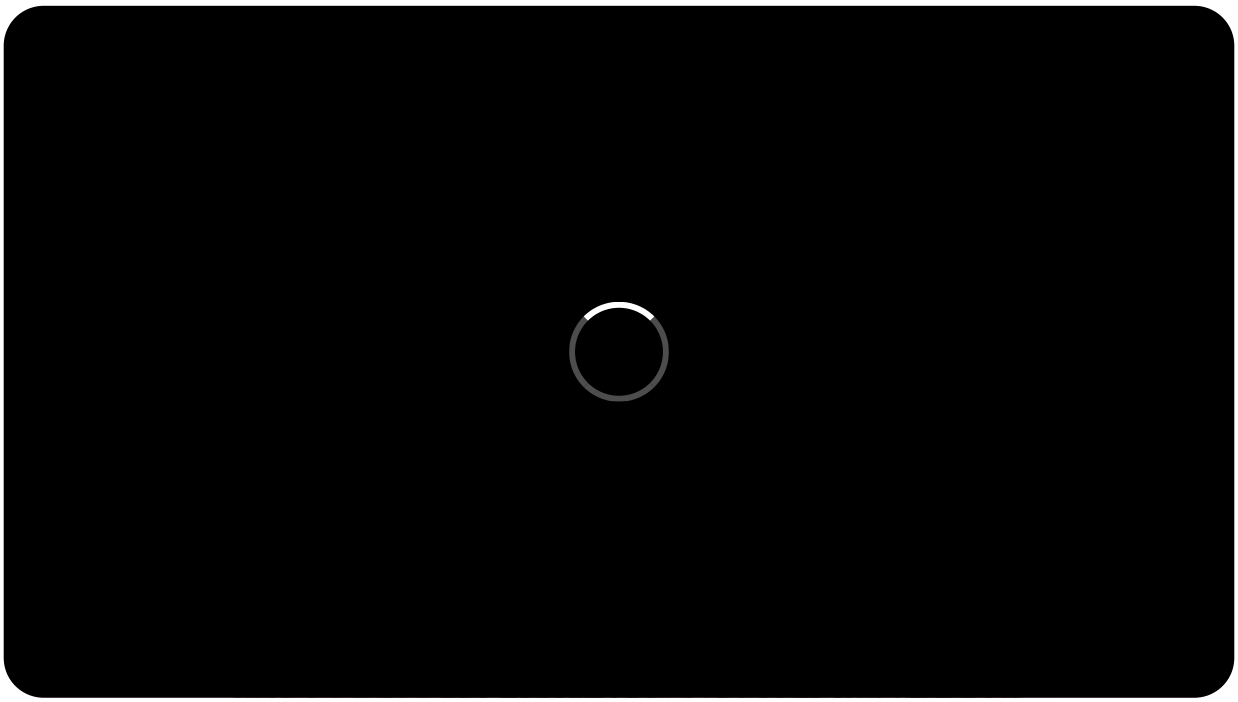
Patrick Mahomes #15 of the Kansas City Chiefs interacts with Marquez Valdes-Scantling #11 of the Kansas City Chiefs prior to the game Super Bowl LVIII against the San Francisco 49ers at Allegiant Stadium on February 11, 2024 in Las Vegas, Nevada. (Michael Reaves/Getty Images)

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The Super Bowl last week was filled with cultural moments that blew people away. Usher provided one of the more entertaining halftime shows in recent memory. Beyoncé announced on a Verizon commercial she's releasing new music . . . and of course, the NFL couldn't get enough shots of Taylor Swift at the big game.

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However, there's one act of the culture that took place that is hardly ever noticed these days, but is nevertheless a cultural touchpoint in the mainstream: the dap.

Dap is a customary salutation or greeting amongst Black people. It's a clasping of hands that can morph into additional hand exchanges and/or a bro hug. It's a Black community tradition first examined in Linguist John Baugh's 1978 work, "The Politics of the Black Power Handshakes," where he noted that "insiders" used the "Black power handshake" amongst their trusted friends, while outsiders were greeted with the "standard handshake," usually determined by which "norm satisfied the immediate social requirements."

The best example of this is the famous "Key & Peele" skit of President Obama reserving dap for skin folk and kinfolk alike while extending the standard handshake for white folks.

Hand gestures, and even verbal expressions – to note the arrival or departure of Black people or simply an acknowledgment of being seen in a society where we're often invisible – were originally deemed low-brow or unprofessional by white folks. But the Super Bowl for example, like the NFL and NBA drafts where Black draftees and white commissioners share emphatic dap is proof that the dap has hit the mainstream. This was especially apparent at the Super Bowl trophy podium.

Everyone is giving dap nowadays.

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I've personally even seen white people giving dap to each other. And when white people give dap to Black folk, we generally welcome it—to the extent that some of us even bestow a level of kinship upon white folks who dap. That may be going a bit too far, but I digress.

It's a sacred art with a history deserving of acknowledgment.

Most people assume dap is a common, everyday kind of greeting. To some degree, it is. But truthfully, it's a sacred art with a history deserving of acknowledgment. The dap is Black history.

It could be assumed to be rooted in hip-hop culture; as hip-hop as the gold "dookie rope" chain adorned by iconic artists including Run DMC, Roxanne Shante, LL Cool J, Biz Markie, Slick Rick, Salt-N-Pepa, Eric B. and Rakim, and Big Daddy Kane. But the history of dap goes back further.

Dap can be traced back to the 1960s, with a rooting in the need for solidarity among Black soldiers during the Vietnam War. Black soldiers created dap as a way to protect each other from racist violence. Such violence came in the form of several unfortunate cases of Black soldiers reportedly being shot by white soldiers during combat. According to a Black private in the Marines, "In 1962, a black GI was shot in the back in Korea by a white man. After that the dap developed so that no Black dude would ever have to worry again."

That, in addition to the racism Black soldiers encountered, was the reason behind creation of the salutation.

The Black power salute, the raised fist in a show of strength and fearless, was put on display for the world at the 1968 Olympics by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the medal stand. The salute was a defiant statement against the systemic oppression of Black people in the U.S. and marked a defining moment in the history of civil rights activism. The U.S. military saw it as a threat and banned its use. The dap, which is believed to be an acronym meaning "dignity and pride" was formed as a substitute for the Black power salute.

At its core, dap means, "I'm not above you, you're not above me, we're side by side, we're together." However, the military saw dap as a threat, suggesting it was a symbol of Black

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insurrection. The use of dap was banned throughout the military just like the Black power salute. Nevertheless, Black soldiers defied the order because dapping saved Black lives.

Dap was primarily used by Black soldiers in Southeast Asia, Europe, Japan, Puerto Rico, Okinawa and Hawaii; rarely was it used on military posts in the United States. Properly executing dap, or the lack of doing so, exposed Black informants and signaled to Black soldiers, which white soldiers they could trust. Therefore, it was vital if not mandatory for Black servicemen to learn how to dap.

But because Dap was outlawed by the U.S. military, soldiers who used dap were punished. It's estimated that hundreds of Black soldiers stationed overseas, in Japan, Puerto Rico, Southeast Asia, Europe and even Hawaii, were punished by the army between 1962 and 1975.

Those punishments included taking on extra duties, prison time or dishonorable discharge. Nevertheless, the practice survived those attacks born from misconceptions due to white fragility. After the Vietnam War, dap served as therapy after the war with Black patients who resisted medical treatment because they did not trust white medical care personnel. The military would bring in Black G.I.s fluent in the dap to dap with these men to build their trust up to accept treatment from white doctors and staff.

Again, dapping is Black history. But dap goes back even further than the 1960s; it dates back to West Africa, where most African Americans trace their origins.

According to Columbia Journalism School professor Howard French, in his book "Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War," dapping can trace its DNA to West African handshakes.

When the Portuguese arrived at Elmina (in Ghana) in the 15th century, they met with a local king named Kwamena Ansa. He was covered in gold all over—a marker of political and spiritual power, in addition to commerce. Ansa, as he approached the Portuguese, was met by one of his subordinates where they exchanged a hand greeting to show him respect

> Ansa took his (his subordinate's) hand briefly, releasing it so as to 'touch his fingers and then snap the one with the other, saying in his language, *bere, bere*, which in

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> ours means *peace, peace*.' As any visitor to West Africa can attest, this finger-snapping handshake survives as an emphatic form of greeting even today.

In "A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone," trader John Matthews during the late 18th century noted that friends in this region had various expressions when greeting each other, including a process in which they would “shake hands, and snap the finger and thumb.”

It would seem like a lot of time passed between the 15th and 18th centuries to the 20th and 21st centuries. How can one be too sure that the DNA of dapping transferred between Africans of the continent and Africans of the diaspora?

By way of the Middle Passage.

The Middle Passage was the portion of the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas, where kidnapped Africans were taken to the Americas for sale to be enslaved. It’s believed that those Africans arrived in the New World with nothing but despair, but that’s not true.

For example, Africans arrived in the New World with food, rice, corn and true yams grown off the coast of West Africa. What Black people call yams are sweet potatoes — a substitute. Okra, watermelon and black-eyed peas made the trip as well. Africans also arrived with ancestral knowledge and ways of knowing to cook and prepare those foods in various ways.

The same is true of handshakes. According to African American and African Diasporic Studies professor Tyler D. Parry:

> Handshakes were arguably easier to preserve since they did not require external equipment, just the ability to maneuver one’s wrist and fingers. However, handshakes were likely specific to one’s ancestral ethnic group. If one was unable to find individuals who shared the same ancestral ties in West Africa, replicating a specific salutation surely proved difficult. Consequently, enslaved friends likely recreated or reimagined their ancestral salutations and modified them within their new circumstances.

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The linkages between modern dapping and African handshakes aren't a coincidence. Its cultural transmission was born from trauma to facilitate solidarity and safety, just as it was during the Vietnam War.

It's a recognition of who Black people are to one another versus who we are seen or portrayed as.

Today, groups like The DAP Project celebrate dap as the love language that it is. It's a love language when I dap my friends. It is when I dap my kids. It was when I dapped my dad. I'm unsure if it's thought of in that way on the NFL or NBA draft stage or while receiving the Vince Lombardi trophy. Ta-Nehisi Coates shared that the place where dap is most likely to be transmitted to other ethnicities is in athletic competition.

Proof of that is Super Bowl MVP Patrick Mahomes, who shares dap with numerous teammates and with opponents after games.

It's too bad that love for Black people isn't as easily transmitted. Thus, the dap endures.

Black people contend daily within an anti-Black society. We've seen our right to vote challenged with laws and court decisions. Police brutality continues, the school-to-prison pipeline still exists, and lawmakers fight to deny the teaching of our history. Maintaining a sense of community in the face of it is how Black people continue to fight against white supremacy at every turn.

Dap is more than a handshake. It's a recognition of who Black people are to one another versus who we are seen or portrayed as within the social structure. Dapping is a mechanism of trust and safety; physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Everyone may dap because it's fetishized as cool or because it's socially acceptable. But for us, the dap transmits the love Black folk have for each other we fail to receive from the world with every clasp of the hands and snap of the fingers.

From Africa to Americana.

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By **RANN MILLER**

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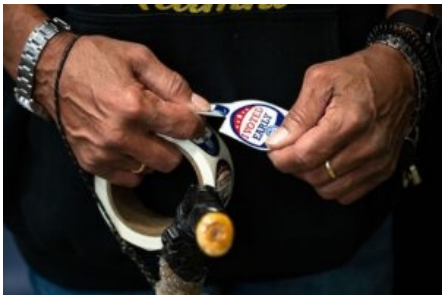
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