

Sharing Is Caring: Vocal Music and Arab Identity in the Middle East

¹Renee Hanna Hattar and ²Carmen Ramirez-Hurtado

¹Peace and Conflicts and Democracy University of Granada, Spain

²Music Education and Peace Research Studies

Abstract: Throughout history the region of the Middle East has known great conflict and war, many of which have appeared to have a religious nature. As a result many Muslim Arabs, who forming the majority of inhabitants of the region's countries, have too often clashed with their fellow Christian Arabs. This article focuses on the nature of so-called religious conflict and argues that it is more truly political in nature, influenced by many external interests and interferences. Religion has been first pretext and, later on, the scapegoats for many wars. Secondly, our focus is one too often ignored: that of a single Arabic identity. The people of the Arab Middle East share the same language, culture, history and music regardless of any religious differences. Hence, from the Middle Eastern perspective, one is an Arab Christian or Arab Muslim, rather than a Christian Arab or a Muslim Arab. Starting from the interface of these two issues-religion and identity-we focus on vocal music and the idea that practicing together their traditional Arabic music might offer an important living example to reinforce the elements of a shared Arab identity among Muslims and Christians in the Arab Middle East. As witnessed by the examples we use, these peoples, who can (and do) sing together and use the same melodies for their respective chants are able, through such practice, to understand one another better and learn how to listen truly to the other and live together more peacefully.

Key words: Identity • Religion • Conflict • Peace • Music

INTRODUCTION

In this article our focus is on two concerns: first, the nature of the conflict in the Arab Middle East; and secondly, the Arab linguistic and cultural identity which is shared by both Muslims and Christians alike throughout the region. What is now known as the 'Middle East' was historically a strategically significant area because of its geographical position, water resources and its fertile land and the fact that it is the cradle of many religions. The peoples living in the countries which make up this region have witnessed the birth of many religions and empires and have experienced times of prosperity together with many wars. This has given them rich awareness of understanding different religions and cultural influences, while at the same time requiring them to coexist for extensive periods with peoples from different cultures and backgrounds. Societies in the countries of the Arab Middle East have always been essentially and profoundly religious, in that religion and

spirituality together have constituted a very important and integrated feature of their culture. Today, a majority of the population in these countries is Muslim, with significant minorities of other faith groups, mainly Christian. Although these populations might confess different faiths, they still share the same essential Arab culture, language, tradition and history. These two principal realities lead us to the main question of this article: is practicing vocal music together able so to strengthen this Arab, linguistic and cultural identity as to enable it to overcome the religious differences and divisions which sadly seem to characterize the peoples of the Arab world?

For this research, we adopt a socio-critical approach, since we are exploring a dynamic reality and we shall endeavor to explore more deeply the phenomenological understanding of this reality [1].

In order to answer this question, we must first explore the concepts of conflict and identity and, in particular, the role of vocal music.

Conflict: We must define what is commonly understood as conflict in the Arab Middle East and its relation to identity. Historically throughout the Middle East, peoples from different religious groups who share the Arab culture, language, history and life have lived together peacefully. They have always considered religion to be a very important part of their history and culture, but not necessarily a source of difference from, or conflict with, their neighbors and friends of other religions. A superficial survey of recent history might well suggest, albeit mistakenly, that the conflict in the Middle East finds its roots in religious differences. It is fundamentally a political conflict which uses religion as a pretext for promoting conflict, playing on religious differences. Such an interpretation denies the fact that by sidelining Christians, Arabs are denying a significant part of their identity by renouncing Arab history prior to the clash between the Christian and the Muslim faiths. Yet, at particular moments in history and largely because of external influences and political interference, Arab Christians have been too often excluded from participation in the Arab Nation as original Arab citizens, essentially because of the perceived identification of Arab culture with Islam, which has been positively promoted by numerous national movements. This is most evident in the aftermath of war between Israel and the several Arab states of the Middle East under the banner of pan-Arabism [2]. This has unfortunately led many Arab Christians to deny their Arab identity and to look to their Christian roots (such as Syriac or Coptic) or other ancient ethnic references (such as Phoenician) so as to establish the foundation of their identity [3].

Recent political events and disasters, including 9/11, wars in Iraq and Syria and the more recent rise of so-called 'radical' Islam, have led the outside world-with the help of the media-to perceive Muslims at large as fanatical, narrow-minded individuals who seek, primarily if not solely, to injure peoples of other religions if they will not renounce their faith in favour of Islam [4].

Such an extreme interpretation of Muslim fundamentalism reflects an exclusive identity which more readily causes conflict, as opposed to a multiple, open identity which helps one to understand people of different cultural, ethnic, religious or other backgrounds without resort to stereotypes and prejudice. What most Arabs consider to be unjust political decisions of Western nations concerning the Middle East, particularly in relation to on-going Arab-Israeli conflict, has caused many of them to identify the so-called "Christian" West

as an enemy of Islam. Such an identification thereby creates and reinforces hostility towards Arab Christians by classifying them as allies of the West, "new crusaders" or part of a Western camp. Such a tendency ignores the reality that policies of Western countries are almost exclusively disconnected from religion, but rather concerned primarily with political and financial agendas [5]. In order to understand better the connection between the conflict in the Arab Middle East and both culture and vocal music, let us preview a few ideas concerning the definition of identity.

Identity: The question of identity is a very wide topic and has been studied under many different angles [6-8] and dealing with all of them would exceed the scope of this paper. Thus, we adopt Sen's view of personal identity, who considers it to be multiple in its nature. Thus, "the same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a tennis fan, a jazz musician and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk [9]. Each one of us has multiple identities and to categorize a person only according to one such is usually impoverishing and above all, often constitutes a source of conflict. According to Sen, each one of us sees him/herself as a member, simultaneously, of a variety of groups.

This mode of characterising identity, open and flexible, rather than narrow and exclusive, is a tool which can protect against, or even prevent, conflict.

A Christian Arab is often asked, especially by Westerners, if they identify themselves as Arab first or as Christian. What they don't realize is that they are both at the same time. Just as much as they are Arabs by birth, having lived, experienced and belonged to the Arab culture and speak Arabic as their mother tongue, they are also Christian because this is the religion they follow, believe in and have struggled to keep for many centuries as minorities. Being able to open up and speak to the others without prejudice or stereotypes helps to communicate without the need of putting the other person in a box. This need comes from our fear from the unknown and this is where xenophobia usually begins. Once we accept others as they are with their multiple identities, interests and beliefs and respect the fact that they could be different, our tendency towards conflict

would be minimal because their own difference wouldn't be a factor of fear any more, all the contrary, it could even mean richness for a society where we all live acknowledging that this plurality means diversity.

Vocal Arabic Music: Arabic music originates from a complex tradition drawing upon musical elements of both Muslim and Christian backgrounds. Arab peoples recognize and rely on, a shared cultural background where there is no need to identify purely 'Christian' or purely 'Muslim' chants. A Christian chanting cannot ignore a Muslim brother, simply because any chant affords a possibility to make peace especially insofar as chanting or singing most often occurs during highly significant moments and events of life. As both the tradition and the culture of the Arab Middle Eastern society is originally religious, so is the music and therefore God is at the center of such inherently religious moments which, as a result, contributes to fostering peace.

In pre-Islamic times, the peoples of the Arabic Peninsula and its surrounding regions had regular and prolonged exposure to Egyptian, Babylonian, Greco-roman and Indo-Persian civilizations which gave rise to many influences and interaction among musical ideas and sounds [10].

Among the many cultural and musical influences derived from commercial travel, war, or exchanges between Arabs and other countries and peoples in the region, are two main traditions which have had significant impact on Arabic music in general and on religious music in particular: the Byzantine and Syriac traditions.

Peoples across the Middle East, from Babylon to Egypt, have a strong tradition of vocal music, which includes both chant as well as non-instrumental vocal music which is either connected with, or derived from, acts of worship. This ascription to worship assures them a continuing tradition which is maintained with decorum and religious devotion [11].

Arabic song, as part of the musical composition of both Muslim and Christian Arabs, is divided into the following categories [12]:

- Folkloric popular song
- Monologue songs
- An Nashīd
- Al Mawwāl
- Musical poetry
- Al Muwashsha?

- Opera
- Religious song, which includes:
 - Adh-Dhikr
 - Al Mawlid
 - Ecclesiastical chants
 - Pilgrimage chants
 - Rithā' an Nādibāt (lamentations)
 - Funerals
 - Islamic call for prayer (al Adhān)
 - The recitation of the Quran (at Tartīl)

In the same way that every individual has a unique fingerprint, one's vocal track is also unique, giving each one of us a particular position in the community and indeed in the world. One's voice is not only a product of the disposition of organs: lungs, larynx, pharynx, roof of the mouth, diaphragm, etc. Each of us uses culture and our very life-breath to make our individual voice unique and unrepeatably [13].

As human persons, we use our voice to communicate with, to express ourselves to and interact with, others. First and foremost, all our cultural traditions, Eastern and Western, were oral. Written language only came late into human society and culture. Human beings are unique in possessing organized and structured speech, which distinguishes us qualitatively from the rest of the animal world [14]. Language develops concurrently with voice and, consequently, phonetic expressive particularities of voice in a specific culture develop alongside language. In other words we learn language at the same time as our voice develops, we can't have one without the other [15].

When we speak, we are using all musical parameters: pitch, duration, intensity and timbre. When we sing, we do this more broadly and explicitly, but it is clear that one who learns to sing, one also learns to speak, to use one's voice more effectively. Consequently, even in speaking one is able to communicate more effectively and expressively with others.

Individually, our voice shapes each one of us much more than we think. Additionally, insofar as it is also the basic instrument of both communication and musical expression, singing as part of a group is something which very clearly contributes to our social profile and our identity [16].

Typically, when Arabs in the Middle East gather to sing at weddings, during celebrations, or even at funerals, individuals rarely stop to think about the religious beliefs held by each person singing. Neither do\

they look for different music or songs to sing. Regardless of different faith backgrounds and practices, they all know both the lyrics and melodies of traditional chants through which they express joy and happiness, or sorrow and grief, according to the occasion. Arabs from all backgrounds share in singing in a common language and thereby express the cultural values which they share historically regardless of any faith differences. Arabs of different faith traditions celebrate weddings and hold funerals together as Arabs not exclusively in their faith communities. They share their joy or grief with their neighbors, their colleagues (from work, school or university) and of course with their friends who could all easily be from a different religion and background [17].

Through their sharing the same language, traditions, history and culture, a Christian Arab and a Muslim Arab have so much more in common through their shared Arab identity than separates them by their religious differences. Christians and Muslims have learned to care for one other through their long coexistence across the Middle East. Their human affection is shown and lived out in many moments and manifested in many places. That is why it is not rare or unusual to see a Christian in the street pouring water into a Muslim's hands to help him wash to perform wuḥū' before praying, or to see a Muslim friend helping a Christian friend in decorating a Christmas tree.

Choirs performing traditional, classical or even religious music in the Arab Middle East which include both Christians and Muslims serve as another example to illustrate the importance of sharing overarching common sentiments, cultural values and ideas.

On the one hand, learning to sing in a group teaches one the art of silence. Such practice is something to be learned, that one must learn to "do". Practicing silence is not something that we can take for granted, neither is it innate, particularly because we are social and communicative when being together. Moreover in a society where noise and volume are increasing, silence is both more rare and more difficult to practice. Noise pollution is a significant contributor to the damage humanity is inflicting upon our environment [17].

A choir waiting with anticipation to perform a piece at a concert, craving that deep silence, immerses itself into a dense and expectant silence awaiting the director's signal to begin singing. Silence is also essential to each singer wishing to learn his or her part in a piece, to allow each one to concentrate on the melody which one has to interpret. And in conjunction with that silence, real listening is also learned: listening to others who are part of the same musical line; to those who sing in the

other parts; to know when to come in as a soloist and to follow the director. To be member of a choir constitutes an important feature of this social genetics that shapes our identity. Although there is some similarity with belonging to an orchestra or a band, the fact of making music together with only our voices brings us closer in a very particular way to the group. As we indicated previously, one's voice is almost congruent with one's personality. Thus, to be able to share our voices together marks our common identity in a very strong way. In a choir, as in any human group, there is the risk of competitiveness and selfishness among individual members.

On the other hand, choir members typically feel a strong sense of belonging. This is an inclusive identity in the sense that singers normally have no objection to singing with other choral groups. On the contrary, these opportunities tend to be celebrated experiences. It is not unusual for one voice to contribute to two groups: someone can belong to both the parish and the school choirs without any problem whatsoever. However, can the same be said of a football fan: can one support two teams whose rivalry seems eternal? Having a vocal identity also includes having cultural, social and religious identities. To give a real life example of what has been laid out above, let us contemplate the lyrics of the following chant. In Jordan both Muslims and Christians share the same wedding chants with the exact same melody. At times, however, they need to change a few words so as to adapt them to the reality dictated by belonging to a different faith group. This part of the chant is usually recited by women to congratulate the bride and groom and give them their blessings. In the Jordanian dialect this chant is called "Mhāhāh".

In a Christian wedding, women would typically sing:

(Ey)Yā reito mbārak
(Ey) Sabe' barakāt
(Ey) Mithl mā bārak il Masī?
(Ey) 'Ala ssabe' khubzāt

Congratulations (blessed be the wedding), Seven blessings
As the ones given by Christ
On the seven loaves.

On the other hand, at a Muslim wedding, the following changes would be made while retaining the same rhyme:

(Ey)Yā reito mbāarak
(Ey) Sabe' barakāt
(Ey) Mithl mā bāarak Muhammad
(Ey) 'Alā jabal 'Arafāt

Congratulations (blessed be the wedding), Seven blessings
As the ones given by Muhammad
On Mount Arafat

In this chant both Muslim and Christian Jordanians alike bless the bride and groom with mention of their respective prophets. While Christians refer to Jesus' miracle of the multiplication of bread and fish, Muslims refer to blessings given by Muhammad on Mount Arafat in Mecca, where the Hajj is initiated. No one knows the exact origin of this chant; whether the Christian verse came first and the Muslims copied it or if the Christians copied it from Muslims and changed the lyrics, all we know is that it is shared and sung maintaining the same melody and in the exact same occasion serving the idea and tradition both religion followers share in their Arab culture.

Another musical example could be the famous *Dal'ūnah* which is a genre of Arabic popular music usually accompanied by a special group dance *Dabkeh*, known in all of the countries of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan) with a few variations in each. The late and famous Lebanese musician Zaki Nassif gave one of the most probable theories to explain the origin of this music. He claimed it is Christian and mainly of Syriac background. It all started with the construction of houses in small towns, where the roofs were built using sand and stones and needed to be pressed. Before having roller stones, people of the town used to gather to do the process themselves, they would form a circle and start dancing holding their hands and standing very close together that their shoulders would touch and start moving in a circle walking to a certain rhythm and stomping their right foot strongly to the ground on the count of 6. Accompanying that process was the *Dal'ūnah* song which is, according to Nassif, an Arabic pronunciation of the syriac /del 'ona/ which means "help". So basically the group on the roof would be dancing and asking the help of others to gather to dance and sing with them in order to help them finish pressing the roof.

This dance and musical Arabic Levantine genre are still used to express this idea of group gathering, help, sharing, closeness and caring among the

ones participating in it. It extended to weddings, celebrations, etc. On one hand no body questions the origins of the music, the tradition or its connection to a certain religion, all Arabs of the region sing and dance to *Dabkeh* tunes with great joy, on the other hand it is a nice example of joining hands between invited persons to a wedding or a celebration, where friends are sharing the joy and help with no reference to religion.

These are only a few manifestations of how vocal music brings together both Muslims and Christians in the Arab Middle East, creating a moment of peaceful dialogue through their shared culture away from religious differences.

CONCLUSION

Interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence are more likely to derive from civil society than from any action or activity on the part of governments. This is particularly true in a situation, whether geographical or political, where there is space which allows for real human interaction and sharing and therefore a real, lived experience of knowing, living and taking care of one other. Where the true humanity of individuals is revealed and commonalities emerge, true respect and relationship can be nurtured.

The shared Arabic language and culture spans and thereby diminishes, the religious divide between Christians and Muslims, especially when both language and culture are transformed into music through singing. It is above all, the human voice that strongly articulates both personal and social identities. Consequently, when voices come together in harmony, the true peace which underlies it is revealed.

Finally, singing together implicates unity. Open collaborative identity is based on language and culture which include yet do not annul personal identity of individuals.

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