

Birds from Palestine: Performing national belonging in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the social effects of a community music program in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, with particular focus on how social music making is implicated in the constitution of cultural identities, national consciousness, and agency. Using ethnographic methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I show how the music program provides the young Palestinians with templates for national belonging that become powerful means of social inclusion and experiences of self-worth, pride, and empowerment. However, I also consider whether these effects can be said to rely on the participants' subjection to socially and institutionally valid notions of Palestinian identity and forms of belonging. I argue that musical participation is implicated in asserting an essentialist notion of Palestinian identity that potentially reduces the complexity of the lived experiences of the young Palestinians and excludes other possible modes of belonging and self-understanding. In this way, the analysis draws attention to the ambiguous role of musical learning and performance in musical-social work.

KEYWORDS

Community music; music education; belonging; cultural identity; Palestinian refugees

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INTRODUCTION

May 2016: The Palestinian/Lebanese NGO *Beit Atfal Assumoud*¹ (BAS) is hosting a concert in the grand hall of the UNESCO Palace in Beirut, commemorating the 68th anniversary of *al Nakba*, the catastrophe, which is the term the Palestinians use to designate the events in 1948 that led to the foundation of the State of Israel and the expulsion of more than 700.000 Palestinians from their ancestral homelands. Employees, volunteers, parents and children associated with the organization fill the hall. Approximately a thousand Palestinians from all over the country have come to witness tonight's performance of music and dance by children and youth from the organization's centers in the twelve refugee camps in Lebanon. One of the more spectacular acts is an orchestra comprising more than 60 musicians, aged 6-21, from a community music program run by BAS in the Rashidieh refugee camp. Since 2012, I have been involved in the music program as a teacher and researcher, and tonight I sit among the audience as nervous as the performers, hoping that the hard work the musicians have put into preparing for this concert will pay off. And indeed it does. After a well-received rendition of the Beatles classic "Let it be," the energy levels are significantly lifted when the two lead singers initiate the song "Ana Falestinye" ("I am a Palestinian"). From my position right in front of the stage, I feel the explosion of commitment from the audience behind me; everybody is clapping, ululating, and waving Palestinian flags to show their excitement. At the same time, I am close enough to the performers to notice how the intense rocking of bodies, focused minds, and occasional smiles exchanged between the musicians reveal that they too are enjoying themselves.

The scene narrated above is one example of how the Palestinians in Lebanon use music and dance to express and construct their identity, articulate and maintain a sense of belonging to their homeland, and assert the continued existence and unity of the Palestinian community.² As for other diasporic communities, musical performance serves as an important means of shaping and articulating a distinct cultural identity and establishing a collective memory of the past (for a review of this research, see Lidskog, 2017). In the social life of the Palestinian community, remembrance is specifically tied to commemorative events, such as the *Nakba* concert described in the opening paragraph. These events are places for articulating a sense of national belonging in stories, symbols, and through the performance of the Palestinian cultural heritage, music and dance. Such occasions function as markers of both the historical events of suffering and the continuous dispossession of the Palestinian people, but also as a show of agency and resistance against the ongoing marginalization (Khalili, 2007). By honoring the past and performing the nation into being, the refugees publicly express the pride, strength, and determination with which they will defend their right to return to Palestine and fight for a life in dignity. This points to another function of commemorative practices and musical performance: Performing the cultural heritage and reiterating the stories and memories of the Palestinian past are educative means of securing a transmission of the national identity to the younger generations of Palestinian refugees with no first-hand knowledge of the land of Palestine. As Juliane Hammer (2005) writes: "For those Palestinians who were born and raised in exile, these

¹ *Beit Atfal Assumoud* (The Home of the Children of Steadfastness) is the Arabic name of the organization. The English name is *The National Institution of Social Care and Vocational Training*.

² Several ethnomusicologists have explored Palestinian music and dance as performance of identity, resistance and belonging (see Belkind, 2014; Kanaaneh, Thorsén, Bursheh, and McDonald, 2013; Kaschl, 2003; McDonald, 2013; and Van Aken, 2006).

memories are their connection to Palestine – their source of knowledge, attachment, and national identity” (p. 43). Learning and performing the cultural heritage are central means by which the coming generation of refugees comes to know themselves as Palestinians.

The view of identity expressed here displaces essentialist notions, in favor of thinking of identity as performatively constituted. The national cultures into which people are born must be seen as discourses that “construct identities by producing meanings about ‘the nation’ with which we can *identify*; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it” (Hall, 1996, p. 613). From this perspective, cultural identities are produced and performed across time and space as people invest in particular meanings provided by the discursive practices in which they engage. Music can be such a process of identification through which people attach themselves to imagined cultural narratives that influence and guide their perceptions of themselves and their social world (Frith, 1996). On a collective level, music is a constitutive part of social life and a vital means by which people locate and relocate themselves in social space, evoke and organize collective memories, and construct, negotiate, and transform social boundaries (Stokes, 1994).

In this article, I explore the connections between musical learning and performance and the maintenance, negotiation, and transmission of Palestinian identity. Previous research has connected the music program in Rashidieh to positive effects such as experiences of well-being, belonging, and empowerment that subvert or challenge prevailing experiences of marginalization and deprivation (Boeskov, 2013; Ruud, 2012; Storsve, Westbye and Ruud, 2010). I argue in this article that the social effects cannot be reduced to these. What must be considered is the way the musical practice constitutes the conditions for agency and experience; not only how participants, through their engagement in the practice express and gain ownership of their cultural identities, but also how they are fashioned as Palestinians and subjected to a specific socially and institutionally sanctioned version of national belonging and identity. In other words, the music program not merely provides participants with opportunities for experiencing a sense of belonging or recognition; it also constructs the conditions under which such experiences can be pursued.

Analyzing the experiences of young Palestinian refugees, I show how the music program provides specific templates for national belonging that become powerful means of social inclusion and experiences of self-worth, pride, and empowerment. However, at the same time, I argue that the musical practice contributes to essentializing Palestinian identity, entailing the advancement of an “official” narrative of national belonging among the Palestinian refugees, which may not fully capture the lived experiences of the young generations growing up in the camps. Further, the musical constitution of a national identity founded on a distant past may exclude other interpretive frames, other lines of belonging and solidarity, through which young Palestinians can come to understand themselves and their social world. In the final section I discuss what these insights might entail for our understanding of music as a means of social intervention.

METHODS

The research reported in this article builds on ethnographic field work (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) in the Rashidieh refugee camp, undertaken through an eight-month stay in 2012, during which I worked as a music teacher in the program, and

subsequent visits in 2016 (30 days) and 2018 (11 days). During these later visits, I primarily engaged in the activities as a participant observer (Spradley, 1980), and I conducted semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) with sixteen music program participants, three music teachers, two administrators from BAS, and also a few young Palestinians from the camp and neighboring camps not associated with the music program or BAS.³ I selected the interviewees myself in order to secure diversity in terms of age, gender, and experience in the program. All participants in the study received oral and written information about the research project, the use of video recordings (see below), the confidential handling of personal information, and the possibility to withdraw consent. For the interlocutors under the age of sixteen, parents also gave their consent. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, and revealing personal information has been omitted or changed in order to preserve anonymity. The research process was reviewed and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

The purpose of interviewing the music program participants was to explore the social significance of the activities, in terms of what musical participation is said to *mean* for the actors involved, but also how music becomes a resource that both the organization and the participants themselves can put to *use* for different purposes. The teachers and the administrators were interviewed in order to understand the wider social significance of the music program, its social and cultural context, and the institutional objectives underlying the activities. These accounts were further put into perspective through interviews and informal conversations with Palestinians living in the camps but not affiliated with the music program or with BAS. The music program participants were asked about their experiences with the music activities, how they connected music making to their everyday lives, and what significance they attributed to specific actions, events, and relationships within the program. During interviews, they viewed short video clips I had made of activities and events in the music program, and they were asked to explain what was going on. The videos provided concrete situations and actions to discuss, particularly helpful when interviewing the youngest interlocutors (age 10-16), who often had difficulties explaining their viewpoints in general terms. While the interviews with the oldest participants, teachers, and social workers were conducted in English, a language assistant helped in interviews with the youngest participants.

As in any other ethnographic study, the present research involves a range of ethical considerations, particularly due to the involvement of children who can be said to be in a vulnerable situation. By interviewing the youngest informants in pairs and in a location they knew and in which they felt comfortable (the BAS center), I sought to create safe situations in which the participants felt able to speak their mind and confident that their opinion and viewpoints mattered and were taken seriously. However, as a white male from the Global North affiliated with some of the organizations that support BAS financially, I was particularly aware of the power relations in the interview situation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, pp. 37-38) and how my position might place the interviewees in difficult situations or influence the interview data, both in terms of how participants might provide accounts that they thought I would like to hear, or how they may have felt obliged to act as representatives of the BAS organization or the Palestinian community in general.

The interviews, however, should not be seen as clear windows into some pre-existing subjectivity. Rather, the interview is a social practice in which meaning is

³ All quotes from interlocutors in the following text derive from these interviews.

constructed as a result of the situational interaction between the participants. As Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (2007) suggest, I read the interviews “for what they tell us about the phenomena to which they refer,” i.e. what participants tell me about their experiences in the music program and the way they use music to negotiate or construct a sense of national identity, but also in terms of “the perspectives they imply” and “the discursive strategies they employ” (p. 97). Therefore, when analyzing the interviews, I specifically looked at *how* the informants (both administrators, teachers, and music program participants) connected music making to issues of national belonging, identity, and culture, the nature of the interpretive constructs the informants applied, and how these were employed.

THE PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON

In May 1948, approximately 100.000 Palestinians fled to Lebanon during the Arab-Israeli war that erupted as a consequence of the establishment of the State of Israel within the borders of the British Mandate of Palestine. In the following years, the majority of these refugees settled in camps established by the newly formed United National Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) that, to this day, continues to provide shelter, education, health care, and employment to the Palestinian refugees in the Middle East region. An estimated 260.000-280.000 Palestinians currently reside in Lebanon (Chaaban et al., 2016, p. 23). In spite of their 70-year residence, Lebanese law still considers the Palestinians foreigners, which places them as a politically and socially disenfranchised community, facing legal and institutional discrimination and lacking basic rights, most importantly the right to own property and to work in a number of liberal professions. The Lebanese authorities partly justify this discriminatory policy by referencing UN Resolution 194, which states that “[Palestinian] refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date” (United Nations, 1948).⁴ According to both Lebanese and Palestinian agitators, naturalization would weaken the Palestinians’ claims to their national rights in Israel/Palestine. However, Palestinian politics have also compromised these rights. The 1993 Oslo peace process resulted in the Declaration of Principles between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was seen to largely renounce the Palestinian refugees’ right of return in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian government in the West Bank and Gaza. The refugees in Lebanon felt effectively abandoned and neglected in the political discussions so central to their future (Schulz, 2003, pp. 146-148). Thus, the Palestinians in Lebanon find themselves in a truly marginal position; expelled and persecuted by the State of Israel, discriminated against and barely tolerated by their Lebanese hosts, betrayed by their own political representatives, and largely forgotten by the international community.⁵

⁴ This resolution is reaffirmed by the UN General Assembly every three years (Peteet, 2005, p. 62).

⁵ For a more detailed picture of the experience of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, see Allan (2014); Hammer (2005); Peteet (2005); and Sayigh (1979, 1994).

THE MUSIC PROGRAM

In the Palestinian refugee camps, the NGOs have emerged as the central organizations attending to the needs of the community, providing a wide range of social and cultural services. Through their connections to and funding from the international donor and NGO communities, they have come to occupy important functions both in sustaining everyday life in the camps and as representatives of the Palestinians in Lebanon in international forums. One of these NGOs is Beit Atfal Assumoud (BAS), an organization with social centers in all of the twelve refugee camps in Lebanon, which focuses on supporting the Palestinian community through educational and cultural activities, remedial training, mental health services, and sponsorship programs. Since 2003, BAS has also run a community music program in the Rashidieh camp in the southern part of Lebanon. Through the voluntary commitment of Norwegian music educators, the program has been gradually built up over the years and now serves between 40-80 children and adolescents, who receive music and dance training two days a week from five local music teachers. The musical activities consist of instrument tuition, orchestra playing, and dance training. With the help of the Norwegian partners, the BAS social center in Rashidieh has been equipped with a PA system, keyboards, xylophones, saxophones, violins, drumsets, Arabic handdrums (*darbeka*), percussion instruments, accordions, melodicas, bouzouks, acoustic and electric guitars, and electric basses, which allow the children to play together in a big and quite unique orchestra.

The repertoire consists of a broad variety of music, both Palestinian/Arabic folk and popular songs, and Norwegian and “international” songs that the Norwegian music educators have introduced over the years. The music is arranged according to the principles of the “multi-use arrangement” (Storsve, Westbye and Ruud, 2010), a highly flexible model of arrangement that allows the newcomer who only knows how to play a few notes to participate in the music making, alongside more experienced members of the orchestra. By adapting the music to the skill level of each individual musician or group of musicians, this type of musical arrangement includes performers at various skill levels and, at the same time, provides challenges for all musicians. In the dance training, participants learn the folk dance *dabke*, a communal line-dance common throughout the Middle East, which is an important part of every wedding, engagement party, or other happy occasions in the Palestinian community. The younger participants learn the basic steps to this dance known by all generations of Palestinians, while a more committed group of older participants is taught a presentational form of *dabke*. Due to the Norwegian partnership, the music program has also been part of cultural exchange activities between the Palestinian children and youth and Norwegian children, high school students, and music educators. Norwegian groups have visited the refugee camp and groups of Palestinians have visited Norway on several occasions, where they have performed music and dance for and together with Norwegians.

THE MUSIC PROGRAM AS NATIONAL EDUCATION

For BAS, music activities have become an important part of the social and cultural work of the institution. A main objective for the organization is to “[p]rovide the youth with a platform for self-expression and opportunities to open dialogues with youth from other countries,” (Beit Atfal Assumoud, n.d.) an ambition the music program has effectively contributed to fulfilling by providing opportunities to perform music and dance for and with Palestinian and Lebanese as well as

international audiences. The program also serves another central objective of the institution, which is to “[p]reserve the Palestinian identity by preserving its cultural heritage and transmitting it to the new generations” (Beit Atfal Assumoud, n.d.). The cultural heritage constitutes an important means of attachment to the lost homeland for the Palestinians in Lebanon, and traditional music and dance, as well as traditional dress, food, and cultural practices connected to pre-1948 Palestinian life, are highly valued, meticulously preserved, and transmitted to new generations of refugees growing up in the camps. The dispossession of the Palestinian people inscribes such practices with a sense of urgency. As Julie Peteet (2005, pp. 34-46) shows, ideological work by the Zionist movement and the State of Israel has crafted a predominantly Jewish past in the historical land of Palestine, marginalizing and erasing the presence of an indigenous non-Jewish population that could hold any form of entitlement to the land.⁶ Therefore, for the Palestinian refugees, preserving the Palestinian identity is a matter of upholding existence as a people with a legitimate claim to the land of Palestine. Transmission of knowledge concerning origin and history and performing Palestinian music and dance are not only means of preserving the national identity, but also a form of resistance. As a BAS senior official explained to me:

We continue struggling and keeping our identity, [and this] begins from the kindergarten in Beit Atfal Assumoud. Each child should know the name of his origin. His town, his village, where he is from, okay? Just to know. Even from the age of three, he should know that the flag of Palestine is like this, the colors are like this. This is how we raise our children to remain Palestinians.

In this way, Palestinian identity is connected to a territorial origin, and in order to establish a coherent self-identity, the children who grow up in exile must know where they belong. The institutional focus on preservation – which is also articulated in the formulations “keeping our identity” and “to remain Palestinians” – points to an essentialist notion of Palestinian identity. My interlocutors in the music program often depict the Palestinian identity as an inner core existing within all Palestinians in the world. Therefore, performing the Palestinian cultural heritage is seen as a way reconciling the fractured self, caused by the diasporic condition, by providing access to a primordial and immutable national identity. As one of the music teachers stated:

I think the [Palestinian] musical tradition is very important for all kids. Because the traditional music means Palestinian identity. And we teach our kids how to be a real Palestinian. [...] So they like to play traditional [music] because they feel: ‘this is mine’. This is my identity. This is what I want to show the people, my identity. My beautiful musical tradition.

The political situation of the Palestinian community renders the employment of such a “strategic essentialism” understandable. As Craig Calhoun (1994) argues, “[W]here a particular category of identity has been repressed, delegitimated or devalued in dominant discourses, a vital response may be to claim value for all those labeled by that category, thus implicitly invoking it in an essentialist way” (p. 17). For BAS and other institutions representing the Palestinian community in

⁶ The much-cited statement by Israeli prime minister Golda Meir that before the sixties “[t]here was no such thing as Palestinians ... They did not exist”, which appeared in *The Sunday Times*, June 15, 1969, p. 12 (quoted in Khalidi, 1997, pp. 147, 181) is often taken as the essence of the attempt to deny the existence of a Palestinian people.

Lebanon, essentialization of Palestinian identity is considered crucial for advancing the claims of national rights on behalf of not only the refugees who actually experienced the *Nakba*, but also the subsequent generations who have inherited the consequent dispossession. However, such essentialist notions of identity conceal the constructed or invented nature of tradition, culture, identity, and “the nation” (Anderson, 2006; Hall and Du Gay, 1996; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Wagner, 2016; Williams, 1977). The Palestinian national identity is not so much preserved through the performance of the cultural heritage; rather, such performances are ways of constituting and reifying this identity. While the staging of Palestinian music and dance may be seen as articulations of a pre-existing national identity, and, therefore, also as acts of resistance to marginalization, on another level, such performances mark the participants as Palestinians and “in the act of marking, the performance regulates, constrains and otherwise mediates fundamental aspects of what it means to be Palestinian and what it means to ‘resist’” (McDonald, 2013, p. 24).

Strategic essentialism may be a potent (even indispensable) means of asserting and legitimizing political claims on behalf of a dispossessed group. However, the risk of essentialism is a reduction of complex subjectivities to a few core attributes deemed appropriate to substantiate the political aspirations of a given group. For BAS, cultural activities, such as music and dance, are used as a means of asserting an unceasing attachment to the land of Palestine, transmitting a sense of national belonging and pride to the children growing up in the refugee camps, and displaying an image of a unified community that patiently awaits the inevitable restoration of social justice, their future return to Palestine. This institutional strategy entails the emphasis on particular events, stories, images, and symbols – a “system of representation” – within which the participants in the music program are afforded specific resources for national identification. In the following sections, I will explore how the young Palestinians invest in, negotiate, or resist the imposition of this dominant national narrative as an adequate interpretive frame for constructing their sense of national belonging and identity.

REMEMBERING PALESTINE, PERFORMING THE NATION

Hanin has been a dedicated member of the music program for eight years and a part of numerous performances, concerts, and cultural exchange activities both in the camp and in Norway. However, as a first-year university student, she is now finding it difficult to come on both Fridays and Sundays for the music activities. Nonetheless, she still feels very connected to the music program and the other participants. We are “like one family,” she tells me, “he is my brother, she is my sister. We are always kidding and laughing and have very nice moments with each other.” When I ask Hanin what music means to her, she tells me:

I feel proud when I get to the stage and start singing and the people start asking about this girl, how did they teach her this old song and traditional song. So I just... keep our culture, I help people to keep our culture in their minds.

The importance of “keeping our culture” and “remembering Palestine” is not just expressed by teachers and administrators of the program; it is also a common theme in interviews I held with the participants. Even some of my youngest interviewees, such as Nour and Farah, two twelve-year-olds in the music program, part of the *dabke* team taught the presentational form of *dabke*, talk about remembering. When I ask them why they like dancing *dabke*, they first point to dancing as a way of

exercising and strengthening the body. Eventually, they also address its symbolic significance for the exilic community:

Nour: It [*dabke*] is ‘folk’ [cultural heritage] for the Palestinians.

Farah: It reminds us of Palestine.

Interviewer: Why is this important to you?

Farah: Why? Because to remember Palestine.

Nour: Because we are Palestinians, and it [*dabke*] reminds us of our customs and traditions.

Farah: It shows an image, that we don't forget Palestine, and we do all these things for it [Palestine]. That we will not forget it.

For Farah and Nour, remembering Palestine is important for asserting an attachment to its culture and traditions. However, when Farah articulates how the performance of *dabke* expresses that the participants have not forgotten Palestine, she is also touching upon a moral imperative in the Palestinian community, connected to remembering, or, more accurately, not forgetting.

The importance of preserving the memory of the homeland is a pervasive theme in Palestinian scholarship and literature. The dispossession and prolonged exile pose an existential threat, which means that “[t]he continued existence of Palestine and its people ... now depends on a consciously remembered history and cultural tradition” (Allan, 2014, p. 42). Forgetting would be tantamount to an erasure of the Palestinian people, rendering years of sacrifices and suffering meaningless. By participating in the music program, the young generation of Palestinians is taught the importance of remembering, which was most clearly articulated by Hanin:

Every country has its history, has its culture, and it must always try to keep these things in their minds. And with the help of, for example, Beit Atfal Assumoud, my second family, they always help us to keep these things. Maybe when I was born, I didn't know what is meant by Palestine or Jerusalem or anything else, but when you see people coming from Palestine to here, or see people all the time talking about my culture, traditional songs, the dress of Palestinian girls or boys, I start thinking that I should keep this culture in my mind, to tell other people about it. And a person without culture is nothing. If they ask me “where are you from?” I have nothing to say. I am nothing.

Hanin's understanding of her cultural identity as related to remembrance of the past, dependent on the continued enactment of a cultural heritage and directly connected to a territorial origin, is congruent with how the participants, teachers, and administrators of the program generally portray their self-understandings. “A person without culture is nothing,” Hanin insists, implying that Palestinian culture is not just an aspect of her subjectivity, but that which enables that subjectivity to exist at all.

For Hanin, remembering has become personally significant, but, as stated above, commemorative practices also hold broader social importance. Attending performances of the Palestinian cultural heritage enables not only the performers, but also the audience, to renew their connection to the homeland. This is especially significant for the first generation of Palestinian refugees, a group of people treated respectfully in the community as important sources of knowledge about Palestine and living testimonies to the continued attachment to the land. Hanin proudly recalls

how after a concert, she was approached by an old man, a first-generation refugee, who complimented her for her singing and told her: “You are a bird from Palestine.” This depiction underlines the symbolic significance of Hanin’s musical performance. By singing the songs from the lost homeland, Hanin not only reminds the refugees of their ancestral homeland but also momentarily embodies the Palestinian national spirit. Notably, Hanin proudly accepts the role as a medium for Palestinian memories and identity and her inscription in the national narrative that emphasizes the refugees’ unceasing attachment to Palestine. The performance of music is a public display of loyalty toward a collective Palestinian identity shared across generations and a powerful symbol of the intergenerational unity of the Palestinian people.

Explaining what the audience feels when they witness the performance, twelve-year-old Farah invokes a kind of nationalist rhetoric often used by speakers at commemorative events. Using a common Arabic metaphor of how the separate fingers work together as a hand to form a strong unit (see e.g. Peteet, 2005, p. 162), she depicts the Rashidieh band as a united force fighting for justice:

They [the audience] feel happy because they know that we are one hand. [...] We encourage the people to trust us and rely on us; that in our hand [our unity, the unity of the band], [because of] our patience, our courage, we will return back Palestine [free Palestine].

Music and dance can be seen as important resources by which the Palestinian refugees construct and transmit the memory of Palestine from one generation to the next and express feelings of belonging to the homeland. However, performing music and dance also functions as the means by which those in the young generation actively subject themselves to the national cause. Palestinian nationalism provides the discursive formation through which the performance of music and dance is interpreted. This is most clearly articulated by the way Farah not only identifies with the Palestinian cause but also makes use of the language of the Palestinian nationalist discourse to describe the social significance of her own musical performance.

DOES PALESTINE REMEMBER US?

As discussed above, remembering Palestine must be seen as a moral imperative for the Palestinians growing up in Lebanon, and, as could be expected, the participants generally expressed loyalty toward the national narrative during the interviews. However, as I will exemplify below, a few young Palestinians displayed various forms of resistance or ambiguity toward this narrative as a meaningful interpretive frame for their musical engagement. Hassan and Khalil are both fifteen years old, and despite the fact that they have been part of the music program for only two years, they have become central members of the orchestra, as well as the *dabke* team. I meet Hassan and Khalil for an interview at the BAS center to ask them about their experiences in the music program. Ten minutes into the interview, I show them a video clip of their *dabke* performance from the *Nakba* concert and ask them what they think about it:

Khalil (in English): Remember Palestine.

Interviewer: Okay.

Hassan: The days of Palestine [expression, referring to pre-1948 Palestine].

Interviewer: The days of the Palestine? *Dabke* is important because it is a way of remembering Palestine?

Hassan: Yes.

Interviewer: And what else, what about dancing, do you like dancing?

Hassan (in English): It's amazing.

Interviewer: What is good about it?

Hassan: It strengthens our muscles and skills.

Interviewer: So dancing *dabke* is for your body, and for developing your skills. And also for being Palestinian?

Hassan: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay, how is... how does dancing help you remember Palestine?

Hassan: Our heritage. There was *dabke* in the past days, we are still related to our culture and we are still performing *dabke*.

Interviewer: So, it is because it is the old traditions that you still...

Hassan: Yes.

Interviewer: Is it important for you to remember Palestine? Can you tell me why?

Hassan: (Laughing) We don't want to remember Palestine.

While both Khalil and Hassan from the beginning reiterate the "official" narrative and the importance of remembering, Hassan suddenly decides to change the perspective, which makes both the language assistant and Khalil laugh. This clearly encourages Hassan, who continues with a smirk:

Hassan: Does Palestine remember us? Palestine has gone. (Laughing again)

Interviewer: So, why do you dance *dabke*?

Hassan: For fun and entertainment.

Hassan's sudden dismissal of the obligatory nationalist reasons for dancing *dabke* is interesting. However, his joking attitude makes it hard for me to discern the meaning of this turn in the conversation. I try to keep the conversation on track and to bring the more reserved Khalil into the discussion as well.

Interviewer: Do you feel the same, Khalil?

Khalil (in English): Remember our history.

Hassan interrupts, again with a smirk on his face: "History, what are you talking about?" which makes Khalil shut up. While Khalil underlines the importance of remembering, thereby reproducing the national narrative, Hassan seems determined to undermine it. Yet, his use of irony safeguards him from direct attempts to pursue these questions in a serious manner. Eager to get my interlocutors to talk about these sensitive issues, I pose a quite direct question:

Interviewer: Do you really feel that it is important for you to remember Palestine or is it more important just to dance and be with friends?

Khalil: We, the boys, fight through *dabke* and history.

Interviewer: What do you mean by this?

Khalil: Teacher A told us this once. They [Israel] are imitating us, our flags, our history.

Khalil refers to the common idea in the Palestinian community that Israel is stealing the primordial Palestinian culture and branding it as Israeli in order to assert ownership over the land of Palestine. While I have heard this theme retold many times in the music program, the language assistant shows signs of confusion, and, in order to clarify, Hassan continues:

Hassan: Israel is imitating our culture, and we want to support our heritage so that Israel will not take it from us.

Interviewer: So you feel it is kind of a fight against Israel to dance *dabke*?

Hassan: Yes.

Interviewer: And you want to participate in this fight, you want to share this fight?

Hassan: Yes.

Interviewer: For the people living here in Rashidieh, or for the Palestinians everywhere?

Hassan (in English): All the children of Palestine.

The conversation comes to a halt. My direct question about the importance of remembering Palestine did not lead to any discussion of the relevance of remembering or ambivalent attitudes toward the national narrative. As the question largely dismantled Hassan's ability to hide behind an ironic attitude, he rejoins Khalil in a reiteration of common and legitimate viewpoints concerning Palestinian nationalism. Hoping to delve more into issues of national belonging, I show Hassan and Khalil a video clip of a performance of a Palestinian song at the commemoration of the Palestinian Land Day, which was held at the BAS center a couple of weeks prior to the interview. After seeing the video, Hassan makes Khalil laugh again, this time by imitating the clichés of official speeches used in commemorative events:

Hassan: Our land is Palestine, we will not let it go whatever happens!

While the language assistant translates to me, trying not to laugh at Hassan's imitations, he continues his improvised speech:

Hassan: Since 1948, Israel made us leave Palestine, and we want to fight for Palestine through music and *dabke* to bring its freedom.

Hassan retains his joking attitude and is clearly doing something that he is not supposed to do in an interview with a foreign researcher about the importance of Palestinian commemoration and political claims. He is obviously enjoying himself and the way he has turned the interview into an awkward situation for me and the language assistant. At this point, it is difficult for me to determine whether Hassan's behavior is meant to disrupt the interview or is actually a display of opposition toward Palestinian nationalism. Seeing no way to constructively address this, I merely try to keep the conversation on track:

Interviewer: So, do you like being on the stage and performing like this?

Hassan: Yes, sure.

Interviewer: What kind of feelings do you get?

Hassan (laughing, as he again imitates official speech mode): Having the soul to resist, Palestine my blood, my heart, my soul. I would sacrifice everything for you. Oh, Palestine ...

The last part of Hassan's speech is turned into a song, until both Hassan and Khalil burst into laughter. The language assistant, who can't stop laughing herself, turns to me and says: "Sorry, Kim."

While my language assistant may have felt that this was a failed interview, I strongly disagree. Rather, I consider it an articulation of ambivalence connected to the subjection to the dominant narrative emphasizing the unceasing attachment to Palestine. Such expressions of ambivalence are also discussed by Diana Allan when, in her study of commemorative practices in the Palestinian camps, she argues that "[y]ounger generations born and raised in the diaspora are finding it difficult to absorb ordinary narratives as part of their own identity or as a frame for national belonging" (Allan, 2014, pp. 60-61). However, I don't believe Hassan's ironic attitude toward the nationalist discourse should necessarily be understood as a complete rejection of the relevance or legitimacy of the official national narrative. Instead, what Hassan's healthy sense of teenage disobedience illuminates is that there is not a neat fit between this narrative and the lived experience of the third- and fourth-generation Palestinians growing up in the camps in Lebanon. I take this interview to reveal how the young generation intuitively knows that the national narrative is a construction that institutions and Palestinian representatives strategically employ in specific situations for the attainment of particular goals, and not a one-to-one representation of how Hassan and his peers understand themselves and their social worlds. While the music program can serve as a means of asserting a national identity and culture, the way Hassan detaches himself from this narrative by evoking it in an ironic fashion suggests to me that it might also have an estranging effect for the participants who, for some reason, do not identify in full with the specifics of these constructions.

BELONGING, ON WHOSE TERMS?

My interpretation of the interview above, as an expression of ambivalence toward the nationalist discourse, is substantiated not only by reference to Allan's (2014) work,⁷ but also through my own experiences in Lebanon, where I have found that the institutional emphasis on remembering and national belonging is not embraced by all young Palestinians. One example is Najad, a university student living in a Palestinian camp close to Rashidieh. She and I met at a conference in Beirut and decided to meet for an interview so I could gain more perspectives on her life as a young Palestinian growing up in Lebanon. Najad is not involved in the music program, nor with any other NGOs or political factions, which she criticizes for not listening to the experiences and wishes of the young generation of Palestinians. "There is a very big difference in generations, because they can't understand such things," she told me, referring to how representatives of the Palestinian NGOs consequently relate Palestinian identity to remembrance of the past. "Old generations are old. And they don't think forward. They don't think that the community is changing and developing." Najad states that she feels connected to Palestine: "I love Palestine," she says, but she fiercely opposes the tendency of victimization and the emphasis on national(ist) education found in the Palestinian

⁷ See also Allan (2018).

NGOs. “They [the NGOs] should teach them that, okay, Palestine is our nation, but we are not victims. We will study to maybe someday take back our land. Children should love Palestine because they love it, not because they [the NGOs] say you should love it.” Adopting a more pragmatic stance, Najad insists that her own generation should not let their future be decided by their grandparents’ attachment to the past, and should be free to establish a sense of belonging – to Palestine and to Lebanon – on their own terms. While I do not wish to cast Najad as the “authentic” representative of the young generation of Palestinians in Lebanon, I believe her experience should at least lead us to question whether the music program, despite its open-access policy and inclusive pedagogical practice, nonetheless risks excluding young people who, for some reason, do not wish to subject themselves to the dominant institutional form of national belonging.

CONCLUSION: THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF MUSICAL LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

In a discussion of the music program in Rashidieh as health promotion,⁸ the music scholar Even Ruud (2012) argues that the music activities provide participants with heightened vitality and pleasure, as well as a sense of agency, belonging, and hope for the future. These findings are substantiated in the interviews I have conducted in Rashidieh. For Hanin, Nour, Farah, and most of the other participants I interviewed, musical learning and performance are tied to a range of positive opportunities, including the ability to establish a connection to a socially significant narrative of national belonging and identity. By enabling the participants to invest in these subject positions, the music program contributes to feelings of empowerment, belonging, and social inclusion, which, as Ruud suggests, can be seen as essential in creating and maintaining a positive self-understanding and a sense of well-being.

What the present study urges us to consider, however, is whether these effects rely on the participants’ subjection to a specific socially and institutionally valid notion of national belonging and identity. For the young Palestinians, the price of empowerment and belonging seems to be the acceptance of a particular national narrative that subjects them to specific feelings of national sentiment and modes of belonging. While becoming a member of the program may entail valuable experiences of belonging and agency, it must be questioned to what degree these experiences depend on the participants’ identification with a national construct that excludes or downplays alternative categories, dimensions, or perspectives, by the means of which the participants can constitute themselves as social agents.

It should be noted that although “the national” is an important interpretive frame, it constitutes merely a part of the available resources found within the program by which the participants can construct their identities. As I have discussed elsewhere (Boeskov, 2018, 2020), some participants utilize learning music to attach themselves to “imagined communities” based on identifications other than the national, which enables them to construct more complex subjectivities that transcend the national narrative as a frame for self-understanding. Notably, the songs and musical instruments from the “Western world” that have been imported

⁸ Ruud (2012, p. 93) employs a *salutogenetic* perspective on health. More than merely the absence of somatic illness, health is perceived as a subjectively experienced phenomenon concerning the experience of meaning and continuity in life.

into the music program through the involvement of Norwegian music educators empower some participants to expand what it means to be a Palestinian, as they are enabled to incorporate other cultural elements into their sense of self. As Hassan's interview also suggests, even though musical practices can overtly or covertly impose specific assumptions, ideas, and values, these constructs are not necessarily adopted automatically or uncritically by individual participants, who may use their musical engagement for a range of idiosyncratic purposes. That said, for participants to experience the music program as a meaningful social practice, they most probably must be able to subject themselves – at least to some extent – to what I argue must be seen as the dominant values underlying this particular organization. Although Hassan may not identify in full with the idea of national belonging performed through the musical activities, he is certainly aware of what such performances mean to his community, and his potential reservations about subjection to such meanings are not visible in the way he engages in the music activities.

While Hassan is able to comply with the social expectations of how national belonging and identity should ideally be performed, Najad's viewpoints urge consideration of what forms of belonging the music practice might exclude. From a position outside the music program, Najad criticizes the Palestinian NGOs for promoting modes of national belonging based on identification with the past rather than a possible future. This should lead to asking: Is it possible for the participants to use their musical engagement for forms of resistance to marginalization not based on a national project? Is it possible to perform other modes of solidarity, to establish other lines of commonality that prepare the ground for alternative ways of imagining a sense of belonging? My suggestion is that these possibilities are largely excluded by the institutional values underlying the music program, in order to prevent diluting the central political claims of the Palestinian community. The continuous advancement of these claims substantiates the legitimacy of BAS as an organization fighting for the right of return on behalf of the Palestinian community, and questioning their status would endanger the organization's reputation and authority. While the music program in Rashidieh in this way implies opportunities for positive social change for the participants, such as experiences of belonging, heightened self-esteem, social inclusion, and well-being, the musical practice simultaneously reproduces broader social and institutional formations that establish the terms under which such experiences can be obtained.

This discussion can be seen as connected to central debates surrounding other socio-artistic intervention programs such as El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programs, which have recently been subjected to critique for one-sidedly emphasizing the positive aspects of social music-making and downplaying issues of power, authority, discipline, and control (see e.g. Baker, 2014; Baker, Bates and Talbot, 2016; Boia and Boal-Palheiros, 2017). The strong belief in music as a means of positive social transformation found within these practices may cause more ambivalent effects to be overlooked – for example, issues of how musical participation can contribute to the imposition and legitimation of particular perceptions of the social world that reproduce social inequalities, rather than obliterating them.

Anna Bull's (2016) study of *In Harmony*, an English Sistema-inspired music program, is a case in point. This program aims to transform the lives of children in deprived communities through classical music ensemble-playing. Evaluations have commended the program for boosting participant confidence, well-being, and social skills. However, when Bull analyzes the program in terms of social class, it is

illuminated how the musical practice contributes to the reinforcement of bourgeois taste and values, thereby furthering the stigmatization of working-class people as lacking certain attitudes and morality. Bull claims that prescribing classical music as an intervention against deprivation and marginalization implies that structural disadvantage can and should be transcended through behavioral change and the adoption of middle-class cultural values and practices. In this way, Bull's analysis shows that while the music program seemingly enables the participants to transcend some problematic aspects of the social context, on a deeper level, the program reproduces and reaffirms perceptions about the social reality that the music program conceals and naturalizes, rather than subjecting them to critical attention.

Similarly, in a discussion of another Sistema-inspired program, the Costa Rican SINEM, Guillermo Rosabal-Coto (2016) argues that the social ascendancy of the at-risk children and young people who participate in this music program relies on their subjection to Western art practices and values. While the government-sponsored program is advanced in public discourse as empowering the participants to improve themselves and transform the social reality of their family, community, and country, Rosabal-Coto (2016) argues that the program rather contributes to "sustaining a predominant social order that has been imagined already by political or financial elites outside [the participants'] vernacular world" (pp. 175-176). In this context, musical participation can be said to conceal, rather than change, structures of inequality and constraint.

Like the analyses conducted by Bull and Rosabal-Coto, the present study prompts us to consider the ambivalent functions of musical practice; not merely whether or how music comes to function as a means of social inclusion and well-being, but more fundamentally how such musical communities are constructed, including the "exclusions and contingencies upon which community activity is based" (Yerichuk, 2014, p. 148). As a powerful tool for identification, musical practices promote or conceal specific conceptions of the social and political reality, with consequences for how musical agents can come to understand themselves and their possibilities for action. While music certainly is an effective way of creating community and experiences of belonging, the effects may be more ambiguous than we might like to consider.

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