Spoken Paper

Ritual, belief, and conflict: Music-making in Palestine

Sommer Forrester  
University of Massachusetts Boston, USA

“My freedom: is to be what they don’t want me to be.”

(Darwish, n.d.)

For over a decade, I have formally and informally investigated the experiences of Palestinians and music education. As the daughter of a Palestinian born in a refugee camp during the war in 1948, I have long since found great interest in the musical experiences of Palestinians and broad sociological themes including identity and perceived identity, visibility and invisibility, and impact of colonialism and decolonization in education in the region. Day-to-day life in this region of the world is heavily influenced by religious and cultural beliefs, and the ongoing political turmoil in the region. Religious and cultural beliefs vary from family to family; however, there are dominant prevailing socio-cultural expectations that impact the day-to-day experiences and viewpoints of individuals. Music-making in the home and community is a cultural norm; however, music is not necessarily a subject that is studied in school. This is in part because the role and function of education are viewed differently than how they are viewed in the West.

In July 2017 and 2018, I lived in Ramallah and taught at the Edward Said Conservatory of Music summer camp as a volunteer. During my time at the Conservatory, I developed relationships with the students and began to document our informal conversations. In addition, I gathered artifacts including recordings of students’ making music, concert footage, and photographs. Within a short time, I became comfortable in this new environment and began to notice and listen on a deeper level. I found myself seeking out the stories of the students, taxi drivers, and shopkeepers, and I became less concerned with gathering data in a structured
manner. I realized that the act of interviewing people was too rigid; rather, I wanted to capture the essence of their experiences, perspectives, and individual stories. The key research questions for this study were: (1) How do Palestinian musicians from the Edward Said Conservatory of Music describe their involvement in music? and (2) How do the socio-cultural expectations of ritual, belief, and conflict, impact music-making, if at all?

The purpose of this presentation is two-fold: (i) to contextualize the “research puzzle” (Stauffer, 2014); (ii) to present the stories of two Palestinians musicians from the Edward Said Conservatory of Music along with vignettes from my experiences in Palestine. Through this presentation, I will explore how the research process evolved from the initial conception of an ethnographic study towards a narrative inquiry. Furthermore, I will explore how the individual stories of the Palestinian musicians helped illuminate meaning through what Stauffer (2014) defined as “lifelikeness or verisimilitude” (p. 187). The individual stories of the Palestinian musicians reveal the multiplicity that exists within the Palestinian culture surrounding identity, beliefs, and rituals. Through our conservations and the individual stories, the participants described how geo-politics, conflict, religion, and culture, impact their identity and inform their motivation to pursue music. Their candor and clarity of thought reveal an overall resilience and desire to be heard, in their own words, how they describe what it means to be a Palestinian musician.