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Songs from Home: A Study of Musical Traditions Amongst Iraqi Refugees

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## INTRODUCTION

I wanted to pursue a project that would combine both my interests in music and anthropology, but I also wanted to learn something new, and something that could be important. Studying musical traditions was a way of playing to my strength as a musician, but also a way of exploring my curiosity about why music is important and how it's used in settings apart from Western art music. In pursuit of this, my research focuses on the music used by resettled Iraqi refugees in the Quad Cities, and asks the questions how does music exist in the memories and daily life of Iraqi refugees in the Quad Cities, and how does the community provide specific expressive outlets for them?

Over the course of interviewing resettled refugees and Quad Cities community leaders, I found that music plays an important part in creating bonds between refugees and their loved ones. Other research has suggested that creating and maintaining a strong support network of friends and family is important for Iraqi refugees, as it can help relieve some of the stress of adapting to a new cultural environment (Yako 2014, 137). In addition to strengthening personal bonds, music can also provide an outlet for refugees and other displaced people to share positive memories and aspects of their home with the larger community, in this case, the Quad Cities. These opportunities to share can be found in events such as the World Cultures Festival, which was hosted at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa this year.

## BACKGROUND

It is important first, to distinguish a refugee from a voluntary migrant. Unlike a voluntary migrant, who is responding to the pull of another nation/place, a refugee is responding to forces pushing them from their home nation/place (Schramm 1986, 92). The resettlement of refugees in

the United States often relies upon a third party advocating to the government on behalf of refugees. These third party organizations can be religiously affiliated or not. For example, World Relief works with local Christian churches to help resettle refugees. Refugees who develop and foster connections with these groups have better odds of being resettled (Ray 2018, 777). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, also known as The UNHCR, created ten categories of risk for refugees, which if met, means an individual is eligible for resettlement in a third country:

Victims of detention or severe trauma or torture; women at risk; those with medical conditions and disabilities who cannot access treatment; dependants of refugees residing in resettlement countries; older persons at risk; unaccompanied or separated children; high profile cases; those who fled as a result of their association with foreign entities...; stateless persons and those who are members of minority groups who have been targeted owing to their religious or ethnic background. [U.S. Library of Congress 2008, 11]

The eighth one on this list, “those who fled as a result of their association with foreign entities” is one that the United States has focused on regarding Iraqi refugees. Many of the Iraqi nationals the U.S. employed or who were employed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) headquartered in the U.S., faced danger as a result of their associations with the United States. Because of this, the U.S. Department of State determined in 2008 that priority two refugees, a status which encompasses specific groups of concern to the United States, would now also include Iraqi nationals who had a close employment association with the United States (U.S. Library of Congress 2008, 14). This was around the same time that the United States decided to start removing all troops from Iraq (Farrell 2008). Priority one refugees consists of those who were referred to the Department of State by the UNHCR, a U.S embassy, or a designated NGO. Priority three consists of cases that involve the reunification of immediate family.

Displaced people often spend time in resettlement camps for refugees in “Countries of first asylum” before being resettled in a more stable environment (Schramm 1986, 94). Early in the Iraq conflict, these countries of first asylum were most often Syria and Jordan (Fagen 2009, 2). Other countries of first asylum include the Gulf States, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey (U.S. Library of Congress 2008, 7). In both Syria and Jordan, Iraqi refugees were accepted as guests, with government officials hoping that peace would soon be made in Iraq, and their Iraqi guests could return home relatively soon (Fagen 2009, 5). Both of these governments were reluctant to label the Iraqi nationals leaving Iraq as refugees, instead treating them as guests (Fagen 2009, 3). This however, also meant that the governments had no long term plans, and their Iraqi “guests” had no assistance or protection, and remained largely unregistered and uncounted (Fagen 2009, 5). The lack of acknowledgement of refugee status by these refuge countries meant that Iraqi refugees were treated as visitors, and subject to the same rules as any other non-citizen (Fagen 2009, 9). Despite this, authorities understood that it would be dangerous for Iraqi citizens to return to Iraq, and so many of these laws that were supposed to govern guests were enforced subjectively, which opened “ the way to frequent abuse against the Iraqi population” (Fagen 2009, 9).

For a refugee, leaving their original country can sometimes means crossing many international borders before arriving at a safe location such as the United States, which sometimes entails thing such as traveling through an interconnected network of smugglers. These journeys are dangerous and can last long periods of time (Ray, 2018, 784). Leaving their country of origin can mean selling off possessions, land, and other means of trade; going beyond that would cost a financial investment that many would not be able to come up with (Ray 2018, 785).

Some Iraqi citizens are able to bring some wealth with them into their countries of first asylum, but if they are unable to find a way to invest it in a business or find professional positions to generate an income, they soon exhaust the resources they brought with them (Fagen 2009, 8).

There are different ways in which the international community has tried to aid the Iraqi refugees and internally displaced people within Iraq. In 2003, the U.N. Security Council established The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, or UNAMI, which focused on seven kinds of aid for Iraq, including resources management, infrastructure rehabilitation, refugees, and support of the electoral processes. Later that same year, the UNAMI headquarters in Baghdad were bombed, and relief programs and efforts were given to Iraqi nationals instead of foreign U.N. officials (U.S. Library of Congress 2008, 9). In 2009, the United States was prepared to accept a total of 80,000 refugees (with room for 5,000 more if need be), 37,000 of which could be from the region which includes Iraq (U.S. Library of Congress 2008, 14). In 2019, the total amount of refugees the United States was prepared to accept was 30,000; this figure includes both already approved refugee cases as well as new ones (U.S. Library of Congress 2019, 5). Unlike in previous years, there are no extra reserve spaces (U.S. Library of Congress 2019, 5). This total for the year is less than half of the numbers just ten years prior, while the number allocated for the Near East/South Asian region is 9,000, just over four times less than the number allowed in 2009 (U.S. Library of Congress 2019, 6). From 2008-2017, the allowed number of refugees from the Near East and South Asia was always between 28,000 - 40,000 people, but in 2018 that number fell to 17,500 - 43% of what it was the prior year, and come 2019, the total number of refugees from that region allowed will be less than one fourth of what was allowed just two years prior (U.S. Library of Congress 2017, 4). A growing movement of islamophobia

in the United States can be seen in this reduction of allowed refugees from Islamic nations as well as rising anti-mosque sentiments, some of which culminate in attacks. In Illinois alone, there have been ten acts of anti-mosque behavior since 2010, from a city denying a permit to build a new mosque to an individual throwing “a bottle filled with acid and other unspecified materials... at an Islamic school during the nighttime Ramadan prayers” (Nationwide Anti-Mosque Activity 2019). Those who flee violence in Iraq can then experience continued violence in the United States, either through harmful rhetoric and policy or through physical violence.

Refugees relocating to new countries face the difficulties of learning how to navigate in a new legal and cultural environment, which involves learning things from how the new educational system works to a whole new language (Yako 2014, 134). This can be accompanied by something called acculturative stress, or “the psychological distress one feels often accompanied by feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, and other difficulties resulting from adjustment to a new culture” (Yako 2014, 134). The major factors that contribute to acculturative stress are “an inability to speak the language, unemployment, and family separation” (Yako 2014, 134). Language capacity can also affect refugees in other aspects. For instance, one study found a positive correlation between individuals who felt confident in English communication and how much discrimination they perceived (Craig and Patil 2009). Children of migrants, especially refugees, have used games and play songs to combat feelings of discrimination in their own environment by adapting the games to their new environment, thus showing a proficiency with the new culture as well as holding on to memories of home (Marsh 2017, 62-63). Oftentimes, these games and play-songs children use can also help children

explore strong emotions in a safe environment, allowing them to process events that led up to their resettlement in a new geographic and cultural place (Marsh 2017, 65-66).

Other than language, acculturative stress for Iraqi refugees can also be affected by gender, religion, and access to family support (Yako 2014, 137). Women are more likely to report experiencing acculturative stress than men are, as are individuals who practice Islam and those who feel they cannot practice their religion. People who have family support in the U.S. are far less likely to experience high levels of acculturative stress (Yako 2014, 137).

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

Choosing a population that I am not a part of, refugees, was a way of finding participants that I didn't have a well-developed and preconceived etic perspective of. I also chose to focus on refugees because so often in mass media, we are either told stories about how this group of people is one that deserves pity because of their circumstances, or this group of people is causing problems because of various and untrue reasons. This sort of rhetoric helps reinforce the distinction between "us" and "them" because it focuses on many negative differences, some of which aren't necessarily true. In conducting research that explored a positive aspect of resettled refugees' lives and their memories of home, I could help tell their stories in a way that fleshed them out as whole individuals whom we can empathize with rather than just part of a group of people or outsiders who deserve our pity.

One of the first obstacles I faced during my research was finding participants. Since I had chosen a population that I new existed in the Quad Cities through word of mouth, but had no actual experience interacting with, I used the recommendation of my project advisor, Dr. Carolyn Hough, to contact a local refugee resettlement agency, World Relief. World Relief is an



international Christian organization that works with churches and communities to resettle refugees and provide them with housing and programs to help them live in the United States during their first few months here. In the Quad Cities, their office is based in Moline, IL.

To contact World Relief, I first called their office, and left a message for them describing my project, my wish to work with world relief, and my contact information. Soon after, I received an email from one of their community outreach workers, who copied the director of World Relief in the email. After initial contact mishaps on my part, where I failed to reach out, the director and I spoke over email and set a date to meet. Two and a half weeks after my original phone call, I met with the director for coffee so that I could explain my project, and how I wanted to work with World Relief. The director was very amiable to my project, and agreed to help for much less compensation than I had thought they'd ask for. In return for helping me find participants, I would email them with the time I spent interviewing people, which they would be able to log as volunteer hours, and alert them if there was something obviously wrong with the housing, such as a thermostat that didn't work. I left that meeting with possible participant demographics, which at the time was six families from the Congo, Myanmar (Burma), and Iraq. I would attend a volunteer training session and complete a volunteer application and background check, and World Relief would find and choose possible participants for me to contact, and then give me their contact information.

The background check became one obstacle, though not because I didn't pass it. Nine days after sending in my completed background check, a representative from World Relief contacted me to ask if I had filled it out. After hearing that I did, and checking back in with their home office they did not find any record of it, so I filled out a second one. This one cleared and I

only had one step left before I could work with World Relief, their Volunteer Orientation. Most of the bureaucratic obstacles I faced working with World Relief could easily be explained by having only a small amount of people in charge to organize and accomplish many things, both bureaucratically and with the refugees they were aiding. In addition to paperwork and other basic requirements of running an organization, the small staff worked directly with refugees, and would pick up new arrivals from the airport, help with basic transportation needs, and perform many other one-on-one activities.

In addition to bureaucratic challenges with gaining contact with participants, I faced many personal challenges as well. The greatest of these was managing a stressful workload and overcoming my personal fears. Many of these personal obstacles I had to overcome directly exacerbated the bureaucratic problems I faced, causing increased time delays before I could contact potential participants. The same term in which I started my research, I also contacted World Relief; the process would have been smoother if I had contacted them the term before my research started, as that would have given me more time to set up interviews afterwards. However, by the time I was finishing getting approved by World Relief, I was also experiencing an increase in my academic and personal/professional time commitments that term. In addition to my field research, I was also taking the maximum amount of class credits I could and I was acting as assistant director, fight captain, and performer in Augustana's winter play. Rehearsal times for the play took up most of my evenings and completing homework the rest of them, especially in the latter half the term, which coincided with a representative from World Relief giving me a list of possible participants' contact information. In addition to this, My mornings

and afternoon were filled with classes. Scheduling time for an interview meant I had to manage my time very carefully, and the times at which I could meet were restricted.

Reaching out to contact possible participants once I had their contact information was another obstacle I struggled with. In my own life up to this point, I did not have much experience reaching out to people, especially strangers. When I finally found the courage to call the list of people and set up interviews one afternoon, I was only able to get in contact with three of the six.

The struggle was not over however, as once I had set up interviews, the weather in my area became especially brutal. I was caught in a snowstorm on my way to meet one of my potential participants, which got so bad at one point that when I was driving through a narrow alley, one of my side view mirrors got caught on a large wooden pole obscured by the snow and broke. In another instance, my car refused to start one blisteringly cold morning, and I was unable to go to another meeting with a potential participant. Following this, I was unable to make contact with them again to reschedule.

Another obstacle that I faced during interviews was a communication barrier. I had at least one possible participant who I was unable to interview because the language gap was too large, and I had no access to a translator. As I described earlier, one of my participants, Zara, spoke English, but needed help from her daughter for us to have an interview. Some things made it easier, such as an app she had on her phone that was able to translate the informed consent document into Arabic for her to read. However, because I lacked knowledge of Arabic, and she was not yet speaking English fluently, some of our conversation had to be translated through her young daughter. While this interaction was fruitful in that her daughter gave her own insights into what her mother was saying and my questions, it also posed the question of how Zara might

have changed her answers because her daughter was present or so that her daughter could understand. Even when not using Kara as a translator, Zara had difficulty expressing complex thoughts in English. For example, When I asked her what her favorite part of being with her family was, she replied with “ I can't talk ... I don't have words in English,” after first trying to describe what she felt with her family.

This project helped me overcome my own personal fears and doubts because it put me in a situation where I not only had to confront fears of ‘how will the person react to a stranger calling them to ask intimate details of their lives,’ but also because it challenged me to critically look at my motivations, and when I doubted my ability as a researcher, to find ways to improve my project and myself. I had to learn to overcome mental and physical obstacles, as well as deal with the frustration of waiting. Many of these lessons were learned towards the end of the project and in retrospect, when I was able to take a step back and really look at what I did; both all the things I accomplished as well as the things that I could do better in the future during similar research.

## METHODS

My research involved human participants, so in the fall of 2018 I started to write my project proposal to get my research approved by the Augustana Institutional Review Board. As part of this process, I had to ensure that my research would not bring any harm to my participants, or that they would be informed of any way this research could impact them before they began. When coming up with pre-prepared questions for resettled refugees, I had to be careful of the order in which I asked them so that I could avoid bringing up emotionally painful memories, since many of my questions were about their childhood and past in Iraq. to do this, I

focused most of my questions on positive memories they had, and I avoided directly asking about their specific rationale for leaving Iraq unless they brought it up. My questions for my resettled refugee participants focused on music and the memories they had attached to the music they discussed.

I conducted interviews with all of my participants, which consisted of a combination of questions I had pre-prepared as well as questions that I asked in response to what my participants had told me. In addition to interviewing resettled refugees, I also interviewed individuals who held leadership positions in organizations such as Quad Citie Alliance for Immigrants and Refugees (QCAir) and who were involved with organizing the World Cultures Festival. These questions were directed at how the festival was planned, how they reached out to refugee and immigrant communities, and what they hoped to see in the future for similar events. I had a different list of questions for both resettled refugees and community leaders. These questions were mostly prepared in the fall of 2018, a few months before my research with participants started.

For the most part, these interviews were conducted between me and an individual, although in one case, I conducted a group interview that included a mother and her two children, all of whom gave their consent to be interviewed and recorded. All of the interviews were helpful because they each gave me direct access to what my participants think about and associate with music. This information would have been well suited to be accompanied by participant observation of my participants using music in their lives, to see if how they talked about it lined up with how they used it, but I was unable to do so given the time constraints of the project.

These interviews were then transcribed, and as I was listening to them and transcribing them, I started looking for recurring themes and stories that seemed particularly important to my participants. My training as a musician came was useful during the transcription process, because it has included both aural and diction training, which gave me the tools to can write down notation for music and language sounds I am listening to. This means that not only would I be able to notate a song that was sung to me, I would also be able to write out what the words of a foreign language would *sound* like. Because many of the songs my participants brought up were in Arabic, a language that I do not speak, utilizing my knowledge of the international phonetic alphabet (IPA) became useful when writing down the words to the songs I was shown. One of my own IPA transcriptions of a song has been included in this paper.

While I was unable to do deep participant observation with my participants, I was able to do so at a local community event, the Quad City World Cultures festival. The festival was hosted by the Quad Cities Alliance for Immigrants & Refugees (QC AIR), St. Ambrose University, and the World Affairs Council. This annual festival included a program of performances by different cultural heritage groups, poster presentations about various countries, food, and a silent auction. Cultural and ethnic groups from across the globe were represented, but Iraq was not. However, there was a table set up to represent Muslims in the Quad Cities, which contained various items such as educational pamphlets about Islam.

My observations at the festival were useful because they helped put me in contact with community leaders who worked with refugees and immigrants. Attending the festival also helped by showing me what opportunities exist for cultural groups to share their musical traditions and history, and how those opportunities help build community on a larger scale.

The biggest change to my research as time went on was adding a focus on community. Going into my project, community and support networks weren't topics that I had intended on focusing on, but as I interviewed people and went over interview recordings while transcribing, the theme of music nurturing community bonds between family and friends continued to resurface as a recurring theme. Then, I discovered the World Cultures Festival through QCAir while searching for organizations that work with refugees. The festival was an opportunity to engage in participant observation, build connections to set up future interviews, and watch community building in progress between refugees, immigrants, their descendents, and the Quad City community.

For this project, I interviewed both resettled Iraqi refugees and Quad City community leaders. Both of the resettled refugees I interviewed were mothers of elementary-school aged children and were in their mid twenties to late thirties, and the community leaders either played a part in planning the spring of 2019's Quad City World Cultures festival, or were involved in leadership positions in the organizations that planned the festival. All individuals mentioned in this project have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Zara is a mother of three, she has two daughters and a son. Her husband works during the day, and her eldest two children attend elementary school, but the family is free to spend time together on Sundays. All of her children were present during the interview, and her eldest, her daughter Kara, helped Zara and I communicate when the language barrier was too wide to bridge. Zara's youngest, an infant named Gigi, spent the course of the interview being entertained by her elder siblings or getting cared for by her mother. Zara was soft spoken, and wore a hijab. Kara was present for most of the interview, and when she wasn't helping translate

parts of the interview for Zara and I, she was playing with Gigi or listening intently. Kara's younger brother, who wanted to be called by his American name, Jack, came in and out of the room, mostly spending his time playing games on his mother's phone when she wasn't using it, a game, he later told, where he could play with and talk to his cousin, who he hasn't been able to see a lot.

Ashia grew up with her mother as the third of four children. She has an elder sister and brother and a younger sister. Her family occasionally lived with her grandmother and aunts when Ashia was growing up. She left her family in 2010, and while her siblings still live in Iraq, she was able to visit them in two years ago for her sister's wedding. Ashia was married at one point, but is no longer. She has two young children, a daughter and a son who live with their father in the United States. She stays in contact with her siblings over the phone, and they are good friends with her children, despite not being geographically close. Recently, Ashia and her siblings all pooled some saved money in order to send their mother to a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Both of the community leaders I spoke with held close international affiliations, one who was proudly an immigrant. The other did not specify his personal connections, but had many professional and academic connections. One was a member of the organization QC Air, which helped to provide the funding for the event. The other was involved in organizing the festival and played a part in contacting the cultural heritage groups to perform.

## MUSICAL MEMORY AND FUNCTION

My research focused on songs from my participants' childhood, and how they learned, remembered, and used those songs. The memories of music in the adult generation I interviewed are tied to either playing games with their accompanying songs with fellow children, or learning



and listening to songs from their elders. The memories of music surrounding the adults and their children however, follow two themes; children growing up outside of Iraq and not learning Iraqi and Arabic music as their parents did, and parents discovering connections with their children through music.

In the older generation, memories of music were tied to two different places, music and games at school, and music at home or with the family. Both participants mentioned that they had played games with their friends and schoolmates as children. Included amongst these games were hand games with accompanying rhymes and play-songs. It is worth noting that when discussing these games, their descriptions were mostly centered around when they would play it with friends, not on the rules of the game or the music or what the words meant. Indeed, while these games were remembered with fondness by both women, neither could remember any of the songs or rules that accompanied the songs. The importance of the games to them now lies not in the value of the song and game itself, but in the positive memories of their childhood and their friendships that accompany the games and songs.

For many children, especially the girls, there wasn't much of an opportunity for other forms of entertainment. As Ashia put it, "You know, life in Iraq is different than here, and it's just school, that's all. That's all we do, school, playing with the kids." For Ashia, the one place she could go to be with friends and have fun was school:

"I love my school. I've never like, missed one day at my school. I go every day, even when I'm sick, I go to school. Because like, to meet my friends, and that's the only thing I have fun, because when you ... grow up, I can't go out, my father don't let me, so the only place I can have fun and talk to girls and stuff is my school. So I love my school."

Like all students when Ashia was growing up, her school consisted solely children of her own sex. The typical school day for Ashia as a child lasted either five and a half or three and a

half hours, depending on the day. Children would attend school in the morning from 8:00 to 12:30 for three days, and then from 12:30 to 4:00 on the other three days, and have Friday and Saturday off. She would get two 10-15 minute breaks per school day, and it was during those breaks that she and her friends would play their games. Outside of the breaks students were given, music was not available for students to practice at school. After school, she would return home, where she would eat, take a nap, and then go outside to play the same games with her friends that she played at school. Ashia's love of school was inherently tied to memories of spending time with friends and having fun, since she was unable to in most other places.

Zara had a similar experience. She attended an all girls school as well, and her school days lasted from 8:00 to 12:00. She enjoyed playing games like jump rope and hand games with her friends during breaks. For Zara, these breaks occurred once every hour to two hours and the children would all go outside, which she stated was because it is warmer in Iraq than it is in the United States. These breaks were free of teacher supervision, and children knew to come back when a bell would ring. While Zara enjoyed these breaks, as was evident by the smile she wore when talking about them, she did recall that these unsupervised breaks from school were scary as well, since there was no teacher to watch out for them.

Unlike Ashia, Zara was able to recall one game she played with her friends as a child in Iraq. The game involved singing a song that used repetitious rhyming words, and is meant to be played by multiple people. Each person would take their turn, and then "put a name in it." Zara would play these hand games with her friend who had lived next door.

Whereas the music from school was tied to positive memories of childhood friends, music from outside the school was tied to memories of family. Zara can recall a lullaby that her

parents would sing to her when she was small. To show it to me, she called for her son to bring the smartphone to her, which she then used to look up the song on YouTube. It was an upbeat, slightly nonsensical song that mimicked the “cooing” sounds of a pigeon, and was common in the state she was from. When Kara listened to it with us, she declared, “What does that even mean? I don’t even understand that.” This theme of pleasant nonsense songs is also present in one of Ashia’s memories.

Ashia has a couple of treasured memories from when she was living with her Grandmother and “Aunties.” Amongst these are memories of sitting close together all afternoon and singing, dancing, and listening to music together. Sometimes, Ashia’s grandmother would share songs with Ashia and her siblings and cousins: “We like her music, that’s our favorite music for the whole family.” One of the songs Ashia could remember sounded like this:

[jɛm hajɛ jɛm rasjɛn hɔʃi dʒɪdɛrnɛ]

It was a nonsense song that talked about a snake with two heads. While explaining the song, Ashia was laughing, insisting that it doesn’t make sense, and that when her grandmother would sing it, she didn’t always understand the words. Ashia’s grandmother spoke Arabic, but it was often hard to understand what she was saying because the older generation “spoke differently” than the younger generation when they were growing up.

Despite not always understanding her Grandmother’s songs, some of the nonsensical lyrics have stayed with her into adulthood. They hold a lot of sentimental value to her, as do the memories of singing and listening to music with her family in their home. Music can and does have intense cultural and situational significance, but the act of coming together and performing creates sense of well-being among people, even if they are from separate cultures (Weston and

Lenette 2016, 130-131). For Ashia, the act of creating music with her grandmother created a sense of familial community and love despite having a slight language barrier between the two.

Building and maintaining familial and friendly bonds is an important way that music can help create a support system. These support systems are important, especially amongst refugees, because they offer a place of understanding and acceptance. They also are one of the major factors that correlated to lower levels of acculturative stress. When refugees have a strong and present family support system, they are less likely to report high levels of acculturative stress (Yako 2014, 137). In this way, because sharing music and creating music with others helps build those support systems, which in turn can help combat acculturative stress, music can be one way in which refugees can create a better experience in their new home. This was one of the ways that the World Culture festival was important to the international community. While at the time of this research, Iraq was not represented at the festival, organizers of the festival were looking for ways of including them. When asked about finding Iraqi heritage groups similar to those found at the festival, the organizers suggested that I should speak with religious organizations and their leaders.

This nurturing of familial ties using music is not something that only occurs between the current adults and their elders, but is also present in the current parent-child generation. This can be seen in a story Ashia told me about the Arabic music her children learned that takes place five years after her and her family were resettled in the United States:

“There is music my kids they love .... They learn it, I didn’t tell them about it. Because in the car, I play it, so they listen to it, so they sing it.... I love this music because two years ago, I took my daughter to Iraq, that first time I took her to Iraq. My sister got married, so we went to her wedding. I was talking to friends and family, I looking for my daughter, I couldn’t find her. I asked some people, they say, ‘we just saw her, she talking to the DJ music, to the guy.’ So I went to him and I saw my daughter she talking to him I’m like, what does she want. He’s like ‘she want this music for you, so you can, so you and her

dance together' so he play the music and we dance in front of all the people. That's why I like this music.”

Ashia loves the song *because* of the wonderful memories of her daughter she has attached to it.

Most of the songs Ashia shared that were important to her as an adult, and which she passed down to her children, were commercially produced popular music and carried a common theme: familial happiness and love. In one, the song that she danced to with her daughter, a husband is singing to his wife and daughter about how much he loves them. In another song, one that a close American friend learned from Ashia's children, the singer is talking about how much you will miss a person that you love when they're gone. Songs in a society can function as “regulators of social norms” by teaching community members what are encouraged “good” practices and what practices are discouraged (Opiyo 2015, 48-49; Okumu 1999, 76). The songs that Ashia passed down to her children all speak of the importance of family and loved ones, and thus, she helps to teach her children the importance of family, a topic which Ashia find very personally important. When Ashia first left her family to get married, she started listening to music about mothers because she missed hers so much, and wanted to remember her family while they were parted. Now, nine years after leaving Iraq, Ashia still listens to music that discusses the importance of family, so much so, that her children were able to learn the songs in Arabic without her teaching it to them.

For many, sound is a vital way in which we interact with our world, and songs make up a significant portion of this interaction. Specifically, songs for children are important because they provide ways of communicating and community building at an impressionable age. Children are also not just “passive recipients of education” but are active individuals who appropriate and

adapt the knowledge imparted through lullabies and other songs (Doja 2014, 118). Multiple languages display a drastic change when addressing infants, and to some extent, children, and this change in speech patterns when addressing infants sounds much more musical than typical speech patterns directed at other adults (Doja 2014, 120). Humans can understand the implicit meaning of large and small auditory signals based on the links between the form the signal takes and its function. For example, sounds that are lower in frequency and harsher are expected to be hostile noises because those sounds grow more prominent in larger animals, which can then defeat smaller animals (Mehr et al. 2018, 356). This form and function relationship between auditory signals and their interpretation can be found in music that is used for dancing and child/infant care (Mehr et al. 2018, 356). This means that across cultures, music used for these purposes should contain similarities. In Mehr et al.'s study, participants were able to accurately identify the function of dance songs and lullabies from outside their own cultural experiences (Mehr et al. 2018, 363). When looking at families in which generations grew up in completely different cultural environments, the common elements found in children's songs can help build connections between their current home and the home their parents left behind. It can also serve as a tool for parents to teach their children aspects of their culture in a way that would be familiar in both of the cultural contexts that the children are living in.

The children of the resettled refugees I spoke to all had a common theme running in their life: they don't remember, or never experienced, life in Iraq. The games they learned and the songs they know they learned in American schools, they easily speak fluent English, and learned Arabic from their parents. Zara's young daughter, Kara, was five when she and her family first arrived in the United States. While Zara was explaining the play-song she remembered, Kara

spoke up, informing me, “I don’t know how to play it.” Kara never got a chance to learn the song the way her mother did, from friends and neighbors on the playground, and Zara did not have a reason, before that conversation, to bring it up and teach it to her daughter.

However, games such as playing jump rope while saying a rhyme or a children's verse, tag, or hand games that involve clapping with a friend are all games that the adults played in Iraq that have similar versions in the United States. When these parallels are found they can help parents and their children build stronger familial connects and provide an outlet for parents to pass down some of their positive memories from their homeland. For example, Ashia described a scene from her living room when a friend was visiting and their children were playing nearby:

“Usually I watch them, they play same game we play, but in English! Yeah! That surprise me, like my friend and I, we sit there like last week, and kids are playing here, and I’m like, ‘watch them!’ It’s same game we used to play at school before, but here in English and there in Arabic ... I told how we play it, and sometimes they play it in Arabic too... They know because I teach them Arabic a lot.”

Ashia was smiling the whole time she described this event. It meant a lot to her that she was able to make this connection between her childhood in Iraq and her children’s childhood in the United States. She also noted that after teaching the children the Arabic words to go with the game, the children from then on would play it in Arabic as well as English. The game provided an outlet for Ashia to connect with her children. In this instance, games and songs helped Ashia both teach her children how to speak Arabic as well as built positive connections for her children to her homeland.

This instance of using the song to continue teaching her children Arabic demonstrates another function that songs have: they can be used to supplement typical methods and routes of communication and education when they are interrupted by conflict by providing both until the

others are available again (Opiyo 2015, 45). In this instance, the song was used to help supplement the children's education in learning Arabic, a language that isn't offered in the American elementary school system.

Music can act as a relic of the past, recounting its contemporary circumstances and can seemingly merge different times and places when listened to in different contexts (Opiyo 2015, 54). For Ashia's family, the Arabic rhyme for the game her children learned in the United States serves as that relic, connecting Ashia's childhood in Iraq with her children's lives in U.S.

In this way, songs can function as a way of remembering and preserving group history and identity (Opiyo 2015, 54-56). In temporary resettlement camps, this can be seen in the variety of music that can be found, often times reflecting the status and history of the refugees living there at the moment (Schramm 1989, 28-29). Creating group identity can also change the musical experiences from traditional ones. For example, Vietnamese refugees in the United States have taken a traditionally private family holiday, Tet, which centers around music and turned it into a shared public event as a way of recreating and reaffirming their new group identity (Schramm 1986, 97). Many of the performances at the World Cultures Festival acted similarly to this celebration of Tet. These performances weren't necessarily done in their original or traditional context or for a traditional reason, but as a way to display a unique aspect of the performing group's culture. This performance not only created a very explicit sense of group identity by utilizing cultural organizations, but the setting of the festival also sparked the possibility of dialogue between the performers and the audience after the performance.

CREATING COMMUNITY



The Annual Quad Cities World Cultures festival is an event that has been gaining popularity in the Quad cities. In 2018 the World Cultures Festival, was hosted at St. Ambrose University for the first time in order to accommodate all the people who wished to attend. The people who attended this year were mostly families with young children, or students. One of the ways in which this festival appealed to families was the inclusion of events like the international fashion show, where people of different heritages were able to show off traditional clothing. In another instance, a break in performances was used as an opportunity for children to dance on the cleared stage floor. Children and their parents danced to all English songs, which included the *Cha-Cha Slide* and *The Chicken Dance*. Before playing the Chicken dance to open up the dance floor however, the announcer was sure to explain some of its international influences.

At the festival, groups of Venezuelan, Chinese, Swiss, Russian, Filipino, Indian, Korean, African, and Native American heritages were all present and performed, sharing things from dances to martial arts demonstrations. They also all had tables which at least presented a poster with basic information about their country/nation, and where representatives made themselves available to answer questions or have discussions with people who wanted to know more about their culture. One of my favorite aspects of the night was visiting those tables and talking with the people there. When asked, the performers generally did like sharing more information about their performance, and had positive feelings about the festival.

There were a multitude of other countries and nations represented at the informational tables, with a total of 17 cultural groups represented. However, Iraq did not number in that 17. There was a table representing the Muslim community in the Quad Cities, however, I was unable to talk with those representatives.

Sharing the music from their homeland, the music the love, can help refugees find a feeling of welcome and acceptance in their new cultural environment. Events such as the World Cultures Festival helps to give them a platform at which to do so. This can be seen on a smaller scale, within the interpersonal relationships between my participants and the support networks they've created. Sharing music with members outside of their culture helped them create and nurture lasting friendships. One of Ashia's favorite Arabic songs is attached to memories of her American friend mentioned earlier:

“They [my children] taught her how to sing this, she's American but she sing this music! ... On my birthday, I was at work, so I came back and I found out my kids and my ex, with the friend ... they all together have a surprise party. And they turned this music, and they sat sing all together...”

Many times throughout my interviews, my participants would double check when I asked to hear a song; they wanted to make sure I knew it was in Arabic. Ashia expressed happy surprise when I asked her if she would teach me the song she remembered her grandmother singing. Having people, specifically Americans in these instances, express interest in hearing and learning Arabic music was a happy surprise for my participants. For Ashia, it demonstrated the depth of friendship her American friend had for her, that she was willing to learn something Ashia perceived as hard for Americans to do.

Music gives people a process to find their own voice and be empowered by it, as well as a time and place to express that voice (Opiyo 2015, 52). Musicians and their music can also be integral parts of communities and a community's voice. During times of extreme instability, musicians can use their music to capture popular opinions and share them with others (Opiyo 2015, 47-48). Music's capacity for interdisciplinary action and transformation makes it a great

medium for conflict transformation, which tries to respond to problems in life and human relationships by “creating constructive change processes” (Opiyo 2015, 45; Lederach 2003, 14).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When coming to the United States, Iraqi refugees face many challenges, from learning the language, finding a job, and dealing with discrimination, which are made all the harder in the current political atmosphere. Resettled refugees can experience acculturative stress when adjusting to this new cultural environment, and certain factors, such as the presence of a familial support system, have a strong relationship with how much acculturative stress resettled refugees feel. Music, which has the ability to create new bonds through collaboration, or sharing it with someone new, is one way in which those important familial bonds are created. Music’s ability to bring people together can also help refugees create new support systems within their new cultural environment, which makes events like the World Cultures festival so important. The festival, and events similar to it, give refugees, other displaced people, and their descendents a platform to start sharing and building larger community ties and support systems.

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