



WHAT IS ISLAMIC ARTS? AND WHAT MAKES ART ISLAMIC? THE EXAMPLE OF THE ISLAMIC DISCOURSE ON MUSIC

Jonas Otterbeck

Professor of Islamic Studies at Lund University, Sweden

This article sets out to contribute to the discussion on Islamic art. Its overall goal is to humbly offer a social science perspective on the questions “What is Islamic arts” and “What makes art Islamic.” First some historical examples on the discussion on music¹ –music will be the example of Islamic art in the article– will be offered and discussed. Next, a theoretical perspective on Muslim scholarly interpretations of Islam will be discussed, followed by a section especially on Islamic arts and interpretation. The article will then return to Muslim scholarly arguments on music and discuss some interesting, present day artists’ suggestions on how to resolve difficult moral issues that are pressing when dealing with music and Islam. Finally, the article will return to the two main questions.

Muslim scholars have voiced their opinions on the legal status of different kinds of music throughout history. Even though the Qur’an contains no verses (or few, depending on the interpreter, see Otterbeck & Ackfeldt, 2012) making direct references to music, the hadith collectors wrote down several traditions regarding tonal expressions with accepted chains of transmission, *isnād*. Several of the legal scholars, who have over time become the most prominent, have commented on music. Other scholars, less known today, but of prominence during their lifetime, have written tracts that have survived to our days. Below, I will comment on two such tracts. The texts are interesting since their authors drew very different conclusions.

Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 894) was a celebrated religious authority during his lifetime. He was Hanbali. Further he was tutor to the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu’taḍid (d. 902) and his son al-Muktafī (d. 908). His writing was quoted long after his demise (*Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Robson, 1938). Among his influential texts one finds several edifying tracts on *dhamm*, translatable as “critical perspectives on...”. One tract, *Dhamm al-malāhī*, critical perspectives on instruments of diversion, features a lengthy critique of music. *Malāhī* has the same root as *lahw*, a word often associated with music through an established tradition to interpret the words *lahw al-ḥadīth* (idle tales) from verse 6 of Surat Luqmān (no. 31) as implying music, a tradition attributed to prominent companions such

(1) Music is a tricky concept. In this article it refers to different composed vocal and instrumental tonal expressions as well as every day music making using the voice, handclapping and whistling. The Arabic term *mūsīqā* is a loan word from Greek and has mainly been used in history for music theory. When referring to music, Arabic writers have used categories like *ghinā’* (singing, but also art music), *māzīf* (instruments with open strings), etc.



as Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 653) one of the formative Qur'an exegetes, and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣri (d. 728) one of the earliest theologians of Islam (Farmer 1929/2001). *Lahw* was a keyword for Ibn Abī al-Dunyā: to spend time with diversion (*lahw*) is to indulge in sin. The scholar found that diversions were intertwined with wine drinking, listening to singing girls and stringed instruments, overeating, and all forms of excess and gluttony. To prove his point, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā quoted, among others, the Umayyad Caliph Ibn al-Walīd (r. 744):

O, Umayyads, avoid singing for it decreases shame, increases desire, and destroys manliness, and verily it takes the place of wine and does what drunkenness does. But if you must engage in it, keep the women and children away from it, for singing is the instigator of fornication. (Robson, 1938:27)

When reading Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's tract it is hard to miss how a vision of edifying didactics dominate the structure of the text (see further Librande, 2005). The famed scholar wanted to write down the straight path and warn against the crooked one, practicing *ḥisbah* through advice in writing and leaving it up to the advised to make informed choices when acting. In an article on contemporary Wahhābī writings on music, I pointed out the importance of understanding the harsh advice often given in Wahhābī fatwas in relation to an idea of a presumed personal choice and responsibility, and further the possibility of compensation when committing a transgression or a sin (Otterbeck, 2012).

The Shāfi'ī scholar Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayri (d. 1074) was a contrast Ibn Abī al-Dunyā. Al-Qushayri was both an Ash'arī scholar of the Qur'an and Sunna and a master of Sufi lore well established in the elite in Khurasan (Algar, 1992). In 1045 al-Qushayri authored a Sufi manual, eventually one of the most widespread, often called *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyah fī 'ilm al-Taṣawwuf* (The Qushayriya Epistle on the Knowledge of Sufism) (Knysh, 2007). The epistle features a part on the defence of *samā'* (the technical term used for music listening implying a setting for doing this) towards the end. He used both Qur'anic verses and hadiths to construct his arguments about music's legality, stressing the beautiful voice of Islam's messengers as proof of the value of tonal expressions. However, it is obvious that the core of his argument –where nuances are expressed– is found in his rendering of the tales and sayings of former Sufi masters. In these, music is presumed to be extremely powerful, bringing out feelings of fear, love, and sadness. It has the ability to render men unconscious and even kill animals and men (it is unclear whether death is primarily symbolic or not). The stories are didactic and tell of music (and *samā'*) as a blessing for the mature Sufi, but a danger to the inexperienced. You need to take into account time (*zamān*), place (*makān*), and friends (*ikhwān*), the latter with the meaning of company, when evaluating what benefits or temptations music might bring (Knysh, 2007).



Why the difference? After all, the texts available for both scholars are similar, they are both Sunni, they both work in the upper strata of society where music was a self-evident part of high culture, etc. Of course, some structural differences are there, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā was a Hanbalite in Baghdad and al-Qushayri a Shāfiī Sufi in Nishapur two centuries later. But it also seems their personal visions of how to write theology differed from each other. While Ibn Abī al-Dunyā seems to experience his role as an uncompromised advisor on what is sinful and what is not in a black and white world, al-Qushayri seems to see his role as one of reflection, exploring complexities. I find it reasonable to suggest that Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's leaning to moderation and restriction (*zuhd*) and Qushayri's high culture Sufism actually formed a crucial framework for the interpretation by the respective theologian.

One must not forget the maturity of thought that Sunni scholars have shown through history in regards to different opinions. The fact that many scholars accepted the plurality of opinion over time and in space as a blessing –at least most theologians accepted this in theory, not necessarily accepting a plurality of truths (Kamali, 1991), just the possibility of human shortcomings– is proof of a wide spread acceptance in Islamic history that the individual theologian's knowledge and position in time and space mattered for opinions expressed. This is not to claim that Muslim scholars invented postmodernity or that Muslim scholars were not interested in enforcing their interpretation on students, colleagues, officials, commoners and family, merely to point out that in a scholarly discussion, this position was standard and that the position creates space for a social constructionist, historical approach.

Islamic studies from a non-confessional point of view

Islamic studies at Lund University, Sweden, or Islamology, as it is referred to in Sweden, is a non-confessional area study of Islam, especially focusing on how Islam is perceived in the contemporary world. Further, it has a long historical relation with the development of History of Religions and Anthropology of Religions. Below follows a sketch of the basic presumptions holding the theoretical frame of Islamic studies together.

Islam as a discursive tradition

Talal Asad (1986) addresses Islam as a “discursive tradition” meaning that Islam is the overall referent interconnecting all the multitude of expressions of rituals, narratives, theology, habitus, legal practices and theories that in some ways make references to Islam. This includes competing narratives on history (like Shīʿā and Sunnī narratives on the marriage of Omar to a woman with the name Umm Kalthūm), contradicting *kalām* (theology) (like Jahmite and Hanbalite understanding of the being of Allah), as well as incompatible local religiously motivated behaviour recorded in the anthropology of Islam. Perceived as a discursive tradition, Islam cannot be understood as a unified whole. Or to be more exact: If Islam is studied through



its immanent, not its transcendent, expressions, the scholar is studying human language, human societies, and humanly constructed and communicated signs and symbols. Such a study is a humanist and social scientist study of how Muslims in time and space formulate, through language or behaviour, what the discursive tradition of Islam is.

If Islam is studied as a discursive tradition it follows that power over the discourse is of interest. To be able to be more precise in my argument, I will need to discuss both discourse and power in a more detailed way. To do this I will position myself as a Foucauldian. Simply put, a discourse, from a Foucauldian point of view, is the sum of possible expressions about a certain topic. These expressions might also include non-verbal communications. But it also implies the practices of exclusion of other expressions deemed unworthy, vulgar, mad or simply erroneous.

Further, it implies the disciplining of the expressions included as valid, reasonable, and correct. The limits of the discourse are guarded by a multitude of gatekeepers standing guard because of their own education, upbringing, sense of justice, morals and ethics, or their understanding of truth and what is thinkable. When someone corrects –mildly and friendly as well as harshly– a child, a student, a colleague or a partner, that person exercises a potentially disciplining power. The limits of the expressible are repeated, re-enacted and confirmed; they are seldom invented. Power, then, is the practice of the many as well as the few in relation to the discursive boundaries. Counter-power (yet another crucial concept) is the power practice of expressing the non-confirmative, consciously as in the case of an artist wanting to provoke or cause a change, or unconsciously as in the case of a child trying out an obscene word not knowing the full value of it.

Thus, power is not something simply owned by an authority and then used to maintain and exercise might. Rather, it is found in the subtle interplay of practices between people including a myriad of minor and major practices (Foucault, 1972, 1980, 1990). No doubt, some individuals and institutions are far more influential than others regarding the discursive tradition of Islam. A legal scholar advising the juridical system of a country, who has obtained a rumour as an expert on Islamic law over decades, is clearly more influential than an older farmer sitting critically commenting on a *khutbah* at his kitchen table with his oldest son and a neighbour as his only audience. Still, his oldest son might be deeply impressed and influenced by his father's views and thus the father, when exercising counter power, might be the most influential person for the son. Or not, the son might be disciplined by the father, knowing that his own contradicting view will not be appreciated so he will keep silent, not to upset the situation, giving the neighbour the impression that he agrees with his father. It is this complexity of power relations that concepts like discursive tradition, power, and counter power tries to address. Asad (1983:251) makes a necessary reservation when discussing similar issues, writing: "From this it



does not follow that meanings of religious practices and utterances are to be sought in social phenomena, but only that their possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces.” Obviously, what anthropology or any other social science can provide is explanations that are this-worldly oriented rather than transcendent.

To study this is somewhat easier when looking at expressed views in texts. Even though we know that scholars might hold back personal views, never expressing them, or waiting for a better timing in regards to their careers, we may read texts as products of a certain time and space. In that sense the author might not be as important as the context. Still, some original thinkers manage to change the line of thinking of a generation and for generations to come. Discourses are not closed, they are open and their boundaries are contested. Yet, they seldom change instantly, and if a radical idea has immediate impact it is more likely to cause a split of a discourse than change everyone at once. Texts are also excellent lasting evidence of contestations and discursive interventions, yet another concept from Asad (1993:164), implying the conscious attempt to change a discourse.

If everyday behaviour is the focus of the study, the task becomes somewhat more problematic. Geertz (1968/1971:4) has called the anthropologists of religion “the miniaturists of the social sciences.” Their task is not to paint something covering Islam as a whole, rather to describe and analyse the relationship of people’s activities (behaviour, speech, etc.) made in an interactive relationship with the discursive tradition as understood in a particular setting. Earlier on, anthropologists often sought out remote places finding semi-isolated cultures; today migration, transnational, translocal and global interconnectedness complicate the analysis of remote areas. Today, more often, city cultures are the foci of scholars, or a certain cultural phenomenon that might be of regional, national, transnational or global interest. Ethnography of interactive media, where access is regulated by language proficiency rather than geography, is a growing area of research.

Still, these new fields of the anthropology of Islam have not changed substantially how Islam is understood. To some, this type of anthropology is hard to accept. For example, when unconventional practices of a community experienced only by them as Islamic are exposed by anthropology as a form of local Islam, a gut reaction of many believers might be to disregard the practice as un-Islamic, and the anthropology as ludicrous. To the anthropologist, both the practice and the protest are interesting, related parts of the discursive tradition of Islam. The power exercised by more intellectually informed Muslims, less bound by local customs, more globally oriented (or the like) when shunning and condemning a local, odd practice, might be a further study of the local custom. In fact, the local custom might be impossible to understand fully



except in relation to more official discourses on Islamic practice and theology. The anthropology has not, at least not ideally, the aim of exoticising Islam or calling Islam into question by this (but according to Asad (1986) this has far too often been an unwanted side effect), rather the goal is to understand how people, in different historical and social circumstances, have come to understand Islam, how this affect their lives and how this is negotiated and renegotiated in times of continuation and in times of change. The idea is that through the produced knowledge, we understand people better. Yet, the anthropological research as a whole does say something about Islam. By the myriad, myopic examples provided a sense of what the less influential Muslims in different times and spaces, of different genders, classes and ages, think about Islam and how they practice the faith is gained. It is this multiplicity that is addressed by Talal Asad when calling Islam a discursive tradition. Anthropological research might be rejected by Islamic scholars as peripheral and obsessed with popular heretical practices or, as I see it, it might be utilized by scholars when trying to address the Muslim public in a manner that matters to the ones not schooled in the *balāgha*, *kalām* and *fiqh* of the Islamic tradition.

Islamic art

Evidently, not all art by a person of an Islamic denomination is Islamic. A Muslim might create a cubist painting of a bull or a postmodern poem to a beloved friend with no religious themes whatsoever. The established non-Islamic scholarly use of Islamic art (especially in history studies) for any artefact created within a Muslim empire is not very precise, informative or useful for religious studies leading to strange labels like “Islamic swords” and “Islamic tiles” for military equipment and building material (see for example Brend 2005; Irwing 1997; Rice 1986). Nor is every work of art commenting on Islam Islamic. Someone wanting to criticize Islam by slandering its revered symbols and narratives might create a piece of art. Rather, this article sees Islamic art as art that is on purpose or by traditional repetition put in the discursive and semiotic tradition of Islam. Further, the artist’s intention has to be affirmative of that discourse, or at least view it as meaningful in the most profound sense of the word. In Islamic art, a natural plurality will emerge distributed in time and space, due to aesthetic ideals of different taste cultures and the complex genealogies of the imaginative mind of individuals. The concept “taste culture” refers to the situation when several individuals share preferences in, for example, clothing, food, behaviour, but also different art forms. Apart from being local, regional, national or international, taste cultures are frequently delimited by class, gender, generation and religion. Some high cultural art expressions survive through centuries like for example the fondness of calligraphy and the arabesque in Islamic art or the appreciation of certain *maqamāt* (tonal scales) like the *Ḥijāzī* or *Bayātī maqamāt*. Other expressions might be more local and temporal (see further Bourdieu 1984; Korsmeyer 2005).

This way of understanding Islamic art denies it of essence. Islamic art becomes a discourse (or



rather several different ones depending on time, space, class, etc.). It does not make Islamic art less genuine, just more historically grounded. One might object that the Qur'an and Sunna set limits and make suggestions to what art should be like. But the interpretation of Islam's central texts is coded in language by scholars and others and is thus made immanent, and history provides evidence of the plurality of interpretations.

In a model of religious emotions, sociologists of religion Olle Riis and Linda Woodhead (2010) suggest that emotions both have an inner and an outer dimension. When someone is deeply moved, bodily reactions are not discursive or socially constructed, but part of our biology or, if preferred, our given sentiments. But what triggers and structures emotions might well be a part of socialisation. Not all people feel religious emotions when entering a church or approaching the Qur'an, not even everyone belonging to the religion that reveres those particular symbols. The parallel with Islamic art is that if Islamic art is to awake religious emotions it needs to either be traditionally established and laden with emotions through socialisation, i.e. be emotionally charged art connected to an established, traditional taste culture, or it needs to be appealing to the aesthetics of another taste culture that can consciously be Islamized. At the same time, tonal sounds seem to stir something pre-discursive in people. It is part of human biology (or possibly learnt already in the womb) to react to tonal sounds and rhythms; the reactions however are no doubt disciplined through socialization (DeNora 2000).

Riis and Woodhead (2010) further discuss the process of how an artefact may become religiously consecrated if made outside the expected. Artists use signs and symbols in their art, they seldom invent those. But an artefact created might be a new combination, a new angle, a new use of forms, signs and symbols. The work of art might be deeply emotionally and intellectually meaningful to the artist. Still, it might not be to others. The artefact may instead be dismissed by others, but it may also be embraced by some. A religious artefact that gains spontaneous popular support may be said to go through a process of insigation, when signs are inscribed in the public conscious.²

The insigation is disciplined through consecration, the process of officially proclaiming or sanctioning something as holy or part of the religion. At the same time, consecration gives the expression some discursive closure. However, this is not a linear process revolving around one object but an on-going discourse in which different voices seek acknowledgement for their understanding and interpretations.

Globalization and democratization of technology and cultural forms

We are, again, in a juncture in the history of Islamic art. Two intertwined processes are central:

(2) "Insignation" is a neology by Riis & Woodhead containing three morphemes: "ation" signaling a process, "in" referring to a merging or inscribing of a "sign" into the public conscious.



the globalization of cultural expressions and techniques to produce artistic expressions; and the possibility for almost anybody to produce artistic expressions claimed to be Islamic in public. As shorthand, I will call the first process globalization and the second democratization, the latter being somewhat a misnomer for lack of a better term. Evidently, this is not the first nor, most likely, the last time Islamic art influences and is influenced by non-Islamic art. The crucial Islamization of both Byzantine and Persian art is a well-known process in studying Islamic art (Irwin 1997). Likewise, the importance of Islamic architecture for the development of the gothic churches of Europe is acknowledged as well as the influence of Islamic aniconism on the iconoclasm of the Byzantine church (Meyendorff 1974/1995).

What is special with our day and age is the power structure of globalization combined with the democratization process. At the same time as technology for mass (re)production of art is made available, causing more people than ever to produce Islamic art, globalization, often equalled with Westernization, is affecting the taste preferences of people all over the world. Adaptations are made to fit local taste culture; only the really rich and the cosmopolites do not bother to, or will not, adjust their art preferences but can afford to replicate the dominant taste culture spreading with globalization. When globally spread taste culture is adjusted to local condition the process is referred to as glocalization. This can be made both consciously and without any plan or notion of what is happening. However, the local affect is similar: the options increases, traditional values, choices and aesthetics become relativized and new ways and genres of artistic expressions emerge. Religious art enter into a competition with other aesthetics – religious as well as not. Artefacts not previously perceived as art might get objectified as art in the process. Taste cultures become more fragmented as generation, social status, subcultural belonging become more important to people's preferences at the expense of religious and national belonging. Similar processes have been described in sociology as a move from destiny to choice (Berger 1979).

When locally dominating expressions of Islamic arts is put in relation to foreign Islamic aesthetic traditions as well as other religious and non-religious aesthetic traditions, new expressions emerge, new boundaries for taste culture is drawn. To survive, local Islamic art needs to adjust to the rearranged conditions of production and a transformation of local aesthetic crafts to art production.

Regarding music, during the last 130 years, following the rapid development of the ability to mediate music through recordings, the regional character of music has been challenged to the point that it is difficult to talk about traditional music (Bohlman 2002). Instead, interconnectedness, mutual influence, and the logic of consumer culture need to be taken into account when one discusses music. Developments in the technique of crafting instruments



(making them more uniform), the adding of electricity to performance, and the use of different styles originating from other cultural spheres (but sometimes fully internalized by generations of musicians) make music an excellent example when globalization and glocalization are studied.

Islamic music

Much recent Islamic scholarly writing has been devoted to the *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* of music. Opinions vary from hardcore, reactionary views to liberal market oriented ones. However, most scholars take a moderate position giving preference to morally sound, disciplined music while rejecting sensual music, and are not willing to create room for postmodern provocative music (Otterbeck 2004, 2008, 2012). Leaving aside the majority of the discussion that tends to concentrate on the *ḥarām* expressions and thus non-Islamic art, one may note that the more affirming discussion on what *ḥalāl* music has increased over the last two decades. In this discussion, visions of *al-fann al-hādif* (purposeful art) and *al-fann al-muqāwim* (resistance art) are formulated and discussed (Alagha 2011; van Nieuwkerk 2011).

Anthropologists, religious studies scholars, and (ethno)musicologists have reported widely on Islamic music the last decades. For example, Tom Solomon has written on German-Turkish Islamic rap (2011), Karin van Nieuwkerk on Egyptian Islamic wedding bands (2011), Bart Barendregt on Malaysian Islamic boy bands (2012), and so forth. Below I will first discuss some central ideas put forth by scholars. Then the consequences for musicians regarding the musical form, lyrics and the view on music as a consumer product will be discussed.

The idea of a purposeful art

Most likely it was the so called *al-wasāṭiyyah* movement in Egypt that inaugurated the present discussion on *al-fann al-hādif*, the idea being that music as a powerful expression should be put in the service of Islam (Baker 2003; Otterbeck 2008; van Nieuwkerk 2011). Among the first prominent sheikhs to take to the barricades on this issue was, to the surprise of many, Sheikh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996) who had voiced strong opinions on the immorality of modern Egyptian art. According to Baker (2003), the turning point came with the nearly fatal knife attack on famed novelist Nagīb Maḥfūz in October 1994. Al-Ghazālī, himself a stout critic of Maḥfūz, immediately rushed to the defence of Maḥfūz and strongly condemned the use of violence.³ He, and others of the *al-wasāṭiyyah*, saw the vicious deed as an attack, not only on the novelist, but on art as such, well aware of the harsh attitudes of reactionary scholars over the last decades. Instead, al-Ghazālī promoted a discursive intervention formulated with the aim of changing the discourse on arts. Some of this discourse was already in place, for example

(2) Al-Ghazali's position on violence against the deviant and heretic is somewhat contradicting, or, as indicated by some, changed during the latter part of his life with the Mahfouz incident as a turning point. When Farag Fouda was murdered in 1992, al-Ghazali seems to have been supportive of violence against some opponents (Mostyn 2002).



in Muḥammad 'Imāra's *al-Islām wa al-funūn al-jamīlah* (Islam and the fine arts) (1991) and in parts in earlier work by al-Ghazālī like the book *Mustaqbal al-Islām khārij arḍih: kayfa nufakkir fih* (The future of Islam beyond its main region: How do we think about it) (1984) and in the rich production of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī. Two important points of departure of this discourse need to be stressed. The first: art in itself, and artists as personas, are not inherently blameworthy. The second: art should be in an active relation with Islam and be inspired by it and give back inspiration. It is clear that the *al-wasāṭiyyah* scholars were more interested in discussing what good art (including) music would mean, rather than engage in explaining, yet again, why lyrics encouraging drinking and fraternizing really can be called Islamically sound.

The idea of a purposeful Islamic art, reminds a lot of the discussion in Marxist and socialist circles about the function of art. In the latter case, art was commissioned to propel the citizen, especially youth, into action for the cause. Further, good art was didactic and edifying not nihilistic or bourgeois. In the early days of socialism, art was seen as an important tool for making the workers see the world with new eyes, leaving their false consciousness (M. Solomon (ed.) 2001). In this, Islamic scholars and socialist ones share a vision.

A person calling for moderation but who has no objections against, for example, love songs is the famous, Qatar based, Egyptian Sheikh Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, the main religious voice on al-Jazeera and associated with *al-wasāṭiyyah*. He has, on different occasions, discussed music or given comments on it in his books, on his TV-show and on his webpage (Qaraḍāwī no date, 2005; see also Zaman 2004:145f.). His general message is that music in itself is not forbidden (he frequently refers to the classical scholar Ibn Ḥazm); it is what accompanies music that makes it a matter of ḥalāl and ḥarām. If it has slanderous or crude language or if it is sexually exciting (through rhythms or through dance) it is generally ḥarām. Further, if the listening is done to excess it is ḥarām as Islam is against taking things to the extremes. But there is a personal dimension to it; if you are not aroused by the songs and you keep your spirituality then there is no problem. His strategy is to connect his interpretation to classical Islamic standpoints on morality targeting slanderous talk, excess, irresponsible sexuality, etc.

Another moderate voice is Egyptian Internet- and TV-*dā'iyyah* 'Amr Khālīd. Khālīd is not a trained theologian. He is a former accountant from an upper middle class, Egyptian family who started his religious career preaching in mosques in well-off areas in Cairo. Khālīd has taken a similar stand as al-Qaraḍāwī on music and he promotes the production of counter-discursive music to the offensive songs. For example, during Ramadan 2004 Khālīd promoted Sami Yusuf, whose music had recently become popular in Egypt, on his Iqra TV show (Ṣunnā' al-ḥayāh, Life Makers) (see Kubala 2005; Armbrust 2005).

What Khālīd is calling for, both on his TV-show and on his webpage, is a modern *dāwah* using



the artistic expressions of the present. “What is needed are arts and culture that will propel youth toward work, development, and production”, Khālid writes (Khaled 2005). Art should, according to him, be useful and moral. Khālid objects to the new trend with commercial video clips seeing it as purposeless and morally offensive. Also al-Qaraḍāwī stresses the importance of seeing morality as integrated in all aspects of society, also in art (Zaman 2004:145).

Some musicians have answered the call for a purposeful art and for a revitalized Islamic music scene. Below follows a discussion on the Islamic music created by these artists.

Musical form

There are basically three different, but interconnected, musical ways of answering the call for a conscious form of Islamic music: using and updating the Islamic forms of song already available like *nashīd*, *nāt*, *ilahī*, *nowḥi* and *qawwālī*; adapting genres developed in the West like hip-hop, soul, pop ballads, reggae, children’s songs to Islamic norms; using the forms developed in Egyptian, Lebanese, etc. pop music. *Nashīd* or *Anashīd* (the plural form) has become one of the popular labels to ascribe to Islamic modern music, regardless of musical strategy.

As Bohlman stressed above, the simple fact of electricity added to performance and a more uniform crafting of instruments condition the music making, making it sound more alike. Admittedly, it is easier to discern music of the first kind mentioned above. For example, club versions of *qawwālī* still sound *qawwālī* to the trained ear (listen to Shafqat Ali Khan’s song “Ish Kamal” from 2003). Islamic music has thus merged in musical expression with global musical genres that stems from the West and from different parts of the Islamic world making it a competitive substitute to non-Islamic music sounding similar or the same. The musical aesthetics is shared, but the messages are different from so-called sinful songs. Typically, if lyrics were taken away, much of the music would be difficult to place geographically, and even harder to do so ideologically and religiously. The contemporary *anashīd* is both eclectic and electric, far from the traditional *anashīd* song by Egyptian artists like Yaṣīn Tuhāmī or Aḥmad al-Tūnī (Hoffman 1995, 1997).

Certain types of Islamic music have merged into and developed the much-discussed genre World Music marketed both as creative fusion and as locally authentic (Shannon 2011), not least different types of “Suficized” music, as Shannon calls it. With this neologism Shannon wants to express the character of music created for a market thirsty for spiritual music (regardless of religion), which certain artists, often with a background as brethren of different Sufi orders, have composed and recorded as Sufi music. The renowned singer and composer Sami Yusuf has, in line with the hunger on the music market for the spiritual, named his style of music “Spiritique”.



An interesting development of the form of music is when artists, like Sami Yusuf, begin to produce different versions of their compositions. Yusuf made a fully orchestrated and a percussions only version of his debut CD Al-Mu'allim to cater both for those who think musical form has to be restricted to percussions and voice only and those who would like a richer sound. The records become consumer products designed to fit different Islamic sensitivities presumed to lead to different life style choices and consumer habits.

Some artists choose to record without instruments, making a cappella songs, possibly with very basic rhythms. This choice can at certain websites be a requirement. On the well-established nasheedbay.com several nashīd-artists are presented and you can listen to their songs. But if you click on an artist who have put instruments in a song you will be informed that: "This nasheed has been removed because it contained music." Some artists have recorded advanced voice only versions of their albums, for example Maher Zain who have redone his musical arrangements, completely avoiding other instruments than the human voice (listen to "I Love You So", Maher Zain on nasheedbay.com). The reason is of course the understanding by some scholars that musical instruments are ḥarām as such. The artists have met this challenge using new digital recording technology basically giving the artists an infinite number of tracks to record on. The complex musical web spun with the human voice acting spider is probably a uniquely Islamic form of musical art.

When Islamic artists adopt globally spread styles and Arab pop styles, it is often the lyrics that set the music apart, and it is to the lyrics we now turn.

Lyrics

There are roughly three themes in the lyrics to modern Islamic songs: Muslim pride (common when being a minority in Europe and North America); praise of Muḥammad, Allah, Islam, etc.; songs on moral behaviour.

The lyrics to "Stand alone" by Native Deen from USA are representative of the first kind (by the way, the song is available in a voice only version too).

Chorus

*I am not afraid to stand alone...
I am not afraid to stand alone...
If Allah's by my side
Everything will be all right
Gonna keep my head up high*

*I know when I'm praying and fasting
They be teasing and laughing
So I called to my Lord for the power
For the strength every day, every hour...*



Verse

*Peer pressure, they were insisting
And I was resisting
Some days I felt I would give in
Just wanted to fit in*

*One day there's a new Muslim teacher
Single mom and the people respect her
Just seeing her strength I get stronger
They can break my will no longer*

A reoccurring theme in this type of lyrics is the doubt felt because of being questioned and teased, but also the reassurance, pride and determination because of the singer's Islamic faith. A version of this is the lyrics describing how the singer reverts to Islam after a period of ignorance (for example Maher Zain's "Thank You Allah"). Life is a test the believer will succeed in due to Allah being by his or her side. This kind of Muslim pride can also take more aggressive forms like in "Allahu Ekber Bizlere Güç Ver" (God is Great, Give us Strength) by German rap group Sert Müslümanlar (Tough Muslims) in which they encourage Turkish speaking Muslims to take up arms and seek revenge against German racists (T. Solomon 2011). Regardless of attitude, Muslim pride lyrics fill the function of counter discourse to Islamophobia and racism.

One puzzling aspect of lyrics is that although pop music lyrics generally are simplistic and reductionary of human feelings and social complexities, it is well attested in research that lyrics can mean a lot to a listener or an artist who can fill the lyrics with rich emotions and give them a very special meaning to his or her private lives. Simple phrases may change lives or give support and strength in difficult situations (DeNora 2000). Judging from online comments on chats attached to web-pages devoted to Islamic music, like muslimhiphop.com or youtube, it is common for listeners to express gratitude over the music of these types of songs. Here is a comment from a young woman:

Wow I love your site. Very refreshing to see an alternative to listen to music without the sins that comes along with listening to the filth that is present in the mainstream. I especially love the work by 3ilm and others who have motivated me to represent better for my deen, inshallah. May Allah swt reward all for their efforts. Salams. - Masha. (muslimhiphop.com)

Other lyrics praise Allah or Muḥammad, the original theme of *ilāhī*, *nāt*, and *nashīd*. Apart from traditional poems and popular chants like "Allah Hoo" popularized by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (d. 1997), some chants are new. Irfan Makki, an artist signed to the Awakening label, recently released a song called "al-Amīn" with a pop reggae rhythm. In it he sings:

Verse:

*Your noble face always had a smile
You walked with grace gentle as a child*



*You taught us to be a mercy to mankind
To spread God's peace throughout all the lands
We say Salam to al-Amīn
You guided us to the perfect Dīn
Let's say*

Chorus:

*Allah Allah yā Allah
Muḥammad yā Rasūl Allah
Allah Allah yā Allah
Muḥammad yā Ḥabīb Allah*

The lyrics read like an Ottoman ḥilyah, a calligraphic description of Muḥammad's character and looks derived from the *shamā'il*-literature. Other songs are similar, repeating well-known attributions and traits of the Prophet. The topic is repeated in an abundance of songs.

Regarding the good conduct of Muslims, a suggestive interpretation of lyrics is often done through an official video clip. I cannot resist the temptation to quote an artist with a Swedish connection, Maher Zain, who, while of Lebanese origin, grew up in Sweden. This is an extract from "For the rest of my life", a love song written by Maher to his wife.

Chorus

*For the rest of my life, I'll be with you
I'll stay by your side, honest and true
Till the end of my time, I'll be loving you, loving you
For the rest of my life, through days and nights
I'll thank Allah for opening my eyes
Now and forever I, I'll be there for you
I know it deep in my heart*

In the video clip, the words are accompanied, among other things, with images of couples showing each other tenderness and looking happy together, stressing the importance of good conduct between spouses for a successful marriage. The lyrics indicate a personal narrative; on an immediate level the song is about Maher Zain's relationship to his wife. But since he is an Islamic artist, it is reasonable to understand the lyrics in relation to the rest of his songs and stress the moral aspect of the lyrics. The video clip invites this interpretation.

The impact of these lyrics is not possible to estimate without a thorough investigation. Still,



judging from comments from chat forums and the devotee website Islamiclyrics.net, we, at least, have to acknowledge a huge interest and passion among a fair amount of listeners.

Another very interesting phenomenon is Islamic children's songs. In them, lyrics are explicitly teaching children 'ilm al-akhlāq, morals, for example the song "Pizza in his pocket" by Zain Bhikha warns against overeating and promotes sharing and modest behaviour. After a rather humorous description of a boy who eats food all over the world ("He ate dates in Damascus, which he thought were very nice. And hot samoosas in Sumatra, seasoned with a special spice.") Zain Bhikha turns the narrative around:

*Then one day he saw a little girl, who held her tummy tight,
And he walked over and asked her if everything was alright.
She said she was so hungry and had been hungry for so long,
Then he realized the way he ate was very, very wrong.
He looked down at his own tummy and he started feeling pain-
Pain from eating too much food, but he knew not to complain.
So he brought the girl some food, shared it with her family,
Then they thanked Allah for what they had, and then he let them be.
So let's try to learn a lesson and let's try to do what's right.
Eat the food your parents give you without a fuss or fight.
Always be thankful to Allah for all your yummy food,
Share what you have with others, because not sharing is rude.
Being thankful is what's really great.
Eat the veggies on your plate.
And don't be like the boy who always ate and ate and ate!*

The idea of creating artistic expressions directed to children is strangely novel. In Islamic art it is throughout history almost unheard of up until modern days. A pioneering work regarding children's literature has been undertaken by British Islamic Foundation since the late 1970's (Janson 2003). But the last few decades the market has expanded tremendously with children's Islamic TV, computer games, books, and music. The claim is not that children have not had music or tales to listen to and to get thrill by – an abundance of such have existed in all societies – but lullabies and stories have been traditional or made up by creative parents rather the composed, written and marketed by artists. But modern technology and the urge to promote Islam felt by many have enabled a market of Islamic artistic expressions today, unprecedented in history.



On consuming music

As with all music, some Islamic music is professionally made, while others amateurish, some music is marketed by recording artists, other music is put free online and yet other artists are primarily live acts. To an increasing degree, a market for Islamic music has emerged. Several artists record songs in different languages for different markets and the practice of different arrangement for different audiences has been mentioned already.

As growing urban middle and upper classes with a Muslim faith and fairly conservative values arise in different parts of the world, the size of the economy of leisure and pleasure increases (compare Abaza 2006:198; van Nieuwkerk (ed.) 2011). Islamic consumer products are marketed and experienced as life style choices and a multitude of alternatives appear. The plurality also constructs brands and products as ideological. By producing Islamic pop-music and Islamic artists, other pop-music and other artists are constructed as (potentially) un-Islamic. The globalization of consumer culture and its accompanying practices of music listening as an interest, passion and pleasure, create a global stage for Islamic pop music.

Consuming *ḥalāl* pop-music is marketed as respectable and suitable for, for example, Muslim youth. Today, at Islamic conferences and at eid celebration parties, *ḥalāl* pop acts frequently feature despite scepticism against music among many. Acts like that of mentioned Maher Zain might do the trick and bring additional youngsters and others to the conference; so be it that the means to the end is music; it is for a good course. Musical acts are through this thinking normalized and can even be expected and anticipated at large gatherings.

But what is consumed will have to fit into the requirements of Islamic discourse, which in its turn requires Islamic discourse to develop standpoints about the performance of Islamic pop. It is in communication with this phenomenon that the theology of *al-fann al-hādif* has been developed. It is important to stress the complex relationship between purposeful art and consumer culture. To be able to package and market music as *ḥalāl*-pop, artists cannot simply avoid sensitive subjects like sexuality, drugs, etc., they must also provide edifying lyrics or religious hymns and further set good examples (take part in charities, perform at Islamic meetings). They need to cultivate and signal an Islamic ethical self (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006). Foucault (1990:26) comments on morality and self, highlighting “the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code”. The codes of conduct always related to subjectivation. In relation to *al-fann al-hādif*, the art (singing, performance, etc.) performed by the artists are both expressions of the truth and importance of the moral code abided to (i.e. Islam), and confirmations of the artists’ adherence to the code (compare Foucault 1980). Since there seems to be a complete collapse of the possible separation between the artists’ stage persona and their private self,



this ethical self needs to be imposed at all times, in all situations. Taken from commentaries on Youtube, fans seem to mark that they take inspiration from the artists to strive after “an ever more complete mastery of the self” to use Foucault’s (1990:38) words, increasing pressure on the artists to behave because of being role models. At the same time, overall aesthetic trends in films, video clips, marketing, frames the aesthetics of the songs and clips provided to market artists.

An intriguing discussion has emerged in the wake of the success of some Islamic nashīd artists: the discussion about the behaviour of the female audience in their veneration and admiration of the artists, or, simpler put, in their behaviour as audience. When I visited a concert by Hamza Robertson in Rotterdam, in a rather small theatre in connection with an eid celebration, some fairly young teenage girls tried out the role of “fan-girls screaming their heads off”. Sitting right behind them, I experienced the reprimanding looks they got from some of the more middle-aged spectators. This behaviour is also visible and audible in other concert clips on youtube. However, this causes trouble for the male performers: how should they react? The issue was addressed by Yvonne Ridley, journalist and convert to Islam, who in 2006 (in May), wrote a confrontational piece (“Pop Culture in the Name of Islam”) on Sami Yusuf’s music and performance:

The reason I am expressing concern is that just a few days ago at a venue in Central London, sisters went wild in the aisles as some form of pop-mania swept through the concert venue. And I’m not just talking about silly, little girls who don’t know any better; I am talking about sisters in their 20’s, 30’s and 40’s, who squealed, shouted, swayed and danced. Even the security guys who looked more like pipe cleaners than bulldozers were left looking dazed and confused as they tried to stop hijabi sisters from standing on their chairs. Of course the stage groupies did not help at all as they waved and encouraged the largely female Muslim crowd to “get up and sing along.” (Ridley 2006a)

Sami Yusuf wrote an eloquent response (“Open Letter from Sami Yusuf to Yvonne Ridley”) marginalizing the phenomenon and pointing out how he consults with scholars about music to be informed of the Islamic perspective so important to him. However, Ridley (2006b) replied that she really can’t see that she erred in her reasoning pointing to a Time Magazine article “Meet Islam’s biggest rock Star” (July 31, 2006) made with the consent of Yusuf in which he is portrayed as a rock star that causes a “Beatle-sized frenzy”.

Regardless of their disparaging opinions, something crucial is touched upon. Both agree upon what is an inappropriate behaviour. Both fill “the sisters” behaviour with meaning when their screams and dancing in public are contrasted with an ideal modest, god-fearing behaviour. Asef



Bayat (2007:435) writes “The history of Islamism has been one of a battle against fun, playfulness, and diversion” something clearly visible as a discursive reference in the discussions above. But to the artists and the audience, other references are also close at hand, for example consumer culturally spread patters (through advertisement, films, Youtube clips, etc.) of how to behave when going to a concert. When at a concert, it becomes a daring challenge to enter the role of screaming fan, or rock star, to enhance one’s own experience, to physically enter the narrative of the fan-star relation, not necessarily in a reflexive way, but certainly through praxis. The new stars of Islamic music offer an arena where all behaviour is not set. At the same time as the artists develop the genre’s and its marketing, its audiences also develop their relations to the consumption thereof.

Islamic art?

What is Islamic art? What makes art Islamic? Throughout this article, I have tried, with the help of Islamic music of various forms, to give examples of a humanist and social science perspective on these questions. Looking at art as part of an Islamic discursive tradition, helps to historicize expressions and interpret them. Contemporary Islamic musical artists are consciously producing a discourse on Islam that run counter to negative stereotypes, especially about backwardness, both in the US and Europe and in Muslim dominated countries. They are consciously creating arts that are on par with global consumer culture and trends in music making. They are further creating their music in relation to known different requirements of Islamic scholars. Much discussion on music by scholars are of course not heard or read by artists but I dare claim from my studies that basic standpoints are well known.

In the beginning of this article, I stated that Islamic art is set apart from other art by being: “art that is by purpose or by traditional repetition put in the discursive and semiotic tradition of Islam”. Some artists make positive reference to the Islamic discursive tradition without actually producing Islamic art. Rather, Islamic art is a conscious product by artists who aim at producing religiously permissible art.

Thus, what makes art Islamic is the ambition by artists to create a work that will be accepted as Islamic by others. In the contestation of inclusion and exclusion taking place in the discursive tradition of Islam, new artistic work needs to find space and be allowed to find it. Discussing music specifically, certain genres are historically well established and an artist following the conventions will find it easier to be accepted by the guardians of the discourse than those who refuse to accept a genres limitations. It is well to remember the now often forgotten revolution of the qawwālī that a once young Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan made (Bohlman 2002). Other genres are new, like Islamic nashīd-pop, and negotiations are on-going, for example if it is acceptable to create pietistic music while touring as a rock star. It is easy to connect to the discussion



by Riis & Woodhead (2010) when trying to describe how a religious emotion is established. The process of insigation and consecration, mentioned above, of a work of art as Islamic is intimately related to discursive power. Surprisingly, religious scholars do not always hold more or a substantially different discursive power than the consumer/listener and their taste culture preferences. They do as individuals but the scholars' possibilities are matched by the many. Islamic scholar who try to find a way of merging the interest and passion of the many for music and Islamic ethics and aesthetics, will find that their blessing and promotion of Islamic musical art will find huge support among non-scholars. But discourses are never simple – they are run through by contesting power and are, even though they are built on repetition, somehow ever changing. But as long as Islam is the master referent to the discourse of the art, and others accept the claim of the art and artist, the art produced can be said to relate to the concept “Islamic art”. And that is what makes art Islamic.

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