

The significance of intercultural music activities: A study of Norwegian Palestinian cultural exchange

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Introduction

This article discusses a community music project in the Palestinian refugee camp Rashidieh in southern Lebanon. The *Lebanon Project*, as it came to be called, was established by Norwegian music educators in collaboration with the Palestinian organisation Beit Atfal Assumoud (BAS), which runs the project at a social centre in Rashidieh. The music project offers music and dance activities for children and adolescents aged 7–20 two days a week. The activities are led by 3–5 Palestinian teachers and consist of band activities where all participants play together and group activities where the children are divided into instrument groups. In the afternoon, the instruments are put aside and the dance activities begin. The children learn the traditional Palestinian dance *dabke*, which continues to gather generations on the dance floor at weddings and other special occasions. Additionally, the older participants are taught various choreographed dances.

A central part of the music project is the cultural exchange between Norwegian and Palestinian children and adolescents. Music students from the Norwegian Academy of Music (NMH) visit the camp every year as part of their education. The Norwegian students provide the musical material in a four-day musical workshop for between 50 and 60 children from the camp. On the final day, the Palestinians perform together with the Norwegians in front of families and friends. Groups of Palestinian students have also visited Norwegian schools and institutions during the past 10 years and have performed and taught Palestinian music and dance. The Palestinians stay with Norwegian hosts and participate in the daily life of these families. They go on trips together and sing, dance and play with Norwegian children and youngsters throughout their two-week stay in Norway. During this time, they have opportunities to tell about their lives and the living conditions in the refugee camp.





This article is a study of these cultural exchange activities based on my own experiences from a longer stay in Lebanon during which I worked as a teacher for the music project in Rashidieh. Drawing on ethnographic methods and anthropological theory, I will attempt to reach a better understanding of the meaning the Palestinian youngsters attach to their participation in the cultural exchange activities, how they connect these experiences to their life in general and what meaning these activities have in the social and cultural context in which they live.

In the field of music education, increasing attention has been focused on how music can be employed to create positive changes for people, and often this research is connected to the term *community music*. Veblen and Olsson (2002) highlight some characteristics of community music projects; such projects often focus on active music making through performance, improvisation and composition and direct attention to the personal and social well-being of the participants as well as their musical learning. Further, Veblen and Olsson note that community music projects seek to include marginalised or disadvantaged individuals and groups in musical activities and to promote intercultural acceptance and understanding. Therefore, the music project in Lebanon can be understood as a community music project that aims to provide a marginalised group of people opportunities for musical participation and thereby create positive change for individual participants and in the broader context in which they live. This article is an attempt to facilitate a clear understanding of how engagement in musical practice potentially generates positive personal and social changes for participants.

Background

The living situation in the Palestinian refugee camps is marked by substantial health and social challenges as a result of the high unemployment rate, the population density and the general feeling of insecurity associated with life as refugees with limited rights and possibilities (Chaaban et al., 2010). The Palestinians in Lebanon have limited opportunities for travelling. Being stateless, the refugees are banned from entering Europe unless close ties to family members can be proved, and even then a visa is almost impossible to obtain. For foreigners, getting access to the refugee camp is similarly troublesome. The only way in is through a check point controlled by the Lebanese military, and entry requires special permission. For the Palestinians, these obstacles make the cultural exchange activities part of the larger story of their oppression in Lebanon and of their limited rights and the powerlessness they feel to change

the situation. The Palestinians feel that the international world simply does not care about them, and they describe themselves as ‘the forgotten people’ (Hanafi, 2008). This makes the cultural exchange activities particularly significant. These activities give the Palestinians opportunities to show the outside world the conditions in which they live and to propound ‘the Palestinian cause’—the liberation of Palestine and the refugees’ right to return. The young Palestinians who participate in the cultural exchange activities in Norway feel that they represent the Palestinian people and therefore find themselves occupying a social role with high significance. Travelling to Europe must be seen as an important event in the lives of these youngsters, just as the Norwegian students’ annual visits to Rashidieh must be considered special occasions of great importance to the Palestinians.

Field work and interviews

I lived in Lebanon from February to December 2012, during which time I worked as a music teacher for the music project in Rashidieh. I participated in the weekly music activities, taught and performed with the children and the other teachers. I also had the chance to participate in and observe the cultural activities, both in Rashidieh and in Norway (in April and September 2012, respectively). It was clear to me that the cultural activities were considered to be something very special by the Palestinians. A certain energy was brought to the place when the Norwegians were visiting, affecting both children and adults, and these visits were talked about both long before and after they took place. The cultural exchange activities could, in my experience, be seen as the core of the music project, as the ordinary weekly music activities were directed towards these special occasions. The music we played in the weeks before the Norwegians’ visit was the music we wanted to perform for them, and after their visit we would continue to play the songs the Norwegian students had taught. Similarly, the months prior to leaving for Norway were filled with intense rehearsals for the dance group members, who struggled to perfect the dances. The significance that I found these activities to have for the music project as a whole prompted me to explore how the Palestinians experience these activities, and what aspects were especially significant to them. Taking ethnography as a methodological starting point (Hastrup, 2003), I have attempted to take part in—or at least gain a deeper understanding of—the cultural experiences (Hasse, 2003) shared by the Palestinian participants that constitute the basis for how they understand and interpret words, actions and events associated with the cultural exchange activities.

A few remarks about my own position in this context must be made. As a 'Westerner', my presence in the camp is significant to the Palestinians because I represent 'the outside world', the international community that the Palestinians feel has neglected them and their struggle for the right to return to their homeland. Further, I represent to them—regardless of whether this is actually the reality—the Norwegian institutions that financially support the Palestinian non-governmental organisation (NGO) running the music activities. These circumstances possibly affect the way informants express their views of the music project to me and necessitate a critical view of potential negative sides that might not be put forward by the Palestinian participants.

As in all anthropological research, ethical issues are evident and must be considered. The anthropologist participates in field work to generate new knowledge. Access to this knowledge is secured by temporarily sharing the daily lives and practices of local informants. Therefore, the relationship between the researcher and the informant is the basic component in the generation of knowledge. This, however, entails an ethical dilemma for the researcher; informants become a tool for the anthropologist in his or her attempt to gain a deeper understanding, which implies the existence of more or less hidden agendas in the social interaction. However, it is not necessarily just the researcher who seeks to use the informants as tools for his or her own purpose; the informants can have agendas of their own and use their relationship with the researcher strategically. During my time in Lebanon, I was often thanked for being in the camp, not only because I contribute by teaching in the music project but also because the Palestinians expect me to call attention to their poor living conditions in Lebanon after my return home to Denmark. Just as I use the informants to obtain knowledge about themes I am interested in, the informants try to use me to advance issues important to them. As an anthropologist, loyalty regarding the concerns and agendas of the people in the field is crucial in order to obtain a legitimate position in the social context. For example, the Palestinians expect me to be on 'their side' in the conflict between Palestinians and the State of Israel, and just the fact that I am present in the refugee camp is to them a confirmation of my sympathy for Palestinians (Buch, 2009). But loyalty regarding the agendas and issues important to the Palestinians is also necessary because they are a part of the foundation for the continuous creation of meaning that occurs in this particular context. In my analysis, when I write about the *fight of resistance* (the implication being the fight against the State of Israel), I do not necessarily take a firm position in the multifaceted conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people. However, for my Palestinian informants, this conflict is an inevitable part of their existence, and the cultural exchange activities they engage in acquire their meaning based on this fact.

In this study, all informants are anonymised. They have all voluntarily agreed to participate and have been informed of the study's theme, aims and dissemination.

Interviews

Field work experiences and participant observation during the cultural exchange activities provide the necessary background for coming to a deeper understanding of the social world of the Palestinian participants. Additionally, semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1997; Merriam, 1998) have been employed to gain insight into the experiences and feelings the informants themselves have regarding the music activities. Two group interviews were conducted, one with three boys aged 15–17 and the other with two girls aged 15 and 16, all of whom participated in cultural exchange activities both in Norway and in Rashidieh. Other participants also fulfilled these criteria, but these informants were chosen for practical reasons, as they were among the most active participants and were always in attendance at the music activities on Fridays and Sundays. However, they are to be considered representative of the group as a whole.

The interviews were conducted in groups to provide the informants with the comfort of being together with peers in the interview situation. Further, interviewing groups of informants allows the researcher to observe the interaction between them and how potentially divergent experiences are negotiated. However, the social interaction between informants can also cause specific views not deemed appropriate in the social context to be excluded or marginalised. Based on experiences from her field work in the occupied territories of Palestine, Lotte Buch (2009) suggests that informants can be inclined to reproduce certain dominating narratives that are deemed socially acceptable even if their personal opinions and feelings about an issue might be more nuanced. During the interviews, the young Palestinians stated that because they are seen as representatives of the Palestinian people, they feel obliged to be role models and to behave in an exemplary way while in Norway. This sense of obligation is probably also present in the interview situation, prompting informants to emphasise aspects they feel obliged to draw attention to. Even if this makes it difficult to show the individual differences in the participants' experiences of the cultural exchange activities, the study will show which interpretations of these experiences are accepted and therefore available to the participants in the sociocultural context they are a part of. In this way, this study not only provides us with insight into the participants' personal experience *or* the possibilities for interpretation made available by the social

context but also with insight into both aspects in their interconnectedness. This is a precondition for all experiences of meaning—that personal and individual experiences are intimately connected and intertwined with broader social and cultural experiences.

At the beginning of each interview, a short film comprised of video clips from the cultural exchange activities, recorded and produced by me, were shown. This film showed the informants in different situations both in Rashidieh and in Norway and functioned as *stimulated recall* (Lyle, 2003), a method to stimulate informants' memories of specific events employed in order for informants to come into contact with the feelings and experiences connected to these situations. This method was deemed relevant because some of the events took place half a year prior to the time of the interviews (October 2012). Stimulated recall, however, includes the possibility that exposure to a video film of past events provides the participants with new experiences not available to them before. The time distance and the opportunity to see oneself from an outside perspective can change the original experience so that it becomes something other than what it was. However, the interview was not only employed to understand these experiences 'as they were' but also to understand how the participants make sense of these experiences later on. Not just the experiences 'in themselves' are interesting but also the continuous re-interpretations.

The interviews were conducted with the assistance of a local Palestinian who translated the informants' accounts from Arabic into English. Some of the statements were given directly in English, but the informants were encouraged to speak Arabic to let them express themselves the way they wanted without linguistic limitations. The translator was informed about the study's themes and aims in advance and received an interview guide with relevant questions prior to the interview. As the translator lived in Rashidieh, she had some knowledge about the project and about the informants, as she had previously been employed at their school. The informants did not in any way seem impeded by the translator's presence but appeared to be sharing their thoughts openly and without reservation. As the informants talked, their accounts were translated into English every few minutes, which gave me the opportunity to take control of the interview, direct the conversation and formulate additional questions to elaborate interesting points. The interview guide was formulated based on my own field work experiences. During my stay in Lebanon, I got to know these informants and thus gained a deeper understanding of their lives and the social and cultural context they live in. This understanding was used during the participant observation of the cultural exchange activities, and the 'amazements' (Fink-Jensen, 2012; Hastrup, 1992) I encountered during these observations, which I subsequently

noted in my field journal, inspired the interview questions. A video recording was made of the interviews, which allowed us to create better translations of the informants' accounts and to identify and discuss any ambiguous or unclear statements of meaning. Quotations used in the following text are given in English in collaboration with the translator.

An anthropological perspective

This section is devoted to outlining the theoretical perspectives that form the basis of my observations. The study is informed by anthropological research, not only methodologically but also in terms of understanding how the music project participants attach significance to the cultural exchange activities. *Symbolic anthropology* (Ortner, 1984) and two great scholars associated with this line of anthropological research, Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, provide us with the starting point.

The cultural exchange as a cultural practice

Geertz (1973) points to Max Weber when he suggests that 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' (p. 5). The central aim of Geertzian anthropology is to understand how cultural symbols 'shape the way actors see, feel and think about the world' (Ortner, 1984, p. 129), in other words, how cultural agents use symbols to interact with and interpret their surrounding world. Geertz takes a symbol to be 'any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception' (Geertz, 1973, p. 91), and the members of a given culture are continuously involved in a (re)negotiation of the meaning and significance of the cultural symbols. A symbol is not necessarily interpreted the same way by all members, and this tension between established meaning and individual variations lends culture a processual and ever-changing aspect. Geertz sees culture as a text under constant revision. The members of a culture are involved in the production and interpretation of this text, and new 'readings' generate further interpretations in a continuous process (ibid.). The text or part of the text is employed by the cultural agents to create meaning and coherence in their lives (Wilken, 2006).

According to Geertz, artistic practices can be seen as an expression of this continuous negotiation of meaning. The artistic expressions of a society or a community of people can be regarded as a way of communicating the usually inexpressible that nonetheless

constitutes deep and significant truths of the group (Geertz, 1983). Art can ‘materialize a way of experiencing, bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects, where men can look at it’ (ibid., p. 99). Central to an adequate understanding of the lives of the Palestinian refugees is that cultural expressions, like traditional music and dance, are considered to be significant expressions of Palestinian identity—an identity under pressure due to the exile and the circumstances in which the Palestinians live. These cultural symbols are connected to some very foundational experiences of what it means to be Palestinian, to be a refugee and to long for a homeland. Through music and dance, these foundational truths are expressed and experienced in significant ways. In the cultural exchange activities, these cultural symbols are employed in an alternative social and cultural frame in which other cultural agents and symbols become a part of and affect the continuous negotiation and (re)interpretation of meaning. From a Geertzian perspective, the cultural exchange activities can be seen as a distinct cultural practice that provides the participants opportunities to express their own cultural identity by means of the symbols employed in the practice. The central questions of this study are therefore: How do the Palestinian participants experience the significance of their engagement in this specific cultural practice? And how do they use this distinct frame to create or uphold a sense of meaning and coherence in life?

The cultural exchange activities as a ritual practice

The cultural exchange activities can also be conceptualised as a *ritual* practice. The study of rituals is central to Victor Turner’s work, in which he explores how rituals and ritual practices are used to create coherence and meaning in a social structure. During his field studies, Turner (1969) observed that ritual actions are often connected to an ongoing crisis or conflict in a social context. Ritual actions can be seen as a way of re-establishing balance in the social life of a community and thereby give reality coherence and meaning that would otherwise be lost. An example is the juridical system. A crime constitutes an interruption of social order, thus bringing the system out of balance. When a criminal faces the court, a ritual is enacted that allows the members of society to uphold a feeling of justice and thereby to re-establish order and balance. Such ritual processes, whether juridical, religious or artistic, can according to Turner be understood as *reflexive*. They reveal the underlying structures and values of a community and thus allow people to investigate, picture, understand and transform the structures they live in (Turner, 1982, p. 75).

Turner (1969) connects ritual participation with the concept of *liminality*. To be in a liminal space is to move on the edge of the existing realities, free of the 'old', determining structures of everyday reality but not yet absorbed by the 'new'. Turner describes this as a position 'betwixt and between' two modes of existence (ibid., p. 95). In this state of liminality, a condition of *communitas* is potentially established for the participants (ibid., p. 96ff). *Communitas* is a special social field that can be said to exist out of time and out of the normal social structure. As an experience of existential character, *communitas* provides a feeling of unity and integration between an individual and the surrounding world marked by equality and fellowship (Turner, 1969; 1974). *Communitas* holds a transformative potential, as this experience produces alternatives to the existing social structure in the form of abstract cultural domains in which new modes of social interaction, values and symbolic representations are revealed and explored. *Communitas* is not a permanent condition but is rather created spontaneously in a dialectic relationship with the existing social structure. It is a mode of existence reached with the help of cultural artefacts as part of a cultural process but that cannot be upheld for longer stretches of time. At some point, it will freeze and become social structure, but *communitas* is at the same time what provides this structure new life and that which offers alternatives to these social structures. Turner regards experiences of *communitas* as a dynamic force in human existence, a catalyst for action and change in the social reality of human life. The symbols and metaphors created in the experience of *communitas* become tools for understanding and transforming existing social structures: 'They incite men to action as well as to thought' (Turner, 1969, p. 129). Turner's theory is interesting because the lives of the Palestinian participants are marked by a continuing social crisis that places them in a marginal position in their social and cultural context. Because they are refugees, the Palestinians' lives are characterised by instability and insecurity. The cultural exchange activities can be seen as ritual actions that potentially create experiences of *communitas* and thereby provide them with experiences of meaning, equality and communality.

An anthropological view of a musical practice

The anthropological perspective outlined here is utilised in this article to explore the music project and the cultural exchange activities in particular as cultural and ritual practices. Drawing on Geertz, I suggest regarding the musical practice and the cultural exchange activities that are a significant part of this practice as a distinct social and cultural frame in which the participants, by means of the cultural symbols that are enacted in the frame, are provided with opportunities to understand and interpret their

own existence in new ways. Due to the liminal position that the Palestinian refugees find themselves in, these cultural processes are, with reference to Turner, understood as ritual actions that allow experiences of *communitas* to occur. According to Turner, such rituals are means of (re)creating experiences of meaning and coherence in life.

In order to tie these concepts and perspectives to music education research, I wish to draw attention to a scholar who has presented a similar anthropological perspective of musical practices. Christopher Small (1998) characterises music as something people *do*, a social and cultural practice, as *musicking*. According to Small, the meaning of a musical practice is to be found in the broader cultural context in which the musicking takes place. In his book, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (1998), Small undertakes an analysis of a symphony concert and draws attention to the cultural symbols and actors that constitute the event—from the layout of the concert hall to the gesture the conductor greets the audience with. In other words, focus is directed towards the cultural symbols that comprise the musical event. The central object of analysis is the musical performance, an event that Small characterises as a ritual in which the cultural agents and symbols interact and in which the meaning is created. In the course of the musical performance, relationships are brought into existence and are experienced, affirmed and celebrated by the participants. These are the relationships that the participants perceive to be an expression of the *ideal relationships* ‘between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world’ (Small, 1998, p. 13). Small’s concept of ideal relationships is closely related to Turner’s notion of *communitas*, which articulates the same sense of collective experience of communality and unity that provides us with an alternative to the ‘normal’ social structures. To both scholars, the performative aspect is central. The experience of *communitas* emerges due to the participants’ engagement in the musical performance or ritual; it is through this engagement that the experience of the ideal relationships is possible.

Small’s ideas can be said to provide the anthropological theory with a layer of music educational thinking. The meaning of music is created in the interaction between the cultural symbols and agents that participate in the musical practice, and this interaction potentially creates experiences of *communitas* or, pointing to Small, experiences of ideal relationships. These theoretical considerations provide us with a conceptual foundation as we turn to an exploration of how the Palestinian participants perceive their engagement in the cultural exchange activities.

Findings

In this section, the interviews with the Palestinian participants are presented. These interviews focussed on the informants' participation in the cultural exchange programme. During the analysis of the interviews, three main themes emerged; the cultural exchange activities were described a) as an opportunity to *experience oneself in a new way*, b) as an opportunity to *experience emotions and a feeling of communality and recognition* and c) as a way of *fighting for the Palestinian cause*.

Experiencing oneself in a new way

During their stay in Norway, the Palestinian participants live with Norwegian families and become a part of these families, and this aspect of the journey has made a significant impression. Several informants believe that staying with the Norwegian families was the best part of the trip to Norway, as they were treated nicely and got attached to the families. The informants compare the life in Norway with the living conditions in Rashidieh. They find that Norwegian children behave better, are more calm and disciplined and therefore are also quick learners. This difference is explained by pointing to the disparity between the living situations in Norway and in Rashidieh. These two places are generally described in opposing terms: neat/messy, spacious/dense, open/closed, clean/dirty, opportunities/lack of work, nature/garbage, well-being/illness. The experience of these disparities in living conditions makes the Palestinians feel like 'different persons' during their stay in Norway. This feeling of being a different person is connected to a different way of living in which people treat each other nicely, show up on time, are a part of 'the system' and like their jobs. Further, the Palestinians experience a different kind of freedom in Norway. They are able to do things here that are not possible in Lebanon; for example, they eat and sleep with their friends, go on trips and spend a lot of time together. Staying in Norway allows the Palestinians to have new experiences of life that differ significantly from their everyday lives in Rashidieh.

These experiences are also connected to the social roles that the Palestinians occupy while in Norway. During the two-week visit, they teach in a Norwegian elementary school, a high school and at an association for traditional folk music. The informants say in the interviews that they thrive in their roles as instructors. They feel comfortable, do not want to go home and like their students, who they regard to be both skilled and easy to teach. A number of informants state that they have developed

personally because of the responsibility they are given, that is, to teach Norwegian children traditional Palestinian dance:

Boy 1: Even our personalities are changed a lot. (...) We learned how to hold a responsibility. Our personalities grow from this; we feel more mature. This is the most important thing we have learned.

By having responsibility for the teaching practice, these young Palestinians get an opportunity to participate in social life in a new and significant way. On other occasions, these new social roles are not related to teaching but to the performance of Palestinian music and dance. The Palestinians have prepared dance shows in which they perform traditional Palestinian dances in schools and public places. Generally, the informants state that they are proud to have had an opportunity to act as representatives of Palestinian culture through teaching and performing Palestinian music and dance.

Experiencing emotions and feelings of communality and recognition

The Palestinians refer to themselves as a 'forgotten people', but the interaction with the Norwegians challenges this experience. The Norwegians treat the Palestinians as equals:

Girl 1: They treat us very good and they said, you are beautiful¹, and not like the people who say, we are not good people, the world says Palestinian are not good, they [the Norwegians] say you are good. (*Stated in English*)

The experience of equality and communality is especially present when groups of Norwegian music students visit Rashidieh. Such visits are significant events and are anticipated with great excitement by the Palestinian children. The informants describe the Norwegian students as understanding, calm and friendly, and they especially notice the way the Norwegians teach. The Palestinian children and youngsters are used to the rather authoritative teaching style of the UNRWA schools², and the Scandinavian pedagogical style practiced by the Norwegians makes a lasting impression on the participants. One of the informants explains that she particularly liked how one of the music students 'high-fived' his students after they finished playing a song. A 'high-five'

1 The word 'beautiful' must in this context not be understood as referring to a person's looks but as a description of a person's character, as a beautiful and decent human being.

2 The UN organisation UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) holds responsibility for the Palestinian refugees and runs schools and hospitals in the refugee camps.

must be regarded as a sign of recognition—a ‘well done’—and this pedagogical style can be said to underpin the participants’ general feelings of recognition and equality that permeate the relationship with the Norwegians.

In addition, the musical material that the Norwegians bring with them to Rashidieh is interpreted as a sign of recognition and communality. One of the informants tells about which songs she remembers from the last visit, and it is noteworthy that these songs mean something to her because of the lyrics and what the songs have come to symbolise in relation to the music project.

Girl 1: I like *Come Together* and *L-O-V-E*. *Come together* means to be together like the Norwegians and the Palestinians are together and the song *L-O-V-E* is about the fact that we love each other, there is no difference between us and them. (...) The songs have a very nice meaning.

This interpretation of the meaning of the songs is underpinned in the final concert, in which Norwegians and Palestinians perform these songs together on the stage in front of family and friends.

It means a lot to the informants that the music students from Norway take part in their lives and in their culture and traditions. During the most recent visit, this aspect was expressed in the final concert in which the Norwegian students performed the dabke dance wearing traditional Palestinian outfits.

Girl 1: We taught them dabke and they accept that they learn dabke and they want it. And they wear our clothes because they like to wear our clothes and because they want to be like us, not only dancing dabke but also wearing our clothes. This means a lot to me because the Palestinian traditions means a lot to us.

The informants emphasise how the Norwegians want to learn the Palestinian cultural symbols, here represented by Palestinian dance. This suggests, according to the informant, that the Norwegians want to be like Palestinians, in other words, that they accept them and consider them to be equals.

Fighting for the Palestinian cause

For the young Palestinians, both teaching and performing are ways of representing the Palestinian people and promoting the Palestinian cause.

Girl 1: When I teach somebody my Palestinian traditions (...) I feel very proud with myself and at the same time I am very happy because I spread the Palestinian traditional dance to the world, for them to know about us and to change their opinion towards the Palestinians.

To the informants, learning Palestinian music and dance is a way of acquiring knowledge about the Palestinian people. The cultural exchange activities provide the participants with an opportunity to do something of significance and to engage in the fight against oppression, a fight that the political leaders are not sufficiently engaged in, according to this informant:

Boy 2: We do something that the prime ministers and the president can't do. We fight for our cause, but the prime minister does nothing.

The performing of Palestinian traditions is seen as an expression of Palestinian identity. By teaching these traditions, the Palestinians show that they exist, and this is considered to be of importance.

Boy 3: [To be a teacher for a group] is nice because it shows our identity, that we exist, that we have a home and traditions. This is very important to us and to our cause.

The informants believe that the expression of Palestinian culture in front of an international audience will generate respect for Palestinians, which they need in order to gain support from the international community. Some of the informants describe the teaching of Palestinian culture as a duty, something they do because they are Palestinians and therefore are obliged to participate in the fight against oppression. This sense of obligation is also connected to the BAS organisation and the music project, which the participants also represent on their trips to Norway. By making a good impression, being excellent performers and behaving properly, the informants feel that they help to secure the continuation of the music project and maybe even a potential expansion of the programme to include other activities of benefit to the Palestinian community.

The cultural exchange activities also provide the participants with opportunities to express their thoughts about their situation on a personal level. During a meeting with a Norwegian high school class, the Palestinians sat with Norwegian students in smaller groups and told them about the living conditions in the refugee camp. One of the informants explains how he felt there was not enough time to talk about these issues:

Boy 3: We talked a lot but we needed more time to talk about a lot of things (...) because there are unlimited things to talk about. When a person suffers he can't talk to anyone about it all, because he needs a lot of time. (...) The youth from the camp need opportunity to talk more [about the suffering].

It means something to this informant to tell about his life, but he was afraid to take up all the time. He also wants his friends to have time to explain how they feel. Possibly, this informant experiences some kind of therapeutic effect in explaining his situation to others, an effect he wishes his peers to benefit from as well. In this way, the trip to Norway offers opportunities to the young Palestinians, both personally and collectively, to show who they are, tell about their lives and fight for the Palestinian cause.

Summing up

Through the cultural exchange activities, the Palestinian participants have the chance to experience themselves in new ways. This is especially pertinent when going to Norway, where participants get insight into a whole different way of life by staying with Norwegian host families. This experience is also connected to the new social roles that participants fulfil as instructors and performers of Palestinian music and dance and thereby as representatives of the Palestinian culture.

The relationship with the Norwegians is in some instances connected to feelings of recognition, respect and equality. The participants experience these feelings in the way they are taken care of in Norway but also in the pedagogical practices of the Norwegian music students during the cultural exchange activities in Rashidieh. The music and the musical activities are interpreted the same way—as symbols of recognition and friendship.

The cultural exchange is also connected to the fight for the Palestinian cause. The expression of Palestinian traditions can be seen as a way of explaining the oppression of the Palestinians. The cultural exchange is therefore regarded by the Palestinian participants as an act of resistance. By engaging with the Norwegians, the Palestinian

participants gain opportunities to tell about their lives and about being refugees, experiences that are regarded as valuable and necessary.

Analysis

The cultural exchange as an alternative framework of meaning

According to Geertz (1973; Ortner, 1984), culture can be seen as a web of meaning that shapes the way we experience ourselves and our surrounding world. When the Palestinian participants feel that they become 'different persons' during their stay in Norway, we might understand this as an experience of a distinct frame for the negotiation of meaning constituted by the cultural exchange activities and the cultural symbols, events and agents that are included in these activities. With reference to Geertz's idea of culture as text (Geertz, 1973; Wilken, 2006), the cultural exchange is an opportunity for the Palestinians to re-interpret and re-write the cultural text that provides the foundation for their experience of their own lives through interaction with the Norwegian participants. The cultural symbols enacted in the cultural exchange and the new and different social roles the Palestinians fulfil become tools in this process.

The cultural exchange, however, is not just framing 'the new' but also the performance of the Palestinians' own cultural symbols, the traditional Palestinian music and dance. According to Geertz (1983), artistic symbols can be said to express deep cultural experiences and knowledge. The cultural symbols discussed here can be seen as an expression of Palestinian identity and of a deeper sense of what it means to be Palestinian and thereby what it means to be a refugee and live in exile. In the cultural exchange, these cultural symbols are enacted in a distinct social and cultural frame in which other cultural agents and symbols influence the continuous negotiation of meaning. When the Palestinian cultural symbols are enacted in the cultural exchange in front of, with or by the Norwegian participants, the Palestinian identity is connected to the feelings of recognition and equality that the relationship to the Norwegians have come to symbolise to the Palestinians in multiple ways. This positive perception of Palestinian identity and culture challenges the general experience the Palestinian refugees have of their own identity, which is formed by the difficult situation they find themselves in. Life in the refugee camp is marked by marginalising structures, both in regards to the surrounding Lebanese society, in which the lack of rights excludes Palestinians from opportunities to find work and education but also in relation to the

international community, which the Palestinians feel has forgotten about them and their fight to return to their homeland. The cultural exchange activities constitute an alternative to this marginalisation. Through the cultural exchange, the Palestinian participants are able to create a connection to an *alternative framework of meaning*, in which general feelings of exclusion are challenged by an invitation to fellowship and celebration of the Palestinian culture expressed in the cultural exchange.

Music activities as expressions of equality

Feelings of recognition and mutuality are realised in the musical activities that frame the meeting between Norwegians and Palestinians. The music offers a frame, something to do together, that both Palestinian and Norwegians experience as something meaningful. The songs, games and dances become symbols of friendship between Norwegians and Palestinians, and through the performance of music and dance, the Palestinians are enabled to experience feelings of equality and recognition connected to this relationship. Turner's notion of *communitas* (Turner, 1969; 1974) is relevant for understanding this process. The Palestinians' living situation is marked by a fundamental social crisis that has placed them on the fringes of society as a marginalised and excluded group of people. When perceived as ritual actions, the music activities can be seen as ways of creating alternative frameworks of meaning characterised by communality, balance and unity—*communitas*. The performative aspect is essential. When Norwegians and Palestinian youths perform music *together*, the possibility of experiencing a shared meaning emerges. The music allows for the experience of a relationship despite language barriers because this relationship is based on a shared musical performance. When Norwegian and Palestinian participants play and dance together, they perform an intercultural ritual, and in this performance feelings of equality and communality—*communitas*—are experienced. It is therefore through a ritual practice, a shared performance of cultural rituals, that the connection to alternative frameworks of meaning is established. According to Small (1998), the musical performance enables the participants to explore the *ideal relationship*, the world as it could be. This connection between the music activities and feelings of recognition and equality also influences the everyday activities of the music project. The songs the Palestinians learn are seen as symbols of the relationship with the Norwegians, and these songs live on and become a part of the musical repertoire of the programme. Performing these songs is a way of re-establishing a connection to the meaning related to the cultural exchange activities, to re-create the alternative framework of meaning. The cultural symbols that Norwegians bring into the cultural exchange context in this

way become important resources for the experience of *communitas* in the everyday activities of the music project.

To take part in the fight

As stated above, the cultural exchange provides the participants with an opportunity to fight for the Palestinian cause. The participants regard the performance of Palestinian music and dance as an expression of their cultural identity. Therefore, teaching Norwegian children and adolescents Palestinian music and dance becomes a way of making the Palestinian culture known and thereby a way to fight against the experienced oppression.

The Palestinians' long-lasting situation as refugees marks every aspect of their existence. However, the Palestinians generally feel totally incapable of changing this situation. The cultural exchange provides the Palestinians with an opportunity to take part in the fight and to affect their circumstances. This proved to be very important to the informants. However, this introduces a political aspect to the cultural exchange activities that we as music educators do not necessarily feel comfortable dealing with in our work. It must be emphasised that the mere existence of these Palestinian refugees is political, and any contact—or abstaining from contact—with this group of people has political implications. A thorough discussion of these matters is beyond the scope of this article. Central for this study is to point out that the informants feel enabled to affect the social structures determining the lives of Palestinians by engaging in the cultural exchange activities. The informants emphasise in the interviews that travelling to Norway means something special because it provides them with opportunities to promote the Palestinian cause, and this makes the participants special compared to the other people living in the camp who do not have this possibility. Therefore, the Palestinians consider the cultural exchange activities to be meaningful events because they offer an alternative social and cultural frame that enables participants to affect central issues in their lives, which they normally cannot do. The cultural exchange can in this way be seen as a way of providing the participants with agency in relation to their own lives; they become agents in the fight for recognition of the Palestinian people, which could influence the participants' self-image and quality of life (Ruud, 1998).

A critical perspective

In this section, I will highlight some critical perspectives that were not addressed in the interviews but which I feel are relevant. These concern how some aspects of

the cultural exchange activities have negative implications. Through their encounter with the Norwegians, the Palestinian participants will also be confronted with large differences in living conditions, and these differences must be perceived as highly arbitrary and unfair. While the cultural exchange can provide positive experiences of recognition and mutuality on one hand, on the other it reveals the great differences between Palestinian and Norwegian life. As one of the informants stated, 'The Norwegians have everything.' We have to be aware of the potential negative feelings that the cultural exchange might create.

Another aspect worth mentioning is how the cultural exchange activities create dependency on the Norwegians. From my experience, the music project is strongly dependent on these activities and the relationship with the Norwegians. These events are highly valued and give meaning to the music project as a whole. During my stay in Lebanon, I experienced how the everyday activities undertaken after the Norwegians left can feel quite 'heavy', both to teachers and students. If the cultural exchange activities provide the music project with its value and meaning, in the local and everyday context the project might be in danger of falling apart if the relationship with to the Norwegians for some reason should be broken. The cultural exchange can in this way be seen as the project's greatest strength and its greatest weakness.

These critical remarks also concern whether this music project can be said to create lasting positive personal and social change for the participants in the problematic situation in which they find themselves. It is difficult to see how the Palestinians themselves are able to change the fundamental structures that limit their freedom, rights and opportunities to live a decent life or how the music project can contribute to changing these circumstances in any way. However, the music project can be seen as a catalyst of both personal and social change. On a personal level, the experience of *communitas* provided by participation in the musical practice enables the participants to temporarily experience themselves in a state of balance, unity and fellowship; in other words, they are provided with a sense of meaning. The music project constitutes special opportunities for the participants to get in contact with significant feelings of acceptance and recognition. These feelings, which in many ways can be said to be totally absent in the everyday context of the Palestinians' lives, are connected to certain cultural symbols through the cultural exchange. By participating in the musical practice, the Palestinians are granted access to these alternative frameworks of meaning. According to Even Ruud (1998), experiences of coherence and meaning conveyed through important experiences of music can potentially affect the participants' experience of themselves, the construction of identity and their perception of

quality of life. These claims are supported by Ruud's own study of the music project in Rashidieh (Ruud, 2011).

Whether the music project can contribute to social change in any significant way is difficult to say. Any radical changes in the social and political structures that limit the Palestinians and their opportunities to live a decent life seem to be beyond reach. However, it is important to acknowledge that the Palestinians themselves feel that they are actually enabled to contribute to the struggle against oppression and thereby to improve their situation. I will not go further into the issue of whether these feelings should be considered as an expression of hope rather than an effect of any real change. However, the personal changes that both this study and previous studies about the music project conducted by Ruud indicate could potentially have some influence on the social life of the Palestinians, as the participants' individual experiences of meaning, health and quality of life can affect the social life of the refugee camp as a whole. The experiences of recognition, joy and quality of life brought about by the music project can be seen as resources that can be utilised by the participants to create change in the surrounding social context. In this way, the music project can be said to contain potential for both personal and social change.

Conclusion

Participating in cultural exchange activities with the Norwegians provides the Palestinian participants with special and unique opportunities to experience and create an alternative sense of meaning compared to that experienced in their lives as refugees who are excluded and neglected by the surrounding world. The cultural exchange activities offer the Palestinian participants an alternative framework of meaning. By performing their own cultural activities for and with the Norwegians, the Palestinians experience feelings of recognition, equality and mutuality and feel empowered to take part in the fight against the oppression of Palestinian refugees. The shared musical practice provides a common ground for Norwegian and Palestinians, and the Palestinian participants consider both the cultural symbols and the pedagogical practices enacted by the Norwegians as signs of acceptance and communality. In the shared performances of these cultural rituals, the Palestinians are allowed to experience, explore and celebrate an ideal relationship, in other words, they experience recognition and communality. This experience can be said to provide a sense of meaning and balance in a life marked by insecurity and loss of meaning.

A final music educational reflection

Two preconditions seem to exist for establishing a connection to these meanings. These are worth highlighting, especially when considering the music project from a music educational perspective. The Norwegian music students' visit to Rashidieh lasts for four days, and in this time the Palestinian participants are allowed to immerse themselves in and work intensively with the musical material and the Norwegian students. This opportunity for immersion in a shared practice has, in my opinion, a significant effect on the experience of a shared sense of meaning. Another crucial point is that it is through their mastering of the musical material that the Palestinian participants are able to take ownership of the experiences of meaning they attain in relation to the Norwegians. By engaging in the practice in an adequate way and by actively contributing to this practice, the Palestinian participants become co-creators and agents in the continuous negotiation of meaning that takes place in the shared practice. Mastering the musical material is important after a cultural exchange event has finished. In recreating the music without the Norwegians being physically present, the meaning connected to the Norwegians' visit can be re-enacted. The immersion in and mastering of the musical material potentially provides the participants with a sense of ownership and attachment to the meaning related to the musical practice. Immersion and mastering can in this way be seen as significant pedagogical landmarks in the cultural exchange activities in Rashidieh.

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