

Musical Practice of Zafin/Zapin Arab in Singapore

According to A/P Farid Alatas, there has always been a close association in Islam between music and worship, particularly in the Sufi tradition. The *zafin*, a music and dance form originating in the Hadhramaut, Yemen, and intimately associated with the Arabic lute, is a devotional genre that is unique in that it combines worship and entertainment at one and the same time.¹

In his research on the Gambus Melayu in Johor, West Malaysia, Larry Hilarian suggests musical instruments have always journeyed along the grain of politics, conquest and economic exploits amongst the communities so linked to trade, mercantilism, adventure and their source of entertainment. The study of musical instruments brings us to the intersection of globalization and diaspora, not in the commercial sense but to the close affinity of intercultural aggrandizement and adaptation.² The Arab community have had a dominant role in South East Asian trade since the fifteenth century, possibly earlier. Hilarian suggests that the Arab trade was already in the region as early as the 9th century AD.³ When Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore in 1819, his blueprint for Singapore included provisions for an Arab district. In giving instructions to a Singapore housing committee in 1822, he stated that *The Arab population would require every consideration. No situation will be more appropriate for them than the vicinity of the Sultan's residence.*⁴ By 1824, we are informed there were 15 Arabs out of a population of 10,683 and Raffles anticipated a rapid growth in Arab immigration.

According to Talib, the first Arabs to arrive in Singapore in 1819 were two wealthy merchants from Palembang in Sumatra, Syed Mohammed bin Harun al-Juneid and his nephew, Syed Omar bin Ali al-Juneid. Their numbers gradually increased and by 1846, there were five important Arab merchant houses. The al-Juneid family in Singapore grew to be a rich and influential family along with the al-Kaffs and the al-Saggoffs and there are numerous streets and a town council named after them. The al-Saggoffs appear to have arrived a little later, as spice traders, but acquired further influence by marrying into a family of the Sultanate from the Celebes and among the many properties they, like the other Arab families, acquired was the **Perseverance Estate** where they grew lemon grass. The estate is now considered the heart of the Muslim community in Singapore.

Apart from being successful merchants and land owners, the family also became involved in civic affairs and various members held civic office on and off from the 1870s until independence. The al-Kaff family arrived in 1852. All these

families lived in mansions of considerable opulence. The al-Kaff house is now a restaurant called the al-Kaff Mansion, as a gesture to preserve the name, but has no other Hadrami connection, either in architectural style or ownership.⁵

Ulrike Freitag informs us of a rare document from the early 20th century which contains instructions from one of the richest men in Hadhramaut to two younger family members, about how to proceed to Singapore where they were to take charge of the family business. Although certainly not typical of ordinary migrants, this document gives a sense of how individuals organised their journeys. The first stage of the journey not discussed in the document, would consist of a seven to ten day ride from the Wadi across the *jol* to the coast:

*When you reach Mukalla, you should stay with Sayyid Hussayn b. Hamid al-Mihdhar. All the money you might require, you will obtain from Salim al-Yazidi whom we have notified. Send presents and letters to your families, children and to us, and write to us from everywhere so that we can rejoice at your well-being. Once you arrive in Aden, we have asked Abd al-Rahman bin Abdallah to write you a letter [of introduction]. When you have met him, follow his instructions. And if you happen to proceed to the haramayn [Mecca and Medina], follow his instructions. We have also asked Muhammad Jabar in Aden to provide you with everything you might need. If there is honey available in Mukalla, get some as a present for the relatives in Singapore. In Aden, buy some halwa, raisins and almonds as presents for your families, for us and the relatives in Singapore. Everything you might need from my money, whether little or much, is at your disposal. You also have my permission to pay sadaqa [alms]. When you travel to Singapore, follow the advice of your uncle Abd al-Rabman b. Abdullah. On the day that you arrive in Aden, send a card to 'Al-Kaff, Singapore, Abu Bakr Abd al-Rabman', so that he knows that you are in Aden.*⁶

We are informed that in the heyday of the Arab prosperity, the Arabs of Singapore maintained close links with the Hadramawt and a lot of money was remitted home in Yemen. The rich built themselves splendid houses there, the most magnificent being the al-Kaff palaces. They also used to send their sons back to the Hadramawt for a spell to enhance their identity as Hadramis. This custom enabled them to maintain their language and Hadrami culture and even resulted in some Malay being incorporated in the spoken Arabic of the Hadramawt. The Hadramawt was regarded as a cultural training ground and the spell there the final preparation for manhood. Upon their return these youths would take their place in the family businesses. According to Talib, until recent developments like the Rent Control Act, Land Acquisition Act, Administration of Muslim Law Act, Hadramis in Singapore were major landlords, the large families having substantial properties held in wakafs (trusts), which ranged from private family trusts to public charitable trusts. Most of the land in today's

central business district was once owned by Hadrami wakafs. These wakafs, bearing the family names, whether private or charitable, gave considerable prestige to the Arab community among the Muslims in Singapore.⁷

In the 1960s, the independent communist government of South Yemen put an end to the Singapore Hadramis returning home. At the same time, the economic developments in Singapore made the importance of the English language and of education even more essential rendering a younger Arab generation gradually losing a sense of identity and affiliation with the Hadramawt in terms of the language, tradition and cultural heritage. Some families, in the oil boom of the 1970s, tried sending their sons to the Gulf or Saudi Arabia, where there were first generation Hadrami immigrants already and the young men returned with their Hadrami ties and their Arabic enhanced, but it was not a success. The young men did not like living in Saudi Arabia and their prospects in Singapore were better than in the Arabian peninsula. The 1990 census indicates the number of Arabs in Singapore around 7,000, but unofficial estimates place the number of Arabs at 10,000; some members of the Arab community are being classified as Malays in official statistics. According to Talib, the Arab community is almost all of Hadrami origin.⁸

From the Singapore Straits Directory, we discover that the Arab Club was established in 1896 while the Arab school was set up in 1898. Not much more seems to have emerged and this warrants further research in tracing the narrative. Our initial foray has had to begin with an oral interview with Mohd. Bagushair, a singer in the **Al-Wehdhal Arab Ensemble** which is supported by the **Arab Association of Singapore**. The oral interview has as its primary aim, a recovery of a practice that has recently gained a presence through research efforts by A/P Farid Alatas of NUS as well as A/P Larry Francis of NIE on the Arab and Malay communities respectively, in Singapore. However, through Bagushair, and on evidence corroborated by research, it is hoped that the interview will throw light on a practice that is likely to have spanned much more than a century.

Many of Bagushair's earlier experiences take him to the days of his elder brother who was a seminal figure in the Arab-speaking world in Singapore. Bagushair was introduced, via his father, to songs by Abdul Wahab and Kalsom, among others. *When I was about six years old growing up my two elder brothers were actually in this kind of music...they were not staying with me but I used to go to Radio Singapore where they used to give recordings...live performances at white weddings and all that....so I was exposed to that kind of music I had two brothers Mohd. Hussein played gambus while Omar played violin....*⁹

Bagushir was born in 1949 around Jalan Eunus in a Malay settlement around Jalan Yasin and Jalan Ismail. At the time, the location was a small contained housing unit, in Bagushair's terms almost by itself – almost cordoned off. People who lived there were more Riau Malays, some Java Malays. His father dealt with batik, sharks-fin and had a lot of trade between Malaya, Yemen and Indonesia. Bagushair's father had a deep love for music and used to buy records of famous singers like **Abdul Wahab**, **Farid al Atarash**. Because his father used to travel he was able to purchase records not likely to be available in Singapore - 78s with a HMV label. The music of these singers interested his brothers who were born in Hadramaut. Their mother passed away so Bagushir's father bought an **oud** and **violin** when they were about seven or eight years old. Both his brothers became very good at playing their instruments and were well-known in the Arab community for their musical skills in the 1950s and 1960s in Singapore. Of the two brothers, Hussein the lute player was not English conversant while Omar the violinist was. Furthermore, Omar composed songs and played two different musical styles and performance modes. Bagushir remembered two musical ensembles Omar played; **Mujum Orchestra** and **Samra al' Fan**. Mujum's repertoire was Malay classic songs while Samra al' Fan played music from the Arabic world. Omar was equally conversant across both performance modes. He didn't sing but rather conducted the ensemble. With Mujum orchestra Omar played Malay music and counted among his group members Normadia and Ahmad Daud. Ahmad Daud was to become Bagushir's brother-in-law. Of the two brothers, Hussein the lute player was not English conversant while Omar was the opposite; he wrote and composed songs. A song he wrote was **Burung Punggok** which was sung by Sharifah Aini. Bagushair believes Omar composed it and probably was sung by Normadia back then. He remembered following them to Radio Singapore at Caldecott Hill. Omar's reputation eventually extended to JB and Indonesia.

Bagushir described Omar's knowledge of the devotional odes but has no idea who moved odes from the Qasidah to song. He also believes Omar did take lessons from someone but does not know who. Omar could read and write music and therefore must have learnt Western notation but again has no knowledge of the person who may have taught his brother. We are informed that Omar was working in the Port Harbour and spoke English but what was even more telling was that Omar played with some of the Filipinos like Anciano, Daroya and even the illustrious Ahmad Jaffar.

Ensemble Configuration

In the Mujum orchestra and al'Fan ensemble, Bagushair recalls there were about 12-15 instruments including a violin, lute, accordion, small accordion (pianica), flute, bongos, drum kit, marawas, jambeh. They played for weddings; repertoire included Malay, English and Hindustani songs. Bagushair observed

that the affinity for Hindustani music was greater among the Malay community than for Arab music. Samras were very different so this was not the same as the repertoire for the Al'fan ensemble. During his musical journeys throughout Singapore, Bagushair came across Hindi musical ensembles like **Shah Jehan** and more notably **Chandiniraat**, a famed local Hindustani ensemble which was led by Halim Marican who earned the label the Mohd. Rafi of Singapore. These musical ensembles used to participate in band contests in Singapore. This was not uncommon among the Malay community who enjoyed songs from Hindustani film – like, Bagushair recalls, the popular culture version of **Rainbow Battle of the Bands** – but it was more for singers rather than bands. It was something like a Talentime which suited the Malay community because of their love for Hindustani movies at theatres like Queens (between Lorong 42 and 40), Garrick (where Galaxy stands). Queens had Hindustani and Malay films which were produced or distributed by Shaw Brothers.

Devotional Context of the Songs

The texts were devotional and the music supported the means, specifically about the music. Bagushair learnt the songs by listening to records. Although he came later into the devotional songs, the interest developed in him by his late father happened very much earlier long time ago. The only reason he never pursued it was because he lacked the opportunity. While the music in the repertory is based on a sense of rhythm either a regulated rhythm as in Zapin Arab, or a fast-paced Sharah, they are both devotional. What is considered different is the use of musical rhythm in creating a physiological and therefore spiritual rhythm in an effort to achieve communion with God. The devotional lyrics hardly fit the context of someone performing at the restaurant; if the restaurant is considered entertainment of sorts. However Bagushair felt that the lyrics were devotional in intention and in a sense this context was specific to the Yemeni community here in Singapore.

Cultural practices in the Yemeni community

Actually Samra was meant only for weddings and somehow in a wedding a formal invitation was needed but for a samra one didn't need an invitation. Everybody was welcome. There wouldn't be elaborate meals but there was food and drink for all, like an "open house" in the Arab community. Bagushair felt maybe the Samra carries this association even till today. Usually, in an Arab wedding, one would not go to the ceremony and reception without an invitation but in the case of a samra, if one heard about it one could go. If the samra happened on the eve of the wedding, it was usually done on the bridegroom's side. Bagushair explained that a Samra in the case of the Arab community, acted metaphorically like a fishing net:

Its like there is a wedding and there is a samra...and for the Arab community, everyone in there knows this...it's a code of behaviour that invites them into the

process...this is what I mean by formalisation...Actually after the nikah, there is a samra...those who are invited to the nikah will go to the nikah...those who know there is a samra will go to the samra...A lot of coffee, French loaf and dhalcha (lentils)...By and large in the Arab community, there is a tendency...it is a tacit agreement that samra...this is the practice in Indonesia I think, in very small cities in Hadrahmaut, if someone is getting married, basically the whole village will get involved...that notion was brought here when they migrated here...and its not extended to everyone but only the Arab community...For those who experienced living in a Malay kampong from young with Malays...only the Malays have this sense of an open house. The question is whether was it also the contribution to the Malay culture that the Arabs had engaged in that sense of continuity...It is possible at one level to think that the Arabs have adopted the Malay way...the berinai...only the samra is separate...actually its most of the music.¹⁰

Textual Considerations

Bagushir's repertoire list consisted of only lyrics. How did one link text with the music? How would he know the way the melody line of the words fit in.... You have to know the melody and from there you get the words...Where did the melody come from? Bagushir talked about listening to other people singing...from cassettes, CDs, some of the songs are classics, some of the songs I know very well...most evergreen...been around for almost 100 years...So like anybody who has played this kind of music will have these songs in their repertoire....¹¹

It might have been possible to check with sources from Hadrahmaut with repertoire played there. In a way that would suggest something much older but there comes with difference the ways that have changed since at least the 19th century...sometimes they can't recognise the tune or the melody...because over time...it evolves and that is good...music changes and evolves over time...some of the songs that I know...it has been around a long time...Many of the songs we know the composers of the text...we know the age of the text...but the many of the songs we sing...what we don't know is how old the tune is and when they were put in place....¹²

When the songs are sung, there seemed to be different modes of delivery. At one end of the spectrum is half-spoken delivery while at the other embellished song:

*The Moha...almost every Zapin song including Sharah is half-spoken with violin (accompaniment)...no percussion...a lot of beginnings of the songs...we have to cut it short because...When you have the taksim...there is a lot of speech or singing...that is like the inroduction...But the Arabs call it Moha...I think it is called Moha...**Ya badi il Jamal** is a very catchy tune...but at the beginning,*

*the introduction is kind of long so we skip some at the beginning...because if you don't understand the meaning behind the words...You find it is dragging...to me I would prefer to have this...Because that beginning is actually the anticipation of the song...which makes it all the more exciting...Arabic singing style has this kind of style...We cut the beginning sometimes because of the audience...In **Zapin Arab** anyway, if you go straight into the song without the beginning, it does not tell you a lot...Hear the taksim, then violin...you want to hear a prelude...But then again, it depends on how long...the longer it is, the longer you keep that crowd in anticipation...Its like a coiled spring...anticipation...where your full participation will be involved in it...so this is a way of preparing it and emotionally to some degree as well, because (the song) has to be prepared sometimes...you can't go straight (into the song)...and sometimes when you start it...like you begin the taksim on the gambus...automatically you know already...this is going into the song...it just strikes you...From the first few lines already you will know what song is going to be sung and played...¹³*

Another observation worth noting because this seemed to happen very often was the way in which the lyrics of the entire song text were recited first in some of the songs and sung the second time. An example was **Warid al Unst**. *Not all the songs...since they are reciting, they might be preparing the way...you're allowing the audience the opportunity to hear the text clearly first...they may not catch it...even if you are a native speaker of the language...especially when the context is devotional...It is done slowly...every word is pronounced slowly...I learn the melody and write the text myself...sometimes I listen carefully and try to take down the text myself...and I prefer the words in Arabic rather than Malay...for instance even though Farid has given this to me...I've checked it out with others and have had to make corrections...so I actually prefer...you see it is sung as ga-yu but it is actually the bua-yu...which is different...actually hearing and the actual words themselves tells you the difficulty...sometimes the singers don't pronounce it.¹⁴*

*Some Zapin Arab tunes like **Farijil Ham** (this is a heavy one) and **Ya badi il Jamal**-they are performed within the Arab community, weddings, Samra. It normally happens, unless the Association has a separate one...once a year...I was told that in Johor it is also held on the eve of Hari Raya, Prophet's birthdate...Maybe it's the practice...but usually it is associated with weddings, but it has been extended to other occasions and I was told that rich individuals hold weekly sessions treating samra now as music for entertainment.¹⁵*

Music and Dance

The Gambus and Zapin Arab have religious significance for the older generation but to the younger generation its more like fun rather than having religious significance:

*I was exposed to records by my father, my brothers who didn't stay with me also played things and I went to their gigs...Radio Singapore for recording...I normally learn a song from a cassette or CD and memorise it or learn about it at live performances and then go to look for the recordings...the dance steps are taught by those from the association...they teach you the steps...During my father's time, how did my parents learnt was by watching others. Watching people dance during the samra...the steps are quite easy to follow...and its something you can develop on your own...but now we have...but its not a very formal way...so like now we're training the youth...like now, these boys...that performed at the workshop, they started less than six months ago...because they were keen to learn... Sharah is a very fast paced kind of music...like rock n'roll...Indonesians have it as well but theirs is very close to ronggeng...Sharah is the only one where you change dancers...in Zapin Arab, its considered rude to interrupt...In slow paced Zapin Arab you dance together until the end...but Sharah you need such a lot of energy to be able to last the whole songs...normally you can cut in...Some sharah tunes...**Ashegil Hahbah, Galdi Mualla, Saralel...**¹⁶*

Repertory

We were informed that the Zapin Arab repertory has about 15-20 songs ...We don't use Gambus Melayu...Alwi (A band musician) got it either from Egypt or Iraq/Iran...another is either from Malaysia or Indonesia...¹⁷ In Yemen, field studies have indicated the use of a **quanbus** which is similar to Gambus Arab which is smaller but has a skin belly taken from the kambing...the back is wood but the portion which is just below the strings is animal skin.¹⁸ It is known to be used in Indonesia, Java but not Malaysia.

Comparing Zapin Arab and Zapin Melayu

Differences between the Zapin Melayu and Zapin Arab:

One is the text....Zapin Melayu is sung in Malay....its not as catchy as our Arab one...Melayu rhythm is very standardised...from end to end there is the same melody and rhythm...the four verses...repeated again and again...whereas in our Arab ones, some of the songs are like that (repeated) but in some we go for difference...Their melody is much more simpler...more moderate...the rhythm is not so catchy. I notice in the Zapin Melayu, its always a mixed dance...between male and female...in Zapin Arab, its strictly male...the dance steps are different...in my opinion, Zapin Melayu dance steps are more suited to women than men...its too 'soft'...There are only two rows of dancers...only two persons

*or four person...in Indonesia, they always do two for Zapin. The Arabs say that the original number of dancers in practice in Hadramaut is two.*¹⁹

Some dances are choreographed, depending on individuality; not the song or text:

*Choreographed means that the two have to learn the same steps...And it is only sharah not zapin...so sometimes you find teams...and you know...these people will dance with the same person only...it's the trend before and still persists...you will notice that some people will dance very well with only certain people...so its not what the Malays are doing...its not considered choreography...there is no special attire for this dance which again is not the same for the Malay Zapin.*²⁰

According to Farid Alatas, Zafin or Zapin Arab is part of the culture of local Arabs:

*Culture is part of their daily lives....its what they pick up when they're young..not something you study and go to school for...its spontaneous...when I go, I take the kids...sometimes I dance here and the kids follow me.....but once you put on the uniform....*²¹

Malay Zapin culture (Larry Francis)

According to Larry Francis, in Malay Zapin you must offer salaam.....sometimes its Indian style, sometimes its bowing. They have to salaam (in Zapin Melayu)...in my work I have discussed this in relation to Mak Yong....in all the court dances....you have to salaam...same sequence...its like service to the Sultan. Malays stand or squat.... But they look at the audience....its eye-contact with the audience...contact with the audience because it's a staged performance.

For Farid Alatas:

*My conjecture is that the Zapin Melayu is a court dance....its obligatory for the Sultan....salaam is to the Sultan...Our dance is different...whereas in Hadramaut....there are no courts in Hadramaut....its for the Shabi...people...its for the masses..it's a social dance...there is no one to salaam to....although I don't know the origins of the sitting down is...we have is a spoken salutation. Well maybe the taksim is the preparation, the anticipation...so when you hear the taksim, you came to sit down....arrange yourself...but squatting is more to the climax of the song...this is more towards the marwis...we make contact with the musicians rather than the audience.*²² To Larry Francis' observation that *the Malays claim your (Zapin Arab dance) steps are large, Mohd Bagushair had this to offer: Zapin no...Sharah yes...In comparison to the Malay Zapin, our steps are larger...but normal for us may be considered.*²³

In relation to song-texts, Larry Francis wanted to know if Zapin Arab used any pantun like the Malays do in the Malay style. Farid Alatas felt this was something that needed further study:

*I haven't studied this...most of it rhymes but what kind of rhyme is it? You have the Rubayat...you have pantun, you have Nasnadih, as far as I know many of our songs follow a Qasidah type....almost all the lines rhyme....AAAB...then the next verse AAAB but some it will be ABAB...whether it is Qasidah or pantun I'd have to study that. We use the Qasidah...sometimes the Malays use it to refer to Taksim...used in the introduction. According to Larry's study, the taksim is used to signify a solo performance....either violin or gambus...buka and tutup....but they use it rather loosely. Mohd. Bagushair believed that the taksim in their practice was called **Moha**.*

Larry clarified that:

*Normally the gambus is the main instrument...Moha is verbal, part of the taksim...the normal thing. First, normally the Gambus is the main instrument...no drum parts...then the violin behind, then the singer will come in and join in the violin and the Qasidah...then you go into the song.²⁴ According to Farid, there is a place in Turkey called Taksim....it divides Europe from Asia at Istanbul...so taksim is the thing is that divides one part of a song from another...which is generally instrumental.²⁵ Bagushair explains further: *Same key but different melody...the key never changes...whether you half-speak or half-sing...**Ya badi il-Jamal** is like that...A specific kind of mode where certain pitches are featured or given greater prominence. Usually at the end of the song, we have a signal at the end of the song – ya salaam, wainak, wainak...in traditional Zapin or Sharah. Larry compared the **wainak** in Zapin Arab to **wainab** used in Zapin Melayu.**

Farid went on to explain why it was called **wainak** in the Zapin Arab:

*When we went to Jakarta, including Ahmad Fadar...it was wainak which means where are you...rhetorical...asking God where He is...a call to God now that I have completed my devotion to you, show me your presence...concentrate on devotion to God like in **Ya badi il-Jamal**...the wasaal...means union with God....so after that you have not found God....so you ask, where are you? Its very Sufi.²⁶*

To the question of types of Zapin rhythms, Bagushair informed us:

From my point of view Zapin has one rhythm only...Rhythms....basically about 120-140 beats per minute...the beat is important...because the music has something to do with the dance...the Zapin we have, the rhythm is very restricted.... The Malays are different....the Malays may have more rhythmic variety...Sharah and Zapin are of course different....each has one (rhythm).

According to Larry, the Malay community referred to Sharah as Sarah but it was his view that the Sarah was fundamentally the joget. Bagushair believed that *the ronggeng steps...are in the Sarah...*

Given some views of the music, the question was asked as to the protocol for dancing in the Sharah and Zapin Arab. Bagushair explained:

*The proper way in the Arab world is always, before when the taksim is started.....in Arab...only in sharah changing of partners is accepted...but in Zapin it is not accepted, unless the person is extremely tired, or injured...in the olden days it was considered rude to do that...against tradition...but nowadays (changing partners) in the Sharah dance is accepted, because it is a very energetic dance...once people get to a certain age, it is very difficult to do.*²⁷

Instruments found in Zapin Arab practice usually consisted of the gambus, the violin, flute (usually substituted by keyboard), marwis, jambeh. These instruments were considered the core of the ensemble...Instead of a **jidur** (bass frame drum), the musicians use the **tombak**; an instrument shaped like the hourglass with high frequencies and the sharp attack that is considered important in performance. However, the marwas was considered the main instrument *for Zapin you need marwas, for sharah you don't need the marwas...no marwas no Zapin...*²⁸

Support system for the Community

Bagushair and his band are supported in this endeavour by the Arab Association. They do it once in a few months...sometimes once a year at a grand occasion but normally it normally coincides with the main event which is the annual dinner of the Association...*we come under the Arab Association...they provide us with the facilities to practice...a place to store our musical instruments...and we practice almost every Friday...Lorong 37, Geylang... premises of the Arab Association...Two to three hours...every Friday evenings...the major instruments are...the accordion belongs to...while the gambus belongs to Ali...the rest belongs to the band...we just have it at the association...So the instruments are largely property of the band...We buy on advance and of course over time can afford to buy it up...part of the money from the gigs...goes to the buying of the instruments. I think the Arab Association was formed during the 1930s or 40s something...I remember the first premises in Geylang Road itself...I remember it was before the war...the focal point was either the Arab Association or the Mosque at Geylang Road....my maternal grandfather was an imam at the mosque...Mualim—he was there from the 1920s up to the 50s/60s...Mesjid Hadijah...the one at Eunos is Mesjid Alkaff...and Mesjid Alwi at Bukit Timah....the focal point was Mesjid Sultan...there were lots of Arabs*

*staying around the Lorong 40, 38, 37 area...all have moved out...the business community seemed to work hand in hand with the mosque but kinship was organised into large family units...largest clan is Alsagoffs...connected by generations before...but this is strictly paternal...if you are looking at Alsagoffs in the 1950s...in the region here...hundreds of thousands are related to each other...and networking among them is according to kinship...*²⁹

Bagushair's family is very small with no kin in Indonesia...my paternal uncle was in Uganda before the Idi Amin regime...people got together by word of mouth...but later invitation cards...but I remember Aljunied (fellow musician) used to tell me they had a list...they employed people to send the messages out by bicycle...the Business association had a list of members but not much more...³⁰

2004 seems to have marked a new awareness for this community in their practice. A seminar-workshop at the National Institute of Education followed by a series of performances and a Channel News Asia documentary have helped draw communities within Singapore to the Arab community.

Discussion

Henri Lefebvre tells us that every society and mode of production produces its own space.³¹ Social practice draws to attention use of the body, its sensory organs, gestures, representations of the body which link the body's relations with its milieu. Bodily lived experience...filtered through cultural intervention ensure and insure mobility of the individual member/s of a given social group, without confusion...constituting a coherent whole by establishing a common language, a consensus and a code.³² The oral interview attempts to get a sense of the movement as well as raising questions surrounding participants and participation of this lived experience; at one level, creators, performers and listeners; and support systems at another level, that is, those who support its promulgation consumption via broadcast media and/or commodification. In this respect Lefebvre's triad of spatial practice, representations of space and representational space become instructive not only by what solidifies into a convention in a practice but also what is dynamic and fluid, given the nature of change within the community.

For instance it may be possible to understand spatial practice by looking first at the Arab Association of 1896, the Arab school of 1898 and a long standing link between Singapore and Yemen; the location of Kampong Glam as an authentic

Arab site; samras, religious and family functions within the Singaporean context where members of the Arab community congregated; the role of Zafin and Sharah, devotional songs, musicians, dance floor space, dancers, among the others as a way of defining spatial practice and the connection with representations of space and representational space.

What emerges from these interviews is very rich data that only succeeds in provoking more questions. If 2004 marks the emergence of musical practice by the Arab community, there must surely be a gap between that and the formation of the Arab club in 1896 and the Arab school in 1898. How was this community sustained? If these were traders, what was the role music and culture played in their lives and those of their families? Who was responsible for the dissemination, teaching and learning of this practice? What was the perception and reception of Arabs living in the Southeast Asian region, quite far away from Yemen and what was their view of home?

We are informed that the repertory in the Arab community in Singapore is based on a sense of rhythm either a regulated rhythm as in Zapin, or a fast-paced Sharah but they are both largely devotional. What is considered different is the use of musical rhythm in creating a physiological and therefore spiritual rhythm in an effort to achieve communion with God. The devotional lyrics hardly fit the context of someone performing at the restaurant; if the restaurant is considered a space for entertainment. One way to understanding musical performances of devotional texts in secular spaces is the way it serves to reach out to the Yemeni community in Singapore.³³

Notions of acculturation notwithstanding, Philip Bohlman's study of the role of chamber music in the lives of the Yekkes, German-speaking Jews in Israel, observes how the music, in this case absolute music, becomes ethically (even ethnically) binding:

*Viewed from a performative perspective, the absence of specific meaning within the text allows meaning to accrue only upon performance, thus empowering any group, even an ethnic community, to shape what it will from absolute music. A gap therefore forms between the content of the repertoire and style of performance situations. It is within the mutability allowed by style that differences in meaning and function of music arise, thereby transforming absolute music into a genre that can follow numerous historical paths...clearly this practice reflects different attitudes towards both the repertoire and the communities that lend the music its distinctive functions and form its different histories.*³⁴

This is no different from the Hadrahmi community whose repertoire of devotional songs at a Samra act in Bagushair's words acts metaphorically like a fishing net for its members:

*There is a samra...and for the Arab community, everyone in there knows this...it's a code of behaviour that invites them into the process...this is what I mean by formalisation...By and large in the Arab community, there is a tendency...a tacit agreement that samra...also the practice in Indonesia I think, and very small cities in Hadrahmaut, if someone is getting married, basically the whole village will get involved...that notion was brought here when they migrated here...and its not extended to everyone but only the Arab community.*³⁵

While it may be true that the motivation is to reach out to the Arab community, its derivations are a little more surprising:...*For those who experienced living in a Malay kampong from young have this sense of an open house. The question is whether was it also the contribution to the Malay culture that the Arabs had engaged in that sense of continuity...It is possible at one level to think that the Arabs have adopted the Malay way...the berinai...only the samra is separate...actually its most of the music.*³⁶

In terms of organology, field studies in Yemen have indicated the use of a **quanbus** which is similar to Gambus Arab which is smaller but has a skin belly taken from the kambing (goat)...the back is wood but the portion which is just below the strings is animal skin.³⁷ It is known to be used in Indonesia, particularly Java, but not Malaysia. As far as Bagushair is concerned, *we don't use the Gambus Melayu...Alwi (one of the musicians in the Ensemble) got it either from Egypt or Iraq/Iran...another from Indonesia.*³⁸ In fact, quite a number of the songs in the repertoire seem to originate from Indonesia (or sometimes Malaysia) rather than Yemen.

Here is a significant point: while the distance in both chronology and geography is an issue that further research requires in terms of cultural sustenance, Indonesia, particularly Java, has been identified as the closest default setting for cultural sustenance for Arab immigrants like Bagushair. The location of Indonesia as the next most feasible centre for cultural sustenance by the Arab Community in Singapore is telling in the ways the distance from home is replaced by a satellite centre. Some of the revelations at the interview with Mohd Bagushair bear out the notions of syncretic processes in the cultural negotiation. A clue to this satellite cultural capital is found in Talib's observation that one distinctive characteristic of Hadrami immigration into Singapore was re-immigration from Indonesia, rather than direct from the Hadramawt. Traders arriving in Singapore it seems had their wealth made in Indonesia. Moreover, being already familiar with local customs, they were easily accepted by the Malay communities in Singapore.³⁹

Another important aspect of the Zafin and Sharah is that the songs, music and dance are almost inseparable. For many of the older musicians, the devotional texts had special significance for them in the Sufi tradition. There were ways in which protocol was adhered to; it was only men who danced; in a Zafin, it was not considered appropriate to opt out mid-way through the dance or improvise on the steps although performers were very adaptable to spatial considerations – if the dance floor/carpet was too small, smaller steps were taken, etc. In the present context, the younger members of the Hadhrami community have been seen to take part in this endeavour enthusiastically, although as Bagushair points out the Gambus and Zapin Arab have religious significance for the older generation but to the younger generation it is more like fun rather than having religious significance.

Consequently, the repertoire of Zapin Arab or Sharah, which is of a devotional nature, no longer finds itself in specific or specified locations as per function or purpose, but in *any* location in Singapore where the Arab community is able to foregather. Hence singing and making music to the devotional texts may be found at staged cultural events, outreach concerts, workshops and even an evening performance at a café, besides of course at weddings, samras and other social occasions.

Much of this impinges on the practices of the Arab community here, from performing music with devotional texts beyond samras, outside of the usually established comfort zones of houses into cafés, performances at secular functions among others serving the dual function of establishing their identity and using these events as fishing nets to draw in the Hadrami community members towards a sense and experience of the collective. This goes some way to explain how in this community that whatever used to hold religious significance has evolved to the extent that it may not hold the same authenticity of meaning and significance for a younger generation. This also accounts for the accounts that changing of dance partners in fast-paced dances like the Sharah which might have been considered inappropriate in earlier settings are today given some benefit of doubt as dancers are injured or feel the loss of energy. There is also the stark revelation of the age of the dancers – given that in a place such as Singapore, where the Hadhrami community are few and aging faster than replacements can permit, that many who carry on the tradition are no longer youthful and have had to make adjustments to compensate for this loss of youth while maintaining their tradition and practices.

Much of this exploration is still at the initial stage. Despite this aural interview, the period spanning 1896 and the present is virtually devoid of written accounts, documentary evidence or documentation. Perhaps it is this absence and silence

which will provide the motivation for further research into the musical practices and by extension the sociocultural practices of Zafin.

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