

Fernand Hörner: Speech at the Opening of the Palestinian Traditional Music Archive,
Brother Vincent Malham Centre, Bethlehem University, March 20th, 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen, Marhaba

I am very glad to be here today and take part of the opening of the Palestinian Traditional Music Archive in Bethlehem University. It is a great chance for me to see how my colleagues here in Bethlehem are working to found and launch this archive. Finally, I must say, because from my point of view, as vice-director of an institute that was founded 1914, the Deutsches Volksliedarchiv Freiburg, I was very surprised that this kind of archive didn't exist here in Palestine or elsewhere in the Arabic world before.

First of all, I would like to thank Professor Moin Halloun to have initiated our very fruitful cooperation. He has been in our institute in Freiburg, Germany last year to visit us and talk about what and how we do to archive popular and traditional music. The idea of our cooperation was, and still is, to find inspiration and also practical help how this could be done in Bethlehem. So Toni Zomot and Adel Abusway have been in Freiburg a month ago to talk with me and my colleagues and it was a pleasure and a very inspiring meeting for both sides.

Maybe the idea of our institute, a hundred years ago when it was founded, was quite the same, than the one in the Palestinian Traditional Music Archive today: Facing difficult political times (it was just before the beginning of the first world war), arouse the desire to preserve the cultural musical heritage and also to start working on the scientific elaboration of what and when and why people are singing, asking how music helps them shape and live their cultural identity. Certainly, our archive has experienced some difficulties, but that was of course, part of the idea to talk together of our whole experience.

The goal is the same, here in Bethlehem and back in Freiburg: To record songs, gather and archive information about title, beginning and subject of the recorded song, who recorded and who sang it, what was the profession of the singer, when and where he sang it. This is a lot of work that can best be visualized when you would come to Freiburg. While the Palestinian music is in digital form, the beginnings of our archiving was hundred years ago, of course, on paper. So, for every mentioned information of a song, my non-digital predecessors had to build up an own handwritten catalogue, each weighing hundreds of kilogram and taking up several square meters.

Thus we have a whole room, only for the catalogues. The work now is maybe a bit easier with computers, but it is still a lot of work that you can't really see when it is digitalized. So Tony came to Freiburg with his material on a single computer. But maybe it would be good too to fill part of those rooms here, maybe the cellar, with data printed on paper. Why? Archivists are sometimes people with crazy ideas. We know that paper can last thousands of years, and we don't know what will happen to computers. I only know that the floppy disk we had twenty years ago, aren't working anymore. Maybe in twenty years the same will happen to internet? It is an archivist's duty not only to save the past, but also to work for an unknown future.

But why are we and should we be doing this? Why have my predecessors spent a big time of their life writing information on file cards and why do our colleagues in Bethlehem take the risk to travel around to record traditional songs and archive them? Why all this work?

First of all, because music is a very precious thing. A fleeting sound that is soon gone away and can only be saved by constant repetition or, in our case, recording. Although it is as well important to note the music in sheets, in my opinion, a sheet will never tell us, how the song was exactly sung, with which feelings and so on. A sheet can never lead us to the essence of the song. This can only be done by recording these important elements of Palestinian culture.

Let me close my little speech with a word from a famous Palestinian writer, maybe, at least from my European point of view, the most famous Palestinian intellectual voice. Edward Said, who, you all know that of course, wrote a lot of essays about music. He was mainly dealing with classical music, but from a point of view he calls that "of a fully committed amateur" as he writes in his collection of essays, *Musical Elaborations*. And this is of course what popular and traditional music is about, it lives through and it lives only through the "fully committed amateurs" that sing and/or listen to the music.

But the project of the Palestinian Traditional Music Archive in Bethlehem University is not only important because it saves a music that is threatened to disappear. There is more to it, and this additional value lies inside but also outside the music. This value is cultural identity. Music is not just a mirror or an expression of identity but it is most of all, a vehicle for identity, a way to get aware of one's own cultural existence.

Because like the music itself that is fleeting, so is the identity that is expressed by and lived through music and other practices. Identity isn't stable or fixed, but has to be lived (or performed; or sung) over and over again.

At the end of his memoir, *Out of Place* (S. 295), Edward Said concludes that his identity isn't solid, but a "cluster of flowing currents" that is always in motion, and out of place in the sense that it can never be fully grasped, that there might be loose ends or contradictions you can't harmonize, but that all that is lived in full conviction that it is part of your life.

What Edward Said says about his own personal identity might be right in general for the identity transported through music as well. Identity is fleeting and at times contradictory, but, or maybe exactly for this reason, it is an important part of our existence. Archiving this music of people that are metaphorically or as well, unfortunately, literally "out of place" is a very important task and I am very glad to know that the traditional Palestinian music will thus eventually find its right place at the Brother Vincent Malham Center.

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