

Qur'anic Recitation Among Pittsburgh Egyptian Muslims: An Ethnographic Field Study

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Abstract: The art of Qur'anic recitation is central to Egypt's cultural and ethnic heritage. This study explores the role of Qur'anic recitation in the lives of immigrant and first-generation Pittsburgh Egyptian Muslims in 2016 and 2017. Through listening sessions and interviews, the research explores several questions, including: 'Do generational differences exist in the role of Qur'anic recitation in Egyptian Americans' lives?' 'What role does nostalgia play in the experience of Qur'anic recitation?' 'How do Egyptian Americans relate the Qur'an to music, and connect with its sound?' and 'How does Qur'anic recitation contribute to building community and identity in diaspora?' In a time where many questions are asked about American Muslims and the role that Islamic traditions play in their lives, this research on the traditional art of Qur'anic recitation is pertinent and timely. Similar ethnographic studies have not been performed on Egyptians in the United States nor on the role of Qur'anic recitation in the lives of Muslims. As such, this article provides a groundbreaking perspective on what it means to recite the Qur'an as an Egyptian in the United States.

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Introduction

A single voice rings clear, uttering syllables in a stepwise melody. The voice flows, smoothly implementing pauses and elongations of syllables. It is calming and captivating at once. This is the sound of the Qur'an when recited. *'Recite in the name of your Lord who created'*, One thousand four hundred years ago, this verse was revealed to Muhammed, a pious man reflecting alone, high on a mountain in an Arabian desert cave. It was the first verse of more than six thousand that would finally make up the Qur'an – 'the recitation' – which would be learned by heart and recited by generations of people worldwide. It was first and foremost transmitted as oral tradition, in a culture of Arabs who treasured spoken word and poetry. The words' meanings, the verses' rhythms, and the enthralling sound of its recitation aloud all contributed to its rapid spread across the globe. Now, the Qur'an is learned and listened to by young and old of many nationalities. While its recitation is guided by the rules of *tajweed*, which dictate rhythm

and pronunciation, its melody is composed spontaneously in performance (Nelson, 1985, p. 14-16, 111). Separate from poetry and music due to its content and nature, it is an art form that elicits emotional response (Nelson, 1985, p. xiiv-xv). After flourishing over the centuries, Qur'anic recitation was first recorded in 20th century Egypt, creating a popular culture of listening to recordings of the Qur'an – especially those by admired Egyptian reciters. In Egypt and among the members of its diaspora across the globe, live and recorded Qur'anic recitation is part of the soundscape.¹ 'The Qur'an is central to Islam, and its immanence in Islamic society is essentially oral. The pervasive sound of recitation becomes basic to Muslims' sense of their culture and religion even before they can articulate that sense, and by listening to Qur'anic recitation they participate in an experience with meaning far beyond the immediate sound or occasion' (Nelson, 1985, p. 188).

As a person of Egyptian descent who trained musically in the United States, I am interested in the ways Qur'anic recitation affects the lives and attitudes of those who live in its soundscape. This article focuses on the ethnographic fieldwork I performed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2016 and 2017. By observing interlocutors listening to different reciters, I studied their emotions, opinions, and attitudes in regards to Qur'anic recitation and its styles. Through conducting one-on-one interviews guided by these listening sessions and a series of thought-provoking questions, I investigated the role that listening to and practicing recitation can play in Egyptian-American life, especially in regards to generational experience of immigration, community and identity, and religious experience in diaspora.

The text of the Qur'an has been extensively studied by scholars from various countries for centuries. But little literature exists on human response to the Qur'an as sound and tradition in everyday life, despite its pervasiveness and its roots as an oral tradition. This study fills this gap in the literature by exploring recitation's role in the lived experiences of Egyptian Pittsburgh Muslims. It is my hope that this research will expand our understanding of the Qur'an and contribute to answering the larger question: How does Qur'anic recitation affect those who live in its influence?

The Muslim Egyptian diaspora as it exists in the United States today has not been studied extensively, if at all. Yvonne Haddad (2011) and Abdo Elkholy (1966) studied Arab Americans, but not Egyptians specifically. Additionally, there are needs for research on Muslim families in the United States (Alghafli, 2015), religion's role in Arab American identity formation (Britto and Amer, 2007) and religious transmission in immigrant Muslim communities (Voas and Fleischmann, 2012). The study of this diasporic community through the lens of Qur'anic recitation is useful and warranted. The uses and purposes of the term 'diaspora' are not well-defined and encompass a large range of ideas about culture, movement, community, and consciousness (Slobin, 2012, p. 97). Ethnomusicology is the sociocultural study of music, and it deals with concepts such as diaspora because art is one of many elements that make up a society (Stokes, 1994, p. 1), and it interacts with other societal processes and phenomena. Here, the art of Qur'anic recitation is one of many Islamic practices that make up Egyptian Muslim society. Since this study focuses on the diasporic nature of the ever-expanding Egyptian society across the globe, it is logical to study diaspora and the traditional arts associated with Egyptian Muslim life. As ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin writes, 'Music offers a richness of methodological possibilities and points of view, opening new windows on diasporic neighborhoods' (2012, p. 98).

¹ The totality of all sounds present in one's immediate environment makes up the soundscape (Hirschkind 2006).

In this study, participation in Qur'anic recitation helps to elucidate how Egyptians in Pittsburgh perceive themselves as part of a larger movement across borders and cultural lines. Kristina Nelson asserts that Qur'anic recitation deserves a category separate from music (1985, p. 190). However, since English does not contain an appropriately descriptive word other than 'music', in this article, I refer to the dimension of Qur'anic recitation that involves the rendition of words melodically and rhythmically as a form of 'music', following Thomas Turino's conceptualization of 'music': 'fundamentally distinct types of activities that fulfill different needs and ways of being human' (2008, p. 1). As Stokes states, 'Music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them' (1994, p. 5). As such, studying how Qur'anic recitation functions in daily life is an appropriate means through which to study the diasporic identity and culture of Egyptians in Pittsburgh.

While I initially expected to study stylistic, sonic features of Qur'anic recitation, I found that this would not be the most valuable contribution to the literature. Nelson has extensively studied the rules of *tajweed*, musical technicalities, and stylistic characteristics of Qur'anic recitation, as well as performance of Qur'anic recitation (1985). Her work emphasizes the network of individuals who created the popular sphere of performed and recorded Qur'anic recitation in 20th century Egypt. Michael Frishkopf extended Nelson's seminal work, writing about the rise of a Saudi style of Qur'anic recitation in the late 20th century (2009). Frishkopf's work discusses how styles of Qur'anic recitation in Egypt have changed throughout modern history as a reflection of political, commercial, and social influences. His work illustrates how this music has changed over time, and what influenced this change. But my research has a new, different focus: those who listen to commercial Qur'anic recitation recordings and recite at home and in their communities. Much can be learned from ethnographic study of how everyday individuals engage with this traditional art in the privacy of their own homes, and the attitudes towards it that they hold.

Additionally, the focus on immigration in this project is unique and novel. Anne Rasmussen studied Qur'anic recitation in Indonesia, and refers to differences between, and influences of, Egyptian recitation on Indonesian recitation (2010). However, Rasmussen's focus is not on the direct relationships between one community and its diasporic community. I focus on the personal convictions and attitudes individuals hold about their homeland, Egypt, and their religion, through the lens of Qur'anic recitation.

Presently, many questions are being asked about the nature of American Muslims' attitudes, religiosity, and the connections between their Islamic practice and their daily lives. This study aims to shed some light on a segment of a demographic that is rarely understood in its richness and complexity.

Methodology

This study was conducted using the scholarly framework and field methods of ethnomusicology: the study of music, society and culture. After studying the history of Qur'anic recitation and its presence in Egypt's popular culture,² I began inviting Egyptian Muslims in Pittsburgh to participate in a field study on the subject. I involved both Egyptian immigrants to the United

² A set of norms practiced by a population based on the ideas, attitudes, and perspectives of the majority.

States and first-generation Egyptian Americans³ in hopes of unearthing similarities and differences between them. I was most interested in the role Qur'anic recitation played in their childhoods and adult lives, as well as their attitudes towards Qur'anic recitation as a tradition, as a text, and as a sonic experience. Those I reached out to gladly agreed, and I began to conduct in-person, individual interviews. First in the interview, I observed each interlocutor as they listened to different recordings of a chapter of the Qur'an, recited by three different reciters. Then, I followed a set of questions to guide a discussion with each interlocutor about their listening experience and their opinions on Qur'anic recitation in relation to music, as an art, skill, and practice, as well as its role in their lives. This study was deemed 'Exempt from Review' by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pittsburgh due to its low-risk nature. All interviews were recorded, then partially or fully transcribed. Field notes were written during the study, and analysis began concurrently with data collection. The names of all interlocutors have been changed in this article to protect their privacy.

Interview Part 1: Listening

In this study, the interlocutors listened to three *murattal* recordings of the chapter of the Qur'an: *al-Fatiha* recited by Abdul-Basit, Al-Minshawi, and Mishary Rashid. These choices are explicated below.

Styles of Recitation: Murattal vs Mujawwad

Recitation is categorized as either *murattal* or *mujawwad*. The *murattal* style of recitation, which I used as listening samples in my research, primarily aims to make clear the words of the Qur'an. The melody is normally kept simple, and the verses must be read through without repeats or dramatic pauses (Nelson, 1985, pp. 102-119). The *mujawwad* style, on the other hand, is characterized by melodic artistry which often includes changes in melodic contours, range, and modes corresponding with the meanings of the passages (Ibid.). In addition, pauses and repeats of phrases are possible, and add to the creativity of the style (Ibid.). When presenting the three reciters' recordings to my interlocutors, I presented only the *murattal* style since it is easier to understand and recite.

Choice of Reciters

While there are many reciters I could have included in the research, I analyzed interlocutors' responses to recorded *murattal* recitations by three prominent reciters, who have distinct styles and hold prominence in Egypt and throughout the world: Mohamed Al-Minshawi, Abdul-Basit Abdul-Sammad and Mishary Rashid Al-Afasy.

They are popularly referred to as Al-Minshawi, Abdul-Basit, and Mishary Rashid respectively, so I use these names throughout the article. Both Abdul-Basit and Al-Minshawi were of the Egyptian reciters who rose to prominence during the 20th century. They, among others, and their recitation characteristics were studied by Nelson (1985). On the other hand, Mishary Rashid is a contemporary Kuwaiti reciter whose recitations are commonly heard on cell-phone applications today. Mishary Rashid also has a notably more melodically varied and melismatic *murattal* style, often employing jumps of large intervals and utilizing a wide vocal

³ Children of Egyptian immigrants who were raised in the United States (in this study – Pittsburgh).

range, while the aforementioned Egyptian reciters maintain simpler *murattal* styles, using a narrower range of tones within a passage to maintain focus on the words of each verse. Although greatly embellished, Mishary Rashid's style is still considered *murattal* since it does not include repeats nor pauses.

Choice of Al-Fatiha

I chose to play the chapter *al-Fatiha* due to its widespread familiarity among Muslims, since it is the short opening chapter of the Qur'an essential to the five daily prayers.

Interview Part 2: Discussion

After I observed each interlocutor as they listened to recordings of *al-Fatiha*, I interviewed each interlocutor about their experience listening to the recordings and other questions about Qur'anic recitation in their lives. Interestingly, the conversations that were spurred during these interviews consistently ventured into questions of identity, religious practice, and the roles of Qur'anic recitation and music in interlocutors' lives.

Participants

I sought out individuals to participate in my study via word of mouth. As a Pittsburgh native, I had grown up around Egyptian Americans at the mosque and at social gatherings. Many of those whom I called to inform about my study were excited to hear that I was beginning work on such a project. I conducted thirteen interviews, including five first-generationers mainly in their early twenties and eight immigrants of various ages and genders. All of the interlocutors were college-educated middle-class individuals. The interlocutors were well-integrated into American society and participated in an intersection of cultures, including American and Egyptian cultures and subcultures. I chose to focus on the expressions of culture that were relevant to Qur'anic recitation in the lives of my participants. There are many Egyptian Muslims in Pittsburgh whom I was not able to interview due to time limitations; this study does not represent the sentiments of Egyptian Muslims in Pittsburgh as a whole, but only those with whom I spoke.

Discussion

The recorded history of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania first shows the presence of Muslims in the 1920s (SJ Martin, pers. comm., 4 February 2018). Pittsburgh received African American Muslims who traveled up the Monongahela River as part of the Great Migration, whose religious practices as a community were shaped over the years by the influence of foreign evangelists, civil rights movements, and changes in the makeup of the community's membership over time (Ibid.). Over the decades, a stream of Muslim immigrants from many countries have settled in Pittsburgh in addition to the original African American communities (Ibid.).

Interlocutors in this study arrived in pursuit of professional opportunity, have graduated college or higher, and primarily work in healthcare. Egyptian immigrants to the United States as a whole are mostly well educated and economically successful (RAD, 2015). Beginning in the mid-1970s, following the lifting of Egyptian legal barriers to emigration, educated Egyptians began to leave the country due to a lack of opportunities in the overpopulated country (Ibid.). In

2012, the United States was the fifth most common country to which Egyptians emigrated (Ibid.), with New York City and Los Angeles holding the greatest concentrations of Egyptians: 40,000 and 20,000 Egypt-born residents respectively (Ibid.).

According to my review, this is the first ethnography of Egyptian immigrants to Pittsburgh and one of the first ethnographies of Egyptian American communities like it elsewhere in the United States.

However, Muslims in the city of Pittsburgh have a rich history. I interviewed local historian Sarah Jameela Martin on February 4, 2018, and was fascinated by her research and personal experience. Sarah Jameela arrived in Pittsburgh in the 1960s. She had converted to Islam upon hearing its tenets in a World Religions class, and soon found herself memorizing *al Fatiha* at the First Mosque of Pittsburgh on Wylie Avenue in the Hill District. The tradition of Qur'anic recitation in Pittsburgh begins at least early in the twentieth century, according to Sarah Jameela's research.

Unlike in Egypt, the sound of the Qur'an in Pittsburgh is privatized. Technologically current, it takes on many forms: heard through earbuds as students in Pittsburgh catch a bus, streamed with accompanying video on YouTube, and alongside English translations on smartphone applications. For first-generation Egyptian American Muslims, it is clear that, while the text is the same, theirs is not their parents' Qur'an.

Generational Meanings of the Qur'an

What happens to immigrants' cultural traditions, habits, desires, and identities upon moving? In my research, I asked this classic question more narrowly: What happens to Muslim Egyptian religious practice—particularly Qur'anic practice—in the event of immigration to the United States? It is easy to assume that since first-generation Egyptian Americans are passively exposed to the Qur'an less than their immigrant parents were in Egypt, their experiences with the Qur'an are lower in quality and frequency. But according to my data, this is not necessarily true.

In fact, due to their parents' efforts, many first-generation Egyptian Americans I spoke with began to memorize or learn to read the Qur'an at home, rather than at school like their immigrant parents. Including a religious tradition at home has been shown to play a large role in religious practice preservation among Jewish American immigrants (Rubin and Rubin, 2014, p. 275), and 'the importance of parents in forming habits of religious practice in their children is well established' (Voas and Storm, 2012, p. 378). For Egyptian Americans I spoke with, learning the Qur'an at home supported the parents in imparting values intentionally. Imparting these values is a priority for Muslim immigrants in the United States (Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000, pp. 208-209), and intentional choices play an important role in the intergenerational transfer of cultural content for ethno-religious minorities ((Gezentsvey 2008 and Gezentsvey Lamy et al. 2013), cited in Rubin and Rubin, 2014, p. 266). In school in Egypt, when immigrants with whom I spoke learned the Qur'an, they absorbed it passively as part of the school curriculum, without emphasis from their parents. By virtue of being native Arabic speakers, Egyptian immigrants naturally read the Qur'an with more ease and fluency than first-generation individuals do. But the efforts and practice that first-generationers I spoke with dedicated to improving their ability to understand and read the Qur'an properly—in some cases—were far more concerted than those by immigrants at the same age.

It is accepted that maintaining Islamic religiosity in the United States requires greater effort (Voas and Fleischmann, 2012, p. 531), but immigration to a new country may promote an

increase or decrease in religious participation (Voas and Fleischmann, 2012, p. 529; Jacob and Kalter, 2013, pp. 39-40), and the topic of transnationalism and religion among first-generationers is understudied and debated (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007, pp. 140-141). While all those I spoke with developed a greater interest in Islam and the Qur'an as they grew older, first-generationers commonly began their Qur'anic improvement endeavors at a younger age than immigrants. By choosing to take elective classes in Arabic in college, and by choosing to listen to the Qur'an through their earbuds on their phone, first-generationers I spoke with consistently make more intentional effort to engage with the Qur'an. However, the presence of the Qur'an in their lives is still relatively less than it was in the immigrants' lives. In this case, it is important not to make broad assumptions about the role of the Qur'an in the lives of Egyptian American immigrants versus first-generationers.

In this study, I found that Egyptian immigrants to the United States who had been raised in Egypt recite the Qur'an to relax and connect with their faith. Their first-generation Egyptian American children do this as well, but also viewed Qur'anic recitation as a means of building solidarity with others like them. This role of the Qur'an in their lives was largely unique to first-generation Egyptian Americans with whom I spoke. Interviews I conducted with first-generation Egyptian Americans, especially those in their early twenties, involved laughing and fond reminiscence of times spent learning to recite the Qur'an with their peers. Learning to recite the Qur'an, perfecting their recitation, and reciting with their friends gave first-generation Egyptian Americans a sense of community and belonging, which their parents did not significantly identify with.

'The Qur'an doesn't mean the same thing to every generation', Amir, a 52-year-old immigrant from Mansoura, Egypt said. A look of wonderment washed over his face as he began to explain to me how the Prophet Muhammed did not go to great lengths to 'explain what the Qur'an meant', and that many passages of the Qur'an had begun to make sense in new ways in every era. But aside from its text, the sound of the Qur'an has remained fresh and relevant, and has brought forth new insights for each generation.

I noticed that immigrant interlocutors, who were of different ages, genders, and personalities, placed a larger emphasis on the meaning of the Qur'an than their mostly younger, American-raised counterparts. When engaging in a variety of discussions, immigrant Egyptians often returned to discussing the importance of the Qur'an's meaning. Hiba, a woman who moved from Cairo to an urban neighborhood of Pittsburgh in 2006, hosted me in her living room on a Thursday afternoon, waiting for her son to return from school. 'In [interacting with the] Qur'an, you pay attention to the words', She had spent her childhood in Saudi Arabia, learning Arabic literature and grammar from a young age. Even Amir, who had told me that the Qur'an plays a different role for people in every generation, was referring not to the Qur'an's role in the community, but rather to its textual meaning. Conversely, first-generation Egyptian American interlocutors spent more time describing their experiences learning how to recite the Qur'an, and how it related to their role in the community. Learning to recite was more often recounted as a communal 'struggle' than by immigrant interlocutors. 'We struggled, but we struggled together—you know what I mean?' said Adel, a 21-year-old, referring to himself and his other first-generation Egyptian American friends. He recounted that as children attending Sunday school at the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh in the early 2000s, they were learning to read and recite the Qur'an. 'I wasn't really a fan', he said, laughing, recounting how his parents encouraged him and his siblings to learn to recite the Qur'an. 'It was seen as more of a chore, to

be honest', But soon after, he nodded his head in thought, expressing 'I would definitely teach my kids to recite the Qur'an', He said he would send his own children to Sunday school as well.

If he had viewed learning Qur'anic recitation as a chore, why would he 'definitely' teach his children to recite? Notably, Adel learned to recite with his family. Family-centered religious traditions, especially in warm family environments, promote intergenerational religious transmission (Voas and Storm, 2012, p. 378; Pol and Tubergen, 2014, p. 102; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019, p. 1096), and for Muslim immigrants to other Western countries, parental mosque attendance, religious socialization, and Qur'an lessons have also been predictors of intergenerational religious transmission (Gungor, Fleischmann and Phalet, 2011, p. 1368; Maliepaard and Lubbers, 2013, p. 430). But a point of emphasis in the interviews I conducted was a sense of community and solidarity among peers. In addition to positive attitudes towards children cultivating God-consciousness and a familiarity with the Qur'an at an early age, Adel enjoyed bonding with other Muslim children, especially Egyptians, in a haven of sorts, while learning to recite the Qur'an. He and others like him want to give this experience to their own children, who presumably will also grow up in the United States. Although, as a child, the Qur'an memorization assignments themselves felt tedious, in retrospect, he enjoyed 'struggling' and commiserating with other like-minded children. The sense of solidarity cultivated in such experience is one that the first-generationers I spoke to desire for their own future children. This is consistent with literature that highlights the role of peer socialization and religious institutions in shaping religious belief and identity (Singh 2012; and Madge *et al.* 2014, cited in Strhan and Shillitoe 2019, p. 1096).

A young woman I spoke with, named Sarah, recounted her own Sunday school experiences, such as asking to use the bathroom, then trying to climb out the bathroom window with her friends to escape the strict Sunday school teacher. 'I don't know whether we learned all that we needed to learn out of [Sunday school], but we had fun and we made friends',

Communal experiences such as these were integral to building Egyptian Americans' identities, due to a shared sense of feeling not quite Egyptian. This sentiment was shared between youth with whom I spoke. Some youth were disappointed that their Arabic, while they were thankful for their skills in it, was not good enough. 'I'll never reach my mom's level', said Ibrahim. But, to this day, he speaks Arabic with his mother and listens to Qur'an on his phone. 'So, do I think I'm still a subpar Arabic reader? (laughs) Yes. When I go to Egypt, I can get by. But when I see my mom read, or understand something political, it's just way out of my league. I feel like I (laughs) I will never reach my mom's level, and I will try, and as I get older I will try harder. But I think it stands that I have subpar Arabic skills', When first-generation Egyptian American Muslims gathered, a desire to empathize with each other's not-quite-Egyptian identities promoted solidarity between them. Ibrahim also went to Sunday school, about which he said 'I think part of what I liked...was that there were tons of like-minded people. We were all children of immigrants who had sub-par Arabic reading skills', he said, chuckling. 'I remember how much we used to mess around with each other'', he said with a smile. Later, he added '[The Qur'an] was difficult for me to learn', he said, agreeing with Adel and others I spoke to. Adel, who I mentioned earlier as having struggled in but enjoyed his time learning to recite, was not alone in these experiences. He said, when he and his friends gathered, they found themselves performing their daily prayers together. In fact, they led each other in prayer and recited the Qur'an aloud. Those I spoke to all reported that years later, Qur'anic recitation had significant value in their lives and was a source of comfort. Their communal experiences as children contributed to their shared sense of identity as first-generation Muslim-Americans, their

solidarity with others and continuing ability to connect with God. ‘We were all, kind of like, learning and enjoying it together. The community element of it made it very encouraging to learn and I also enjoyed coming here [to the mosque as a child]’ said Ibrahim. The role of religious music in creating a sense of community in diaspora has been observed in at least one other study (Warden, 2010, p. 101).

Additionally, Ibrahim expressed the sentiment of communal struggle between him and his siblings as young children. ‘It was funny because we would literally stand in front of my parents’ door, waiting to recite [from memory]. I remember the *Fatiha*, you know. Of course, there was a lot of tension, you know, we didn’t want to frustrate our parents. We [siblings] were very supportive [of each other]; yeah it was definitely a team effort there, we had each other to rely on and struggle with.’ This quote also reflects the role that Qur’anic recitation played in developing familial identity, which Leila, age 19, similarly expressed. When Leila first heard the recording of Al-Minshawi, a wide smile spread across her face. She recognized his recitation style from childhood family road trips. This personal nostalgia⁴ for their own early lives in the United States, unique from many others’, was important in developing first-generationers’ sense of urgency regarding familiarity with the Qur’an, its recitation, and the Arabic language. The recitation of the Qur’an also cultivated a sense of unity between them and their families. Other ethnographic work has also shown family-oriented Islamic and Jewish practices in the West have a similar effect (Marks, 2004, p. 225; Alghafli *et al.*, 2019, p. 130).

While some immigrant interlocutors expressed that learning to recite the Qur’an as children growing up in Egypt was a challenge, it was often one they faced alone. ‘My mom hired a *sheikh* (individual of Islamic knowledge) to teach me [how to recite]’, said Nadia, who emigrated at age 20 to Pittsburgh from Alexandria, Egypt in 1989. ‘But I never got it!’ she exclaimed. ‘It wasn’t ‘till I came here to Pittsburgh and began to study on my own in my twenties that I really started to learn’. Nadia lived with her mother on a street in Alexandria with mosques at every corner, and one right behind her house. However, Qur’anic recitation was a struggle she faced without the support of other children nor an attitude of urgency, due to her mother’s lack of concern for her success in the task. In contrast, the first-generationers were raised in a city with very few mosques, but faced the challenge with other children like them, encouraged by the resolve and energy of their peers and parents. Over time and experience, they created between them a collective identity.⁵

Rather than fostering personal relationships, as it did with first-generation Egyptian Americans, Qur’anic recitation created a sense of national pride for immigrants with whom I spoke. Specific sounds from the homeland may elicit strong emotions or memories for people living in diaspora (Chapman, 2005, p. 6), contributing to maintenance of a national identity (Lidskog, 2016, p. 10). Nearly every immigrant interlocutor wistfully recalled days of their youth waking up to the voice of Abdul-Basit on the Egyptian radio. Even those who were raised in relatively nonreligious households fondly remembered the Qur’an’s sound echoing through the halls of their homes. ‘No matter whether you were Muslim or Christian, you would learn Arabic through the Qur’an at school’, said Nadia, speaking about the use of the Qur’an as academic literature, growing up attending a Catholic school in Alexandria, Egypt in the 1970s. The Qur’an

⁴ Nostalgia for one’s nuclear family history and the traditions of one’s childhood, especially in terms of learning to recite the Qur’an and listening to the Quran in the car, which was a memory multiple first-generation Egyptian Americans mentioned

⁵ An identity shared by several individuals in a group, founded on struggles and experiences in common.

was a constant in Egyptians' lives before immigrating to the United States, and as such, built a sense of national pride.

Those raised in predominantly Muslim communities, whether in a village or in a densely-packed city, did not strongly correlate learning the tradition of Qur'anic recitation with creating personal relationships. Rather, they associated sounds of Egyptian reciters with Egypt, national pride and a sense of home much more than first-generationers. Generational differences in how people in diaspora relate to the music of their homeland has been documented elsewhere and was also found here (Chapman 2005, p. 6). First-generation Egyptian Americans associated recitation in general with their religious identity and responsibilities, and rarely commented on the nationalities of Egyptian or non-Egyptian reciters. This is consistent with other researchers' observations that first-generation Muslims in Western countries have been noted to dissociate Islam from culturally-specific practices of their parents' homelands (Leonard, 2002, p. 241; Bayoumi, 2010, p. 170; Voas and Fleischmann, 2012, p. 525; Scourfield et al., 2013, p. 75). While first-generationers and immigrants did not associate recitation with the same concepts, both related Qur'anic recitation with identity in some way. This speaks to music's ability to strengthen diasporic groups' cohesion and identity (Reyes-Ruiz, 2005, p. 229; Baily and Collyer, 2006, p. 180; Boura, 2006, p. 6; Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008, p. 1199; Lewis, 2010, p. 571; Erol, 2012, p. 833) and cultivate a sense of diasporic consciousness (Brennan, 2012, p. 4).

However, the perception of a recitation's relatability was a common topic of discussion only among first-generation interlocutors, who looked to musical aspects of Qur'anic recitation as well as social connection as factors of appeal to it. 'He just has more passion', Ibrahim told me of Mishary Rashid, whose melismatic and tonally-varied style was perceived as more emotional and passionate than the other reciters' *murattal* styles. Sarah, Leila, and others all agreed with this sentiment in their independent interviews. A study on a Jewish minority in New York City found that first-generationers similarly perceived religious tunes from the more pervasive Ashkenazi tradition as happier-sounding, which the researcher attributed to how much more commonly heard the Ashkenazi tunes were (Rapport, 2014, p. 133). In this case, Mishary Rashid's recitations are more commonly heard online and on mobile apps than the other reciters' versions. This frequency of exposure may play some role in first-generationers' positive perception of his recitation as more passionate and emotional.

First-generationers I spoke to placed high importance on connecting with their religion and the Egyptian traditions of doing so, wanting to listen to and recite the Qur'an often and learn its meaning. But they said that it does not often come naturally nor easily. This is due to a lack of Arabic comprehension skills, which aid native Egyptians in quickly connecting to the Qur'an through its meaning. Also, first-generationers must actively seek exposure to Qur'anic recitation in an environment where it is not a common part of the soundscape. Thus, they cling to an aspect of recitation to which they can easily relate: musicality. British Sikhs in diaspora seeking religiosity also cling to musicality in the face of language barriers (Singh Khabra, 2012, p. 156). When Adel heard the recording I played of Mishary Rashid's recitation, he said 'I like it a lot. It's like I'm listening to a song with good rhythm. It draws me to it like music', He later commented that 'The more rhythmic [reciters] help me feel their emotion more than the ones who read just for the content—which I wouldn't be as interested in [when listening].'

Generational differences in the expression of shared religious beliefs was shown by sociologist Stephen Wieting (1975, p. 144). Here, while both generations of interlocutors believed in the value of Qur'anic recitation, only first-generationers expressed it by relating to its musicality. Interestingly, in a very brief mention of Qur'anic recitation, a study on British Muslims

recounted first-generationers' frustration in not understanding 'what [the Qur'an] was' during recitation lessons (Scourfield et al., 2013, p. 76). Among first-generationers in my study, while they too could not understand Arabic well, the same frustration was not shared. Rather, interlocutors shifted to appreciating the musical quality of the Qur'an and its ability to evoke an emotional connection. This may be due to the place Qur'anic recitation played in their lives specifically as part of the Egyptian culture, which includes listening to Qur'anic recitation as a pastime.

Qur'an as Music

The desire to relate to the Qur'an through something as familiar as music leads to an increased willingness to consciously and verbally associate the Qur'an with music, a taboo among many conservative Muslims. Those who associated the Qur'an with music, too, emphasized a difference in the gravity of content between the two art forms, as well as a difference in the etiquette and respect with which one should regard them. But they were willing to find similarities in their ability to evoke emotions, viewing the comparison between Qur'anic recitation and music as positive. '[As a child], I saw Qur'anic recitation as a chore, but now I do see it as music. There are a lot of options [styles] to listen to', said Sarah. By juxtaposing the descriptions of Qur'anic recitation as 'a chore' and as 'music', Sarah expressed that she regarded the association between music and Qur'anic recitation as positive. When I asked what music meant to her, she hesitated, deliberating, then answered 'Well, music is a bunch of sounds that mesh together to make you feel the way you want'. What many first-generation Egyptian American Muslims look for in the quality of Qur'anic recitation mirrors what they look for in music. They seek first to relate to the recitation's sound—rather than its words—to find solace and connection with God, and encouragement to then seek out the meanings of the passages.

While Leila did not consider Qur'an to be music, she preferred Mishary Rashid's melodious recitation and admitted that she felt the Qur'an has musical qualities. 'I think it gives it more emotional weight. When something sounds beautiful, you want to listen to it more', said Leila, when asked why she felt the Qur'an is recited melodiously instead of simply read or recited aloud, like typical books or poetry. 'It's not the same... if you want to listen to an audiobook it's not the same experience as listening to someone recite Qur'an. Someone monotone-ly reading the Qur'an [is] not gonna have the same effect as someone who has that [reciting] talent, you know?'

Christopher Small insists that performance is the performer's modeling of ideal relationships. 'When we perform, we bring into existence, for the duration of the performance, a set of relationships, between the sounds and between the participants, that model ideal relationships as we imagine them to be and allow us to learn about them by experiencing them' (Small, 1998, p. 218). In the case of those I spoke with perceiving a Qur'anic recitation performance as executed 'with emotion', a set of relationships is created. This models an ideal that the interlocutors hold about their relationship with the Qur'an – and, by extension, God. They aspire to have an emotional relationship with God. 'Well I liked a lot more the way this was recited', said Bilal, age 20. 'I like the sound of his voice. It also sounded like there was more emotion when he was saying it, which I think comes into play depending on how you recite', Most interestingly, he added: 'Usually if I'm reciting, as the *imam*,⁶ while praying with a group of people, I try to put emotion into it like that [recording]', Bilal here clearly indicated that he aims to create an ideally

⁶ An *imam* is one who leads a group in prayer, often reciting the Qur'an aloud.

emotional relationship between himself and the Qur'an as he recites aloud, performing for his fellow Muslims in prayer. When interlocutors expressed that the sound of recitation creates an emotional experience, they demonstrated a mental receptiveness and an ability to 'hear with the heart', which Charles Hirschkind conceptualized as an 'ethical performance' (2001, 2006). Hirschkind asserts that this kind of 'affective-volitional responsiveness' was necessary for understanding recorded sermons in late 20th century Egypt (2001, p. 624). The quotes by Bilal and other interlocutors on the connection between Qur'anic recitation and emotional experience suggests that a similar state of mind is present for first-generationers listening to Qur'anic recitation.

Additionally, Small suggests that '[There is] a comparable confusion to that which [we] have seen surrounds the word *music*, for just as there is no such thing as music, neither is there such a thing as beauty. There are only qualities in an object or action that arouse in a perceiver a pleasurable response and make him or her perceive it as beautiful' (1998, p. 218). Music is a vehicle for communication and elicitation of pleasurable response in listeners via gestures. Mishary Rashid's recordings were perceived as most pleasurable, and the recording by him which I showed to interlocutors is characterized by gestures of exaggerated melisma, a minor mode, and high-fidelity recording. These gestures were perceived as beautiful by those I spoke with in this case, and their responses highlighted that their ideal relationship with God is one characterized by emotion.

Furthermore, it is likely that the first-generationers' shared attitudes towards Qur'anic recitation and what aspects of it they seek to relate to aided in forming a sense of solidarity with each other. 'We as a generation are exposed *much* less to [Qur'anic] recitation', Sarah said. She explained that she looked for the most musical sounding recitations to help her connect to the Qur'an. This, in combination with a shared lack of understanding of classical Arabic, tied the Egyptian Pittsburghers of this generation together.

Nostalgia

The feeling of not quite belonging to the Egyptian collective identity, coupled with a sense of Otherness felt when among the general American population, cultivated a nostalgia for Egypt among first-generationers. However, this nostalgia was often particular to the perceived religiosity of Egyptians and ease of daily Islamic practice in Egypt. Instead of being wistful for a purely cultural belonging, focused on ethnicity and tradition, first-generation Egyptian Americans I interviewed longed for a culture in which their religion would come naturally. But this sentiment did not come without criticism, and Leila, a 19 year old woman, said 'I feel like the Qur'an[*'s* recitation] is a lot less intentional [in Egypt], you know? People don't appreciate it', She had visited Egypt multiple times, and added, 'Being a Muslim there is more cultural, and since it's easy, young people especially don't value it', Leila was not alone in her opinion and her perspective has been documented in the literature (Berger 1967; Bruce, 2011, p. 37; Scourfield et al., 2013, p. 75), but the majority of first-generationers I spoke with held a nostalgia for ease of Islamic practice in the home country and practiced that nostalgia by learning and reciting the Qur'an together. Sometimes, this nostalgia was only imagined; in other words, individuals who had never experienced life in Egypt also held nostalgia for the country. The nostalgia experienced by immigrant and first-generation interlocutors supports their characterization as a diasporic group, which is distinct from other kinds of minority communities

due to their collective memory and their connection with a homeland culture (Safran, 2004, p. 10; Shuval, 2000, p. 43).

Nostalgia has been discussed as a term that can hold more than one form. According to Nadia Seremetakis, American nostalgia implies romantic sentimentality which ‘confines the past and removes it from any [...] material relation to the present’ (1994, p. 4), while Greek nostalgia is ‘the desire or longing with burning pain to journey’ back to the place of origin (Ibid.).

The American first-generationers aptly exhibited Seremetakis’ American nostalgia. While interlocutors fondly recalled memories of visiting their loved ones in Egypt, or spoke with great respect and adoration for the morals, values, and culture of the home country, a burning, nostalgic desire to return was not evident.

The same held true for immigrant interlocutors, who held a more vivid nostalgia for the country they once called home. Although they were happy to remember and recount tales of their lives in Egypt, the music, and the Qur’an that was heard there, they did not express a sense of urgency to return. ‘You know what, I miss Egypt’, said Asma, a 44-year-old homemaker who has lived in Pittsburgh since 2000. ‘I miss how my relatives used to gather together every week at my dad’s house. I miss how we used to check on each other all the time. But the Egypt I remember is not that same as it was now. I went back for the first time in 16 years and everything was different, *subhan Allah*’.⁷ Asma clearly held a romantic sentimentality for Egypt, characteristic of American nostalgia, and because she was aware that the Egypt she held feelings for existed in her memory alone, she did not express a longing to return. This compartmentalization of the object of nostalgia in the past also aligns with Seremetakis’ American nostalgia concept. ‘You know, every year we thought we might go back [to Egypt], but we stay. We are here for our kids – they grew up here, they don’t know anything else. The education is better here’, Asma explained matter-of-factly. Her expression lacked the sort of burning sadness or longing to travel described as Greek nostalgia by Seremetakis. Neither did it include an evocation of the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement, which Seremetakis attributes to Greek nostalgia (1994, p. 4). Rather than a sense of exile and estrangement, Asma felt that she and her family left Egypt as a matter of choice and stayed for pragmatic reasons.

Several scholars have asserted the differentiation of the senses from each other in their functions societally and in engagement with a subject. ‘The senses, in modernity, are detached from each other, refunctioned and externalized as utilitarian instruments, and as media and objects of commodification’ (Seremetakis, 1994, p. 9-10). Classen views the five senses as culturally constructed (Classen, 1993). She explains that sight separates the viewer from the viewed, providing a unique objectivity and thereby establishes itself as a scientific sense. Sound provides depth perception, while sight provides surface perception. The depth perception that sound facilitates gives insight into the interior understanding and dynamism of a subject or environment.

I would like to extend this argument to further distinguish between the significance of listening and the significance of orating. To listen is to pay attention to some sounds rather than others, and requires a certain level of concentration. But to orate, recite, or sing, transcends simply focusing on a particular sound in the environment, and requires the subject to produce sound from within themselves. This results in a stronger connection between one and the content of what they say, recite or sing, due to the sense of ownership and production.

⁷ ‘Glory be to God’ is a common Egyptian expression of wonderment.

Ibrahim, a first-generationer, told me that ‘If you’re driving somewhere you don’t physically have a Qur’an with you, you can experience it and listen to it without having it with you. So there’s some practical benefit to [listening]’, his comments on listening transitioned into a discussion on reciting: ‘By reciting it yourself, you can kind of experience that emotion to a degree to another level [beyond when reading silently or listening]’, he said. ‘So when I read Qur’an [...] aloud and I can hear myself saying the words and I can actually think about what I’m saying, I think it’s more humbling and I feel like I’m getting more out of it. My relationship with God is there. It’s a physical action that creates a greater sense of emotion or a better feeling. A lot of it is just feeling, you know? Getting closer to God’. Ibrahim distinguished both between listening and reciting the Qur’an, in addition to comparing reciting versus silently reading the Qur’an. This interplay of actions and the perceptions of such actions: listening, reciting, and reading, is indicative of a complex range of experiences that the Qur’an, as a practice among Egyptian Muslims, encompasses.

The interlocutors I interviewed in Pittsburgh often mixed descriptions of listening and reciting the Qur’an together. Leila mentioned that her dad taught her and her siblings to vocally recite the Qur’an, then seamlessly elaborated that the idea was reinforced through listening to Qur’an recordings on road trips. For first-generation Egyptian American Muslims, it is clear that listening and reciting are intertwined auditory and vocal experiences associated with religious practice.

Debbora Battaglia presents nostalgia as a duality (1995). It is both a mode of production as well as a mode of consumption. She expands on this idea by introducing the consumption of nostalgia through listening to the radio, and its production via the practice of singing. Finally, she asserts that through these modes, nostalgia is then embodied by the individual. Rather than merely a sentimental attitude, she argues that nostalgia is an embodied practice that is a ‘transformative action with a connective purpose’ (Battaglia, 1995, p. 77).

In accordance with this theory, engagement with the Qur’an among Egyptians in Pittsburgh involves the consumption of nostalgia through listening to the Qur’an, and the production of it through recitation. However, I believe that the case in Pittsburgh is more nuanced than this simple statement. The evidence I collected in my fieldwork indicates that indeed, engagement with the Qur’an among Egyptians in Pittsburgh involves the consumption of nostalgia through listening to the Qur’an across both generations: immigrants and first-generationers. But the data suggests that recitation has embodied nostalgia only now, in the United States. Even before emigration from Egypt, Egyptians listened to and recited Qur’anic recitation and did so without reference to the past. These acts might not be purely nostalgic, but rather embodiments of tradition and habit spurred by forces such as religious spirituality and identity-formation, in addition to nostalgia. Furthermore, both Leila and Ibrahim happily recalled memories of their parents playing cassettes and CDs of Qur’an in the car. But they referred to recitation as something they performed as children to be obedient to their parents and to create a sense of community with children in the same Sunday school. And during adulthood, they used it as a means of individual spiritual growth. In neither of these cases was recitation performed for overtly nostalgic reasons. Therefore, Qur’anic recitation is not simply an expression of the consumption and production of nostalgia referring to the past. Instead, it is a dynamic experience that is engaged with nostalgia for the past equally with experiences and bonds in the present.

Otherness

The desire to relate to the Qur'an through its musicality stems from a yearning to compare something traditionally foreign to something familiar. It is amplified by a perceived otherness of Qur'anic recitation compared to mainstream American music and an analogous Otherness of Islam compared to mainstream American culture. Whether or not this 'Otherness' is an objective truth is not the question, because it does exist in American popular discourse today and has seeped into the consciousnesses of first-generation Egyptian-Americans with whom I spoke. 'Music represented culture in two ways: as a form of expression common to humanity, and as one of the most extreme manifestations of difference' (Bohlman, 2011, p. 31). Bohlman here discusses empire and colonial encounter, however I believe the theory can be applied to the immigration of Egyptians to Pittsburgh, where the power geometry is shaped by the 'new' Egyptians encountering the 'existing' American population.

Neither Egyptians nor Muslims at large are colonizing the United States, however this dynamic exists in an analogous way, and is augmented by the popular media representation of Muslims as seeking to 'dominate' the United States; while it is not a substantial nor factual claim, the concept of Muslim colonization of the United States exists within the public consciousness and intensely affects the attitudes of Egyptian Muslims I spoke with in Pittsburgh, exemplified by statements like 'I want to show my coworkers I'm just like them and normal, even though I'm Muslim. That Muslims are normal!' said Mo, an immigrant graduate student. 'And so I'm proud to be Egyptian, and I openly advertise that, despite what happens. A big part of [my attitude] is [due to] Islamophobia' said Ibrahim. It is true that the opinion of Islam in the United States is not positive (Voas and Ling, 2010, p. 66) and post-9/11, some Muslim youth have emphasized the coexistence of their American and Muslim identities (Bayoumi, 2010, p. 167). According to Talal Asad, identity is engaged in a discourse of fear and depends on *the other's* recognition of the self (2003, p. 161). Establishing a European identity engages a 'desire that those [who do not share it] recognize what is included in the name one has chosen for oneself. The discourse of European identity is a symptom of anxieties about non-Europeans' (Asad, 2003, p. 161). While this may be the case for Europeans fearing a dangerous Other, Mo's hope that his coworkers see he is 'just like them and normal' indicates that the discourse of Muslim Egyptian identity is a symptom of anxieties about non-Muslims.

'The awareness of difference intensifies encounter, and that awareness engenders wonder and awe, which, however, lie precariously close to fear and violence. Music marks the moment of encounter, for it stands out as the form of communication that is at once most familiar and most incomprehensible' (Bohlman, 2011, p. 30). It is for this reason that in discussions primarily about Qur'anic recitation and what it means to people, first-generation Egyptian Muslims I spoke with mentioned feelings of Otherness and fear. Although Qur'anic recitation is one element of Muslims' way of life that is different from that of mainstream American culture, it provides respite to Pittsburgh Egyptian Muslims I spoke with in the face of Othering.

The meaning that Qur'anic recitation holds to people across time differs. While immigrants in this study viewed it as a source of religious comfort and national pride, Egyptian children raised in the United States used it as a means of both connecting with their faith and with others in their personal communities. 'It's important that music and dance [...] are not just seen as static symbolic objects which have to be understood in a context, but are themselves a patterned context within which other things happen' (Waterman (1990), cited in Stokes, 1994, p. 5). Qur'anic recitation is one musical ritual too in which spiritual connection is created between an

individual and God, and in this case, their peers. Immigrants who grew up in Egypt experienced Qur'anic recitation by themselves through the radio, school, and the mosque. Despite the Qur'an's large presence in the Egyptian environment, they found these experiences to be largely personal and individual. But while first-generation Egyptian American Muslims often felt alone in general society, in their small Muslim community, and through their experiences with Qur'anic recitation, they could feel very much united.

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