



مركز دراسات التشريع  
الإسلامي والأخلاق

Research Center for Islamic  
Legislation and Ethics

عضو في جامعة حمد بن خليفة  
Member of Hamad Bin Khalifa University

ISLAM & APPLIED ETHICS

# WHAT IS ISLAMIC ART? AND WHAT MAKES ART ISLAMIC?

ABDULLAH AL-JUDAI'  
JONAS OTTERBECK

COMPILED AND EDITED BY: DR FETHI B JOMAA AHMED

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## Introduction

*In the name of God,  
the Most Gracious,  
the Most Merciful*

The Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) is pleased to place into the hands of readers this series of booklets, which contain a collection of research papers that have been presented at events organized by the Center. Through these booklets, we are seeking to build a methodological platform that will contribute to the CILE's key objective, namely promoting radical reform. The type of radical reform that we are calling for is based on a fundamental concept: transformational renewal. This concept transcends traditional renovation and *a posteriori* diligence, which tends to maintain reality and adapt to it, assessing and judging its components through the system of the five categories of laws in Islam: *Wajib* (required, obligatory); *Mandoob* (recommended); *Mubah* (permitted but morally indifferent); *Makrooh* (discouraged or abominable); and *Haram* (forbidden or prohibited); in other words, it is rather an evaluative type of jurisprudence. Transformational renovation goes beyond this intellectual space to create a kind of renovation and jurisprudence that addresses facts critically and explores reality intellectually so as to reform it, or even rebuild it if necessary. Moreover, this transformational renovation process puts forward alternative solutions for the shortcomings of the current reality, seeking to establish new means, models, and paradigms at all levels that would achieve

ethical objectives. Therefore, radical reform purports to go beyond superficial issues and directly into the crux of objectives and ethics, beyond minor details into theoretical foundations and frames of reference.

In order to implement radical reform by means of transformational renovation, religious scholars and scientists should share the responsibility. While religious scholars, in many cases, have been capable of judging reality based on specific facts provided by scientists, the task is different when it comes to diligence and transformational renovation. This is because an endeavor such as this requires an advanced and comprehensive understanding of both religion and reality. Being well-versed in Islamic Sharia sciences and being formally and partially aware of reality alone will not help bring about transformational reform unless it is accompanied with similar knowledge of our reality, and with today's scientific advancement, this is only possible by involving those specialist scientists and practitioners. The process of building reality on the foundation of proper Islamic ethics and values should be based on a deep and comprehensive understanding that will help analyze the reasons behind malice, which drive people to engage in substandard activities. This understanding may lead to the introduction of alternative solutions and new practices, which are more deeply founded on scientific knowledge. Not to dismiss the sound efforts and evaluative diligence of religious scholars, neither Islamic Sharia scholars nor scientists alone should monopolize knowledge or assume sole responsibility for undertaking reforms in society.

CILE activities are noteworthy for bringing together both religious scholars and scientists. We do not seek to address the evaluative process, which is limited to understanding reality through judgment and adaptation, drawing on permissions

or prohibitions. Rather, CILE events facilitate open dialogue between scholars and expert practitioners, who can then collectively propose how best to undertake radical reforms and recommend solutions that are at once inspired by Islamic principles and supported by scientific knowledge.

While the combined work of religious scholars and scientists constitutes a fundamental methodological basis for transformational renovation, it should be coupled with many other elements pertaining to the methods, theories, and objectives of science. For instance, traditional Sharia scientific methods do not preclude the type of renovation desired. At the same time, modern science has failed to focus on ethics, as it has not addressed ethics as a fundamental issue. Rather, science relegates ethics to a secondary position. This raises the issue of the division of sciences into religious or secular sciences, and of their tendency to focus excessively on highly specialized topics without associating them with greater universal themes.

Undoubtedly, this undermines the communication between scientists from various disciplines and thwarts their efforts to work together to develop an epistemological approach that combines their knowledge to serve the important purpose of promoting ethics. Therefore, the challenge set before us is not to persuade scientists belonging to various disciplines and backgrounds to work together. Rather, it is to shake them in their scientific safe havens and drive them to push through the epistemological paradigms governing their own knowledge in order to set up a new system and outline methods toward achieving renewal.

Enhancing its specialized research activities aimed at facilitating and exploring the communication between religious scholars and scientists, the CILE convened a three-day closed seminar from 30 April to 2 May 2013 in Oxford University, UK

to consider the contemporary challenges of and the relationship between Islamic ethics and arts.

Outstanding scholars and intellectuals with theological and practical experience from around the world participated in the seminar including Sheikh Dr Abdullah Ibn Yusuf Al-Judai', Sheikh Dr Larbi Becheri, Dr Essam Tallema, Dr Jonas Otterbeck, Dr Abdelkrim Berrechid, Dr Ali Al Omarey, Zarka Nawaz, and Ruh al-Alam, in addition to Dr Tariq Ramadan and Chauki Lazhar. The seminar was moderated by Sharif Hasan Al-Banna.

The CILE requested the participants to focus the discussions on the following topics:

(A) What is Islamic art? And what makes art Islamic?

(B) What are the ethical limits on arts?

This booklet includes some of the research papers presented in this seminar and is a part of CILE book series which we hope will contribute to our project of transformational renewal.

CHAUKI LAZHAR, *CILE Deputy Director*

## About the Authors

SHEIKH ABDULLAH IBN YUSUF AL-JUDAI' received his PhD in Islamic Economics and is one of the leading Islamic scholars in the world today. Born in al-Basra, Iraq, in 1958, he received *Ijaza* from the leading scholars of Iraq. He was a founding member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, where he served as General Secretary from 1998 to 2000; his roles – among many – included being an Imam and Khateeb of Al-Nijada Masjid in al-Basra (1976–1978); head Imam and Khateeb of Al-'Uqaila and Amr Ibn 'As Masajid in Kuwait (1979–1986); and a senior Islamic Studies teacher in Dar al-Qur'an in Kuwait (1986–1988). Combining a broad knowledge of Islamic sciences and using modern day tools and information technology, he served as a research consultant for al-Sakhr Technologies in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (which introduced the first Arabic PC), where he edited most of the initial software programs on Hadith and other sciences. Sheikh Abdullah published his first book at the age of 18 and has since published almost 100 books on a wide range of topics and issues. He has received commendations from the leaders of Islamic *fiqh* and hadith around the world. He is currently the head of Al-Judai' Centre for Research and Counseling, a religious consultant for Leeds Grand Mosque, and a teacher of Usul Al-Fiqh at the European Institute of Human Sciences, Wales.

JONAS OTTERBECK is a professor of Islamology, History of Religions and Religious Science at the Centre for Theology and

Religious Studies (CTR) at Lund University in Sweden. His main research interest is what happens to Islam in the present time. How do Muslims – in different places and from different social positions – understand their religion? Most of his research has dealt with the situation in Sweden. Since he researches Muslims in Sweden, he has also been involved in the study of the representations of Muslims in that country. But he also has a keen interest in how Muslim scholars in the Arab world relate to and understand popular culture and the consumer society, not least popular music. Professor Otterbeck has published eight books, 33 chapters in a book, 24 articles in refereed journals, and many newspaper articles and scientific reports.

What Is Islamic Art?  
And What Makes Art Islamic?

Abdullah Ibn Yusuf al-Judai'



This paper is intended to answer the following questions: “What is Islamic art” and “What makes art Islamic?” This topic has been a field of great interest to the researcher who tackled it in some detailed juristic researches; some of them have been already published in, for example, the book entitled *Almosiqa walghinaa’ fi mizan al-Islam (Music and Singing from an Islamic Perspective)*, which presented an answer to the above-mentioned questions. Some other papers were presented in some conferences and seminars dealing with the subject of “Rulings of Entertainment.” Some of those papers have not been published yet. The current paper presents a summary of many detailed and deep studies, so I hope it may help as an added value in discussing this issue of far-reaching effects in our reality.

### **What Is Islamic Art?**

To answer this question, we need to define the exact meaning of “Islamic art.” In so doing, we should consider the two words of this phrase.

#### ***Fann* (art)**

The Arabic word *fann* (art) denotes something that refers to a kind or a variety of a certain thing. It is said in Arabic *funun* and *afanin* to refer to various kinds and types of that thing.<sup>1</sup> *Funun* means different groups of people of different tribes.<sup>2</sup> We can

also say: *arrajul yufannin alkalam*, which means the person is tackling different fields and disciplines in his talk.<sup>3</sup>

All those meanings refer to a variation in different kinds and forms. It also denotes creativity and cleverness of the person or the thing to transform from some state to another and to tackle various things. The word *fann* may be given to a certain kind of knowledge. So we may say the *fann* (art) of syntax, art of logic, etc. which refers to mastery of different aspects related to that kind of knowledge.

In *Al Mu'jam Al Waseet*,<sup>4</sup> *fann* is defined in a way that makes it closely related to its specific technical meanings. It has four meanings:

1. A practical application of scientific theories through relevant methods; this is acquired through study and training;
2. A set of principles related to certain industry or craft;
3. A set of methods employed by a person to provoke emotions and feelings, especially the esthetic emotions, as in music, poetry, and photography;
4. A skill disciplined by taste and talent.

Thus, art can be related to any field of human creativity. This includes crafts, sports, both mind and physical sports, story-writing, essay-writing, discursive styles, etc. There are some other particular fields, which include music, poetry, and photography.

Traditionally, the use of this term is restricted to some of its meanings. It is currently used to refer to some crafts such as carpentering, sewing, and cooking in addition to a set of creative arts such as poetry, music, dancing, drawing, sculpting, and architecture. If the term is used in its general sense, it refers to the creative arts, which may be also known as “fine arts.”<sup>5</sup>

Today, when we use the Arabic term *fannan* (artist), it gen-

erally refers to a person with artistic talent, such as writer, poet, musician, actor, and photographer.<sup>6</sup>

This general contemporary meaning is the intended one here in this paper.

Art of this meaning is not new to Muslims. In fact, poetry, music, singing, dancing, painting, and sculpting are very established and were common arts for the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period. At the advent of Islam, those arts were present and popular. Surely, the Arab did not witness, to the best of our knowledge, the acting art in its modern sense, except for Shadow Art, to which we found a reference in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AH.<sup>7</sup> Due to its human creative nature, art, therefore, is not associated with a certain nationality across the world.

### ***Al-Islami* (Islamic)**

The term Islamic means that something is acceptable by the Sharia or put in a certain relation to it, including as Islamic thought, Islamic methodology, Islamic doctrine, Islamic work, Islamic rule, Islamic finance, Islamic media, Islamic art, Islamic dress, etc. The prefix Islamic is used to denote the legal validation and acceptability. It is similar to the word *halal*, which the majority of Muslims use to legalize consuming food or beverage.

I spent a lot of time thinking about the validity of adding such adjectives and prefixes and I found it to be a restriction that can be considered as: (a) an unnecessary addition because permissibility is the default ruling on all things and (b) a kind of innovation in religion as it means if something is not described as Islamic, then it is perceived, as (potentially) un-Islamic. This adjective is added to differentiate between what is Islamic and what is not.

Moreover, it has not been reported from the righteous pre-

decessors that they added such a prefix (Islamic) to anything. The same thing applies to the companions of the Prophet; they did not use this adjective to distinguish anything related to normal practices, eating, drinking, dressing, and dealings as Islamic or *halal*. The legal proofs and validation were limited to things that were given a ruling other than the default permissibility. Other things were left untouched. “And in no way is your Lord forgetful” (Qur’an, 19: 64).

Although I have some reservations about the prefix Islamic, I will take into consideration the purpose of this seminar and the intended meaning, which refers to legality and acceptability, where a thing described as Islamic should not contravene Sharia rulings.

### **Necessary preliminaries**

It should be noted that the topic under discussion with all of its details is subject to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). It has nothing definitive and is not prone to discussion and disagreement. So, when examining this topic, we fully understand that we are only exercising our efforts to the best of our knowledge to reach the juridical ruling, which may be the right Sharia ruling or not. Our opinion may be valid and preponderant and any other opinion may be weak. We respect all opinions and appreciate if others do the same and respect our right to differ and choose.

The way to distinguish what is lawful and what is not is the Qur’an and Sunnah as per the established rules and principles. No effect is given to the fabricated hadiths or ungrounded opinions as those are disregarded. Actually, the issue of arts is one of the topics that witnessed great controversy and many false reasoning and argumentation due to mistakes in citing proofs or

misunderstanding of the real meanings and the effective cause of analogical deduction.

Non-devotional acts of life affairs are permissible by default and do not take another legal ruling without clear evidence of Sharia. This includes whatever people invent or come up with habits and customs.

Islam did not prevent people from a behavior or habit except for those implying certain evils. When examining what Islam prohibited and transferred from the default permissibility, we find such things are very limited. The Qur'an reads: "Say, 'I do not find in what has been revealed to me anything prohibited to an eater (Literally: feeder) who feeds thereof except it be carrion, or blood poured forth or the flesh of swine, (for) then surely that is an abomination or an immoral thing that has been acclaimed to other than Allah'" (Al-Anaam: 145). Allah also says: "Say, Come (so that) I may recite what your Lord has prohibited you" (Al-Anaam: 151). In this verse, Allah enumerated what is prohibited. Those verses and many others show that the prohibited things are limited. Actually, Allah created life and subjected everything within to man. Allah says: "And He has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth, all together from Him" (Al-Jathiyah: 13). This is the default situation; thus, the Qur'an rebuked those who prohibit what Allah has made lawful.

There are some things that Allah did not give certain rulings concerning them. This is considered as sanction and tacit approval. Abu Darda' reported the Prophet (PBUH) to have said: "What Allah has made lawful in His Book is halal and what He has prohibited is haram, and that concerning which He is silent is allowed as His favor. So accept from Allah His favor<sup>8</sup>, for Allah is not forgetful of anything. Then he recited: 'And in no way is your Lord forgetful'" (Maryam: 64).<sup>9</sup>

Based on the above rule, all that is appealing to people and their natural instincts is considered *tayyib* (pure and good) and thus it is considered permissible. Allah says: “They ask you what is made lawful for them. Say, ‘The good things are made lawful to you’” (Al-Ma’idah: 4). Talking about His Prophet, Allah says: “making lawful for them the good things, and prohibiting for them the wicked things” (Al- Aaraf: 157).

*Tayyib* is everything appealing to people as long as it is not prohibited by Sharia. Taste does not make things unlawful as it varies from a person to another and only evidence and legal proofs are considered in this regard such as in case of wine and dead meat.

All allowable things related to human behavior: this should go genuinely in accordance with the higher objectives *maqasid* of the Islamic law. The measure is to be based on the consequence of doing things and damages. Doing acts, however, is usually classified based on being preferred or obligatory, and it can be hated to be done or forbidden.

## **Examining Legal Rulings of Art Issues**

We have arts of beauty or fine arts, and the source of this beauty is the artist who needs a special talent and superior skills that enable the person to produce a piece of art that is received by high admiration. This admiration may be reflected in a set of different feelings, such as comfort, happiness, joy or sadness, pain, and grief. If it is a readable piece of art, such as a story, the readers feel as if they are part of events.

Here I would like to review the meanings of some arts:

*Story*: is an artistic formulation of a real or imaginary incident that may be lengthy or short. There is no certain date for the emergence of this kind of art, and it is not exclusive to one

nation only. The general purpose of stories is to amuse the readers and deduce some benefits from reading or listening to a certain story.

*Poetry*: is a form of literary art that uses esthetic and rhythmic qualities of language. It has different genres and details.

*Singing*: the Arab called raising one's voice with something and repeating it once and again as singing, especially when it is accompanied by a nice voice and tender tone or melody.<sup>10</sup> In most cases, the lyrics are a piece of poetry.

*Music*: sounds produced by musical instruments, which is sometimes accompanied by singing.

*Dance*: repeated movements of body performed in a regular sport fashion, individually or collectively, often rhythmic and to music.<sup>11</sup>

*Acting and performing*: a person's portraying of another in movement and appearance. Acting as a type of art is a certain work written in prose or rhyme according to a set of rules to represent and portray a real or imaginary event in order to teach a certain lesson and give an example.<sup>12</sup>

*Tasweer or image-making*: in its general linguistic meaning, this is to depict and shape something. This shaping could be through sculpting, painting, carving, weaving, or molding. Today, this term refers also to photography and painting. It also includes decorative arts.

## **Clarifying the Foundations of Legal Rulings on Arts**

All acts of people could be given one of the five legal rulings. The act may be required to be done or to be avoided. This requirement could be in binding terms or not. If an act is required in binding terms to be done or avoided, then it is obligatory or prohibited respectively. If an act is required to be done or avoided,

but with no binding terms, it will be recommendable or abominable respectively. If there is no certain requirement to do or avoid the act, then it is permissible.

This requirement of doing or avoiding an act needs a *shar`i* (legal) proof, explicitly or implicitly. If such a *shar`i* proof is not available, then there is no legal requirement in this case, and this is innumerable as it is related to the free will and choice of man. By contrast, the acts required to be done or avoided are limited in order to alleviate hardship and ease difficulties for people.

Keeping silent concerning a myriad of acts comes in line with the human nature and the fact that man is sane and free to choose. Thus, Islamic Sharia makes permissibility as the default ruling on all things, and this is the general rule unless there is a proof showing a change from default permissibility to another ruling. This change is not related to the act itself but to something accompanying it, and this depends on the *maqasid* (general objectives of Islamic law). Therefore, the ruling is rendered into obligation, prohibition, recommendation, or abhorrence.

This means that the change from the default permissibility needs a clear reason and effective cause or the permissibility persists according to the following maxim: “the ruling revolves around its legal cause in its presence and absence.”

This is a great principle reflected in many verses of the Qura’n. Allah says: “He is (The One) Who created for you whatever is in the earth altogether” (Al-Baqarah: 29). This principle is in harmony with the easiness and facilitation urged and promoted by Islam. Allah says: “He is (The One) Who has selected you, and in no way has (He) made for you (any) restriction in the religion” (Al-Hajj: 78).

Deciding the ruling on arts should be formulated in the light



of the above-mentioned principles. This means that to answer the question of this seminar, we should discuss the ruling of art itself in its essence and original state, taking into consideration its role and purposes, without tackling other things that accompany art except when necessary.

Among those other things is the question about the woman's role in arts. Actually, the ruling on arts, in its essence, does not differentiate between man and woman as the case with all other obligations and commandments. The differentiation should be limited to the special conditions of this commandment, that is, if we are to say art of acting is permissible and women are going to take part, there may be special questions concerning the dress of a woman, covering her body, and other things required so that such participation by women can be acceptable. Still, there may be other questions regarding a woman's presence with non-mahram men, talking to them or appearance on TV or any other mass media. These issues are worth discussing in a similar seminar or conference to clarify the legal opinions in this regard, as the discussion in such a case should not be limited to a woman's role in art. Actually, this represents a big issue and concern for a lot of Muslims and jurists.

Here I would like to discuss some different kinds of art and clarify the legal rulings concerning them.

### **Art of Story and Poetry**

There should be no controversy concerning the legality of arts of story and poetry. If the story is true, then its legality is crystal clear as shown in many texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Allah says: "And all (that) We narrate to you of the tidings (information accounts) of the Messengers" (Hud: 120). Allah also says: "Indeed in their narratives is already a lesson to (the

ones) endowed with intellects. In no way is it a discourse fabricated, but a (sincere) verification of what is before it, (Literally: between its two hands) and an expounding of everything, and a guidance, and a mercy to people who believe” (Yusuf: 111). Surely, the stories of the Qur’an and the Sunnah are the best.

The imaginary story is also present in the Qur’an, for example: “Allah has struck a similitude: a slave possessed (by his patron), unable to determine anything, and one whom We have provided of Ourselves with a fair provision, (and) so he expends of it secretly and openly. Are they equal? Praise be to Allah! No indeed, most of them do not know. 7 And Allah has struck a similitude: two men, one of them dumb, unable to determine anything, and he is wholly dependent upon his care giver-wherever he/she directs him, he comes up with no charitable (acts). Is he equal to him who commands to justice and is on a straight Path?” (Al-Nahl: 75-76).

The crucial factor in any imaginary story is represented in the admonition and inspired lesson only; therefore, it may be less effective compared to the realistic story, which gives a real model and exemplary behavior. This may explain why there are more realistic stories in the Qur’an than the imaginary ones.

The art of writing stories in an interesting style and attractive fashion can be included in the Prophet’s saying: “There is some magic eloquence and some wisdom in poetry.”<sup>13</sup>

As for poetry, it was recited in front of the Prophet (PBUH) in many occasions and there were great poets among the companions, including Hassan ibn Thabit, Walid ibn Abi Rabi`a, Abdullah ibn Rawaha, Ka`b ibn Zuhair, and Ka`b ibn Malik. The Prophet once said: “Truly, in some poetry, there is wisdom.”<sup>14</sup>

It was also narrated that when a Qur’anic verse was revealed concerning poetry, Ka`b ibn Malik came to the Prophet (PBUH) and said: Allah (glory be to Him) has revealed what you know

about poetry, so what do you think? The Prophet said: “The believer strives with his sword and tongue.”<sup>15</sup>

The Qur’an criticized that kind of poetry which distracts people from belief and righteous work. Allah says: “And the poets, the misguided closely follow them. Have you not seen that they wander in every valley? And that they say what they do not perform, except the ones who have believed, and done deeds of righteousness, and remember Allah much, and vindicate themselves ever after being unjustly treated” (Al-Shuaara: 224-227). Those verses themselves could be a proof of permissibility of poetry when it is recited in the suitable context.

As for the context of criticizing and condemnation of certain kinds of poetry, the Prophet (PBUH) said: “It is better for a man to fill his belly with oozing pus than to fill it with poetry.”<sup>16</sup> This is poetry which bars from the way of Allah and distracts people from the Qur’an and the righteous and useful work.<sup>17</sup> This criticism does not apply to poetry which invites people for good things or which comes in good context. It was narrated that Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) said: The Prophet (PBUH) was once asked about poetry. He said: “Poetry is in the same position as speech. The good of it is like good words and its bad part is like bad words.”<sup>18</sup> Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) used to say: “Poetry can be beautiful or ugly; so take what is beautiful and leave what is ugly.”<sup>19</sup>

To sum up, the beautiful aspect in poetry is clear and it should take the same rulings on ordinary speech and talk. If there is no wrong with a certain talk or subject, then it is lawful to compose poetry on this subject and vice versa.

## **Art of Singing and Music**

Singing is not only a means of entertainment but also a real art

and literature. It has its own rules and methods but, like any other arts, there are some people who enter this field without having the suitable qualifications and requirements. This kind of art is related to entertainment, which is appealing to people and easy to practice; thus, we find a lot of frivolous persons in this field which, like our contemporary era, witnesses corrupt tastes and bad behaviors.

Determining the legal ruling on singing depends on its components, lyrics, melodies, etc.

Singing is based on poetry, which is generally permissible as shown above; similarly, singing in essence takes the same ruling, as it is a kind of speech.

The mere chanting of words does not render speech unlawful. Chanting is a process of enhancing and beautifying one's voice, which is a praiseworthy thing and recommendable in reciting the Qur'an. This modulating could be criticized for external things that are not inherent, such as copying and imitating females by males and vice versa.

The issue of singing witnessed great controversy among people for a long time; some opinions forbade it, while others saw nothing wrong with it. Those upholding lawfulness based this on the default permissibility, while those refusing it relied on certain proofs especially when singing is accompanied by music.

I examined the proofs cited by both parties, discussed them in detail in my book entitled *Almosiqa walghinaa' fi mizan al-Islam* and here is the summary:

1. There is no consensus of opinions concerning the ruling on singing with or without music;
2. There is no Qur'anic script that dealt with this matter;
3. There is no firmly established text of Sunnah prohibiting music or singing;

4. There is no evident opinion from the Prophet's Companions or the *Taabi'een* (the generation after the Companions) prohibiting music or singing; rather such opinions of prohibition came after them;
5. Ascribing the opinion of prohibition to the four imams of the Sunni juristic schools is disputable and inaccurate;
6. This issue can be decided in light of the rule of default permissibility in habits and practices;
7. The original rule concerning voices and speech is permissibility, and the same thing applies to the act of chanting and modulating. Moreover, the beautiful voice is itself a blessing from Allah;
8. Out of the narrations criticizing music and singing, only a few are of decisive texts not subject to allegorical interpretation. Even those are disputable in terms of accuracy of transmission and narration and rulings cannot be based on unauthentic narrations;
9. The firmly established narrations that were mistaken as proof of prohibition can be in fact a proof to the contrary perspective, which maintains the default permissibility.

When considering the lyrics, there are roughly three themes:

*First:* praiseworthy meanings inviting to virtues and good deeds and this kind is lawful. This includes poems of wisdom, asceticism, litany, remembrance of Allah and praising Him, and lyrics that invite people to work for the reward in the hereafter. Poetry of praising the Prophet (PBUH) such as the poem composed by Ahmed Shawki and singing in special events such as welcoming Ramadan, pilgrimage, etc. are included in this category.

It also includes lyrics that urge people to work and bring out feelings of faithfulness and loyalty to religion and country, such as the songs of jihad and patriotic songs in love of countries.

This category also includes songs that are listened to in order to get rid of weariness without implying any banes. Songs of kids, cradle songs, and lullabies are examples of this kind.

*Nashid* (the plural form is *anashid*) has become very popular chanting nowadays, and it is a kind of song with good lyrics and meanings. Themes of *nashid* can include remembrance of Allah, praising and thanking Him, seeking His forgiveness, and praising His Messenger. It may also include regretting the past times of one's life that have been uselessly wasted. *Nashid* is performed with beautiful voice, and music can be added to the performance. To listen to such a kind is better than listening to the poems of love and loss, and this kind can be a means of refreshment and recreation without leading to a sin.

*Second:* A kind that excites strong feelings in one's self. Such feelings could be that of sadness and pain. This kind of singing includes regret over sins committed in the past and it is surely lawful.

To express a lamentation over loss of love or not sharing it is a theme of such a kind which is permissible in essence but it may be blameworthy as it implies regret over a worldly matter and missing enjoyment of the present life as in the heartbreak of those lovers who failed to reunite with their beloved ones.

However, this kind is permissible and the proof for that is found in the story of Ka`b ibn Zuhair who recited his famous poem, which began with a similar meaning, in front of the Messenger (PBUH). Ardent love could happen to any person and it may develop a malady; in this case, the lover is excused as long as he or she commits no sin but they should resist this.

This kind is popular and can be found in the majority of songs. When examining the lyrics of many contemporary famous songs, we find them dealing with this theme, talking about love, pain, and the affairs of lovers, and this is the most

common theme among poets of all times. Allah says about those poets: “Have you not seen that they wander in every valley” (Al-Shuaara: 225).

This theme includes lyrics describing feelings aroused due to traveling and leaving homes, friends, family members, etc. Such feelings and longing are natural and permissible by default. These sad feelings may be due to a change of one’s state and circumstances, and this is also acceptable in general.

In addition, there are songs that provoke lusts, such as lyrics describing women. If this excites a husband toward his wife, then it is OK. Actually, the original rule in this regard is the permissibility of reciting pure love poetry without targeting a certain person who is not in a marital relation. The impure love poetry is not acceptable at all. If it provokes an unlawful desire, then it is prohibited. Allah says: “And help one another to benignancy and piety, and do not help one another to vice and hostility, and be pious to Allah; surely Allah is strict in punishment” (Al-Ma’idah: 2).

This kind of impure poetry and singing helps in spreading obscenity. Allah says: “Surely the ones who love that (the) obscenity should be widespread among the ones who have believed, (they) will have a painful torment in the present (life) (Literally: the lowly ‘life,’ i.e. the life of this world) and the Hereafter” (An-Nur: 19). Uttering nasty and obscene words in describing what should be covered is a kind of obscenity that contravenes the real belief and faith. The Prophet (PBUH) said: The believer does not slander, curse, or speak in an obscene or foul manner.<sup>20</sup>

Ali ibn Abi Talib said: “The one who talks obscenity and the one who makes it known are equal in sin.”<sup>21</sup>

*Third:* A kind of singing that uses prohibited lyrics such as swearing by other than Allah, denying the fate and destiny,

using obscene language, lyrics of flirting with other guys, lyrics that arouse people to commit a forbidden act such as looking to women in a lustful way, kissing a woman unlawfully, etc. Such kind of singing is prohibited. This kind is found in classic and modern songs.

The sane and wise person chooses what they listen to and avoids the nasty and unsuitable things. Songs differ in a considerable way; there are wise and good ones and of course there are obscene and nasty others.

The ruling of permissibility of singing includes the act of singing on the part of the singer and listening by the audience in different circumstances and events, whether mere entertainment and amusement or special events such as births, weddings, finishing memorization of the Qur'an, and finishing one's studies.

The default permissibility can be changed and rendered into another ruling under certain circumstances and for certain purposes. In such cases, the new ruling can be one of the following:

*First:* preference as in wedding celebration to publicize marriage;

*Second:* abhorrence when it distracts persons from a recommendable act that cannot be realized later or when there is exaggeration and extreme preoccupation at the expense of a real benefit;

*Third:* prohibition when implying forbidden sayings or lyrics such as the words of disbelief; or if it is used in a disobedience or inviting people to that. One example of this kind is *sama'* (the technical term used for music listening implying a setting for doing this) that provokes people to drink wine or commit adultery. It also becomes forbidden if it involves the appearance of the singer in a way that excites people as in many commercial



video clips, which concentrate on showing the beauties of the singer.

Generally speaking, there is no difference between man and woman in such rulings of singing or listening, or in terms of listening to the opposite sex. The prohibition is related to something external that is far from the essence of music and singing.

Actually, what is permissible to do is also permissible to take as a job and this should not represent any reason to criticize persons or defame them. This general rule is applicable to the art of music and singing.

### **Art of Dance**

Dance may be accompanied with music listening or not. Actually, dance could be:

1. Folklore habit and sometimes it is a characteristic of certain group of people;
2. Special events dance, as in weddings. This kind of dance is varied so that we may find a woman dancing before women or men, an effeminate boy dancing before men, or even mixed dance;
3. Dance of evening parties and gatherings;
4. Dance on TV and media;
5. Sporting dance such as gymnastics;
6. Religious dance and this is common in some religions other than Islam.

Those are different kinds of dance; some of them are classical and some are modern. Jurists held different opinions concerning dance. Some maintained the default permissibility and cited the famous hadith of Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) as a proof. She said: “Some Abyssinians were dancing (*yazfīnoon*).”<sup>22</sup> In another narration she said: “The Sudanese

came and played in front of the Messenger (PBUH)”; in a different narration: “Abyssinians once played with their spears.” It was reported in another narration that: “Some Abyssinians came and played in front of the Prophet (PBUH). The Prophet invited me and I put my palms on his shoulders and watched them play. Umar scolded them but the Prophet said, ‘Leave them. O Bani Arfida! (Carry on), you are safe (protected).’”<sup>23</sup>

The Prophet clarified the reason for leaving them saying: “So that the Jews may know that there is latitude in our religion.”<sup>24</sup>

This dance by Abyssinians is similar to what some Arabs nowadays call the *dabke*. The Abyssinians did it in the mosque of the Messenger (PBUH) in his presence and he let Aisha watch and did not agree with Umar when he scolded them.

Some people claimed that this was made permissible only because playing with spear is a kind of training to use weapon. This is an invalid claim as the hadith clarified that it was playing and entertainment.

Others maintained that permissibility in this hadith is limited to Eid and some scholars saw it acceptable to give the same ruling to other lawful events such as weddings. It can be argued that if there is a proof rendering the matter from the default permissibility, then it would be valid to limit such permissibility and this can be considered as exemption. However, there is no such proof, so this hadith supports the default permissibility.

Moreover, dance is a kind of habit and custom and we have a principle regulating habits and endorsing them as long as they are not contradicting Sharia. That means the original rule is to accept people’s habits and customary acts in this regard.

When examining all the proofs cited in support of prohibiting dance, we find strange and bizarre interpretations. For

instance, they used the following Qur'anic scripts as proofs: "And be moderate in your walk" (Luqman: 19); "And do not walk in the earth merrily" (Al-Israa: 37).

They may sometimes use a hadith and give it a different indication and significance as in the following hadith: "Every play of a believer is void except in three cases: horse-riding, archery and mutual foreplay with his wife these are *haqq* (permitted)." <sup>25</sup> Some people used this hadith to prohibit dance but they substituted the word *haram* (prohibited) for the word void.

Some people said this hadith was an indication of abhorrence based on the connotation of the word *batil* (which is translated here as void). This word is not used with a praiseworthy and good thing; thus, it may be an indication of abomination of all acts of playing and diversion except for those three cases.

This may be argued that the meaning of *batil* is futile and useless, and the exception of the three things in this hadith supports this meaning as those things are useful and meaningful. Based on the general maxim that any ruling revolves around its legal cause in its presence and absence, if a plaything fulfills certain benefit, it is given the same ruling of those three things and is exempted from abhorrence; the abhorrence persists only if this thing has no benefit and is useless.

I may say that the ruling on dance should consider certain things such as how and where it is performed. To give more details, dance can happen in one of the following ways:

*First:* in a marital relation between a husband and a wife. This kind is acceptable and can be a kind of foreplay;

*Second:* as one of the creative arts with sporting useful movements, and this is practiced, for example, in school during sports classes especially for girls. I cannot find an established proof to criticize or prohibit such a kind; rather, it has certain

benefits and it can be included in the acceptable playing and diversion such as horse-riding;

*Third:* an example of entertainment and amusement such as what is performed in special events and evening parties.

This kind, if not combined with an external prohibited thing, could be permissible, such as dancing in weddings or popular dancing in national events. This may have certain benefits such as identifying and acquainting the unique characteristics of different nations. It may be included in the considerable means of uniqueness. Allah says: “We have made you races and tribes that you may get mutually acquainted” (Al-Hujurat: 13).

If it has no benefit, then occupying oneself with watching or performing it can be considered as a kind of abhorrent diversion and playing. It may be combined with another thing that renders it prohibited, such as dancing that excites people and arouses the lust of the flesh. This is absolutely prohibited and includes the following forms: dancing by semi-naked women, dancing by a woman while displaying her beauties and adornment, dancing in front of men or with them as slow dance in mixed parties, and dancing by males in an effeminate way copying and imitating women for there is a script prohibiting this imitation of the opposite sex. This form is not allowed to follow as a profession nor to practice or participate in it, while the earlier mentioned kinds that are free from prohibited things are permissible to watch and practice. Those kinds should be rationalized so as to remain within the circle of permissibility.

Generally speaking, we should not deny that dancing is a beautiful act of art, so we are required to make use of it by developing sporting and educational programs in schools and clubs in a way that does not render it prohibited. Preventing dancing at all will result in a kind of hardship for people, so it will be better to have it rationalized in the best possible way.

## **Art of Acting and Performance**

We dealt with the art of story in an earlier section of this paper and clarified how the Qur'an and Sunnah used this art, whether it was a real or an imaginary story. The top kind of stories is the realistic one; however, it is a set of news for the listener or the reader and surely listening is not seeing. Here comes the role of acting to transform this story into a visible and watchable thing as if the spectator lives the events of such a story. Of course, this has far-reaching effects on people.

Acting is one of the prominent and effective kinds of contemporary arts. In spite of its great importance as human creativity with a very powerful effect, there have been no serious researches tackling this issue in light of the general objectives of Sharia. Rather, a group of muftis (Islamic authoritative judges) prohibited it, either without thorough consideration or affected by some violations and unacceptable practices in this field. They presented some proofs that could be summarized as follows:

1. Acting (performance) is a kind of lying as the actor is pretending to be somebody else;
2. It is plaything and a waste of time, if we are to assume that it has nothing wrong with the content;
3. It promotes and spreads ill behaviors, especially nowadays with new technology and modern techniques of mass media;
4. It is a kind of imitating and copying non-Muslims as it is alien to our Islamic traditions;
5. There is a higher possibility of committing Islamic law violations and refused practices when women participate in this field.

On the other hand, there is another group who permitted it under some conditions and considerations to avoid any religious violations.

In my point of view, I think acting is a kind of striking the similitude and giving examples, as it is portraying of a story or event through certain roles assigned to different characters. This affects the audience deeply and firmly establishes the story in minds. If a person tells another that someone sat down and drank water in a certain way, then he carried a cup of water and imitated that person, in this case he is not claiming to be that person. Rather he is trying to render what happened in a better way. Consequently, acting is only a means and method to render something.

When examining this kind of art to decide on its juridical ruling, we should tackle the art in its essence away from any other reflections of negative realities. In this way, if the ruling of permissibility is given, this enables us to make use of this art, find useful alternatives and limit prohibition to works involving religious violations and unlawful things.

Actually, the art of acting is a creative human activity that should not be refused only because it is developed by non-Muslims, if we are to take this for granted. Knowledge, literature, and art should not be refused and denied as non-Muslims took the lead in such fields. People of the era of the Prophet (PBUH) used the different artifacts and industries developed by non-Muslims, and the general rule in this regard is getting the benefits of those things and avoiding evils. Refusing this is a kind of refusing the established facts. Acting is in fact an instructive and recreational means like many other contemporary useful and educational means, which are common among Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

It is very strange to find some people prohibiting such a

means under this pretext while accepting to record their voices by techniques invented by non-Muslims, or publishing their articles and *fatwas* on the Internet. Moreover, some of those scholars appear on TV or use DVD, projectors, etc. and all those things were invented by non-Muslims. How can they prohibit acting because it is taken from non-Muslims!

If they based their reasoning and prohibition on the current violations and misuse of this means, there would not be any objection in this regard, as it is established that using the permissible means in any act of disobedience is not acceptable; however, misusing a lawful means by some people does not make it unlawful.

It would have been better if those *fatwas* focused on the rationalization and necessity of using this art effectively. Those *fatwas* should have emphasized on the importance of this means and its critical role in implanting and promoting virtues and good manners. Even when acting is used for recreational and entertaining purposes, this should be in a reasonable and acceptable way and could be used to criticize nakedness, evils, ill manners, and all that is contradicting to the Islamic law. As for the opinion refusing this art totally, it is contradicting to the principles of good reasoning because permissibility is the original rule; if there is a certain thing that transforms this default permissibility into another ruling, the restriction should be put on this new thing instead of prohibiting everything or people will not pay attention to such opinions.

It is worth mentioning here that one of the earlier *fatwas* in this regard is that by the great scholar Muhammad Rashid Reda on November 21, 1911 in *Al Manar Magazine*, where he maintained the permissibility of the art of acting. The question mentioned that acting may include backbiting, so the mufti replied: "In this case, prohibition is limited to backbiting only

and it does not include the story or the acting itself.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, the ruling should tackle the art of acting in its essence and use.

Undoubtedly, to maintain the default permissibility of the art of acting paves the way for establishing sound foundations of its use in harmony with the general objectives of Sharia. Surely there are certain practices in the field of acting that cannot be accepted or permissible. Such practices must be denied and condemned. On the other hand, a lot of the research problems in this field are reflected in the controversial issues concerning the role of women, music, portraying real stories, such as those dealing with the life of companions, and the more controversial issue of presenting the characters of the Prophets. Each single issue requires detailed and deep researches to reach the juridical ruling based on sound reasoning, strong proofs, and consideration of consequences.

For example, on the issue of representing the noble and great characters of the Muslim nation such as Prophets and the righteous companions, one should not say: Their prestigious status and nobility prevent portraying them by anybody through acting and it is not acceptable for any actor to represent such characters. Actually, this is a weak reasoning as the effect in acting is given to the role and not the real character of the actor. The role of the actor is only presenting the character to the audience, and this in no way can be a kind of underestimation or degradation of the character.

The real problem of this kind of acting lies in the historical nature of the characters. This nature poses a challenge and difficulty in terms of accuracy, authenticity of narrations, and presenting them as a complete filmed event. A lot of incidents of history are missing some aspects, so the scenarist adds some parts and retouches. Some retouches can be acceptable, for example: if we have the following text (the person took a cup



of water and drank it), the required movements for portraying this are easy to perceive, but the case is totally different with a series or sequence of historical events detailing some personal lives where the scenarist can add some things to the real events and this may be considered lying.

The matter becomes more difficult when it deals with the character of the Prophet (PBUH).

I am not giving a juridical ruling here in this special part of acting, namely the acting of real events, as this issue requires a deep research but if it is said this kind of acting is permissible, this will be conditioned on accuracy and authenticity of events portrayed. As for acting of the imaginary stories, I think there is a vast room to achieve some useful goals and make use of this art.

Further to this, there is another kind of acting: animation or cartoon acting. Some people prohibit this kind because of the issue of *tasweer*, which will be discussed below, but we need to assure here that prohibiting this kind totally is not in conformity with the detailed proofs and general objectives of Sharia.

### **Art of Image-making (*tasweer*)**

Image-making (*tasweer*) is the name that combines different kinds of painting, molding, sculpting, etc. A picture or image is in fact a shape. So what is lawful in those plastic arts?

Again the rule of default permissibility should be applied till there is a new thing that changes this permissibility. Some Prophetic traditions were reported in this regard, but there was a kind of contradiction in understanding their intended meanings and whether they render the default permissibility into impermissibility. They are authentic traditions; however, there is certain controversy in terms of their interpretation.

Some of those traditions read as follows: “Those who will be most severely punished by Allah on the Day of Resurrection will be the image-makers.” and “Those who make pictures will be punished on the Day of Judgment. It will be said to them, ‘Bring to life what you have created.’” There is another hadith in which the Prophet said: “Whoever produces a picture (of an animate object) in this world will be forced to bring it to life on the Day of Judgment but he will be unable to do so. The Malaikah (angels of mercy) do not enter a house wherein there are pictures (of animate objects).”<sup>27</sup>

Those texts are clear warning but our scholars and jurists differed about the intended *tasweer*. Actually, this disagreement goes back to the era of the Companions where there were certain kinds of *tasweer* at that time reflecting the human creativity in shaping and molding. This disagreement has persisted till our contemporary era, and it has been extended by some scholars to the new techniques of picturing and photography.

Clarifying the point of disagreement requires an adequate understanding of the word *tasweer* and if the prophetic guidance in this regard revolves around certain effective cause, or it is a devotional thing without understandable legal cause.

When carefully reflecting on the Prophetic texts in this regard, one may conclude that:

1. The restriction may be applicable only to *tasweer* (image-making) of creatures that have a soul, such as human beings and animals. The default permissibility applies to other things;
2. There should be a distinction between images of living creatures that cast shadows (three-dimensional objects) and those that do not (two-dimensional images).

Busr ibn Sa`eed narrated from Zaid ibn Khalid Al Juhanai (a companion of the Prophet) from Abu Talha Al-Ansari that

the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: “The Malaikah (angels of mercy) do not enter a house wherein there are pictures (of animate objects). Busr said: then Zaid fell ill and we paid him a visit. Behold! There was hanging at his door, a curtain with an image (surah) on it. I said to ‘Ubaidullah Al-Khawlaanee, the foster-son of Maimoonah (may Allah be pleased with her), the wife of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him): ‘Didn’t Zaid tell us about images the day before yesterday?’ Ubaidullah said, ‘Didn’t you hear him saying: except a design in a cloth (*illa raqman fi thawb*)?’”<sup>28</sup>

*Raqman fi thawb* is a design in a cloth that could be drawn, carved, or woven and of course this has no shadow. Walls and drawing papers are like clothes in this regard. Based on this hadith, we can conclude the permissibility of all images that do not cast shadows.

It may be argued that: The Prophet disliked images in pillows and curtains. When he saw pictures of Abraham and Ishmael in the Ka`ba, he did not enter it till he ordered them to be erased by water, which is a proof that those images did not cast shadows; however, the Prophet erased them.

It may be answered that the dislike in the first hadith is not prohibitive non-preference. Texts showed that this non-preference is related to wasting money on mere adornment and decoration or it may be out of asceticism. Thus we find the Prophet said to Aisha: “Allah has not commanded us to dress (embellish) stones and clay (bricks).” Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) once mentioned that they had a curtain with the figure of a bird on it. When the Messenger of Allah (peace be on him) entered the house and saw it right in front of him, he said: “Remove it from here. When I enter and see it, I am reminded of this world.”<sup>29</sup>

As for pictures of Abraham and Ishmael, they were erased

as they were remnants of *jahilliyyah* (pre-Islamic period); they were inside the Ka`ba and Abraham and Ishmael appeared carrying the arrows of divination.<sup>30</sup>

Actually, if it is permissible to have such two-dimensional images, then it is also permissible to create them. It becomes abhorrent or forbidden if only such images are used in an abominable or prohibited thing such as using them in an excessive ornament or in devotional context such as images of disbeliever deities or religious rituals as in churches. This is prohibited as it implies a kind of glorification; therefore, the Prophet ordered the images of Ibrahim and Ishmael to be removed from the Ka`ba.

As for the other three-dimensional images that cast shadows, some of them are permissible, such as images of trees and other things that have no soul. The same ruling of permissibility applies to children toys, as specifically indicated in hadith texts. If we study this text carefully, we can realize the reason behind prohibition in terms of three-dimensional images that cast shadows.

The exception to the general prohibition for children's toys is due to the fact that the main reason for the prohibition is not present and there is also a tangible benefit, worthy of consideration, in their use for entertainment and education. Moreover, using those images as toys for children negates any kind of glorification so they are totally different from the statues that were made and even worshiped by Arabs in the pre-Islamic period. Those images and statues were created for the purpose of worship not as a mere artistic work. The great warnings by the Prophet (PBUH) against those images and statues are due to the fact that they were worshiped by the pagans; this severe warning cannot be perceived to apply to the person who artistically makes a toy for children or a statue for decoration. Even if

we are to accept this act to be sinful, it should be noted that the Kind Legislator did not set such a severe punishment for a sin less than polytheism or disbelieving, which may indicate that the purpose of this severe warning is not related to mere purposeful artistic works.

Actually, considering the effective cause of prohibition necessitates prohibiting statues of trees and inanimate beings if those things are customarily worshiped or glorified. The rulings should be formulated in light of this interpretation as it considers the objectives of Sharia.

Taking this into consideration, we can safely say that the prohibition is limited to those things made for purposes of worship or glorification. It should not be applicable to things made for purposes of education, recreation, or mere adornment, which are originally permissible. Allah says: “Who has prohibited the adornment of Allah, which He has brought out for His bondmen, and the good things of (His) providing?” Say, “These, on the Day of the Resurrection, will be exclusively for the ones who believed in (i.e. during) the present life.” (Literally: the lowly life, i.e. the life of this world) (Al-Araaf: 32). In light of the above-mentioned, we can understand why Allah has considered making statues for the Prophet Sulaiman as a blessing. Allah says: “Making (Literally: between) for him whatever he decided: chambers and statues, and bowls like water-troughs, and anchored cauldrons” (Saba: 13). Sulaiman was one of those Prophets that Allah mentioned for the Prophet Muhammad and ordered him to follow their guidance. “Those are they whom Allah has guided; so emulate their guidance” (Al-Anaam: 90). Giving effect to this interpretation should take priority over claiming that the hadiths prohibiting image-making have annulled and abrogated the ruling related to the Prophet Sulaiman.<sup>31</sup> Actually, this kind of image-making is not

intended for prohibition as the effective cause is not present in it.

However, it should be taken into consideration that some hadiths indicated another effective cause of prohibiting image-making, which is imitating the creation of Allah. The Prophet (PBUH) said to his wife Aisha when she placed a curtain having images over (the door of) her chamber: The people who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who try to make the like of Allah's creation.<sup>32</sup> This is clear in the sacred hadith that Allah, may He be exalted, says: "Who does more wrong than the one who tries to create something like My creation? Let him create a grain of wheat or a kernel of corn."<sup>33</sup> As we see, this act is not limited to the purpose of image-making; rather it extended to another aim (imitating Allah's creation), which is not acceptable from any human being.

This imitation may occur to the mind of the artists when they are conceited of their own artistic work. Actually, this could lead to dispraised pride and arrogance which Allah dislikes. The Prophet (PBUH) said: "While a man was walking, dragging his dress with pride, Allah will make earth swallow him and will go on sinking with a tumble in it till the Day of Resurrection."<sup>34</sup>

All of the abovementioned is related to image-making known from the old times, which included sculpting, drawing, and carving. It is not applicable, in my point of view, to the contemporary photography using the modern techniques, as this is unique to our times and does not imply any imitation of the creation of Allah.

If a person called Zaid took a document written and signed by Khalid and put it in a duplicating machine to produce many copies, the new produced copies are in no way attributable to

Zaid. It is the same idea of images taken by a camera or camcorder. When people see such images, they may comment: oh, glory be to Allah the Creator; while if they see a sculpture or a drawing, they may comment: this artist is very skillful and talented. This is a clear difference in approaching the two kinds.

Thus, those who generalized the prohibition to include the modern photography understood the word *surah* (image) mentioned in the hadiths as a general and absolute term applicable to all kinds of image-making. This is very shallow and superficial reasoning, as it is established that the legal terms are not construed in light of the customary meanings; rather the effect is given to the intended purpose of the Legislator or the common language of legislation. Moreover, the effective cause of the ruling should be taken into consideration, and then the term may be applicable to all what has the same meaning.

The abovementioned difference between the two kinds of image-taking makes this analogy and generalization null and void. However, it should be stressed on the necessity of maintaining legal purposes in technical photography, which is a mere capturing of the image through light and lens, and it should remain like this without any interference and alteration or it may be given the same ruling of old image-making.

To sum up, *tasweer* (image-taking) with its two aspects, creative and technical, is one of the great and useful means that can be used in many meaningful purposes to highlight different cultures and knowledge, rectify certain behaviors, etc. It may be one of the necessities of our era to make use of such a means at the educational, teaching, and cultural levels.

The creative *tasweer* (image-taking) is a process of stimulating minds to unleash their potentials. It is also a means of documentation. The artists of the old times and previous civilizations used it to record their history and important events.

Today, when a person visits a painting museum that narrates a historical stage of certain nation in Europe or elsewhere, s/he can have a better idea about this nation through those artistic paintings rather than reading a detailed book.

Sheikh Muhammad Abdou called drawing the “Silent Poetry.” He wrote: “Drawing is a kind of poetry that is seen not listened to while poetry is a kind of drawing that is listened to not seen. Those paintings and statues recorded the different states and affairs of people and groups in different sites and places, so they deserve to be called the register of human conditions and affairs.”<sup>35</sup>

Considering the rule of effective cause and general objectives and its relation to the legal rulings gives room for Muslims to unlock their potential and show creativity in this field. Such a field is a human activity that should not be exclusive to non-Muslims only.

## **Decorative Arts**

Decorative art is a unique form of arts connected with drawing and painting. It is an art of harmonious carvings, which may include imaging of living creatures that have souls. Decorative arts also include calligraphy.

The default permissibility of ornament applies to this kind of art as there is no certain script excluding it except for few texts specific to decorating mosques and *mushaf* (a copy of a sacred Qur’anic book). There is no established proof of prohibition, and the hadiths narrated in this regard are generally disputable in terms of authenticity or intended meaning. Even if we accept those texts, they only refer to abhorrence of decorating *mushafs* and mosques while neglecting their real role and function.



This can be clearly understood from what Ibn Mas`ud said when he saw a decorated *mushaf*: “The best thing to decorate *mushaf* with is to recite and follow it rightfully.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, upon building the mosque of the Prophet, Umar ibn Al-Khattab said: Build it in a way that protect people from rain and avoid colorfulness and decoration.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, abhorrence should be limited to two things:

*First*: if it distracts the person from his prayer especially when it is present in the direction of Qiblah or prostration;

*Second*: if it includes extravagance and excessive expenditure as this is against wisdom.

If these two things are avoided, then decoration will be permissible as mosques are the highlight of the Muslim nation and its civilization, so it is praiseworthy to pay attention to the esthetic aspects in their building, out of reverence, whether this includes decoration by calligraphic art or carvings and paintings.

During the caliphate of Othman ibn Affan, there were some alterations in the building of the mosque of the Prophet. Abdullah ibn Umar said: “He expanded it and constructed an arcade of stone and plaster was added to the mosque and the columns were remolded and built of decorated stone. The roof was built of the strong and precious teak strong precious lifted on the pillars.”<sup>38</sup>

Actually, the jurists who allowed this such as Hanafis set a condition that the cost of this decoration should not be taken from the public treasury or the mosque fund. They said: The mosque fund should be dedicated to spending on essential building or restoration, nor decoration and beautification.<sup>39</sup>

Decorative arts are very broad and more general than decorating mosques and *mushafs*. Actually, this art is connected to architecture in its different forms and fields. It also enters

in a lot of crafts, including clothing, textiles, and carpentering. The original rule of permissibility should be maintained and creativity in such a field should be supported and promoted especially if it becomes a field of uniqueness, such as Islamic arabesque, which is a form of artistic decoration that has been known for ages.

## **Conclusion**

Art is a kind of expressing different concepts in a way that is compatible with human nature. It is a very useful means of clarification and expounding of ideas, promoting virtues, highlighting belonging, and manifesting identity. Moreover, it is a good means of recreation and entertainment that wards off boredom and weariness, enriches intellect, and calms souls. It is also a manifestation of beauty that attracts people.

All those are sublime objectives considered by the wise Sharia. Even the objective of entertainment and enjoying beauty is a meaningful and required one. Actually, to burden ourselves all the time is very difficult as our bodies have rights over us, and our heart has the right to tranquility, calmness, and recreation.

The Prophet said: “Don’t take upon yourselves, except the deeds which are within your ability. The deeds which are loved most by Allah are the most regular constant deeds even though they may be few.”<sup>40</sup>

Love of beauty is a human instinct. Ibn Mas`ud narrated that the Prophet (PBUH) said: “No one with the slightest particle of arrogance in his heart will enter Paradise.” A man remarked, “But a man likes his clothes to be nice and his sandals good.” The Prophet said, “Verily, Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Arrogance is refusing to acknowledge what is right and considering others beneath one.”<sup>41</sup>

In the hadith of Hanzala Al-Usaydi, he said: “Abu Bakr, may Allah be pleased with him, met me and said, ‘How are you, Hanzala?’ I said: ‘Handhala is a hypocrite!’ Abu Bakr said: ‘Glory be to Allah! What are you saying!’ I said: ‘We were with the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) who reminded us of the Garden and the Fire and it was as if we could see them with our eyes. When we leave the presence of the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) we attend to our wives, children and estates in a state of great heedlessness.’ Abu Bakr said, ‘By Allah, we have experienced the same as this!’ So Abu Bakr and I went to visit the Messenger of Allah and I said, ‘Handhala is a hypocrite, Messenger of Allah!’ The Messenger of Allah said, ‘Why is that?’ I said: ‘O Messenger of Allah, when we are with you, you remind us of the Hellfire and Paradise, as if we see them with our own eyes. But when we depart from you, we meet our wives, our children and our homes and we forget much (of what we heard from you).’ The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: ‘By Him in Whose Hand is my life, if your state of mind remains the same as it is in my presence and you are always busy in remembrance (of Allah), the Angels will shake hands with you in your beds and in your paths. But, there is a time for this and a time for that.’ He (the Prophet) said this thrice.”<sup>42</sup>

If the Muslim tries his best to avoid the prohibited things, Allah’s mercy will shower him in every aspect of life affairs. Actually, it is incompatible with the easiness and facilitation of Islam to block the door to creativity and ignore creative potentials. The absolute asceticism in worldly interests is against the teachings of Islam, as our religion did not come to put an end to this world; rather it urges us to inhabit the earth and work to enhance our life on it through the righteous deed. This righteous deed is broad enough to include everything that helps us inhabit earth while maintaining Allah’s orders and laws.

Unfortunately, art in its different kinds and forms is almost exclusive to non-Muslims although Muslims do not lack potentials and creativity, but because Muslims surrendered to certain obstacles. Some of those obstacles are fake ones, such as the issue of juridical ruling on art discussed here. We have seen in this paper that the issue is subject to juridical reasoning and different opinions although there are some strict opinions. Those strict views are not binding and have been affected by unauthentic or fabricated narrations. Other obstacles include that of asceticism, austerity, and the issue of imitating non-Muslims in their culture, without differentiating between elements of uniqueness and things in common. There is also the obstacle of traditions and strict customs that are not based on Sharia.

All those things are some reasons behind lagging behind and not taking the lead in highlighting the beauty of our religion and Sharia. This religion considers aesthetic aspects, permits pure enjoyment and pleasure, and does not block the door to creativity; rather it encourages it as a kind of knowledge and an element of civilization. Allah did not criticize any nation for their creativity or interest in worldly benefits, but He rebuked them for arrogance, haughtiness, and using Allah's bounties to commit acts of disobedience.

Three essential things are to be concluded here from what we mentioned:

1. The arts that Islam accepts can be defined as: any creative product by humans (called arts) but it must comply with the absolute laws of Sharia;
2. All standards to regulate arts in order to be accepted as per Sharia laws is called the lawfulness of artistic productivity, for the sake of reaching the noble end in spreading benefit;
3. If arts are to express the authenticity of Islam, based on

Islamic principles, then such arts meet the higher objectives of Islam and therefore permissibility is allowed, as arts can guide life in all walks at the present age.

I hope I was successful in providing an answer to the main question of this seminar: What is Islamic art? And what makes art Islamic? I ask Allah to forgive me for any mistake and to accept this paper as a humble contribution to the establishment of sound foundations of discussion and argumentation.

## Notes

- 1 Ibn Faris: *Mu'jam Maqayis Al-Lughah* (4/435).
- 2 Ibn Manzur: *Lisan Al-Arab* (13/326).
- 3 Al-Azhari: *Tahdheeb Al-Lugha* (15/465).
- 4 The Arabic Language Academy: *Mu'jam Al Waseet*, p. 733.
- 5 See Imil Badi' Ya'qub, Michel Assi: *Almu'jam almufassal fi Al-lughah wa aladab*, p. 956.
- 6 The Arabic Language Academy: *Mu'jam Al Waseet*, p. 733.
- 7 Ibn Hazm Al-Andalusi (d. 456) mentioned in his treatise (*Mudawat an-nufus*, p.351) it is a kind of acting that uses puppets and light effects where those puppets are moved by a stick from behind curtains and light is spotted on them, so they appear for the spectators as acting movements. There was a man known for this kind in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AH. He was Muhammad ibn Daniyal al-Mausili and he wrote comics and plays in this field, such as his book entitled *Taiif Al-Khayal*. See Shawki Daif: *fi ash-shi`r wa alfukaha fi misr* (On poetry and humor in Egypt), p. 80; Lutfi Ahmed Nassar: *Wasa'il at-tarfihi` asr salatin almamalik fi misr*, p. 336.
- 8 This could be a reference to Allah's saying: "O you who have believed, do not ask about things which, in case they were displayed to you, would vex you, and in case you ask about them while the Qur'an is being sent down, they will be displayed to you. Allah has been clement towards them, (i.e., those things) and Allah is Ever-Forgiving, Ever-Forbearing" (Al-Ma'idah: 101).
- 9 Reported by Al-Bazzar (Hadith no: 123, 2231 – Kashf Alastar), Al-Hakim in "Almustadrak" (hadith no: (3419) and Al-Bayhaqi in "As-sunan al-kubra" (12/10). Al-Bazzar said: Its *isnad* (chain of narrators) is valid; Al-Hakim said: its *isnad* is authentic. The same meaning is reported in another hadith by Salman Al-Farsi, Abu Th`alaba Al-Khushni and Ibn Abbas.
- 10 Al-Khattabi: Gharib Al-hadith (1/656).
- 11 See The Arabic Language Academy: *Mu'jam Al Waseet*, p. 364.
- 12 Ibid., p. 854.
- 13 Reported by Al-Bukhari (no. 4851) from Abdullah ibn Umar, and by Muslim (no. 869) from Ammar Ibn Yassir.
- 14 Reported by Al-Bukhari (no. 5793) from Ubbai ibn Ka`b.
- 15 Reported by Ahmed in his "Musnad" (Hadith no. 15785) with authentic *isnad*.
- 16 Reported by Al-Bukhari (Hadith no: 5802) from Ibn Umar, and hadith no. (5803). It was also reported by Muslim (no. 2257) from Abu Hurairah. This hadith was narrated by a group of the companions of the Prophet (PBUH).
- 17 See Abu Ubaid Al-Harawi: Gharib Al-hadith (1/36).
- 18 Reported by Abu Ya`la in his "Musnad" (Hadith no. 4760) with sound *isnad*. See also Al-Judai` : *Almosiqa walghinaa' fi mizan al-Islam*, p. 236.
- 19 Reported by Al-Bukhari in "Aladab Almufrad" (Hadith no. 866) with sound *isnad*.
- 20 Reported by Ahmed (Hadith no: 3948) and Al-Bukhari in "Aladab Almufrad" (Hadith no. 312) from Abdullah Ibn Masu`d, with authentic *isnad*.
- 21 Reported by Al-Bukhari in "Aladab Almufrad" (Hadith no. 324) with sound *isnad*.
- 22 *Yazfinoon* means dancing.
- 23 Reported by Ahmed, Al-Bukhari, Muslim, and others. For more details about these narrations, see Al-Judai` : *Almosiqa walghinaa' fi mizan al-Islam*, pp. 368–80.
- 24 Ibid., p. 369. Reported by Ahmed in his "Musnad" with sound *isnad*.
- 25 Reported by Ahmed in his "Musnad" (Hadith no. 17337, 17300), Tirmidhi in "Al-Jami`" (hadith no. 1637), Ibn Majah in "Sunan" (hadith no.: 2811) from Uqbah ibn Amer. Tirmidhi said: "It is a good hadith."
- 26 Muhammad Rashid Reda: *Al-Manar Magazine* (14/827–830).
- 27 For these and many other Prophetic traditions, see Sahih Al-Bukhari (5/2220–2223); Sahih Muslim (3/1664–1672).
- 28 Reported by Al-Bukhari (Hadith no: (5613). It was also reported by Muslim (no. 2106).
- 29 Those two hadiths were reported by Muslim (no. 2107).
- 30 Reported by Al-Bukhari (Hadith no. 3174).
- 31 For more information on this, see An-Nahhas: *I'rab Al-Qur'an*, p. 7860; Al-Qurtubi: *Al-Jami li-Ahkam Al-Qur'an* (14/272).
- 32 Reported by Al-Bukhari (Hadith no: 5610) and Muslim (3/1668).

- 33 Reported by Al-Bukhari (Hadith no: 5609). It was also reported by Muslim (no. 2111) from Abu Hurairah.
- 34 Reported by Al-Bukhari (Hadith no. 5452), and Muslim (3/1654) from Abu Hurairah.
- 35 Muhammad Abdou: *Al-`Amal Alkamilah* (The Complete Collection) (2/198).
- 36 Reported by Abdul Razzaq in "Al-Musannaf" (no. 7947), Ibn Abi Shaiba in "Al-Musannaf" (hadith no. 30235), S`aeed Ibn Mansour in "Sunnan" in (At-Tafsir or Exgesis) no. 164 with authentic *isnad*.
- 37 Reported by Al-Bukhari (1/171) as *Mu`allaq* (hanging) without *isnad* but he affirmed it.
- 38 Reported by Al-Bukhari (no. 435).
- 39 See: Sarkhasi: Al-Mabsût (30/284); Ibn Hajar: Fath Al-Bari (1/540-541). For more information about the different opinions of Juristic schools, see Ibn Rajab Al-Hanbali: Fath Al-Bari (3/284–285).
- 40 Reported by Al-Bukhari (hadith no. 5523). It was also reported by Muslim (no. 782) from Aisha.
- 41 Reported by Muslim (hadith no: 91).
- 42 Ibid., no. 2750.

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What Is Islamic Art?  
And What Makes Art Islamic?  
The Example of the Islamic Discourse on Music

Jonas Otterbeck

## Introduction

This article sets out to contribute to the discussion on Islamic art. Its overall goal is to humbly offer a social science perspective on the questions “What is Islamic arts?” and “What makes art Islamic?” First, some historical examples on the discussion on music – music will be the example of Islamic art in the article – will be offered and discussed.<sup>1</sup> Next, a theoretical perspective on Muslim, scholarly interpretations of Islam will be discussed followed by a section specifically on Islamic arts and interpretation. The article will then return to Muslim scholarly arguments on music and discuss some interesting, present-day artists’ suggestions on how to resolve difficult moral issues that are pressing when dealing with music and Islam. Finally, the article will return to the two main questions.

Muslim scholars have voiced their opinions on the legal status of different kinds of music throughout history. Even though the Qur’an contains no verses (or few, depending on the interpreter, see Otterbeck and Ackfeldt 2012) making direct references to music, the hadith collectors wrote down several traditions regarding tonal expressions with accepted chains of transmission, *isnad*. Several of the legal scholars, who have, over time, become the most prominent, have commented on music. Other scholars, less known today, but of prominence during their lifetime, have written tracts that have survived to

our days. Below, I will comment on two such tracts. The texts are interesting since their authors drew very different conclusions.

Ibn Abi'l-Dunya (d. 894) was a celebrated religious authority during his lifetime. He was Hanbali. Furthermore, he was tutor to the Abbasid Caliph All-Mu'tadid bi-llah (d. 902) and his son al-Muktafi bi-llah (d. 908). His writing was quoted long after his demise (*Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Robson 1938). Among his influential texts, one finds several edifying tracts on *dhamm*, translatable as "critical perspectives on..." One tract, *Dhamm al-malahi*, critical perspectives on instruments of diversion, features a lengthy critique of music. *Malahi* has the same root as *lahwa*, a word often associated with music through an established tradition to interpret the words *lahwa-l-hadith* (idle tales) from verse 6 of Surat Luqman as implying music, a tradition attributed to among others such prominent companions as ibn Mas'ud (d. 653), one of the formative Qur'an exegetes, and al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), one of the earliest theologians of Islam (Farmer 1929/2001). *Lahwa* was a keyword for Ibn Abi'l-Dunya: To spend time with diversion (*lahw*) is to indulge in sin. The scholar found that diversions were intertwined with wine drinking, listening to singing girls and stringed instruments, overeating, and all forms of excess and gluttony. To prove his point, Ibn Abi'l-Dunya quoted, among others, the Umayyad Caliph ibn Walid (d. 744):

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

When reading Ibn Abi'l-Dunya's tract, it is hard to miss how

a vision of edifying didactics dominates the structure of the text (see further Librande 2005). The famed scholar wanted to write down the straight path and warn against the crooked one, practicing *hisba* (accountability), through advice in writing and leaving it up to the advised to make informed choices when acting. In an article on contemporary Wahhabi writings on music, I pointed out the importance of understanding the harsh advice often given in Wahhabi *fatwas* in relation to an idea of a presumed personal choice and responsibility, and further the possibility of compensation when committing a transgression or a sin (Otterbeck 2012).

The Shafi'i (school of Islamic law) scholar Abu 'l-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 1074) was a contrast to Ibn Abi'l-Dunya. Al-Qushayri was both an Ash'ari (school of tenets of faith) scholar of the Qur'an and Sunna and a master of Sufi (mystic) lore well established in the elite in Khurasan (Algar 1992). In 1045, al-Qusayri authored a Sufi manual, eventually one of the most widespread, often called *al-risala al-qushayriya fi ilm al-tasawwuf* (The Qushayriya Epistle on the Knowledge of Sufism) (Knysh 2007). The epistle features a part on the defense of *sama'* (the technical term used for music listening implying a setting for doing this) toward the end. He used both Qur'anic verses and hadiths to construct his arguments about music's legality, stressing the beautiful voice of Islam's messengers as proof of the value of tonal expressions. However, it is obvious that the core of his argument – where nuances are expressed – is found in his rendering of the tales and sayings of former Sufi masters. In these, music is presumed to be extremely powerful, bringing out feelings of fear, love, and sadness. It has the ability to render men unconscious and even kill animals and men (it is unclear whether death is primarily symbolic or not). The stories are didactic and tell of music (and *sama'*) as a blessing

for the mature Sufi, but a danger to the inexperienced. You need to take into account *zaman* (time), *makan* (place), and *ikhwan* (friends), the latter with the meaning of company, when evaluating what benefits or temptations music might bring (Knysh 2007).

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

One must not forget the maturity of thought that Sunni scholars have shown through history with regard to different opinions. The fact that many scholars accepted the plurality of opinion over time and in space as a blessing – at least most theologians accepted this in theory, not necessarily accepting a plurality of truths (Kamali 1991), just the possibility of human short-comings – is proof of a widespread acceptance in Islamic history that the individual theologian's knowledge and position in time and space mattered for opinions expressed. This is not to claim Muslim scholars invented postmodernity or that Muslim scholars were not interested in enforcing their interpretation on students, colleagues, officials, commoners, and

family, merely to point out that in a scholarly discussion, this position was standard and that the position creates space for a social constructionist, historical approach.

### **Islamic Studies from a Non-confessional Point of View**

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

#### **Islam as a Discursive Tradition**

Talal Asad (1986) addresses Islam as a “discursive tradition” meaning that Islam is the overall referent interconnecting all the multitude of expressions of rituals, narratives, theology, habitus, legal practices, and theories that in some ways make references to Islam. This includes competing narratives on history (like Shia and Sunni narratives on the marriage of Omar to a woman with the name Umm Kalthum), contradicting *kalam* (theology) (like Jahmite (followers of Jahm ibn Safwan (d. 128/746) and Hanbalite understanding of the being of Allah), as well as incompatible local religiously motivated behavior recorded in the

anthropology of Islam. Perceived as a discursive tradition, Islam cannot be understood as a unified whole. Or to be more exact: If Islam is studied through its immanent, not its transcendent, expressions, the scholar is studying human language, human societies, and humanly constructed and communicated signs and symbols. Such a study is a human-

ist and social scientist study of how Muslims in time and space formulate, through language or behavior, what the discursive tradition of Islam is.

If Islam is studied as a discursive tradition, it follows that power over the discourse is of interest. To be able to be more precise in my argument, I will need to discuss both discourse and power in a more detailed way. To do this, I will position myself as a Foucauldian. Simply put, a discourse, from a Foucauldian point of view, is the sum of possible expression about a certain topic. These expressions might also include non-verbal communications. But it also implies the practices of exclusion of other expressions deemed unworthy, vulgar, mad, or simply erroneous. Further, it implies the disciplining of the expressions included as valid, reasonable, and correct. The limits of the discourse are guarded by a multitude of gatekeepers standing guard because of their own education, upbringing, sense of justice, morals, and ethics, or their understanding of truth and what is thinkable. When someone corrects – mildly and friendly as well as harshly – a child, a student, a colleague, or a partner, that person exercises a potentially disciplining power. The limits of the expressible are repeated, re-enacted, and confirmed; they are seldom invented. Power, then, is the practice of the many as well as the few in relation to the discursive boundaries. Counterpower (yet another crucial concept) is the power practice of expressing the non-confirmative, consciously as in the case of an artist wanting to provoke or cause a change, or unconsciously as in the case of a child trying out an obscene word not knowing the full value of it. Thus, power is not something simply owned by an authority and then used to maintain and exercise might. Rather, it is found in the subtle interplay of practices between people, including a myriad of minor and major practices (Foucault 1972, 1980, 1990). No doubt, some



individuals and institutions are far more influential than others regarding the discursive tradition of Islam. A legal scholar advising the juridical system of a country, who has obtained a rumor as an expert on Islamic law over decades, is clearly more influential than an older farmer sitting critically commenting on a *khutba* (religious narration) at his kitchen table with his oldest son and a neighbor as his only audience. Still, his oldest son might be deeply impressed and influenced by his father's views, and thus the father, when exercising counter power, might be the most influential person for the son. Or not. The son might be disciplined by the father, knowing that his own contradicting view will not be appreciated so he will keep silent, not to upset the situation, giving the neighbor the impression that he agrees with his father. It is this complexity of power relations that concepts like discursive tradition, power, and counter power tries to address. Asad (1983:251) makes a necessary reservation when discussing similar issues, writing: "From this it does not follow that meanings of religious practices and utterances are to be sought in social phenomena, but only that their possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces." Obviously, what anthropology or any other social science can provide is explanations that are this-worldly oriented rather than transcendent.

To study this is somewhat easier when looking at expressed views in texts. Even though we know that scholars might hold back personal views, never expressing them, or waiting for a better timing with regard to their careers, we may read texts as products of a certain time and space. In that sense, the author might not be as important as the context. Still, some original thinkers manage to change the line of thinking of a generation and for generations to come. Discourses are not closed, they

are open, and their boundaries are contested. Yet, they seldom change instantly, and if a radical idea has immediate impact it is more likely to cause a split of a discourse than change everyone at once. Texts are also excellent lasting evidence of contestations and discursive interventions, yet another concept from Asad (1993:164), implying the conscious attempt to change a discourse.

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

Still, these new fields of the anthropology of Islam have not changed substantially how Islam is understood. To some, this type of anthropology is hard to accept. For example, when unconventional practices of a community experienced only by them as Islamic are exposed by anthropology as a form of local Islam, a gut reaction of many believers might be to disregard the practice as un-Islamic and the anthropology as ludicrous. To the anthropologist, both the practice and the protest are interesting, related parts of the discursive tradition of Islam. The power

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

### **Islamic Art**

Evidently, not all art by a person of an Islamic denomination is Islamic. A Muslim might create a cubist painting of a bull or a postmodern poem to a beloved friend with no religious

themes whatsoever. The established non-Islamic scholarly use of Islamic art (especially in history studies) for any artifact created within a Muslim empire is not very precise, informative, or useful for religious studies leading to strange labels like “Islamic swords” and “Islamic tiles” for military equipment and building material (see for example Brend 2005; Irwing 1997; Rice 1986). Nor is every work of art commenting on Islam is Islamic. Someone wanting to criticize Islam by slandering its revered symbols and narratives might create a piece of art. Rather, this article sees Islamic art as art that is on purpose or by traditional repetition put in the discursive and semiotic tradition of Islam. Further, the artist’s intention has to be affirmative of that discourse, or at least view it as meaningful in the most profound sense of the word. In Islamic art, a natural plurality will emerge distributed in time and space, due to esthetic ideals of different taste cultures and the complex genealogies of the imaginative mind of individuals. The concept “taste culture” refers to the situation when several individuals share preferences in, for example, clothing, food, behavior, but also different art forms. Apart from being local, regional, national, or international, taste cultures are frequently delimited by class, gender, generation, and religion. Some high cultural art expressions survive through centuries like, for example, the fondness of calligraphy and the arabesque in Islamic art or the appreciation of certain *maqamat* (tonal scales) like the *Hijazi* or *Bayati maqamat*. Other expressions might be more local and temporal (see further Bourdieu 1984; Korsmeyer 2005).

This way of understanding Islamic art denies it of essence. Islamic art becomes a discourse (or rather several different ones depending on time, space, class, etc.). It does not make Islamic art less genuine, just more historically grounded. One might object that the Qur’an and *Sunna* (the traditional portion

of Muslim law based on Muhammad's words or acts, accepted (together with the Koran) as authoritative by Muslims and followed particularly by Sunni Muslims) set limits and make suggestions to what art should be like. But the interpretation of Islam's central texts is coded in language by scholars and others and is thus made immanent, and history provides evidence of the plurality of interpretations.

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

Riis and Woodhead (2010) further discuss the process of how an artifact may become religiously consecrated if made outside the expected. Artists use signs and symbols in their art, they seldom invent those. But an artifact created might be a new combination, a new angle, a new use of forms, signs, and

symbols. The work of art might be deeply emotionally and intellectually meaningful to the artist. Still, it might not be to others. The artifact may instead be dismissed by others, but it may also be embraced by some. A religious artifact that gains spontaneous popular support may be said to go through a process of insigation, when signs are inscribed in the public conscious.<sup>2</sup> The insigation is disciplined through consecration, the process of officially proclaiming or sanctioning something as holy or part of religion. At the same time, consecration gives the expression some discursive closure. However, this is not a linear process revolving around one object but an on-going discourse in which different voices seek acknowledgement for their understanding and interpretations.

### **Globalization and Democratization of Technology and Cultural Forms**

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

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

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

Regarding music, during the last 130 years, following the

rapid development of the ability to mediate music through recordings, the regional character of music has been challenged to the point that it is difficult to talk about traditional music (Bohlman 2002). Instead, interconnectedness, mutual influence, and the logic of consumer culture need to be taken into account when one discusses music. Developments in the technique of crafting instruments (making them more uniform), the adding of electricity to performance, and the use of different styles originating from other cultural spheres (but sometimes fully internalized by generations of musicians) make music an excellent example when globalization and globalization are studied.

## Islamic Music

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

Anthropologist, religious studies scholars, and (ethno) musicologist have reported widely on Islamic music in the last decades. For example, Tom Solomon has written on Ger-



man-Turkish Islamic rap (2011), Karin van Nieuwkerk on Egyptian Islamic wedding bands (2011), Bart Barendregt on Malaysian Islamic boy bands (2012), and so forth. Below I will first discuss some central ideas put forth by scholars. Then, the consequences for musicians regarding the musical form, lyrics, and the view on music as a consumer product will be discussed.

### **The idea of a purposeful art**

Most likely it was the so-called *al-wasatiyya* (moderation) movement in Egypt that inaugurated the present discussion on *fann al-hadif*, the idea being that music as a powerful expression should be put in the service of Islam (Baker 2003; Otterbeck 2008; van Nieuwkerk 2011). Among the first prominent sheikhs (Muslim scholar) to take to the barricades on this issue was, to the surprise of many, Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1996), who had voiced strong opinions on the immorality of modern Egyptian art. According to Baker (2003), the turning point came with the nearly fatal knife attack on famed novelist Naguib Mahfouz in October 1994. Al-Ghazali, himself a stout critic of Mahfouz, immediately rushed to the defense of Mahfouz and strongly condemned the use of violence.<sup>3</sup> He, and others of the *al-wasatiyya*, saw the vicious deed as an attack, not only on the novelist, but on art as such, well aware of the harsh attitudes of reactionary scholars over the last decades. Instead, al-Ghazali promoted a discursive intervention formulated with the aim of changing the discourse on arts. Some of this discourse was already in place, for example, in Muhammad 'Imara's *al-islam wa al-funun al-jamila* (Islam and the belle arts) (1991) and in parts in earlier work by al-Ghazali like the book *Mustaqbal al-Islam kharij ardi: kayfa nufakkiru fih* (The future of Islam beyond its main region: How do we think about it) (1984) and in the rich production of Yusuf al-Qarad-

awi. Two important points of departure of this discourse need to be stressed. The first: art in itself, and artists as personas, are not inherently blameworthy. The second: art should be in an active relation with Islam and be inspired by it and give back inspiration. It is clear that the *al-wasatiyya* scholars were more interested in discussing what good art (including) music would mean, rather than engage in explaining, yet again, why lyrics encouraging drinking and fraternizing really can be called Islamically sound.

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

A person calling for moderation but who has no objections against, for example, love songs is the famous, Qatar-based Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the main religious voice on al-Jazeera and associated with *al-wasatiyya*. He has, on different occasions, discussed music or given comments on it in his books, on his TV show and on his webpage (Qaradawi, no date, 2005; see also Zaman 2004:145f.). His general message is that music in itself is not forbidden (he frequently refers to the classical scholar Ibn Hazm); it is what accompanies music that makes it a matter of *halal* and *haram*. If it has slanderous or crude language or if it is sexually exciting (through rhythms or through dance), it is generally *haram*. Further, if the listening is done to excess, it is *haram* as Islam is against taking things to the extremes. But there is a personal dimension to it; if you are

not aroused by the songs and you keep your spirituality, then there is no problem. His strategy is to connect his interpretation to classical Islamic standpoints on morality targeting slanderous talk, excess, irresponsible sexuality, etc.

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

What Khaled is calling for, both on his TV show and on his webpage, is a modern *da'wa* using the artistic expressions of the present. "What is needed are arts and culture that will propel youth toward work, development, and production," Khaled writes (Khaled 2005). Art should, according to him, be useful and moral. Khaled objects to the new trend with commercial video clips seeing it as purposeless and morally offensive. Also, al-Qaradawi stresses the importance of seeing morality as integrated in all aspects of society, also in art (Zaman 2004:145).

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

### **Musical form**

There are basically three different, but interconnected, musical ways of answering the call for a conscious form of Islamic music:

Using and updating the Islamic forms of song already available like *nashid* (meaning: “chants”; also is a work of vocal music that is either sung a cappella or accompanied by percussion instruments such as the *daf*), *na’at* (is a poetry that specifically praises Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)), *ilahi*, *nowhe*, and *qawwali* (Muslim devotional music associated particularly with Sufis in Pakistan); adapting genres developed in the West like hip hop, soul, pop ballads, reggae, children’s songs to Islamic norms; and using the forms developed in Egyptian, Lebanese, etc. pop music. *Nashid* or *Anashid* (the plural form) has become one of the popular labels to ascribe to Islamic modern music, regardless of musical strategy.

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

Certain types of Islamic music have merged into and developed the much-discussed genre World Music, marketed both as creative fusion and as locally authentic (Shannon 2011), not

least different types of “Suficized” music, as Shannon calls it. With this neologism, Shannon wants to express the character of music created for a market thirsty for spiritual music (regardless of religion), which certain artists, often with a background as brethren of different Sufi orders, have composed and recorded as Sufi music. The renowned singer and composer Sami Yusuf has, in line with the hunger on the music market for the spiritual, named his style of music “Spiritique”.

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

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

an infinite number of tracks to record on. The complex musical web spun with the human voice acting spider is probably a uniquely Islamic form of musical art.

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

## **Lyrics**

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

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

### *Chorus*

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

### *Verse*

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

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

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

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

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

"Wow I love your site. Very refreshing to see an alternative to listen to music without the sins that comes along

with listening to the filth that is present in the mainstream. I especially love the work by 3ilm and others who have motivated me to represent better for my deen, inshallah. May Allah swt reward all for their efforts. Salams” – Masha (muslimhiphop.com).

Other lyrics praise Allah or Muhammad, the original theme of *ilahi*, *na’at*, and *nashid*. Apart from traditional poems and popular chants like “Allah Hoo” popularized by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (d. 1997), some chants are new. Irfan Makki, an artist signed to the Awakening label, recently has released a song called “Al-Amin” with a pop reggae rhythm. In it, he sings:

*Verse:*

Your noble face always had a smile  
You walked with grace gentle as a child  
You taught us to be a mercy to mankind  
To spread God’s peace throughout all the lands  
We say Salam to Al-Amin  
You guided us to the perfect Deen  
Let’s say

*Chorus:*

Allah Allah ya Allah  
Muhammad ya Rasool Allah  
Allah Allah ya Allah  
Muhammad ya Habib Allah

The lyrics read like an Ottoman *hilya*, a calligraphic description of Muhammad’s character and looks derived from the *shama’il*-literature (the appearance of Muhammad (PBUH), often referred to as Shama’il, is a collection of hadiths) . Other songs are similar, repeating well-known attributions and traits of the Prophet. The topic is repeated in an abundance of songs.



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

*Chorus:*

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

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

The impact of these lyrics is not possible to estimate without a thorough investigation. Still, judging from comments from chat forums and the devotee website [Islamiclyrics.net](http://Islamiclyrics.net), we, at least, have to acknowledge a huge interest and passion among a fair amount of listeners.

Another very interesting phenomenon is Islamic children's songs. In them, lyrics are explicitly teaching children *ilm*

*al-akhlaq* (morals), for example, the song “Pizza in his pocket” by Zain Bhikha warns against overeating and promotes sharing and modest behavior. After a rather humorous description of a boy who eats food all over the world (“He ate dates in Damascus, which he thought were very nice. And hot samosas in Sumatra, seasoned with a special spice.”), Zain Bhikha turns the narrative around:

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

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

### **On consuming music**

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

As growing urban middle and upper classes with a Muslim faith and fairly conservative values arise in different parts of the world, the size of the economy of leisure and pleasure increases (compare Abaza 2006:198; van Nieuwkerk (ed.) 2011). Islamic consumer products are marketed and experienced as life style choices, and a multitude of alternatives appear. The plurality also constructs brands and products as ideological. By producing Islamic pop music and Islamic artists, other pop music and

other artists are constructed as (potentially) un-Islamic. The globalization of consumer culture and its accompanying practices of music listening as an interest, passion, and pleasure, create a global stage for Islamic pop music.

Consuming halal pop music is marketed as respectable and suitable for, for example, Muslim youth. Today, at Islamic conferences and at *Eid* (a Muslim festival, in particular the feast marking the end of the fast of Ramadan) celebration parties, halal pop acts frequently feature despite skepticism against music among many. Acts like that of mentioned Maher Zain might do the trick and bring additional youngsters and others to the conference; so be it that the means to the end is music; it is for a good cause. Musical acts are through this thinking normalized and can even be expected and anticipated at large gatherings.

But what is consumed will have to fit into the requirements of Islamic discourse, which in its turn requires Islamic discourse to develop standpoints about the performance of Islamic pop. It is in communication with this phenomenon that the theology of *fann al-hadif* (purposeful art) has been developed. It is important to stress the complex relationship between purposeful art and consumer culture. To be able to package and market music as halal-pop, artists cannot simply avoid sensitive subjects like sexuality and drugs, they must also provide edifying lyrics or religious hymns and further set good examples (take part in charities, perform at Islamic meetings). They need to cultivate and signal an Islamic ethical self (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006). Foucault (1990:26) comments on morality and self, highlighting “the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code.” The codes of conduct always related to subjectivation. In relation to *fann al-hadif*, the

art (singing, performance, etc.) performed by the artists are both expressions of the truth and importance of the moral code abided to (i.e., Islam), and confirmations of the artists' adherence to the code (compare Foucault 1980). Since there seems to be a complete collapse of the possible separation between the artists' stage persona and their private self, this ethical self needs to be imposed at all times, in all situations. Taken from commentaries on YouTube, fans seem to mark that they take inspiration from the artists to strive after "an ever more complete mastery of the self" to use Foucault's (1990:38) words, increasing pressure on the artists to behave because of being role models. At the same time, overall esthetic trends in films, video clips, and marketing frame the esthetics of the songs and clips provided to market artists.

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

"The reason I am expressing concern is that just a few days ago at a venue in Central London, sisters went wild

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

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

Regardless of their disparaging opinions, something crucial is touched upon. Both agree upon what is an inappropriate behavior. Both fill "the sisters" behavior with meaning when their screams and dancing in public are contrasted with an ideal modest, god-fearing behavior. Asef Bayat (2007:435) writes "The history of Islamism has been one of a battle against fun, playfulness, and diversion" something clearly visible as a discursive reference in the discussions above. But to the artists and the audience, other references are also close at hand, for example, consumer culturally spread patters (through advertisement, films, YouTube clips, etc.) of how to behave when going to a concert. When at a concert, it becomes a daring chal-

lence to enter the role of screaming fan, or rock star, to enhance one's own experience, to physically enter the narrative of the fan–star relation, not necessarily in a reflexive way, but certainly through praxis. The new stars of Islamic music offer an arena where all behavior is not set. At the same time, as the artists develop the genre's and its marketing, its audiences also develop their relations to the consumption thereof.

### **Islamic Art?**

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

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

## Conclusion

Thus, what makes art Islamic is the ambition by artists to create a work that will be accepted as Islamic by others. In the contestation of inclusion and exclusion taking place in the discursive tradition of Islam, new artistic work needs to find space and be allowed to find it. Discussing music specifically, certain genres are historically well established, and an artist following the conventions will find it easier to be accepted by the guardians of the discourse than those who refuse to accept a genre limitation. It is good to remember the now often-forgotten revolution of the *qawwali* that a once young Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan made (Bohlman 2002). Other genres are new, like Islamic *nashid*-pop, and negotiations are on-going, for example, if it is acceptable to create pietistic music while touring as a rock star. It is easy to connect to the discussion by Riis and Woodhead (2010) when trying to describe how a religious emotion is established. The process of insinuation and consecration, mentioned above, of a work of art as Islamic is intimately related to discursive power. Surprisingly, religious scholars do not always hold more or a substantially different discursive power than the consumer/listener and their taste culture preferences. They do as individuals but the scholars' possibilities are matched by the many. Islamic scholar, who try to find a way of merging the interest and passion of the many for music and Islamic ethics and aesthetics, will find that their blessing and promotion of Islamic musical art will find huge support among non-scholars. But discourses are never simple – they are run through by contesting power and are, even though they are built on repetition, somehow ever changing. But as long as Islam is the master referent to the discourse of the art, and others accept the claim of the art and artist, the art produced can be said to relate to the concept “Islamic art.” And that is what makes art Islamic.



## Notes

- 1 Music is a tricky concept. In this article, it refers to different composed vocal and instrumental tonal expressions as well as everyday music-making using the voice, handclapping, and whistling. The Arabic term *musiqi* is a loan word from Greek and has mainly been used in history for music theory. When referring to music, Arabic writers have used categories like *ghina'* (singing, but also art music), *ma'azif* (instruments with open strings), etc.
- 2 "Insignation" is a neology by Riis and Woodhead containing three morphemes: "ation" signaling a process, "in" referring to a merging or inscribing of a "sign" into the public conscious.
- 3 Al-Ghazali's position on violence against the deviant and heretic is somewhat contradicting, or, as indicated by some, changed during the latter part of his life with the Mahfouz incident as a turning point. When Farag Fouda was murdered in 1992, al-Ghazali seemed to have support of violence against some opponents (Mostyn 2002).

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