

Islamization of Knowledge

Islamization Through the Sound Arts

by Lois Lamyā' āl Fārūqī

I. The Need

Just as philosophical and religious writings are a verbal expression of the ideology of a people, just as social and economic institutions are determined by that basic ideology, so also music and the sound arts are "translations" of the deepest convictions of a people. They fit into the cultural whole as pieces of a giant mosaic, each tessera reflecting the world view of that people and corresponding to the other expressions of that spirit. Fulfilling this role in the culture, the arts of sound become an important, even crucial, bulwark of a people's heritage.

In English, such aesthetic "translations" of the ideology into pitches and durations are known as "music"; and the term has generally encompassed all forms of sound art, regardless of their intrinsic characteristics or the circumstances of their performance. In Islamic culture, however, there is no term or expression which includes all types of sound art. The term *mūsīqā*, which is sometimes loosely equated with the English term "music," is certainly inadequate. That Arabic term derived from the Greek has been applied primarily to those forms which, because of context of performance or aesthetic characteristics, were culturally and religiously regarded with some degree of suspicion, or in certain cases, even condemned. The term *mūsīqā* has never included those genres of sound art which were wholeheartedly approved and fostered by the culture, e.g., Qur'anic chant, the *adhān*, the pilgrimage chants, *madiḥ* or chanted poetry (*shi'r*). Elsewhere I have therefore advocated the use of a new expression, *handasah al ṣawt* (al Faruqi 1982:30ff). This designation would cover all the forms of sound art, and thus more truly equate with the term "music" and its cognates in other European languages. It is with that expression and an appreciation of the wide meaning which it implies that this presentation continues.

Handasah al ṣawt is a cultural phenomenon which can play an impor-

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tant role in the life of a nation and a people. But this important role cannot be played by *any* sound art, regardless of its content and form. It must be one growing out of the cultural roots of its people and expressing the message of the cultural complex from which it arises. The fostering of such a sound art or musical tradition is crucial to any people at any period of history. But it is especially important to the Muslim peoples today as they face the drastic cultural changes of our contemporary world, extensive migratory displacement, and the unprecedented incidence of cultural interaction and alien influences on their life and culture. *Handasah al şawt* is an important aspect of that cultural core which is ultimately the only significant defense against cultural alienation or annihilation. It is an important factor in strengthening the Islamic cultural core, or, put another way, a crucial ingredient in the process of Islamization of the *ummah*.

Islamization, as a process of renewal and creativity, has been on the lips of Muslim activists and reformers for decades. Yet few writers and thinkers have pursued Islamization with any understanding of its implications for *handasah al şawt* or the sound arts. We read of the Islamization of knowledge, the Islamization of the field of economics, the Islamization of social theory, the Islamization of political thought, and the Islamization of psychology. We even see the effects of the Islamization of dress codes and eating habits. All of these movements and changes are attempts to produce the requisite Islamic core and identity from which the Muslim peoples can encounter or avoid, adapt or ignore, accept or reject the influences of contemporary life which are inevitably thrust upon them. Without this Islamization, maintaining a positive and actively creative cultural identity becomes doubtful, and even our very existence as a viable community is threatened.

Despite their concern for Islamization of many other aspects of culture, contemporary Muslims seem strikingly unaware of the de-Islamization which is evidenced in the aesthetic components of their lives. Many of them fill their homes with French provincial furniture and figural painting produced for a 19th century European clientele. They entertain themselves with the products of the Western or Hindu movie and television industries, which are anything but Islamic in content and form. And radios and cassette machines fill the sound waves of their environment with the latest musical expressions of a non-Islamic cultural message. Equally disturbing is the response from the other end of the liberal-conservative spectrum. When one asks any of the super-conservatives about Islamic musical expression, they hasten to disassociate themselves from the discussion as though not only the listening to music, but even the discussion of it might have a contaminating effect. An exchange regarding the wide variety of new religious songs from Egypt elicits the response from one devout Muslimah that she will no longer listen to any type of music for it *may* be disapproved by Islam. The presentation of musical knowledge

is never included on the agenda of any Islamic conference. And it is impossible to count the number of times Muslims have asked me whether music as such is *ḥalāl* ("legitimate") or *ḥarām* ("illegitimate").

It is true that the older generation of Muslims, whether living in the so-called Muslim nations or in regions of the non-Muslim world, still react Islamically with reserve or negation to the musical expressions coming to them from non-Muslim sources through the means of radios, television sets, the cinema, or the sound and video cassette. Though they rarely analyze the reasons for their lack of interest or rejection of these artistic expressions, they have a kind of "gut feeling" that the music from the alien sources—whether that of the latest "pop" stars or the contemporary classical music composers of Europe and America—does not "speak" to them or is not carrying a message they wish to hear. Their early involvement with a vibrant Islamic sound art tradition has oriented them to other types of musical expression. What of their offspring, however, who have been born and raised in the world of Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, and Arnold Schonberg? Those Muslims, who will soon join the adult community, have had little strengthening of their identity through an Islamic musical acculturation, since most of the sound arts which they encounter are derived from an alien culture and ideology. This will certainly have serious consequences in the future as the cultural identity of Muslims is threatened with erosion or obliteration.

If an Islamic core personality is recognized as crucial, it is impossible to overlook the importance of every aspect of culture that can contribute to this personality. The sound arts, being ever present and working in exceedingly subtle ways on the individual and the community, are a crucial feature of the acculturating process. It is imperative that Muslims be awakened to the importance of Islamization in every aspect of their lives, including that of the *handasah al ṣawt* contributions.

II. Background Explanations for Our Sound Art Attitudes

There are a number of reasons that may have contributed to the apprehensive neglect of the sound arts and the lack of active concern for their Islamization.

A. One reason for this aesthetic disinterest and complacency is the common belief among Muslims that music is a "forbidden" pleasure which they can only participate in and enjoy with some measure of guilt or misgiving. This results from the centuries-old controversy in the culture on the advantages or disadvantages of certain types of sound art. Despite countless statements and treatises from some of the Muslim world's leading brains (e.g.,

al Shāfi'ī 1906:VI, 215; al Ghazālī n.d.:II; 1901-1902; Ibn Taymiyyah 1966:II, 295-330; and the late rector of Al Azhar University, Maḥmūd Shaltūt 1960:355-359),¹ the controversy has never been settled conclusively, and confusion regarding the status of the musical arts pertains to the present day in many Muslim minds.

B. Contemporary attitudes about the sound arts also result from misunderstandings and variant interpretations of the term *mūsīqā*. That term, as was mentioned earlier, should be understood as applying only to certain genres or types of *handasah al ṣawt*, generally the more secularly oriented and instrumentally embellished forms. It never connotes, as does the English term "music," such sound arts as *tartīl al Qur'ān* and the *adhān*, even though they evidence the artistic organization of pitched sounds which is generally associated with the English term "music." Though the fact has not been consistently understood by all Muslims and certainly not by non-Muslims, the controversy over the legitimacy of music in Islamic culture was never meant to involve all the sound arts. The legitimacy of the non-*mūsīqā* genres was not questioned by the jurists, nor were all *mūsīqā* genres categorically condemned by them (see al Faruqī 1982 for a fuller treatment of this matter). The rejection of certain types of sound art therefore should not be viewed as a cultural or religious prohibition of all types of *handasah al ṣawt*. It represents instead attempts by the leadership and the community to direct musical expression and appreciation toward those forms that were compatible with the ideology and ethos of Islam and in harmony with its customs and traditions.

C. A third reason for the disinterest in the Islamization of the *handasah al ṣawt* genres is fear that involvement with any type of *mūsīqā* is prohibited by Allah ta'ālā in the Holy Qur'ān. This is of course false; there is no Qur'anic passage that condemns the sound arts generally or even those genres properly labeled as *mūsīqā*. Nor does it mention them. The only passages relevant to the arts of sound are those commanding the cantillation or vocalization of the Qur'ān (e.g. 25:32; 73:4), although proponents of *mūsīqā*, as well as those who condemn it, have often sought to read into other passages support for their arguments (Roychoudhury 1957:Chapter II).

D. A fourth reason for the lack of concern for the sound arts in the writings of contemporary proponents of Islamization relates to what many Muslims suppose to be the stance of the *ḥadīth* literature on musical expression. Antagonists of musical expression cite certain of its passages to support their

¹ See also Roychoudhury 1957; Robson 1938; Ibn al Qaysarānī 1390/1970; al Nābulusī 1302/1884; and al Fārūqī 1985, for additional materials on the controversy.

contention that the Prophet (SAAS) condemned music.² On the other hand, protagonists of musical expression point to other *aḥādīth* which imply support for their position.³ Both sides have sought to substantiate their stance rather than to analyze the issue in order to penetrate to the deeper truth behind the apparent contradictions. Certainly the Prophet (SAAS) was not so inconsistent as to condemn a practice on one occasion and condone the same practice on another. There must therefore have been variant circumstances that necessitated his differing responses. This may have resulted from the nature of the musical expression itself. In other words, was it aesthetically or musically beautiful, fitting, and morally uplifting? Or the Prophet's variant reactions may have been due to the circumstances of its performance. Was it presented at a suitable time, in a suitable place, and under conditions that were conducive to the well-being of the participating individual and community?

E. A fifth reason for ignoring the potential of the sound arts in the Islamization process may be the common failure or inability of contemporary Muslims to distinguish between the sound art expressions which are Islamically significant and those which could lead to de-Islamization. Many contemporary Muslims appreciate certain types of sound art and reject others instinctively, without thinking to ask themselves why the former is preferable to the latter. This may be adequate in an environment where non-Islamic cultural influences are absent or statistically negligible. But such an environment is a "pipe dream" in the second half of the 20th century, regardless of the part of the world in which one lives. Some Muslims have attempted therefore to erect an "iron curtain" around themselves, to isolate their families and children from those forms of sound art that might be instruments of de-Islamization. With the prevalence of modern communication technology in every town and village,

² For example, the Prophet (SAAS) is reported to have put his fingers to his ears so as not to hear a particular performance (Abū Dāwūd 1396/1950:40th Book on *Adab*, Chap. 52). This is then interpreted to be a condemnation of all *mūsīqā*. Another *ḥadīth* reports the following: "No one lifts up his voice in singing but God sends to him 2 devils on his two shoulders, beating with their heels on his breast while he sings refrains" (reported by Abū Umāmah but not in the al Bukhārī or Muslim collections of *aḥādīth*). See al Qaysarāni 1390/1970:75-95, for other *aḥādīth* implying discouragement of various genres of *handasah al sawt*.

³ According to 'A'ishah, "Allah's Apostle (SAAS) came to my house while two girls were singing beside me the songs of Bu'āth. . . Then Abū Bakr came and spoke to me harshly saying, 'Musical instruments of Satan near the Prophet (SAAS)?' Allah's Apostle (SAAS) turned his face toward him and said, 'Leave them.'" (al Bukhārī 1971:37). Another incident given on the authority of 'A'ishah is the following: "On the days of Minā (10th, 11th, 12th of Dhul-Ḥijjah) Abū Bakr (RAA) came to her while two young girls were beating the tamborine and the Prophet (SAAS) was lying covered with his clothes. Abū Bakr (RAA) scolded them and the Prophet (SAAS) uncovered his face and said to Abū Bakr, 'Leave them, for these days are the days of 'Id and the days of Minā.'" (al Bukhārī 1971:55-56). Compilations of the *ḥadīth* materials on *mūsīqā* and *samā'* can be found in Roychoudhury 1957:66-70; al Ghazālī 1901-1902; Ibn al Qaysarāni 1390/1970; Robson 1938; see also Yūsuf al Qaradāwī n.d.:300ff.

such attempted isolation is rarely if ever successful. Others meet the challenge by trying to prohibit all the sound arts, regardless of their characteristics. In such cases, the resulting artistic vacuum is inevitably filled by non-Islamic forms of music, which invade the minds of the less thoroughly Islamized members of the community—its youth. It is time that Muslims realized the consequences of such a mental and aesthetic “cop out.”

F. A sixth factor contributing to the failure actively to pursue Islamization of the sound arts can be described as a lack of awareness of Islamic significance in this regard. For example, many Muslims are not conscious of the importance of Qur’anic recitation or “chant” in their aesthetic lives. They are of course aware of its religious and ethical significance, but they are oblivious of its role in shaping their aesthetic and musical sense and the degree to which it has determined the characteristics of the other genres of sound art that have been developed and performed throughout the Muslim world. Of course, there are differences between the musical traditions of various regions of the Muslim world, but one cannot fail to notice that many genres of *handasah al şawt* performed and enjoyed by Muslims from Morocco to the southern Philippines evidence a number of core characteristics based on that prime model of the Islamic sound arts—the recitation of the Qur’ān (see al Fārūqī 1983–84). Incorporation into our daily lives and activities of sound arts that evidence this Qur’anic influence and determination, as well as the creation of new similarly based examples, could provide tremendous potential for aesthetic Islamization. It is a potential that has never been actively harnessed. It is a potential waiting to be tapped by contemporary Muslims who have already experienced political and economic invasions of their lands, and are now well on their way to experiencing the results of a perhaps even more devastating cultural and aesthetic invasion of their soul.

III. Importance of Handasah al Şawt for Islamization

In what ways, you may ask, can *handasah al şawt*, determined by the Qur’anic principles, contribute to Islamization?

A. First of all, the way Islamic sound arts can have a powerful effect is by implementing their role as “translations” into sound of the Islamic message of *tawḥīd*. Those sound arts representative of that message should never be regarded as mere entertainment. In fact, they are examples of creativity which remind the listener of his/her commitment to Allah (*subḥānahu wa ta’ālā*). They do not focus attention on man, on this world and its activities, or on depiction of human emotions. They have a higher goal, and their abstract rather than programmatic qualities give convincing evidence of that goal.

Whenever examples of sound art expression become too sensuous or musically descriptive of earthly or human qualities, rather than a succession of sound patterns that leads the hearer to contemplate the higher Reality, Muslims have sought to correct or reject them. *The Islamic organization of musical elements should reflect a series of infinite patterns in sound which, in their modular units, their repetitive aspects, their intricacy, and their never-ending quality, would be perfect complements of the literary "patterns" of the Qur'an itself and its "translation" into visual arabesques.* Such sound reinforcements of the message of *tawhīd* cannot but enhance the Islamization process of the individual and of the community.

B. A second way in which *handasah al ṣawt* can contribute to Islamization is by uniting Muslims, whatever their national identity, whatever their ethnic background, and wherever they may live, around a common and indigenous aesthetic sound tradition. Islamization must be widespread if it is to be effective in developing and maintaining an Islamic religio-cultural identity. That can never be achieved through nationalistic movements, linguistic *shu'ūbiyyah*, or ethnic chauvinism. It must be based on Qur'anic principles that can fire the imagination of all Muslims. This is, in fact, the situation that pertained in earlier times; and there are still remnants of the influence of the Qur'anic recitation on many performances of both the *mūsīqā* and other *handasah al ṣawt* genres throughout the Muslim world. Unfortunately, however, the alien aesthetic influences today are much more pervasive an influence than they were in earlier times. Contemporary technological advances such as the video- and audio-cassette, satellite relays, and the transistor radio have brought a sound art invasion based on other ideologies into the most remote corners of the Muslim world, for the ready consumption and indoctrination of mass audiences. If the sound arts compatible with the goals of a *tawhīd*-based art are not encouraged and supported, the resultant lacunae in Islamic existence will certainly be filled—are, in many instances, already filled!—with the non-*tawhīd* sound arts.

C. The *tawhīd*-inspired sound arts could not only contribute to Islamization by helping to musically unite the Muslim world on a global level, a contribution which we might label as the horizontal dimension of their Islamization importance. They can also unite the Muslims on a vertical dimension. By this is meant that a common sound art tradition, fostered and supported by the Muslim community of any nation or region, would contribute towards breaking down the barriers that presently divide such a community into disparate strata.

Muslim society—in whatever nation of the Muslim world one investigates—has been truncated in recent centuries by two opposing systems of education. One is the traditional Islamic system operative in the *kuttāb* or elementary/secondary school and the more advanced institutions of Islamic

learning. The other is modeled after the educational establishments of Western Europe and America. This bifurcation of the educational system has resulted in a polarized society in which the graduates of one system have little in common with the graduates of the other. Lack of understanding, political strife, frustration, instability, and social isolation are the results of this unfortunate educational legacy from the colonial period. It permeates all fields of thought, learning, and action; and makes it impossible for the two segments of any Muslim society meaningfully to communicate and cooperate with each other. It has been a cause of much lack of cohesion in Post-Revolutionary Iran, and it hovers as a possible igniter of disastrous conflict in many Muslim nations. This potential for trouble is not just a difference pertaining to political or economic views. It is also a difference involving social customs, leisure activities, and expressions of the visual and sound arts. All of these aspects of life and culture have suffered reorientation through the prolonged colonial and post-colonial periods. Unless all of them—including the sound arts—are re-Islamized and reunited in a vertical way in our societies, we can look forward to a continued cleavage between the two diversely educated segments of Muslim society and to the consequences that such a situation portends.

IV. Whence A Solution?

From where will the impetus for an Islamization of the contemporary sound arts and an awareness of its importance come? Certainly, we cannot depend on the Muslim governments to initiate such a move, for their officials are for the most part unaware of, or indifferent to, the benefits to Islamic global horizontal unity and national vertical unity that can be derived from such Islamization. In addition, most of the present governments are politically too unstable to risk moves toward Islamization, which might open them to attacks from Muslim conservatives, on the one hand, or from secularists, on the other.

The international Islamic organizations are no less susceptible to political constraints, which incapacitate them from implementing any Islamization of the sound arts. In addition, they have perennially suffered from the common Muslim world disease of institutional "radical surgery." This practice so inhibiting of progress, is, unfortunately, evident in most of the institutions of the Muslim peoples. Instead of building organizations which are strong enough and sufficiently stable to continue and progress despite changes of leadership, we Muslims tend to build battlefields for leadership strife and destruction. Instead of establishing institutions with a strife-insulated pattern for leadership succession, we seem able only to create individuals who rise to power for a brief "splash" of achievement, before being cut down by an opponent.

The successor immediately practices “radical surgery” on all that his predecessor had accomplished – cancelling, undoing, and redirecting whatever progress had been made. The result is not a move ahead for the institution and for those who should benefit from it, but a regression. Soon this leader is also replaced and another application of “radical surgery” follows. If the institution survives at all – and many of them do not – the *‘ummah* is cheated of benefit.

If governments and international institutions are not to be expected to instigate and carry out the Islamization of the sound arts, from where can such a movement originate? It can come only from those individual Muslims who realize the importance of imparting *tawhīd*, not only to their religious rituals, but also to every other aspect of their lives. And it can come only when they act on that realization and commitment. It is “people power” that carried Islam to the four corners of the earth. It is a similar “power” that will produce Islamization of the sound arts. Only such a grass-roots motivation and call for Islamization will be lasting and significant.

Certainly, as Muslims, we must aspire to being *tawhīd*-oriented in a comprehensive way. We must activate our *dīn* to involve our total existence and commitment. This should include the aesthetic creations of which Allah made His vicegerent capable, and the beautiful things of life of which Allah made His vicegerent susceptible and appreciative.⁴ Only when we have accomplished this as well as all other forms of Islamization, will we have achieved the unity of religion and life that Islam was meant to engender.

⁴ Say: Who hath forbidden
The beautiful (gifts) of God,
Which He hath produced
For His servants,
And the things, clean and pure,
(Which He hath provided)
For sustenance?
Say: They are, in the life
Of this world, for those
Who believe, (and) purely
For them on the Day
Of Judgment. Thus do We

Explain the Signs in detail
For those who understand.
Say: The things that my Lord
Hath indeed forbidden are:
Shameful deeds, whether open
Or secret: sins and trespasses
Against truth or reason; assigning
Of partners to God, for which
He hath given no authority;
And saying things about God
Of which ye have no knowledge.
(Qur’ān 7:32-33)

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