

Dance and Music in the Bangladeshi Diaspora in Italy. The Identity Links forged by Musical Education

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The purpose of this project was to investigate, as part of an explorative-type research project, whether art – in this case music and dance – can act as a tool capable of favouring social integration within modern intercultural and multi-religious social contexts, while, at the same time, fostering cohesion between the members of Italy's largest Bangladeshi community, that of Rome. The researcher chose a qualitative methodological approach, grounded in participant observation of social, political Bangladeshi events and religious Festivals held in Rome, as well as investigation of lessons in singing, instrumental music and private dancing lessons conducted by the *Sanchari Sangeetayan School* and promoted by the new generations of Bangladeshi resident in Rome.

Keywords: identity, women, art, inclusion, immigration, Bangladesh

How can the arts forge identity links with the culture of the origins? How does the use of the mother tongue promote educational relationships? The aim of the present project was to answer these questions on the basis of the data acquired during the field research and resulting from previous empirical investigations carried out within the same socio-cultural context. The identarian link made available thanks to use of the mother tongue provided the community of the Diaspora with considerable educational perspective.

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Social Context

Art is a fundamental individual and public element, an important link between the life of the artist, the context in which the artist lives and is related to, as well as ways in which he/she chooses to represent and express a work of art. Artistic expression becomes one of the tools of social communication, closely connected to its appreciation within the community of origin, its codification and interpretative symbology (Santagata 1998).

Art, if seen as the result of collective interpretative categories, may be explained in as many ways as there are categorisations attributed to artists and their creative activities. It is important to understand the type of art one is dealing with, the authors and the historical periods to which works of art belong. Moreover, one cannot ignore the biography of composers, painters, sculptors or artists in general. In this sense, art is reborn in history every time it is deciphered, decoded and interpreted (Gammaitoni 2004: 26). Here it is mandatory to overturn some perspectives; not as opportunities for female redemption, but to provide space capable of compensating for the oblivion to which women's art has been subjected for centuries (Gammaitoni, 2013: 8–9). "Analysing the female artist as an extraordinary and contradictory product of the interweave between gender and modernity, leads us to question, in depth, the very construction of the history of art"² (Trasforini 2009: 291).

There is an evident inclination to accentuate the role of men in the history of music, a tendency which voluntarily obfuscates a large part of the history where women were and are protagonists. This creates a void and a lack of recognition which diminishes the identity of female artists. The invisibility of women in the landscape of artistic endeavour, highlighted in the history of Italy down through the centuries, becomes even more evident when the protagonists are "migrants".

Their artistic fame remains rooted within their community of origin, outside of which it is extremely difficult for immigrant women to make themselves known, because, in some socio-urban contexts, a Eurocentric vision of art prevails. Furthermore, very often, artists who relate themselves timidly to the community of their origins are content with the success their art reaps within that community. This means that their art usually remains secondary to the lives of these women, as a utopian dream, unattainable, seeing that they are obliged to perform other tasks to make ends meet.

During their migratory experience, art travels along with the artist who brings to the community a cultural background although not always openly explicit. This is an intangible heritage made of cultural patterns, traditions and beliefs which become an important part of the immigrants' diasporic life.

In the two case studies presented here, the traditional music of Indian Subcontinental culture plays an important role in the lives of both the director of the *Sanchari*

² Translated by the author. The original version, in the Italian Language recites "analizzare la donna artista come straordinario e contraddittorio prodotto dell'intreccio tra genere e modernità, porta ad interrogare in profondità la costruzione stessa della storia dell'arte".

Sangeetayan School and the young dancer interviewed. In the first case, music is a veritable *raison d'être*, the true purpose behind a long-term migratory project associated with life in Italy. In the second case, on the other hand, we find relinquishment of the “dream” to pursue the pathway of dance as a profession, a utopia that lasted as long as the protagonist’s free time and which contained no pretension to success in the long term.

According to another educational perspective, art, seen in its various forms of pedagogical innovation, represents an effective tool capable of fostering learning and the social inclusion of those with different learning speeds and modes. In fact, learning, if grounded in creativity and emotional intelligence, makes the transmission of socio-pedagogical content and shared values particularly effective. By studying the ways this kind of knowledge is transmitted and how this process is achieved by recourse to creative art forms, permits scholars to understand the close bond existing between cultural context and transmission, because “learning is dynamic, social and context-dependent [...]” (Cattaneo 2018: 28). From this perspective, feelings play an enormously important role rooted in the emotional ties which bind individuals to their families, culture, tradition and past. We can clearly see, however, in pedagogical literature, in educational contexts (formal and non-formal), how and to what extent interactive, artistic-creative workshops³ produce positive results impacting on learning, participation and the socialisation of children and young people in intercultural social contexts and situations of social vulnerability. This perspective makes art a direct distinctive expressive feature of the culture, identity and life experience of the origins for those who, for various reasons, have left their native countries for a new homeland. (Moro 2011; Allievi 2018; Ambrosini 2017). In the case of migration, art becomes a proud testimony of the factors which make a culture unique, in particular due to the ways in which artists personalise them on the basis of their background experiences.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The author of the present report based her investigation on a framework grounded in background research informed by the scholarly literature available, on accredited data concerning art and the social inclusion of migrants accessible within the academic/scientific sphere and partly on interviews and participating observation⁴. This meant availing herself of a sociological methodology based largely on the con-

³ It suffices to think of José Abreu’s Venezuelan *El Sistema youth orchestras* and the Italian artistic Mus-e project; see: Audino F. (2016), *L'arte per l'integrazione culturale a scuola. Dalle discipline artistiche all'arte educativa*, Rome: Erikson.

⁴ “Direct observation of phenomena is a very thorough method of research especially in qualitative investigation. Observation, in the various forms it is carried out, is considered within the context of the human and social sciences, an extremely valuable method of investigation [...]” (De Beni, Bomassar, Grossele, 1995: 40). Translated by the author.

sultation of available sources, a preliminary elaboration of what had been treated previously regarding the subject and read from a perspective directed by the research question posed.

This sociological investigation is, therefore, exploratory in nature and consists of a descriptive analysis of the links existing between the musical and cultural education of countries of origin and that of host countries. It represents the researcher's preliminary empirical approach regarding the association between art and migration, a background research capable of giving rise to initial orientative working hypotheses.

The research question which guided the development of the empirical work carried out here, and whose intention was to provide an answer based on the results of the scientific work done, was: can art create important social links with the tradition of the origins for new generations of children born/raised in Rome who have not experienced "that kind" of culture directly? The research aimed at investigating whether art – in this case music and dance – can act as a tool favouring social integration within modern intercultural and multi-religious social contexts, while, at the same time, fostering cohesion between the members of Italy's largest Bangladeshi community, that of Rome.

The methodology used was qualitative in approach and consisted in a preliminary collection of data from primary and secondary sources, in-depth interviews and participant observations of a number of lessons and public performances of dance and music.

The methodological choice was informed by the need to penetrate more deeply into some topics of scholarly interest following valid and useful research approaches and methods. It is evident that qualitative research requires no sampling, something which does take shape, however, during the empirical phase of the work, in association, for example, with the choice of the people to meet and interview, the selection of the stakeholders, deciding which circumstances and situations to observe, the kind of systematic, continuous or occasional observation to apply, whether to opt for active research-action participation or non-participative observation, etc. All this was important to the design and finalisation of the series of data capable of completing the research design (Palumbo, Garbarino 2006; Corbetta 2014).

As we are aware, qualitative knowledge is never absolute, nor can it be the bearer of objective truth. It is limited to the perception of the researcher, "limited" precisely because of his/her humanity; it is "relative" with respect to the situation, the moment and the social context studied (Bruschi 2005). Moreover, empirical work permits the researcher to enhance the specificity of the object/subject, by concretising the "different social situations" examined (Corbetta 2003: 90). The qualitative perspective is frequently the most suitable one to adopt when seeking to investigate phenomena in detail, especially when a limited number of interviews, for example, does not guarantee or aim at guaranteeing a quantitatively valid sample. Its goal is, instead, that of providing some basic questions regarding the matter and the subjects

of the research itself. The subjects to be interviewed are often selected because of the interest they “seem to express, an interest which may change, however, during the course of the research itself” (Corbetta 2003: 76).

It is important to establish the method to employ before beginning a research project as well as before undertaking the organisation and collection of knowledge during the field-work phase (Agnoli 2004). Through the two in-depth interviews carried out and described here, the researcher was able to study the macrocosm by means of a sociological interpretation of a microcosm (Cipriani 2006). Unlike the quantitative method, the qualitative one does not aim at providing a statistical kind of representativity but “one of substantive representativity, aimed at covering all the social situations of primary interest to the research, rather than reproducing the characteristics of the entire population” (Corbetta 2003: 75). The social environment, where the subjects live on a daily basis and which act as the setting of the lives they narrate through stories or in-depth interviews, is fundamental for interpretations of the reality they intend to interpret. Researchers need be able to assume the role of the listener, to become involved empathically, to be in tune with the context and aware that its collocation can never be indifferent to the context of the analysis being conducted (Tognonato 2008).

The life stories narrated by the interviewees acted as important points of contact with the original community and, therefore, with the social group. Through the life stories narrated, the researcher was enabled to get to know and understand interpersonal relationships and deepen her awareness of the importance of the social capital of these two Bangladeshi women living in Italy.

During this field research, the researcher had an important role to play in an effort to build up an empathic, trusting relationship. While conducting the interviews, her role involved providing the interviewee with the opportunity to converse in a friendly and frank manner, without fear, in an open space where the intervention of the researcher was minimal (Corbetta 2014; Cipriani 1987). During the second phase of the research, it was possible to hypothesise further empirical work informed by the Grounded Theory (Tarozzi 2008) to analyse and penetrate more thoroughly into the life stories, interviews and the other empirical material made available. This qualitative methodology was capable of guaranteeing a strategy and a better way of collecting the empirical data which might inspire the conduction of further empirical research of greater magnitude and depth, on the basis of a circularity capable of creating a continuum between the collection, analysis and scrutiny of the data collected. This “data-theory” approach was considered necessary only after the exploratory research reported here and required a research phase envisaging a greater collection of empirical data.

Research Results

Both of the two women interviewed are artists born in Bangladesh but of different generations and backgrounds. Sushmita grew up in Bangladesh and arrived in Italy as an adult, in 2008, to join her husband, also a musician, who had reached Italy during the first wave of migration which characterised a large part of the Bangladeshi community in Italy⁵ (Carnà, Rossetti 2018). She had studied music, singing and dancing from her early childhood. As an adult she had been given the opportunity to study for seven years at the *Institute of Dance, Music and Show Sangeet Bhavan* of the *Faculty of Visva-Bharati University* in Shantiniketa, a prestigious University located in India, in West Bengal and founded by the famous poet and Nobel Prize Rabindranath Tagore. Here, she had the opportunity of exploring different types of arts, in particular singing.

Madhobi, on the other hand, a young woman, arrived in Italy with her family when she was only three years old, older than two other siblings born and raised in Rome. She studied in the Italian school system and approached dance only thanks to her mother's teaching, something she continued later as a self-taught artist.

It is important to underline their backgrounds and the cultural milieu and tradition in which they grew up, because these had a significant impact on the lives and choices of the two women. The education they received within their families contributed significantly to their formation and had an impact on the parent-child relationship also with regard to their countries of origin. Both women are closely bound to their art thanks to the love their families transmitted to them. Sushmita's father had always believed in her and helped her to pursue her dream. Madhobi's mother was a dancer in Bangladesh and transmitted her passion for dance to her daughters (to Madhobi's younger sister too) teaching them from a very early age.

"This might sound like a sentence copied from some famous person, a VIP or someone like that... but for me dance was not really a passion, it was more like copying the gestures my mother made. Over time, however, music began to represent a way by means of which I might learn more about the culture of my origins and to let others know about Bangladesh and its traditions" (a part of Madhobi's interview).

For Madhobi and her sister, their art, dance, was an instrument which permitted them to maintain a link with the tradition of the origins while, at the same time, enabling them to spread the culture of Bangladesh in Italy. The sisters did not need to be accepted or integrated in a new society, like their mother and father, because they were perfectly integrated into the city's social fabric, as members of the "new generation". Indirectly, however, they wished to make their original culture known. So, dance became a means through which to diffuse their family's native culture in

Italy. In recent years, in Italy, we have learnt much about the Bangladeshi community, at social and religious level, thanks to the growth of its population, although many do not know much about their tradition and the wealth of their cultural heritage. Consequently, examples of the spread of Bangladeshi culture through art are rare indeed.

It is evident that family education plays a fundamental role in the construction of identities for children of foreign origin. While the first generations may fail to become fully integrated into the new social context, the new ones, make the two cultural systems an integral part of their sense of belonging. It is within this generation gap that even family structures are reinvented by implementing new educational strategies seeking internal balance. The first obvious need is that the new generations strengthen their ties with their cultural roots and the tradition of the origins.

Dance is an important medium of the identarian expression of peoples who experience a Diaspora, but it is also a means by which the new generations can assert their identity, create bridges between two or more different cultural systems, that of the origins and those of their new realities. Through their artistic work, dance and song, they strive to act as a bridge between the two cultures with which they manage to identify: that of the country of origin and that the host country. Art can become one of the tools providing the possibility of making a significant social contribution, where integration policies fail.

“In my work, I always thought that I was sowing small seeds and then picking up and watching a big tree blossom. I don’t know if I am right, I am trying my best with my school. *Sanchari Sangeetayan*, means “making music all together”. In actual fact, singing and playing together means coexisting, sharing a profound emotion and an ideal of beauty generated through the perfect harmony of music. At the same time, the practice of choral musical performance, like that of a choir, requires the rigor and discipline of cooperation such as to create a spirit of solidarity and brotherhood. In 2012, the person responsible for the *Asinitas Association*⁶, where I was learning the Italian language, proposed that I open a school, my own school, where I could teach singing and dancing to the new generations of Bangladeshi children. For me it was a great opportunity; to have a school of my own had always been my dream since I was in Bangladesh. For 8 years now I have been teaching more than twenty children on various days of the week. Most are Bangladeshis, though some Italian girls come too. It is important for those of Bangladeshi origin to know the culture of their origins because they may easily forget it living in Italy. Many families from back home often come from villages, have not studied and are unable to help their children; my school permits them to give these children a traditional education and teach them the discipline and beauty of art. The “social prices” charged, make it possible for everyone to enrol” (a part of Sushmita’s interview).

⁶ See: <https://www.asinitas.org/>

Social projects related to music, dance and other artistic or sports activities, guarantee access, above all, to the children of the more vulnerable families, while, at the same time, it fosters an important kind of inclusion that passes through the conception of “music as a common right”⁷. In general, music develops personal self-esteem and serves to facilitate sensitivity towards the ethical and aesthetic values closely grounded in musical practice.

These two women are perfectly aware of the fears associated with emancipation and independence when it comes to the Bangladeshi Islamic patriarchal system. Religion as a tradition interferes with their lifestyle and the family is expected to conduct itself within the community according to the precepts and tradition of Islam.

Madhobi never emphasises her religious affiliation explicitly, because, in her opinion, as her lifestyle is identified with religious orthopraxis it is not necessary to express her religious belief. In actual fact, she identifies herself within the Islamic community, but, in her dance, she does not refer explicitly to Islam, except when interpreting songs where religious membership is expressed.

“When you are a child, the community accepts your performance with enthusiasm, but when you become a girl and a woman, the view changes. I speak about Rome’s Bangladeshi community, because I really don’t know if the situation is the same situation in other European countries or cities. When you become a girl first, then a woman / wife / mother then, you are the first person who wants to stop performing and dancing, because you feel you and your family are being judged—” why does she dance? She is not a child; she is a mother!”. When it comes to performance they comment “She is not perfect as a professional Bangladeshi dancer! Why? Did not she study enough?”, then they make remarks about your body “Did you see her? She looks fatter than last time”, gossip about religion affiliation etc... because you are a woman / a wife / a mother, although you may not be aware of it personally, you are told later that the audience commented on the shape of your body or I don’t know what else. This is why, for the last three years I have decided to teach dance to children only. Secondly, I think it is very important that Italian-Bangladeshi children learn something more about their original culture as I have done in my lifetime. Religion plays an important part in our lives, but in more cases, here, the Islamic interpretation does not provide us with the opportunity to feel “free” but is influenced by a “closed mind”. However, my family gave me a good education, so I am afraid for this reason” (a part of Madhobi’s interview).

Immigration does not render the migrant or “sons/daughters of migrants” immune from the criticism, censorship and conditioning of their ethnic community, even in the host country. Identity for a lot of immigrants or members of the new generations remains, even today, indelible something with which to identify or to abandon.

⁷ In Italy, the “Musica Bene Comune Association” teaches music as a factor of social evolution and individual growth, without social distinctions, races or different abilities. It focuses on making music together, an activity that brings solid values that are the basis of civil life. The art and the music become a tool to let young people experience an inclusive model of society.

The Moroccan sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad (2002), in his book called “The double absence”, emphasises how migration reflects the deep contradictions of a society, by making the discovery of social, economic and political dynamics possible. The sociologist also provides a perspective as an insider, a migrant, while attempting to explain the human and social condition of immigration and emigration and underlining the difficulties encountered.

In this regard, Sushmita clearly explained the differences between Bangladeshi citizens in Bangladesh and Bangladeshis of the Diaspora, by pointing out that “dance has no faith. Anyone who thinks that dancing is a bad thing for the Islamic religion is wrong. There are songs that are sung by Muslim women. Even Muslim women in Bangladesh dance and sing. Here the problem is that the community here is rather closed. Did you know this? I am a Muslim but have always been making music and teaching singing and dance. This closure is a problem sometimes, but it does not really affect anything I do. I go on teaching my children and involving them in musical events. For them it is a joy” (a part of Sushmita’s interview).

Conclusion

According to the research question posed, on the basis of direct experience carried out during the exploratory phase, but also thanks to the study of the sources and the results of some work and empirical research carried out previously⁸ within the same context, it emerges that art in its simplicity represents an instrument of inclusion, dialogue and transmission of the values of the country of origin.

In the context of education, art and creative-laboratory methods represent an important opportunity to encourage learning and explorative acquisition of knowledge, especially in markedly intercultural environments (Carnà 2020). Art permits people to convey their emotions, often unexpressed or hard to manifest in a number of socio-cultural contexts. At the same time, it provides people with the opportunity of externalising their essential selves and cultural identities, especially if the chance/ possibility to do so cannot occur through the language of the host country. In educational as in social contexts on the whole, art, in its various forms, represents an opportunity to express individuality, above all, in environments of social vulnerability or where the social control exercised by the community is so strong that it hampers forms of individual expression (Carnà, Rossetti, 2018). In conditions of diaspora, for example, the subtle borders between individuality and community tend to “merge”, especially in realities where it is the individuals in the social and /or ethnic social groups who find ways of existing thanks to those who share the same sense of belonging and mutual recognition, grounded in values, traditions, lifestyles and beliefs (Granata 2016; Fabietti 1998).

⁸ See: Carnà and Rossetti (2018) and Carnà (2020).

From this extremely specific research endeavour, which can never be considered representative of all migrant community present on Italian soil, some important characteristics emerge, which permit us to grasp how closely interwoven links between the migratory phenomenon, social inclusion and acknowledgement of identity are within diasporic situations. According to the empirical work carried out here, art in Italy's Bangladeshi community in Italy is a potent instrument of individual and community identification and a symbol of belongingness. The migrant moves abroad, leaving his/her country, modifying his/her life, travels as a treasure trove of identity; his/her cultural background travels with her/him. The link with the culture and tradition of the origins remains as a marker of people's individuality, also in relation to the education they received within the family and religious community of their native country. The new generations, however, are heirs to multiple "educational cultures" (Granata 2016).

On long migratory routes, art and the idea of art, creativity and artistic skills travel with the migrant who brings a store of culture with him/her; one that may not be clear or rendered explicit. An intangible heritage composed of beliefs, traditions, symbols, values, rituals, stories, customs and habits; historically constituted, collectively shared cultural resources, upon which the individual can draw to maintain identification with the country and the culture of the origins (Orioles 2011).

Here, the art-dance of two women underlines a culture with all the contradictions and contrapositions that characterise a Diasporic immigrant community. Their artistic passion becomes the antidote against closed minds and strict traditional regulations. Their examples are extremely important when seeking to understand how a woman, simply through her art can bring about change. Sushimita's school and Madhobi's choreography and private lessons are means of discovering aspects of their own identity and links with their origins.

Despite the difficulties within the community, Sushmita continues to move forward, fighting for the values she believes in and continuing to transmit them thanks to music, dance and song. Madhobi, on the other hand, last year, because of her job, was unable to practise dance as a profession and has been obliged to put it on stand-by.

Their passion for music, transmitted through study and inherited from their families, has helped them find a valid reason for moving forward and passing the tradition on to the new generations. Both, in their artistic work, have spread a passion for traditional music but, first of all, a passion for the transmission of Bangladeshi culture through their own mother-tongue, the Bengali language. Language is a key element capable of forging links with a tradition and permitting in-depth entry into the very heart of a population and its identity

Art and the mother tongue work synergistically to create an important system of communication between the Bangladeshis of the Diaspora and the tradition of the origins.

If, on the one hand, the link with the country of origin belongs to the realm of desire of the first generation, on the other, the risk is that it may not remain so for

the new generations is extremely high. The bond with the country of origin appeared more marked in those who arrived in the host country earlier. For them the concept of identity and belongingness represented, in the face of the difficulties associated with their social insertion in the host country, a true exigency. The new generations, born and/or raised in Italy, and whom we got to know during the course of our research, keep the relationship with the tradition and culture of origin alive only in relation to the determination of their families which urge them to keep this bond alive, at least, during the first ten years of their lives.⁹ The musical arts unite many of the female students we met and the participation of many of them has come to signify a passion that might have regarded Bangladeshi song/dance just as easily as any other artistic tradition. We came across some rare cases where a similar passion, linked to the tradition, was found among the community's adults. The case of Madhobi, is a clear, unique example, perhaps, where a young woman, driven by pure passion has decided to carry on the art form she learnt from her mother.

At the same time, if, on the one hand, passion has a positive impact upon the expression and public performance of art itself; on the other hand, however, the social control (Gurvitch 1997) exercised by the community of origin in the diaspora, imposes certain unwritten rules, which members of the community must choose to respect or abandon definitively. In reality, the effort required to combine belongingness, a passion for art while continuing to experience the complexity of a certain kind of identity, is not always easy. For this reason, many young Bangladeshis decide, at a certain point in their lives, to renounce this task and open their priorities up to other possibilities, without considering themselves victims of censure.

In everyday life, however, in the midst of family, religious and scholastic education, dance represents a "safety valve" for many of the young girls attending Sushmita's and Madhobi's classes. It provides them with an opportunity to socialise, to express their personalities as an aspect of their identities. As they grow up and mature, it is evident that the link with tradition assumes other forms; the bond with the native language, for example, is fundamental to their relationship with the culture of the origins, as is their culinary tradition, two aspects that act as links with the tradition but which do not require them to forsake their new identities, those typical of generations who straddle two or more cultures.¹⁰ Their identity is one, but their cultural references can be manyfold (Granata 2016: 60).

⁹ See also: K. Carnà (2020), *Nuove identità di una società multietnica. Percorsi tra scuole, religioni, famiglie*. Padova: Cleup.

¹⁰ Complex identities, that is, those based on double or triple cultural references, are formed starting from awareness of the possible existence of a transversal kind of belonging which does not make their shared co-existence contradictory.

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