



CARPO
Center for Applied Research
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08

Study
20.01.2020

Bar'a as an Expression of Liminality

Ritual Performance, Identity
and Conflict Prevention in
the Highlands of Yemen

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Introduction

In a tribal society such as the Yemeni highlands, leaving one's own territory, crossing borders, and getting in contact with strangers are all considered situations of uncertainty and potential danger. In order to ease tensions, an elaborate ritual helps to stabilize this liminal situation and thus avoid potential conflict. This ritual strengthens the collective identity of the travelers on their way to the meeting point, formalizes the actual contact situation, and integrates strangers as guests into the host group. This social practice is expressed through several verbal and nonverbal performative genres, such as *bar'a*, *raqs*, *zamil* and *razfa*, which are simultaneously or alternately performed within the ritual.

My analytical focus in this CARPO Study, which is based on my PhD thesis *Bar'a – Ritual Performance, Identity and Cultural Policy in Yemen*,¹ will be on the performative genre *bar'a*. *Bar'a* is one of the most important means of non-verbal communication between social groups in Yemen and therefore plays a central role in the tribal reception ritual. As such, this Study deals with a cultural practice of the tribal population in the Yemeni highlands that also has important significance for Yemeni society as a whole by serving as an expression of tribal, regional and also national identity. Moreover, the practice is a cultural tool that enables tribesmen to deal with unsafe and potentially conflict-bearing situations in a stabilizing manner. It is used as a ritual for integration and strengthening collective identity, as well as as a means of keeping peace and preventing conflicts. Therefore, *bar'a* has special significance for processes of negotiating social affairs at a communal, local and regional level.

My analysis is based on an approach that combines ethno-choreology with anthropological ritual and performance theories (van Gennep 1909; Turner 1982) in order to explain indigenous concepts of performativity and formalized body language. Thus, this Study will concentrate on the question of how performative genres are defined in indigenous terms and which concepts of identity and its bodily expression are inherent in this cultural practice. I will additionally focus on the role of this performance practice as a cultural tool for preventing conflicts and guiding the proceedings of social events in a safe way.

¹ PhD thesis in social anthropology at the University of Frankfurt/Main, Germany, published as *Bar'a. Rituelle Performance, Identität und Kulturpolitik im Jemen*, Studies on Modern Yemen 8, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag (2009). Fieldwork in the highlands of Yemen was conducted between 1996 and 2006, i.e. before the Arab Spring and the current Yemeni war.

Defining the Concept: What is Dance?

This study deals with a performative genre, *bar'a*. In European terminology, it would be defined as dance, but in the indigenous Yemeni concept *bar'a* is strictly distinguished from genres described by the Arabic word for dance: *raqs*. When European academic concepts and terms that define categories such as music, dance, song and other performative genres are applied to a context in the Middle East, confusion rather than an increased understanding of indigenous phenomena and concepts results. European definitions tend to be strict and fixed, and are mainly based on formal criteria such as rhythm. Arab-Islamic definitions by contrast are more flexible and shift according to social and ritual contexts. Further, the Arabic language tends to keep genres and categories separate, while European definitions tend to subsume different phenomena under one category (such as 'music': orchestral music, chamber music, song, etc.). Therefore, Arab-Islamic performative genres are not often adequately grasped in Western academic terms, which often leads to misconceptions and to academic interpretations that result in new contradictions and paradoxes rather than elucidating indigenous phenomena, practices and classifications. It is therefore important to develop methods and theoretical frames that provide more differentiated tools to recognize indigenous concepts and to acknowledge them in their own right. An initial step in this direction was made by Anthony Shay (1995): He suggests that instead of defining what dance is, it might be more effective to look at what dance *is not* in an Arab-Islamic environment. My own approach also takes into consideration social and ritual contexts of the genres' definition.

In the highlands of Yemen, there are various performative genres – such as *bar'a*, *raqs*, *zamil*, *razfa* – practiced at different social and festive occasions such as weddings, weekly markets, collective work projects, tribal meetings and the Islamic feasts *'Id al-Fitr* and *'Id al-Adha*. *Bar'a*, the focus of this study, is a genre that would be classified as dance in Western academic terms; but in indigenous terms it constitutes a separate category in itself. The general term for 'dance' in Arabic is *raqs*. Yet in Yemen, *raqs* denotes a specific performative genre. *Bar'a* is set apart from both the term *raqs* and from the genre denoted by that term. It rather constitutes a separate genre by itself. The two genres *raqs* and *bar'a* are each clearly defined by several features: Each has its own specific rhythm, movements and ritual context. *Bar'a* is only accompanied by two kettledrums in a 4/4 rhythm without any melodic instrument or human voice. It is performed only by men and only in public outdoor spaces at different ritual and social occasions within the framework of the reception of guests. *Raqs*, by contrast, has a 7/8 rhythm and is accompanied by luth and song in the city, and by drum and song in the countryside. It is performed by

both men and women (gender segregated) inside a house at social gatherings and weddings. *Bar'a* participants do not have bodily contact with each other; in *raqs*, participants join hands. In Arab perception, *raqs* – despite the clearly defined ritual context in which it is performed in the highlands of Yemen – is perceived as an expression of individual emotions and may have, per an Islamic viewpoint, a touch of moral ambivalence.² *Bar'a*, in contrast, is clearly defined as a nonverbal, bodily practice and a ritual expression of responsibility and self-control and thus is not subject to Islamic moral debates within Yemen. Although these two genres are strictly distinguished and set apart from each other, they also have a complementary role. In the following, I will describe in detail the choreography and ritual context of both *bar'a* and *raqs*, focusing on their integrative, peacekeeping role in Yemeni highland society.

The Choreography of *Bar'a*

Bar'a is a genre only performed by men. The musical accompaniment consists of two kettledrums – *marfa'* and *tasa* – without any melodic instrument or human voice. Yemenis do not classify the two kettledrums as musical instruments; rather, they define them as ceremonial devices and as the insignia of



Marfa' (all pictures by author)

² For a discussion of Islamic attitudes towards music and dance, see Braune 1994.

*Tasa*

a *shaykh*. In addition to the rhythm that accompanies *bar'a*, there are several other kettledrum rhythms that serve to announce and acoustically define space and time of public affairs, such as weddings, religious feasts, and tribal meetings. As mentioned, the two drums are symbols of a *shaykh*. When attending a formal event, a *shaykh* is always accompanied by drummers, playing the *marfa'* and *tasa* in a special rhythm to mark his appearance and participation. Many *shaykhly* houses have drums hanging on the wall in the reception room. Drums and their specific rhythms, loaded with deep meaning and symbolic power, form a veritable communication system in the highlands of Yemen.

Bar'a is part of this communication system and – per the cultural diversity of Yemen – there are many local and regional *bar'a* versions throughout the highlands. These versions, which are not necessarily exclusive to a tribal section or tribe, differ from each other in rhythm, choreography and the number of participants. Some versions may have up to 50 participants forming a large circle, others only three or five. Most *bar'a* versions, however, consist of three or four parts. A complete *bar'a* performance of four parts is called *hilqa* (ring, circle, round) and lasts about ten minutes.³

³ The following description gives only some characteristic elements of *bar'a*, not a specific version. For details and an overview of several versions, see Stohrer 2009: 47-65.

Based on a regular 4/4 rhythm, the basic step of *bar'a* consists of three steps forward, a hop, and a turn around the performer's own axis. This figure is performed several times in different directions, back and forth, as well as in a circle going clockwise and counter-clockwise. Performers define bodily posture and movements in *bar'a* as 'upright' and 'straight ahead' (*musannab*, 'ala tul'). There are no sideways movements, and there is no swinging, no loose waggle of the head or arms. But this does not imply a taut posture: Though the back is erect, shoulders are relaxed. Steps and movements take minimal space, and there are neither jumps nor deep squats. During the first three parts, the participants alternately go back and forth, either standing side-by-side in a line or behind one another in a circle. They never touch each other by holding hands or by putting their arms around each others' shoulders. *Bar'a* performers do not have bodily contact with each other – there is always some open space left between each other. Thus, during the whole performance, each member of the group is recognized as an individual within this group activity. The position of each participant in the line is defined by skill and age, not by social status. From puberty onwards, each man is allowed to participate.⁴ The drummers are professionals



Drummers accompanying bar'a

⁴ Often younger boys try to enter the circle of *bar'a* performers, but they are kindly led out of the circle to perform separately. Youth learn to perform *bar'a* by observation and mentoring. Performing *bar'a* – like wearing a dagger – is a sign of adult status and shows the performer's sense of responsibility for social values.

belonging to the social group of *mazayina* (sg. *muzayyin*),⁵ a lower status group in Yemen's stratified highland society; *bar'a* dancers are amateurs and come from all social strata (*mazayina*, *qaba'il*, *sada*).

Men in the highlands of Yemen learn to perform *bar'a* by repeatedly participating in the performance, becoming skilled over the years. Thus, the oldest members of the group are usually the most skilled. One of the most skilled leads the performance and stands in the middle of the line. Next to the leader, on the right and left, stand the other participants according to their skill. The youngest and least experienced performers take their position at the two ends of the line, allowing them to leave the group when they are no longer able to keep pace in the steadily accelerating tempo.



The first part of bar'a as performed in a circle

The participants compete with each other to keep pace as long as possible; in the course of a *bar'a* performance, however, the number of participants usually steadily decreases. The leader has much influence on the course and shape of the performance, but he makes his decisions in correspondence with

5 The *mazayina* in the highlands of Yemen are butchers, musicians, barbers, matchmakers, messengers, etc. They have a special social status: On the one hand, from the perspective of the tribesmen, they are of low status; yet on the other hand, they are protected by tribal law and can freely travel in between the different tribal territories. In terms of Victor Turner (1982), they can be seen as truly 'liminal' people, 'betwixt and between'. The *mazayina* have profited from recent changes in Yemeni society as their services are essential for it. In the last few decades (before the current war), many of them have become very wealthy and socially more accepted.

the participants' skill and mood. If the dance does not achieve synchrony, or if the participants are tired or just not in the right mood, the leader may break off the performance at any point. Thus, the course of a *bar'a* performance is always unpredictable.



The second part of bar'a as performed in a row

The last part of *bar'a* (*hawshaliya* – excitation, tumult), performed only by the most skilled men of the group, is not enacted very often. Much depends on the mood and endurance of the leader, who will choose one or two group members to perform it with him. The character of this last part differs from the preceding movements: While the first three parts are more formalized choreographically, the last part is playful (*li'ab*) and has no prescribed steps. In some regions of Yemen, the *hawshaliya* may be a dramatic duel of two antagonists competing in agility and endurance. In others, it is harmonious and calm, the two partners performing side by side in unison.

An important requisite of *bar'a* is a dagger with a curved blade (*janbiya*), worn by men in the highlands of Yemen as an accessory and status symbol at festive occasions, as well as in everyday life. During the performance, the right hand holding the dagger always remains at waist level. Only when performers make turns do they lift the right hand holding the dagger to the forehead and move the *janbiya* with a light gesture of waving. The participants hold the hilt of the dagger by the tip, with two or three fingers only, the pinky often elegantly extended, which allows them to move the *janbiya* easily and quickly



The last part of *bar'a* (*hawshaliyya*) may appear very dramatic



out of the wrist into all directions. This is a very artificial and aesthetical movement. It shows grace, ease and agility and requires careful concentration by the performer. This gesture is an expression of the participant's skill and competition as well as playful creativity. The audience, i.e. passersby and men who are not in the mood to perform or have already left the performance, discusses and judges the performers' ability to handle the dagger gracefully. There is no movement or gesture in the performance that would be considered aggressive or hostile. Rather, *bar'a* is a ritual means to restrain oneself and at the same time to ease tensions by channeling it into a concentrated

collective action. The use of the dagger in *bar'a* is opposite to the way the dagger is handled as a weapon. Used as a weapon, the *janbiya* is held firmly with the whole fist, the tip of the blade pointing downward. This use requires a powerful and focused movement of the entire arm with a strong and fixed wrist. Thus, the handling of the dagger in *bar'a* points to the ritual's role in conflict prevention in Yemeni highland society: It serves to ease tension when strangers encounter one another and is an expression of performative art and aesthetics in its own right.

A *bar'a* performance is characterized by steadily increasing tension and drama; but even in the most dramatic versions of *hawshaliya*, it is not the intent to reach an ecstatic or trance-like state of consciousness. During the whole performance, motion and emotion are controlled. Tribesmen in Wadi Dhahr told me that it is an essential feature of their good manners to keep a calm and concentrated attitude during the entire performance. A *bar'a* performance progresses from collective action and formalized movement to individuality and playful virtuosity and includes cooperation as well as competition. Each member of the group contributes according to his abilities. Thus, the choreography is perfectly described by the etymology of the term *bar'a*, which means 'to achieve, to become perfect, to excel', as well as 'to contribute, to be ready'.



Handling of the dagger in *bar'a*

Handling of the dagger in violent action
(drawing of Carsten Niebuhr in local
dress, The Royal Library of Denmark)

The Ritual Context of *Bar'a*

The context confirms the self-restraining and integrative character of the ritual. *Bar'a* is performed at various occasions, such as weddings, religious and national holidays, tribal meetings, weekly markets, and collective work projects. What all these occasions have in common is that they bring different local and social groups in contact with each other. Tribesmen regard such situations of contact with strangers as potentially unsafe and as conflict-bearing. Thus, the place and time of these occasions are often defined, according to tribal law, as neutral or protected (*hijra*) in order to guarantee a peaceful event. Essentially, *bar'a* is involved in the reception of strangers and their safe transformation from strangers to guests. Within this context of a *rite de passage*⁶ in the true sense of the word, *bar'a* is performed at each of the three succeeding phases that constitute the course of the reception ritual:

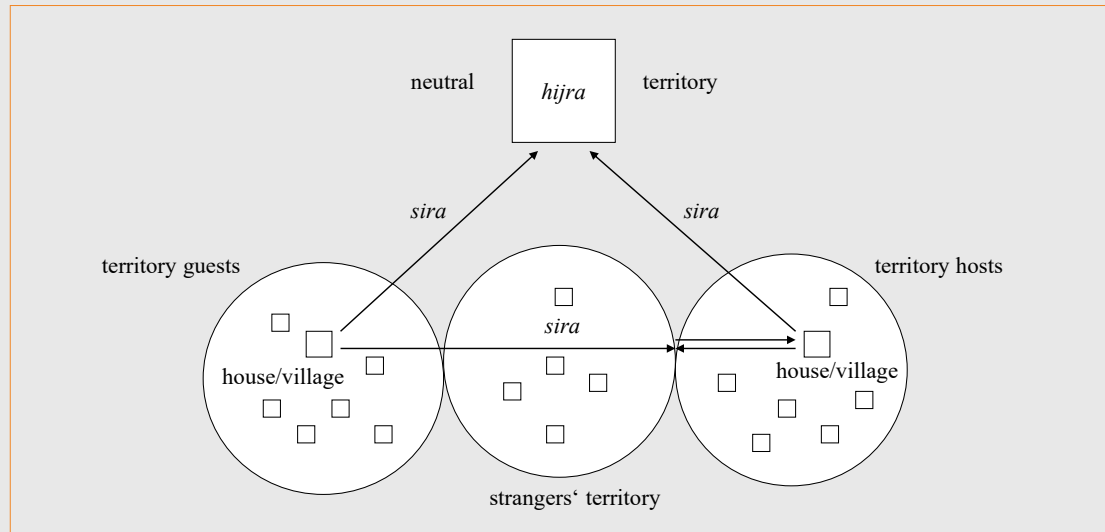
- 1) The participants' procession to the place of the event (*sira*)
- 2) The contact of hosts and guests in the tribal reception ceremonial (*istiqbal*)
- 3) The official, public soiree (*samra* or *sahra*)

1) *The procession (sira)*

In the tribal areas of the Yemeni highlands, men participating at a formal event (such as tribal meetings, collective work projects, weekly markets or an Islamic feast such as *'Id al-Adha* or *'Id al-Fitr*) will walk from their home to the meeting place in a procession called *sira* (walk, march).⁷ The hosts walk, in the same mode, from their homes to the village entrance or to the border of their territory to welcome the guests.

⁶ The theoretical concept of rites of passage was first developed by Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1909). By comparing rituals from all over the world, he discovered that they always share the same structure and purpose: to control transitions in the social life of an individual such as birth (the transition from the unborn to the world of human beings); puberty (the transition from child to adult); weddings (transition from single to married and to a fully responsible member of the group); death (transition from the living to the dead); as well as transformations within social groups or even states. The structure of rites of passage is always the same and consists of three phases: 1) Phase of separation: the participants are separated from their former social group, expressed by actions like destroying things, cutting hairs, changing clothes, etc. 2) Phase of transition or liminality: participants remain in a segregated place, to receive knowledge about the important values of the group they are about to join and to acquire the appropriate behavior. This is the most important and elaborate phase of the ritual. 3) Phase of aggregation: participants are integrated into their new status group, expressed by dancing or eating together. In my opinion, this concept fits perfectly the occasions within which *bar'a* is performed, and helps to understand their proceedings and meaning. See also Stohrer 2008 and 2007.

⁷ It may also be that the participants move by cars. Then it is the same procedure with accompaniment of the drums (the drummers sit on the rooftop of the car), chanting of *zawamil* (pl. of *zamil*) by the participants, and interruptions for *bar'a* performances. In the past, before the war, drivers and guides of tourist groups also performed *bar'a* next to the cars while the tourists took pictures.



The sira-procession I

Two drummers playing the *marfa'* and the *tasa* lead each group. While the groups are walking, the *tasa* in each group constantly plays a special 'procession rhythm' (*daqqat as-sira*), during which the tribesmen chant in unison a chorus of the poetic genre *zamil*. This type of impromptu poetry is very famous and popular in the highlands of Yemen, and is a means to express feelings of tribal group belonging and social values such as hospitality, cooperation, and solidarity, amongst others. Yet, a *zamil* can also express autonomy and the willingness of the tribesmen to defend their territory if necessary.⁸ The following example of a famous historic *zamil* gives an impression of the power, wisdom and aesthetics of these verses:

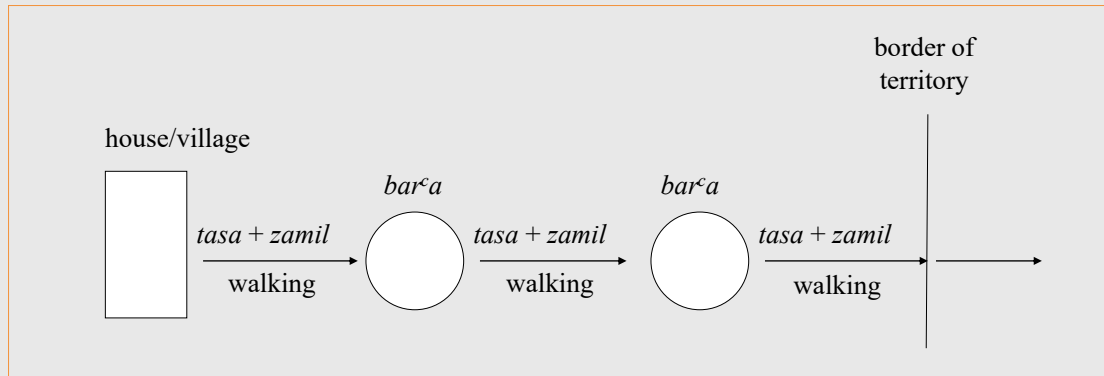
Ya ashabana, ya nsabana ya ahl ash-sheru' al-wafiyah
Yalli hamaytum haddakum min sharr walla 'afiyah.

O friends, o allies, o people loyal to the tribal law [whose feelings of honor are perfect]
 You protect your frontiers against any damage and all aggression.

(Yamine 1995: 130)

During the *sira* procession, participants will halt their walk several times, cease their *zamil* chant, and perform *bar'a*. Characteristic of the *sira* is that different performative genres – *tasa* rhythm, *zamil* chorus, *bar'a* – are performed either simultaneously or in alternating modes, while remaining formally independent from each other. The *sira* is not a march. The participants' steps are neither formalized nor synchronized with the *tasa* rhythm. Each man walks at his own individual and natural pace. The *zamil* chorus also has its own rhythm, which

⁸ For a detailed description and analysis of the performative practice of *zamil* in the highlands of Yemen, see Caton (1991) and Yamine (1995).



The sira-procession II

is independent from the *sira* rhythm played at the same time by the *tasa*. Finally, *bar'a* has its own rhythm as well, played by *marfa'* and *tasa* together. How long the *bar'a* performance within a *sira* lasts depends on the length of the procession and on the participants' mood. They may stop for *bar'a* several times, or just a few times; they may perform all four parts of *bar'a*, or only one or two. They may do only one round, or several rounds in succession, before resuming their walk. The course of a *sira* is not pre-determined, as much depends on the spontaneity of the participants. From the structural perspective of the *sira* procession, as a rite of passage in the true sense of the word: The procession separates the participants from their homes and families (Phase 1 – separation). Even as the *sira* progresses, the participants' social status is also in motion and transition. The *sira* is a flexible ritual that enables tribesmen to cope psychologically with liminal situations in several contexts. *Bar'a*, as performed within a *sira*, is a nonverbal, bodily means to keep stability and peace in an unstable and unsafe situation. It concentrates and channels the



Sira on foot

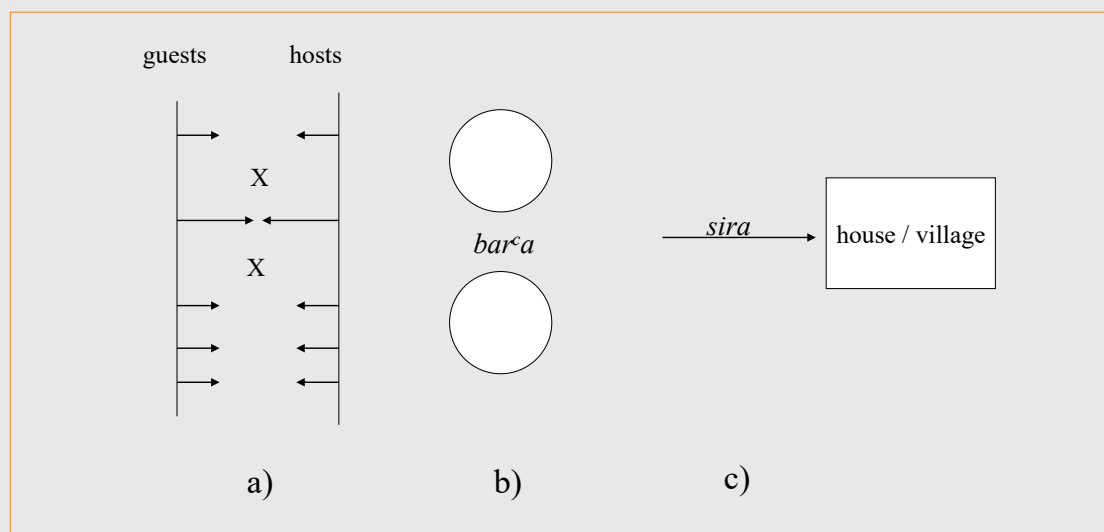


Sira by car

participants' motions as well as their emotions in a collective ritual action, giving them a sense of self-assurance and collective identity without denying their individuality. *Bar'a* thus has a clearly self-disciplining, calming, and group-binding purpose.⁹

2) The reception ceremony (*istiqlal*)

The *sira* procession comes to its end when arriving at the border of the hosts' territory. The hosts usually arrive first and pass the waiting period by performing some *bar'a* and chanting *zawamil* (pl. of *zamil*). When the guests appear, the ritual comes to its climax as a cultural means of preventing potential conflict by canalizing movement and speech of the participants into a safe and relaxed mood: hosts and guests now confront each other. The hosts, upon seeing the guests approach, form a long line, standing closely side-by-side. The guests then form the same type of line while walking towards the hosts, and briefly stop when some meters away. The guests then continue moving, slowly in a ceremonial way, forward towards the waiting row of the hosts. Once the two lines face each other, the musician of the hosts, standing between the two lines, plays a special 'reception rhythm' (*daqqa al-istiqlal*) with the *tasa* drum. Now one member of each line, the official speaker of the respective group, takes one step forward, thus leaving his line. The two speakers then stand in the middle, between the two lines, and exchange formal verbal greetings according to the given occasion, shaking hands and exchanging cheek kisses. After having finished this greeting-exchange, all the other members of the two groups greet each other individually in the same way as the two leaders. In doing so, the two lines merge and dissolve.



The reception (istiqlal)

⁹ For a discussion of Western stereotypes that perceive *bar'a* as a 'war dance', see Stohrer 2000, 2009a and 2010.

After these verbal greetings have been exchanged, *bar'a* is performed. The hosts begin. If the guests have the same *bar'a* version, they may join the circle. If they have their own version, they may perform at the same time next to the hosts, or after the hosts have ended their performance.



The reception: in the foreground, the circle of guests performing bar'a; in the background, the line of the hosts observing the guests' performance

After the *bar'a* performance, guests and hosts move together in a *sira* procession to the house of the host where a meal will conclude the reception ritual. The procession to the house is accompanied by the *sira* rhythm of the *tasa* and by a *zamil* chorus, but is no longer interrupted by *bar'a* performances.

Bar'a, as an element of the tribal reception ritual, marks the beginning of the transformation of the social status of the guests. The guests are transformed, step-by-step, from potentially dangerous strangers into safe, temporary members of the host group. The jointly performed *bar'a* marks the first step of this process. This transition also has legal consequences in terms of tribal law for both groups: From this point on, the guests are under the protection of the hosts for the duration of their stay in the hosts' territory. The hosts are now fully responsible for the safety and security of the guests and for providing a safe and peaceful space during the whole event. The guests, now under the protection of the hosts, are not allowed to defend themselves in case of any offence. It is significant for the performative practice of *bar'a* within this ritual – as well as for the concept of tribal, 'segmentary' societies in general – that although the guests and hosts are now integrated, groups with different *bar'a*

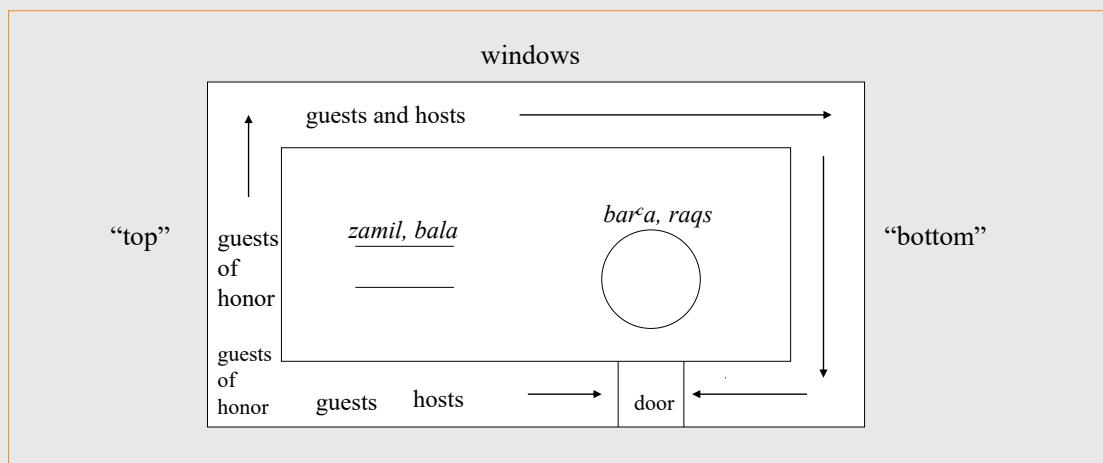
versions do not merge into one circle in order to demonstrate their newly established alliance. Rather, each group remains autonomous while simultaneously or alternately performing with others. This practice is also analogous to the structure within any *bar'a* group, where each performer keeps his individuality in the collective action.

3) *The official soiree (samra/sahra)*

When the formal part of the reception is finished, the more sociable, convivial part begins. This official social gathering in the evening, in the form of a feast or social gathering, is called *samra* or *sahra* (to pass the night awake/talking). It is comparable with weddings receptions or official state functions in Europe. The *samra* is announced by a special 'invitation rhythm' of *marfa'* and *tasa* (called *tamsiya* or *daqqat ad-da'wa*) played on the rooftop of the host's house. This may be the house of the groom's family in case of a wedding, or the *shaykh's* house at a more official occasion such as a tribal meeting or religious feast. It may also be that a wealthy member of the community provides his house for the occasion. In daily life, a Yemeni home – and Arab houses in general – is a strictly private space; only men of the household or family have access while women are present.¹⁰ Yet, at a wedding or feast, the rhythm of the drum acoustically defines the private house for the duration of this special event as public space. Every man who hears the rhythm may participate. Moreover, to demonstrate the cohesion of the community to the guests, it is expected that each household of the community is represented by the presence of at least one man. The *samra* takes place in the reception room of the house (*diwan*), which is the largest and most elaborate room of the building. The *samra* is convivial and entertaining, but at the same time it is an official event that requires appropriate behavior. At the *samra* there is a special order of seating to maintain. All participants are seated along the walls of the room on mattresses. Guests, along with the oldest and most high-ranging members of the hosts, sit at the wall that is most distant to the door (called 'top' of the room), so that they have a secure place from which they may overlook the whole room and the door, meaning no one can come upon them from behind. These seats also offer a pleasant view through the windows. On the left and right of the guests and honored hosts, the other participants follow according to their age and social status. The youngest and those with the lowest status sit near the door (the 'bottom') and are expected to serve others upon request of the host. The seating structure is constantly adapted as people come and go, change places to speak with friends, and so on.

¹⁰ An exception is the daily gathering for the chewing of *qat* in the afternoon, although women will agree to meet for their *qat* chew gathering at one house and the men at another. Even on these occasions, when a man belonging to the family enters the house, he will acoustically announce himself (by calling *ya allah*) and go straight to his room, in case a woman not of the family is present.

The course of the *samra* is structured further by the succession of several collective performative genres: First, participants are greeted again with a *zamil*; then *bar'a* is performed. After this, further *zawamil* and *bar'a* are performed, either alternately or in separate parts of the room at the same time, according to the participants' wishes. At a *samra*, *zawamil* are often performed as an antiphonal 'dialogue' between guests and hosts: One participant improvises a verse, recites it for all to hear, and provides a melody. Then all participants take up the *zamil* and chant in unison while moving slightly backwards and forwards in a line. This is repeated several times, alternating between the hosts and the guests.



The *samra/sahra*: the reception room (*diwan*) of the hosts' house

After the *zawamil* are finished, the men may perform some *bar'a* rounds.¹¹ Then the *samra* move to the more playful and individualistic poetic genre *bala*. Its name derives from *bal*, meaning mind, *esprit*. *Bala* is a *jeu d'esprit*, a poetic competition. As during the performance of a *zamil*, at the *bala* participants form two lines, facing each other; but now two individuals stand between the lines, acting as poets and improvising verses consisting of two hemistiches (half lines). One poet recites the first hemistiche, which the men standing in the line take up in chorus, repeating it. Then a second poet gives the second hemistiche and the chorus repeats it. Finally, all other participants in the room can join: Any man present can step into the middle and offer verses, as long as he is able to invent new poetry. It is the aim of each poet to stay as long as possible in the center, and entertain the audience with the most intelligent and inspired verses. The audience serves as judges, by appreciating, commenting and criticizing the verses and the poets' performance. The verses of the *bala* may praise the guests and hosts; yet in certain contexts

¹¹ *Zamil* and *bar'a* may also be performed at the same time: *zamil* in the 'upper' part of the room, and *bar'a* at the 'lower' end.



Raqs performed in a festive tent at a wedding in Sana'a'

they may also discuss, in satirical form, social and political subjects and thus serve as a tool for negotiating social values and the behavior of individuals or groups. *Bala* may also serve as an instrument to criticize the government.

On occasion of a wedding, the dance genre *raqs* may also be presented at the *samra*. A wedding *samra* is the only occasion at which both *bar'a* and *raqs* are performed. Also, the *samra* is the only occasion at which *bar'a* is enacted inside a house.¹²

Looking at the course of the ritual, we can see that it moves from group cohesion and formalized action to individuality and playful creativity and virtuosity. The process of integrating the guests into the host group comes to its completion at the *samra*. Now, i.e. during the *samra* and in the further course of the event, the members of both groups can make personal contact with each other and establish individual relationships. This intention to establish wide-ranging connections between guests and hosts at an individual level is often expressed when hosts invite the guests to perform *bar'a* or *raqs* with as many different partners as possible. Performing together is seen as a means to establish or strengthen friendships and emotional ties between the partners. Once again, we see that within the ritual, the competitive and

¹² Participants explicitly call it *bar'a fi 'l-bayt* [*bar'a* inside the house] and by doing so strengthen the concept of *bar'a* as an activity that usually takes place outdoors. At the same time, this labeling points towards the status of the house as public space during the *samra*.

integrative sides of the genres performed are kept in a subtle balance that allows individual expression within the social framework. In personal communication with me, however, participants always emphasized the cooperative, integrative aspect of the different dance and chant genres over their competitive side and pointed out their purpose of showing respect to the guests. At the *samra*, both *bar'a* and *raqs* are 'rites d'agrégation' (rites of aggregation or [re-]incorporation) that help stabilize the new social situation. In Turner's terms, the performative genres are "ergic-ludic", which means that – despite their ludic, playful character – they are also ritual "work" and enhance the efficacy of the ritual. By the end of the reception ritual, a safe and peaceful setting will have been established. The further course of the feast or wedding – or the discussion and negotiation of a given topic at a formal tribal meeting – can now take place in a relaxed atmosphere.



Raqs performed at a wedding in a house

Having explained the ritual and social context of *bar'a*, we will now look at the wider context of everyday body language and the social values of the tribal society in the highlands of Yemen. This will serve to further elucidate the indigenous concepts of defining genres and categories.

Body Language as an Expression of Social Values and Identity in the Highlands of Yemen

When relating the characteristic movements of *bar'a* and *raqs* to body language and social values in everyday life in highland Yemen, a special concept of the body becomes apparent:¹³ Rural highland Yemenis distinguish between postures and movements in very subtle ways, and classify them either as 'upright' (*musannab*) and 'straight ahead' (*'ala tul*), or as 'winding' (*lawa*) and 'snakelike' (*mithl al-hanish*). An upright, erect posture and straightforward movement – as practiced in *bar'a* – is valued as an expression of the uprightness and honesty of the performer and the sincerity and authenticity of his emotions.¹⁴ In tribal society, such behavior characterizes a personality considered self-confident, responsible, and autonomous, a person who is 'he himself' (*nafshu*). In contrast, movements classified as 'winding' or 'snakelike' are equated with lies, falsehood and opportunism: Such a person is considered not to be himself, but to 'sell himself' (*yabi'u nafshu*).¹⁵ Broad gestures and movements, such as the brandishing of arms and jumping, are seen as exaggerated and 'crazy' (*majnun*).

Traditional body language in the highlands of Yemen is characterized by self-restraint and moderation. Movements, as well as verbal expression, should be deliberate, calm and collected, an ideal also formulated in the Qur'an (sura *luqman*, vs. 18, 19). Emotions can be expressed, but exaggeration and exuberance are to be avoided. All social groups share this concept of an acceptable body language, although each interprets it differently. Each group places itself in the center, as embodying the 'golden mean', while regarding others as examples of extremes. The higher one is in social status, the more restrained movements and speech should be. However, any movement or gesture is judged according to the actual context and the social status of those present. Different social strata, as well as diverse regions, define themselves in a variety of ways, as is seen in the numerous versions of *bar'a*. Even within the same version, members of neighboring villages execute the same

13 This concept is elaborate and subtle, and only a broad outline can be given here. For further details, see Stohrer 2009: 56-66.

14 The sincere and authentic expression of emotions is a key concept of music and performance practice in rural highland Yemen, affecting the social life of all social strata.

15 According to tribal values, an 'authentic' individual (women as well as men) is someone who is self-confident and straightforward. Tribesmen live off agriculture for subsistence. When surplus is sold at the market, it is not the tribesmen themselves but brokers from the *mazayina* status. Selling and even the marketplace itself is considered unclean and not appropriate for tribesmen. For a discussion of this concept, see Stohrer 2009a.

movements in dissimilar ways and accentuate different elements. The eastern regions of the highlands (mainly tribes affiliated with the Bakil confederation) in general emphasize strength and drama in *bar'a*; while the western regions (Hashid confederation) characterize themselves as calm and collected. Men of the Hamdan Sana'a' tribe, on which I focused my research, especially stressed the emphasis on concentration and cooperation in their *bar'a* performances. Easterners perceive western versions as 'weak' (*dha'if*), whereas westerners view eastern versions as 'overacting' (*mutakabbir, kabir*).

The *raqs* genre expresses this concept of body language and social values in similar ways. *Raqs*, as mentioned above, is formally and contextually set apart from *bar'a*. *Raqs* is accompanied by rhythmic and melodic instruments, and by the human voice. The two drums accompanying *bar'a* are not used. In the highlands of Yemen, *raqs* consists of three parts performed by two partners, which stand closely side-by-side, hands joined. The final part includes – similar to *bar'a* – a competition between the two partners in agility and endurance. The dagger is handled in the same way as in both *raqs* and *bar'a*. *Raqs* has some winding movements, like a light swaying of the hips and a forward shaking of the shoulders, which in the (urban) Islamic view earns *raqs* a frivolous connotation. Music and dance are suspected to lead to an ecstatic state of heightened consciousness (*tarab*), the inability to control the mind during performance, and thus a potential threat to the stability of the social order.¹⁶ Therefore, *raqs* is forbidden in mixed gender gatherings and when practiced as pure distraction (*lahw*); but it is allowed when ritually embedded in a wedding, where it also has meaning as a means to magically enhance fertility and thus stabilize society.

In order to avoid exuberance, highland versions of *raqs* have only short-measured steps. Movements and gestures do not take much space, are very subtle and sometimes only hint at the gesture, thus giving the performance a special refinement and delicateness. Highlanders criticize some dances of the *raqs* genre in the coastal areas of Yemen as indecent (*'ayb*) due to their more expressive movements, while considering their own version as moderate.

¹⁶ On the Islamic debate about music, see Braune 1994. As mentioned earlier, *bar'a* is traditionally not subject to moral debate and is perceived to be separate from the genre *raqs*. Yet an interesting case occurred on my last visit in Yemen, in 2006. Certain Islamists in Sana'a' tried to interdict the performance of *bar'a* and *zawamil* at the *sira* procession of weddings in Wadi Dhahr, suggesting they be replaced with the call *allahu akbar*. They argued that *bar'a* is a dance (*raqsat al-bar'a*) and that its performance is immoral. This case is interesting because these Islamists did not refer to the subtle traditional Arab/Islamic classification of genres developed in their own culture, but followed the European concepts of dance. In doing so, they brought on a moral debate that is completely absent from the traditional ritual practice of the *sira* procession. Tribemen I spoke to heavily rejected this demand, saying that it was "crazy" (*majnun*) and "not Islam, but politics" (*mish islam, siyasa*). The *sira* in question took place in its traditional form and people refused to pay attention to the Islamists. The traditional concept and practice of *bar'a* thus remains stable, even when challenged by hardliners.

Especially the trance-dances practiced by women within the *zar*-ritual in the coastal regions of Yemen, at which they shake their uncovered hair and fall into trance, are viewed by highlanders as 'crazy' (*majnun*), as dancers make twitching movements and lose control over both body and mind.

Nevertheless, highlanders will experiment with new dance forms and physical expressions from abroad. In 2006, I saw two young men at a wedding perform the final part of *bar'a* (the playful *hawshaliya*) by a virtuoso combination of the original rhythm and choreography with movements from hip hop. Innovations introduced to other genres, such as *raqs*, take further inspirations from rap, MTV clips, Egyptian TV, and Bollywood films. There are also some versions of *bar'a* and *raqs* in gangnam style on YouTube.¹⁷

In both *bar'a* and *raqs*, the relationship between individual and community is crucial. *Bar'a* has integrative as well as competitive aspects. Competition is not so much a matter between different groups, but between the members of one group. Though its ritual framework is representative, performing *bar'a* in front of guests is a show of respect and reciprocity on an equal footing, rather than competing with them in virtuosity. Tribesmen say that a performer should be 'himself' and should not care about spectators. Yemenis emphasize that one is expected to actively participate rather than merely observe. In *bar'a* as a collective activity, emphasis is given to individual autonomy within the group, whereas in the more individualistic genre *raqs*, emphasis lies on the cooperation of two partners and the restraint of individuality. Thus, we see that *bar'a* and *raqs*, albeit two separate genres, share some commonalities. Both have formalized and restrained movements, and both express social behavior in a clearly defined ritualistic framework. The two genres embody two complementary aspects of the same social concept: to balance autonomy, individuality, and difference on the one hand; and cooperation, solidarity, and integration on the other.¹⁸ This balance is found anew in each performance. Different versions of the performing genres reveal varying interpretations of this concept, as each group accentuates distinctive aspects. Although they

¹⁷ For example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrR_gCXRY2Q or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cDx-AbK3fgU> (18.06.2019).

¹⁸ To say it once again, *bar'a*, is not in any way a 'war dance'. Such a definition, often used by European travellers and journalists, was even promoted by the former Ministry of Culture in Yemen. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Ministry of Culture was led by Soviet-trained officials and choreographers, who also used European concepts. European clichés about tribal societies in general conceive the latter as archaic, primitive, emotional, violent and belligerent, and therefore as a threat to the modern state. This concept has its roots in nineteenth-century evolutionism, which pits the state and tribes as antagonistic to each other and tribes as anachronistic relics of an early stage of human society. This is despite the fact that in the Middle East tribes and states have symbiotically coexisted for centuries in cooperation rather than in conflict (Kraus 2004). For an overview of common clichés about Yemen and its tribal population in German newspapers, journals and travel guides, see Stohrer 2000; for a discussion of the former cultural policy of the government of Yemen, see Stohrer 2009, 2009b, 2007, 2008.

influence each other, and many men are able to perform several versions, the various versions coexist as equals, expressing 'unity in diversity', rather than competing against each other in search for the one 'right' version.¹⁹

As we have seen when discussing the reception ritual, cohesion in Yemeni tribal society means only a temporary alliance of autonomous individuals or groups. In contrast, nationalistic standardizing intentions demand stronger cohesion since the nation state requires permanent loyalty from all citizens. Before the current war, there was a national folklore ensemble in Sana'a, established by the Ministry of Culture to help the government implement a united, centralistic national identity. The dancers and choreographers were trained in the USSR; thus, the ensemble was governed by socialist concepts and integrated many movements and gestures borrowed from European ballet in order to 'develop' Yemeni traditional dances and adapt them for performance on a stage. Also, all the playful, improvisatory elements of the traditional performance practice were eliminated in favor of a strong group cohesion and strictly synchronized movements (e.g. no one could leave the group during a performance, in contrast to normal *bar'a* practice). This folklore ensemble was not successful, however.²⁰ Many people in the highlands of Yemen rejected this standardization of movements and social practices, saying that they were 'not Yemeni' (*mush yamany*), 'meaningless' (*bidun ma'ana*), and 'stupid' (*bidun mukh*). These criticisms did not imply a rejection of the nation or a unifying national identity. In fact, the highland tribesmen take great pride in their Yemeni identity. What they did reject was the top-down inclusion of 'foreign' elements in a presentation of something portrayed as 'typically Yemeni': movements that did not fit into their traditional practice, as well as the fixed and uniform shape of the choreography. Scaling this rejection up to the political level, we may argue that this reaction reflects the embracement of Yemen's sociocultural diversity and therefore the rejection of a centralized state in favor of a more decentralized model that acknowledges Yemen's diversity. Local, regional and tribal identities in Yemen continue to coexist with national, Arab or Islamic identities as complementary aspects of a complex identity. Therefore, the *bar'a*'s traditional ritual practice with its improvisatory

¹⁹ Yemenis see performative genres not only as a cultural expression of tribal, regional and national identity, but also give them a quasi-genetic connotation of being entirely 'Yemeni'. During my fieldwork, people often said to me that Europeans *a priori* are not able to learn and understand Yemeni music or dances. Yemenis, by contrast, are perceived to have this ability. Per definition, every Yemeni man can perform *bar'a* (although in fact, there are many men who cannot). When I was learning Yemeni dances, people observed my quick grasp of rhythm and the right style of movements, and asked several times if I had a Yemeni father. Although I answered negatively, the audience continued to intensively discuss this question, always concluding that there *must* be some kind of genealogical connection, because Europeans simply *cannot* learn Yemeni dances.

²⁰ I have described and analyzed in detail the performances and concepts of this folklore ensemble in my dissertation (Stohrer 2009a); see also Stohrer 2007, 2008, and 2009b.

elements and a variety of versions continues intact to this day and serves as a framework of continuity for a common cultural identity among Yemenis with diverse regional traditions and practices. Yemenis are very creative in experimenting with regional versions from within Yemen, as well as adapting or incorporating foreign elements.

Yet, all these changes do not violate the traditional concept of proper body language and the distinction between separate categories of genres, each appropriate to a specific ritual and social context. Although there are changes within each genre, there is no merging of separate genres. Even if temporarily crossed and partly modified, their boundaries remain intact. Some foreign elements are adapted to the tradition in a process of 'Yemenization', by which people carefully select what in their eyes might 'fit' (*munasib*) into their own culture and tradition. Therefore, a performance practice that has always been and remains open for regional variety and multiple meanings continues to be practiced in Yemen up through today. This practice allows for the negotiation of social and cultural values in an enduring and perpetual process, in which difference and integration, preservation and alteration interact complementarily, not antagonistically. The tribal reception ritual and its performative genres provide a safe and secure space and framework for this process.

Conclusion

This Study's analysis of Yemeni ritualistic and performative practices demonstrates that cultural practices may provide a well-adapted framework for conflict prevention and the negotiation of social affairs on a local and regional level. The reception ritual in the highlands of Yemen is a practice that gives groups and individuals self-assurance in liminal situations. It aims at calming tensions and avoiding conflicts and reflects perfectly the structure of *rites de passage* as developed by van Gennep. It consists of three phases: The *sira* procession marks the first (phase of separation) and second phase (of liminality or transition), which separates the participants from their former group and living place and bares them of their social status, recognizing them simply as individuals. *Bar'a* at the *sira* procession helps stabilize this unsafe and unstable, liminal situation. In the situation of contact between guests and hosts, the exchange of greetings and the performance of *bar'a* marks the first step in the process of integrating the foreigners as temporary members into the host group. Finally, the *samra* re-establishes the social status of the participants and concludes the integration of guests into the hosts' group as a *rite of aggregation/incorporation*.

In summary, the most important characteristics of the tribal reception ritual are:

- it provides a safe space for the negotiation of social affairs;
- it guarantees peace and safety for all participants;
- it helps stabilize an unstable, uncertain and potentially conflict-bearing situation;
- it provides space for ludic creativity and play with the aim of embodying, as well as negotiating and transforming, social values;
- it expresses different aspects of social values (to be negotiated);
- it keeps in balance autonomy/individuality and cooperation/cohesion;
- it expresses different layers of identity (tribal, local, regional, national); and
- it acknowledges 'the Other' as 'the Own'.

Despite the overall integrational purpose of *bar'a*, however, ritual practice in the tribal society of Yemen keeps performative genres and regional versions separate even within an integrating ritual framework. Similarly, different social groups remain independent while cooperating with each other, illustrating a concept of society that focuses on 'unity in diversity'. Different *bar'a* versions and several independent genres performed simultaneously within the reception ritual express the concept of a tribal society that balances autonomy and cooperation between individuals as well as between groups. Different local and regional versions are embodiments of divergent viewpoints within this concept.

As we have seen in the choreography as well as in the ritual context, *bar'a* has a concentrating, cooperative and self-restraining purpose and serves as an expression of responsibility. Thus, we can conceive it as a performative tool intended to maintain or (re-)establish peace, and are unequivocally able to reject (Western) depictions of *bar'a* as a war dance and the tribal society of Yemen as belligerent and impulsive.

Bar'a reveals different intentions in a fluid process of experimentation, adaptation and rejection. The two main aspects of rituals – status stabilization and status transformation – are both inherent in *bar'a*. It is open for multiple meanings and interpretations within a clearly defined ritualistic framework. The Yemeni case illustrates that rituals can be more flexible and can integrate more aspects than is expected per dichotomous thinking. Difference and integration, autonomy and cohesion, seriousness and play, preservation and alteration can interact as complementary, rather than antagonistic, characteristics. The tribal reception ritual in the highlands of Yemen provides space for creativity, individuality, competition and innovation. However, the ludic

elements are not free play, but serve to increase the efficacy of the ritual and thus are a type of social 'work'. In this way, the ritual retains its flexibility and can actively adapt itself to new situations, as is required of Yemen in its current situation.

This dynamic process should be preserved and protected. The rich intangible cultural heritage of Yemen in all its facets may also be used for negotiating peace and reconstruction at a communal level (for example, in peacebuilding from below), also taking into consideration the inner concepts and values of the tribal society of the highlands of Yemen. To protect the rich corpus of ritual and performative practices in Yemen, the placement of *bar'a* on the UNESCO World Heritage list, alongside its architectural and archeological heritage, would be a fitting step towards strengthening and stabilizing Yemeni cultural identity. For such a project, I would be well placed to advocate for and engage in its realization.²¹

Yemenis have a strong national identity, even as local, regional, and tribal identities continue to coexist with national, Arab, or Islamic orientations. These are complementary aspects of a complex identity, which in any given situation can shift from one to the other. Men, while performing *bar'a*, can simultaneously express multiple identities. We may therefore conclude that *bar'a*, as an embodiment of multiple identities, can also be seen as an expression of the current liminal situation of the whole of Yemeni society.

21 It is thanks to the efforts of the French ethnomusicologist Jean Lambert that *ghina' san'ani* (traditional Sana'ani song accompanied by luth, an instrument that also accompanies *raqs*) is currently the only Yemeni performative genre with a place on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage.

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Ulrike Stohrer studied Social Anthropology, History, Theatre-, Film- and Media Sciences, Musicology, and Modern Standard Arabic at the University of Frankfurt/Main. Additionally, she completed training in classical singing at the conservatory of Frankfurt/Main. Her dissertation *Bar'a. Rituelle Performance, Identität und Kulturpolitik im Jemen* [Bar'a – Ritual Performance, Identity and Cultural Policy in Yemen] dealt with the cultural practice of *bar'a* in Yemen and its relevance for tribal, regional, and national identities. Ulrike also does research on material culture, traditional architecture, clothing and consumption.

From 2007 to 2009, she implemented a pilot project at the Institute for Near Eastern Archeology at the University of Frankfurt/Main in the field of applied anthropology on intercultural communication and local identities at an archaeological site in Tell Chuera/Syria. Since 2004, she has regularly lectured at the universities of Frankfurt, Heidelberg, and Marburg. She also works as a teacher for Arabic and as an independent corrector and lector.

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CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. Since its inception, CARPO has retained a strong focus on Yemen and currently implements several Yemen-related projects focusing on peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.

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ISSN 2367-4539

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