

## **“SOAS GOES TO CALAIS” – Perspectives on radical ethnomusicology**

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### **0. PREFACE**

The purpose of this article is to invite musicians and musicologists to consider new methods of research and social action. It is not programmatic. It describes some of the things that we have done, and invites you to join us in developing this kind of work.

In particular you are invited to join us on musical trips of solidarity with the migrants gathered in the French ports of Calais and Dunkirk, and in other gateways of Fortress Europe, which are currently the location of pitched battles over questions of nationhood, bordering, citizenship, identity, belonging and exclusion .

This paper is slowly taking shape, with material being added as our activities develop. It is a work in progress.

Eventually we hope that this work will result in the establishment of “Music Rooms”, as of right, in all places where refugees and migrants are aggregated.

See:

[www.facebook.com/The-Music-Room-Project-Calais-982011138538193/](http://www.facebook.com/The-Music-Room-Project-Calais-982011138538193/)

## 1. RE-MAPPING

The post-imperial map of the world is a place of wars and massacres, fractures, and divisions, and fast-moving re-alliances. This is particularly true in the Middle East (an inadequate and contested term), and as a result whole swathes of territory have become no-go areas for musical researchers. In 2013 our musicians travelled to Iraqi Kurdistan. We were welcomed everywhere we went – dancing with border guards armed with Kalashnikovs, jam sessions with local musicians... We performed in Duhok – a comparative study of dance forms, ours and theirs (notably circle dance). By 2015 this had become the operational territory of ISIS and fundamentalist Islam. No chance for music. And no chance that we can return there for the foreseeable future. <sup>1</sup> [Note 1]

But paradoxically history has made it so that the music comes to us. The great migrant flows, of a kind unseen for decades, are daily bringing refugees from the Middle East in their thousands, coming to Europe by whatever means necessary, to find a safer, happier, more productive and war-free life for themselves and their families.

Many make their way speedily through France to arrive at the port of Calais. Their hope is to reach Britain – which they can only do by illegal means (hanging onto the undersides of container lorries, climbing into freight trucks, hiding, in car boots, strapping themselves to Eurostar trains, or trying to walk the 30 miles of the Channel Tunnel).<sup>2</sup> [Note 2]

Inevitably, however, only a very small percentage manage to achieve the “Crossing” to Britain. The rest remain bottlenecked in Calais in a kind of “no man's land”, subject to municipal humiliation, social exclusion, substantial police violence and racist attacks. They are confined within an area known as the “Jungle” in the sand dunes along the northern sea coast. The Jungle has a paradoxical dual reality – on the one hand a state-organised ghetto which applies the (British and Nazi) logic of the concentration camp; on the other, a liberated space of autonomous self-activity of determined and resourceful peoples. <sup>3</sup> [Note 3]

In a series of visits to Calais we have developed a practice of musical research, co-performance and the creation of significant moments of musical empowerment which we propose as a political and musicological methodology.

Musical activists at SOAS are concerned with mapping. Music crosses borders; it defies nationalisms; it flows through barbed wire and under prison doors. Understanding the flows and charts of musics is a fine field of liberatory possibilities. As we have found, *inter alia*, in our studies of *maqam* systems <sup>4</sup> [Note 4] and in studying the musics of Greece and Turkey. <sup>5</sup> [Note 5]

## 2. OUR MUSICIANS

I am an independent musical researcher operating out of the School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS, London]. My principal fields are the *muwashshah* and *zajal* dance songs of al-Andalus, and the distinctive Greek “urban blues” genre of rebetiko. I also organise the SOAS Arabic Band, the SOAS Ceilidh Band (as both fiddler and dance caller) and the SOAS Rebetiko Band. In related

strands I also organise the “Maqam Project” and the “Kurdish Songbook Project”. All of this intersects with the various forms of radical politics which thrive at SOAS.

Recent years have seen the development at SOAS of a “posse” (*see below*) of overlapping constituencies of people with a shared commitment to political activism and musicality. These people have travelled several times to Calais, with a view to bringing solidarity to the many migrants gathered in that town. We bring our musics, we seek to share in their musics, we see music as a critical potential for empowerment, and we do musicological research. We are diasporic musicking subjects of resistance (*see below*).

### 3. A MOMENT OF MUSICAL “MAPPING”

What follows is an account of a moment from one of our journeys to Calais. In July 2015. At the Syrian Camp, which was later brutally evicted by police, and its residents forced to go and live in the ghetto. <sup>6</sup> [Note 6]

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#### **Mapping the Musical Homeland: An encounter with Syrian migrants – Calais – July 2015**

Diary entry:

“We have done an amazing work. Truly amazing. It will take me a while to describe it.

“We are three. Herself with her fiddle and her juggling clubs; me with my fiddle and the bones; and our artist with her fine-tip black pen, her watercolours and her special Japanese water-brush which, she says, has revolutionised her world.

“I gave a rendezvous to the Syrians that we would be there at noon (they scattering seed-corn on the asphalted roadway in front of their tents, to feed the flighting birds that are their companions). We were late – because we paused for a while at the lighthouse, to lie and the grass and talk of love, life and philosophy. When we arrived, a thickset Syrian was seated on the ground with a cup of warm water, a razor, and a small hand-mirror, shaving in the afternoon sun. With his friends gathered round, he allowed our artist to enter the intimacy of his moment. She began to draw. Sketching with quick, deft movements. She will flesh out the detail later, and wash it with the colours of the moment, because she has a powerful memory for the constituent elements of the visual.

“Perhaps there are twenty persons here. Sleeping in small one- and two-person tents ranged along the loading bay at the Paul Devot Hangar. The eldest is 50-something; the youngest a mere 17; and all of them male. Bare feet showing at the tent doors tell that the men are sleeping during the day, because they spend their nights trying to jump the freight lorries to make their illegal entry into Britain. «Crossing», as they say.

“We exchange banter. Our artist and myself, we have both spent time in Palestine, but our Arabic is rusty. So piece by piece we reconstruct our mental

dictionaries in quickfire exchanges. In passing we are taught in Arabic to curse Bashir al-Assad, a sentiment roundly cheered by all present. And then we fetch out our instruments.

“On previous occasions we have brought *'ud* and *darbuka* drums, and our friends ask where are the drums. The drums will be here next time, I say – and already we know that the next time will be very soon, because all of us know that something special is beginning to happen here.

“We abandon ourselves to a cordial and haphazard mayhem of music, song, dance and juggling. The juggling clubs fly here and there with varying degrees of incompetence, and people enjoy having a go. The juggling balls are more successful, fewer of them dropped. The fiddling tunes are well received. And then someone pulls out a mobile phone and summons up Syrian dance tunes. The men begin to dance – circle dance, strong, vigorous, with a stamping step, *debka*. Then they haul the girls into the line and the dance continues pell-mell, and there is joy and good humour on all sides.

“Now listen to this. Our artist settled on the ground in front of one of the tents, with her sketch-pad at the ready. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed as she gestured to the young men to come close. She made them a suggestion – a thought that came in an instant – that they should describe to her their village, their town, the places that they come from, and she would try to draw those places.

“They began. They started with a mountain. Mountains, in fact. A river was added. Then came some houses, here and there. But even before the houses, aircraft flying in the sky, and bombs dropping down, and policemen moving around, with guns. And then that the houses were – BOOM! – bombed down, destroyed, flattened. Instantly we were transported into a scenario of war. But equally instantly we became aware that these were not generic spaces – it was a single, unitary space, and all these men come from that same single place. They live in the same village. And they are here, in flight, fleeing the horrors of that war and trying to find a better life, where they can earn the money to feed the families that they have left behind. The village is Medinat al-Haarrah. The town is Dara'a.

“By now all these friends are gathered round. More houses are added. And a school, and a restaurant, and olive trees in fields. And then we ask – where are the people? In the bottom corner a child appears. Sprawled on the ground, Dead, With red bloody running from his small body. Seven died here, they tell us. A whole family. Killed during Ramadan, as they ate their evening meal. Our artist hands them the pen: «Tell us the names. Tell us who lived in these houses.» And the men write, in a firm hand and in Arabic, on the roofs of the houses, the names of the families – «the house of Mohammed», «the house of Mahmoud»...

“By now there is an intense, urgent intimacy in the unfolding of history, memory and narration, Mahmoud – young, tall, handsome, in a red running top and a multi-coloured headscarf, leans in on the artist. In his mobile phone he has the photographs – the keepsakes – of his village. He shows the pictures, and detail is added to the drawing, and it grows. But memory is never memory without the

song that accompanies it. Quietly he flicks through the phone-files until he finds what he wants. A song. A song that is his song. A song that is the song of his country, his lived places. Gently he begins to sing. And as he sings, his hand moves across the paper of the sketch-pad, pointing to the landscapes evoked by the song. The olive trees – *zeitoun*; the river – *al-nahr*. Not now, but earlier, he had tears in his eyes as he described these places, and his sense of loss.

“Is it true to say that these men are in mourning? Yes it is. For one of them, his house was bombed flat only two days ago, while he was here. And as this pen-and-ink enactment unfolded we were as much tearful as they were, torn with the inner emotion of the moment. But they are also strong and vigorous in their determination. Today they showed it, instantly and upon a whim, by suddenly and spontaneously constructing themselves into a human pyramid three storeys high. Reaching to the sky and cheering all around. Flashing victory signs, all caught smiling in the viewfinder, and there is Mahmoud the singer, the strong pillar of the second storey.

“Then a sudden switch. Another young man, in a black T-shirt, reached across and took the sketch-pad from our artist's hands. She let it go, gave him the pen, and turned up a fresh page for him. Using my violin case as his table, he set to work. Drawing patiently the same scene, but in his own terms, marking it with his own memories and meanings, in his own voice. Ducks on the river, for instance. And the electricity poles running along the roadside. And, most particularly, the olive trees – each drawn neatly, determinedly, laden with their yearly crop of olives that he will not be there to harvest.

“And by the end of it we know and they know that we have done something sacred here. The ink and colour-wash of the terrain of their homes is a document more precious than money could buy. It sits in your hand pregnant with meanings, and pasts and futures, all with their full charge of horror and hope, of love and pain, of humour and despair. This simple sheet of paper vibrates with an intense psychic energy, like holding a mind-bomb in your hand, like balancing the life-force of a whole community in its beingness and its becoming.”

Here is the link for this moment of musical “mapping”

[https://youtu.be/DUAkP5nz4\\_c](https://youtu.be/DUAkP5nz4_c)

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#### 4. THE MIGRANTS IN CALAIS

I have had many discussions in Calais about the correct term to use for these black and brown people gathered at the harbourside. Local activists have their own distinctive practices, further complicated by the gender requirements of the French language (for instance *exilés/ées* etc). I have opted to use “migrants” for the present paper.

What we know is that these people, travelling huge distances into strange lands and uncertain futures, bring with them, as part of their personal luggage, their *musics*, their *songs*, their *dances*. And we know that, given the opportunity, they

may be prepared to share them with us.

Working with them is part of an exploration of musical intervention, of musical empowerment, and of notions of music, song and dance as fundamental human rights.

#### **(a) Music as a human right**

The Charter of Lampedusa is a charter of rights for migrants, created in 2017 when the full horror of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean came fully into public view.<sup>7</sup> [Note 7] Reading it I was struck by the fact that this very long document contains nothing about music, song and dance. In my view these things are fundamental to agency and to personhood. Within this context I advance the following as a programmatic proposal. Music, song and dance should be regarded as fundamental human rights, and their encouragement should be part of every programme of humanitarian aid for uprooted peoples. As such, they should be inscribed into the Lampedusa charter, and into other similar charters of human rights.

#### **(b) The methodology of the drum**

Our methodology is to create micro-situations, outside of institutionality and beyond the socially expected, in which music, song and dance find free expression. At those moments interflowing flows of communication are enacted. Multilateral conversations. New knowledges emerge, new possibilities of social action are imagined and enacted, new social subjects are formed, and musicological research finds new territories for collecting, archiving, research, propagation and sharing.

The drum (but it could as well be a tin whistle or whatever suits the context) is the key to our method. We bring drums to the migrant camps (recently *bodhran*, *daff*, *darbuka* and *djembe*). We buy generally buy them in London. The drums accompany our wanderings in Calais. The drums are the instigators of conversations with the people that we meet. Sometimes we leave the drums in the camps, as a gift to the people that we have met. The drum is never-failing in its magical potential.

### **5. THE KURDS FROM SULEIMANIYAH**

I am walking down the long (7km) road that leads out of Calais to the Jungle. Not all the migrants are here voluntarily – many of them have driven there by police. Forced marches, with the use of CS gas and beatings. This is a road of encounters. I am here to record the musics of the migrants. I am carrying with me a *darbuka* drum – an Arabic goblet drum. I bought it at Foote's drum shop in London. It is the tool of my methodology. My motto – *mai più senza tamburo*. New, bright, shining in the afternoon sun. From across the road someone whistles to me and I turn to see. Four men, walking back to their home in the Jungle. They gesture to me. They want the drum.

Narrowly avoiding being run down by a truck I go to join them by the wall. They take the drum, all silvery-shiny as it is, and finger it lovingly, getting a sense of

its weight, its balance and its tone. One of the men begins to tap out a rhythm, and then builds it in intensity. His friend with the headscarf joins him, head to head, squatting on the pavement, and with a kind of call and response they sing a song from their home country. A joyous song. I imagine that it is a wedding song. The two men trade lines between each other, crossing and overlapping. The drumming of the younger man is taut and complex. Sometimes they forget the lyrics, but then they recover. And all the while they are laughing, and a burning joy is bright in their faces. Stuff of the homelend. Stuff that is theirs. Stuff that marks their territory in this racist, alien, hostile land. They are happy to have me there, watching and recording as they sing. I ask them what the song is about. They say that it is about nothing really. I ask where they are from. They say they are Kurds, from Suleimaniyah. *C'est tout*. Having sung, they hand the drum back to me and they proceed on their way.

The song is rather precious. It has a raw authenticity that stands out from the confined offerings of the world music industry. Upon my return I ask one of our Kurdish singers to help with the translation. One cannot – she is Kurmanj, and the song is in Sorani. Another manages to provide a translation. The lyrics are erotic, familial, strong, bubbling with energy. I am lucky indeed for this moment of musical enactment. No discussion of matters of copyright, of rights over reproduction, of contractual commitments... they were instantly on their way and untraceable among the milling thousands in the camp. And we remained mutually anonymous to each other – me to them, and them to me.

I draw from this a sense of social empowerment of our singers. And a precious research potential. And an awareness that we have an area of problem as regards publication rights. And also a vibrant living musical object that I am eager to project into the world. A moment where the voiceless suddenly have voice, in an enactment that is of their own making, but one that is willing to be watched by others.<sup>8</sup> [Note 8]

### **The song of the Kurds from Suleimaniyah**

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How has the situation become like this?

How the doctor goes to those who have pain.

Oh, Leila, Leila (my beloved), please come to my corpse.

[Here the singer has difficulty finding the words and says]

Believe me, I can sing.

Oh you, the beautiful girl, who are from Mawlawai Street.

Go on then, you with the red hair, please sing, because I cannot sing...

*Kawi kawi kawi* (Oh the Partridge from Hawara Barza) [a district of Suleimaniyah]

Put your mouth on her breast, it is cool like chilly water

She is wearing a pairs of earrings

I die for those beautiful eyes. She raises them gently

*Kawi kawi kawi* (Oh the Partridge from Hawara Barza) [a district of Suleimaniyah]  
Put your mouth on her breast, it is cool like chill water  
The very beautiful lady is in the city, and I bring her as much money as there are leaves on that tree.  
I die for those beautiful eyes. She raises them gently.  
Oh damn, Aram! Play that drum, you ....  
The very beautiful lady is in the city, and I bring her as much money as there are leaves on that tree.  
I die for those beautiful eyes. She raise them gently.  
Look at the beautiful lady, how she comes along with me. I hope Dod [?] is not taking her from me.

[The song ends. Clapping.]

“Thank you, thank you.”

“Where are you from?”

“Iraq – Iraq – Iraq.”

“Where in Iraq?”

“Suleimaniyah – Kurdistan ....”

[Recorded in Calais – September 2015]

*Translation:* M. Izadpanah <sup>9</sup> [Note 9]

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## 6. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SONG

A few hundred yards from the ferry terminal stands the magnificent Calais lighthouse. A beacon of hope and security that pulses like the heartbeat of this town. A thing of mesmerising beauty, especially when the full moon is rising behind it. At the foot of the lighthouse is where the Syrian refugees have set up their camp. Some of them sleep on the wide covered porch of the church of St Peter and St Paul – the church is disused, opening only for occasional funerals, during which time the migrants agree to move out of sight. Others sleep on the covered loading bay of the Paul Devot warehouse, which ironically is the back part of the workers' cooperative which has been battling (and failing) to save jobs on the old SeaFrance ferries. Here, in full public view, they seemed to have gained temporary respite from persecution. Here we find that song has its possibilities – but also its impossibilities.

### (a) The Syrians stand up for their rights

The previous time we came to the Syrian camp [November 2014], the Syrian migrants were strong and organised. As we came from the ferry we met them at the corner of Salam, the former food distribution area. They had banners and placards, calling on Britain to honour its responsibilities under Europe's refugee resettlement agreements. A demonstration, demanding their rights as refugees. We brought with us two *'uds* and a *darbuka* drum. Directly upon arrival we handed them to the Syrians. One was an *'ud* player himself. He got the feel of the instrument, took the plectrum and ran out some tunes. Then a young man rose to his feet and started to sing, while another accompanied on the *darbuka*. He sang of the shame of Syria in the horrors of war. I filmed, and the camera shot shows him slightly shy, slightly gauche, singing to the four winds and to the skies of freedom. What we know is that this clip has been shared back in the home country. It is a marker, a statement, of “here we are, arrived and also on our way, and determined in our steadfast intention to cross that sea to Britain”. And we left both the drum and the *'ud* with them, as our gift, to do whatever they wished with them.<sup>10</sup> [Note 10]

The young Syrian man sings his song:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XZNaS2145E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XZNaS2145E)

### **(b) A cartography of hope and flight**

The next time [July 2015] we set in motion a different project. A mapping project. A cartography of hope and flight. We have an artist among our posse. She said: «You tell me about your village and I shall draw it.» And so they did. [See above] Our artist transferred the images to paper, and we made a video which tells their poignant story: The video is methodologically innovative, politically creative, and opens the way to future similar work.<sup>11</sup> [Note 11]

### **(c) How can we sing King Alfa's song in a strange land?**<sup>12</sup> [Note 12]

This time, however, [September 2015] the atmosphere has changed. The personnel of the Syrian camp are different. The people we knew last time have moved on – we know that some of them have crossed and are in England by now. Once again we sit with the men. They offer us tea. We talk in desultory fashion of this and that. They are tired, they are borne down by the oppressive weight of their journeys (sometimes on foot and across huge distances) and the viciousness of the technologies being mobilised against them (razor wire that tears your hands – they show the wounds; dogs that terrorise you; police who spray CS gas into your face and leave you prostrate and gasping). We bring out the *'ud*, we bring out the *darbuka*. «No,» they say. And again: «No. We cannot sing. How can you expect us to sing. Our loved ones, our families are dead or dying, we have known only war and misery, we are exiles with nowhere to call home, it is not possible for us to sing.»

There was no contesting this. Indeed the fact seemed obvious. And then another man appears – angry – from his tent and shouts that nobody should make noise with singing and drums, because that will give the police reason to evict them from their makeshift camp. So the ethnomusicologist packs his microphone self-consciously back into its case, and after a little more desultory conversation we

go on our way.

**(d) The Syrian man breaks off his song**

At the Jungle [again, September 2015] the mood is good-humoured. We have brought the drum, and once again it works its magic. It happens that we are next to the queue where people wait for the evening food distribution. A young Egyptian takes the drum and puts out some Egyptian rhythms. A Kuwaiti insists on giving the queue his Kuwaiti rhythms, so he takes the drum and starts to play. By now the whole queue is dancing, swaying to the pulse. Then, when things have quietened a little, a Syrian man comes up. He sees that I have the microphone. He indicates that he wants to sing. He sings of his beloved Syria. But when he gets to the second voice – about the war – his voice falters, the tears begin to come, and he cannot continue. He breaks off his song, hands back the microphone and moves away into the middle distance. <sup>13</sup> [Note 13]

**7. THE EVICTION OF THE SYRIAN CAMP – A DAY OF HORROR**

Elsewhere in town many of the migrant camps in town were evicted by the police during recent months, at the relentless insistence of the mayor. Only the Syrian camp remained. A fluctuating population of a couple of hundred people who have managed to maintain a precarious existence for several years. It has been a bastion of determined resistance – marches, protests, sit-ins and pickets, fighting for their rights..

These people are our friends. We have met them on previous visits.

In early September 2015 I was with them again, and helped them to record an interview in which they call on David Cameron to fulfil his obligations of Syrian refugee settlement. [*See section 11 below*]

On Monday morning the police evicted the Syrian camp. They put the Syrians onto a forced march to the “Jungle”, a state-enforced ghetto located in swampland 7 kilometres north of Calais. The police gassed the migrants. <sup>14</sup> [Note 14]

Upon arrival the police tore up many tents, destroyed refugees’ meagre properties, and several people lost their passports as a result of the police attack. Losing your passport is like losing your life. Once again the police gassed the migrants (this time many Eritreans, including women and children).

You can read the account here, on the Calais Migrant Solidarity website:  
<https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/>

In short, the situation is horrific. And the British government is entirely complicit. Recently British police were sent to Calais to institute anti-migrant measures, and the torment of the migrants in Calais is as much a British responsibility as it is a French responsibility.

Additionally there is a strong build-up of racist and fascist political activity in the area. The National Front would-be presidential candidate Marine Le Pen will be

standing in the regional elections shortly.

The purpose of the rightwing mayor of the town – Natacha Bouchart – is that the several thousand migrants should be driven out of town, into the ghetto, and should be rendered entirely invisible in the town itself.

The parallel with the Nazi ghettoisation of Jews and Roma is not rhetorical.

And just as collectors have made it their business to collect the songs and poems of those ghettos, so we do the same today.

## **8. THE NON-CITIZENS (“*BI DUN*”) FROM KUWAIT**

A diary entry:

“We bring our drums also with interventionist political intent. We know the power of marching drums – our SOAS samba band is a driving force in student demonstrations, generally hemmed by close-marching police as if they too know the power of the drum. Saturday sees a rolling agenda of marches from the Jungle. The migrants refused to be confined to the ghetto. They announce a march into town, which takes them to the Town Hall. They gather at the front steps, their speakers (of various nations) address their compatriots through a loud hailer, and several hundred migrants are seated on the ground. All of this is in bizarre contradiction with the dozen Calais wedding parties who, having solemnised their vows at the Registry office, now wish to be photographed on the selfsame steps. It is notable that the chanting has a circular, overlapping quality, unlike the linear chanting of the traditional left.

“We walk up to the demonstrators. We hand over our *darbuka* drum. It disappears into the melee and reappears on the Town Hall steps, where, in the hands of an expert drummer, it provides a driving pulse for the chanting. The drum is an empowering force in the face of the police who guard the Town Hall. When the migrants are forcibly moved off the steps the drum continues to provide a strong constituting sonority that energises the protest.

“The crucial thing about this encounter was that it highlighted the plight of these left-out-of-account people. They are Kuwaiti (*‘bi dun’* – ‘without status’). Having no citizenship, no papers, no status, they are utterly at the bottom of the list of priorities for aid agencies and refugee resettlers. Brief conversations with them were an introduction to a whole new world of problem, of which we had been unaware – and it was the drum that made these conversations possible.”<sup>15</sup>

[Note 15]

## **9. THE SYRIAN RAP POET**

Each man we met (and for socio-cultural reasons we met only men) had an intensely-crafted personal soundscape, a musicated persona, which preserved being, and was able to reproduce powerful elements of identity. The young Syrian rap poet was a case in point. Our artist was again proposing to the Syrians “You describe to me your village, and I shall draw it.” He didn’t want this. He moved away in the direction of the little tents – but in so doing he took one of

our artist's black-ink pens. Sitting apart, with another friend from Dar'aa, he recounted a little of their tortured journeys to reach Calais. The pain was fiercely and literally embodied – the friend pulled down his trousers and showed me the long purple gashes in his groin, from bombs in the war in Syria. Then the poet bared his forearms – “This,” he said, pointing to similar gashes, “is from Syria. And this,” again pointing, “is from Calais.” A man cut and wounded by David Cameron's kilometres of steel fencing topped with razor wire, that now dominate the Calais shorescape.

These wounds are wounds in which I am complicit – in which we British are complicit. We are answerable somewhere in the realms of human rights. But his pain runs deeper than that. He is a poet of love – of a love momentarily experienced, and then lost – but perennially preserved in memory. He will not tell me his name, nor will he let me photograph his face – at least, not until he makes it «across» to England. But he lets me photograph his arms – and as I watch, he begins to draw. On his own skin. Inscribed directly onto his scars. Graceful lines, extending down to his fingers. Slowly they take shape – and what emerges is a portrait of a young woman with long dark hair. Finally, as the finishing touch, what appears to be flames of passion, and under that he writes the words – “I... need... you...” Written across his knuckles. And then, this done, he recites his poem.

And, as is the manner of young persons who create rap, each phrase, each inflection, each pulse and scansion is intensely crafted, honed, tested and perfected until it becomes his very own and inalienable statement of identity.

All of this passes in a matter of a few minutes, and the pulse of his own personal rhythms makes clear why he declined the use of the *darbuka* drum that I had offered him earlier. And then I came away. With the pictures of his scars, and his drawing, with a half-remembered image of his face, and with the sound-file of his rhymer gem that he had allowed me to record.

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### **The first time I saw your eyes**

The first time I saw your eyes I didn't know how to reach you.  
I became your shadow everywhere you went.  
After you appear I tell you all of me Loves you.  
It's a difficult word. How can I know how to pronounce it?  
How can I draw it?  
I tattoo it on my face when I put it together.  
I had a small dream, the dream of, for a moment, being your lover,  
Your heart desires mine,  
And I take the risk and touch your hand.  
The distance between us went away from that day  
I will protect you for the rest of your life.  
For the sake of your eyes, I draw your name on my hand as a tattoo.  
Cheated, gone, lost,

Willing to accept to be with you [to 'live' you] in the most beautiful dream.  
I grabbed a paper and a pen, I started to express, to write,  
Believe me I won't lie,  
An angel from the high skies, sent to me by Allah,  
Until my life became sweet and my future sweeter.

[A rap poem by a young un-named Syrian poet from Dar'aa.]

Recorded at Calais harbourside, September 2015.<sup>16</sup> [Note 16]

[*Translation*: Sara Bazouk]

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## 10. YA BRITANIYA...

The author of this next song did not wish to be filmed yesterday. Rightly so. He was unshaven. So we come back today. He would like to show us his song. He sits down and begins to write out the verses, in Arabic. He illustrates each verse with a little picture – a boat, a train, his fellow travellers on the road. The song is about their journey from Syria. The journey across the sea was like a film, he says – it was very dangerous. Then the train through Serbia. And then on their group, going all day and all night, moving very quickly. They got very tired, but they carried on. Their destination is Britain – hence the refrain “Britanya, Britanya”. He explains how the song came about. He wrote it for a bit of fun. When you are walking, walking, you talk, and you get depressed. When you have a song, it makes the time pass more lightly. It is a marching song – it has an initial refrain; the rhyme of the initial refrain is then taken up in three triplet verses; and each verse ends with a reiteration of part of the refrain.

Of course the song has value as a musical and social document in its own right. But it also has historical value. It was only when I returned to London that I realised a remarkable fact. For some time I have been proposing that the arrival of the medieval verse forms of Andalus into Europe had some relationship with processional and pilgrim song. Having studied the manuscript of our friend's poem I realised that the song is in fact in the classical Andalus form of the *zajal*. A *zajal* functioning, precisely, as processional song. A precious research insight for the historical ethnomusicologist, for whom practical research insights are a rarity. Down-in-the-dirt historical research is vindicated.

## YA BRITANIYA...

*Chorus*:

Britain! Britain! You're held in high esteem (lit. You're on the eye) O, Britain!  
O, Lass. By Allah! Tell me: What is the situation on police taking fingerprints  
in Hungary?

Woe and woe to me, because of the boat Our journey has become like a film	It almost killed us, that boat. all for the sake of Britain.
Woe and woe to me, because of the train We walked day and night	the youth of our group are like fire. to enter Britain.
Woe and woe to me, because of Serbia* We met the best people with Britain.	we crossed its border as a group*. and we are happy, god willing,

\* “صرب” (Serbians) and “سيرب” (squadron/group, invoking war) rhyme in Arabic but they do not in English.

**Transliteration:**

*Chorus:*

Breetania breetania ‘al’ain yaa breetania  
Yaa bnayya billaahi qooleeli esh wad’ basmati hingaria

Yaa wayli wayli min l-balam raad iymawwitna hal-balam.  
Rihlatna saarat ka-l-filim kullu kurmaal breetania

Yaa wayli wayli min l-qitaar shabaab qroobna mithl l-naar.  
Wi-hnaa masheena layl m’a nhaar hatta nfoot breetania.

Yaa wayli wayli min-s-sirib ‘abarna hdooda wa-kinnaa sirib.  
Wi-ltaqaina b-‘atyab sha’ib wi-mkayfeen bi-‘ithn allah ‘a-breetania.

Recorded at the Syrian camp, Calais lighthouse, September 2015.<sup>17</sup> [Note 17]

**11. THE MICROPHONE CHANGES HANDS – A MESSAGE FOR DAVID CAMERON**

Mustafa, who wrote the “Song of the Road” and recorded it for us, took his chair round to the other side of the hedge, opposite the Paul Devot warehouse, and beckoned me to follow him. We sat for a while, and the conversation was vacuous and definitely boring. Indeed life at Paul Devot – Le Quai des Syriens, as it is known locally – is definitely boring. It consists mainly of sitting and waiting till the night when crossings might be more possible, or wandering off in solitary attempts to find a bit of fence that could be crossed, and snoozing or sitting in their little green and blue tents that line the loading bay. The lads – the *shabab* – are looking for amusement.

I see Mustafa looking at my microphone. He reaches across, picks it up, and tries it for size. Then he picks up my headphones and puts them on. Then he snuggles the Marantz recorder – a thing of subtlety and beauty – into his hand. All of a sudden he has taken on the persona of a reporter. “A BBC correspondent”, as he says. Confident and easy in his role. Whereupon he summons his compatriots to come across and be interviewed.

When I say compatriots I mean that not only are they from the same country –

Syria – they are also from the same town – Dar'aa, where the rising against Bashar al-Assad began in 2011. Many of them have travelled across together, making the sea crossing and then travelling overland by various means to reach the North Sea and this crossing point to England. Many of them already have their families in England, and they want to join them. The sense of fraternity is intense.

In a recent paper I referred to the microphone as part of the extractive industries. It is a tool of extraction.<sup>18</sup> [Note 18] It is a tool of power, and of those who have power. As such, its practices and its ethics have to be problematised and subjected to critique. In much the same way that the traditional colonial mining industries are now subject to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. For this reason I am endlessly cautious about what my microphone is, and what it does, and the power that it represents. What has happened here is a *bouleversement*, a reversal of the traditional roles. Mustafa has the microphone, he frames the questions, he organises the conceptual presumptions of the discourse, and he makes the moment his own.

And what comes out – good-humoured, powerful, and above all non-victimist – is a strong message from the Syrians of Calais to David Cameron, delivered uncompromisingly in the Arabic language, that he must sit up and listen to the voice of this tide of humanity that is sweeping across Europe. The Syrians are coming to England, and by whatever means they can find, whether legal or illegal. We do not want to die in the attempt. Open your borders and do what you have to do.<sup>19</sup> [Note 19]

## 12. DIASPORIC MUSICATING SUBJECTS OF RESISTANCE

I often find myself thinking about the Hungarian composer, musicologist, pianist and anti-fascist Béla Bartók. He was a musical researcher. He travelled in the field collecting folk song. He recorded, transcribed and archived that material, using the mechanical recording devices of his day, and then took that material and reworked it as the basis for his own compositions, which he then had the capacity to perform. As recorder, transcriber, archiver, composer and performer he was more than just a musician – he was a fully integrated «musicating subject», and as such was remarkable in his own time. .

Today the developments in digital technology have massified the possibility for people worldwide to become musicating subjects in their own right. The remarkably endowed individual has become a massively enabled social subject. Those capacities are within reach of all of us. The smartphone makes Béla Bartóks on the street corner.

In our own intentionality (“music beyond borders”; “music against borders”) we recognise our own musical identities as hybrid compositions pieced together from around the world and beyond the constraints of nationhood. We have moved beyond the convulsive creation of nations through music. We recognise the hybridity in us, the hyphenated identities. A bit of this and a bit of that. We are proud of this fact. We are diasporic.

And by the nature of the times that we inhabit, we are dissident, antagonistic, contestational, breakers of old moulds, seeking to find new institutionalities for the creation of a better world. Creating ourselves as new social subjects – subjects of resistance, who seek like-minded persons with whom to aggregate and to build.

As ethnomusicologists we are, in short, “diasporic musicating subjects of resistance”.

### **13. THE MUSIC ROOM – A PROJECT FOR 2016**

SOAS has a good history of making radical and creative spaces. In 2010, in the middle of the student mini-riot in Parliament Square, ‘Penny Red’ tweeted: “SOAS have set up a kettle cafe! With a little tent selling tea and cake for pennies! I love SOAS.” And then the famous SOAS Yurt... and then the Ramadan Tent...

Our radical ethnomusicology work with migrants has convinced us of the value – indeed the necessity – of establishing spaces for musicating activities.

In 2016 we are launching the project of “The Music Room”.

To be established in all refugee camps and places of people in migration. As of right. Namely the inderogable right of peoples to music, dance and song.

The Music Room is a physical space and also an intentionality. As a physical space it can be as simple as a couple of sheets of plastic with supports, or as complex as the high-sided wooden octagon that we are hoping to build in the Calais jungle. It may be temporary – just for a day – or permanent – lasting through centuries. Its intention is to provide a defined space for musicating. The Music Room will fulfil the following functions:

- \* The provision of musical instruments, supplied through charity donations;
- \* The provision of a safe physical space in which the songs, music and dance of the homeland can express themselves;
- \* A space for the recording and filming of song, music and dance, if possible in studio conditions, for eventual distribution, for archiving, and for future enjoyment;
- \* A space in which the teaching and learning of national and ethnic musics can take place – a space of participatory co-research, engaging accomplished musicians, musical amateurs, researchers, and with a particular emphasis on the musical empowerment of children and young people.
- \* A space in which the accompanying totalities of music – people’s life narratives – can find expression. The telling of personal and community stories. A process of coming to terms with experiences of migration and exile, of possible healing, and also of empowerment;

We are hoping that the first embodiment of the “Music Room” concept will be in the jungle of Dunkerque in Northern France, where a very large population of Iraqi Kurds (1,500+) is living in appalling conditions in woodland on the outskirts of town. In honour of the struggles of the Kurdish people, the room will be framed as the “Kobane Musical Academy”. It will provide a space for the performance, learning and archiving of Kurdish song.

This will be a first experimental approach, extending the work of the “Kurdish Songbook Project @ SOAS”.<sup>20</sup> [Note 20] On the basis of what we learn in Dunkerque the Music Room project will then be developed as a template that can be applied in other refugee and migrant situations. Possibly in Lesbos, where SOAS people are currently volunteering. And later to be developed in Kobane [Rojava / Northern Syria].



*This is the design that we have in mind – a migrants' information point in the Calais Jungle designed by Charpentiers sans Frontières and built by volunteer labour in December 2015*

#### **14. ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOAS**

Confronted with the upcoming Centenary of SOAS in 2016 we are more inclined to critique than to celebrate the past hundred years of our school, and we are particularly interested to create a good blueprint for the *next* 100 years.

The SOAS school motto is “Knowledge is Power”. It is inscribed in a scroll subtending the shield of the City of London, which in turn is topped by what appears to be the Lion of Judah (we ask ourselves why) and attended on each side by a camel and an elephant. Both rampant, and both looking distinctly uncomfortable.<sup>21</sup> [Note 21]

We read “Knowledge is Power” within the known colonial history of SOAS, producing administrators and intelligence personnel for the management of Empire.

[The people who produced those straight-line maps of the post-WWI Middle Eastern states which, for example, have denied the Kurds nationhood etc etc]

“Knowledge is Power” – a Baconian notion that has been challenged by various schools of thought – feminist and otherwise.

John Holloway (working around Antonio Negri) has elaborated the distinction.<sup>22</sup>  
[Note 22]

Power with a big P – “Power” – is THEIR power. It is “power over”. In Latin it is *potestas*. In Italian it is *potere*. In French it is *pouvoir*. We reject that power, and on all occasions we attempt to subvert it – not least where big-p Power is in the motto of our School.

On the other hand power with a small p – “power” – is OUR power. It is «power to». In Italian it is “*potenza*”. In French it is “*puissance*”. It is potentiality and new constitution. We celebrate that power, and we attempt to build it on all possible occasions.

*Potenza* and *puissance* have their root in *POSSE*, the Latin verb meaning TO BE ABLE. Historically it is also a word for a group of like-minded people committed to courses of action. Poss-ibility. We are posse.

Our future programmes can be structured around notions of building POSSE. This implies ways of seeing things, and also ways of doing things, and also ways of living our lives in different ways. Imaginative, creative, subversive, the self-construction of new social subjects.<sup>23</sup> [Note 23]

I would add that POSSE also engages LOVE. We are about love and activism, activism and love. Plus, of course, music, song and dance. Which is the subject of the present paper

We are also attracted to another proposition, an additional element for the above equations. Namely JUNGLE. Jungle as autonomous spaces of liberatory activity, a pulsing invigorating set of resistances and possibilities. Some of us have been working in jungles.

In short, POSSE, LOVE and JUNGLE as the watchwords that guide our upcoming forays into musical activism.

And of course the politics of ethnomusicology.<sup>24</sup> [Note 24]

All persons of integrity, musicality and good will are invited to join us on our future solidarity trips across the English Channel.

## 15. POSTSCRIPT: “SOAS GOES TO CALAIS – OCTOBER 2015”

Brief report-back:

On the weekend of 30 October to 2 November 2015 a posse of people from SOAS (about 30 of us) went to Calais in Northern France, a voyage of solidarity with the thousands of migrants who are stuck in that town trying to get to Britain. They live in an overcrowded camp on the sand dunes, called the “Jungle”.

One aspect of our trip was musical. We are working with the notion that music, song and dance are a fundamental HUMAN RIGHT, and should be formally recognised as such.

We also see music, song and dance as a special way towards empowerment of people who otherwise have little or no power – as is the case of the migrants in Calais.

Music makes a stand. Music resists oppression. Music is fundamentally subversive – it flows through borders, over barbed wire, under prison doors. Music mixes, spreads and blends and hybridises with joyous promiscuity.

During our trip we were able to make several short music videos with people in the camp.

Here are four of them. They are rather wonderful. Furthermore they are conceived within a perspective of radical ethnomusicology (of which more anon).

1. Sarwar Mahmud is Kurdish from Suleimaniyah (Iraq). He sang a piece with our santur player providing the accompaniment. You will find the clip here:

<https://youtu.be/AO6U6ujgfc>

2. An unnamed singer from Iraq also sang a song with our santurist. You will find the clip here:

<https://youtu.be/FqxJWqePYNA>

3. On Saturday evening, on the “high street” in the middle of the camp, Iranian Kurds had taken over the space (when passing cars allowed), and they did a vigorous Kurdish dance, while other nationalities in the camp looked on. A strong moment. You will find them here:

<https://youtu.be/bSD0RqbomDk>

4. And another remarkable recording of Sarwar Mahmud, with a vocal improvisation in the middle:

<https://youtu.be/UwiwhhhT2Sk>

The point about these videos is that they offer a window onto the joys and

beauties of life in the Jungle. Too often people on the outside have a victimist view of the Jungle. In fact the place is full of energy, creativity, constructive activity and undying hope. It is so important to remember this.

We shall continue to build our musical activities in the Jungle.

We are planning to a series of return trips return to Calais. We hope to bring Arabic and Kurdish musicians and singers from Britain to do concerts in the Jungle. If you wish to join one of these trips please write to:

[soascalais@soas.ac.uk](mailto:soascalais@soas.ac.uk)

In addition to the musical activity, there will be plenty of scope for practical helping in the camp. Cooking, cleaning, helping with clothing distribution etc. Willing hands are always needed.

We are also beginning to build towards creating a «**MUSIC FESTIVAL OF THE MIGRANTS**» [Fête Musicale des Migrants], to be held in Calais on 20 June 2016. That is the date of World Refugee Day. It is also the day before France's national music day. Ironic counterpoint.

All musicians from everywhere are invited to come to Calais for that day.



*Police evict migrants' camp – Calais – October 2015*

[Ends]

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## REFERENCES

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- <sup>1</sup> SOAS Ceilidh Band tour to Iraqi Kurdistan:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=41B8cVremEY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41B8cVremEY)
- <sup>2</sup> BBC report on migrants in Calais: <https://youtu.be/CkE1ij84Pnc>
- <sup>3</sup> Link to online article by Vice; also link to Calais Migrant Solidarity website at <https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/>
- <sup>4</sup> Maqam Project @ SOAS website:  
[www.youtube.com/user/MaqamProject/videos](http://www.youtube.com/user/MaqamProject/videos)
- <sup>5</sup> SOAS Rebetiko Band website: [www.youtube.com/user/SOASRebetikoBand](http://www.youtube.com/user/SOASRebetikoBand). See also the film by Bulgarian film-maker Adela Peeva, *Whose Is This Song*.  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGCURBHF2Ss](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGCURBHF2Ss)
- <sup>6</sup> *Guardian* video and report: [www.theguardian.com/world/video/2015/sep/22/french-police-use-teargas-on-refugees-in-calais-video?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2015/sep/22/french-police-use-teargas-on-refugees-in-calais-video?CMP=share_btn_fb)
- <sup>7</sup> Charter of Lampedusa: [www.lacartadilampedusa.org/](http://www.lacartadilampedusa.org/)
- <sup>8</sup> Link to the audio account of this moment: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03941tf>
- <sup>9</sup> Video of the Iraqi Kurds singing – Calais 6.ix.2015: <https://youtu.be/jfB93aPdPgI>
- <sup>10</sup> Video of young Syrian singing: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XZNaS2145E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XZNaS2145E)
- <sup>11</sup> Link to “A Cartography of Flight and Hope”: [https://youtu.be/DUAKP5nz4\\_c](https://youtu.be/DUAKP5nz4_c)
- <sup>12</sup> King Alfa's song. Bob Marley, “Rivers of Babylon”, citing *Psalms* 137?
- <sup>13</sup> The moment was filmed but not published.
- <sup>14</sup> Police gas migrants: [www.theguardian.com/world/video/2015/sep/22/french-police-use-teargas-on-refugees-in-calais-video?](http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2015/sep/22/french-police-use-teargas-on-refugees-in-calais-video?)
- <sup>15</sup> Kuwaiti stateless persons (“bi dun”) information pages:  
[www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/26/kuwaits-plan-pawn-its-stateless](http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/26/kuwaits-plan-pawn-its-stateless)  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-14185365>
- <sup>16</sup> Young Syrian from Dar'aa recites his rap poem. This clip has not yet been posted.:
- <sup>17</sup> The Syrian poet singing his 'Britaniya' – Calais 6.ix.2015:  
<https://youtu.be/hIX1bDqgXbw>
- <sup>18</sup> Regarding extractive industry, see Ed Emery – “The Kurdish Songbook Project 2014-15: The right to song, and a model for radical ethnomusicology”

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– paper presented at Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum, City University, London, 22 May 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Link to video file of Syrian migrants’ interview: <https://youtu.be/1n5ta75XoDg>

Also: [www.facebook.com/arabicmusicsoas](http://www.facebook.com/arabicmusicsoas)]

<sup>20</sup> Kurdish Songbook Project @ SOAS:  
[www.youtube.com/channel/UCaZTz1AnY7co2fhBHFXY4TA](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaZTz1AnY7co2fhBHFXY4TA)

<sup>21</sup> *Ipsa scientia potestas est* – Dubious attribution. SOAS coat of arms.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:SOAS\\_Crest.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:SOAS_Crest.jpg)

<sup>22</sup> John Holloway, *Beyond Power*, see <https://libcom.org/library/chapter-3-beyond-power>

<sup>23</sup> Our repertoire of life techniques includes juggling (sometimes with fire), busking in the streets, flashmob dance moments, poi performance, impromptu song in resonating spaces, collective cooking, graphic art, video, photography...

<sup>24</sup> It would be naive to think of music and musicology as areas set aside from the practices of power. At SOAS, for instance, from about 2010, there is ample case history to indicate a concerted attempt at Israelification of the activities of the Music Department – music as the soft underbelly of British liberalism, whereby the apartheid Israeli state could sidestep the wave of international wave of revulsion at its occupation and exclusion of the Palestinians. This was eventually seen off, and in 2014 a widely canvassed referendum vote of the whole of SOAS (students, academics, admin personnel and cleaning staff included) voted in favour of the academic boycott of Israel.

<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/rana-baker/londons-soas-backs-israel-boycott-referendum-landslide>



*The SOAS crest*

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