

# "Community Art Practices from a Multilinguistic and Intercultural Lens for Intercultural Dialogue in the EuroMed Region"

(Arabic and Turkish languages)

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## **Abstract:**

Most research locates the emergence of community arts to 1960, as the practice emerged in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia. However, community art practices have traces that have not been fully documented and researched in the past and present of various languages and cultures. This research paper relies on desk research and participatory research methods such as participatory observations and participatory interviews to unpack the meaning of community arts in the history and the present in Arabic and Turkish linguistic and cultural contexts. The findings address the common aspects of community arts in matters of space or ceremonies via desk research, such as the concept of SAMAR as the art of community conversations in the Arabic language or Mahalle in the Turkish language as social units to converse between community members on socio-political issues where arts could take place too. The art of story-telling Al Hakawati in the Arabic cultural context and the Karagöz plays in Turkish cultural contexts have factors that connect arts to community in matters of community gatherings for dialogue through theatre and the art of storytelling addressing and reflecting on socio-political issues. This research paper also presents key findings about current community art practices from the lens of its practitioners, who speak Arabic and/or Turkish and use community arts for social inclusion, community building, or socio-political dialogue. Therefore, the paper provides important insights into community arts for community building, social inclusion, and socio-political and intercultural dialogue from an intercultural and multilinguistic lens.

*Keywords: community arts, intercultural dialogue, Arabic language, Turkish language.*

## Unpacking the concept of community arts in Arabic and Turkish languages and cultural contexts through desk research

The Arabic word فَنّ (fann), which means art in English, has multiple interpretations. The word "industry" was used to describe art. In the Al Waseet dictionary, art is defined as a set of rules specific to a craft or industry. Photography, music, and poetry are examples of techniques used to elicit feelings and emotions, particularly a sense of beauty. It is a skill determined by taste and talent, and the artist is the person with artistic talent, such as a poet, writer, musician, photographer, or performer (Bin Ahmed Al-Shami, 2015). Music, for example, fell under the category of industry. For example, Ibn Khaldun<sup>1</sup> defined music as creating melodies and balanced poems that divide sounds into predictable proportions. The Arabic language also uses the term "arts" to refer to various scientific disciplines (Çetinkaya, 2021). One example is Ibn Aqeel's book, "Al-Funun," which was four hundred volumes long and covered many of the sciences popular at the time (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). In the Al Wasset dictionary, the word "fan" has different interpretations, which can be summarised as follows: Art can be defined as a type or state of something, a strategy for stimulating people's thoughts or feelings, a way to decorate, or a method for mastering a speech. "Altafanon bel Kalam" combines the arts and speech, referring to the mastery of speech (*Dictionnaire al-Wassit - Arabe/Arabe - المعجم الوسيط*, n.d.).

SAMAR is an Arabic word that means "to sit together in conversation at sunset or in the evening." It is also a form of community art that promotes participation and collaboration among people of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences (Gohil, 2023). SAMAR provides an opportunity to unwind, relax, and forget about the stresses of daily life. It provides an opportunity to connect with others on a deeper level and strengthen bonds. SAMAR also honours life's simple pleasures, like good food, drink, music, and company. Therefore, it connects community building in sociable contexts.

Some research on community arts in Arabic associates the term with modern arts-based interventions for social problems (Obeidat, 2021). In Arabic history, there is the "Al Hakawati", which is the art of storytelling. It is a well-known traditional art of storytelling that was used to engage the audience in reflecting on sociopolitical issues (Al-Gharbawi, 2023). "Al Hakawati" is described as revolutionary art in the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Khaldoun, a 14th-century Arab scholar, developed a sophisticated theory of civilizations' rise and fall, analyzed economics, sociology, and political science, and served as a diplomat and teacher.

traditional theatrical style. This is because the storyteller's dynamic performances are more engaging for the audience than traditional theatrical settings. This aspect of audience engagement is critical to community arts and advocacy for social and political issues.

In Turkish, the word "art," which reads "Sanat," has multiple meanings, as does Arabic. Which among them are all the rules that must be followed in order to master a particular profession, all the methods used in the expression of emotion, design, beauty, and so on, or the superior creativity that emerges as a result of this expression, and expression created in accordance with the understanding and taste standards of a specific civilization or community (Habertürk, 2024). Arabic has similar definitions for expression and mastering a craft. Furthermore, the Turkish language includes the context of rules associated with specific communities based on their culture.

The Turkish term "topluluk sanatları" means community arts. In Turkish culture, a "mahalle," which means "neighbourhood" or "quarter," is an example of community space. Mahalle are social units that reflect Turkish urban life's diversity and solidarity. It is a place where people share common values, traditions, and interests while participating in various cultural and artistic activities (*Mahalle@İzmir*, 2020). Mahalle also inspires many Turkish artists, who use it to express their identity, creativity, and social commentary on current events. For example, Ayse Erkmen is an installation artist who creates works that interact with architectural and environmental spaces. She frequently employs materials and objects relevant to the local context and culture, such as carpets, boats, and water pipes. She also involves the public in her work by inviting them to interact with the installations or participate in the performances (Zarastro Art, 2023).

Karagöz plays are a type of shadow theatre that is traditionally performed in Türkiye. It was named after its main character, a humorous and mischievous folk figure. These plays are created on the spot from situations that depict how people lived socially and culturally in the Ottoman Empire and the states that followed it. Puppets are held on rods in front of a light source, and their shadows appear on a cotton screen. People enjoy watching the Karagöz during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. These plays form part of Türkiye's intangible cultural heritage. People in Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia also enjoy these plays, which have been adapted to suit the languages and situations of each location. The Karagöz plays are a type of community art that employs humour and satire to educate, reflect, entertain and criticize political structures (Dinçel, 2010). Research on art and community in Türkiye emphasized the sociopolitical impact of art on political institutions. Hence, community art in the Turkish context is linked to sociopolitical advocacy and

censorship imposed on artists who advocate for social progress towards democracy (Köksal, 2004). Scholars also addressed how artists may face pressure to ally and even advocate for repressive regimes, which can be referred to as cooptation (Geybullayeva, 2022). In both scenarios, the connection between art and the community's socio-political context is present and strong. Sunur and Atlyi (2018) investigated how arts and sports in Türkiye contribute to social polarisation; however, the authors also discussed recommendations and the potential of arts for social cohesion and community building beyond polarised images.

Finally, the word art has a connotation of impact on beholders or receivers of art as a space for community gatherings in Arabic and Turkish. "Community arts" is sometimes synonymous with modern arts in Arabic. In Turkish, community arts are sometimes associated with celebrating cultural identities. Some studies also investigate the relationship between the arts and social-political issues in Arabic and Turkish cultural contexts. Furthermore, there are clear examples of phenomena in Turkish and Arabic art and cultural contexts that celebrate art as a tool for community building and reflecting on sociopolitical issues through theatre and storytelling.

### **Participatory research with practitioners of community art practices in the Arabic language**

1. Participatory interview with Reeman. Reeman comes from Syria and lives in Ankara, Türkiye. As she was in Syria, Reeman was part of the Salam community arts group, which was advocating to eliminate all forms of prejudice and stereotypes against people with disabilities. Being a refugee and a wheelchair user herself, as well as a performing artist, Reeman had her own interpretations of community arts in the Arabic language. Since moving to Türkiye in 2011, Reeman has advocated for intercultural and social dialogue through performing arts in both workshops and performances. Unpacking the expression of community arts in Reeman's work mainly relies on building a community by creating an alternative reality through performing arts and role-playing. The performing art techniques provide a veil to discuss topics that are otherwise hard to discuss in broader society, such as ethnic discrimination and xenophobia that intersect with ableism. Reeman's work in performing arts tackles the social barriers to social cohesion and intercultural dialogue between various communities in Ankara in terms of disabilities, gender, socio-economic backgrounds, and age as intersecting factors. Therefore, the artist addresses community arts as tools and platforms where art can build communities by rising above all forms of prejudice and stereotyping.

2. Participatory interview with Ali Shabhar. Ali Shabhar comes from Aleppo City in Syria. He started his journey as a decoration designer and, afterwards, started his work in theatre. He studied musical theatre, connecting to Al-Rahabna School<sup>2</sup>. Currently, Ali lives in Ankara. Ali worked with professional artists and amateurs. He perceives community art as any form of art that tackles social issues. He identifies his work as a form of community art. He recalls precisely his work on remembering the Palestinian struggle for freedom. Ali also worked on social issues, such as combating smoking as a harmful habit for society and the environment. He distinguishes between the flow of subjects in his community art practices before and after the Syrian revolution. In all types of his work, Ali identifies his practice as a community art practice due to two factors: 1. tackling socio-political causes that concern humanity and 2. giving space for critical thinking and for the audience to get engaged in finding answers through the piece of art. Ali gives an example of one of his proposals for community theatre, which has not been realized yet due to limited financial resources. His proposal comes from the struggle refugees coming from Syria face while living in Ankara. His proposal relies on music and frozen images<sup>3</sup> to combat the narrative of otherness against refugees and stimulate empathy between people, regardless of language and ethnicity. From Ali's perception, what distinguishes community arts from other forms of arts is the power of community arts in building and enhancing communities beyond language and other potential separation factors, as well as providing a space for critical thinking and audience engagement.

### **Participatory research with practitioners of community art practices in the Turkish language**

1. Participatory interview with Neslihan Noyan. Neslihan is an Ikebana artist and a board member of the Japanese Music and Art Association in Türkiye. The artist hosts exhibitions, presentations, and interactive workshops on Ikebana that are open to everyone, regardless of background. Neslihan refers to her Ikebana work as a community art practice because it promotes intercultural learning between Turkish and Japanese cultures. It provides interactive platforms for building communities through collective healing. Neslihan refers to Wabi-Sabi, the Japanese art of impermanence, which is "treating each moment like a present" as a way for collective healing. In her book "Sakura Says," the concept of community building is led by the main character, the flower "Sakura." This non-anthropocentric concept is similar to

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<sup>2</sup> [The Rahbani school, a prominent Arab art school, has a profound impact on Lebanon's history and future. The school, consisting of Asi, Mansour, and Fairouz, has a unique approach to art, focusing on bringing joy, love, and patriotism to the hearts of its students.](#)

<sup>3</sup> frozen images is part of forum theater. It is a technique where performers freeze at a critical moment in the scene, and then ask the audience to comment on what they see, what they think, and what they would do differently.

the politics of nature<sup>4</sup> in which humans and nature are treated equally in a given community. Neslihan's work in Ikebana contributes significantly to the identification of community arts as practices for intercultural dialogue, community building, collective healing, and the pursuit of peace enabled by nature. The flowers of Ikebana in Neslihan's work provide alternative platforms for people to rediscover new ways of communicating with society and with themselves. Community arts can be defined as art practices that address social issues that affect specific communities. However, Neslihan's Ikebana arts practice has the potential to redefine social issues as universal issues in which nature and humans coexist equally through intercultural and non-anthropocentric learning.

2. Participatory observation<sup>5</sup> of dancing workshops by Ankara Sanat Kulübü.

The Ankara Dancing Club (Ankara Sanat Kulübü) is a voluntary organisation founded by various volunteers, including Engineer Türker Demir.

The group employs traditional Turkish folk music and dance to foster communication and community building between and among various social groups, including children with mental disabilities or illnesses, as well as cancer patients.

The selection of music and dance movements is not coincidental.

It is based on the diverse traditional and folk music of Ankara.

Reflecting on community arts as practices for community building, healing, and advocating for social issues, Ankara Dance Club's workshops fall into this category because they provide an interactive environment for people from various social backgrounds to interact, communicate, and form bonds.

The dancing workshops also promote the inclusion and integration of children with mental disabilities and people who are vulnerable due to cancer.

Ankara Dance Club's approach to community arts does not incorporate the concept of co-creation.

However, it focuses on the concept of community building and advocating for the inclusion of social groups who are vulnerable in the larger community as a result of illness or the social stigma associated with illness.

## **Research findings**

Community arts as an expression carries various implications and potentials in Arabic and Turkish languages and cultural contexts. Tracking and investigating how art enables communities and vice versa provides a rich environment to research this

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<sup>4</sup> The politics of nature, according to the philosopher Latour, is not about managing or protecting nature, but rather about integrating the sciences into democracy.

<sup>5</sup> Participatory observation is a research method where the researcher joins a group of people and observes their behavior, interactions, and practices, while also participating in their activities

phenomenon further. As a term in Turkish and Arabic languages, the meaning of art has varied over the years, from describing an industry, science, or mastering one's profession to creative expressions and an agent of social empathy and awareness. In Arabic language and cultural contexts, some research links community arts to modern arts; however, there are also traditional artistic phenomena that embody the values of arts for the community in terms of enabling people to address and reflect on communal socio-political issues, such as the art of storytelling, which is known as "Al Hakawati" in Arabic, or the Karagoz theatre plays that entertain, provoke, and reflect on socio-political scenarios from the past to the present in the Turkish context. This research also unpacked the concept of community arts from the lens of its practitioners, who come from Syria and Türkiye and are currently living in Türkiye. Some things in common between Turkish and Arabic-speaking community art practitioners are the use of art to build communities, facilitate intercultural dialogue, reflect on socio-political issues and the mutual need to debunk prejudices and stereotypes, such as using the performing arts for inclusive dialogue to combat ableism and ethnic-based discrimination. In conclusion, community arts are strongly present as practices in Arabic and Turkish languages and cultural contexts that arise from the need for social inclusion, advocacy for human rights, collective healing, and justice. It is also a phenomenon in different stages of Arabic and Turkish history, where art engaged communities in socio-political reflections and discussions.

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