

REPORT

Transient communities: The case of a refugee choir in the Catholic church of Lesbos

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ABSTRACT

For many refugees fleeing conflict in the Middle East and Africa, the Greek island of Lesbos is the first point of entry into the European Union. However, due to an agreement between the European Union and Turkey declared in March of 2016, people crossing the Aegean Sea without formal travel documents would be detained on the Greek islands until their asylum applications were examined. This bureaucratic slowdown trapped refugees on Lesbos for months and years of unknown waiting. At the same time, the arrival of refugees from various African countries led to a flourishing of the small Catholic church in the capital city, Mytilene. In 2017, a parish choir was established by Congolese refugees with the purpose of providing a refuge to members who sought a sense of community, spirituality, and normality. Through interviews, participatory observation, and polyvocal ethnography, we address the following research areas: the importance of spirituality in the lives of refugees, how participation in the choir helped them to feel a sense of community, and the use of choral singing as a form of integration. More specifically, we discuss how the refugee-initiated autonomous aspect of the choir created an environment in which each member had a personal stake in developing and caring for the choir community as a whole. As a majority of the interviewees felt that singing for God was the highest purpose, participation in this choir helped members connect to their faith while also giving a much-needed sense of purpose in uncertain times.

KEYWORDS

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Jennifer Sherrill holds bachelor's and master's degrees in vocal performance and pedagogy from Northern Illinois University and North Park University. She taught and performed throughout the Chicagoland area as a jazz and classical singer for over 20 years. She directed youth and community choirs and cofounded the Thousand Mile Choir, a choir premised on representing the many musical cultures of the members.

Since 2017, she has worked with multiple musical NGOs on the island of Lesbos and on multiple occasions, has served as a temporary director of the choir at the Assumption of Mary Catholic Church, Lesbos. Jennifer is currently pursuing a PhD in ethnomusicology at the University of California, Davis. [jlsherrill@ucdavis.edu] **Antonis Ververis** was born in Athens and brought up on the island of Lesbos, Greece. He studied musicology and music education at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and sociology at the University of the Aegean. In addition, he received graduate degrees from Roehampton University, UK, and Lynchburg College, USA in choral education and choral conducting, respectively. He holds a PhD from Aristotle University where he carried out research on gender stereotypes in music education. His research interests also include children's vocal development and teaching methods of traditional Greek music. Since 2018, he has been teaching in the Department of Music Studies at the University of Ioannina, Greece. [ververis@uoi.gr]

INTRODUCTION

During the 2010s, Europe witnessed one of the worst refugee crises since World War II. During 2015 and the first few months of 2016, approximately 1.2 million refugees and migrants reached European shores to flee conflict, persecution, and economic hardship. Almost half of them entered Europe through Lesbos, a Greek island of 85,330 inhabitants in the North Aegean. As official statistics suggest, during the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015, 512,237 of the 856,723 refugees who entered Greece by sea found temporary shelter in Lesbos, while the number of refugees who passed through the island during the 2015-2020 period is officially estimated at 670,699 (UNHCR, 2020a). Afouxenidis et al. (2017) described the “heroic” actions by many locals, especially the residents of Skala Sykamias, who offered to help the distressed refugees reaching their coastal village by boats in August 2015. Two residents of the village were also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize “for their efforts to save thousands of refugees” (Schoenbauer, 2016, para. 1).

Lesbos was not meant to be only an entrance or temporary passage for refugees entering the European Union. According to an agreement between the European Union and Turkey declared in March 2016, people crossing the Aegean Sea without formal travel documents would be detained on the Greek islands until their asylum applications were examined, determining whether they may be transferred to the Greek mainland or another EU country, or deported back to Turkey (Endicott, 2018). As asylum procedures have been very slow due to bureaucratic reasons, this agreement had great consequences for asylum seekers who, in reality, found themselves trapped on the islands (Jauhiainen, 2017). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there were approximately 19,500 asylum-seekers residing in islands of the Aegean in November 2020, of which 46% were from Afghanistan, 18% from Syria, and 7% from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC; UNHCR, 2020b).

Since 2015, the arrival of refugees to Lesbos from various African countries as well as members of Western non-governmental organisations (NGO) led to a flourishing of the small Catholic Church in the capital city, Mytilene. This became apparent due to the large number of believers attending services at the once half-empty church that previously served a small local Catholic community. In 2017, a Congolese asylum-seeking musician established a choir comprising primarily Congolese refugees attending the church services. In July 2019, when he was granted asylum and left Lesbos, the second author of this report and American music educator Jennifer Sherrill temporarily filled in. In September 2019, the first author and Greek music educator Eirini Papanikolaou took on the responsibility of directing the choir, a position she held until September 2021. The overall purpose of the choir was to provide a refuge for members who sought a sense of community, spirituality, and normality, a refuge that helped them cope with the traumas of the past in addition to easing the stress of the situation they are currently experiencing.

As a topic, the therapeutic effects of spirituality and choral singing for displaced people have long attracted researchers' interest (see, for example, de Quadros & Vu, 2017; Hurly, 2019; Phelan, 2017; Raanaas et al., 2019). In most studies, choral singing is seen as a means for refugee integration into the society of the host countries. However, the case of the church choir in Lesvos is unique as its members are in a situation that could be better described with the term "in-between" due to the agreement between the European Union and Turkey. The refugees are in a place they did not intend to stay and do not know how much longer they must wait. Most importantly, until they are granted refugee status, they are officially considered "asylum seekers" and do not have the autonomy to make plans for their future.

In this report, we investigate the case of the aforementioned choir through an interdisciplinary approach that combines resources from fields such as historical musicology, ethnomusicology, choral music education, and music therapy. According to our research areas, we attempt to explore issues and better understand: (1) the reasons that prompted these refugees to establish and participate in this choir, (2) the structure and the ways through which the choir operates, (3) the selection of repertoire and its language, and (4) the liturgical colonial traditions that refugees bring with them. Furthermore, this exploration is an opportunity to explore community music-making in transient conditions, since Lesvos and the camps on Lesvos are not places considered the final home for a majority of the refugees.

BACKGROUND

Choral singing as a means of refugees' social integration

As a topic of inquiry, the therapeutic effects of choral singing for socially excluded people – that is, individuals with limited access to social, economic, political, and cultural systems (Feronas, 2005) – have long attracted researchers' interest. For example, Silber (2005) investigated a choir comprising women inmates in an Israeli prison, while Bailey and Davidson (2005) conducted research into two Canadian choirs for homeless people.

Lenette and Sunderland (2016) articulated a framework for understanding music-making projects involving refugee or asylum seekers. They outlined three categories based on the setting: (a) conflict situations in countries of origin, (b) refugee camps in exile, and (c) resettlement contexts, which is the most common case. With regards to existing literature about choral projects with refugees, one easily notes that most of them have a "top-down" structure since they are run by state organisations of the resettlement country or western NGOs. It should also be noted that the purposes or the methods employed by these projects vary greatly depending on the immigration policies that apply in each country and may focus either on the integration or assimilation of immigrants and refugees (Isaakyan, 2016). Thus, in some countries, local choral conductors prefer to recruit refugee singers to their choirs, while in other cases, refugee-specific or multicultural choirs have been established. In addition, some programs insist on the developing skills that may assist refugees in their "new life" such as learning the language and the dominant culture of the host country, while other programs celebrate diversity by performing music from the members' countries of origin.

For example, de Quadros and Vu (2017) explored the strategies employed by Swedish choral directors for the inclusion of refugees into their choirs. The researchers pointed out the Swedes' hospitality and willingness to help refugees integrate into Swedish society. However, they expressed their concern about Swedish conductors' reluctance to teach repertoire in the refugees' language, many of whom had never participated in a choir before arriving in Sweden. On the other hand, Raanaas et al. (2019) interviewed refugees singing in a multicultural amateur choir in Norway. The participants of this study maintained that the choir was important to them since it provided them a reason "to be busy" along with opportunities to socialise with others. The participants also highlighted that they were able to sing not only in Norwegian but also in their own language. Therefore, they had the opportunity to practice their skills in Norwegian and at the same time teach their language to the other members. Furthermore, they appreciated and felt proud that they could suggest songs from their own country which were then included in the repertoire of the choir. As Guinup (2020), conductor of the Tacoma Refugee Choir, suggested, choosing songs from the refugee's culture and singing in their language proved to be crucial for their recruitment and retention in the choir.

Another point of differentiation among the aforementioned cases concerned the extent to which local and refugee singers could exchange cultural elements, a note that highlights the debate between multicultural and intercultural. According to Triantafyllaki (2014), the term multicultural describes the peaceful coexistence of different cultural groups, while intercultural refers to relationships of interaction and exchange between these groups. Danochristou-Kairi (2014) argues that multiculturalism is what happens since we live in a multicultural society and interculturalism is what ideally should happen as dialogue and communication between cultures is of great importance. Even so, it is worth noting that interculturalism remains important even without the presence of the "other." When a person, who is part of the "dominant culture," grows up in a monocultural context, they might find it different to understand and accept alternative worldviews that are different from their own. A children's choir established by an NGO in Lesvos consisting of local and refugee children was a case in point. As its founders stated, "we try to gradually incorporate the refugees into our classes and on one hand to keep the intercultural character, but, on the other hand, to keep the refugees to a number not exceeding 15%" (Averof-Michailidou et al., 2020, p. 206). This quote suggests that the people of this NGO believe in the significant benefits to all participants through intercultural interaction between local and refugee children. However, assigning an ideal percentage to the number of refugees needed to maintain intercultural character can be considered problematic, unfounded, and an imposition of the dominant culture's perspective.

So far, we have referenced cases of choral projects intended for refugees, with a "top-down" structure since they are run by NGOs or state organisations. As this practice seems to be the "rule," it does not come as a surprise that there are also exceptions. Hundertmark (2018) investigated a choir in Germany founded by refugees from Syria. Through choir participation, members wished to express themselves through Syrian music and dance, contribute to cultural diversity, and promote intercultural dialogue and understanding within the wider community. This became apparent in the value the members attached to the performance of Syrian songs translated into German.

Closing this section, we would like to add into this discussion Amir's (2004) suggestion that not all refugees find it easy or are willing to share their culture with others. From her experience, some refugees place importance on the preservation of their cultural identity, while others reject it as they

seek to erase any sign of their past in order to become assimilated in the dominant culture of the host country. This proposition highlights the uniqueness of each refugee's story, along with the need for avoiding general assumptions that apply to all refugees, or individuals at risk in general.

Spirituality as a means of refugees' social integration

For this report, we use the term "spirituality" to refer to the search for higher meaning and purpose, while "religiosity" to refer to specific cultural practices and beliefs shared by a religious community. Several authors from a wide range of disciplines suggest that spirituality and religiosity can be crucial factors in the process of refugees' integration in the country of resettlement, as they provide relief from past and present traumatic experiences. Adedoyin et al. (2016) conducted an extensive review of studies "discussing how religiosity functions as an effective coping mechanism for African refugees living in the United States" (p. 97). The researchers maintained that since religiosity is central to the value systems of most African refugees, it shapes the ways in which they interact with people and their environment. Spirituality contributes to the overall well-being of refugees who are healing "both the physical body and the mind from post-traumatic experiences" (Adedoyin et al., 2016, p. 103). Similarly, a study by Abraham et al. (2021), in which the participants were 63 adult female Eritrean refugees living in asylum reception centres in Norway, suggested a strong correlation between refugees' religiosity and spirituality and overall quality of life. It should be noted that spirituality may be helpful in assisting refugees of all religions and spiritual practices. For example, Kirmani and Khan (2008) investigated the contribution of a Muslim faith-based organisation assisting refugees. As the researchers maintained, for many refugees – irrespective of religion – the inability to participate in religious and cultural rituals can further intensify the pain and trauma of displacement they already are experiencing.

The existing literature about refugees' integration also notes cases where religiosity was combined with music. Hurly (2019) investigated the cases of three former refugee African women who resettled in Canada. As she observed, faith, church, and church activities seemed to play an important role in the women's lives and leisure. Michelle, whose country of origin was the DRC, suggested that church going and singing in a church choir helped her find relief from the daily problems of life and the traumatic memories of her past, noting:

You feel happy when you sing. It helps me through. I forget about all the challenges and my mind is focused. You feel a connection in your brain when you are singing spiritual songs. You feel like you're talking to God. (Hurly, 2019, p. 6).

Phelan (2017) explored the case of a choir established by asylum seekers in Ireland who were mainly from the DRC. This choir differs from all the cases mentioned in the previous section as it focused on choir member needs for spirituality and expression of their religious faith. Thus, apart from its numerous recordings and appearances in various music events, the choir participated regularly at the Sunday Mass of the church which provided space for its rehearsals. One could assume that in this case, religion was a factor assisting refugees in their social integration since they were practicing

Catholics who gained asylum in a country where Catholicism is the predominant religion. Indeed, participants suggested that being in the church made them feel that “they were where they belonged,” even while pointing out the liturgical differences between Catholic churches in Ireland and the DRC. As one member remembers, “it was fascinating that first Mass because it was nothing like I had ever witnessed. I didn’t understand anything, not even the ‘Our Father’ which I grew up saying every morning” (Phelan, 2017, p. 254). These differences may not relate only to language or liturgical order. For example, Facci and Cosentino (2018) referred to the “musical” difficulties which a Congolese priest and musician encountered when he decided to study Gregorian chant in Rome. The main difficulty concerned the fact that though he had been used to playing music solely by ear, unaided by notation, the unfamiliar sounds of the eight modes of chant presented an aural challenge. Similarly, an African refugee living in the state of Kentucky, mentioned in Gichuru’s (2019) study: “My wife wanted to sing in the choir. They only use books [music notes] and if you do not know that, then you cannot sing. So, my wife could not sing in the choir” (p. 105). This comment indicates that choral conductors in countries of refugees’ resettlement need to make adaptations and experiment with methods and unfamiliar practices if they wish to integrate refugees into their choirs.

THE PROJECT

Our exploration is based on ethnographic data including contextual field notes, semi-structured interviews/conversations with five choir members, and autoethnographic material and reflections from August 2019 until July 2023, during which two of the three researchers [E.P. and J.S.] served as directors of this choir at different times. In this report, we present data obtained mainly from interviews with the participants, while the rest of the ethnographic material was used for data triangulation purposes. At the time the interviews were held, all participants were adults with a legal residence permit, at least a temporary permit in the case of asylum seekers. No ethical approval was required by any governmental or other organisation, but we considered the potential ethical implications of our project in detail. All participants were members of the church choir at the local parish, and we informed them about our project. They had opportunities to ask questions and choose whether they would like to participate in the project.

As Smith (2009) pointed out, researchers wishing to conduct research with marginalised populations such as refugees should take into consideration multiple factors: (1) the participants’ vulnerable position throughout the period of crisis in their country of origin, (2) their migration, resettlement, and adjustment, and (3) their level of vulnerability in the receiving country. Therefore, we respected some of the informants’ request to not include their narratives in the study. Additionally, in order to protect their anonymity, we have used pseudonyms instead of the interviewees’ real names. As our concern was with the comfort of those we interviewed, we audio-recorded the interviews but put aside our pens and paper, creating space for the interviewee to lead the conversational narrative.

The interviews took place between April and July 2021, and the interviewees consisted of five choir members, of which three originated from the DRC and two from Cameroon. According to Gorashi (2008), most refugees are reluctant to talk about traumatic experiences in their past, preferring to bury them instead of being reminded of them. Nevertheless, this did not apply in the present project, since

the participants were asked to speak more about their present and future dreams, and less about their past.

Although most of the participants spoke English, the interviews were conducted in French, the language in which participants were able to express themselves more comfortably. Led by our research areas mentioned above, we posed some of the following questions to the interviewees:

- How important is music and spirituality in your life?
- Do you perceive the choir as a means of integration into the host country or as a “window to your home”?
- Have you noticed any differences (liturgical, musical cultural, etc.) between the Catholic church in Lesvos and your country of origin?
- Is choral singing a part of your future plans?

With regards to data analysis and presentation, we decided to adopt methods of polyvocal ethnography, seeking to decolonise the knowledge presented in this report. This positions our voices as only a few among the many and privileges the voices of our interviewees (Ndaliko, 2016). To this end, we present our interviewees as quoted individuals rather than a homogenous collective whole. As our aim was to highlight the uniqueness of each participant’s personal story, we avoided procedures that could lead to the quantification of data (Kiriazi, 2011). Finally, through reflexive anthropology (Abu-Lughod, 1990), we found that our own personal complex interactions within the church and choir informed the shape of this report. To that end, we close this section with a short passage in which Eirini (E.P.), the last director of the choir, reflects on her experience. Since Eirini is one of the authors of this report, her thoughts are presented in first person.

Jonathan

Jonathan, a refugee from the DRC, was 41 years old at the time of the interview. A father of five children and a mechanical engineer, he arrived in Greece in May 2019 facing serious health problems. In October 2019, his asylum application was approved by the Greek state and, despite many difficulties, he decided to stay in Mytilene, a place for which he felt great gratitude.

Mytilene for me, it’s like my family, my parents, my country. I came here illegally, and they accepted me. I was ill and they helped me get better; I had an operation and now I am fine. Now I can walk again. I would like to live here but I need a home, my home, and a job. I don’t want to go to Athens. I don’t like big cities, but I have to be patient.

Jonathan, who had been participating in choirs since his childhood, associated choral singing with religion and his Catholic faith, suggesting that most choirs in his country were church choirs. However, he stated that he would not mind learning to sing secular repertoire or many different languages as he likes “learning new things.” Furthermore, he would be interested in sharing his culture with other members by teaching them songs in Lingala, the dialect he speaks.¹

¹ In Democratic Republic of Congo there are four main dialects: (a) Lingala, (b) Tsilumba, (c) Kigongo, and (d) Swahili.

In his narrative, Jonathan highlighted the importance of the choir, which helped him perform his religious duties, socialise with others, and “feel like home” since he always sang in a choir when he was in the DRC.

In Congo, I used to sing in Sunday Masses as a church choir member. When I arrived in Lesvos and started living in the camp, my friends, who had already been here for a long time, informed me that there is a Catholic Church where a Sunday Mass takes place every week. The first Sunday that they invited me to attend the Mass was a real “opening” for me. Because, from the day I arrived here, I didn’t have any opportunity to pray, and I felt isolated and alone. In the church, I was given the opportunity to pray and talk to other people. I got back my voice, my pride, and my Catholic life. I was really happy.

Although singing in this choir reminded him of his home, he also noticed some differences between the small Catholic Church of Mytilene and his church in Congo.

There are not so many differences, except that the church [in Congo] is much bigger, and the Mass lasts longer, perhaps three hours. Everybody is animated. There are people who dance, others who sing... there is the choir and the musicians. It’s really alive. Here, we must watch always the time and finish in one hour.

Jonathan also referred to the difficulties he faced when asked to sing in Greek. However, he maintained that this would help him in the process of learning the Greek language, a crucial skill for his integration into Greek society.

Singing in Greek was very difficult. I couldn’t understand anything. I couldn’t even read the lyrics. I was just moving my lips. But it was something that made me happy. I saw singing in a new language as a challenge. This was also the moment I realised that I need to learn this language as this will help me in everything; to understand the songs we sing in Greek, perhaps to read in Greek in the church, and to integrate myself.

Finally, Jonathan referred to his voluntary involvement in the activities of a local NGO which assisted refugees, his “brothers and sisters” whom he was unable to help when he was facing health problems. At the end of the interview, he wished to continue helping those who are in need and keep singing in the choir as he wanted to become “a member of this community and improve himself.”

Mary

Mary, a 26-year-old asylum seeker from Cameroon, entered Greece about two years before the time we interviewed her and had previously worked as a hairdresser. Being an orphan from an early age, she was raised by the priest from the parish where she received her first communion. Therefore, being in

a Catholic church reminds her of her home and her family back in Cameroon. "God is my father (*mon papa*) and the church is my family. Wherever I am, I never feel alone".

Mary's love for music and singing prompted her to join the choir. She did not mind singing in languages other than hers: "Music is my passion. I like singing in any language, but especially in English." Our interview with her took place during the COVID-19 lockdown, a period in which she realised how important her choral participation was for her daily life. "I have nothing to do. I sleep, I wake up, I eat. It's only that. Every day the same thing. I don't even have a job."

Closing her interview, Mary expressed her hope that Greece, and Europe in general, will treat refugees in a better way: "I hope that Greece will accept us, the refugees, especially those from Africa. Because we are peaceful. We don't like creating problems and if we are given the chance, we can offer so much in this society." Days later, Mary's asylum application was approved, and she left Lesbos.

Henry

Henry, a 33-year-old asylum seeker from Cameroon, studied Agriculture Science in his country but was forced by his family to come to Europe in order to work and assist them financially. As his asylum application had been denied, Henry felt great insecurity about his future. Although he used to help the priests of his church during the masses, Henry had never been a choir member before his arrival to Greece. Despite his inexperience in choral singing, he decided to try. As he said,

The choir and the church helped me a lot. It's a great opportunity to meet new people from other countries and make new friends... but singing for God makes me happy too. It's a relief and a joy. In general, spirituality is something very important for everyone's life, especially for my life.

In addition to singing in the choir, he served as a volunteer in an NGO which helped refugees. At the end of the interview, he made a wish for the future: to learn the Greek language and to have a "normal" life in Greece.

I would like to stay here, because Greece is a big and beautiful country and there are so many nice people. I don't feel so insecure here as in Cameroon. So, I will be really happy if I manage to stay here and live in this country.

Robert

At the time of his interview, Robert, a 41-year-old asylum seeker from the DRC, had already been in Lesbos for almost five years as his asylum application had been denied several times. However, he did not seem to lose hope and faith. Although his parents were Catholic Christians, Robert became a Protestant like his grandfather. Thus, he was familiar with both liturgical traditions and had been a member of several choirs from his early years. In addition to the church choir, he also participated in a community multicultural choir and a music group created by refugees. During his stay in Lesbos, he also took both Greek and English language lessons and served as a volunteer in an NGO that provided help to refugees.

Robert noticed several differences between the Catholic Church in Lesvos and his church in Congo:

The church there [in Congo] is so big and the choir has many members. Sometimes we had five rows of seats only for the choir members. The choir must have many members so that we can have all four voice parts; soprano, alto, tenor and bass, and singers can really support them.

He also referred to the ensemble that accompanied the choir in his church, in which there were various instruments, such as the piano, keyboards, guitars, electric guitars, saxophones, trumpets and percussion instruments like tam tam and maracas.

According to Robert, singing, especially for God, is very important for him. As he said, “singing for God is like praying twice.” In addition, he acknowledged the opportunities he had to socialise with others thanks to his involvement in music activities:

I don't know what I could have done if I wasn't singing. Imagine... Could I stay for four years in a corner just waiting for the documents? No. I sing, I rehearse and that gives me the pleasure to forget all my problems and the stress I feel. Furthermore, music has offered me a really big family and a lot of new friends.

At the end of the interview, Robert expressed his desire to continue singing in choirs and wished that the church choir in Lesvos would continue its operation and have many members one day.

Jacob

The last choir member we interviewed was Jacob, a 26-year-old asylum seeker from the DRC. Jacob studied Computer Science and he has been singing in choirs since his childhood. He arrived in Lesvos in October 2019 and until the time our research took place, he had not been granted asylum.

Although Jacob attended Sunday mass every week, it took him three months to decide to participate in the choir. As he said, “he had his doubts”:

In the beginning I only watched the choir singing during the Mass. I convinced some friends to participate in the choir... but I had my doubts. Some months later, I realised that I should start singing again for my God. And this is how I joined the choir.

Jacob also noticed some differences between his church in DRC and the church in Lesvos. First, in the DRC there were three different masses each Sunday: one in French, one in Latin, and one in Lingala. In all cases, there were choral ensembles performing in the language of each mass. He also mentioned that they sang the whole hymns, while other people were dancing – especially during the *Gloria*, no matter how long it took. Furthermore, as priests did not have a stable income in Congo, people offered them goods such as food, water, oil, paper, or anything needed in their daily lives.

Singing for God was important for Jacob and was the main reason prompting him to join the choir in Lesvos. He found the idea of singing in a non-religious choir interesting as it was an unusual concept to him. As he said, "If I don't sing for God, who will I sing for? [...] Without God, I wouldn't know even who I am. He is always with me..." At the end of the interview, Jacob referred to problems he faced in his daily life in Lesvos and wished that the choir would continue to exist, suggesting ways through which it could improve even more.

I know it's very difficult to keep this choir alive, because everybody is leaving to find a true life. However, I would love to come back one day and see that it still exists. I will feel nostalgic, listening to the new members singing will make me happy. It's you, Eirini, who must take care of this.

Eirini's reflection

After Jen [co-author, J.S.] passed the director's torch to me in September of 2019, I became the director of the refugee church choir in my hometown, Mytilene. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we rehearsed twice a week and participated regularly in the Sunday Mass, in addition to ceremonies such as funerals or celebrations, like the Feast of Saint Valentine.

Directing this choir proved to be a challenge since everything was new for me: the church, the hymns, the music, the African culture, the daily struggles of a refugee's life. Initially, I struggled with my French and had to overcome my fear that the singers would not accept me since I was white, Greek, and Orthodox Christian, while their founding director was Congolese. However, I soon realised that the exact opposite was happening. They were actually worried that I would not accept them, and they showed great respect towards me. They always helped me by carrying and passing out song books to the rest of the choir and they worked hard to sing the hymns correctly and beautifully.

In the next two years that I conducted the choir, several singers passed through Lesvos. They came to the church and joined the choir before eventually moving on to Athens, Thessaloniki, or even farther to France or Belgium. Often, many of them were unable to say "goodbye" as they had to leave immediately or secretly if their asylum application had been denied. Making plans for such a choir proved nearly impossible as many times I had to move away from my initial plans in order to adapt to the unpredictable situation. It was heartbreaking for me every time I realised that I could possibly never see someone again when they were unexpectedly absent from rehearsal. I would ask "where is he/she" and the remaining singers would answer "he/she is gone." But I soon realised that this was a positive move forward for them. I simply had to wish those leaving "good luck" and continue on with the others.

Six months after I started working with the choir, we had already developed a relationship of mutual trust to an extent that whenever the singers had a problem, they felt comfortable enough to discuss it with me. Although instability and temporality were main features of this group since its members were changing frequently, the choir felt more like a family for me. A singer who discussed his problems with me, once said, "You are our *maestra*. You take care of us. So, you are the mother of this family, and we trust you."

Directing the Catholic choir of Lesvos helped me broaden my horizons as I learned about the Catholic religion and music as well as the African cultural connections to God. I also learned the

important skills of musical flexibility when last minute changes are necessary, and conducting a choir in which we do not all speak the same language. Most importantly, I met my husband through the choir and am now a mother. I and my new family attend church almost every Sunday and singing for God is now connected to my everyday life.

DISCUSSION

As we have already pointed out, the case of the choir in Lesvos presented some unique features differentiating it from other choirs or music projects that involved refugees. Since its members were in a place where they did not know how long they were going to stay, the element that characterised all their efforts was that of the temporary, a fact which made us consider this choir as a transient community. This became apparent in Eirini's reflection as well as in the singers' narratives from which only one expressed his will to stay permanently in Lesvos, a place for which he felt great gratitude.

Another point of interest was that although the choir operated in the framework of an official organisation, the Catholic Church of Lesvos, it was established by African refugees primarily for African refugees. Our case shared many common elements with the church choir that Phelan (2017) investigated in Ireland, which was also established by Congolese refugees. In both choirs, the main factor that prompted singers to join was their need for spirituality and their will to express their religious faith through choral singing. We should mention that both cases differed significantly from the choir that Hundertmark (2018) explored in Germany whose members, all Syrian refugees, highlighted its importance as a means of expressing themselves through their culture, contributing to cultural diversity, and promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding within the wider community. In our exploration, the singers did not appear to express such feelings, possibly ignoring the fact that Catholicism is a minority in Greek society, and thus, as members of the Catholic Church of Lesvos, they formed "a minority within a minority."

The church, with a pre-crisis membership ranging before refugee crisis from 10 to 20 members, had already been a minority in Lesvos and had attempted to culturally align with the Orthodox Church in order to in order to feel welcomed on the island. An example of this is the shifting of the Easter date from the Gregorian calendar to the Orthodox calendar. By hosting Masses in French instead of Greek and allowing a place for refugees to worship in a way that is not culturally homogenous, the church risked drawing the negative attention of the local population. However, since the Masses that the refugee choir sang for were attended predominantly by refugees, the precarious positions of the refugees within the Catholic Church and the church within an Orthodox Lesvos were not obvious.

This refugees' preference for attending services in French can be attributed to the similarity, in melody and lyrics, of the French hymns they sang in Lesvos with the hymns of colonial origin they sung in their home parishes. This finding could be useful particularly for music therapists working with refugees, whose aim is to assist their patients in discovering and expressing themselves through "their own authentic voice" (Amir, 2004). However, the participants also referred to some differences they observed between their church back home and the church in Lesvos. These regarded the small size of the church and its choir, along with the short duration of the masses in Greece, while in their home countries, singing in church was accompanied by multiple music instruments (such as piano, keyboards, guitars, wind and brass instruments and percussions) and dance.

The singers' familiarity with the form of the Mass and means of worship in the Catholic Church of Lesvos may justify the fact that they considered their participation in the choir more as a continuation of their previous life, and less as a means of integration into Greek society. As a key factor that led them to join the choir, all five participants mentioned their need to perform their religious duties, exactly as they did back home, a fact which made them feel joy and temporary relief from the difficulties they had to overcome. It should be noted that for all participants, spirituality and religiosity possessed a central place in their lives while they were still in their homeland. Furthermore, participants referred to factors that typically lead amateur singers to join community choirs, such as their love for music and singing, and the opportunities that choirs provide for socializing with others.

CONCLUSION

In answering our initial research questions, we learned from our interviewees that though the celebration of the Mass in outward expression is different from that in their countries of origin, the singers in the Lesvos Catholic choir connected to one another as a family and also were able to connect to the God of their childhood homes. Participation in this choir gave a much-needed sense of purpose during an extended stressful liminal period while also providing an opportunity to learn new languages and music, thus aiding in the integration of the singers into the wider community. In support of the research into spirituality as a coping mechanism by Adedoyin et al. (2016), a majority of the interviewees felt that singing for God was the highest purpose for making music. God brought them to the choir and the choir gave them family. As a refugee-initiated group, the choir created an environment in which each member had a personal stake in developing and caring for the choir community as a whole. Because the choir had been formed by the refugees rather than through a larger NGO, the organisation of the choir was better able to meet the specific emotional and musical needs of those participating. Finally, all of the interviewees planned to continue choral singing in the future, taking their faith, community, and culture with them wherever they may go.

CODA

As these lines were being written in July 2023, the refugee choir of our project has continuously adapted to the unpredictable circumstances affecting the lives of the singers. These adaptations are attributed to the significant reduction in the number of refugees on the island combined with the governmental decision to establish a closed refugee camp away from the city of Mytilene. At present, there are fewer singers in the choir than before and the director, Papanikolaou, had relocated to Athens. Despite this, the choir continues making music for masses under the direction of a Congolese asylum-seeker. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the first director and many of the choir members who passed through the Catholic Church of Lesvos, upon arrival in Athens, created a similar but larger choir in a Catholic Church in the city centre. There are also alumni members from the choir on Lesvos who are now singing and playing in churches in Paris and Berlin.

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

Προσωρινές κοινότητες: Η περίπτωση μίας χορωδίας προσφύγων στην Καθολική εκκλησία της Λέσβου

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Για αρκετούς πρόσφυγες που διέφυγαν των συγκρούσεων σε Μέση Ανατολή και Αφρική, το νησί της Λέσβου αποτέλεσε πρώτο σημείο εισόδου στην Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση. Ωστόσο, ύστερα από συμφωνία μεταξύ Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης και Τουρκίας τον Μάρτιο του 2016, άτομα που διασχίζουν το Αιγαίο χωρίς επίσημα ταξιδιωτικά έγγραφα κρατούνται στα ελληνικά νησιά έως ότου εξεταστούν οι αιτήσεις ασύλου τους. Αυτή η χρονοβόρα γραφειοκρατική διαδικασία παγίδευσε τους πρόσφυγες στη Λέσβο για μήνες ή και χρόνια, με άγνωστη διάρκεια παραμονής. Ταυτόχρονα, η άφιξη προσφύγων από διάφορες αφρικανικές χώρες οδήγησε στην άνθηση της μικρής Καθολικής εκκλησίας στη Μυτιλήνη, την πρωτεύουσα του νησιού. Το 2017, ιδρύεται ενοριακή χορωδία, αποτελούμενη από Κονγκολέζους πρόσφυγες, η οποία αποτέλεσε καταφύγιο για όσους αναζητούσαν ένα αίσθημα κοινότητας, πνευματικότητας και κανονικότητας. Μέσω συνεντεύξεων, συμμετοχικής παρατήρησης και πολυφωνικής εθνογραφίας, εξετάζουμε τα ακόλουθα ερευνητικά θέματα: Τη σημασία της πνευματικότητας στη ζωή των προσφύγων, το πώς η συμμετοχή στη χορωδία τους έχει βοηθήσει να αισθανθούν ότι ανήκουν σε μία κοινότητα, και πώς μπορεί να αξιοποιηθεί το χορωδιακό τραγούδι ως μέσο ένταξης. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, συζητάμε πώς ο αυτόνομος χαρακτήρας της χορωδίας, που δημιουργήθηκε με πρωτοβουλία των προσφύγων, συνετέλεσε στη δημιουργία ενός περιβάλλοντος όπου κάθε μέλος συνεισέφερε προσωπικά στην ανάπτυξη και τη φροντίδα της κοινότητας ως ολότητα. Καθώς για την πλειονότητα των ερωτηθέντων το να τραγουδούν για τον Θεό αποτελούσε στόχο υψίστης σημασίας, η συμμετοχή στη χορωδία τους βοήθησε να συνδεθούν με την πίστη τους και παράλληλα, να έχουν ένα αίσθημα σκοπού, στοιχείο αναγκαίο κατά τις στιγμές αβεβαιότητας που βίωναν.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

προσφυγική κρίση, κοινοτική μουσική, χορωδιακό τραγούδι, πνευματικότητα