Chapter 3
Collective Identity in National Anthems: Investigating Commonalities and Differences Among African and Non–African Arab Countries

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how national anthems of African and non-African Arab nations reflect a collective national identity. The national anthems of 22 Arab countries were analyzed using the textual thematic analysis to identify the common attributes of national identity in these anthems and the variance in referring to political entities, national symbols, and natural artifacts according to the political system (republic vs. monarchy) in the country. The analysis shows five thematic components of the national identity presented by those anthems, with an emphasis on the themes of religion and local political leaders in the anthems of monarchies. On the other hand, republics base their identity on religion, history, and nation-related natural and national artifacts. The anthems of the republics show a higher level of complexity (thematic richness) and more tendency to use emotionally charged, forceful language, in contrast to the anthems of the monarchies.

INTRODUCTION

Typically, national anthems are the exemplification of collective identity of nation-states as envisioned by their political elites and/or populations at large. They are “modern totems—signs by which nations distinguish themselves from one another or reaffirm their identity boundaries” (Cerulo, 1989b, p. 76). Every nation has intentional and rational motivations for adopting this unique sort of verbal and musical symbol. Great Britain, the first nation to adopt a national anthem, correctly perceived the bonding function of this symbol, hence the anthem “God Save the King” was adopted by King George II in

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1745 to rally support for himself and the monarchy. In Malta, the national anthem was a melodic prayer intended to “unite all parties with the strong ties of religion and love of the country” (Reed & Bristow, 1985, p. 294). However, not all national anthems stem from political motivations. For example, the Costa Rican national anthem was created when the government needed an anthem to welcome the diplomatic representatives of the United States and Great Britain (Costa Rica, 2012).

Cultural, historical, and political transformations represent the dominant discourse that determines the selection and adoption of a national anthem. Such factors take a unique shape in each nation-state unless there are cultural and contextual commonalities across contiguous political entities—such as the case in the Arab World. The Arab countries share the heritage of Islam, the Arabic language, and a common political history through caliphates, colonization and the period of post-colonial independence that started in the late 1940s. This shared collective memory among the citizens of the Arab states underscore a commonality in how the political elites of those states sought to craft a collective national identity and determine the priorities of self-perception.

Although Arabs share a common history, religion, and language, they have their individual cultural and political distinctions. They speak Arabic in different dialects; they are governed by both monarchies and republics, and they have multiparty systems versus single-party regimes inside their republics. Such commonalities and dissimilarities are manifested in how the Arab political elites prime their fellow citizens cognitively and emotionally through the deliberate selection and/or manufacture of national symbols. The present study is a textual analysis of the current national anthems of all 22 Arab countries, located in both Africa and Asia, to examine the national identities represented in these anthems. The study also explores how different political regimes create different patterns of national identities in the Arab world.

BACKGROUND

National anthems are songs that are rarely created for aesthetic reasons. Rather, they serve specific communication functions. Governments tend to use national anthems “to create bonds, motivate patriotic actions, honor the efforts of citizens, and legitimize formal authority” (Cerulo, 1993c, p. 244). The desire to legitimize formal authority is usually the strongest when the political system has been put through dramatic political transformations, such as military coups, popular uprisings, and the gaining of independence from dominant foreign entities. Most Arab countries were occupied for decades until a wave of independence swept through the region after WWII. The new indigenous regimes in the region wanted to establish their legitimacy, assert their sovereignty, separate themselves from the previous colonizing regimes, and strengthen their status as members of the Arab League, which was established in 1945. Two Arab-African countries, Egypt or Tunisia, have alternately hosted the Arab League headquarters ever since. National emblems, such as the flag and the anthem, were invariably considered by the newly formed regimes to be essential to the creation of what the French sociologist Emile Durkheim termed “Collective consciousness” (Durkheim, 1893).

The League of Arab States is a substantial regional organization with 22-member states (14 republics and 8 monarchies) with a total population of 406 million (World Bank, 2016). Most of the Arab population (61%) live in Africa and represent one of the main ethnicities in the continent. The Arab League was the exponent of pan-Arabism (Seeber, 2007, p. 13) until the year 1977, when Algeria, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen decided to boycott the Arab League summits in Cairo to protest the Egyptian President Sadat’s