



Vignette 6

Singing in Scots and Swahili: Faith-based education for Global Citizenship at the Scottish school in Jaffa, Israel

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Abstract

This vignette describes observations made by the author at the Church of Scotland's Tabeetha School in Jaffa, Israel, a Christian school with a majority Arab-Palestinian student base. The firm pursuit of global citizenship education undertaken by the school, demonstrated here in the singing of songs in Scots and Swahili, is located within its complex geopolitical context in the divided society of Israel. The contribution also engages with practices of a faith-based global citizenship against the backdrop of a colonial legacy embedded within a conflict-ridden landscape. In a school where politics is claimed to be left at the door, global citizenship rooted in Christian values is developed as the most efficient means to serve the agenda of the religious minority. Given Palestinian social and political marginalization in the contested city of Jaffa, the Scottish School provides a safe space for students to experiment with global identities.

An intoxicating African rhythm filled the assembly hall on a Friday morning at the Church of Scotland's Tabeetha School in Jaffa, Israel's ancient port city on the Mediterranean Sea. The primary-school students, clad in sky blue T-shirts emblazoned with the school's coat of arms – a trinity of symbols featuring a biblical oil lamp, the diagonal cross of St. Andrew, and a dove flanked by olive branches – sat cross-legged on the floor. As the gravelly rattle of the *shekere* maintained the spirited tempo, jubilant drumming, syncopated with the lively clang of the cowbell, conjured

the sounds of the Congo. “We’re going to sing a song in Swahili!” exclaimed the music teacher, a Jewish-American immigrant. Excited to perform this new genre studied in their music lessons, the students responded with a cacophony of enthusiasm, shouting joyfully in a jumble of Arabic, Hebrew, and English. *Yay! Yesh! Yes!*

Bouncing up and down to the beat, the music teacher waved her arms, slicing through the sweltering, late spring air. Bobbing their heads in time with the pulsating cadence, the children belted out the lyrics in a call and response pattern, mixing English and Swahili:

*Let all things their Creator bless,
O sifuni mungu (o praise God)
And worship Him in humbleness,
O sifuni mungu (o praise God)
O, praise the Father, praise the Son,
Imbeni, imbeni (sing, sing)
And praise the Spirit, Three in One!
Pazeni sauti imbeni (lift up your voice and sing)*

Tapping my feet to the music as I scrawled the words into my field notebook, I reflected on how in this era of globalization, global flows of peoples, images, technologies, capital, and ideologies (Appadurai, 1996), have the potential to bring Swahili lyrics, based on a traditional English Christian hymn, to the voices of Palestinian students taught by a Jewish-American teacher in a Church of Scotland school in Israel.

This scene of convergence between the global and local also chronicles a religious minority within a divided society, where indigenous Christians are precariously positioned between the hammer and anvil (Tsimhoni, 1993) vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Once the economic and cultural capital of Arab Palestine, following its conquest in 1948, Jaffa was transformed from a city with a Jewish minority to one with a Palestinian minority. Despite its mixed demographics, Jaffa remains an ethnically fractured city where Arab-Palestinians must contend with an unequal distribution of resources, racism, Jewish gentrification, threats of eviction, widespread crime, and political marginalization (LeVine, 2007). Jews and Arabs may *de facto* live together in parallel overlapping spaces, yet this very ‘mixedness’ highlights the paradox of Palestinian citizens living in a Jewish state (Monterescu, 2009, 2015). The predicament of the Palestinian minority in a Jewish ethnic state (Rouhana, 1998) is reflected in divisions in the education system in Jaffa, where a *de facto* coexistence does not guarantee access to educational institutions of equal quality (Leoncini, 2014).

Parents in Jaffa have three main school choices: Hebrew state schools, Arab state schools, and Christian private schools (Ichilov & Mazawi, 1996, 1997) such as

Tabeetha. Despite their strict rules, selectivity, and high tuition, approximately 43% of Palestinian students in Jaffa attend one of the three Church-affiliated private schools (Monterescu, 2015) to bypass the low-quality Arab sector schools. Rooted in the colonial enterprise, Tabeetha School was founded in 1863 by Scottish missionary Jane Walker-Arnott to serve the poor Arab girls of Jaffa. Bequeathed to the Church of Scotland upon the founder's death, Tabeetha has evolved into a coeducational school primarily serving the Palestinian community in Jaffa, as well as a handful of Jewish students and globally mobile expatriates. However, unlike the other Christian schools in Jaffa, Tabeetha has a "policy of ensuring a Christian majority from the community," in the words of Fiona,¹ a Scottish expatriate teacher.

Instruction in the English language has been a key feature of the school almost since its inception, as attested to by an 1875 visitor, who wrote, "they sang for us English tunes like any Sunday school, a strange sound in a Moslem town" (Goodwin, 2000, p. 26). Continuing in this tradition with students still singing in global tongues, all instruction (except for Hebrew and Arabic language classes) takes place in the English language following a "very British-centric" curriculum,² in the words of Mark, an Anglo-Israeli teacher. Today, to fill the need for qualified teachers who speak English as a mother tongue, the school is staffed by a sizable number of Jewish immigrants from anglophone countries. While the origins of an English-medium curriculum at Tabeetha School can be traced to the rise of European colonialism in the Holy Land, what started as a missionary project has continued to appeal to the minority of indigenous Christians due to its potential to confer Bourdieusian notions of distinction and symbolic capital (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016). Catriona, another Scottish expatriate teacher, explained that the school "started in English, and continued in English, and parents wanted it in English. Because somehow they think that's going to open up new worlds for children." For the vulnerable Palestinian minority living in a broken world of conflict, the possibility of opening up alternative worlds is particularly appealing.

At the same time as it creates new worlds, the school isolates students from the uncertain world outside the school in what Catriona and other teachers described as a bubble:

You kind of just feel that you're living in the Middle East and in a kind of bubble ... Sometimes the kids describe it as a haven, or an oasis ... when there's trouble outside they come in and just kind of feel like they can breathe, because they're safe.

Within this 'bubble' students are free to experiment with global identities, for example learning about British culture or singing Christian hymns in Swahili. In a place where one's local citizenship is contested and sense of belonging unsettled, practices of global citizenship have the power to combat alienation and impart feelings of security.

These practices of global citizenship can have a lasting influence, as evidenced by an alumnus visit during an assembly for the secondary students later in the day. Eleven graduates from the 1960s arrived from all corners of the globe, including Serbia, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Singapore, and Israel. The deputy principal introduced the alumni as honored guests, announcing that “they live by these words up here,” pointing to the three stone arches marking the entrance to the hall. In her lilting Scottish accent, she read out the faded verse from the Book of Psalms inscribed on the stones with an intricate, Gothic, black calligraphy reminiscent of that in a medieval Bible: *The Lord is my strength and my shield. My heart trusted in Him and I am helped. Therefore, my heart greatly rejoices.* She continued:

They’ve taken these words, among other things, wherever they may be throughout the whole world, starting out at Tabeetha and moving out into the world, and that’s what you guys are going to do in a few years.

Together, current and former students performed a stirring rendition of the classic Scottish folksong *Auld Lang Syne* (Times Gone By), with a gray-haired alumnus playing the traditional ballad celebrating old friendships on the black upright piano with great fanfare. Although they are scattered about the farthest reaches of the earth, the alumni have carried the faith and international capital nurtured at Tabeetha with them.

Practices of a faith-based global citizenship emerged yet again the following week during the school’s celebration of Pentecost, commemorating the birthday of the Church when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles seven weeks after Easter. A photograph of the world map, painted in blues, greens, and browns onto the contours of a human face, illuminated the projection screen. Reverend Ian, a community religious leader and frequent guest at Tabeetha School events, posed a question about the significance of the apostles now speaking in foreign tongues after being filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Wearing black jeans, a black short-sleeved button-down shirt with a white clerical collar, and brown leather sandals, while a carved wooden cross on a simple leather cord hung about his neck, Reverend Ian preached in a melodic, tranquil voice:

The different languages represent the extent of God’s love for all humanity. And Tabeetha as we know ... is a small example of Pentecost. Because here you are, from different backgrounds, different religions, different language groups, here you are together learning and engaged in friendship together I know that we leave politics at the door here so I’m not going to go into politics, but we all know that the region we live in has got problems We need to find a way of understanding and working together.

Invoking the school’s oft-stated credo that they leave politics at the door, he emphasized the multicultural and the multilingual aspects of the Tabeetha ‘bubble.’ Politics

checked at the door is exchanged for faith, as the verse of scripture lettered on the stone arches reminds all who enter the building.

Reverend Ian closed his remarks by projecting a silhouette of Christ, depicted breaking free from shackles, as he advocated a global Christian consciousness:

You are involved in God's kingdom of justice and peace, which goes back to Pentecost in terms of bringing harmony, compassion, and love to the society in which we all live ... The Holy Spirit of God comes to set our love free from the structural sin and structural injustice of hatred and greed that is decimating our planet, trashing our ecosystems, and fueling the wars of conflicts that surround us. The Christian message comes to heal.

Christianity, as the quintessential example of a universal religion, is positioned as a uniting force for all people, of all languages, to combat the evils of the world. Infused with the Holy Spirit at Tabeetha, like the apostles, students are tasked with using their acquired international capital to take an active role in spreading the message of freedom, hope, and peace. Looking up at the chained figure of Christ, I could not help but wonder if Palestinian students can truly imagine a hopeful future free of oppression for their discriminated minority, or whether they will ultimately seek to escape the conflict and leverage cosmopolitan capital like those alumni visiting from such places as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Against the backdrop of a colonial legacy embedded within a conflict-ridden landscape, in a school where politics is claimed to be left at the door, a global citizenship rooted in Christian values is developed as the most efficient means to serve the agenda of the religious minority. Given local Palestinian social and political marginalization in the contested city of Jaffa, the Scottish School provides a safe space for students to experiment with global identities. Meanwhile, Christian values foster an awareness of universal interconnectedness, and a proficiency in the English language and familiarity with western cultures enables cosmopolitan journeys abroad. Thus, a novel form of education for global citizenship materializes in the Scottish School, where students are primed with a global Christian consciousness intended to be carried with them, wherever the English language may open up new worlds of possibility. And perhaps in another sixty years, today's students will also gather for a reunion where they can sing of times gone by in Scots – or praise the Lord in Swahili.

Notes

1. All names used are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.
2. The school currently uses the British-developed International GCSE and International A-Level curricula, designed to be comparable to the British GCSE and A-Levels but specifically adapted for international markets.

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