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The interreligious Choir of Civilizations: Representations of democracy and the ritual assembly of multiculturalism in Antakya, Turkey

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This chapter discusses the intricate relationship between ritual and democracy in the context of interreligious relations in the Turkish province of Hatay. The findings presented here are drawn from ethnographic research conducted on the Choir of Civilizations in the city of Antakya based on interviews during the summers of 2012 through 2014. By design, this choir, founded in 2007, is intended to represent the diverse religious traditions in the city of Antakya in the form of a musical kaleidoscope of religious coexistence. Thus, it performs songs drawn from the various religious communities locally present: Jews, Orthodox Christians, Armenian Christians, Catholics, Turkish Sunni and Arab Alawite, the latter two being the major religious majorities of Hatay. To better understand the significance of the choir, some background information is necessary. At the choir's formation, it consisted of about thirty to fifty members, that grew growing over the years to about 150 choral members in 2014. Many founding members of the choir knew each other from years of living together in the old town of Antakya, where there are different churches, various mosques or shrines and a synagogue all located within the realm of one or two square miles. The first members of the choir consisted of the educated elite, who had a unique interest in supporting the culture of interreligious tolerance and respect among the members of their society. Although the Choir of Civilizations neither performs rituals in the strict sense nor serves as a public entity to formally represent democratization processes, it can provide valuable insights into the intertwined dynamics of ritual practice and democratic discourse in the public sphere in Hatay.

History of the Antakya Choir of Civilizations

Initiated on the occasion of the annual tourism week in April 2007 under the name 'Rainbow Choir', the choir was renamed only weeks later and officially founded under its current name as the Antakya Choir of Civilizations (Turkish: Antakya Medeniyetler Korosu). In direct consultation with the leaders of local religious communities who served as the initial board members and in close collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, the choir was institutionally placed under the care of the governor of Hatay. With generous financial and institutional support from the government, the choir gained instant access to the most valuable resources and networks. Based on its success, it was subsequently coined as the exemplary emblem that best showcases the multiethnic and interreligious culture of Antakya.

In fact, advertisement of the plurality of diverse religious communities was the major aim of this initiative. In preparation for the week of tourism, the head of the directorate of cultural affairs considered and collected ideas regarding possible ways to brand Antakya for purposes of advertising its unique culture of religious coexistence. Instead of a specific delicacy, product or site of tourism through which other regions of Turkey are branded and advertised, the idea was that Antakya could best be represented through the dynamics of its religious culture. Within two weeks, leaders of the choir were appointed and started working with members of the religious communities to collect musical pieces of the different religious traditions. These were to be sung at the reception for the opening of the Week of Tourism in April 2007. On this occasion, the choir gave its first concert in the Archaeological Museum of Antakya. After the official name change in May 2007, the Choir of Civilizations gave its first public concert during celebrations of Pentecost in May 2007 at the Orthodox Christian Church located in the centre of old town Antakya.

The first concert outside of Hatay was held during the celebrations of the year of St. Paul in 2008. In Tarsus, the birthplace of St. Paul, the concert of the Choir of Civilizations provided a ceremonial framework for celebrations at the square of the main church. With members of each religious community singing songs from their own liturgical or musical tradition, this concert provided the first venue for the choir to visually and acoustically represent the religious diversity of Antakya during a festival held to celebrate the heritage of the Christian minority in present-day Turkey.

The concert in Tarsus was important to the identity formation of the choir as much as it marked a turning point in its history, during which the choir decided

to abandon the idea that each religious community would sing only the songs from its own tradition. From then on, it established the practice that all members of the choir would sing all songs together. Additionally, all members of the choir would wear a uniform liturgical costume during the concerts and, except for religious headgear of men and women, would discard any other traditional garb through which the members could otherwise be identified in their religious identity. This concert in Tarsus also fostered the idea that the choir could spread in one voice the message of Antakya's religious peace and coexistence.

Soon afterwards, the choir began to perform outside of Turkey's borders beginning with an invitation to give a concert at a summit of the European Union in Paris. As many members of the first generation of the choir still vividly recall, in 2009, the members of the choir were informed about the concert on the very same day. The choir flew in the private jet of the then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Paris, gave a concert at the EU assembly and flew back to Antakya that evening. This was one of the most memorable events for those members of the choir who were able to participate. Another significant concert was given at the Assembly of the United Nations in New York in 2011. After being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize during the same year, the choir performed at the European Parliament in Strasbourg and gave numerous concerts in European cities like Berlin, Oslo and Rome. In 2012, the Antakya Choir of Civilizations performed in Washington, D.C., followed by a concert tour in various towns in Germany. Most of these international tours were – as I was told by the choir members – organized and sponsored by the network of the Gülen movement in the respective cities and towns. Along with tours to international destinations, the choir continued to perform in Antakya and throughout Turkey.

Interreligious soundscapes of Antakya

Visitors to Antakya recognize that the public sphere in the old town district of Zenginler is characterized by a unique sonic or acoustic environment or 'soundscape' as 'the sonic environment, the sum total of all sounds within any definitive area which surround us as a result of certain historical, technological, and demographic processes' (Schafer 1993; see also Thompson 2002, 2; Ingold 2007, 10–11; Samuels et al. 2010, 330), that indicates the interreligious relations of this part of the city. Due to the close proximity of churches and mosques in Antakya's old town, it is at times possible to hear the ringing of church bells along with the call for prayer as it is common in this region

(Borsay 2002: 94–5; Bandak 2014: 248–50). It is in this context of the sonic environment of an interreligious soundscape that the Choir of Civilizations has recently had its own house: the House of Civilizations. This house with its high walls and spacious courtyard was formerly built and owned by Armenian Christians. After being abandoned for years, it was completely renovated in 2013–2014 in an antique Ottoman style and dedicated to the work of the Choir of Civilizations. The architecture of the House of Civilizations, with the high ceiling of its rehearsal rooms and a tiered platform at the eastern end of the elongated wide-open courtyard, provides a soundscape of its own. Due to architectural design, the soundscape is shielded from many other sounds that could disturb its peacefulness. The high stone brick walls act as a shield against the sounds of the surrounding streets and create a space of relative silence in the courtyard. Although the courtyard buffers the urban soundscape, it is possible to hear aerial sounds like the call for prayer and the church bells of the Orthodox Church. The medium-size stage at the eastern end of the courtyard is designed to give open-air concerts during the late spring and through the late summer months. The two rooms in the back of the house are primarily used for the choir's rehearsals, with one specifically designed for the choristers and the other for the instrumentalists, but they can also serve as a meeting space and for concerts during the rainy winter months. They both have very high ceilings and the only windows they have face the courtyard. The Choir of Civilizations also accentuates the interreligious soundscape of Antakya by blending different local styles and traditions into a unique performance of religion and music. In doing so, it serves as a sonic medium to initiate, signify and maintain the dynamics of interreligious relations in Antakya. It established itself as an auditory medium in the transformation of diverse religious and musical folk traditions through their performance on stage (Shannon 2004; Ingold 2007; Born 2011). Particularly the aim of bringing the message that peaceful interreligious coexistence is possible on stage brings the forms of religious coexistence as practised by locals in everyday life through social life, political debate and economic interaction onto a new level. Framing these musical styles and religious traditions as a message of interreligious peace (Robertson 2010) carries this message by musical means beyond the borders of the city.

Although the choir produces this interreligious soundscape primarily on stage, the soundscape the choir produces is perceived by the members of different religious communities differently (Dağtaş 2012; Kreinath 2019a). Through the songs alluding to a different set of soundscapes, the audience is able to perceive these as different soundscapes interacting with one another on

stage. The local influence of the choir and its musical performances involves its contribution not only to the religious soundscape in Antakya but also to the sensory effects it has on its members (Kellogg 2015: 433–4; Laack 2015; Wilke 2019). It enables the members of the choir to experience and appreciate the musical features of other religious traditions while nevertheless empowering the latter to interact with one another musically and ritually, not only during rehearsals and performances but also in the course of social interaction outside of the choir's direct vicinity. In this regard, the Antakya Choir of Civilizations cultivates a new sensory aesthetic of religious music and thus contributes to the formation and transformation of a civil society as it fosters respect and courtesy through the ritual interactions of its musical performances (Dağtaş 2012). It does so by allowing its members from different religious communities to interact with one another through the religious aesthetics of sensory perception during their joint performance of religious songs.

Through the adjusting of musical scores, members of the different communities adjust to the different musical styles and religious aesthetics ingrained in the various traditions that are represented in the choir and only come into play through its musical performances (Born 2011: 380; Faudree 2012: 520; Laack 2015). The choir rehearses the songs not by using musical scores but rather singing by ear. The texts that the choir uses that are not in the Turkish language are transcribed by using Turkish phonemics. In light of this, one can recognize the variations that are taking place in the choir's production of an interreligious soundscape. Musical instruments used in the concerts reflect to a certain extent the local musical traditions. These include the *bağlama*, a traditional Anatolian string instrument, the *ney*, a long reed flute used for traditional Sufi music, the cello, the guitar, the violin and the flute, as well as the shells and the drums. The use of electronic percussion during the concerts as an aesthetic device is foreign to the musical performance of local religious traditions and adds a layer of contemporary mundane reality. To untangle the dynamics of interreligious relations at play in these performances, it is necessary to develop a clearer idea of the musical and social assemblages these performances put into effect.

The choir's repertoire of local musical traditions

The songs performed during concerts were chosen from a repertoire of religious songs collected by the leaders of the choir who met and consulted with the leaders

of the local communities represented in the choir. The repertoire consisted in 2013 of about thirty-five songs, which are sung in changing combinations during different concerts. Even though the religious communities represented in the choir do not have the same forms and styles of musical traditions, the repertoire was intended to represent at least some traditions of every religious community participating in the choir.

Over the years, various songs were added or removed depending on the priorities of the conductor and preferences of the choir's members. The actual selection of songs from this repertoire always depends on the time, place and occasion of the concert and is made anew by the conductor every time. As a guiding principle, however, the programme for each concert consists of a mixture of Jewish, Armenian, Orthodox and Catholic Christian, as well as adaptations from the Sunni and Alawite Muslim tradition of Qur'an recitation. While some songs chosen at any given concert are part of the standard repertoire, other songs are only chosen for the respective occasion. Usually one song in particular is chosen for each concert to reflect on the local tradition of the city where the concert is given and to better connect with the anticipated audience.

The repertoire of the Choir of Civilizations was adopted from existing local traditions as practised within the religious communities. However, while the local Jewish and Christian communities have a considerable musical tradition, such equivalents do not exist among the Sunni and Alawite communities (Kreinath and Sariönder 2018). The repertoire of the Choir of Civilizations includes many songs from local folk music traditions or from other well-established musical traditions more widely known throughout Turkey (Stokes 1998). Besides, the choir also adapts to local customs, as it sings all songs from the Christian tradition homophonically instead of polyphonically as well as in tonic scales and tempi that are different from those used in Jewish or Christian religious services.

Aside from the specific selection of religious songs for the individual concerts, the overall structure of all concerts in principle follows a previously determined sequence. All concerts open with the ninth Symphony of Ludwig van Beethoven, known as 'The Ode to Joy', which was adapted as the Anthem of the European Union and identified as an emblem for civil engagement and political participation, and all concerts end with the 'Memleketim', a popular folk song widely known in Turkey. Both songs frame every concert and provide – aside from songs selected to represent the tradition of the host city or community, which often can be mundane – a clearly secular framework within which the religious songs from the various traditions are performed.

The way in which the songs of the different religious traditions are arranged into a sequence and sung collectively along with the accompanist musical instruments creates an interreligious soundscape through the amalgamation of different harmonic styles and traditions. The songs that became most popular throughout its history include the 'Eladon', 'La El Baruh' and 'Hava Nagila' from the Jewish tradition, which appear as recurrent elements in the concerts. Preferred choices for the concerts also include the 'La Rabbal Kuvvat' taken from the Orthodox Christian tradition and the 'Sari Gelin' and 'Sasna Şaran' implemented from the Armenian tradition. Similarly, the 'Hallelujah', 'Jubilate Deo', as well as 'Laudate Si' are songs most commonly employed from the Catholic musical tradition. The songs that are taken to represent the Sunni Muslim tradition are 'Bülbül Kasidesi', 'Salat-i Ummiye' and 'Erler Demine,' while 'Yine Dertli Dertli' and 'Demedim Mi' as those songs taken from the Alevi and Sufi tradition. All these songs by design create musical soundscapes, and through their performance on stage, they represent the different religious soundscapes in which they are traditionally embedded. The sequence in which the songs are sung during the concerts is aimed to create an acoustic environment, where each of the songs reflects and inflects the various soundscapes that the choir aims to represent.

Aesthetic design features of the Choir of Civilization

Aesthetically, the choir transgresses various traditional distinctions between the liturgical and musical use of religious songs as well as the religious and secular function of a concert hall or church. To sing religious songs of worship and prayer as part of a musical concert implies a conflicting frame of reference by reframing the intended meaning of religious songs within a secular context (Handelman 2004; Kreinath 2019b). This also changes the interaction between the choir and its audience within the soundscape that is created through the concerts.

The concerts are supported by lighting and background acoustics. An arrangement of the stage, with religious and secular symbols displayed in the background before which the choir performs its concerts, supports the perception of the interreligious soundscape that the Choir of Civilizations creates. The concerts are all well-choreographed and the visual design of the stage is usually very strong. Considering the choir's beige silk robes, the compositions, the instruments played and the lighting of the stage, the musical performances

simulate a form of religious worship. Even though the choir performs at both religious and secular locations, the concerts are always aesthetically designed to create an experience of religious peace and spread the message of tolerance through musical means, as it is also known from other contexts (Clark 2010; Robertson 2010; King and Tan 2014).

The blending of religious traditions in the design and composition of musical performances uses various forms of interreligious aesthetics. Although the concerts are framed as cultural performances of religious songs and conducted in often predominantly secular settings, the combination of traditional religious music with elements of local folklore gives the design of these performances a religious character. In doing so, the choir shapes its own culture of religious coexistence among the members, and through their joint performance, the choir's members are all perceived as serving the One God of the Abrahamic religious tradition (Bandak 2014; King and Tan 2014).

In the communal and public enactment of singing songs that otherwise serve religious and cultural functions within the different religious communities, it demonstrates that the Jewish, Christian and Muslim members of the choir are willing to jointly praise the same God by singing songs that originated in their different religious traditions. In doing so, the Choir of Civilizations creates a new form of religious worship that is ambivalent about its religiosity and secularity, aesthetically transgressing such frames of reference (Kreinath 2019b). By being at the same time religious and secular by nature, it cultivates, embodies and shapes a form of interreligious coexistence in its own way. Regardless of how it represents the actual religious diversity of Antakya, no religious symbols that would exclusively be identified with one of the represented traditions are displayed on stage.¹ It is primarily by means of religious songs that an aesthetic soundscape of interreligious coexistence impacts how the dynamics between the three Abrahamic religions are perceived and how the musical performances of religious songs contribute to a peaceful coexistence (Shannon 2004).

Negotiating religious traditions and the message of the Choir of Civilizations

One of the most significant design features of the Choir of Civilizations is that the members of different religious communities sing songs together that are – to differing degrees – central to religious worship in synagogues, churches

or mosques. The main reason for the decision to sing all songs together was apparently an aesthetic one. Because the religious groups were unevenly represented in their musical traditions and in number, with some communities consisting of just five members and others more than four times that size, the volume of the smaller groups was considered not strong enough to have the desired impact to make this project worth continuing within that format. This decision, which was made by the conductor, led to considerable discussion among the members of the choir and the leaders of the respective religious communities about which songs were acceptable to be performed by all members. Some members initially could not accept singing songs from other religious communities due to dogmatic reasons or simply because they felt odd or uncomfortable performing and representing the musical traditions of religious communities other than their own.

Overall, this discussion assessing all songs for whether or not they would be acceptable or at least tolerable found that with the exception of some few folklorist songs, almost none of the religious songs were uncontested. As recalled by many of my interlocutors, this phase in the initial formation process was experienced by many members as quite challenging and personal, as the members of the choir were asked to do something they had never done before: not only to tolerate the beliefs of their fellow members from other religious communities but also to actively engage in some of their religious traditions and cosmologies. This process was intense for a lot of members, as the very act of talking about one's religion or religious beliefs in public is quite a sensitive issue for most natives of Antakya. Religion is, by most, considered a private issue, despite its virtual presence in everyday life (Kreinath 2019b).

In the end, the choir as a whole ended up with some major revisions to the repertoire of the choir's songs. Whereas before numerous songs of the other religious communities were tolerated simply for matters of respect and non-interference, now the situation was considerably different. Those who would sing songs of praise and prayer from religious traditions other than their own would voice and thus actively represent these traditions. With the decision for the whole choir to sing the songs of other religious traditions, the minimal consensus of all members involved needed to be reached, and this affected the selection of the songs that were available for further consideration.

The choir assembled a catalog that was generic in their message relating to the praising of God while at the same time excluding dogmatic differences, particularly those attached to the names of figures central for the respective

beliefs like Ali or Mary (Kreinath 2014, 2019a). This decision can be seen as unique in the formation and shaping of interreligious relations. The assemblage of songs of different religious traditions that are sung by all choir members thus has a significant impact on the message the choir is able to transmit (King and Tan 2014). Even though not all religious groups represented in the choir have the same form of musical traditions, as discussed above, the repertoire was invented to give every religious group its share in the choir. As the members of all religious communities started to sing the songs of combined religious traditions and wore uniform attire for the concerts, the audience would not be able to distinguish or identify the religious affiliation of the choir's members. This procedure helped to overcome religious division among the choir members by erasing their differences and creating a form of group membership unique for this choir.

Although the concerts are framed as musical performances from the different religious traditions and indiscriminately conducted in secular and religious settings, the combination of traditional religious music with elements of local folk music gives the performance a ritual design (Kreinath 2016). Since some of these songs are integral parts of liturgical traditions as performed by some communities in their religious services, the musical performances gain a semi-religious character while they are usually performed on a stage or in a church setting.

The mission of the choir and its musical and religious composition

When the Antakya Choir of Civilizations was founded, its explicit aim was to advertise the peaceful coexistence of different religions in Antakya through musical performances. Its mission to bring peace to the world – as it was subsequently articulated – assumes that peace in the world depends on the peaceful coexistence between the different monotheistic religions. It is stated by numerous informants that the concerts of the Choir of Civilizations demonstrate peaceful coexistence by affirming that members of different religious communities not only sing together the songs of their traditions but also express their common belief in the One God that conjoins the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths based on the shared soundscape's capacity to animate an imagined community, 'aggregating its adherents into virtual collectivities and publics based on musical and other identifications' (Born 2011: 382).

The main message of the choir is that all Abrahamic religions worship the same God and hence the similarities between the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions are emphasized. The message is embodied through the assemblage of songs that are sung within the frame of the choir's concerts. Since most of the songs have a specific function in the local religious communities, the singing of these songs still reflects and performs their religious functions for the members of the respective community even if these songs are sung on the stage of a concert hall.

The production of the interreligious soundscape shapes the perception of religious dynamics between the different religions involved. It is the unity of these communities that is highlighted and in the end the choir embodies and enacts a form of interreligious worship as they praise together the unity of the same God. In doing so, the choir is shaping its own form of religious practice. The leader of the choir even stated in an interview with me that the choir is an instrument of God to bring peace to the world. Advertising the plurality of diverse religious communities was one of the methods for this approach, and it serves as a major motivator for interreligious engagement. At the opening of a concert, the choir is always announced as representing the three monotheistic religions and its six denominations in Antakya.

Social dynamics in the transformation of interreligious relations

The Choir of Civilizations presents a unique example highlighting the dynamics of interreligious aesthetics that emerge by conjoining musical and ritual elements that otherwise do not exist together. Due to the transformation of the interreligious relations among the members of the choir, formations of social relations as they occur through the work of the choir can be analysed in terms of ritual. The membership in the choir is defined by three criteria. One criterion for participating in the choir is membership in one of the religious communities. The second criterion is that one needs to have been born in Antakya. In addition, minimal vocal skills are the third criterion for the admission to the choir. The membership in the choir is decided by a committee; and new members of the choir are selected annually in September.

The internal structure of the choir as it currently exists explains some of the dynamics of interreligious relations that have already been analysed. There is a clear distinction of the roles and hierarchies established in the choir,

which is also reflected by the salary that some of the members receive. The conductor deals with all business related to the work of the choir, including the arrangement and organization of the concerts as well as the rehearsals and concert performances. He also deals with the media and is the only person in the choir who is authorized to give interviews. The conductor has a staff of numerous voluntary assistants who take care of all related administrative responsibilities in particular with regard to the arrangement and organization of concerts that are performed outside of Antakya. Although the choir is a lay choir based on the commitment of voluntary choristers, professional instrumentalists are hired and paid per concert. The work of the choir is usually accompanied by eight to ten instrumentalists. Overall, the instrumentalists themselves are mostly music teachers or professional musicians who make a living by playing music. Other than the instrumentalists, none of the regular choir members receive a salary or an honorarium, although travel and housing expenses during travels for the concerts are covered. At times, the choir is even accompanied by a well-known soloist who is paid an honorarium.

The instrumentalists are from within the musical profession, usually with respective academic training. With the exception of the priests and imams, all other choral members are lay persons from different social strata and religious communities in Antakya. Although participation for the choir members is voluntary, the conductor clearly has a list of preferred choristers who are invited to join the international concerts based on experience and degree of commitment. The degree of commitment required to be a member of the choir often only permits students, retirees or teachers who could make special arrangements with the school authorities to participate in the choir activities on a regular basis. Participation in the choir is particularly attractive for teachers, students and younger members of the society due to the fact that the choir is very successful and established. However, numerous students I talked with had to give up their role in the choir due to their commitments to their future careers that are not in the field of music.

This commitment to the choir was centralized in that most of the original members had a unique interest in fostering and supporting the culture of interreligious tolerance and respect among the members of their society. The vast majority of the 150-member choir is Sunni, while other groups are minimally represented with at times only one or two members. As dictated by the choir leader, religion and politics are topics that are not allowed to be talked about in the House of Civilization. Interestingly, some of the younger members informed me that they did not know which religion many of the other members

are a part of and that this is not something discussed, which seems to be a norm among the members. Privileges (received by members of the choir selected for international travel and similar to those issued to diplomats) particularly irritated the members who were either not included in the travels or permitted to join the choir. Although the choir aimed to keep a considerably low profile with the intention of being a lay choir, the members grew to serve as cultural and religious ambassadors of Antakya's peaceful coexistence and were recognized as local celebrities.

Political implications of the Choir of Civilizations

The choir dwells in the cosmopolitan image of Antakya with its portrayal of peaceful coexistence and is used for advertising the city's faith tourism and interreligious pilgrimage (Doğruel 2013; Prager 2013). Beside invitations from different foundations and organizations to perform at social gatherings, cultural events or religious festivals, the concerts were sponsored by local and regional businesses, which considered such events to be public outreach as a welcome opportunity for charity and advertisement. The instant success of the choir can be attributed to the continued support and endorsement of various local religious organizations. Through backing from local networks of the social, political and economic sectors of the civil society in Antakya, the choir gained wider public recognition and was considered one of the most successful civil initiatives in Antakya.

Since its inception, the choir's success exceeded the founders' expectations and, over the past few years, the fame of this choir has transcended the Turkish borders. This success was greeted with mixed responses from various segments of the society – mainly among those people who worked as professionals in a religious, cultural or educational sector or dealt with music and folklore in various ways, leading to suspicions and rumours about the surprising success and seemingly unconditional support by the Turkish government. The choir's public recognition also became a particularly sensitive issue since other choirs and cultural initiatives that were founded with the intent to further strengthen interreligious relations and forms of religious coexistence did not receive such generous support from the government, nor were they so closely tied to the economic sectors of the business world and regional tourism industry.

The choir's public appearances were followed by the local media and always covered in local newspapers and broadcasted on local television stations. These

achievements not only impacted the general perception of the choir but also shaped the public appearance of the choir and its members. Aside from some critical reports in some leading and well-established newspapers in Antakya that shaped the public discourse on the choir, the broad public coverage and media attention also created social and religious dynamics in Antakya that led to the formation of new initiatives and the foundation of new choirs – partly in critical response to the broader controversial perception of the choir.

Although none of the political events – which marked some of the major turning points in recent Turkish national and international politics – immediately impacted the work of the Choir of Civilizations, the dynamics these events unleashed in local and global politics that also played out on regional and local levels impacted the long-term mission and mobility of the Choir of Civilizations in the arena of representing interreligious relations of Hatay both at home and abroad. Since the external dynamics that impacted the Choir of Civilizations themselves align to different notions of democracy and governance while employing their own sets of rituals, the comparison of how ritual and democracy relate to one another in other more distinct cases, like the Gezi protests in 2013 and the attempted military coup in 2016, helps illustrate how the Choir of Civilizations is positioned in the context of local and regional dynamics.

Even though the leader of the choir claims to stay out of discussions about religion and politics by not taking any particular position, the choir is loyal to the current government according to its leader. The leader clearly stated that the choir performs whenever and wherever it is invited by the government or any other social, cultural, religious, political or economic organization or foundation that supports its mission. However, some critics of the choir say that they are too closely tied to the current government and that it would vanish if a new government were elected. The stance of the choir's leader and conductor to stay out of matters concerning religion and politics is perceived by some not only as simply opportunistic or tactical but also as dangerously naïve and highly controversial. By not taking sides or by remaining silent on religious and political issues, the choir is perceived as being content with the government. This position is understandable since the choir is financially and logistically dependent not only on the governor of Hatay but also on the president of Turkey, who had a hand in its instant success. These strategies were questioned by members of different religious minorities and political opposition groups who have suffered from the politics of religious and ethnic division that have increased in Turkey since 2013.

Conclusion

This chapter addresses the limits of rituals shaping public discourse and democratic participation. The main objective of the research project *Reassembling Democracy* was to determine how far rituals are or can become a cultural resource for democracy. My case study concerning Antakya's interreligious Choir of Civilizations suggests that the ritual dimensions of the choir's work only have a limited impact. As argued, the Antakya Choir of Civilizations aimed to represent the religious diversity of this region by dwelling on the public image of the city's multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Composed of members of the three Abrahamic religions, this choir could be perceived as integral to the representation of religious coexistence, as it performs religious songs on a concert stage, thus presenting features resembling ritual elements of religious worship.

It could be assumed that a thorough study of the internal and external dynamics of interreligious coexistence in the civil society as reflected in the composition of the choir would provide some interesting ethnographic evidence and some considerable ground for studying ritual as a cultural resource of democracy. Focusing on the agenda of the Antakya Choir of Civilizations – that is to perform songs of different religious traditions on stage with a choir composed of members of different religious communities – the case study was designed to address the main question of our research group, *Reassembling Democracy*: 'Can rituals also contribute to enhance democracy or to change society?' Even though my general answer would be affirmative to the research objective, the specifics of my ethnographic evidence do not allow me to come to such a conclusion. It was integral to the argument presented in this chapter to specify the factors that accelerated or blocked certain internal and external dynamics that led to the branding of the choir. However, the main model on which the choir is based is a representational one, which takes the mere presence of different religious communities in the choir as being sufficient to index the religious coexistence in Antakya. Put otherwise, it is believed that it is sufficient to perform concerts with the appropriate songs and members of the respective communities to be effective in making changes in supporting interreligious peace.

The Antakya Choir of Civilizations makes every effort to represent interreligious peace through the interface of concerts. Other than the transmission of the general image of religious coexistence as practised in Antakya and represented in the choir, no attempts are made to enhance democracy

or change society. It is the image of representation that matters most for the Antakya Choir of Civilizations, and the concerts are given on invitation by any special interest groups, businesses or any governmental or non-governmental organizations. The internal dynamics of social and religious relations among members of different religious communities may contribute to the unity and cohesion of the choir. However, the social hierarchy within the group indicates the social dynamics within the choir that might counter the public image that the choir is supposed to convey.