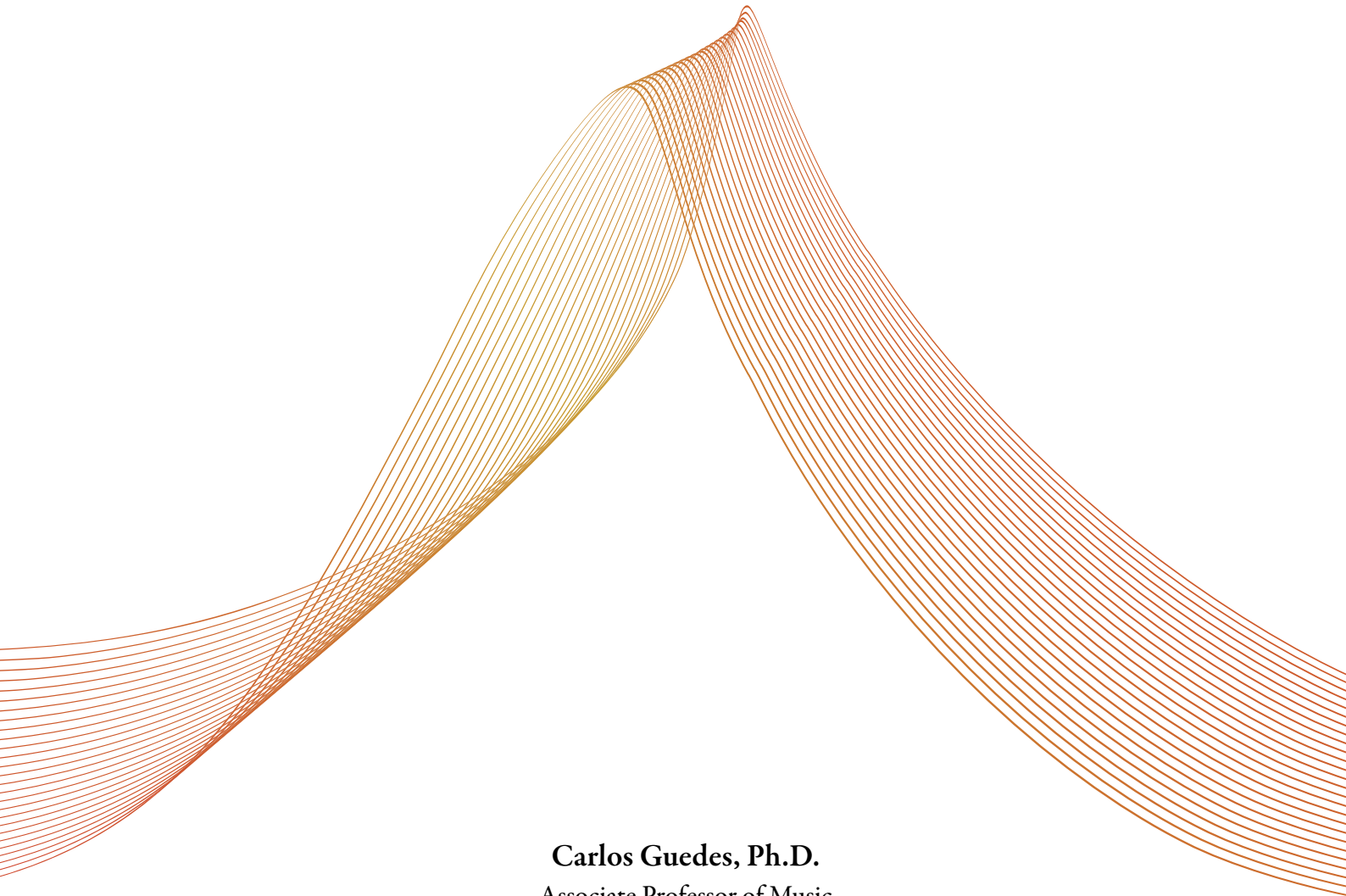




Exploring the Musical Traditions of the Shihuh



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Existing information and documentaries about the Shihuh tribe is scarce and consists only of videos with (particularly) rather poor audio quality. Therefore, to gather a deeper knowledge about the tribe and its music traditions, the author and research team developed a project entitled *Exploring the Musical Traditions of the Shihuh*. Funded by the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, this project consisted of recordings of the musical practices of the Shihuh tribe, focus group discussions, and individual interviews. It aimed to better understand their musical forms and its relationship to tribal social values and cultural identity. State-of-the-art recording equipment and techniques were used to produce four high-quality recordings to create short and informative bilingual documentaries about the Shihuh tribe.

This field report describes the knowledge gathered and provides recommendations that highlight the importance and advantages that this type of work has on promoting unique cultural features of the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. A submission of a modified version of this paper will soon be submitted to *Asian Music*, a prestigious academic journal that focuses on music from Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Exploring the Musical Traditions of the Shihuh is a project aimed to document the music traditions of the Shihuh tribe, including the *nadabah* (*kubkub*), a tribal war cry used in festive occasions (Thomas, 1929). The motivation that drove this project was to better understand the tribal musical practices in the UAE and their trans-cultural relationships. The project primarily focused on producing field recordings of the music of the Shihuh tribe in Ras Al Khaimah. Field work was conducted at the Shihuh Cultural Association which is where members of the Shihuh community often gather and socialize. Interviews were held at the Lehmoudi house which is a private heritage site containing a small mosque owned by Abdulla Hassan Lehmoudi Al-Shehhi.

The project consisted of three interrelated components: (1) the audiovisual recording and focus group interviews about the music styles to be recorded; (2) a collection of short ethnographic video documentaries; and (3) the publication of a paper in a relevant peer-reviewed journal reporting the entire project and its results. The significance of each of these components and what makes this project relevant to Ras Al Khaimah and the UAE is the fact that the region concentrates a substantial part of this tribe's population. Gathering and documenting this knowledge is important because it provides insight into the cultural practices of a tribe that has inhabited part of UAE territory since pre-Islamic times (*Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, 915 A.D./1967).

The research aimed to develop a methodology to capture the musical traditions of the UAE and Arabian Gulf in their many dimensions, while producing high-quality audiovisual content that can be used for archival purposes and to disseminate these traditions to the wider public. Current existing documentaries of music by the Shihuh consist of videos with (particularly) rather poor audio quality. Thus, by using state-of-the-art recording equipment and techniques (e.g. ambisonics) we were able to produce four high-quality recordings and create short and informative bi-lingual documentaries about the musical styles we recorded.¹

This field report provides a discussion about the Shihuh tribe and their musical traditions. It is divided into three main sections. The first one (Introduction) comprises this introduction and next section (Context and Background), where a summarized context is presented describing the Arabian Gulf as a place for strong ethnic diversity, the UAE in this cultural context, and finally the Shihuh and their better-known musical practices: the *nadbab*, the *rawāḥ*, and the *razīf al-Shihuh*. I also provide a critique of the status quo where certain observations about the tribe's integration in Ras Al Khaimah and in the general cultural context of the UAE are exposed. Section two describes the main components of the research and an interpretation of the results; finally, section three provides some recommendations for measures to be implemented in the future that may potentiate the mission of the Emirate and of the Foundation in further developing the artistic and cultural scene of Ras Al Khaimah.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Ethnic diversity, cross-cultural influences in Gulf music

Ethnic diversity is a distinct characteristic of the Arabian Gulf. This diversity is a consequence of trade and political connections with other oceanic societies around the rim of the Indian Ocean and South China sea for centuries (Izady, 2002). In his fascinating account of the Gulf's ethnic diversity, M. R. Izady affirms that “[t]he genetic imprint of East Africa, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent was already strongly present in the Gulf population long before the twentieth century (cite). The recent oil boom and the flood of expatriate workers into the region has just increased that diversity” (Izady, 2002, p. 33). In his study, Izady (2002) provides a rather precise insight onto the Gulf basin as a refuge to many exotic or persecuted religious and linguistic groups, describing it as a seafaring society “that has used migration (into and out of the Gulf) and cultural exchange as foundation blocks for forming commercial and defensive alliances that brought wealth and diversity to the region” (ibid, p. 34).

This melting pot of cultures has recently caught the interest of music scholars who try to understand the several influences operating on the music from this region. Lisa Urkevich's recent book (2015) discusses folk and traditional urban music, along with dance and rituals of Saudi Arabia and the Upper Gulf States of Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. The fact that

¹ These documentaries were narrated by the practitioners of the styles and are available on a playlist at the Music and Sound Cultures research group's YouTube channel — <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRvorCYCDZ1i8y6e4ExAalfZ9OcBlpM3w> — counting more than 1600 views since its launch date on December 2, 2022. The Al Qasimi Foundation also has copies of the documentaries to be used for the promotion of the musical culture of Ras Al Khaimah. This is perhaps the greatest contribution of this study.

there has been a substantial increase on the availability of audiovisual clips in streaming platforms such as YouTube — including some clips showing performances of the *nadbab*² — certainly helps feed this interest (Campbell, 2015). However, not much has been published about music in the southern part of the Arabian Gulf aside from the monograph by Dieter Christensen and Salwa Castelo-Branco (2009) about music in Oman. Aisha Bilkhair (2006, 2007) has studied African influences in Emirati culture and music, namely how practices of pagan spiritual healing practices like the *zar* were imported from Africa and modified by appealing to Islamic practices and codes of ethics (Bilkhair, 2006), and how styles of music from East Africa like the *nuban*, *zar*, and *layawa* (sung in Swahili) could still be heard today in the UAE (Bilkhair, 2007). The space of Emirati traditional music is rather complex, containing styles of African and Persian influence (Bilkhair, 2019) besides the more commonly performed styles of Bedouin origin (e.g. *al ayala*).

Not much has been published in English language about the Shihuh either. Aside from the study cited above (Thomas, 1929), which makes reference to the *nadbab/kubkub* and to some musical activity of the tribe, the other two studies I accessed (Dostal, 1972; Izady, 2002) do not mention their musical activity. Dostal (1972) analyses the tribe from an eco-cultural perspective (i.e. the relationship between the environment — the Musandam peninsula — and their culture), and Izady (2002) refers to the modern Shihuh as an amalgam of the diverse early settlers from Africa, coastal India, and the Malay Archipelago.

The Shihuh

According to Falih Hanzal (1978/2019) The Shihuh are known as tribes that migrated during the destruction of the Marib Dam in Yemen in 450 A.D. and they resided in the area of Ru'us al-Jibal, which extends from Kumzar and up to Dibba including parts of what is now known as Ras Al Khaimah.³ As mentioned in one of the interviews, “the Shihuh built their lives based on an individual identity, taking into consideration the influence of their surroundings” (S. Al-Shehhi, personal communication, January 15, 2022). Certain members of this tribe speak Kumzari, a dialect exclusively spoken by the Shihuh from Kumzar in the peninsula of Musandam. This dialect is a mixture between Arabic and Farsi (Thomas, 1929; Dostal, 1972). The tribe is divided into two categories: bedouins (mountains, farming, grazing, trading in the cities) and urbanites (people of the sea, their lives depend on fishing and mostly fish) and they have expanded throughout the years to intersect and grow in the UAE northern region but mainly Ras al-Khaimah (Hanzal, 1978/2019). According to Dostal (1972), the name of the tribe is associated with its way of living in the mountains. Yet based on personal conversations with tribe members, there are differing narratives regarding the name. For example, one tribe member asserted that the name dates back to years before Ras al-Khaimah was named: when the Islamic leader, the Khalifa Abu Bakir, sent Huthaifa al Gadafani to collect the Zakat during the Ridda Wars (wars of apostasy) after the death of prophet Muhammad, it was said that the tribe refused to pay the Zakat (S. Al-Shehhi, personal communication, January 15, 2022).

² https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=فن+النبة

The Shihuh tribes also have a history of remarkable efforts in fighting the Portuguese invasion of mercantile ports and cities in Julfar (a port city that is now part of modern Ras al Khaimah) and Khasab (a city in Oman), and other coastal towns between 1507-1525. Claims considering the Shihuh as descendants of Portuguese origins have not been confirmed and several members of the tribe deny these claims (ibid).

Musical traditions of the Shihuh

The musical traditions in the UAE are carried across generations and embody a form of art that resists cultural and geographical changes. In the past, most families did not have the capacity to pay for bands, which was an incentive for neighbors to show support by gathering up and performing music. This concept is known as *fazaa* or social solidarity (Al-Shehhi, M., personal communication, January 15, 2022). Following the saying of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, the founder of the nation, “he who does not know his past does not know his present nor his future”, musical groups aim to preserve cultural heritage through the dynamic setting of music, prose, and dance. There are three main genres comprising the traditional music of the Shihuh: *nadbab*, *rawāḥ*, and *razīf al-Shihuh* (Albudoor, K., personal communication, October 19, 2021). Below I provide a succinct description of each of these styles that is largely informed by the practitioners of the music we interviewed — Mr. Mohammad Saeed provided insights about the *razīf al-Shihuh* and the *rawāḥ*, and Mr. Saeed Al-Salhadi Al-Shehhi provided insights about the *nadbab* and the *rawāḥ*.

Nadbab

Nadbab - also called *kabkub* or group — derived from the root na-da-ba which translates into wail, howl, or scream. *Nadbab* is a famous form of sonic expression in mountainous areas of the northern region in the UAE and Musandam, specifically for the Shehhi tribe — which also includes the bin Shumaili, the al-Habsi, and the Dhuhoori tribes. It is the counterpart of *‘āzī*⁴ in terms of expression of pride and praise (Shawqi, 1993). The *nadbab* is characterized by a group of ten or more men called the *nadeeda* (repeaters) from the family or the neighborhood surrounding the *nadeeb*; usually the oldest man or a man of the tribe that has a strong voice that is capable of repeating the verses several times with a performative charisma. The *nadeeb* is like a poet that requires support from the men around him to ignite the sense of bravery and excitement as he raises his hand and conveys words of appreciation to the tribe or expresses pride in his own tribe (S. Al-Salhadi Al-Shehhi, personal communication, January 15, 2022). It is a symbol of bravery for the family, which ignites excitement in the tribe members to participate. The *nadbab* is structured in a musically

³ There are three foundational Arabic books that were written between the 10th and 14th centuries that help to explain the origins and buildup of the tribe: 1) *History of the Prophets and Kings* published in 915 A.D./1967 (*Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*), and more commonly known as *Tārīkh al-Tabarī* by the Persian Scholar Abū Ja‘far al-Tabarī; 2) *Dictionary of Countries* (*Mu‘jam al-Buldān*) written between 1224-1228 A.D./2014 by the Byzantine Greek scholar Yāqūt Shihāb al-Dīn al-Hamawī; 3) *The Complete History* (*al-Kāmil fī Tārīkh*) published in 1231 A.D. / 1965-1967 by the Arab/Kurdish historian Ali ibn al-Athir. The most recent literature on the tribe is a book titled *Shihuh and the History of Ru’s al-Jibal in the Arabian Gulf* (*al-Shihuh wa Tārīkh Mantiqat Ru’s al-Jibal*) published in 1978 (republished in 2019) by the Iraqi historian Falih Hanzal.

entertaining way where the *nadeeb* repeats the call three times with an interval of two minutes rest in between. For the Shihuh, the *nadeeb* starts with repeating the term “O Shihuh”, while for the Dhuhoori family, the *nadeeb* would repeat “O Dhuhoor.” This calls for the gathering of the tribe to indicate that there is something happening. The surrounding men gather and chant in response repeating the verse “Ho...howwa” several times, acting like a unified echo to the *nadeeb*. In the past, the *nadbab* was used in wars as a form of *fazaa* especially in the harsh mountainous areas due the lack of technological forms of communication. It was also used as a method of spreading news, notifying the area in cases of emergencies, and calling for help. The *nadbab* is currently performed in weddings, national celebrations, and when welcoming rulers and guests (ibid). Yusuf Shawqi (1993) mentions that the *nadbab* is usually performed to the accompaniment of a drum, however this was not confirmed by the Shihuh community in this study.

Rawāḥ

Rawāḥ - A musical tradition of the Northern region in the UAE and in Musandam Oman performed for entertainment. It is composed of four parts each of which is performed at a given part of the day or night, which may reflect an Indian influence. According to Al-Salhadi Al-Shehhi (2022), there are four parts performed throughout the day:

1. *Sārīḥ* or *sīrah*, *sayriḥah* performed in the morning;
2. *Ṣadir*, performed in the middle of the day
3. *Rawāḥ*, performed in the afternoon
4. *Sārī* or *sayrī*, *sayrīyah*, performed in the evening (S. Al-Salhadi Al-Shehhi, personal communication, January 15, 2022; see also Shawqi, 1993)

For men, the *rawāḥ* is characterized by one line with drums that move forward and backwards, three or four at a time. The choreography depends on the organization of the men as they rotate in a circle, in a line, and move back and forth in a rhythmic manner. For women it is usually performed while being seated in either a line or a circle, repeating different verses than the men, while moving their hair back and forth. According to Shawqi (1993) the *rawāḥ* uses many handmade drums made from sidr tree trunks of Asian origin: *kāsir*, *raḥmāni*, and *rannah*. The rhythm and the verses repeated differ depending on the timing of the day, but they are all connected to the rhythm of the drums. The rhythm is repetitive, fast and lively, with the drummers creating rhythmic patterns associated with the verses repeated. Like *the nadbab*, the *rawāḥ* is also performed in weddings, national celebrations, and when welcoming rulers and guests (S. Al-Salhadi Al-Shehhi, personal communication, January 15, 2022).

⁴ *Al ‘āzī* is a choral ode typical from Oman performed by a solo singer and a chorus of responders, containing a tight poetic structure (Garvey, 2019).

Razīf al-Shihuh

Razīf al-Shihuh - is also called *al-harbiya*. In the past, the *razīf* was characterized by two rows of men performing repetitive movements using bamboo sticks standing in front of each other while a poet stood in the middle performing the poetry to each row. For several rounds, the men repeat the poetic verses one at a time. The verses are usually related to the occasion of the performance and the drummers follow the rhythm of the verses. The drums were introduced later in the 1980s, while other instruments such as the oud, the org and more modern instruments were introduced in the 1990s. Merging dance with music and poetry, the performative tradition of *yowla* or weapon dance is also introduced with the *razīf*. Bamboo sticks, dummy rifles or swords can be used in the *yowla*. The *razīf* is performed in weddings, national celebrations, welcoming rulers and guests and is almost the same as the *razīf* that is performed in Oman⁵, especially as both countries have interconnected traditional and cultural ties (M. Al-Shehhi, personal communication, January 15, 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This project consisted of three stages: 1) field work consisting of musical recordings and interviews; 2) analysis of the music and translation of focus group interviews; and 3) dissemination. IRB clearance for the project was obtained from NYUAD and each of the subjects completed a consent form prior to the performances. During the months of recording, which took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team provided free rapid Covid tests to all participants and only pursued the sessions after ensuring that each person tested negative.

Field work

The field work was carried out in Ras Al Khaimah on January 15 and 16, 2022 at the Shihuh Cultural Association and at the Lehmoudi house. In October 22 and 23, 2022 field work was conducted at the Shihuh Cultural Association only. The goal was to record the better-known styles but also other music such as work songs and lullabies sung by women.

Audiovisual recordings

The recordings were made using state-of-the-art audiovisual media, capturing audio in first-order ambisonic format and digital video in high resolution (4K). The use of ambisonic format for audio is to better capture the spatial component of this music that often involves movement/dance through the space where it is performed. The Cultural Association is known to provide the best music performances of the Shihuh's musical traditions, and we had around 30 musicians involved in the recording sessions. After each recording session we conducted focus group interviews with the musicians asking several questions about the structure of the music and history of the Shihuh. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and video recorded. The research team consisted of six people including Maryam Al Shehhi (translator), Safeya Alblooshi (research assistant), Amna H. Alnowais (filmmaker), Waleed Madani (cinematographer), Juan Sierra

⁵ For a detailed description of the many styles of the *razīf* in Oman, see Christensen & Castelo-Branco (2009)

(sound recordist) and myself.

We recorded several performances of the *razīf*, two performances of the *nadbah*, and of the *rawāḥ*. We also recorded a wheat grinding song, and five songs sung by women consisting of one henna song, one Shihuh wedding song, one coffee grinding song and one water pulling song. In total, approximately four hours of audiovisual recordings were collected.

Analysis of Recordings

All interviews were translated by Maryam Al Shehhi who provides an additional emic perspective to this field report that richly complements what has been written in the English language. Regarding the music, the second recording session enabled me to understand important aspects of how the musical forms reflect the Shihuh's strong bond as a community and their social interdependence so many times affirmed in the interviews. These are manifested in the *nadbah*, *razīf*, *rawāḥ*, and *m'hobi*.

The call and response nature of the *nadbah* and *razīf* highlight the collaborative and interdependent nature of this music. In the *nadbah*, there is an impressive synchronization between the *nadeeb* and the responding group (*radeeda*) in the alternation between the rhythmic screams of the *nadeed* and the interjections from the group that creates a uniquely hypnotic continuum. In the *razīf*, the rhythms from the drums are derived from the verses, which creates a complex network of relationships that interrelate the text (being recited in an improvisatory fashion), the rhythm of the drums (which derives from the text), and finally the dance, which is set to the rhythm being performed.

In the *rawāḥ*, a dance that not only portrays the Shihuh work ethic but also represents a full day of work (Albudoor & Gargash, 1991), in its four parts representing different times of the day, the rhythm is created by two interlocking patterns of “three against two” that provides the strong groove that sustains the dance throughout its 10-20 minutes of duration.

Finally, the *m'hobi* is also a work song, but for grinding wheat. Its lyrics change during the day and was used not only to help keep the pace of the grinding mill but also to signal the community that wheat is being ground so that they come and help. Up to 200 kilograms of wheat could be ground in one session by the community (Al Shehhi, S. A., personal communication, January 15, 2022).



Figure 1. Recording of the *razīf al-Shihuh* at the Shihuh cultural association in Ras Al Khaimah on January 15, 2022.

Dissemination

As mentioned earlier, one of central goals of this project was to create high-quality audiovisual content that portrays the musical traditions of the ancient Shihuh tribe. This is in direct connection to the goals of the research group that I coordinate at NYU Abu Dhabi (Music and Sound Cultures), whose mission includes the creation of strategies for the preservation and dissemination of music from the Gulf region, namely the UAE. As such, these high-quality recordings will be preserved in perpetuity, thereby providing an important testimony of the music from the region for generations to come, and eventually be released digitally. They are also accessible to other researchers interested and willing to invest the multiple facets of this music.

Besides the preservation, we also aim to disseminate this work which has been strategized into two levels: specialist and general. At the specialist level, we have made these archives available for other researchers through specialized publications (papers) that explain the work and how the project was conducted. For the general public, these audiovisual documentaries are available on MaSC's [YouTube channel](#).⁶ This project will continue to unfold as the materials are very rich and provide many opportunities for exhibitions and the creation of other audiovisual materials.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Exploring the Musical Traditions of the Shihuh was a project that engaged ethnomusicology, the study of ethnography music tradition, to record the audio and visual heritage of a tribe that constitutes an important ethnic group in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. Due to their ancestral relationship with the region and inhabiting the mountains of Ru'us al-Jibal, these recordings provide an important testimony of about the Shihuh's musical activities, their relation to their society and their social values. Based on our review of relevant bodies of literature and visual documentaries, besides "Dances from the mountains," an episode from TV series *Echoes in time* (Albudoor & Gargash, 1991), the results of this project presents the *only* audiovisual documentary that explains the musical traditions of the Shihuh. Unlike *Echoes in time*, it is available publicly as a YouTube playlist and has been provided to as a resource to stakeholders for use and dissemination. In addition to these audiovisual materials (also being preserved as an archive), other actions are being undertaken to disseminate this work on a larger scale.

Above all, this project was a very enriching experience to my research team and myself that allowed us to employ a prominent research methodology for capturing the rich musical traditions of the Shihuh. These methodologies are transferrable to the recording of other regional musical styles and tribes. The interaction with the Shihuh community, despite the language barrier, was extremely fruitful and helped to garner a better understanding of their music, its strong relationship with their social values, and its non-relationship to the Portuguese. As such, the section that follows provides three recommendations that highlight the importance and advantages of this work and how it might be applied as a tool for promoting unique cultural features of Ras Al Khaimah.

Provide Support to Researchers Vested in the Preservation of Ras Al Khaimah Culture

I have barely scratched the surface of the fascinating world of the Shihuh community. Therefore, more field work should be done together with more recordings and high-quality audiovisual products of this exquisite sonic world. This tribe is well integrated in Ras Al Khaimah and their musical traditions (in many ways unique) could be one of the hallmarks of the Emirate. By supporting the production of content such as this one, about the Shihuh community, Ras Al Khaimah would be promoting a tradition that is unique in the UAE. It complements the high-end tourism and hospitality industry which already prevelant. Also, efforts should be taken in order to inscribe the *nadbah* in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage practices.

Create Local Displays of the Shihuh Traditions

Endeavors that forefront the arts and culture industry are growing steadily in Ras Al Khaimah and larger UAE. For instance, the Ras Al Khaimah Fine Arts Festival (RAKFAF) is a distinguished example as it continues to grow in popularity and draw larger crowds each year. Invested artists, reseachers, and other stakeholders on productions of audiovisual deliverables should be invited to present them in Ras Al Khaimah at the Festival or other venues suitable for the presentation of this type of work. This would reinforce the Foundation's mission in developing the artistic and cultural scene of Ras Al Khaimah.

Provide Opportunities for Artists to Stimulate Contemporary Creations around Local Traditions

One distinct way to keep these traditions alive is to stimulate contemporary artistic creation around these traditions to make them more integrated in the contemporary life of the Emirates. With doing so, the uniqueness of certain musical styles could give rise to interesting musical developments that would be typical of Ras Al Khaimah. A certain number of initiatives could be created around the musical traditions of the Shihuh that could stem from workshops about how to perform the *nadbah*, the rhythms the *rawāḥ* and the *razīf*, or on how to improvise the verses in the *razīf*.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRvorCYCDZ1i8y6c4ExAalfZ9OcBlpM3w>

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Appendix

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