

“Black Music” in the Maghrib Communities, Practices, and Performance beyond Rouanet

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Abstract

Based on extensive and award-winning ethnographic fieldwork on Algerian *dīwān* spanning 2013 until 2022, this essay engages with Rouanet’s writings on *dīwān*, both in terms of his colonial language and judgments but also in order to correct and confirm useful historical connections such as pointing out the rich and diverse *dīwān* scene across Algeria. Turner gives examples of the most current *dīwān* practices today while showing how at least three schools of practice link back to heterogenous trans-Saharan caravan routes. For example, Eastern Algerian “*dīwān*” is an almost entirely different practice than *dīwān* in the west. It connects more to Sidi Merzug than Sidi Bilal while focusing on percussion rather than the *gīnbrī* (three-stringed lute) and one-on-one musical diagnosis – similar to another Algerian ritual known as *neshra*—rather than the large group therapeutic practices of western *dīwān*.

Keywords : Diwan, Sidi Bilal, Neshra, Ritual, Sidi Merzug.

Résumé

Basé sur un travail ethnographique approfondi et primé sur le *dīwān* algérien s’étalant de 2013 à 2022, cet essai s’intéresse aux écrits de Rouanet sur le *dīwān* à l’époque, à la fois en termes de son langage et de ses jugements coloniaux, mais aussi afin de corriger et de confirmer des liens historiques utiles tels que la scène du *dīwān* riche et diversifiée à travers l’Algérie. Turner donne des exemples des pratiques de *dīwān* les plus

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actuelles aujourd'hui tout en montrant comment au moins trois écoles renvoient à des itinéraires caravaniers transsahariens hétérogènes. Par exemple, le « *dīwān* » de l'est de l'Algérie est une pratique presque entièrement différente de celle de l'ouest car il se connecte davantage à Sidi Merzug qu'à Sidi Bilal tout en se concentrant sur les percussions plutôt que sur le guembri (luth à trois cordes) et le diagnostic musical individuel – similaire au rituel algérien qu'on appelle *neshra* – plutôt que sur les pratiques thérapeutiques de groupe du *dīwān* occidental.

Mots-clés : Diwan, Sidi Bilal, Neshra, Rituel, Sidi Merzug.

المُلخَص

يتناول هذا المقال كتابات روائية حول الديوان استناداً إلى العمل الميداني الإثنوغرافي المكثف والحائز على جوائز حول الديوان الجزائري الممتد من عام 2013 حتى عام 2022، سواء من حيث لغته الاستعمارية وأحكامه ولكن أيضاً من أجل تصحيح وتأكيد الروابط التاريخية التي يشير إليها مشهد الديوان الغني والمتنوع في جميع أنحاء الجزائر. ويتقديم أمثلة على ممارسات الديوان في الوقت الحالي، يتضح لنا بروز ثلاث مدارس على الأقل لقوافل ذات مسارات مختلفة عبر الصحراء الكبرى. فعلى سبيل المثال، يعتبر "الديوان" في شرق الجزائر ممارسة مختلفة تماماً عن الديوان في الغرب، إذ أنه يرتبط بسيدي مرزوق أكثر من سيدي بلال مع التركيز على الإيقاع بدلاً من الغنبري (عود ثلاثي الأوتار) والتشخيص الموسيقي الفردي - على غرار ما يعرف باسم "النشرة" - بدلاً من الممارسات الجماعية الكبيرة ذات الطابع العلاجي للديوان في الغرب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الديوان، سيدي بلال، نشرة، طقوس، سيدي مرزوق.

Introduction

One thing seems certain: Rouanet did not exactly appreciate the music of Black communities he encountered in North Africa. Throughout the encyclopedia, he paints the music of “*les nègres*” as “noisy bacchanal” (*leur bacchanale bruyante*) or “a terrible hullabaloo” (*charivari épouvantable*), implying it was devoid of merit or skill. He insists that the music is “*purement rythmique*,” and their instruments are “rudimentary,” suggesting an absence of musical or compositional complexity. While Rouanet then later documents “melodic” music, such as that of the *gumbri*, even awkwardly transcribing a melody for the *jinn*, Baba Merzūg, he still infers a lack of melodic inclination and neglects to explore or even comment upon non-public or private sites of music making.

Overall, within *La musique arabe dans le Maghreb* (1922), Rouanet’s references to Black musicians and communities -“*les nègres*”- are sporadic and interspersed within subheadings on other genres of music. Rather than consider Black communities’ musical practices as a category or pay attention to wider social contexts and relationships, they are simply added on, here and there, as background, annoyance, as wacky entertainment not to be taken seriously, or as distraction to something else going on.

A word on “Black communities” in the Maghrib: while Rouanet includes “negroes” from the Gurara region (“*les nègres de Gourara*” or “*les nègres du Sud*”), thus sometimes implying the practices of indigenous Blacks, Rouanet is primarily referring to the descendants of slaves, brought north via the trans-Saharan slave trade. He refers to them as being originally from sub-Saharan Africa (*le Soudan*). In other words, by and large, the Black musical communities Rouanet is depicting are, today, known as the *Dīwān of Sīdī Bilāl* in Algeria, the *gnāwa* of Morocco, and Tunisian, *ṣṭambēlī* communities, although he does not mention them by name nor does he draw any real connections between sub-Saharan (“*sūdānī*”) communities across the Maghrib.² His information is primarily on Algeria, with focus on Algiers, but features several references to the south, specifically Laghouat and the Gurara region (on the historical and contemporary politics of being Black in Algeria, see particularly Blin, 1988; King, 2021).

² I use the term “*sūdānī*” to refer to these black communities whose origins are traced to sub-Saharan Africa.

Rouanet does not mention -or is not aware- that the *sūdānī* communities across Algeria arrived via different trans-Saharan caravan routes and, thus, possessed large ethnolinguistic differences, resulting in diverse *sūdānī* practices. The primary caravan routes involved one branch originating from Timbuktu and another from Agades (Bovill, 1933, p. 107) that crossed Tuwat Oases (especially Adrar)(Pâques, 1964, p. 449), and continued north to Tlemcen or Oran while another branch split from the Mزاب Valley up to Medea -one of the largest slave markets- and onto Algiers. At other times, caravans kept a more south-easterly trajectory through Ouargla and into Tripoli (see Lovejoy, 2004; and Lydon, 2012).³ We can observe these patterns in the aesthetic tendencies and practices of various black communities in Algeria today.

For example, the comparable practice in Constantine associated with Dār Baḥrī and Dār Hausa-Bornu resonate more with the aesthetics of Tunisian *ṣṭambēlī*- a barrel shaped *gūmbrī*, a signature five-stroke *qrāqeb* mode, more emphasis on minor second scale degrees- while their ritual practices attach more to (Sīdī) Merzūg than (Sīdī) Bilāl.⁴ Furthermore, other *sūdānī* practices in Constantine, such as the *neshra* ritual, and the “Merzūg” rites in Biskra or the Mزاب’s *dūndūn* tradition share some ritual practices, pantheons, and legends yet entirely escape Rouanet’s knowledge

³ Baude wrote in 1841 that the three main caravan destinations in Algeria were Oran, Medea (continuing onto Algiers), and Constantine, with Ouargla also being an important crossroads for caravans that continued to Medea and Constantine (Baude, 1841, p. 163; see also Fey, 1858). Also important to the trade were the northeastern Saharan oases of Ghat, Ghadames, and Murzug (Lydon, 2009, p. 80-81). On Sīdī Merzūg, see Khiat, 2006, Oussedik, 2012.

⁴ Most importantly, the Afro-Maghribi family of music practices is commonly bound by its identification with Bilāl, an Abyssinian slave who converted to Islam, was tormented by others for his conversion, and was freed by the prophet, becoming not only a close companion to the Prophet but also the first muezzin (caller to prayer). Bilāl powerfully symbolises and validates Black subjectivity in Islam and the supposed passage from slavery to freedom via Islam. Despite the fact that Bilāl was not a saint (*sīdī* or *wālī*) nor a holy man in the sense of performing miracles, and while he did not have a *ṭarīqa* (spiritual path; ṭuruq, pl.), disciples, or his own lineage—meaning that, by definition, his is not a Sufi order—Bilāl nevertheless functions symbolically as a shaykh; he is sometimes referred to as the “spiritual father,” *el-‘āb er-rūhī*. His disciples, who are referred to as the Bilaliyya, share epistemological lifeworlds with other orders, particularly the Qadiriyya, those who associate with the Sufi saint ‘Abd el-Qādr Jīlānī. The very fact of calling Bilāl a ‘Sīdī’ (saint) establishes him as a manner of *shaykh*.

or attention.⁵ Put bluntly, Rouanet lumps together “negroes” and does not bother to nuance or trace different histories, ethnicities, or social positions.

In commenting on and critiquing Rouanet’s contributions and shortcomings, I draw from other anthropological and historical sources as well as my own recent ethnographic fieldwork with Algerian *dīwān* (2013-2016) (see Turner 2017, 2020, 2021) and Moroccan *gnāwa* (2008-2011) communities. Lastly, in this text, I pair Rouanet’s French renderings with Arabic terminology transliterated using the system of the Journal of Middle Eastern Studies with some adaptations for Algerian dialect. For example, I clarify his rendering of *tebeul* as *ṭbel*.

Communities and their practices

Rouanet introduces his readers to Black communities in the Maghrib by launching into the following scene, apparently in Algeria during Ramadan:

Ils chantent et dansent jusqu’à ce qu’ils tombent épuisés ; à ce moment ils se mettent à divaguer, et c’est le djinn [28], l’esprit diabolique, qui parle par leur bouche. Les familles qui ont des malades ne manquent pas de profiter de la circonstance pour demander au nègre possédé par le djinn le nom et le remède de la maladie. Le nègre leur répond avec assurance, sans oublier de faire promettre le sacrifice au djinn d’un bouc, d’un mouton, d’un bœuf ou d’une volaille dont la chair sera distribuée à toute la confrérie. (p. 2822)⁶

Taking into consideration the historical context of French anthropological scholarship on North and West Africa and its pathologization of “possession,” it is not surprising that his depiction focuses on a bodily inhabitation of a *jinn* speaking through the mouth of the “possessed.” However, Rouanet misses the *musical* production of such phenomena; that is, the inextricability of music from states of consciousness. What can be gleaned from this vignette is a glimpse into a wider phenomenon here of *musical* diagnosis that still persists, particularly

⁵ Today, *dūndūn* communities in the Mزاب attach themselves to Bilāl. In other words, they see themselves as part of the Bilāliyya network of traditions and, for this reason, have contact with *dīwān* communities, sometimes even holding rituals together.

⁶ While some *dīwān* and *w’adat* (larger, multi-troupe, semi-public, and multi-day *dīwān* “festivals”) are somewhat accessible to a non-insider public, practices such as Rouanet described no longer occur publicly.

in contemporary Algerian ritualized practices of trance and their approaches to health and healing.⁷

I witnessed a resonant kind of private musical diagnosis at Dār Baḥrī in Constantine where, after a series of songs performed and trance dancing on the part of the “afflicted,” a *moqedma* (female ritual elder and here, *clairvoyante*) gave individual consultation to the “patient,” and recommended certain therapeutic actions and the ingestion of particular herbs. Moreover, according to elders in Saida, such patterns of diagnosis did formerly occur. Speaking of the earliest days (“the first ones” *lewvelīn*), septuagenarian, the late Mūḥammād Hāzeb of Saida told me in 2014 that, in his memory, a sick person was “brought to the blacks” after which some personal article of the patient, such as a shirt, would be given over, in order to receive a diagnosis of the sickness: “*kī kūn mrīḍ, jīhum ‘and l’abīd, y’atik le diagnostique.*” However, it should be noted that many Sufi orders across the Maghrib, such as the ‘Issāwa, conduct related modes of trance dancing (*jedba*), mortification practices (knife play), and intense bodily release for the purpose of mental-emotional relief and healing. In other words, despite the stigma Black communities received and still suffer—sometimes accused of practicing *la magie noire* or “voodoo” (see Khiat, 2014; Turner, 2021)—the dynamics that Rouanet describes above are not strictly “black” phenomena.

As if to give some background about these black communities regarding the passage above, Rouanet mentions houses that formerly existed and that pertained to the various “tribes” (In footnote 5, p. 2822):

Ces nègres guérisseurs avaient autrefois à Alger des maisons consacrées au culte de leur djinn favori, et chacune de ces maisons appartenait à une tribu. Il y avait la dar Ketchna, la dar Haoussa, la dar Guerma, la dar Bembre, la dar Senghi, la dar Tembou, la dar Zouzou et la dar Bermou.⁸

Andrews (1903) and other sources had already noted or confirmed these various *diyār* in Algiers while a different system of segregated, social organization existed in the west; the *gurbī* or *grāba* (plural): shantytowns or all Black villages, sometimes called *villages nègres*, occasionally housing a *zāwīya* or ritual space for the local *dīwān* community. Both in the more active, western Oranais *dīwān* communities and in Algiers and Blida, my interlocutors listed the most prominent ethnolinguistic

⁷ See Turner 2020a and 2020b for examples of the musical aspects of these rituals.

⁸ Today known as Katchena, Hausa, Gurma, Bambra, Songhay, Tombu, Zozo, and Barnu

influences as Hausa, Songhay, Bamba, Bornu, and Zozo in order of decreasing occurrence. While we find more precise information about the houses in other sources (Andrews, 1903; Dermenghem, 1954), Rouanet mentions the most venerated “*djinns*” he came across, again not exactly relaying or recognizing the *musical* or social importance here.

Understanding the spirit pantheon, the “*djinns*,” and other non-human presences significant to these communities can tell us something about social dynamics at the time. Given that certain families affiliated with ethnolinguistic groups in Algiers, Oran, and elsewhere specialized in particular song repertoires for spirits (*arwāh*) or *jnūn* (plural), the tenacity of specters and their songs may indicate the *strength* of associated kinship groups. For example, in the High Plateau of Algeria, the Hausa “Migzawa” (Maguzawa) repertoire seems to have originally been the expertise of the Sarji family (Pâques, 1964, p. 582) formerly based in Saida and confirmed today by the Sarji kin in Oran and Mostaganem. Today, the Canon kinship group of Saida disputes it as their “lineage.” Mascara is also a key region of “Migzawa” expertise, and according to ritual expert, ‘Azzedīn Benūghef, the tradition goes back to the first “*sūdānī*” family in Mascara, that of Sīdī ‘Alī Muḥammad Būfraḥ, or Bū Ganga, born in Mascara approximately in 1887. Precisely on that note, of particular historic merit here is Rouanet’s mention of the “Megazoaua” (Migzawa, Maguzawa) series. This pantheon group is not well understood but increasingly popular and controversial in contemporary Algerian *dīwān* practice (Turner, 2021). The repertoire and ritual order of Migzawa today varies significantly even between small distances such as Mascara and Saida and more so between Algiers and the west. While the High Plateau is seen as the birthplace of the Migzawa repertoire and is still considered its stronghold, Khat (2014) demonstrates that its prominence continues in Algiers.

Aside from this pantheon group, according to Rouanet’s limited observations, the *jnūn* most venerated at the time were (with spelling adjusted): Sergu, Jato, and bin Lehmer. The latter could likely be a mistake: to my knowledge, no such “*jinn*” appears in other sources nor in contemporary practice. Without question, Sergu remains a powerful and influential *jinn*/song today; as a specter of the trans-Saharan slave trade (Turner, 2020), Sergu’s trancers outnumber that of most other *dīwān brāj*, with the exception of Sīdī Ḥsen. Jato, not particularly well known today, is still performed but his influence seems to have diminished historically, given that Pâques (1964) and others (Besmer 1983; Rouch, 1989) write of his presence. In Mascara and Algiers, Sergu is sometimes seen as one of the Migzawa spectres while, in the Oranais ritual path (treq), he constitutes

part of a larger Baḥrīyya (“of the water”) group. In any case, because repertoires and songs have changed and disappeared over time with the rise and fall of families and lineages, paying attention to repertoires and pantheons is especially critical.

As noted, generally speaking, Rouanet is imprecise in his depiction of Black communities. He implies only two types: indigenous black communities in southern Algeria (“*Gourara*,” “*le Sud*” and Laghouat) and those whose origins lie in “*le Soudan*,” sub-Saharan Africa. Rouanet’s commentary on the “blacks of the Gurara” is wanting for nuance, considering the very different musical styles of black communities of the region, such as *ahelil* (see Mammeri, 1984). While *dīwān* has purportedly existed in adapted forms in southern Algeria (Gurara, Mzab, and Tuwat Oases), Rouanet overlooks musical overlaps and differences between the south and the north, only noting that the *qrāqeb* (metal clappers) partially arrived via the Gurara (p. 2936). The Tuwat Oases and Gurara region were, indeed, critical to trans-Saharan trade so, while evidence is opaque (with the exception of Champault, 1969), we can indeed presume that much of the “northern” practices we associate today with the *Dīwān of Sīdī Bilāl* emerged from more southerly outposts.

Most of Rouanet’s references to “*les nègres*” are in outdoor or festive contexts, playing their large, double-headed barrel drums and metal clappers (“*tebeul et krakeb*”; (*tbel*; *qrāqeb*) in the streets, with non-*dīwān* spectators, such as Rouanet himself. These are precisely the contexts for which he has such negative opinions to give- noisy bacchanal, terrible hullabaloo. Yet, even more troubling is his evolutionary approach to music making, describing these musicians and listeners as being at an earlier stage of musical development that requires no real musical or “artistic” education -the rhythmic stage- before evolving to be more like “White” Western classical music, such as that of the classical symphony. He argues that such a developmental rhythmic plateau-one that “stops at the senses” meaning that it does not engage the intellect, thought, or mind-reveals the “primitive” and “coarse” nature of these “Arabs and negroes.”

Les Arabes de l'extrême Sud et les nègres disséminés dans l'Afrique mineure ont une musique purement rythmique : leur orchestre se compose d'instruments de percussion, et on peut croire que leur plaisir musical est aussi intense à entendre des heures entières le dialogue du tebeul et des castagnettes de fer, que celui du mélomane qui écoute une symphonie classique. Ces auditeurs nous représentent donc le premier degré de l'échelle du plaisir musical et aussi la première phase de la musique. Le rythme est

seul l'élément musical, élément instinctif qu'aucune éducation artistique ne donne, qui s'arrête à la sensation et suffit à ces natures primitives et frustes. (pp. 2906-2907)

In fact, *ṭbel* mastery is a revered art among *dīwān* communities. Particularly in *w'āda* (larger, outdoor festival) contexts, one may witness extraordinary performances, focusing on *ṭbel*, *qrāqeb* and call and response singing. In Mostaganem, for example, the Sarji kin pride themselves on elaborate sticking technique where the *ginbrī* melody of a *borj* (song) from indoor ritual can be tapped out on the drumhead by taking full advantage of the subtle tones of the *ṭbel*. That is, by attending to the subtlety of tones, a musical ear can pick out the pentatonic melody on the drum, one that approaches the texts of songs. Indeed, Rouanet does confirm three positions of *ṭbel* sticking that produce variable pitches and comments that the musicians themselves referenced “notes as words” yet he fails to take seriously the versatility and virtuosity of the instrument and its masters. Such contexts involve two to three *ṭbel* players with the *m'allem* of the *ginbrī* delivering the most intricate and melodic *ṭbola* part. In Saida as well, among the Canon kin, a robust drumming tradition persists both in small and larger ritual contexts, consisting of entire repertoires heard *only* on *ṭbel*.

Moreover, we know that musical exchange between the Mزاب and the north, particularly Algiers, has historically been strong, including many kinship connections with *dīwān* families. The drum and dance tradition called *dūndūn*, involving elaborate circle and line dances constituted by multiple refrains and developments, features elegant, slow, and sonorous *ṭbel* parts along with signature *qrāqeb* rhythmic modes heard *only* in the Mزاب-again, these are important overlaps and differences between “black communities” who play *ṭbel* and *qrāqeb*. A similar drum and dance tradition called *benga* in Ouargla also shares and departs from *dīwān* roots-let us recall that Ouargla was a key point in the trans-Saharan slave trade.

In my visits with Remdane Bouchareb, a prominent *m'allem* in Ouargla, we examined differences in *ginbrī* technique and usage: here, it is primarily a simple accompanying instrument to the priority of percussive expression. Like *dūndūn*, in *benga* the *ṭbel* repertoire is often slow, sauntering, and nostalgic. Thanks to fans in Saida, today *dūndūn* may precede *dīwān* rituals when the best known troupe of *M'allem Muḥammad “Ḥammitū” Samāwi* from L'atéf is invited. Such facts of musical diversity and richness of drum and dance traditions attest to Rouanet's negligence. Rouanet's only mention of *dūndūn* (*dendoun*) appears near the end of the section, as one of the terms for *ṭbel* used by “*les nègres d'origine soudanaise*.” He also

briefly mentions another term “*guengou*,” currently pronounced as “*ganga*.” In Mascara, the term “*ganga*” refers to a master player more often than the instrument itself but both are common across Algeria.

When considering the type of non-insider, public performances Rouanet references, it is necessary to nuance the various scopes and purposes of such processional, outdoor phenomena. Some function specifically to announce a ritual and implore donations. These traditions are historically remembered as “Baba Salem,” (see Miliani, 2009, p. 13) yet black musicians today remember this term as carrying racist undertones (Khat *nd*).⁹ Primarily, however, outdoor spectacles are intended for the *dīwān* community itself. Traditionally, and still today, *dīwān* and *w’ādat* (larger scale multi-day rituals) are still preceded by elaborate *ṭbel* and *qrāqeb* performances, featuring the very ritual musicians who perform for the indoor sessions.

Sometimes, semi-codified “*kuyu*” dancing joins the percussion, such as in Saida and Mascara where an older and divergent style of percussion-only “*mbara*” dancing sometimes precedes rituals. *Mbara* is oftentimes associated with the Migzawa repertoire and consists of several songs enacting hunts; the dancers exaggerate with crouching and squatting, noticeably divergent from typical *kuyu* dancing that focuses on footwork. Comparing the opinions of prominent singer (“*kuyu bungu*”) in Oran and a *m’allem* in Mascara, it appears that *mbara* was a former dance for old men whereas “*kuyu*” was the dance for the younger men, involving fancy footwork. *Mbara* is said to have disappeared, yet the Canon family in Saida claim to still perform it, at least in part. That is to say that “dancing” to *ṭbel* and *qrāqeb* is also a nuanced, multi-faceted practice—it is not only as a “possession” trance response or as a spontaneous, celebratory response to bombastic rhythms but, rather, its many styles involve skill, meaningful choreography, and knowledge.

On occasion, in smaller communities, virtuosic *ṭbel* playing in public, outdoor spaces serves the purpose of impressive musical announcements of upcoming rituals, possibly including a parade through the streets, as

⁹ Khat (*n.d.*, p. 7) notes the local reference to the term Baba Salem: “Nous ouvrons ici une parenthèse, pour dire que l’appellation de « Diwan » a un autre contenu et comprend une autre réalité que celle qu’on retrouve dans les expressions qu’on entend ici et là telle que : « Baba Salem », « Bambara » « Boussaâdiya ». Celles-ci, comme beaucoup d’autres qui disent le noirs, sont témoins d’une configuration qui mérite bien d’être illucider. Le sens que donne la société blanche, par exemple à « Baba Salem » définit le noir comme un être insignifiant, ou une culture passive (d’où le mot Salem) dont le rapport à sa production rituel ne succite donc pas l’inquiétude et est nullement contraignant.”

I witnessed in Arzew, Kristel, and Busfer. In *w'āda* contexts, these parades function as festive, sonically exciting arrivals of troupes from around the country. For example, an Oranais troupe arriving in Arzew would announce their arrival by parading to the locale accompanied by *ṭbel*, *qrāqeb*, and singing, typically featuring the song for Mūlay 'Abd el-Qādr. Moreover, related to these outdoor displays, some might wonder about other traditions, such as the historic 'Aīd El-Fūl (Festival of the Bean), particularly famous in Algiers where the black communities gathered to perform and parade a bull in costume that would be sacrificed and provide sustenance for the ritual community. Without necessarily including the procession of the bull, *dīwān* families in Sidi Bel Abbes are annually striving to recreate these lost festivities of 'Aīd El-Fūl.

As for interior, semi-private music making, unfortunately, Rouanet only hints at these milieux. Later in the encyclopedia, he describes the “*guenbri*” (*ginbrī*) referencing a visit with *m'allem* Mohamed Ben Barka in Laghouat and, near the end of the section, in one of his “Fête nègres” descriptions, mentions the *goubri* and *krakeb*, suggesting an indoor and private gathering. Nevertheless, we learn next to nothing about the social contexts of such gatherings—and not surprisingly as his entry into such a space would have been extraordinary. His descriptions of the instruments and their approximate practices is, again, both perplexing and surely accurate in some cases and inaccurate in others. It is unfortunately not always clear which is which.

Performance and Organology

While Rouanet does not provide information about interior music making, the rituals involved, or any degree of social activity beyond religious holidays and their festivities (Ramadān, Mūlūd, 'Aīd el-Kebīr), he does address the instruments of *sūdānī* communities, particularly some bizarre but compelling details about the “*goubri*.” The *goubri* would not typically have been played in outside musical performances—it would have been impossible to hear. Thus, what he calls the “Fêtes de nègres” in Algiers (p. 2937) involving one *goubri* and two pair of *qrāqeb*, is either a mistake on his part or was an indoor occasion. As for organological information, he discusses together the sub-Saharan *goubri* with the *guenibri*, a small plucked instrument, usually with a tortoise shell body that, he claims, was imported from Morocco. The plausible connection here is that, as he notes, some musicians in the Gurara play these instruments. However, there are a number of musical traditions involving

such instruments, such as *ahelil* that often uses a small *ginibri* made of a tiny, dried gourd shell. These typically have nothing to do with the “*dīwān*” or *sūdānī* communities Rouanet focuses on although, in some rural areas of Morocco, *gnāwa* communities have been known to use something more like a *ginibri* than the *sūdānī ginbrī*.

Interestingly, Rouanet mentions that the *goubri* or *guenbri* can have three or four strings. Indeed, while *gnāber* (plural) today always have three strings, oral history in Algeria among *dīwān* communities asserts that, in the past, the *ginbrī* could have four strings. Rouanet’s photos, showing slightly different shapes and sizes of *gnāber* are valuable. Of interest is that the long, rectangular *goubri* he attributes to Laghouat (p. 2930) resembles that of the Moroccan *gnāwa* rather than the contemporary usage among Algerian *dīwān* communities. However, it is difficult to draw comparisons or conclusions here as individual *m’allemīn* choose instruments to their own personal liking, regardless of wider trends.

If Rouanet’s observations were correct, either the tuning of the *ginbrī* has changed or the players he consulted were left-handed. He notes that the lowest string would be to the right of the neck (p. 2030) but today, as in recent memory, the lowest string should sit to the left of the neck when looking directly at the *ginbrī*. This means that, if the player is right-handed, the lowest string sits “on top,” furthest from the ground when holding the *ginbrī* to play. Precisely, whether or not a player is right or left-handed would determine the position of these strings. In Oran, I saw left-handed *m’allemīn* take the time to disconnect and swap out the outside strings so that the lowest string would still be “on top”; left-handed *m’allemīn* are uncommon. What is consistent, and still remains the case today, is that the middle string (typically called *lostīyya*), is always the highest pitch, at the octave of the lowest string, and is approximately half the length of the longest string. Just like contemporary use, Rouanet comments that the middle string functions only as accompaniment; we would say as an ostinato emphasizing the tonic (on African sensibilities of tuning lutes, see Morra, this volume).

Especially perplexing is his transcription of the song for Baba Merzūg (pp. 2930-2931) apparently delivered by virtuosos in the extreme south. In attempting to play Rouanet’s transcription on my *ginbrī*, Rouanet’s generous use of chromaticism, inconsistently indicating accidentals in some places (the E-flats or E-naturals in the first few bars) and not others, is remarkably awkward. For example, does he really mean that the first bar begins with an augmented second between D-flat and E-natural or are we missing an E-flat? The last three bars resound more like a Bach *etude* than

a *ginbrī* line. In other words, we certainly miss a sense of pentatonic modality here, the most quintessential quality of Afro-Maghribi communities in the Maghrib. There is no doubt that performance styles and attention to modes varies dramatically between the north and the south. Indeed, the further one travels, one finds more of an accompaniment role of the *ginbrī* overall. In other cases, one notices imperceptible pitches or, when perceptible, those drastically “out of tune” according to a tempered tuning system. In fact, even in Oran amongst older players, individual aesthetics of tuning, pitch, and timbre often map onto age bracket. That is, older players tend not to fret over precise *ginbrī* tuning and aim more for timbre and resonance.

Speaking of tuning, Rouanet determines that this piece utilizes A-flat at the octave and D-flat. In customary *ginbrī* tuning, the A-flat should function as the tonic—indeed the overwhelming tonicity of the music is ubiquitous. Yet, in this transcription, it is not clear whether the D-flat or A-flat is meant to function as tonic while his transcription seems to suggest the tonic center is D-flat. This is rare but would not be unheard of. However, it raises questions about his transcription accuracy or if he heard tonicity differently. Furthermore, the seemingly minor mode implied here is also uncommon but possible.

Later on (p. 2936), Rouanet transcribes three *qrāqeb* modes, labeled as eastern, northern, and western. While the “*mode oriental*” resembles a common 3/8 mode—yet possibly mistaken here as the duple emphasis over a 3/8 pulse— the other two modes do not resemble any contemporary metric patterns in *dīwān* communities. Again, without more specificity on the communities in question (rather than just “blacks from the south”) and the precise musical practice, it is difficult to compare with today’s norms. It is possible that these patterns belong to other musical styles. Indeed, *ṭbel* and *qrāqeb* playing increases in complexity further south. Could these modes have been *dūndūn* from the Mzab or *benga* from Ouargla?

Speaking of regions where the art of *ṭbel* and *qrāqeb* performance is exceptional, Rouanet makes a few notes on the historic place of the *ṭbel*, its ubiquity in the region as well as its place in Arabic sources, and adds that it is used in the south of Algeria (known as “*taria*”) and among the *sūdānī* communities. Similar to contemporary practice, Rouanet mentions large and small *ṭbel* (*kebīr*, *sgħīr*), an important detail affecting the variability of tone quality and the ability for the two drums to “talk” with distinguishable voices. Precisely on this note, he mentions that the small drum plays a steady rhythm (“*le rythme principal*”) while the larger *ṭbola* expands upon musical material, demonstrating the most virtuosity and

thematic development. Also noted is that *sūdānī* communities play only on *one* side of the drum, rather than both sides, as is sometimes the case in other traditions. Single side playing requires particular techniques and affords an astounding range of nuanced embellishments (*zwāq*) both with sticks and fingers. Indeed, perhaps the most helpful contribution here is his attention to sticking and performance technique comparable with today's practice.

On this note, Rouanet specifies that one stick is curved and one is long and flat ("*une baguette*") or, alternatively, a player will use his fingertips. This detail is critical to the quality and volume range of tones possible at different placements on the drumhead which is traditionally made of animal hide. What Rouanet does not explain is that the smaller stick should be highly flexible, thin, and lightweight so that it rebounds quickly against the skin of the drum, producing high frequency popping or smacking tones close to the rim of the drum. Furthermore, the dense, curved stick does the "speaking" nearer the center of the drum, drawing out the lower frequencies with less bounce and more direct contact against the skin, but within a range of hand positions moving outward, as Rouanet sketched on page 2933.

In his diagram, Rouanet notes four different angles of the *baguette* to the drumhead, resulting in different positions -and of course tone qualities- and four different placements of the curved, dense stick moving out from the drum's center where the tone is most resonant. This all may seem quite pedantic and parenthetical but, again, the idea is that a rich variety of tones, volumes, and speaking voices can be coaxed from the *tbel* in the hands of an expert player. Strangely, despite his attention to hand position and sticking details, that which escaped Rouanet is that "melodies" and texts can be rendered for those who are willing to listen. As we saw above, he more or less dismissed the instrument for its supposedly rudimentary rhythmic limits, writing it off as noisy and crude.

Concluding Thoughts

We perhaps cannot expect Rouanet's typical French colonial perspective to have been less racist and totalizing, such as his judgments of musical evolution, his lack of nuance and differentiation, and paucity of imagination or curiosity afforded to a particularly marginalized group of individuals. Nevertheless, Rouanet's descriptions regarding the music of black communities are not without value. Indeed, his mentions of particular "*djinn*s" and their possessions, musical practices (albeit loud and

crude), instruments and their construction, performance technique such as sticking, rhythmic and melodic modes -whether correct or not- all provide productive glimpses into the state of musical Black communities in 1913.

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