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Yamma: A Musical Heritage Which Video Clip Illustrates the Architectural, the Sartorial and the Ritual Ones

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Abstract

If we dive into the past of each square meter of Tunisia, we can find a different heritage, but once assembled together; we discover a north to south, east to west complementary ancestry of a deeply linked culture.

Such tightly bound link was perfectly illustrated in the junction of the inherited remade song *Yamma*, with a video clip which illustrates the wedding rituals of the *Jelwa Sfaxia*.

What if the making of a video clip for the remade song, becomes itself an illustration of an immaterial heritage, in addition to the inherited song's one? We will answer this question through this article, by dissecting the case of *Yamma* song, remade by the singer *Chahrazed Hlel*¹, which is complementarily specified by being inherited in the *Hchichina*² village, in addition to a traditional aura through the illustration of the Tunisian time-honoured marriage rituals.

Key Words

Heritage, Tunisia, Musicology, Traditional clothes, inherited song, wedding rituals

¹ I have made many kindly welcomed interviews with this singer seeking for the old version of the song, and its remix

² A village which belongs to Sfax Governorate of Tunisia

Being partially linked to the subject of my Philosophy Doctorate, which turns around the cultural material and immaterial heritage preservation, through its illustration in Tunisian feature films; I felt deeply attached to write an article since I saw the video clip of Yamma song. I said partially linked, as in my PhD, I am studying the heritage preservation through cinema; but in this case, it is a video clip; nevertheless I decided not to lose the opportunity to decode to the readers, how much it is linked to the Tunisian cultural Heritage's illustration, then preservation.

Yamma inherited song is a priceless masterpiece, found by the lecturer of musicology, Mrs Chahrazed Helal who, according to her deep research and safeguarding heritage's aim, we may name as 'music-archaeologist'. Yet, the complementarity of such masterpiece, made it eligible for an anthropological-ethno-musical study, as such qualification figures in the junction made between the song itself, and its making of.

Being an inherited remade one, with updated lyrics and partitions, makes its composition distinguished with a pure Tunisian *Tbaâ*³: *Asbaâin* and Tunisian percussions figuring in *Barwal* and *Bounawara*. Besides, the making of the video clip is worthy of note that it is rich of deeply detailed illustrations of heritage, varying between the architecture of a Moorish house where the video clip was shot and where habitually a marriage celebration takes place, being distinguished with numerous traditions such as the practice of the incense in order to ward off the envy *fig. 1*, the different rituals of the wedding ceremony, the traditional clothes worn by the bride and the groom and all the family members and guests of the wedding, et cetera; that I will analyse with more details in this article.



Figure 1: The Ritual of the Incense using to ward off the envy during Tunisian celebrations

Through the contact I made first by an email then by a phone call interview (Helal, 2017) with Mrs Chahrazed Helal⁴, I found a clear explanation about the attraction that such song made me want to decode it.

Yamma Song itself is a musical heritage.

According to the international convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, officially published by UNESCO on October, 17th, 2003 *fig.2*: the intangible cultural heritage of each country -member in this convention-, relies on the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith.

The musical heritage of every nation can be classified simultaneously in more than one domain of the intangible cultural heritage. It can figure in both: oral traditions and expressions, performing arts and social practices, in addition to the rituals and festive events.

³ *Tbaâ* is the Tunisian *Maqam*, the system of melodic modes used in the Tunisian Music, which sum is named *Tbouâa/Maqamet Tounsiya*: طبوع/مقامات تونسية

⁴ Chahrazed Helal is a singer and a Musicology Lecturer in the High Institute of Music ISM (section of the University of Tunis)



Figure 2: Convention of UNESCO about intangible cultural heritage

Many vocal-social behaviours, regardless of the related ethnicity and religion, are characterised with an artistic heterogeneous musical aura, which makes the celebrations distinguished with specific songs, inherited from one generation to another: a national musical heritage, which is always distinguished with its variety and linking to the traditions.

For the wedding festivities, we can compare the songs of a marriage ceremony, to the colours of a vitalised canvas, being once religious, others festive. It is a magic smell of an oral tradition that makes the celebration unforgettable, full of cheerful shared happiness between the family members, friends and guests.

Musical heritage figures also in performing arts by the way of interpreting a song: soloist or choral, vocally or with instruments...

And as the wedding is a family celebration, we always find the happiness figuring in all its members' faces, aiming to illustrate such joy by singing individually or collectively, playing an instrument -generally percussion- or even by applauding, dancing or throwing Ululations or yoyos *fig.13*.

The whole body of a guest or a family member, each part separately, lives the situation and illustrates the contentment and the cheerfulness about the bride and groom, or let's say the queen and the king of the party: tears of happiness flow, the hands' palms clap, the feet and the waists dance, the tongues sing and throw ululations... Such shown happiness deeply links the wedding songs to the social practices, rituals and festive family events.

Yamma song figures in this viewing angle: an inherited song, which lyrics treat indirectly the issue of the marriage with perforce; and which is habitually interpreted by the family of a bride, specifically in the case of her departure to live in another region in Tunisia, far from her native town: this is what figures in the lyrics of this song, that I translate to English so:

*Oh Mum! You married me so far,
This is why I'd say no
Oh Mum! You married me so far,
To there, even cars don't go⁵*

In the interview I made with Mrs Helal, I asked her about the history of this musical masterpiece; and she told me that it is an inherited song of the zone Hchichina: a rural area just after the district of Mahres, in the intersection between the governorates of Sfax and Gabes (south Tunisia). She has known about this song by asking an old grandma 'Ommi Mbarka' (Misk, 2017) from that zone, to whom she has listened while singing it (Helal, 2017), and felt attracted to keep its Tunisian traditional character. She even insisted that the song should keep its Tunisian aura, through playing its partition with the *Takht* way (Misk, 2017): a representative musical ensemble, like orchestra, composed of purely Tunisian traditional music instruments such as the *Lute*, the *Flute*, the *Darbuka*, the *Kanoun*, the *Violin*, the *Tar* and so on.

⁵ These are the Arabic lyrics (written in Tunisian dialect) that I translated to English:

يَمَّة عَطِيَّتِي بَعِيدَة، وَنَايَا مَا عَيْنِي شِي
يَمَّة عَطِيَّتِي بَعِيدَة، الْكِرَاهِب مَا تَمَشِي شِي

Mrs Helal was right to think so, as an inherited discovered song, facing the risk of extinction and just vocally transmitted from mum to son, should be saved, “*just like it is done with a discovered archaeological site: being a cultural gain for the homeland, it deserves a hard work of a traces’ research team*” (Misk, 2017) as she said.



Figure 3: the inherited and updated partition of Yamma Song

Yamma chant deeply belongs to such an ethno-archaeological axis, by being a musical heritage which faces the risk of extinction, because it is known just by the generation of the third age to which belongs ‘*Ommi Mbarka*’, and geographically limited to the mentioned zone of Hchichina. In addition to its distinguished lyrics with a rural era and an urban seasoning spice, its music, which underwent an update by Mrs Helal, on the partition and the percussion, *seems to be a mixture between the sophisticated and the popular*⁶: *The Fazzani popular percussion, which origin goes back to Fezzan, a town of Libya; and the Tunisian Slow Barwal of the Maalouf genre* (Triki, 2017).

So in order to save such masterpiece from extinction, and trying to confirm the fertility, variance and richness of our cultural heritage, Mrs Helal asked the Tunisian songs-poet *Jlidi Laouini* to update its lyrics -by saving its most important chorus-, then updated its music partition *fig. 3* through the integration of the Tunisian percussion *fig. 4 Slow Barwal*⁷; and has registered her interpretation of this song. She even strengthened (Krida, 2017) the percussion during the solo made by the flute player. And in order to enhance the composition, she integrated the drum rhythm by *Tabla* instrument, making it a *mixture between two rhythms: Fazzani and Bounawara* (Triki, 2017).

⁶ My own translation to English, of the Arabic message of Mr Wahid Triki , which was his answer to my question about such styles of music and percussion that distinguish Yamma song, and he answered me with his musical analysis, in which he said :

موسيقى هذه الاغنية هي عبارة عن خليط بين المتقن والشعبي، اذ انها عبارة عن مزج بين ايقاع الغزالي الشعبي (نسبة الى مدينة فزان الليبية)، والبرول التونسي الموجود في موسيقى المالوف

⁷ *Barwal* which plural is *Brawel*, is the third percussion, coming after the *Masdder* and the *Btayhi* in the Tunisian Nouba, which is a succession of Andalousians *Mouwashahat* with a percussion that proceeds from the slowest to the rapidest one (Helal, 2017). *Must be mentioned that in the case of this song, Barwal percussion is slower than it is habitually in the Nouba of Maalouf* (Kriâa, 2017)