

The Sound of the ‘*Ūd* ‘*Arbī*: Evocations Through Senses

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Abstract: *This article investigates the possibility of assessing sound and music in terms of somatic values, norms and practices. I discuss ways in which the Tunisian musical instrument ‘ūd ‘arbī is connected to its sound and the player’s body. I explore the reflexive dynamic by which the intersensorial experience (Connor, 2004) of ‘ūd ‘arbī roots the instrument’s sound in Tunisian society. Qualities, the effects of the plectrum’s special position and touches, hands movements, resonances and stroking gestures, recall the intimate sense of crafting the instrument, the shaping of its organic matter and the potential relationships between the player’s body, the instrument, and its maker.*

Keywords: ‘ūd ‘arbī, musical instrument, body, intersensorial experience, somaesthetics, Tunisian culture.

In line with the development of studies in the body-centered discipline of somaesthetics (Shusterman, 1999), we are currently witnessing a growth in research into music in terms of experiences of embodiment, for example in McCartney (2004), Vitale (2010), Tarvainen (2018). For Shusterman (1999, p. 308), the body is now viewed not only as an object of aesthetic value but also as a crucial sensory medium for enhancing our understanding and practice of arts, music and sound. After all, the body is the essential tool through which cultural values are transmitted, inscribed, and preserved in society. Provocative developments in the social sciences argue for the re-cognition of human body interactions with raw matter, including work of craftsmanship (Sennett, 2009).

Taking up the challenge of such voices, this article will consider the relationship between body and sound, focusing on the reflexive dynamic by which the intersensorial body experiences (Connor, 2004) involved in musical instruments (both making and playing them) root the instrument’s sound in society. My article turns to the traditional Tunisian musical instrument, ‘ūd ‘arbī, with which people perform contemporary *mālūf*, one of urban Tunisia’s foremost musical genres.

Steven Connor and others have highlighted the idea that the senses are inseparable from one another (Connor, 2004, p. 153). This intersensoriality opens a field of cultural possibilities, a range of forms, images and dreams in relation to the wood, strings and plectrum of the ‘ūd

‘*arbī*, that I explore through body sensory perception. How do we experience sound through the senses? How can our body consciousness inform cultural identity through music and the sound of musical instruments? In other words, I will explore how the ‘*ūd ‘arbī*’s cultural identity is also shaped by the ways of experiencing the sound through the interaction of other senses: sight and touch. I will demonstrate how the very sound of the ‘*ūd ‘arbī* is iconic in the same way that the instrument is felt, touched, made and experienced through the body, and that it is invested with culturally constructed meanings. I report players’ accounts and interweave data from my own research (doctoral thesis) and interviews with people who recounted memories of particular sounds, and instruments or who described how they perceived the legacies of the instrument and the way it "sounds Tunisian".

The Tunisian ‘Ūd ‘Arbī

The ‘*ūd*, a plucked instrument, is the most prominent musical instrument in the Arab-Islamic world. It developed an unusually large following throughout the twentieth century, in both the Arab world and outside, capturing the imagination of musicians more than many other Middle Eastern traditional instruments. The recognized standard Arab/Egyptian model (‘*ūd sharqī*, oriental ‘*ūd*, also called ‘*ūd miṣrī*, Egyptian) is the most commonly used type, along with the Turkish model, and there are also various models from Iran, Greece, Iraq and Syria. Several practices and styles of ‘*ūd* co-exist in Tunisia, as well as a unique type recognized as indigenous and genuinely Tunisian, named ‘*ūd ‘arbī*, today also known as ‘*ūd tunsī*.



Figure 1: ‘*ūd ‘arbī* (1867). Courtesy Horniman Museum & Gardens (Photo. David San Milan del Rio).

Ethnomusicologically speaking, the ‘*ūd ‘arbī*’s case is one of patrimonialization and revival. This can be traced in the artistic, pedagogical, political and symbolic meanings given to the instrument, as well as in its varying material qualities over time. The mutating course of the ‘*ūd ‘arbī*’s public life throughout the twentieth century situates the instrument’s changing performance practices, meanings and values within a heterogeneous cluster of sociocultural currents that interact with individual and national actors. In my master’s research (Morra, 2013), I agree with the widely held view that the Tunisian ‘*ūd* school owes its formation to the legendary player *sheykh* Khamaīs Tarnān for the ‘*ūd ‘arbī*, but argue that it was also largely created by ‘Alī Srīti and Aḥmad al-Qala‘ī for the ‘*ūd sharqī*. The dominance of the standard oriental ‘*ūd* in Tunisia distinguishes the Tunisian model from a range of social, musical and identity features in the twentieth first century, where the Tunisian instrument has not had the lion’s share of political policy, upper class society or players’ encouragement. The ‘*ūd ‘arbī* in the 1960s had, like the oriental *sharqī*, many performance possibilities; this was a market associated and marketed with Tunisian music supported by the Bourghiba government through the figure

of Šālah al-Mahdī.

In her extensive research into the Tunisian *mālūf*, Davis reminds us that this music had been linked in the twentieth century to an ideology of national identity and nostalgia for a past golden age. As Davis pointed out, this explanation was supported by drawing on the myth of the *mālūf*'s Andalusian origins to justify the authority of the canon of *mālūf* published notations (1960s) after independence: *al-turāth al-mūsīqī al-Tūnisi* (Tunisian Musical Heritage) (Davis, 2002). Similarly, nostalgia creates a space where performing the *'ūd 'arbī* is encouraged as an instrumental means of increasing authenticity. It also serves to generate and sustain bonds of national consciousness, however, between and among the players and public.

Today, of the *'ūd*-s of North African type, it is the *'ūd 'arbī* that is played throughout urban Tunisian centers (Tunis, Sfax, Soussa, Monastir), parts of North Africa (Algeria and Morocco), and in a range of diasporic communities from France to Italy. In Tunisia, there are three makers of this instrument: the Bēlaṣfar family and 'Abdelatif Bēlaṣfar (Tunis), Ridhā Jandoubī (Menzel Temīn), and Faīṣal Ṭwīrī (Bardo). Their work with crafts sets out crucial information regarding the construction of the instrument, that is the result of body-hands procedures transmitted orally through generations. The *'ūd 'arbī* also coalesces in a variety of sites: concert halls such as the *Masrah al-Baladī*, *Acropolium Chartage*, Rashīdīa Institute of Tunis, Sfax, Monastir, Kairouan; the practice rooms of the Institut Supérieur de Musique; *mālūf* clubs such as Conservatoire al-Farabi; teaching studios, one example being *Les Jeunes du Maluf Tunisien*; private homes; museum collections in London, Brussels and Tunis; online Facebook groups, such as: Le Malouf Tunisien, al-Malūf club de Chant Arabe, Rashīdīa -Monastir; YouTube channels such as Jalēl Benna with 1,647 followers and 'Alī Sayarī with 9,431 followers; instrument makers' workshops (Tunis, Sidi Bou Said, Hammamet); websites (oudmigrations.com, chikioud.com, christianrault.com), outdoors spaces (Ennejma Ezzahra), and recording studios, to give only a partial list.

Today, there are three prominent players of *'ūd 'arbī* in Tunisia. Zīād Gharsa is the son of the *sheykh* Ṭāhar Ghara, who was pupil of the legendary *sheykh* Khamaīs Tarnān, and therefore in a direct lineage of transmission with the musical heritage. He is in his forties and lives in the capital. Like his father, since the age of four, Zīād has lived in a music culture context centered on the Rashīdīa Music Institute¹ and various private *mālūf* associations. His knowledge of *mālūf* and technical skills on the instrument are recognized and widely appreciated. 'Abīr 'Ayādī is a young *'ūd 'arbī* player from Sfax, who, like Zīād, has considerable experience performing and composing for the instrument, as well as institutional involvement; she is one of the *'ūd* teachers of the ISM of Sfax; and she has also served in the *mālūf* orchestra of Sfax and Tunis and organizes summer schools. Finally, Zīēd Mehdī is a young Tunisian accountant who lives in Paris, and a passionate and prolific *'ūd* player. Zīēd trained as a player with Kamel Gharbī, and his brother and sister, who are settled in Tunis, are amateur musicians too. Zīēd owns several different construction of *'ūd*-s *'arbī*, and he is obsessed by the sound this traditional instrument makes. He lives most of the time in Paris, where he attends the *Mālouf Tunisien*'s association directed by Aḥmad Ridhā 'Abbēs and performs with his ensemble *Ambar*.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, and today the Tunisian *'ūd 'arbī*, is still experiencing musical changes and different positions in Tunisian society. Within the last fifty to seventy years, its transmission has moved back and forth from national institution to private association, from *sheykh* oral tradition to one with a more modern structured, recreating its identity, appeal and diffusion in many diverse situations. This musical instrument, therefore, is

1 The Rashīdīa Institute of Tunis was founded in 1935 and devoted to the education and promotion of Tunisian music.

entangled in a web of complex relationships and situations between human, socio-historical and cultural contexts (Bates, 2012, p. 364).

‘ūd ‘arbī, Crafting Wood by Hand

Various aspects of body sensory perception involve the role of the craftsman and their work, exploring whether there is a relationship between the way of making ‘ūd ‘arbī and the sound the instruments produce. As William James noted, everything circles round the body, and is felt from its point of view (Shusterman, 2006, p. 7). My observations of instrument construction by the luthier Hedī Bēlaṣfar at the workshop of the Centre of Arab and Mediterranean Music (CMAM) in Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, in June 2015, led me to believe that there was a relationship between the maker’s hand movements and how the instrument sounded “Tunisian”. It is not a matter of abstract quality: Hedī Bēlaṣfar’s technical skills are considered cultural merits rather than mere procedures, embedded in Tunisian national craftsmanship. They are transmitted orally and come from a past from which few examples survive today.²

Through the months of May and June 2015, I observed Hedī Bēlaṣfar making an ‘ūd ‘arbī that I had commissioned at the start of my doctorate. The various stages and order of working are flexible, but the basic process involves creating the mould, “qālib al-qaṣ‘a”, a model for the body. Luthiers have several moulds for several models of ‘ūd, and as Hedī Bēlaṣfar’s son, Muḥammad -Islām, told me they have the “old” and “authentic” mould for ‘ūd ‘arbī in Tunisia. Ribs are attached to the mold, which form the base for the case of the instrument. The *al-k‘ab* is important in this phase, a small cubic block that is placed on both the upper and lower part of the body (*al-qaṣ‘a*), where the ribs are attached.

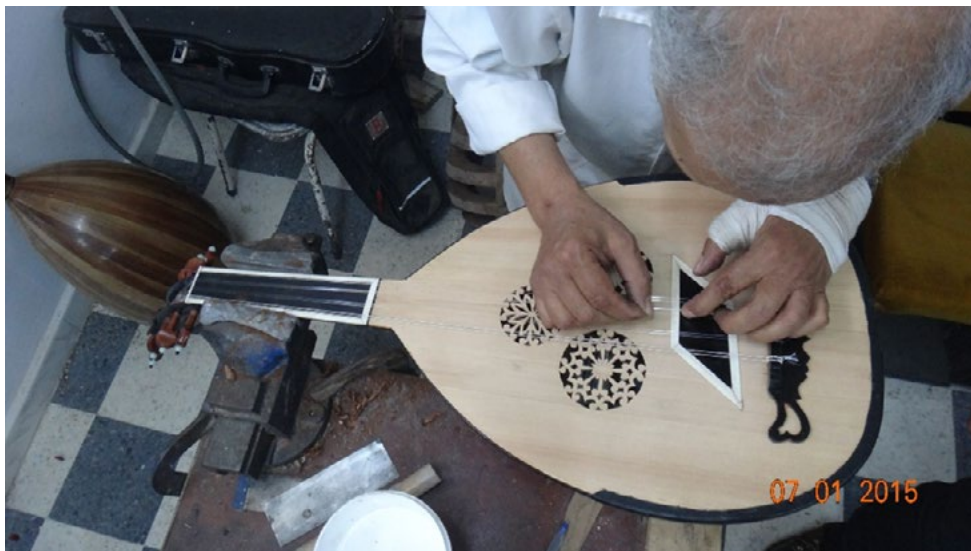


Figure 2: Hedī Bēlaṣfar crafting the instrument, 2015.

The ribs, called *aḍlā‘a* and literally meaning "sides", are between 2 and 3 cm long, and 3 mm thick that are reduced to 1.5 mm after cleaning and smoothing. Their shaping is achieved using a saw (*munshār*). After cutting the ribs, Bēlaṣfar bows them, literally "arch" or "arcade",

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbegbO2DWkk&t=16s>. "The Making of the Tunisian ‘ūd". Written and directed by Salvatore Morra, Assistant Claudia Liccardi, Camera Operator Muḥammad Azziddin, Post Production Coordinator and Editor David San Milan, Subtitles Ikbāl Hamzaoui and Stephen Conway. Morra© 2015

dipping them in water and adjusting them on a hot surface. The last part of this stage is the manufacturing and fastening of the ribs. The aim is to provide support, what he calls *al-‘amūd al-faqrī*—literally meaning the "backbone" or "spine"—to the body starting with placing the ribs from the middle of the *qālib*. The direction of placing the ribs is from the right hand side—then left and again right and so on—from top down, to be welded by adding a sharpened spike. Then it is left to dry.

When they are dried, a fine strip of paper is added between them to keep them accurately joined together with an organic glue. The glue, called *ghīra*, and made from the legs of calves, is dried, treated and then dissolved in water under heat (in the interview, Bēlaṣfar highlights the quality of this glue and its property to let the sound propagate through the wood). I have seen Hedī Bēlaṣfar using this and other organic material with "natural movements" as if every touch on the instrument, even the most careful for precise gluing, is to be conducted without overdoing it. Bēlaṣfar knows the results he wants on the basis of his years of experience with sight and touch. As Sennett (2009, p. 9) reminds us, the intimate connection between head and hand, the thinking and the real putting into practice, are the focus of the craftsman. The use of glues between the rib papers, for instance, is the result of Hedī Bēlaṣfar's hand movements. It is entirely a conscious movement, a consciousness transmitted from the mind to the hands after years of work. Up to this point, all the crafting is done by hand.

Crafting the rosettes (*al-qamrāt*), literally "moons", is a work of artistic manufacturing. The *‘ūd ‘arbī* has three rosettes. They are placed towards the chest of the soundboard. Reinforcement using another wood, often spruce, is placed underneath the rosette (the reverse side of the surface). The idea of reinforcing under the face of the instrument goes against the principles of lightness and sound propagation, as the luthier Ṭwīrī likes to highlight. The reinforcement inevitably makes the instrument heavier, he says. The weight of an *‘ūd ‘arbī*, approximately one kilogram, is above the average of other models of *‘ūd*.

The lower bridge "*al-fars*", literally "horse", or "*kursa*" chair, is glued on the lower part of the surface, measuring 36 cm from the *musāfa* (end of the body and beginning of the neck). On the *fars* there are eight grooves in which to insert the strings. A membrane made of wood (rosewood or mahogany and decorated with mother of pearl), *al-wiqāya*, literally "protection" or *raqma*, is placed below the two roses to protect the surface from the strokes of the plectrum. In the *‘ūd ‘arbī*, a piece of leather is placed around the edge of the body to keep it securely fastened and protect it against high temperatures. Thick bone inlays and mother of pearl, for instance, render the instrument heavier, particularly towards the neck side. The neck is made of red pine, covered with ebony wood on the top and decorated with several patterns of black ebony and white cow bones. The neck is attached to the body by a piece of wood that ends at the other extremity, with a *dhīl khuṭāf* (Tunisian expression) *ba‘abūs al-kharīfa*, a "swallow tail" or "dovetail" (*rondinelle*) with four angles inserted into the neck. Makers do not need to glue this, as this feature slots into both parts and fastens securely. The headstock, called *al-bunjuq*, is normally made of walnut (*al-jūz*), and carved from only one piece of wood. It is standard practice to paint it black.

In this description of crafting the *‘ūd ‘arbī*, two features of the instrument are important for the point I wish to make here. The first concerns the fact that the instrument is very much a robust plucked instrument. It is constructed to be heavy and sturdy. Consequently, in some ways, especially due to the thickness of the neck and the tension of the strings, it is also hard to play. This difficulty is a principle characteristic of the *‘ūd ‘arbī*, and results in the unique resonance for the instrument. This feature also renders the instrument distinctive from other *‘ūd* types, and even among North African models. In the Bēlaṣfar instrument, this is a matter

of the overall amount of material, the wooden reinforcements, the amount of glue and how everything is assembled.

What is characteristic of Belaṣfar's 'ūd making initially seemed a rather casual approach towards the accuracy of details and the lack of personal design innovations: wood, bone ornamentations, rosette carving, overall design shape, and materials all fall within an imagined, idealized Tunisian crafting tradition. This idealized tradition has come from the numerous 'ūd 'arbī that Belaṣfar has seen, repaired and constructed in his life. Crafting is a physical hands-on practice for Belaṣfar, involving hands-on contact with the instrument, of touch and movement rather than an imaginative process or an activity following a theoretical acoustic principle. It is experienced through the body, which is the center of vision, the center of action. In turn, Belaṣfar's 'ūd-s 'arbī can be considered genuine and rustic, almost rural, earthy. He encompasses 'ūd 'arbī nature, evoking the instrument's rhythmic attitude. These values regarding how the instrument looks are also reflected in the sound the instrument produces, a sound that prominent players such as Zīād Gharsa and Zīēd Mehdī have said imitates characteristics of Tunisian identity, as we are going to further explore, connecting with sentiments of both its African and Arab/Tunisian sources.

Hearing and Touching the Instrument, Experiences of 'Ūd 'Arbī's Sound

For Connor "with sight we achieve balance and understanding", instead, "touch performs sound" and it is directly related to the material of the object (Connor, 2004, p. 154). He further argues that "we hear the event of the thing not the thing itself" (2004, p. 157), and to think of a sound as the "voice" of what sounds, is to think of the sound as emanating from its material source. Many players, including myself, believe that those organic materials, unique to this type of 'ūd, contribute to the sound of the instrument as "Tunisian" and are also experienced through the sight of it. For example, when I asked Yasin, a Mehdī's student of 'ūd 'arbī, about the first approach he took with the instrument, he replied:

The first approach was visual (to the 'ūd 'arbī). The template and the decorations on it are peculiar and have something medieval and hypnotic about them. At the sight of the instrument we are already projected into Andalusia or to Andalusian Tunisia. It is therefore the testimony to an era. (Yasin, Interview, November 24, 2017).

The 'ūd 'arbī decorative materials, as we are going to see, sometimes intersect sight with sound, thereby shaping images and ideas about the instrument's identity.

During my fieldwork in Tunisia in November 2018, I decided to move to Sfax in search of other 'ūd 'arbī players who would help me explore the issue of sounds not through the medium of recordings but rather through sight, by touching and playing. At dusk one Saturday that month, I had an appointment made through Facebook with Muḥammad Dammāk, who had continuously posted photos of himself with his Tunisian 'ūd in earlier months. Muḥammad is a Sfax-based 'ūd player, teacher and doctoral student at the ISM of Sfax. Although Muḥammad was a little wary of me that evening, a foreigner looking so hard to find an instrument, he brought his 'ūd to show me and played an *istikhbār*³ in mode *dhīl*, going on to tell me about his idea of the sound of this Tunisian instrument.

³ *Istikhbār* is an improvisation, a word and a musical form that not only refers to an improvisatory prelude to a song and combination of melodic patterns, but also to the special Tunisian modes.

Muḥammad owns a fine *‘ūd* made by the maker Ridha Jandoubī in the same year as his examination recital. This instrument, he says, "has something different, it sounds different". After playing an improvisation, Muḥammad focused on the difference between the two Oriental and Tunisian instruments, although he did not have the first one with him, as if the standard starting point must be the former without which the latter could not have existed or at least be understood. Muḥammad places the power of his experience with this instrument in the playing and listening to sound and the sonority it produces, in contrast with the everyday Oriental, Iraqi and Turkish ones:

The timbre (ṭab‘, saūt) of the Tunisian ‘ūd is special, what's beautiful is that its register is very high due to its smaller body. Sol yakāh and do raṣd, for example, played on the fifth string, important for every player who ends a phrase in the lower register, do not exist. This is what is difficult and at the same time interesting and fascinating. The fact that in the raṣd dhīl, or dhīl mode, when playing the tetrachord mḥair ‘irāq on the note sol yakāh you have to go higher playing sol nawā instead, because you don't have that string, it forces you to constantly transpose your phrasing. An odd practice initially, which seems unnatural to the ear. (M. Dammāk, Interview, November 20, 2016)

The resulting sound from this higher pitch phrasing, the continuous combinations and apparently sudden shifts from one register to another, is what attracted him most, especially the fact that it is very different from what we are used to with other *‘ūd*-s styles.



Figure 3: Muḥammad Dammāk, Sfax, 2018

One of the most important features of the *‘ūd ‘arbī* is the tuning. North African *‘ūd*-s, similarly consists of a fourth interval between the first and second strings, either C–G as a practice in Tunisia, G–D used in Algeria (Constantine) or D–A in Morocco, and a fifth, between the third and fourth strings (Guettat, 2000, p. 334). Several Algerian players have confirmed to me that the note C is often tuned into A, forming an octave between the 3rd and 4th strings, which is a constant and uniquely Tunisian feature (d 3rd, D 4th) among those Maghrebian tuning patterns.

This octave interval is central to my argument about the 'ūd 'arbī's intersensorial experience which touches on other local factors embedded in its African context.



Figure 4: The Tuning of the Tunisian 'ūd 'arbī

On the basis of this feature, players argue that the tuning affects the style, body and hands movements, and musical phrasing, notwithstanding the repertory performed. Dammāk introduced me to the idea of cultural differences between old and new, traditional and modern perceived through the body experiences of the materiality and sound of a musical instrument. Its timbre is affected by tunings, combinations of materials and ways of production by hand, all of which characterize the sound.

In *al-Aghānī al-Tūnīsiyya*, in describing the Tunisian 'ūd, Rezgui (1989, p. 58) specifies that it is different in *timbre* from the Oriental 'ūd. In defining timbre, Dammāk uses variously the word *ṭab'a* (sing.), which also refers to the mode of the Tunisian modal system, and to the expression *saūt*, which means sound. The North African modes system *ṭubū'a* (plur.) defines Tunisian as "Maghrebian". Guettat (1980, p. 278) interprets it as the recalling of identity, a modal system, and a form of improvisation. This term, *ṭab'a*, is traditionally also used for timbre by players, or when indicating a special sound effect. Timbre is therefore one aspect of the 'ūd 'arbī's sound as being identifiably Tunisian—soon recognized as specific to a culture and a territory—and it is obtained through certain hand movements governed by the instrument's tuning.

The constant transposing of phrasing and shifts of registers that Muḥammad Dammāk highlights characterize the right hand strokes, up and down along the octave strings, as well as the left hand movements along the neck to give a high pitch sound to the phrasing line. Those body gestures generate the sound that is enhanced by the sense of "sight" in musical performance. Dammāk affirms that those awkward gestures "seem unnatural to the ear", and that therefore the relationship between hearing and sight correspond and result in a unique sound. The octave tuning of the 'ūd 'arbī, in particular, forces the gesture that is in turn imprinted in the sound. Perhaps one of the most important features of the 'ūd 'arbī's sound is that it embodies the possibilities of two dimensions concerning right and left hand movements: the manner of strokes production with the plectrum and the position of hands on the neck due to the inverse tuning. The former gives an image of an unusual timbre effect; the latter is an image of the sound almost compressed into set gestures. The 'ūd 'arbī can therefore also be defined by the position of the hands when played.

Similarly, when I met Muḥammad Bouzguenda, the 'ūd player of the Rashīdīa of Monastir, he also underlined the importance of the *timbre* in understanding the Tunisian 'ūd 'arbī sound. He introduced me to the term that is a metaphor for *timbre*, namely *lahja*, which is rendered by the resonating octave tuning, and is mostly limited to a Tunisian repertory, indicating its rhythmical African beating strokes. *Lahja* is a linguistic term which denotes the nuances of dialect pronunciations. Obtaining the *lahja* on the 'ūd 'arbī is what often makes this instrument difficult to play for players of a standard 'ūd. "To achieve the *lahja*, if we play a Tunisian song, we do it directly with the Tunisian 'ūd", its "dialectic sound" already exists in the tuning, but the left

hand shifts and right hand strokes you make are also crucial, Bouzguenda told me. To distinguish the *lahja* requires careful listening and the player must pay attention to the relationship between phrase listening and view fingering. As Bouzguenda showed me, the most common fingering mistake of *'ūd sharqī* players who are playing the *'ūd 'arbī*, is playing the note D first position on the string C *kerdēn*, instead of using the open D third string. In this way, he explained, the octaves tuning loses its effect and the *lahja* is lost.



Figure 5: Muḥammad Bouzguenda, Monastir, 2016

The way that something sounds also depends on what touches or comes into contact with the hands to generate the sound (Connor, 2004). The *rīsha* (a plectrum) presents a particularly complex and fascinating "tactile landscape" (see Connor, 2004, p. 165) in terms of the different shapes, material and texture that combine to produce sound. It functions complementarily to the body gestures. There are *rīsha*-s made of tortoise shell, bull-horn and original eagle feathers. The ones used to play the *'ūd 'arbī* in both Tunisia and Algeria, are usually longer than standard Oriental *'ūd* plectra, because the right hand up and down strokes are different in terms of plectrum position and tremolo techniques. The role of notions such as traditional and authentic types of plectrum are also particularly striking. Plastic *rīsha*-s seem alien among *'ūd 'arbī* players, and the example below of the player Gargourī can be seen as an exception. The hardness of the bull-horn plectrum, for instance, its durability and the more sensitive final portion of these long *rīsha*-s, make them seem older and closer to authentic "sound" and *lahja*. Zīād Gharsa, for instance, is always seen (in videos) playing official concerts with an original long eagle feather.

The choice of *rīsha*-s for *'ūd 'arbī* players is connected to understanding its elasticity in relation to the length and hand position. The *rīsha* dramatizes the contrast between the robust materiality of the *'ūd 'arbī* and the hard touch used to stroke the strings. The hard stroke of *'ūd 'arbī* players has often been associated with the materiality and weight of the instrument, the heavy body and rural "voice" adapting well to open-air performance (Guettat, 2000). There is also a crafting dimension: the hardened "voice" is intrinsic to the material, whereas the form and length of the *rīsha* are shaped by the player. According to 'Ayādī, Mehdī and Gharsa, *rīsha*-s

should be rounded on the playing edge and two and half times longer than the palm of one's hand. The *rīsha* is not involved in producing all the timbre and nuances, but the stopping and stroking of all courses together and the hard rhythmical accents up and down along the strings always seems to involve what many players define as the "joyful, harmonious" touch, that is a quality of 'ūd 'arbī's sound. For many players, this is obtained by a long *rīsha* held between the index and middle finger, which is positioned to face the strings. Importantly, this style of touch on the strings is not lateral or smoothly done, but rather it is frontal to them and therefore heavy, earthy. In this case, there is much more material for the *rīsha* to pass on to the next stroked string.



Figure 6: Ḥassen Gargourī playing the 'ūd 'arbī with his *rīsha*.

In terms of cultural meanings rather than the object's quality, Ḥassen Gargourī, a Sfaxian amateur 'ūd 'arbī player, is not particularly concerned about the instrument he plays, and Gharsa's authentic touch does not interest him at all. Ḥassen uses a long piece of plastic as *rīsha*, a sort of elastic strip. This strip is unique in its genre, and no one else that I know plays any 'ūd-s with such an object in Tunisia. It is a compromise between having a long thin piece, which imitates the form of the traditional bone/feather *rīsha* used everywhere by Constantine players, but at the same time less is expensive and readily available. However, Ḥassen is adamant about the right hand movement he has to make with such a plectrum, not the actual sound the object makes or helps to make. The technical concerns about the *rīsha* analyzed so far, such as its length, for example, tend to become something more abstract, sometimes for aesthetic reasons.

While the material of the plectrum lies within the sound-touch relationship highlighted by Connor (2004, p. 154), a long *rīsha* and hearing a good 'ūd 'arbī sound are central to the sound-sight relationship instead, where the evidence of sight in this case acts to fix, characterize and complete the evidence of sound. These applications of the *rīsha* may be seen as both a primary way to the medium of touch in 'ūd 'arbī sound identification—because it is the most proximate, medium of sensory contact between the instrument and players' hands—and as a refining of the body's hearing-touching circuitry that distinguishes the 'ūd 'arbī's sound from that of other 'ūd-s.

In this respect, it seems that the knowledge 'ūd 'arbī players have of other 'ūd types becomes crucial to understanding the instrument's sound. When I asked Basēm 'Affēs, a young 'ūd

virtuoso and teacher based in the town of Soussa, about playing Tunisian music on the oriental *'ūd*, he explained "it is possible to play the notes of the Tunisian mode *mazmūm* on the oriental *'ūd*, but to get the Tunisian sound you have to imitate the *'ūd 'arbī* technique of playing as close as possible". The emphasis on the technique of playing is important here. While hearing the F note of the *mazmūm* mode provides the intensity of the sound rather than its specificity, the hearing seems incomplete and questionable without the determination of the sense of touch (Connor, 2004). As we have seen, the "touch" is a consequence of many elements, body form, hand movements, and use of the plectrum, that coalesce into a specific *'ūd 'arbī*'s timbre-sound.

This sense of touch was described in a conference paper entitled "The struggle of teaching Tunisian music with the *'ūd sharqī*", which Basēm presented at the music conference "La Musique du Maghreb entre apprentissage et transmission" held at the ISM of Soussa in March 2017. He asked two main questions: can we apply *'ūd 'arbī* techniques to the *'ūd sharqī*? How can we use the *'ūd sharqī* to play Tunisian music in the *'ūd 'arbī* style? During the session, Basēm played some examples with his oriental *'ūd*. He compared the two instruments, playing *'ūd 'arbī* right hand techniques with the oriental *'ūd*. He used the example of playing the different stroke types of the plectrum, and the effects of moving between high and low registers according to the octave tuning of the Tunisian *'ūd*. Although I felt a change in the sonority of the instrument, he concluded the performance by playing similar sound effects that can be obtained on the oriental *'ūd*. Those effects imitate the *lahja*, that special linguistic dialect or musical sound effect of Tunisian styles. In an interview with me some days after the conference Basēm discussed what most Tunisian oriental *'ūd* players agree about the *'ūd 'arbī*, namely, that the *'ūd sharqī* has greater technical potential than the *'ūd 'arbī*, but different sound effects. Hence, "you can play all that is performed on the *'ūd 'arbī* with it, but not the other way around", he concluded at the conference. The obvious question was why use the *'ūd 'arbī*? "Because the sound is different", he answered. Basēm admitted that applying *'ūd 'arbī* techniques is not a definitive solution, that in truth the oriental *'ūd* cannot really equal the sound of the Tunisian, but that it is rather a mere "imitation" of it.

I am further interested here in narratives that help us understand the meaning of the *'ūd 'arbī*'s sound as a "Tunisian sound" through the body of the player. As Regula Qureshi (1997, p. 2) has demonstrated, instruments can *mean*. Their sound can immediately evoke specific experiences, and the instrument may turn out to be a potent icon of both social practice and personal experience. Cornelia Fales (Fales, 2002, p. 91) goes further in proposing the notion of "timbre" as a "double medium", "a place holder for some absent entity": as in other contexts it may represent a sound of the ancestors, a sound of nature etc. The *'ūd 'arbī*'s sound, for instance, is an expression of "Tunisian/African sound", its identity, which makes sense of the relationship between the instrument, human body and society.

Not only does the *'ūd 'arbī*'s sound evoke a Tunisian identity, but it enriches its complexity through narratives of places, sites and itineraries. It recalls Labelle's (2010, p. xxv) notion of "acoustic territories" in which sound creates a relational geography that is most often emotional, fluid and "that moves in and out the body providing intimacy". Ziēd Mehdi is obsessed by the sound this instrument makes, talking about it as "sounding Tunisian", about the way its sound evokes and identifies his culture. The first time Ziēd talked about sound to me, it was in Tunis at his house in the summer of 2015. He played a chord on the *'ūd 'arbī* and said, "listen to how it sounds Tunisian". That night I did not fully grasp what he meant, I was focused on the music and staring at his hands on the instrument, but I have spent as much time in Paris as in Tunisia with

Ziēd, and sound appears to be an overt theme in Ziēd's attitude to music with the 'ūd. For Ziēd:

Listening to the oud arbi's sound you feel an amazing commotion that carries you away to another time and place. You feel like you are traveling back in time and space, strolling far away in the old medina of Tunis and Sidi Bou Said, probably because for me they are my favorite places in Tunisia and they are a kind of anchorage to where I want to be, and they make me feel a sensation of freshness and joy. (Z. Mehdī, Interview, 18 June 2017).

The interpretation of the *khatam ramal*, the incipit *Yā 'Ashiqīn dhāka al-sh'ar*, for instance, that he performed for me in his apartment in Paris, points to a specific intimacy. Like many of his feelings, it was richly embedded in homeland memories, incorporating sounds that seemed to be moods in the timbre, and were expressed in structural intervals of the melodic line of the song. It all suggests that Ziēd demonstrates that playing the 'ūd 'arbī prompts mutable forms of evocating Tunisian culture.



Figure 7: Ziēd Mehdī, Paris, 2015.

One day in the winter of 2015 we went to his home after a rehearsal session of the group, *Mālouf Tunisien Paris*, at the Tunisian Cultural Center of Paris, because I wanted to learn to play some pieces. That evening, Ziēd's attitude to sound matched the musical structure inherent in the piece well. He played it slowly, in a more melancholy manner, discerning its nuances of sound carefully. His sound functioned as a central cross-sensory metaphor for connecting words, sound and body, yielding insights into the 'ūd's felt relationship with its Tunisianness.

I was not entirely convinced, so that evening I asked what he really meant by "sounding Tunisian". Ziēd said, "the sound of the Tunisian 'ūd is round, bewitching and sparkling", highlighting the third string pitch of note D. He played all four courses of strings together as a guitar chord type of effect, positioning the third finger on the note B half-flat on the second string. "You see, when Gharsa takes a Tunisian 'ūd, this is the first thing he plays, I have seen him doing it many times". The open strings, generally, create a "bright" sound effect, what Mehdī

indicates as the "sparkling" sound. "This is the sound of *sheykh* Ṭahār Gharsa's voice, which is the "voice" of *mālūf*." A particular plectrum touch, for example, which consists of a long light tremolo *ferdēsh* in standard 'ūd practices, is rendered instead on the 'ūd 'arbī by energetic, fast triplet (down-up-down) strokes interrupted by a pause between each of them.

This type of *ferdēsh* is unique to the 'ūd 'arbī and "it works well with its robust strings action and accentuated rhythmical style of Tunisian music," Zīēd explained. Furthermore, "with the *rīsha*, literally, you have to rotate between high and low pitches," he added. This means that you must often change register to complete a melodic line, due to the absence of the lower C note (*raṣd*). Both the movement of the plectrum and the phrasing between the registers is important. "The movements must be harmonious so the sound is pure," he said. "By pure I mean that the sound has to recreate Tunisian situations, for me it evokes smell, *rāiḥa*—the smell of the Tunis Medina, of *shīsha*-s and jasmine," he concluded.

Within this sound world of the Tunisian 'ūd 'arbī, evocation is mediated through the body, which is invested with culturally and intimate constructed meanings. They are embedded in the Tunisian mode system and the way they are rendered on the 'ūd 'arbī through the body's movements endows its sound with an association of longing and nostalgia, lost memories, various aspects of Tunisian life: from joyful sentiments to a harmonious state of mind. The same sound permeates the rich and different intimate worlds of everyone who encounters it, deeply anchored in places that are the very medium of Tunisian-Arab identity.

According to Connor's (2004, p. 153) idea of the "predominating sense", where close inspection reveals that this predominating sense is in fact being shadowed and interpreted by other, what he defines as "dormant senses", like touch and sight in this case, it is possible to argue that experiencing 'ūd 'arbī's sound consists of multiple intersensorial actions and that it establishes strong bonds of identity with those senses and associated organs. The more we concentrate on hearing its sound, the more it will implicate other senses and their complexity. As we have seen, hearing the 'ūd 'arbī sound becomes less and less "pure", where touching the instrument also accompanies, doubles and performs the sound of it (2004, p. 154). To look intently at the instrument is to grasp the timbre of an era, or the *lahja* of a language. To be surrounded by its sound is to be moved by its *rīsha*-s' touches; to hear the stroke is to see the long plectrums. I argue that the 'ūd 'arbī is an object whose apparatus (decorations, strings, plectrums, weights), implicates a complex sense and body introspection to support and supply a notion of sound, where each sense threads through all the other modes of sensory apprehension.

I have explored the notion of Tunisian sound in relation to the touches and bodies of 'ūd 'arbī players and the meanings they construct. The experience of senses reveals interlinked sonic qualities which further disclose meanings of Tunisian identity. I have explored how the application of a multiple intersensorial analysis of touch, sight and hearing (Connor, 2004) to the 'ūd 'arbī, enhances the idea of its sound. Whereas some decorative materials evoke the sound of an ancient time, others deploy heavy and robust feelings, mainly in connection with touch and sight. Such experiences of senses, I have suggested, are contingent upon how the apparatuses of the instrument (decorations, strings, plectrums, weights) support the notion of a "Tunisian sound". I have argued that in spite of certain exceptions and variations, it is one way in which the sound of the 'ūd 'arbī enacts its "Tunisianness", becoming distinct and defining a limited metaphorical territory of Tunisian society.

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