The Tunisian *ʿūd* Video Culture

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Abstract: In contemporary Tunisia, compulsive filming and on line music sharing has become a method of expressing musical identities and participating in networks of affinity. In this essay, I provide an overview of the Tunisian musical instrument *ʿūd ʿarbī*'s virtual life as composed of visual, oral, temporal and auditory elements. By investigating *ʿūd ʿarbī* music videos, I highlight some of the ways in which my own filming of the instrument in the field and *mālūf* (Arab-Andalusian music) aficionados/musicians' virtual video sharing/archiving contribute to create and maintain communities through video practices. This analysis also contributes to discussions of ways the fields of visual anthropology and film studies have redefined ethnographic method (Hockings, 1975; Zemp, 1988; Baily, 1989) while benefiting from research into media and visual communication, sound and music studies (Feld, 1976; 2004, Lysloff, 2003; Karaganis, 2007; Strangelove, 2010).

Keywords: Tunisia, *ʿūd*, *mālūf* music, film, modernity

The *ʿūd* is the most prominent musical instrument of the Arab-Islamic world, today capturing the imagination of musicians more than many other Middle Eastern traditional instruments. The Tunisian type *ʿūd ʿarbī*, Arabic *ʿūd* is of the North African *ʿūd* family, often spelt *oud*, sometimes named also *kouitra*, *kwitra*, *quwaytara* - and today played throughout urban Tunisian centers (Tunis, Sfax, Soussa, Monastir), parts of the North Africa (Algeria and Morocco), and in Europe (Italy and France). This paper reveals the ways in which this *ʿūd ʿarbī* is incorporated into the virtual world, circulating through new visual technologies and digital medium (YouTube, Facebook). I try to weave these routes together into a story about why such activities matter for, and beyond, what I call the "Tunisian *ʿūd* video culture". Despite focusing on a single subject, I use this term "'ūd *culture*" (after Bennett and Dawe, *Guitar Cultures* 2001) to cover a range of themes that engage with some of the core concerns of cultural studies. On the one hand, in referring to the modern sense (both education and civilisation) of the Arabic word *thaqāfa* for culture (Ṭibāwī, 1955: 222), and illustrating its meanings in relation to performance, reception, and digital imaginary spaces the *ʿūd* is positioned in, this paper more broadly argues for the role of this instrument in identity construction and boundary marking. On the other hand, more specifically, the expression "Tunisian *ʿūd* video cultures", as it is used here, refers to the players, makers and audiences who pervade the instrument itself with the range of visual dimensions and meanings through which it assumes its importance as culture identity. How can digital mediation change our experience of the materiality of this instrument on line? In answering this question, I use interviews, participant-observation, and analysis of videos both on- and off-line. Accordingly, my research repeatedly affirms a combination of in-person fieldwork, which has long been central to the practice of ethnomusicology, with on line fieldwork, which is much less familiar. This mixed ethnographic method mirrors the Tunisian *ʿūd* video culture, which is experienced in the arenas of digital domains.

From ethnographic material, covering the musical scenes of the city of Tunis over a period of several months in 2015 I have come to sense that there are times when the *'ūd 'arbī* seems to disappear altogether, existing as an idea, its importance not exactly immaterial but its Tunisian identity carried in the sights and sounds of other media. The *'ūd* seems re-embedded in a range of other forms of material culture which, by extension, can be seen to include internet and digital video. The Tunisian *'ūd* video culture can be defined as a network of creative practices, a cultural system, collectively co-created by users, through the activities such as filming, uploading, viewing and discussing. This video culture emerged only five years ago, YouTube is its primary way of communicating the videos content. The videos provide a new materiality to the instrument through which social interaction and group formation can take place. This video culture is constructed entirely on the instrument and the music it makes, its sound, and image - most of the videos are structured around the cultural artifact itself. What are its aims? And how do such videos create and maintain interest around the instrument?

The type of filming of this video community can be distinguished into two main categories. The first, and larger, is represented by home based forms of video making. Aficionados are either filmed performing or they film themselves performing. In this context it does not much matter whether you do so well or badly. It is a social interaction of amateur participants, who focus on a musical communicative orientation, capturing intimate and personal ephemera with the aim to transmit a feeling of sharing a particular experience with the instrument (Figures 1).
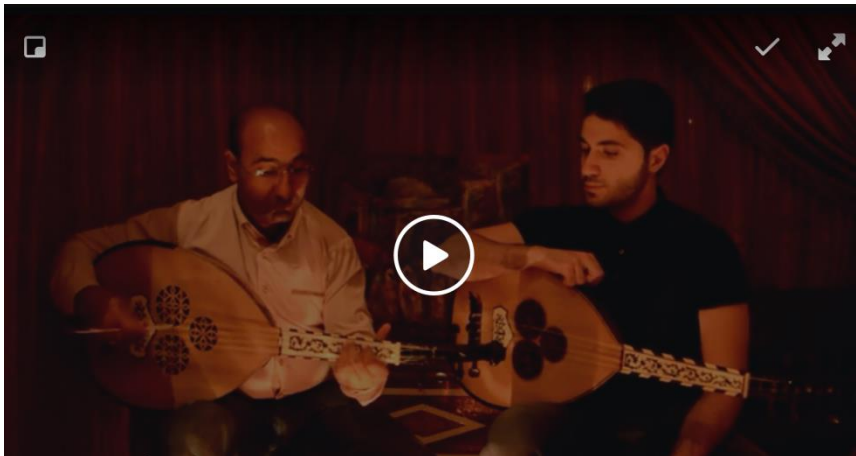

Figure 1 players self-filmed performing

The second category are video loggers. Mainly through their Facebook pages people upload videos that are meaningful juxtapositions of sounds and images, the instrument and the music performed with it (Figures 2, 3). By creating your own video with the *'ūd* you make it your own, in much the same way that you make any music your own by playing it. The visual dimension of these videos can be interpreted as an extension of the music and the performance. Sometimes, the music also asserts its dominance over the visuals, turning the video into a visualisation of the music.

Figure 2 video logger 1

Figure 3 video logger 2

In light of these examples, I suggest that the activities around the Tunisian *'ūd* of these group of lead users, a category that operates in the community itself as well as in the academia, are very important drivers of attention revival of the instrument, and significant in the co-creation of a particular version of its emergent video culture. Bearing in mind Slavoj Zizek's notion of cyberspace (1998), in these virtual domains, at one extreme, we can count very well-known individuals: teachers with many students who are frequently involved institutions; prominent *'ūd* makers whose instruments sell widely; those involved in organizing events and associations. These accounts are largely rooted in domestic settings, with portable video

technology. At the other extreme are those players and aficionados, not necessarily in remote locations or musically any less skilled, who interact very little with others, preferring to play for themselves or to listen what other people post. Such individuals exercise considerable power in the transmission of musical knowledge, shaping agendas from the aesthetic to the educational of the *ʿūd ʿarbī*. Human relations are fostered and the creativity is enhanced in this community. The video making, with its intimate accounts, has benefit effects on the art of performance and thus a private space, acoustic and visual, for the instrument is also re-configured on line.

In this research, I am not only a participant observer, but I am also well known to my informants as making videos as them. I initially used video recording as part of my data collection strategy, and later on I contributed to this emerging video culture with a short movie, filmed in the field, titled "The Making of the Tunisian *ʿūd*" (Figures 10, 11, 12).[1]

Figure 4 "The Making of the Tunisian *ʿūd*" screen shot 1

Figure 5 "The Making of the Tunisian *ʿūd*" screen shot 2

Figure 6 "The Making of the Tunisian *ʿūd*" screen shot 3

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[1] Written and directed by Salvatore Morra, Assistant Claudia Liccardi, Camera Operator Muḥammad Azziddin, Post Production coordinator and Editor David San Millàn, Subtitles Ikbal Hamzaoui and Stephen Conway. Morra© 2015

I actively participate in the creation and circulation of content about the instrument on line. Transforming my filming into a participatory activity, I soon begun visible to the community and to other professionals in their research settings. My case provides a particularly rich example that points to the relations of cultural production and artefacts. The community was especially curious about this video, as it is the first ever made video on the construction of this peculiar instrument. Users in the Facebook post of the film begun openly to query the character of the video with comments in on line discussions. People responded by affirming the benefits of filming the instrument as a cultural practice. I explain that the main reason for making and posting this video was to establish an on line presence for the *'ūd 'arbī* in order to develop a network around the instrument. While the ideas that emerge in forums are familiar from my ethnographic interviews, filming the construction of the instrument points to the existence of a collective imaginary about making it, one built from disparate experiences of luthery-making in the Arab world, incorporating the voices of both prominent makers and relatively unknown ones.

In this respect, I attempt to show that the relation with the *'ūd 'arbī* is becoming less and less material: the rapidly expanding market in portable digital video makers has ensured that the instrument is increasingly becoming visualised through video practices, stored and otherwise treated purely as data files, rather as tangible physical properties. This geographical separation is increasingly reworked through digital practices including file sharing, social media, mobility and connectedness, however, equally significant to the topography of the space the instrument is performed in. As a result, internet is one location integrated with other, and the aim of file sharing is to keep the community members together.

Of course, discourse is not simply about the musical instrument, but woven here into a dynamic of musical practice which makes it ideal for exploring how moving images and music become entangled during the transmission process. Knowledge about the *'ūd 'arbī* is transmitted through the videos and the identity of the instrument is performed and shaped through them. I suggest that the videos reported in this essay function as "statements" of the instrument, they are intertwined and co-constructing its individual and collective identity. In conclusion, the idea of this Tunisian *'ūd* video culture is predicted on a collective sense of common interest and purposes. It provides a forum as never before for this instrument, in which connections are made between established professionals and those of the amateur world. These video/media representations allows us to create in our minds certain images of the past and which may shape our own contemporary experience of the instrument. Overall, the Tunisian *'ūd* video culture represents traces of personal appropriation of an iconic artifact, and filming can be seen as an everyday memory recollection for this Tunisian musical instrument.

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FIGURES

Figure 1 player self- filmed performing

Figure 2 video logger 1

Figure 3 video logger 2

Figure 4 "The Making of the Tunisian *ʿūd*" screen shot 1

Figure 5 "The Making of the Tunisian *ʿūd*" screen shot 2

Figure 6 "The Making of the Tunisian *ʿūd*" screen shot 3