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**The Valued Beauty of *Ġnā*.
A Genre of Tunisian Women's Songs**

Abstract

Tunisian women folk songs have not found themselves among those subject matters enjoying a large amount of interest on the part of scholars,¹ although attitudes in academic circles towards this area of folklore differ.² Recently, however, a gradual increase of interest in folk songs can be noticed.³ Researchers have become aware of the importance of exploring folk songs both with respect to their contents and language. Hopefully this will lead to an increase in scholarly research in this field.

Keywords: Tunisia, songs, folklore, women, *ġnā*, singer, *ġannāya*

Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to discuss some problems related to women's folk songs in colloquial Tunisian Arabic. The approach to these songs taken is thus socio-and ethnolinguistic rather than literary-theoretic although some aspects connected to literature are considered here. The author does not intend to present a collection of *ġnā* songs nor to present a detailed grammatical analysis of texts of these songs here. A few songs are briefly presented and the contents discussed, but the primary goal of the article is to express concern about the danger of this genre of songs disappearing and thus to sensitize both specialists and public opinion about this subject. The author expresses this fear by

¹ See e.g. Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, pp. 231–232; Brahem 2013/2014, p. 8.

² This includes the work of European dialectologist and ethnographers. Most of the works of Tunisian scholars concentrate on the musical aspects of these songs.

³ See bibliography.

relying on personal observations as a native belonging to this cultural community and taking into account similar views of researchers and artists from within the field.⁴ More precisely the author will focus upon the following points:

- (i) The problem of terminology applied to folklore and folk songs,
- (ii) The scarcity of sources concerning Tunisian women's folk songs,
- (iii) An analysis of some aspects of women's songs.

This article should be viewed as a first approach to this genre of folk songs, and the intention is first to determine the status (character) of *ġnā bi-t-ṭwīl* songs within the broader context of Tunisian folk songs, since their status is ambiguous. This is caused, among other factors, by a lack of agreement between sources. Researchers' opinions vary concerning clearly marked distinctions between these traditional genres of Tunisian songs. For the sake of brevity the more general term *ġnā* is used throughout the text. The author is planning to continue research on various aspects of these songs including linguistic analysis. She has already succeeded in collecting a large amount of material and knows many songs from memory since from her childhood she has attended (and still attends) performances of these songs together with the inhabitants of her village. Being interested in the preservation of Tunisian folk culture (folktales, poetry, dance, etc.) she continues to collect materials and provide workshops and works with others interested in Tunisian culture.

The methodological principles underlying the current approach to Tunisian folk songs should become apparent to the reader of this article. Nevertheless, a brief clarification of these principles, prior to the inquiry proper, may be appropriate. As already hinted at above, our attention will be limited to a certain fragment of the vast reality of the songs in question, namely to the songs called *ġnā*. However, the domain of *ġnā* songs is fairly diversified, and keeps changing. Being an advantage of the older women, these songs are hardly practiced by the younger generation of women, and, what is worse, this generation considers these songs as old fashioned, whence does not show much interest in them.

In spite of many modern adverse circumstances *ġnā* songs are still alive, and they undergo various, not always desirable, changes, keeping pace with the ongoing metamorphoses in everyday life. In consequence many variants of *ġnā* songs are created, in addition to the geographic diversification, and their being conveyed orally.

Taking into account the dynamic nature of *ġnā*, the methodology applied to its description and elaboration should revolve around the following requirements:

- (i) the identification of the original *ġnā* songs;
- (ii) their multi-dimensional nature, in particular linguistic, socio-and ethno-linguistic and the recognition of the relations obtaining between songs;
- (iii) the comparison of *ġnā* variants, and their classification based on a sufficiently diverse collection of songs;
- (iv) the establishment of types of *ġnā* and their distinctive properties.

⁴ Only a selection of them is presented in this article.

Of course, in this article, the intended goals could have been accomplished only partially.

A more advanced approach to the methodology of folkloristics would provide for making clear the distinction between *theoretical* and *practical folkloristics*. However, we are not going into this fascinating problem here, because such an enterprise, being relatively demanding, would require more space. We intend to deal with this problem in the future.

Before the proper analysis, for the sake of clarity, the author would like to provide the following information:

- (i) The notation of Arabic names (cities, towns, villages) will be given in Arabic script used for administrative purposes, and also in transcription except for “Dūz, Šaṭṭ al-Ġarīd, Maṣāzīg” which is given in the transliteration applied by Ritt-Benmimoun in her work mentioned in this article.
- (ii) In notating the Arabic names of authors and artists two methods are applied:
 - (a) If they use a romanization of their names in publications then these forms are used in the present article.
 - (b) If the names of authors and artists are given in the Arabic script, then their names are transcribed by the system used in this article.
- (iii) Words from Modern Standard Arabic, further on MSA, (titles, terms) will be given in Arabic script and in transliteration.
- (iv) Words from MSA will be translated in English when necessary.
- (v) Words from colloquial Tunisian and related to folk culture will not be translated into English. They will be given in transliteration and in phonetic transcription (IPA) when necessary, and sometimes in Arabic script.
- (vi) Taking into account the lack of unified method for writing colloquial varieties of Arabic the songs examined in section (5) are transcribed from the sung versions known by the author. The transcription used is somewhat idealized in the direction of MSA though some features of local pronunciation are maintained.

1. Problems concerning the terminology of folklore

1.1. Virtues and vices of the term *folklore*

The term ‘folklore’ was used for the first time in 1846 by William John Thoms to denote the traditional knowledge of a people, including beliefs, legends, customs, etc.⁵ However, it subsequently brought about a long scholarly discussion regarding its domain of reference, that is, the ‘cultural reality’ being designated by it.⁶ This term has been taken into Arabic as a loan word, and turned out to be expedient and intuitive but it was

⁵ See e.g. Al-‘Antīl 1965, pp. 15ff.; Abū Ṭālib 2013, pp. 9f.

⁶ See e.g. Al-‘Antīl 1965, pp. 35ff.; Al-Ġawharī 1981.

generally applied to denote rather different kinds of phenomena. The unclear denotation of the term folklore caused some Arab scholars to utilize other terms, such as *fulklūr ša'bī* (فلكلور شعبي), that is, adding the word *ša'bī* 'popular' to the word folklore. This new term appeared in the titles of articles, books and journals. However it was not accepted by all because *ša'bī* repeats in this case the meaning of 'folk'.⁷ The obscurity of the term 'folklore' as well as its negatively marked usage created a terminologically misleading situation and reluctance towards using it. As a result the term 'folklore' was replaced by other terms derived from Arabic roots related to 'folk' such as:

- (i) *al-funūn aš-ša'biyya* (الفنون الشعبية),
- (ii) *al-adab aš-ša'bī* (الأدب الشعبي),
- (iii) *al-ma'tūrāt aš-ša'biyya* (المأثورات الشعبية),
- (vi) *at-turāt aš-ša'bī* (التراث الشعبي).⁸

Although there are differences in the use of these terms by scholars, it can be generally said that the term *al-funūn aš-ša'biyya* (الفنون الشعبية) literally means 'folk arts' including dance, songs, music, etc. but it does not include folk tales or proverbs. The term *al-adab aš-ša'bī* (الأدب الشعبي) literally means 'folk literature', including folk tales, proverbs, poetry, and the texts of the songs but does not include customs, beliefs, arts or manual crafts. It is important to add that this term refers only to that folklore which is expressed orally. The literary meaning of both the terms *al-ma'tūrāt aš-ša'biyya* (المأثورات الشعبية) and *at-turāt aš-ša'bī* (التراث الشعبي) is 'popular heritage', and they are often qualified by the adjective *šafahī* – 'oral'. And some scholars use these terms as synonymous with the term *al-adab aš-ša'bī* (الأدب الشعبي), but actually the range of denotation of each of the former two terms is broader than the range of the denotation of the latter.⁹

To recapitulate, it can be said that all the terms discussed above for the sake of exemplification approximate the denotation of the term 'folklore', but they are not entirely equivalent with it. Others terms have been coined in recent years such as *at-turāt al-māddī* (التراث المادي) and *at-turāt al-lāmāddī* (التراث اللامادي).¹⁰

1.2. No terminological agreement in sight

Generally speaking the term 'folk song' is translated into Arabic as *uġniya fulklūriyya* or *uġniya ša'biyya*. Unfortunately the former term has rather negative connotations. In contrast, the latter is used more frequently by Arab speakers but it conveys, among others the following two meanings:

- (i) Folk songs handed down by oral tradition describing the real life of common people,
- (ii) Folk music, in fact street music and Arabic pop music. It is one of the most popular forms of music in Arab countries and today it is also mixed with various western music genres.

⁷ See Al-Bikr 2009, p. 52.

⁸ See e.g. Šalah 1971; Al-Bikr 2009, pp. 58f.

⁹ See Al-Bikr 2009, pp. 58–59, 66–71; Abū Tālib 2013, pp. 14–16; Šalah 2013; Mursī 2001; Fārūq 1992.

¹⁰ See e.g. Al-Bikr 2009, p. 62.

In consequence, the term *uḡniyya ša'biyya* in Arabic usage is ambiguous in certain contexts.¹¹

In the case of Tunisia, various terms are in actual use in connection with folk songs, and among them the following:

- (i) *uḡniyya ša'biyya* (أغنية شعبية) 'folk song/popular song',
- (ii) *uḡniyya turāṭiyya* (أغنية تراثية) 'traditional song',
- (iii) *uḡniyya ša'biyya turāṭiyya* (أغنية شعبية تراثية) 'folk song',
- (iv) *uḡniyya ša'biyya min at-turāt* (أغنية شعبية من التراث) 'folk song',
- (v) *uḡniyya turāṭiyya muḥaddaba* (أغنية تراثية مهذبة) 'folk song refined',
- (iv) *uḡniyya ša'biyya muḥaddaba* (أغنية شعبية مهذبة) 'folk song (refined)/popular song (polite),
- (iiv) *uḡniyya ša'biyya badawiyya* (أغنية شعبية بدوية) 'Bedouin folk song',
- (iiiiv) *fann ša'bī* (فن شعبي) 'folk art/folk song/popular song'.¹²

The large number of terms indicates significant differences in the approaches taken to this genre of literature and it also reflects the linguistic situation in Modern Standard Arabic when applied to the study of folklore. It should also be noticed that all the terms mentioned above, which are used in Arabic folklore studies for the purpose of denoting types of folk songs, also convey an evaluation of their contents in either positive or negative terms.

2. Scarcity of sources concerning Tunisian folk songs *ḡnā bi-ṭ-ṭwīl*

The study of Arabic folk songs began to develop in the 20th century, along with the study of Arabic folklore in general. This in turn resulted changes of attitudes towards this genre of folk literature. Unfortunately, researchers who specialize in different types of oral folk literature whether poetry, fairy tales, proverbs or others as well as music and songs face many problems in carrying out research. In addition to the lexical and other dialect problems in approaching folk songs researchers are confronted with environmental, social and technological barriers which impede the direct contact necessary for collecting material. These difficulties discourage others from engaging with genre of oral literature. This is one reason that studies concerning Tunisian folk songs *ḡnā* [ɣnɛ] pose at times overwhelming challenges to researchers. In the subsequent review, some of the works consulted are briefly presented. The selection here is not meant to denigrate those not mentioned.

2.1 Written sources

The book *Aḡānī an-nisā' fī barr Al-Hamāma* (أغاني النساء في بر الهمامة) – "Women's songs in Hmāma's land" was published in 2010. The two authors Na'īma Ḡānimī (نعيمة غانمي) and Aḥmad al-Ḥaṣḥūṣī (أحمد الخصوصي) collected the material from oral

¹¹ See e.g. Šams Ad-Dīn 2008, pp. 9f.; Al-'Antīl 1987.

¹² These terms are used by scholars and also in radio, TV and newspapers. See also Ḥmāḥim 2013, pp. 143–146.

sources. Doctor Mabruk al-Mannā'ī (مبروك المناعي) in his introduction for this book proposed using the term *aš-ši'r al-badawī* (الشعر البدوي) or *aš-šafawī* (الشفوي) instead of *aš-ši'r aš-ša'bī* (الشعر الشعبي) or *al-malḥūn* (الملحون) which have negative connotations. According to him the term *aš-ši'r aš-šafawī* (الشعر الشفوي) is the correct translation of the term 'poesie orale' ('oral poetry'). Al-Mannā'ī also insisted in his introduction on the importance of this genre of literature which should be studied in depth. The material in this book was collected from older women. All of them knew the songs since childhood. The researchers were able to collect a rich trove of oral material. They arranged the songs according to subject matter, including the songs of *al-mahfal* [əl-məħfel] (المحفل). The book contains also a very rich glossary.

The article by Nawāl Ġalālī (نوال جلالی) was published in 2017 in the journal "Aṭ-Ṭaqāfa aš-Ša'biyya" (الثقافة الشعبية, 'Folk Culture') and entitled *Al-Mar'a wa-at-turāt al-mūsīqī bi-baldat Al-Qadaḥ aš-šamāl al-ġarbī at-tūnusī* (المرأة والتراث الموسيقي ببلدة القدح) (الشمال الغربي التونسي) – 'A study of women and musical heritage in Qadaḥ in northwest Tunisia'. It concerns women's wedding songs performed in the village of Qadaḥ (القدح). This village is located in the Northwest of Tunisia, not far from the border with Algeria. It is characterized by a geographical location and historical data that have a direct impact on its cultural characteristics. In particular, the author focused in her analysis on the cultural and social aspects that characterize women's songs in these mountainous areas. And she concluded that *an-niġma* [ən-niġmə] (النجمة), was the most important celebration in Qadaḥ and nearby villages during weddings.

The next study considered here is a series of six articles written by Amal at-Talīlī (أمل التليلي) and published in the daily newspaper "Aṣ-Ṣadā" (الصدى) from April 20, 2017 to May 25, 2017. The first article of this series was devoted to the definition of folk songs in general and folk songs in Tunisia more specifically. The author divided folk songs into two types, urban and rural. The first type has been studied in Tunisia more than the second type which in turn is divided into two subtypes: one accompanied by musical instruments and a second one without accompaniment. The next four articles were dedicated to folk songs in the Tunisian region of Silyāna, and consisted of children's songs, religious songs and wedding songs. The sixth article of the series is dedicated to the problem of oral heritage and offers some proposals for preserving it.

The masters (MA) dissertation *Al-Aġānī an-nisā'iyya bi-minṭaqat Banbala: Dirāsa iġtimā'iyya wa-tiqaniyya* (الأغاني النسائية بمنطقة بنبله دراسة اجتماعية وتقنية) – 'Women's songs in Bembla: A social and technical study' by Aymen Brahem submitted in 2013–2014 in the High Institute of Music in Sousse, presented information on women's songs from Bembla. It was just a small village in the past but now it is an agricultural town in the process of becoming an industrial one. Bembla belongs to the central coast region of Tunisia, in the Sahel area. The author presented fifty nine songs recorded from six women. All of them stated that they began to learn this type of songs at the age of ten to fifteen. In the thesis the songs are written in the Arabic alphabet, not translated into English or another language, however, some of the local words are translated from the Bembla dialect into Standard Arabic.

An article published in 2009 by Veronica Ritt-Benmimon entitled *Bedouin Women's Poetry in Southern Tunisia* treats a considerable number of songs, most of which were recorded in the oasis of Dūz, situated southwest of Šaṭṭ al-Ġarīd in southern Tunisia. The analyzed songs are in the Bedouin dialect of the Maṛāzīg tribe. The female singers whose songs are presented in this work were between forty five and seventy eight years old. It is important to note the fact that most of these songs were recorded during the period of seven years in the oasis of Dūz. Some songs were dictated to the author and she wrote them down rather than recorded them. The songs are also translated into English by the author.

2.2 Other sources

In addition to written sources other works have been consulted such as projects by artists who were working on the revival of the local cultural heritage, especially folk songs including those of interest for the author. Some of these projects were very successful. The serious work of the artists in collecting a number of forgotten songs and bringing them back to life deserves to be highly praised. Their accomplishments deserve attention and are briefly presented here.

The intention of the artist Abderrahmen Chikhaoui (عبد الرحمان الشخاوي) was to revive the forgotten heritage songs which were still present, although sometimes only foggily, in the memory of a few people. Born in the region of Al Kāf (الكاف) in northwestern Tunisia he has devoted himself to digging into old forgotten songs, especially in this region. This activity resulted in collecting a considerable number of songs, within his projects, and giving performances such as *al-mansiyyāt* (المنسييات) and *al-ġannāyā* (الغنايا). It is significant that he refused to be referred to by other names but *ġannāy* [ɣænnɛːj] (غناي, 'a person who performs traditional *ġnā* songs or others similar traditional Tunisian songs; in some cultural milieus in Tunisia it may have negative connotations'), since for him being a *ġannāy* is not at all inferior to other artists performing other genres of songs. It should also be emphasized that Abderrahmen Chikhaoui graduated from a theatrical academy in Tunisia. The knowledge acquired by him there was put it into practice while shaping old songs in new forms during his performances. The artist is also convinced that the environment in which he has lived determines also the choice of the genre of songs he likes to sing. He deeply appreciates the invaluable advice of his mother to collect and correct texts of songs, based on various songs memorized by her during her childhood. Unfortunately, the preference of Chikhaoui to sing *ġnā* is neither understood or accepted by some critics who are of the opinion that he is wasting his talents, because he has an inborn gift to sing songs belonging to more prestigious genres than *ġnā*.¹³

Nidal al-Yahyaoui (نضال اليحياوي), a musician educated in the High Institute of Music in Tunisia, who returned in 2007 to his home village Ad-Dīr Awlād Yaḥyā (الدير أولاد يحيى) in the region of Silyāna (سليانة), in his project 'Bargou' succeeded in collecting numerous

¹³ See also internet sources (3, 4 and 5).

old songs directly from elderly men and women. The results of this work were successfully presented for the first time in 2013 and later to a large Tunisian public in a number of performances and festivals. In this project, he engaged musicians from Tunisia, such as Sofyan Ben Youssef (سفيان بن يوسف), as well as musicians from other countries, like Tsubasa Hori from Japan who played an instrument very similar to the *tabla* in Tunisia. In 2015, the musical group 'Bargou 08' as a part of the project 'Bargou' began to work on the album *Toroq* ('ways') which was recorded in a studio made of straw in 'Bargou' with cooperation from the inhabitants of the village. The name of the album reflects an old genre of music which is characteristic of the mountainous regions in the northwest of Tunisia.¹⁴ Al-Yahyaoui describes his project as follows:

I began working on the music of the Rbo' Silyāna, because I originate from this region. I began this work before 2009. I came here to conduct research on traditional musicians which are still active here. I wanted to attempt to collect a large number of songs, musical texts, rhythms, and the like... My music stems thus from Rbo' Silyāna.¹⁵

To sum up, it can be stated that all the authors of the works presented above often emphasized how difficult it was to collect folkloric materials. Most of the women who knew these songs were old and the young generation was not interested in this type of songs. Thus, for example, Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun depicts the uneasy situation as follows:

...women complain that younger women are no longer capable of singing these songs and do not know the words of ever well-known verses sung at special occasions, let alone being able to compose verses by themselves. Women of the younger generation consider these kinds of songs as old-fashioned and thus pay little attention to them. Consequently the recording and preserving of women's poems is an urgent matter because such songs are on their way to oblivion. When I recorded some marriage songs at

¹⁴ See internet sources (7, 8 and 9).

¹⁵ See internet source (6).

بدبت نخدم على الموزيكي متع ربع سليانة على خاطرني أنا من ربع سليانة أصلي معناها وبدبت نخدم عليها قبل عام 2009 جيت لهننا خدمت terrain على musiciens traditionels لهننا إلي يخدموا حبيت حاولت نجمع برشة غنايات وموزيكي ورينمووات وحاجات هكاية... البلاصة هادي هي إلي طلعت منها الموزيكي.

bdūt niḥdim 'lā l-mūzikā mta' Rbo' Siljāna 'lā ḥāṭirni ānā min Rbo' Silyāna aṣlī ma'nāhā w bdīt niḥdim 'līhā qbal 'ām 2009 ḡit lihnā ḥdimit 'terrain' 'lā 'musiciens traditionels' lihnā illi yiḥdmū ḥabbūt ḥāwilt naḡma' barša ḡnāyāt w mūzikā w rītmūwāt w ḥāḡāt hakkāya... l-blāša ḥāḡī hiyya illi ṭal'it minhā l-mūzikā.

This text is available in oral version. The author transcribed it into Arabic script and in transliteration as applied to MSA, with some adjustments, however, in order to approximate phonetic transcription. The French words occurring in this text are left not transliterated. As of yet, there is no agreement among Arabists on the transliteration of dialect texts. Concerning the transcription of *l-mūzikā*, it should be noted that, rather exceptionally, Tunisian Arabic at times permits long/semi long vowels in final position.

a wedding, the women told me afterwards that they had only sung because the electricity was out and the cassette recorder did not work.¹⁶

And she added in other place:

Since this poetry is not considered very prestigious, it has not received much attention.¹⁷

A similar opinion was expressed by Aymen Brahem in his work (2013/2014) saying:

We observed a completely ignorant attitude on the part of the younger generation towards the preservation of this genre of songs, because firstly they are not interested in these songs and secondly they admire only contemporary songs.¹⁸

Also Sofiene Ben Youssef, the artistic director of the project 'Bargou', who graduated from the Higher Institute of Music in Tunisia, expressed his conviction that it is extremely difficult to get access to musical archive in Tunisia:

The musical archive is completely neglected. It is time to digitalize it in order that everybody can acquaint themselves with it and admire the unparalleled beauty... Tunisian heritage abounds in beautiful musical styles, and they need only to be unveiled without additional comment. Does a beautiful woman need make-up?¹⁹

¹⁶ See Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, pp. 217–218.

¹⁷ See Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, p. 231.

¹⁸ See Brahem 2013/2014, p. 22.

أما فيما يتعلق بالمحافظة على التراث من الإندثار طرحنا السؤال على المؤديات حول عملية تلقين هذا التراث للأجيال اللاحقة حيث لاحظنا عزوفا واضحا لحفظ الأجيال الحالية لهذا النوع من الغناء لعدم المبالاة به أولا والاهتمام المفرط بغناء جيل اليوم ثانيا.
ammā fīmā yata'allaqu bi-l-muḥāfazat 'alā at-turāt min al-inditār tarahnā as-su'āl 'alā al-mu'addiyāt ḥawla 'amaliyyati talqīn ḥadā at-turāt li-l-aḡyāl al-lāḥiqa ḥaytu lāḥaznā 'uzūfan wāḍiḥan li-ḥifzi al-aḡyāl al-ḥāliyya li-ḥadā an-naw' min al-ḡinā' li-'adami al-mubālāti bihi awwalan wa-al-ihtimām al-mufrat bi-ḡinā' ḡīl al-yawm tāniyan.

¹⁹ See internet source (7).

وعرج بن يوسف، وهو خريج المعهد العالي للموسيقى ومقيم منذ سنوات ببلجيكا على نقطة سلبية تتمثل في صعوبة النفاذ الى الأرشيف الموسيقي التونسي قائلا "إنّ أرشيف التراث مهمل وحن الوقت لأن يوضع على الحوامل الالكترونية حتى يتسنى للجميع الإطلاع عليه والتمتع بما يزر به من روائع. وقال بن يوسف، إنّ المخزون التراثي التونسي يعجّ بالأنماط الموسيقية الجميلة، وهي بحاجة فقط لإمطة اللثام عنها من غير إضافات معلقا: "هل تحتاج المرأة الجميلة الى مزيد من المساحيق؟".

...wa 'arraḡa Ben Youssef wa-huwa ḥirriḡu al-ma'had al-'ālī li-l-mūsīqā wa-muqīm munḍu sanawāt bi-Balḡikā 'alā noḡta salbiyya tatamattalu fi šu'ūbati an-naḡād ilā al-aršīf al-mūsīqī at-tūnisī qā'ilan 'inna aršīfa at-turāt muḥmal wa-ḥāna al-waqt li-an yūḍa'a 'alā al-ḥawāmil al-iliktrūniyya ḥattā yatasannā li-l-ḡamī' al-iḡtilā' 'alayh wa-at-tamattu' bi-mā yazḡaru bihi min rawā'i'. wa-qāla Ben Youssef inna al-maḡzūn at-turātī at-tūnisī ya'uḡḡu bi-l-anmāt al-mūsīqiyya al-ḡamīla wa-ḥiya bi-ḥāḡa faḡaḡ li-imāḡat al-liḡām 'anhā min ḡayr iḡāfāt mu'alliḡan: "hal taḡtāḡu al-mar'a al-ḡamīla ilā mazīd min al-masāḥīq?".

In spite of these adverse conditions, efforts are now being undertaken by Tunisian scholars and musicians to preserve the local cultural heritage, which is in danger of vanishing forever.

3. Characterizing the background of women's songs *ġnā*

The women's songs that are the subject of this article originate from various places and communities in northwest Tunisia. An adequate examination of these songs requires taking into consideration geographical, sociolinguistic and cultural factors. The areas in question are fairly diverse geographically, characterized by a natural beauty found in surrounding plains, plateaus, mountains, and valleys. The climate is rather severe, with rain in winter and heat in summer. Most of the inhabitants of these areas live from agriculture.

The northwestern region of Tunisia differs from the rest of the country with respect to their local dialects. The speech of these regions is to some extent diverse but relatively uniform and mutually understandable in spite of the vastness of the territory. These dialectal differences exert their influence on women's songs, and thereby contribute to the specifics of the local culture.²⁰

Most of the heritage songs in these regions are associated with stories which may refer to either real or imagined events. These songs serve on the one hand to express women's feelings and pain while describing love or expressing their attitudes to life and death but on the other hand they accompany women in their everyday life while preparing bread, pasturing, harvesting, collecting olives and other daily tasks. Consequently, the songs coupled with everyday life manifesting themselves both in happiness and hardships, in festivities and toil.²¹ In these communities there was a considerable difference in education between women and men – the level of education of women was lower than that of men. Illiteracy affects many older women even nowadays. And therefore one should not wonder that the songs sung by women are inherited and performed only orally. It should also be emphasized that in these songs it is the content and not the form which is the most important.²²

In studying dialectal Tunisian folk songs scholars have attempted to distinguish genres and subgenres based primarily upon subject matter, structure, and musical features of the songs. Some songs are named after events such as weddings, circumcision, the Hajj or the birth of a child. Another classification is based on songs related to customs such as singing lullabies or songs related to agricultural work such as sowing, harvesting grains, collecting fruits (olives, dates) or with spinning wool or grinding grains into flour. Yet another classification is based on musical scales which were often named after the persons who created them, and sang them or the place from which that manner originates.

²⁰ See also Ġalālī 2017, pp. 141–142; Zikri 2014, pp. 132–133.

²¹ See also Ġalālī 2017, p. 141; Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, pp. 131–132.

²² See Ġalālī 2017, p. 141; Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, pp. 131–132; Zikri 2014, pp. 132–133.

Other researchers grouped songs according to the region in which they were performed (northern, southern etc) and others grouped them by the names of tribes. In her article, Talīlī presented another classification which divides Tunisian folk songs into groups rural and urban which in turn can be divided into those which use local musical instruments and those sung without instrumental accompaniment. According to researchers, depending on the region singing without accompaniment was allowed both for men and women but most associate the creation of this genre with women. According to social traditions it was unacceptable to relate men with singing. The urban type of singing without accompaniment is named according to region: *ṭawwāhī*, *ḡnā bi-ṭ-ṭwīl* or *ḡnā bi-ṣ-ṣūt*. It is important not to confuse this genre of songs with *Ṭoroq* songs.²³ The classification presented by Talīlī turned out expedient for the purposes of this paper.

The present author concentrates on the presentation of only one genre of female songs, namely *ḡnā bi-ṭ-ṭwīl*, which is endangered and could disappear completely. And, more importantly, the author herself is emotionally bound to this kind of songs, since it is her conviction that they abound in traditional beauty which deserves to shed more light on its exceptionality.

In the communities of northwest Tunisia, *ḡnā* is a part of daily life and is performed on important occasions especially weddings, since these are the most important events in both men's and women's lives.²⁴ Wedding customs are generally similar in all the regions in northwest Tunisia including the villages and small cities belonging to the governments of Al Kāf (الكاف), Silyāna (سليانة), Bāḡa (باجة) and Ġandūba (جندوبة). During a traditional wedding there are different ceremonies. Some of these are organized in the bride's family home and others are organized in the bridegroom's family home.

One of these ceremonies is the *hoṭba* (خطبة), namely asking for the girl's hand in marriage from her parents (first her father) in the name of the bridegroom by sending a group of people from his family (father, mother and other members of the family). And for the purpose of this event a meeting of the members of both families is organized at the bride's family home. If the family accepts that their daughter marry the man, the couple is presented to each other. Then they begin preparations for the wedding which is usually in the summer or beginning of autumn after the harvest is finished and enough money for the marriage has been collected.

The wedding lasts one week. One of the most important ceremonies in this week is the henna night ((ليلة الحنة) [līlit əl-ḥinna]), during which an old woman called *al-ḥannāna* (الحنانة) puts the henna on the hands of the bride and groom. The guests and the members of both families can also enjoy this tradition. Henna symbolizes joy and protection against badness, jealousy and the evil eye.

The application of henna is repeated three times during the week before the wedding. This ritual ends with the ceremony called *sahriyyat āḥir lyālī al-ḥinna/al-wṭiyya* 'the last night of henna'. During this ceremony the bride is dressed in traditional clothes

²³ See internet source (2), Talīlī 2017, article 1.

²⁴ See also Ġalālī 2017, pp. 141–143; Brahem 2013/2014.

and jewelry, goes to the group of women waiting to present in front of them the henna designs and is congratulated by those present. In this way family and neighbors say their farewells to the young bride who will soon move to a new home, at times far away.

As for the groom, henna decorations are limited to one night and his hands are only symbolically painted at the end of his little finger. The most important part of the entire ceremony is that during the decoration only those closest men to the bridegroom are present and they are called *‘arrāsa* (عراسة). The task of this group is to give him advice concerning the wedding night and married life.

The bride is decorated with henna which she receives from the groom's family several days before the decorating ceremony. This gift is called *goffa* (قففة), a name which comes from the traditional basket made of palm leaves in which the bride receives the henna. Apart from the henna, the basket contains *swāk* (سواك) 'tooth cleaning stick', *lubān* (لبان) 'olibanum', *khol* (كحل) 'a traditional eye cosmetic', *mošṭa* (مشطة) 'wooden comb', *mrāya* (مرآية), 'mirror', *bīs* (بيس) 'traditional Tunisian candy' and other items depending upon the region. According to tradition when a woman receives *goffa* she must open it at once in the presence of guests and praise the contents and share a portion of them with the guests.

The day on which the bride is taken to the new home is called *hazzān* or *ġībān al-‘rūsa* (هزان / جيبان العروسة). During this event the *faz‘a* ((فزة) [fəz‘æ]), which is composed of the members of the two families take the bride from her family home to her new home. The night of the wedding ((ليلة العرس) [līlit əl-‘iris]) is the biggest ceremony of the entire wedding celebration – music is played and singing, and dancing continue late into the night. The ceremonies are called in these regions *nġim* [nɟim] singular *niġma* [niɟmɛ].²⁵

Niġma is a complete performance in which singing and other social customs are presented together. The name of the performance is connected with stars because in the far past it occurred under the light of the moon and stars. As a ritual, *niġma* has particular rules and an established order of performing the different parts. In the past it lasted for 15 nights, over the weeks before and after the wedding, but the most important ceremony of *niġma* occurred on the wedding night. The final day of celebration is connected with the departure of the bride from her new home for the first time since the wedding and visiting her family home to greet her parents and the rest of her family as well as to receive their congratulations for getting married. The final day of *niġma* is called *il-yūm is-sāba‘/is-sāba‘* (اليوم السابع) 'the seventh day after the marriage'. In the past *niġma* began with lighting a fire which was an invitation to the wedding and the beginning of the wedding celebrations. The invitation was for the whole community, men, women, regardless of age, although women and children are usually segregated. In addition men were separated into older and younger. During *niġma* singers begin their performances with short religious songs which are devoted to the beginning of the 'iris (عرس) 'marriage' celebrations in the name of God and with the blessings of the Prophet. *Niġma* still functions within Tunisian society, but for reasons of changing lifestyles the

²⁵ See also Ġalālī 2017, pp. 143–145; Internet source (2), Talīlī 2017, article 4.

length of the rituals has been reduced to seven days and as a result the particulars of the celebration have changed. In spite of this, depending upon the wishes of the family these songs may still be found in wedding celebrations. It is also still possible to hear the voice of a woman saying *hayyā yā nsā ġībū ġunnāya!* ‘Women shake with the voice!’ to which women answer *zġārīd* (زغاريد) and begin singing.

4. *Ġnā* and *ġannāya*

The traditional image of *ġnā bi-ṭ-ṭwīl* encoded in the people’s consciousness can be described as follows: *ġnā*, in the singular *ġunnāya* [ɣunnɛ:jæ], is a genre of songs performed without the accompaniment of musical instruments by an individual female singer or by a group of singing women. The solo singer known as *ġannāya* [ɣænnɛ:jæ] (غناية) is accompanied by two women who repeat the song after her and who are called *raddāda* [radde:de] or *šaddāda* [šedde:de] (ردادة أو شدادة). Among the singing women there may be found the bride or bridegroom’s family (mother, sisters, cousins, aunts), as well as non-family members (neighbors, friends, guests). Since the songs are known only in oral versions the singers must memorize them very well. The role of *raddāda* is to repeat the refrain and thereby to help the audience to enjoy the songs.²⁶

Some contemporary scholars agree with the characterization given previously of *ġnā* and *ġannāya* but they complement this image by adding some particularities. Thus, for example, a Tunisian researcher Amal Talīlī writes:

...There is also a large part of rural folk songs that are not accompanied by musical instruments, and which are limited to singing using only the throat and vocal cords. ‘They are songs sung with an elongated, high-pitched voice’. This type of singing is characterized by a strong voice that imitates rhythm which gives the song a beautiful and distinctive melody coming from the sweetness and strength of the sound. This type of singing is called ‘*long singing*’ or ‘*singing by voice*’ as the people of Badia call it. When a woman or man is asked to sing on an occasion, it is said to him or her *yā fulāna* or *yā fulān* ‘shake with the voice’. The rural folk song is called by the people from Badia ‘*al-ġunnāya*’ [əl-ɣunnɛ:jæ]. It is a poem or just some verses arranged specifically for singing either according to a familiar melody or a style invented by the singer himself. *Al-Ġunnāya* is performed by an individual singer or by a whole group of singing women or men but assistance is necessary in either case.²⁷

²⁶ See also Zikri 2014, p. 145; Ġalālī 2017, pp. 143–144; Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, p. 217.

²⁷ See internet source (2), Talīlī 2017, article 1.

كما نجد جزءا كبيرا من الاغاني الشعبية الريفية تكون غير مصحوبة بالالات الموسيقية حيث تقتصر على الغناء باستعمال الحنجرة والحبلين الصوتيين فقط “فهي أغان طووحة اي تغنى بصوت ممدود وذي طبقة مرتفعة”. وهذا النوع من الغناء يمتاز بقوة النبرة التي تحاكي

Similar descriptions of *ġnā* are provided by other scholars as well, however, they differ from *Talīlī* in some important points namely, that *ġnā* is performed only by women and in some very conservative communities the songs are not performed in front of men.²⁸ Thus for example Salah Ben Ayyad (صلاح بن عياد), who strongly emphasizes his high admiration for this genre of songs as well as their beauty, writes the following:

Al-Ġannāya in some Tunisian dialects, means the female singer who was active in all Tunisian villages. She was famous for her beauty, elegance, fresh voice and light wit.²⁹

And he added:

...a woman's voice is filled with joy, simplicity and depth, a real joy that carries along the rites and customs of those villages and cities. Similar to the *ġannāyāt* in North of Tunisia there are *ḥannānāt* on the country's coast. They are women specialized in applying henna to the bride but

إيقاعا وهو مايكسبها لحنا جميلا ومميزا لحلاوة وقوة الصوت ويطلق على هذا النوع من الغناء "الغناء بالطويل" أو "الغناء بالصوت" كما يسميه أهل البادية. وعندما يطلب من المرأة أو الرجل الغناء في مناسبة ما يقال يافلانة أو يافلان هز أو هزي بالصوت. والأغنية الشعبية الريفية يسميها أهل البادية "بالغناية" و"الغناية" بضم الغين وهي قصيدة أو أبيات شعرية وضعت خصيصا للتغني بها إما حسب ألحان سماعية متعارف عليها أو حسب نمط غنائي يبتكره المغني لنفسه. والغناية يمكن أن يادبها الفرد الواحد أو أكثر من النساء والرجال غير أن المساعدة وجوبية فيها.

...kamā naġidu ġuz'an kabīran min al-aġānī aš-ša'biyya ar-rīfiyya takūnu ġayra mašḥūba bi-l-ālāt al-mūsīqiyyat ḥaytu taqtaširu 'alā al-ġinā bi-isti'māl al-ḥunġura wa-al-ḥablayn aš-ṣawtiyyayn faqaṭ „fahya aġānī tawwaḥa ay tuġannā bi-ṣawt mamdūd wa-dī ṭabaqat murtafi'a'. wa-hādā an-naw' min al-ġinā' yamtāz bi-quwwat an-nabra al-latī tuḥākī iqā'an wa-huwa mā yuksibuhā laḥnan ġamīlan wa-mumayyazan li-ḥalāwati wa-quwwati aš-ṣawt wa-yuṭlaqu 'alā ḥadā an-naw' min al-ġinā' "al-ġinā' bi-t-ṭwīl" aw "al-ġinā' bi-ṣ-ṣawt" kamā yusammīhi ahlu al-bādiya. wa 'indamā yuṭlab min al-mar'a aw ar-raġul al-ġinā' fī munāsaba mā yuqālu yā fulāna aw yā fulān hiz aw hizzi bi-ṣ-ṣawt. wa-al-uġniyya aš-ša'biyya ar-rīfiyya yusammīhā ahlu al-bādiya 'bi-l-ḡunnāya' wa 'al-ḡunnāya' bi-damm al-ġayn wa-hiya qaṣīda aw abyāt šī'riyya wuḍi'at ḥiṣṣan li-taġannī bihā immā ḥasaba alḥān samā'iyya muta'āraf 'alayhā aw ḥasaba namaṭ ḡinā'ī yabtakiruhu al-muġannī li-naṣīhi. wa-al-ḡunnāya yumkinu an yu'addihā al-fard al-wāḥid aw akṭar min an-nisā' wa-ar-riġāl ġayra anna al-musā'ada wuġūbiyya fihā."

²⁸ "Women usually sing their songs together with other women, but sometimes by themselves. The important thing is that the songs are not performed in front of men" – Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, p. 218.

الرجال القابعون بعد مسافة ينشدون من أول الليل إلى آخره لأصوات النسوة المغنيات/الغنايات دون أن تكون الحاجة ماسة لحضور أجسادهن، إنه الصوت لا غير.

ar-riġāl al-qābi'ūn bu'da masāfa yanšaddūn min awwali al-layl ilā āhirihi li-aṣwāt an-niswa al-muġanniyāt/al-ġannāyāt dūna an takūn al-ḥāġa māssa li-ḥuḍūri aġsādihinna innahu aš-ṣawt lā ġayr.

See internet source (1).

²⁹ See internet source (1).

"الغناية" في بعض لهجات تونس تعني المغنية التي كانت ناشطة في كل القرى التونسية، يذيع صيتها وتشتهر بجمالها وأناقته وصوتها العذب، وروحها الخفيفة.

al-ġannāya fī ba'ḍi lahaġāti Tūnis ta'nī al-muġanniyya al-latī kānat nāšīṭa fī kulli al-qurā at-tūniyya yaḍī'u sītuḥā wa- taštahiru bi-ġamāliḥā wa-anāqatiḥā wa-ṣawtiḥā al-'adb wa-rūḥihā al-ḥafīfa.

they do not hesitate even for a moment during long nights to sing songs filled with tales from the sea coast.³⁰

Moreover, Ben Ayyad cannot hide his love for *ḡannāya* and its natural beauty which spreads around inviting people to rejoice at the songs. And this is confirmed by his words:

Tunisian *ḡannāya* in the villages of Al Kāf and Silyāna in the North-West, decorated with some *koḥl* in the eyes and two small tattoos on her cheeks and dressed with brightly colored *mlāya*, shakes her voice in one of the houses and thereby gathers people who enjoy listening around her.³¹

Such a description of *ḡnā* finds reflection in other works concerning other communities in Tunisia. Thus, for example Brahem states that while collecting materials for his work in the region of Bembla, he encountered two ways that women sang songs, that is:

- (i) the song may be sung only by one woman called *ḡarrāda* [zarra:da] or,
- (ii) by a group of women of which one is a main singer called *ḡarrāda* accompanied by another woman repeating after her and called *raddāda* [radde:de]. Both *ḡarrāda* and *raddāda* may appear as a duet.³²

³⁰ See internet source (1).

...صوت نسويّ يعبق بالفرحة وبالبساطة والعمق، فرح حقيقيّ يحمل طقوس وعادات تلك القرى والمدن، شبيهات “الغنايات” في الشمال التونسي “الحنّانات” في ساحل البلاد وهن نساء مختصات في وضع الحنّاء للعروس إلا أنهن لا يتردّدن لحظة واحدة على الغناء في حضرتهن لليل طوال أغنيات مليئة بحكايات الساحل البحريّة المرفهة.

...ṣawt nisawī ya ‘baqu bi-l-farḥati wa-bi-l-basāṭati wa-al-‘umuqi farah ḥaqīqī yaḥmilu tuqūs wa-‘ādāt tilka al-qurā wa-al-mudun šabihātu al-ḡannāyāt fī aš-šamāl at-tūnisī al-ḥannānāt fī Sāḥil al-bilād wa-hunna nisā’ muḥtaṣṣāt fī waḍ’ al-ḥinnā’ li-l-‘arūs illā annahunna lā yataraddadna laḥza wāḥida ‘alā al-ḡinā’ fī ḥaḍratihā li-layālī tiwāl uḡniyāt malī’a bi-ḥikāyāt as-Sāḥil al-baḥriyya al-muraffiḥa.

³¹ See internet source (1).

الغناية التونسية في قرى “الكاف” أو “سليانة” في الشمال الغربيّ وهي متربّنة ببعض الكحل في العين وبوشمين صغيرين على الخدين وملاءة زاهية اللون “تهزّ بصوتها” في إحدى الدور لتكون برعما يتجمّع حوله أناس يحسنون الفرح والتقبّل.

al-ḡannāya at-tūnisīyya fī qurā Al kāf aw Silyāna fī aš-šamāl al-ḡarbī wa-hiya mutazayyina bi-ba’ḍ al-kuḥl fī al-‘ayn wa- bi-wašmayn ṣaḡīrayn ‘alā al-ḥaddayn wa-mulā’a zāhiyati al-lawṇ tahuzzu bi-ṣawtihā fī iḥdā ad-dūr li-takūna bur’aman yataḡamma’u ḥawlahu unās yuḥsinūn al-farah wa-at-taqabbul.

³² See Brahem 2013/2014, p. 20.

خلال القيام بعملية البحث الميداني وجمع التّساجيل التي أردناها أن تكون موضوع بحثنا خلال معايشتنا للحياة الإجتماعية بمنطقة بنبلّة ... إضافة إلى الإحتكاك المتواصل لمؤدّيات النّمت الغنائي الشعبي وجدنا أنّ هناك طريقتان لأداء الأغاني الأولى بصفة فردية والثانية تكون ثنائية كالآتي:

. مؤدّية واحدة، حيث تؤدّي أغنية كاملة من طرف مؤدّية واحدة أو حين عدم وجود “ردّادة” تقوم “الجرّادة” بعملية الغناء الفردية. مؤدّية رئيسية “تقيم” ومؤدّية ثانوية “تحطّ” أو مؤدّيتان رئيسيتان “تقيمان” ومؤدّيتان ثانويتان “تحطّان” وتكون عادة إما بشكل تبادلي بين الجرّادة والردّادة للأبيات، أو أنهما يتقاسمان الجمل الرئيسيّة باعتماد ثنائيّة السّؤال والجواب سواء كان ذلك بين المذهب والأبيات أو يردّدها سوياً حيث تجلس الجرّادة قبالة الردّادة وتجلس الجرّادتان بجانب بعضهما في شكل يساعدهن على فهم بعضهن خاصة في عملية الإنتقال من بيت إلى آخر.

ḥilāla al-qiyāmi bi-‘amaliyyati al-baḥṭ al-maydānī wa-ḡam’ at-tasāḡil al-latī aradnāḥā an takūna mawḍū’a baḥṭinā ḥilāl mu’āyašatinā li-l-ḥayāt al-iḡtimā’iyya bi-miṭṭaqat Banbla... iḍāfatān ilā al-iḥtikāk al-mutawāṣil li-mu’addiyāt an-namaṭ al-ḡinā’ī aš-ša’bī waḡadnā anna hunāka ṭarīqatān li-ādā’ al-aḡānī al-ūlā bi-ṣiḡfa fardiyya wa-at-tāniya takūn ṭunā’iyya ka-al-ātī:

5. On some other characteristic aspects of *ġnā*

Since *ġnā*, as mentioned above, is traditionally performed by a group of women singing without instrumental accompaniment, the women's voices could be considered as the only musical instrument. The songs are sung with a very strong high-pitched voice. Often each line is repeated, both in words and music: usually once by the *ġannāya* and the second time by the *raddāda*. In general, a striking feature of *ġnā* is its simple style. The melodies take precedence over the words. For the sake of preservation of this melody the singer may adapt the text by adding in various sounds, or meaningless syllables or repeating some word, or by starting to sing from the second word of the text.³³ While listening to *ġnā* songs, even those who do not understand their contents, are captivated by the beauty of the rhythm. In order to impress the audience, the *ġannāya* endeavors to preserve the rhyme which appears at the end of the line, and may also occur at the end of the hemistich. Alliteration may also be used. The rules of rhythm and rhyme are reminiscent of characteristic of classical Arabic poetry, although there are significant differences in metrical structure.

The texts of these songs are mostly understood by the local community, since they draw upon the everyday language, therefore it is rather easy to replace words or phrases by others. However, it is remarkable that the way of singing these texts in a high pitched voice, and the added meaningless syllables may cause difficulties in understanding them, even for a native speaker of this variety of language.³⁴

The songs of *ġnā* are built on metaphors and similes whereby they are capable of evoking emotion in the listeners, although some songs are made up of but a few verses. The contents of these songs are full of descriptions of real life in which sorrows are interlaced with joys expressing the emotional attitudes of people to life and death, separation and coming together, love and loneliness.³⁵

Some of these songs crossed the boundaries of small villages becoming popular all over Tunisia and thereby are part of the national heritage. However, it should be mentioned that currently some songs have lost their original spirit since some younger singers permit themselves to aggressively change the older beautiful words and melodies in the direction

• *mu'addiya wāhida ḥaytu tu'addā uġniya kāmila min ṭaraf mu'addiya wāhida aw ḥīna 'adami wuġūd „raddāda” taqūmu „al-ġarrāda” bi-'amaliyyati al-ġinā al-fardiyya.*

• *mu'addiya ra'isiyya „tuqīmu” wa-mu'addiya t̄anawiyya „taḥuṭtu” aw mu'addiyatān ra'isiyyatān „tuqīmān” wa- mu'addiyatān t̄anawiyyatān „taḥuṭtān” wa-takūnu 'ādatan immā bi-šakl tabādulī bayna al-ġarrāda wa-ar-raddāda li-l-abyāt aw annahumā yataqāsamān al-ġumal ar-ra'isiyya bi-i'timād tunā'iyati as-su'āl wa-al-ġawāb sawā'an kāna ḍalika bayna al-maḍhab wa-al-abyāt aw yuraddidānihā sawiyyan ḥaytu taġlisu al-ġarrāda qubālata ar-raddāda wa-taġlisu aġ-ġarrādatān bi-ġānibi ba'ḍihimā fī šakl yusā'iduhunna 'alā fahmi ba'ḍihinna ḥāṣṣatan fī 'amaliyyati al-intiqāl min bayt ilā aḥar.*

³³ See Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, p. 218; Brahem 2013/214; Zikri 2014; Ḥmāḥim 2013.

³⁴ See Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, p. 218.

³⁵ See Ritt-Benmimoun 2009, p. 218, pp. 231–232; Ġalālī 2017, pp. 141ff.; Brahem 2013/2014.

of cheap pop music. In consequences the world image fixed in these traditional songs functioning as a kind of shelter for women is in danger of irrevocably disappearing.³⁶

Nevertheless, there is at least some hope of reviving *ḡnā* by the activity of other groups of artists who are working hard to preserve the original form of the songs although they also incorporate some changes concerning the music, the wording, number of singers, and introducing new musical instruments in addition to the old ones. Their attention is directed towards bringing these songs closer to a broader audience, especially to younger generations. One of these groups is ‘Bargou 08’. This band has succeeded in removing the dust from the old songs in the region of Bargou by maintaining the traditional music on the one hand, and intelligently employing modern musical features, on the other. Here a few songs will be presented, chosen on purpose from the internet to make them easy available to those interested. It is also possible to see, in the comments, how everyday people react to them. What is interesting is that many comments claim the songs for particular regions in Tunisia or even Algeria. What is certain is that these songs are still commonly encountered during weddings and other occasions.

One such recovered song is *Lā mīn yḡīnā* (لا مين يجينا) – “Will someone come and visit us”. This song was sung by the nomads of northwestern Tunisia and it became known all over the country generating various versions. Since time immemorial, women have sung this song without the accompaniment of musical instruments. Presented below are two versions of this song which differ from each other by performance and the words used in some parts of the lyrics. The two versions will not be translated literally but the general content of the song and selected differences between the two versions will be given.

Lā mīn yḡīnā

Version 1

ḡannāya

Lā mīn yḡīna w-rayyiḍ dilāla
ā nās gawlu l-ḥamma bi-s-silāma

raddāda

lā mīn yḡīna w-mrayyiḍ dilāla
ḡūlu l-ḥamma mrayyiḍ wa-llā lā lā

ḡannāya

labsit ḡrīdi nahḥaytu bīdi
‘lā katif saydi dagg il-ḥlāla

raddāda

lā mīn yḡīna w-mrayyaḍ dilāla
ḡūlu l-ḥamma mrayyaḍ wa-llā lā lā

ḡannāya

labsat mḡalla w-ḥalfat b-walla
uḥayyak ‘abd allah fi-rūs il-ḡibāla

³⁶ See also internet source (1).

raddāda

lā mīn yġīna w-mrayyaḍ dilāla
gūlu l-ḥamma rḥal bi-s-silāma

ġannāya

in-naġa' raṣṣa 'lā swāyih gaḥṣa
w-ḥālī waṣṣa b'aṭ is-silāma

raddāda

lā mīn yġīna w-mrayyaḍ dilāla
*gūlu l-ḥamma rḥal bi-s-silāma.*³⁷

Version 2

Lā mīn yġīna mrayyiḍ id-dilāla
ḥā gūlu l-ḥālī rḥal bi-s-silāma
barnūs drīdi 'lā kitif sīdi
naḥḥītu bīdi dagg il-ḥlāla
barnūs ġarbi 'lā kitif šalbi
wa-l-ḥobb ydarbi 'lā rūs il-ġibāla
libsit gmaġġa w-naḥḥat gmaġġa
w-ga'dit titraġġa gālīt ḥolfu lā lā
libsit 'orḍa wa-'yūn morḍa
kān ḥālī yarḍa nbī' il-ġimāla
lā mīn yġīna mrayyiḍ id-dilāla
*ḥā gūlu l-ḥālī rḥal bi-s-silāma.*³⁸

In the first version, which is exclusively vocal, the *ġannāya* sings and the *raddādā* chorus repeats after her. The lyrics is very short. In the second version the entire text is sung by one man accompanied by the *tabla* and *zokra* (طبلّة وزكرة), which are traditional Tunisian musical instruments. The second version contains more lyrics than the first one. The song is about great love, separation, longing and hope for being together. The song today may be sung by a man to a woman or by a woman to a man. The word *ḥālī* (literally 'my uncle') appears as does *Ḥamma* (a man's name in Arabic) referring to the addressee of the song. This would suggest the original author of the song could only be a woman using the terms *ḥālī* and *Ḥamma* as pseudonyms for her beloved. In the song here is a description of how the man looks wearing a traditional Tunisian woolen winter garment, which suggests the noble background of the man wearing it and the wealth of its owner. There is also a description of a beautiful woman in the lyrics. Similarly to the presentation of the man, her beauty is described only in terms of her wardrobe (*libsit ġrīdī*, *labsat mḥalla*, *libsit gamġa*, *w-naḥḥit gamġa*). Taking the relevant traditions into account the woman was unusually brave in that she turned down marriage to others

³⁷ See internet source (10).

³⁸ See internet source (11).

and was ready to wait for the return of her beloved one even if she would have to wait alone for the rest of her life.

The band ‘Bargou 08’ sings this song with certain changes in the lyrics, an accelerated tempo and the light use of electronic instruments in the background.

*W lā mīn yġīna mrayyid id-dilāla
 aaa w-gūlu l-ħamma rħal bi-s-silāma
 barnūs ġarbi ‘al katif šalbi
 il-ħobb ydarbi b-rūs il-ġibāla
 sab ‘a mġārig fi-l-bīr ġārig
 w-ħayyik mā yfārig darb is-silāma.³⁹*

Another of these songs is *Hizzī ħirāmik w ħamrīk* – “Lift your shawl and dress”. The song concerns a man singing to a woman expressing his desire to see her tattoos (a marker of beauty and wealth). Despite his poverty she has promised herself to him, but his attempts to gain permission to marry her have been unsuccessful and he has been ignored and shunned. He compares himself to an army on perpetual guard duty. He has nothing left but the weeping sound of the flute symbolizing his unhappiness. Although the song is sung from a male perspective it was probably also traditionally sung by women expressing their desires in an indirect way since women were not supposed to openly give voice to certain feelings.

Two versions are presented here, both of which maintain the general meaning of the song. In addition, the second version compares great passion of young man to a blaze in a mountain forest. The great love may lead the singer to kill beloved woman’s father and uncle who are standing on the way of their marriage. The blaze is an indirect expression of the intensity of the singer’s feelings.

Hizzī ħirāmik w ħamrīk

Version 1

*Hizzi ħirāmik w-ħamrīk
 w-lā māl w-lā w-bwāš našrīk
 hizzī ħirāmik w-ħamrīk
 lā māl w-lā w-bwāš našrīk
 nā ‘yīt mā-l-mašy wa-ġay
 ġrāli ki- ‘askir il-bay
 hizzi ħirāmik w-ħamrīk
 w-lā māl w-lā w-bwāš našrīk
 w-yā gasbit il-‘ūd rinni*

*‘lā l-wašmtik habbalatni
 ġīr kalmtik ḥaššalatni
 ‘ā il-wašmtik habbalatni
 ġīr kalmtik ḥaššalatni
 w-lā ḥadd ḥdāli bi-l-ħātir
 w- ‘assās taḥt il-gnātir
 w- ‘ā l-wašmtik habbalatni
 ġīr kalmtik ḥaššalatni
 w-yā mħaḍḍaba bi-l-ħnāyin*

³⁹ See internet source (12).

w-yā darm 'it il- 'īn hilli
hizzi ħirāmik w-ħamrīk

w-yā m'addaba yā kul fāni
'ā l-wašmtik habbalatni.⁴⁰

Version 2

ġannāy

Hizzi ħirāmik w-ħamrīk
lā māl w-lā w-bāš našrīk

'ā wašmtak habbalatni
ġīr kalmtik ḥaššalatni

raddāda

hizzi ħirāmik w-ħamrīk
lā māl w-lā w-lā bāš našrīk

'ā wašmtak habbalatni
ġīr kalmtik ḥaššalatni

ġannāy

yā fātma yā ragbit il-bay
'al ġālik nogtol obbay

ragbit ġzāl l-ħmāda
w-nkammil 'ammi hwāda

raddāda

hizzī ħirāmik w-ħamrīk
lā māl w-lā bāš našrīk

'ā wašmtik habbalatni
ġīr kalmtik ḥaššalatni

ġannāy

w-ħāk il-ġibāl it-tilāta
w-ħarīga mā tafti ḥarīga

wa-t'āraku bi-l-ħarāyig
w-ħarīgat ḥamma bi-zāyid

raddāda

hizzī ħirāmik w-ħamrīk
lā māl w-lā w-lā bāš nišrīk

'ā wašmtik habbalatni
ġīr kalmtik ḥaššalatni

ġannāy

āw hizzi ħirāmik w-ħamrīk
lā māl w-lā lā bāš našrīk

'ā wašmtak habbalatni
ġīr kalmtik ḥaššalatni.⁴¹

Another very well known song is *Rīm il-fayyāla* – “Oh, distracted gazelle”, which appears in both simple local versions and more elaborate performances by professionals. The first version here is a local version while the second is much more developed and intricate. This illustrates the protean nature of the songs which can be adapted both textually and musically in a number of different ways. The first version here consists of the title and a few lines which are presented in nearly every version. The song concerns a beautiful woman who is compared to a white gazelle but who is distracted and very sad because the man she loves is marrying someone else. The song warns her to pay attention to her surroundings lest she injure herself.

⁴⁰ See internet source (13).

⁴¹ See internet source (14).

Rīm il-fayyāla

Version 1

rīm il-fayyāla 'lā ḥawyit il-'abbūn
'lā ḥawyit l-'abbūn
'išti ḍallāla 'lā ḥamma 'rīs il-yūm
yā r-rākba fi-l-kālīs
yā r-rākba fi-l-kālīs
sāyis rōḥik lā yšiddik il-bawlīs
rīm il-fayyāla 'lā ḥawyit il-'abbūn
'lā ḥawyit il-'abbūn
*'išti ḍallāla 'lā ḥamma 'rīs il-yūm.*⁴²

The second version, sung by a professional, modifies and adds many elements to this basic idea. The physical description of the woman is more detailed by employing words relating to her outer and inner beauty. This version omits description of women's sadness and the warning that she should watch herself. This could mean that she herself is the bride. The singer also addresses the man getting married, reminding him of the virtues of his wife to be. She is beautiful like a *hourī* and will be always faithful to him. The song also stresses the importance of family and gives advice to the bride not to pay attention to gossips, to be good to her husband and that God will reward her. An alternative reading is that the song is telling the man to forget about the first woman and to value and pay attention to the woman he is actually marrying. It seems that many changes have been made to the original song. This contemporary adaptation, although based on the original melody, differs from its original folk version performed by the oldest inhabitants of this region, as far as the language and style are concerned.

Version 2

ḡannāya

Rīm il-fayyāla

'lā ḥawyit il-'abbūn

raddāda

'lā ḥawyit il-'abbūn

ḡannāya

simḥa bāhya miswāla

'lā l-ḡālya 'rūs il-yūm

raddāda

wi-l-ḡālya 'rūs il-yūm

⁴² See internet source (15).

ġannāya*'rūsik yā ḥamma migdiyya****raddāda****'rūsik yā ḥamma migdiyya****ġannāya****ġmīla kāyinni ḥūriyya****raddāda****ġmīla kāyinni ḥūriyya****ġannāya****t'ammir dārik w-tṣūn id-dirīyya**w-toṭlob rabbī ḥāš'a ki- tgūm****raddāda****w-toṭlob rabbī ḥāš'a kī-tgūm****ġannāya****lā thūnik w-lā tfassid niyya**'fīfa ḥorra min-ḥyār il-gūm**mabrūka nšā lla w-hniyya**wi-l-ḥīr 'lā goṣṣitha ydūm****raddāda****rīm il-fayyāla**'lā ḥawyit il-'abbūn****ġannāya****'lā ḥawyit il-'abbūn****raddāda****silsa miswāla**wi-l-ġālyā 'rūs l-yūm****ġannāya****'lā lilla 'rūsa l-yūm.⁴³*

Another song examined here is *Za'ra mazgūlat in-nāb* – “Za'ra with beautiful teeth”. This song also has been recorded in different variants though not as many as the previous song. The part presented here is found in all versions examined by the author. Again, this is a song about a beautiful women. Although sung now by both men and women it is always performed from the male perspective. The man asks Za'ra to raise her lips (i.e. to smile) so that he may see her teeth, a symbol of beauty in Tunisian culture. In another version he asks her to uncover the lower part of her legs. He recognizes that it is a sin to make such a request but he is willing to undergo God's punishment. This basic framework is elaborated in various ways by different performers.

⁴³ See internet source (16).

Za'ra mazgūlat in-nāb

*Za'ra mazgūlat in-nāb yā llī dāk m'addībni
hizzī iš-šiffa 'lā in-nāb/hizzī il-ḥamrī 'lā is-sāg ḥalli rabbi yḥāsibni.*

The last song presented here, *Lasmar ḥūya* (لسمر خويا) – “My brother with dark skin”, is considered as one of the most famous songs in the region Dīr Awlād Yaḥyā. The band ‘Bargou 08’ performs this song using traditional musical instruments such as the *bindīr* (بندير), *gambarī* (قمبري) and *gaṣba* (قصبه) which dominate rhythmically creating a new character of the song.

The song is sung from a woman’s perspective. She addresses the man she loves expressing her desire to always be with him. Instead of naming him directly, she refers to him as ‘a brother’. This is a general trait in these songs that women do not address the men they love by name but rather with pseudonyms, often referring to family members. At other times names such as Ḥamma and Muḥammad are used. They are so common that they do not directly identify a particular man. In this version she says, for example, that her love is so strong that she feels it “in her liver” (related to a common Tunisian idiom). She imagines life with him in a manner that is much more direct in its expressions of physical intimacy than it is common in other types of songs (or in Tunisian culture in general). Talīlī has examined the song in an article devoted to wedding songs in the region of Silyāna.⁴⁴ She claims that the song is sung from the point of view of a sister to her brother, who is far away. She expresses her love for him and how much she misses him. Taking into consideration the role of the sister in family life where she at times may be treated like a mother, such openness with regards to physical and emotional closeness is possible. Since the song comes from the same region as the researcher the author of this article finds her interpretation to be probable. This song differs from the first song described here in that she begins with the syllables *Yā lā lī lā* which express pain and suffering.

Lasmar ḥūya

*Yā lā lī lā ḥūya nḥibbu
w-ḥobbu ḡāni fī-l-kibda
mā ḡātši il-yūm
yalḥagni ḡodwa
yā lasmar ḥūya nḥibb nazha m'āk
yā lā lī yā il-bāriḥ ḡāni
yalḡāni rāḡda w-mamdūda
w-bāsni ḥūya mi-l- 'īn is-sūda
yā ḥlīli ḥlīli nḥib nḥib nazha m'āk*

⁴⁴ See internet source (2), Talīlī 2017, article 4.

yā lā lī yā il-bāriḥ ġāni
yalgāni rāgda 'a l-mḥadda
yā mhhir yā l-līl t'adda
*yā lasmar ḥūya nḥib nazha m'āk.*⁴⁵

Conclusion

The linguistic analysis of *ġnā* songs may also be helpful for revealing the phonetic, phonological, morphological and lexical peculiarities of Tunisian dialects. Thus, for example, the occurrence of phone [g] is one of the characteristic features of *ġnā* songs. It should be emphasized also that these songs are deeply rooted in natural and cultural environments which are reflected, among other ways in the lexical component. The problems addressed here only briefly, deserve to be researched in detail.

It is to be hoped that an effective oral transmission of *ġnā* songs has begun at last. This seems to be justified by the activity of groups of both researchers and musicians working with various aspects of Tunisian heritage. The success of both these groups depends on people's memories, upon which not only in the case of *ġnā* rests the preservation of these songs from oblivion.

The revival of the old songs is considerably difficult due to the fact that they exist only in oral versions, and national archives (radio, television, museums), have only sporadic recordings at their disposal.

Although the present generation is rather reluctant to sing this genre of songs, since they reflect a different cultural reality which has vanished, the activity of some Tunisian musical groups has nonetheless given these songs a new modern touch and has thus fortified the hope for their survival and revitalization of old traditions.

The author of this article feels a strong obligation to continue her enquiry into *ġnā* songs for the foreseeable future, all the more so since she respects this music and has succeeded thus far in collecting quite a few *ġnā* songs, especially from her native region.

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⁴⁵ See internet source (17).

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