



Jewish Community in Maghrebi Art (Music and Cinema)

La Communauté Juive dans L'Art Maghrebin (Musique et Cinema)

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Abstract

The idea of a Jewish-Muslim community sounds odd in the twenty-first century while a few decades earlier it was an ordinary phenomenon in the Maghreb countries. The Jewish community who lived in North Africa before the conflict of the middle east yearns for a return to Maghreb countries which they consider as their home and part of their identity. This paper exposes the cohabitation of the two communities during the colonial period. The reasons of the success of cohabitation are to be explored briefly with a small theoretical interpretation. Jews today are rejected in North African countries but history witnesses the existence of a Maghrebi Jewish community which is discussed in two cases in this research work, the first one is the case of Algerian Châabi music performed by Jewish artists, and Tunisian film *Un Été à la Goulette*, which shows three families from the three religions living together. Finally an analysis of the reasons is conducted to find out whether the reason of such cleavage is cultural or political. Throughout the analysis it is argued that this cohabitation broke the rules of sameness set by the colonizer in both countries. Problems between the two social groups arose after the naturalization of the Jews during the French colonization of Algeria then the invention of the country of Israel. The film depicts Tunisia as a melting pot of different cultures which manage to live together peacefully. The phenomenon is explained using the concept of the Carnavalesque by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin thus referring such harmony to the impact of segregation imposed by the colonizer. The analysis of whether the conflict is political or religious includes arguments by scholars like Benjamin Stora.

Keywords: jewish community, maghreb countries, jewish maghrebi s, chaabi music, tunisian film, *Un Été à la Goulette*

Résumé

L'idée d'une communauté judéo-musulmane semble étrange au XXI^e siècle alors que quelques décennies plus tôt c'était un phénomène banal dans les pays du Maghreb. La communauté juive qui vivait en Afrique du Nord avant le conflit du Moyen-Orient aspire à un retour dans les pays du Maghreb qu'elle considère comme sa patrie et faisant partie de son identité. Cet article expose la cohabitation des deux communautés durant la période coloniale. Les raisons du succès de la cohabitation sont à explorer brièvement avec une petite interprétation théorique. Les Juifs sont aujourd'hui rejetés dans les pays d'Afrique du Nord mais l'histoire témoigne de l'existence d'une communauté juive maghrébine qui est abordée dans deux cas dans ce travail de recherche, le premier est le cas de la musique algérienne Châabi interprétée par des artistes juifs, et du film tunisien *Un Été à la Goulette*, qui montre trois familles des trois religions vivant ensemble. Enfin une analyse des raisons est menée pour savoir si la raison d'un tel clivage est culturelle ou politique. Tout au long de l'analyse, il est avancé que cette cohabitation a enfreint les règles d'uniformité établies par le colonisateur dans les deux pays. Des problèmes entre les deux groupes sociaux sont apparus après la naturalisation des Juifs lors de la colonisation française de l'Algérie puis de l'invention du pays d'Israël. Le film dépeint la Tunisie comme un creuset de cultures différentes qui parviennent à cohabiter sereinement. Le phénomène est expliqué à l'aide du concept du Carnavalesque par le philosophe russe Mikhaïl Bakhtine référant ainsi cette

harmonie à l'impact de la ségrégation imposée par le colonisateur. L'analyse de savoir si le conflit est politique ou religieux comprend des arguments d'érudits comme Benjamin Stora.

Mots clés : communauté juive, pays maghrébins, maghrébins juifs, musique chaabi, film tunisien, Un Été à la Goulette

Introduction

This study sheds light on Maghrebi perceptions of Jewish community in North African countries, in this case Tunisia and Algeria, through art. Two examples are exposed, the first being a representation of multicultural relationships in Tunisia (often shown as the cradle of tolerance for its ability to convey many religions and cultures within the same community (Ben Said)) in a film by Férid Boughdir, *Un Été à la Goulette* (1996). The second case being Algerian *Châabi* music performed by Jewish artists and so a description of their relationships with their Muslim peers and friends. The two themes are discussed in a way as to reveal the congenial relationship between members of the two communities in a time in which this conformity is denied.

The film reveals that the relationship between people of different religions in Tunisia was affected by cultural stereotypes and world politics to a certain extent, but feelings of belonging, alliance, and familiarity were stronger. Likewise, the video-reports on Algerian *Châabi* music performed by Jewish artists scrutinized for this research prove that both the Jews who were forced to leave Algeria after the independence, and their Algerian peers, carry memories of cordial life in Algeria. Arguments trying to explain this phenomenon in this essay prove it to be a will for setting free from the closed institutions of culture long imposed on human beings.

1. Multicultural Cohabitation in North African History

Multicultural cohabitation, as well as religious diversity, in Arab countries seem to struggle for survival with political events going up a blind alley. One of the most serious and complicated conflicts in the area is the Judeo-Muslim problem in the middle east. The Jewish existence in the middle-east is rejected by Arabs, particularly with Israeli attacks on Palestinians every now and then since 1948. In Maghreb countries, the Jews had a quite ordinary life until the 1960s to the 1970s, a period of struggle and big change in this area.

Factors like Algerian independence, and the beginning of the Israeli war in the Middle East (as explained in Benjamin Stora's work discussed later within this essay) changed societies' perspectives, thus obliged the Jews to leave Maghreb countries. Jewish presence in this area became problematic as cultural factors transformed the possibility of a harmonious cohabitation between Muslims and Jews into a taboo. Even though the relationship became incongruent in these countries, the Jewish who left Algeria after independence still carried nostalgia for Algeria and for their friends. Likewise, in Algiers, relationships between musicians originating from the two social groups remained faithful to their common memory, thus transcending that cultural barrier which caused them to bust up.

Yet, the colonial period in Algeria, which also occurred before the Arab-Israeli war, contains memories of common culture and art that define the two groups. In the late 1950s, harmony was maintained through social relationships such as friendship and neighborhood, but also through activities like folk *Algerois* music, also called *Chaâbi*. In this period the Jews were naturalized as French citizens, even though they arrived in Algeria before the French. The reason for which they were naturalized is assigned by some historians to a sort of allegiance to French colonialism (Menasseria, 2009), while others refer it to the fact that Jews were

segregated in Algerian society because of their religion, thus their naturalization was meant for their safety (Ismail & Samih, 2014)

Whether the reason of the naturalization of the Jews is allegiance to the colonizer or a protection, along with their Algerian counterparts, they managed to cross these conflicts through art. Art broke political boundaries by allowing a celebration of a spontaneous cohabitation. In *Histoire de Relations Entre Juifs et Musulmans* by French scholar Benjamin Stora, and Tunisian scholar Abdelwahab Meddeb, the main problem in this cohabitation is referred back to political problems only, stating that culture and religion have never represented a real threat. Thus, the origin of the conflict may be referred to political reasons, not cultural nor religious (cited in Laithier, 2021). Therefore cohabitation can be spotted in art as a symbol of the multiculturalism of such community.

Religious diversity is a theme stressed particularly in Tunisian cinema—among others—because of the religious and cultural diversity in this country. It is impossible to deny Jewish impact on Tunisian society or the fact that its history contains a great part of Jewish presence. Until the Arab-Israeli war in the Middle East the two communities lived in perfect harmony, with positive relationships built on feelings of brotherhood and friendship. In a video report conducted by AFP Arab showing Jewish and Muslim Tunisians speaking of their lives—even after the 2011 revolution—as very harmonious and perfectly peaceful (AFP, 2014). This idea is further stressed in the film *Un été à la Goulette* by Ferid Boughedir (1996) (*A Summer at La Goulette*), la *Goulette* being a seaside area in Carthago, Tunisia, long known for its religious diversity because it is occupied by people of different religions.

2. Cultural Transgressions and Cohabitation in *Un Été à la Goulette*

The film features a multicultural life in 1960s Tunisia, which coincided with the Arab-Israeli war. In this neighborhood in *La Goulette*, people of different origins occupy different houses in the same building. The three main families in the film include a Muslim man who is neighbored by a Jew and a Christian. Their relationship is friendly, not including any religious influence. These men have three girls that are very close to each other and, more than their fathers, respected each other's religious beliefs and belongings, thus never considering them as inconvenients for their friendship. Through these girls, one can see a young motivated Tunisia, breaking with traditional archetypes and advocating a freedom that claims no religious or geographical boundaries as makers of identity.

The girls decide to lose their virginity on the 15th of August, which is a Christian celebration—the assumption of Mary on August 15—each with a boy of a different religion. Even though this behavior is considered immoral in the three religions, the girls, unconsciously, transgress cultural boundaries with such a decision and set all three religions on one equal level, thus breaking the notion of the sacred, which is reduced to the woman's body in some societies, specifically, Arab ones. The film also shows that virginity was a cause of conflicts among the fathers, thus bringing their friendship to an end.

The religious conflict becomes more serious as the fathers of the girls discover their plan and start attacking each other's religions and cultures as immoral and impure. By this incident, the film sheds light on the cultural stereotypes usually shared between people of these religions about each other. The film draws a link between the relationship of the fathers and the news coming from the Middle East about the Arab-Israeli war. The friendship of the three neighbors (who belong to the old generation) ends when the war begins. The younger generation in the film represents tolerance and aspirations for change.

Within the film, the female body becomes a main means of distraction, either from conflicts or for leisure, instead of caring about what really matters, i.e. the war between Arabs and Israelis in the Middle East. This becomes a peripheral theme in the plot as society's

approach to women seems to be limited to what women do with their bodies. On the one side, the fathers are breaking their friendship and attacking each other's religions because of their daughters' virginities. Yet, on the other side, news about the war are delivered in a café to a number of people who make no reaction. A few minutes later, someone announces that an Italian attractive actress had returned to her house in *La Goulette*, and every one runs avidly to her house to see her. These two scenes contrast society's concerns in an ironic frame. They are somehow centred in female virginity and in women's availability for leisure, rather than in cultural and religious conflicts taking place in front of their eyes.

The fathers, already influenced by world affairs and by public opinion, do attack and insult each other's beliefs at a moment of anger. The girls on the other hand, preserve the strength of their friendship. By the end of the film, the fathers become friends again, although still protecting their daughters. One of the themes of the film is that friendship and feelings of brotherhood are indeed strong and transgress hatred engendered by power.

The Jewish community was prosecuted and shunned in many places around Europe, however, there have been 14 centuries of cohabitation between Muslims and Jews which ended by the period of colonialism according to B. Stora (Laithier, 2021). According to a number of sources, Maghrebi countries, more specifically Morocco, did welcome the community in North Africa and allowed a more or less decent living to these people¹. Although this claim is being disputed by non-academic views. A number of historians, mainly the two works mentioned earlier, agree that the relationship remained, for a long time, friendly. These ideas have been already represented in art, as in the film previously discussed in this essay.

In Algeria on the other hand, this relationship was embodied in many forms, and for this study music by Jewish artists in Algeria is to be approached as an example of harmony. This music arose in a symbolic period, that of the decolonization and the early spread of the Islamic ideology in Maghreb countries which later led to the complete break with Jewish community.

3. Religious Cohabitation in Algerian *Châabi* Music

Jewish music in Algiers was characterized by a double culture easily sensed in these songs. Jewish artists sang both in Algerian dialect and in French, and spoke of general themes from society, not only about love, but about varied themes, even Sputnik and the Atomic bomb (Rabnass, 2021). These artists reported that they felt no segregation between Muslim and Jew while living in Algeria, although they have been automatically naturalized as French (Bousbia, 2009).

Jewish music was an expression of two cultures. On the one side French culture, for Algerian Jews had a French lifestyle after their naturalization, and Algerian culture when they sing in Algerian dialect about Algiers and different themes from society. These artists sang and played musical instruments with Arab and Muslim artists, careless of their cultural differences. They imitated each other and sang each other's songs. Reinette l'Oranaise for example gathered Arab musicians as Mustapha Skanderani, who turns out to be a strong name in Algerian *Châabi* music. In an ancient *Youtube* video entitled *Reinette L'Oranaise Accompagner Par le Maître du Piano "Mustapha Skandarani"* (Aouidat, 2021), the two artists seem in perfect harmony while arguing about music, their argument ends in a merry laugh. Mustapha Skanderani, Reinette l'Oranaise as well as other artists are considered as icons of *Châabi* music in Algeria.

But these were not the only artists who broke the cultural boundary in music, others sang Andalusian folk music, like Alice Fitoussi (Rabnass, 2021) who is compared to Fadéla Dziriya, and the difference identified between the two artists is that of pronunciation, because

¹ (as in books *النشاط الصهيوني في الجزائر 1897-1962* (2014) and *الإستيطان اليهودي في الجزائر 1830-1962* (2009))

Alice Fitoussi has a Jewish intonation. Reinette l'Oranaise sang *Hawzi*, which is quite ancient, (dating from the eighteenth century). She is considered as one of the last singers of classic Algerian music. She is said to have learned classical Arabic in order to sing *Nouba*² repertoires. She never distinguished Algerian from Jewish in her songs, as she is said to be singing for all people. This music knows no boundaries of religion nor those of culture, for such an atmosphere there is only music to be cherished and celebrated. It managed to digress these borderlines to establish the happiness of performing and enjoying Algerian culture.

In *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature* (1991), Keith Booker argues that transgression is a core element of literariness, likewise, other forms of art can represent popular culture as literature does, and transgression serves the goal of liberating culture from imposed boundaries in art, in this case Music and Cinema, as well as it does in literature.

Youssef Hagège, known as José De Suza explains how people from Tunisia and Algeria sang together in *Cabaret El Djazair*³, both Arab and Jewish in perfect harmony, sharing their passion for music with a smile. The themes of these songs varied from love to nostalgia for the mother land, to friendship, hardships of daily life and even the Atom bomb, the plane and the radio (Rabnass, 2021). Singers like Line Monty represented both oriental and western cultures, she was viewed as a successful mixture of the two cultures, which submitted her as a very distinguished artist.

Abed Azrié, music composer, calls this type of music (voicing two cultures at the same time) the song of the Mediterranean, because the same style was performed in most Mediterranean countries. Others argue that the tendency of singing in two languages was a trend in these times, and he supports his claim with ancient songs from Lebanon, also sang in two languages. He argues that the songs had a western style which was quite trendy, but the themes, and texts were rather “local” and close to the origin (in this case Algeria). He says the song is a “profound reflexion of society” (Rabnass, 2021).

Music in this use allows a transgression limited and prohibited by both politics and culture. Art, more specifically passion for music, allows friendliness and brotherhood that have been impossible to achieve through culture and tradition. It is not a news that art transgresses tradition when necessary. An inspiring example is given by Keith Booker (1991) who compares transgression to the original sin, when Adam and Eve ate from the tree they were warned to avoid, and considering the act itself, which started human life on earth, as an act of transgression, thus the critic argues that life on earth itself started with an act of transgression.

Transgression in this sense rings a bell to Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction⁴, Derrida sought to dismantle the structures that have been put forward by the Logos (the centre) which can only be suppressed by assuming, then accepting difference. Derrida came up with the concept Différance, which is both a difference from the same but a difference which is differed, and yet to come, somehow, still in the making (Lucy, 2004). The assertion and openness of the yet to come opens different possibilities that seemed impossible before. It is worth saying that Derrida himself conceived these ideas as a reaction to racism he was subject to as a Jewish child in French schools in Algiers (Defrance, 2004)

Différance is the act of creating difference by the deferring the meaning, this occurs while displacing the element from its temporal and spatial environment, thus depriving it of its “logocentric” meaning. Differance is thus the fact of opening new spheres and new possibilities, by diferring the meaning. A thing is always related to its differences, it cannot

² *Nouba* is a type of music sang in ancient Andalusia

³ A sort of a pub in Paris in which Algerian singers performed Algerian music every night

⁴ French philosopher Jacques Derrida set the philosophy of Deconstruction, which is the dismantling of hidden structures that make ideological and cultural binaries, thus destroying the binaries and bringing them to one level.

occur without its “outside” which is its differences (Lucy, 2004, p.27). In this case mentioning a Jewish family or Jewish culture in a Maghrebi context raises much hatred and hostility than friendship, even though people would admit friendship with such culture through Maghrebi history. What art managed to do here is to shed light on the differences, or the outside of Jewish presence in Maghrebi society, which is the friendly side, often ignored in history books. For Niall Lucy, “everything owes its identity to difference” because it allows freedom from closure (cited in Lucy, 2004, p.27).

In this sense, the Judeo-Muslim conflict gains its power as it remains connected to the centre and to sameness. As long as the ideas of separation between the two cultures remain active, chances for cohabitation grow narrower. On the other hand, art, managed to transgress these boundaries, by imagination, because “imagination is characterized by an act of rebellion against the divine order of things ... while it empowers man to imitate God, it does so by means of an unlawful act” (Booker, 1991, p.80).

In this context the point is not necessarily that of imitating God, but to explain the power of imagination in making possible what the law of the same considers not only impossible, but simply non-existent. In the two examples discussed above, Jewish families live in perfect harmony with their Christian and Muslim neighbors, even though a war was starting. In music, even though Jews were said to be serving French colonization during the Algerian war against France, in music such boundaries disappeared and they simply enjoyed the beauty of Oran, and of Algiers, as well as of musical instruments in their music.

Derrida for example, father of the deconstructionist philosophy, reports cases of racism he was subject to in French schools of colonized Algeria because of his religious belonging. In this case, as a Jewish child, Derrida along with other Muslim children, was victim of racism from the French during the Vichy⁵ government. He reports that he was top of his class in school and suffered segregation under this regime, as he was supposed to raise the flag each morning as a reward, yet Derrida was never called to raise the flag and later understood that the reason was the fact that he was a Jew (Defrance, 2004). The 1930s in Algeria saw some action in favor of Jews and Algerians as minorities, when figures like Henri Aboulker, Albert Confino, and Elie Gozlan engaged in action against the marginalization of Jews and Algerians and improve their life conditions (*Juifs d'Algerie- Exposition*, 2015)

4. Analysis of the Judeo-Muslim Situation in North-Africa through History

During the Algerian War of Independence, the Jews had to choose whether to side *FLN*⁶ or *OAS*⁷, they were prosecuted by both sides and decided to remain neutral. After Algerian independence the Jews had to leave Algerian soils (*Juifs d'Algerie- Exposition*, 2015) while they remained in Tunisia for few more years, left Tunis by the war in the Middle East according to Férid Boughedir's film, yet, many of them still live in few villages and the island of Djerba today.

Arabs, Jews, Italians and Spanish lived in the *Casbah*, within the same streets, sharing same neighborhoods, thus inventing and sharing memories, as one common community. One of the factors for which Jews and Arabs shared such moments is that of language and the fact that segregation put them together, thus shared the same experience of repression (as Europeans

⁵ Vichy France is the Allies' description of the government of the French State (*État Français*), following its relocation to the spa town of Vichy, headed by Marshal Philippe Pétain from 1940 to 1944 during World War II

⁶ National Liberation Front, a party constituted by Algerian revolutionaries who started the War of Independence

⁷ Secret Army Organization, a French organization created in Algeria in February 1961 to defend French colonization and settlement in Algeria. This organization used violent methods against Algerian population and revolutionaries.

lived in the city which is flat and Arabs and Jews were kept in the *Casbah* like a mountain) thus a common memory (Bousbia, 2009). “There was harmony,” these singers say, “all people spoke to each other and lived with each other, without any boundaries” (Bousbia, 2009)

In this film, *El Gusto*, a young Algerian female producer is interested in reviving this common memory, of *Chaâbi* music of a mixed community. She interviews these musicians, both in France and Algeria, and even though, many years had passed, these people remained nostalgic for their past. Some of them described such relationship saying: “we were brothers, we had the same lifestyle, we lived exactly the same, nothing separated us. Even weddings were the same, the only difference was the presence of beverages in Jewish weddings” (Bousbia, 2009). Thus, the relationship was that of harmony and brotherhood.

When a social space is characterized by such freedom, abundance and equality, yet, remains alternative from the rules of the same (in this case those of the French colonizer) the phenomenon can be referred to as what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the Carnavalesque. It is a tradition in which everyone is equal in a particular social rank, usually that which differs from the general ruling system. In the Carnavalesque, it is said, “The body is here figured not as the individual or ‘bourgeois ego’ but as a growing” (Robinson, 2011), thus the collective memory of Jews and Algerians in the *Casbah* ensured an equal progress of these segregated minorities, which they reflected in art.

The period of cohabitation between Jews and Muslims in Algeria as reported in history books only reflects conflict and tension between the two communities, yet, little has been said about harmony and friendship. Most accounts report that the Jewish community of Algeria pledged allegiance to the French after the Cremieux decree of 1870 which gave the French nationality to the Jews. It is mostly argued that the relationship was that of friendliness and peace before this law was made and that from the fall of Granada in 1492 and the arrival of the Jews to the Maghreb countries they managed to live as original inhabitants of these lands and that no acts of discrimination have been reported. Since most of the works reporting about this relationship in Algeria were written by Muslim historians it is often argued that Muslims kept a good relationship with the Jews who became French and considered them as ordinary Algerian citizens specifically during the period of revolution (1954-1962). The Jews of this period have been reported to be taking part in colonial activity meant to repress Algerian resistance. These accounts also report that Algerian revolution leaders tried to include these Jews in the resistance as part of the repressed community and that these Jews refused to collaborate as they prepared for their settlement in Palestine (Menasseria, 2009)

Yet, other reports state that during the 1940s, more particularly the Vichy administration from 1940 to 1944, the Jews were subject of segregation along with the Muslims of Algeria and were deprived during this period of their citizenship and even delivered to the Nazi Regime. The Vichy government, as reported by historians, reduced the Jews to unwelcomed individuals and mistreated them by depriving them from decent jobs and making difficult all manners of earning a living. When Jacques Derrida spoke of his souvenirs as a Jewish child in a French school during the Vichy government he mentioned no forms of segregation, hatred, or violence by Muslims. This point is common between Derrida and Muslim historians who describe the Muslim community as very peaceful towards the Jewish one, the period is described as a shared experience between both communities for they had the same oppressor.

Youssef Menasseria says that the National Front of Liberation (FLN in French) often called the Jewish community to stand with the revolution, reminding them of their Algerian belonging before they turned into French citizens, and maybe for this reason, that is the fact that the Jews kept sticking to their French citizenship during the war that after the war they were asked to leave the Algerian soil, considered French (as reported by the Jewish artist in the video). Art thus reveals itself to be able to break such cultural and political boundaries through

making real things such as friendship (in music) and a resetting of a mixed community in Tunisia through Cinema. Art thus turns out to be a means of revolution and of freedom.

Fawzi Saadallah's work sheds light particularly on these aspects of cohabitation in his three books on Jewish-Muslim relations in Algeria. His work tackles the Jews of Algeria in Algerian music in which he reveals the ofte dismissed side of this cohabitation, that of harmony. He explains that Andalusian music imposed a sort of cohabitation between life and religion on the Jewish community who itself preserved this music by singing these songs in their original—Arab—language in their official gatherings like weddings (Saadallah, 2009).

5. Conclusion

Forms of religious cohabitation in the North African countries were faced by political obstacles that influenced the public opinion. Three major historical events affected this relationship. The first one is the Judeo-Muslim cohabitation in Spain before the fall of the Muslim empire. After the fall, the Jewish community had to escape Spain and settle in North-Africa to escape Christian prosecution. The second historical event that also affected this relationship, yet negatively, is the Cremieux Act by France in Algeria. The latter came in an attempt to weaken the Algerian resistance. It offered Naturalization to Jewish Algerians to make them French in identity and belonging. The consequences of the act were the ban of the French Jewish community (also known as Pieds-noirs) from Algeria after the independence. The third event is the Israeli-Arab war in the Middle East which ended all forms of cohabitation in the Maghreb countries and Arab world. The paper shows that beyond ideological differences, and during the colonization period in Algeria, as well as protectorate period in Tunisia, the two social groups experienced segregation, prohibition, and racism by the French government. The paper shows that through the works of Art, including music in Algeria and an eye on the social life in Tunisia, the two groups have transgressed the colonial rule by asserting an authentic Maghrebi identity and culture in which both were perfectly represented and celebrated their solidarity.

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