

PLAYING OUT:
WOMEN INSTRUMENTALISTS AND WOMEN'S ENSEMBLES
IN CONTEMPORARY TUNISIA

by

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To my parents,
Janice and Jeffrey Jones

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Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Figures.....	vii
List of Acronyms.....	ix
Glossary.....	x
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Gender and national identity in Tunisia.....	43
Nationalists and debates over women’s emancipation.....	44
The emerging nation state, 1956.....	49
State policy, Islamists, and feminists during the 1970s and 1980s.....	53
Women’s rights, Islamism, and the state under President Ben Ali.....	59
Chapter Two: Histories of women musicians and music performance in Tunisia.....	69
“Singing slave girls” in Tunisian and Arab history.....	70
Late nineteenth and early twentieth century performance.....	77
Women singers and dancers: <i>Sāna ‘āt</i>	83
Women’s ensembles at weddings and at <i>zwāya</i>	88
Aristocratic women: musicking at home.....	90
New technologies and women vocalists, c.1908–1930.....	94
The Rachidiyya Institute, “Tunisian music,” and nationalism.....	101
Women vocalists and the new <i>aghānī</i> at the Rachidiyya and Radio-Tunis, 1934–1956.....	105
The Rachidiyya and respectability.....	113
Following independence, 1956–1986.....	116
The Radio Ensemble (1958) and women vocalists.....	121
The Ministry of Culture (1961) and national cultural institutions.....	123
The Higher Institute of Music (1982).....	131
After “The Change” (1987).....	134
Women musicians and the transnational world music market.....	141
Chapter Three: Playing out(side) as women instrumentalists.....	146
Contemporary social changes: Highlighting respectability.....	147
Changing social opinion and family permission, encouragement.....	153
Women’s agency and empowerment: performing after marriage.....	159
Working as musicians and mothers.....	164
Constraints within the art music community.....	170
Experiences in mixed-gender ensembles.....	177

Chapter Four: Women’s festival ensembles: Playing out the nation?.....	193
Making history.....	194
Subsequent women’s ensembles: <i>Taqasim, Tanit, and Angham Hawwa</i>	204
Playing out the nation.....	212
Reviewing women’s performances in the press.....	215
State-sponsored performance contexts.....	221
Gala dinners.....	226
Chapter Five: Playing out and creating <i>jaww</i> : The work of women’s wedding ensembles.....	237
Women’s wedding ensembles.....	242
Ensembles in demand.....	252
Gender-segregated parties.....	254
Displaying status, playing out gender identity.....	258
Creating <i>jaww</i>	262
Gender-segregated ensembles and homosocial <i>jaww</i>	267
Chapter Six: Playing outside the lines: Debates about Tunisian musical identity.....	276
“Playing outside the lines”: Instrumental ornamentation and heterophony.....	277
Solo instrumental improvisation and other improvisatory techniques.....	283
Tunisian musical identity in crisis.....	287
Efforts to revitalize Tunisian music.....	295
Women musicians’ perspectives.....	298
Expanding Tunisian musical identity.....	315
Conclusion.....	318
Bibliography.....	335

List of Figures

3.1	Hajer Gana (<i>org</i>), Hinda Bel Heni (violin), and Maherzia Tawil (voice) performing with a women’s ensemble directed by Zina Bou Ali at a wedding at a five-star golf club.....	181
3.2	Khadija El-Afrit (<i>qanūn</i>), Abdessatar Mahfoudh (chorus), and Zied Gharsa (<i>org</i>) performing with Gharsa’s ensemble at the Binzerte Festival.....	185
3.3	Khadija El-Afrit performing with vocalist Leila Hejaiej and her ensemble at the Hammamat International Festival.....	187
3.4	Myriam Lakhoua playing ‘ <i>ūd</i> in the Rachidiyya Ensemble during their summer concert at Ennejma Ezzahra (CMAM).....	189
4.1	<i>El ‘Azifet</i> , directed by Amina Srarfi.....	202
4.2	<i>El ‘Azifet</i> , directed by Amina Srarfi, performing at the Hammamat International Festival, Hammamat, Tunisia.....	204
4.3	<i>Taqasim</i> , directed by Semira Esseghir (far left).....	205
4.4	<i>Tanit</i> , directed by Asmahan Chaari.....	206
4.5	<i>Angham Hawwa</i> , directed by Nejwa Kraiem.....	208
4.6	Vocalist Soumayya Mersni performing with Nejwa Kraiem’s ensemble, <i>Angham Hawwa</i>	209
4.7	Flier advertising Taqasim’s performance in Seyssins, France, 2003.....	223
5.1	The musicians’ stage (left), the bridal throne (right), and the guests’ tables (foreground) at a mixed-gender wedding celebration in Nasr, a suburb of Tunis.....	244
5.2	Myriam Slama and her ensemble (<i>Houriya at-Tarab</i>) wearing the “Hammamat” costume and performing at a partially gender-segregated <i>outia</i> in Monastir.....	245
5.3	Vocalist Soumayya Mersni performing with members of Olfa Baouab’s	

	ensemble (<i>Firqat Olfa</i>) at a partially gender-segregated <i>outia</i> in Nasr, Tunis.....	246
5.4	Jouda Najah and her ensemble <i>Founoun</i> performing at a gender-segregated <i>outia</i> in Tunis.....	248
6.1	Violinist Anis Klibi’s transcription of “Yilli Baadek,” composed by Khemais Tarnane (1894–1964).....	281
6.2	Violinist Anis Klibi’s performance of “Yilli Baadek,” played with ornamentation.....	282
6.3	The Arabic lyrics to “Yilli Baadek,” by Jalaladdine Enniqash.....	291
6.4	Example of music notation and Arabic lyrics together: excerpt of a <i>wasla</i> (suite) by Mohamed Saada.....	292

List of Acronyms

ATFD: Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates [Tunisian Association of Women Democrats], also known as “Femmes Démocrates”

AFTURD: Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement [Tunisian Women’s Association for Research and Development]

CEMAT: Centre d’Études Maghrébines à Tunis [Center for Maghrib Studies in Tunis]

CMAM: Centre des Musiques Arabes et Méditerranéennes, also known as *Ennejma Ezzahra*, “Palais D’Erlanger,” and “Dar Baron.”

CREDIF: Centre de Recherche, d’Études, de Documentation, et d’Information sur la Femme

CSP: Code du Statut Personnel [Personal Status Code]

ISM: Institut Supérieur de Musique; Al-Ma’had al-‘ali li’l musiqa [the Higher Institute of Music]

PSD: Parti Socialiste Destourien [Socialist Destour Party]

UGTT: Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail [Tunisian General Trade Union]

UNFT: Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes [National Union of Tunisian Women]

MTI: Mouvement de la Tendance Islamiste [Islamic Tendency Movement]

RCD: Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique [Constitutional Democratic Rally]

Glossary

‘ādī: normal, commonplace.

aghānī (singular, *ughniyya*): songs.

‘aīb: disreputable, shameful; shame.

Angham Hawwa: literally, “songs of Eve.” A conservatory-educated women’s festival ensemble founded by Nejwa Kraiem in 1999.

‘ars: marriage; wedding; final wedding-night party.

awzān (singular, *wazn*): metric modes; rhythmic modes or patterns, also referred to as *īqā’āt* (singular, *īqā’*).

‘azīf: instrumentalist (feminine singular: *‘azīfa*; masculine plural: *‘azīfin*; feminine plural: *‘azīfāt*).

El ‘Azifet: literally, “the female instrumentalists.” The first conservatory-educated women’s ensemble in Tunisia, founded in 1992; directed by Amina Srarfi.

bendīr (also *bandir*): large frame drum, with one or two vibrating metal cords stretching across the diameter (underneath the head).

bey: the title of the Tunisian head of state from the eighteenth century until 1956. (*Bey* was the Ottoman title for provincial governor).

biyānū: piano; harmonium.

cafés chantants (also *kafichanta*): cafés in which audiences were seated in rows and served by waiters while watching performers onstage.

darbūka: single-headed goblet drum.

dawr (plural, *adwār*): a multi-part Egyptian vocal genre developed during the late nineteenth century.

Diplôme de musique arabe: Diploma in Arab music, awarded after passing a test instituted by the government in 1958.

dîner-gala: gala dinner.

diyār al-thaqāfa (singular, *dar al-thaqāfa*): literally, “cultural houses;” local cultural centers created by the Tunisian Ministry of Culture in the 1960s.

duff (also *daff*): small single-headed bass drum played with the hands, often placed on a stand between the player’s legs.

fannān (feminine, *fannāna*): literally, “artist,” referring to a person who pursues Tunisian or Arab art music (especially *tarab* music) as a profession.

firqa (plura, *firaq*): music ensemble.

Firqat Qowmiyya (also *La troupe nationale de musique*): the National Music Ensemble in Tunisia, founded in 1983.

Firqat al-Idā’a: the Tunisian radio and television ensemble, founded in 1958.

Founoun: literally, “arts.” Women’s ensemble founded by Jouda Najah and Olfa Ben Smida in 1996, among the first to perform regularly at weddings.

gharbī (feminine, *gharbiyya*): adjective for “Western.”

hijāb: an Islamic headscarf or veil worn by women.

īqā’ (plural, *īqā’āt*): metric mode; rhythmic mode or pattern, also referred to as *wazn* (plural, *awzān*).

istikhbār: instrumental improvisation in Tunisian music.

jawāri (singular, *jāriya*): female slaves; singing slave girls.

jaww: atmosphere, ambiance; heightened festive atmosphere.

kamanja (*kamān*): violin, referred to in Tunisia as *kamanja tūnsiyya* in Tunisian music, *kamanja sharqiyya* in Eastern Arab music, and *kamanja gharbiyya* in Western music.

Kitāb al-Aghānī: Book of Songs, a twenty-four volume anthology by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (897–967 C.E.).

klām: talk, gossip.

lawāzim (singular, *lāzima*): short instrumental interludes or fillers.

Al-Ma’had al-‘alī li’l mūsīqā: also *L’Institut Supérieur de Musique*, the Higher Institute of Music, founded in 1982 in Tunis; the first higher-education institution in

Tunisia to offer university-level instruction in music and musicology.

Al-Ma'had al-watani li'l mūsīqā wa'l raqs: also *Conservatoire National de Musique et de Danse*, the National Conservatory of Music and Dance; founded in Tunis in 1956.

ma'lūf: literally, “familiar,” “customary;” the Tunisian genre of Arab-Andalusian music; designated the Tunisian national music in 1956.

maqām (plural, *maqāmāt*): melodic mode, especially in the Middle East.

mizwid: Tunisian bagpipe; also a term for the popular Tunisian music genre that features the bagpipe.

mūsīqā: music, especially instrumental music.

mūsīqār: musician, especially an instrumentalist.

mūsīqāt (feminine, *mūsīqiyya*; plural, *mūsīqāt*): musicians, especially instrumentalists.

naqqārāt: pair of small kettle drums played with thin drumsticks.

nāy: reed end-blown flute.

org: a digital synthesizer that can produce the microtonal variations used in Tunisian and Arab music, and that can imitate the sounds of various Middle Eastern and Western instruments.

outia (also *al-ūtiyya* or *lutiyya*; plural, *outiāt*): party for the bride, also known as a *henna*.

qafla: a cadential pattern ending a phrase.

qanūn: plucked zither, introduced in Tunisian ensembles during the 1920s.

qanūnjī (feminine, *qanūnjiyya*): *qanūn* player.

qiyān (singular, *qayna*): literally, “skilled workers;” terms used for “singing slave girls,” or female slaves who had been trained as singers, poets, and/or musicians.

rabāb: two-string spike fiddle used in Tunisia.

Rachidiyya Institute: also *Al-Ma'had al-Rashīdī*, or *L'Institut de la Rachidia*. Founded in 1934 in Tunis for the preservation, development, and transmission of the *ma'lūf* and other Tunisian music genres. Named for Muhammad al-Rashid Bey, the eighteenth-century ruler and patron of the *ma'lūf*.

Rachidiyya Ensemble: the music ensemble of the Rachidiyya Association, founded in 1934.

riqq: small tambourine with five sets of symbols around the frame (known as *tār* in Tunisia).

rūh: spirit, soul.

safsari: a type of veil traditionally worn by women in Tunisia, actually a long white sheet covering their heads and entire bodies.

samā'ī: a genre of Turko-Arab instrumental art music without voice, based on the ten-beat rhythmic mode it uses (also known as *samā'ī*).

sāna'āt: also “*chanteuses-danseuses*,” or women who combined dancing and singing.

sharī'a: Islamic law.

sharqī (feminine, *sharqiyya*): Eastern, Oriental; related to the term for the Arab East, al-Mashreq. In Tunisia, the term refers to music of the Mashreq (Egypt and the Levant), although it is also used to distinguish the West (Europe and North America) from the East (the Arab world), or Western music from Arab music.

shaykh (also *sheikh*; plural, *shayūkh*): religious leader; in Sufi contexts, the leader of the Sufi brotherhood and its rituals; in music, an elder who is a master of a specific repertoire.

stambeli: the spirit possession music associated with descendents of sub-Saharan slaves in Tunisia.

tab' (plural, *tubu'*): Tunisian melodic mode

tabla (also *tabl*): a double-headed bass drum, used in the *tabla wa zokra* [bass drum and shawm] genre in rural Tunisia.

al-Taghrīr: also *le Changement*, “The Change,” marking President Ben Ali’s peaceful takeover of the Tunisian government from President Bourguiba, November 7, 1987.

takht: literally, “platform.” A small instrumental ensemble specializing in *tarab* music, prevalent in eastern Arab cities during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

t'alīlāt (singular, *t'alīla*): literally, “justifications” or “explanations;” traditional songs performed at weddings and circumcisions in Tunisia.

Tanīt: a conservatory-educated women’s ensemble founded in 1997 by Asmahan Chaari; named after the Phoenician’s patron goddess of Carthage.

taqsīm (plural, *taqāsīm*): instrumental improvisation in Arab music.

Taqasim: a conservatory-educated women’s ensemble founded by Semira Esseghir and Asmahan Chaari in 1994, named after instrumental improvisations in Arab music.

taqlīdiyya (masculine, *taqlīdī*): traditional; term used to refer to traditional women’s and men’s music ensembles.

tār: small tambourine with five sets of symbols around the frame (known as *riqq* in the Arab East).

tarab: musical rapture or ecstasy; traditional urban music of the Arab east.

tarjama: literally, translation; instrumental filler or accompaniment that echoes a preceding musical phrase.

tūnsī (feminine, *tūnsiyya*): Tunisian (adjective).

turāth: also *patrimoine*; heritage, cultural heritage.

Al-Turāth al-mūsīqī al-tūnisī: also *Le Patrimoine Musical Tunisien*; The Tunisian Musical Heritage. A nine-volume collection of *ma’lūf* and other tunes, published by the Ministry of Culture during the 1960s and 1970s.

‘ūd: short-necked, non-fretted plucked lute.

‘ūd sharqī: Eastern Arab lute with five or six courses (pairs) of strings, played in Egypt and other parts of the Arab East (the Mashreq).

‘ūd tūnsī (also *‘ūd ‘arbī*): “Tunisian lute” or “Arab lute,” with four pairs of strings, used in Tunisia especially in *ma’lūf* ensembles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

ughniyya (plural, *aghānī*): song.

ughniyya tūnsiyya: literally, “Tunisian song;” short strophic song genre in couplet-refrain form, developed in Tunisia particularly starting in the 1930s.

ustādh (feminine, *ustādha*): professor; a title of respect for knowledgeable music teachers, master musicians, and learned people.

wazn (plural, *awzān*): rhythmic mode or pattern, also known as *īqā’*.

zāgharīt: high-pitched ululations uttered by women to express praise, joy, and blessings, especially at weddings.

zāwiya (plural, *zwāya*): Sufi lodge or shrine.

Introduction

Throughout the Arab-Muslim world, women musicians have been appreciated as vocalists but rarely as instrumentalists, and it has often been considered disreputable for women to play instruments in public. In early twentieth-century Tunisia, social and religious taboos stigmatized musicians, who were primarily male, but especially defamed female singers and dancers, who were associated with prostitution. Efforts to promote national culture beginning in the 1930s and continuing after independence in 1956, however, elevated and institutionalized the *ma'lūf*, Tunisia's genre of Arab-Andalusian music. In 1956 the Tunisian government also passed the Personal Status Code (CSP), which radically reformed Islamic family law, promoted women's rights, and mandated universal education. As greater numbers of Tunisian women participated in the public sphere during the 1970s and 1980s, a few women instrumentalists began performing in public for mixed-gender audiences.

Women's public performance as instrumentalists has continued to increase since the early 1990s, due in large part to individual women's initiatives in creating contemporary women's ensembles such as *El 'Azifet* ["the female instrumentalists"], *Taqasim*, *Tanit*, and *Angham Hawwa*.¹ These four conservatory-educated ensembles still perform at high-profile festival concerts in Tunisia and abroad. In addition, increasing numbers of women are studying music at conservatories and other music institutions.

¹ The name *Taqasim* refers to solo instrumental improvisations in Arab music: sing. *taqṣīm*, pl. *taqasim*. *Tanit* is the name of the Phoenician's patron goddess of Carthage; and *Angham Hawwa* translates as "songs of Eve."

Since 2000 several other women musicians have formed their own women's ensembles; these newer groups are primarily hired for private weddings, where they perform for mixed-gender audiences or gender-segregated audiences comprised only of women.

Despite these pioneering efforts, the proportion of women instrumentalists participating in music lags behind that of women in other professional fields. While women comprised 59.5% of university students in 2008–2009, at the university-level music institute in Tunis (L'Institut Supérieur de Musique) women constituted only a third of enrolled students during the 2007–2008 academic year (Dahmani 2010a). Moreover, despite the increased prestige accorded to women musicians and the increasing numbers of women studying music, very few women instrumentalists have infiltrated the prominent, male-dominated music ensembles that perform Tunisian “art music.”²

This dissertation focuses on the performances and lived experiences of conservatory-educated women instrumentalists and women's ensembles, who have transformed the Tunisian music scene and Tunisian society. Although these musicians face competing narratives and conflicting ideologies prescribing women's behavior and appearances, they have expanded the parameters of women's performance, of Tunisian musical identity, and of gender roles in the public and private spheres. As they have taken on repertoire and instruments mostly associated with men, they have enacted change by gendering Tunisian music and public space; they have also redefined gender-segregated spaces in their performances for women-only audiences. Their performances carry complex meanings concerning Tunisian nationalism and contemporary politics, and they

² “Art music” is defined differently in Tunisia and the Arab world than it is in Western cultures; in a later section of this chapter I explain how conservatory-educated musicians who perform Tunisian and Arab art music genres (such as the Arab-Andalusian *ma'lūf* and related genres) in art music contexts form part of the “art music establishment” or art music community of Tunis.

are frequently subject to state control or mediation. Yet individual women attempt to craft their own identities as members of a new, third category of musicians: “women instrumentalists.” They are especially proud of their relatively unique standing in the Arab-Muslim world, as cosmopolitan women who hold music-conservatory degrees and perform as professional instrumentalists for mixed-gender audiences. In the following chapters I have sought to illustrate the contexts in which these women musicians are forging their careers, drawing upon interviews and informal conversations with women and men musicians in Tunis, as well as participant-observation at rehearsals, concerts, and wedding celebrations between 2007 and 2009. Above all, I wish to convey these musicians’ personal perspectives concerning their performances and lived experiences in the male-dominated art music community of Tunis.

Several musicians told me about the various constraints that women have faced in the music profession, including questions of respectability, family responsibilities, and other factors stemming from social expectations of women’s roles in the public and private spheres. Another large constraint affecting contemporary women instrumentalists involves men musicians’ perceptions of women musicians’ inferior playing abilities—including criticisms that women do not employ important elements of Tunisian and Arab music such as ornamentation and improvisation. Such criticisms usually do not relate to women’s inherent ability to perform music but rather to their lack of experience performing in informal contexts such as weddings, which have been off-limits to “respectable” women musicians until recently. These criticisms are also linked to disparaging comments that women musicians spend more time caring for their appearances instead of practicing their instruments.

Women instrumentalists also confront criticisms that performances by women's festival ensembles like *El 'Azifet* are government-sponsored gimmicks presenting an image of "liberated Tunisian women" to foreign audiences. Meanwhile, other members of the Tunis art music community label women's ensembles "backwards" due to their gender-segregated nature. These critics especially consider performances by women's wedding ensembles at gender-segregated parties for women who veil to be backwards, representing a return to traditional, pre-independence society. Thus on one hand, women's festival ensembles are accused of serving as government pawns who play out nationalist ideologies promoting women's rights. On the other hand, women's wedding ensembles are accused of subverting such nationalist ideologies by performing for women who veil and for families who host gender-segregated parties. At the same time, more women's ensembles have formed specifically to meet the demand for performances at gender-segregated wedding parties, and they generally earn more money on average than do men musicians for similar performances. Thus by performing in these contexts women musicians have earned significant financial and musical empowerment, and they have begun to transform ideas about gender roles in the household as well as in public.

Contrary to dominant narratives depicting Tunisian women as passive recipients of state reforms, I use the metaphor of "playing out" to show how women musicians have exercised agency and enacted change by forming their own ensembles and "playing out(side)" in public. Firstly, I examine how they have "played out" and "played outside the lines" by creating their own spaces for women's musicking. Secondly, I explore how Tunisian women musicians play out by expanding understandings of Tunisian musical identity, gender, and national identity. Although women musicians are often perceived as

symbols of the state's commitment to women's emancipation, many women exercise agency by developing and performing their own constructions of national identity, musical identity, and gender on their own terms. While many paradoxes surround women musicians' performances at gender-segregated weddings, these performances are particularly significant opportunities for playing out and "playing with" concepts of gender, national culture, and Tunisian musical identity.

Finally, I investigate how women musicians have enacted change and disrupted notions of gender and musical identity. By performing in mixed-gender ensembles and with women's ensembles (especially at weddings), women instrumentalists have developed their own musical skills and have thereby challenged criticisms about women's playing. Their success as professional musicians has been enabled by state reforms for women's rights; but women musicians have created many opportunities for professional advancement themselves.

Tunisia in perspective

Located at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, the region now known as Tunisia was inhabited during the early historical period by Berber tribes. In the tenth century BCE, Phoenicians from Tyre (in present-day Lebanon) began settling the coast; they are believed to have founded the city of Carthage in 814 BCE. Following the Punic Wars between the Carthaginians and the Romans (264–146 BCE), the region became the Romans' first African colony and was known as "the granary of Rome." Since antiquity other peoples from the Middle East and Europe, including Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, Spaniards, Italians, Maltese, British, and French, have entered and often controlled the region. In contemporary Tunisia there still remain Roman-era mosaics and amphitheatres,

Arab-Muslim fortresses and mosques in the *medina* [literally, “city”; walled Arab city] of each prominent town, and traces of Ottoman, French, and Italian architecture (Perkins 2004: 5).

After the decline of the Roman Empire, when the region was Christianized, the region was briefly ruled by the Vandals and then by the Byzantine Empire. At the end of the seventh century, Arab Muslim armies advancing from the Nile Valley conquered the region; theirs has been the most profound and enduring legacy (Ibid.). They founded the first Islamic city in North Africa, al-Qayrawan (or Kairouan), and erected the Great Mosque of Kairouan in 670 CE. The city of Tunis was founded in 698, when the Zitouna (or Zaitouna) Mosque was first built, but was overshadowed by al-Qayrawan. Successive Muslim dynasties ruled over Tunisia, then known as *Ifriqiyya* [“Africa,” after the Romans’ term for the region], including the Aghlabids (800–909) and the Fatimids (909–972) (Brunschwig 2010).

Between the tenth and seventeenth centuries, Andalusian Muslim and Jewish refugees arrived in Tunisia and other parts of North Africa upon fleeing the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula (Davis 2004: 2). In Tunisia they settled mainly in towns along the northern coast, although a community of Jews currently living on the southern island of Djerba also associates its history with these refugees. During this time Tunisia was ruled by the Zirid dynasty (Berbers ruling from c. 972–1148), the Almohad caliphs beginning in 1159, and the region enjoyed a golden era under the Berber Hafsids (c. 1207–1569) (Brunschwig 2010; Abun-Nasr 1987; Jankowsky 2004).

While part of the Ottoman Empire (starting in 1574), Tunisian rulers enjoyed substantial autonomy. In the late sixteenth century the Regency of Tunis was formed,

recognizing the leadership in Tunisia of the *bey*, or governor, of the province. The term *bey* was applied to each ruler of Tunisia until 1956. During the Husainid (or Husaynid) dynasty (1705–1957), which claimed Tunis as its capital city, European powers such as the Italians, British, and French competed for influence in Tunisia. Their economic and political interests were augmented by the influx of European settlers in the country, particularly during the reign of the modernizing reformer, Ahmed Bey (1837–1855). When Muhammad Bey began his reign (r. 1855–1859), some 7,000 Maltese as well as roughly 4,600 Sicilians, Sardinians, and mainland Italians lived in Tunis and its suburbs. During the following two decades the number of Italian immigrants doubled and concentrated in La Goulette, the port of Tunis (Perkins 2004: 20, 44; Brown 1974; Clancy-Smith 2010).

It is significant for the history of Tunisian music that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries large number of non-Muslims immigrated to the region, since traditionally it was considered disreputable for pious Muslims to perform music in public. In the mid-nineteenth century roughly twenty to twenty-five thousand Jews lived in Tunis and La Goulette, in other urban and rural areas along the coast, and on the southern island of Djerba. A large, generally poor community of 18,000 Jews traced its roots to the Diaspora following the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE (Davis 2002c: 523; Perkins 2004: 20). A few thousand others included descendents of Andalusian refugees or recent immigrants from Livorno (Italy) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of the latter included merchants who were able to use their education and European contacts to join the circle of ruling elite (Perkins 2004: 20).

Economic crises and domestic unrest threatened the Husainid dynasty's control of Tunisia, as did France's occupation of Algeria in 1830 and the Ottomans' reassertion of sovereignty in Libya in 1835. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, when the European powers met to discuss the fate of the Ottoman Empire, Britain disassociated itself from Tunisian affairs while Italy and France competed for control. In 1881 France invaded Tunisia and imposed the Treaty of the Bardo, thereby initiating the period known as the French Protectorate of Tunisia (1881–1956). The Treaty acknowledged the *bey's* sovereignty but sanctioned the French military occupation of Tunisia, placed the *bey's* army under the command of a French general, and appointed a French resident-minister in control of Tunisia's foreign relations (Ibid.: 10–12; 36–38). The number of French settlers, however, did not match the large populations of other Europeans (mostly Italians and Maltese) until the early twentieth century. In 1883, 95% of the foreign community was not French but was mostly Italian. As Italy refused to accept the inevitability of French control, the Italian population increased by 88% during the first decade of the protectorate; in 1896, the 55,000 Italians living in Tunisia outnumbered French citizens by five to one (Ibid.: 44).³

Both French rule and the Husainid dynasty ended in 1956 when the Tunisian state achieved independence from France. Many French settlers and Italians departed after Tunisian independence in 1956. Many Jews emigrated en masse to Israel and France during the 1950s and 1960s: following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 (when fifteen percent of the Jewish population of 85,000 left in the four succeeding years), after Tunisian independence in 1956 (when 6,500 departed), and after the 1967 war between

³ Cf. Perkins 2004 and Pitt 2010 regarding European music theatres and opera in Tunis during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Israel and its Arab neighbors, which reduced the Tunisian Jewish population to less than 29,000 (Ibid.: 144–145).

Upon independence Tunisia became a republic, with Habib Bourguiba as its president from 1956 to 1987. As I will describe in the next chapter, one political party—under different names—has dominated the country since independence. In 1987 President Zinelabidine Ben ‘Ali took over the government from Bourguiba in a bloodless coup; he promised to increase political pluralism, but his tactics against opponents have become increasingly authoritarian (Sadiki 2002). Since independence the government has pursued economic and social reforms that have dramatically transformed Tunisian society; at the same time, demographic changes have made the population more ethnically and linguistically homogenous than in the previous two centuries.

Contemporary Tunisia

Compared to other North African states, Tunisia is a small country with a small population (almost 10.5 million in 2010).⁴ In 2008, ninety-eight percent of the population was Muslim, while one percent was Jewish and one percent was Christian. Article One of the Constitution declares Islam the state religion, but the Constitution also declares free exercise of religion (Moghadem 2005: 299). Arabic is the official language and French is the language of commerce. Contrary to Algeria and Morocco, Tunisia no longer has a critical mass of Berber speakers. The Berber language is spoken by only one percent of the population, mainly in a few villages in the rural south and among some migrants to Tunis. Although several Tunisians possess Berber family names, few remnants of Berber

⁴ This contrasts with the large populations of other North African [Maghrib] states such as Algeria (34.1 million) and Morocco (31.3 million). CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ts.html>. Accessed August 12, 2010.

culture remain: the Arabization of Berbers in Tunisia has been nearly complete (Jankowsky 2006: 407).

Other ethnic minorities in contemporary Tunisia include small populations of Jews living in Tunis and Djerba (and other towns in the north), Europeans and other immigrants, small communities of Berbers in the south, and blacks. The latter are mostly descendents of sub-Saharan Africans (from the Kanem-Bornu region or descendents of Hausa-speaking peoples) brought to Tunisia in the trans-Saharan slave trade, which transported roughly nine million slaves from 650 to 1900 CE (Jankowsky 2004: 71, 83). In Tunisia the slave trade peaked under the Husaynid dynasty (1705–1881). The first steps were taken to abolish slavery in 1846, and by 1890, slave holding and trading finally became illegal, with fixed penalties (Ibid.: 84). In contemporary Tunisia blacks live mainly in the south and in large cities in the north. They experience widespread racism and are still associated with the servitude of slavery: the most common term for black people is *wasfān* [servants] (Jankowsky 2006: 377).

Rapid socioeconomic transformations during and following colonialism, such as rural to urban migration, have resulted in 67% of the Tunisian population residing in urban areas by 2010. In 2008, 1.2 million people lived in Tunis, the capital city, which has dominated the country politically and economically. (Close to four million people live in the greater Tunis area.) Although Tunisia has experienced economic growth in recent years, boasting a literacy rate of 74.3% and a GDP per capita of \$8,000 USD in 2008 (compared to \$7,000 USD in Algeria and \$4,500 USD in Morocco), disparities persist among rural and urban populations. While cosmopolitan elites in Tunis may travel abroad and experience the everyday impacts of information technology and globalized

media, people living in rural areas in the impoverished south and west may not have running water, electricity, or basic education. Yet in 2005–2006 only 3.8% of the Tunisian population lived below the poverty line, compared with 23% in Algeria and 15% in Morocco.⁵

Across the country the unemployment rate has been rising, from 14.2% in 2008, and 14.7% in 2009. Unemployment has particularly risen among young Tunisians, whom include a growing number of unemployed university graduates. Roughly 29.7% of the population is between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine, but university graduates under the age of thirty constitute 42.5% of all unemployed Tunisians (Barrouhi 2010; Slimani 2010a). This constitutes the highest rate of unemployed graduates in North Africa.⁶

Standing apart: women's rights

Tunisia especially stands out from other Arab-Muslim nations due to the rights enjoyed by women. In 1956 President Bourguiba and his government passed the *Code du Statut Personnel* [Personal Status Code], or CSP, which radically reformed Islamic family law. Tunisia was the first Arab-Muslim nation to abolish polygamy and to grant women the greatest degree of legal rights. Indeed in the Muslim Middle East, Tunisia's reforms of Islamic family law are only second to Turkey in their sweeping, radical nature. Both Turkey's and Tunisia's governments have been committed to secularism and modernism, and are viewed by others as holding liberal, Westernized stances towards women's rights.

⁵ CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ts.html>. Accessed August 12, 2010.

⁶ Youths between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine constitute 32% of the total population in Algeria, and 33% in Morocco; but university graduates under age thirty constitute 37.8% of the total unemployed in Algeria and 29.6% in Morocco (Slimani 2010a).

As I will discuss in the next chapter, the state has promoted Tunisian women's emancipation, education, and participation in the work force as key components of Tunisian national identity, although its full-fledged support for women's equality has wavered at different historical moments. In contemporary Tunisia, the state's commitment to women's rights and secular-modernism constitutes a significant component of many Tunisians' national identity and pride. On the other hand, many other Tunisians have argued that reforms such as the CSP were imposed from above by Bourguiba and other nationalist lawyers educated in France. Since independence these critics have suggested that such reforms resulted from belief systems that were very different from those of the general populace.

By the 1970s, critics of the government's secular-modernist stance on women's rights included members of a growing Islamist movement. In 1979 an Islamist political party was formed (Movement of the Islamist Trend, or MTI, later called *al-Nahda*) but was denied official recognition and participation in elections. Tensions between Islamists and the government heightened in the 1980s and early 1990s, an era that was also marked by economic crises and the bloodless coup in which President Ben 'Ali took over from Bourguiba. During the 1980s a women's movement also developed, challenging the Islamists' demands for a repeal of the CSP. In the early 1990s the government cracked down on the Islamists and supported women's rights, at least in form.

Throughout the history of the nationalist movement and the Tunisian state, as in many other countries with large Muslim populations, women's veiling has been a contentious issue. In Tunisia veiling has served as another case in which women's bodies and women's rights have been at the center of larger debates about cultural and national

identity, gender roles, and political rights. After independence Bourguiba's government did not explicitly prohibit veiling, but encouraged women to remove their veils as a signal of their emancipation and of their participation in mixed-gender society. In 1981, however, as support for the Islamists grew and their political threat to the government increased, the government passed Circulaire 108, a law banning the *hijāb* [headscarf] in schools, universities, and government buildings.

In Tunisia and in other parts of the Middle East, conservative Islamist sentiment has increased since the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003. The state has responded by characterizing the *hijāb* as a foreign import from the Gulf. While women choose to veil for various reasons, many Tunisian supporters of secularism see veiling and other conservative practices (such as hosting gender-segregated wedding parties) as constituting a threat to Tunisia's modernity and threat to women's rights, as well as a threat to foreign tourism and investment and Tunisia's economy.

Because women's rights are such a central component of national identity, how women dress, act, and perform in public holds significant meanings for many Tunisians. This is particularly the case for women instrumentalists, whose performance in public represents a distinct departure with pre-independence, gender-segregated society. Yet these musicians also hold a diverse range of beliefs about gender roles, about proper behavior for men and women, and about women's dress. Most of the musicians in women's ensembles identify as Muslims, but they express their faith in various ways. Most of them fast during Ramadan, although a few do not. I observed some musicians praying before a performance, and I learned that a few of them had recently returned from *'Umrah*, a pilgrimage to Mecca that can be performed at any time of year. Most of

them do not veil, with the exception of one or two women. Many of them dress modestly and do not wear much makeup, while many others follow the newest, sexiest trends for women's clothing, hairstyles, and makeup.

The musicians in women's ensembles are mostly unmarried women in their early 20s, although several are in their 30s and 40s and a few ensemble directors are in their 50s. They are mostly from middle-class backgrounds, but many of them hail from regions outside Tunis. The diversity of their beliefs, religious practices, behavior, dress, and other appearances reflects the diversity of young Tunisians and of Muslims across the globe. While contemporary Tunisians are often viewed by outsiders as extremely Westernized and influenced by trends in France and the rest of Europe, they hold a sense of shared Arab-Muslim heritage and identity with other peoples in the region. Young, cosmopolitan, middle-class Tunisians are also connected to other cosmopolitans in other parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe through the similar media they encounter. Tunisians have access to satellite television from Europe, the United States, and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa: they can watch MTV (or the Arabic version, Rotana), or tune in to conservative Islamist leaders from the Gulf (Slimani 2010a, 2010d).

Young Tunisians especially take advantage of the Internet and social networking sites to share their interests and to stay abreast of recent trends. While previous generations of Tunisian musicians were highly influenced by Egyptian and Lebanese music, today's conservatory students are interested in Turkish music, jazz, and various kinds of pop music genres. They are also more likely to travel abroad than previous generations of Tunisians. Many Tunisians study or work in France, Italy, other parts of

Europe and North Africa, or the Gulf. Many permanently settle abroad and return to visit their families during the summer months, although increasing numbers of Tunisians who hold French citizenship are returning to live in Tunisia (Dahmani 2010c; Brunschwig 2010).

Burgeoning access to transnational networks may open possibilities for thinking about gender and the roles of Tunisian women and men in the public and private spheres. In her research with urban middle-class women in Fes, Morocco, Rachel Newcomb notes that debates about women's behavior in North Africa and the Middle East have often been characterized according to binary oppositions such as "modernity" and "tradition," or secular governments versus conservative Islamists. But ideologies about women's identity and behavior entering Tunisia from outside via satellite and Internet, such as from Europe or the Middle East, have also influenced these debates in a new way. While Islamists call for women to behave in certain ways so as to create an ideal Islamic society, visions of European society depict luxurious lifestyles in which women are presumably free to behave as they like (Newcomb 2009: 9). As Tunisian women craft their individual identities they draw upon these ideologies in different ways, often by constructing a modern identity according to local idioms.

Women musicians in Tunisia and the Arab-Muslim world

Like other Tunisian women, young conservatory-educated musicians have come of age amidst competing discourses in globalized media and in local circles about women's movement, behavior, and appearances in the public and private spheres. As musicians, however, they have especially confronted long-standing ideas about women's and men's respectable participation in music and performance. In Tunisia, as in other

parts of the Arab-Muslim world, men's and women's performance has historically been stigmatized and associated with illicit sexuality. Lois Ibsen al-Faruqi has illustrated that over the centuries, Islamic religious opinion has created a hierarchy of permissible and forbidden forms of music, from Qur'anic recitation as most permissible, to religious music and chanting, to songs sung at family celebrations, to the least permissible, music performance associated with illicit activities such as alcohol consumption and prostitution (1985: 9). In Tunisia's modern history, context (as well as the genre and education of the performers) has been the greatest determinant of a music performance's permissibility and respectability. While Tunisian art music performances by conservatory-educated musicians in art-music contexts are now considered respectable, cabaret performances of popular music are disapproved of; hence, respectable women musicians participate in the former but not the latter.

Thus one of the primary obstacles facing women performers in Tunisia and across the Arab-Muslim world has been the issue of respectability. This is a particularly sensitive issue in the Arab-Muslim world due to traditional ideologies concerning honor and shame (or modesty). Lila Abu-Lughod explains that while men have been equated with honor and reason, women are said to lack reason, to depend on men for their honor, and are accordingly supposed to act with shame and modesty in the presence of honorable men (1986: 78–167). Newcomb adds that shame and modesty are positive qualities for women in Morocco and other parts of the Arab-Muslim world: women are proud to demonstrate shame because it represents a civilizing force, something that gives women of higher classes social capital (2009: 148). This belief system takes on different local forms in different regions. Similar beliefs have called for the seclusion of women

and the establishment of segregated spaces for both sexes. In Tunisia before independence, urban women of higher classes were secluded from public view; if they entered public space they were expected to demonstrate modesty and to wear the traditional Tunisian *safsari* (a veil that fully covered their bodies). Covering their bodies has been a way for women to demonstrate modesty and religious faith, and to hide their bodies and sexuality from the view of unrelated men in public. On the contrary, the flaunting of women's bodies and sexuality in public has been a threat to social order and a symbol of social chaos [*fitna*] (Richardson 2009: 161; Newcomb 2009: 256).

Across the Arab-Muslim world, male and female performers have been stigmatized for their associations with disreputable contexts, but especially because their sensual performances of song and dance have been considered examples of *fitna* that disrupt conventional gender norms and behavior. Women singers and dancers have particularly struggled with perceptions of their work as associated with prostitution. Much research on gender and music in the Middle East and North Africa has focused on female performers who have been negatively stigmatized and socially marginalized; some work suggests that these performers' marginal status may also afford them greater license as performers. Deborah Kapchan (1994) and Alessandra Ciucci (2007), for example, highlight how the *shikhāt* in Morocco subvert gender norms by performing publicly for mixed audiences, by including erotic gestures in their dance, and by making subversive social commentary in their lyrics. Kapchan asserts that *shikhāt* "turn the social gaze upon aspects of female expression that are taboo expect in the context of performance" (1994: 90). The potential of performers to transgress gender norms is also evident in the work of gay singers and dancers in Tunisia and Algeria, who may cross-

dress or dance like women. In her research with women singers and dancers in Egypt, Karin van Nieuwkerk points out that class also determines how female performers are perceived: while upper- and middle-class Egyptians consider their work disreputable, lower-class Egyptians living in the Cairo neighborhood where many of these singers and dancers reside understand their plight in needing to work for a living (1995, 1998). Nevertheless, in the view of middle- and upper-class elites in many parts of the Arab-Muslim world, needing to work has also been a factor tainting the respectability of women performers: it demonstrates their lack of access to a man's support and their lack of shame in working (and displaying their bodies as dancers) in public (Newcomb 2009: 179).

As Abu-Lughod has asserted, many Middle Eastern women access respectability by "distancing themselves from sexuality and its antisocial associations" (1986: 165). This has been the primary means by which prominent female vocalists have elevated their status and accessed respectability. Umm Kulthum, Fairuz, and other prominent Arab women vocalists have been idolized as role models (Racy 2003); in public they have promoted modest, conservative, morally "proper" personas. In performance, they have performed upright and relatively still, without moving their bodies too much. They have worn clothing that covers their bodies in a modest way, and they have often promoted religious and/or nationalist ideologies. In these ways they seem to negate their feminine sexuality and the stereotype that the female voice creates sexual ecstasy for male listeners. Contemporary women vocalists who have achieved fame throughout the Middle East may flaunt their bodies in more sexual ways, but they are often considered beyond the basic standards of local society due to their fame (Newcomb 2009: 179).

Across the Arab-Muslim world women musicians have also performed in “private” for all-women’s gatherings and celebrations such as weddings, circumcisions, and births. These performers have tended to be considered somewhat respectable because they do not perform in public, in front of men; but they have also been considered marginal due to their low socioeconomic status and need to work outside the home. In addition, these performers have often not been considered serious musicians due to their lack of formal music training (Ciucci 2007; Campbell 2002; Langlois 1999).

Art music performance in the Arab world has primarily been the domain of men instrumentalists and composers; women have participated mostly as vocalists (Jones 1987; Racy 2003; Davis 2004; Shannon 2006). Yet as conservatory education has elevated the status of art music in certain countries, some women have begun participating in conservatories and learning art music instruments. In Egypt as in Tunisia, for example, a few women have been participating as *‘ūd* and violin players in mixed-gender ensembles. In Morocco, women’s ensembles comprised of conservatory-educated instrumentalists perform Andalusian art music; but they perform primarily for gender-segregated audiences (Ciucci 2007). A conservatory-educated women’s ensemble in Syria performs for mixed-gender audiences, but this ensemble is a Western art music orchestra. Further research needs to be conducted with women instrumentalists performing throughout the Arab world to learn how and where women are breaking into a domain that has previously been dominated by men.

Conservatory-educated Tunisian women musicians are different from other women musicians in the Arab world because have been performing instruments in greater numbers than anywhere else. They have created increasing numbers of conservatory-

educated women's ensembles, which perform Tunisian and Arab art music for both mixed-gender and gender-segregated audiences. Their greater numbers are due in part to the Tunisian state's radical reforms for women's rights, as well as nationalist reforms to elevate, promote, and diffuse Tunisian music. Studying their work thus contributes to filling a gap in Arab music scholarship, which has heretofore relied on the perspectives of male musicians concerning Arab art music. Tunisian women musicians' performances also carry special meaning for the Tunisian state and for other supporters of Tunisia's secular-modernist identity; their performances have been promoted by the state because it considers the promotion of women's rights to be a crucial component of its image abroad and domestically.

Yet like other female performers in the Middle East and North Africa, Tunisian women musicians have confronted historical associations stigmatizing their work and linking them with illicit sexuality. In early twentieth-century Tunisia, most men and women performers were Jews and Muslims of low social status. Female singers often doubled as dancers and they were especially stigmatized as "women of loose morals," due to their status as women who worked outside the home, as performers who were associated with prostitution, and as women who displayed their bodies while dancing for men. According to musicologists Mourad Sakli (1994) and Ruth Davis (2009), these Jewish and Muslim men and women musicians contributed significantly to the development of the Tunisian *ughniyya* [song] genre during the early decades of the twentieth century.

In the 1920s and 1930s, reformers among the Tunisian elite sought to elevate the status of Tunisian music and musicians and to create a national "Tunisian music." Davis

(2004, 1997a, 2002a) has written extensively about how the Rachidiyya Institute and the Rachidiyya Ensemble have transformed the *ma'lūf* (Tunisia's genre of Arab-Andalusian music) and music culture in Tunisia, especially after the state created national conservatories and institutes for diffusing the *ma'lūf*. Although most of Davis's work draws upon the perspectives of male musicians, in her research on Tunisian efforts to revitalize the *ma'lūf* during the 1990s she briefly discusses the work of *El 'Azifet*, including accusations that the ensemble is merely a gimmick or government ploy. Her descriptions of *El 'Azifet* and the controversies they have created inspired me to investigate their work and such controversies further.

My dissertation also follows research conducted by ethnomusicologist JaFran Jones and communications scholar Laura Lengel on women musicians in Tunisia. Writing in the 1980s about her field research in Tunis during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jones describes the gradual increase of women learning instruments in conservatories, although she notes that among professional musicians, "women are singers while instrumental music and musical creation remain the domain of men" (1987: 77). Lengel conducted research with *El 'Azifet*, *Taqasim*, and individual women vocalists and instrumentalists during 1993 and 1994. Her work provides an invaluable snapshot of these ensembles when they first formed. She depicts the many obstacles that women musicians have faced in Tunisian society, especially historical associations linking female performers with prostitution and sexuality (Lengel 1995, 2000, 2004). However, Lengel's focus on respectability, sexuality, and honor and shame contrasts with Sakli's assertion that Tunisian women musicians no longer face any barriers to becoming professional musicians (Sakli 1997). Indeed, Sakli's comment resonates with comments

that I heard from men and women musicians concerning contemporary women's performance as "normal."

My work thus extends and departs from Lengel's research by showing that since the founding of *El 'Azifet* in 1992, women musicians have expanded the parameters of respectable performance to the extent that some say that they do not face any more obstacles in becoming musicians. Many constraints still remain, including questions of respectability, but the latter are not the focus of most women musicians' concerns. In subsequent chapters I show how women instrumentalists have earned respectability by distancing themselves from the sexualized images of women vocalists and by highlighting their education and modernity. I hypothesize that women instrumentalists may be further removed from historical questions of respectability since they comprise a new, third category of professional musicians: women instrumentalists. But because my informants did not dwell on questions of respectability, I have also considered other constraints that women face in becoming professional musicians, including issues within the art music community and ideas in Tunisian society about women's roles in the home. In this way my dissertation expands research on female performers in the Middle East and North Africa by going beyond questions of honor and shame.

Playing out

Throughout this dissertation I use the term "playing out" to explore the various meanings of women playing instruments—both for themselves and their audiences. While this is not a specific phrase that my informants used, they usually spoke of themselves as "playing" instruments [*n'azif*: "I play"], as a player of a specific instrument [*kamanjatiyya*, or female violinist; *qanūnjiyya* (female *qanūn* player)], and as

“musicians” [*mūsīqīn*; singular feminine, *mūsīqiyya*; as opposed to “*mutribīn*” or “*mughanīn*,” used for singers] or as “instrumentalists” [masculine plural: ‘*azifīn*; feminine plural: ‘*azifāt*]. For many of the musicians I interviewed and with whom I spent time informally, their identity as musicians—but especially as women instrumentalists—seemed very important to them. Their identity as “playing” female instrumentalists [‘*āzifāt*] has probably also been shaped by the name of the first and most prominent conservatory-educated women’s ensemble in Tunisia, *El ‘Azifet* [the female instrumentalists].

With the phrases “playing out gender” and “playing out” national identity, I often interchange “playing out” with “performing.” Yet I have chosen to use this phrase rather than “performing” to highlight the significance of women musicians *playing* instruments *out(side)* in public. Firstly, it is important that the women I have worked with are playing, not singing; for this they are unique and potentially disruptive, both in the Tunisian music scene and in the literature about Arab music and about Arab Muslim women. Secondly, they are “playing out” in the sense that they are playing “outside,” in the public sphere (and for mixed-gender audiences) and not only in private, as Tunisian women had previously done. I also interpret the phrase as it is used by musicians: to “play out” means to play louder or with more force, thus projecting one’s sound and infusing one’s playing with more spirit and personality. In this sense, women musicians’ “playing out” disrupts perceptions of their limited musical abilities, lack of stamina and confidence, and other social expectations of their gendered behavior. In the following chapters I show that women musicians not only play instruments “out” in public—they often “play out”

powerfully and confidently, especially when creating *jaww* [ambiance] at wedding celebrations.

By playing outside [*barra*] in public, women musicians are gendering public space. Social science research in North Africa has noted that according to cultural ideals, women are oriented towards the private sphere (home), while men are oriented towards the public sphere (outside the home: the street, workplace, marketplace, and so forth). Spatial seclusion was a feature of Tunisian society until the years leading to independence; after independence, however, the government encouraged women to attend school and to participate in the workforce. Tunisian women have entered the public sphere in increasing numbers since the 1960s and 1970s, and women's gendering of the public space, or the gender-mixing of Tunisian society, is a symbol of national pride. Thus as Tunisian women have gradually gendered many aspects of public space, a straightforward understanding of public/male and private/female spheres may be inadequate (Newcomb 2009: 131). Yet gender-segregated spaces still remain. All-male cafés are still prevalent in city and town centers, although women in Tunis and other urban areas increasingly frequent chic *salons de thé* [tea salons]. The street is also still a domain of male dominance: women walking in the street are continually harassed by men's catcalls.

Women musicians' performance as instrumentalists has further disrupted conventional notions concerning women's respectability and performance in the public sphere (Post 1994). As respectable middle-class women musicians have gendered men's musical spaces, they have expanded the parameters of women's performance. They have transformed women's roles in the public sphere; and as I will show in subsequent

chapters, they have also begun to transform ideas about men's participation in the private sphere.

Furthermore, conservatory-educated women musicians' performances in all-women spaces infuse new meaning to concepts of space and gender-segregation. In the Arab-Muslim world, gender-segregated spaces have been symbols of oppression for some women and men, emblems of a glorified, traditional past, and/or sites for homosocial bonding and potential resistance. In contemporary Tunisia, gender-segregated wedding celebrations are all-female spaces that may be criticized as being backwards for their confining nature. Many Tunisians accept men's domination of the street and all-male cafés, and their continued control of government and most of the workforce; but they criticize women-only spaces as threats to the modern, secular nature of mixed society. Such criticisms are tightly linked with many Tunisians' fear of Islamism and of how that could upset the economic and political stability Tunisia currently enjoys. Yet while these gender-segregated spaces may be a sign of conservative Islamist beliefs, they may also be an indicator that women wish to craft their own spaces away from the male-dominated street and workforce. Indeed, part of the reason Amina Srarfi founded *El 'Azifet* was to create an alternative space for women to play Tunisian music, apart from male-dominated ensembles. Moreover, my research with wedding ensembles demonstrates that gender-segregated wedding parties—and women's ensembles themselves—may be progressive spaces in which women are able express new forms of empowerment and alternative forms of gender identity, gendered behavior, and sexuality. In this way Tunisian women musicians are gendering and re-shaping both public/mixed-gender and private/gender-segregated spaces.

Performance and play

My use of the phrase “playing out” rests upon a theoretical understanding of performance as a powerful social force, subject to modification and unanticipated responses. Drawing upon Judith Butler’s theories of performativity and gender, I consider performance as not merely reflecting or expressing social life, but also actively shaping social life and social constructs such as national identity and gender (Butler 1997: 40; Askew 2002: 5). As Deborah Kapchan and Deborah Wong argue, performing (or “playing out”) something means carrying something into effect, or enacting, making, or becoming something (Kapchan 1995: 479; Wong 2004: 4).

As noted above, I use the phrase “playing out” rather than “performing” to stress the power of *playing* music (and of women playing instruments) to construct, enact, and reshape social norms and identities. In this sense my understanding of “playing out” relates to Christopher Small’s descriptions of musicking (1998). In discussing musicking as a verb rather than music as a noun, Small focuses on performance and process: musicking as an activity rather than music as an object. Like other scholars of performance, Small considers musicking as a means by which people bring into existence, learn about, and explore a set of relationships that model the relationships of our world as we wish them to be (1998: 50). Performing, musicking, or “playing out” are ways of bringing into being and questioning socially constructed notions of reality such as gender norms and national identity. Small also treats music as a participatory phenomenon, in which audiences and performers contribute to the overall performance. Similarly, throughout the dissertation I examine “contexts for musicking” as interactive

spaces in which audiences, musicians, and others contribute to the meanings created during the course of performances.

Focusing on the process of music making allows for a greater understanding of performer-audience interaction as an important component of Arab music. In his research on *tarab* music in the urban Arab world, Ali Jihad Racy (1991b, 1998, 2003) describes how intimate performance contexts, initiated audiences, and performer-audience interaction contribute to heightening feelings of *tarab* [musical ecstasy or rapture], to improving solo improvisations by musicians, and thus to creating a successful performance. In Tunisian music, *tarab* is mentioned less frequently than it is in the Mashriq [the Arab East], although the term is often used when *tarab* music from the Mashriq is performed.⁷ Tunisian musicians more often discuss the *jaww* [atmosphere] of a performance.⁸ *Jaww* can refer merely to the atmosphere or ambiance of an event, space, or group of people, such as the good or bad *jaww* among a group of people or in a music ensemble. *Jaww* also refers to a festive atmosphere, ambiance, or mood, as in the phrase, “he made *jaww* at the party”—in other words, he heightened the mood or brought life to the party.

Jaww is dynamic, context-specific, and interactive, relying on the participation of musicians and guests. Negative sentiments or uncomfortable feelings on the part of either the musicians or the guests will negatively affect their ability to create *jaww* (Racy 1998, 2003). *Jaww* is considered key to most successful performances, but it is essential at wedding celebrations, where the goal is to celebrate and to incite as many people as

⁷ The Mashriq, or Arab East, is the place where the sun rises: the lands of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt. The Maghrib is the West, “where the sun sets,” or North Africa: Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, although the latter three are often grouped together due to their shared French colonial and linguistic histories.

⁸ In the Mashriq, cultivating a good *jaww* is a necessary element for creating *tarab* (Racy 2003: 64).

possible to dance. Following Racy's work on the performer-audience feedback loop in Arab music, I show that in Tunisian weddings a good *jaww* causes people to dance, which heightens the *jaww*; in turn, this encourages the musicians to play out and improvise more, creating an even hotter *jaww*.

A fun *jaww* at a wedding also creates a feeling of festivity and play. My use of the phrase "playing out" therefore brings forth the multiple meanings of "play" as conceptualized by performance theorists. Victor Turner, who was highly influenced by Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage and by earlier research on human play, has considered play a liminal or liminoid mode, expressing a hypothetical possibility of what may or might be (Turner 1988: 169). Following research by Don Handelman and Gregory Bateson, Turner suggests that play can provide a metalanguage and thus provide a range of commentary on the social order (Ibid: 168). Brian Sutton-Smith further proposes that the disorderly quality of play and other liminal activities might provide a means of learning about the possibility of alternate social orders. Some theorists, such as Johan Huizinga, have viewed the cultural functions of play as primarily conservative, serving to strengthen community feeling (*communitas*) and community assumptions (1950).⁹ Sutton-Smith and Turner, instead, have highlighted the subversive functions of play in its explorations of alternatives to the status quo (Carlson 1996: 23–30). In the following chapters I similarly examine how the playing that women musicians do onstage and offstage can both uphold and subvert social norms.

Expanding notions of Tunisian musical identity and gender

My exploration of how women musicians play out also focuses on how they

⁹ Throughout the dissertation I refer to *communitas* in the sense used by Huizinga and Turner (1969), rather than as more recently examined by Roberto Esposito.

expand notions of Tunisian musical identity. I argue that when they perform with mixed-gender ensembles and/or with women's ensembles, these musicians are playing out by gendering Tunisian musical identity. My work follows recent ethnomusicological research on gender, which has moved beyond mere descriptions of the roles women play in various music cultures to questioning how music performance serves as a special means of instilling and perpetuating basic gender values, and how women resist and transgress gender norms through their public performances. Further research has investigated the gendered attributes of specific instruments, as well as the ways women's performances may be shaped by questions of confidence, modesty, appearances, and social expectations of how women should behave (Doubleday 2008; Downing 2010). I explore these questions when examining Tunisian women musicians' performances of repertoires and instruments that have traditionally been the domain of men. As women instrumentalists take on male repertoires and instruments in performances with mixed-gender ensembles and for mixed-gender audiences, they may be seen as disruptive, as transgressing traditional gender roles, and as trespassing upon male territory (Holst-Warhaft 2003; Labajo 2003; Bithell 2003).

Feminist music theorists have also sought to understand the ways in which gender influences how we listen to, analyze, perform, and compose music (McClary 1991, 1994; Cusick 1994). My dissertation contributes to this research by examining how women discuss their musical performances and their perspectives on Tunisian musical aesthetics, suggesting that their analyses (and performances) may disrupt conventional understandings of Arab music and of gender and music. I argue that when they discuss the specific contributions that women musicians add to Tunisian music, or how women

play differently than men, they expand, play out, and reconstruct notions of Tunisian musical identity.

This dissertation also contributes to cross-cultural research on music and gender by exploring how gender identity is performed musically, or how music performance serves as a special means of contesting, reinforcing, and re-working concepts of gender identity (Wong 2004; Magrini 2003: 5). Following Butler, I explore how specific attributes—for example, the appearance of beautiful women dressed in traditional Tunisian costumes playing refined, traditional art-music instruments—constitute a particular gender identity and representation of Tunisian women, tradition/modernity, and national identity (Downing 2010: 60; Ferchiou 1996). I especially examine how women musicians play out gender identity in wedding performances. Since wedding celebrations are specifically gendered rites of passage, women musicians' performances at weddings are particularly effective in instilling, perpetuating, or resisting specific ideas about gender (Magrini 2003: 2; Sugarman 1997).

In turn I use the phrase “playing out” to highlight the subtle questioning of heteronormativity that some women and men musicians perform. Although homophobic sentiment persists in contemporary Tunisia, some intellectuals, artists, and musicians have come out as openly homosexual. A few members of women's ensembles are openly lesbian; others are unmarried women who identify strongly with feminist agendas, while others hold more conservative views. Some musicians present ultra-feminine appearances, while others experiment with alternative forms of feminine and masculine identity in their appearances. These musicians particularly complicate ideas about gender identity and sexuality in Tunisia when they play at wedding parties, where their

performances celebrate heterosexual gender norms. This ethnographic account also demonstrates that subtexts of homosocial desire may also be present at wedding parties when women's ensembles perform for women-only audiences. Thus my use of the phrase "playing out" further explores how women musicians expand Tunisian ideas about sexuality and gender identity.

Creating women's spaces and enacting change

Tunisian women musicians have "played outside the lines" and expanded understandings of Tunisian musical identity by creating their own women's spaces for musicking. By creating their own ensembles, they have opened new avenues for women to gain experience playing instruments and improvising. Moreover, they have created spaces in which Tunisian music is performed by only women, thereby challenging notions of Tunisian instrumental music as male and creating new performances of Tunisian music. Several musicians also suggested to me that their musical performances are affected by the gender of the other ensemble musicians and by the gender of the audience members.

My work thus advances research on gender and music by examining how the gender of performers and audience members affects the quality of musical performance, improvisation, and dancing. I draw upon theories of *jaww* and the performer-audience feedback model (Racy 1998, 2003), of interaction and competence among performers in music ensembles (Brinner 1995; Downing 2010), and of interaction among performers in gender-segregated ensembles (Labajo 2003) to investigate how women's ensembles often cultivate a *jaww* that is gendered.

This dissertation further expands research on homosocial musicking, music ensembles, and performance contexts. At gender-segregated weddings in particular, Tunisian women musicians create new, gendered performances of Tunisian music, improvisation, and national culture. Furthermore, by playing wedding music together, inducing guests to dance at weddings, and creating a particularly sensual, homosocial *jaww*, women musicians acquire and instill concepts of gender and sexuality. But they also have the potential to suggest ways these concepts can be modified (Sugarman 1997).

As “respectable” middle-class women have moved from playing music within their homes as amateurs to playing out(side) as professionals, I consider music performance as a powerful medium for social change. Moreover, I investigate how upon creating their own spaces for performing music, and/or upon performing with mixed-gender ensembles, women musicians have enacted change that has transformed the soundscape and the music profession in Tunis. The changes these musicians enact in the music profession and in their personal lives bring them financial, musical, and personal empowerment. Furthermore, by playing out confidently they enact change by challenging others to reconsider perceptions of women’s playing. In these ways, women musicians are radically re-shaping ideas about women’s behavior and roles in Tunisian music and in Tunisian society.

By using the phrase playing out, then, I wish to stress the agency these women have exercised in developing careers as musicians and in creating new possibilities for women’s performance. In this sense I attempt to go beyond narratives of Tunisian women as passive recipients of state reforms or as victims whose activism is co-opted by the state. I also attempt to surpass these narratives by investigating criticisms of women

musicians and women's ensembles as government pawns or gimmicks who serve as symbols of national identity. Examining how and why women's ensembles' performances are promoted and controlled by the state, and how they have room for resistance, however, requires an understanding of power, resistance, and the Tunisian government's need to control the nation's image domestically and abroad.

Playing out the nation

My understanding of performing or playing out the nation is based on theories of nationalism, performance, and power that treat the nation-state as a construct that relies upon continual performance for its efficacy. As Foucault notes, power is rendered efficacious in the process of enactment, and power must be seen to be appreciated (Foucault 1980: 89). Through its performance of power and national identity, a nation-state comes into being, but it must continually smooth over inconsistencies and deal with various ideologies that compete for recognition as the dominant ideology of national culture and national identity (Askew 2002: 10). Thus in a newly independent nation such as Tunisia, the government's control of national culture and national identity is crucial to upholding the artifice of the nation (Ibid.: 5–26). As I will explain further in the next chapter, the Tunisian state has promoted a particular vision of Tunisian national identity in which Tunisia is modern, open to the West, and committed to upholding women's rights. Much is at stake for the Tunisian government if they lose control of their version of national identity, both domestically and internationally.

The Tunisian state performs its power by enforcing state borders, controlling the press and the political arena, and by stationing hundreds of police in downtown Tunis. The state also performs its vision of national identity in various ways: by passing laws

concerning women's rights; by prohibiting women from veiling in schools, public buildings, and on television; by designating a Tunisian national musical heritage; by suppressing certain "backwards" practices, customs, and music genres; and by sponsoring performances of Tunisian culture. In these contexts the state uses music and dance performances, rather than print media, to construct and play out the nation (Largey 2006: 16–17). Moreover, the government does not just sponsor such cultural performances. Since independence most public performances must be approved of by the government, which controls each performance of national culture with varying degrees of intervention (Jankowsky 2004: 299). The government also attempts to mediate reception of these performances in state press reviews.

Yet as Foucault notes, power is a diffuse resource available to everyone—though to various degrees. The state and its actors are not the only performers of national identity, and they cannot control all aspects of national identity and its performance. Indeed debates about national identity throughout Tunisian history highlight its contested and malleable nature. Thus individual citizens also have a role in playing out and playing with nationalist ideologies, especially in cultural performances (Askew 2002: 9–15; Largey 2006: 13). Not all women musicians are complicit with the state's agenda, nor are they uncritical of such state interference.

Because the regime's power and its vision of national identity can be contested, however, the authoritarian police state in Tunisia takes particular pains to perform its power by attempting to control and promote the official national image in cultural performances. Its coercive interference does not always leave much room for resistance, especially for women who are perceived as representing national identity. Moreover,

since the government is a strong supporter of women's rights, many women support (or do not criticize) the regime because they are proud of and grateful for the rights they enjoy. The state's commitment to maintaining a secular-modernist identity (including its commitment to women's emancipation) constitutes a significant part of many Tunisians' national pride and national identity. In turn, Ben Ali's regime and its followers have been very supportive of women musicians and women's ensembles because of their power to play out a particular vision of national identity.

Due to their power as symbols of women's rights and national identity, women's ensembles and women musicians are subject to greater state control of their performances and appearances than are men musicians. But many women resist this control in subtle ways, such as by attempting to fashion their own appearances and by reclaiming their agency and pride in performing Tunisian music as women instrumentalists. Their efforts illustrate the power of musicians to reconstruct and expand concepts of national identity and gender on their own terms.

* * * * *

Research Experiences

This dissertation is based on ethnographic field research I conducted in Tunis, the capital city of Tunisia. After a preliminary visit to Tunis in 2006 for the month of July, during which I studied Arabic at the Institut Bourguiba, I returned for an extended stay of fifteen months, from late June 2007 to late September 2008. I made subsequent visits for three weeks in January 2009 and for three weeks during June and July 2009. Although during these stays I was based in Tunis, I was able to travel extensively throughout Tunisia as I accompanied women musicians to their performances in towns as close as

Gammarth (twenty minutes from downtown Tunis) and as far as Sfax (five hours by bus). I also traveled independently in order to research traditional women's ensembles and wedding celebrations in towns along the northern and eastern coasts. In addition, on two occasions I was invited as a close family guest to attend weddings in the southern towns of Gabes and Ghomrassen. These experiences greatly expanded my understanding of gender, music, and wedding celebrations in Tunisia.

When I first began my research, however, I did not plan on studying wedding music. I initially intended to study at conservatory settings such as the Institut Supérieur de Musique (ISM) in Tunis, and to observe rehearsals and performances by women's festival ensembles such as *El 'Azifet*, in order to study the work of conservatory-educated women musicians. To this end, I primarily conducted my research in the "art-music establishment" or community of Tunis (Davis 2004; Jankowsky 2004). This art-music community includes musicians, scholars, critics, and other intellectuals, many of whom are invested in promoting, preserving, and performing Tunisian art music [*musique savante*]. As I will explain in Chapter Two, the Arab-Andalusian music genre of *ma'lūf* was designated the national cultural heritage beginning in the 1930s. Although the *ma'lūf* was traditionally based in popular contexts, efforts to reform, systematize, theorize, and discipline the genre led to its association with elite art-music contexts, taught with notation in conservatories and performed in concert halls. The Tunisian government's efforts to create music-education institutions have also cultivated new generations of musicians who have learned Tunisian, Arab, and Western art music in conservatory settings. Most of the men and women musicians with whom I worked have earned degrees from music institutions, and many of them teach at ISM or related

conservatories—although many of them also perform popular music or “art-popular music” (such as hits by Umm Kulthum and similar Egyptian, Lebanese, and Tunisian artists) at festivals and at weddings. I acknowledge that art music in Tunisia and the Arab world means something quite different than it does in Western music contexts (Davis 1996). But due to their conservatory training and frequent performance of elite art music such as the *ma’lūf*, and for the sake of simplicity, I use the phrase “members of the art music community” to refer to most of my interlocutors.

In discussing the “art music community” I also recognize the sense of community these musicians feel. Whether based at ISM or the Rachidiyya Institute as teachers or students, or graduates of those institutions, many musicians in this community frequently work together outside of the conservatory setting as they perform in state-sponsored ensembles, festival ensembles, and wedding ensembles. Working as a professional performing musician in Tunis requires becoming a part of this community and tapping into this network in order to be solicited for performance, recording, and teaching opportunities. Musicians are called to perform in ensembles not only because of their reputation as able musicians, but also due to their professionalism and interpersonal skills.

My first contacts with members of this community were through the Centre de Musiques Arabes et Méditerranéennes in Sidi Bou Said (CMAM, located fifteen kilometers from downtown Tunis), home of the national sound archives and host of music researchers and festival concerts. With the assistance of CMAM directors, I began taking *qanūn* and violin lessons with two male musicians who teach at ISM during the

academic year. During the summer of 2007 I also attended many festival concerts of Tunisian music.

In the fall of 2007 I began auditing classes at ISM, where I gradually began interviewing men and women professors and students in Tunisian Arabic and French. Through friends I made at ISM, I was invited to observe rehearsals of the Rachidiyya Ensemble, the pre-eminent (male-dominated) ensemble of *ma'lūf* music. I continued attending the Rachidiyya's rehearsals and concerts throughout my fieldwork; the musicians I met at the Rachidiyya, ISM, and CMAM accelerated my access to other mixed-gender festival ensembles and top-notch musicians. Throughout my fieldwork I also continued to attend performances of Tunisian music in concert halls and festival contexts.

I recognize that as a violinist, a woman in her twenties, and an American researcher, I had access to many spaces that might be closed to others. Because I was a violinist and was studying privately with a renowned Tunisian violinist, Anis Klibi, I was welcomed by the director and members of the Rachidiyya and other ensembles. Moreover, as I began playing in Western-music and Tunisian-music ensembles with other Tunisian musicians (many of whom studied at ISM or played in the top art-music ensembles), I felt that I earned greater respect and acceptance among my informants and among members of the art music community. My status as a researcher affiliated with CEMAT (Centre d'Études Maghrebines à Tunis, an American research center supported by the American Institute for Maghrib Studies) and CMAM also accelerated my access to auditing classes at ISM and observing El 'Azifet's rehearsals and performances.

Furthermore, as an unmarried woman musician I made friendships with other young unmarried women in their mid-20s and was accepted into some of their social circles. I became close friends with violinist Myriam Slama; she and others (Sirine Ouesleti, Abir Zahra, Samia Ben Youssef, and Yossr Labidi) invited me into their homes and to accompany them to their rehearsals and performances. It was Slama, especially, who introduced me to the world of women's wedding performances and the network of musicians who perform in women's wedding ensembles. Although men are not officially prohibited from attending rehearsals by *El 'Azifet* and other women's ensembles, I suspect that as a woman my presence was more acceptable than that of a man. Above all, as a woman I had access to many spaces that a man could not observe: gender-segregated wedding celebrations at which only women were present; backstage changing rooms in which members of women's ensembles discussed their performances; and busses, cars, and hotel rooms in which members of women's ensembles socialized while traveling to their performances. I also socialized with Slama and her friends during meals before performances, and after performances in cafés, at dance clubs, and at slumber parties in her home. Spending time with these musicians offstage greatly enhanced my investigation of their onstage performances.

As a researcher in my late 20s I also felt affinities with and developed close relationships with Khadija El Afrit and Myriam Lakhoua, who at the time were in their early 30s and were writing their PhD dissertations at the University of Paris. Yet I recognize that my life experiences, privileges, and perspectives are very different from those of my informants, and that my understandings of gender, nationalism, and musical identity in Tunis are clearly influenced by my perspectives as a Caucasian, American

woman. I realize that my observations of the art music community and the lives of professional musicians in Tunis are also shaped by my personal experiences as a musician and daughter of two professional Western classical musicians and music educators. In this dissertation, however, I have sought to present the views of the women and men musicians I interviewed and to learn about gender and Tunisian music through them. I hope that together with my fieldwork observations and theoretical reflections, their perspectives and experiences will enrich our understanding of gender, music, and national identity in Tunisia.

Dissertation Overview

How women musicians exercise agency and play out gendered musical identity and national identity in Tunisia is intimately connected to the worlds in which they live and work. In the next chapter I present a brief historical background of gender and nationalism in Tunisia. This background is necessary for comprehending how women's rights and women's performances of gender in Tunisia have been entangled with political power struggles and debates over national identity since the 1920s. A discussion of the Tunisian women's movements in the 1980s and state reforms for women's rights in the early 1990s also sets the stage for the focus of later chapters: the emergence of women instrumentalists and women's ensembles in the 1980s and 1990s.

In Chapter Two I examine the changing status of music and musicians from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. Focusing on the history of women's participation in Tunisian music, I investigate how questions of respectability have affected women's performance and how nationalist reforms and national music institutions have elevated the status of music in Tunisia.

In Chapter Three I focus on the perspectives of contemporary women instrumentalists in Tunis. After describing the contemporary factors that affect women's participation as musicians in Tunis, including criticisms of women's playing, I explore how some musicians have expanded and reconstructed gender roles in both the public and private spheres. I then consider the experiences of women instrumentalists performing with mixed-gender ensembles and their status in-between the categories of "female vocalists" and "male instrumentalists."

In Chapter Four I focus on conservatory-educated women's festival ensembles and their performances in prestigious, state-sponsored contexts. I apply theories of performance and nationalism to examine the power of these ensembles to "play out the nation." I then examine how the state attempts to harness that power by sponsoring and controlling certain aspects of women musicians' performances, and how musicians in these ensembles can potentially play out and play with concepts of national identity and gender for themselves.

In Chapter Five I examine conservatory-educated "women's wedding ensembles," which play for mixed-gender and gender-segregated audiences at wedding celebrations. Drawing upon my participant-observation at over thirty weddings, I investigate how women musicians have enacted change by forming their own wedding and festival ensembles. At wedding celebrations these musicians gain experience improvising, "playing out" with confidence, and creating a heightened festive atmosphere [*jaww*], often when only women are present. I thus examine how women's wedding ensembles play out gender and national culture at wedding parties, and how the gender of the performers and audience affects the *jaww* and the music performance. I also explore

women musicians' suggestions that special musicking exists within women-only musical spaces.

Lastly, in Chapter Six I focus on women instrumentalists' perspectives of their own playing and of Tunisian musical identity. After explaining how improvisatory techniques such as ornamentation and improvisation are used in Tunisian and Arab music and how they are considered important emblems of Tunisian and Arab cultural identity, I contextualize criticisms of women's playing in light of debates about Tunisian musical identity that have circulated throughout the past century. Upon examining women's perceptions of their own playing, of gender and music, and of the aesthetics they value in Tunisian music, I argue that women instrumentalists are "playing out" and expanding conventional understandings of Tunisian musical identity.

In conclusion, I reconsider questions of respectability, power and nationalism, gender and music, and homosocial spaces for musicking in light of the perspectives and performances of Tunisian women musicians recounted in this dissertation. Despite the competing narratives that attempt to characterize and often criticize Tunisian women musicians, this work demonstrates that these musicians have forged successful careers through their own agency. In the process they have transformed the Tunisian music scene and reformulated women's roles in the public and private spheres.

Chapter One

Gender and national identity in Tunisia

This chapter provides a brief historical background of gender and nationalism in Tunisia. Since the 1920s and earlier, women's rights and women's performances of gender have been entangled with political power struggles and debates over national identity. Nationalists and state leaders have taken various positions on women's rights depending on the historical moment and the political struggles at hand. State reforms for women's rights have contributed to creating opportunities for Tunisian women musicians to become professional musicians, but perceptions that women's rights are a gift of the state have also led to backlash criticisms that women musicians are government pawns. The history of women musicians and women's ensembles has also been intertwined with the state since the formation of the first women's conservatory-educated festival ensembles in the early 1990s. This followed the emergence of a burgeoning Tunisian women's movement in the 1980s and occurred during a time of heated political debates about women's rights and Tunisian identity. In the 2000s, a rising tide of Islamist sentiment led to a surge in veiling and in a new wave of debates about cultural and national identity. Women's wedding ensembles also emerged during this time and have multiplied (in part) due to the demands of increasing numbers of women who veil and who wish to hold gender-segregated wedding parties.

The events of the 1980s and 1990s are particularly significant for understanding the emergence of women's ensembles in the early 1990s, as well as for comprehending state support of these ensembles and backlash criticisms among the art music community. Above all, the history of the Tunisian state and nationalist movement demonstrates that women's rights, appearances, and behaviors have frequently been identified as symbols of cultural and national identity. Although this history is particular to Tunisia, it also demonstrates that state and popular support for women's equality can be quickly reversed, dampened, or complicated by other social and political transformations occurring domestically and abroad.

Nationalists and debates over women's emancipation

Gender issues have been a significant part of Tunisian national discourse since first debated by nationalists before independence in 1956. During these debates, nationalist leaders and writers were influenced by colonial feminist discourse even as they attempted to challenge it and to create their own representations of the "Tunisian / Muslim woman." From the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a subgenre of French texts focused on "the Muslim woman" in Tunisia. These texts defined the colonized "woman" in a way that reduced her to a few essential characteristics, and they held a paternalist, patriarchal view that kept men in power. Colonial feminist texts especially attacked Islam and condemned veiling and segregation; they also attacked local Tunisian society by pointing to the ill treatment of women as symbolic of an inferior, stagnant society (Mamelouk 2007: 133). Ignoring the fact that only a minority of elite urban women wore veils and were cloistered in harems, colonial feminists used the inferior status of women and labeled practices such as segregation and veiling as

“perverse” as a strategy to attack Islam and Muslim identity. Instead, they promoted French education, a Western model for women, and the French language as a vehicle for modernity (Ibid.: 140).

In her work on the French-language, Tunisian women’s periodical *Leïla*, Nadia Mamelouk argues that many Tunisian writers viewed French constructions of the Arab-Muslim woman as Orientalist.¹⁰ They attacked the French focus on the veil and challenged the French negative representations of colonized women (Mamelouk 2007: 131-132). Although eager to promote modernity, several nationalist leaders defended the veil as a symbol of Tunisian cultural identity and of resistance against the French. Meanwhile, since 1924 some members of the French Socialist party in Tunis had begun a campaign against the veil and organized debates around the subject. At one of their meetings in 1929, Habiba Menchari denounced the veil and questioned the silence of Tunisian women. Prominent nationalist leaders swiftly condemned her (Ibid.). Habib Bourguiba, a nationalist lawyer from the coastal town of Monastir who had studied in elite schools in Tunis and France, gave a speech the same day in which he defended the veil as a symbol of national identity and as a defense against assimilation. Bourguiba declared that “Tunisians must safeguard their traditions, which are a sign of their distinctiveness, and therefore the last defense of a national identity in danger” (quoted in Charrad 2008: 116). Charrad notes that nationalist leaders also did not generally oppose

¹⁰ *Leïla: revue illustrée de la femme* [Leïla: Illustrated women’s magazine] was a new women’s periodical published as a monthly magazine (Dec. 1936–Nov. 1940) and as a weekly newspaper (1 Dec. 1940–8 July 1941). In her research Nadia Mamelouk suggests that the publication’s title defends Arab and Tunisian identity by referencing the famous Arab love story of Kaïs and Leïla. This periodical stands out from other publications in that time period because it was a Tunisian-run literary periodical that contained articles by both Tunisian and French women and men about national cultural debates and about changing roles for women in Tunisian society (Mamelouk 2007: 2–17). For a listing of other French-language and Arabic-language periodicals during the French Protectorate (1881–1956), cf. Mamelouk (2007: 13–14). Mamelouk’s and Morgan Corriou’s studies of *Leïla* are among the first in-depth scholarly examinations of literary periodicals during the Protectorate era.

the veil because they needed to present a unified front against the French. They avoided divisive issues (such as veiling) that could weaken the anticolonial consensus among the nationalist movement, which comprised both elite intellectuals such as Bourguiba and conservative Islamic judges and scholars (Charrad 2008: 116–117). Charrad argues that by asking women to remain veiled during the late 1920s and early 1930s, Bourguiba and other nationalists asked women “to act as the embodiment of Tunisian identity” (Ibid.: 118).

Debates about women’s emancipation continued in the early 1930s, sparked by the publication of Tahar Haddad’s *Our Women in Law and Society* (1930). In this controversial book (which was published in Arabic), Haddad linked the progress of Tunisian society to the emancipation of women. A reformist and nationalist intellectual, Haddad argued that the question of veiling was a social problem, rather than a religious problem, that hindered social and economic progress. Yet he considered the debate surrounding the veil to be secondary; instead, he proposed education as the key to women’s emancipation, and he called for reforms to marriage and divorce laws (Mamelouk 2007; Charrad 2008: 117). In her studies of Haddad’s work, Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon argues that his writings display the infiltration of colonial feminist discourse among Tunisian intellectuals, particularly when he argues that women’s inferior status is to blame for social problems. Indeed, Haddad had been exposed to colonial discourses of modernity and Western thought through various channels; the work of Egyptian reformists such as Qasim Amin also affected his writing. Other modernizing reformists also saw the inferiority of their own societies in comparison to European military and technological superiority as requiring social reforms (Charrad

2008: 116-117). Yet rather than promoting secularism or colonialism, Haddad rooted his comments in Islamic texts, including the Qur'an, and he argued for the emancipation of women within a nationalist context. He promoted the inclusion of Tunisian women into the public sphere and as members of the nation. In this way, Haddad's writings represent one of the earliest Tunisian attempts to break down barriers between masculine and feminine spheres. At the same time, however, his argument upholds patriarchal social structures: he promotes women's education so as to improve childrearing and marital relationships (Ferchiou 1996: 121). Although at the time Haddad's book was attacked and his diplomas from the religious Zaitouna University were rescinded, his work paved the way for proponents of women's emancipation in subsequent years (Zayzafoon 2005; Mamelouk 2007: 134–135, 166–170).

Controversy surrounding Haddad's book did not subside until after his death in 1935. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, individual women and men continued to debate women's emancipation in relation to colonialism and nationalism. According to Mamelouk, as she observed in periodicals such as *Leïla*, by 1936 many nationalists' opinions had changed; they began questioning the veil and attempting to convince the public that it should be abolished (2007: 165–166). Mamelouk argues that in *Leïla*, some writers promoted unveiling as a step towards modernity and change, while others still saw the veil as a stronghold of resistance against colonialism (Ibid.: 189, 247). Writers and artists also proposed some interesting changes for Tunisian women that went beyond nationalist leaders' ideas of women's roles in Tunisian society. While still framing their promotion of women's rights within nationalist discourse, a few women contributors openly criticized men and the exclusion of women from debates over women's

emancipation. They argued that the “problem” was not veiling but inadequate education, a public forum that excluded women, and the lack of freedom to circulate and travel to their schools and jobs. Furthermore, Mamelouk proposes, they looked to Egyptian women for models while also creating representations of “new Tunisian women:” respectable, modern professionals holding diplomas, who worked and freely circulated in the public sphere (2007: 21, 188–250).

Nevertheless, Mamelouk argues, male writers and nationalist lawyers contributing to *Leila* dominated the discourse on women’s emancipation and promoted it within the frameworks of nationalism and motherhood. They called for Tunisian women to become educated so as to raise educated Tunisian sons for the nation, and so as to take on new roles as primary “managers” and shoppers for their households (Mamelouk 2007: 195, 249). The dominance of men’s discourse highlights a broader problem for women’s emancipation until after independence in 1956: a veritable “Tunisian women’s movement” did not exist during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. While a few Tunisian women did take positions on nationalism and women’s emancipation, these few were members of elite families living in Tunis. They founded several formal organizations, including the Muslim Women’s Union of Tunisia (with a reformist-modernist Islamic orientation), the Union of Tunisian Women (socialist-communist) and the Group of Destourian Women.¹¹ But Tunisian feminist scholars point out that these organizations were either eradicated or dominated by Bourguiba and his political party

¹¹ The Destour [or Dustūr, “constitution”] party was the name of the leading nationalist party beginning in 1920. Its full name was *al-Hizb al-Dustūri al-Hurr al-Tūnisī* [*Parti Libéral Constitutionnel Tunisien*, or Tunisian Liberal Constitutional Party], formerly known as the Parti Tunisien, whose key goal had been the creation of a constitution. In 1934 Bourguiba and other nationalists split from the Destour party and created the Neo-Destour party (Perkins 2004: 76–79; 94–95).

following Independence (Dwyer 1991: 192–193).¹² They argue that into the 1980s, reforms for women’s rights were largely promoted by men, and not with the aim of radically transforming women’s traditional roles. Rather, male political leaders encouraged women’s emancipation and education as mothers, thereby upholding patriarchal family structures and men’s spheres of influence (Ferchiou 1996: 122; Charrad 2008; Zayzafoon 2005).

The emerging nation state, 1956

In 1954 and 1955, conflicts erupted between the two leading factions of the nationalist movement. Bourguiba’s “modernizing faction,” which drew its support mostly from urban areas and unions, fought against Salah Ben Youssef’s faction, which had support from members of the religious establishment and among kinship groupings in rural areas (Charrad 2008: 117–118). As these conflicts intensified, the ideological positions of the two factions became polarized; and when Bourguiba’s faction ultimately prevailed and declared independence from France in 1956, it quickly disabled the power bases of the rival faction. Bourguiba’s new government intervened into rural areas, eliminated religious landholdings, and dismantled religious educational institutions. Bourguiba also proposed a reform of family law that reflected his faction’s modernizing vision for Tunisia and that “was likely to weaken its now-defeated rival” (Ibid.: 117–118).

Bourguiba’s government passed the Personal Status Code [*Code du Statut Personnel*], or CSP, just months after declaring independence from France in 1956. The CSP outlawed polygamy, allowed women to file for divorce, increased custody rights,

¹² For more on Tunisian women’s organizations before Independence, cf. Dwyer 1991: 192–193; Gilman 2007; and Murphy 2003.

and eradicated a husband's right to repudiate his wife. Women were no longer considered minors in a court of law, and women and men had the right to choose their own spouses. The CSP also established a minimum age for marriage (15 for women, 18 for men, raised to 17 and 20 in 1964). In addition, the state placed emphasis on women's education and their right to work outside the home.

Although the CSP radically reformed Islamic family law [*sharī'a*], by passing these reforms Bourguiba did not seek to fundamentally undermine traditional family relations (Brand 1998: 180).¹³ Tunisian feminist scholars point out that in fact, the CSP still preserves several aspects of gender inequality found in the *sharī'a*, such as unequal inheritance rights for women and the statement that a wife is expected to obey her husband (Charrad 2008: 119).¹⁴ Charrad thus views the CSP as motivated less by male political leaders' desires to promote gender equality than by their maneuverings in political power struggles (Ibid.: 118–119). She argues that most importantly, the CSP replaced the “traditional,” patriarchal model of the extended family (based on kinship ties among male relatives) with individual rights and a model of the nuclear family. As such, the CSP reduced the power of Ben Youssef's faction of rural kinship networks and the Islamic religious establishment.

Thus with the CSP, Bourguiba replaced the authority of male patriarchs in extended families over matters of family law with the authority of the state. His government also worked to enforce the new laws and their vision of Tunisian national identity, promoting a particular vision of “modern” yet Tunisian national culture. They denigrated “backwards” traditional practices, closing Sufi lodges and *stambeli* houses

¹³ The rest of Tunisian law was based on French civil code.

¹⁴ The latter was reformed in 1993, but the inheritance laws still stand.

(which hosted performances of *stambeli*, the spirit possession music associated with descendents of sub-Saharan slaves), while instead promoting a “high modernizing ideology” in which the government named the *ma’lūf* (Tunisia’s genre of Arab-Andalusian music) the “national cultural heritage” and established cultural policies and music institutions to promote and reform Tunisia’s national culture.¹⁵

Furthermore, according to Bourguiba’s “high modernizing ideology,” educating and “liberating” women was fundamental to becoming an independent, modern, secular nation (Ferchiou 1996; Jankowsky 2004: 47–52). Bourguiba denounced women’s veiling and segregation in the home as “backwards” hindrances to the new nation’s modernizing and development goals. He stated that progress required fighting against “anachronistic traditions and backward mentalities” (quoted in Charrad 2001: 220). The government subsequently led a campaign against veiling and Bourguiba publicly removed women’s veils himself, in a filmed performance of the state’s power over women’s bodies. Among other acts, this demonstration—performed on and through women’s bodies—constituted a performance of the nation, and of the state’s particular vision of national identity. In the early years of the Tunisian nation, then, Bourguiba and his government (synonymous with the ruling political party, the Neo-Destour, and its administrative elite), performed their power and their vision of Tunisian national identity by modernizing Tunisian society and national culture. Their social programs represented one of the most radical state efforts for transforming society in the Arab world (King 2000; Tessler 1978).

As Bourguiba and his party began to control most aspects of civil society, they also sought to dominate the women’s organizations that had formed prior to

¹⁵ Cf. Jankowsky 2004, 2006, 2007 concerning trance and possession rituals in *stambeli* houses in Tunisia, and the independent regimes’ changing stances towards *stambeli*.

Independence. Most of these organizations were denied formal government recognition to form as legal associations; and when Bourguiba passed the CSP, he did not recognize these organizations' efforts prior to Independence. Indeed because of his role in promulgating the CSP and other reforms outlining his vision for Tunisia, Bourguiba became known as "The Liberator of Women" and "The Father of Tunisia." In this capacity he exercised control over one official national women's organization, the National Union of Tunisian Women [UNFT, or *l'Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes*], by appointing as its director in 1958 a newcomer to the women's movement (Dwyer 1991: 193).

Due to Bourguiba's co-option of women's rights for political aims, critics on the left and right of the political spectrum have criticized the CSP as a reform from above. On one hand, feminist scholars of state feminism in Tunisia have pointed out that while governmental reforms have certainly improved the lives of many women, these "top-down" reforms have not solved the underlying problems of a social system underpinned by a family structure in which women are viewed as unequal or dependent (Brand 1998: 211; Hatem 1992: 232). They stress that the presence of women in certain aspects of public sphere, such as in politics and in unions, remains symbolic (Ferchiou 1996: 120). Moreover, there is a sense that these policies "did not come in response to broad or systematic organizing from within women's ranks," and that the president is "both liberator and the guarantor of women's rights" (Brand 1998: 213). This has created the perception that women are passive recipients of Bourguiba's reforms. According to political scientist Laurie Brand, many men and women feel "that women have already received all their rights and that there is little or nothing left to fight for" (Ibid.: 214).

On the other hand, opponents of the CSP have argued that such reforms were imported from the West (by way of elite politicians who had studied in France) and are incongruent with Tunisia's traditional, Islamic, authentic cultural identity. Although the CSP originally met with strong opposition from conservatives and members of the religious establishment, these voices were repressed by Bourguiba's and the Neo-Destour's overwhelming control of the government and civil society immediately following Independence (King 2000; Tessler 1978: 142–143). These voices became louder during the 1970s, however, as conservative sentiment and a cultural movement towards Islamism increased and as the ruling regime's hold over competing political factions decreased.

State policy, Islamists, and feminists during the 1970s and 1980s

The government passed further reforms for women's rights through the late 1950s and 1960s, but during the 1970s and 1980s the state retrenched on gender issues. This shift in state policy was related to several factors. First, the government's economic policy underwent several transformations during this time. From 1956 to 1961 the Tunisian government had practiced a liberal economic policy, but as the economic situation worsened the Neo-Destour adopted a ten-year program for development and changed the party name to the Socialist Destour Party (PSD). But the era of Tunisian socialism ended in 1969 as large landowners urged a policy change. In the 1970s state policy shifted towards economic liberalization, and the landed elite and their urban partners began to dominate government policy. By the late 1970s, however, growth in GDP had dropped in half and unemployment had doubled, and increasing urbanization rapidly transformed Tunisian society (King 2000: 174–178).

During the 1970s and 1980s the most serious threat to Bourguiba's regime was a leftist movement consisting of intellectuals, university students, and a wing of the trade union movement that had expanded in urban areas in recent years. Because Bourguiba's one-party system denied permission for Marxist and socialist groups to form as legal associations, these networks largely operated underground (Charrad 2008: 121). They protested the government's bias towards capitalists, and they backed frequent demonstrations and strikes. According to Stephen J. King, the late 1970s was "one of the most unstable times in the Tunisian political system since independence" (King 2000: 178). The government shifted policy again, but the situation remained unstable in the early 1980s as strikes and civil disturbances continued and opponents called for political liberalization (Ibid.: 179–80).

Charrad explains that in response to the threat of the leftist movement, the state "leaned increasingly on Islam for its political legitimacy," realigning itself with the Islamic establishment in Tunisia and strengthening symbols of Islamic identity (2008: 121). This included changing the language of instruction in schools from French to Arabic, strengthening the Islamic content of the educational curriculum, and reinforcing ideals about extended kinship rather than individualism. The government also sponsored the founding of the Association for Safeguarding the Qur'an in 1970, and in 1973, at the first government-run book fair in Tunis, they helped distribute the writings of the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood. At this point the Islamist movement was viewed as a cultural movement and seen by the state as less dangerous than radical socialist literature (Ibid.; Moghadem 2005: 296).

Changes within the PSD (Socialist Destour Party) in 1974 led to conservative domestic economic policies and less concern for social reforms among the ruling elite (Tessler 1978: 146). The government initiated fewer reforms for women's rights and family law, and political discourse stressed women's roles as "wives, mothers and homemakers" (Bourguiba 1981, quoted in Charrad 2008: 122). Throughout the 1970s the official national women's organization, the UNFT, languished under the direction of Fethia Mzali, the wife of future prime minister Mohammed Mzali (Dwyer 1991: 193). During the 1970s and 1980s the pace of women's increased participation in education and the workforce also declined. Reduced public investment in education resulted in stagnant school enrollment among women (the proportion of women attending primary school did not rise between 1970 and 1978), and women's political participation declined as popular political participation declined overall (Moghadem 2005: 296; Cochrane 1995; Tessler 1978: 147).

Since women's rights in Tunisia have been tied to the state's willingness and ability to enforce them, when the state began to withdraw support during this period, the situation of women and popular attitudes towards gender issues began to deteriorate (Murphy 2003: 176; Tessler 1978: 154). Surveys conducted in Tunis and smaller towns found that total support for women's emancipation markedly declined during 1967 and 1973, particularly among men in smaller towns. Conservative tendencies increased in both Tunis and in smaller towns during this period, especially regarding the issue of women's participation in the workforce, and in fact opposition to women's liberation increased among some men. These attitudes were likely related to the reduced state investment in education, to the government's new tendency to support traditional values,

and to feelings of insecurity and frustration among men who had migrated from rural to urban areas who had difficulty finding employment, and felt marginalized by modern sectors of society. Such feelings of marginalization were probably augmented by the government's turn away from socialist programs in favor of capitalism and large landowners (Tessler 1978: 153-54; King 2001).

In the late 1960s an Islamic revival movement had also begun to take shape. Scholars note that the movement found support among increasingly conservative sectors of society, particularly among poor rural-urban migrants and other unemployed young people who had become disillusioned with the government's economic policies and aggressive top-down reforms of Tunisian society. The ascendancy of the Islamic revival movement in Tunisia was tied to external forces as well, such as the resurgence of Islamism in Egypt and Sudan following Egypt's defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967, the upheaval of May 1968 in France, and the Iranian revolution of 1979.¹⁶ In Tunisia throughout the 1970s, most Islamists were not opposed to the government, but they were bitterly opposed to the Marxist Left. As such their targeted constituency were students (who were under the influence of the Left), as in Sudan. The Tunisian movement also appropriated the discourse of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers [*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*; in Tunisia today an Islamist is labeled an "*ikhwānjī*"]. They blamed social problems on "Westernization" and changes in family law and women's rights, arguing for collective patriarchal family organization, a restoration of polygamy, a repeal of women's rights to file for divorce, and for women's place in the home as mothers. They called instead for a culturally authentic path to social modernization (Murphy 2003: 188). For the Tunisian movement, 1979 heralded a new phase of militant and political Islamism, marked by the

¹⁶ Cf. Dwyer 1991 and Mahmoud 1996 concerning the Islamist movement in Tunisia.

Iranian revolution and by the founding of the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamiste [Movement of the Islamist Trend], or MTI, led by Rashid al-Ghannushi (b. 1941). MTI—later named *al-Nahda*—quickly emerged as the most prominent Islamist organization seeking status as a recognized political party. Bourguiba’s regime subsequently began repressing the MTI, which responded with a series of opposition incidents throughout the early 1980s. (Mahmoud 1996: 249–250; King 2000: 179; Dargouth Medimegh 1996; Charrad 2008: 125–126, Dwyer 1991).

In its battle against the MTI, the government attacked symbols of Islamist sentiment, such as veiling. Traditionally, the veil worn by Tunisian women had been the *safsari*, a long white sheet covering their heads and entire bodies. As Islamist sentiment grew in the 1970s and 1980s, however, more women began donning the *hijāb*, a headscarf worn by women in Egypt, other parts of the Middle East, and other parts of the Muslim world. In 1981 the government passed Circulaire 108, banning the *hijāb* in government buildings, schools, and universities. The wording of the Circulaire condemned the fact that young female students were donning the *hijāb*, a habit that “is completely foreign to our dress traditions” and which is a sectarian dress, “contrary to the spirit of our epoch and to the healthy evolution of our society” (Chouika 2005: 4). Tunisian human rights activists and other opposition leaders quickly condemned the law, but veiling has since become a contentious issue.

During the same time, women involved in a growing feminist movement began to assert their voices in the political arena. Since professional women played a large role in the movement, state reforms and social changes for women’s liberation had partly contributed to its emergence, as had growing political dissent and calls for increased

political liberalization. Many women involved in the movement had been members of Tunisian leftist organizations that had been operating largely underground and in cultural clubs. But they felt that male leaders of these organizations refused to recognize and fight for women's issues. In 1979, a group of women seeking autonomy from the male-dominated leftist organizations—and from the state—formed the Club d'Études de la Condition des Femmes (known as the “Club Tahar al-Haddad”) at the Tahar Haddad Cultural Center. Throughout the 1980s, as more women joined the club, the club hosted several debates and talks (including visits by Egyptian writer and activist Nawal el-Saadawi). Yet internal divisions splintered the group as they debated the label of “feminism,” argued over radical or conservative goals for changing women's status, and discussed how to increase their constituency beyond educated urban women. In 1985 members of the club created a bilingual monthly magazine, *Nissa* [Women], as a forum for discussing gender issues. But financial burdens and conflicts among the editorial board led to its demise in early 1987 (Dwyer 1991; Jrad 1996; Gilman 2007; Murphy 2003).¹⁷ In 1985 members of the Club Tahar Haddad created a formal organization, the Tunisian Association of Women Democrats [l'Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrates (ATFD)], also known as “Femmes Democrates,” the first autonomous women's organization in Tunisia that can be classified as a protest group and that uses the “feminist” descriptor (Gilman 2007: 98). Official government acceptance of this organization was aided by the climate of political liberalization in Tunisia during the mid-1980s. In addition, in 1985 a women's commission had created itself within the

¹⁷ For more on the feminist movement in the 1980s, cf. Jrad 1996; Dwyer 1991; Gilman 2007; Ferchiou 1996; Murphy 2003.

Tunisian League for Human Rights, and the official union of Tunisian workers (UGTT) had established a women's commission in the early 1980s.

Throughout the 1980s, women's rights activists were motivated by burgeoning transnational feminist movements, by increasing disparities between Tunisian state reforms and conservative attitudes towards women's role in society, and by the rising strength of the Islamist movement. They wished to further reform the CSP so as to reduce gender inequalities in fundamental areas such as inheritance rights and mixed marriages, but they increasingly found themselves having to defend the CSP from Islamist threats. In 1989 an Islamist leader gave a speech against the CSP, which led a few hundred women to protest in the streets (Charrad 2008: 124, Dwyer 1991: 202). Throughout the 1980s women's rights activists feared that the state might sacrifice its commitment to women's rights in order to appease Islamists. Moreover, they worried that if Islamists gained political power in the government, the CSP would certainly be in danger (Chater 1992: 276–277).

Women's rights, Islamism, and the state under President Ben Ali

On November 7, 1987, several doctors declared President Bourguiba unfit to rule, and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali took over the government from him in a peaceful coup. Ben Ali had formerly been the director of Military Security, the Minister of the Interior, and had served as Prime Minister in the month before replacing Bourguiba. The peaceful takeover, which became known as “The Change” [*le Changement, al-Taghrīr*], occurred amidst increasing political unrest and calls for political liberalization. Ben Ali's first years in office were subsequently marked by an increasing display of political pluralism, as he allowed some opposition parties to become legalized, and he created term limits for

presidential rule. Yet in February of 1988 he merged the ruling political party and the government by becoming head of the PSD, which he re-named the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique, or RCD (Brand 1998: 192).

During this period of increasing freedom of expression, Islamist voices grew louder, as did their attacks on the CSP in 1989. Women's rights activists became concerned that the CSP was at the mercy of the state's power plays with Islamists. Moreover, Ben Ali worried them with his increasing use of Islamist discourse and support for religious programs. Laurie Brand argues that with these actions, Ben Ali sought to co-opt Islamic discourse so as to draw religious constituents away from the strongest Islamist party, *al-Nahda* (formerly MTI), and to demonstrate that the state was the sole guardian of Islam. Thus the government's stance on women's rights and Islamist sentiment was continually fluctuating throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, as it tried to balance opposition factions on the left and right. In 1988 Ben Ali accommodated women's rights activists by stating that the Personal Status Code was an "irreversible civilizational gain," although he also stated that women were responsible for safeguarding Tunisia's Arabo-Islamic identity (Brand 1998: 233–234).

Yet Ben Ali was apparently surprised by the Islamists' strong showing in the April 1989 elections, with reports officially estimated at 13 percent of the vote but rumors indicating thirty percent in some urban areas. As Islamist power had grown in Tunisia, even non-Islamist men who did not necessarily agree with Bourguiba's reforms considered attacks on the CSP to be attacks on Tunisia's modernist-secularist national identity and the (economic) status quo (Brand 1998: 180–181). In this climate, the CSP

and women's rights became symbols of Tunisian national identity (Charrad 2008: 128; Zayzafoon 2005; Murphy 2003; Ferchiou 1996).

As fears and rumors of Islamist terrorism combined with reports of Islamists' increasing power and attacks on women in neighboring Algeria, Ben Ali gradually began a full-scale assault against *al-Nahda*. Civil unrest in the spring of 1991 also led to state arrests and rumored torture of Islamist political opponents. Foreign observers such as Amnesty International and members of the opposition left, including the LTDH [Tunisian Human Rights League] and the ATFD (known as *Femmes Democrat*es), denounced the state's human rights abuses and crackdown on free press and political pluralism. They criticized the regime of using the fear of Islamists to legitimize its control of power; yet as a bloody civil war in Algeria erupted in the early 1990s, killing thousands and sending many refugees to Tunisia, many middle-class Tunisians felt that Ben Ali's policy towards the Islamists had saved Tunisia from a similar fate (Clancy-Smith 1994: xi–xii). Moreover, criticisms of human rights abuses have been overshadowed by Tunisia's emergence as an "IMF success story" in implementing structural adjustment programs, increasing state policies for economic liberalism, and attracting foreign investment and tourism (Brand 1998: 197–201; King 2000).

During the early 1990s Ben Ali also began a policy of supporting women's rights, at least in form (Brand 1998: 234). Among other actions, in 1992 Ben Ali appointed a commission to review Tunisian women's status, which submitted its report in August 1992; the changes the commission recommended were passed in 1993 as amendments to the CSP. Starting in 1992 the president also appointed women to several high-level positions as ministers, vice-president of the parliament, and political advisor to the

president (Ibid.: 242). Next, the state permitted the legalization of autonomous women's organizations such as the ATFD and its research-oriented sister organization, AFTURD (Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement).

Furthermore, the state sponsored the creation of several government-affiliated NGOs for women's issues, including the research center CREDIF (Centre de Recherche, Études, Documentation, et Information sur la Femme). Many of these organizations participated in the Rihana Network, a network of NGOs organized by the state-affiliated UNFT in 1992 to prepare for the 1995 Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing. Moreover, in preparation for the Beijing conference autonomous activists connected with women's rights activists in Morocco and Algeria (Gilman 2007: 105–112).

Scholars such as Charrad (2008) and Brand (1998) argue that like Bourguiba, Ben Ali supported women's rights in the early 1990s less for ideological reasons than in response to political power struggles. Charrad suggests that the rising threat of Islamists in the late 1980s and early 1990s prompted Ben Ali and the state to secure more support against them, and that this included supporting women's rights "sufficiently to obtain the backing of most women's rights advocates" (1998: 127). According to Charrad, preserving and reforming the CSP had served as a "rallying call for feminists, human-rights advocates, democratic forces, and modernist Tunisians, whom the state could not alienate" in the face of the Islamist threat (Ibid.: 128). Yet despite activists' demands, in 1993 the state did not amend unequal inheritance laws in the CSP—perhaps so as not to incite the Islamist opposition and their supporters. Brand (1998) and other scholars point out that while some of Ben Ali's reforms for women's rights were concrete, his other

gestures for supporting women's rights—such as appointing women ministers and supporting new women's organizations—were mostly symbolic.

Brand also notes that while Ben Ali and his state have recognized women's rights advocates as “a pressure group of importance,” their support for women's rights must be understood within the framework of maintaining domestic political and economic stability (1998: 245). Moreover, the state's display of its commitment to women's rights should be understood in light of Tunisia's economic dependence on foreign investment and tourism. Despite the regime's authoritarian command of a police state, its human rights abuses, and its control of the press, the regime's commitment to women's rights, modernity, and economic liberalism is viewed favorably by Western politicians and investors. A former activist suggested that the state's legalization of the ATFD in 1989, for example, served as a “nice decoration” to prove to domestic and foreign observers that the regime supported democratic civil society (Ibid.: 240).

Feminist scholars and activists are concerned that women's rights are still at the mercy of the state and are dominated by state actors. Despite the progressive reforms, they regret that women's rights have become associated with the state, which has often created backlash sentiment against women when the economy falters or the state's authoritarian grasp on civil society intensifies. Narratives that women have been passive recipients of top-down reforms erase the emergence of an autonomous women's movement in the 1980s and the efforts of women's rights activists in recommending reforms to the CSP in 1993. Nevertheless, reforms for women's rights have remained the domain of the state; in addition, most of the organizations working for women's issues

are affiliated with the state and/or with Ben Ali's party, the RCD.¹⁸ Only a few autonomous organizations exist, and the state does not always welcome their transnational networking with activists in the Maghrib or in Europe, or their criticism of the state's human rights abuses; in response to activists' transnational networking, the government has frequently confiscated their passports (Gilman 2007). These activists also recognize that educated, professional women and men still dominate the discourse on Tunisian women's rights. They point out that rural women's voices are not heard, and their access to education, employment, and empowerment in the private sphere still lags behind that of urban women. Furthermore, activists and scholars note that several state-affiliated and "autonomous" organizations are implicated in transnational discourses and agendas regarding gender and development, since they receive funding from foreign donors in Europe, the USAID, and the Canadian government.¹⁹ Yet others argue that despite depending on national and/or foreign support, women's activists in Tunisia have exercised agency and created awareness that has given energy to women in all areas (Dwyer 1991: 207).

Like other scholars of gender in Tunisia, I noted that many women are unwilling to criticize the regime's approach to women's rights (and its corresponding repression of Islamists). According to Brand, Tunisian women most often cite the CSP provisions regarding divorce and polygamy, combined with the state's emphasis on women's education and right to work outside the home, "as having made a difference in their sense of rights and empowerment" (1998: 213). Indeed for many Tunisians, the state's commitment to women's rights forms an important part of their national identity and

¹⁸ Critics point to this as emblematic of the state's desire to control all aspects of civil society.

¹⁹ Cf. Gilman 2007; Murphy 2003; Moghadem, 2005; and Brand 1998: 214–219 regarding women's rights activists' involvement in transnational networking.

pride. They are proud that Tunisian women have made “the most progress” among other women in the Arab-Muslim world. Critics, however, point out that rural women still do not have equal access to education or other tools of empowerment, and that all Tunisians—women and men—suffer under an authoritarian, state-police regime that tightly controls civil society and restricts freedom of the press.

Women’s rights activists and defenders of Tunisia’s modernist-secularist identity (including the regime) have also become concerned about the growing numbers of Tunisian women and men wearing Islamic dress and attending mosques. They note that increasing numbers of women have donned the *hijāb* since the turn of the twenty-first century. Some consider the *hijāb* a political-religious symbol of commitment to political Islam, and hence a symbol of political opposition to the current Tunisian regime. While some women may wear the *hijāb* for these reasons, others may do so because it is a symbol of modesty and respectability. Women may also wear the *hijāb* as a way to respectably enter public space and as a form of protection, so that they do not receive catcalls or sexual harassment from men on the street. (On the other hand, women wearing the *hijāb* may actually receive more harassment than unveiled women, especially by the police, because of the veil’s power as a political symbol.)

Some women have donned the *hijāb* as they have grown older and more religious. Others have done so in solidarity with Muslim women in war-torn Afghanistan and Iraq. In this sense the *hijāb* holds power as a political and religious symbol protesting Western attacks against Muslims and the Islamic religion. Such sentiment may be furthered by religious television programs diffused on the Internet and satellite television, such as the Saudi network *IQRA*, in which women wear the *hijāb* (Chouika 2005: 8). Veiling may

also be encouraged by the return of Tunisian émigrés each summer: many Tunisian women who visit Tunisia from Europe during the summer months veil (Ibid.). Other women have taken up veiling upon returning from *'Umrah*, a type of pilgrimage to Mecca. Slaheddine Jouchi, journalist and vice-president of the Tunisian human rights league, suggests that this revival of religious sentiment is not synonymous with political opposition against the government, but is an expression of identity and of a surge in religious feeling that has been diffused by religious leaders in Egypt or the Gulf (Ibid.). Debates about veiling in Tunisia have also been fueled by recent debates about veiling and assimilation in the French press and on French television, broadcast via Internet and satellite in Tunisia (Ibid: 10).

The Tunisian government has tolerated veiling during the summer months, but it has recently cracked down on veiling in schools and among the government administration. Ben 'Ali and his supporters have argued that people who wear Islamic dress want to change Tunisian society and to return to so-called "backwards" traditions. They claim that this way of thinking and dressing is "imported" from the Gulf and other parts of the Islamic world; wearing the *hijāb*, for example, is not a return to Tunisian traditions, since Tunisian women have traditionally worn the *safsari* when they have entered public space. Furthermore, these critics argue that these ways of thinking and behaving, such as wearing the *hijāb*, calling for women's return to the home, and hosting gender-segregated wedding parties, are antithetical to Tunisia's modern-secularist national identity (Zouari 2008; Krichen 2008). While human rights leaders and other members of the opposition support the right of women to veil, the ATFD (*Femmes Democrat*) has taken an ambiguous position. They uphold civil rights but have

expressed “profound inquietude” regarding the trend for wearing the *hijāb*, which they say has been diffused by satellite television propaganda from the Arab East. Some members of the ATFD have argued that the veil serves as a symbol of regression and of women’s oppression, while others perceive donning the veil as a legitimate choice in the name of individual liberty (Chouika 2005: 8, 14–15).

Conclusion

Such debates continue to entangle women in struggles over political power and in promoting specific versions of Tunisian national identity. In contemporary Tunisia, what women wear, how they behave in public, and what they do professionally signify particular positions in debates over national and cultural identity. For many women, then, performing gender is conflated with performing national identity. The powerful meanings such daily performances of gender and national identity convey are magnified for women instrumentalists, whose playing of instruments “out(side)” in public is often perceived as representing a particular vision of national identity—a vision in which women’s education and participation in the public sphere are emblematic of the nation’s modernity and progress.

This vision of national identity and modernity contrasts with a past in which women were excluded from the public sphere. Indeed, until Tunisian independence and for some time after, women’s public performances were associated with transgression and sexual promiscuity. In the next chapter I examine how questions of respectability have affected women’s performance in Tunisia at various historical moments. Like state reforms for women’s rights, nationalist and state reforms to elevate Tunisian music and democratize music education have contributed to the rising number of Tunisian women

instrumentalists forging careers as professional musicians. Yet while women musicians are proud of and grateful for the rights they enjoy in Tunisia, they are also proud of the accomplishments they have achieved on their own, without the assistance of the state.

Chapter Two

Histories of women musicians and music performance in Tunisia

In late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Tunisia, social and religious taboos surrounding music performance stigmatized men musicians, but were especially harsh on women singers and dancers who were associated with prostitution. Whether or not women performers actually did engage in prostitution or courtesanerie, popular imaginings of these historical figures continued to associate them with disreputable contexts and licentiousness into the mid-twentieth century. Starting in the 1930s, however, nationalist reformers sought to elevate the status of certain music genres in order to promote them as national “Tunisian music.” Their efforts, combined with the pioneering work of individual women and men musicians, have considerably raised the prestige of music making.

In this chapter I trace the changing status of music and musicians from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. Focusing on the history of women’s participation in Tunisian music, I investigate how questions of respectability have influenced women’s performances of certain musical genres in certain contexts. I show how nationalist reforms and national music institutions have served to elevate music making, as well as how individual women musicians have assumed agency and shattered social taboos. I argue that in recent years, women musicians have been considered respectable mainly if they performed certain genres of art music—genres that became

associated with formal music education, modernity, and national identity during the course of the twentieth century.

“Singing slave girls” in Tunisian and Arab history

Several histories of women’s music performance in Tunisia commence with discussions of the *qiyān*, “singing slave girls,” who were enslaved by nobles at medieval Islamic courts. By taking a similar course I do not wish to suggest parallels between the *qiyān* and contemporary women performers in Tunisia. Rather, I wish to investigate how historical imaginings of the *qiyān* have influenced perceptions of women performers in Tunisia’s recent history, particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Historical accounts linking women performers to “licentious” activities often focus on musicians’ activities at the Arab-Islamic courts: Damascus under the Umayyads (661–750 C.E.), Baghdad (762–836, 892–1258) and Samarra (836–892) under the ‘Abbasids, Cordova (756–1031) under the second Umayyad dynasty, Al-Qayrawan²⁰ (in present-day Tunisia) under the Aghlabid dynasty (800–909) and under the Fatimids (909–969), and Cairo (1250–1517) under the Mamluks. Women musicians at these courts were usually *qiyān*. Freed slaves and a few women aristocrats (freewomen by birth) were also musicians, but they performed behind curtains and participated in music secretly because it was considered disreputable for noble women to perform music in front of men. In addition, other women of lower classes performed in public taverns (Meyers Sawa 2002: 294; Jones 1987: 72).

Several medieval sources discuss “singing slave girls,” referred to by various names; the richest sources concern the ‘Abbasid court at Baghdad and Samarra.

²⁰ In contemporary Tunisia, “Al-Qayrawan” is transliterated as “Kairouan.”

According to Kristina Richardson, in these sources “the term *qayna* (pl. *qiyān*) refers specifically to a slave girl who has been trained as a singer, poet, or musician (or all three). *Qayna* is the feminine form of *qayn*, “skilled worker” (2009: 165, n10).²¹ *Qiyān* were usually purchased when young girls.²² They were then educated in various subjects, including Arabic grammar, poetry, calligraphy, singing, instrumental performance, music and poetry improvisation, backgammon, chess, and sometimes even philosophy, *belles lettres*, and history. Like their male counterparts, they were highly educated so as to serve as boon companions to the caliphs and other aristocrats (Meyers Sawa 1987: 94). Because of their extensive education and musical training, *qiyān* were bought and sold at higher prices than other female slaves.

Arab rulers and aristocrats owned *qiyān* from pre-Islamic times until the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²³ Like other slaves, the *qiyān* were not Muslim, but they were of Arab, mixed, and non-Arab origins, often captured during raids in foreign lands.²⁴ In Tunisia, as in Damascus and Baghdad, *qiyān* at Al-Qayrawan and Mahdia were owned by the households of wealthy nobles and by the Fatimid caliphs (Jones 1987: 71). According to Tunisian historian al-Wahhab, “early Tunisian rulers frequently sent shopping expeditions to Baghdad to purchase ‘singing girls’ and other cultural artifacts” (Ibid.). One mission in 905 C.E. returned to Al-Qayrawan with 30,000 dinars worth of *jawāri*. Al-Wahhab suggests that after the fall of

²¹ The term *jāriya* (pl. *jawāri*) refers simply to female slaves, while *mughāniyya* (pl. *mughāniyyāt*) means female singer. Often those two terms were used independently to refer to singing slave girls. “But if an author wants to avoid any ambiguity, he couples the terms, and the resulting phrase *jāriya mughāniyya* (pl., *jawāri mughāniyyāt*) is synonymous with *qayna*” (Richardson 2009: 165, n10).

²² Richardson explains that precise details about *qiyān*’s ages when purchased are unavailable.

²³ Richardson states that slavery was abolished in Arab-Islamic regions in the twentieth century. But in Tunisia, the first steps were taken to abolish slavery in 1846; by 1890, slave holding and trading finally became illegal, with fixed penalties. The sale of white slaves was abolished in 1816, but the trans-Saharan slave trade continued until 1890 (Jankowsky 2004: 84).

²⁴ According to Islamic law, only non-Muslims could be enslaved.

the Aghlabid sultanate in Al-Qayrawan (909 C.E.), the *jawāri* who subsequently went to Spain significantly contributed “to the cultural brilliance of Cordoba in the tenth century” (al-Wahhab 1966: 196-197, 199-200; quoted in Jones 1987: 71).

In her work on women performers at the medieval Arab-Islamic courts, Suzanne Meyers Sawa argues that the *qiyān* played an important role in the history of Arab music. She notes that the *qiyān* were the primary court entertainers until the eighth century, after which male singers and musicians played greater roles (2002: 294). Richardson adds that frequent mention of *qiyān* in medieval literature “attests to their prominence in the consciousness of the learned classes. Indeed, the intricacy of their training and the otherness of their origins likely enhanced their mystique, encouraging public curiosity about them” (Richardson 2009: 156). Above all, the *qiyān* were important bearers and transmitters of music repertoire; they were skilled vocalists, instrumentalists, improvisers, and composers in their own right (Meyers Sawa 1987: 93).²⁵ They were also known as prominent teachers, with at least one establishing a music school (Meyers Sawa 2002: 294). Every court owned hundreds or thousands of *qiyān* who played in all-female orchestras or performed as solo vocalists for the caliph, his companions, and for women at the court (Ibid.). The ‘music’ they performed is now lost, but many anecdotes about their performances and examples of their poetry and song lyrics before the eleventh century are collected in Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani’s (897–967 C.E.) twenty-four volume anthology, the *Kitāb al-Aghāni* [Book of Songs].²⁶

²⁵ Meyers Sawa also discusses their role as professional mourners (2002: 293).

²⁶ For further discussion of *qiyān* and freedwomen performing during the medieval period, including descriptions of specific performers, c.f. Richardson 2009; Gordon 2004; Rowson 2003; Meyers Sawa 2002 and 1987; Sawa 2004; al-Wahhab 1966; Al-Jahiz 1980. Cf. Jankowsky 2004: 64–101 for discussion of the sub-Saharan slave trade in Tunisia.

Recent research on the *qiyān*, particularly work by Kristina Richardson, discusses their ambiguous status. *Qiyān* had access to resources that other women did not, and they were often viewed as elite, “privileged” slaves. They were highly educated and cultured, were not strictly consigned to labor or concubinage, and they had access to powerful men. Yet they were still slaves. In Baghdad, for example, the *qiyān* “were on the one hand praised for their contributions to Arabic literature and music and on the other vilified as unprincipled women” (Richardson 2009: 155–156). They held liminal status, not fully accepted by either the court society of male literati nor the secluded sphere of aristocratic women.

The *qiyān* were considered unprincipled because of their supposed sexual duties, their association with prostitution, and their mythical powers of seduction.²⁷ Richardson notes that many stories depicting “female performers as profligate and indiscriminately sexual abound in medieval Arabic literature” (Ibid.: 155). The respected Baghdadi litterateur Al-Jahiz (d. 868 or 869), for example, vilifies *qiyān* and warns men to beware of their seductions, which would lead them to indulge in misbehavior and sexual indecency (Al-Jahiz 1980: 26–27; 30–35). Richardson explains that a *qayna*’s sex appeal was “an integral aspect of her enslavement. Her first duty was to serve her master, which typically meant entertaining him and serving as an object of sexual desire” (2009: 159). Richardson states that *qiyān* were hired out to customers for private performances,

typically with the understanding that the girls would perform sexual favors. Although the Qur’an explicitly forbids this practice (verse 24:33 commands Muslims to “compel not your slave-girls to prostitution”), the sexual exploitation of *qiyān* was sufficiently common in the ‘Abbasid era for these singers to be readily identified with

²⁷ Cf. Richardson for further discussion of the *qiyān*’s unveiling as opposed to the veiling practiced by elite noblewomen. Unveiled, *qiyān* were seen as morally and socially distinct from other women in the household. A *qayna*’s lack of a veil thus represented her lower social status, impiety, and “the propagation of *fitna*,” or “the undisciplined release of sexual energy in public spaces” (2009: 161).

promiscuity and licentiousness. (Ibid.: 158)

Yet not all *qiyān* were considered sexually promiscuous. Although those owned by nobles were hired out as performers and sometimes as prostitutes, this was not so for *qiyān* owned by caliphs. Above all, *qiyān* who performed for royalty were held in higher esteem than those who entertained other audiences. Al-Jahiz disapproved of this double standard, declaring that all *qiyān* should be condemned or accepted categorically (Ibid.: 159):

When they are in the dwelling of a man of the common folk, one may disapprove of them; but when they move up into kings' palaces, there is no excuse at all. But the cause and reason for the phenomenon is one and the same. (Al-Jahiz 1980: 34)

Richardson, however, argues that the reality was not so clear: like their overall status, the morality of a *qayna*'s behavior was ambiguous (Richardson 2009: 158–9).²⁸

Indeed *qiyān* and other female slaves could elevate their status by bearing their Muslim master's child. The slave then acquired a new status, that of *umm wālad* [literally, “mother of a child”; pl. *ummahāt awlād*]. While the child was born free, the mother would remain a slave, unless her master decided to free her; but she could never be sold to another owner. Men were therefore cautious about impregnating their slaves, and *qiyān* had some access to power through sexual relations and motherhood. *Qiyān* who bore the caliph a son attempted to position their son as heir to the throne. Several ‘Abbasid caliphs had slave mothers, some married former slaves, and many had half-siblings whose mothers were *qiyān*.²⁹ In medieval sources most *qiyān* are anonymous or

²⁸ Cf. Meyers Sawa 2002: 296; Richardson 2009: 162–3; and Rowson 2003 regarding transgendered performers at the medieval Arab-Islamic courts.

²⁹ For example, the freewoman composer and performer, ‘Ulayya bint al-Mahdi (d. 825) was the daughter of a prominent *qayna*. She was also the half-sister of the caliph, Harun al-Rachid (d. 809) of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and the half-sister of the famous prince-musician Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi (Meyers Sawa 2002: 294).

known only by their pet names, with the exception of the *ummahāt awlād* and a few other prominent *qiyān* (Richardson 2009: 153–154, 163–164; Meyers Sawa 2002: 294; Jones 1987: 71).

Once free, or if born free, women in the court were not supposed to perform music openly. If allowed to sing, they were required to perform behind a curtain that hid them from the sight of men (Meyers Sawa 2002: 294). Aristocratic women were not regarded as professionals but as skilled amateurs. They had access to resources that women of other classes did not have, but they were confined to the privacy and restrictions of the harem system. Anecdotes in the *Kitāb al-Aghāni* suggest that particular noble women’s participation as musicians was not supposed to be mentioned, so as to protect their honor; thus, like most *qiyān*, their names and their histories are unknown (Meyers Sawa 1987: 95).

Another class of women musicians had performed at public taverns since pre-Islamic times. This may be to whom Al-Jahiz refers in his comment above. Meyers Sawa surmises that these performers engaged in “the sex trade” more than *qiyān* who worked in private settings. She suggests that after the Islamic state outlawed alcohol, the number of women working in taverns decreased. Nevertheless, “the continued association of singing-girls with illicit behavior, listening to music, and drinking wine gave conservative Muslim theologians grounds for criticism” (Meyers Sawa 2002: 294). Lura JaFran Jones also notes that some records of “the *qiyān* of taverns and public houses” survive, but she does not provide further details nor specify the time period (Jones 1987: 72).

During my ethnographic research with members of the art-music community in Tunis, I encountered several references to *qiyān* in popular histories of music and in conversations about the history of women's performance. Such contemporary imaginings of the *qiyān* tend to stress their education and musical skills, thereby proving women's ability to compose music and play instruments.³⁰ Yet when writing about her fieldwork in Tunisia during the late 1970s and 1980s, Jones notes that contemporary women performers were still associated with the *qiyān* and other disreputable performers. She argues that while men musicians earned respectability during the course of the twentieth century,

The public, professional female musician (almost invariably singer or dancer, rarely, if ever, instrumentalist or composer) has descended directly from the pleasure palaces of the golden past, from the slave harem, from the libidinous dream world of the Thousand-and-One Nights, or from the more sordid public tavern... (Jones 1987: 79–80)

Although during my fieldwork such associations seem to have disappeared, at least within the music community and among middle class cosmopolitans in Tunis, Jones's testimony indicates that popular imaginings of women performers in the past still affected perceptions of contemporary performers into the late twentieth century.

Such associations were certainly present in the late nineteenth century. Jones notes that a travel-essayist "writing from Tunis in the late nineteenth century, calls singers in a Marseille café *qiyān*, and dancers on a London stage *jawāri* (Jones 1987: 73).³¹ Jones also points out that Tunisian music historian 'Uthman Ka'ak, writing in 1982 about Shaykh Ahmad al-Wafi, refers to the singers in early twentieth century *cafés*

³⁰ Cf. Jones (1987) and Bouhdiba (1998) regarding Bouhdiba's claim that "these slave girls were the true vanguards of female liberation in the Arab world," and that they serve as a prototype for "the modern Tunisian woman...[...].as she leaves the sequestration of the traditional family and assumes her role in public life" (Jones 1987: 71).

³¹ Here Jones cites Shidyāq 1881: 69, 310–11, published in Istanbul (in Arabic).

chantants as *'alājī* [Christian slave girls], even though he reports in the same work that the last *'alājī* were brought to Tunisia before 1882.³² Although the use of terms such as *qiyān*, *jawāri*, and *'alājī* in these contexts may be anachronistic, and may not necessarily refer to these women as slaves, Jones suggests that the use of these terms is “more specifically indicative of how professional musicians were perceived in Tunisia” (1987: 73).

Most historical associations linking women performers to licentiousness refer to women musicians during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.³³ Yet as Jones suggests, certain imaginings of the *qiyān* have affected historical depictions of these modern performers. The latter are perceived as having been singers and dancers, and prostitutes or concubines; and even if they were not necessarily prostitutes or concubines, they were often confused or associated with them. The next sections investigate the history of women musicians during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, after first introducing contexts for music performance and the status of male musicians during that time period.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century performance

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth century, women’s musical activities were relegated to three spheres. As singers and dancers, some women performed popular music in public bars and *cafés chantants*; in traditional women’s ensembles, other women performed traditional folk music at private family celebrations or Sufi lodges for women-only audiences; and other women

³² Cf. footnote 4 (above) regarding the abolition of slavery in Tunisia.

³³ Female performers of European music in the West have also been associated with sexual promiscuity, although each local context bears its own historical and cultural particularities. Cf. Austern 1994; Cook and Tsou: 1994.

performed the *ma'lūf* and Western music (as instrumentalists and vocalists) in the privacy of their homes. Mostly Jewish and lower-class women participated in the first two spheres, but only aristocratic women had access to private art music instruction. Meanwhile, public performance of the *ma'lūf*—and instrumental performance in general—was the domain of men.

Historical accounts of Western music performance during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries highlight the presence of Jewish and foreign musicians performing in Tunis. Increasing numbers of Italians had migrated to Tunisia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including many Jewish merchants from Livorno. Italian, Maltese, French, and other foreign musicians dominated the Western music scene during this period, performing regularly at theatres and establishing the French music conservatory in 1896 in the heart of Tunis's European quarter (Davis 2004: 51; Sakli 2008: 17–19).³⁴

Due to religious and social mores, “respectable” male Muslim musicians gathered to listen to and make music only in certain contexts. Most sources describe their performances of the Tunisian *ma'lūf*, one of four Arab-Andalusian repertoires of the Maghrib known as *mūsīqā andalūsiyya*. Popular belief holds that these repertoires originated in Andalusia during the ninth century and were imported to North Africa by Muslim and Jewish refugees fleeing the Christian re-conquest of the Iberian Peninsula between the tenth and fifteenth centuries (Davis 2004: 2).³⁵ Despite their different names and distinct local characteristics, the *mūsīqā andalūsiyya* repertoires share performance

³⁴ Interview in Tunis with Rachid Kouba, February 28, 2008; Interview in Tunis with Saifallah Abderrazaq, April 23, 2008.

³⁵ These music traditions are known as *ala* (“instrumental music”) in Morocco, *gharnati* (“from Granada”) in Western Algeria, *sana'a* (“work of art”) in Algiers, and *ma'lūf* (“familiar” or “normal”) in Eastern Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya (Davis 2004: 2).

practices and musical and linguistic characteristics that collectively distinguish them from repertoires of the Arab east (Davis 1996b, 2004; Schuyler 1984; Guettat 1980, 2002).

In her work on the Tunisian *ma'lūf*, Davis notes that contemporary regional differences among the *mūsīqā andalūsiyya* repertoires in North Africa are due to the specific patterns of migration from Andalusia, since each court in each Andalusian city had its own rival music school. In North Africa each repertoire blended with regional influences and developed along different lines in each region, particularly since the repertoires were transmitted orally (Davis 2004: 3). In Tunisia, for example, the *ma'lūf* has transformed amidst various indigenous and foreign influences, such as Turkish influences since the sixteenth century, and Egyptian and European influences since the late nineteenth century (Ibid.: 4). As a result, the regional *mūsīqā andalūsiyya* genres today are distinct traditions, with different instruments, repertoire, terminology, large-scale forms, and melodic and rhythmic modes.³⁶

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Tunisia, the *ma'lūf* was popular in coastal and northern towns; until Independence in 1956, however, it was virtually unknown elsewhere (Abdel Wahab 1918). In such urban areas traditional performance contexts for the *ma'lūf* corresponded to the two types of performance practice prevalent at that time: instrumental *ma'lūf* and *ma'lūf kham* (“raw” or “unrefined” *ma'lūf*). *Ma'lūf kham* was performed in Sufi lodges [*zwāya*, s. *zāwiya*] by a male chorus singing in unison, accompanied by hand-clapping and/or by percussion instruments (Davis 1996b).

Davis notes that until the advent of modern state patronage and the decline of the Sufi movement, the chief patrons of the *ma'lūf* were Sufi brotherhoods—“popular

³⁶ Cf. Guettat 2000: 257 for a comparative study of these four musical traditions.

religious organizations where orthodox Islamic taboos against musical activity were waived” (Davis 2004: 4). While in urban areas, public music-making in secular contexts was considered shameful (performed only by lower class people or Jews), Sufi lodges were “veritable music conservatories” where respectable Muslim men learned the local *ma’lūf* repertoire by attending weekly Sufi ceremonies (Davis 1996a: 316–317). In each lodge the ensemble was led by a *shaykh* [religious leader, or an elder who had mastered the repertoire], but all present—including men of various social classes—could participate in the singing and hand-clapping (Davis 2004; Jones 1977, 1982, 2002b). Although only men participated in these ceremonies, there were (and still are) instances where women present in an adjoining room could overhear what was going on in the men’s ceremony, and thus participate amongst themselves (Jankowsky 2006: 407, n.16).

Sufi musicians rehearsed the *ma’lūf kham* alongside their sacred repertoires; they performed the secular songs after their public ceremonies (Davis 2004: 42). In Tunis and other towns, *ma’lūf kham* was thus a popular tradition learned by the community at large during weekly ceremonies. In some towns outside Tunis, the *zwāya* also “functioned as springboards for music making in secular contexts”; Sufi musicians performed *ma’lūf kham* in local cafés, street processions and pilgrimages to the shrines of local saints, at family and communal celebrations (Davis 2004: 4).

The other type of *ma’lūf* involved instruments and various instrumental pieces, and was thus confined to specialists—professional and amateur musicians. Until the 1930s this type of *ma’lūf* was performed by small ensembles including an *‘ūd tūnsī* or *‘ūd ‘arbī* (“Tunisian lute” with four pairs of strings), *rabāb* (two-string spike fiddle), *tār* (small tambourine), *naqqārāt* (pair of small kettle drums), and occasionally one or two

solo vocalists. A *shaykh* led the ensemble while playing the *'ūd 'arbī* or the *tār*, but each musician was free to perform his own renditions of the melody, complete with his individual embellishments and improvisations, creating a heterophonic texture. When performing the vocal genres the instrumentalists also served as a chorus (Ibid.: 7).

In large cities such as Tunis, Bizerte, and Sousse, performing in most public contexts was considered shameful and inappropriate for Muslims “of higher social standing and moral repute” (Davis 2009: 195). In these urban areas instrumental *ma'lūf* was relegated to specific performance contexts, either the *zwāya* or at private homes. Amongst members of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie (many of whom were amateur musicians themselves), instrumental *ma'lūf* was performed in private, intimate settings at their homes, such as in luxurious parlors or fragrant palace gardens. This type of “sophisticated” instrumental *ma'lūf* was particularly cultivated and patronized by Ottoman princes in their palaces (Davis 1996a: 317). Davis points out that like *ma'lūf kham*, instrumental *ma'lūf* was primarily performed and patronized by men.³⁷ In his article on “Arab music in Tunisia” (1917), Rodolphe D'Erlanger only once refers to women in association with instrumental *ma'lūf*; he describes a *ma'lūf* performance at his home, where the women present crowded to listen to the musicians “behind the grills that separated them from the men” (Davis 2004: 48).

In the early twentieth century, some male musicians also gathered to rehearse the *ma'lūf* in “respectable,” all-male Muslim cafés in Tunis. Sadok Rizqi contrasts these amateur performance contexts, however, with disreputable “commercial” contexts (such as taverns, bars, and *cafés chantants*, discussed below) where various genres of Tunisian and Arab music were performed by lower-class and Jewish musicians.

³⁷ Cf. Davis 1986 and 2004 for further information about D'Erlanger (1872–1932).

During this era Egyptian, Libyan, and other Middle Eastern musicians were prominent performers in the cafés and theatres of Tunis, but Jewish musicians in particular are reported to have dominated the performance of Tunisian and Arab popular music in such contexts (Davis 2004: 94; Jones 1987: 72).³⁸ Davis notes that in the early decades of the twentieth century professional musicians were primarily Jews and Muslims of low social status, “typically barbers and other members of the lower artisan classes, who were generally considered to be of dubious moral standing” (Davis 2009: 195). As ‘Abd al-Majid Sahli reports, “at that time the only people who got involved with music were those lacking all moral character and a few Jews, who monopolized the artistic milieu” (Sahli 1975: 25, quoted in Jones 1987: 73).

The disreputability of these musicians related to their low social status, to the commercial nature of their work, and to the disreputability of the contexts in which they performed. These contexts included public, commercial venues such as bars, taverns, music halls, and *cafés chantants*, where audiences were seated in rows and served drinks by waiters while watching performers on an elevated stage (Sakli 1994: 309). Most bars and taverns were run by Jews, who monopolized the alcohol business during this epoch (Ibid.: 307). Jewish musicians were also prominent performers of the *mizwid* [bagpipe] instrument and genre; they frequently performed *mizwid* at Jewish weddings, where alcohol was reportedly served in generous amounts (Stapley 2006: 345).³⁹

³⁸ Ruth Davis and Mourad Sakli have written about the participation of Jewish musicians in popular music in Tunis during the early twentieth century, before Jews emigrated from Tunisia en masse during the 1950s and 1960s. Davis and Robert Lachmann have also researched the music of Jews on the southern island of Djerba: cf. Davis 2002c; Bolhman 2002: 58–60; Lachmann 1940.

³⁹ Cf. Kathryn Stapley’s (2006) work on *mizwid* for further discussion of the *mizwid* instrument and the eponymous genre’s history. Stapley notes that during the early decades of the twentieth century Jewish musicians were some of the most famous *mizwid* players; and “...it was at this time that *mizwid* first came to be identified with the imbibing of copious amounts of alcohol, an association that remains to this day” (Stapley 2006: 345, citing al-’Akrami 1994).

These contexts were considered disreputable by pious Muslims because they were associated with rowdy, licentious behavior, such as drinking alcohol, smoking hashish, soliciting prostitutes, and observing women performers display their dancing bodies onstage. Rizqi implies that the presence of women and alcohol specifically tarnished the respectability of certain contexts for music performance: as noted above, he contrasts Jewish taverns with respectable Muslim coffeehouses, where “where legitimate music may be heard” and where the music ensembles are “free of women” (Rizqi 1967: 98, as quoted in Jones 74).

Women singers and dancers: Sāna‘āt

Historical accounts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century note that most women vocalists frequently doubled as dancers. In these texts such women musicians are mostly referred to as *sāna‘āt*, a term that has been used to signify “*chanteuses-danseuses*” [singers-dancers], or women who combined dancing and singing (Rizqi 1967: 63; Sakli 1997: 186; Abassi 2000: 47).⁴⁰ Like other performers, the *sāna‘āt* were primarily Jewish, although Sadok Rizqi and Hamadi Abassi mention that some Muslim women were also *sāna‘āt* (Rizqi 1967: 63; Abassi 2000: 21).⁴¹ Rizqi argues that most *sāna‘āt* were Jewish because Jews were less confined socially than Muslims; Mourad Sakli suggests as well that the harsh economic conditions of most Jews living in the Hara (the Jewish quarter of the Tunis *medina*) forced Jewish women to work. Sakli furthermore states that some *sāna‘āt* were women from rural areas who migrated to Tunis

⁴⁰ *Sāna‘āt* is plural of *sāna‘a*, the feminine form of *sāna‘*, “maker, manufacturer; artisan, craftsman; worker, laborer; servant” (The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, Fourth Ed., 1994: 617).

⁴¹ In his popular history of Tunisian music, Hamadi Abassi names the following Muslim *sāna‘āt*: Aïcha Bent Chok El Osbane and her sister Mamia; Hassina Barruta; Habiba Ryakit Libden; Zakia Guerba; Dhaw El Bousta; Salha Nosf El Dunya; and Aïcha Krartiya (Abassi 2000: 21).

and were probably in need of money. He comments that, as outsiders who lacked family networks in Tunis, these women were less subject to the strict social mores regulating conservative Tunisian society (Sakli 1997: 187).

Nevertheless, Sakli argues, even among the Jewish community it was disreputable for a woman to perform music in public, due to the poor moral reputation of most singers of the time. He notes, for example, that the famous Jewish singer, Cheikh el Afrit, forbade his sister to sing at home, for fear of seeing her perform one day in public (Sakli 1994: 276–278). The ill repute attached to the *sāna ‘āt* related to several factors: their status as women who worked outside the home and in a mixed-gender milieu; the fact that they performed in disreputable contexts such as *cafés-chantants*, where alcohol and prostitutes were probably also present; and the fact that they performed as singers and dancers, unveiled, for male audiences. Although not explicitly described in most sources as prostitutes or courtesans, *sāna ‘āt* are frequently described as dancing seductively, and as transgressing social mores. As noted above, Rizqi implies that the presence of women and alcohol tarnished the respectability of certain performance contexts.

In her research on the historical associations of Tunisian women musicians, Lengel argues that the status of women performers into the late twentieth century “stems from a history, albeit reified or actual, of women performers as prostitutes, serving men with music, dance, and sex in both pre-colonial and colonial periods” (Lengel 2000: 343). Yet very little “proof” exists that women musical performers during that time actually did engage in prostitution or courtesanerie. Although several Tunisian scholars have recently published historical studies of courtesans and prostitutes in the *medina* of Tunis during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, none of these works makes significant

analysis of women performers and “the possibility that they combined music and performance work with prostitution” (Ibid.). Only a few traces of documentation confirm associations between women performers, courtesans, and prostitutes.

For example, Mohamed Kerrou and Moncef M’Halla note that during the mid-nineteenth century before the French Protectorate (1881–1956), women known as ‘*ahirat*’ [sing., ‘*ahira*’] hosted clients in their private homes, where they sang, danced, played *darbūka*,⁴² and where drinking and smoking *kif* [cannabis mixed with tobacco] and *takruri* [another variation of cannabis] occurred (Kerrou and M’Halla 1993: 206). But they stress that in these contexts, the ‘*ahirat*’ were not prostitutes [*filles publiques*], but “women of loose morals” [*femmes aux moeurs libres*, or *femmes de mauvaises moeurs*], or courtesans of both low and high economic status who entertained suitors. Kerrou and M’Halla also make a clear distinction between courtesans and prostitutes. Contrary to prostitutes, courtesans could choose their suitors, the exchange of money was not the object of their encounters, and their encounters took place in the “invisible worlds” of private homes, not out in the street (Ibid.: 207). Their encounters did not necessarily involve sex, but more specifically, an evening of smoking and drinking while women sang and played *darbūka*. While Kerrou and M’Halla do not make a clear distinction between *courtisanes* and *danseuses-chanteuses*, perhaps neither did the police, who taxed “*les danseuses-chanteuses*” ten *rials* “at a certain moment” (Ibid.: 210).

Kerrou and M’Halla argue that *courtisanerie* disappeared after the French occupation and was replaced by prostitution and brothels. The French Protectorate authorities tried to implement municipal laws legalizing and regulating prostitution, which would allow them to tax prostitutes and submit them to medical exams. They were

⁴² The *darbūka* is a single-headed, goblet-shaped drum.

delayed in implementing these laws by *l’Affaire Tunisienne* in 1885, when Tunisian notables claimed that such laws essentially recognized a vice that was forbidden according to the *sharī’a* [Islamic law] (Ibid.). The French regulations were eventually implemented in 1889, but they were not limited only to prostitutes [*filles publiques*]. Kerrou and M’Halla note that the Protectorate authorities extended these laws “to the category of dancers and of singers” (Ibid.: 211).⁴³

Singers and dancers subsequently acquired 800 signatures on a petition to protest regulations that would subject them to obligatory medical exams and a monthly tax of twelve francs and that would list their names on the register of prostitutes (Ibid.). Their protests suggest that the category of dancers and singers was distinct from that of prostitutes, or at least that these performers considered themselves as belonging to a separate category. Their petition also suggests that these performers were not necessarily engaged in any kind of sex work and that the associations between women’s music performance and prostitution were therefore grounded more in stereotype than in fact.

In the early decades of the twentieth century such associations persisted. Writing in the 1930s, Rizqi describes Jewish-run taverns where alcohol was served, and where a number of “Jewish prostitutes” sang and danced to seduce the male spectators and entice them to consume alcohol (Rizqi 1967: 96). Sakli explains that such reports certainly contributed to tarnish the image of women singers in the society at the time (Sakli 1994: 278). Yet these prostitutes were not necessarily *sāna ‘āt*, and Rizqi does not use that term in this context. The perception of women performers as disreputable was also found in villages outside Tunis; Marçais (1925) notes that the image of Tunis’s ill-reputed singers

⁴³ This corrects Lengel’s misreading of Kerrou and M’Halla, where she states that the tax resulted from regulations set in place by the French authorities that *filles publiques* “exercise their profession under the arbitrary category of dancers and singers” (Lengel 2000: 344).

represented the debauchery young boys would encounter when visiting the city (Marçais 1925: 270, 290; quoted in Jones 1987: 74).

Such associations linking turn-of-the-century women performers to prostitution and courtesanerie have persisted into the contemporary era. Although not much documentation about these early performers' activities survives, and even if these performers did not explicitly engage in prostitution, in the Tunisian collective imagination they are still associated with performing in disreputable contexts and exhibiting their bodies to male audiences.

As noted above, women other than *sāna 'āt* also participated in musical activity, either in traditional folk ensembles or in the privacy of their aristocratic homes. The respectability of these musicians was directly related to their socioeconomic status. *Sāna 'āt* were stigmatized because they performed in public for men, because they earned money doing so, because they were of lower-class and/or Jewish backgrounds and needed to work for money, because they displayed their bodies and danced, and because they were associated with disreputable performance contexts and prostitution. While also hailing from lower-class backgrounds and needing to work, women performing in traditional folk ensembles held a slightly more respectable status because they often performed religious music in religious contexts, and because they performed for audiences comprised only of women. But these musicians have also been disregarded by the art music establishment because they were not formally trained in music and because they performed folk music rather than art music. Instead, aristocratic women musicians have been most highly regarded by historical accounts, owing to their class status, their

training in and performance of art music, and the fact that they played music in private contexts, often for women-only audiences.

Women's ensembles at weddings and at zwāya

According to many of my research consultants, traditional women's ensembles have "always" existed in Tunisia, performing at family celebrations for exclusively female audiences. Most sources only offer descriptions of women's ensembles starting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although Jones notes that in Fatimid times (909–969 C.E.), apart from *qiyān* "there seemed to have been also self-employed female singers, who lived in respectable districts, sang at private parties and weddings, and kept the neighbors up at night" (Jones 1987: 72). Al-Wahhab describes an account of one such woman in tenth century Kairouan; her name has not been remembered, but she is described because the noise she made disturbed the writer, an orthodox cleric (1966: 202; quoted in Jones 1987: 72).

At the turn of the twentieth century men musicians also performed at weddings; Rizqi notes that mostly Jewish musicians performed at such events, although increasing numbers of Muslim musicians were beginning to participate. Most of these musicians performed at wedding parties for audiences comprised only of men. Those who performed for women's parties were either women musicians or Jewish or blind male musicians. Such male musicians were allowed to perform in the presence of Muslim women because blind musicians could not see the women, while Jewish men were not a threat because they were not considered potential suitors for the women (Rizqi 1967: 62–63; Sakli 1994, 1997). Memories of the famous blind men's ensemble *Awadet el-Kantara*, for example, still persist in popular imaginations (Abassi 2000: 20–21).

The “traditional,” “old,” or “folk” women’s ensembles [*fīraq nisa’iyya taqlīdiyya*, *fīraq nisa’iyya qadima*, or *fīraq nisa’iyya sh’abiyya*] have traditionally existed in urban areas, where they have performed traditional folk music for exclusively female audiences. The women participating in these ensembles have not received any musical training, and they are generally considered women of lower socioeconomic status—not least because they are perceived as women who have to work outside the home. Several of these ensembles still exist today, mostly in towns other than Tunis.⁴⁴ In most of these ensembles the musicians sing and play percussion instruments; only a few ensembles include melodic instruments.

The oldest women’s ensembles are said to be religious troupes affiliated with Sufi lodges [*zwāya*]. They have traditionally performed liturgical repertoire praising God, the Prophet Mohammed, and local saints, in weekly *hadhrāt* ceremonies at the *zwāya*, where participants often trance. Other troupes, especially the ensembles along the coast, do not have links to *zwāya* at all (or any longer), although their repertoire may include some liturgical songs. These secular ensembles perform for family celebrations such as weddings and circumcisions at their clients’ private homes. These are the types of ensembles that include melodic instruments; they also perform contemporary pop hits alongside their traditional repertoire. These ensembles play an invaluable role at women’s wedding parties (known as *hennāt* or *outiāt*): they perform traditional songs pertaining to the local ritual performance of the *henna* or *outia*, and they incite guests to dance so as to celebrate the occasion. In these rituals the musicians and other women ritually prepare, honor, and bless the bride—psychologically and physically (in beautiful dress, jewelry,

⁴⁴ Women have also played an important role in *stambeli* as ‘*arifat* [healer-priestesses, s. ‘*arifa*], and as clients who participate in dancing, trancing, and possession rituals (Jankowsky 2004: 108, 149--151; 2006: 385).

henna, and hair removal)—as she passes from her status as unmarried virgin and daughter to that of married wife, future mother, and daughter-in-law in her husband’s family.

Traditional women’s ensembles have been hired to perform for private family celebrations throughout recent Tunisian history. But although some of the musicians in these ensembles may have been “professional,” in the sense that they earned their living by performing at weddings or at *zwaya*, they have been overlooked and even denigrated by the art music establishment because they perform folk music and because they have not received formal musical training. Likewise, *sāna ‘āt* and other popular women vocalists were similarly denigrated because they did not receive formal training in music. Until Independence in 1956, formal musical training and instrumental performance was monopolized by men—with the exception of a few aristocratic women.

Aristocratic women: musicking at home

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth century, most Tunisian Muslim women did not have access to musical training, with the exception of some young women from elite *tunisiois / beldi* families.⁴⁵ They received music lessons in their homes, but they never performed in public. Some girls learned music at the home of a *m ‘allma*, a female instructor who taught young women sewing, embroidery, cooking, and good manners (Sakli 1997: 186). Salah el-Mahdi and Muhammad al-Marzuqi also mention “a music school in the Beylical palace in which the royal princesses and some privileged outsiders received training” (1981: 36; quoted in Jones 1987: 77), and Belhassen Farza “refers to a Jewish immigrant from Libya who

⁴⁵ *Tunisiois* or *beldi* are adjectives used to describe residents of Tunis, particularly elite bourgeois families living in the Tunis *medina* (the ancient, fortified Arab city).

established a music school for ‘the daughters of prominent families’ ” (n.d. 1970: 6; quoted in Jones 87: 77–78).

Most of these young women learned a keyboard instrument such as piano or harmonium, and/or *‘ūd sharqī*, *‘ūd tūnsī*, or violin (Sakli 1994: 251-3). Their teachers were primarily men and included Maltese, Italian, and French musicians, as well as Tunisian Jewish musicians and blind musicians. Yet as Sakli notes, for these aristocratic women playing music was merely a leisure activity, and the most talented of these instrumentalists contented themselves with playing for friends who visited them. He suggests that such women “from a very respectable social class” may have also composed music, but “it is unthinkable that their compositions left their homes.” (Ibid.).

Because these women were not supposed to perform in public, little documentation of their musicking survives. Historical evidence primarily exists in the form of personal testimonies from the women themselves, recounted in interviews they have granted in recent years. Zaynab Kushouk, for example, was a member of a prominent *beldi* family and spent most of her life in the Tunis *medina*. She told me that she learned Arab music and Tunisian repertoire (including the *ma’lūf*) on the violin and piano from Professor Albert Albitbol, studying with him for six years during the 1930s.⁴⁶ Kushouk and Fathia Jellouli (also from a prominent family) stressed that they played music only in private. In private contexts they also attended gender-segregated wedding celebrations where *sāna’āt* and traditional women's music ensembles performed.⁴⁷

Kmar Djaziri Zelfani has recounted memories from her childhood as granddaughter of the Husainid ruler, Ahmed Pacha Bey (r.1929-42). Zelfani explained to

⁴⁶ Conversation with Zaynab Koushouk, March 31, 2008.

⁴⁷ Conversation in Tunis with Fathia Jellouli, November 27, 2007.

Mustapha Chelbi that when she was seven years old her mother arranged for the famous singer Fritna Darmoun to give her piano lessons, and for Gagou to give her *'ūd* lessons. Her grandfather also regularly hosted concerts by the best orchestras of Tunis at his palace, which performed with the best vocalists of the time—including Chafia Rochdi, Hassiba Rochdi, Julie Marseillaise, and Fathia Khairi. According to Chelbi, these concerts were exclusively reserved for the princesses and other women of the royal court. Even the princes were not admitted—they listened in the adjoining room (Chelbi 2000: 110).

Zakia Bey's memories of her musical activities are recorded in her published interview with Dalenda Largueche (1993). Born in 1927, Zakia Bey was the sixth daughter of Amin Bey (ruled 1943–57), the last ruler of the Husainid Dynasty.⁴⁸ She first learned to play the *biyānū* [harmonium] and then the *'ūd*, and her father arranged for her to take lessons from *Ustādh* [professor/master] 'Ali Sriti and *Ustādh* Saïd Chotta. However, she only played music within the palace, at some gatherings and soirées that were the occasion for her to pursue her musical practice. Although her father thoroughly enjoyed the arts, he did not approve of her performing in front of a large group of people. After her marriage she continued her musical practice in private, and she hosted gatherings and soirées with her friends and some artists, but she was not able to further polish her talents (Ibid.: 56–57).

Within the contemporary art music community of Tunis, recollections of elite women's musicking constitute key elements of Tunisian women's music history. Many famous men and women musicians have noted that their mother, grandmother, or other

⁴⁸ As noted in the Introduction, the rulers of the Husainid Dynasty governed Tunisia with substantial autonomy under the Ottoman Empire from 1705 to 1881, and under the French Protectorate from 1881 to 1956.

female relatives sang and/or played an instrument in the privacy of the home—as was the case for the mother and sisters of *ma'lūf* master Ahmed al-Wafi (1850–1921) (Kaak and Mahdi 1982: 15–16). Jones encountered similar recollections during her fieldwork research in the late 1970s and 1980s:

Some older Tunisians who have shared their reminiscences with me have boasted of a mother who could play the *'ūd* very well and even perform the Malouf repertoire, but only within the narrow family circle. It is inconceivable that a respectable wife and mother would allow her musical talents to be exposed in public. (Jones 1987: 80-81)

Such memories of aristocratic women's musicking have also permeated popular culture by way of Moufida Tlati's 1994 film, *Silences of the Palace* [*Les Silences du palais*]. The film focuses on a young woman vocalist, Alia, and her memories of 1955, when she was fifteen years old and lived with her mother as a servant in the Beys' household. In the film, Tlatli represents various types of women's musicking and performance before independence: aristocratic women and men playing art music instruments at home and hosting performances by popular singers and dancers, and servants singing traditional folk songs in the kitchen and listening to the national anthem on the radio. Tlatli also depicts the difficult life Alia faces after independence, as she struggles to work as a vocalist while facing harassment from men and moral judgment from her neighbors (Sherzer 2000: 52–55, 57).

Until independence in 1956, “respectable” elite women's musicking was still confined to the privacy of their homes. In the decades leading to independence, however, the status of music and musicians radically changed, and popular women vocalists gradually became disassociated with prostitution. The next section studies these transformations during the early recording era and after the founding of the Rachidiyya Institute (1934) and Radio-Tunis (1938).

New technologies and women vocalists, c. 1908–1930

The advent of the recording industry and the development of *al-ughniyya* [the Tunisian song] created new performances opportunities and success for popular women vocalists. From the 1930s to Independence in 1956, women vocalists also played a prominent role in promoting Tunisian music and song through their performances with the Rachidiyya Ensemble and through their broadcasted performances on Radio-Tunis. In the next sections I present the various factors that led to the promotion of “Tunisian music,” including nationalist movements, modern-reformist intellectual movements, the Cairo Congress of Arab Music in 1932, and Tunisian efforts to combat the dominance of Egyptian music on Tunisian airwaves and markets. I suggest that while other Tunisian artists, intellectuals, and nationalist politicians developed and promoted concepts of Tunisian national identity during the 1930s, Tunisian musicians sang, composed, and played out the nation in their performances of Tunisian music.

Upon creating the Rachidiyya Institute and the Rachidiyya Ensemble, nationalist elites sought to promote a national music that was culturally authentic yet sufficiently modernized. Their attempts to modernize and discipline Tunisian music were also intended to elevate the respectability of music performance. At the same time, the art music genres they promoted earned further prestige through their association with nationalism and their characterization as national Tunisian music. The radical transformations of music performance, transmission, and the status of musicians that began during the 1930s have had significant ramifications for Tunisian music and for women and men musicians into the early twenty-first century.

In 1908 Gramophone began recording artists in Tunis under the label of its French company, Zonophone, and in 1910 Gramophone created its first catalogue for Tunisian music.⁴⁹ Jewish women vocalists were prominent among the first recording artists. They included the Chamama sisters; Leila Sfez (1874-1944); Fritna Darmon (born c. 1875); and Julie Bent T’Mami, niece of the Chamama sisters (Hachlaf 1993: 163; Abassi 2000: 6–9).⁵⁰ The 1910 Gramophone catalogue, for example, includes a series of records by Leila Sfez performing the *ma’lūf* and Middle Eastern songs (Davis 2004: 95). Among others, Fritna Darmon recorded for labels such as Gramophone (1908), Pathé (1926), Odéon, Decca Columbia, and Polydor (Hachlaf 1993: 163–164; Abassi 2000: 8).

Like male vocalists, these artists performed a variety of musical genres, including *fūndūwwāt* (“semi-classical” songs related to the *ma’lūf* and to folk music) and other types of Tunisian song that were commercially popular, including songs that used Franco-Arabic lyrics. At this time Egyptian music as well as Tripolitanian (*tarabulsiyyāt*) and Algerian (*dziriyyāt*) tunes were also popular in Tunis (Davis 2004: 95; Hachlaf 1993).

As Davis notes, Moussali’s study of recordings by Tunisian musicians until the 1930s reveals a diverse, eclectic repertoire, “apparently reflecting the variety of live music performance in Tunis” during the early decades of the twentieth century (Davis 2004: 95). Yet many Tunisian accounts about this time period focus not on the diversity

⁴⁹ These recordings include religious hymns of the Sulamiyya, verses of the *Quran*, monologues and comic sketches, various Tunisian, Egyptian, and Ottoman marches, *qasaid* (in Tunisian and Middle Eastern modes), and a series of records by Leila Sfez performing the *ma’lūf* and Middle Eastern songs (Davis 2004: 95).

⁵⁰ These performers are sometimes referred to as *sāna’āt* in the Tunisian collective imagination and in popular histories of Tunisian music (such as Abassi 2000). (Conversation in Tunis with Fathia Jellouli, November 27, 2007.) Cf. Hachlaf 1993, Davis 2009 and 2004 (citing Moussali 1992), and Sakli 1994 regarding early recordings in Tunisia. Cf. Abassi for more about the Chamama sisters (also spelled “Chem mama”).

but the inferiority of Tunisian musical production. They describe the 1920s and 1930s as “*l’âge de décadence*,” when Tunisian music was in a state of decadence and decline (Davis 2009: 194). They deplore the encroaching influences of Egyptian and other Middle Eastern music genres in the record industry and in the cafés and theatres of Tunis. According to this narrative, the record industry is particularly to blame for “the corruption of Tunisian music” and of “musical life in general” by promoting songs with trite or obscene lyrics, which often mixed Arabic with French (Davis 2004: 95–96). This narrative also blames the commercial influence of the recording industry for corrupting musicians, whom Mahmoud Guettat depicts as “a class of opportunists whose depraved behavior and financial greed dragged the art of music and the status of the musician into a deplorable situation” (2000: 238, quoted in Davis 2004: 96).

Proponents of this narrative considered the new songs produced by the commercial recording industry as trivial, and accordingly labeled them “light songs” (*ughniyya tunisiyya khafifa*). Since the late 1980s, however Tunisian musicians, scholars, and other writers have rehabilitated this repertoire. Davis argues that the early decades of the twentieth century thus emerge “as the formative period” of *al-ughniyya al-tunisiyya* [*la chanson tunisienne* or Tunisian popular song]” (Davis 2009: 201). Born around the turn of the twentieth century in the cafés, bars, and music theatres of Tunis, the *ughniyya* (pl., *aghānī*) was performed and composed primarily by Jewish musicians, and it later became the dominant genre of the recording industry in Tunisia (Ibid.: 193).

In his pioneering research on the *ughniyya tunisiyya*, Sakli defines it as a short strophic song in couplet-refrain form (1994: 17). It is particularly the *ughniyya*’s use of a solo singer alternating with a chorus, and the recurrence of the refrain each time to the

same melody, which distinguishes the *ughniyya* from other song genres in Tunisia. Like the *ma'lūf*, Tunisian *aghānī* use Tunisian rhythmic modes [*īqā'āt / awzān*] and melodic modes [*tubu*'], but they especially draw upon Eastern Arab (especially Egyptian) melodic modes [*maqāmāt*] and rhythmic modes (Sakli 1994: 375–405)

Traditionalists who labeled early Tunisian song “decadent,” “foreign,” and “corrupt” disliked the use of Eastern Arab melodic and rhythmic modes and of European instruments in *ughniyya* and *ma'lūf* ensembles (Davis 2009). During the late nineteenth century, European instruments were beginning to be introduced to Tunisian *ma'lūf* ensembles. Into the 1930s somewhat larger ensembles also included *'ūd sharqī* (“Eastern lute” with six pairs of strings), violin (introduced in the 1920s), *nāy* (reed flute), *qanūn* (plucked zither, introduced in the 1920s), *darbūka* (single-headed goblet drum), and *bendīr* (frame drum).⁵¹ The violin gradually replaced the *rabāb*, and instruments of fixed pitch such as the harmonium and piano were also added, despite their incapability to perform the microtonal variations present in Tunisian and Eastern Arab melodic modes (Sakli 1994: 166–193; Davis 2009: 202). In the first recordings of Tunisian *aghānī* produced by Zonophone in 1908, the accompanying ensemble included *'ūd 'arbī*, violin, harmonium or piano, *naqqārāt*, and *tār*. Moussali notes that this particular combination of Tunisian and European instruments was a specialty of Jewish musicians “eager to free themselves from the constraints of the traditional modes and scales, and equally attentive to the acoustical quality of the Western instruments and the extent of their ensembles”

⁵¹ The *bendīr* or *bandir* is a large frame drum, with one or two vibrating metal cords stretching across the diameter (underneath the head).

(Moussali 1992:4, quoted by Davis 2009: 203).⁵² Such instrumentation became standard during this period.

Despite traditionalists' depiction of 1920s musical culture as an aberration, Davis argues that early *ughniyya* "is rooted linguistically, thematically and structurally in traditional Tunisian popular song" (Davis 2009: 194). Moreover, in their mixing of women's voices, Egyptian modes and rhythms, and Western and Arab instruments, Jewish *ughniyya* musicians laid the foundations for the genre of "Tunisian song" as it developed throughout the twentieth century.

Women vocalists played an important role in performing the early Tunisian songs. Previously in *ma'lūf* ensembles, a solo vocalist or an instrumentalist in the ensemble sang the verses, and the other instrumentalists provided the chorus. But due to the importance of the *ughniyya*'s couplet-refrain structure, the *ughniyya* expanded opportunities for solo vocalists. Davis argues that it was during the 1920s and 1930s "that the female solo vocalist acquired a status in performance equivalent to that of her male counterpart" (Ibid.: 201). Moreover, women vocalists became successful stars through mass-distribution of their recordings—as in Egypt, where commercial recordings had been popular since 1904.⁵³ Many of these Tunisian and Egyptian artists, however, had also already performed in local concert halls and theatres and may have already amassed a devoted following (who then purchased their recordings), as Umm Kulthum had done by performing in the eastern Delta (Danielson 1991: 300).

⁵² Cf. Davis 2009 for further discussion of this issue.

⁵³ Danielson states that "It was in the realm of commercial recording that Umm Kulthum experienced the success that sustained her during her early years in Cairo" (1991: 300). Between 1924 and 1925 Odeon Records released fourteen songs sung by Umm Kulthum; following their immediate sales success, Umm Kulthum negotiated the highest recording fee in Cairo in 1924, higher than Bessie Smith commanded in 1923 in her contract with Columbia in New York (Ibid.: 300, 308).

One of the greatest performers of early Tunisian *aghānī* was Habiba Msika (1893–1930). The niece of Leila Sfez, Habiba Msika remains one of the most famous Tunisian vocalists and actresses in recent history.⁵⁴ During the 1920s she performed and recorded various genres of music with labels such as Pathé (1926) and VSM (1927, 1928), including Tunisian *arubi*, Egyptian *adwār* [pl. of *dawr*], many Egyptian *taqāṭīq* (pl. of *taqtuqa*), Tunisian folksongs and folksongs from Algeria and Aleppo (Syria), and Tunisian *aghānī* labeled *ughniyya khafīfa*, *chansons judéo-arabes* [Jewish-Arabic songs] and *chansons franco-arabes* [Franco-Arabic songs] (Boudhina 1995: 21–24; Hachlaf 1993: 165; Abassi 2000: 11–13). In 1928, Msika was among a few prominent Tunisian artists invited to record with Baidophone in Berlin. These recordings include her performances of traditional Tunisian wedding and circumcision songs, traditional songs from Tripolitania, Middle Eastern *qasaid* (including two originally recorded by Umm Kulthum), and several Tunisian, Lebanese, Egyptian, and Syrian patriotic songs (Moussali 1992: 12–13; quoted in Davis 2004: 96).⁵⁵

Besides Msika, women vocalists performing during the 1920s and early 1930s included Fadhila Khetmi (1900–1928), Chafia Rochdi (1910–1989), and others, such as “Mademoiselle Dalila,” Badia Essaghira, Julie Slama, and Julie La Marseillais (Abassi 2000: 23–26; Hachlaf 1993: 169–170; Davis 2009: 188–189). Another important Jewish artist who sang similar repertoire and recorded with labels such as Gramophone, Polyphone, and Columbia during the late 1930s and 1940s is Louisa Tounsia. The lyrics of some of the songs she performed “portray women who challenge or transgress

⁵⁴ Msika died in 1939 when she was burned alive while asleep in her house, set on fire by a jealous lover.

⁵⁵ Davis cites a paper Bernard Moussali presented in 1992 at the opening of the *Centre de musiques arabes et méditerranéennes*.

conventional social roles,” such as “*Ma Nhabbshi N’aris*” [I don’t want to get married], which she recorded in 1945 (Davis 2009: 189; Hachlaf 1993: 170–171).

Like their Egyptian counterparts, many Tunisian women vocalists were also accomplished actresses and dancers, and they later became directors of their own musical and theatrical troupes. According to Abassi, Fadhila Khetmi was the first woman to create a theatrical troupe in 1928; and Chafia Rochdi later created her own troupe, *Noujoum El Fen* (Abassi 2000: 18–20; 24–26). And several of these artists played prominent roles in the 1930s cultural renaissance: Chafia Rochdi, for example, was a frequent participant in the intellectual salon “*Taht as-Sour*.” Khetmi and Rochdi were also among the first Muslim women vocalists to attain star status as prolific recording artists and performers.

The available sources suggest that despite their successful recording careers, these women artists held ambiguous social status during the 1920s and early 1930s.⁵⁶ Originally from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, most of these women used pseudonyms during their careers as artists. Chafia Rochdi, for example, was the pseudonym of Zakia Marrakchi, who was born an orphan (Abassi 2000: 18). In recent biographical literature some of these vocalists are referred to as *sāna ‘āt*, and some are said to have danced onstage as well. The fact that they sang, danced and acted probably tarnished their reputations. Danielson notes that women vocalists in Egypt during the 1920s were also of lower class backgrounds, and due to their profession they could not

⁵⁶ Cf. Corriou (2006, n.d.) and Mamelouk (2007) for women’s activities in Tunisian theatre during the 1930s. Cf. Mamelouk (2007: 372–3) for an index of musicians mentioned in articles of the French-language periodical *Leila*, and Corriou (2006: 61) for articles in 1941 about Rochdi’s scandalous behavior on two occasions. In her work on women performers in Egypt, Danielson shows that many women vocalists/actresses owned their own musical and theatrical establishments, and successfully managed their own careers and finances (1991: 303).

have married into higher social classes. Several prominent vocalists, however, achieved economic success and held themselves to certain standards: some of them refused to drink with male customers, for example, when asked to do so in order to increase the patron's alcohol consumption. According to Danielson, these vocalists were particularly distinct from lower-class performers engaging in prostitution (Danielson 1991: 301).

The Rachidiyya Institute, “Tunisian music,” and nationalism

According to the traditionalist narrative, a pivotal event occurred in 1928 when Baidaphone encouraged Msika and other prominent Tunisian artists to record in Berlin.⁵⁷ This high-profile project supposedly caused the Tunisian musicians involved “to recognize their lack of a specifically Tunisian repertory suitable for recording” (el-Mahdi 1980: 90; quoted in Davis 2004: 96). The founding of the Rachidiyya Institute in 1934 is thus presented as a rescue operation to save traditional Tunisian music (namely the *ma'lūf*) from the threatening influences of other repertoires and from the supposedly corrupt, commercial, Jewish-dominated musical culture proliferating in Tunisian cafés and music theatres.

Bourgeois Muslim critics of the contemporary musical culture called for both elevating the social and moral status of music, and for preserving and promoting “a more ‘authentic’ Tunisian musical culture, based on the *ma'lūf*” (Davis 2009: 193). In November 1934, seventy-one founders established the Rashidiyya Institute in Tunis with similar goals. The founding members included “professional and amateur musicians, writers, poets, doctors, lawyers, administrators, and politicians” (Davis 2004: 51). They

⁵⁷ At Berlin in 1928 the top Tunisian artists included Jewish vocalist Habiba Msika, the pianist and *qanun* player Mohamed Qadri, and the singer and *'ūd 'arbi* player Khemais Tarnane (Davis 2004: 96).

included one woman: Chafia Rochdi, the prominent vocalist and actress (Jones 1987; Abassi 2000: 32–33).⁵⁸

Named for Muhammad al-Rashid Bey, the eighteenth-century Ottoman patron of the *ma'lūf*, the Rachidiyya Institute “provided the indigenous counterpart to the French music conservatory, founded in Tunis in 1896” (Davis 2004: 51). The Rachidiyya set out to elevate the status of musical activity, providing the first public, secular, respectable context for music making. It established a system of formal music training, including Arab music history, theory, and instrumental technique. The Rachidiyya also transcribed the entire repertoire of the *ma'lūf* into Western notation for both teaching and performance, and it created a larger, new type of ensemble and performance practice, inspired by European and contemporary Egyptian ensembles (Davis 1996a: 318; 2004: 51).⁵⁹

The founding of the Rachidiyya was preceded by the efforts of Tunisian youth and *shayūkh* (plural of *shaykh*) to defend traditional Tunisian music and identity. The activism of *ma'lūf shayūkh*, who had turned their homes into private music clubs, had also been followed by the efforts of Baron d'Erlanger and his circle. A European aristocrat who settled in the coastal town of Sidi Bou Said in 1911, d'Erlanger had been a connoisseur of Arab music since 1914, when he became a student of Shaykh Ahmed al-Wafi (1850–1921), and when he began gathering musicians to play at his palace. In his 1917 article, “Au sujet de la musique arabe en Tunisie,” and in his monumental work *La Musique Arabe* (five volumes published between 1930 and 1959), d'Erlanger contrasted

⁵⁸ Jones notes that Rochdi is “largely unsung” for “her role in the cultural ferment and reform” of the 1930s (Jones 1987: 74–76).

⁵⁹ Western notation had already been used at the courts of the Ottoman rulers by wind bands (Davis 2004: 52). Although it introduced instrumental doublings, a separate mixed chorus, and cellos and basses, the Rachidiyya ensemble excluded instruments of fixed pitch (Davis 2009: 203).

the rich heritage of Tunisian music with what he described as its current state of decline and neglect. D'Erlanger called for reviving the *ma'lūf* by notating it and devising a comprehensive theoretical system—without which, he argued, Tunisian music would be vulnerable to outside influences and may eventually disappear (Davis 1986, 2002b). He encouraged European scholars to provide Arab musicians with a theoretical basis for their teaching, so that *shayūkh* could instruct “all the rules of that art” to their pupils (D'Erlanger 1917: 95, cited in Davis 2004: 44).

Such actions resounded with similar efforts to reform music across the Middle East and North Africa, which culminated in the first Congress of Arab Music, held in Cairo in 1932.⁶⁰ The Congress was held specifically to address the encroaching influences of Western music and commercialized music, which were seen as causing radical changes in indigenous music traditions throughout the Middle East. The Egyptians and Europeans attending the Congress shared similar suggestions about how to go about reforming Arab music traditions, such as by founding national institutions and by creating systematic theoretical systems for Arab music using Western notation. But Jihad Racy notes that while the Europeans wanted to use Western notation to preserve authentic traditions, the Egyptians at the Congress proposed using Western notation so as to modernize Arab music (Racy 1991).

⁶⁰ Cf. Davis 2004 regarding the significant role played by D'Erlanger in organizing the Cairo Congress. As an organizer and contributor to Cairo Congress, d'Erlanger was assigned the task of classifying the melodic and rhythmic genres and compositional forms of modern Arab music. In 1931 the Egyptian government sent the Syrian musician Shaykh 'Ali al-Darwish to Tunis to assist d'Erlanger with this task. While in Tunis, al-Darwish gave public classes in the *medina*, where he taught modern Arab music theory using solmization and Western notation. Although d'Erlanger could not attend the Cairo Congress due to illness (he died in October 1932), his reports were presented and published in *La Musique Arabe* (which also included translations he supervised of medieval Arab theoretical treatises into French). D'Erlanger's work has had a monumental impact on Arab music, since he and al-Darwish reintroduced to modern Arab music theory the medieval concept of classifying modes by their tetrachords (or *ajnās*, by which students learn *maqamāt* to this day). Their methods were subsequently adopted by musicians in the Arab East and Tunisia.

At the same time, a similar discourse promoting reform and modernity was circulating among nationalist movements in the Arab world. In Tunisia nationalists had formed the *Dustūr* [constitution] party in 1920, but the nationalist movement was radicalized when the “modernists” split from the “traditionalists” to form the Neo-Dustur party in 1934, the same year the *Rachidiyya* was established (Perkins 2004: 79, 95). As part of their agenda, nationalists in Tunisia were striving to construct a “national Tunisian culture,” including a national literature, national theatre, and national music (Mamelouk 2007: 258). This national culture needed to be indigenous, authentic, and Arabic—“in opposition to French colonial culture” (Ibid.). But it also needed to be reformed, institutionalized, and systematized in order to stand on a par with French culture. As Richard Jankowsky states,

...just ‘having’ a unique musical tradition was not sufficient; under the pressure of nationalist sentiment, this tradition had to be seen and recorded, it had to become tangible and reproducible. (Jankowsky 2004: 50)

Even as Tunisian nationalists conceived of a distinct, “authentic” cultural identity for their nation-state, they also needed to consider their nation in relation to other nation-states (Jankowsky 2004: 50; Largey 2006: 5). As Thomas Turino demonstrates, nationalist movements are paradoxically “dependent on cosmopolitanism, but are simultaneously threatened by it” (2000: 15). This is particularly true for a colonized state such as Tunisia, where Europeans had used culture in their civilizing missions. As the Tunisian delegation expressed at the Cairo Congress, policy-makers in Tunisia needed a national music that “they felt could compete with European musical traditions” (Jankowsky 2004: 50).⁶¹

⁶¹ This sentiment was communicated by the Tunisian delegation (as well as other delegations from Arab states). Cf. Guettat 1992.

Thus in Tunisia as in other colonized states, nationalists seized upon rhetoric promoting the modernization of “authentic” music in their quest to forge a national identity; in this way they could advocate progress and modernity as well as the preservation of a national heritage that pre-dated the colonial era. Founded amidst the “heady nationalist climate of the time,” the Rachidiyya aimed above all to preserve and promote the *ma’lūf* (Davis 2009: 197). Davis argues that as a popular yet newly re-invented art tradition, the *ma’lūf* well suited the nationalists’ discourse of development and modernization, as well as their calls to Arabize the Tunisian nation.

As Tunisia’s most prestigious continuously surviving indigenous repertory, patronized by both the Ottoman aristocracy and Sufi brotherhoods, the *ma’lūf* was considered equivalent in social, historical, artistic and intellectual status to the Western classical tradition. (Ibid.)

Moreover, the *ma’lūf* had its own Arab music theory, a distinguished (non-Western) intellectual history, and it was specifically not French or Egyptian—instead, it represented the prestigious legacy of Arab-Andalusian culture.

Women vocalists and the new aghānī at the Rachidiyya and Radio-Tunis, 1934–1956

While promoting the *ma’lūf* as “an emblem of Tunisian musical identity,” the Rachidiyya also sponsored competitions and commissions for the creation of new compositions, especially of Tunisian *aghānī* composed in the style of the *ma’lūf* (Ibid.). The Rachidiyya promoted the belief that the *ma’lūf* was the root of all music in Tunisia; thus new compositions using the *ma’lūf* as inspiration (if not as a model) were perceived as a continuation of the traditional *ma’lūf*. The *aghānī* created for the Rachidiyya between 1935 and independence have since been referred to as *mūsīqā ‘atīqa* [old/traditional music], and they are sometimes loosely termed “*ma’lūf*” (Davis 1996a).

The Rachidiyya and the new *aghānī* created new opportunities for women vocalists. Like early Tunisian *aghānī*, the new songs created for the Rachidiyya featured solo vocalists, who were now predominantly Muslim women. And while the Rachidiyya's expanded ensemble did not include any women playing instruments, its new chorus comprised both men and women vocalists. The first solo vocalist of the Rachidiyya was Chafia Rochdi, who had helped found the ensemble. Rochdi was later joined by other popular women vocalists such as Fathia Khairi (1920–1986), Hassiba Rochdi (1918–), Oulaya (1936–1990), and Na'ama (Abassi 2000: 28–33; Boudhina 1996).⁶² The legendary vocalist Saliha replaced Chafia Rochdi as lead vocalist when Rochdi retired from the ensemble in 1941. According to Davis, Saliha “sang exclusively for the Rachidiyya in return for a monthly retainer and free lodgings until her death in 1958” (2009: 197).

Thus in promoting the new *aghānī*, the Rachidiyya “provided the springboard” for Tunisian popular media artists such as these women vocalists (Davis and Jankowsky 2005: 78). At the same time, vocalists such as Saliha played a key role in promoting and revitalizing Tunisian song from the mid-1930s until independence, especially through their performances on the radio.

The first state-owned station, Radio-Tunis (initially called Tunis-PTT), was founded on 14 October 1938.⁶³ By the first days of World War II other regional stations were suppressed and Radio-Tunis remained the only working station in Tunisia (Corriou

⁶² Hassiba Rochdi's birth name was Zohra bent Abdennebi (Abassi 2000: 32–33).

⁶³ The first radio station in Tunisia had been created in 1924 for military purposes, and in subsequent years several private stations had begun to broadcast in Binzerte, Sfax, Sousse, and Tunis. When founded in 1938, Radio-Tunis was placed under the management of the Broadcasting Department of the Ministry of Post, Telegraph, and Telephone Services [*Service de la Radiodiffusion du ministère des Postes, Télégraphes et Téléphones*], under French administration. (Corriou n.d.: 3–4).

n.d.: 3–4). Although under French administration, the radio’s artistic director was Mustafa Bushushah, the brother-in-law of the Rachidiyya’s president, Mustafa Sfar. Radio-Tunis subsequently adopted a policy of promoting Tunisian music and artists: at first the Rachidiyya dominated the station’s musical programming, but later the station broadcast the Rachidiyya’s live performances only two evenings a week, while the ensemble’s star vocalists and musicians broadcast on other evenings (Davis 2004: 98). Radio-Tunis thus played an important role in diffusing Tunisian music, particularly the *ma’lūf* and the new *aghānī* promoted by the Rachidiyya. In fact, Mamelouk argues, “the formation of a national music was integrally connected to the introduction of new technologies” such as records, record players, and the radio (2007: 311).

Radio-Tunis’s programming policy was meant to combat the predominance of Egyptian music and culture. As noted above, during the 1930s and 1940s Egyptian music and film were distributed throughout the Arab world. Egyptian songs and vocalists were featured in films, and audio recordings of those songs helped to further promote the films and their star vocalists. In Tunisia, Egyptian cinema and music were extremely popular, not least because they were perceived as uniting traditional Arab-Muslim culture with modernity in a language that Western colonizers could not understand (Corriou 2006: 50–53). The French administration was wary of the pan-Arab sentiment diffused through Egyptian music and cinema, and so they assisted in supporting the Rachidiyya and broadcasting Tunisian music on Radio-Tunis.

In her research on Tunisian radio and cinema during the 1930s and 1940s, Morgan Corriou argues that the Protectorate administration’s support of Tunisian music unintentionally contributed to the development of Tunisian cultural identity and national

consciousness. During this era Tunisians could not openly discuss national identity on the radio. Particularly under the Vichy regime (1940–44), very few messages of resistance managed to pass through French censorship. Nevertheless, the station and its programming “initiated numerous debates on the question of national identity, especially in the press” (Corriou n.d.: 15).

Debates about Radio-Tunis’s music programming particularly focused on the predominance of Egyptian music. Critics writing in *Leïla*, a French-language periodical directed at a female readership, accused the Tunisian radio of playing the same recordings as Egyptian stations. They also criticized Tunisian compositions that they perceived as imitating Egyptian music. Underlying their criticisms was a call for new Tunisian songs—similar to the project of the Rachidiyya. They encouraged poets to write for the service of “Tunisian Art,” and in 1941 critics praised the creation of new songs glorifying Tunisia. They hoped that these songs would not be sentimental love poems or contain licentious themes, but would instead exalt “a return to the earth,” celebrating Tunisia and its natural resources. Corriou notes that here the critics’ discourse seems similar to Vichy propaganda, but she argues that by employing such vocabulary the critics contributed to the development of a national consciousness. In turn, the radio played an important role in diffusing these new compositions. Songs broadcast on Tunis-National in 1941 included an anthem glorifying a *fellah* (farmer) by Hadi Labidi, and a song by famous poet Abderrazak Karabaka praising the palm tree, performed by female vocalist Hassiba Rochdi (Corriou n.d.: 13–14).

Critics writing in *Leïla* often praised the Rachidiyya, but they called for a more coherent promotion of Tunisian music in Radio-Tunis’s programming. In 1941 an article

advocated for the creation of a Tunisian radio orchestra (separate from the Rachidiyya), arguing that the radio had already had its own French orchestra since 1938 (Corriou n.d.: 13).⁶⁴ Some writers also criticized the Rachidiyya, arguing that the orchestra had become too elitist. Their articles contributed to debates circulating about the nature of the new Tunisian *aghānī* and Tunisian national culture in general.⁶⁵

In turn, debates about Tunisian music during the 1930s and 1940s contributed to the development of national cultural identity and national consciousness. Although the press was censored, Mamelouk explains that writers used their debates about “culture” to mask their underlying nationalist messages. Indeed, she argues, nationalists used debates about Radio-Tunis, the Rachidiyya, Egyptian music, and other aspects of culture to promote a national music, national theatre, and national literature. Moreover, by raising the issue of Tunisian cultural identity they helped to “write the Nation” and bring it into being (Mamelouk 2007: 279). The cultural debates and criticisms in periodicals such as *Leïla*, however, were primarily fueled by intellectual elites. And although several women writers contributed to *Leïla*, most of the critics were men. Most importantly, it was primarily intellectual elites who could read these debates in French and Arabic press and magazines (Mamelouk 2007: 28–29, 324).

In contrast, the radio was able to reach a larger public, including illiterate men and women. Sales of radios rapidly increased during the 1930s, and between 1936 and 1939, the number of radio sets nearly doubled. Although not many Tunisian Muslims owned radios, they owned proportionally more than Algerian and Moroccan Muslims (Corriou n.d.: 27–32). Corriou’s research also reveals that large groups of men listened together to

⁶⁴ The Tunisian radio orchestra was finally created after independence, in 1958.

⁶⁵ Cf. Corriou (2006: 58) and Mamelouk (2007: 308–319) for a discussion of *Leïla* articles about a national music, including Manoubi Snoussi’s article in June 1938.

radios in public spaces such as cafés and shops. Since women did not listen to radios in these contexts, but rather in domestic spaces, it is difficult to study their listening habits—though neighbors often gathered together to listen to a radio, or to recount to others what they heard on a radio in another location (Corriou n.d.: 16–17; Corriou 2006: 68).⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Corriou suggests that for women secluded in their homes, listening to the radio offered an opportunity to learn more about the outside world.

Thus I propose that while intellectuals and critics were “writing the nation” through their debates about national culture in periodicals such as *Leïla*, Tunisian musicians—especially women vocalists—contributed to nationalist fervor amongst a broader public by singing, composing, and playing out national identity in their performances of Tunisian music. Although the Rachidiyya’s commission of new *aghānī* was not nationalist per se, the project embodied a discourse similar to that of the *Leïla* critics’ calls for national poetry and music. El-Mahdi notes that the Rachidiyya’s poets and composers “approached their work not so much as a recreation but rather as a duty,” recognizing their responsibility to bring change to Tunisian music (Davis 2004: 97). Sakli also describes these poets as “convinced at once of the nobility and the urgency of their task” (1994: 255–256, quoted in Davis 2004: 97). Moreover, emphasis was placed on creating “Tunisian” songs using Tunisian melodic and rhythmic modes and local dialect. Davis writes that in contrast to *ma’lūf* songs, which used literary Arabic mixed with Tunisian dialect, the new *aghānī* featured various Tunisian dialects, from both rural and urban Tunisia (2009: 197). Although Eastern Arab rhythmic and melodic modes were still employed, effort was made to create distinctly “Tunisian” compositions. Radio

⁶⁶ Corriou notes that certain programs were probably listened to by certain populations. For example, women and workers who did not understand literary Arabic (broadcasted on foreign channels) probably listened to Radio-Tunis, which had programs in Tunisian dialect (Corriou n.d.: 32–33).

audiences in Tunisia subsequently listened to performances of these new *aghānī* by the Rachidiyya Ensemble and its star musicians on the radio—*aghānī* that were later praised as popular classics symbolizing a Golden Age of Tunisian music. At the same time, as noted above, debates about these compositions, the Rachidiyya, and the radio circulated in print and in conversation, further contributing to the development of national culture and national identity.

On the radio, Tunisians also heard the voices of Tunisian and Egyptian announcers, vocalists, and actresses. The presence of the first woman announcer was shocking to many, since her radio speech constituted a form of public exposition. Other social norms proscribing gendered behavior also shifted as women began to attend the cinema. Corriou explains that during the 1930s and 40s attending the cinema became a means of liberation and socialization for many Tunisian women. It presented an occasion to leave the house, to dress up, and to socialize with other women. Moreover, at the cinema women watched films featuring Tunisian and Egyptian actresses and vocalists, who held star status through their success in the cinema and radio. Perhaps the status of these artists was raised through their frequent contact (via film, recordings, and radio) with female audiences. Several of these artists also succeeded in raising the “image” of women artists themselves, such as Umm Kulthum, whose decorous bearing and artistic mastery helped to raise the status of women vocalists throughout the Arab world.

For women vocalists in Tunisia, Radio-Tunis thus offered new opportunities to advance their economic and social status. Although men dominated the administration and membership of Radio-Tunis and the Rachidiyya, both institutions openly solicited women vocalists (Jones 1987: 76). At the Rachidiyya singers and musicians received a

regular stipend, and Radio-Tunis offered a regular income to the greatest singers of the time (Corriou 2006: 61). Both ensembles also offered employment opportunities for women and men vocalists in the chorus, as the new *aghānī* and Rachidiyya ensemble format required a mixed-gender chorus. Since most of these women vocalists came from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, developing a career as an artist provided them a means of economic advancement (Corriou 2006: 61; Danielson 1991; Jones 1987: 76). Some chroniclers also note that at the Rachidiyya, women vocalists such as Saliha and Zohra Faiza learned how to read and to interpret difficult texts in literary Arabic (Corriou 2006: 60).

Corriou suggests that through employment at the Rachidiyya and Radio-Tunis, women vocalists were able to earn their living; they did not have to depend on others for financial support, and therefore they could escape from heavy social pressures. Moreover, some prominent vocalists married wealthy or well-connected men, thereby advancing their social status. For example, following Hassiba Rochdi's divorce from musician Mohamed Triki (who had helped her advance her career as a vocalist), she married an American diplomat, with whom she traveled and later lived in Cairo. Rochdi was among the first Tunisian women vocalists to create a successful career in the Egyptian music and film industry.

Other singers were not as fortunate, and they remained somewhat marginalized as women who worked and performed in public for mixed-gender audiences. And even star vocalists were not entirely immune from social judgment, however: as in Egypt, the most prominent women vocalists were constantly scrutinized in the press (Corriou 2006: 61; Danielson 1991: 301). Yet overall, prominent women vocalists before and after Tunisian

independence probably enjoyed more financial independence, divorced more frequently, and traveled abroad more often than most Tunisian women.

As described in the next sections, efforts by the Rachidiyya and other nationalist reformers to raise the prestige of music making also helped to elevate the status of women vocalists performing with the Rachidiyya and Radio-Tunis. As Jones argues, the Rachidiyya created a new space for respectable Muslim musicians to perform that was public and professional yet nevertheless dignified and refined, and where they also came into contact with other prominent musicians, composers, and poets. (Jones 1987: 76). This advancement for women vocalists, however, did not cause a radical change in public opinion regarding their respectability. Along with other reforms and social transformations, the Rachidiyya's and Radio-Tunis's employment of women vocalists contributed to gradually elevating the prestige of women musicians during the last half of the twentieth century.

The Rachidiyya and respectability

During the 1930s and 1940s many Tunisian writers argued that in order to be promoted as national culture, Tunisian theater, literature, and music needed to be “cleaned up,” or elevated socially and morally. In promoting the *ma'lūf* as the national Tunisian music, the Rachidiyya seized upon a genre that was already associated with a higher status than the commercial musical culture they were reacting against. The *ma'lūf* had been patronized by pious Muslim aristocrats and bourgeois elite, but it was also considered “popular,” or “of the people,” because it was disseminated in Sufi lodges [*zwāya*] among men of all classes. Its Arab-Andalusian legacy, and the fact that it was the

only secular repertory performed in the *zwāya*, further lent the *ma'lūf* social and moral prestige (Davis 2004: 71).

An essential component of the Rachidiyya's project to reform the *ma'lūf* involved other steps to "clean up" musical activity as a whole. As Davis notes, the Rachidiyya discouraged its members and students from performing the *ma'lūf* in the traditional 'vulgar' contexts such as wedding celebrations with their alcohol and cafes with their hashish smokers. (Davis 1996a: 318)

The Rachidiyya also effectively "replaced the commercial imperative of professional musicians," performing in *cafés-chantants* and weddings, by the "moral imperative of dedicated amateurs" (Davis 2004: 97). The Rachidiyya's status as an official association comprised of elite amateurs, *shayūkh*, and renowned musicians lent it further prestige. Subsidized by the government of the Protectorate, its elected president was Mustapha Sfar, the head *shaykh* of the Tunis *medina*.

Moreover, the Rachidiyya attempted to "cut through traditional social taboos on public music-making by providing for the *ma'lūf* an academic status" and a socially respectable performing context, apart from Sufi contexts (Davis 1996a: 318). The Rachidiyya provided for the first time "a public, secular environment for Tunisian music comparable in social status and function to a Western music academy" (Davis 2004: 97). As Jones explains, the Rachidiyya created the opportunity for respectable men and women Muslim musicians to perform in public "without compromising their reputation and good morals" (Jones 1987: 75).

The Rachidiyya's establishment of regularly scheduled performances also served to elevate the prestige of music by formalizing their performances and disciplining the musicians and audience. In opposition to the informal, irregular performances previously

characterizing commercial musical culture in Tunis, the Rachidiyya created a regular rehearsal and performing schedule, including fortnightly public concerts held on Saturday afternoons in the courtyard of the institute. Holding the concerts in the afternoon also served to contrast their propriety with disreputable performances taking place at night. As Muhammad Triki, the first leader of the ensemble, noted, “we go there...as if to mosque” (Guettat 2000: 241–2). This suggests the moral respectability of religion, but also the disciplining, regulating, and modernizing nature of a timetable.

Efforts to notate, systematize, theorize, and standardize the *ma'lūf* by D'Erlanger, Tunisian youth and *shayūkh*, and the Rachidiyya also elevated its status. Such “disciplining” of the *ma'lūf* lent it respectability, by associating it with Western music theory and with ideologies such as modernist-reformism (Bergeron and Bohlman 1992; Turino 2000: 16–17, 106–110). Furthermore, the Rachidiyya emulated Western art music through its conservatory design, formal concert settings, and large ensemble, modeled after Western orchestras. In rehearsals and performance the instrumentalists used notation and were directed by a director with a baton (Davis 2009: 196). Such emblems of (Western) art music thus served to raise the respectability of the *ma'lūf* and Tunisian music.

Moreover, the Rachidiyya, the *ma'lūf*, and the new *aghānī* earned prestige through their associations with nationalist ideologies and the nationalist movement. In order to be promoted as national music, the *ma'lūf* needed to be elevated socially, but it also gained respectability in becoming the national music. In being labeled the “traditional,” “authentic” emblem of Tunisian musical heritage, the *ma'lūf* became the object of preservation efforts and became more respectable than the supposedly foreign

early *aghānī*. In addition, “as the official representative of Tunisian music,” the Rashidiyya presented performances in honor of distinguished national figures and visiting foreign dignitaries, and to mark important events in the nationalist struggle (El-Mahdi 1981: 104–6; cited in Davis 1996a: 318). And as noted above, the Radio’s efforts to broadcast the Rachidiyya’s performances of the *ma’lūf* and the new *aghānī* furthermore promoted these genres as Tunisia’s prestigious national music.

The nationalization of certain Tunisian music genres has had significant implications for women musicians, particularly as it has involved an essential element of Tunisian nationalists’ modernizing ideology: the disciplining of musicking, including the institutionalization of formal music education. Following independence, the Tunisian government’s efforts to promote national music have further helped to elevate the prestige of music and musicians. The government adopted the promotion of the *ma’lūf* as a key component of its modern national cultural policy, and it established several state cultural institutions to that end. Since independence women have developed successful careers as musicians and music teachers particularly by studying at national conservatories and university-level music institutions and by performing in formal concert-hall or festival contexts.

Following Independence, 1956–1986

In 1956 the new government created the National Conservatory of Music and Dance, using the same building that had housed the French music conservatory.⁶⁷ The curriculum of the National Conservatory of Music included Tunisian, Arab, and Western

⁶⁷ *Al-Ma’had al-watani li’l mūsīqā wa’l raqs; Conservatoire National de Musique et de Danse*. The French conservatory had been founded in 1896.

music instruction and performance. The Tunisian and Arab components of the curriculum were derived from the Rachidiyya Institute, whose teaching methods were also used.

In a presidential decree in 1958 the government initiated a Diploma in Arab music [*“Diplôme de musique arabe”*], which musicians were granted after studying at the Conservatory and passing the national exam. Upon receiving the Diploma, musicians could teach music in public schools and at the Conservatory. The Diploma exam covered Western music theory and Tunisian music genres, modes, and rhythms, as well as those of the Middle East (Davis 2004: 72; Sakli 2008: 23).⁶⁸

All courses at the National Conservatory have been open to both men and women. Women began studying there shortly after it was opened in 1957; Kmar Djaziri Zelfani was one of the first women to enroll. The granddaughter of the former Tunisian ruler, Ahmed Pacha Bey, Zelfani was one of the first four musicians to obtain a Diploma in 1958, the first year that the exam was offered. Mustapha Chelbi notes that Zelfani passed the Diploma exam after studying at the National Conservatory for only one year because of her “natural musical talent,” as well as her previous musical education in the royal palace (Chelbi 2000: 110). A few other aristocratic women enrolled as music students at the National Conservatory in the years immediately following independence, including Zaynab Kushouk, who received her diploma in 1959.

Despite the early presence of these women from noble families, throughout the 1960s and 1970s very few women studied at the National Conservatory of Music.

Violinist Rachid Kouba recalls that when he was studying at the National Conservatory

⁶⁸ At the turn of the twenty-first century, most students take the Diploma exam after studying six or seven years at a conservatory, where they have taken classes on weekday afternoons (after regular school hours) and on Saturdays. Research consultants told me that the exam was notoriously difficult, and that many people failed each year.

between 1968 and 1980, less than 20% of the students were women.⁶⁹ He told me that during this time, becoming a musician was frowned upon:

The people who sent their children to learn music were a cultural elite. Their children came and studied music, but the parents did not want them to become musicians. They came in order to get some culture.⁷⁰

Similarly, when Jones attended classes at the Conservatory during a two-year period in the mid-1970s, she observed that only one Tunisian woman was present. According to Jones, “She said she was taking the classes for her own cultural edification, without any intention to practice music professionally” (1987: 78). When Jones again visited the Conservatory during the 1983–84 session, she found that the program had grown, but that women still accounted for well under 10% of the total number of students.

Official records listing the musicians who passed the Diploma exams (and most likely attended the Conservatory) between 1958 and 2007 indicate that in the 1960s and 1970s women generally accounted for a small percentage of musicians passing the national exam.⁷¹ In the 1980s they accounted for roughly 21% of the total, and in the 1990s, 25% (on average) of the students who passed the exam were women.⁷² By the 2000s, women constituted an average of 40% of the total number of musicians who

⁶⁹ At the Conservatory, Kouba studied Western solfège, Western music history, Western violin, and Western chorale, alongside studies of Tunisian and Arab music, music theory, and music history.

⁷⁰ Interview in Tunis with Rachid Kouba, February 28, 2008. (Unless noted, all other interviews and conversations with research consultants were conducted in Tunisian Arabic, which several consultants frequently mixed with French.) Meanwhile, Sakli (1994) notes that since most professional male musicians were generally from the lower classes, they did not attend formal music institutions such as conservatories until the 1980s or later.

⁷¹ Although I have not been able to locate enrollment registers for the National Conservatory since it opened in 1956, I have obtained records listing the Diploma exam results. I am grateful to Lassad Qariaa, director of the National Conservatory in Tunis in 2007 and 2008, for providing me with these records. Note that the total number of musicians passing the exam fluctuates each year, depending on who decides to take it each year, and how many succeed in passing. Some years the exam is more difficult and less musicians pass it; the following year those who failed may re-take the exam and finally pass it. Thus these records do not reveal how many musicians took the exam, nor do they indicate how many musicians were studying at conservatories but did not take or pass the exam.

⁷² I have calculated the percentage of women (out of the total number of students passing the exam) for each year, and then I have calculated the average of those percentages for each decade.

passed the exam. Thus as the total number of students passing the exam has increased each year (from four in 1958 to 109 in 2007), the percentage of women passing the exam has also increased.

As Kouba explained, however, many of the musicians studying at the Conservatory during the 1960s and 1970s did not subsequently pursue careers in music. This was especially true for women. Kouba told me that of his female classmates, only one of them is still performing as an instrumentalist: Amina Srarfi, who passed the Diploma exam in 1979. He then suggested that many of the women and men who have pursued music careers following their Conservatory studies belong to “musical families.” Amina Srarfi, for example, is the daughter of famous violinist and composer Kaddour Srarfi; Srarfi’s and Kouba’s music-professor colleagues include four brothers: Mohammed, Hicham, Hafedh, and Bassam Makni. In many of these cases musical dynasties are traced not only through kinship ties but through musical apprenticeships as well. The present director of the Rachidiyya, Zied Gharsa, for example, studied with his father, the late Tahar Gharsa, who studied with *ma’lūf shaykh* Khemais Tarnane.

Rachid Kouba noted that in his family, he and all three of his siblings have pursued careers as performers and/or music teachers—primarily in Western music. His younger brother, for example, studied violin and now performs as a professional violist in Switzerland. Rachid himself is an active conductor and performing violinist; he also holds a permanent post as professor of Western violin at the Higher Institute of Music in Tunis. His sisters, however, have pursued careers teaching rather than performing. One sister studied piano, cello, and pedagogy and now teaches music in France. His older sister studied piano and now teaches music in *lycées* [high schools] in Tunis. Kouba

explained his sister's decision to teach rather than perform as based on her having small children.

Into the 1980s, then, small but increasing numbers of women studied music at the National Conservatory. But few of these women pursued careers in music, and if they did, they mostly pursued careers as music teachers, not as performers (Sakli 1997).

According to Chelbi, Kmar Zelfani was the first Tunisian woman to teach music in the schools, after she received her Diploma in 1958 (Chelbi 2000). Since then, the accepted norm that women music students generally become music teachers and not performers has persisted. Many women musicians explain that teaching is a respectable profession that allows them to work outside the home but still care for their families—whereas performing would require them to find childcare each night they are hired to perform or rehearse. Although most music teachers are not cited in books on Tunisian music history, professors such as Kmar Zelfani have been highly regarded by their students, some of whom work as professional musicians or musicology professors today.⁷³ Over the course of their teaching careers, professors such as Zelfani have taught thousands of young Tunisians. In 2007, women were prominent music teachers at the National Conservatory, at the Higher Institute of Music in Tunis, and in many high schools in and around Tunis.

Rachid Kouba also explained that in the 1970s, earning a Diploma of Arab music was a valuable asset for some men and women. A Diploma was a professional qualification with which one could earn money; even if a woman or man did not earn a

⁷³ One of Zelfani's former students is Dr. Mourad Sakli, who in 2007 was director of the Centre de Musiques Arabes et Méditerranéennes in Sidi Bou Said, and also served as professor of musicology and *oud* at the Higher Institute of Music in Tunis. (Conversation in Sidi Bou Said with Mourad Sakli, January 21, 2008.)

BAC, she or he could become a teacher and civil servant of the state.⁷⁴ With that position came a good salary and respectable social status. Kouba explains that his father was thus “very happy” for his sister when she earned her Diploma, and when she became a professor at a *lycée*.⁷⁵

The founding of the National Conservatory not only represented the new Tunisian government’s efforts to institutionalize, nationalize, modernize, and reform national culture. It also elevated the status of music and opened new avenues for women’s public participation in music. By instituting the Diploma system, moreover, the government created a qualified pool of music teachers to instruct Tunisian music in public schools as universal public education and music education spread throughout the nation (Jones 1987; Chelbi 2000). As music students and music teachers, women became key actors in the government’s program for promoting “national Tunisian music.”

The Radio Ensemble (1958) and women vocalists

As noted above, women musicians were also prominent performers on Tunisian radio. In 1958 the Tunisian government created a national Radio Ensemble; subsequently, the growing impact of the Tunisian radio (and later television, after the late 1960s) generated a new generation of musicians who helped the Tunisian *ughniyya* become a dominant music genre in Tunisia (Sakli 2008: 23). Some of the women vocalists who became media stars after independence include Oulaya, Naama, Choubeila Rached, Zouhaira Salem, Soulef, Safoua, Safia Chamia, and Aicha, among others. Their careers were also promoted by recording companies such as Ennagham in Tunisia, as

⁷⁴ Following the French education system, students take the BAC (a series of exams in multiple subjects) following their last year of high school. The BAC is very important in Tunisia, particularly as a symbol of social status; students must take the exam to receive a high-school diploma and to study at university.

⁷⁵ Interview in Tunis with Rachid Kouba, February 28, 2008.

well as by other French companies specializing in music recording and distribution (Ibid.: 24).

Yet despite the success of these artists, Tunisian critics have described the years between 1960 and 1980 as a period of decline for Tunisian music. During this time Egyptian music recordings, films, and radio continued to dominate media across the Arab world; Tunisian audiences embraced Egyptian music. Indeed the Tunisian Radio Ensemble was modeled after Egyptian broadcasting ensembles and looked primarily to Egypt for its sources and models (Davis 2004: 99; Davis and Jankowsky 2005: 78). According to Davis, its agenda largely involved accompanying solo vocalists in their performances of popular Egyptian and Tunisian songs. The Radio Ensemble also expanded the Rachidiyya ensemble format to include European and electric instruments (from the late 1960s). Although the personnel of both ensembles frequently overlapped, after 1958 the Rachidiyya ceased to give regular broadcasts. Instead, into the early 1980s the Radio Ensemble dominated the production of new Tunisian songs (Davis 2004: 99).

Until the 1990s the instrumentalists performing in the Radio and Rachidiyya ensembles were men: women attained successful music careers with these ensembles only as prominent vocalists. During this time the image of women vocalists was improving, although a stigma still surrounded the ambiguous social status of women performers. On one hand, in the 1960s and 1970s artists such as Umm Kulthum and Fairouz helped to elevate the image of Arab women vocalists—through their decorous off-stage behavior, their statue-like manner of keeping their bodies still while performing, and their associations with nationalist and Arab-nationalist sentiment. On the other hand, some Tunisian women vocalists performing during this time were disowned from their

families for working as professional musicians, and many confronted the stereotype that women vocalists needed to have sexual relations with powerful men in the music business in order to achieve success.⁷⁶ They thus encountered sexual harassment within the music business, and perceptions among other Tunisians that they were loose women (Jones 1987: 79–80; Sakli 1994: 278–279; Lengel 2000: 352–354). Jones notes that the Rachidiyya’s efforts to solicit women vocalists in the 1970s included assurances for families that probably reflected such “misgivings about the moral implications” of a musical career for a woman among the general population (Jones 1987: 79). In searching for singers, and “eager to disarm parental reluctance to let their daughters participate” in the ensemble, Muhammad an-Nayfr stated in 1975:

The Rachidiyya is prepared to extend to every such talent a maximum of material and moral encouragement, as well as a guarantee for the safeguarding of good morals and the preservation of a virtuous reputation.
(Khanisi 1975: 15, quoted by Jones 1987: 79)

The Ministry of Culture (1961) and national cultural institutions

In 1961 the government created the Ministry of Culture and Heritage Preservation. The Ministry was divided into several specialized departments: the Department of Music and Popular Arts was directed by Salah al-Mehdi, who in 1949 had replaced Mohamed Triki as director of the Rachidiyya. The Ministry’s responsibilities included “cultivating the national cultural heritage; providing education in all aspects of that heritage; and forging relations with foreign and international organizations” (Davis 2004: 72). As noted above, the Tunisian nationalists were similar to postcolonial reformers in other regions confronting the paradox of nationalism and cultural reform: they simultaneously needed to cultivate an indigenous cultural identity while also playing

⁷⁶ Conversation in Tunis with Soulef, April 26, 2008.

out their modern national identity for a larger international community (Turino 2000: 15–16).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the Ministry of Culture and the Department of Music created several international summer music festivals, including the *Festival Internationale de Carthage* and the *Festival Internationale de Hammamat* in 1964. These two summer festivals continue today, hosting local and international artists and local and foreign audiences. They are the two largest festivals held in Tunisia: the Carthage festival takes place in the restored Roman amphitheatre of Carthage, which seats 7500; the other is held in Hammamat, a famous resort town on the eastern coast of Tunisia located within an hour's drive from Tunis. The Ministry also founded the first national festival of *ma'lūf* in 1967; held in Testour, it has increasingly invited ensembles from other parts of North Africa (Davis 2004: 75). In 1972 the Ministry launched the Monastir summer festival. In 1970, the Ministry launched the summer music festival at Tabarka (a northwestern coastal town), which in the early 2000s hosted festivals of jazz, world music, *rai*, and Latin music.

The Ministry of Culture also created several national ensembles, such as the Tunisian Symphony Orchestra [*L'Orchestre symphonique tunisien*] in 1969. In its early years, the Symphony Orchestra comprised many foreign musicians, including Italians and Bulgarians, and its first music director (Jean-Paul Nicollet) was French. In 1979 Nicollet was replaced by the current director, Ahmed Achour. The Symphony Orchestra primarily performs Western classical orchestral repertoire, but it has also performed hybrid compositions by Tunisian composers Salah El Mahdi, Ahmed Achour, Slim Larbi and Ouanès Khligène. Women's participation in the Symphony Orchestra has gradually

increased since 1969. In 2008 I observed that many Tunisian and foreign-born women were playing string instruments in the orchestra. During my fieldwork this was the only prominent mixed-gender ensemble in which more than one or two of the players were women.

In 1963, the Ministry created the National Troupe of Popular Arts, with the mission of preserving and promoting the national folk dance heritage. This ensemble has performed in Tunisia and throughout the world; women have played a significant role as dancers in this troupe. In 1983, the National Troupe of Music [*Firqat Qowmiyya; La troupe national de musique*] was created, but not until the late 1990s did a few women begin to regularly perform as instrumentalists in this prominent ensemble.

As part of its national cultural policy, the new Tunisian government thus created ways to promote and connect Tunisian national culture to international communities by founding international festivals and “national” music and dance ensembles. The content of the national culture the state cultivated, however, was “Tunisian.” Following independence, the government officially designated the *ma’lūf* as the “national cultural heritage.” The Ministry thus promoted the *ma’lūf*, as well as the *aghānī* performed by the Rachidiyya since its founding.⁷⁷ On the contrary, members of the regime and the art music establishment denigrated the *ughniyya* performed during the early twentieth century by Jewish musicians as foreign and corrupt (Davis 2009: 193).

⁷⁷ Meanwhile, in promoting the *ma’lūf* the Ministry took up the Rachidiyya’s project of documenting, notating, and systematizing the *ma’lūf* repertoire. But their project now involved notating and publishing a single, standardized version of the *ma’lūf*. During the 1960s and 1970s the Ministry subsequently published a nine-volume collection of *ma’lūf* and other tunes designated as “*turath*” [heritage], entitled *Al-Turāth al-mūsīqī al-tūnisī* [*Le Patrimoine Musical Tunisien; The Tunisian Musical Heritage*].

The notated, standardized version of the *ma'lūf* was centralized in Tunis and recorded by the Rachidiyya. The Ministry subsequently created cultural houses [*diyār al-thaqāfa*; singular, *dar al-thaqāfa*] and regional music clubs throughout Tunisia where graduates of the Rachidiyya taught others using the standardized *ma'lūf* notations. Davis explains that some of these regional clubs and cultural houses gradually “developed systematic teaching programs along the lines of the National Conservatory; some, such as Sfax and Sousse, became fully fledged regional conservatories offering the entire curriculum up to diploma level.” (Davis 2004: 73). Most regional clubs also hosted their own ensembles; modeled after the Rachidiyya, these ensembles included a mixed-gender chorus in which women participated as vocalists. To encourage and monitor the new amateur ensembles, the Ministry sponsored an annual cycle of competitions and festivals, culminating in the International Festival of the Ma'lūf held in Testour each July (Davis 1997c).

The personal histories of women and men musicians who were youths during the 1960s and 1970s reveal the importance of the new regional music clubs and other government music institutions for cultivating their musical educations. Moreover, Jones suggests that by the 1970s, national institutions for music education had elevated the respectability of music to the extent that women's participation in such institutions was no longer stigmatized. Combined with state reforms for women's rights and changing social norms, such institutions had expanded opportunities for women, particularly women instrumentalists. She states:

Advantages in this vein are multiplied considerably for women who learn to play an instrument or dance and who participate in public performances. This has possibly the most potential of creating a new role for women in music, for it contradicts previous norms. Public performance on instruments, except at gatherings exclusively for

women, has typically been the province of men only. To see a young woman playing an improvised *ūd* solo at a Malouf concert, with a venerable *shaykh* sitting silently next to her, still belies what one has grown accustomed to expect. Also striking is the apparently unstigmatized, unthreatening atmosphere in which these performances take place. Apparently, both the girls' reluctance and their parents' suspicions are allayed by the protective prestige of the school or the Ministry of Culture. Girls are even permitted to travel with their ensembles for festival performances in other cities. (Jones 1987: 79)

Indeed, Jones and Davis noted that more young women were beginning to participate as instrumentalists in the 1970s and early 1980s, particularly within the framework of amateur clubs, conservatories, and school music associations. Although Jones observed that more boys than girls are involved in school and government music programs, girls' participation in school and civic music activities is nevertheless significant and represents a break with earlier traditions (Jones 1987: 78).

The personal recollections of Asmahan Chaari, now the director of the conservatory-educated women's ensemble *Tanit*, show how individual women musicians took advantage of new institutions for formal music education and performance to develop experience as instrumentalists. They also demonstrate how the government's national culture program succeeded in diffusing Tunisian music and culture to youth throughout the country, in schools, civic associations, regional clubs, and cultural houses. In recounting her first experiences as a music student, Chaari told me,

I started studying music at age seven. I began on classical piano; my teacher was from Czechoslovakia, and he came and gave me lessons at home. Then in high school I joined the *Jeunes scolaire*, or *Shebab madrasiyya*, an association of students for cultural and sport activities. ... This was 1961 or 1962. There wasn't piano at the high school, so I did accordion – but it didn't have any quarter tones for playing *musiqqa sharqiyya*.

In 1966 or 67, when I was 16 or 17 years old, we were playing in a *firqa* [in the *Shebab madrasiyya*], and by chance there was someone playing double bass. ... During the pause, I tried out the bass – and I began playing immediately! Nobody taught me how to play notes or chords or anything – I was playing immediately. The

professor entered and said, ‘what are you doing?’ –‘*Pardon, monsieur, semahni, semahni* [Pardon, sir, excuse me].’ He told me, ‘No, no, play! Play!’ He told the rest of the *firqa*, ‘Play.’ He told me, ‘Give me the accordion,’ and he said, ‘Play the contrebass with them.’ Immediately, by ear, I played with them. That was Wednesday. That Saturday we had a performance, and I played bass onstage. So that’s how I began playing bass, by ear.

Then, when I came to Tunis for my university studies, there was a Polish professor, who was the first bassist in the Orchestre Symphonique de Tunis. So I took lessons with him for three years, at the Conservatoire de Musique on *Nahaj Baris* [Avenue de Paris]. I also studied at the national sports institute. ...I did Western bass at the conservatory, and then I adapted to Arab music.

I played [bass] with the *Shebab madrasiyya* in Sfax, and with the *Firqat Dar Thaqafa Ibn Khaldoun* in Tunis.⁷⁸ ...This was between 1969 and 1973, when I was a [university] student in Tunis. ...I was the only woman [to play in troupes like this].⁷⁹

In her narrative Chaari perceives herself as a pioneer. She told me,

I am the first woman in Africa to play the double bass. ...I started in 1961. Since I was in high school, I was the only woman playing in public. ...And at the *dar thaqafa* [cultural house] I was the only girl playing.

In our interview I then asked her what the ambiance was like for her during that time, as one of the few women playing an instrument. She responded,

It was very good. I was considered... Well, it’s normal that everyone was looking at me, a woman, who’s playing double bass, and a small woman—understand? I wasn’t very tall, I was very small, and I was playing double bass: this was something very bizarre.

And to begin with, the double bass wasn’t very present in Arab orchestras at that time. ...There were very few men playing bass at that time. Even now, in Tunis there are only six or seven men who are double bassists.

I then asked her, “were people saying that it was ‘*aīb* [disreputable] for women to play in public then?”

Yes, for women it was ‘*aīb*, but me, they adored me very much. And at the same time I was dancing on stage—I did dance and music performances. (But of course not at the same time as I was playing bass!)

⁷⁸ The “Ibn Khaldoun” Cultural House Ensemble. (She explained that other famous musicians also came out of this ensemble, including Lotfi Boushnak.)

⁷⁹ Interview in Tunis with Asmahan Chaari, June 20, 2008.

So I did not have problems. ...Although I know that other women had problems with their fathers, etc.

My father (God bless him) encouraged me. My brother, Habib, is a great *cinéaste* [film maker]. He was the first film actor in Tunisia. So he encouraged me to do sports, music, and dance. And that's how I've become a specialist in dance. I received my diploma in sports (physical education). I specialized in dance because there are sports and there is music, and between the two is dance.

When I asked Chaari if her family members were also musicians, she replied,

No, music lovers. My father was an amateur actor, but he was also a music lover. He bought me all of my instruments: at home I had three pianos, two accordions, a drum set, a violin, and two guitars. ...He wanted all of his sons to play, and his daughters to play. And it was my father who pushed me to do music. He always encouraged me and I never encountered problems, neither in doing sports or music.in other families, it was impossible that their daughters would play music, and in public... But for me, no. I didn't have any problems.⁸⁰

Chaari's story reveals the important role the family environment played in permitting and encouraging women (and men) to study and pursue careers in music and other arts. The family's socioeconomic situation and interest in the arts also served a role, as it did for Rachid Kouba and his siblings. Her narrative also demonstrates how individual women acted as pioneers in playing out, even while they were the only women performing as instrumentalists at that time. In Chaari's narrative, her father pushed her to play music; but other women were forbidden from performing in public. As noted above, Jones found that women's participation as professional musicians—particularly as vocalists—was still morally suspect during the 1970s and early 1980s (Ibid.).

Alongside Asmahan Chaari, several other pioneering women instrumentalists began performing in public with mixed-gender ensembles during the 1970s and early 1980s, thereby breaking social taboos and entering a field dominated by men. Pianist Semira Esseghir (née Attia) was among the first few women studying at the National

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Conservatory (in Tunis) in the late 1960s. Like several other musicians, she grew up in a family of music lovers, and her father was a musician. Originally from Sousse, Esseghir began studying violin, piano, and *'ūd* at the age of six. In 1971 she was awarded First Prize in piano performance at the Conservatory, the same year in which she began to teach piano there. Esseghir subsequently became a member of the National Symphony Orchestra, and she has since performed numerous recitals as soloist and accompanist.⁸¹

Violinist Amina Srarfi has become another of the most prominent women instrumentalists in contemporary Tunisia. In the 1970s Srarfi was a student at the National Conservatory, where she studied both Western and Arab music theory and violin. Born in 1958, she earned her *Diplôme de musique arabe* in 1979, and in 1985 she was the first woman to win first prize in violin performance at the National Conservatory. Srarfi's father, Kaddour Srarfi, was a famous violinist and composer during the mid-twentieth century; throughout her career she has been known as "the daughter of Kaddour Srarfi," but she has also worked hard to further his legacy and promote concerts of his compositions. In 1982, Amina Srarfi became one of the first women members of the National Symphony Orchestra. In the early 1980s she also became known as a vocalist and as conductor of the ERTT (Tunisian radio) children's chorus.⁸²

A few other women studying at the National Conservatory in the early 1980s have subsequently established careers as professional instrumentalists and music teachers, including Sana Slimane (violin), Senda Zinelabidine (*'ūd*), Leila Habashi (*'ūd*), Saloua Hafaiedh (*'ūd*), Emna Louz (*qanūn*), Hela Negra (*'ūd*), and Hinda Belhani (violin).⁸³ In the 1990s these women became some of the first participants in the women's ensembles

⁸¹ Interview in Tunis with Semira Esseghir, April 18, 2008.

⁸² Interviews in Tunis with Amina Srarfi: January 16, 2008 and February 16, 2008.

⁸³ Interview in Tunis with Henda Belhani, September 16, 2008.

formed by Amina Srarfi, Semira Esseghir, and Asmahan Chaari. Prominent women vocalists who became stars during the 1980s include Amina Fakhret, Monia Bejaoui, Sofia Sadok, Dhikra Mohamed, Nawal Ghachem, and Latifa Arfaoui, among others (Sakli 2008: 24). Following their pioneering efforts, increasing numbers of women began studying music, especially at the newly established Higher Institute of Music.

The Higher Institute of Music (1982)

In his recent summary of Tunisian music history for the Ministry of Culture's website, Mourad Sakli states that the period from 1956 to 1986:

...was propitious concerning the creation of formal music institutions, as well as the "nationalization" of others. However, we may argue that above all, the creation of the Higher Institute of Music in 1982 constitutes a key factor reflecting the prevalence of music and changing society. (Sakli 2008: 24-25)

In 1982, the Higher Institute of Music in Tunis [*Al-Ma'had al-'alī li'l mūsīqā; L'Institut Supérieur de Musique*], or ISM, became the first higher-education institution in Tunisia to offer university-level instruction in music and musicology. Before its founding, musicians usually attended the Rachidiyya or the National Conservatory, but they could not receive a university degree in music. They held Diplomas in Arab music and, in order to practice as professional musicians, "professional cards." As noted above, public-school music teachers were required to hold a Diploma of Arab music. But Tunisians wishing to study musicology did so abroad, primarily in France (Kamoun 2009: 70).

ISM was created under both the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Higher Education. The founder and first director of ISM (from 1983 to 1998) was Mahmoud Guettat. Guettat is considered the founder of Tunisian musicology due to his leadership at

ISM and his extensive research on Arab-Andalusian music; accordingly, he was the first musicologist to obtain status as “full professor” in Tunisia.

In 1999 two other Higher Institutes of Music were created in Sfax and Sousse, the second- and third-largest cities in Tunisia, respectively; according to Kamoun, these have become “the centers of musical life in their respective regions” (Ibid.). Other university-level music institutions have been created recently in the regions of Gabes, Gafsa, and El-Kef (Ibid.; Sakli 2008: 25).

The founding of the first ISM marks a momentous point in the history of music education in Tunisia, and it has been especially important for women’s participation as instrumentalists, musicologists, and music professors. Under Guettat’s direction, the first ISM was established with a particularly strong emphasis on musicology. In addition to some foreign professors, the professors hired at ISM include Tunisian researchers who have pursued musicology studies in France. As stated in its official Guide, the mission of ISM is:

- (1) to promote musical culture and develop musical creation and experimental research;
- (2) to contribute to the conservation of the Tunisian musical heritage, its study and diffusion;
- (3) to improve the musical quality and musical standards in Tunisia and to provide the country with qualified specialists in various fields;
- (4) to provide in-service training and retraining for those involved in musical production and elaboration.⁸⁴

Although ISM’s primary function is to instruct teachers and musicians in Tunisian and Arab music, it has also expanded opportunities for Tunisian students wishing to pursue musicology and other types of music study besides music performance and music education. As of 2008, the ISM in Tunis allows students to specialize in musicology,

⁸⁴ *Al-Ma’had al-‘alī li’l mūsīqā: Al-Dalīl*. Tunis, 1994. The guide in Arabic also includes shorter texts in French and English; I located it in the library of the IRMC, Tunis.

performance (Arab or Western music), jazz, conducting, and sound engineering production. It offers courses ranging from Arab and Western music history and theory (including jazz), to Tunisian folk music and ethnomusicology, sociology/anthropology, instrument building and repair, information technology, foreign languages, and human rights (ISM guide, 1994). Recently the ISM in Tunis began offering a doctorate in musicology.

As Sakli suggests, the founding of the first ISM in 1982 is not only important for the history of music education and musicology in Tunisia; the establishment of a national institution for university-level music education valorized the importance of music in Tunisian society. The founding of ISM acknowledged music as a valuable subject of study and as a potential career path for young Tunisians. Until 1999, it centralized post-secondary music education in Tunis and offered a Tunisian complement to European studies in musicology. According to ISM professor Rachid Kouba, music education subsequently become democratized: whereas in the 1960s and 1970s most conservatory students were children of the cultural elite, by the 2000s youth from various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds were attending the ISM in Tunis.⁸⁵ As an extracurricular activity, studying music at a conservatory requires children and parents to invest money and time over the course of several years. But to enter ISM (in 2008), students only had to pass an exam, which tested their music skills but was not necessarily biased towards students who had already studied at a conservatory. At the same time, as the prestige of the music profession has increased, youth from middle-class and upper-middle class families are not only studying music but are establishing careers as

⁸⁵ Interview in Tunis with Rachid Kouba, February 28, 2008; Conversation with Sirine Ouesleti, August 3, 2008.

professional musicians. In this way the status of the profession has been further elevated and is no longer associated primarily with lower-class musicians.

This democratization of music education is correlated with the increasing participation of women in music. In its early years, the ISM in Tunis hosted a small number of students and professors, very few of whom were women. But as the overall number of students has steadily increased, the percentage of women students has also increased. In the academic year 1982–83, only 7% of the enrolled students were women; in 1992–93, 15.25% were women, and in 2002–03, 32% of all students (including undergraduate and graduate students) were women. By 2007–08, 34.33% of the student body, except for the doctoral students, were women, as were several professors.⁸⁶

After “The Change” (1987)

On November 7, 1987 Zine El Abidine Ben Ali took over the government from President Bourguiba in a peaceful coup. Following “The Change” [*al-Taghrīr; le Changement*], the government issued a series of cultural policy reforms that contributed to decentralizing and revitalizing Tunisian music. In her research on the *ma'lūf* during the early 1980s, Davis notes that many musical commentators attribute such new approaches towards music not only to cultural policies passed after 1987, but to general shifts towards individualization and diversification that had begun in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During that time several musicians and critics lamented that the *ma'lūf* had become a museum piece; their revitalization efforts included returning to the use of traditional *ma'lūf* instruments, oral instruction methods, and soloistic ensemble formats (Davis 2004: 100, 105). Sakli notes that another step towards decentralization was taken

⁸⁶ I am grateful to ISM director Mohamed Zinelabidine and the administrative staff at ISM for providing me with these statistics in 2008.

in the early 1980s, when the opening of private recording studios ended the monopoly of the state radio station (Sakli 1994: 340–42).

Yet the state's reformed cultural policies also helped to create a new climate of revitalized, diversified music making. These policies correlated with global trends towards privatization (following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989), neo-liberalism, and economic globalization. In 2000, President Ben Ali delivered a speech in which he applied neo-liberal ideals to cultural policy. He declared that the state would increase the Ministry of Culture's budget, but he framed this by stating that in the new market economy, "culture belongs to everyone; its promotion is a collective responsibility" (Davis 2004: 106). He discussed the important role of production and marketing, and he encouraged private businesses and investors to take interest in the cultural sector and "lend support to the national effort" (Ibid.).

Since the 1980s state reforms and trends within the art music community of Tunis have been significant factors encouraging women's increased participation as musicians and particularly as instrumentalists. Individual women have been at the forefront of these changes, including the creation of private conservatories, the revitalization of Tunisian art music, the valorization of instrumental music performance, and the creation of conservatory-educated women's ensembles. It was especially during the 1990s that increasing numbers of women began playing as instrumentalists in public—with women's ensembles and with mixed-gender ensembles, and as successful artists in the transnational world music industry.

Women were prominent among the first musicians to create their own conservatories and ensembles during the late 1980s and 1990s. Violinist Amina Srafi, for

example, was among the first to open a private conservatory in 1988 (*Conservatoire Kaddour Srarfi*), which she named after her father. Many other private music schools and conservatories have since opened in Tunis and in other urban areas, especially in wealthy neighborhoods. Prominent musicians can earn a decent portion of their income by teaching part-time at these conservatories and/or by founding one in their name. Teaching at a conservatory has also become an important means of income for many music students as they complete their studies at ISM. Many private conservatories offer the same program of study (leading to the Diploma exam) as the state conservatories; but other conservatories include courses in Western music and jazz. Amateur musical clubs have also been founded; some are attached to a conservatory, while others are organized by a group of friends hosting the club in their homes (Davis 2002).

The increased number of private music schools and clubs is correlated with an increasing interest in music among the public during this period (Sakli 2008: 27). And as Tunisia's middle class has grown, so has middle class Tunisians' participation in music. Although some families consider studying music to be merely an extracurricular activity, perhaps as a class or status symbol, many conservatory students now continue to study music at the university level, and even pursue it as a career or serious hobby that they perform in public. As noted above, music education has become diffused and democratized as more public schools have offered music classes. In order to enter an ISM and eventually teach music in schools, a Diploma (and thus a seven-year conservatory education) is no longer needed. Thus even students from various socioeconomic backgrounds—and in several regional areas—can attend an ISM and potentially become music teachers.

Since the 1990s the number of state regional conservatories and Higher Institutes of Music throughout the country has risen, and the government has recently decreed that Music could be a subject option on the BAC exam taken by all graduating high-school students. I suspect that such changes have further served to democratize, diffuse, and lend prestige to Tunisian music and music education, and thereby elevated the status of musicians and music teachers. I also suspect that the increasing number of music students has led to an increased demand for teachers, and that more teaching jobs might be available for women musicians. Indeed many of the women music students I met at ISM Tunis were teaching at a state or private conservatory while studying for their Bachelor's or Master's degree in music, and those with Bachelor's degrees were also training to obtain the new certification required to teach in public high schools.

Besides state reforms, trends within the music community during this time have had important ramifications for women's public participation in music. In the 1980s and 1990s, several high-profile musicians began a popular revival of the *ma'lūf*.⁸⁷ For some musicians and scholars, this also involved a revived interest in culture during the Protectorate, including the early twentieth-century *ughniyya*. Their efforts included scholarly works concerning the *ughniyya* and the early recording industry (such as Sakli 1994 and Moussali 1992), the reissue of vintage recordings, and several popular histories that are largely journalistic and biographical in nature (Davis 2009: 197–198).

These and other studies were associated with the inaugural conference of the Centre des Musiques Arabes et Méditerranéennes (CMAM) in 1992. Located in Sidi Bou Said on the grounds of Baron D'Erlanger's palace, CMAM houses the National Sound Archives, an instrument collection, D'Erlanger's art collection, and a luthier's workshop

⁸⁷ Cf. Davis 2002 and 2004 for further discussion of the *ma'lūf* revival.

for the restoration and production of traditional Tunisian instruments. Although funded by the state, CMAM represents another example of decentralizing Tunisian national music—particularly in its efforts to offer a diverse offering of musical performances. In recent years CMAM has organized several annual music workshops and festivals, including festivals for Tunisian music, world music, and jazz, that are co-funded by the state and private sponsors. The Center’s presentation of performances by international artists is complemented by its promotion of Tunisian musicians during the annual festival “Musicians in Tunis.”

Another trend of the 1990s has had important ramifications for women instrumentalists: the increasing valorization of instrumental music performance. In Arab cultures, vocal performance has traditionally been considered more prestigious than instrumental performance. This is partly due to religious beliefs favoring the voice over instruments, and also because poetry and vocal music are considered more important than instrumental music.⁸⁸ One rarely attends concerts of purely instrumental music, and in most music performances a solo vocalist takes center stage.

In the late 1980s and 1990s in Tunis, however, several musicians attempted to elevate the status of solo instrumental performance. They also aimed to raise solo instrumental performance to virtuosic levels. They composed instrumental pieces themselves, and performed in intimate concert-hall contexts. Their efforts extended from the trends favoring individualism and smaller, soloistic ensembles that Davis observed during the late 1970s and 1980s. These instrumentalists included *‘ūd* players and

⁸⁸ C.f. al-Faruqi 1985 for a concise analysis of Islamic views on music. C.f. Racy 2003 regarding the *tarab* music culture of Arab urban areas.

composers such as Ali Sriti, Mourad Sakli, Mohamed Zinelabidine, Anouar Brahem, and Yusra Dhehbi (Sakli 2008: 27).⁸⁹

It is only within the past decade or so that Tunisian festival organizers have presented concerts featuring instrumental music ensembles without vocalists. Recently, entire festivals have been created to highlight instrumental performance. These include the “Young Virtuosos” festival at CMAM, featuring young solo instrumentalists from Tunisia and Europe, and the “Instrumental Music Week” festival, directed by a private association. In 2008 the Instrumental Music Week festival featured ensembles from Tunisia, Turkey, and Europe. Like other jazz and Western classical music festivals in Tunisia, these festivals take place during the winter and are primarily sponsored by private businesses, such as telephone companies Tunisie Telecom or Tunisiana. These festivals not only showcase instrumental performance but also provide a new space for performances by new ensembles and instrumentalists, some of whom include women musicians. At “Young Virtuosos” in 2008, for example, many of the foreign instrumentalists were women; although most of the Tunisian soloists were men, a young woman, Abir Ayadi, presented a solo *‘ūd* recital. In 2008 Ayadi was a student at ISM Sfax, but she frequently played *‘ūd tūnsī* in the Rachidiyya Ensemble’s monthly performances in Tunis. Many consider her a rising star of the instrumental Tunisian music scene.

Above all, the creation of conservatory-educated women’s ensembles has opened new avenues for women’s performance as instrumentalists. After becoming one of the first to open a private conservatory, in 1992 Amina Srarfi created *El ‘Azifet*, the first contemporary women’s ensemble in Tunisia comprised of conservatory-educated women

⁸⁹ Interview in Tunis with Senda Zinelabidine, June 19, 2008.

musicians. During the 1990s, three former members of *El 'Azifet*—Semira Esseghir, Asmahan Chaari, and Nejwa Kraiem—founded their own women's ensembles: *Taqasim*, *Tanit*, and *Angham Hawwa*, respectively. These orchestras still exist today; like *El 'Azifet*, they have primarily performed at festival concerts in Tunisia and abroad. The agency and success of conservatory-educated women's ensembles, their level of educational and cultural capital, and state support for their performances has greatly elevated their prestige. Indeed many research consultants suggested to me that *El 'Azifet*'s founding in 1992 constitutes the starting point for women instrumentalists' success in Tunisia.

Alongside the founding of *El 'Azifet* and subsequent women's ensembles, by the mid-1990s a few women instrumentalists were performing Tunisian and Arab music in prominent mixed-gender ensembles. Cellist Nejwa Ben Arafa and *'ūd* player Yusra Dhehbi were among the first women to regularly perform as instrumentalists in the Rachidiyya Ensemble, during the 1990s; *qanūn* player Khadija el-Afrit performed in the Rachidiyya from 1999 to 2001, before she left to study musicology in Paris. In the early 2000s, violinist Saba Slimane and Khadija el-Afrit were the first women instrumentalists to perform in the *Firqat Qowmiyya* (National Troupe) and the radio and television orchestra (known as *Firqat al-Idā'a*, or the Radio ensemble).⁹⁰

Yet Davis notes that despite the pioneering efforts of these musicians, and the equal education opportunities enjoyed by women, in the late 1990s the prominent Tunisian and Arab-music ensembles in Tunisia were still dominated by men. The few women musicians who perform with these prominent ensembles were—and still are—a significant minority. In December 1994, for example, the Rachidiyya Ensemble consisted

⁹⁰ Interview with Khadija El-Afrit, Jan 31, 2008; Conversation with Saba Slimane, May 17, 2008.

of twenty-nine players, two of whom were Yusra Dhehbi and Nejwa Ben Arafa; in 2001, Khadija El-Afrit was only one woman in a twenty-three-member instrumental ensemble.⁹¹ During my fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, the Rachidiyya alternately (depending on the month) comprised zero, one ('ūd player Myriam Lakhoua), or two (Lakhoua and 'ūd player Abir Ayadi) women instrumentalists. The Tunisian radio ensemble did not include any women instrumentalists, nor did the ensemble created for the annual Tunisian Song Festival in March 2008.

Several factors affect women's participation in these prominent ensembles, including the ensembles' hiring methods. Davis explains that in 1992, when the Ministry of Culture appointed the retired director of the Radio ensemble (Muhammad Belalgia) as director of the Rachidiyya, musicians of the Radio ensemble replaced the Rachidiyya's former players, mostly conservatory professors and students (Davis 2002). Many of the same musicians still perform in the three dominant Tunisian music ensembles: the Radio ensemble, the Rachidiyya ensemble, and the *Firqat Qowmiyya*. This could partly explain why musicians who are new to the Tunis art-music scene (such as women) have difficulty infiltrating these ensembles. Recent trends favoring smaller ensembles may have also reduced employment opportunities for women instrumentalists. The next chapter will discuss additional factors affecting women's participation in mixed-gender ensembles.

Women musicians and the transnational world music market

Lastly, since the 1990s the diversification of musical styles in Tunisia and the expansion of the transnational world music industry have opened new avenues for Tunisian women's performance. New technologies and Internet social networking sites

⁹¹ The chorus of the Rachidiyya Ensemble, however, has always included women. I am grateful to the Manager of the Rachidiyya Ensemble for providing me with these rosters from the 1990s.

have created multiple ways for musicians to promote their compositions, recorded live performances, and ensembles. Women vocalists such as Sonia Mbarek and Amina Annabi (known as “Amina”) have earned recognition in the world-music market, as has male *‘ūd* player and composer Anouar Brahem. Perhaps the most internationally renowned Tunisian female singer, Amina Annabi has collaborated with world music stars such as Nusrat Ali Fateh Khan. She has spent her entire career in Paris, and was the first Arab to represent France in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1991 (Davis and Jankowsky 2005: 79–80).

Several Tunisian vocalists—such as Latifa (Arfaoui), Dhikra Mohammed, and Saber Rebai—have earned fame in the Arab pop music market by producing recordings in Cairo and singing in Egyptian dialect. Other Tunisian women vocalists who dominate the airwaves in Tunisia include Sofia Sadoq and Amina Fakhel. In recent years the Arab music market has diversified; besides Cairo, other centers of production include Beirut and the Gulf. Popular Arab radio and television music stations thus present hits not only from Egypt, but from Morocco, Lebanon, and the Gulf as well (Ibid.; Frishkopf 2006).

Other women musicians have assumed agency and have contributed to world music performance scenes. In 1995 Mouna Amari participated in the Last Caravan festival in Milan, which included women vocalists from fifteen African countries. In a resulting recording, *Donna Africa* (1996, Caravanes Productions UC 001, Italy), Amari sang duets with Algeria’s Houria Aichi and Senegal’s Sarah Carrere (Davis and Jankowsky 2005). When I interviewed Amari in 2008 she was working as director of the

Regional Conservatory in Sousse, and she was also actively practicing *oud* and composing for summer festival collaborations with Italian musician Mauro Pagani.⁹²

Since 2000, *qanun* player and ISM professor Khadija El-Afrit has recorded for several CDs distributed in the world music market. She has performed on the Last Caravan CD of *Donna Africa*, the CD “*Médina*” with Pino Daniele in Italy, and on the 2009 compilation CD “*Airs de Méditerranée*,” and with a label in Paris she has created several solo recordings of Tunisian and Egyptian songs for children. El-Afrit has performed frequently in Paris and Europe with North African, Middle Eastern, and Western/hybrid music ensembles—including *L’Orchestre pour la Paix* [the Orchestra for Peace] in 2002, 2003 (for UNESCO), 2004 (for the United Nations in Geneva), and 2005.

Despite the successes of these individual musicians, Tunisian music has received very little recognition by the world music industry. Davis and Jankowsky suggest that the “Tunisian regime’s nationalist cultural policies are partly responsible for this void” (2005: 76). Following independence and state efforts to linguistically and culturally unify Tunisia through the promotion of the Arabic language, Berber languages have mostly disappeared. Bourguiba’s regime also suppressed the activities of Sufi brotherhoods and practitioners of *stambeli*, the spirit possession music associated with descendents of sub-Saharan slaves. As Davis and Jankowsky argue,

... [Tunisia’s] geographic location enables its elites to emphasize certain historical connections (such as its proximity to modern Europe in ancient Andalusia), while suppressing others (its ties to the Sahara region and the African continent as a whole). (2005: 76)

Yet since the late 1980s and 1990s President Ben ‘Ali’s regime has been more receptive to offering performances of “world” music (such as Tunisian *stambeli*) in an effort to

⁹² Interview in Sousse with Mouna El-Amari, January 28, 2008.

attract cultural tourism. Jankowsky argues that this “festivalization of cultural performance,” however, serves to further reinforce notions of *stambeli* and other folk musics as “traditional,” backwards, and exotic, meant for cultural display (2004, 2006). The *ma'lūf* and certain kinds of Tunisian *aghānī* are still considered the only genres considered sufficiently “modern” and respectable to be promoted as national/Tunisian music.

Even though the popular music genre *mizwid*, for example, became the highest-selling Tunisian music genre in the country by the mid-1980s, it is only recently becoming recognized as an important musical genre in Tunisia. Due to its historical associations with “disreputable” contexts, members of the cultural elite have considered *mizwid* a disreputable genre. The first broadcasting of *mizwid* on national television in 1988 caused outrage and public debate, and the genre is still controversial. *Mizwid* is frequently labeled *shaabi* [“popular”], or of the people; in this case, belonging to urban working-class milieux. Its associations with alcohol, the urban poor, rowdy crowds, sex, prison life, and slavery have tarnished the respectability of the genre and the musicians who perform it (Stapley 2006; Davis and Jankowsky 2005). If women participate in *mizwid*, they do so not as instrumentalists but only as vocalists or as dancers.

Conclusion

The state’s and cultural elite’s valorization of the *ma'lūf* and *aghānī* over other music genres in Tunisia has significantly affected women’s participation in music. The art-music community in Tunis is the primary music scene where women have become recognized as accomplished, respectable musicians. Because women’s music performance in the past has been perceived as morally suspect, contemporary musicians

who wish to be considered respectable must distance themselves from such historical associations.

In the next chapter I focus on the experiences of contemporary women instrumentalists, particularly those performing art music in mixed-gender ensembles rather than women's ensembles. I demonstrate that many women musicians have accessed respectability by presenting themselves as educated, modern musicians who perform Tunisian art music or national *turāth* [heritage] genres. In this way they reflect the discourse nationalist reformers used to create a national music and to elevate the status of music. I also show that while women musicians' success in the Tunisian art music community is still constrained by certain contemporary factors, individual women have effected change themselves by expanding the parameters of women's performance and the roles of women in both the public and private spheres.

Chapter Three

Playing out(side) as women instrumentalists

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the two greatest factors constraining Tunisian women's performance "outside" as instrumentalists were questions of respectability and access to professional training. Women's public participation in music was also limited by their family's permission and social opinion concerning their movement in the public sphere, and by social expectations that women were the primary caretakers of their homes and families. Several recent social and political shifts, however, have dramatically transformed women's participation as instrumentalists in contemporary Tunisia. Since the creation of women's ensembles and the pioneering efforts of women instrumentalists in the early 1990s, women musicians have redefined respectable performance. In 2008, many women told me that their public performances for mixed-gender audiences were not only considered normal [*'ādī*], but were also encouraged and applauded by Tunisian audiences.

Drawing upon the perspectives of several women instrumentalists, in this chapter I demonstrate how they have played out and expanded the parameters of women's performance. In the first part of the chapter, I address four contemporary inter-related changes that have affected women's participation as instrumentalists: the recent success of women's ensembles and their efforts to highlight their respectability, especially as

instrumentalists; changing social opinion related to recent political shifts, which have led many Tunisians to encourage women's performance as instrumentalists; feminist movements and women's enhanced sense of empowerment, whereby some women have chosen music careers over marriage; and women musicians' attempts to continue performing after having children. In some of these cases, women musicians are thus starting to effect change by redefining gender roles in the private sphere as well as the public sphere, although they still face constraints that influence their ability to participate as professional musicians.

In the second part of the chapter, I consider contemporary issues specific to the art music community of Tunis that constrain women's participation as professional instrumentalists. These include perceptions of women's inferior playing abilities, inadequacies of formal conservatory education, and, until recently, women's inability to gain informal performance experience at weddings. Lastly, in the third part I focus on how contemporary women instrumentalists negotiate these constraints when performing with mixed-gender ensembles. These musicians often feel unwelcome and uncomfortable playing in male-dominated ensembles. They also frequently believe that they have been hired to perform as symbols that decorate the ensemble and demonstrate Tunisia's commitment to women's emancipation. Nevertheless, they seek to reclaim and assert their presence as women onstage. As such they attempt to play out and define their identities as women instrumentalists on their own terms.

Contemporary social changes: Highlighting respectability

Since the 1990s, the success of conservatory-educated women's festival ensembles (such as *El 'Azifet* and *Taqasim*) has accorded prestige to women's

performances as instrumentalists. As they have performed at international festivals in Tunisia and abroad, and as their performances have been broadcast on state television, *El 'Azifet* has become a household name. International performances by women's festival ensembles have also been applauded and funded by the government as exemplars of the state's commitment to women's rights.

Beyond their associations with the state, directors and members of these women's ensembles—and other women instrumentalists—have augmented their prestige in several ways. Firstly, individual women musicians have enhanced the positive reputations of women's ensembles and women instrumentalists in general through “their own respectable comportment as public performers” (Lengel 2000: 355). Above all, these musicians have highlighted their educational and cultural capital (their conservatory training and higher-education degrees) and their performance of art music. As noted in the previous chapter, women musicians have earned respectability by playing certain music genres (the *ma'lūf* and other national or art music genres) that are associated with national identity, with art music and formal music education, and with members of the elite social classes. Respectable women also perform in art music contexts (concert halls, festival stages, conservatories) as opposed to other contexts such as weddings, restaurants, and hotels. In stressing their conservatory educations and performance of art music, women instrumentalists and women's ensembles highlight their middle-class backgrounds and distinguish their work from that of other contemporary women performers, such as women's *taqlīdiyya* [traditional] folk music ensembles and other lower-class wedding musicians.

They also stress their education and their performance as instrumentalists so as to distance themselves from the stigma historically associated with women vocalists. *El 'Azifet*, for example, is primarily an instrumental ensemble. When Amina Srarfi directs, she stands in front of the ensemble while conducting and playing her violin. *El 'Azifet* does not often perform songs that feature a solo vocalist; and when the ensemble does, the vocalist remains seated with the rest of the chorus, behind the instrumentalists. I suspect that *El 'Azifet* does not feature a solo vocalist partly so as to distance women's performance from associations with women singers and dancers. The ensemble's name especially reveals the musicians' desire to stress their performance as instrumentalists (*El 'Azifet* literally means "the female instrumentalists").

On one hand, since women's performance as instrumentalists is novel in the Arab-Muslim world, it disrupts conventional gender norms. In her research on percussion instruments in the Middle East, Veronica Doubleday points out that mastery of technology or an instrument is usually the domain of men; in this way women's instrumental performance in Tunisia is perhaps more disruptive than women's vocal performance (1999; 2008). Yet I suggest that women instrumentalists' performances may now be considered more respectable than vocalists' because they have distanced themselves from the stigma attached to vocalists' exhibition of their bodies onstage. As Lucy Green and Beth Abelson Macleod have noted in their research on women musicians in Western Europe and North America, Western women's performance as instrumentalists is perhaps more acceptable than singing because the singer's instrument is her body:

...the body of the woman singer is more on display because the body is the instrument being played. In the case of the instrumentalists, however, an instrument, or 'piece of technology,' mediates between the performer and her audience. (Macleod 2001: 26)

Tunisian women instrumentalists' presence onstage thus differs from that of vocalists because they are seated behind music stands and behind their instruments. The way women instrumentalists present their bodies onstage also serves to negate tinges of illicit sexuality and avoids accusations of disreputability. Musicians in women's ensembles wear beautiful, traditional costumes that are uniform and modest, covering their arms, shoulders, and legs at least to the ankle. They also form part of a collective, rather than exhibiting themselves and attracting attention as a solo vocalist in front of an ensemble and audience.⁹³

In contemporary Tunis, women vocalists performing in prestigious concert halls, festival stages, and television programs are viewed as somewhat more respectable than in the past, but are still perceived by some people as exhibiting their bodies for mixed-gender audiences. Like male vocalists their instrument is their body, and they stand in front of an orchestra while singing. Unlike male vocalists, however, women vocalists confront perceptions that the "seductive" female voice incites sexual desire and ecstasy for male listeners (Racy 2003: 17, 87). And unlike their male counterparts, women vocalists are expected to wear fancy gowns, a great deal of makeup, and elaborate hairstyles: indeed, they are expected to attract attention to themselves.

The negative reputation of women vocalists also stems from rumors concerning their sexual exploitation. They are not only perceived as flaunting their bodies to sell recordings, but as having to exchange sexual favors for success in the male-dominated

⁹³ And while Amina Srarfi wears a different costume and stands in front of the ensemble, her dress consists of a black *qaftan* (caftan) and cloak that completely covers her body except for her neck and head.

music business. I have not encountered any vocalists who had personally experienced such exploitation themselves, but some musicians recounted rumors that other women vocalists have been pressured to have sex with their male managers or recording producers so as to continue their career and achieve success.⁹⁴ Whether or not these rumors are true, they had persisted into 2008, further tarnishing the respectability of women vocalists. Combined with these perceptions, and the perception that they flaunt their sexuality onstage, some vocalists are also perceived as being voluntarily promiscuous offstage. On the contrary, none of my research consultants mentioned such exploitation or other activities when discussing women instrumentalists in the art music community.

I suspect that women instrumentalists have further succeeded in distancing their work from historical stigma because their public performance of instruments is novel, yet also rooted in histories of elite women's musicking. While the predecessors of contemporary women vocalists are believed to have been associated with prostitution, the only Tunisian women who performed art music instruments in the past two centuries were elite, aristocratic women playing in the privacy of their homes. Women instrumentalists have thus elevated their respectability by performing certain traditional instruments that are associated with aristocratic women and which may be considered feminine. Women's performance of *qanūn*, *'ūd*, violin, and piano is more appropriate—and thus more common and less disruptive—than their performance of other instruments because women played these instruments in private contexts before independence. It is also perceived that playing these instruments does not require as much physical force or

⁹⁴ Interview in Tunis with Soumayya Mersni, January 15, 2009; Interview in Tunis with Yossr Labidi, September 9, 2008.

“unfeminine” bodily movement as does playing certain “masculine” instruments such as the *darbūka* and bass.⁹⁵

Yet in contemporary Tunis, more women have been expanding notions of gender and music further by playing traditionally masculine instruments. In the past, women rarely played *darbūka* or upright bass, which are perceived as masculine because of the force and stamina needed to play *darbūka* and the stature required to play the bass. Women’s performance of *nāy* [reed flute] has also been rare because blowing into a reed instrument with one’s mouth is considered inappropriate for women.⁹⁶ Yet in recent years more women have begun playing these instruments in public, especially in women’s ensembles. While women instrumentalists performing in prominent, professional mixed-gender ensembles (such as the Rachidiyya) have typically played ‘*ūd*, *qanūn*, or violin, in 2008 I observed a few women playing percussion, bass, and *nāy* in mixed-gender ensembles at ISM.

Women instrumentalists have also been expanding the parameters of women’s performance by participating in traditionally male performance contexts such as weddings. While some musicians and their families still consider it ‘*aīb* or *mal vu* [disreputable] for women to perform at weddings because of the clientele and the supposedly disreputable activities (such as drinking alcohol and rowdy behavior) that take place in these contexts, in recent years some conservatory-educated women musicians have begun playing at weddings with women’s ensembles.

⁹⁵ MacLeod (2001) and Jennifer C. Post (1994) note that women’s participation as instrumentalists in European classical music has been affected by stereotyping about feminine instruments (such as the guitar, keyboards, and harp) that began in the Renaissance. In the West and in other parts of the world, when women have been involved in instrumental performance in the past, they have often played instruments that have not required alterations in their facial expressions or in their physical stance (Post 1994: 40).

⁹⁶ Conversation in Tunis with Khadija El Afrit, January 31, 2008.

Changing social opinion and family permission, encouragement

Increasing numbers of women musicians have been performing as instrumentalists as social opinion regarding their respectability has radically transformed. Previously, Tunisian women were prohibited from performing in public by their families—not only because music performance was considered disreputable, but also because their families did not want them going out at night to perform. But as noted in the previous chapter, state reforms for nationalizing music and democratizing music education have elevated the prestige of the music profession. Moreover, recent social and political transformations—together with the success of women’s ensembles and pioneering women instrumentalists—have further augmented popular support for women’s freedom of movement and public performance as instrumentalists. Yet at the same time, conservative ideas about women’s behavior persist and still constrain some women’s participation as performers.

In the past (and still to some extent), families’ misgivings about women’s lifestyles as musicians have related to fearing for their safety when they return home late at night from performances. Although women fill the streets of downtown Tunis during daylight hours, they frequently face verbal (and sometimes physical) harassment from men and boys on the street (Lengel 2000: 342). Women are less likely to be harassed if they are accompanied by a man or by other women, and if they move quickly along their route. Upper-class women are also less likely to be harassed because of their class standing and the fact that they probably own cars and can drive or be driven. After dark, however, women risk verbal and physical harassment, especially if they are alone. As

Lengel has noted, in certain quarters of Tunis women who are alone after dark are assumed to be prostitutes (Ibid.; Newcomb 2009).

Many families have also worried that their daughter's reputation—and the reputation of their family—would be threatened if she regularly stayed out late at night, performing in strange locations with predominantly-male ensembles. These families are particularly worried for the marital prospects of their daughter, who may no longer be considered a virgin.⁹⁷ Their concerns reflect traditional values prescribing that a woman must be a virgin when married, and that her virginity reflects the honor of her entire family; if her reputation were tarnished, her family would be shamed and she would have difficulty finding a husband. Tunisian society (especially in certain *milieux*) is not as conservative as other societies in the Arab-Muslim world; most women musicians I interviewed did not mention shame, modesty, honor, reputation, or virginity in the course of our discussions.⁹⁸ But they explained that other families sometimes resist women's music performance and their daughters coming home late at night because "people," especially "neighbors" will talk. This *klām*, or gossip, is ever persistent in Tunis. My friend Rim Ben Hassine explained to me that she has felt "anonymous" and lonely when studying and working in Paris, while in Tunis "everyone knows everyone else's business." When she lives in Tunis she is haunted by others' talk, rumors, and gossip: "everything you do is scrutinized."⁹⁹ Violinist Myriam Slama also told me that her neighbors "were starting to talk" because she frequently arrives at her house between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. most summer nights after performing with women's wedding ensembles.

⁹⁷ Cf. Labidi 1989; Abu-Lughod 1993; Lengel 2000 and 2004; Latreille 2008; and Newcomb 2009 regarding family reputation (honor), shame, sexuality, and virginity.

⁹⁸ Cf. Foster 2002 regarding young women's sexual behavior before marriage in Tunis.

⁹⁹ Conversation with Rim Ben Hassine on Skype (between Tunis and Montreal), January 31, 2010.

She stated that “they talk; they know what I do and that it’s with women’s ensembles in good hotels, but they still talk.” Nevertheless, Slama and her family ignore these rumors, and she continues to perform in late-night concerts and weddings.

Families that have worried about their daughters’ safety and reputations have subsequently prohibited them from performing in public. Women musicians such as *org* player Olfa Ben Smida told me that several women have still not been allowed to perform music because men in their families have sought to control their behavior and freedom of movement.¹⁰⁰ She explained:

After independence they removed the *safsari*,¹⁰¹ and women’s education became obligatory. But it’s still a man’s society [*majmua rajilia*]. Women still don’t have the right to smoke on the street, for example, or to enter certain cafés.

... Women’s ensembles are still rare, because fathers still refuse to let their daughters play. There is a violinist, Dorsaf, for example, whose husband refuses to let her play.

... And women don’t play in the large mixed ensembles because for some, it’s still *mal vu*—but they say it’s *mal vu* only because fathers, brothers, husbands want to decide for and control them [*yekhhu fihum*]. They say their wife or daughter must stay home.¹⁰²

Some other families have reluctantly allowed their daughters to perform in women’s ensembles, but they have carefully inspected and supervised these ensembles and restricted their daughters’ freedom of movement.

In contemporary Tunis, however, most of the women I talked with did not mention such supervision by their families; nor did they struggle to obtain their families’ permission to participate in music. On the contrary, most research consultants told me that their families had encouraged them to study music and become musicians—

¹⁰⁰ The *org* is a digital synthesizer that can produce the microtonal variations used in Tunisian and Arab music, and that can imitate the sounds of various Middle Eastern and Western instruments.

¹⁰¹ As explained in the Introduction, the *safsari* is a traditional covering or veil worn by women in Tunisia. A large white cloth that fully covers the body, it is held closed in front with one hand.

¹⁰² Conversation with Olfa Ben Smida, January 19, 2009.

including Asmahan Chaari, Amina Srarfi, Khadija El Afrit, Myriam Lakhoua, Olf Ben Smida, Myriam Slama, Azza Chebbi, and Imen Ben Alya, among others.¹⁰³ In recounting their life trajectories as music students and professionals, these musicians particularly noted the important role their father played in encouraging their music studies. Many of their fathers were musicians (as in the case of Srarfi, El Afrit, and Ben Smida) or enthusiastic music-lovers [*mélomanes*], as in the case of Chaari, Lakhoua, Slama, and Chebbi. Some women told me that their mothers and other family members also encouraged and assisted them in pursuing their music studies.

Changing social opinion about women's music performance and freedom of movement in the public sphere has been linked to several recent political and social trends. Since the late 1980s, popular support and national pride about women's professional accomplishments and Tunisia's commitment to women's rights has increased. Above all, this is due to the efforts of individual women, who have earned increasingly higher levels of education and augmented their participation in the workforce. It is also related to the work of feminist activists and organizations beginning in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, this popular support and national pride is linked to the Tunisian government's ideological orientation away from (and opposing) conservative Islamist movements, especially during the 1990s civil war in Algeria. In turn, the government re-oriented Tunisia's national identity as "open" to the West, both ideologically and economically. In the early 1990s Ben Ali initiated a renewed commitment to women's rights. These events have also been accompanied by economic liberalization and cosmopolitan trends among middle-class Tunisians, who have increased access to globalized media and technologies. Such trends have introduced

¹⁰³ "Imen Ben Alya" is a pseudonym.

youth to alternative lifestyles as well as to multiple discourses from various parts of the globe (especially the Arab Gulf and Europe) concerning gender roles and behaviors in the public sphere. In contemporary Tunis, a person's opinion about women's participation in the workforce or women's performance as instrumentalists can vary widely, depending to a certain extent on their family background, religious beliefs, social circle, educational background, socioeconomic class, personal convictions, and specific life trajectory. Nevertheless, especially among certain *milieux* in Tunis, many Tunisians are very supportive and proud of women's professional accomplishments and of the state's commitment to women's rights.

Several women musicians thus told me that they have felt encouraged in their role as 'novel' women instrumentalists, by Tunisian audiences and the general public as well by their families or by the state. 'Ud player Myriam Lakhoua, whose father directed the Rachidiyya association during the 1990s, recounted receiving this support from audiences when she performed in the Rachidiyya Ensemble in 2007:

People were happy that there was a woman in the middle of the ensemble—the audience, for example (women and men). After the concert, for example, audience members came up to me and told me, 'y'atik es-saha' [lit., God give you health; God bless you¹⁰⁴], etc. Of course, maybe some of them knew my father, and that's why...¹⁰⁵

During the same conversation with Lakhoua, our mutual friend Anas Ghrab later suggested that "audiences would like to see more women; Tunisian society would like to see more women in the Rachidiyya and ensembles such as that." Lakhoua elaborated by explaining that while some women's participation in certain professions is limited due to familial objections regarding respectability,

¹⁰⁴ This phrase is also the most common way of saying "thank you" in Tunisian Arabic.

¹⁰⁵ Interview in Manouba with Myriam Lakhoua, April 3, 2008.

you can find women in all fields now. ...Because women in Tunisia, as I told you, they don't have problems. There are women who want to do men's work, difficult work, that has a difficult lifestyle, and their parents accept that. In fact, according to our *mentalité*, it's prestigious—for example, the woman who is a pilot... It's a matter of pride for Tunisians, for all Tunisians.¹⁰⁶

Several younger musicians that I met and talked with at ISM similarly recounted family encouragement of their music studies, and their pride that Tunisian women are now participating in various professional fields. Pianist and *org* player Imen Ben Alya told me that her grandmother was not allowed to sing or play music, even at home, because it was taboo; but after the success of the famous vocalist Saliha, and starting at the end of the 1960s and 1970s, attitudes towards women's performance began to change: "...now it is the opposite—our families encourage us to study music—it has great value [*andaha qima kebira*]. Women musicians now perform in festivals, private parties, and gala dinners, no problem."¹⁰⁷ Yet when I asked if any music directors were women, Ben Alya said no. She explained that a few visiting conductors for the National Symphony have been women, "and that's normal—there's no complexe [psychological complex, or hang-up]. But Tunisian women conducting? No—there's no *mentalité* that would accept that. It would be like seeing a woman taxi driver, or a woman driving the metro."¹⁰⁸

Ben Alya's comments demonstrate that while many Tunisians now encourage women to study music because it is highly esteemed, there are still limits to the types of professions that are considered acceptable for women. At the same time, however, there are women who are pushing those limits and expanding the parameters of "appropriate" work for women. Amina Srarfi states that she became the first woman conductor in

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Conversation with Imen Ben Alya and Amira Midani, December 3, 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Although during my research I did not encounter any women taxi drivers, I observed that women police officers are stationed all over Tunis, especially downtown along Avenue Habib Bourguiba.

Tunisia, primarily by conducting her women's ensemble, *El 'Azifet*, since 1992, and by directing the ERTT (Tunisian radio) children's chorus in the 1980s. Ben Alya's comments also contrast with Lakhoua's statement that Tunisian women can now be found in all professions. According to Lakhoua, women who work in historically masculine professions are not only accepted but are also praised for their prestigious accomplishments. In turn, many women musicians' sense of empowerment is linked to their belief that their performance as instrumentalists "is a matter of national pride."

Ben Alya's and Lakhoua's differing opinions demonstrate that in contemporary Tunis, multiple opinions and "mentalities" exist concerning women's public performance. While most women musicians with whom I spoke said that they were encouraged to study music, they also acknowledged that this is not the case for every woman in Tunisia. Women musicians negotiate their careers amidst various discourses and *mentalités* [mentalities] about women's behavior, dress, and roles in the public and private spheres. While the dominant nationalist ideology praises women's professional accomplishments, on a daily basis Tunisian women confront other opinions from men on the street, from men in their families, and from potential suitors.

Women's agency and empowerment: performing after marriage

Another significant contemporary change affecting women musicians is the enhanced empowerment of Tunisian women. In turn, many women have begun to pursue music careers even after they marry; and some women have even chosen their careers over marriage. But continuing to pursue performance careers after marriage has been difficult for women musicians—more than for Tunisian women in other professions—

because of the social taboos and practical considerations constraining women's performance "outside" at night.

Even after increasing numbers of women began studying music at conservatories and at the Higher Institute of Music in the 1980s, most of them became music teachers and ceased performing after marriage. This was partly because their husbands did not want them to perform in public, for similar reasons concerning women's safety and reputations. Social norms have also dictated that married women should not go out at night to perform, but should be at home caring for their husbands, children, and households. In contemporary Tunis many women still pursue teaching rather than performance careers, and some cease performing after marriage; yet this pattern is beginning to transform. As noted in the previous section, these changes are due in part to shifting *mentalités*, particularly among men. As Ben Alya explained,

There are men, even musicians, who don't want wives who are musicians—that's a traditional mentality [*mentalité taqaleed*]. But there are other men who don't have any problems; for example, there are a lot of married couples in the National Symphony—because they are already open, they study music.¹⁰⁹

Hela Masmoudi similarly told me that many women musicians are married to other musicians, or as Olfa Ben Smida explained, to "someone who understands." Khadija El Afrit, Amina Srarfi, Senda Zinelabidine, and Hinda Bel Heni, among others, are married to other prominent musicians in the art music community of Tunis. Several of these women were born into musical families; in some cases their spouses were as well.

Khadija El Afrit, for example, is married to Nabil Said, an *'ūd* player and fellow professor at ISM Tunis; several of his male relatives are professional musicians. She told me more about her personal life one evening in August 2008 as we returned to Tunis

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

from Binzerte, where she had performed *qanūn* in Zied Gharsa's festival ensemble. We were riding in a mini-bus with the rest of the musicians (ten other men who were also members of the Rachidiyya Ensemble), but we were sitting in the front seats and could carry on a private conversation in low voices. During the trip her husband called to find out when she would be returning to downtown Tunis, where the bus would leave her with her car. I asked if he was also working that night; she replied, "Yes. He works almost every night in the summer. . . . But I'm lucky. Other women's husbands don't like their wives being musicians. Other women musicians have difficulty with their husbands."¹¹⁰ She explained that before marrying her husband she had been engaged to her neighbor, a banker: "We had started to set a date for the marriage and he said, 'you have to stop playing music.' I said no. (It wasn't a great love.) And he was shocked that I would leave him for that, for music, for my work."¹¹¹

Although *mentalités* have begun to change, many men still constrain their wives' or fiancées' participation as performing musicians. Yet some women have subsequently broken off their engagements or divorced—including 'ūd player Yusra Dhehbi, who told me that she divorced her first husband because he did not want her to work as a musician. Other musicians told me similar stories of having broken off engagements because their fiancés wanted them to quit playing after they married, including violinist Sirine Ouesleti, violinist Myriam Slama, and 'ūd player Douja Ben Abdallah.¹¹² Thus in contemporary Tunis, several Tunisian women musicians are now continuing to perform into their 20s, 30s, and 40s not only because they have married men who are "understanding," but also because they have rejected husbands or fiancés who wanted them to stop playing.

¹¹⁰ Conversation with Khadija El Afrit, August 15, 2008, on a mini-bus returning to Tunis from Binzerte.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² "Douja Ben Abdallah" is a pseudonym.

While state reforms have made it easier for women to divorce, these musicians' decisions to divorce probably had significant impacts on their families, financial circumstances, future prospects for marriage, and their reputations in their communities. Marrying and having children are still perceived as the most important events in a Tunisian woman's life; most young women with whom I spoke desired to marry and frequently talked about their future marriage prospects. It is therefore striking that some women have divorced or have refused potential husbands so as to pursue careers in music.

These musicians' decisions to pursue careers instead of (or as well as) marrying demonstrate women's enhanced empowerment and agency in contemporary Tunisia. This relates to the recent efforts of feminist activists and the recent social and political transformations noted above, which have encouraged women to work outside the home and have resulted in delayed marriage and childbearing. Young women musicians' augmented sense of empowerment furthermore stems from their recent experiences in women's ensembles. Apart from Khadija El Afrit, many of the women who told me about rejecting former fiancés were in their early- to mid-20s. Unmarried women in their 20s also comprise the core of musicians who perform in women's wedding ensembles, where they can earn up to \$4000 or \$5000 USD each summer.¹¹³

Their work and financial success at weddings has also expanded women musicians' sense of freedom. Young unmarried women who work at weddings have been able to save money to buy their own cars and clothes, to save for their futures, and to travel abroad with friends. (In late December 2008, for example, Myriam Slama traveled to Istanbul with her friends and fellow musicians Abir Zahra and Soumayya Mersni, and

¹¹³ As noted in the Introduction, in Tunisia in 2008 the GDP per capita was \$8,000 USD.

in December 2009 she traveled to Geneva to visit her sister, niece, and Moroccan brother-in-law.¹¹⁴) Moreover, with their own cars women musicians have gained increased freedom from their families' attempts to control their lifestyles and behavior. I frequently observed young musicians telling their parents that they would be out late at a performance when they really were going to a café or dance club with their friends. On a few occasions we also went to cafés and clubs after a performance; in these situations, the musicians had told their parents earlier in the evening that their performance was a long-distance drive from Tunis and they would not return home until five or six o'clock in the morning.

Individual desires to marry and have families, combined with social and economic pressures to marry, however, still cause many young women musicians to marry and subsequently quit performing. When I returned to Tunis for a brief research trip in January 2009, I was surprised to learn that one of my friends, percussionist Emna Triki, was engaged and that her fiancé wanted her to stop playing in wedding ensembles. Her fiancé said that she could still play in festival concerts, but not weddings.¹¹⁵ He objected to her performance at weddings because he considers them less respectable than festival performances. He also objected to the lifestyle she would lead if she continued working at weddings: performing almost every summer evening and returning home by 2 or 3 a.m. at the earliest, and thus never having time for watching her children or spending time

¹¹⁴ I have observed that musicians such as Slama, Mersni, Maherzia Touil, and others use Facebook to publicly post photos of the travels, and to post video and audio recordings of their recent performances and performances by artists they admire—from Turkish and Tunisian artists to Joshua Bell and Michael Jackson. (You Tube is banned in Tunisia.)

¹¹⁵ Emna Triki is a pseudonym.

with him.¹¹⁶ While Triki was discussing the matter with him, she acknowledged that she would still marry him.

Other young women musicians expressed their frustration that they have had difficulty finding potential suitors who would accept their work as professional musicians. According to Douja Ben Abdallah, men outside the music community are not interested in marrying a woman musician:

I want a career, but men here, when they ask what I do and I say music, they say '*Au revoir*, ' because they think I would stay out late for concerts, I wouldn't be able to watch our kids, etc.¹¹⁷

In expressing their frustration, many musicians told me that reconciling their career ambitions with their personal lives constitutes a significant constraint for women.

Nevertheless, some women musicians are increasingly expanding their options and choosing to pursue their careers—even at the expense of shattering social and familial expectations that they marry.

Working as musicians and mothers

Women musicians have also recently begun to reconcile their careers as performers with their duties as mothers. In the past, women have chosen to pursue careers as teachers (rather than as performers) after they had children, since a teacher's lifestyle accommodates raising a family better than that of a performer. Yet as this pattern has started to change, taking on "double duties" at work and at home has put women musicians—who practice at home and perform at night—in particularly difficult situations.

¹¹⁶ Conversation in Tunis with Emna Triki and Myriam Slama, January 17, 2009.

¹¹⁷ Conversation in Tunis with Douja Ben Abdallah, November 23, 2007.

In contemporary Tunis, women's participation in the professional workforce has become a fundamental component of nationalist ideology. Women have increasingly desired to pursue full-time professional careers as they have earned higher-education degrees and developed cosmopolitan lifestyles. Contemporary socioeconomic trends and globalized media have also created desires for conspicuous consumption and greater disposable income, while economic constraints (related to economic liberalization and structural adjustment reforms) have led to high unemployment; as a result, many families rely on the income of both husbands and wives, or in some cases mothers are the primary breadwinners.

In addition, in 1993 specific reforms to the *Code du Statut Personnel* [CSP] legally recognized the need for women to contribute to household income. Article 23 was changed to stipulate that "The husband, as head of the family, must provide for the needs of the wife and children according to his means..."; "The wife must contribute to the family expenses if she has the financial means" (Article 23; République Tunisienne 2001: 10). Article 24 then clarifies that the husband does not have any right to administer his wife's finances. Regarding children, Article 57 (modified in 1966) stipulates that childcare during marriage belongs to the father and mother (Ibid.: 23).

Thus according to the law, both parents should manage childcare, and women are expected to contribute financially to the household budget if they have the means (although the CSP does not specify that their means are to be acquired by working). Yet social behavior has not kept pace with legal reforms. Even among Tunisians with so-called emancipated *mentalités*, women are expected to be devoted wives, mothers, and generous hostesses. Very few men take on household responsibilities, least of all

childcare, because that is not a part of their gender role. Despite the fact that increasing numbers of Tunisian women have obtained degrees in higher education and have entered the working world, these women are still expected to shoulder most household responsibilities, thereby working two jobs—both outside and inside the home.¹¹⁸

These expectations have had an even greater impact on the lives of women musicians, composers, writers, and other artists, who may often try to work at home. For many women musicians, having to manage domestic responsibilities (such as childcare, cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, and hosting guests) means that they do not have much time left for practicing or performing their instruments.¹¹⁹ Amina Srarfi told me that this explains why very few Tunisian women have emerged as virtuoso instrumentalists, even though increasing numbers of women are studying music:

...Because there is still this mentality among Arab men [*chez l'homme arabe*] that his wife must take care of him, his children, and his home. Thus it's for this reason that... This is one of the parameters holding women back from excelling [*briller*].

There are good musicians, but they can't become excellent because we don't let them. Because...after a woman marries, that's it—she has to take care of her husband, their kids; and then, even if she is a professor and she wants to play as well, she can't manage, she doesn't have the means to pay someone to take care of her kids and her husband while she concerns herself with nothing but her work. To become a good musician, to become a virtuoso, one must do eight hours of work, per day. ...But no women can find that time—not in Tunisia, or anywhere in the Arab world.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Scholars conducting research with middle-class women possessing college degrees have particularly discussed the double work these women perform. Cf. Mahfoudh-Draoui 1994; Triki 1994; and Holmes-Eber 2003. Other research on women's direct or indirect economic contributions to the household through domestic housework and their work in the "informal economy" in Tunis has been conducted by Ferchiou (1998) and Lobban (1998). Cf. Melliti and Najjar 1994, Najjar and Kerrou 2007 for studies of women's decision-making; cf. Latreille 2008 regarding rural women's management of family farms and households due to male "out-migration" in northwest Tunisia.

¹¹⁹ This phenomenon is also found in other cultures; Post notes that in some cultural contexts (as in Tunisia), the boundaries around women's work in the domestic sphere are not as defined as those of men's work, and this allows women less time for leisure and for musical enjoyment. In the case of conservatory-educated musicians in Tunis, the primary space where they practice their instruments is at home; but women's domestic responsibilities leave them with less time than men to devote to their instruments (1994: 38).

¹²⁰ Interview in Tunis with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

Srarfi and others told me that even before marriage, women are expected to help out at home (although to a lesser degree than once they are married). Men, however, are not given the same responsibilities. Thus while men are able to practice their instruments several hours a day to reach a professional level of playing, women do not have the same amount of time due to their other responsibilities in the home. Those who have already succeeded as professional musicians, including Khadija El Afrit and Amina Srarfi, among others, were fortunate to have studied music from a young age, thereby reaching a high level of playing before marrying and having children.

Above all, however, women musicians have had difficulty pursuing music careers because they cannot balance the late-night lifestyle of a professional musician with their childcare duties. Many women cannot follow such a lifestyle because they are expected to care for their children and often cannot find others to look after them at night. They may also be looked down upon by other women in their families or communities for not properly assuming their duties as wives and mothers. It is still highly unusual that a man in Tunisia would care for his children while his wife went out and worked during the evenings.

In recent years, some women musicians have attempted to pursue careers as performers and to raise their families—but not without encountering a great deal of difficulty. The few women instrumentalists who have succeeded in performing in prominent mixed-gender ensembles explain that it is very difficult, indeed nearly impossible, to be both a mother and a professional musician. Those who have married other musicians find their husbands to be more understanding, but they face difficulties finding childcare when both parents are scheduled to perform concerts during the same

evening. Violinist Hinda Bel Heni, for example, told me that after she started having children and performing with the women's ensemble *Taqasim* during the 1990s, she and her husband had to struggle to find family members or friends to watch their young children.

Khadija El Afrit and Myriam Lakhoua are among the few women instrumentalists who regularly perform with prominent mixed-gender ensembles in Tunis; they also happen to both have young sons who were about three or four years old in 2008. During the bus trip to Binzerte (for her performance with Zied Gharsa's ensemble), El Afrit told me that she finds it increasingly difficult to juggle her multiple roles as ISM professor, professional musician, and researcher completing her dissertation while also trying to be a good wife, homemaker, and mother. After discussing the pressures she feels to perform with women's ensembles in cultural performances, she remarked, "it's very difficult being a woman musician in Tunisia." She added,

...and my family, my husband's family, even though all of the men in the family play, they don't understand what I'm doing with my life. The other women my age already have three kids, and I only have one.¹²¹

El Afrit faces family pressures to have another child, but she already has too many other responsibilities at the moment. I asked if, as a result, she wanted to continue performing or to focus on research and teaching at ISM. She replied,

I really do want to keep playing concerts, to keep my level up and to always learn new things—like Algerian, Moroccan music... and I want my son to see that I'm doing that, as opposed to just playing at marriages with a low level.¹²²

On the bus ride home from Binzerte, however, El Afrit commented that she might eventually slow down her career,

¹²¹ Conversation with Khadija El Afrit, August 15, 2008.

¹²² Ibid.

...because I want to take care of my family, to take care of my son. I can't take care of my household if I have this kind of life. It was okay when we were younger—staying out at night, waking up at 3 p.m., over and over again. But it's difficult being a woman musician in Tunisia. I want to be a good mother, and it's difficult with this work—it's nearly impossible for mothers to be musicians—returning home late and all that. Mothers cannot—girls, yes, but mothers, no. So it's best to dedicate oneself to music early, to reach a high level, and then to be able to choose the performances you want to play.¹²³

Myriam Lakhoua similarly told me that men continue to dominate prominent mixed-gender ensembles in Tunis because “it's a difficult career, in the end, for women.” According to Lakhoua,

...the lifestyle is not easy. For me, for example, it's not easy to go to four-hour rehearsals, to go on tour. ...Because women—me, for example, I have my household [*mon foyer*], I have my son, I have to cook all of the meals, etc.

Men have their wives at home, who take care of their children and everything. But me, I have to manage all of that myself...

You can say more precisely that in Tunisia women are “evolved” [advanced; mature, broad-minded] that they work two jobs: outside and inside the home. ...In other words, men haven't evolved as women have.¹²⁴

Despite these difficulties, Lakhoua and El Afrit are attempting to develop their music careers while also meeting social expectations regarding their roles as wives and mothers. Several other women also talked to me about balancing childcare responsibilities with their evening performances at weddings.¹²⁵ They told me that because of their financial earnings from wedding performances, “money plays a role” in allowing some young mothers to perform at night, placing care for their children in the hands of husbands and other family members. Abir Zahra explained that especially if a

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Interview in Manouba with Myriam Lakhoua, April 3, 2008.

¹²⁵ Women professional musicians in the United States face similar issues regarding childcare and their evening performances. But in Tunisia there is an even greater social taboo against women going out at night and leaving their children in someone else's care. Moreover, it is extremely rare that men share childcare responsibilities.

husband is unemployed or underemployed, he might be less likely to prohibit his wife from “going out” and earning roughly \$100 a night for each wedding gig she performs. Such increased economic freedom could represent a shift in the balance of power within households, and men’s declining control over women’s behavior.

Consequently, by playing out as musicians, some women instrumentalists have begun to expand and redefine women’s roles in both the public and private spheres. Within the art music community of Tunis, however, they still confront several factors that constrain their professional careers. While previous research on women musicians in Tunisia and the Arab world has tended to focus on questions of respectability, women instrumentalists in contemporary Tunis told me that other factors specific to the art music community—together with the practical work-life balance issues they face—represent more significant obstacles to their career development.

Constraints within the art music community

Women’s access to professional music training has risen following state reforms for democratizing music education and the creation of university-level music institutes in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet although increasing numbers of women have studied music in recent years, their formal music degrees do not adequately prepare them to develop professional levels of playing. Beyond (or rather than) studying at conservatories, male musicians have earned playing experience by performing at weddings—contexts that have been off-limits to women until recently. As a result, many members of the art music community perceive women instrumentalists as having inferior playing abilities. These criticisms have taken on special weight in recent years as part of a backlash against

women's ensembles, whom male musicians perceive as government pawns receiving special treatment from the state.

When they criticize women's supposedly inferior musical abilities, male musicians perceive that their playing—and that of women's ensembles in particular—is marked by a dearth of essential Tunisian and Middle Eastern stylistic elements. For example, my violin teacher in Tunis, Anis Klibi, often instructed me to not play “flat,” like violinists in a women's ensemble. Klibi and others do not mean that women musicians play below the pitch, but by saying “flat” they claim that women do not use any of the elements characterizing Tunisian and Arab music—especially ornamentation such as slides, trills, mordents—that help create the thick heterophonic texture important to ensemble performances in the Arab world (Racy 2003: 76–87; Davis 1997b). In *tarab* music it is usually incorrect to “play together”: although almost all of the instruments play the same melodic line, each musician elaborates the melody in his or her own way. In contemporary Tunisia, then, women musicians and women's ensembles are accused of playing too cleanly and “together,” without the requisite ornamentation and heterophony.

Many men in the Tunisian art-music establishment also claim that women do not improvise well. Together with ornamentation and heterophony, modal improvisation is a cornerstone of Tunisian and Arab music and of *al-lehja al-musiqiyya al-tunisiyya* [Tunisian musical “intonation,” or musical identity] (Sakli 2007). Criticisms of women musicians' improvisational skills thus not only suggest that women do not meet professional requirements for joining the music field; they also hint that women are not adequate performers of Tunisian musical identity. Such negative perceptions constitute a significant factor constraining women's careers as professional musicians. Upon arriving

at rehearsals with male-dominated ensembles, they hear similar comments and feel that they are not welcome to play in the same ensembles as men.

When I asked men and women musicians about these criticisms, most replied that the perceived differences between men and women's playing have less to do with innate ability than with training and experience. (A few musicians claim, however, that women do not possess the physical capacity to play certain instruments with the same force and stamina as men.) Although by 2008 women constituted a third of the student population at the Higher Institute of Music, most musicians explained to me that the unwritten rules of Tunisian art music—particularly of playing ornamentation and improvisation, the elements that are not notated on the sheet music—are not easily taught at ISM but are instead transmitted orally and informally. Men have learned these skills by hanging out with other musicians, by listening to recordings, and most importantly, by playing side-by-side with more experienced musicians in mixed-gender ensembles, especially at wedding celebrations.

As Myriam Lakhoua explained,

...the music profession is more difficult for women than men—as professional musicians, not as researchers. It is more difficult here [in Tunisia] than in the West, where musicians perform in concerts. Here, for us, the real work is in weddings. Playing concerts will not earn you a living—it's playing in weddings, restaurants, and hotels.¹²⁶

In his work on the Tunisian *ughniyya*, Mourad Sakli confirms that the career path for most musicians has been working in weddings. He explains that working in such contexts constitutes an obligatory rite of passage for most instrumentalists, and indeed, most of Tunisia's famous vocalists started their careers by performing in weddings. In the past, musicians playing weddings generally came from lower-class backgrounds; even for

¹²⁶ Interview in Manouba with Myriam Lakhoua, April 3, 2008.

most male musicians today, performing at weddings during the summer still provides a significant portion—if not the majority—of their income (Sakli 1994: 279–284, 299–307, 313).

As noted above, however, respectable women instrumentalists have not performed at weddings because until recently it has been considered “*mal vu*” for them to perform in such contexts. In addition, some conservatory-educated musicians denigrate wedding musicians not only because the context is disreputable. Myriam Lakhoua, Amina Srarfi, Semira Esseghir, Khadija El Afrit, Anas Ghrab, and Rachid Kouba, for example, all told me that they do not perform in weddings. These musicians look down upon musicians who perform the same repertoire night after night in *awāda* ensembles. (The term *awāda* refers either to an ensemble led by *‘ūd*, or, in this context, to an ensemble that repeats the same repertoire.) Perhaps they denigrate wedding musicians because the audience is not necessarily paying attention to their performance, as opposed to concert-hall and festival-concert performances. Some conservatory-educated musicians also describe wedding musicians as performing for financial gain rather than artistic merit. Khadija El Afrit described wedding musicians as leading an uncertain existence, playing “one day at a time, day by day, gig by gig,” never able to rely on a steady income. Furthermore, some conservatory-educated musicians perceive wedding musicians as acting as mercenaries, reneging at the last minute on performances they formerly agreed to play because they have been offered a better-paid job in the meantime.

Despite their personal reservations about performing in weddings, Rachid Kouba and others assert that the best school for learning Arab music is weddings. According to

Kouba (who plays Western violin), this is because he considers the conservatory-ISM system to be inadequate for learning Arab music, particularly Arab violin:

We still don't have a great system for teaching Arab music at ISM or the conservatories. Western music education is one model, but it's based on using notation, sheet music. We don't have much of that for Arab music. And even if we do, the sheet music doesn't include ornamentation. It's very difficult to teach Arab music with notation or in the conservatory setting, because it's not about technique—it's about the style, the spirit [*rūh*]. This is a problem for students at ISM who want to learn Arab violin—how to teach and learn Arab music... A violinist can't reach a high level if they study Arab violin only at ISM and conservatories.”¹²⁷

By studying at formal music education institutions such as ISM and conservatories women have integrated themselves into the music profession, but they cannot rely only upon their formal music training for developing their professional careers.

Criticisms of women's “flat” playing, without ornamentation, also have to do with their previous experience studying and playing Western music. Indeed many of the musicians who first performed in women's ensembles such as *El 'Azifet* had never performed Arab music before. Several musicians told me that when *El 'Azifet* was first founded the ensemble did not possess a high quality of Arab music performance, owing to the limited musical experience and Western music training of its members.

Women violinists have especially tended to specialize in Western violin rather than in Arab violin.¹²⁸ Some women may prefer to play Western violin because it is taught more frequently in conservatories; because it is a required part of the ISM curriculum; and/or because the pedagogical methods are more established than those for Arab violin. That is, many women and men perceive Western violin instruction not only

¹²⁷ Interview in Tunis with Rachid Kouba, February 28, 2008.

¹²⁸ I use the term “Arab violin” to include both Tunisian styles of playing violin [*kamanja tunsiyya*] and Eastern Arab styles [*kamanja sharqiyya*], each with their own patterns of ornamentation, melodic modes, senses of rhythm, and rules for improvisation. In both cases, violinists hold the violin horizontally (on the left shoulder) and tune its strings to G-D-G-D (as opposed to Western tuning, G-D-A-E). Since Turkish music is currently in vogue among musicians in Tunis, increasing numbers of violinists (and *qanūn* players) are also learning Turkish repertoires, modes, and styles of playing.

as more formalized, but also as more rigorous and concrete, since it is based on establishing a virtuosic playing technique (according to Western classical-music standards). Women musicians who play Western violin explain that they prefer it, or that they had no choice, due to the workings of the music-education system in Tunis. Many of these women have also received advanced violin instruction in France or the U.K., and they now teach violin at conservatories or ISMs in Tunisia. The same, however, cannot be said for Arab violin. There are not any women currently teaching Arab violin at ISM Tunis.

The music-education system is therefore partly to blame for the disparate numbers of women playing Arab violin. Not every student can find Arab violin instruction at their conservatory, and so many must play Western violin. At the Higher Institute of Music (ISM), moreover, all violin students must study Western violin during their first two years at the Institute, regardless of the fact that they play Arab violin outside of school, or that they may have already studied Western violin, or that they never studied Western violin previously. Azza Chebbi, for example, is a first-year student at ISM who plays Arab violin. She prefers playing Arab violin, but she is obliged to take Western violin lessons at the Institute. The reasoning behind this pedagogical system is that two years of Western violin instruction provides Arab violinists with a minimum foundation in Western playing techniques. Violin teachers at ISM argue that this improves their overall level of playing, even in Middle Eastern music. They point to the fact that some of the best male Arab violinists studied Western violin for several years, and a few of them are equally proficient in both types of music.

As Rachid Kouba noted, however, the greater problem with the pedagogical system is that most students learning Arab violin are not taught according to an established instructional method, as is the case for Western violinists in Tunisia. This is due to the fact that Arab violin is traditionally taught using oral methods, often according to a master-apprentice model. When this type of oral tradition is placed within a Western-style conservatory system, problems arise. Most professors of Arab violin still attempt to teach their students orally, but cannot devote the necessary amount of time required by this model. Moreover, each professor follows a different teaching method, uses different repertoire examples, and different styles of playing. As ISM professor Saifallah Ben Abderrazzeq explained to me, students need an adequate methods book for Arab violin that is similar to the pedagogical organization of Western method books, which gradually introduce certain technical challenges and complement them with compositions and exercises appropriate to the students' level. He argued that with the limited pedagogical materials available at present for Arab violin study, students are forced to advance from learning the alphabet, for example, to immediately writing a novel. As a result, most professional-level male violinists earn most of their training outside of the formal education system, by performing at weddings.

While the ISM instruction methods for *'ūd*, *qanūn*, and percussion are better established than those for Arab violin, male musicians playing these instruments still earn greater experience than women by performing at weddings. At weddings they also earn money and networking opportunities to further develop their careers. Thus, although women musicians have taken advantage of music education institutions and the possibilities they offer for studying and teaching music, until recently they have been

unable to access the “real” professional arena: informal networks of male musicians performing at weddings.

By recently forming their own festival and wedding ensembles, however, women musicians have created alternative ways to develop their playing ability and improvisational skills while also expanding conventional understandings of women’s performance. In the next two chapters I focus on the work of women’s festival and wedding ensembles. But first I will investigate how a few women instrumentalists have also played out and expanded the parameters of women’s performance by playing in mixed-gender ensembles. The next section investigates the experiences of these instrumentalists as they have attempted to infiltrate the most prominent, male-dominated Tunisian music ensembles.

Experiences in mixed-gender ensembles

July 26, 2008. It was a warm evening in Hammamat, the international resort town on Tunisia’s eastern coast. I had been invited by qanūn player Khadija El Afrit to attend a performance at the prestigious Hammamat International Festival, held in a Roman amphitheatre adjacent to the sea. She was performing in a concert of Eastern Arab tarab music and Tunisian ma’lūf with renowned vocalist Leila Hejaiej.

When I arrived at Dar Sebastian, the two-story Andalusian palace adjacent to the amphitheatre, Khadija immediately led me to the dining room, where we ate a spicy lamb stew with the rest of the ensemble. Following the meal she and I left the palace together to return to the amphitheatre’s backstage dressing rooms. We followed a sandy path strewn with pine needles, illuminated only by the moon and the distant lights of the amphitheatre. With nightfall the warm air had become slightly cooler, aided by a

refreshing breeze from the adjacent sea. As we approached the dressing rooms Khadija talked about how she had been asked to perform in this concert by Leila Hejaiej, whose regular qanūn player was not available that evening. She told Leila that she would be happy to play with her ensemble, and that she knew the other musicians from her previous experience playing in the Rachidiyya. Leila told her, nevertheless, “be careful, men are not happy to play with women. You are entering their world.”

Khadija then explained to me, “as a woman musician you have to be far better than the average man, just to prove that you’re decent as a woman, because the others always doubt.”¹²⁹

* * * * *

Although a few pioneering women instrumentalists began playing in the prominent, state-sponsored Tunisian music ensembles (the Rachidiyya Ensemble, the *Firqat al-Idā’a*, or radio and television orchestra, and the *Firqat Qowmiyya*, or “national orchestra”) during the 1990s, I suspect that contemporary women musicians participating in these ensembles face extra criticisms about their playing due to a recent backlash against women’s festival ensembles and their supposedly inferior playing abilities. And as Leila Hejaiej told Khadija El Afrit, men still do not necessarily welcome women instrumentalists among their ranks. These ensembles comprise many of the same musicians, who also dominate smaller ensembles that vocalists such as Hejaiej put together for summer festival performances. Some women instrumentalists attempting to join this network told me that they have felt uncomfortable and unwelcome; accordingly, some women choose to perform with women’s ensembles rather than in mixed-gender

¹²⁹ While I use musicians’ last names in most of the dissertation, in descriptions of events excerpted from my field notes I refer to musicians by their first names.

ensembles. Yet despite the difficulties they face in mixed-gender ensembles, including perceptions that they are hired only as symbols of women's emancipation, some women prefer to perform in them. They struggle to decide how to present their appearances onstage, but they also assert their presence as women in the midst of male instrumentalists.

Khadija El Afrit, Myriam Lakhoua, Myriam Slama, and Saba Slimane are among the few women instrumentalists who have performed with the best Arab-music ensembles in Tunis. In discussing their experiences with me, they were overwhelmingly positive about the high quality of musical performance these ensembles maintain, and in some cases, the *tarab* they felt while performing with these ensembles. They were not as positive, however, about the *jaww* [atmosphere, ambiance] of these ensembles during rehearsals and performances.

When Saba Slimane started studying music she began learning Western violin; by the early 2000s she was performing regularly in the National Symphony Orchestra. She first began playing Middle Eastern violin when she was invited to join the women's ensemble *Tanit*, with whom she performed for one year. She later became the first woman violinist to play Arab violin with the Rachidiyya Ensemble, the National Radio and Television Orchestra [*Firqat al-Idā'a*], and *Firqat Qowmiyya*. Since 2007, however, she has ceased performing regularly in order to pursue another career in business.

While conversing with Slimane about her experiences in mixed-gender ensembles, she explained that although she enjoyed the playing experience she did not enjoy the *jaww* of rehearsals and concerts with the *Firqat Qowmiyya* and the *Idā'a* orchestras. As the only woman instrumentalist, she told me, she had heard several

negative comments about women's playing. She had also felt uncomfortable in such a masculine atmosphere, where men frequently cursed and made bad jokes.¹³⁰

Part of Slimane's discomfort may have also stemmed from perceptions that "men are not happy to play with women," as Leila Hejaiej told Khadija El Afrit. Perhaps men musicians resent that women are joining their ranks; perhaps they feel jealous and threatened that women might take their jobs; and perhaps they resent the fact that with a woman present they are expected to behave differently. According to Hinda Bel Heni, certain men also believe that the atmosphere of male-dominated ensembles is inappropriate for women:

There are some women who play in those ensembles, one or two at a time ...but not many. I don't play with them because my husband doesn't want me to. He knows what the *jaww* is like—they say bad words [*klām khaiba*], etc. So I only play with women's ensembles.¹³¹

Like Hinda Bel Heni, Hajer Gana chooses to play only in women's ensembles, although in the past she participated in a few mixed-gender ensembles at ISM and at her high school. Gana is a multi-instrumentalist who began playing *org* and percussion at age twelve (see Figure 3.1). She told me that she learned Tunisian, Eastern Arab, and Western music by participating in her school's music club, chorus, and instrumental ensemble.¹³² In the club she sang, played *org*, and sometimes played percussion, gaining the confidence to perform onstage in concerts—including a performance at the presidential palace. She studied at a conservatory for only one year before entering ISM, but like other ISM students she included a "Music option" as part of her BAC exam studies. During her four years as an undergraduate at ISM, Gana focused on learning

¹³⁰ Conversation in Tunis with Saba Slimane, May 3, 2008.

¹³¹ Interview in Tunis with Hinda Bel Heni, September 16, 2008.

¹³² Like several of her ISM colleagues, Gana attended a high school for artistically inclined students, where she learned to read music notation.

qanūn, but she also studied *‘ūd* for three of those years and piano during her first two years. At ISM she also played percussion (*darbūka*, *tār*, and *duff*¹³³) with the mixed-gender instrumental ensemble, and she began performing percussion and org with women’s festival ensembles (such as *Angham Hawwa*) and wedding ensembles.¹³⁴



Figure 3.1 (left to right): Hajer Gana (*org*), Hinda Bel Heni (violin), and Maherzia Tawil (voice) performing with a women’s ensemble directed by Zina Bou Ali at a wedding at a five-star golf club. July 4, 2009, Gammarth (Tunis). (Photo by author.)

Gana told me that while she has been invited to perform in mixed-gender ensembles, she prefers to perform with women’s ensembles because of the intimate *jaww* she has found when playing with women. She also explained that she dislikes playing

¹³³ The *duff*, or *daff*, is a small single-headed bass drum played with the hands; it is often placed on a stand between the player’s legs.

¹³⁴ During the 2008-2009 academic year Gana was starting to write her thesis as a second-year Master’s student at ISM, while also teaching beginning piano at the Rachidiyya Institute and *qanun* at two conservatories.

with men because they often want to flirt with her and ask her out on dates. Like Gana, some musicians choose to play in women's ensembles because they feel more comfortable. Others, however, do so for the sake of their husbands or parents, who do not want them to play with men in mixed-gender ensembles.

On the other hand, Khadija El Afrit prefers playing with mixed-gender ensembles to playing with women's ensembles. In August 2008, backstage before she performed with Zied Gharsa and his ensemble at a festival in Binzerte, she told me that she had not rehearsed with them because Gharsa's regular *qanūn* player called her to replace him at the last minute. Yet she had already played a great deal with these musicians in the Rachidiyya. In addition, she explained, she already knew the repertoire for the concert because it was famous, including songs from weddings and Gharsa's compositions played on the radio.¹³⁵ She added, "I really enjoy playing with these musicians. I improve with them. I've finished playing with women."¹³⁶ El Afrit told me that she dislikes playing with conservatory-educated women's ensembles partly because in their performances she feels like a "decoration" or "symbol." In women's ensembles, she explained, she feels like her presence and appearance onstage as a woman is more important than her musical performance.

Other women instrumentalists, however, have felt like symbols or decorations when performing in mixed-gender ensembles. In discussing her participation as an *'ūd* player in the Rachidiyya Ensemble, Myriam Lakhoua reflected, "Well, maybe I entered the Rachidiyya, I don't know, because I'm a woman? Maybe, I don't know." She explained that women musicians are sometimes hired to perform in mixed-gender

¹³⁵ El-Afrit told me that the same is true for when she performs with Amina Fakhret and Nabiha Karowlee, but not for Leila Hejeij, whose art music repertoire is more difficult and not as well known.

¹³⁶ Conversation with Khadija El Afrit, August 15, 2008.

ensembles as “symbols,” to show to Tunisian and foreign audiences that Tunisian society is gender-mixed and that Tunisian women are modern, educated professionals. Violinists Myriam Slama and Sirine Ouesleti also told me that they believed they had been hired to perform on state television with mixed-gender ensembles because they were women—as Ousleti said, “I think I was hired only as a *figurant* [literally, an extra on a movie-set; or mannequin, symbol].”¹³⁷

Whether or not they were hired as “symbols,” several women instrumentalists told me that they still felt like they were perceived as symbols by audiences and other ensemble members. Myriam Lakhoua, for example, told me that she has felt acutely aware of her identity as a woman while playing in the Rachidiyya. She particularly noted that her appearance onstage as a woman seems more important than her musical contribution.

Now in terms of playing, how did I feel in the middle of the ensemble? It’s true that you feel like you are a woman, really.
 ...Meaning, ‘let’s use this woman;’ they want to show that they have a woman in the ensemble. In other words, I felt more like a *taswira* [*figurante*; symbol intended only for appearances] than as a player [*‘azifa*].

I asked her if she felt like this in relation to the audience or the other players. She replied,

...to the ensemble, the entire ensemble. I felt like they wanted me there because I decorate [*nbaharaj*] or dress up the ensemble, because I’m a woman. It’s unsaid, implied. Whereas just as an instrumentalist—for example, if they were to record in a studio [where no one would see me], would they call me [to play]?¹³⁸

As noted above, Lakhoua told me that Tunisian audiences are happy to see women performing in a mixed-gender music ensemble such as the Rachidiyya, and that women’s participation in all professions is a source of pride for many Tunisians. For some women musicians, this national pride and encouragement from audiences could be

¹³⁷ Conversation in Megrine with Sirine Ouesleti, August 7, 2008.

¹³⁸ Interview in Manouba with Myriam Lakhoua, April 3, 2008.

an important part of their personal identity and sense of empowerment. At the same time, however, these women may feel that men musicians (and audiences) do not treat their playing seriously because they are mere decorations or symbols.

Partly because they sometimes feel like “decorations” onstage, many of the instrumentalists I interviewed frequently discussed their appearances. They feel that their appearance onstage is scrutinized, since women’s appearances in general—and those of a woman instrumentalist playing with an otherwise male instrumental ensemble—are often treated as powerful indexes of cultural and political ideologies in contemporary Tunisia (Turino 1999). Thus several instrumentalists told me that they struggle to decide how to dress and how to look onstage. On one hand, some musicians discussed dressing modestly, or wearing muted colors to blend in with the rest of the male instrumentalists. On the other hand, some women told me they wished to highlight their presence onstage by wearing bright colors or makeup, or by otherwise accentuating their femininity.

Just before going onstage to perform with Zied Gharsa and his ensemble in Binzerte (August 15, 2008), for example, El Afrit commented on her costume to me. The other members of the ensemble (all men) were wearing black suits or white dress shirts with ties and black pants; she was wearing a black dress with long sleeves and a high collar, and she had tied a shiny silver cloth around her sparkly black head covering (see Figure 3.2). She told me, “when I play with older musicians [les musiciens âgées], I try to be très correcte, [correct, proper], très femme [very womanly, feminine] onstage.”¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Conversation in Binzerte with Khadija El Afrit, August 15, 2008.



Figure 3.2 (left to right): Khadija El Afrit (*qanūn*), Abdessatar Mahfoudh (chorus), and Zied Gharsa (*org*) performing with Gharsa’s ensemble at the Binzerte Festival. August 15, 2008, Binzerte. (Photo by author.)

For El Afrit, her choice of dress is largely determined by her personal convictions and religious beliefs. To this end she covers her hair in all circumstances, although she sometimes wears a sparkly scarf in performances. For her, moreover, being proper involves being “feminine.” El Afrit explained to me that she also chooses her dress according to the performance context, the formality of the performance (and the ensemble and repertoire), and the age and experience of the other musicians. When performing Tunisian art music with members of Zied Gharsa’s ensemble, who are also older musicians and regular members of the Rachidiyya Ensemble, she tries to look proper.

When playing with younger musicians, however, El Afrit explained that she still tries to be modest, but she sometimes attempts to add some color in order to highlight her presence onstage. Following her performance in Binzerte with Gharsa's ensemble, she told me that she admired the turquoise tunic I was wearing. "You've given me an idea, to wear a turquoise dress when I'll play with Farhat [Bouallagui] in El Jem, because I'll be the only woman in the ensemble."¹⁴⁰ Bouallagui is a musician in his early 40s who performs world music genres and his own compositions; he primarily resides in Paris, where he performed violin in the *1, 2, 3 Soleils* concert with Algerian *rai* stars Khaled, Rachid Taha, and Faudel. Even though Bouallagui is still older than El Afrit, she likely considers him a "young musician" because his repertoire does not focus on traditional Tunisian or Arab art music, but is rather aimed at younger audiences. Moreover, he does not hold the same degree of experience or status in the Tunisian art music community as veteran musicians from the Rachidiyya Ensemble. Yet above all, as El Afrit stated, she wished to wear a brightly colored dress with Bouallagui's ensemble because she would be the only woman onstage.

Thus musicians such as El Afrit are also acutely aware of their gender and appearances when performing because they are not like the other male instrumentalists, and because they do not wear the same concert dress as the rest of the (male) ensemble. They face such awareness especially when performing with a chorus including women vocalists: do they dress like the women vocalists, or like the male instrumentalists? When Khadija El Afrit performed with Leila Hejaiej and her ensemble at the Hammamat festival in July 2008, for example, Hejaiej asked her to wear the same dress as the women

¹⁴⁰ In the end El Afrit did not play with Bouallagui in El Jem because of budgetary reasons forcing him to reduce the size of his ensemble.

in the chorus. (See Figure 3.3) While the men wore white dress shirts, black dress pants, and rose-pink ties, the women vocalists wore black pants and matching hot-pink, low-cut



Figure 3.3: Khadija El Afrit performing with vocalist Leila Hejaiej and her ensemble at the Hammamat International Festival. July 26, 2008, Hammamat. (Photo by author.)

satin blouses with spaghetti straps. Since El Afrit covers most of her body and her hair in accordance with her religious beliefs, she modified this costume: she wore black pants, a black head covering, and a black turtleneck under the hot-pink blouse. But during the first part of the concert the blouse's spaghetti straps kept slipping as she played *qanūn*; she later explained that during the intermission she safety-pinned the straps to her turtleneck so that she was more comfortable and less distracted while playing.

Deciding what to wear as a woman instrumentalist in a mixed-gender ensemble has also been a struggle for Myriam Lakhoua; she told me that above all she has aimed to

wear practical clothing that would not interfere with her playing or with her feeling at ease onstage (see Figure 3.4). Finding her own costume has also caused her to reflect on her gender and her liminal status outside the categories of “female vocalist” and “male instrumentalist”:

In the Rachidiyya the men have their costume, the *jibba*, and I wear all black.¹⁴¹ I made an embroidered vest similar to their *jibba*, just a vest, and I wear that over a black shirt and black pants. In the summer they wear a white *jibba*, so I wear white pants and a white shirt.

The women who sing, they have their costume. But I don't want to dress like the women, because I am part of the [instrumental] ensemble...

I'm not like the women—not like the women in the chorus. I'm like that, that's my choice. I made a costume that goes with the men, not with the women—it goes with the instrumentalists.

When I asked her what the men in the chorus wear, she replied,

That's true, the men in the chorus dress like the ensemble. ...But the women's costume is not practical. It's important to consider that, understand? For example, the men who wear the *jibba*, that's not practical for playing violin, either. Before, when they held the violin like this [vertically, on the knee], maybe they could wear the *jibba* then, but now...

I dress this way for practical reasons, in order to be comfortable, at ease. ...I have to take all of that into consideration.

And because of this, I find that onstage I should be *présente* [present, visible], understand? I highlight my appearance as a woman [*Je me mets en valeur comme femme*]. For example, I never go to the hairdresser, but before a concert I go to the hairdresser, I put on earrings, as someone who is going to be watched onstage, in the end—even more, as a woman. Men in the ensemble do this too, they shave, they wear a lot of hair gel...¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ A *jibba* or *jebba* is a traditional one-piece tunic worn by men in Tunisia. It is long-sleeved, calf-length, and often richly embroidered. Socks and traditional slippers (rather than Western trousers) are visible from the calf to the foot.

¹⁴² Interview in Manouba with Myriam Lakhoua, April 3, 2008.



Figure 3.4: Myriam Lakhoua playing ‘ūd in the Rachidiyya Ensemble during their summer concert at *Ennejma Ezzahra* (CMAM). June 26, 2009, Sidi Bou Said (Tunis). (Photo by author.)

After reflecting on her costume and presence onstage, and after telling me how she does not “play the gender card” nor think about gender as some instrumentalists do, Lakhoua stated towards the end of our interview,

But I think that – ...as I told you, for me, it’s true that in the orchestra I’m not with the chorus, and I’m not like the men instrumentalists, it’s true. I’m not like the instrumentalists because I’m a woman. I feel that, I mean.

I asked, “even in rehearsals?”

—Yes, in the rehearsals too. But on the contrary, as a musician, meaning, how I consider myself, as a player, and how they consider me.... it depends on how I will assert myself [*comment je vais m’imposer*], *voilà*.

This exists also for men musicians just starting in the music business—they have to assert themselves, because it’s a small, closed circle. ...And it’s difficult for young

musicians to take places [in prominent ensembles] from the older musicians. It's always about how you assert yourself, understand?¹⁴³

Lakhoua argued that it is important to assert oneself as a musician in order to forge a career in the close-knit music community of Tunis. She also tries to assert her presence onstage and highlight her appearances when performing in concert—both because she is performing onstage for an audience, but especially as the only woman instrumentalist in a prominent ensemble. Earlier in our interview, after discussing the pride that Tunisians feel for women who have succeeded in male professions and following Anas Ghrab's comment that Tunisian audiences would like to see more women in music ensembles, Lakhoua stated,

And plus, I'll tell you, I believe in my presence in the [Rachidiyya] ensemble. ...I am conscious that I should be *présente* [present, visible] onstage. ...I should project, emit [*dégager*] something—I am conscious of that. It's true. I should wear red lipstick, for instance, really red!¹⁴⁴

Conclusion

Like Myriam Lakhoua, several women instrumentalists want to be seen onstage as women, but not only as women. They recognize that they stand out from the other members of male-dominated ensembles and that they are not like the men, and they decide to assert their presence onstage as women—sometimes by highlighting their appearances. But these musicians do not enjoy being treated as “*figurantes*,” as symbols of women's emancipation. Khadija El Afrit, for example, wants to be a professional instrumentalist, but on her own terms—she does not wish to be pigeonholed as a woman musician playing with women's ensembles. In struggling to decide how to present their appearances onstage, these instrumentalists are grappling with the question of how to

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

define their presence as women in the midst of all-male ensembles. They are also struggling with how to shape their identities as pioneering members of a third category of Tunisian musicians, fitting neither into the traditional category of “male instrumentalist” nor that of “female vocalist.”

Furthermore, in choosing how to present themselves in performance, these musicians are negotiating complex, competing ideologies about Tunisian women and their roles and behavior in public. They may choose to dress modestly and negate sexual aspects of their appearances, and/or they may choose to highlight their feminine appearances. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, musicians in women’s ensembles have used various strategies to make their performances both “novel” yet permissible. Women instrumentalists have tended to play “feminine” instruments, and musicians in women’s ensembles have particularly highlighted their beautiful costumes and feminine appearances. On one hand, such strategies might serve to dilute their disruptive presence onstage, just enough so that their performance of traditionally masculine roles is acceptable for the public and fellow musicians; or these strategies might lead men musicians and audiences to primarily focus on their appearances rather than to appreciate their playing ability (Tucker 2000).

On the other hand, women’s feminine appearances onstage—as this draws attention to the presence of *women* onstage—may highlight the disruptive aspect of their performances as instrumentalists, particularly when women play in mixed-gender ensembles. In any case, with their presence onstage, women instrumentalists expand conventional understandings of Tunisian music and of who performs Tunisian instruments. And just as they are effecting social change and redefining women’s roles in

the public and private spheres, these musicians are attempting to shape their identities as women instrumentalists on their own terms.

Chapter Four

Women's festival ensembles: Playing out the nation?

El 'Azifet is undeniably the most famous women's ensemble in Tunisia. Director Amina Srarfi proclaims that it is the first conservatory-educated women's orchestra of Tunisian and Arab music in the Arab-Muslim world. Founded in 1992, *El 'Azifet* is credited as leading to the formation of several other conservatory-educated women's ensembles in Tunisia, including the festival ensembles *Taqasim*, *Tanit*, and *Angham Hawwa*, and numerous other wedding ensembles in recent years. The visibility and success of these festival ensembles has inspired younger generations of women to pursue careers as musicians. Many women instrumentalists have also gained a great deal of musical training and experience by playing with such ensembles. In the words of music professor Mohammed Ali Kammoun, the large-scale participation of Tunisian women as instrumentalists all began with *El 'Azifet*.¹⁴⁵

Yet when I told men musicians and other members of the art music community in Tunis that I was conducting research on women's ensembles such as *El 'Azifet*, many of them scoffed in disapproval: they did not consider this a worthy research subject. They perceive that ensembles such as *El 'Azifet* are not serious but are rather a gimmick, "an establishment ploy to present a liberated image of Tunisia to foreign audiences" (Davis 2004: 119). They believe that the government grants special favors to women's

¹⁴⁵ Personal communication with Mohammed Ali Kammoun, January 8, 2009.

ensembles for political reasons only, and to the disadvantage of “better” men musicians. Related comments accuse women’s ensembles of caring more about appearances than about the quality of their playing. In 2006, when I told an instrument-museum curator that I would attend a concert by *El ‘Azifet* for the first time, he told me not to expect a great musical performance, since “they spend more time putting on makeup than rehearsing.”

This chapter focuses on conservatory-educated women’s festival ensembles such as *El ‘Azifet*, *Taqasim*, *Tanit*, and *Angham Hawwa*. After presenting a brief history of these four ensembles, I investigate how women’s ensembles are particularly subject to scrutiny by the state and to criticisms by male musicians because of their power to “perform the nation.” I explore how the state attempts to harness that power by supporting and controlling performances by women’s ensembles, and by telling Tunisian audiences how to “read” women’s performances in the state press. Musicians in women’s ensembles must frequently negotiate such state support and control of their performances, but they also find room to play out, play with, and expand national identity and gender for themselves.

Making history

El ‘Azifet and the other first few women’s ensembles created in Tunisia (*Taqasim*, *Tanit*, and *Angham Hawwa*) share similar histories that are linked to events in the political sphere and the art music establishment during the 1980s and 1990s. As noted in previous chapters, during that time increasing numbers of women began participating in music as instrumentalists. Trends within the art music establishment also heralded a revitalization of Tunisian music, including the creation of new chamber ensembles, the

valorization of instrumental performance, and a revival of repertoire performed before Independence. At the same time, President Ben Ali's "Change" marked a brief period of political pluralization, during which national culture was slightly decentralized and musicians such as Amina Srarfi opened private conservatories.

The creation of new women's ensembles also parallels the development of feminist movements and organizations, which grew in strength and numbers during the 1980s and 1990s. Just as feminist activists were fighting for women's rights on the national political stage (rather than being granted reforms from above), women musicians also enacted change themselves. Feminist activists created their own organizations to protest their marginalization from male-dominated leftist movements. Amina Srarfi created *El 'Azifet* in part to protest women's near-exclusion from the male-dominated state-sponsored ensembles (Davis 2009: 198).

During the early 1990s, issues surrounding women's rights were hotly contested political debates. The state's support of the CSP, for example, became a battleground for political power struggles and debates over national identity between Islamists and women's rights supporters. After trying to accommodate both sides, Ben Ali and his regime eventually suppressed their Islamist opponents and supported reforms for women's rights. In 1992, the same year that *El 'Azifet* formed, Ben Ali appointed a commission to review Tunisian women's status, and in 1993 his government passed amendments to the CSP. Starting in 1992 the president also appointed women to several high-level positions as ministers, vice-president of the parliament, and political advisor to the president, although feminist scholars have pointed out that these appointments were largely symbolic (Brand 1998: 242).

Since these turbulent years many middle-class Tunisians have continued to support Ben Ali and his regime's efforts to maintain peace and economic security, especially when they consider neighboring Algeria's bloody civil conflicts. In turn, as noted in the previous chapter, popular support has grown for women's rights and for women's participation in unconventional professions such as music. At the same time, however, especially due to unemployment, many Tunisian men resent the gains that they say women have been given by the state. This resentment has fueled backlash against women professionals and against women's ensembles. Nevertheless, many audiences still praise the accomplishments of these ensembles and enjoy attending their performances.

An historical narrative tracing the creation of Tunisian conservatory-educated women's ensembles actually begins before *El 'Azifet* was founded in 1992. In 1985, Salah El Mahdi (director at the time of the Department of Music in the Ministry of Culture) was asked to form a women's orchestra for a special event. President Habib Bourguiba's wife had invited an Omani princess to visit Tunis and wanted to present her with a musical performance; but since the princess did not frequent mixed-gender contexts, none of the state-sponsored music ensembles could perform for this occasion. A professor at the National Conservatory and Higher Institute of Music, Salah El Mahdi, thus organized a small women's ensemble for the occasion comprised of music students and teachers, including Hinda Belhani (violin), Leila Habashi (*'ūd*), Saloua Hafaiedh (*'ūd*), Emna Louz (*qanūn*), Hela Negra (*'ūd*), and Amina Srarfi (violin) among others. According to Hinda Belhani,

We created a program, and we brought Shoubayla Rached and Zouhayla Salem, and the women who were singing then, our older women of Tunisia. We played

their repertoires and they sang. We performed at the Palace. We did two concerts: one at the Palace at the time in La Marsa, and a concert at the Carthage Palace.¹⁴⁶ ...So this is where the idea came from for creating a women's ensemble—from 1985. One of the women who came with us—named Leila Habashi—together we said, let's make a group. Five of us, maybe, began playing rehearsals, but then I got married, each of us went on our own ways, and so Amina Srarfi made the most of it. From this idea, she went and quickly created the group—and with her were Semira Esseghir and Asmahan Chaari.¹⁴⁷

Musicians other than Belhani have also noted that it was not Amina Srarfi's original idea to create a women's ensemble. They explained that she did not create *El 'Azifet* completely on her own, but was joined by Semira Esseghir and Asmahan Chaari, two musicians who later formed their own ensembles. In my interviews with Srarfi, however, she stressed that El Mahdi's ensemble only rehearsed twice and performed only two performances in 1985. Conversely, “the ‘Azifet ensemble is an ensemble that has its own name, its own form, its own rehearsals, its own concerts, and its own organization.”¹⁴⁸

Srarfi and her colleagues faced several challenges in forming and maintaining *El 'Azifet*, including finding enough musicians for the ensemble. At this time very few women were professional instrumentalists available to participate in *El 'Azifet*. Even though social stigmas against musicians had decreased by the 1980s and early 1990s, some people still held deep reservations about allowing their daughter or wife to become a performer, or even to study music. Many men did not allow their wives and daughters to participate in the ensemble, and those who considered granting their permission came to inspect the group themselves. Srarfi remembered that upon founding *El 'Azifet* she had asked a friend with whom she had studied, a pianist, to join the ensemble, “but her

¹⁴⁶ The palace in La Marsa, a wealthy northern coastal suburb of Tunis, is formerly a palace belonging to the Bey. The palace in Carthage is the Presidential Palace, sitting amidst ruins of ancient Carthage. Carthage is another wealthy northern coastal suburb of Tunis, overlooking the Gulf of Tunis and the Mediterranean.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Hinda Belhani, September 16, 2008.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

husband told her ‘no.’ He told her, ‘I married a professor of music—I did not marry a *fannāna* [artist].’ And so she could not come with us.”¹⁴⁹ This man’s comment highlights the respectability and symbolic capital associated with education, and the stigmas attached to performers (even though *fannān* / *fannāna* is one of the most respectable terms for a musician, highlighting his or her artistry). As noted earlier, in Tunisia women’s education has been a symbol of modernity, representing the nation’s progress and development. In addition, a female professor of music is understood to hail from the middle or upper-middle class, while women (and men) performers have traditionally held lower-class status; thus a professor’s education and career not only highlight her modernity, but also her family’s class status and respectability.

Srarfi explained that fortunately, however, her name and reputation as the daughter of the famous violinist and composer Kaddour Srarfi preceded her. So did her visibility on television, where viewers had seen her singing and conducting her children’s choir. Musicians’ family members thus gradually trusted her, she said, and eventually allowed their wives and daughters to join *El ‘Azifet*.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, Srarfi suggested to me that since women’s public performance as instrumentalists was previously ‘*aīb* [disreputable], *El ‘Azifet*’s founding in 1992 constitutes the starting point for women instrumentalists’ success in Tunisia.¹⁵¹

The musicians who first participated in *El ‘Azifet* included professors at the National conservatory, students at the Higher Institute of Music, and students at Srarfi’s private conservatory. They played instruments such as violin, ‘*ūd*, piano, *qanūn*, double

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

¹⁵⁰ Laura Lengel similarly discusses other musicians’ recollections that they were allowed to join *El Azifet* only after their family scrutinized the respectability of the ensemble and its members (Lengel 2004: 217).

¹⁵¹ Interview with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

bass, *darbūka*, and *tār*. Several vocalists also participated as chorus members. But not all of these musicians had experience playing Tunisian or Arab music; some, for example, had studied violin or piano in the Western classical tradition. Furthermore, some women held Arab music diplomas but were not experienced at performing in an Arab music ensemble. Thus, according to Srarfi, the next challenge involved coordinating the musicians to play together in an ensemble. She recounted,

They were not accustomed to playing together. So many rehearsals were necessary, to obtain homogeneity, so that everyone played together...and to create good music as well. And then, all of the other girls had not received the same training as I had. I had received training that was both Western and Middle Eastern, that is, the two together.¹⁵²

The musicians' various levels of experience and types of musical training were also a factor for Srarfi in deciding which repertoire the ensemble would play. She told me that she chose repertoire from the *turāth* [Tunisian musical heritage], including the Arab-Andalusian *ma'lūf* and other traditional compositions by anonymous authors. According to Srarfi, these songs were familiar to all of the musicians and thus served as a foundation for developing a homogeneous sound in the ensemble. Additionally, by first performing songs that were familiar to Tunisians and that were furthermore considered Tunisia's national music, *El 'Azifet* appealed to audiences and rooted their artistic project in performing the national musical heritage.

Beyond the *turāth*, *El 'Azifet* has performed other repertoire considered emblematic of Tunisian cultural identity. This includes popular songs from the Golden Age of Tunisian music (1930s to 1970s) that are now considered "traditional," especially the 1970s songs of Hedi Jouini. *El 'Azifet* has also been at the forefront of efforts to revive early Tunisian *ughniyya* from the 1920s and 1930s. The ensemble has revived

¹⁵² Ibid.

repertoire performed by the Jewish singers Shaykh El-Efrit and Habiba Msika, and other pieces with which Srarfi's father, Kaddour Srarfi, was associated during the 1920s and 1930s (such as *chansons judéo-arabes* and *chansons franco-arabes*), "when he was apprenticed to ensembles of Jewish musicians" (Davis 2009: 198–199). And like other Tunisian art music ensembles, they perform songs by the most prominent composers of the *Rachidiyya*, such as Khemais Ternane, Muhammad Triki, Ali Riahi, Salah el-Mahdi and Kaddour Srarfi (Davis 2002).

El 'Azifet also performs repertoire other than traditional Tunisian music, such as "Ya Rayah," an Algerian song that has become popular in the world music market. Like other festival ensembles, they perform "classic" songs from the *Mashreq* [Arab East] popularized by Umm Kulthum, Muhammed Abdel Wahab, Farid al-Atrash, Asmahan, and other stars of Egyptian and Lebanese media during the 1930s to 1970s. In addition, *El 'Azifet* performs new compositions created specifically for the ensemble by Srarfi's husband, composer Faycal Kraoui. Srarfi explained to me that Kraoui works with her and *El 'Azifet* to create compositions specifically for the ensemble that "protect the timbre and the style of the orchestra" (Srarfi 2005: 17). These new compositions include two choral pieces that resemble march-like anthems: a hymn for *Azifet* ("*Nashid El 'Azifet*"), and a patriotic song, "*Tunis watan al majd*" [Tunisia, the glorious nation]. Kraoui has also composed several instrumental works, such as the dance piece "*Maazoufet Dounia*" and "*Samā'ī destkah*," in which Srarfi asked Kraoui to innovate and transform the traditional *samā'ī* form.¹⁵³

El 'Azifet's repertoire is thus rooted in the Tunisian *turāth* and other traditional compositions while also comprising new compositions. In describing this work, Srarfi

¹⁵³ Interview with Amina Srarfi, February 16, 2008.

stressed that she aims to add a “*plus*” to Tunisian music: something extra, different, and innovative. When she described the original project of creating *El ‘Azifet*, she used similar language marking novelty and difference. Srarfi explained that she formed an ensemble comprised only of women because she wished to do something “out of the ordinary,” something that audiences were not accustomed to seeing onstage.

Furthermore, at their first performance she presented the ensemble with traditional costumes, so as to depart from the standard black and white dress worn by professional musicians in most other orchestras in Tunis. In this way, she said, she wished to present an extraordinary performance: “With this idea of women, I decided, I will also present a show [*un spectacle*]: a show for the eyes, and a show for the ears as well.”¹⁵⁴

El ‘Azifet has continued to wear traditional or neo-traditional costumes in all of its performances. Moreover, wearing such matching costumes has become a trademark image for all conservatory-educated women’s ensembles. In *El ‘Azifet*’s early years Srarfi chose traditional costumes from different regions, such as Hammamat, Moknine, Mahdiyya, and Rafraf; in her opinion, dressing the entire ensemble in one of these costumes created a beautiful tableau onstage. But since then, she explained, just as her music has evolved, her costumes have evolved as well. Today Srarfi works with two fashion designers, who create special costumes to coordinate with the music (see Figure 4.1). *El ‘Azifet*’s costumes are inspired by traditional Tunisian dress and by Tunisian music, but they are new and different, just like their new compositions. For Srarfi and many members of *El ‘Azifet*, the ensemble’s repertoire, performance, and appearance are intimately linked. These elements are rooted in the national cultural heritage, but they are also novel, modern, and innovative.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

(Washington, D.C.); in 1998 at the Jarash Festival in Aman (Jordan) and the Nobel Prize headquarters in Stockholm (Sweden); in 1999 in Paris and Doha (Qatar); and in 2000 they performed in London and at the Expo 2000 celebration in Hanover, Germany. Since then they have presented other performances in Switzerland, Spain, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy, England, Norway, Turkey, Japan, and the United States. In 2008 Srarfi told me that *El 'Azifet* performs once a month on average. Accordingly, the ensemble rehearses almost every week and has a relatively fixed membership. When I observed their performances in 2008, *El 'Azifet* was comprised of three *'ūd* players, one *qanūn* player, one violinist (Srarfi), one pianist, one keyboardist playing the bass part, three percussionists (playing *darbūka*, *bendīr*, *tār*, and *duff*), and eight chorus members (see Figure 4.2).

Srarfi and other members of *El 'Azifet* are proud that the ensemble maintains an active rehearsal and performance schedules, since other conservatory-educated women's festival ensembles are no longer so active. In the mid- to late 1990s, however, three other women's festival ensembles besides *El 'Azifet* were also performing. In turn, their success encouraged the creation of further women's ensembles. Like *El 'Azifet*, these ensembles have had a significant impact on the Tunisian music scene: most women instrumentalists have performed—and still perform—in at least one of these first four women's ensembles. As described in the previous chapter, a few professional women instrumentalists have not participated in these ensembles and have instead participated in mixed-gender ensembles. But in many ways these four women's festival ensembles have served as a type of training ground for most women instrumentalists in Tunis, even if many of them have moved on to create their own women's wedding ensembles.



Figure 4.2: *El 'Azifet*, directed by Amina Srarfi, performing at the Hammamat International Festival, Hammamat, Tunisia. July 24, 2008. (Photo by author.)

Subsequent women's ensembles: Taqasim, Tanit, and Angham Hawwa

After performing in *El 'Azifet* for two years, founding members Semira Esseghir and Asmahan Chaari left the ensemble, citing disagreements with Srarfi. In 1994 they formed their own ensemble, *Taqasim*. In her work with *Taqasim* during this time, Lengel explains that the founders aimed to create a more egalitarian ensemble where no one was explicitly the director: a woman's group "that would be supportive rather than hierarchical" (Lengel 1995: 107). This implied a departure from Srarfi's ensemble, where she directed rehearsals, performances, and financial matters. Despite her original aim, Semira Esseghir eventually came to direct *Taqasim* and the ensemble has since been associated with her leadership. Asmahan Chaari then left *Taqasim* in 1997, taking some players from that group with her to form her own ensemble, *Tanit*. Finally, in 1999 a former member of *El 'Azifet*, Nejwa Kraiem, formed a new ensemble, *Angham Hawwa*.

As in *El 'Azifet*, members of the other three ensembles wear traditional or neo-traditional costumes in performances, and they have performed at similar festival concerts in Tunisia and abroad. They also use similar instrumentation, including all or some of the following elements: *qānūn*, *'ūd* (between one and three), violin (between one and three¹⁵⁵), *org* and/or piano, cello, upright string bass, and *darbūka*, *tār*, and *daff*. Most ensembles also include three to eight chorus members, and one or two solo vocalists (see Figure 4.3).¹⁵⁶



Figure 4.3: *Taqasim*, directed by Semira Esseghir (far left).
Photo from the back cover of their eponymous CD.
(Tunis: Africa Cassette, ACCD 534)

Each women's ensemble, however, distinguishes itself from the others in various ways. First, each ensemble is recognized by its specific director and the instrument she

¹⁵⁵ Many more violins can also be used, as in the state-sponsored ensembles, in which more than ten violins regularly perform.

¹⁵⁶ The composition of these ensembles furthermore resembles that of many men's ensembles, such as the Rachidiyya and *Idhaa* (national radio and television) orchestras.

plays. According to Myriam Slama, for example: “first there was *El ‘Azifet*, directed by Amina Srarfi on violin, then *Taqasim* directed by Semira Esseghir on piano, then *Tanit* under the direction of Asmahan Chaari on bass, and *Angham Hawwa* with Nejwa Kraiem on *qanūn*.”¹⁵⁷ The album covers of *Tanit*’s and *Angham Hawwa*’s CD recordings also present prominent pictures of each director with her instrument, thereby encouraging the consumer to identify the ensemble name with the director and her instrument (see Figures 4.4 and 4.5). The album cover of *Angham Hawwa*’s CD indicates the name of the ensemble and, written in Arabic, “under the direction of Nejwa Kraiem” (see Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.4 (above): *Tanit*, directed by Asmahan Chaari.
 Photo from the back cover of their eponymous CD. (Tunis: Phonie PCP 046)

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Myriam Slama, April 23, 2008.

Each ensemble is also said to have a distinct identity and atmosphere [*jaww*]. Perhaps to present a different look from the other conservatory-educated women's ensembles, in Figure 4.4 Asmahan Chaari and the ensemble are wearing matching yellow and green pantsuits. Younger women musicians studying at the Higher Institute of Music say that *El 'Azifet* and *Tanit* are comprised of older musicians. Conversely, the directors of *Taqasim* and *Angham Hawwa* say that their ensembles have especially attracted younger musicians still studying at high school. Their rehearsal schedule has adjusted as a result, taking into account busy periods during the academic year when students take exams. Nejwa Kraiem also distinguishes her ensemble (*Angham Hawwa*) by its size. At the height of *Angham Hawwa*'s success in 2003, roughly twenty musicians performed with her at summer and Ramadan festivals (see Figure 4.5 and Figure 4.6). Musicians in *El 'Azifet* proudly say it is the most disciplined ensemble; others say it is the most hierarchical, since Srarfi directs all aspects of the ensemble. Conversely, *Angham Hawwa* and *Taqasim* are described as having a more relaxed atmosphere. In performance they seem more egalitarian than *El 'Azifet*, since their directors never stand in front of the group as a conductor but situate themselves within the ensemble, playing their instruments with the rest of the ensemble.

Musicians distinguish these first four festival ensembles by their different musical styles. According to Hela Masmoudi, *Tanit* plays more popular music than *El 'Azifet*. As noted above, *El 'Azifet* is more oriented towards the *turāth*, the *ma'lūf*, and the repertoire with which Kaddour Srarfi was associated. *El 'Azifet* also performs new compositions that are specifically created for them by composer Faycal Kraoui. Over several years, Nejwa Kraiem and Asmahan Chaari have also hired composers to create new

arrangements and compositions for their orchestras. These compositions give each of the ensembles a distinct repertoire and sound. Moreover, according to Semira Esseghir, *Taqasim*'s distinction derives from the classical (Western) spin they put on traditional tunes and the new compositions that she herself creates for the ensemble.

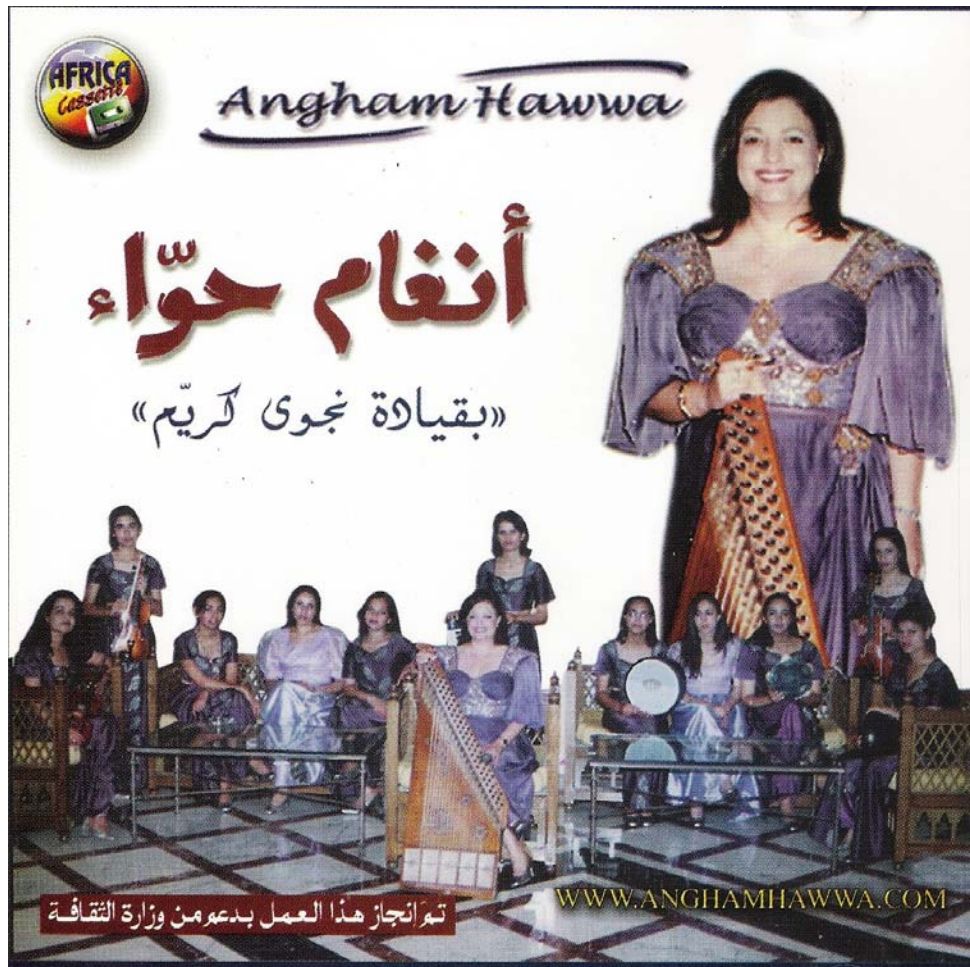


Figure 4.5 (above): *Angham Hawwa*, directed by Nejwa Kraiem.
 Photograph from the front cover of their eponymous CD.
 (Tunis: Africa Cassette, ACCD 409)



Figure 4.6: Vocalist Soumayya Mersni performing with Nejwa Kraiem’s ensemble, *Angham Hawwa*. Festival of the Medina, Tunis, Ramadan 2003. (Photo courtesy of Mersni.)

Although the directors of *El ‘Azifet*, *Taqasim*, *Tanit*, and *Angham Hawwa* distinguish each of their ensembles from the other festival ensembles, they similarly characterize their ensembles as comprised of conservatory-educated musicians. In interviews and performances they introduce members of their ensemble as professors and students of music. As noted in the previous chapter, highlighting their education—which also implies a certain level of cultural capital, socioeconomic class, and family background—is one strategy by which women musicians have stressed their respectability. Furthermore, stressing their education also highlights their modernity and justifies their claims to professional status.

Yet by wearing traditional costumes, conservatory-educated ensembles share a similar resemblance to *taqlīdiyya* [traditional] women’s folk music ensembles. Indeed for some audience members the appearance of an all-woman orchestra wearing traditional costumes indexes “tradition,” the *turāth*, and *taqlīdiyya* women’s ensembles. Even Srarfi occasionally presents *El ‘Azifet* in conversation as “the modern counterpart” of *taqlīdiyya* women’s ensembles (Davis 2004: 118–119). In my interviews with Srarfi and other ensemble directors, however, they all stressed the differences between contemporary and traditional ensembles rather than their similarities. Firstly, they explained that *El ‘Azifet* is a “modern art-music orchestra,”¹⁵⁸ whereas the others are not orchestras or ensembles but small groups [*les troupes*,” *al-majmūāt*]. Secondly, they noted that *taqlīdiyya* musicians do not play art music but rather folk music, by ear rather than by reading music. On the contrary, as Srarfi stated, “the girls who are in *El ‘Azifet* all graduated from private conservatories or from the Higher Institute of Music. That is, they know how to read music, they are cultured [*muthaqafāt*]; they know, they study music.”¹⁵⁹

Next, Srarfi remarked that women performing in *taqlīdiyya* ensembles do so because they have to, “in order to survive. That’s not the case for my orchestra. For me, it’s the cultural aspect, the “*plus*” that I will add to Tunisian music.”¹⁶⁰ She inferred that conservatory-educated musicians do not play because they need to earn money, and thus that they are not as financially constrained as *taqlīdiyya* musicians. Finally, these directors and other musicians pointed out that the performance contexts for the two types

¹⁵⁸ Here art music [*musique savante*] implies musical education and modernity. It includes the *ma’lūf* and other elements of the *turāth* that were transformed from oral repertoire to standardized, notated “national music,” taught across the country in national conservatories and cultural houses and on which students are tested in the Arab music diploma exam.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

of ensembles are very different. The *taqlīdiyya* ensembles perform for all-woman audiences in private homes, for family celebrations such as weddings and circumcisions. The conservatory-educated ensembles instead perform in public for mixed-gender audiences at events such as international festivals in Tunisia and abroad, gala dinners, performances on state television, and annual national celebrations.

Nevertheless, for some audience members the traditional costumes of conservatory-educated women's ensembles still reference *taqlīdiyya* ensembles. Perhaps part of the directors' goals in choosing such costumes was to create a link with the past. Critics, however, accuse women's ensembles of using these costumes as a gimmick, of playing on the state's valorization of the *turāth*, and of appealing to foreigners' ideas of exotic Tunisian culture. But as noted above, Srarfi originally introduced these costumes in order to create something new and different, not traditional.¹⁶¹

Such criticisms of women musicians' costumes fit within a larger discourse in the art music community that denigrates women's ensembles. Many men musicians are resentful of women's ensembles' frequent international performances; they believe that the Tunisian government sponsors them so as to promote a particular vision of national identity. These criticisms also imply that these ensembles are not genuine, and that they would not achieve success were it not for government support and the fact that they are women. In the rest of this chapter I address these criticisms by examining how the state actually sponsors and controls performances by women's ensembles as it attempts to harness the power of women musicians to perform or play out the nation.

¹⁶¹ Some men's *ma'lūf* orchestras, such as the *Rachidiyya* ensemble, also wear traditional men's dress in performance.

Playing out the nation

Despite the fact that the state sponsors their performances at certain high-profile events, women's ensembles are not state-sponsored on a regular basis. Conversely, musicians in the most prominent, male-dominated Tunisian music ensembles (such as the Rachidiyya Ensemble, the *Firqat al-Idā'a*, and the *Firqat Qowmiyya*) receive regular salaries from the state. Yet women's ensembles are often subject to greater state control and interference than their male counterparts, especially when they perform for foreign audiences. In the following sections I consider how the state promotes its vision of national identity by sponsoring performances by women's ensembles, and how women musicians play important roles in performing the nation. Next, I investigate how the state teaches Tunisian audiences to read women's performances in state press reviews. I then examine women's performances at various state-sponsored events, exploring how women musicians play out and play with concepts of national identity and gender for themselves.

As noted in previous chapters, the Tunisian state has promoted a particular vision of Tunisian national identity in which Tunisia is modern, open to the West, and committed to upholding women's rights. The state promotes this vision and performs its power in various ways; it particularly sponsors cultural performances as a way to promote this vision of Tunisia to domestic and foreign audiences. Moreover, because women are seen to embody national identity, women musicians must frequently negotiate state support for and state interference in their high-profile performances. The contexts in which they perform include state television, international festivals in Tunisia and abroad, "culture days" abroad (presentations of Tunisian food, music, and dance sponsored by the Ministry of Tourism), and gala dinners for visiting foreign dignitaries and other VIPs. In

these performances, when they wear traditional costumes and play authentic Tunisian music for domestic and international audiences, women instrumentalists can be perceived as playing out the state's vision of Tunisian national identity, including the image of Tunisian women as modern (and educated) yet aware of their cultural heritage.

While men musicians also perform in similar contexts, women musicians are especially subject to state interference at these events. In this way the state attempts to harness the power of women's ensembles to play out the nation—the power of women's appearances and behavior to index certain political and cultural values. Because women have come to represent the nation, musicians are subject to the state's vision of what Tunisian women should look like. They are asked by state actors organizing these events to look traditional by wearing their traditional costumes. They are also asked to play certain repertoire so as to highlight the state's presentation of authentic Tunisian cultural heritage for foreigners.

At the same time, they are also directed by state actors to look modern: for example, they are asked to smile more and to wear more makeup. Furthermore, following the state's view of the veil as symbolizing backwards traditions and a political (Islamist) threat to the current regime, women musicians are forbidden to wear the *hijāb* or any other kind of veil in these performances. High-caliber instrumentalist Sara Nasri told me that one reason she has ceased playing with women's ensembles is because she cannot wear her *hijāb* in performance with them.¹⁶² On more than one occasion, when playing with a women's ensemble at a gala dinner in Tunisia or at a cultural performance in France, she has been asked by the ensemble director or event organizer to remove her

¹⁶² Sara Nasri is a pseudonym, used at this informant's request. She urged me not to tell anyone else in Tunisia about our conversation, since if the government found out she would fear for her safety and that of her family.

hijāb because government officials or press photographers were present. In these situations, she explained, she has protested but then complied with this directive, vowing never to perform in that situation again. In our whispered conversations about this she expressed her frustration that she was forced to set aside her religious beliefs and sacrifice a core element of her identity. She played anyway, however, because she had already given her word to perform and because she knew that the director could not find a last-minute replacement.

This has also occurred to Nasri when performing with a mixed-gender ensemble on state television. The television staff told her to remove her *hijāb* and reveal her hair, asked her to apply more make-up, and made her fix her hair in a special *coiffure*. She told me that she found this experience humiliating. Since then she has stopped performing on television, but this has created a significant constraint for her career development. In summer 2007 and 2008, however, she was able to wear her *hijāb* in festival performances with mixed-gender ensembles. We might ask why she has been allowed to veil when performing with men and why not with women. Her experience on television, however, reveals that this rule does not just apply to the gender composition of the ensemble, but more to the visibility of the performance. As Nasri explained, those in charge do not want to show that Tunisian women veil—either to foreigners or on Tunisian television.

Nevertheless, Nasri has not been allowed to veil at any time when performing with women's ensembles. Women's ensembles' appearances are more important to control because by presenting a modern women's orchestra they perform a modern image of the Tunisian nation. Here the state might also care more about the appearances of women's ensembles in festivals than those of mixed-gender ensembles because they

consider women's ensembles important only because of their appearances, while prominent mixed-gender ensembles are valued for their performances of high-quality Tunisian music.

Reviewing women's performances in the press

Such stress on women's ensembles' appearances infiltrates press reviews of their performances. As in other young nations, the press has been a powerful tool for nationalists and the post-colonial regime in Tunisia. The state censors the media and owns several newspapers and television stations that are mouthpieces for the ruling party. The nation is not only imagined in print, but the state also performs its power by controlling the press and performing its vision of national identity through the press (Anderson 2006). By reviewing women's performances, the state furthermore promotes its vision of national identity and mediates audience reception: it tells its audience how to read women's performances.

At the same time, press reviews are valuable for most musicians who compile them in dossiers that they present to potential future employers for future engagements. The press dossier of *Taqasim* that Semira Esseghir gave me, for example, includes reviews of their performances at international festivals in Tunisia and abroad, at cultural days abroad, at gala dinners in Tunisia, and on live television shows. However, I found that the authors of these newspaper articles highlight similar gendered themes, and that they often use the exact same phrases to describe *Taqasim* and their performances. In fact the articles resemble each other so much it seems that they have all drawn upon the same set of themes and even identical stock phrases. This reinforces my belief that these articles directly present the state's mediation of women's performances.

Most press reviews argue that the favorable image of these conservatory-educated musicians onstage illustrate the state's efforts for promoting women and cultural development. Several authors highlight this image of women and of the nation particularly when writing about performances for audiences that include foreigners:

The not unintentional choice of Tunisian women musicians for the closing of these days [an international cinema festival] yet again shows the interest of the country's authorities in the advancement of women and particularly in cultural activities. (Ben Ghali 1996)

It is not just the image of women onstage that so effectively promotes Tunisian national identity. Their performance of Tunisian music—notably music from the *turāth*—moreover highlights the efforts the state has made to promote national culture and preserve the national heritage:

This favorable image [*belle image*] eloquently illustrates the effort engaged, notably since the Change, for promoting women, cultural development, and the strengthening of our musical heritage [*patrimoine musicale*]. (Naili 1998)

Accordingly, all of the articles in *Taqasim*'s press dossier stress the ensemble's performance of "*chansons de notre riche patrimoine*" [songs from our rich heritage]. They also discuss *Taqasim*'s performance of songs from Egypt that they consider difficult. They especially mention their performance of new compositions created specifically for the ensemble by men composers and by Semira Esseghir herself. These new compositions are described as preserving elements of authentic Tunisian music. In this way, the reviewers argue, the composers and the ensemble have succeeded in combining modern and traditional elements. According to Raja Ben Khemiss, Semira Esseghir's greatest success is "this alliance of old music with modern notes" (Ben Khemiss 1999). And when describing *Taqasim*'s performance at a cultural day in Lyon, Dura praised their "insertion of authenticity into the modern" (Dura 1999).

Thus in these articles the state press promotes a national identity that combines modernity, in the form of women's rights, cultural development, and new compositions, with authentic tradition, in the form of preserving the national cultural heritage. The state furthermore encourages youths' participation in national culture, which they should undertake by embracing modernity while preserving their heritage. As young women performing both traditional and modern music, *Taqasim* provides reporters the perfect opportunity to highlight the state's promotion of youth, gender, and national culture. In her article "Youth and talent," Hédia Saadaoui praises the efforts of "the country's authorities" to "further affirm our cultural identity, and to offer cultural spaces where youth can develop a musical culture of good taste and appreciate their heritage" (Saadaoui 1998). Here she echoes Ben Ali's "outwardlookingness" and other nationalist discourse whereby Tunisian national culture is innovative and open to the outside, yet also protective of its traditional heritage (Brand 1998). This blend of cosmopolitanism and preservationism is especially important for advocates of Tunisian music, which nationalists have struggled to preserve despite the threatening influences of Egyptian and Western music (Davis 2004; Turino 2000). "While remaining open to different cultures, Tunisian youth remain profoundly attached to their roots" (Saadaoui 1998). Thus "the favorable image of *Taqasim* is, in a certain way, a testimony to the talent of youths who, while accessing progress and science, watch over the preservation and the enrichment of our heritage" (Saadaoui 1998).

The press reviews note another traditional aspect of these ensembles: their traditional costumes. But it is the fact that they are conservatory-educated women musicians that clearly breaks with tradition and illustrates their modernity. In her article

about *Taqasim*'s performance in Belgium, Sarra Ganem describes their entrance onstage as a pleasant surprise for her. As noted above, she had been expecting a dance or music performance by a folkloric troupe, but instead was presented with *Taqasim*:

...the performance of this group, composed notably of music teachers and students in various disciplines, permitted the Tunisians, North Africans and Belgians to appreciate, yet again, the progress achieved for women within national development efforts. The presence of '*Taqasim*' in Belgium, and the elegance and high quality of their performance, reflect these efforts. The profile of these musicians allows us to recognize the interest accorded to music and music education for the cultural development of the nation, and particularly, to promoting Tunisian women. (Ganem 1996)

Further echoing the nationalist rhetoric of the state press, Ganem thanks the president, the Tunisian Embassy in Brussels, and the Ministry of Culture—but not the musicians—for “giving a ‘new look’ to our culture” (Ganem 1996). For the state press, then, educated women musicians highlight several other aspects of Tunisian national identity: the state's creation of national institutions for music education, and the state's promotion of education for women. As educated women they symbolize the modern nation, while also advertising the state's music-education system:

These women, as pupils, university students, and music teachers attending the conservatories founded in several cities of the country, are capable of contributing to the cultural advancement of our country, and to the distinctive image [*l'image de marque*] of the Tunisian woman. (Naili 1998)

In praising respectable, educated women musicians, the press also praises the state's successful modernization of Tunisian national music. Indeed most of these reviews praise women's ensembles as a way of praising the state above all.

When the review authors discuss *Taqasim* itself, they stress the gendered aspects of their performances, such as their refinement, beauty, and costumes. Many of the stock phrases repeated throughout the articles describe *Taqasim* as performing “with a lot of

class,” “with talent and charm,” and “with grace and quality.” Such descriptions of refinement and grace are used to distinguish women’s ensembles from other ensembles, namely folkloric troupes. But these are aspects that reviewers would not highlight in articles about men’s performances. Reviewers use these terms to highlight the musicians’ respectability and class as educated, modern women, and to stress the gendered, feminine aspects of their performances.

The reviews also comment on the musicians’ beautiful costumes, and they stress gender and appearances in their titles, such as “Feminine musical beauty,” “Music is woman,” “Feminine in the plural,” “Sweet melodies,” and “Overture in beauty.” Lilian Khayat, expecting a folkloric troupe to perform at a gala dinner near Tunis, writes that instead she was surprised by seeing “an ensemble of young women, very gracefully wearing costumes that were coquettishly Tunisi-fied” (Khayat 1998). Hédia Saadaoui writes that *Taqasim*’s performance of Tunisian and Arab songs, together with their costumes, were “in perfect harmony” with the traditional architecture of their surroundings, as if they were in a scene from *A Thousand and One Nights*. Alya Ghali moreover notes,

It was a real pleasure for the eyes and for the ears, charmed by the grace and the class...of young music professors and students who authoritatively performed a rich repertoire that is especially difficult to play. (Ghali 1998)

In part, such comments echo Amina Srarfi’s desire to use special costumes so as to create a show for “the eyes and the ears”. However, Srarfi does not present her ensemble’s achievements within the context of the state, as these articles do. And above all, Srarfi stresses the musical contribution that *El ‘Azifet* adds to Tunisian music. She promotes her ensemble as a professional orchestra able to stand on its own musical merits. In these

articles, however, it seems that reviewing a women's ensemble's performance is an excuse to praise the state. By placing so much stress on the musicians' appearances, the reviewers reduce the importance of their playing: they make them seem more significant for their appearances (and their illustration of national identity) than for their playing.

Such subtly patronizing treatment of women performers extends to discussions of their playing ability as well. Although the reviewers praise *Taqasim's* performances, they do so in an ambiguous, subtly condescending manner. In this way they seem to respond to implied expectations of women's incompetence as musicians—including perceptions that women's ensembles play simple repertoire, that they cannot successfully perform difficult pieces, and that they cannot perform well in general. All of the authors, for example, discuss the difficult repertoire that the ensemble performed, as if this were unexpected. One author notes the audience's appreciation that "*Taqasim*, avoiding easy solutions, voluntarily chose not to play simple and pleasing melodies." Rather, the group "dared" to play some beautiful/wonderful *bachraf*-s and difficult pieces of Abdelwahab and Umm Kalthoum (Naili 1998).

Next, several articles include the same stock passages in which they discuss *Taqasim's* success in managing to not botch the performance. Alya Ghali writes, "None of the vocalists nor the instrumentalists, and even less their conductor/*org* player, seemed to botch their work, or to hurry to finish it" (Ghali 1998). Many authors also praise the musicians' courage in playing new compositions for the first time in public, without the slightest appearance of fear. "Without fearing an eventual negative reaction from the audience, *Taqasim* played a very beautiful piece composed by its conductor" (Naili 1998). In writing this way, the authors imply that these young women might be afraid to

play new pieces for the first time. They also seem to respond to men musicians' criticisms that women do not play or compose music well by indirectly negating those criticisms: after hearing *Taqasim* perform, Moufida Naili writes, "we can affirm that it is not only desirable but possible to present quality music performed and even composed by women" (Naili 1998). In addition, many authors are impressed that these women musicians, these "good professionals, never missed a signal" from Esseghir, who sat in their midst playing the *org*, while also "keeping an eye concentrated on their music stands" (Ibid.). To me as a musician, this comment is condescending in its assumptions, since one of the most basic techniques a conservatory-educated musician learns when playing in an ensemble is how to follow the director while also reading from the sheet music on their music stand.

Finally, in not openly criticizing women's ensembles' performances, these reviewers actually do them a great disservice. First of all, they do not put them on the same level as men musicians, whom they sometimes critique even in the same articles, demonstrating that they do not consider women to be serious professionals. Like the state, these reviewers consider women's performances as more important for show than for musical quality. These reviews lead to negative ramifications in the art music community, especially among men musicians who see such articles as evidence that women's ensembles do not include serious musicians but are decorations promoted by the government.

State-sponsored performance contexts

Beyond using the state press and state television to promote its vision of Tunisian national identity to domestic audiences, the state sponsors music performances at national

celebrations. The state also sponsors international music festivals in Tunisia, such as the Carthage International Festival and the Hammamat International Festival during the summer, and the Festival of the Medina during the month of Ramadan.¹⁶³ The Minister of Culture and the president himself approve the programs for the Carthage and Hammamat festivals each summer.¹⁶⁴ Audiences at these festivals are comprised of Tunisian residents, foreign visitors, and Tunisians living abroad who visit Tunisia during Ramadan and during the summer.

The state also promotes its vision of Tunisian national identity to foreigners by sponsoring musicians' performances at international festivals abroad. Together with the international hosts, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Tourism usually help sponsor and plan these trips for women and men musicians. Figure 4.7, for example, advertised a concert for *Taqasim* at a festival in Seyssins, France (near Grenoble). As the flier reveals, the concert's sponsors were primarily French companies, but also the state-owned TunisAir. Such concerts are thus one way in which the Tunisian government promotes Tunisian culture to attract European tourists.

The Tunisian government more explicitly promotes Tunisian culture to foreigners by organizing cultural performances at Tunisian embassies abroad, such as "Tunisian culture days" or "Tunisian culture weeks" in Marseilles, Brussels, Spain, or Syria, for example. Various aspects of Tunisian culture are presented at these events, such as music, dance, food, and traditional costumes. Women's ensembles have frequently performed at

¹⁶³ The state is not only the sponsor; so-called private companies also sponsor these events, but most of them are state-owned or owned by elites allied with the state.

¹⁶⁴ This is one reason why the programs are not released until a few days before the festival commences; in 2007, the program for the annual Festival of the Medina held during Ramadan was not publicly released until the day after the festival had commenced.

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Figure 4.7 Flier advertising Taqasim's performance in Seyssins, France, 2003.
(Courtesy of Semira Esseghir.)

these occasions, but men's ensembles and other folkloric troupes also participate in such performances. On some occasions an entire women's ensemble plays at these

performances; in others, only four women are invited to perform in a small quartet. They are asked to wear traditional costumes and their appearance is monitored. In March 1999, for example, Semira Esseghir and *Taqasim* performed at a series of cultural days in Lyon, France, including a gala dinner for members of the mayor's office and other French, Franco-Tunisian, and Tunisian audience members. The event also comprised a performance by the folkloric troupe of Tozeur, *El Hamla*, and a fashion show in which models presented various traditional Tunisian costumes (Dura 1999).

According to Ganem, writing in the Tunisian newspaper *Le Renouveau*, Tunisia has worked hard to organize cultural events abroad so as to exhibit its cultural “*spécificities*” and, since the 1960s, to “promote its burgeoning tourism, notably to European cultures” (Ganem 1996). She writes that previous performances at such cultural days by folkloric troupes, particularly the famous female dancers, Zina and Aziza, presented a stereotypical folkloric image of Tunisia. In recent years, however,

..the organization of cultural weeks or days has taken on a new dimension, for promoting artistic creation, showing a new image of our culture, and benefiting Tunisians living abroad... (Ganem 1996)

The new image of Tunisian culture refers to performances by women's ensembles such as *Taqasim*. By presenting conservatory-educated women musicians, *Taqasim*'s performance demonstrates the modern elements of Tunisian national identity as well as the authentic, traditional elements necessary for attracting cultural tourists.

During my fieldwork research I was unable to attend performances by women musicians at such cultural events abroad, but several musicians talked to me about performing in them. Most recently, in late August 2008, the Tunisian Ministry of Tourism had organized a series of cultural performances in Spain, for which they hired

‘ūd player Olfa Baouab and seven members of her ensemble, *Firqat Olfa* (including violinist Myriam Slama, *org* player Hajer Gana, and *darbūka* player Leila Farhati).

During their four-day trip, the musicians performed three concerts for various dignitaries in prestigious locations. Although all of their expenses were paid, including per diem for food, they were not paid for their music performances. In other words, they worked for three or four days but did not return to Tunisia with pay from their performances. Khadija el-Afrit explained to me that musicians are usually not paid for such performances abroad, but many eagerly accept these jobs because they provide travel opportunities not otherwise available to young women.

On this occasion, however, one musician also took advantage of *Firqat Olfa*'s trip to Spain as an opportunity to escape Tunisia and immigrate illegally to Europe. Sonia Baruni, one of the best *darbūka* players performing with women's ensembles in recent years, disappeared during the final night of the trip.¹⁶⁵ The other members of the ensemble discovered that she had “*haraqat*” [literally, “burned”], or immigrated illegally, and was probably on her way to France where she could join relatives. This was not the first time a Tunisian musician has defected during a cultural performance trip in Europe, but it caused a great deal of grief for Baouab and her ensemble, who were questioned by Spanish and Tunisian authorities in Spain and upon their return to Tunisia.¹⁶⁶ When I spoke to the other ensemble members after their return, they were saddened by Baruni's escape. They noted that as a form of punishment, Baouab had lost most of her clients among the government and establishment élite. But they also wished Baruni the best of luck, commenting that her life must have been very difficult in Tunis for her to take such

¹⁶⁵ “Sonia Baruni” is a pseudonym.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Jankowsky 2004: 312–313.

extreme action. Although Baruni's escape had negative ramifications for her colleagues and family in Tunisia, her act was also a very public way of turning the tables on the Tunisian government (Jankowsky 2004: 312–313). She demonstrated that she had agency and access to power, and that women are not necessarily well-behaved, respectable, passive pawns of the government. Moreover, she embarrassed the Tunisian state agents in front of their Spanish hosts, exposing their fake image of Tunisia as a developed country where “*kul shay behi*” [everything is great] for women (Lengel 1994). Furthermore, her escape resists the artifice of the nation and the hypocrisy of state borders and immigration laws, which determine who is allowed to visit Europe without a visa (an American, for example) and who is not (a North African).

Gala dinners

El-Afrit explained to me that although musicians are not paid for their work at such cultural performances abroad, they are repaid by the Ministry of Tourism in another way. Their performances abroad constitute a “*marché*” [exchange] linked to *dîner-gala* [gala dinner] performances in Tunisia, for which the musicians are paid. The Ministry of Tourism thus offers a deal for musicians: play at these events abroad, even though you will not be paid in full, and you will be repaid by being invited to perform at gala dinners in Tunisia during the following year. Many musicians consider gala dinner performances to be financially beneficial because they usually occur during the slow winter season when musicians do not have many other gigs. Gala dinners are also often prestigious events that are hosted for visiting VIPs, for government ministries, dignitaries, and even heads of state, including the Tunisian president.

Like cultural performances abroad, gala dinners are occasions for the Tunisian state to promote its vision of Tunisian cultural and national identity to foreign and domestic audiences. Women's ensembles are frequently invited to perform at gala dinners, particularly when they are held for conferences or events pertaining to women and development. At these events government agents often oversee women's ensembles' repertoire and appearance, and the director keeps a sharp eye on how the musicians look and behave. Like cultural day performances, moreover, gala dinners often involve a presentation of Tunisian culture in multiple ways, such as through food, music, dance, decorations, and speeches by state agents. A state-sponsored press review of a gala dinner in 1998 explains that these performances encouraged foreign visitors to appreciate "the richness and beauty of the Tunisian heritage" and to retain beautiful memories of Tunisia (Khayat 1998).

In April 2008 I observed a gala dinner that was held on the grounds of a fancy hotel in Hammamat, an internationally renowned coastal resort town. The dinner celebrated the closing of an international conference for gynecologists and obstetricians; the two hundred guests included doctors from Tunisia, Europe, North America, and Asia. The following is excerpted from my field notes about that event:

We arrived to find the dining tables and chairs outdoors, in the grass between the pool and the beach, under a large tent carpeted with thick red Tunisian rugs. While all was still quiet inside the tent, we could hear the waves lapping on the beach just outside. The smell of the sea and pool waters mingled with the scent of bkhour [incense] burning in small kanoun-s [braziers]. Directly opposite the entrance, against the back of the tent, was a large black platform that included a center aisle extended into the audience, like a

fashion runway. A large screen on one side of the tent projected power-point slides in French, presenting statistics about women's health and development in Tunisia. A photographer later took pictures of people at each table, which were then projected on the giant screen.

After the musicians had changed into their costumes they returned to the tent, where they took their places onstage, sitting in a slight semi-circle across the platform. They set up their music stands, warmed up their instruments, and conducted a sound-check. Since Olfa Baouab was the director of this ensemble, Firqat Olfa, she interacted with the sound engineers and moved around the tent, listening to the balance. Olfa later directed the ensemble while playing 'ūd and sitting in the center of the ensemble. She stood out from the rest of the musicians by wearing an elegant, richly brocaded red qaftan [caftan, a long-sleeved, ankle-length outer garment]. The other musicians were wearing their "Hammamat" costume, comprising white tunics and pants trimmed with thick lace, underneath colorful velvet vests decorated with gold brocade. The ensemble included Myriam Slama (violin), Khadija el-Afrit (qanūn), Leila Farhati (darbūka), Abir Zahra (duff), and Soumayya Mersni (voice and tār), among others.

Olfa's ensemble began playing just before the first guests arrived. They played mostly Tunisian pieces that they characterize as calm, including instrumental and vocal pieces from the turāth, as well as a few popular pieces from Egypt. From my position at a table in the audience, I noticed that many guests were partially listening to the musicians, at least at the beginning of the event before everyone had arrived and before guests were served. The volume of the music was also quite loud; at first it was hard not to hear the musicians playing. Once the tables were filled and everyone was talking, however, it

became difficult for me to hear the musicians and attune to their performance. Some people applauded after their pieces, but the ambiance was entirely different from that of their concerts. Nevertheless, many people seemed to enjoy the music. Towards the end of the musicians' performance the rhythms became livelier, and several men rose from their seats and began dancing. I believe that some of them were Tunisian doctors, who encouraged their European and North American colleagues to join them.

The musicians had been told to stop playing at eleven o'clock. At this point the organizers announced that a roasted lamb buffet was being served outside the tent. As I walked with Myriam and Khadija to their dressing rooms, where they would change out of their costumes, we could smell the savory aromas emanating from the mechoui [roasted lamb] platters and see the guests waiting in buffet lines beside the pool. Just before leaving, upon returning to the rear of the tent to collect their instruments and stage equipment, we observed the next performance of the evening: a fashion show set to a DJ's pop-music soundtrack, in which male and female models presented traditional costumes from various regions of Tunisia.

At this event I felt that my senses were overwhelmed by the organizers' quests to present multiple aspects of Tunisian culture all at once. These aspects, however, were only those that fit the state's vision of cultural identity. The event organizers had presented a modern orchestra of conservatory-educated musicians and had offered slideshow and verbal presentations of Tunisia's development reforms, at a contemporary hotel serving wine and European-style appetizers. Meanwhile, they had created an Orientalized setting of traditional Tunisian culture, with Bedouin-like tent decorations, traditional rugs, traditional costumes from various regions, and a women's ensemble

dressed in traditional costumes performing music from Tunisia's authentic heritage. The organizers thus presented Tunisia as a model post-colonial nation-state: successful at implementing modern reforms for women and development, eager to participate in scientific advancements, and welcoming foreign investment and tourists. At the same time, they appealed to tourists' sensibilities by presenting Tunisian culture as unique, exotic, and rooted in an authentic traditional past (Turino 2000; Zayzafoon 2005). As part of their buffet presentation of Tunisian culture, the organizers used *Firqat Olfa's* performance to play out the state's vision of national identity.

Despite the prestigious nature of gala dinners and the important networking they can entail, some women musicians are critical of playing at these events. They value performing at festivals instead, because contrary to gala dinners, at a festival they perform a professional concert for an audience that has come to listen to them. At gala dinners they feel that the audience is not there to listen to them; this makes them feel more like decorations than performers. Moreover, when they perform at gala dinners some musicians are paid differently than they are for a festival performance. Khadija el-Afrit, for example, normally earns 200 Tunisian dinars (DT) per concert (plus 20 DT per rehearsal) when she performs with prestigious mixed-gender ensembles in festivals. She is one of the few women to play at this professional level, as she terms it, which is the same rate that the top-notch men performers are paid in those ensembles. When she is asked to perform with women's ensembles at gala dinners, however, she is offered what she calls "the women's rate," 100 DT per concert. This is what most women instrumentalists earn when performing with women's ensembles at festivals and gala

dinners.¹⁶⁷ El-Afrit told me that she dislikes playing with women's ensembles because they do not pay her as a professional. This makes her feel as if she is no longer valued as a professional musician, but as a woman.¹⁶⁸

Verbal criticisms are subtle means by which women musicians can express their frustration at being used by the government as decorations, particularly at gala dinners and cultural performances. When government interference in their performances moves beyond requesting certain repertoire to controlling their appearances (by removing Nasri's *hijāb*), the stakes are raised. Since state agents have forbidden her to veil on television, at cultural days abroad, and at gala dinners, Sara Nasri has refused to participate in such performances, even though this has adversely affected her career. She explained to me that most musicians could not afford to give up these gigs: they would suffer financially, and they would also miss out on advancing their career, since such performances are linked to press reviews and visibility. They are seen as favors one must perform for the state. By not performing in these contexts, she has missed out on performing in festival performances as well. Refusing to perform in such cultural performances, however, may affect more than a musician's performing career. One musician told me that when she declined to perform with a women's ensemble at a set of cultural days abroad, the government would not return her passport for several weeks, restricting her ability to travel to France for her required graduate-school registration.

Such coercive interference by the state restricts women's agency, but several musicians still find ways to resist. Even when they perform at gala dinners or at cultural days abroad, some women behave in ways that subtly contest the state's image of

¹⁶⁷ Conversely, when performing at weddings most women musicians have been earning more, an average of 120 DT/night; this is actually more than the average rate for men musicians.

¹⁶⁸ Personal communication with Khadija el-Afrit, August 15, 2008.

Tunisian women. Nasri and other musicians, for example, refuse to wear much makeup onstage at these events. They also challenge the state's prescriptions for how the modern Tunisian woman should behave. At the Hammamat dinner I attended, for example, some of the musicians resented the fact that they were not offered dinner by the hosts after they had finished playing: following their performance, they defiantly walked over to the buffet and helped themselves to the bountiful *mechoui* [roasted lamb] anyway. At another gala dinner, some musicians criticized the dressing room they had been provided, since it was tiny, distant from the stage, and filled with costumes for the hotel's MCs and day-care counselors. After the performance we laughed uproariously as many musicians defiantly raided the costumes and took turns trying on various wigs, Viking helmets, and clown suits.

On another occasion, I witnessed an attempt by a women's ensemble to circumvent the government's control over Tunisian musicians' performances in Tunisia and abroad. In August 2008, I was asked to help Neila Ghourabi create a DVD for her ensemble.¹⁶⁹ Ghourabi wanted to send the recordings to China, to friends who wanted to organize a tour for her ensemble there. I was requested not to tell anyone else about this, since Ghourabi had invited a selected group of musicians to participate and did not want other musicians to be offended that they were not involved. The filming took place on a Sunday afternoon in Megrine, a suburb of Tunis. Ghourabi had rented a special performance space, hired a sound engineer, and asked me to use my video equipment. She also brought costumes specifically designed for her ensemble. The costumes were comprised of lavender satin tunics and pants underneath purple velvet brocaded vests; on their feet, the musicians wore silver heels or silver dress flats.

¹⁶⁹ Neila Ghourabi is a pseudonym.

This recording was unlike any performance by a women's ensemble that I had previously observed. Because we were filming, the musicians could stop and start the pieces at any moment, taking time to discuss the pieces and their playing. Because they were creating a film with the sole purpose of attracting foreigners to invite them for a tour, they placed particular emphasis on playing Tunisian music, on looking nice, and on smiling a great deal. Ghourabi kept telling the other musicians to smile, since "foreigners like that."

Although Ghourabi and her ensemble could be perceived as reproducing state mediation of their performances, it is significant that in this situation they alone were in charge of their self-presentation, their repertoire, their appearances, their playing, and their recording. They circumvented the *marché* whereby the state sponsors foreign tours and writes glowing press reviews and the musicians obediently pay back favors. They similarly circumvented historical patterns in which Tunisian women are dependent on the state. Instead, they wanted to sell their performance directly to foreigners. Critics could argue that they were pandering to the desires of a foreign audience, whom Ghourabi believed would like to see smiling women playing traditional Tunisian music. But they were also performing for themselves, and performing what they wanted to show—they were playing out the nation on their own terms.

Conclusion

By proudly playing out the nation in their own way, women musicians reclaim their agency, their performances, and their gendered national identity for themselves. Moreover, by playing out the nation they are bringing it into being and shaping it for themselves. Indeed several musicians told me that they are proud to perform in women's

ensembles; in particular, they enjoy traveling abroad and performing in prestigious contexts, and they are proud to represent their country in these occasions. Some musicians said they are especially pleased to play Tunisian music, particularly for foreigners. Other musicians said they wish to show foreigners specific elements of Tunisian culture, such as traditional music and costumes. Srarfi and others are proud to contribute to Tunisian music by performing new compositions, and by presenting a “new look” for domestic and foreign audiences.

Srarfi and others also told me that they are proud to show domestic and foreign audiences what Tunisian women can do. As noted above, women’s rights, secularism, and women’s participation in the public sphere are important elements of many Tunisians’ national identity and pride. Many women musicians thus take pride in shocking foreign audiences, whom they believe hold certain stereotypes of Arab-Muslim women. When Srarfi discussed her status as the conductor of *El ‘Azifet*, she noted,

even in Europe, or in America, they were very surprised that there’s an Arab-Muslim woman who directs; it’s not easy, because of our traditions, religion... that’s what they think abroad, that women are forbidden to not even do music... But thanks to God [*elhemdullilah*], I have demonstrated the opposite. I am *musulmane* [Muslim (feminine)], Arab. I’ve acquired wonderful experiences, and I’ve studied in order to become a (woman) conductor... I am the first woman conductor in Tunisia, in the Arab world.¹⁷⁰

Unlike the state press and critical men musicians, Srarfi and other women do not directly link their accomplishments to the state. They are proud to advertise their accomplishments as professional musicians, especially their agency and entrepreneurship in creating their own ensembles. As Mikhaela Mami—a Bulgarian violinist, founding member of *El ‘Azifet*, and professor at the Higher Institute of Music—writes,

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

the creation of *El 'Azifet* is considered a very important occasion whereby women demonstrated their abilities. It was considered an exceptional women's musical troupe in the Arab world, capable of representing women in the artistic domain, especially in the professional domain. [] ...these women had a lot of passion for music and the need to communicate it. Within this orchestra, excellent instrumentalists demonstrated their ability and imposed change upon the typical landscape of men instrumentalists. (Mami 2004: 23–24)

Criticisms about women's festival ensembles serving as government pawns ignore the fact that women musicians have created, directed, and organized these ensembles themselves. They have designed the costumes, planned most of their repertoire, and actively promoted their ensembles. Moreover, by taking pride in their agency as musicians, directors, and entrepreneurs, they play out and expand national identity for themselves, potentially creating a national space that is not dominated by men.

Furthermore, by forming their own ensembles, Amina Srarfi, Semira Esseghir, Asmahan Chaari, and Nejwa Kraiem have transformed the Tunisian music scene. They have circumvented a domain dominated by men and have created alternative outlets for women to pursue careers as professional instrumentalists. These musicians and their ensembles have also served as role models for future generations of women musicians. Young women now studying at ISM grew up watching *El 'Azifet* perform at festivals and on television during the 1990s; violinist Azza Chebbi, for example, told me that the success of *El 'Azifet* inspired her to pursue a career as a musician. In addition, most women instrumentalists now performing in Tunis have played with at least one of these first four ensembles at some point in their careers. In these ensembles they have earned valuable experience playing in an ensemble, learning repertoire, performing in public, traveling abroad, and learning to improvise. Several instrumentalists told me that these

women's ensembles provided them with their first opportunities to play Arab and Tunisian music in an ensemble. And even though Khadija El-Afrit prefers to no longer perform with women's ensembles, she acknowledged to me that she first gained experience improvising by playing with *Taqasim*.

Musicians performing in women's ensembles have also expanded Tunisian musical identity by creating spaces for women to play music together without the presence of men. In the next chapter I will investigate how several women musicians have expanded the parameters of women's performance to include wedding celebrations, at which musicians enjoy improvising, playing dance music, and creating *jaww* [a festive atmosphere]. Like musicians in women's festival ensembles, musicians in women's wedding ensembles have enacted change themselves by developing alternative spaces for women's musicking.

Chapter Five

Playing out and creating *jaww*: The work of women's wedding ensembles

Following the success of conservatory-educated festival ensembles, the number of women's ensembles in Tunis has rapidly multiplied. Most of these ensembles now perform at wedding celebrations, where they have played for mixed-gender and gender-segregated audiences since the late 1990s. Musicians in these wedding ensembles have promoted their novelty, prestige, and educational capital to make their presence at weddings not only acceptable but also desirable among affluent families. Many musicians say that women's wedding ensembles are currently in demand, partly due to a rising number of women who veil and wish to hold gender-segregated wedding celebrations.

In this chapter I examine how conservatory-educated women's ensembles are transforming the Tunisian music scene by playing out at both mixed-gender and gender-segregated wedding celebrations. After briefly describing these ensembles and the performance contexts in which they work, I discuss various reasons for their popularity. I then examine how they perform gender identity and create a heightened festive atmosphere [*jaww*] in the course of wedding celebrations. I apply theories of the performer-audience feedback loop in Arab music to explore how musicians gain experience improvising, playing out with confidence, and creating *jaww*, often when only women are present. Several musicians in these ensembles told me that they prefer performing with other women musicians and for women-only audiences, suggesting that

gender affects the *jaww* and musical performance (especially improvisation) at weddings in significant ways. While some Tunisians consider women's performances in gender-segregated contexts to be more respectable than in mixed-gender contexts, some male musicians still denigrate wedding ensembles and consider the gender-segregated nature of their work backwards. Yet the comments of women in wedding ensembles demonstrate that these ensembles create important spaces for women's musicking. Moreover, women's ensembles create spaces both on and offstage in which musicians may feel comfortable acting out and challenging gender norms prescribing their behavior.

* * * * *

Although we had left Tunis behind schedule, a sense of adventure filled the van as we traveled to Taboulba, a three-hour journey by car. I was riding with seven musicians who would play with Jouda Najah's Founoun ensemble at an outia [party for the bride] that evening; Jouda and Semira Bouchallah were each driving their cars behind us, filled with other musicians, children, and instruments. The other musicians in the van treated the journey as a vacation: they told jokes, smoked, and cranked up the van's stereo volume. Along the route we listened to music sung by pop singer Nancy Ajram; some of the women sang their own versions of pop singer Haifa's and Ajram's latest songs, mocking the sexy voices and dance moves these singers have used in their music videos. As we decelerated to drive through small towns along the route, some musicians shouted bawdy comments out the window as we passed men walking in the street—parodying the catcalls women frequently receive on the streets of Tunis. And when we passed a town hall where a newly married couple was parading down the building's grand front stairs,

Yossr Labidi and Hanan Gharbi grabbed percussion instruments from the rear of the van and loudly sang traditional wedding songs in a tongue-and-cheek manner.

Upon arriving at the private home where the musicians had been hired to perform, we found dozens of family members busily preparing for the evening's celebration. Men in the courtyard were preparing the party space, and women in the kitchen were preparing the sweets and drinks they would later serve to guests. We were led first to the musicians' stage, erected in the northeastern corner of the family's large courtyard, to deposit instruments and test the sound equipment. The entire house was new, quite grand, and whitewashed; I had the immediate impression that this family was very wealthy. Their hospitality further demonstrated their affluence and generosity. They served us dinner on the balcony overlooking the courtyard; the meal included a sumptuous spread of grilled fish, large shrimp, a traditional lamb stew known as kamouniyya, fresh bread, and various types of salads. For dessert we were served mint tea and fresh slices of juicy, succulent melon.

Since we had arrived a bit late, we rushed to finish eating so that the musicians could wash up and prepare for their performance. In an adjacent bedroom they hurriedly changed into their costumes, applied makeup, and fixed their hair. Once they were all downstairs and onstage, they tested the sound system once again. But the sound system had a "bug" in it, such that the singers' voices sounded garbled and scratchy.

With Jouda's assistance I had asked the family for permission to film the party, and I set up my camera on the balcony so that I could have a clear view of the musicians' stage, situated next to the bride's "throne" and platform. Because they had arrived later than usual (it was already close to 10 p.m.), the musicians did not have time to perform

the calm instrumental pieces they usually play before the bride arrives. This night they only had time to tune each of their instruments, to test the microphones, and to warm up. When they received word that the bride would soon arrive, the ensemble began playing the opening of “Inzād al-nabī” [The prophet is born]. The percussion, org, and violin initiated the opening rhythmic ostinato, and the nāy and org added solo improvisations. Then Samia Ben Youssef began her vocal improvisation, marking the entrance of the bride and her entourage.

During the first part of the evening the bride wore a traditional dress from this region, topped with an elaborate cloak and headdress. She wore gold jewelry from head to toe, including a “Khomsa” necklace and “hūt” (fish) charms to ward off the evil eye. Her parents and female relatives accompanied her to the bridal throne while holding candles. They helped her to settle into her chair, posed for pictures, and then danced around her, as the musicians progressed from playing “Inzād al-nabī” to other traditional songs and dance pieces performed at wedding celebrations.

When the bride left the courtyard to change her clothes the musicians played another traditional wedding song. They then took a break, returning upstairs to the balcony to partake in the sweet almond pastries and fresh fruit juices provided by the servers. (The audience had been served the treats earlier, while the musicians had been playing.). The servers also distributed a majmūm (tiny bouquet, or “bunch”) of fresh jasmine to each of us, including myself. I was quickly surrounded by the scent of jasmine, which mingled with the sweet odors of pastries, incense, and perfume as guests danced in the warm night air.

After the ensemble resumed playing, they played another t'ālīla, or traditional wedding song for the bride's reentrance to the party, "Salī 'ala sayyid al-nabī." For the second part of the celebration the bride wore a Western-style cream wedding dress topped by a matching hijāb [head covering, or veil]; her neck and arms were completely covered with cream opaque gauze. She was accompanied by her fiancé, who wore a beige business suit. The new couple processed to their throne, where they stood to have their pictures taken for several minutes while the musicians continued to play. Later the bride and groom danced, but the groom, the bride's father, and a few younger men were the only men who danced near the bridal throne and the musicians' stage. The other (few) men in attendance were seated at the rear of the space, in the southwestern corner of the courtyard. Indeed the dancers, like most of the guests, were primarily women, who danced as most women do at weddings in Tunis. Holding their hands just below chin level, with their wrists and elbows bent and moving outwards as if gesturing to other dancing women, they slightly moved each of their feet forward and back in place so as to shift their weight and sway their hips to the beat of the drums. An older woman wearing traditional dress, however, spent most of the evening in front of the stage with another older woman, both waving green handkerchiefs as they danced in the traditional style of that region.

As they danced I observed Jouda's special ability to animate the performance and interact with the audience. She frequently left her seat and circulated amongst women sitting at their tables, beating her tambourine and dancing so as to induce them to rise and dance. And throughout the evening she used a microphone to address the audience, bless the bride, and praise the bride's beauty. She encouraged the guests to dance, to

ululate in honor of the bride, and to applaud for the servers and musicians. Jouda's actions were complemented by other musicians' animated verbal interjections, and by the darbūka player's solo improvisations. At this point I regretted standing alone on the balcony. Since the musicians were playing great dance music and really heating up the party's jaww, I wished that I were downstairs with them, dancing amongst the crowd.

Women's wedding ensembles

Although it was previously considered *'aīb* [disreputable] for respectable middle-class women to perform at weddings, increasing numbers of women's ensembles have been performing at weddings since the turn of the twenty-first century.¹⁷¹ In 1996 Jouda Najah and Olfa Ben Smida formed *Founoun*, the first conservatory-educated women's ensemble to regularly perform at weddings. In the early 2000s the number of conservatory-educated women's ensembles rapidly multiplied, due to an increased number of women studying music and escalating demand for hiring these ensembles. These new ensembles are directed by Olfa Baouab (*Firqat Olfa*), Lamia Ktata (*Tarab*), Henda Belhani (*Al-Andalousia*), Olfa Ben Smida (*Filla*), and Myriam Slama (*Houriat at-Tarab*), among others. Indeed, during my fieldwork research I encountered very few women musicians who had never performed in festivals or weddings with a women's ensemble. Although the directors of the first few women's festival ensembles (*El 'Azifet*, *Taqasim*, and *Angham Hawwa*) say that their ensembles never perform at weddings, the musicians performing in festival and wedding ensembles are often the same. And some festival and wedding ensembles have often overlapped: Baouab's ensemble occasionally

¹⁷¹ Some women's *taqlīdiyya* [traditional] ensembles have historically performed folk music at weddings for audiences comprised only of women, but the folk performers in these ensembles hold lower socioeconomic status than conservatory-educated musicians and are considered "women who have to work."

plays at festivals, Henda Belhani's *Al-Andalousia* began as a festival ensemble, and Asmahan Chaari's *Tanit* now performs primarily at weddings.

At least seven full-time wedding ensembles now exist, performing almost every evening during the summer wedding season between late June and early September. Many other newer ensembles, such as Myriam Slama's *Houriat at-Tarab*, perform less frequently, and their musicians participate in several other ensembles during the summer. Roughly fifty musicians circulate among these various wedding ensembles; only *Founoun* and *Filla* have relatively fixed personnel rosters.

These ensembles perform at the final wedding night party known as the *'ars*, when the groom's family hosts a large party culminating the wedding celebrations, and at the *outia*, a party for the bride held two evenings before the *'ars*.¹⁷² While the *outia* is usually a smaller affair, at the *'ars* the bride's and groom's families unite in celebration; after the *'ars* the bride and groom consummate their marriage and begin living together as husband and wife. At the *'ars* women's ensembles usually perform for mixed-gender audiences, while at the *outia* they perform for mixed-gender audiences as well as for gender-segregated audiences comprised of only women. Although these family celebrations are private, over two hundred people can be invited. They are held in fancy hotel ballrooms, indoor banquet halls, outdoor banquet spaces, and outdoors in the internal courtyard or side yard of a family's home. Yet since each of these spaces is enclosed (even the yards are enclosed by high walls), and the guest list is limited to family and friends, these events are viewed as "private." Women's conservatory-educated wedding ensembles are usually hired by wealthy upper class and upper-middle class

¹⁷² I use this spelling of *outia* because this is how it is commonly transliterated in print in Tunisia. The first letter (*alif*) of *al-ūtiyya* is often not pronounced in Tunisian dialect, which may explain why Lengel (2004) and Davis (2009) spell it as *lutiyya*.

families to perform in these contexts; they are rarely hired by families of lower socioeconomic status, who host wedding parties on the roof of their house or apartment building. As such, these ensembles distinguish themselves from the typical men’s wedding band, which performs “*fūq as-sitah*” [on top of the roof] and is known as an ‘*awāda*. Here performing on top of a roof is denigrated because it is less of an enclosed space, and because it implies that the host’s family does not have enough money to host the event in a more private space.

At most wedding parties the event space is organized so that the bridal “throne” and the musicians’ stage are both elevated and located next to each other in front of the spectators (see Figure 5.1). The bridal throne or the musicians’ stage is in the center, with the other to its side; in front of both is an open space for dancing. The rest of the space is



Figure 5.1: The musicians’ stage (*left*), the bridal throne (*right*), and the guests’ tables (*foreground*) at a mixed-gender wedding celebration in Nasr, a suburb of Tunis. July 2, 2009. (Photo by author.)

filled with tables and chairs for guests, with a center aisle for the bridal procession. At upper-class wedding parties in Tunis and other urban areas, small snacks and drinks are

offered to guests.¹⁷³ Depending on the family’s economic means, two or more courses of sweet and salty pastries (and sometimes wedding cake) are served, as well as expensive fresh fruit juices (strawberry, lemonade, melon, or kiwi) or cheaper bottles of soda (Coke, Fanta, and the Tunisian soda brand Boga).

In performance the instrumentalists are amplified with microphones, as are the vocalist and chorus members. Unlike in women’s festival ensembles, a conductor does not direct women’s wedding ensembles. They do not use music notation or music stands either, although a vocalist still learning the repertoire may refer to printed song lyrics. Seated in a semi-circle, the instrumentalists arrange themselves in the same manner for each performance (see Figure 5.2). From left to right, the synthesizer [*org*] player sits



Figure 5.2: Myriam Slama and her ensemble (*Houriya at-Tarab*) wearing the “Hammat” costume and performing at a partially gender-segregated *outia* in Monastir. (From left to right): Sirine Chikh Rouhou (*org*), Myriam Slama (violin), Amina Slama (*qanūn*), Sara Turki (*ūd*), Soumayya Mersni (lead vocalist & *tār*), Ahlem Hammami (*duff*), & Hanan Gharbi (*darbūka*). August 10, 2008. (Photo by author.)

¹⁷³ Meals and gift-giving occur during the course of other smaller celebrations preceding the final wedding night. In many rural areas throughout Tunisia, however, the final wedding party [*el-‘ars*] involves a couscous meal served to all guests.

next to the violinist, followed by the musicians playing *qanūn* and *‘ūd*, the featured vocalist, and the percussionists.¹⁷⁴ The percussionists play *tār*, *duff* [a one-headed cylindrical hand drum placed on a stand between the player’s legs], and *darbūka*. The featured vocalist, often a star who has earned fame by performing on Tunisian television or with the *Rachidiyya* Ensemble, sings only a few numbers that are known to be artistically challenging. One of the percussionists or another hired vocalist sings the other vocal solos during the evening celebration, while the other percussionists provide choral responses. The lead vocalist for each song often sings while seated amongst the ensemble; but for featured solos and especially towards the end of the evening, she stands in front of the ensemble and even moves throughout the dancing crowd with her wireless microphone (see Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3: Vocalist Soumayya Mersni performing with members of Olfa Baouab’s ensemble (*Firqat Olfa*) at a partially gender-segregated *outia* in Nasr, Tunis. (From left to right): Soumayya Mersni (voice), Khaoula Sellami (*tār*), Abir Zahra (*duff*), Ahlem Hammami (*darbūka*). June 25, 2009. (Photo by author.)

¹⁷⁴ The *qanun* player may not always be present, or she may be replaced by a musician playing *nay* [reed flute].

With seven or more musicians, conservatory-educated women's wedding ensembles are larger than the average men's wedding ensemble. They are also different from men's ensembles because they frequently include instruments such as the *'ūd* and *qanūn*. These instruments are not very audible in a loud wedding setting, but they index traditional Tunisian and Arab art music as well as the performers' musical literacy and cultural capital. Women's wedding ensembles especially differ from men's ensembles due to the traditional women's costumes they wear. With the exception of men's *ma'lūf* and Sufi ensembles, most men playing at festivals or weddings wear black pants and a black shirt, or black pants, white shirt, tie, and black suit-coat. Most women's wedding ensembles, however, wear dresses similar to the costumes worn by women's festival ensembles, such as the "Hammamat" costume (see Figure 5.2) or the costume designed by Jouda Najah, modeled after her grandmother's *beldī* [Tunisian *medina*] dress (see Figure 5.4). The lead vocalist (and often the ensemble director) wears a different dress, often a long-sleeved, elaborately embroidered *qaftan* [caftan].

The repertoire that women's ensembles perform, however, is very similar to that performed by men's wedding ensembles. They perform selections from a canon of wedding songs, including traditional Tunisian wedding songs known as *t'alīlāt* ["justifications" or "explanations"]. Mourad Sakli notes that the semantic contents of *t'alīlāt* song lyrics, which frequently praise God and the Prophet Muhammad, are not necessarily related to the wedding event; rather, these songs are performed for their ritualized social function—because they are customarily performed at weddings (Sakli 1994: 347–9). Moreover, by praising God and the Prophet, the songs bless the newlyweds, their union, and their families. Wedding musicians thus play important ritual

functions by performing these songs for the bridal party’s processional and for marking the close of the celebration. Furthermore, wedding musicians hold a key role in playing out national culture by performing such songs from the national heritage [*at-turāth*] at weddings.



Figure 5.4: Jouda Najah and her ensemble *Founoun* performing at a gender-segregated *outia* in Tunis. For this traditional folk song many of them played *bendīr*, a frame drum associated with Sufi brotherhoods and folk music. (From left to right): Shedhia Ayadi (*bendīr*), Maherzia Tawil (lead vocalist and *bendīr*), Samia Ben Youssef (lead vocalist and *bendīr*), Jouda Najah (*bendīr*), Semira Bouchaallah (*duff*), Hanan Gharbi (*darbūka*). July 4, 2008. (Photo by author.)

The contemporary canon of wedding music also includes medleys of popular songs [*aghānī*] from the golden ages of Tunisian and Egyptian music (1930s–1950s), and recent Tunisian and pan-Arab dance hits currently popular on the radio, music video channels, and the Internet. Women’s ensembles usually perform songs featuring a solo vocalist, although they often perform instrumental pieces, such as Riyadh Sunbati’s “Longa Farahfaza” and Abd al-Halim Hafiz’s “Kamel al-Awsaf,” during the early part of the evening before the bride arrives. They may also play instrumental pieces during calm

moments when the guests are served food or drinks, and when the lead vocalist needs to take a break.

But throughout most wedding performances women's ensembles play popular dance tunes to enliven the celebratory atmosphere. For example, the immensely popular Lebanese *debke* tune "Tanoura" was a hit during the summer of 2008. All of the women's wedding ensembles I observed performed this tune, but none as dramatically as did Jouda Najah's ensemble, *Founoun*. On several occasions I watched as Shedhia Ayadi rise from her seat to pick up a large *tabla* drum and sling its cord around her neck. She proceeded to beat the drum on both sides with sticks, creating a deep, powerful bass resonance; she encouraged the crowd to dance and form a *debke* line as she danced amongst them. This performance startled me not only because I had never seen women perform *debke* music, but also because in Tunisia the *tabla* is associated with male musicians who perform rural folk music known as *tabl wa zokra*. *Founoun's* *debke* performances thus present a striking example of women musicians performing a markedly masculine song genre, which, they claim, other women in the Arab world do not perform. The fact that they often perform *debke* for mixed-gender audiences further disrupts norms dictating gendered behavior and instrumental music performance.

How are women instrumentalists' performances at weddings now possible? As some women's ensembles now perform at weddings, a milieu that was particularly off-limits to respectable women performers, their self-presentation becomes even more important for attracting clients and justifying their work to their families and colleagues in the music community. Women playing in wedding ensembles thus frequently stress their education, professionalism, and modernity. Almost all of these musicians are music

teachers in public schools, and they frequently advertise this to their clients in the course of performance. At an *outia* in Monastir in August 2008, for example, singer Soumayya Mersni introduced each member of the ensemble as a professor of music. Where applicable, she also listed the degrees they had earned, such as: “*Ustādha Myriem Slama, ustādha al-mūsīqā wa magistīr al-‘alūm al-mūsīqiyya*” [Professor Myriem Slama, music teacher and Master’s in musicology (literally, “the science of music”)].¹⁷⁵ And as noted previously, the success and visibility of festival ensembles such as *El ‘Azifet* has especially lent prestige to conservatory-educated women instrumentalists. At several weddings, I overheard guests or servers referring to an ensemble as “*El ‘Azifet,*” and the musicians performing did not correct them.

The fact that their ensembles are comprised of only women has further added to their respectability. It has certainly helped individual musicians convince their families to let them participate. The gender-segregated nature of their ensembles also makes it acceptable to travel together late at night for performances in other cities (often three to five hours one-way by car). In addition, at weddings these ensembles often perform in gender-segregated contexts, which many people consider more respectable than mixed-gender contexts. In these cases the families hold gender-segregated events because some of the women present observe certain tenets of Islam and wear the *hijāb*; their faith makes their celebrations more respectable, as does the fact that neither men nor alcoholic beverages are present. In general, musicians in women’s wedding ensembles say that they perform for respectable families, whose wealth, status, and/or religious beliefs lend them prestige. If on rare occasions alcohol is served at these parties, the event is still

¹⁷⁵ The term “*ustādha*” (feminine) or “*ustādḥ*” (masculine) is used for professors, teachers, or masters of a craft, or as a term of respect for one’s elder whose knowledge surpasses one’s own.

respectable because a wealthy family hosts it at a fancy banquet hall and raucous behavior is not permitted.

As noted above, these musicians distinguish themselves from average wedding bands that play on rooftops. They do so particularly by highlighting their larger ensembles, traditional instruments, professionalism, and refined behavior. They stress their professionalism by using contracts, in which they present their government-issued professional musician's licenses, the hours they will work (between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m.), the date and location, the number of musicians who will perform, and their fees. The use of contracts demonstrates discipline and serves to counter stereotypes of average wedding performers as "*arabūn*," always playing to the highest bidder and renegeing on their word at the last minute. Musicians in women's ensembles also closely adhere to the rules of their contracts, despite the protests of clients who want them to continue playing into the night. During their performances they take only one break, off-stage and usually out of sight from the audience, when they consume food and beverages provided by the hosts. They differentiate their behavior from that of men musicians, whom they say take several breaks, drink alcohol backstage, and smoke onstage. By not smoking, drinking alcohol, or consuming food or beverages onstage or in sight of their clients, they are specifically *not* behaving as many men musicians and women's *taqlīdiyya* [traditional] ensembles do at wedding performances. Moreover, they believe that their refined behavior is a significant part of their appeal for respectable (wealthy and/or religious) families.

Furthermore, the women musicians I interviewed distinguished themselves from other wedding musicians due to their financial earnings. They proudly stated that they earn roughly 100 to 120 Tunisian dinars a night for their wedding performances, which is

more than the average male musician earns at weddings.¹⁷⁶ The fact that they are expensive to hire, and that they primarily perform for affluent families in “respectable” contexts, has further increased their prestige, and thus the demand for their performances.

Ensembles in demand

Among upper-class and upper-middle class families in Tunis and other urban areas, women’s ensembles’ performances are not just acceptable at weddings: they are in demand. When I asked women musicians why their ensembles are in such high demand, their replies were similar to that of Azza Chebbi: “because more women are veiling and wish to hold gender-segregated women’s parties.” Other musicians’ responses concerned their novelty and popularity: Yossr Labidi and Sirine Ouesleti explained that hiring a women’s ensemble is “à la mode” and “something new” [*haja jedīda*].¹⁷⁷ Indeed many musicians mentioned that it is currently fashionable to hire women’s ensembles for wedding parties. They linked this fashion in turn to other trends: for hosting elaborate wedding parties, and for reviving the tradition of the *outia*, or party for the bride.

The *outia* (or *henna*, as it is called on the eastern coast) is hosted by the bride and her family and is held two nights before the ‘*ars*. The type of party and the rituals performed differ according to region, class, and individual tastes. But in general, the *outia* (pl. *outiāt*) is held to celebrate the beauty of the bride, her dresses, and the *henna* decorations on her hands and feet, as well as to host a party entirely in her honor where she can dance with her family and friends. Traditionally, before independence in 1956, the ‘*ars* was celebrated separately by men and women; for the women’s party the musicians included women’s ensembles or ensembles comprised of Jewish men or blind

¹⁷⁶ In July 2008 100 DT [Tunisian dinars] roughly equated to 75 USD, and 120 DT to 89 USD.

¹⁷⁷ Interview in Tunis with Azza Chebbi, February 7, 2008; Interview in Tunis with Yossr Labidi, September 9, 2008; Interview in Tunis with Sirine Ouesleti, July 2, 2008.

men (Sakli 1994, Chelbi 2000, Rizgui 1967). According to many of my research consultants, hosting a gender-segregated *outia* was also common practice prior to independence. But after independence, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, the practice of hosting an *outia* declined in Tunis. Due to the gradual disappearance of gender-segregated contexts, the custom almost disappeared among middle and upper class families in Tunis. Scholars Imed Melliti and Mounir Hentati also explained to me that the relative absence of *outiāt* during the 1970s and 80s was replaced by a different trend among certain urban couples: to simply marry in city hall, without hosting any parties. I talked with many white-collar professionals from this generation who married at the *baladiyya* [city hall] and abstained from holding an *outia* or even a final wedding party. Melliti and Hentati noted that this trend was influenced by economic constraints and by ideological convictions discouraging elaborate displays of conspicuous consumption (Labidi 2008: 238–239).

Today some couples still choose to simply marry at city hall, but many also host a final wedding party and an *outia*, as well as a party for the groom and other smaller celebrations marking this important rite of passage. In particular, starting in the late 1990s a revival of the *outia* has occurred in Tunis, with growing numbers of families hosting this party for the bride. But unlike *outiāt* before independence, many *outiāt* today are hosted for completely mixed-gender audiences. In this case the *outia* does not appear to be different from a mixed-gender '*ars*': men and women sit together at tables, and in some cases they dance together.

In many other instances the *outia* is hosted for a partially mixed-gender audience: women sit together at tables close to the musicians' stage and the bride's throne, while

men sit together at the rear of the party space. As at the *outia* I attended in Taboulba, mostly women dance, particularly women from the bride and groom's families; the few men who dance include the groom and the newlyweds' close male relatives. In this circumstance, since this is the bride's party, the groom is not present until halfway through the event. In other cases the *outia* is partially gender-segregated: mostly women are present, with the exception of the father, brother(s), and other close male relatives of the bride, and the hired service workers, such as the videographer, sound technician, servers, and possibly musicians.¹⁷⁸ Here the other male guests—more distant relatives and neighbors of the bride and groom, especially the husbands of women attending the *outia*—may sit outside the party space at tables reserved for them. Finally, some *outiāt* are completely gender-segregated. In these situations no men are present, not even a male videographer, sound technician, or waiters serving drinks. Only the groom may enter at the very conclusion of the party, when traditional songs are performed to celebrate the new couple.

Gender-segregated parties

The *outia* revival is in part related to the increase in the number of women who veil, and to a reclaiming of certain aspects of traditional and religious identity. My research consultants explained that a completely or partially gender-segregated *outia* allows the bride and other women present to feel more at ease [*à l'aise*]. Whether or not they veil, the bride and her guests do not have to worry about the presence of strange men and are thus free to display their beauty—including their stylish wedding costumes and party dresses, hair-dos, and elaborate makeup. They can also dance freely among

¹⁷⁸ Some families will not hire male servers but will enlist the bride's male relatives to serve food and drinks.

themselves, without the presence of men. For women who veil this is particularly true; when no men are present they often remove their veils. As Maud Nicolas (2000) notes, a gender-segregated party allows married women to dance more freely, whereas at a mixed-gender party they might fear their husbands' jealousy were they to dance in front of other men.

According to the women musicians I interviewed, sixty percent of their ensembles' performances occur at gender-segregated parties where only women are present. Many ensemble members perceive the increased demand for—and increased number of—women's wedding ensembles as due to a rising number of gender-segregated parties. Henda Belhani, for example, told me that contemporary women's ensembles are meeting this demand and playing where men cannot. She remarked that their ensembles are replacing the orchestras of blind men who performed at gender-segregated parties prior to independence.¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, Hela Masmoudi and Olfa Ben Smida told me that many women's clubs meet weekly and invite musicians to play for them. Women's ensembles are increasingly solicited for these performances, since women who veil can then dance without reservations. According to Masmoudi,

This is similar to what Olfa [Baouab] has done—playing at *outiāt*. A lot of girls are covering now, so these musicians have a lot of work. If a women's ensemble is playing, they feel free, more at ease... they don't have any restrictions. They can take off their head cover, dance, and have fun—it's nice.¹⁸⁰

Some men musicians, however, criticize women's ensembles' performances at gender-segregated parties. They find it hypocritical that liberated women instrumentalists, who have been given so many rights by the state to enable their emancipation, are now making a lot of money by performing at backwards, gender-

¹⁷⁹ Conversation with Henda Belhani, August 20, 2008.

¹⁸⁰ Interview in Tunis (in English) with Hela Masmoudi, August 26, 2008.

segregated parties for women who veil and for clients who would constrict women's rights if given the chance. These critics told me that such gender-segregated contexts are antithetical to women's participation in the public sphere and Tunisia's modern national identity. Indeed for many secular elites, an increase in gender-segregated parties implies a rise in conservative religious sentiment, which they perceive as the greatest threat to the secular regime and the economic stability of the nation (Zouari 2008; Krichen 2008; Charrad 2008; Dargouth Medimegh 1996; Ferchiou 1996). Sociologist Senim Ben Abdullah even suggested that women's ensembles themselves are backwards because they are predicated on gender segregation. As another male musician remarked,

Why form a women's ensemble? It's sexist! That's a sexist way of thinking. ...After Amina Srarfi formed *El 'Azifet*, now there are many ensembles... And now there are many weddings where the women cover their hair and only women are present. ...In my opinion that's a return to the past.¹⁸¹

The various women musicians I worked with expressed several different reactions to their work at gender-segregated parties. Most responded that they perform at weddings for *khobz* [literally, bread; in this context, money]. They have to make a living, and they cannot afford to decline wedding gigs. Indeed, a completely gender-segregated wedding party provides well-paid work for many women, in jobs that were previously dominated by men: as musicians, servers, and possibly as the musicians' sound technician. Musicians in wedding ensembles also pointed out that they usually do not know if a wedding celebration is mixed-gender or gender-segregated until they actually arrive at the party.

Yet occasionally the musicians in women's ensembles have criticized the gender-segregated nature of a party. At one performance a musician told me that gender-

¹⁸¹ Interview in Tunis with Rachid Kouba, February 28, 2008.

segregated parties bored her, since she could not look at any men in the audience. At another wedding celebration, held in the northern town of Kalaat el-Andalous in June 2009, I observed Myriam Slama and the musicians in her ensemble make unprecedented criticisms about the traditional *mentalités* of their clients. Although these musicians frequently perform for gender-segregated *outiāt*, on this occasion they resented the way the groom had segregated men and women for the *‘ars*. When we arrived that evening we were escorted to the women’s party space, in the courtyard of the town’s open-air market. We entered the space in the musicians’ cars and parked next to the stage. The space was deserted and seemed neglected since it had not been whitewashed for some time, and there were not any decorations in place but merely a few white plastic tables and chairs. The musicians seemed to resent the low-class aspect of the performance space, expressing their incredulity that they were performing in “the market!” as opposed to a banquet hall. Then we were invited to eat a *mechuoï* [roasted lamb] dinner with the male guests at the groom’s house, where the men’s party would be held. The house was a large, brand-new, whitewashed mansion featuring modern architecture, a manicured lawn of green grass, and a pool in the rear courtyard. As the musicians walked past the tables of men eating their dinners, one of them said, “see how the women are treated, as opposed to the men?” Following the performance, in Slama’s car, the *org* player began criticizing the gender-segregated division of the party and discussing religious beliefs and veiling with the other musicians, arguing that “God doesn’t want women to cover.” The musicians continued to debate ideas about gender and Islam in the car as we returned to Tunis; together with the *org* player, the vocalist expressed her fear of *ikhwanji* [Islamic brotherhood, a term used for Islamists] and the spread of such beliefs in Tunisia.

On one hand, as their critics suggest, it may seem paradoxical that women musicians—who are often perceived as symbols of women’s emancipation—are playing in gender-segregated contexts for clients who may wish to replace the rights granted to women under the CSP with Islamic law. On the other hand, on some occasions (as in Kalaat el-Andalous) women musicians have reacted strongly to the gender-segregated nature of the event and the cultural and political values that implies. In some cases, their negative experiences have led them to reflect upon and affirm their ideas about women’s rights, and their support for the state’s commitment to women’s emancipation. At the same time, as I will show below, other musicians perceive the gender-segregated aspect of certain performances in a positive light. Moreover, as a result of performing in such contexts, many women musicians have earned musical, personal, and financial empowerment and have started to transform gender roles in their personal lives. Before considering the potentially empowering aspects of gender-segregated performances, however, the next section examines how wedding ensembles play out gender identity and other identities at weddings, and how they have become prestigious status symbols for affluent families.

Displaying status, playing out gender identity

Many research consultants told me that the *outia* revival is linked not only to trends for holding gender-segregated parties, but also to a rise in disposable income and conspicuous consumption. Hosting an *outia* provides an extra occasion for inviting family and friends and displaying one’s status, wealth, generosity, and hospitality. At both the *outia* and the *‘ars*, families make careful decisions regarding the event location, the decorations, the food, the expensive clothing of the bridal party, and the musicians.

According to women musicians, women's ensembles have become especially popular among affluent families because they are novel, "beautiful," and expensive to hire. Because they cost more, they are in higher demand: only wealthier families can hire such large ensembles, and the ensembles thus become markers of status and class.

Wedding celebrations in Tunisia involve a mixture of practices expressing class identities, regional identities, Tunisian identities, traditional and modern identities, Arab-Muslim identities, and cosmopolitan identities. Clients hire women's conservatory-educated ensembles in part because they present a particular mixture of traditional, modern, cosmopolitan and Tunisian identities. By wearing traditional costumes, these ensembles not only present a more beautiful image—they also reference women's *taqlīdiyya* ensembles, which have traditionally performed folk music at gender-segregated wedding parties. In this way, and when they perform traditional songs from the musical *turāth*, they play out certain elements of Tunisia's cultural heritage. Women's ensembles also highlight their musical literacy and cosmopolitanism by performing popular art-music repertoire and contemporary pop hits from throughout the Arab world.

Women's wedding ensembles thus play out various identities, including gender identity, in various ways during their performances. The musicians present certain norms of respectable and refined femininity through their behavior, physical gestures, and self-presentation, but they also have the potential to challenge these norms. Although they wear traditional or neo-traditional costumes, women musicians in wedding ensembles are not subject to the same degree of control regarding their appearances as women in festival ensembles are. They can potentially choose to not wear makeup, to cut their hair like men, to not paint their nails, and so forth. I observed that several women in wedding

ensembles tested the limits of appropriately feminine appearance and behavior, both on and offstage. Some women (a few of whom are openly lesbian) chose to wear more masculine clothes and hairstyles; others presented ultra-feminine appearances with manicured fingernails, immaculate coiffures, high heels, and elaborate makeup; while others wore modest clothing or did not wear much makeup. As performers, these musicians' diverse appearances, sexual identities, and behaviors may have significant impacts upon their clients and other wedding guests. On one occasion, for example, I overheard young girls in the audience telling their shocked friends that they observed the musicians smoking backstage. In addition, observing musicians' diverse ways of performing gender and sexual identity may lead guests to reconsider social norms, or to identify role models for their own questioning and shaping of their identities.

Furthermore, by performing for and enabling dancing, the musicians engender participants' bodies in particular ways. It is especially at wedding celebrations, for example, that young girls and boys learn gendered ways of dancing and interacting with others. Playing for dancers at weddings also enables matchmaking to occur: traditionally at *outiāt* or gender-segregated weddings, mothers selected potential wives for their sons by carefully watching young women dance (Nicolas 2000). In this sense women's dancing, particularly by moving the hips (in a modest way), has carried symbolic references to sexuality and fertility. Some women may still consider weddings a site to select potential daughters-in-law, just as at mixed-gender weddings, dancing men and women may seek out potential mates on their own. Moreover, the guests embody gendered ways of moving and presenting themselves for others as they dance to particular rhythms and in front of particular people.

Above all, women's ensembles perform for highly gendered rites of passage, particularly at the *outia*, where they honor the bride and praise her beauty in multiple songs. By enacting and blessing a marriage through musical performance, they not only accompany but they play out the newlyweds' union and the bride's transition from unmarried virgin to wife and future mother. The musicians also provide verbal commentary blessing the marriage, protecting the couple against the evil eye, and praising the couple's good looks. In addition, the musicians involve the audience in blessing the couple's marriage. They facilitate guests' active participation in the celebration by encouraging them to dance, clap, sing along, and ululate. By singing and dancing at weddings, musicians and audiences sanctify the rite of passage and also help to bring it about (Sugarman 1997: 259).

Tunisian wedding parties celebrate a heterosexual couple's marriage as well as the proper channeling of a woman's sexuality, newly defined relationships between two kinship groups, and the continuation of the groom's family line through future children. As they sing, play, dance, and participate in other ways, musicians and guests play out kinship and interpersonal bonds, especially when the dancing and heightened ambience [*jaww*] unites participants and musicians in a momentary state of *communitas*. We might ask, what complex meanings are created for wedding guests when they see, hear, and dance to a performance by a women's ensemble in this context? What might a musician experience as she upholds normative performances of gender identity sixty consecutive nights each summer, especially if in her personal life she is neither married, nor heterosexual, nor a mother? How do the musicians' performances vary depending on the

specific context each night, particularly if the audience is comprised of men and women, or if the guests are all women?

Before investigating how the musicians' experiences and the celebration's ambiance [*jaww*] are affected by the gender of the performers and the audience, in the next section I demonstrate how *jaww* is created musically, and how it depends on the interaction between performers and the audience. At weddings musicians play important ritual functions, including blessing the bridal party and the union of marriage itself. Most significantly, they are deemed competent performers if they can make *jaww*, or create a great party, by inciting participants to dance and to thus participate in celebrating the newlyweds' union.

Creating jaww

When I accompanied Myriam Slama and other women musicians to their wedding performances, they frequently expressed pride in their ability to create *jaww* and to put on a successful party. They also listed this as a reason for their popularity with clients. I often observed that at the end of the musicians' final set, the host and other women approached them, breathless after dancing. They expressed their enthusiasm for the musicians' playing and applauded them for the *jaww* they created during the celebration. These clients then profusely thanked the musicians for their performance and requested their business cards in order to hire them for a future occasion. Regarding their playing, Slama and others often told me, "*Ay, namelu jaww,*" or "Yeah, we can really make *jaww.*"

Creating *jaww* is essential at wedding celebrations, where the goal is to celebrate and to incite as many people as possible to dance. Indeed a wedding celebration is only

considered successful if many people are dancing (Nicolas 2002). During the course of a performance a good *jaww* causes people to dance, which increases the *jaww*; this better *jaww* further encourages the musicians to play out and improvise more, creating an even hotter *jaww* and getting more people to dance and have a good time.

Musicians use particular techniques to create and heighten *jaww*. First, at the beginning of a performance they need to “warm up” the *jaww* by appropriately setting the mood. Thus as in other wedding celebrations, Myriam Slama and her ensemble (Houriat at-Tarab) began playing instrumental pieces meant for listening when they performed at the ‘*ars* of Slama’s distant cousin on the evening of June 15, 2008. They began their first set with calm pieces as guests were just arriving, greeting each other, taking their seats, and talking with each other at their tables. This mixed-gender celebration was held in a banquet hall at a five-star hotel in Hammamat, a resort town on the northeast coast of Tunisia. That night Slama’s ensemble included Hajer Gana playing *org*, Slama playing violin, Soumayya Mersni as featured vocalist, Abir Zahra playing *santūr* [Iraqi zither], and Amina Slama on ‘*ūd*. The percussion section comprised Khaoula Sellemi playing *tār*, Zina Bou Ali playing *duff*, and Leila Farhati playing *darbūka*. Both Farhati and Bou Ali served as lead vocalists and chorus members for certain songs.

The musicians told me that they usually perform such calm pieces at the start, before the bride arrives, so as to gradually warm up the audience for the imminent party. Then, for the entrance of the bride and groom and their family members, Slama’s ensemble began performing a processional. As at most wedding celebrations, to parade the bridal party into the banquet hall the musicians performed the *t’alīla* entitled “Inzād al-nabī” [The Prophet is born]. After Zina Bou Ali told the audience to ululate for the

couple, or “*zagharīt al-araīs*,” the musicians commenced the processional with a moderately slow and stately rhythmic ostinato. They warmed up the audience to the song’s mode by performing introductory melodic improvisations over that ostinato. Slama, playing violin, provided a brief improvisation that outlined the Tunisian mode *hsīn* (D, E half-flat, F, G, A, B half-flat, C, D). Hajer Gana also played scalar sequences and responses to Slama’s phrases on her *org*, which she had set to sound like a piano. Bou Ali also warmed up the *jaww* of the song by interjecting verbal exclamations, such as “*Aywa!*” [Yes!] and “*Allah!*” [lit., God], and by again asking the guests to ululate. At each performance the musicians’ improvisations vary in length depending on the time it takes for the bridal party to parade down the center aisle of the banquet hall. In this case the instrumental improvisations were very brief; in closing, on the *org* Gana echoed the violin’s *qafla* [final cadence], which flowed into the vocal improvisation sung by Leila Farhati.

In her vocal improvisation, Farhati used elements of the song’s text to further warm up the *jaww* of the song. Slama frequently echoed and commented musically on Farhati’s phrases with her violin, using a technique some Arab musicians term *tarjama*, or translation (Racy 2003). In addition, the violinist and *org* player often played simultaneously with what Farhati sang, providing support for her voice and creating a thicker, heterophonic texture with their melodic ornamentation. Following her vocal improvisation, Farhati started playing her *darbūka* to introduce the melody for the song’s first verse of lyrics. This change occurred when the bridal party had reached their throne at the front of the hall, next to the musicians.

The faster melodic rhythm and the more intense rhythmic mode helped to heighten the *jaww* another notch, and some members of the bridal party started to dance. Bou Ali encouraged them by shouting, “*Yallah, yallah!*” (let’s go, come on!). The overall texture and dynamic intensity of the ensemble also changed: the *darbūka* entered, all of the percussion and other instruments played louder and more intensely, and Gana switched the *org*’s sound to a fuller synthesizer sound. She and Slama supported the vocalist’s melodic line while also playing quick instrumental fillers [*lawāzim*].

With these techniques—all improvised in the course of performance—the musicians warmed up and then heightened the *jaww* of the party, which they continued to do throughout the evening. As in their other wedding performances, they responded to the audience’s mood, increased the tempos, and performed songs that they felt would bring guests to their feet dancing, singing, and clapping along. They performed several sets of song medleys, allowing for long, uninterrupted stretches of dancing. They also encouraged dancing by extending songs’ instrumental interludes, during which the violin, *org*, and *darbūka* players improvised. The musicians also improvised with each other, and in response to some dancers’ movements. Farhati especially watched the dancers throughout the night; with particular patterns on her *darbūka* she influenced and responded to the dancers’ movements. And Hajer Gana frequently created improvised statements on the *org* that were answered by rhythmic solos on the *darbūka*. These crowd-pleasing performances seemed to increase the *jaww* and cause the guests to dance with more energy.

Some musicians also interjected vocables that served to accentuate certain musical phrases and emphasize the dance beat. Percussionists Leila Farhati and Zina Bou

Ali, for example, frequently emitted an ascending portamento “*waaaaaaay!*” or descending slide “*owwwwwww!*” at the end of a particular musical phrase, and they repeated “*barakika barakika barakika*” to match a certain dance rhythm or certain dancers’ movements. These verbal interjections heightened the *jaww* and reinforced the connection between the performers and dancers. Physical gestures and verbal interactions amongst players onstage furthermore added to this *jaww*: when they laughed and smiled together onstage, their exuberance spilled over into the crowd. In turn, the instrumentalists—especially the percussionists—played out even more.

Playing at weddings thus provides opportunities for women musicians to develop improvisatory techniques, including solo improvisations, instrumental responses to vocal lines, and instrumental interludes. By creating *jaww* at weddings, these musicians gain experience playing out strongly with confidence and stamina, thereby contradicting men musicians’ criticisms about women’s inferior playing abilities. Weddings also provide situations where women musicians must improvise on many levels: they work with different vocalists and instrumentalists in new contexts with new audiences every night, and they learn to adjust their repertoire and the timing of their improvisations to these differing circumstances. Furthermore, at weddings they exercise ritual power by performing traditional wedding songs, blessing the newlyweds, and creating a collective festive atmosphere, or *jaww*. To make *jaww* they improvise and interact with the audience on many levels—verbally, rhythmically, melodically, and physically—in a constant feedback process.

How might this feedback process change when the audience is composed of only women, or of men and women? And when the musicians play in a women’s ensemble or

in a mixed-gender ensemble? In other words, how does gender shape the *jaww* of a performance? Musicians in women's ensembles can particularly shed light on these questions, since they perform and create *jaww* for both mixed-gender and gender-segregated audiences at weddings.

Gender-segregated ensembles and homosocial jaww

Org player Olfa Ben Smida told me that when she performs for women only, it is easier to create a hotter *jaww*, and thus her performances are more enjoyable. She explained that gender-segregated parties often involve more relaxed atmospheres, where guests feel more comfortable dancing because men are not present. When more guests dance, it is easier to create *jaww* and perform a successful party.¹⁸² Some musicians also said that they themselves feel more comfortable performing when only women are present. Certain musicians may thus improvise better, and play out more, when only women are present.

I have observed that at some gender-segregated events, the musicians seemed more relaxed and interested in interacting with the audience than at other events. Many vocalists interject more verbal exclamations and even dance with gender-segregated audiences, but not with mixed-gender audiences. At a party for women doctors in Ezzahra in June 2009, for example, some of the musicians in Zina Bou 'Ali's ensemble said they were having a lot of fun playing for only women. As opposed to the party in Kalaat el-Andalous, Myriam Slama told me, this was not a wedding, and "you can see that this party was organized by women."

¹⁸² Conversation in Tunis with Olfa Ben Smida, January 19, 2009.

When we arrived at the house in Ezzahra we were greeted by our host and led to the outdoor courtyard where a dozen white plastic tables and chairs had been set up. The host of the party showed us around the first floor of her house, which included a doctor's office filled with physical therapy equipment. Our host was dressed unusually for Tunisian women, quite unlike the ideal feminine image promoted on state television. She had short hair and was wearing jeans, a masculine-looking sleeveless t-shirt, and heavy silver chains around her neck. Meanwhile, as the guests arrived wearing party dresses or suits, I noticed one of them remove her hijāb and long overcoat to reveal a skin-tight, low-cut, leopard-print party dress.

This night the musicians were creating a hotter jaww than usual. They were especially encouraged by the many women dancing together and singing along with the music. Even when the musicians played a calm song to give the dancers a break while they were being served refreshments, many guests still sang along, waving their hands and dancing with their wrists to the melody. A few guests—including the woman in the leopard-print dress—continued to dance even during these slow songs, demonstrating their belly-dance skills as they slowly and sensually undulated their hips to the music.

Because the guests were enjoying themselves and vigorously participating in the performance, the musicians also seemed to be enjoying themselves. They smiled and laughed onstage with each other, they improvised melodically and rhythmically to the dancers' movements, and the jaww became hotter and hotter. After the performance, Myriam Slama, org player Hajer Gana, and percussionist Zina Bou 'Ali told me they had a lot of fun at this event. (Myriam said she always enjoys playing in groups directed by Zina, because of her darbūka skills but especially because Zina asks her musicians to

wear comfortable black clothing (a black shirt and black pants) rather than traditional women's costumes.)

As the ensemble created hotter jaww, they also interacted verbally with the audience over their microphones. At one point Zina made comments about having a women-only party, "leaving the men at home." At another point, since the ensemble's musicians normally play at weddings (and wedding music permeates the Tunis soundscape during summer months), they jokingly played a t'alīla, "Marhabat bil Awlād Sidi." At the end of the song Zina told the audience "Khamisa wa Khemais," mocking the way she would bless the newlyweds (and protect them from the evil eye) at a wedding. They laughed at this and her subsequent jokes: she reiterated typical blessings from weddings, such as hoping that the other women present would marry soon—or, as she added, she hoped that they would remarry if they were currently divorced, or that they would divorce soon if they were currently unhappy in their marriages.

Finally, at the close of the evening the ensemble performed a Tunisian song that praises women, "Ennissaa, ennissaa" [Women, women]. The majority of guests rose to their feet, and some of the musicians danced amongst the crowd during this song. Meanwhile, the players were grooving and creating jaww at a higher level than I had ever observed previously. The guests enjoyed their performance so much that the ensemble repeated a few stanzas of this song as an encore.

At this event the musicians viewed the gender-segregated nature of the party in a positive light. They felt comfortable playing out, improvising, and making jokes with the audiences about women's issues. In a cultural context where women are more comfortable dancing among women than in front of men, it makes sense that greater

jaww might be created at a gender-segregated party rather than at a mixed-gender party, and that musicians might therefore play out more in gender-segregated contexts. Rather than representing constraints on women's emancipation, this type of gender-segregated event seemed to expand the musicians' sense of pride as Tunisian women.

Such performances demonstrate that women musicians and audiences may feel empowered in gender-segregated contexts. These contexts are also occasions in which women's sensuality, sexual energy, and desire brim beneath the surface, as they may feel more comfortable dancing and experimenting with moving their bodies to music than in other occasions. Sexual energy and desire is particularly present at gender-segregated wedding parties (especially the *outia*), when women traditionally gather together to prepare the bride for her transformation into a sexually active wife and mother. As noted earlier, dancing at weddings is also a way for unmarried women to present themselves (and their bodies) to future mother-in-laws. In these situations a special *jaww* is created, with subtexts of heterosexual, lesbian, and homosocial desire. Such desire and sexual energy is enabled, channeled, and re-imagined in the body by the musicians' playing and the guests' dancing. The subtexts of this homosocial *jaww* may cause guests, dancers, and musicians present to re-evaluate and re-shape their ideas about gender and sexual identity. Such *jaww*, sexual energy, and desire may especially affect the instrumentalists' musical performance in powerful ways. This homosocial musicking may be different than that performed in mixed-gender contexts or in men-only contexts. Thus, such gender-segregated performances may create new types of musicking that disrupts conventional understandings of gender and Tunisian music.

Since the founding of *El 'Azifet*, women's ensembles have been challenging men's monopoly of instrumental Tunisian art music: they have played out by creating their own spaces for women to play music together. While some people may view such gender-segregated contexts as sexist or backwards, many women feel empowered by playing with women's ensembles. Musicians such as Ben Smida and Hajer Gana expressed preference for performing not only for other women, but *with* other women musicians. They said that with women, rather than with men, they feel more comfortable and can create more *jaww*.

Gana specifically cited onstage interactions—such as laughing, teasing, and joking together onstage—as possible only in a women's ensemble; with men onstage the interactions change and the *jaww* is affected. She explained to me that although she has been invited to play in mixed-gender ensembles, she chooses not to for specific reasons:

Several times they've called me, saying 'come, please, we need an *org* player, come play with us.' But on principle, in order to avoid any problems...on principle, I don't like to play with a *firqa mixte* [mixed-gender ensemble], or a *firqat errijal* [men's ensemble], because I'm against the *jaww*, *l'ambiance* among the musicians.

... I always love playing in ensembles...but with men...

In a music ensemble you can become intimate friends with the other players, understand? But when I play with men, I always put up barriers, boundaries—me personally, I mean. It's difficult to become friends with the guys in ensembles because then they want to date you. Even sometimes in a women's ensemble I put up boundaries—not everyone is a friend, understand? And I don't break these boundaries. For my private life, I like to put up barriers. My private life is my private life. My professional life is something else, understand? So to prevent any problems, I don't back down from my principles. I don't play with mixed or men's ensembles.

...In women's ensembles we make *jaww* together, and the *jaww* is always intimate, a *jaww intime*. But when you're in a mixed ensemble you don't find this intimate *jaww*. Whereas in a women's ensemble you're more comfortable [*a l'aise*], understand?"¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Interview in Tunis with Hajer Gana, September 8, 2008.

Other musicians similarly discussed the special, intimate *jaww* of women's ensembles, in which they felt comfortable interacting freely amongst themselves. They also mentioned the support network that some ensembles have fostered, as they have created many friendships with fellow members. This is not to suggest that all members of ensembles have always gotten along; on the contrary, many women also cited negative memories of conflicts between members. Indeed, the history of many ensembles is marked by disagreements between certain musicians, after which the groups fractured and additional, separate ensembles were created. Yet most musicians told me that they have especially enjoyed playing in women's ensembles because they have built wonderful friendships with other members. Despite some interpersonal conflicts, former members of *El 'Azifet* (such as Hela Masmoudi, Olfa Baouab, and Mikhaela Mami) and former members of *Taqasim* (Khadija el-Afrit, Hinda Belhani, Asma Ghrab) told me that they had a lot of fun participating in those ensembles.

Most of the women I spoke with also had fond memories of traveling throughout Tunisia with wedding ensembles and touring abroad with women's ensembles. Touring has provided them with opportunities to perform in prestigious locations and to travel to places in Tunisia and abroad that they would not otherwise have had. In discussing their travels, several women musicians stressed the fun they had and the friendships they strengthened while on tour. Myriam Slama and Hajer Gana have frequently traveled together with *Angham Hawwa* and *Firgat Olfa*; through touring, they have strengthened their bonds as friends and as fellow ensemble members. Gana and other musicians told me that they feel more comfortable touring and performing with a women's ensemble,

referencing the positive *jaww* they have created both on and offstage. Traveling with women, for example, allows them to feel more relaxed and thus to have more fun.

I have observed that traveling with a group comprised entirely of women allowed individual women greater freedom to behave as they liked. As during our trip to Taboulba, I noted that when offstage, some women blatantly played with and challenged social norms concerning feminine behavior and appearance. During a bus trip to perform for a wedding dinner party in Sfax (three to four hours by bus), for example, a young musician who is openly lesbian took the bus microphone and began mimicking and mocking men's singing and dancing. The power of her drag performance was heightened by the sound of her voice (which is low and raspy due to chain-smoking), by her masculine haircut (which she had slicked back with hair gel as many young men do), and by the masculine dress she wore: men's pants, dress shirt, and tie. During the same bus trip another young musician grabbed the microphone and began mocking the sexy way that Arab women pop stars sing and dance. Furthermore, during the return trip to Tunis that evening (between 2 a.m. and 5 a.m.), percussionist Leila Farhati played a *bendīr* and sang traditional folk songs with altered, often bawdy lyrics; with her voice she mimicked the stereotypically untrained female voices of older *taqlidiyya* folk musicians.

In these various circumstances I observed women musicians acting out and playing together in a homosocial environment. Their play served to mimic stereotypical performers, to mock conventional norms and behaviors, and to imagine potential alternatives to their realities. These examples demonstrate that the homosocial dynamics of women's ensembles have created opportunities for women to play with social norms

prescribing women's proper behavior, to play out alternative gender identities, and to expand ideas about gender—both on and offstage.

Conclusion

Women's wedding ensembles have not only broken social taboos by performing for mixed-gender audiences in contexts that were previously off-limits to them. By playing out and creating *jaww* at weddings, they break down other barriers constraining women's careers as professional musicians. At weddings, women instrumentalists can gain experience performing with an ensemble, practicing improvisation, performing significant ritual functions, and playing out loudly and forcefully. Thus in women's wedding ensembles, many musicians boost their confidence and develop higher levels of playing. In turn, they have started to transform the negative perceptions their male colleagues hold of women's playing: in July 2009 I witnessed some prominent men musicians tell Myriam Slama that they were impressed by her and Hajer Gana's improvisational skills, and by the strength and stamina of their *darbūka* players. Upon playing out at weddings, then, these musicians further disrupt conventions about women's behavior, playing, and appropriately feminine instruments.

By forming their own wedding and festival ensembles, women musicians have enacted change and have created their own spaces for women's musicking. These are not only spaces in which women can develop experience playing and improvising, but also spaces in which they can create women-only *jaww* and perform Tunisian music in a different way, depending on the gender of the performers and the audience. As several musicians suggested, the gender-segregated nature of their ensembles does more for women musicians than add a respectable tone to their work. Musicians who prefer to play

in women's ensembles (festival or wedding ensembles) indicate that a special atmosphere exists within women-only musical spaces. The gender of the ensemble members affects their interactions on and offstage, and consequently the musical performances they create.

Some musicians also point out that women's wedding ensembles can create special, women-only musical spaces at gender-segregated parties. Their perspectives show how gender affects music performance, improvisation, and the performer-audience feedback loop of *jaww*. Playing in a more comfortable environment—depending on how each musician may define that—allows them to experiment with improvisatory gestures and with techniques used to animate the audience and create *jaww*. They may also play out behaviors with which they might not otherwise experiment in mixed-gender contexts. As Olfa Ben Smida remarked, many musicians participate in women's wedding ensembles not only because they are paid well, but because they enjoy playing with their friends and “doing what they love—making music and creating *jaww*.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Conversation in Tunis with Olfa Ben Smida, January 19, 2009.

Chapter Six

Playing outside the lines: Debates about Tunisian musical identity

When they perform with women's ensembles or with mixed-gender ensembles, women instrumentalists in contemporary Tunis are playing out and gendering Tunisian music. With their perspectives on the gendered *jaww* of women's ensembles, women musicians explore what it means to play with women only, and for women only. In this chapter I examine specific women instrumentalists' reflections on how their gender identity affects their playing. Their perspectives expand conventional understandings of Tunisian music and contribute to contemporary debates about Tunisian musical identity.

Instrumentalists such as Khadija El Afrit, Myriam Lakhoua, and Amina Srarfi have diverse perspectives on the question of gender identity and its influence on playing ability. They suggested to me that women musicians add something to Tunisian music, that women play with more sensitivity than men, or that some women musicians play with more *rūh* [soul, spirit] than might other musicians who are concerned with developing technical virtuosity. Their perspectives on women's playing challenge criticisms of women musicians for not playing as well as men, for not using improvisatory techniques such as ornamentation and solo improvisation, and for not playing outside the lines. These criticisms, however, are not only directed at women but form part of larger debates about Tunisian musical identity.

Before discussing the perspectives of El Afrit, Lakhoua, and Srarfi, in the first sections of this chapter I explain how improvisatory techniques are used in Tunisian and Arab music and how they are considered important emblems of Tunisian and Arab cultural identity. I then contextualize criticisms of women's playing in light of debates about Tunisian musical identity that have circulated throughout the past century. In the last sections of the chapter I present the insights of these three instrumentalists on questions of gender and Tunisian music. Besides contradicting and challenging criticisms of women's playing, their perspectives also address issues of vocal and instrumental performance and training, and of vocal and aural aesthetics in Tunisian music.

“Playing outside the lines”: Instrumental ornamentation and heterophony

Like solo improvisation, ornaments such as mordents, slides, and trills are not usually notated or pre-composed, but are spontaneously improvised in performance. Thus if instrumentalists learn, rehearse, or perform using staff-notated sheet music, when they ornament they do not play only what is written on the staff lines: rather, they “play outside the lines,” ornamenting and elaborating upon each phrase as is stylistically appropriate. In a small ensemble, most or all of the melodic instrumentalists play the same melodic line, using the same piece of sheet music (if they use notation). As they play the melody they each embellish it according to their instrument, the musical style of the composition, and their personal taste and background. The ornamentation they play creates the thick heterophonic texture that is a significant element of art music performed by *ma'lūf* ensembles in Tunisia and by small *takht* ensembles in eastern Arab cities (Davis 2004: 7; Racy 2003: 80–87; Marcus 2007: 100).

In his work on *tarab* music performed by *takht* ensembles, Racy terms this type of heterophonic interplay “simultaneous” heterophony:

This happens when *takht* instruments perform the same basic composition together, but with each one rendering it differently through subtle variations, omissions, ornamental nuances, syncopation, anticipations, and so on. In the process, the performers produce interlocking melodic structures and intricate heterorhythms. [...] Realized spontaneously in actual performance, heterophony is a highly coordinated process rather than a mere confluence of isolated musical renditions or a collection of simultaneous creations of one fixed tune. (Racy 2003: 80)

The heterophony highlights the distinct timbres of the individual instruments in the *takht* and *ma'lūf* ensembles. In the eastern Arab *takht*, for example, the timbres and ornamentation style of plucked instruments such as the *'ūd* and *qanūn* contrast with the timbres and ornamentation style of sustained instruments such as the *nāy* and violin, which are often likened to the human voice and said to create emotional expressivity and *tarab* [musical ecstasy or rapture]. A traditional *takht* comprises only one of each melodic instrument, as well as a *riqq* [tambourine]; this allows the listener to carefully discern “a few layers of discernable timbral-acoustical lines” and the individual embellishments of each instrument (Ibid.: 77).

Traditional *ma'lūf* ensembles in Tunis during the early twentieth century similarly highlighted the timbral-acoustical differentiation and simultaneous heterophony created by four distinct instruments: an *'ūd tūnsī*, *rabāb*, *tār* (tambourine), and *naqqārāt* (pair of small kettle drums).¹⁸⁵ As in a *takht*, the small size of a *ma'lūf* ensemble (known as a *jawq*) meant that each instrumentalist could be heard and appreciated individually; the small size also allowed the musicians to perform together as a tight-knit group (Racy 2003: 80–81). This provided them with “an intimate physical context ideally suited for

¹⁸⁵ The *qanun* was added starting at the end of the 1920s, and the violin gradually replaced the *rebab* after the 1930s (Sakli 1994: 166–172, 188–189).

establishing direct visual contact and exchanging various music-related cues” (Ibid: 80).

Playing in intimate performance contexts such as private homes and cafés also encouraged interaction and intimacy among the musicians and the audience.

In contemporary Tunisian music performance, the types of ornaments each musician uses depends especially on the instrument he or she plays: embellishments on the violin, a bowed instrument, are different from those on plucked instruments such as the *‘ūd* and *qanūn*. Performers also decide how to perform ornamentation and improvisation based on established convention and individual preference (Ibid.: 87). A wide variety of embellishments exist in Tunisian art music, for example, including quick mordents, long tremolos, and small portamentos. But it is the careful timing and judicious use of ornaments that particularly marks an instrumentalist’s or vocalist’s artistry (Ibid.). Since ornamentation is not notated, musicians learn how to use appropriate ornamentation and improvisation through oral transmission: in private lessons with teachers, by listening to recordings, and by playing alongside skilled musicians in prominent ensembles and weddings.

Ornamentation is considered an inseparable component of a composition. Thus sheet music notations of compositions are usually understood as mere skeletons of the melody, representing the melody’s basic notes, structure, and melodic rhythm. Indeed, many sheet music notations are actually transcriptions created from aural memory or from recordings; the composers never notated their compositions, or the pieces’ composers are unknown, and the pieces are therefore transmitted orally.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Davis 2004: 52–69 for a detailed history and analysis of the notation used and transcriptions created by the Rachidiyya in Tunisia.

In my violin lessons with Anis Klibi, for example, he gave me several sheet music transcriptions of famous Tunisian songs. Figure 6.1 presents violinist Anis Klibi's transcription of "Yilli Baadek," composed by Khemais Tarnane (1894–1964). Klibi explained that this song is frequently performed at weddings, as part of a medley of other songs by Tarnane (such as "Ardhouni Zouz Sebaya") that are set in the melodic mode of *mazmoum* (roughly equivalent to F major). After placing the transcription on the music stand, he then played the song for me, which I recorded. What he played was much more elaborate than what was notated (see Figure 6.2). He showed me how to play different types of ornaments, such as short mordents, rhythmically accented trills, and short *portamento* slides. He explained that a musician learns to use ornaments by listening to others, by listening to recordings, and in this case, by imitating their teacher. After learning how to play certain ornaments and how to use them, a musician will then know how and where to place them in a song "through feeling."

At first it was difficult for me to imitate all of the ornamentation he included during the lesson; but Klibi pushed me to go beyond what was written on the page, telling me to not play *plat* [flat], without ornamentation, "like women's ensembles, like *El 'Azifet*."¹⁸⁷ Klibi then explained, however, that most Tunisian players do not use as many ornaments as he was teaching me. (Yet older recordings—such as the recording of Saliha performing "Yilli Baadek" with the Rachidiyya during the 1940s—feature a great deal of ornamentation and heterophony.¹⁸⁸ Racy notes a similar tendency for greater

¹⁸⁷ Private violin lesson with Anis Klibi, September 16, 2007. By using the term "flat," Klibi and others do not mean that women musicians play below the pitch, but that they do not use much ornamentation. When discussing poor intonation Tunisian musicians instead use the term "*nashaz*."

¹⁸⁸ The recording to which I refer is from the CD, *Sahara khālida m'a Saliha* (Symphonie Musique SMM CD 1517. n.d.: Tunisia). This is most likely a re-released recording of Saliha performing with the Rachidiyya Ensemble, made when Saliha was their vocalist (from 1941 until her death in 1958).

Yilli Baadek

5 *Fine*

9

13

17

21

25 *D.C. al fine*

Figure 6.1 (above): Violinist Anis Klibi’s transcription of “Yilli Baadek,” composed by Khemais Tarnane (1894–1964).

Yilli Baadek

as played by Anis Klibi

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Yilli Baadek" as performed by Anis Klibi. The score is written in a single melodic line on a treble clef staff. It begins with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The score is divided into eight systems, each starting with a measure number: 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, and 27. The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together, and some measures with rests. The final measure of the eighth system is marked "D.C. al fine".

Figure 6.2: Violinist Anis Klibi’s performance of “Yilli Baadek,” played with ornamentation. Transcribed by the author, from a recorded violin lesson with Klibi (September 16, 2007). Klibi performed this song in the Tunisian melodic mode [*tab*] of *mazmoum*, whose tonic is usually F. (In Saliha’s performance the musicians have transposed *mazmoum* so that the tonic is C.) Note that Klibi’s violin is tuned G-D-G-D, so that the opening note, C, is played with third finger on the G string (not second finger on the A string, as on a Western-tuned violin).

ornamentation in older recordings of Egyptian music as well.) Klibi also qualified his statements about *El 'Azifet* by explaining,

all of the women's groups used to play like *this* [demonstrating plain, legato phrases], since they were trained in Western violin—they all played legato, simple. Now they are getting better.¹⁸⁹

In the subsequent lesson, Klibi asked me to play the song on my violin as he played the song's *wazn* [rhythmic mode] on a drum in his teaching studio. He told me that the song's melody and the ornamentation go together with the *wazn*. He also explained that the ornamentation used in Tunisian music is very rhythmic and accented, and that in this way Tunisian music is like the Tunisian dialect. Klibi then demonstrated to me the different types of ornamentation that characterize Tunisian violin playing from *sharqī* [Eastern Arab] and Turkish violin playing, “just as the Tunisian dialect is different” from Egyptian and Moroccan dialects of Arabic.¹⁹⁰ Klibi and other Tunisian musicians explain that while more slides and legato styles of playing are used in *sharqī* music, Tunisian playing involves faster mordents and trills that appear more often, and thus Tunisian violin playing sounds more rhythmically accented than *sharqī* violin playing.

Solo instrumental improvisation and other improvisatory techniques

As Klibi explained, the distinct types of ornamentation and improvisation used in Tunisian music are perceived as elements that distinguish Tunisian music from *sharqī* or Turkish music. The unique Tunisian melodic modes [*tbu'a*]¹⁹¹ and rhythmic modes

¹⁸⁹ Private violin lesson with Anis Klibi, September 16, 2007.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. For violinists in Tunis, the three most prominent styles of Middle Eastern violin playing are *sharqī* [Eastern Arab, especially Egyptian], Tunisian [*tunsi*], and Turkish. These three styles of music and violin playing are furthermore distinguished from Western classical music and violin performance.

¹⁹¹ In Tunisian music the term for a melodic mode is *tab'* (pl. *tbu'a*), and for a rhythmic mode, *wazn* (pl. *awzān*). *Maqāmāt* (s. *maqām*) and *īqā'āt* (s. *īqā'*) are used in *sharqī* music to designate melodic modes and

[*awzān*] are also elements that clearly mark Tunisian music as Tunisian as opposed to Egyptian music, Moroccan music, or other music from the Arab world. (Different melodic and rhythmic modes also distinguish Tunisian *ma'lūf* from Tunisian folk music.) Moreover, it is by performing solo melodic improvisation [*istikhbār*] that a musician especially demonstrates his/her competence in Tunisian music.¹⁹² In an *istikhbār*, the instrumentalist “illustrates” the melodic mode, outlining its primary sets of tonal units [*‘uqūd*, s. *‘iqd*, literally, necklace]. The *‘uqūd* are sets of three, four, or five successive scale degrees that are “defined by intervallic structure and root degree” and are linked together in ascending and descending scales (Davis 2004: 13–15).¹⁹³ Although an *istikhbār* is improvised, it is based on a set of rules governing which motifs and embellishments to use and how to move throughout the mode, which are in turn characteristic to each mode. Improvisation also involves modulation, again governed by rules determining to which modes one can or should modulate and how to return to the original mode. In addition, convention and personal taste determine how a musician ends the improvisation and the individual phrases within it; these cadences, known as *qaflat* (sing. *qafla*), are highly patterned, or “cliché-like,” and are also “powerful ecstatic devices” (Racy 2003: 103).¹⁹⁴

Most art musicians in Tunisia have been trained in both *sharqī* or *tarab* music and Tunisian *ma'lūf* (and related Tunisian genres). They are accustomed to performing *sharqī*

rhythmic modes, respectively; but some Tunisian musicians often interchange these *sharqī* terms with Tunisian terms. At ISM, however, they are used carefully to distinguish Tunisian and *sharqī* music.

¹⁹² An instrumental improvisation in Tunisian music is called an *istikhbār*, while in *sharqī* music it is called a *taqsīm* (pl. *taqāsīm*). But Tunisian musicians often use the noun *taqsīm* and the verb “*taqāsīm*” [to divide] when discussing their modal improvisations.

¹⁹³ Cf. Davis 2004, D’Erlanger, Sakli 2008 for further discussion of Tunisian modes and *‘uqud*.

¹⁹⁴ According to Racy, “listeners, music critics, and theorists generally view the *qafla* as one of the distinguishing traits of *tarab* music. Some even state that it is a uniquely Arab phenomenon, while others describe it as an Egyptian trait *par excellence*” (Racy 2003: 104).

music, and they are familiar with the rules for solo improvisation and other improvisatory techniques used in the Arab East. Similar improvisatory techniques (ornamentation, *qaflāt*, and so forth) are used in both *sharqī* and Tunisian music, but improvisation in each regional music tradition (such as Tunisian music) is distinguished from improvisation in another regional music tradition by its distinct melodic and rhythmic modes, and the distinct compositions and improvisations that are based on those modes. (Songs are further distinguished by their lyrics, in Tunisian or Eastern dialects, and by the different types of forms they may use that are specific to each tradition.) As I noted in Chapter Two, the Rachidiyya Institute and the Ministry of Culture worked to systematize Tunisian music theory starting in the 1930s. At music education centers in contemporary Tunis, musicians thus learn to distinguish between the two types of music—but in their performances they may frequently perform both.

Whether instrumental or vocal, solo improvisations “are the creations of the individual performer, combining individual ideas with idiosyncratic renditions of traditional phrases, ‘common practice’ phrases one learns aurally for each *maqām*” (Marcus 2007: 104). Racy explains that an artful solo improvisation is marked by a careful balance between using familiar modal material and introducing new elements that are aesthetically fitting. On the one hand, the musician draws upon “a kind of table of contents of the mode” or set of ingredients that are “at least to a degree obligatory” (Nettl 1974: 12–13, cited in Racy 2003: 95). These include typical starting notes, stylized cadential motifs, characteristic intervallic structures, notes of emphasis, and likely modulatory options (Racy 2003: 95). Improvisations also “incorporate a vast number of small motivic structures that reappear in numerous variations from one performance to

another, and to some extent, from one mode to another” (Ibid.) On the other hand, the improviser should not only draw upon stock patterns and motifs that would be too predictable or redundant, but should try to introduce novel elements. Like ornamentation and heterophony, improvisation is not notated but learned aurally and fine-tuned in performance; successful improvisations attest to the skill and knowledge of a fine musician.

Instrumentalists also learn other improvisatory techniques in the course of performance, especially when they accompany vocalists. During a vocal improvisation (such as a *layali* or a *mawwal*), for example, the instrumentalists spontaneously follow the singer as he or she improvises (Marcus 2007: 107). Often only the *qanūn* player accompanies the vocalist in this case, although the *ūd* player and violinist may also participate. As the vocalist improvises phrase by phrase, “the accompaniment ‘echoes’ the leading part at a slightly delayed pace, or in a rather ‘out of sync’ fashion” (Racy 2003: 80). Racy terms this “overlapping” heterophony.

Immediately after the vocalist finishes a short phrase, the *qanūn* player (and/or other instrumentalists) improvises an instrumental interlude that emulates the preceding vocal phrase, granting the vocalist “suitable moments of repose between the improvised vocal phrases” (Ibid.: 82). This improvised instrumental interlude is called a *tarjama* [literally, translation] in *tarab* music. (It is also commonly used during vocal improvisations in Tunisian art music, but I have not yet heard it labeled with a specific term.) The *tarjama* (pl. *tarjamāt*) also reinforces the vocalist’s “ecstatic message without disturbing his creative train of thought” (Ibid.). Thus, accompanying a vocal improvisation requires a great deal of artistic mastery from the instrumentalists (Marcus

2007: 107). I have noted in the previous chapter that women performing in wedding ensembles gain experience performing such *tarjamāt* and responding to vocalists' subtle nuances during their improvisations.

Together with instrumental and vocal improvisation, improvisational techniques such as ornamentation, heterophony, and *tarjama* are considered symbols of *al-turāth* [cultural heritage] and of Arab cultural identity.¹⁹⁵ But in recent years, musicians, scholars, and critics across the Arab world have lamented the declining use of improvisation and heterophony, which many see as representing a crisis of Arab musical and cultural identity (Sakli 2007: 8–10).

Tunisian musical identity in crisis

In recent Tunisian music history, the first identity crisis occurred during the 1920s and 1930s. Alarmed at the increasing influence of Egyptian music recordings and inspired by the burgeoning nationalist movement, members of the cultural elite aimed to rediscover and reassert the Tunisian musical identity (Davis and Jankowsky 2005: 76). They subsequently organized a Tunisian delegation to the Cairo Congress in 1932 and created the Rachidiyya Institute in 1934. In this period the modernized *ma'lūf* symbolized the Tunisian national identity (Davis 1997a: 79). Commentators lamenting a second crisis of Tunisian music were especially vocal during the 1980s, complaining that Tunisian music had been declining since the 1960s. As during the first crisis, they criticized the fact that the music industry in Tunisia was dominated by Egyptian music and “second-rate Tunisian imitations” of Egyptian music. Commentators also criticized the ossification and reification of the *ma'lūf*, arguing that state conservatories and state-sponsored ensembles, with their formal styles of presentation and uniform interpretations,

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Marcus 2007: 104, 114; Racy 2000; Sakli 2007, 2008; Shannon 2006: xx–xv.

had turned the *ma'lūf* into a museum piece (Davis 1996b: 436). As Davis and Sakli demonstrate in their research, during the course of the twentieth century directors and musicians of the Rachidiyya and *ughniyya* ensembles introduced radical changes in the transmission and performance of traditional Tunisian music, reflecting musical ideologies and aesthetic values directly opposed to those of previous ensembles (Davis 1997a: 78). Increasing dependence on music notation and the increased size of ensembles corresponded with the declining use of improvisation, ornamentation, and heterophony in Tunisian art music.

Upon its founding, the Rachidiyya association invited Mohammed Triki to lead the ensemble in performance and to oversee the transcription of *ma'lūf* pieces into Western staff notation.¹⁹⁶ These transcriptions were created after listening to several *shayūkh* perform their versions of each piece; they later became sources for the *ma'lūf* notations published during the 1960s and 1970s by the Ministry of Culture in the nine-volume collection, *Al-Turāth al-mūsīqī al-tūnisī* [The Tunisian musical heritage]. Triki emphasized that these transcriptions were meant only as memory aids for learning and as standard versions for performance, not as a means of preservation; musicians told Davis in the 1980s that “it would be impossible to learn new pieces from notation alone” (Ibid.: 53–54).

Into the 1940s Triki created a new format for the Rachidiyya Ensemble, modeled after contemporary Egyptian ensembles that had in turn been influenced by the size and ensemble aesthetics of Western symphony orchestras. But unlike those ensembles he excluded instruments with fixed pitch, since they would sacrifice the intonation of the

¹⁹⁶ Davis notes that “Western staff notation was first used in teaching and performing the *ma'lūf* when Ahmed Bey I created a military academy in 1840 and hired European music teachers to create a band” (Davis 2004: 52). Cf. Davis 2004: 52–55 for more on the history of transcription in the Tunisian *ma'lūf*.

ma'lūf. The core of the Rachidiyya Ensemble comprised several violins, cello, and bass, playing in unison and octaves, combined with traditional Arab instruments such as *'ūd tunsī*, *'ūd sharqī*, *qanūn*, *rabāb*, *nāy*, *darbūka*, *tār*, and *naqqārāt*. This ensemble was novel in size and the variety of instruments; but it was especially unprecedented because it doubled instruments of the same type (Ibid.: 52–54).¹⁹⁷ Triki wanted the chorus and strings to sound in unison,

‘like an army of soldiers,’ while the solo Arab instruments were free to improvise embellishments; in effect, however, such individual contributions became virtually redundant since they were swamped by the uniform sound mass of the rest of the ensemble. (Davis 1997a: 82)

Triki also introduced new methods of rehearsing and performing which have become standard practices for the Rachidiyya Ensemble. Triki used the *ma'lūf* transcriptions to rehearse the instrumentalists, but he asked Shaykh Khemais Tarnane to rehearse and teach the repertory to the members of the chorus.¹⁹⁸ Triki united both sections for the final rehearsals before a concert, and he directed the entire ensemble in performance either from within, playing the violin, or from the front with a baton, like the conductor of a Western orchestra (Davis 2004: 54).

The Rachidiyya’s approach to teaching and reading vocal parts continues to be used in all of the art-music ensembles I observed during my fieldwork in Tunis. Davis notes that because “the nuances of the vocal line were considered too subtle to be taught other than by direct imitation,” Tarnane taught the chorus using the traditional method of repetition and memorization (Ibid.). When I observed rehearsals of the Rachidiyya and *El 'Azifet*, I noted that while the instrumentalists read from Western staff notation, the only

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Davis 1997a: 91; Sakli 1994 166–197; El-Shawan 1984; and Marcus 2007: 100–102 for more on ensemble expansions in Tunisia and Egypt.

¹⁹⁸ Tarnane directed the chorus until 1964, when Tahar Gharsa became choral director.

written source used by vocalists were the lyrics, written in Arabic. In performance members of the chorus occasionally placed lyrics on their music stands for reference, but solo vocalists almost always performed without any visual aids.

Vocalists in Tunisian art music thus have a different relationship with reading music than do instrumentalists. In recent decades most vocalists have studied at conservatories and have learned to read notated music, but most vocal parts still include only the Arabic lyrics printed on a page. Many Tunisian songbooks (such as those published by Mohamed Boudhina) present the songs' poetry on one page and the music notation on a different page (see Figure 6.3). Each book of the nine-volume *Turāth* collection also presents the songs' poetry separately, in the first section of the book, with the corresponding notation at the rear of the book. In the *Turāth* books, the lyrics are also written above the music notation. But since Arabic text is read from right to left (while Western staff notation is read from left to right), the lyrics are broken into syllables and the flow of the poetry is broken (see Figure 6.4). In order to correctly pronounce and convey the meaning of the poetry—qualities that are prized above all in Arab culture—it thus makes more sense for vocalists to read directly from the poetry, without looking at the music notation.

Musicians at the Rachidiyya told Davis that vocal parts are so nuanced that they should not be notated, but rather transmitted orally by a chorus master and memorized by the vocalists through repetition. Indeed, when Myriam Lakhoua talked to me about her

Figure 6.3: The Arabic lyrics to “Yilli Baadek,” by Jalaladdine Enniqash. From Bouthina 1996: 44. (This is what vocalists would read when singing.)

يا اللّي بُعدك ضيّع فكري
كلمات : جلال الدين النقاش **ألحان : خميس الترنان**
غناء : صليحة

<p>ارجع لي للقلب انضمّمك حياتي في كلمة من فمك سمّعني نغمة الاطيّار في ضحكة روض الأزهار غير وصلك يظفي لي النار كيف ريتك حجّبت على أمك والسحر اللّي خلقو ربّي وشرح اللّي كتمّو قلبي ومتّو دوايا ومتّو طبّي كيف نجّابو قلبي يذمّك حرام عليك تعذب في جهنّم توقد في جواجي ما تجودش بالوصل علي وشرع الحب يحرم ظلمك ونكمد حسّادي واعدايا للصدر اللّي حامل دايا وننسى دموعي وننسى بكايا كيف يضيق الحال نشمّمك</p>	<p>يا اللّي بُعدك ضيّع فكري جنّتي حبّك يا عمري اتكلّم خلّي نتّهني واضحك لي راني نستني قلبي حاير ما يتمني يا بنت النجمة اللّي تسري عينك السيف اللّي جرحني جيت نخبي دمعي فضحني حبّك مسّاني وصبّحني قلبي ينشد وينو صبري متعذب هكّة ترضاني متليّع والبعد كواني ترضى نعدّي عمري فاني في شرعك حلّلتني هجري نحوزك زعمه يكمل سعدي ونضمّمك يا روعي بزندي وتنهني ونبلغ قصدي ونحطّك وردة على صدري</p>
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tradition, while instrumental practice has adopted more modern, systematized, and Westernized methods of instruction and performance practice.

Following independence the Tunisian government created the national Radio Ensemble in 1958. Modeled after contemporary Egyptian radio and film ensembles, the Tunisian Radio Ensemble expanded the Rachidiyya Ensemble format to include larger string sections and European instruments of fixed pitch such as flutes, clarinets, saxophones, and accordions. Starting in the late 1960s, electric keyboards and guitars were added, and from the early 1980s, synthesizers (Sakli 1994: 201–3; Davis 2004: 99).²⁰⁰ Since the 1980s, however, musicians and scholars have criticized orchestras such as the Radio Ensemble for including instruments of fixed pitch that are not suited for playing the microtones of the Tunisian melodic modes; for performing mostly Egyptian or Egyptian-inspired music; for performing with a conductor, as in Western orchestras; and for doubling instruments and nearly obliterating the heterophonic textures of traditional Tunisian music (Sakli 2007: 7).

Abdulhamid Belalgia became the first director of the Radio Ensemble. He aimed to create new professional standards for the full-time, government-funded orchestra and the small *ma'lūf* ensemble it included.²⁰¹ Among other changes, he created his own transcriptions of the *ma'lūf*, in contrast to the official ideology that a standardized, unified *ma'lūf* should exist (Davis 2004: 55–57, 109). Belalgia also applied to the *ma'lūf* Western orchestral practices that had been used in *ughniyya* ensembles since the 1930s.

²⁰⁰ Cf. Davis 1997a; Sakli 1994 166–197; El-Shawan 1984; and Marcus 2007: 100–102, 123–124 for comparisons with Egyptian orchestras and reform efforts.

²⁰¹ See Davis 2004: 55, 99, 107–8 regarding the overlap and difference among personnel in the professional Radio Ensemble and the Rachidiyya, and the changing status of the Rachidiyya Ensemble (from amateur to professional, then to amateur, then again professional, etc) at different points in time. Note that Belalgia's reduced *ma'lūf* ensemble included ten violins.

Whereas Triki's notations provided a single melodic line, Belalgia created separate parts for each type of instrument. Most of the melodic instruments played the main melody with characteristic embellishments, but the cellos and basses read from different parts (Ibid.: 55). The cellos and basses were to articulate the *iqa'* or *wazn*, reinforcing the percussion in a reduced version of the melody (Ibid.). Belalgia's scores also synchronized bowings and indicated tempo, dynamics, and phrasing.

Critics have argued that the large size of modernized ensembles such as the Radio Ensemble—particularly the large size of their string sections, which played the melody in unison or octaves with synchronized bowings—created a homophonic wash of sound that seemed to imitate Western orchestras.²⁰² In these ensembles one could no longer hear individual instruments such as the traditional, acoustic *'ūd tūnsī*, *rabāb*, or *qanūn*, let alone the embellishments individual musicians may have performed. In such ensembles ornamentation and other improvisational techniques were no longer possible nor perhaps desirable, since heterophony could quickly become cacophony.

Belalgia later transferred many of the same standards and practices that were considered professional to the Rachidiyya when he directed the ensemble from 1972 to 1978.²⁰³ The government had provided funds to pay the musicians, and many of the amateur Rachidiyya musicians were replaced by Radio ensemble musicians. Belalgia also imported the scores he had created for the Radio ensemble. When the Rachidiyya returned to amateur status and Mohamed Saada became director in 1979, Saada also

²⁰² In Egypt, however, they did not adopt the Western orchestral practice of synchronizing the violinists' bowing strokes, and therefore these ensembles have a distinctly non-Western look (Marcus 2007: 100).

²⁰³ Belalgia directed the Rachidiyya again, from 1992 to 2006.

created his own transcriptions and notated separate parts for each instrument.²⁰⁴ Although Saada tried to renew the Rachidiyya's repertory by performing neglected, older *ma'lūf* pieces, overall he continued the performance practices introduced by Belalgia.

Efforts to revitalize Tunisian music

By the 1980s many musicians, journalists, and politicians were criticizing the standardized nature of music performance and education in Tunisia. Musicians accused the large state-sponsored ensembles of creating a gulf between contemporary practice and traditional Tunisian music. They blamed the Rachidiyya, for example, for “alienating potential audiences with its formal, disciplined presentations of the same well-worn repertory” (Davis 1997a: 90). Critics argued that although their initial aim was to counteract Western and Egyptian musical influences, the Rashidiyya and Radio ensembles had eventually adopted textures and performance practices similar to Western and Egyptian orchestras. These ensembles performed in formal concert settings wearing Western concert dress; their large string sections produced a homophonic sound; they increasingly introduced Western polyphony; and the use of fixed-pitch instruments had led to a declining use of Tunisian melodic modes. Critics particularly bemoaned the decreasing use of improvisational techniques such as ornamentation, heterophony, and solo improvisation. Sakli notes that *ughniyya* compositions both reflected and furthered these trends, as their instrumental introductions and interludes were no longer improvised but pre-composed and notated (Sakli 1994). Furthermore, the Rashidiyya's uniform interpretations and institutionalized performance conventions were blamed for the lack of

²⁰⁴ Both Belalgia and Saada claimed that their versions were rooted in tradition, stemming from their personal experiences learning the *ma'lūf* in *zwāya* [Sufi lodges]. Cf. Davis 2004: 55–57, 66–69 for controversy over the *ma'lūf* as a unitary tradition, and over the alleged homogeneity of the published notations in the *Al-turāth* books.

improvisation and development that might have enabled Tunisian music to counter the influx of Egyptian and Western music in the media.

In order to counteract outside influences, musicians aimed to revitalize Tunisian music (Sakli 2007: 8–10). Their revitalization efforts included a revival of the *ma'lūf*, a revival of early twentieth-century *ughniyya*, and the creation of private conservatories. They also involved the creation of smaller, soloistic ensembles, and a push for the increased use of traditional acoustic instruments (such as the *rabāb* and the *'ūd tūnsī*), oral instruction methods, improvisational techniques, and more flexible approaches to performance practice in general (Davis 1996b: 437). Musicians such as Mohamed Saada, Salah el-Mehdi, Fethi Zghonda, and Rachid Sellami, for example, have advocated for the revitalization of the Rachidiyya's repertory and for teaching solo instrumentalists aurally,

by the traditional method of repetition and memorization, using the notations merely as prompts. By thoroughly absorbing the repertory in this way, they argued, the musicians would be equipped to improvise embellishments in a manner that was both personal and consistent with tradition. (Davis 2004: 101)

Trends towards smaller, soloistic instrumental ensembles and oral transmission methods have continued into the first decade of the twenty-first century. When Zied Gharsa became director of the Rachidiyya in 2006, for example, he reduced the ensemble's size and promoted oral transmission methods.²⁰⁵ When I observed the Rachidiyya's rehearsals and concerts during my fieldwork, I noted that the ensemble still includes ten violins, one or two cellos, and a bass, but only one of each instrument from the traditional *ma'lūf* ensemble (*'ūd tūnsī*, *rabāb*, *nāy*, *qanūn*, *tār*, *naqqārāt*). All of the

²⁰⁵ Cf. Davis 2004: 110–112. Zied Gharsa is the son of Tahar Gharsa, previous choral master of the Rachidiyya. Tahar Gharsa studied with Khemais Tarnane, who was a student of Ahmed al-Wafi, D'Erlanger's original mentor. Zied Gharsa is thus considered a musical descendent of his father, Tarnane, and al-Wafi. Upon his father's death in 2003, Zied Gharsa took over direction of the Rachidiyya chorus; when Belalgaia retired in 2006 Gharsa became director of the entire Rachidiyya ensemble. He subsequently reduced the size of the ensemble to include only ten violins and doubling on only a few other instruments (occasionally *'ūd tūnsī* and cello).

instrumentalists, including the percussion and bass, read from the same notation, a simple skeleton or prompt of the melodic line. In rehearsal Gharsa sat at a desk playing his *'ūd tūnsī* and singing the lyrics or instrumental melody. He repeatedly stopped the ensemble to suggest embellishments to the violins or other melodic instruments, often demonstrating on *'ūd tūnsī* or violin.²⁰⁶ Meanwhile, the bass and cello improvised their own parts as they played, aligning core notes of the melody with the *wazn*. These musicians must therefore possess deep knowledge of the song, its melodic mode, and its *wazn*. Accordingly, these instrumentalists have performed with the Rachidiyya for many years.

Criticisms about playing without ornamentation or improvisation are therefore not only confined to women musicians; throughout recent decades these criticisms have been prominent issues in debates over Tunisian musical identity. Davis and Jankowsky note that from the 1920s, D'Erlanger, the 1932 Cairo Congress, and the Rachidiyya, to the 1990s Festival of Tunisian Song,

the cultural elite has acted on its anxiety over the 'Tunisian-ness,' or lack thereof, of Tunisian music. Efforts to discipline popular music from above have contributed to the marginalization of certain musics; the promotion, even invention, of others; and has ensured that, far from solving the 'crisis' of Tunisian music, the debate only continues. (Davis and Jankowsky 2005: 80)

During my fieldwork, however, I found that criticisms about not playing outside the lines are particularly aimed at women instrumentalists and regularly reach their ears, constituting a significant factor that constrains their participation in the music profession.

²⁰⁶ Gharsa also performs as a solo vocalist and plays *rebab*, viola, *org*, and piano (such as in early *ughniyya* compositions by Sheikh Afrit). He is known as a faithful performer of traditional Tunisian music, but he also composes his own repertoire; he is one of the most celebrated singers, composers, and instrumentalists in Tunisia today.

Yet several women instrumentalists contradict and challenge these criticisms with their own perspectives about their playing, about women's contribution to Tunisian music, and about gender and aesthetics in Tunisian music. The next sections present the perspectives of Khadija El Afrit, Myriam Lakhoua, and Amina Srarfi, concluding with an analysis of *El 'Azifet's* contributions to the Tunisian music scene.

Women musicians' perspectives

Among other women musicians, Khadija El Afrit suggested to me that her gender positively affects her playing. In our interview she told me that women play with more sensitivity than men, and with a distinct sense of interpretation. In another conversation, when we were returning by private bus from the concert she performed in Binzerte with Zied Gharsa, El Afrit talked about how she has sought to convey that sense of interpretation to one of her female students. She explained that the student in question had previously studied with the primary *qanūn* teacher at ISM, Jamel Abid, who has also published a beginner's book of exercises and repertoire. Abid's method focuses on developing technique, particularly speed and agility, and approaches the Turkish style of *qanūn* playing. After studying with Abid for one or two years, the aforementioned student then began taking lessons with El Afrit. El Afrit explained,

I taught her the classical repertoire, *interprétation*, tension and release, and sensitivity, how to play as a woman... and how playing is not only about technique.²⁰⁷

El Afrit's comments about "how playing is not only about technique" are similar to those of other musicians I talked with in Tunis. Rachid Kouba, for example, told me that "it's very difficult to teach Arab music with notation or in the conservatory setting because it's

²⁰⁷ Conversation, with Khadija El Afrit, August 15, 2008.

not about technique—it’s about the style, the *rūh* [spirit/soul].”²⁰⁸ Such discourse reflects musicians’ renewed interest in oral transmission as a means of revitalizing Tunisian music.

In the course of this conversation El Afrit also contrasted the classical repertoire and school (in which she has trained) with current trends for the Turkish school of virtuoso instrumental performance, which she said is “all about technique.” She told me that in studying with her father, with Mohamed Saada, and with Ali Sriti, among others, she became steeped in the classical repertoire of Tunisian *ma’lūf* and Near Eastern/Egyptian *tarab* music. In this classical school she often learned aurally, and she was encouraged to improvise and ornament in the style of those traditions.

According to El Afrit, in the classical style a *qanūn* player usually plays in two octaves. The musician’s right hand plays the melody in a treble register, ornamenting with embellishments such as mordents. The musician’s left hand plays an octave below, often echoing the melody by playing slightly off the beat or by playing octave tremolos with the right hand. In a small chamber ensemble the *qanūn* complements the timbres of the other instruments with its plucked, slightly metallic sound; it also fills out the melodic range of the ensemble by playing in both low and high registers (Racy 2003: 77). The preferred instrument for vocal improvisation, the *qanūn* also typically provides instrumental fillers [*lawāzim*] during a pre-composed piece. Even when amplified with microphones, the *qanūn* is difficult to hear; in *lawāzim* the *qanūn* player thus often plays with both hands in the treble register so that the filler stands out from the main melody. In the Turkish school, however, pieces are often very fast; the *qanūn* player often plays only

²⁰⁸ Interview in Tunis with Rachid Kouba, February 28, 2008. Cf. Shannon 2006: xix regarding “oriental spirit” [*rūh sharqiyya*], emotional sincerity, and musical rapture (*tarab*) in Syrian music.

in the treble register so that she can play and ornament the primary melody with both hands.

El Afrit told me that she transfers the values of the classical school to her teaching—both in her private lessons and the Tunisian music theory courses she teaches at ISM. When I later took *qanūn* lessons with her in her home, for example, she taught me using oral methods. These seemed quite different to me since I had previously studied *qanūn* in Tunisia with a former student of Jamal Abid, using Abid’s book. In a typical lesson with El Afrit we did not use notation. Rather, we chose a song I already knew, such as “Yilli Baadek”; proceeding phrase by phrase, she showed me how to play the melody in two octaves and how to ornament it accordingly.

El Afrit’s comments and teaching methods reflect her musical training, her experience playing with the Rachidiyya and other ensembles, and contemporary discourse about traditional Tunisian and Arab music. Furthermore, she has added her perspective as a woman musician to that discourse. On one hand, as she previously told me, she finds it difficult to pursue a music career as a woman for various reasons—including men musicians’ criticisms about women’s playing. On the other hand, in other conversations she seemed to positively perceive the effect her gender has upon her playing and the contributions women instrumentalists make to Tunisian music, particularly by playing differently and with more sensitivity; she contrasts playing with sensitivity, “as a woman,” with focusing primarily on technique.

Myriam Lakhoua similarly contrasted women’s playing and the classical school with musicians who mostly concern themselves with technique. Yet when we first began discussing the subject of gender and instrumental performance in our interview, Lakhoua

stated that “men and women play the same.” She then qualified this by explaining that more men tend to play instruments than women do, and that men have more experience playing outside [*barra*] at weddings. If men tend to play better than women, she argued, it is because they have more experience; while if women were to gain the same amount of experience, they could play just as well as men. In other words, Lakhoua explained, differences in men’s and women’s playing should not be attributed to gender but to different levels of experience.

Wallahi [Really, I swear], men and women play the same. Except that, how should I say, in relationship to instruments... men are less afraid of instruments [*yekhafu aqal bil instrument*], maybe, and they devote more time to instruments than do women, maybe. But if they both worked the same amount, they’d both play very well. In other words, there isn’t a reason why all men are better than women, except that men take the instrumental route more often.

I asked, “but do they have a different way of playing?”

If you see Yusra [Dhehbi], for example, no. It depends on you and who taught you, your school, and your experience, too. Because... ah, voilà. Do you know—she was in *Taqasim*—Aida Babbou? I think she was in *Taqasim*. And she created an ensemble that plays at weddings. Because the experience of weddings, too—Aha! Men have more experience because they work outside [*barra*] a lot, understand? So it’s normal that after, they become... in other words, who works more becomes better, that’s all. While women, women have always been vocalists. The experience they have in the profession is in singing—not in playing.²⁰⁹

Next, however, after discussing men’s criticisms of women’s ensembles and their level of playing, Lakhoua offered her opinion of women ‘*ūd* students at ISM and the feminine elements they add to their ‘*ūd* playing:

This year I started teaching ‘*ūd* [at ISM], and I’ve seen the feminine elements that they add to the ‘*ūd*.

...Before, most of the instrumentalists who played very well were men, and women sang. But this year, I’ve seen that there are girls who play really well. And they sing, eh? In other words, those who play very well have studied singing, have specialized in singing—at least, that’s in my opinion.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Interview in Manouba with Myriam Lakhoua, April 3, 2008.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

Later in our interview, Lakhoua argued that musical training affects one's playing more than one's gender. She explained that she has more in common with a man who studied with the same teacher as she did, for example, than with a woman who studied with a different teacher. Yet she then mentioned the better sound of women 'ūd players at ISM who had studied voice.

I'll tell you my perception. I am not like men, you see? I'm different. But since I had a teacher like Si Ali Sriti, it's my musical education that counts, understand?²¹¹ I would have something in common with Anas [Ghrab] if we had the same teacher. That's what counts for me. Me, I had a teacher like Si Ali; I am not going to have things in common with her [Leila Habashi] just because I'm a woman.

But, on the contrary, as I noted when I gave exams to the ISM students [in January 2008], the women who sing... that's my perception: when they play 'ūd, the sound that comes out [*el hiss, le son qui sort*], for the women who sing, it's... I preferred it to others.

I was on the jury with three men (if you want to compare women with men), and, for example, there was a student—and I didn't know anything about these players—who played me something... [*she sang a fast musical passage*], with an incredible technical ability [*une technicité effroyable*]. But it did not move me! [*Cela m'a pas touché!*] I said, the sound he has does not please me.

But maybe that's because my school is not his. My school of 'ūd, understand?

Whereas the women who came to the exam, by chance [*bi zahar*], study voice. Thus they are close to my school, with song. Not the technical ability of Nacir Shama, and all the *longat*, understand?²¹²

—Those are my criteria, understand? I can't explain this because they were women.

I asked, “did you observe 'ūd exams of men who also study voice?”

I didn't...but after, I gave an exam to a male student, and he passed well—and that's true, because he sings. He has the “*plus*,” the sound that I like from the 'ūd, understand?

²¹¹ “Si” is the abbreviation for “Sidi,” a term of respect for older men. Ali Sriti (1919–2007).

²¹² Nacir Shama is a famous Iraqi 'ūd player known for his virtuosic technique. *Longat* (s. *longa*) are fast instrumental pieces adopted in Egyptian and Tunisian music from Ottoman Turkish culture (Marcus 2007: 101). Like a *samā'ī*, another instrumental form of Ottoman origin, a *longa* is comprised of four “verses” [*khanat*, s. *khana*] and a refrain. Unlike *samā'ī*, *longat* are usually in duple meter and are performed at a quick tempo, allowing opportunity for the instrumentalists to display their technical facilities.

I explain it this way; not because they're women, understand?

I then asked, “what about women who only play *'ūd*, and don't sing—are they the same?” Myriam replied, “I think that the ones who sing are better, by chance... but this needs to be studied and investigated scientifically.”²¹³

Like El Afrit, Lakhoua implied that technical ability is (negatively) associated with men, while students who had studied voice—and happened to be mostly women—played with a better sound that moved her. Indeed, she repeated this perception to me again in June 2008, after we had observed the ISM senior *'ūd* recitals (for which she was not a member of the jury). She told me that although a famous male student had received a superior grade for his recital, his incredibly fast, impressive technical playing did not move her. On the contrary, she had enjoyed the sound and *rūh* created by a female student. Lakhoua expressed disappointment that the judges had awarded this student a low grade, arguing, “it's not only about technique!”²¹⁴

Yet Lakhoua qualified her generalizations by arguing that experience and training ultimately affect a musician's playing more than does his or her gender identity. Refusing to “play the gender card” (as she said) like other women, she stated that it is by chance that women *'ūd* players have studied voice and thus have a sound that she prefers. She explained that their type of playing, and their training in voice, is also closer to her school of *'ūd* training and her personal experience.

Like Khadija El Afrit and acclaimed *tarab* vocalist, Leila Hejaiej, Lakhoua studied with Ali Sriti, renowned master of classical *sharqī* music, who taught using oral methods. Like El Afrit, Lakhoua told me that the classical school is concerned less with

²¹³ Interview in Manouba with Myriam Lakhoua, April 3, 2008.

²¹⁴ Conversation with Myriam Lakhoua, June 9, 2008.

technical ability than with sound and *rūh*. Believing that an *ūd* player creates a better sound when she or he has studied voice is perhaps related to the fact that vocal training incorporates more oral transmission than does instrumental music education. Such a position may also relate to perceptions that vocal training remains classical (rooted in traditional Tunisian and *sharqī tarab* music), while instrumental music education and performance often reflect the current vogue for Turkish music and related efforts to elevate musicians' technical virtuosity.

Lakhoua's comments also echo the recognition that in Arab music the voice is the best medium of musical execution (Racy 2003: 87). For her, as for many Arab musicians, *ūd* playing goes hand in hand with singing:

Before, I was memorizing [*nahfuth*] with the chorus [in the *Rachidiyya*], like Zied [Gharsa]. Zied told me, 'sing with the *ūd*.' And I was playing and singing. Meaning, for me, playing came to me with singing [*el 'azif jeenni ma' el ghina*'].²¹⁵

In Arab art music many vocalists have traditionally played *ūd*, and composers have usually used the *ūd* for composing. Amateurs who love to sing also generally learn to accompany themselves with the *ūd* above all other instruments. And in Arab culture, historical references to singing and playing the *ūd* date to the seventh century. Singing with and "through" the *ūd* is thus a powerful symbol of Tunisian and Arab cultural identity.²¹⁶

Lakhoua and El Afrit imply that vocal training and oral transmission create better playing—playing that contrasts with mere technical ability. Their aesthetic judgments align with their personal training in the classical school and with their experiences as vocalists. Just as Lakhoua has extensive experience memorizing the *ma'lūf* as a member

²¹⁵ Interview in Manouba with Myriam Lakhoua, April 3, 2008.

²¹⁶ Cf. Racy 2003, Marcus 2007, Shannon 2006, and Danielson 1997.

of the Rachidiyya Ensemble's chorus, El Afrit has also performed as a vocalist. Although many members of the art music community have called for the increased use of oral transmission since the 1980s, these two musicians specifically link oral methods to increased sensitivity and better sound, which they furthermore link to vocal training and women's playing. Their comments suggest that women offer more sensitivity or certain feminine elements to instrumental performance; but is this because women have traditionally been identified with vocal performance? Instruments and technical ability have traditionally been associated positively with men in the Middle East (Doubleday 2008). But Lakhoua and El Afrit imply that certain male musicians have become too concerned with technique, and that their playing lacks elements that would move a listener. This contrasts with men's criticisms of women's playing as flat and boring, a product of disciplined, Westernized, formal conservatory training.

In my interviews with Amina Srarfi, she told me that “gender has nothing to do with music.” Yet upon explaining her objective in creating *El 'Azifet*, she stated,

... it is the cultural aspect, it's the “*plus*” that I will add to Tunisian music. [...] What's important for me is to leave an imprint [*empreinte*] on Tunisian music and to reduce the gap [*écart*] or the wall that there is between *le musicien* [male musician] and *la musicienne* [female musician].

Today, everyone—we all love music, we all do music; there's not a difference based on gender. Gender [*le sexe*] has nothing to do with music. There's no difference, voilà.²¹⁷

Srarfi's position that “gender has nothing to do with music” may be her way of arguing for women's inclusion in the music profession—in other words, so as to prove that there are not any differences between women's and men's playing. Her perspective may differ from that of El Afrit and Lakhoua because she is at least ten years older than they are:

²¹⁷ Interview in Tunis with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

Srarfi is among the pioneering women instrumentalists who first participated in mixed-gender ensembles during the 1980s. She most likely encountered more gender discrimination in the music profession than did women of later generations.²¹⁸ Indeed, according to Davis, Srarfi founded *El 'Azifet* so as to challenge “the virtual exclusion of female instrumentalists from the major state ensembles;” “to prove that Arab Islamic women can perform as well as their male counterparts;” and “to prove that they can succeed independently of men” (Davis 2004: 118–119).

When discussing her pioneering efforts as the first woman conductor in the Arab world, Srarfi again stressed that gender does not affect a conductor’s success:

I am the first woman music director in Tunisia, in the Arab world, but whether woman or man, gender has nothing to do with music. One must have good foundations, solid foundations in music; and one must have a lot of experience as a musician, especially as an orchestral conductor, in order to succeed...

In addition, one must have a lot of character: one must be courageous to be able to direct an ensemble. In other words, your musical training is not enough. For a conductor you need talent, musical training, and also a strong enough character for controlling everyone.

In response I asked, “if gender doesn’t matter, why did you create *El 'Azifet*, an all-women ensemble?” She replied,

All women? Because I don’t like to do the same things as others ... I like to change...and I am a creator, I like to create things that are out of the ordinary.²¹⁹

Srarfi then suggested that *El 'Azifet* adds a *plus* to Tunisian music, and that this *plus* is furthermore significant because it is contributed by women. As noted in Chapter Four, part of this “*plus*” involves creating something “new and “different,” such as the

²¹⁸ Here I consider generations in the sense of women and men born about a decade apart. (As in “Generation X,” Y, etc.)

²¹⁹ Interview in Tunis with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

“shows” *El ‘Azifet* create for audiences: they aim to present not only good music but also a beautiful scene onstage.

Moreover, by reviving *aghānī* from the early twentieth century and by performing classic Tunisian and Arab songs with new arrangements, Amina Srarfi and *El ‘Azifet* have been at the forefront of the movement to revitalize Tunisian music since the 1990s (Davis 2009: 198). As noted in Chapter Two, Srarfi was also one of the first musicians to open a private music conservatory, another key factor in decentralizing musical education in Tunisia. Furthermore, Srarfi has contributed to revitalizing Tunisian music by creating a small ensemble such as *El ‘Azifet*, in which initially the instrumentalists doubled as the chorus and there was no solo voice. (And although *El ‘Azifet* has also included piano, a fixed-pitch instrument, the only instrument that has been doubled is the *‘ūd*.) In this way, Srarfi has chosen similar ensemble aesthetics as found in traditional *ma’lūf* ensembles during the early twentieth century, and as in other small, soloistic ensembles created during the 1990s by musicians such as Lotfi Boushnak and Sonia Mbarek (Davis 2004: 112–119). In recent years, however, Srarfi has added a separate choral section comprised of four to eight vocalists. Srarfi chooses one of these vocalists as a soloist for each song that features a solo voice; yet in performance the soloist does not stand in front of the ensemble but remains seated with the chorus.

Srarfi has not only aimed to revitalize Tunisian music by creating new arrangements of classic songs, but also by commissioning new compositions. Consequently, today, she told me, “*El ‘Azifet* has its own personality: it is the orchestra directed by Amina Srarfi, with its own music, its own compositions.” She explained that Faycal Qawri has composed several pieces specifically for *El ‘Azifet* and about *Azifet*. In

our interviews Srarfi stressed the novelty of these compositions, especially their transformation of classic forms such as the *samā'ī*. She said that she recently asked Qarwi to compose a new *samā'ī* for orchestra and chorus, thereby adding women's voices to a traditionally instrumental form. *El 'Azifet* performed this piece, entitled "*Samadir*," on their new CD of the same name, and at the Festival of the Medina in October 2007. Srarfi remarked,

This is something new! This is a new addition to Tunisian music, and it came from a woman. And it's performed by a women's ensemble. Why not?²²⁰

Srarfi told me that she wished to add voices because of the distinct and excellent sound of *El 'Azifet*'s chorus. As a result of her conducting studies in France and her experience with the Tunisian national children's choir, Srarfi pays special attention to vocal nuances and to the chorus of *El 'Azifet*. She noted that this is not common among many other conductors, even though in Arab art music the vocal parts and proper pronunciation of poetry have traditionally been considered more important than instrumental performance. Srarfi explained that because she loves to sing, she has highlighted the chorus and brought out a distinct timbre in *El 'Azifet*. This has affected the sound of the entire orchestra, thereby distinguishing it from other orchestras in Tunisia: "It's not the Tunisian Radio orchestra, it's not the national troupe [*Firqat Qowmiyya*], it's not the same. ...It's a different timbre, a different purpose."²²¹

The distinct timbre of the chorus and the entire ensemble is thus another plus that Srarfi and *El 'Azifet* claim to have added to Tunisian music. Srarfi described this timbre to me as clean and disciplined, and she was clear that she specifically aims for the

²²⁰ Interview in Tunis with Amina Srarfi, January 16, 2008.

²²¹ Ibid.

homogeneity of her ensemble. This desire to play together and create a uniform, disciplined ensemble is a positive aesthetic for Srarfi's group—despite critics' comments—that offers a unique contribution to Tunisian music.

Srarfi's ensemble rehearses often and presents impeccable performances. Other members of El 'Azifet also proudly describe it as the most disciplined and most professional women's orchestra, with regular weekly rehearsals, performances, and international tours. To investigate the particular dynamics of *El 'Azifet*, I attended several of their rehearsals, held Saturday afternoons at the Kaddour Srarfi Conservatory of Music and Dance in downtown Tunis. In the following excerpt from my field notes I noted Srarfi's distinct command of the ensemble, and the ensemble's use of music notation.

When I entered the rehearsal room at five p.m. (April 12, 2008), the ensemble members were still in the process of arriving. As women opened the conservatory door, they greeted other members of the ensemble with warm smiles, kisses on two cheeks, and the customary greeting in Tunisian Arabic, “Aasalama! Shnou houalek? Lebas?” “Lebas, el hemdullah, Lebas enti?” “Lebas, ‘Ayshek!”²²² After also asking after the health and well-being of their families, they brought their instruments into the rehearsal room. This large space resembled a dance studio, with hardwood floors and a full-length, full-wall mirror on one side. The ensemble members' seats were arranged in a semi-circle with their backs to the other wall; they faced the mirror, and they could see themselves while playing. In the center of the room, just in front of the mirror, was a tall music stand with a high stool behind it. Amina Srarfi later stood and sat there, facing the ensemble with her back to the mirror. On the far left of the room (to Srarfi's right) stood

²²² [Hello! How are you? Are you well?

– I'm well, thanks be to God. Are you well?

– I am well, Thank you!]

an upright piano, next to an org. Next to them was the qanūn player, who sat in the center (directly in front of Srarfi) with the two ‘ūd players to her right. Along the back wall, behind the ‘ūd players, were eight vocalists sitting in two rows, while the three percussionists sat at an angle alongside the right wall (to Srarfi’s left side).

Once everyone had arrived and warmed up their instruments, talking with each other and practicing the pieces they were to play that day, Srarfi began the rehearsal, conducting from her place at the front of the room. Unlike other women’s ensembles but like the state-sponsored ensembles, she stood in front of the orchestra and directed them from behind her music stand. She also conducted the ensemble while playing her violin, something no other women’s ensemble director does. During vocal parts of a song she stopped playing but still used her bow as a baton, singing the words along with the chorus and encouraging them to support their breath and create musical phrases, which she gestured with her bow. As she conducted, she often used facial expressions to highlight the emotional or musical meanings of the song; she also used facial expressions and shouted out comments while playing her violin with the rest of the ensemble, particularly in instrumental parts: “azrab” [faster]; or “shwayya, shwayya” [softer, softer]. In this rehearsal and others I observed, Srarfi’s presence in front of the ensemble was commanding and authoritative, in many ways not unlike male music directors I have observed in Tunisia.²²³

²²³ In rehearsals of the Rachidiyya, for example, Zied Gharsa also holds a commanding presence (despite his youth), often ordering the musicians to be quiet (*iskat!* [silence!]) when they talk too much during the rehearsal. He also directs the ensemble while singing along and playing the ‘ūd *tūnsī* (although sometimes he sits at his desk and conducts the ensemble with his hand, often singing along). Unlike Srarfi or other male conductors of large ensembles, however, in performance Gharsa usually does not stand at the front of the ensemble, choosing instead to sit amongst the ensemble, front and center, while playing ‘ūd *tūnsī*.

The instrumentalists in El 'Azifet also appeared to use music notation in a unique way. Unlike wedding ensembles, who do not use notation, but like state-sponsored (male-dominated) professional ensembles such as the Rachidiyya, the players at this 'Azifet rehearsal used music stands and sheet music notation. They and Srarfi had large folders in front of them, filled with notated pieces from their repertoire. In contrast to the Rachidiyya's current practice, in El 'Azifet each piece is arranged and written out for each instrumentalist. That is, the pianist reads from a different piece of music than does the bassist. Whereas in the Rachidiyya under the current director, Zied Gharsa, all of the instrumentalists read from the same notation (the exact same piece of sheet music).

Srarfi's manner of carefully notating the parts for each instrument differs from the Rachidiyya's current practice, but not from the previous practice of the Rachidiyya and the Radio Ensemble under Belalgia and Saada from the 1970s to 2006. Other directors of women's ensembles, particularly Semira Esseghir, also take pains to notate each instrumental part. On one hand, this method resembles notation practices in Western classical orchestras; on the other hand, this notation does not exclude the use of improvisatory techniques such as ornamentation and solo improvisation. This method also reinforces Srarfi's aim to present a clean and disciplined sound. Additionally, such notation works especially well for creating new arrangements that might introduce moments of polyphony. The chorus members of *El 'Azifet*, however, do not use musical notation; like other vocalists in Tunisia and the Arab world, they use notated lyrics in Arabic but learn their parts aurally. Thus when Srarfi adds elements to classic songs, particularly in the vocal parts, she must teach this to the chorus using oral methods. This

clearly requires additional rehearsals and discipline, but allows for the ensemble's distinct choral sound.

Srarfi has introduced moments of polyphony on *El 'Azifet's* recent album *Zurkind*, particularly in their performance of the classic Tunisian composition by Khemais Tarnane (1894–1964), “Ardhouni zouz sebaya” [“I met two beautiful girls”]. In *El 'Azifet's* version the piece opens with a brief *a cappella* statement by the chorus: a polyphonic, harmonic arrangement of the primary melodic phrase's closing cadence, using the corresponding Tunisian Arabic lyrics from the end of the first verse (“*hakin nahar*”). Then the chorus stops singing and the melodic instrumentalists enter with Srarfi's arrangement of the song's typical instrumental interlude. Here she has used the interlude as an introduction, although the same material still returns later during instrumental interludes between verses. In this recording the cellist, pianist, and Srarfi (playing violin) perform two statements of that melodic material in unison, after which the percussionists join them in performing the rest of the interlude material (at 0:13 on Track 2 of the *Zurkind* album). At the end of each verse the chorus sings the same cadence in harmony, and in the next instrumental interlude the cellist and violinist create polyphonic versions of the typical melodic material. In this recording, Srarfi and *El 'Azifet* have thus introduced polyphony to a traditionally monodic Tunisian song. The fact that this song is set in the Tunisian melodic mode of *mazmoum*—which roughly corresponds to F major (here transposed to C major)—accommodates their use of piano and of diatonic harmonies in certain places. Furthermore, *El 'Azifet's* use of polyphony and Western harmony is not pervasive but used only occasionally in a few pieces of their repertoire.

I observed Srarfi's and *El 'Azifet*'s experimentation with traditional aesthetics in their recent live performances as well. During their concert performance of "Ardhouni zouz sebaya" at the Hammamat International Festival (July 24, 2008), for example, the audience was singing and clapping along with the musicians. Indeed, members of the audience clapped when *El 'Azifet* began performing this piece, as well as for another classic Tunisian song, "Taht el-Yasmina fi Lil" [Under the Jasmine Tree at Night], composed by Hedi Jouini.

In this performance of "Taht el-Yasmina fil Lil," Srarfi opened the piece with an instrumental introduction that she performed as solo violinist. Audience members familiar with Jouini's recording would have noticed that Srarfi has added this innovative instrumental introduction to the piece. As in "Ardhouni Zouz Sebaya," she has added Western harmonies in the instrumental and choral parts during the musical interludes and introduction. She has also added voices to the musical interludes between verses, thereby highlighting her work with the choral voices of her ensemble. And whereas in his version, Jouini originally used only limited percussion, *naqqārāt*, Srarfi has added frame drums, *darbūka*, and castanets, further adding a *plus* to the rhythmic feel of the song. Finally, as Srarfi attested, the visual effects of her ensemble and her direction also added to the performance. The mixed Tunisian and foreign audience at this event was quite taken away by *El 'Azifet*'s concert, clapping and singing along to several tunes and offering a standing ovation at the finale.

According to Srarfi, this "new vision and different musical writing gives the stamp of daily life from our time" upon classic tunes (2004: 9). For Srarfi, then, her contributions to Tunisian music include revitalizing older repertory with new

arrangements, reviving neglected repertory, and creating new compositions. These activities are not unlike those of other musicians who have sought to revitalize Tunisian music since the 1980s and 1990s. Srarfi also sees her work as adding another *plus* to Tunisian music, by presenting a new ensemble comprised entirely of women and by creating a beautiful *tableau* onstage. Furthermore, *El 'Azifet* adds a musical *plus* by performing with a clean and disciplined sound and a uniquely choral timbre across the entire instrumental ensemble.

El 'Azifet's choral timbre is also distinctly comprised of women's voices only. This further distinguishes the ensemble from larger ensembles with mixed-gender choruses, and from *ma'lūf* ensembles in which male instruments provided the chorus. As performance practices and aesthetic preferences have changed throughout the twentieth century with regard to the balance among instrumental, solo vocal, and choral timbres in Tunisian art music, *El 'Azifet* thus offers a unique—but not radical—approach. The ensemble's female vocal timbre especially sounds striking when they perform patriotic tunes and songs in praise of women.

Like Myriam Lakhoua and Khadija El Afrit, Amina Srarfi similarly stresses vocal aesthetics. These musicians also frequently sing while playing their instruments or directing (in Srarfi's case), something only a few male vocalists and members of the Rachidiyya Ensemble still do. Coincidentally, all three of these instrumentalists have studied voice and understand the importance of vocal training and oral transmission in Tunisian music. Furthermore, they are all descended from great instrumentalists in Tunisian music history, either by kinship or by way of their musical studies. I surmise that these women musicians may similarly stress vocal aesthetics for various reasons:

perhaps out of personal taste; because women have traditionally performed as vocalists; because they have all received vocal training; because their teachers stressed the importance of vocal and oral transmission; and/or because they form part of a generation of musicians seeking to revitalize Tunisian music by returning to oral tradition.

Expanding Tunisian musical identity

Throughout the past century in Tunisia, conservatory-educated women musicians have developed pioneering careers as vocalists and instrumentalists in mixed-gender contexts. They have done so particularly by stressing their respectability, which has been associated with conservatory education, modernity, national music and national identity, and formal, respectable performance contexts. At the same time, Tunisian nationalists' efforts to reform Tunisian music, together with state reforms for women's rights, have allowed for increasing numbers of respectable women and men to study and perform music in public. Such efforts to discipline and modernize music and gender relations from above, however, have created backlash and debate about the Tunisian musical identity and Tunisian national identity. Since the 1980s, certain members of the art music community in Tunis have blamed state reforms for disciplining and formalizing the *ma'lūf* to the extent that it has become a museum piece. When conservatory-educated women's ensembles such as *El 'Azifet*—in which many instrumentalists were playing Arab music for the first time—were founded, such critics found prime targets for their disapproval of the declining use of ornamentation and improvisation in Tunisian music.

Yet many women musicians have been at the forefront of efforts to revive Tunisian music, and Khadija El Afrit's and Myriam Lakhoua's preferences for oral transmission and improvisatory aesthetics comprise part of such efforts. Their

perspectives therefore challenge criticisms about women's playing, specifically when they discuss the special sensitivity and *rūh* with which they believe some women play. At the same time, other women musicians—such as Amina Srarfi and members of *El 'Azifet*—challenge criticisms about disciplined music by viewing clean and disciplined playing in a positive light. In this way, they reevaluate Tunisian musical aesthetics on their own terms.

I have also noted earlier that some instrumentalists have elevated their respectability and made their performances acceptable by distancing themselves from the negative stigma associated with women vocalists. Most women instrumentalists dress modestly onstage and play behind their instruments (and often behind music stands), distinguishing their work from that of vocalists, who use their bodies as instruments and exhibit their bodies onstage. Yet upon discussing women's playing and Tunisian music, Srarfi, El Afrit, and Lakhoua similarly stressed vocal aesthetics, which in turn are linked to oral transmission. Their perspectives complicate the distinctions between vocalists and instrumentalists, and highlight the importance of incorporating vocal experience into instrumentalists' professional training. Their insights thus contribute to recent debates about vocal and instrumental performance and the music education system in Tunis.

These instrumentalists' perspectives offer valuable insight on Tunisian and Arab music and especially instrumental performance, which until recently was dominated by men. By performing instrumental music and offering their perspectives on Tunisian musical aesthetics, these women expand conventional understandings of Tunisian music. Moreover, when they discuss the specific contributions that women musicians add to

Tunisian music, or how women play differently than men, these instrumentalists further play out and reconstruct notions of Tunisian musical identity.

Conclusion

The stories of the musicians in this ethnographic account illustrate how women instrumentalists have transformed Tunisian society and the Tunisian music scene.

Women musicians have exercised agency and enacted change by forming their own ensembles and by playing outside, in public. They have played out by creating their own spaces for musicking, by taking on conventionally male repertoires and instruments, and by expanding understandings of Tunisian musical identity, gender, and national identity. Furthermore, by performing in mixed-gender ensembles and with women's ensembles, women instrumentalists have developed their own musical skills and have challenged criticisms about women's playing.

Nevertheless, there are several competing narratives for explaining women's performances and contribution to Tunisian music. My approach has been to forefront the perspectives of women musicians themselves, while contextualizing their lived experiences, perspectives, and performances in light of these multiple narratives. In using the phrase "playing out," I have drawn upon theoretical understandings of performing as enacting or carrying something into effect (Kapchan 1995: 479). This implies a notion of agency and empowerment, although performance also always carries with it the possibility of being misread (Wong 2004: 5–7). Thus I have sought to highlight the

agency of these musicians while also considering the many criticisms and other constraints they must negotiate (Inhorn 2003).

Stressing the agency of women musicians and the changes they have enacted themselves contradicts contemporary narratives about Tunisian women as passive recipients of state reforms, or as complacently following trends in the West or in the Arab East. This dissertation shows how women musicians have been affected by—and taken advantage of—state policies towards women’s rights, but it also demonstrates how they have taken advantage of other sociopolitical transformations. State reforms for women’s rights have created opportunities for women musicians to earn education and perform in respectable contexts; in turn, individual musicians have created their own women’s ensembles, apart from the state-sponsored, male-dominated ensembles. The state’s subsequent attempts to promote and control women’s festival ensembles has led to backlash criticisms that they are government pawns, but musicians have continued to participate in these ensembles and to form their own women’s ensembles. In recent years, rising religious conservatism among many Tunisians has led to calls for a return to gender-segregated contexts; but in turn, this phenomenon has created new performance opportunities for women’s wedding ensembles. As a result, more women musicians have taken advantage of this situation to form their own ensembles, to perform in potentially empowering women’s spaces, to make money, and to transform gender roles in their private lives as well.

Questions of respectability

As Tunisian women instrumentalists have played out in the public sphere, they have disrupted notions about women’s appropriate behavior in public—at least according

to traditional beliefs. Before independence, female performers who sang and danced in public were considered transgressive and sexually promiscuous. Yet since the 1930s, and since the newly independent state created national institutions promoting the *ma'lūf* and democratizing music education, music and musicians have earned respectability. I have described how by systematizing, notating, and disciplining Tunisian music, Tunisian reformers successfully elevated the *ma'lūf* to the status of “national music.” They also transformed the *ma'lūf* by moving it from popular contexts to modern, art music contexts. By the turn of the twenty-first century, increasing numbers of women musicians considered their work respectable and “normal.”

Yet while Tunisian women musicians have expanded the definitions of respectable performance, questions of respectability and modesty have not disappeared altogether. They affect the types of musical instruments and music genres women tend to perform, the contexts in which they perform (bars and nightclubs are still considered disrespectable for both men and women, but especially women), and the types of performance they practice—dancing onstage, for example, is still considered risqué. Some musicians transgress these boundaries in specific contexts, such as at an all-women’s gathering, when the *jaww* is hot and they would not be considered disrespectable for dancing in an all-women’s space. Other popular women vocalists, such as Amina Fakhed, are simultaneously adored and disapproved of because of their sensual singing and dancing for mixed-gender audiences.

Indeed, such boundaries of respectability are necessary in order to be transgressed, particularly in music performance. Studies in anthropology, performance studies, and ethnomusicology have highlighted how performance—as a space apart from

everyday life where alternative realities can be imagined—can be profoundly transformational and subversive. Performers across the Middle East and North Africa have been stigmatized and marginalized by respectable members of society, but from their marginal positions they have also had the power to transgress and subvert social norms in performance. Female singers and dancers (*shikhāt*) in Morocco, and gay singers in Algeria and Tunisia who dance in effeminate ways and/or cross-dress, for example, have subverted gender norms in performance; but their transgressions are temporary for the audience, demonstrating what might be while ultimately reaffirming conventional norms and structures (Kapchan 1994, 1996; Ciucci 2007; Carlson 1996).

Tunisian women musicians have gradually expanded definitions of respectability while remaining respectable. Those who perform art music are successful because they are perceived as being both respectable and disruptive. Their novel performances as educated, modern women performing for mixed-gender audiences are powerful because they show how Tunisia has changed. Contrasting Tunisian women's rights and behaviors with those of other women in the Arab world also provides them with distinction. Many Tunisian women musicians enjoy shocking foreigners, who may perceive that Arab-Muslim women wear veils and do not perform instruments in public. Thus Tunisian women's participation in unconventional professions is a form of national pride because it contrasts with past (and present) ideas about what Arab-Muslim women can do.

Playing out and playing with national identity

While the state promotes the novel aspects of women's ensembles, it also tries to control and mediate their performances in the service of promoting the regime's vision of Tunisian national identity. Subsequently, within the context of state-sponsored

performances women musicians do not have much room for being disruptive, although some musicians have performed small acts of resistance. By examining the dynamics of state power and resistance, this dissertation thus contributes to theories about the performative and improvisational aspects of power and the nation. Following Foucault, Askew suggests that the nation needs to be performed and “brought into being” in order to be recognized (Askew 2002: 291–293). In turn, individual citizens have a role to play in performing the nation and recognizing state power in everyday practice. Hence, despite the regime’s attempts to control the national image, individual citizens have room for resisting, re-shaping, and playing out national identity in their own way.

Music and musicians also have a particular power to *play* out the nation. My work thus contributes to research highlighting the role of music and dance genres, as well as print media, in constructing and performing the nation. In Tunisia, nationalist reformers sought to elevate the *ma'lūf* as a national music, a systematized art music that could encapsulate Tunisia’s modernity and traditional heritage. From the 1930s to the 1960s, musicians and composers—among them prominent Jewish musicians and women vocalists—worked to preserve the *ma'lūf* and to create new Tunisian songs. Through their performances, these musicians significantly contributed to *playing out* national identity and bringing the nation into being.

In studying music and nationalism, however, we must keep in mind that music performance has the power to create multiple meanings for various audiences. Because of its non-representational nature, music can narrate “only what given subjectivities will it to narrate” (Bohlman 2008: 247). For many Tunisian audiences, hearing Tunisian music generates sentiments of nationalism and national identity: performances of classic tunes

such as “Ardhouni zouz sebaya” (by Khemais Tarnane) or “Taht el-yasmina fil-lil” (by Hedi Jouini) at weddings, for example, contribute to feelings of shared cultural identity and national culture. Europeans listening to Jouini’s song, however, might recognize the waltz rhythm and be pleased with the familiarity of the rhythm and the song’s major mode, or they might be displeased that they are not hearing what they think should sound like authentic Tunisian music. Performances of these pieces by women’s ensembles at festival concerts or at weddings may create additional meanings for Tunisian and foreign audiences: surprise at hearing these songs performed by women instrumentalists and a chorus comprised entirely of women, feelings of (national) pride in women’s accomplishments, approval that a women’s ensemble is performing for a gender-segregated party, interest (and approval, disapproval, or disinterest) in the polyphonic arrangements that Amina Srarfi has composed for these songs, or distaste for women’s playing.

Due to the conflation of performing gender with performing national identity in Tunisia, women musicians have special power to play out the nation. This dissertation thus adds a consideration of gendered performances of national identity to research on music and nationalism. Women musicians’ appearances onstage index multiple meanings for audiences and other musicians, including the image of Tunisian women (and the Tunisian nation) as educated, emancipated, modern, and committed to preserving Tunisian cultural heritage. But it is by actually *playing* Tunisian and Arab art music on specific instruments that allows women musicians the greatest potential for upholding, resisting, and reshaping Tunisian national identity, gender identity, and national music. Recognizing the power of women’s ensembles to play out national identity, the Tunisian

government thus attempts to control women's ensembles' performances and appearances, and they mediate reception of their performances in the press, describing their playing in gendered ways (using terms such as "graceful," "classy," and so forth) and telling readers how to hear women's playing.

Women musicians have recourse to challenging state control and mediation of their performances in various ways: by criticizing state control, by circumventing state networks for performing abroad, and by refusing to participate in state performances. They also create and re-shape their own versions of national identity and gender identity by attempting to control their own appearances, by resisting being treated as symbols in mixed-gender ensembles, by claiming their accomplishments and their ensembles as their own, and by expressing pride in their performances for foreign audiences. Furthermore, they play out their own versions of national identity and gender identity at private wedding parties, and they have begun to add their own perceptions of their playing to discourses about Tunisian music.

I especially wish to stress the potential of women instrumentalists' *playing* to reaffirm or challenge ideas about gender and national identity. Some women musicians may perform gracefully and "with class," as state press reviews perceive them to. Yet when percussionist Hanan Gharbi plays out forcefully and wildly as she improvises *darbūka* patterns in response to lively dancing at a festival or wedding, for example, she challenges stereotypes of women's playing as inferior to men's or as "graceful" and "classy." When Shedhia Ayadi picks up the *tabla* drum and dances *debke* amongst a line of dancing women, she further disrupts notions of women's playing and expands parameters for women's performance across the Arab world. Their actions may affirm

national pride in women's accomplishments, but they may also be pushing the boundaries of women's appropriate behavior a bit too far. Myriam Lakhoua and Khadija El-Afrit also challenge women musicians' treatment as national symbols in mixed-gender ensembles. In fashioning their own identities as members of a new, third category of professional musicians (women instrumentalists), they resist state control over women musicians' appearances, and they resist narratives in which women are passive recipients of state reforms. Moreover, by performing and teaching complex, classical repertoire using oral methods, they contradict perceptions that women musicians are associated with disciplined, conservatory training and cannot improvise, learn aurally, or play complex repertoire.

Gender and music

This dissertation confirms theories of gender and music that posit that gender profoundly affects how people listen to, analyze, perform, and experience music. This work also contributes to a growing body of literature on contemporary women's ensembles across the globe, many of which similarly emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. In her work on women's salsa bands in Cali, Colombia, Lise Waxer (2001) notes that while a first wave of *orquestas femininas* in Cali were aligned with feminist ideology, the second wave of women's *orquestas* re-appropriated the eroticized image of Latina women in order to gain commercial success. In this way these orchestras are quite different from women's ensembles in Tunisia, although in both locations these women musicians have mostly been young and unmarried and have created their own ensembles as new avenues for participating in a field that was previously inaccessible to them. Like women's ensembles in Tunisia, the Cali women's orchestras also face perceptions that

their appearances are more important than their playing; but the Cali orchestras' re-appropriation of the image of sexualized women performers contrasts with Tunisian women's ensembles, which have distanced themselves from associations with illicit sexuality.

Waxer finds that the emergence of women's salsa bands in Cali during the late 1980s and early 1990s resonates with the emergence of all-women merengue bands in the Dominican Republic and all-women dance bands in Cuba during the same period. She posits that these phenomena reflect larger socio-historical transformations during the late twentieth century, as women in Colombia and other parts of Latin America have become participants in the public sphere as breadwinners and consumers (Ibid.: 252–253). In Tunisia, women's ensembles emerged during the early 1990s in part owing to women's increased participation in the workforce, their increased access to music education, and political debates about women's rights during the 1980s and 1990s. Yet the growing number of Tunisian women's ensembles since the 2000s is in part linked to a rising tide of conservative Islamist sentiment, which many see as a threat to women's rights.

During the 1980s and 1990s, women in Bali also began playing in women's ensembles. Balinese women's gamelan ensembles [*gamelan wanita*] have performed since the early 1980s and are especially ubiquitous in South Bali. In the mid-1990s, some Balinese women began playing *gamelan beleganjur*, a masculine genre of *gamelan* that Michael Bakan (1997) describes as the “gamelan of walking warriors.” In his research with these musicians, Bakan explains that the emergence of women's *beleganjur* owes not only to social transformations within Balinese culture, but also, like Tunisia, to the official promotion of *emansipasi* [women's emancipation] as a symbol of the Indonesian

nation's modernization (1997: 37–41). As in Tunisia, the Indonesian government has employed women's *beleganjur* as an ideological tool to support New Order *emansipasi* ideology. And as in Tunisia, Bakan and Sonja Lynn Downing (2010) explain that women's gamelan ensembles are considered to be inferior in technique to men's. Yet unlike Tunisian women's ensembles, they play easier versions of the same pieces that men play, and they have generally been directed and/or taught by male musicians. Women's gamelan groups also emerged in Central Java during the same time; they have similarly been discredited due to a perceived lack of technical ability, a reliance on visual appeal for their popularity, and dependence on the guidance of male teachers and other male musicians (Scott-Maxwell 1996).

Bakan's work is significant for studies of nationalized gender constructions, revealing that patriarchal control over the institutions of women's *emansipasi* diminishes *emansipasi*'s potential to fundamentally challenge established gender hierarchies (1997: 53). Yet he also points out the benefits and pleasure that women *beleganjur* musicians derive from playing, and the potential power they could have as a force of social change. Bakan posits that “the image may become the reality; ideological symbol may inform a transformation of social and political practice, if only to the extent that women may eventually gain greater control over the creation and production of the music they make” (Ibid: 74). As I have demonstrated in my work with Tunisian women's ensembles, Bakan argues that as public performers, women *beleganjur* musicians are active agents rather than passive recipients of their ideological roles as symbols of *emansipasi*. Similarly, in her work with children's gamelans performing *gong kebyar* in Bali, Downing argues that despite different pedagogical approaches and expectations for girls and boys, girls and

young women “are asserting agency by challenging previously accepted gender divisions, stereotypes, and associated musical and physical styles of playing” (2010: 56). She particularly focuses on how gamelan knowledge is transmitted through bodily learning as well as cognitive understanding. Drawing upon theories of embodied knowledge and perception (Thomas J. Csordas; Maurice Merleau-Ponty), Downing demonstrates that children and young women are learning new styles of moving and identifying themselves and hence reformulating gender concepts; in this way, children’s agency “has the potential to radically alter socially accepted ideas of gender” (Ibid.: 76).

These few examples of contemporary women’s ensembles across the globe display similar themes concerning perceptions of women performers’ inferior playing and feminized (often sexualized) appearances. Yet each example demonstrates local particularities that highlight the diversity of women musicians’ lived experiences. Tunisian women’s ensembles have not experienced the same commercial success as the Cali women’s orchestras, they do not present eroticized images of themselves, and they confront a different legacy of sexualized performers and religious-cultural stigmas. Yet like Cali’s women’s orchestras, they have changed social perceptions about Tunisian women performers in a positive way. They have expanded the definitions of respectable women performers and the parameters for women’s performance. And like Cali’s women musicians, Tunisian women musicians have started to transform ideas about women’s and men’s roles in the public and private spheres.

Unlike Balinese and Javanese women’s ensembles, Tunisian women’s ensembles are directed by women and do not play repertoire that is different than men’s. Furthermore, unlike Downing, I have not worked with children nor focused on theories of

embodiment or perception. But my work draws upon these studies and suggests that through certain gestures, appearances, and ways of playing, women musicians have the potential to assert their agency and reshape concepts of gender identity (and national identity) in performance.

My work also adds to research on gender and music by highlighting Tunisian women musicians' perceptions that they play differently than men. Women musicians additionally suggest that the gender of other ensemble members and of audience members affect the *jaww* [atmosphere] and, in turn, the musicians' improvisations and overall performance. Some women musicians believe that they play differently than men; others explain that they play differently in a women's ensemble than in a men's ensemble; and others state that they play better for audiences of women only. Hence, the music women perform in these contexts may sound differently than that performed by men in mixed-gender or all-male contexts. Many of these ensembles clearly sound differently because women's wedding ensembles use a wide array of art-music instruments, while many men's wedding ensembles use primarily *org.*, percussion, and violin. Women's festival and wedding ensembles also sound differently than mixed-gender ensembles because of their all-women chorus and the specific arrangements they create of popular Tunisian songs. But some women instrumentalists suggest that women's ensembles, and women-only parties, might create special, homosocial contexts for women's musicking.

In this way my work expands research on gender and music (and women's ensembles) by exploring how the gendered, often homosocial dynamics of music ensembles affect their performance and reception. It also expands research on Arab art

music and performer-audience interaction by offering women musicians' insights on performing Arab art music and on creating a gendered *jaww*. Their insights suggest that Tunisian music is not only becoming gendered as women perform differently than men in mixed-gender ensembles, but also as they create potentially alternative performances in women-only contexts.

Furthermore, this dissertation adds to research on gender and performance by showing how women musicians can affirm and reconstruct gender identity in performance. As noted above, women's ensembles create powerful meanings through their appearance, their playing of instruments, and their playing of Tunisian music. As women they are expected to behave, dress, and play their instruments in ways that are feminine and appropriate to their gender. Yet their identity as members of a new, third category of musicians ("women instrumentalists"), performing in ways that women have not previously, may also create room for experimenting with new or alternative ways of behaving and performing. In their appearances, gestures, and ways of playing (delicately, sensitively, in a modest way or "playing out" strongly), they play out and play with ideas about gender identity. Their performances of gender identity take on special meaning in the context of highly gendered rites of passage such as wedding celebrations, and in women-only contexts.

I have used the term "playing out" specifically to refer to the playful aspect of wedding celebrations and the *jaww* that women musicians create for dancing audiences. Play theorists such as Brian Sutton-Smith have argued that we have something to learn through playing and being disorderly, such as the possibility of alternate orders. A wedding party is a time set apart from everyday life, when guests can release their

everyday concerns and responsibilities to let go and dance to the music. Mothers may not be accompanied by their children, or young girls may not be accompanied by their mothers, and they may be freer to act and move their bodies in ways that they would not in other (public) contexts. Women who veil may also remove their veils at gender-segregated parties; and at such homosocial contexts all guests present may feel more comfortable to dance in the absence of men—although they may still be careful about dancing and behaving properly under the gaze of other women (particularly those looking for potential daughters-in-law).

Understanding how play and performance allow for experimenting with alternative realities also explains the appeal of performers who transgress gender norms and subvert social order. At Tunisian wedding celebrations I frequently observed women musicians pushing the boundaries of appropriate behavior and appearance. Some sought to assert their femininity, while others presented more masculine appearances. Many laughed, joked, and danced onstage in ways that would be inappropriate for women to act in everyday public life. I have noted that musicians played out alternative forms of women's behavior and appearances "offstage" or "backstage" as well. Here their play was certainly meant to mock and possibly to subvert social norms: backstage and during bus trips they mimicked costumed tour operators, traditional folk performers, and sexy female pop singers. One woman also mimicked and mocked male singers, while others mimicked men's catcalls to women on the street as they shouted out catcalls to men. In these ways they played out and played with ideas about gender identity and behavior, as they also experimented with and/or asserted alternative sexualities.

Play may also reinforce community consciousness or “*communitas*,” as Huizinga proposed (1950). Through dancing together at a celebratory ritual such as a wedding party, audience members create a hot *jaww* and a feeling of *communitas*. Such hot *jaww* may be created not only at wedding parties but also in other women-only contexts, such as the doctor’s party held in Ezzahra. At these events a subtext of desire may be present, as women dance in sensual ways with each other. At wedding parties such desire is accentuated by the bride’s impending transformation into a newly sexual and fertile woman. The hot *jaww*, sexual energy, and desire at women-only events have undertones of heterosexuality as well as homosexuality and homosociality. Thus in the course of women’s parties, women can play out and play with various forms of desire, gender identity, and sexuality. Musicians create this *jaww* and encourage this playfulness with their performances; in turn, the playful *jaww* feeds the musicians’ abilities to improvise and play out more forcefully.

This ethnographic account therefore demonstrates the nuances of gendered space in contemporary Tunisia. Concepts of public and private space are constantly shifting, particularly when the gender of participants is concerned. Some wedding parties are partially gender-segregated, for example, due to the idea that close male relatives of the bride can be included at an otherwise women-only party. Women and men also perform gender identities differently depending on the space they occupy. The street is a public, male space in which men occupy cafés and often verbally harass women. Women do not smoke on the street (without fear of being labeled a prostitute), but many smoke in more intimate, indoor *salons de thé* [teahouses] with their friends. For some women, private mixed-gender wedding parties constitute a private space where they can behave more

freely than in public because they are among their families and friends (Kapchan 2003). But others may feel most comfortable at a private event if only women are present. In addition, many musicians only act most freely and radically offstage, in private, among friends in their women's ensembles.

While some Tunisians characterize gender-segregated spaces as a regression to a traditional past, my research reveals that these all-female spaces are becoming redefined by some women as potentially progressive spaces, as places of empowerment where women are able to experiment with desire and alternative identities. Just as women musicians have transformed Tunisian public space and are starting to enact change concerning men's and women's roles in the home, they are also reshaping and redefining conceptions of private, gender-segregated space. Indeed, it is particularly at wedding parties—more than at festival performances—that women musicians have opportunities to resist and re-shape concepts of gender identity and national identity on their own terms.

In sum, the work of conservatory-educated Tunisian women instrumentalists demonstrates that despite the power of nationalist ideologies and other discourses, individual citizens play an important role in performing gender identity and national identity in their own way. Musicians especially have the power to play with and reconstruct concepts of national identity and gender identity in performance. Additionally, in performing music differently than men, women may have the potential to transform music genres that have previously been dominated by men—particularly when they create music in women-only spaces. Although the instrumentalists depicted in this account have tangled with competing narratives about their work, they themselves

suggest new insights for exploring how gender affects music performance, *jaww*, and ensemble dynamics, and how performing national identity is experienced by individual women. Above all, through their performances and perspectives they have offered new opportunities for re-imagining gender, the nation, and music in Tunisia.

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