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A Study of Stambeli in Digital Media

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A Study of *Stambeli* in Digital Media

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Abstract

This research paper explores *stambeli*, a traditional spiritual music in Tunisia, by understanding its musical and spiritual components then identifying ways it is presented in digital media. *Stambeli* is shaped by pre-Islamic West African animist beliefs, spiritual healing and trances. The genre arrived in Tunisia when sub-Saharan Africans arrived in the north through slavery, migration or trade from present-day countries like Mauritania, Mali and Chad. Today, it is a geographic and cultural intersection of sub-Saharan, North and West African influences.

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Introduction

It was March 2, 2019 and I was sitting in a taxi on my way to Palais des Sports d'El Menzah – an event arena not far from Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis.

The taxi driver asked, “What is going on here?”

We were approaching the arena.

“It’s a concert.” I replied.

“Whose concert?” he asked.

“Damso. Do you listen to him?”¹ I replied.

“Ahhh Damso. I know him.” he said.

We finally arrived at the arena. I exited the taxi, paid the driver and made my way inside. While walking, I saw large groups of teenagers and young adults excitedly entering the arena. I walked to the floor area and found a comfortable spot to stand. In front of me, I could see the stage surrounded by people waiting for the show to begin. I looked behind me and took note of the people sitting in the seats overlooking the floor area and the stage. The lights dim and Tunisian rapper, A.L.A appears on stage. The crowd jeers in unison as he performs his number one hit, *Used To*, he electrifies the audience wavering between French, Tunisian Arabic and English. A.L.A’s active engagement with audience relied on high energy and excitement expressed through multilingual communication that connected him to the audience, and the audience to his music. In *Global Pop, Local Language*, it highlights the complexity of language choice and dialect combined with other elements of musical performance to produce rich meanings to situate events with larger social contexts.² Considering A.L.A, background as a

¹ William Kalubi, also known as Damso, is a Belgian-Congolese rapper, singer and songwriter. He grew up in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. He immigrated to Brussels when he was nine years old with his family.

² Berger, Harris M., and Carroll, Michael Thomas, eds, *Global Pop, Local Language*, 11.

young Tunisian male, his wavering between languages reflected larger context rooted in Tunisian history. As a former French colony, its history is expressed linguistically as French remains a common language in society thus it is presented in other areas of Tunisian culture like music. Additionally, eight-years post-revolution Tunisia's young population including A.L.A express unrest with its government system and overall conditions of the country through music.

The stage lights dim then ease into a montage of colors: black then white, red then white, yellow then red. Damso appears on stage and the crowd cheers louder than before – more flashes of cameras and the Vulcan Salute.³ As Damso performs, my mind races between the stage lights, lyrics and audience – the overall ambiance. Between the different groups of young Tunisians: young men and women of different shades and backgrounds shouting the lyrics of a Belgian-Congolese rapper and previously the songs of a Tunisian rapper, I continued to think about the social context of this experience.

Each rapper's lyrics were laced with their life experiences and hopes for the future often relative to their country's circumstances. A.L.A comes from a generation of Tunisian rappers who spoke against the inadequacies of the Ben Ali regime leading up to and throughout the 2011 Revolution.⁴ This rise of rap culture brought rap to mainstream air waves and rappers like A.L.A. became representatives of a young multi-faceted generation of Tunisians. On the other hand, Damso grew up in Brussels where he struggled with identity and racism that directly impacted his education and opportunities. In an interview with Jeune Afrique, Damso stated ““I

³ Damso's album cover of Lithopedion includes a hand sign known as the Vulcan Salute. Damso often flashes this salute in his music videos and concerts. This salute was popularized by the 1960s television series Star Trek. It consists of a raised hand with the palm forward and the thumb extended, while the fingers are parted between the middle and ring finger. The salute is seen as a universal sign for “live long and prosper.”

⁴ The Tunisian Revolution, also called the Jasmine Revolution, was a campaign launched against former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime objectively beginning December 18, 2010 and concluding on January 14, 2011.

did marketing and psychology, but racism took a toll on my life choices. I never really felt accepted because of that. I tried to find jobs, I had interviews, but it never worked out. Maybe it's because of my height, I'm intimidating, I don't know... Working behind a desk with a boss who calls you a "dirty nigger" has never been an interest of mine. I didn't want to accept such treatment, just because I have to pay my rent at the end of the month.”⁵

Even though Damso and A.L.A's respective rap careers are based on different reasons for using rap as a medium to individually express themselves, they shared a single stage and audience. Both rappers operate in a pop culture society with access to a wide audience via social media, established international production companies or digital streaming platforms like YouTube. On YouTube, Damso's music videos have been viewed over 322 million times since May 4, 2018 and A.L.A follows with over 100 million views since June 22, 2017 and over 630,000 subscribers.⁶ As today's artists, they are a part of creating music that is then shared via digital platforms where people can connect to the content of this music, identify, and find the same experiences in their own daily lives. Essentially, they fashion music in an international and multi-cultural space that escapes the realities of hardships imparted by systems of oppression and corruption. Against the landscape of today's rap culture, I wanted to explore multi-ethnic identity and expression in music within traditional forms – like *stambeli*, against different digital and artistic backdrops.

Richard Jankowsky's *Black Spirits, White Saints: Music Possessions, and Sub-Saharanans in Tunisia* describes *stambeli* as a “spirit possession music associated with slaves, descendants

⁵ Josset, Jean-Sébastien. « *Belgique – Damso : « Travailler Derrière Un Bureau, ça Ne M'intéressait Pas »* »

⁶ According to YouTube, as of May 2, 2019.

and other displaced sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia.”⁷ It is rooted in pre-Islamic West African animism as it believes in spirits, musical healing and trances. The genre arrived in Tunisia when sub-Saharan Africans came to the north through slavery, migration or trade from present-day countries like Mali and Chad. *Stambeli*’s roots date back to the 18th century and its influence continues to present itself through language, rituals, customs and instruments. As sub-Saharan Africans adapted to the Muslim faith, *stambeli* slowly aligned with forms of Islamic and Sufist beliefs. Essentially, Jankowsky identifies *stambeli* as a story of immigration and multi-ethnic identities merging to create a unique North African style. On the other hand, Amira Hassanoui examines *stambeli*’s continuous shifts within artistic and socio-economic changes after the 2011 revolution and the *stambeli* performances in urban spheres of Tunis.⁸ Hassanoui’s analysis is recent as her work was published in 2017 and Jankowsky’s in 2006. Hassanoui undertakes a continuous analysis of a prevailing discourse among popular culture scholars and post-colonial theorists further identifying new amalgams produced by non-sacred contexts of *stambeli*. Through this paper, I am examining interactions between digital art and *stambeli*. Thus, the questions raised and investigated are **what is *stambeli* and how is it presented in current digital media?**

⁷ Jankowsky, Richard C. "Black Spirits, White Saints: Music, Spirit Possession, and Sub-Saharanans in Tunisia." *Ethnomusicology* 50, no. 3 (2006): 373.

⁸ Hassnaoui, Amira "Stambeli Awakening: Cultural Revival and Musical Amalgam in Post Revolution Tunisia." 5.

Methodology

Digital media is often defined as interdisciplinary because it draws connections between different disciplines – visual art and music, linguistics and popular culture.⁹ In interactive digital media it is a space for an active dialogue between the audience and creator. This dialogue allows the creator to hold the audience's attention and reinforce the art forms presence in society. In the context of *stambeli*, *stambeli* is the creator of a form of music and spirituality; however, this research paper is studying its dialogue as it is presented through digital media. For the purpose of this paper, I am defining digital media as audio, film, digital light drawing and social media.

Today, *stambeli* is only performed in certain areas including the shrine of Sidi Ali Lasmar. The shrine of Sidi Ali Lasmar continues to uphold *stambeli* as a marker of memory, spiritual practice and heritage.¹⁰ Several *stambeli* shrines known as *zwiyya*, like Sidi Bou Fredj, were vandalized after the 2011 revolution due to an increase in ultra-conservative Salafism. In addition, there is a mounting number of *stambeli* musicians and dancers who have passed or in their old age. In an interview with Salah el Ouergli, a well-known *stambeli* musician in Tunis who was trained by prominent *stambeli* masters, he stated,¹¹ “[*Stambeli*] is the music of peace—peace on the whole world.” Due to the nature of *stambeli*, it was important to begin this study by investigating the origins and musical components of *stambeli*.

My methodology consists of fieldwork – mostly conducting interviews, along with referncing academic literature and digital material. I began by analyzing the historical context and musical structure of *stambeli* by reading Richard C. Jankowsky's *Black Spirits, White*

⁹ Lovejoy, Margot, Christiane Paul, and Viktorija Vesna Bulajić. *Context Provider : Conditions of Meaning in Media Arts*.

¹⁰ Mogbo, Nneka, and Brik, Amina. Interview with Riadh Ezzawech. Personal Interview. Sidi Ali Lasmar, Medina of Tunis. May 4, 2019.

¹¹ Souli, Sarah. "Can Stambeli, the Spiritual Music of Tunisia, Be Saved?" Vice.

Saints: Music, Spirit Possession, and Sub-Saharanans in Tunisia. His work is based on nearly two years of participation in the musical, ritual and social worlds of *stambeli* musicians. This source laid the foundation for an ethnomusicological understanding of *stambeli* encompassing linguistic, cultural, social, musical and anthropological elements. To further my study, I interviewed Yukao Nagemi, a visual artist who combines figurative hand drawing with abstract generative digital effects. He draws connections between science and technology by using digital drawings, live graphic performances, graphical effects and videos. In 2018, Yukao Nagemi and Salah el Ouerqli held a live combined performance of *stambeli* with instruments, live action painting and digital effects.

I attended a live *stambeli* performance on April 27, 2019 in Sidi Bou Saïd. This performance was hosted by the Cultural Association of Stambeli in Tunis for châabena. I later conducted an interview with the president of the Association, Riadh Ezzawech. My findings from each interview and academic source will be detailed in later sections.

Also, I added digital components to this study by videotaping the performance I attended, listening to *stambeli* recordings and, watching *Stambali / Le Spleen du Yenna*.¹² I conducted several interviews but was unable to interview Salah el Ouerqli, an outstanding figure in the practice of *stambeli*. However, many of my sources cite their own interviews and experience with Salah. In addition, I saw Salah perform live when I attended the performance in Sidi Bou Saïd. I captured the performance on video which was part of my final presentation. Lastly, as a Nigerian-American I noticed elements of *stambeli* that reminded me of my family's Igbo heritage. This reminder evoked fond memories of traditional music and spirituality that are respectively reflected in Igbo and Hausa cultures in Nigeria. Overall, I greatly appreciated the

¹² A short documentary filmed and directed by Matthieu Hagene. This documentary features Salah el Ouerqli, a trained *stambeli* yinna [stambeli master].

opportunity to study *stambeli*. As I was challenged by time constraints, in the future I would like to continue this paper by comparatively studying other traditional music forms and their digital presence. As Tunisian Arabic and French are not my native languages, I acknowledge there are aspects of *stambeli* along with some of my interviews that may have been lost in translation. I consulted native speakers as translators to help me overcome this challenge.

Research Analysis

1.1 LEGEND AND ORIGINS OF *STAMBELI*

The history of *stambeli* is cloaked in North African and sub-Saharan cultural influences “concerned with making connections between two Africas rather than setting them apart.”¹³ These connections flowed through a network of communal houses called *zwiyya* for migrants and slaves who were arriving in Tunisia. Even after January 1846, when slavery was abolished in Tunisia, *zwiyya* were home to migrants with similar traditions, languages, customs and beliefs. Even though each house maintained its own customs, these homes were important environments for slaves and migrants to form diverse communities and preserve cultures. In turn, the homes became shrines that honored saints and ancestors.¹⁴ Jankowsky’s work focuses on Dar Bornu, a home where many people from Bornu (once a part of the ancient Bornu-Kanem empire, now part of northeastern Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon) congregated.

The legend of Bou Saddiyya (or Bousaadeya, Busa’diyya) is important to “keeping alive the history of the *stambeli* community’s modes of emplacement in Tunis.”¹⁵ Bou Saddiyya, a Tunisian-born man from a sub-Saharan family, showed newly arrived sub-Saharanans around Tunis.¹⁶ Based on their tattoos and body paint, he was able to show them which communal house would best fit. As a hunter, Bou Saddiyya provided for his wife and daughter until his daughter was abducted in Tunis. Bou Saddiyya longingly searched for his daughter along the trans-Saharan caravan routes to Tunis making music by singing songs and playing a handheld cast iron instrument called the *shqāshiq*. The legend of Bou Saadiyya is remembered quite

¹³ Jankowsky, Richard C. "Black Spirits, White Saints: Music, Spirit Possession, and Sub-Saharanans in Tunisia." *Ethnomusicology* 50, no. 3 (2006): 374.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 375.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 380.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 380.

differently within and outside sub-Saharan communities, he is often regarded as a scary mythical creature serving as a Hausa masquerade in Arab spectacles. On the other hand, within communities often connected to sub-Saharan groups and identities –Bou Saadiyya’s legacy points to “the longing for a homeland and the immediacy of helping others who were similarly displaced.”¹⁷ Many songs call on Bou Saadiyya, including the song in figure 1 performed and recorded by Salah el Ouerqli, pointing to Bou Saadiyya’s significance and ominous memory. His legacy is unique as he is a part of the *stambeli* pantheon, but he is not a spirit or a saint rather his memory is an embodiment of the slave trade and fusion of customs, traditions and identities simultaneously presented through *stambeli*’s sound.

¹⁸ Firka bou Saadiya (x2)	<i>Firka Bou Saadiya</i>
Firka sidi gnawa	<i>Firka Bou Saadiya</i>
Wala gnawa el Baya	<i>Firka Bou Saadiya</i>
Wala barka je bou	<i>Firka Bou Saadiya</i>
Barka gnawa el Baya	<i>Firka Bou Saadiya</i>
Firka salem Ali Kom (x2)	<i>Firka Bou Saadiya</i>
Wala nakhalani (x2)	<i>Firka Bou Saadiya</i>
Wala salem Ali Kom (x2)	<i>Firka Bou Saadiya</i>
Wala bleidi baïda	<i>Firka Bou Saadiya</i>

Figure 1 Excerpt from the song "Bousaadeya" performed by Salah el Ouerqli

¹⁷ Ibid, 381.

¹⁸ Salah el Ouerqli, “Bousaadeya.” track 5 on *Stambeli*, Par Les Chemins Productions, 2011, Spotify.

1.2 COMPOSITION OF *STAMBELI*: THE TROUPE AND INSTRUMENTS



Figure 2 Stambeli Troupe Performance with Salah el Ouergli on April 27, 2019 (photo credits to author)

Stambeli compositions begin with two main instruments: the *gumbri* and *shqāshiq*.¹⁹ The *gumbri* is a three-stringed lute that many believe has a sub-Saharan origin and important when communicating with the spirit world. The *gumbri* defines the melody of the music using its bass sound and circular body which doubles as a drumhead – it is fashioned as a chordophone and a membranophone. The *shqāshiq* is a metal instrument and its origins are connected to both sub-Saharan and Islamic influences due to Sidi Bilal, a black African slave who was freed and chosen by the Prophet Muhammad to be Islam’s first *mu’adhdin* or caller-to-prayer. Sidi Bilal converted to Islam during a time when conversion was not widely tolerated as result, he was punished for his faith. He became a steward to the Prophet. His presence stands as a symbol that

¹⁹ Ibid, 387.

legitimizes the connection between displaced sub-Saharan Africans in North Africa to Islam. Together, the *gumbri* and *shqāshiq* create a sequence that summons specific spirits and saints. These sequences are referred to as *nūba*, they are tunes with different lyrics and dance movements. The *nūba* for Sidi Bilal often comes after the *nūba* for the Prophet – this is significant because it musically personifies a historical relationship between sub-Saharan and North African relations.

In a *stambeli* troupe, the groups are organized first with the *yinna*, then the *shqāshiqiyya* and the *arifa*. The *yinna* or the master plays the *gumbri* and uses vocals to lead the troupe. Also, the *yinna* serves as the voice of ritual ceremonies diagnosing the afflicted, selecting medicine, or determining ritual practices. The *yinna* plucks the strings of the *gumbri* and beats the rhythm against the drumhead.²⁰ The strings reflect the voice of an old man, a youngster and the *rdād* which translates to “the one who answers.” For certain sequences or *nūba*, as the tempo increases the *yinna*’s strumming of the strings and tapping against the drum base occurs at varying speeds to attract a certain spirit or saint. These changes in *nūba* not only call upon the spirits, but they also allow the *yinna* to situate them according to the structure of a ritual. Organized *nūba* are known as *silsila* and they musically and sequentially welcome ancestral spirits into a host’s body. Even though *silsila* are musically and conceptually organized, there is still space for the performers to manipulate the sequence.

Next to the *yinna* is the *shqāshiqiyya* (or the *sunā’a*) who plays the *shqāshiq*. There may be multiple *shqāshiqiyya*; however, the leading *shqāshiqiyya* often sits to the right side of the *yinna*. In addition to playing the *shqāshiq*, the *shqāshiqiyya* prepare the components of the ritual like the candle lighting or incense. In ritual settings, the *arifa* specializes in dancing, diagnosis,

²⁰ Ibid, 389.

divination and caring for the afflicted making sure they do not run into the musicians or audiences during trances. When people pass out during a trance, the *arifa* performs techniques to expel spirits from the dancer's body. Overall, the troupe is a family system wherein the *yinna* is seen as the *bābā* or the father and the *shqāshiqiyya* are treated as his family.

1.3 SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS CHARACTERISTICS

The different categories of spirits and saints in *stambeli* provide a unique sketch of Tunisia geo-cultural history.²¹The Whites or *al-abyad* are Muslim figures who are regarded as saints. They are believed to have been dressed like the pious Muslims who wore white robes. White Saints typically lived in North Africa, the land of the whites, *bilād ibdān*. Each saint's *nūba* is tied to the next saint in a historically and musically pleasing succession. For example, even though Sidi Bilal is a sub-Saharan man, he is considered a White Saint because he lived in North Africa thus his *nūba* is tied to the Prophet Mohammed's *nūba*. In addition, his musical ability, Islamic orthodoxy, connection to the Prophet and sub-Saharan identity further links his *nūba* to the *nūba* of the Prophet. *Silsilas* performed for saints are often in the spirit of praising the saints to receive their blessings and these sequences are performed at the beginning of the performance before proceeding to the *msdhāyikh*. *Msdhāyikh* demonstrate qualities of a White Saint with Black spirit traits too. They are capable of possessing human hosts, creating trances, and speaking through their hosts to prophesy divine futures. At times, saints like Sidi Abdeslam will cause his host to ask the musicians to stop the music and the host will recite the *fātiha*, the opening verse of the Qu'ran.

²¹ Ibid, 395.

The Black spirits are not connected to any human, even though many Black spirits are related to Hausa bori spiritual pantheon.²² These spirits are seen as the work of the devil and *stambeli* cannot heal those afflicted by the devil. This belief strikes a stark similarity between *stambeli* and Islam because exorcisms are considered sacrilegious in both Islam and *stambeli*. While Black spirits are not likened to human figures, they possess different personalities, genders and temperaments.²³ The *stambeli* spirits are organized into three groups: *Banu Kuri* (Kuri's Children), *Bahriyya* (Water Spirits) and *Beyāt*. Banu Kuri are black Christians while Bahriyya are water spirits. In addition, Banu Kuri spirits are seen as the most powerful spirits often invoked after midnight and who are violent towards their host. The Bahriyya exhibits parallels between the sub-Saharan and North African concept of spirits; therefore, they are easily understood within North African Islamic framework. These spirits often afflict those whose work involves water like fishermen or maids. It is believed that carelessness with water summons Bahriyya spirits. On the other hand, the *Beyāt* correspond directly to the Ottoman Beys whose practices were suppressed during the nationalist regimes.²⁴ The Beys were different from past regimes as they supported the black community socially, politically and politically allowing cultural elements like *stambeli* to flourish and the abolishing of slavery in Tunisia in 1846.²⁵

²² Hausa refers to an ethnic group that emerged from modern-day Nigeria, Niger and Chad. As nomads, they traversed the Sahara Desert to trade and settle in different areas. Thus, their cultural and linguistic influence is present in different countries including Tunisia.

²³ Ibid, 398.

²⁴ Ibid, 398.

²⁵ Ibid, 398.

2.1 PLACEMENT AND DISPLACEMENT OF *STAMBELI*: INTERVIEW WITH RIADH EZZAWECH AND SIDI BOU SAÏD *KHARIJA*

I interviewed Riadh Ezzawech, president of the Cultural Association of *Stambeli*. He grew up in the Medina of Tunis, started playing *stambeli* instruments and learning *stambeli* dances when he was 11 years old. He later founded the Association on June 25, 2016. When I asked him why he founded the association he said, “I did this because I felt that Tunisian tradition and folklore was on a decline since the age of Bourguiba. I decided to start this association, and my friends supported me in doing so.”²⁶ Riadh briefly was sent to France in 2013 to treat his wounds after he was attacked by Salafists during the rise of Salafism in Tunisia.²⁷ He was attacked by salafist because of his association with the *zwiyya*, as Salafists view *stambeli* as a form of heresy and deviation from Islam. In France, Riadh worked with George Moustaki, a well-known French musician, where he added *stambeli* dances to Moustaki’s live performances as an *arifa*. He returned to Tunisia in 2015, where started the Cultural Association of *Stambeli* on June 25, 2016. The Association hosts *ziyara* (in English, pilgrimages) throughout the year and live performances.

On April 27, 2019 I went to a *stambeli* performance in Sidi Bou Saïd. This performance was in honor of *châabena* or *sha‘bān*, the eighth Islamic month. Historically, it is also the time of the year when many Arab tribes dispersed to find water. It is also related to a period between Rajab and Ramadan – the seventh and ninth Islamic months. The performance began as a procession up the hill in Sidi Bou Saïd. Sidi Bou Saïd is a popular city outside of Tunis named after a Sufi religious figure who lived there, Abu Said al-Baji. His shrine was highly criticized by

²⁶ Mogbo, Nneka, and Brik, Amina. Interview with Riadh Ezzawech. Personal Interview. Sidi Ali Lasmar, Medina of Tunis. May 4, 2019.

²⁷ Salafists adhere to a purist creed, methodology and way of life in Islam. They are associated with Salafi jihadism and violent extremist groups.

Salafist who believed people were practicing idolatry by his tomb. His shrine was later set ablaze and destroyed in January 2013. Today, Sidi Bou Saïd is regarded as a picturesque town that attracts many tourists. Most importantly, Sidi Bou Saïd is also home to a nearby *zwiyya*, now hotel, called Sidi Bou Fares, “we chose Sidi Bou Saïd because it is related to Sidi Bou Fares. [in the 1800s] The slaves often congregated in Sidi Bou Fares and performed *stambeli*. Sidi Bou Fares is now a hotel which is why we could not do it inside. I still wanted people to see the meaning behind the event.”²⁸ This displacement of *stambeli* has forced the Association to find alternative spaces to share the spirit of *stambeli*. Riadh further explained, “for 14 weeks, the *stambeli* troupe performs in a new spot in Tunis city. People inform each other that there’s going to be a *ziyara* [pilgrimage] for Sidi Saad, or Sidi Fredj for instance.... The message is not often well-spread that’s why I wanted to buy the *zwiyya* and keep *stambeli* alive. In 1964, the government sold this *zwiyya* [Sidi Ali Lasmar] for only 440 dinar [Tunisian currency] under Bourguiba. The remaining three *zwiyya* were Dar Bornu, Dar Jamiah, Dar Khouffa and Sidi Ali Lasmar. One was sold, one was knocked down and one was left to deteriorate. Only Sidi Ali Lasmar was left and active – it’s here we keep the traditions alive.... Because we are active, people can hear about us on social media. I want to buy this property in the name of the Association from the government or whoever has the documentation for this property.” Riadh uses social media graphics on Facebook to advertise *stambeli* events. The Association’s Facebook page has over 3,800 people (as of May 11, 2019) following their page, events and announcements – this is quite different from earlier *stambeli* masters. In the past, *stambeli* masters simply performed for enjoyment, spiritual healing and tradition without access to modern-day social media networks. The network of earlier *stambeli* masters was based on the

²⁸ Mogbo, Nneka, and Brik, Amina. Interview with Riadh Ezzawech. Personal Interview. Sidi Ali Lasmar, Medina of Tunis. May 4, 2019.

communal network of the different *zwiyya*. Now, *stambeli*'s placement relies on the convenience of a location given the limited access of *stambeli* troupes and the Association to practice in different *zwiyya* like their predecessors – thus they craft their own spaces digitally while repurposing current public spaces that are relevant to *stambeli*'s history like Sidi Bou Saïd.

Currently, Riadh currently rents the space known as Sidi Ali Lasmar, located outside the Medina of Tunis near the Kasbah Square. The position of Sidi Ali Lasmar is ironic. It is located near Tunis city center – a hallmark of Tunisian history, daily city bustle and tourism yet it is not regarded as a historical monument. In addition Sidi Ali Lasmar, much like the Kasbah, has witnessed Turkish, French, Tunisian influences and historical events including the 2011 revolution. Yet, Sidi Ali Lasmar and the Association are struggling to mark the cultural significance of *stambeli* within Tunisia. Thus, this music form has been displaced and members of the Association like Riadh are struggling to gain recognition and mark the cultural significance of *stambeli* in Tunisia – especially in public, physical spaces. In a wide digital landscape, the Association is utilizing social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube to promote *stambeli*. *Stambeli* musicians like Salah el Ouergli have their recordings available on music streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music. In its geographical displacement, *stambeli* is entering the world of digital media now sharing platforms with modern-day musicians like Damso and A.L.A.

On the day of the performance, there was a significant mix between Tunisians and tourists, like me. My colleagues (Batoul Hasan, Katie James and Anna Browning) and I were waiting for the troupes to assemble and the procession to begin. A woman approached us and inquired about the time the event would begin. Batoul replied to her inquiry, then she asked us where we are from. We explained that we are American students studying in Tunisia for the

spring 2019 semester. I further explained that I was born in the United States, but my family is originally from Nigeria. She explained that she was a Tunisian from a nearby Grand Tunis city called, Ariana. I asked her if she frequently attends *stambeli* performance and she said it was her first time. I asked her if she felt *stambeli* reflected elements of Islam and Sufism. “Noooo, why do you ask?” she exclaimed. I told her I was studying *stambeli* and there are sources that point to *stambeli* expressing elements of Islam and Sufism. She said, “*stambeli* came when Tunisia had slavery. Now, we don’t have slavery. We are the first North African nation to abolish slavery. Now, we do not have problems. We are all African!” I told her I was aware of Tunisia’s history and abolishment of slavery. “You don’t think Tunisians are African?” she asked. I was surprised by her question, but I explained “of course Tunisians are African. Nigerians and Tunisians are on the same continent.”

In retrospect, I acknowledge that my identity and clear outward appearance as a sub-Saharan black woman sparked the latter exchanges in our conversation. At the same time, her statement countered recent sentiments of black Tunisians and sub-Saharan migrants. Furthermore, our exchange reminded me of Jankowsky statement: “sub-Saharans have been understood to be geographical outsiders...*stambeli* and other rituals associated with spirit possession and the ‘cult of saints’ are deemed pagan and therefore un-Islamic.”²⁹ On October 9, 2018, Tunisia passed the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination Act. This law defines and criminalizes racial discrimination and further supports the rights of 10 to 15 percent of the black Tunisians and sub-Saharan population in the country.³⁰ Its promulgation came after a stream of hate crimes against black Tunisians and sub-Saharan migrants.³¹ Prior to this law, Al

²⁹ Ibid, 377-378.

³⁰ Grewal, Sharan, and Sharan Grewal. "In Another First, Tunisia Criminalizes Racism." Brookings.

³¹ Al Jazeera. "Tunisia's Dirty Secret." Tunisia | Al Jazeera. March 17, 2016.

Jazeera released a documentary titled *Tunisia's Dirty Secret*, it details the stories of abuse, racism and prejudice against black Tunisians and sub-Saharan migrants. Black Tunisian musicians like Slah Mosbah and his son, Sabri Mosbah, have stated there is an absence of black people in public spaces – especially concerts. This is significant as *stambeli's* roots are related to the sub-Saharan identity and culture.³² In the same vein the black or sub-Saharan identity is newly recognized in public, cultural elements that are seen as black or sub-Saharan like *stambeli* are viewed as an obscurity to the general society. As Jankowsky stated that “*stambeli* is not a common component of the public sphere in Tunisia.”³³ Coupled with the history of race relations and the perception of *stambeli* in Tunisia as a sub-Saharan cultural spectacle, it situates *stambeli* in a state of otherness. Thus, this state masks *stambeli's* true essence, a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural form of music, further perpetuating public misconceptions. In a later interview with the president of the *stambeli* association, Riadh Ezzawech said he often struggles with educating fellow Tunisians about *stambeli* “they do not know about *stambeli*. I go to some places and they'll [Tunisians] say, ‘what is *stambeli*?’ Or they think it’s just an [sub-Saharan] African thing so it is not important.”³⁴

My conversation with the woman came to an end as the troupes lined up for the procession which is also called *kharija*. The procession was comprised of four troupes: Algerian *diwan*, Moroccan *gnawa*, Tozeur *stambeli*, and Tunis *stambeli*. According to Riadh, *stambeli*, *diwan* and *gnawa* are similar as they share richly African Islamic spiritual religious songs and rhythms; however, Algerians refer to their version as *diwan* and Moroccans refers to theirs as

³² Dahmani, Frida. "Racisme : En Tunisie, Slah Mosbah Ne Veut plus être « le Noir De Service » – JeuneAfrique.com." JeuneAfrique.com. April 24, 2014

³³ Jankowsky, Richard C. "Black Spirits, White Saints: Music, Spirit Possession, and Sub-Saharanans in Tunisia." *Ethnomusicology* 50, no. 3 (2006): 378.

³⁴ Mogbo, Nneka, and Brik, Amina. Interview with Riadh Ezzawech. Personal Interview. Sidi Ali Lasmar, Medina of Tunis. May 4, 2019.

gnawa.³⁵ This deviation in name and style is partially due to historical conflicts between Algeria and Morocco. In the 1980s Moroccans intentionally differentiated itself musically from Algerian music forms like *diwan* or *rai*.³⁶ At the same time, *stambeli* came along as a form of spiritual worship, then the music developed as worship and prayers were linked to musical sounds. As the sound spread, different regions replicated it using materials and instruments at their disposal. Even though the music sounds similar, each troupe uses various instruments made from different materials ranging from wood, animal skin and steel. Just as the instruments are different, the reception of the music is different in each region. Moroccans overwhelmingly love *gnawa* music and highly respect *maleem* (*gnawa* masters). *Gnawa* is often featured in many global music festivals including the annual *Gnaoua World Music Festival* in Essaouira, Morocco. During the procession the *gnawa* performers were adorned in short red caps called *fez*, named after the Moroccan city Fez and popularized during the Ottoman era. Much like Morocco, Algeria hosts *diwan* music festivals allowing *diwan* troupes from different areas of the country to perform. On the day of the Sidi Bou Saïd performance, the *diwan* performers were dressed in black and white carrying drums wrapped in the green, white and red Algerian flag.

Followed by the Algerian *diwan* troupe was the Tozeur *stambeli* troupe. Tozeur is an oasis city in southern Tunisia. It is home to many Berbers, an indigenous group spread across north and west Africa, who speak Tamazight and considered a minority group in Tunisia. The troupe was primarily comprised of black Tunisians. They were dressed in loose-fitting robes known as *djelleba*, their heads were wrapped in blue and red turbans. They wore black *balgha*. heelless slippers made from leather. They had an assortment of drums and unlike the Tunis

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

stambeli troupe, they did not have a *gumbri* player during the procession or their performance – which again points to the replication of *stambeli* sound using different instruments. Their largest drum belonged to the group’s master as he set the rhythm and cued the *shqāshiqiyya*. The *shqāshiqiyya* both danced and played the *shqāshiq*. As they danced, their feet aligned with the rhythm of the large bass drum.



Figure 3 Toezur Stambeli Troupe during the procession on April 27, 2019 (photo credits to author)

The Tunis *stambeli* troupe was led by Salah el Ouergli. Instead of his *gumbri*, Salah and members of the troupe were playing a large bass drum accompanied by the *shqāshiqiyya*. Each member of the troupe was wearing black *belgha* – much like the Toezur troupe. Salah was dressed in a golden djellaba with a white scarf draped across his shoulders. Other members of the troupe wore red djellaba and a fez – the colors are reflective of Tunisia’s red and white country flag. At the front of the troupe, there were two *arifa* who were women of sub-Saharan descent.

They wore scarves on their head, long skirts and a blouse along with a scarf draped across their shoulders. They often danced to the music using both their body and the scarf draped across their shoulders.



Figure 4 Tunis Stambeli Troupe during the procession on April 27, 2019 (photo credits to author)

The crowd excitedly followed the procession up the hill. Many danced along with the music, taking pictures or videotaping the procession. Later I asked Riadh about his view on the audience's interaction with the procession and performances, he said "it was good. When they videotape or take pictures, its more publicity for *stambeli*... It helps us [the Association] keep *stambeli* alive."³⁷ The procession stopped at the top of the hill and each troupe went to different areas. The Algerian troupe performed in a courtyard outside Alghfran mosque. In the courtyard, the troupe sat and played on a large rug. While they played, many onlookers joined in the

³⁷ Mogbo, Nneka, and Brik, Amina. Interview with Riadh Ezzawech. Personal Interview. Sidi Ali Lasmar, Medina of Tunis. May 4, 2019.

performance by dancing in front of the seated musicians. The setting was intimate compared to the Tunis *stambeli* troupe, as the Tunis troupe was situated in the middle of the hill in front of a famous restaurant called Au Bon Vieux Temps. Due to the location, it was quite crowded between the foot traffic of people purchasing items from the nearby shops and others watching the performance. Further up the hill, the Toezur *stambeli* troupe was performing at the top of the hill on the rooftop of a café. Even though there was no space for the audience to engage in the performance, like the audience engagement with the Algerian diwan troupe, the audience responded by clapping and swaying as the rhythm of the drumbeats changed. Despite the displacement of *stambeli* for this particular event and destruction of *zwiyya* in the past, the re-purpose of space and understanding of larger public spaces in Tunisia like Sidi Bou Saïd and social media networks allows *stambeli* to re-claim space in a modern-day society.

2.2 *Stambeli* in Digital Art: Interview with Yukao Nagemi

Yukao Nagemi is a French artist based in Copenhagen who produces digitally augmented performative drawings by adding digital effects on ink and tablet drawings. Yukao Nagemi performed alongside Salah el Ouerqli, Slim Molki and Farah Bahri in September 2018 for a performance titled *Lights and Resonances of Stambeli* during a multidisciplinary art festival hosted by a feminist organization in Tunis called *Chouftouhonna*. Salah el Ouerqli is a Tunis-based *yinna* and Slim Molki is a *shqāshiqiyya*.

I interviewed Yukao Nagemi via Skype and he talked about his experience in Tunisia and preparing for this performance. He said, “I found elements of Sufism, West Africa and spiritual healing [in *stambeli*].” Yukao’s family lived in Senegal briefly, but he remembers seeing the different forms of Sufi music like mouride. The Mouride Brotherhood was founded in 1883 in

Senegal by Amadou Bamba and it is a mystical sect of Islam where followers seek the help of mediators known as marabouts. In turn marabouts aid in protecting, blessing and even cursing enemies or evil spirits. Mouride influences are found in music including Youssou N'Dour's Grammy Award winning album, *Egypt. Egypt* shared Youssou N'Dour's beliefs and retells the story of Amadou Bamba and the Mouridiya. Much like *stambeli*, mouride music lyrically depicts the lives of saints and ancestors who were considered pious Islamic figures.

I asked Yukao, "How did you feel when you came across mouride and sufism?"

"I remember the traces in the soil from the dancing. I felt at home with the Sufi prayers. I am not Muslim, but I felt connected." Yukao continued, "when performing, I felt the music in my body.... The festival's theme [in Tunisia] was 'Heritage and Music.' I wanted to mix my drawing with spiritual healing." Yukao's drawing was based on four themes of a ritual: dedication to Sidi Mansour, lighting of candles, sacrifice and dance.³⁸ In preparation for the performance, Yukao practiced live with Salah el Ouergli and sometimes using recordings of Salah's music. The digital availability of Salah's recording made the performance feasible for Farah and Yukao as they could practice for the performance. In addition, they were able to listen and connect to the sound even when Salah was not playing. Compared the past, *stambeli* sounds were reserved for live performances and rituals. Now, recordings are available and artists like Yukao can perform alongside *stambeli* musicians or be inspired by the sound recordings.

During the performance, Yukao remembers the crowd dancing and clapping along to the music. Farah Bahri, a visual artist, worked on the digital light drawings and painted alongside Yukao. Yukao shared a video of the performance on Vimeo, a video streaming website. I watched the video of the performance and I noticed that Farah and Yukao danced along with the

³⁸ There is a mosque erected in honor of Sidi Mansour Abou Daliah, a Sufi saint, in Tunis. In addition, *Sidi Mansour* is a popular folkloric Tunisian song.

music. Their paint strokes alternated between painting with their hands or paint brushes. Salah el Ouerqli and Slim Molki were seated on a yellow carpet, Salah playing the gumbri and Slim playing the shqāshiq. Yukao's painting and light drawings were projected on the floor. Watching the video, I noticed Salah playing and watching the light projections on the floor. I mentioned my observation to Yukao, "the ground is much more relevant." Yukao explained that the painting on the floor overlaid by the light drawing invited all elements: sound, light and movement to be in unison.

I asked Yukao Nagemi about the challenges he faced in this process. He felt it was one of his best collaborative and artistic experiences. He explained he did not want to take advantage of Tunisia or the country. He recognized Tunisia and France's colonial relationship; therefore, he did not want to perpetuate a spirit of dominance and imposition. "I wanted the culture and Tunisian people to be the main focus... together we were a team, and I always felt welcomed." Without the dancers or *arifa*, involved in the performance the painting and light become the flowing force along with the rhythmic movement of Yukao and Farah as they painted. The intersection between Yukao's art and the *stambeli* music presents *stambeli* in a multi-dimensional medium that equally highlights *stambeli* equally multi-cultural background that touches multiple areas of life and art. Although Yukao is not Tunisian or African, there is still an understanding of *stambeli* through sound, vision and light. Thus, digital and visual art is an additional space that *stambeli* is inhabiting despite its geographical displacement or misconceptions of its origin.

2.3 STAMBELI IN FILM: *LE SPLEEN DU YENNA* AND *LA DERNIERE DANSE*

A documentary produced by Matthieu Hagene titled *Le Spleen du Yenna* in 2012 that focuses on Salah el Ouerqli as one of the few remaining *stambeli yinnawet* (plural of *yinna*, *gumbri* master). This film was produced prior to the founding of the Cultural Association of *Stambeli*. In the film Salah el Ouerqli said, “every *yinna* disappears with his music... with his art... the *gumbri* will stay as an object of decoration. So little by little a day or more, this art is at risk of disappearing.”³⁹ In addition to the geographical displacement of *stambeli*, musicians are challenged to find ways to continue *stambeli* and share their stories. As one of the few remaining *yinna*, Salah is different from the *yinnawet* who preceded him as his music is available on music streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music. Salah grew up in Dar Bornu and from the age of eleven, Salah started learning how to play the *gumbri* and learning from Bābā Masjid. Bābā Masjid was a “repository of history through his memories and the only *stambeli* practitioner old enough to have experienced firsthand or heard from others, the historical events and stories from the time when Dar Bornu was a highly active communal house.”⁴⁰ Salah now carries this knowledge as a *yinna* who “learned from *stambeli* masters...the rituals, rules and traditions.”⁴¹ In the past, *yinnawet* like Bābā Masjid focused on teaching his apprentices until his death in 2008. Now, *yinnawet* like Salah el Ouerqli are tasked with continuing the tradition and spreading them sustainably. Thus, in this digital age the spread of *stambeli* relies on formal associations and digital promotion via documentaries.

As one of the few remaining *arifa*, Riadh Ezzawech’s story and the Association’s efforts are shared in *La Dernière Danse*, a film produced by French filmmaker and photographer,

³⁹ *Le Spleen du Yenna*. Directed by Matthieu Hagene. Tunis. 2012

⁴⁰ Jankowsky, Richard C. *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Augustin Le Gall. With the help of Riadh, Augustin Le Gall situates the world of *stambeli* and the communities that contribute to the sound, spirit and practices in *stambeli*. The film explores Tunis and Dakoro, a small city in southern Niger where the spirits, dances and ancestors of *stambeli* originated. Then, the film follows the story of *stambeli* from Moroccan mountains to sanctuary cities for black communities in Nouakchott, Mauritania to Tombuktu, Mali. Riadh shares that he did not chose his path as an *arifa* or guardian of Sidi Ali Lasmar. At a young age Riadh fell ill and his family consulted a *stambeli* prestress from Sidi Ali Lasmar, who was also a descendant of sub-Saharan slaves. This is important as Jankowsky points out that it is “a common belief among Arab Tunisians that sub-Saharans are particularly efficacious in healing ailments brought on by the agency of spirits.”⁴² Riadh was healed and as a young boy growing up in the Medina of Tunis, he continued returning to the *zwiyya* of Sidi Ali Lasmar. Many *arifa* are women and considered the divinity of *stambeli*, a man must be chosen to be an *arifa*. Riadh is among the few men who were chosen to be an *arifa*.⁴³ When I visited him in Sidi Ali Lasmar, the walls were surrounded with photos of past *arifa* and *yinnawet*, the ceiling adorned with hanging instruments. Riadh said, “*Arifa* is my freedom to exist on this bridge that connects the human world to the spirits.”⁴⁴ As the guardian of Sidi Ali Lasmar and a knowledge bank of *stambeli* rituals, customs, traditions and history he is using digital media as a tool to deposit this knowledge and garner support for preserving the last *zwiyya* in Tunisia. As the film follows the stories of *stambeli*, it trails from North to West Africa thus producing a digital account of *stambeli* that not only documents historical and cultural pieces – but is also establishes *stambeli*'s digital presence despite its displacement from public spheres in Tunisia.

⁴² Jankowsky, Richard C. "Black Spirits, White Saints: Music, Spirit Possession, and Sub-Saharans in Tunisia." *Ethnomusicology* 50, no. 3 (2006): 378.

⁴³ *La Dernière Danse*. Directed by Augustin Le Gall. Tunis. 2019.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

In this paper, I seek primarily to investigate *stambeli* and its rising presence in digital media. Thus, I focus on identifying digital media productions such as *Le Spleen du Yenna* and *La Dernière Danse*. I contextualize these productions by explaining *stambeli* in historical and cultural context that points to the multi-ethnic stories of its origin. The multi-ethnicity of *stambeli* stems from the enslavement and migration sub-Saharan Africans in North Africans which ultimately brought a myriad of languages, cultures, beliefs and customs. In the North, they came together as communities in *zwiyya* which built a network of homes where these multi-cultural connections were cultivated – which is how *stambeli* has woven the sound of these connections. Over time, Tunisia faced changes in colonial rule and government systems that influenced the way traditional practices were upheld. In addition to larger government influence, *stambeli*'s musico-religious roots made it a target for religious groups who opposed its heresy and deviation from Islam. With challenges that opposed *stambeli*'s cultural and religious roots, its physical space decreased due to the destruction of many *zwiyya*. Also, its social space was limited as misconceptions of *stambeli* oversighted its public perception. Thus, *stambeli* has faced social and physical space struggles that forces its guardians, like Riadh Ezzawech, to turn to modern-day platforms to counter this marginalization of physical space and public misconception. These platforms include film, digital art and social media networks. The production of *Le Spleen du Yenna* and *La Dernière Danse* serve as educational tools that both promote *stambeli* and shares its history. The artistic engagement with modern visual artists like Yukao Nagemi highlights *stambeli* as a music form rooted in spirituality that can be applied to other artistic medium. These films support the work of the Cultural Association of *Stambeli* and local troupes as they fight to establish and re-claim their space in the public sphere. Altogether,

stambeli is a traditional form of music and spirituality that was created by a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural network of slaves and North African indigenes. While they formed physical locations, these locations have been destroyed and guardians of *stambeli* are seeking alternative spaces to celebrate their heritage. Like Damso and A.L.A, *stambeli* is traversing the public sphere by presenting itself in digital and artistic environments; however, as a traditional form of music it is marking its presence to avoid disappearing from society.

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