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Published in:
Studies on the Muwaṣṣah and the Kharja: proceedings of the Exeter international colloquium

Citation for published version (APA):
Some Remarks on the Present-Day Tradition of Andalusian Muwaṣṣaḥāt in North Africa

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Some years ago I came into contact with the present-day tradition of Andalusian muwaṣṣaḥāt in North Africa, in three main ways: firstly, when a colleague at the University of Amsterdam, Leo J. Plenckers, asked me to consider the texts of his musical recordings made in Algeria; secondly, when I was asked to look at an anonymous nineteenth-century Maghribi manuscript of songs which was being catalogued at the Leiden University Library; and thirdly when my attention was drawn to a Hebrew book with liturgical music, published in Tunis at the beginning of this century, in which religious songs were listed according to the melodies of Arabic muwaṣṣaḥāt andalusīyya.

The Leiden manuscript and the Hebrew song-book, as well as a modern Algerian anthology of Yalas and Hafnawī, which is based on interviews and interrogations of traditional musicians about the old repertoire, give a good insight into the texts of modern Maghribi muwaṣṣaḥāt songs in all their variants.

Leo Plenckers’ view about the relationship between music and the text of the muwaṣṣaḥāt is that although an a priori relationship between music and text is not necessary in general, in these Maghribi muwaṣṣaḥāt such a link seems to be provable. He believes that the texts of the muwaṣṣaḥāt are set to music according to fixed musical patterns. The nucleus of such a pattern is formed by a long syllable preceded by a short one. The long syllable always coincides with a comparatively strong beat of the melody and the preceding short one having a comparatively weak beat. All remaining syllables are placed on alternating weak and strong beats, with the syllable immediately preceding the short one having a strong beat, and the syllable immediately following the long one having a comparatively weak beat. On the other hand, it should be noted that earlier Plenckers demonstrated the likeness between the musical form of the modern muwaṣṣaḥāt and that of the medieval Cantigas de Santa María.

No notation of Arabic music in the Middle Ages is available. The earliest information we possess is a notice by a European traveller about a song of the muwaṣṣaḥāt repertoire, which he had heard during a trip in North Africa in the eighteenth century. We may suppose, however, that the musical tradition of the muwaṣṣaḥāt must be a very old one, imported by musicians.
and singers who originally came from al-Andalus and emigrated to the Maghrib because of changing political circumstances. Thus present-day Maghribi music may tell us something about an old musical tradition which may have its roots in the Middle Ages, as may also be concluded from the similarity with the music of the Cantigas de Santa Maria. Nowadays, however, the tradition risks being forgotten through the impact of modern life and the possible influence of music from other areas, including Western music. Thus recordings of the old musical tradition are of crucial importance. The Algerian anthology of Yalas and Haflnawi is apparently an attempt to preserve that old tradition, though clearly a printed book, without musical notation, has serious limitations in that respect. The collection was apparently made by interviewing old musicians and asking them about the old texts. I should emphasize, however, that there is a possibility that the original medieval musical tradition developed into a totally different one, long before the eighteenth century, when the first muwash'ah of this tradition was written down in Western musical notation. This development could perhaps have taken place at the court of Alfonso el Sabio of Castile and Leon, 1252-84.

In this paper, however, I wish to consider the possibility that the present-day recordings of so-called Andalusian muwash'ah can shed light upon some questions involving muwash'ah tradition, especially with regard to the performance of the songs, despite the fact that only a handful of ancient muwash'ah figure in the modern collections. I am less pessimistic than Stern, who over twenty years ago made the observation, 'We have lost perhaps a chance which could have been taken a century or a half a century ago to observe the last phases of the living tradition of the Andalusian muwash'ah.' I shall deal with several aspects of the musical tradition of the muwash'ah in North Africa in order to allow you to assess its value in the context of the different problems connected with the older Andalusian stanzaic poems. In what follows I shall therefore touch on their language, themes, formal structure, and matters connected with performance and imitation.

The anthologies usually give the complete surviving version of the poem, consisting of five or six couplets. Complete muwash'ah in the classical Andalusian form are not found, though pieces by Ibn Baqi, Ibn Zuhr, Ibn Sahl and Ibn al-Khaqani are preserved in part. The poems are arranged according to melodic notes and rhythmic modes.

However, when it comes to performance, the basic point to note is that the muwash'ah are always put to music in fragments. This may be an indication of a change in tradition, as Tanjam Yemsalm implies that in his experience the whole of the muwash'ah was sung. On the other hand, in the classical Khâib al-Aghâni the musical pieces are normally only three or four line fragments of poems which are in reality much longer. Usually only two 'couplets' of a muwash'ah are used in any one musical performance.

Separation of my beloved clothed me in thinness.
longer understand the original meaning of the text, or because they fall back on their own dialect.

With the Leiden manuscript one has the impression that in many places the language has moved in the direction of dialect. This can be seen from the way that, for example, sabab is written as sabdb, with a long second syllable, a change typical of western Arabic dialects.

Yalas and Ḥafnawi, on the contrary, appear to give a more balanced view of the original song texts, especially from the point of view of the use of classical Arabic. Sometimes, however, the nature of the rhymes makes a classical reading impossible, and a dialectal reading highly probable. This can be clearly seen in words that have a short final syllable in classical Arabic but require a long syllable for rhyming purposes. Perhaps the most obvious dialect features in the texts are interrogatives such as e/, J/, 'a/JJ; the combination lasbad (classical Id budda); and the intermittent disappearance of the fourth form of the verb, through the elision of hamza, as mentioned above.12

I should now like to turn to some of the material recorded by Plenckers, and comment on some texts of special interest. I shall pay particular attention to thematic points, language, formal structure and performance.

My first text, no.1 in Plenckers' collection,13 is interesting from the thematic point of view, because it contains a dawn finale comparable to the same theme in some early Andalusian kharjas and in troubadour poetry. The initial part of the Arabic text is as follows:

1. layâli surrâ | fi ḥusni zamânî
2. Inna-hâ tamûr | 'an kulli insânî
3. Bitnâ fi surûr | farhân wa-salwâni
4. Fa-fiqâqna 'l-sâbâh | isrâ' li-ajli
5. Lâs yâ sâbâh | farraqta li ūlamî
6. Bi-ilâhî yâ sâbâh | ijma' li ūlamî

1. Nights of joy in the goodness of time
2. They will pass away for every human being;
3. We were passing the night in gladness and joy.

In the first three lines in particular, we can perceive an isosyllabism, which corresponds with the musical notes. It should be noted, however, that there are considerable variations between lines 4-6 as given above and the versions to be found in Yalas and Ḥafnawi and in other recorded versions.

The next text, Plenckers no.5,14 has a description of a drinking scene in a garden as morning is approaching. In fact, most of the themes in Plenckers' collection are connected with drinking.

There are two variant texts, one of them also being found in part in Yalas and Ḥafnawi. The first variant goes as follows:

1. Rayta 'l-riyâda qad labas | tawbân jadid min nuwâr | yâ mawlâyâ
   fi h min šarâb mà nadjûq
2. Ḥawlu-hu 'l-banasaq wa-l-âs | ḥabq ma'ā jullinâr | yâ mawlâyâ
   fi h min šarâb mà nadjûq
3. 'Idâ yašamu 'l-nafas | yakhî 'l-misk ma'a 'l-'uqqâr | yâ mawlâyâ
   fi h min šarâb mà nadjûq

1. I saw that the gardens have clothed themselves in a new covering of white flowers; o my lord, there are drinks for us to taste there.
2. Around them are violets, myrtle and basil, together with pomegranate blossoms; o my lord, there are drinks for us to taste there.
3. When they give out breath, they are like musk together with wine; o my lord, there are drinks for us to taste there.

The variant recording has another refrain:

yâ mawlâyâ, fi šarâb mà [a]ladda-hu

o my lord, there are drinks; how delicious they are!

In Yalas and Ḥafnawi's text there is no addition of the kind yâ mawlâyâ etc. The text itself is also slightly different. Thus the second and third lines are:

2. Ḥawla 'l-banasaq wa-l-âs | wa-'abâq ma'ā jullanâr
3. 'Idâ yahubbu 'l-nasîm | naṣummu miska 'l-zahârî

2. Through the violets, myrtle and the fragrant flowers together with pomegranate blossoms,
3. When the wind blows [through them], we sniff the musk of the flowers;

Line 2 contains a variant that is classical Arabic rather than dialectal, âs instead of yâs. Also, there are no additions and no attempts to make the first hemistichs rhyme with each other. This approach is possible only by treating long and short syllables as having no difference at the end of the hemistich: labas (for labîs), yâs, nafas.

Sometimes, however, the singers appear not to pay much attention to the original rhyme, especially when its meaning has become obscure to them. Text no.67 represents a stanza whose musical performance produces in various respects a text that is different from that collected by Yalas and Ḥafnawi. This latter is apparently nearer to the 'original' text of the muwaṣṣâh. For each line I give first the recorded text, then that collected by Yalas and Ḥafnawi (variants being indicated by Roman characters):15

1. Gùzayyîlî sukûr nâbî | mûlî 'l-'uyûn mugannîjâr
   li-dâ 'l-gazâl 'aqîj jirât
The substitution of nashar for naskur (i.e. 'I will stay awake' instead of 'I will get drunk') is interesting. This is a well-known conventional substitution which is made during the performance to avoid falling foul of the strictures and sanctions of Islamic Law in its prohibition of the drinking of wine. The substitution is something of a pun and a joke. It will be seen again in the recorded text of poem 106, which I shall deal with below. There sukhār is substituted for sukār.

The last important change in the recorded version is the extension of the first half of line 4. That constitutes a break in the scheme of the line. This is apparently due to the performance: the singer is describing how he is becoming drunk with passion in the presence of those two red apples, i.e. the cheeks of the beloved. He then remembers other vital parts of her body: two pomegranates (her breasts) and two little peaches (her nipples). The diminutive takhwekhaten, formed by the prefixing of -a- is thought to be due to Berber, an influence normally overlooked when we think about the musical performance maintains the original structure which is lost in the text. However, the musical performance maintains the original structure which is lost in the text. Among the poems that are in highly classical language is text no. 18.*

The same is true of the repetition of mQld 'l-'uyin al-mugannijat in the same two lines.

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The lines may be translated as follows:

4. And do not say that shame is covering him. Take both my eyes, but do not take the apple of my eye.

[The eyes of shyness were winking; the light of my eyes was upon them.]

5. Oh, who will heal our drunkenness? Let us take the opportunity of a pleasant drink!

We can again see in line 3 of 106b the change from ‘drinking’ (suqāḥ) to ‘awake’ (suhhār). The latter is, of course, very close to sukār ‘drunk’, which is clearly what is meant, despite the euphemism. Yalas and Ḥanīfāwī have another variant in line 4. It is bi-khāmri muzīl al-kasāl. In the second section of line 5 both the recordings are virtually impossible to understand, and I have had to restore the text in both versions by using that found in Yalas and Ḥanīfāwī.

The repetition of a word in each hemistich of 106b and eight out of the ten hemistichs in 106a should be noted, as it gives an insight into the relationship between the syllables and the music. The basic pattern seems to be of three syllables followed by two syllables, followed by repetition of these two, and then the three syllables again.

The Hebrew adaptation of the song was perhaps made by a Jewish singer who was also a singer of the Arabic song. Certainly, the syllabic scheme outlined above fits with no great difficulty. The Hebrew text runs as follows (with the repeated syllables in Roman characters):

1. El, ḫus ‘al-‘irī w-ḥurban-ah | ḥurban-ah ‘oybim lo kad-dat
2. Le-beti shaknā ‘ananan | we-gorban hat-tamid shabat
3. Yaṭ’igū ‘al-e kul-anāh | laqšu ‘erēq ḥalab zebat
4. Hinne-nī dim’ātī tizzāl | ’al teherash ‘el dim’ātī
5. U-shlaḥ li meshīhā yiq’ āl | ḡobal dibre sha’ţ ajātī.

We may translate this as follows:

1. God have compassion on my city (Jerusalem) and her ruins; | enemies have destroyed her illegally.
2. Upon my house (Jerusalem) a cloud is dwelling [Job 3:5] | and have taken a land flowing with milk [and honey] (the land of Israel).
3. They are mocking with all these things [Gen. 42:36] | and the daily sacrifice has ceased to exist.
4. Look at my tears flowing; | hold not your peace at my tears [Psalm 39:13]
5. And send to me a Messiah who redeems | at the words of my wailing.

As the Hebrew poem has the same rhyme and rhythm as the Arabic poem, it is clearly just as much of a mu’ārada of the Arabic poem as the Hebrew mu’āradas of the Andalusian period were of Arabic originals. The syllables in bold type in the Hebrew version are the ones that have to be repeated. There are a number of places where I have had to eliminate the shewah na‘ or mobile, but this is sometimes legitimate in Hebrew poems that are based on
Arabic models. In other cases the *shewah* na' is long, in the way that we have seen syllables lengthened in the Arabic poems.

It is possible to argue that these modern muwaṣṣāhāt have a metrical basis in the KhalTūan system and identify them as being *ramal* or *rajaz* etc. That may well be their origin. It certainly seems likely when one considers them in relation to the music. Plenckers' theory about the combination of text and music (the musical setting of the text) gives strong evidence for it.

As far as the total tradition is concerned, the recordings are an eleventh-hour collection, and the time span between them and the period of the classical Andalusian muwaṣṣāh is very great. Nevertheless, Plenckers' success in showing the link between these modern versions and the *virelai* makes links with the classical muwaṣṣāh not implausible. It is an area that clearly requires much more work — and conference sessions at which the wine circulates.

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**NOTES**

1. See the dissertation of L.J. Plenckers, *De muziek van de Algerijnse muwaṣṣāh*, Amsterdam 1989; for musical recordings and texts, see pp.155-169. I wish to express my gratitude to him for providing me with copies of the recordings, together with musical notations, necessary for this paper.


11. The Arabic text is: *al-bu’du kasāni muhâl*  
(Plenckers no.12, Yalâs and Ḥafînî, I, p.134.)

There are many plays on the theme of emaciation in both stanzas and non-stanzas Arabic poetry.


15. Yalâs and Ḥafînî, I, p.213.

16. The most striking example of this in the early Andalusian muwaṣṣāh occurs with the name Ḥrâhîm, which is made to rhyme with ḥâmîm and ḥâlîm in the *ṣâyîl* of the final stanza of poem 93 of the *Uṣâdat al-jâlî* and with ṭâlîm and ḍîm in the *ṣâyîl* of the third stanza of poem 141 of that anthology. (I am grateful to Alan Jones for this information).

17. Yalâs and Ḥafînî, I, p.212.
