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## BEDOUIN WOMEN'S POETRY IN SOUTHERN TUNISIA

POESÍA BEDUINA FEMENINA EN EL SUR DE TÚNEZ

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### Abstract

This article deals with poetry and songs performed particularly by women in the Bedouin dialect of the Maṛāzīg tribe in Southern Tunisia. The poems are transcribed and translated. It is differentiated between *ḡnē* which means simply "song" and *ṛubbāž* which are lullabies.

### Resumen

Este artículo se ocupa de la poesía y canciones que componen especialmente las mujeres en el dialecto beduino de la tribu de los Maṛāzīg, sur de Túnez. Los poemas se transcriben y traducen. Se diferencia entre *ḡnē*, que simplemente significa "canción", y *ṛubbāž*, es decir, canciones de cuna.

**Keywords:** Tunisian Bedouin dialect, dialectal poetry, songs, oral literature.

**Palabras clave:** Dialecto beduino tunecino, poesía dialectal, canciones, literatura oral.

Short poems sung or recited by women are called *ḡnē*, in the singular *ḡunnāya*. Lullabies which will also be dealt with here are called *ṛubbāž*. Most of the poems presented in this paper were recorded during the past several years in the oasis of Dūz, which is southeast of the Šaṭṭ al-Ġarīd in Southern Tunisia<sup>1</sup>. The inhabitants of Dūz are of the Maṛāzīg tribe. The songs are transcribed in the Bedouin dialect of the Maṛāzīg and translated. They give a glimpse into the rich lyric repertoire of the Bedouin women of Southern Tunisia.

*ḡnē* is the prerogative mainly of older women. As is the case with other traditions, elderly women complain that younger women are no longer capable of singing these songs and do not know the words of ever well-known verses sung at special occasions, let alone being able to compose verses by themselves. Women of the younger generation consider these kinds of songs as old-fashioned and thus pay little attention to them. Consequently the recording and preserving of women's poems is an ur-

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the songs were dictated to me and I wrote them down rather than recorded them.

gent matter because such songs are on their way to oblivion<sup>2</sup>. When I recorded some marriage songs at a wedding, the women told me afterwards that they had only sung because the electricity was out and the cassette recorder did not work.

Following Bil-Ġēt's arrangement, iṣ-Š'rif bin Muḥammad<sup>3</sup> (on [http:// marsad.blogspot.com/2009/12/blog-post\\_29.html](http://marsad.blogspot.com/2009/12/blog-post_29.html)) lists among women's poetic genres lamentations of the dead, wedding songs, cradle songs, songs sung at circumcisions, grinding songs, and weaving songs<sup>4</sup>. The chief characteristics of women's poetry that he mentions are its short length and simple style. This poetry often consists of a mere handful of verses – sometimes a single line alone – that nevertheless can much move the listeners. According to iṣ-Š'rif bin Muḥammad, metaphors and similes are frequent in this kind of poetry. Many good examples of women's poetry can be found on [http://marsad.blogspot.com/2009/12/blog-post\\_29.html](http://marsad.blogspot.com/2009/12/blog-post_29.html). From among them I will cite two examples. They are given in Arabic on the website: the following transcriptions and translations are by myself. Unfortunately the authors are not named.

*mūš rāžli w-māhīš dār mīgāmi*  
*ġēr fi-ž-ž bīn ṁṣaṭṭ'rat ayyāmi*

“He should not be my husband  
and this should not be the place where I live.

It is only that my days [i.e. my life] are strung on my forehead”.

*ḥadīd širku māḳ'š ḥadīd ṁnāzil*  
*ġēr min ṣ'waž l-ayyām dirtak rāžil*

“(You are like) the iron of barbed wire and not like the iron of sickles.

Only the unfair twists of the days [i.e. of life] made me take you as my husband”.

Women usually sing their songs together with other women, but sometimes by themselves. The important thing is that the songs are not performed in front of men<sup>5</sup>. They can either be sung, or simply recited as poems. When sung it is mostly (at least this is true for songs sung at special occasions) without the use of musical instruments with a very strong high-pitched voice that can sound like shouting. Unless familiar with the words of the poem, even members of the local population cannot understand what is being sung. Meaningless syllables are added between the syllables of the poem's words, which makes them difficult to identify. Abu-Lughod 1986, p. 178 writes, “When sung, either when people are alone working or at formal occasions such as weddings or circumcision ceremonies, *ghinnāwas* are ‘charac-

<sup>2</sup> Abu-Lughod 2006, p. 1023: “I had thought, when I left Egypt after my first period of fieldwork in 1980, that the Bedouin *ghinnāwa* was dying out”. P. 1025: “... were not, after all, dying out. Bedouin love songs were taking on different meaning and force, having been given new life by the advent of the cassette”.

<sup>3</sup> In the dialect the first names Mḥimmad and Muḥammad exist. Whenever it is not clear from Arabic script which one is meant, the form Muḥammad is used.

<sup>4</sup> See Yelles-Chaouche 1990, pp. 145-159 for an overview of the (female) oral repertoire in Tlemcen.

<sup>5</sup> See Abu-Lughod 1985, p. 252: “The persons with whom one is most likely to share poetry are those individuals from whom one does not *taḥashsham*”.

terized by a high-pitched chanting, the repetition of words within the verse and the stretching out of single syllables into whole melodic passages' (Smart 1966, 206)".

The female singers and/or informants whose songs are presented here were:

Maryam B. (about 75), Mbārka (about 50), Mbārka D. (deceased; the poem was recited by her daughter-in-law), Maryam X. (about 70), Fayza (about 45), Salma (about 65), Šēša (about 78), and a group of six women recorded at a wedding in July 2009.

**a) Songs for special occasions:**

Women perform their songs at special occasions and festivities like weddings and circumcisions. They can be sung by one woman or by a group of women. These short songs usually consist only of a single verse with two hemistiches that rhyme with each other<sup>6</sup>. They are part of the oral literary heritage of the Bedouins, and therefore have a fixed arrangement of verses and words that are known by every woman – with the exception, as has been mentioned, of the younger generation, which does not seem to be very familiar with them.

Some of the songs for special occasions presented here can also be found in my forthcoming book (Ritt-Benmimoun 2011, pp. 236-247), where they are translated into German.

The following examples of songs presented by women at circumcisions were recited to me by Maryam X. and Fayza:

*iṭ-ṭahhār žāna w-žāb<sup>6</sup> žbāyra*

*w-ṭhārat il-ḡāli in-šalla taṣbah bārya*

"The circumciser came to us and brought with him his kit.

The circumcision of the precious one will, God willing, be healed by morning"<sup>7</sup>.

*ḥaḍḍaṛna l-ḥaṣīr w-ḥammasna<sup>8</sup> t-ṭrāb*

*w-ḥaḍḍaṛna muḥammad w-iš-šāṭān ḡāb*

"We prepared the mat and roasted the sand.

We made (the prophet) Muḥammad present, whereas the devil was away"<sup>9</sup>.

*faṛrašna l-ḥaṣīr w-ḥaḍḍaṛna t-ṭrāb*

*ḥaḍḍaṛna muḥammad w-iš-šāṭān ḡāb<sup>10</sup>*

"We put the mat on the floor and prepared the sand.

We made (the prophet) Muḥammad present, whereas the devil was away".

<sup>6</sup> The formal aspects (rhyme, verse etc.) are not dealt with in detail here.

As to wedding songs, Boris 1951, p. 153 distinguishes between couplets called *ṭawwāhi* and songs comprising three lines. In Boris 1958, p. 381 *ṭawwāhi* is explained "chant de femmes, à vocalise prolongée".

<sup>7</sup> A similar example is also found in Louis 1979, p. 184.

<sup>8</sup> Boris 1958, p. 127: "dessécher légèrement (le café, l'orge) dans le poêle rond (*ṭāžīn*), faire chauffer sans durcir simplement pour griller". The roasted sand is spread over the mat on which the boy will be circumcised and laid after the circumcision.

<sup>9</sup> In al-Marzūgī 1984, p. 24 this verse is: *faṛrašna l-ḥaṣīr w-ḡarbalna t-ṭrāb ḥaḍḍaṛna muḥammad w-iš-šāṭān ḡāb*.

<sup>10</sup> A similar text is found in al-Marzūgī 1984, pp. 23f.

The above two examples illustrate how very formulaic this poetry is and how various words or phrases can easily be replaced with others. But it also illustrates how this poetry is threatened with oblivion.

*ṭahhir yā mṭahhir ṣahḥ aḷḷāh idīk  
lā tūḏif wḷīdi lā naḡḡab ṣalēk*

“Do the circumcision, O circumciser! May God make your hands firm and healthy.

Don’t hurt my little son so that I won’t get angry with you”<sup>11</sup>.

In this society, a wedding is the most important event in a man or woman’s life. Because of this, wedding songs are very numerous. They express joy and contain many felicitations and blessings. When celebrating the wedding of others, a mother thinks about her own sons and wants them to experience the same happiness and to marry soon (the following three verses were recited to me by Maryam X.):

*yā xāḷgi in-šalla l-ṣḡūba linna  
w-<sup>ṣ</sup>nhizz kiswta w-nahḡar il-xaṭṭ fi-l-ḥinna*

“O my Creator, God willing, the same will soon happen to us!”<sup>12</sup>

I take the clothes from him [to the bride]  
and I am present when the henna is applied”.

*yā sēdna ṣ-ṣuḷṭān yiḡwi ḡayyak  
w-in-šalla l-ṣaḡḡara l-kull talḡaḡ zayyak*

“O our lord, the sultan!”<sup>13</sup> May your light shine.

God willing, all the unmarried young people will come as far as you”.

The women also sing while baking the traditional wedding bread at night:

*yā rāḡdīn in-nōm nūḡu ṣallu  
nḡūlhūm ṣal-aḷḷāh bībān il-fraḡ yinhallu*

“O you, who are asleep, get up in order to pray.

I say to them: Relying upon God will open the doors of salvation”.

The following verse, recited by Maryam B., expresses the happiness the bridegroom’s mother feels about her son’s marriage:

*yā saṣdi ma-brak n<sup>ḥ</sup>hāri  
w-<sup>ṣ</sup>lhig<sup>ṣ</sup>t farḡak<sup>14</sup> yā ḡāli*

“Oh my happiness! How blessed is my day.

I have lived to see your wedding, O precious one”.

By contrast, the bride’s family, who must bid their daughter farewell, is very sad. The female family members sing about her and cry over her (this verse was recited to me by Maryam X.):

<sup>11</sup> This example is also found in al-Marzūgī 1984, p. 23, and a modified example in Louis 1979, p. 184 and in Sonneck 1902, p. 163 (translation in Sonneck 1904, p. 275).

<sup>12</sup> Lit.: “... is the sequence for us”, i.e. hopefully our sons will also marry soon.

<sup>13</sup> The groom is called “sultan”.

<sup>14</sup> *farḡh* means “joy” as well as “wedding”. See Boris 1958, p. 457: “joie; fête de famille”.

*fī-l-āmān yā rīm iż-žlība*  
*il-furǧa lāzma lākin šlība*

“Goodbye, the herd's white gazelle!

The separation has to be, but it is hard”.

Boris 1951, pp. 128f., al-Marzūgī 1984, p. 91 and al-Marzūgī 1967, p. 214 present another piece of poetry of an entirely different tone regarding the bride's separation from her family:

*šalāš tibki yā l-uxayya txaššri dam<sup>o</sup>štik*  
*bin šammik š<sup>š</sup>gīgik w-ummik žārtik*

“Why do you cry, little sister?

You lose your tears in vain [i.e. there is no reason for crying].

Your husband<sup>15</sup> is your first cousin and your mother is your neighbour”<sup>16</sup>.

Maryam B. recited the following song at someone else's wedding expressing her wish that her own son may marry soon:

*yšūd šalayy il-far<sup>h</sup> nalḥag zayya*  
<sup>o</sup>*txušš žih<sup>o</sup>fta l-il-ḥōš w-umma ḥayya*

“May God let the happiness come back to me.

May I experience one like it.

May his litter [carrying the bride] enter the house

when his mother is still alive”.

Because their content and meaning are quite clear, the following verses are transcribed and translated without commentary. All of them were recorded during a wedding in Dūz in July 2009 and were performed by a group of six women:

*mabrūk yā ḡāli šalēk šarōšak*  
*w-bikrak w<sup>l</sup>lad yalšab šala barnōšak*

“Congratulations, my dear one, on your bride.

May your first child be a boy that plays on your *barnūs*”.

When I recorded this song, it was sung with the following word order<sup>17</sup>:

*šalēk šarōšak*  
*w-mabrūk yā ḡāli šalēk šarōšak*  
*šalēk šarōšak*

<sup>15</sup> Lit.: “your cousin”. *bin šammi* is used by older women instead of the word *rāžli* “my husband”.

<sup>16</sup> Boris' translation is as follows:

“Pourquoi pleurer, petite sœur,  
 oui, pourquoi donc gâcher tes pleurs?  
 (Que craindre d') un cousin germain!

Ta mère et vous restez voisins”. (Boris 1951, p. 146).

<sup>17</sup> For word order in the poetry of the Egyptian Awlād šAlī see Abu-Lughod 1986, p. 180: “The only general rule about word order is that all but the first word of the second hemistich are always sung first, followed by the words of the first hemistich, and, near the end, the whole song from beginning to end including the missing first word of the second hemistich is sung more or less in the correct order”.

*w-bikrak w<sup>l</sup>lad yalṣab ṣala baṛnōṣak*

*bikrak w<sup>l</sup>lad yalṣab ṣala baṛnōṣak*

*hāḍa ṣirsak yā ṣazīz w-ṣāfi*

*w-baṣḍak ḡ<sup>l</sup>lēla w-bārdāt aktāfi*

“That’s your wedding, O dear one and pure one.

After you [i.e. without you] (I am) humiliated and my shoulders are cold [i.e. no one is there to protect me anymore]”.

Like the previous song, it was sung with the following word order:

*ṣazīz w-ṣāfi*

*hāḍa ṣirsak yā ṣazīz w-ṣāfi*

*ṣazīz w-ṣāfi*

*w-baṣḍak ḡ<sup>l</sup>lēla w-bārdāt aktāfi*

*baṣḍak ḡ<sup>l</sup>lēla w-bārdāt aktāfi*

*il-ṣirs nirṣu fiḥ linna mudda*

*š<sup>l</sup>faḡ sam<sup>o</sup>s min tiḥt is-šhāb t<sup>l</sup>ṣadda*

*mūlāh mā-nagdar ž<sup>l</sup>mēla ṛṛudda*

“We have been waiting for the wedding for a long time.

Sunbeams made their way through the clouds.

It is impossible for me to return the favors the groom [lit.: the master of the wedding] has done for me”.

*hāḍāy ṣirsak yā ṣazīz ṣalayya*

*nalgāk maržūṣi ṣagāb il-ṣayya*

*niḥmīh ḥatta l-mūt fi-kirṣayya*

“This is your wedding, you, the one who is dear to me.

I pin my hopes on you after the exertion.

I celebrate<sup>18</sup> (your wedding) even when I am very ill and can’t move anymore

[lit.: even when death is at my feet]”.

*hāḍāy ṣirsak yā ṣazīz ṣalayya*

*yā ṛāḥti ṣugb iṣ-š<sup>l</sup>gā w-il-ṣayya*

“This is your wedding. O you, the one who is dear to me!

Oh my recovering after affliction and exertion!”

In this verse the singer wishes her son, who is now getting married, further joy – presumably in the form of his first child:

*yṣūda ṣalēk il-faṛ<sup>o</sup>ḥ yā maḍnūni*

*yā zahw ḡalbi yā r<sup>l</sup>bīṣ<sup>o</sup>ṣyūni*

“May He [i.e. God] let you feel happiness once again, my beloved one.

O joy of my heart, spring of my eyes!”

*ž<sup>l</sup>badnāh ṣirs il-baṣaṛ ṛabbi ytim*

*yažṣal m<sup>l</sup>dāma ḡēṭ tarwa l-umm*

“We brought the wedding of the man to mind.

May God bring it to a favorable issue.

<sup>18</sup> Lit.: “I protect”.

May He make its completion [i.e. that of the wedding] like the rain with which the (groom's) mother quenches her thirst".

*širs l-šzāz in-šalla nšišō-la*  
*kull min yžīna šēf rruddō-la*

"God willing, we will live to see the wedding of the beloved ones.  
We will try to return to every guest that comes to us (his favours)".

*hažžib šalēhum w-l-šžāb mn-ašlla*  
*kull min šbahum šal-muhammad šalla*

"Protect them [i.e. the sons] from evil forces. Protection like an amulet comes from God.

May everyone who sees them out of admiration exclaim, 'May (the prophet) Muḥammad be blessed!'"

Three songs similar to those quoted above are given by al-Marzūgī 1967, p. 210 in Arabic. They are sung by the women at the beginning of the wedding festivities to express their joy<sup>19</sup>:

*hāda širsak yā gāli*  
*yā zahw bāli*  
*niḥmih īda rād il-šāli*

"This is your wedding, O dear one, joy of my mind.

I celebrate it if that is what the Exalted [i.e. God] wants". [i.e. if God lets her stay in good health]

and

*hāda n-n'hār illi nibgīh*  
*w-il-gaḥb šāhīh*  
*yažšāl muhammad hāšīr fīh*

"This is the day that I love and that the heart longs for.

May He make the (prophet) Muḥammad attend it"<sup>20</sup>.

and

*hāda n-n'hār illi bgēta*  
*w-šhig t rēta*  
*nalḥag šrōša fī-bēta*

"This is the day that I loved and that I lived long enough to see.

I lived to see his bride in his house".

#### b) Individual and personal songs:

These little poems or songs are sung or recited by a woman when, for instance, alone while occupied with work like weaving, washing, or while with another woman. They express a woman's feelings and thoughts and are a way of coping with

<sup>19</sup> Some other wedding songs that are not cited here can be found in al-Marzūgī 1984, pp. 100-104, al-Marzūgī 1967, pp. 210-217, Boris 1951, pp. 153f. and Louis 1979, pp. 304-310. For Central Tunisia see al-Xašxūšī 2007. For Takrūna in the Tunisian Sāḥīl see Marçais & Guīga 1925, pp. 168-177 where many wedding songs are cited.

<sup>20</sup> The same song is cited by Marçais & Guīga 1925, pp. 174f.

the strokes of fate and with unfamiliar situations<sup>21</sup>. Feelings like grief, disappointment, longing, and loneliness are often expressed in such poetry. Death and separation are particularly frequent themes of these little poems<sup>22</sup>. A beloved family member, like a child, a brother or a mother, is usually the subject of such a poem. In contrast to the ceremonial songs of group a), the personal songs of group b) have a prevailing negative mood and are not used to express positive feelings like happiness and joy.

This type of poem or song seems to correspond to the songs recorded and translated by Lila Abu-Lughod among the Awlād ṢAlī of the Western Desert in Egypt, where they are called *ḡinnāwa* “little songs” (Abu-Lughod 1986, p. 27)<sup>23</sup>. They can also be compared to the so-called *malālīya* songs of the women of the Hamāmma tribe in Central Tunisia, which are called by that name because each poem starts with the syllables *yā lā lā yā*. These short poems consist of only one and a half verses and are a way for a woman to express her thoughts and feelings (see al-Xaṣṣūṣī 2006).

Although such poetry is prompted by special personal, highly subjective, events, similar formulas are used in the poems and repeated by the individual women composers. Thus the situation seems to be similar to the one described by Abu-Lughod 1985, p. 257 for the Awlād ṢAlī: “When individuals recite poems, they either appropriate them whole from the cultural repertoire, or compose them by drawing on a common stock of themes, metaphors, phrases, and structures. They combine these formulaic elements or elaborate on themes within traditional constraints, considering questions of authorship immaterial”<sup>24</sup>.

Another feature this poetry has in common with the songs described by Abu-Lughod is brevity: “...the *ḡhinnāwa* is composed of only one line of approximately fifteen syllables, divisible into two hemistiches, and can be sung or recited by anyone” (Abu-Lughod 1986, p. 178). The majority of the poems presented here show the same structure as the songs belonging to the ceremonial poetry of group a).

The first poem is about Maryam B.’s eldest son. She composed it in 1980 when he went to the army and was stationed at the North Tunisian town of Binzirt, 600 km from Dūz, where the family lives. It was the first separation from one of her children suffered by Maryam B., which she found very hard to bear:

*yā zahw galbi yā rʿbī ṣyūni*  
*w-ḡat guṣṣak binzirṣt yā maḡnūni*

<sup>21</sup> Compare Abu-Lughod 1985, p. 247: “... that people turn to poetry when faced with personal difficulties”; and Abu-Lughod 1986, p. 31: “The *ḡhinnāwa* can be considered the poetry of personal life: individuals recite such poetry in specific social contexts, for the most part private, articulating in it sentiments about their personal situations and closest relationships”.

<sup>22</sup> Abu-Lughod 1986, p. 270: “The sentiments are those of the difficulty of parting, the longing for those far away, the sense of emptiness after loved ones have gone, and the misery of having no news”. For other themes in the poetry described by her see Abu-Lughod 1986, pp. 268-271.

<sup>23</sup> See also Abu-Lughod 1993, pp. 243-256. According to Abu-Lughod 1986, p. 178 this poetry is also recited at weddings and circumcisions.

<sup>24</sup> For the use of formulas see also Abu-Lughod 1986, pp. 262-268.



"O delight of my heart, O spring of my eyes.  
Your lot came to be Binzirt, my dear one".

The following verse is also about Maryam B.'s eldest son far away from her in Binzirt:

*yā zahw galbi yā simḥ anḍāra*  
*yẓī mas<sup>3</sup>knak fi-maḥmal it-tayyāra*  
"O delight of my heart, you with the beautiful eyes!  
You are now living near the factory for planes [Binzirt]".

The next verse, also recited by Maryam B., differs from the former only slightly. This again shows the formulaic composition of these verses and the interchangeability of words between them:

*yā zahw galbi yā smīḥ anḍāra*  
*ẓat gur<sup>3</sup>ḥtak fi-maḥmal it-tayyāra*  
"O delight of my heart, you with the beautiful eyes!  
Your lot came to be the factory for planes".

In the following verse Maryam B. addresses a man called ḤAbd-Allā, who is also in her eldest son's situation, doing his duty for his homeland, and asks him to take care of her son. This song was most probably sung to or with ḤAbd-Allā's mother. In this verse we learn that Maryam B.'s son's name is Mḥimmad:

*<sup>3</sup>mḥimmad r<sup>1</sup>fīgak xūk yā Ḥabd-alla*  
*w-rāṣ iṣ-ṣ<sup>3</sup>ḥar taḥtu Ḥalēna ṭalla*  
"Mḥimmad is your companion, your brother, O ḤAbd-Allā.  
At the beginning of the (next) month pay us a visit!"

Another verse, in which Maryam B. addresses the same son, shows how much she misses him and how much she longs to see him again:

*yā zahw galbi yā Ḥazīz Ḥalayya*  
*w-tallat xayālak xēr min māliya*  
"O delight of my heart, you who are precious to me!  
Your coming is better (for me) than wealth".

In the following verse Maryam B. sings about her youngest brother, who was at that time in military service. In contrast to the normal character of this type of poetry, information about the subject of the poem is given here, as well as feelings expressed:

*<sup>3</sup>štāḥa<sup>3</sup>t w-<sup>3</sup>ṭwālat Ḥalēna l-gēba*  
*w-yẓī mas<sup>3</sup>knak wēn <sup>3</sup>nt<sup>3</sup>fē bū-rgēba*  
"I miss (you) and your absence became long for us.  
You are now living where (the former president) Bū-Rgēba was brought into exile". [Manzil Bū-Rgēba]

Maryam B. composed the following verse from her children's point of view concerning the absence of their uncle, her youngest brother. He does his basic training in the army during the month of Ramadan:

*yā xāl <sup>3</sup>ṭwālat Ḥalēk il-midda*  
*w-rumḍān lā sālak Ḥalēk <sup>3</sup>ṭrudda*  
"O (maternal) uncle, the time (of your absence) became long.

If you owe Ramadan fast days, you must give them back to it”.

Although not evident from the words, this verse is about Maryam B.’s youngest son, who lives in Europe:

*ṭāl il-mīdē w-il-waḥš yā maḏnūni  
yā zahw galbi yā rībīš yūni*

“The duration (of your absence) and the longing became long,

O my dear one.

O delight of my heart! O spring of my eyes!”

Perhaps her youngest son’s absence would be easier for her to bear if news from the people who live with him in Europe would reach her, because, as she says, just hearing his name is sweet for her:

*lā riž l timši lā ḥabīb yžīni  
w-simmāytak zayy il-ḥasal tirwīni*

“No foot goes (to you) and none of your beloved ones comes to me.

(The sound of) your name is as delicious as honey for me”<sup>25</sup>.

In the following verse Maryam B. mentions how far away her son is and how out of reach he is for her. The distance cuts her off from his life:

*baṛrak bīšīd w-mašḥak miṭṭawwiḥ  
gillat ḥabīb-in yūšlak w-yṛawwiḥ  
baṛrak bīšīd w-mašḥak xāfīni  
w-gillat ḥabīb-in yūšlak w-yžīni*

“Your land is far away and your place of arrival is a long way off.

There are no beloved ones that reach you and come back here.

Your land is far away and your place of arrival doesn’t belong to me.

There are no beloved ones that reach you and come to me”.

In the following verse Maryam B. asks her youngest son to come back to his hometown and to his family because the emptiness he left when he emigrated to Europe cannot be filled:

*ṛawwiḥ l-wakrak yā ḥazīz il-ḡāli  
w-ḥammaṛt w-akr in-nās w-wakrak xāli*

“Come back to your accustomed place,

O you who are precious and dear to me.

You live in the accustomed place of (other) people

whereas your place (here) is empty”<sup>26</sup>.

Nevertheless Maryam B. wishes him all the best and a good journey, anticipating even from the moment of his departure their happy reunion sometime in the future:

<sup>25</sup> Lit.: “(The sound of) your name satisfies my thirst like honey”.

<sup>26</sup> Certain formulas and verses seem to be particularly widely used. A similar verse is cited in Marçais & Guíga 1959, p. 1198: *ṛawwaḥ-ləblādek* (var. *-lwakrok* ou *-lwakrek*) *ya-ḡrīb użāli x ya-mḥammoṛ baṛṛ* (var. *-wakṛ*) *-onnās ubaṛrok* (var. *wakrok*, *wakrek*) *xāli* “retourne à ton pays (var. “à ton gîte”), ô étranger expatrié! O toi qui peuples la terre (var. “le gîte”) des autres alors que la tienne (var. “le tien”) reste vide”. This verse was first cited by Stumme 1894, p. 57.

*ḥrīg is-s'lāma yā-lli msaggid zēna*  
*w-sāḥa s'ḥēda kbēd<sup>27</sup> tā-tlāgēna*

"May your journey be safe, O you who are leaving.  
 (May you experience only) good things.

May it be in a happy moment [and not because of a bereavement], O dear, that you will meet us again".

Maryam B. sings to her youngest son, whom she wishes was with her. Only then can she be happy and people will not always ask her why she is sad and in a bad mood:

*mītmannya nnādīk yā maḥnūni*  
*w-anē fārḥa w-in-nās mā-ylūmūni*

"I wished I could summon you, O my dear one.

Then I will be happy and people won't reprimand me".

The following verse shows how deeply hurt and desperate Salma felt about the death of her mother:

*yā gabār ḥill il-bāb xan-nxušš-ilha*  
*w-ḥīndi mwāḥiḥ fi-l-gaḥab tā-ngūl-ilha*

"O grave, open your door so that I can get (into the grave) next to her.  
 I have pains in my heart that I want to tell her about".

Waiting especially for male family members is part of a woman's destiny and burden in this Bedouin society. Salma describes the impatience she feels while waiting for her brother to return home:

*raḥēt wigāft mi-t-timaḥ yizzīni*  
*w-ḥannēt wild ummi l-ḥazīz yžīni*

"I was waiting and standing (there). I've had enough longing.  
 I thought the dear son of my mother would come to me".

Maryam B. felt hurt when she learned that her brother had had time to visit people around her but didn't find the time to call on her. She expresses her hurt and amazement in the following verse:

*āḥ dirt-lak min ḥēb walla zayya*  
*axaḥḥim aḥḥāya mā-ḥanīt-š bīya*

"What kind of shameful deed or something similar did I do to you  
 that you pass by next to me being unconcerned about me?"

Mbārka D. felt deep grief when her grandson was in the town of Dhēba in South-eastern Tunisia at the same time her son was in France:

*minni ḥazam il-gaḥab yā tiḥḥēba*  
*w-yinžāl bēn frānša w-aḥhēba*

"My heart left me. Oh its torture!

It comes and goes between France and Dhēba".

When Mbārka was faced with separation from her parents, she composed two comparatively long poems to express how much her parents mean to her, how helpless she feels without them, and how much she misses them:

<sup>27</sup> Actually it should sound *kbēda*.

*anē štigəthum l-əʕzāz alla yžūni mūḥāl lā ylūmu w-lā ykāfūni*  
*hum wāldāya w-baṭṭāl mā-takbar əʕmāhum sayya*  
*w-lā lfiṭ ḥatta d-dār tafrah bīya yaḏhar il-xāfi līy w-əməḏānīni*  
*anē w-ayyāmhūm ḥilma mišat ʕalayya w-il-yōm hāni bākya wiḥšūni*  
*anē baʕədhum mā-sadd ḥadd ʕalayya ḥatta ḥamad w-yāmna w-maḏnūni*  
*əmnēni ʕgīr gaddāš-ma ʕānūni*  
*anē ṭālba l-ʕāli w-yaṛḏu ʕalayya yā gālya w-in-šālla ysāmḥūni*

“I regret them, the dear ones that used to come to me.

It is impossible that they reprimand me or retaliate against me for something I have done to them.

They are my parents and never ever will a sin become worse with them.

When I arrive near them even their room welcomes me. The hidden things [e.g. sweets] appear for me and my dear ones [her children].

My days with them are a dream that has left me.

Today I am crying and I miss them.

After them no one bailed me out. Even Ḥ<sup>a</sup>mad [her brother] and Yāmna [her sister?] and my dear one [her son] (could not replace them).

When I was little how much did they struggle with me!

I ask the Exalted [God] that they may be content with me.

O precious one; God willing, they forgive me”.

The second long poem was inspired when Mbārka moved house away from her parents. In it she talks about her mother:

*ʕām is-s<sup>i</sup>nē b-<sup>o</sup>zyāda w-ʕām is-s<sup>i</sup>nē fārag<sup>o</sup>t in-naššāda*  
*anē m<sup>i</sup>rīḏ mā-tamm-<sup>o</sup>š d<sup>u</sup>wā ydāwīni maftūm w-<sup>o</sup>mmammi ʕala l-ḥannāna*  
*anē griḃ<sup>o</sup>t niḥsāb il-ʕazēza dżīni*  
*anē gāfla fi-l-bāb tā-mādīni tugʕud<sup>o</sup> ḥdāya w-ma-s<sup>o</sup>mḥa mēʕādha*  
*w-b-alfāḏ simḥa il-gālya<sup>o</sup> twaššīni tinšid ʕala ḏirri w-wakri aš zāda*

“In this year (the pain) is worse.

This year I parted from the one who used to ask me (about my condition) [i.e. her mother].

I am sick, but there is no medicine that cures me.

I am weaned and long [like a small child] for the kind-hearted.

I stuck around her and I believed that the dear one would come to me.

(I wish) that, when I was unthoughtful, she would stand at the door and call me.

(I wish) that she would stay with me; how beautiful would conversation with her be!

The precious one would give me pieces of advice with beautiful expressions.

She would ask about my children, and about the news of my (new) place”.

Also personal and individual, and thus of this category, are the songs cited in Stapley 2006, chapter 2.6.4., which she calls “hijra songs” (“emigration songs”). According to Stapley they are sung by women whose husbands or other family members have emigrated. She describes this genre as follows: “Mainly sung by women about their absent husbands, fathers, brothers and sons, they are often letters in the form of songs, expressing the women’s longing to be reunited with their loved ones”. Among the songs she quotes and translates are:

*ħissī dirīsa il-bāxira f-il-mūja  
anī ħājtī b-masħūd mūš bi-flūsa*

"I feel the beating of the boat on the waves  
I need Massoud not his money" (Stapley 2006, chapter 2.6.4).

and

*ana sārħa w inta ślā l-batīma  
taħsab śandī is-suġur yuġsid dīma*

"I am daydreaming while you are on the apartment building  
Do you think my youth will last forever?" (Stapley 2006, chapter 2.6.4).

### c) Cradle songs:

Another category of songs sung by women are cradle songs, called *rubbaž* (singular: *rubbaža*), the *mašdar* of the verb being *tirbiž*. They are not only sung as lullabies to put the children to sleep, but also to comfort them when they get hurt, or are afraid, or for some other reason are crying. Mothers also sing these songs when watching their children play while occupied with their household work. In these songs the mother addresses either her child, or God, from Whom she asks for the fulfillment of her wishes regarding the child. When the child addresses the mother in the poem, the mother's desires become quite obvious: she wants him to care and provide for her, and to be the most important person in his life. As stated in al-Marzūgī 1967, p. 226 and 1984, p. 18, these songs praise the children's beauty and their future character and express the hopes the mother has for her child and herself<sup>28</sup>.

It seems to be a feature of these poems that the stress of the last word of a hemistich is on the last syllable, which in normal speech would not be stressed. In the examples given it is almost exclusively a syllable comprising the long vowel *ī*. The initiator of a cradle song can be the first name of the child with which the other verses are rhymed, e.g. *yā śalī, yā śalī...*

The first example of a cradle song was recited to me by Maryam B. In the first verse the mother addresses the child and in the others the son addresses his mother:

<i>saśdūdī</i>	<i>kammil w-dūm śalayy</i>
<i>faħħik yā wālittī</i>	<i>kānni g<sup>i</sup>śad-lik rāši ħayy</i>
<i>l-axwālī mā-taḥ<sup>2</sup>xšī</i>	<i>w-l-aśmāmi mā-tižžaddī</i>

"I am so happy! (God), make it [i.e. the joy] turn out well  
and stay with me!

Your delight, O my mother, is if I [lit.: my head] stay alive for you.

You won't become worthless to my maternal uncles, and there will be no need for you to ask my paternal uncles for help". [That is: As long as her son is alive he will provide and care for her.]

ŚĒša sung the following cradle song for her eldest son. From the repetitions and the confused mingling of verses it is clear that she is not really familiar anymore with the words and the proper order of the verses:

<i>śal-aktāfa tā-yśallīnī</i>	<i>əb-baḥnūša tā-yraffidnī</i>
<i>w-yā saśdi māḡa śindī</i>	<i>anē ŧamni il-mōla min śinda</i>
<i>saśdūdī saśdūdī</i>	<i>takbar yā ġāli wildī</i>

<sup>28</sup> For examples see al-Marzūgī 1967, pp. 226f. and al-Marzūgī 1984, pp. 18-21.

*ʕal-aktāfak tā-ʕallīnī*                      *w-fi-l-ḥazza tā-nalga l-ḡālī*  
*w-yāxiḍ uxayyāni bnāt ʕalī*      *w-ḡāl farḥik yā wālittī*  
*w-l-axwāli mā-tiżżaddī*              *kān ḡʕad-lik rāši ḥayy*

“He will lift me onto his shoulders.

He will give me his *barnūš* to make me sit comfortably.

O my luck! How many things I have,  
 with which God has endowed me from Himself.

I am happy, I am so happy! May you grow up, my precious son.

You will lift me onto your shoulders. In distress I will find the precious one  
 (ready to be there for me).

He will marry a girl from the Awlād ʕAlī-clan who are my brothers.

He said: That is your delight, O my mother.

You won’t need to ask my paternal uncles for help if I stay alive for you”.

The following two lullabies were recited by Fayza. In the second of them she mentions the name of her oldest son Šākīr:

*saʕdūdī saʕdūdī*                      *ʕāš rāšak w-ḡʕad-li ḥayy*  
*saʕdi w-ʕṭāni rabbī*                      *w-yiʕdilha lā mālat bī*  
*ykabbir-li ballat rīḡī<sup>29</sup>*                      *aḷḷāh mʕalli ʕa-n-n’bī*

“I am happy, I am so happy!

May you [lit.: your head] live and stay alive for me.

I am happy that God gave (him) to me,  
 so that he will balance it [i.e. my life] in case it inclines with me.

May He let the one who wets my saliva [i.e. the one who appeases me, who comforts me] grow up. May God bless the Prophet”.

*saʕdūdī saʕdūdī*                      *saʕdi w-ʕṭāni rabbī*  
*ʕāš rāšak w-ḡʕad-li ḥayy*                      *aḷḷāh ykabbir šākīr wildī*

“I am happy, I am so happy! I am happy that God gave (him) to me.

May you live and stay alive for me. May God let my son Šākīr grow up”.

Al-Marzūḡī 1967, pp. 226f. (and also Boris 1951, pp. 160f. with slight modifications) cites the following lullaby, which has very close similarities to the formulas used in the above transcribed and translated poems:

*zēna lī zēna lī*                      *yā saʕdi ʕṭāni rabbī*  
*žāb-li wlad ywannis fī*                      *in-šāḷḷa takbar yā kabdī*  
*yusfur l-il-gamḥ it-tallī*                      *w-yžīb ḥmūla l-īdayy*  
*ḡnḡawwig ummi w-axwātī*                      *w-žīrāni w-min lāyid bī*  
*yraḥḥinni mā-yxallīnī*                      *žimla l-ʕāgil l-ʕrkūbī*  
*fōg aktāfa yʕallīnī*                      *wēn il-waʕr yḡawwid bī*  
*b-il-marḡūm yfarrišnī*                      *w-b-il-barnūš yḡaṭṭīnī*  
*ḡāl farḥēk yā mmīmī*                      *kān ḡʕad-lik rāši ḥayy*  
*l-axwāli mā-tiżżaddī*                      *rabbī ʕṭāni ykammil-lī*

“His beauty is for me, his beauty belongs to me.

I am happy that God gave (him) to me.

<sup>29</sup> See Boris 1958, p. 44: *bal’ rīḡi* “rassurer, consoler, réjouir celui qui est inquiet, triste, affligé”.

He brought me a boy who keeps me company.  
 God willing, you will grow up, my son.  
 May he travel to get wheat from the High Tell and bring me its loads.  
 I let my mother and my sisters taste it,  
 and my neighbours and the people that surround me.  
 He takes me to the desert; he does not leave me alone.  
 His calm camel is for me to ride on.  
 He lifts me onto his shoulders. Where there is hard and dangerous ground, he  
 guides it [the camel] with me.  
 He spreads a woven carpet (where I sit) and covers me with a *barnūs*.  
 He said: It is your delight, O my dear mother, if I stay alive for you.  
 You don't need to ask my maternal uncles for help. God gave me (His benefits)  
 and may make it turn out well for me". [So that her son can make her wishes  
 come true]<sup>30</sup>.

**Final remarks:**

As has been stated by many (particularly female) researchers (such as Abu-Lughod 1986, pp. 30f. and al-Ghadeer 2009, pp. 9-23), women's poetry, although comprising many different genres, is a highly neglected but also a highly interesting field of Arabic Studies and oral literature. In addition to the categories of songs described above, *šāšūra*-songs and lamentations are in the women's domain of poetry. For the former see Ritt-Benmimoun 2011, pp. 264-267, al-Marzūgī 1967, pp. 218-224, and al-Marzūgī 1984, pp. 195-206; and for the latter see al-Marzūgī 1967, pp. 228-230. Nor do I have space here to discuss songs that are sung while weaving, while grinding, or in connection with other activities. For examples see [http://marsad.blogspot.com/2009/12/blog-post\\_29.html](http://marsad.blogspot.com/2009/12/blog-post_29.html); Louis 1979, p. 302 (for grinding) and Marçais & Guïga 1925, pp. 108-115 (also for grinding).

Since this poetry is not considered very prestigious, it has not received much attention. Recently a book which deals with the songs of the Bedouin women of Central Tunisia has been published: Naṣīma Ġānimī and Aḥmad al-Xaṣxūšī, *Aġānī an-nisā? fī barr al-hamāmma* (Tūnis, 2010). Unfortunately I was not able to obtain it in time for consideration in this study.

The differences between these short poems sung and recited by women and the long poems called *qašīdas* by the Bedouins, which are mainly composed by men, are obvious. The *qašīdas* are more prestigious and thus have been written down and collected in so-called *dīwāns*. Their often quite sophisticated and elaborate verse presupposes a good deal of education. In this Bedouin society women have been less educated than men, and even now the majority of the older women are still illiterate. Thus the verses and poems composed by women remain a strictly oral domain. In this poetry the stress is on what is said, not how it is said. It is a means for expressing joy as well as sorrow, and serves the women as a faithful companion in

<sup>30</sup> Boris 1951, pp. 160f. also transcribed and translated this lullaby that, in his text, was sung by a woman who was breast-feeding her baby. For its translation into French see p. 175. Other lullabies for girls and for boys in Southern Tunisia (but actually without specifying where exactly) can be found in Louis 1979, pp. 292-295; lullabies from various regions of the Maghreb in Sonneck 1902, pp. 160-162 (translation in Sonneck 1904, pp. 271-274).

daily life as well as for festivities. It is a field that concerns only women and to which men have had little or no access or input. Whereas men are presently trying to fit their poems into the digital age (many poets of *qasīdas* are presenting their poems on the internet and TV)<sup>31</sup>, the development of traditional women's poetry seems to head into the opposite direction. Young women are still very closely tied to their houses and families, but consider themselves much more modern than their mothers and grandmothers. Thus as they have abandoned traditional activities like weaving, they are doing the same with the short poems and songs that have been presented here.

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<sup>31</sup> See Ritt-Benmimoun *in press*, and Ritt-Benmimoun 2009.



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<http://www.marsad.blogspot.com/> (blog from the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2009):  
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