

From Mud to Music: The Production and Uses of Clay Drums in Morocco

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Abstract

Clay drums are the most common musical instrument in Morocco. They are frequently found in households and are played not only in some of the most important private celebrations, but are also present in an enormous variety of musical contexts and diverse musical genres. These membranophones show a striking formal continuity with Medieval Islamic drums of the Iberian Peninsula, therefore, an ethnoarchaeological study was carried out in Morocco in order to better understand the Iberian archaeological findings. However, the research unveiled the remarkable contemporary phenomenon of the mass production of clay drums in modern Morocco.

Dal fango alla musica: produzione e uso dei tamburi di creta in Marocco. I tamburi di creta sono lo strumento più diffuso in Marocco. Si ritrovano spesso nelle abitazioni e sono suonati non solo in alcune delle più importanti feste private, ma anche in una grande varietà di contesti musicali e in diversi generi musicali. Considerato che questi membranofoni mostrano una impressionante continuità con i tamburi islamici medievali della Penisola Iberica, è stato condotto uno studio etnoarcheologico in Marocco al fine di comprendere meglio i ritrovamenti archeologici iberici. La ricerca ha rivelato il significativo fenomeno contemporaneo della produzione di massa di tamburi di creta nel Marocco di oggi.

Film: *Tarija: from mud to music*, 19', 2019.



FIGURE 1. Screenshot from *Tarija: from mud to music* showing the construction of a *t'arija*.

Clay drums from al-Andalus constitute the largest corpus of archaeological musical instruments found so far in the Iberian Peninsula (from 8th to 15th centuries), and it is one of the largest in Europe. Their geographical distribution corresponds to that of the Islamic domains. The chronologies and locations of the findings prove that they disappeared southwards following the Christianisation of the Iberian territories. These membranophones are pottery single headed goblet drums measuring between 8 cm and 32 cm high (Bill *et al.* 2013). Their sizes and shapes are very similar to the modern Maghrebian examples. The archaeological contexts tend to indicate that these drums were relatively common, not considered luxury or valuable items, and were produced in regular potters' workshops. In contrast with the important number of archaeological findings, written Islamic medieval musical treatises remain silent about these instruments and many questions regarding their uses, functions, and symbolic meanings remain unanswered. Moreover, the instruments have completely vanished from Iberian musical traditions, while very similar instruments are still highly popular and widely used 14 km across the Gibraltar strait.

Clay drums are the most common musical instrument in Morocco. They are frequently found in households and are played not only in some of the most important private celebrations, but are also present in an enormous variety of musical contexts and diverse musical genres. From small drums of only some centimetres high such as the *t'arija* for the little children during 'Āšūrā' (Fig. 2), to the large *harrāz* of the Ḥamādša confraternity (Fig. 3), the drums are mass-produced and sold in millions every year, to



FIGURE 2. *Ta'rija-s* of different sizes in Ahmed Rougan's workshop (Sebt Douib).



FIGURE 3. A member of the ḥamādša confraternity playing a *barrāz* in Marrakech, during a visit of the king Mohamed VI (December 2016).

the point of becoming a noteworthy element of Moroccan musical identity. One of the most remarkable features of these instruments, along with frame drums, is their close connection with feminine performative and ritual contexts. These “feminine” performa-

tive contexts not only include adult women, but also children, both female and male, and gender fluid individuals, all in the margins of the strict heteropatriarchal society of Morocco. This significant relationship between female performers and clay drums shows a noticeable continuity that is demonstrated by archaeological, historical and ethno-historical sources (Jiménez and Bill 2012, 2016).

In order to have a deeper insight into the interpretation of the medieval drums, an ethnoarchaeological study of the instruments in modern Morocco was carried out in the frame of the international exchange project Marie Curie DRUM – Disguise Ritual Music (2013-2017), under the direction of Prof. Nico Staiti of the University of Bologna. This research explored the solid association of drums and ritual practices through the archaeological record, the historical sources, the contemporary practices, and the individual experiences of women in modern Morocco. It attempted to show both the continuities and changes of the performative contexts of the clay drums and the mentalities linked to this material culture. The study of material culture combined ethnoarchaeological as well as audiovisual ethnomusicology methodologies. However, it also revealed a very interesting modern musical phenomenon: the mass production of a traditional musical instrument in the main pottery centres of modern Morocco.

The markets in Āšūrā: the mass production of an "insignificant" instrument?

The main pottery centres of Morocco in Safi, Sebt Douib (Azemour), Fez and Marrakech currently produce enormous quantities of different types of clay drums throughout the year. Despite the fact that these membranophones are used in different performative contexts (weddings and other private celebrations, spirit-possession trance dances, and both traditional and urban musics), this mass production is mainly aimed at supplying markets and supermarkets for the celebration of 'Āšūrā'. 'Āšūrā' is a festivity of the Islamic calendar corresponding to the 10th day of Muharram. During these days, where a voluntary fasting is followed, men and women visit the cemeteries and give charity. Children spray water to passers-by and receive presents in the form of pocket money, toys, clay drums, and frame drums. People buy, eat and donate dry fruits (*fakia*, see Fig. 4), dry meat and sweets, fire petards and jump bonfires. Children and women play and dance to clay drums and tambourines so as to accompany the 'Āšūrā' repertoire. This festivity is highly complex and not exclusively associated with religious beliefs, but also with transgressions of boundaries, goods distribution, children inclusion, and social cohesion. It is also a time where the gates of heaven are open and the spirits are released, thus making magic and spirit rituals more powerful. Besides, at times, women perform spirit-possession trance dances. Additionally, 'Āšūrā' is regarded dangerous by many, as female magic is more powerful during these days, with women having the opportunity to obtain what they wish through the use of spells, hence ritually challenging the male domination (Maarouf 2009).

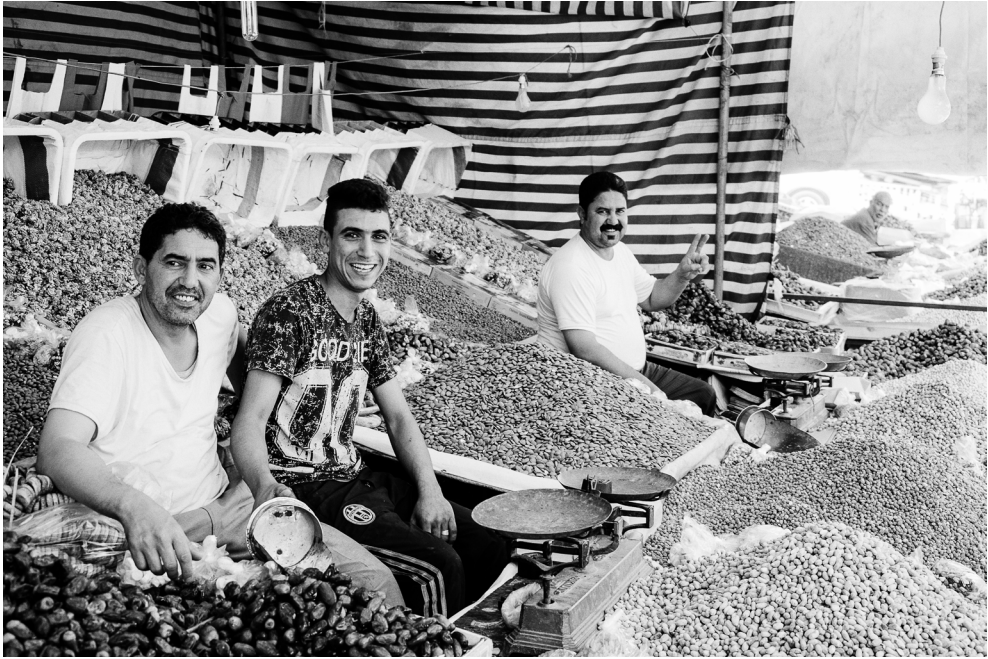


FIGURE 4. Some of the multiple market stalls with nuts and dry fruits (*fakia*) that appear during 'Āšūrā' in Safi.

Among the instruments that accompany these rituals and celebrations, a small, apparently insignificant two or three snare clay drum – the *tārīja* – is the most relevant. Some days before 'Āšūrā', all the street markets and supermarkets are flooded with these small instruments. These small drums are doubtlessly the symbol of 'Āšūrā'. Drum decoration changes every year, so consumers are tempted to buy a new specimen, even if they may already have one at home (although past year instruments are most likely to be broken). These little drums also seem to embody some of the traditions of the feast. Their different sizes may be regarded as a metaphor of the transformation of the female body as well as the belonging of the children to the feminine sphere. We were explained that the smallest drums, sometimes only five or six cm high, without snares and with little or no acoustic use, represent the babies, who are not yet able to speak or sing. Other sizes and shapes seem to represent children and women. Male children traditionally stop playing the instrument when they reach their teenage years, as they do not belong to the feminine sphere anymore. Teenager and adult women, on the other side, would continue to play the *gwāl* (the name given to the biggest type) on different ritual occasions such as weddings and a number of other family festivities.

Other than this symbolic meaning, the musical role of the *tārīja* in the percussion ensembles (which in this festivity may include frame drums, metallic idiophones and even *darbukas*) may seem simple, but it is a crucial musical element that vertebrates the

rhythm and shapes the acoustic distinctive trait of the repertoire. The transcriptions below are a schematic approximation of the polyrhythm played all day long during this festivity, both in public and private spaces. In Fig. 5 is a rough transcription of what children are playing in the streets of Biada neighbourhood (at 16'56" in the film, see below), while the sequence transcribed in Fig. 6 (at 16'18") allows to better perceive the upbeat pattern as performed in the market by the passing-by foreground woman that joins in (see "*bendir* 4" in the transcription; in the sequence transcribed in Fig. 5 that same pattern was barely audible and performed by the hand-clapping of the background girl). The pattern represented in Fig. 6 also shows possible variations to the polyrhythm, being the most evident the three-four time played by the *bendir* in the background ("*bendir* 3"), in a superposition of binary and ternary meters characteristic to these musics. The transcription in Fig. 7A offers our first perception of what some teenagers, sons of our friend Milloud Moushim, potter and musician, are playing in the market (at 16'35"). At first, we tended to measure the structure following "*bendir* 5" strokes on the centre of the membrane, but we soon noticed that with its frame strokes the musician was doubling the *ta'rija's* rhythmic pattern, now apparently displaced in the measure. Soon after, the *darbuka* player (performing the part of "*bendir* 2" we have seen in Fig. 5) started to mark clearly its main accent by hitting the centre of the hide in what would be the fifth quaver of the measure. Fig. 7B shows the same musical pattern, this time organized around *darbuka's* accents: the result is, once again, the same polyrhythm we have been hearing all day long, but with new variations played by the *bendir* strokes. Whether it represents at best what is being performed might be arguable – as well as could be considered the transcription in a twelve-eight time instead of six-eight time – it clearly shows what our interlocutors told us every time: "that is the rhythm played by the *ta'rija*". This same polyrhythmic structure can be heard, with variations and perhaps less clearly because of the metallic idiophones (in this case, a metallic tray), at the end of the film during the female performance (17'10"). At times, it is possible to clearly perceive, besides the pervasive quavers pattern now performed by the metallic tray, the *ta'rija* rhythm and the upbeat claps, being the three, in our opinion, the most defining elements of this repertoire.

The *ta'rija* is also becoming a marketing symbol of 'Āšūrā', and this re-signification is changing the traditional uses. In the upper and middle classes, it is even being played by men and women indistinctly in parties that interestingly have lost most of symbolic and ritual meaning of the original celebration. There are even multiple *ta'rija* android apps, with new ones appearing every season. The instrument has become a commercial emblem of modern 'Āšūrā'. Enterprises such as supermarkets and phone companies announce special offers during these days using images of the drums. This modern conception is stripping this celebration away from some of its main functions, such as the boundary challenging character and the magic and ritual essence, thus transforming it into a commercial celebration, this being comparable to the transformation of Christmas

Figure 5 shows four staves of musical notation in 6/8 time. The top staff, labeled 'Tarija', features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff, 'Bendir 1', has a simple rhythmic pattern of quarter notes. The third staff, 'Bendir 2', consists of a continuous eighth-note accompaniment. The bottom staff, 'Claps', shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with rests.

FIGURE 5. Rhythmical pattern performed at ca. 16'56".

Figure 6 shows three staves of musical notation in 6/8 time. The top staff, 'Tarija', is identical to the one in Figure 5. The middle staff, 'Bendir 3', has a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes. The bottom staff, 'Bendir 4', has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with rests.

FIGURE 6. Rhythmical pattern performed at ca. 16'18".

Figure 7A shows two staves of musical notation in 6/8 time. The top staff, 'Bendir 5 centre', includes a 'frame' marking and features a complex melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The bottom staff, 'Darbuka', has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents.

FIGURE 7A. Rhythmical pattern performed at ca. 16'35".

Figure 7B shows two staves of musical notation in 6/8 time. The top staff, 'Bendir 5 centre', includes a 'frame' marking and features a complex melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The bottom staff, 'Darbuka', has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents.

FIGURE 7B. Rhythmical pattern performed at ca. 16'35", alternative transcription.

من الأربعاء 7 إلى 25 أكتوبر 2015
Du mercredi 7 au 25 octobre 2015

عاشوراء
اهدايا وافاجات

Poupée 28cm
2 modèles
للبنية
dh 25

Tablette Samsung Galaxy TAB E
SAMSUNG
3G
Qual Core
Android 4.4.4
RAM 1.5G
لوحه إلكترونية
dh 2999

Voiture
Lamborghini
avec télécommande
Audi R8
للبنية
dh 69,90

Marjane
j'y vais, j'y gagne!

مرجان
الربح في الجودة والائتمان!

FIGURE 8. Sha'ba (Safi) during 'Āšūrā' (October 2017), one of the few dates when potter's workshops are closed.

traditions in Christian countries. Special offers on toys and 'Āšūrā' food are advertised by the main supermarket chains and this "Christmas strategy" is even affecting the figure of Baba 'Ayshur, a mythical old man invoked in the female 'Āšūrā' repertoire. This traditional character is currently being transformed into the Moroccan Santa Claus, who, hired by supermarkets and playing to the rhythm of a clay drum, attracts children to the consumption of toys (Fig. 8). Complaints arise of this strategy of creating a "Moroccan Christmas" with a clear commercial scope, a renewed tradition that has nothing to do with Islam, nor with the traditional 'Āšūrā'. However, others regard it as an attempt to avoid the disappearance of Moroccan traditions and identities by changing some formal aspects in order to adapt them to the modern times. 'Āšūrā' 2017 witnessed a strong media campaign against the lighting of bonfires in the streets and also warning the population of the dangers of black magic. Be that as it may, this transformation of 'Āšūrā' into an exclusively "Christmas-like" children amusement is probably preventing women



FIGURE 9. Front page of the 2015 ‘Āšūrā’ catalogue of the supermarket chain Marjane featuring Baba ‘AyShur. In the following link, a TV advertisement of the supermarket chain Marjane of the same year: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UDers-bEAA>.

from celebrating an occasion on which they appropriated the public space and ritually trespassed moral and cultural boundaries, and thus, taking away from women a chance to challenge the patriarchal authority and even coping with it.

Filming clay drums: from mud to music

To the date, we have studied the production process in multiple locations from north to south, but in this research film we focus in Sha’ba (Safi pottery complex, see Fig. 9) and in Sebt Douib, a village between al-Jadida and Azemour, where we have spent more fieldwork time. We have spent approximately three months spanned between 2016 and 2017, although our relationship with the people that have helped us to understand this phenomenon has been sustained in the distance. If it is widely asserted that fieldwork borders are now blurred thanks to new technologies, in the case of our Moroccan friends is even truer.

Sha’ba pottery complex is one of the most important centres of ceramic production in Morocco. Until 2018, tens of workshops and wood-burning kilns were active all year round. Many of these workshops solely produce clay drums. This pottery centre has now disappeared. Only very few potters and workers remain, as most of them have been moved to a new industrial complex with fuel-burning kilns. Sha’ba is about to be completely destroyed. In a near future we would like to visit our potter friends to see how their life conditions have changed. Sha’ba was located near Biada, a neighbourhood home to most potters and workers. Workshops and kilns were outside, surrounded by plants and water. The new industrial complex is far from Biada, and we suspect modernization has not come without a prize. Some of the potters in Sha’ba have been even

thinking to move their business to Sebt Douib. This village (the other location of our research film) and its surroundings hosts at least forty families who are dedicated to the production of clay drums. Most of these families claim to have common ancestors, and many have worked in the production of drums for at least two generations. The village is well known for the quality of their clay drums. Intermediaries go to the village in order to acquire instruments, at times even unfinished, with the aim of preparing them for 'Āšūrā' and further distributing them in *zouks* and supermarkets all over the country.

From the early days of the research, we decided to document the impressive phenomenon unveiling before us: the mass production and consumption of clay drums in Morocco. Our research film shows a small part of this ongoing work, as it is aimed at summarizing some of the main stages of this process: the obtaining of the raw materials, the clay preparation, the construction of the drums in the potter's wheel, some decoration techniques, the assembly of the snares and the lamb hide (goat hide is only used when professional musicians prepare the instrument), their commercialisation and, finally, a small glance at some of its uses during 'Āšūrā'. Most of the time, potters and workers were enthusiast about being portrayed and recorded in camera, even more so after receiving their printed photos as a sign of gratitude and reciprocity. We were blessed with the friendship of people from Biada neighbourhood and Sebt Douib, without whom the access to filming most of the workshops would have been impossible. We have received also some positive feedback from locals and potters. Some people appreciated our interest in the subject, as their task is often little valued by local authorities and hidden to tourists. Other people are also happy that Sha'ba, now in process of dismantling, is portrayed in our recordings. Still, we are very conscious of our privilege as western scholars in post colonial Morocco, and we have tried hard not to abuse some of the benefits of our *status*.

Because of our late involvement with the research project and time limitations due to the Spanish university teaching schedule, we could not plan the research extensively. This is particularly visible in the film editing structure, where chronological and geographical jumps displace viewers back and forth in order to show or suggest the different steps involved in clay drums production. Most of the shots were handheld and not previously arranged, with the exception of the setting of the drum hides, which, unluckily, we could not have filmed otherwise. However, the girls in charge of such operation were happy to show us, as it was a job meant to be done anyway. Our priority has always been to disturb workers as little as possible during their activities.

We recorded the whole process with an Olympus EM5-markII mirrorless camera, sporting a zoom *f*/2.8 lens with a focal length equivalent to 24-80mm, and a shotgun Sennheizer MKE 400 mounted on it. Occasionally, as during some *shikhat-s* performance, we recorded audio on a Zoom H4n using its internal microphones. We find that, overall, the quality obtained with this combo was acceptable for our purposes and small enough to not represent an obstacle for us and for the people that agreed to take

part in it. The most remarkable limitations were a very perceptible hiss generated by camera's preamp (reduced in postproduction) as well as sensor readout problems when panning or tilting. All shots were recorded with low contrast in order to maximize dynamic range and were not graded for this publication as we do not consider the film a finished product. It is important to highlight that, for us, documentation was the final goal. Even though we plan to eventually shoot a documentary film, we were conscious that, given the research timeframe, this time it would have been impossible.

Regarding edition, we opted to find an equilibrium between an observational style, which we prefer, and an editing pace able to evoke, in roughly twenty minutes, the transformation of mud into music. For this reason, we avoided voiceover and decided to use diegetic sound for every shot. We believe this choice allowed us to suggest through soundscapes some of the contrasts characteristic to modernization and resignification of clay drums in contemporary Morocco. We have also avoided academic transliterations of the Arabic terms, for reasons of legibility.

We have chosen to blur the faces of the children that were not our friends'. We leave the adult faces visible. We have never hidden the cameras and we assume that adults know that films can be nowadays available from all corners of the world. In fact, we have several shots of hands of potters that did not want to be recognised in film. We have not used footage of people concerned about being uploaded in platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

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