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**Title:**

Black Spirits, White Saints: Sub-Saharan Music, Spirit Possession and the Geo-Cultural Imagination in North Africa

**Summary:**

In Tunisia, descendents of slaves, migrants, pilgrims, and other members of the sub-Saharan diaspora developed a healing music called *stambeli*. From without, *stambeli* is understood as 'African', meaning non-Tunisian, sub-Saharan, and Other. From within, however, *stambeli* ritually negotiates the encounter between sub-Saharan and North Africa by invoking Black Spirits (sub-Saharan) and White Saints (North African), who heal and make their presence known through ritualised trance. My research will finalise my ethnomusicological fieldwork on *stambeli* in order to complete a monograph on music, spirit possession, and the geo-cultural imagination in North Africa, and to produce the first audio recordings of *stambeli*.

**Outline of Research:**

My proposed research seeks to finalise my ethnomusicological fieldwork on *stambeli*, the spirit possession music associated with slaves, their descendents, and other members of the sub-Saharan diaspora in Tunisia. The purpose of the music is to heal humans by invoking the aid of a wide variety of individualised, named sub-Saharan Spirits and North African Muslim Saints who make their presence known through ritualized trance and possession. My account of *stambeli* is shaped by two related claims: first, *stambeli* was never only of, and only for, the sub-Saharan community; rather, there has always been a strong demand for this ritual music among Arab Tunisians. This mixing of black and white bodies, consequently, has made *stambeli* a highly problematic presence in Tunisian society. Secondly, although it is, in part, the otherness of *stambeli* that has made it so desired by Tunisians, the deep structure of the music ritually negotiates that difference by charting geo-cultural *connections* between sub-Saharan spirit possession practices and North African Islam. *Stambeli*, I argue, is not a ritual that is about sealing a black subculture off from white society; rather, it ritually mediates the geo-cultural encounter between what is locally understood as Black (sub-Saharan) and White (North African) in Tunisia.

As the Tunisian state continues to situate its future in European terms (through its high modernist development programmes) and its past in Middle Eastern terms (an Arab-Islamic heritage), it distances itself from continental Africa. In such politicised contexts, the prismatic nature of ritual and its music can provide one of the most illuminating perspectives on the performance of counter-narratives that acknowledge suppressed histories such as Tunisia's sub-Saharan diaspora and the violence of the slave trade that gave it birth.

The lens of spirit possession offers particularly vivid insights onto diasporic identity in North Africa. By considering as valid and important the participants' claims about the agency of spirits—rather than getting bogged down in speculation over the musical mechanics of trance production—I am able to delve deeply into the symbolic importance of the categories of sub-Saharan/Black and North African/White and their manipulation in ritual.

## Research Questions

The music of stambeli communicates with two categories of the invisible world: the White Saints and the Black Spirits. The White Saints are associated with North Africa (known in local Arabic as “land of the whites”) while the Black Spirits are understood as originating in sub-Saharan Africa (known as “land of the blacks”). The Spirits and Saints (literally) embody the encounter between sub-Saharan and North Africa, and it is through ritual music that this encounter is performed and reworked. Each Spirit and each Saint is identified with and summoned by its own specific tune (*nūba*; pl. *nuwāyib*). A stambeli ritual entails the successive invocation of numerous Spirits and Saints through music, involving up to several dozen spirits in a single performance.

I have identified two specific components of the repertoire that require further study in order to make a comprehensive depiction of stambeli and a compelling argument about its ritual efficacy:

1. There are two local Tunisian Saints (Sayda Manubiyya and Sidi Belhassan), who are not understood as part of the stambeli pantheon, but who nonetheless have stambeli songs. Both Saints have their own musics and possession practices that attract a clientele similar to that of stambeli. Their inclusion in stambeli ritual suggests that stambeli triangulates with two other important local possession practices. I will learn how to perform them and how to situate them within the stambeli ritual structure, and investigate why these two Saints, and not any of a multitude of other local Saints, have been entered into the stambeli system.
2. One of the least understood stambeli practices is the music of the *debdabu* percussion ensemble. This music is performed only once a year, at the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Sidi Frej. Of all stambeli musical practices, the *debdabu* is the most easily traceable to observed sub-Saharan African practices (ancient Mali). However, the *debdabu* is not performed for the Black Spirits. Rather, it is performed in honour of Sidi Abdul-Qader, the most powerful of the White Saints. Is this yet

another instance of stambeli blurring the boundaries between “black” and “white”?

Finally, I will assess to what extent this nuanced ritual knowledge is disseminated to participants and audiences. While stambeli still remains largely underground, there has been a handful of public concerts in recent years. How have these been received? Have they merely reified the public’s racialized perspective of the sub-Saharan diaspora? Or has the ritual performance of stambeli contributed to a public rethinking of national identity—one that does not exclude the sub-Saharan connections? This question requires interviews, both formal and informal, with participants, as well as surveys of Tunisian journalistic literature in French and Arabic.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The main outcome of the project will be a detailed monograph on stambeli. The second outcome will be an audio compact disc recording. Rather than include an accompanying CD to the monograph, I have chosen to produce the audio material to submit to a major distributor of ethnomusicological or world music recordings (e.g., Ocora or Smithsonian Folkways). This will enable the music and its significance in diaspora identity (to be made clear in the accompanying liner notes, which I will author) to reach another, wider audience.

### **Research Context**

For centuries, North Africa has been a destination for countless displaced sub-Saharan Africans, most of whom were captured slaves forced across the Sahara. Once in North Africa, they formed networks of houses that offered support for other migrants and freed slaves by providing an environment in which they could find others who shared their language, customs, and beliefs. It was within this network that stambeli emerged. Each house corresponded to a political, ethnic, or linguistic sodality in sub-Saharan Africa. My research site is Dar Barnu (lit. the ‘Bornu House’) which, as its name suggests, congregated people from Bornu region of sub-Saharan Africa. It is the last surviving vestige of the network in Tunisia. Abdul-Majid Barnawi, the head of the household and leader of its stambeli troupe, is over eighty years old and is the last of his generation of stambeli elders. He has been providing my ritual-musical training and is the only member of the community who can speak authoritatively about the history of stambeli in Tunisia.

The magnitude and impact of the trans-Saharan slave trade and the resulting sub-Saharan diaspora in North Africa have only recently begun to be addressed by scholars. This project will provide a historical sketch of system of communal houses established by the members of the diaspora, and will therefore be of interest to historians, anthropologists, and other scholars interested in diaspora and identity in North Africa. It will also constitute the first in-depth ethnographic study of the main cultural and economic activity of the houses, namely stambeli. As for my home discipline of ethnomusicology, this study constitutes a new approach to the study of musics of spirit possession, which is often blinded by speculation about the

production of trance states through music. Through music, the spirit possession it enables, and the discourse surrounding it, stambeli recreates its own movement—the movement of the racialized body—across the Sahara and its ensuing historical encounters in North Africa. In other words, the cultural ‘work’ of stambeli is more concerned with cultural *routes* than with cultural *roots*.

## Research Methods

My primary research method will be focused ethnography at Dar Barnu. As an adoptive member of the Dar Barnu household and apprentice to the master musician Abdul-Majid, I have internalised much of the ritual repertoire as well as discourse about music, race, and the geo-cultural imagination in Tunisia. I have now identified what ritual-musical information I need to procure, and what questions need answering by my field consultants.

## Project Management

The project is based on two research trips to Tunis to perform fieldwork at Dar Barnu. Each of these research trips will be followed up by several weeks of writing up results and preparing both the manuscript and audio CD for publication. The timeline is as follows:

February 24-March 24:	fieldwork at Dar Barnu (participation in private stambeli ceremonies, focused interviews, survey of journalistic literature, continuing ritual-musical apprenticeship)
March 25-April 24:	writing up, preparing audio tracks
July 3-August 3:	fieldwork at Dar Barnu (participation in annual pilgrimage, with emphasis on <i>debdabu</i> percussion ensemble repertoire, focused interviews, final discussions with co-participants about my findings)
August 4-September 4:	writing up, preparing audio tracks
November 15-19:	present findings at Society for Ethnomusicology conference



**Note on photo:**

Inside a stambeli spirit possession ceremony, Tunis, July 2005. Ilyas (center, wearing red fez) is possessed by one of the Royalty spirits. The *yinna* (master) Abdul-Majid (far right) leads and plays the *gumbri* (three-stringed lute) while Hafiz, Belhassan, and the principal (r-l) sing and play the *shqashiq* (iron castanets). Photo by Tola Khin.