METAL, RAP, AND ELECTRO IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY TUNISIA

A FRAGILE UNDERGROUND

Stefano Barone

Metal, Rap, and Electro in Post-revolutionary Tunisia

Metal, Rap, and Electro in Post-revolutionary Tunisia is a trip into the music scenes of Tunisia after the Arab Spring. Based on extensive field research, it explores the social life of heavy metal, rap, and electronic music in a North African country whose mass revolution of 2010/2011 led the way to a troubled and yet unique democracy. How is it to be part of a music scene in a place affected by severe inequality? How do the many conflictual souls of Tunisian Islam shape local metal, rap, and electro? What are the social and cultural stakes of music in a nation constantly represented as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East? How do music scenes articulate the complex political scenario that followed the Tunisian revolution of 2011? The book answers these questions by offering new theoretical reflections on youth cultures and popular music in a global perspective, and thus pushing the debate on "post-subcultures" and music scenes forward. At the same time, it offers a dense sociological analysis of youth and music in a country whose society, culture, religion, and politics are stakes in a historical transformation.

Stefano Barone holds a PhD in Sociology from Griffith University (Australia), and is a lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire (England). His research focuses on youth cultures and popular music in the Middle East: he investigates the fragility of youth culture-based social forms in the region, and how they relate to the local political, cultural, and social dynamics. Stefano has published on journals including the *Journal of Youth Studies*, the *British Journal for Middle Eastern Studies*, and *Politique Africaine.*

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A Fragile Underground

Stefano Barone

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To Sofiane

and all the youth in Tunisian jails.

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A note on Arabic transliterations used in the text

The transliterations of Arabic characters employed in this book are based on the two main forms of transliteration used in Tunisia. The first, more formal, uses French orthography. French is the second official language of Tunisia, and personal names, as well as city names and road signs, are usually both written in Arabic and transliterated in French. An example is the word Bouchoucha (بوشوشة), designating a neighbourhood in Tunis. In this word, the English reader has to pronounce the *ou* as *oo* (as in the word "fool"), and the *ch* as *sh* (as in the word "shine").

The other system of transliteration is called *3arabizi* or *Arabish*. 3arabizi is an Arabic/English slang mostly used in internet and cellular phone chats: its use of arithmographemes (numbers used as letters) allows users to transliterate letters of the Arabic alphabet that have no correspondent in the Latin one (Bianchi, 2012). Numbers do not transliterate the same letters all through the Arabic-speaking world: the uses of 3arabizi are, to a certain extent, incoherent. I will refer here to the 3arabizi employed by Tunisians. In the course of the book, the reader will only find three arithmographemes: the number *3* transliterates the letter ع (*'ayn*, or /ʕajn/ according to the International Phonetic Alphabet), that has to be pronounced through "a tightening of the throat resembling a light gargle" (Bianchi, 2012, p. 91). The number *7* transliterates the ح (*ha* or /ħaːʔ/ in IPA), pronounced as a heavy h. The number *9* transliterates the letter ق (*qaf* or /qa:f/ in IPA), a guttural q.

Reference

Bianchi, R. M. 2012. 3arabizi – When local Arabic meets global English, *Acta Linguistica Asiatica*, 2/1, 89–100.

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Introduction

Trash in the dustbin, clubbing stormtroopers, and a phoenix that struggles to rise again

1. Sounds from the *Underga3*

> WE REGRET TO ANNOUNCE THAT THE BAND HAS SPLIT UP!!!
> THANKS TO EVERYBODY WHO HAS BEEN SUPPORTING US ALL ALONG THESE YEARS!!!
>
> [Facebook message by the band Deadmoon, 18/10/2013. Translated from French]

After mature reflection, it's with big regret that we announce the end of the group.

We care to thank all the people who have supported and encouraged us, directly or indirectly, all along our path …

[Facebook message by the band Wrong Side Out, 07/11/2013. Translated from French]

Happy new year 2014 metalheads!!!

The band is actually on hold. I'm getting a break (and a loooooong one), and I'm sorry about that. But heck, you don't give a fuck do you?

As you can know we were working on a new material, but the sessions were stopped some months ago.

Wait. It was last year. Damn …

The reason? Bah. Who cares?

Maybe Vielikan will be stopped. Maybe the band is just getting a break. Maybe and maybe …

I'll be back guys, for some news … maybe?

Fedor

[Facebook message by the band Vielikan, 01/01/2014]

Deadmoon, Wrong Side Out, and Vielikan were three of the most incisive metal bands in Tunisia. They had built a following between the late 2000s and the early 2010s. Those years witnessed a historical transition in the small North-African country: 2011 saw the twilight of the regime of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, which had dominated Tunisia for 23 years, and the dawn of an unprecedented revolution, which sparked the so-called Arab Spring and was followed by a complicated phase of "democratisation".

When I first went to Tunisia to research local metal (from November 2010 to June 2011), Deadmoon, Wrong Side Out, and Vielikan embodied the diversity and liveliness of Tunisian metal. During that period, I saw them live several times, talked to them and got a picture of their future plans, artistic desires, and career perspectives. All had just released new music right before they disbanded: Deadmoon had published their debut EP online in 2012. Vielikan was the prominent extreme metal band in the country: it had marked the days of the revolution with *Corpses and Still No Life*, the main anthem about the Arab Spring produced within the scene. The band was now struggling to get gigs and promote their debut album "A Trapped Way for Wisdom" – furthermore, they were in the process of writing new songs. Wrong Side Out was recording and publishing their first album: indeed, their goodbye message on Facebook was accompanied by a link to the song *Singing About This World*, a last gift to their fans.

Those three bands were just the tip of an iceberg. ApostoL, Cartagena, Flagellation, Infinity, and 13 Years Later were just a few of the other groups that split up or were put on hold in the same period. Some of their members accomplished their dream of leaving Tunisia and kept on creating music from their new cities around the world. Some others re-made themselves as cover band musicians and played songs by Stevie Wonder or System of a Down in the bars of the northern *banlieue* of Tunis. Someone discovered DJing or started producing dubstep music. Somebody got married and dropped out. A few embraced Salafism, a radical current of Islam.

It is impossible to say that such a collapse of the Tunisian metal scene came out of the blue. The basic conditions of its existence had always been precarious, and the revolution was followed by a series of small losses, disappearances, and subtle signs of decay. And yet, if one looks at the time frame of the three messages above, their coincidence is striking. Why did so many bands (indeed, *nearly all* of the prominent metal bands in the country) split up at the same time? How was it possible that a music scene, however weak, had passed from feeble and yet constant presence to almost complete silence in a couple years?

This shift is all the more striking if we consider the post-revolutionary musical panorama in a broader sense. The events of 2011 had put Tunisian youth on the map, with its political struggles and cultural shout-outs. Countless journalists and academics stormed the country in order to document the revolutionary youth – the hipster cyberactivists, the angry poor males, the bearded Islamist radicals, the graffiti artists, the b-girls, the students in hijab

and Converse All Stars, the emergent political leaders, and the permanent political losers. And along with the media, there came the money. NGOs, international agencies, foreign states, and private corporations began investing in Tunisian youth, financing projects that would foster capacity building, improve the conditions of the devastated inland regions of the country, promote the rights of women and minorities. Art was often seen as a strategic weapon, especially forms of art that were most related to street culture – rap, graffiti, and breakdancing in particular. The idea that these kinds of art were inherently akin to the spirit of protest, and to the lives of disadvantaged youth, made them valuable as an alternative to the material poverty and political silence that had affected local youth for decades. This assumption did not come from nowhere: after the success of the political anthem *Rayes Lebled* and the arrest of its author, the rapper El General, in the latter days of the Ben Ali regime, rap came to be celebrated as *the* music of revolution and knew an unprecedented surge in the following years.

Upon my arrival in Tunisia, in March 2014, it was seemingly impossible to avoid listening to *Houmani*. The song, by Hamzaoui Med Amine and Kafon, kept on blasting from taxi speakers and shop radios, invading the streets. It had already received some five million views of YouTube, and its success would grow relentlessly, making it one of the strongest successes in the history of Tunisian popular music. *Houmani* focuses on the hard life of youth from the *houma* ["quarter" in Tunisian; the word mainly indicates the disadvantaged neighbourhoods], who were described through metaphors such as "Zebla fi poubella" ["trash into the dustbin"]. Therefore, the song totally fit with the post-revolutionary narrative that apparently put poor, revolutionary youth at the centre of Tunisia's national consciousness. Kafon himself – released from prison in the days of my arrival, after a ten-month sentence for minor drug offences – perfectly represented the stereotype of the Tunisian rapper from the *houma*: a boy of modest origins that was cracked down on by the police for his streetwise lifestyle and, implicitly, his art.

Barely a month before, a musical event had shaken Tunisia, seemingly inaugurating a new era in the country's pop culture and its musical (and tourist) industry. Les Dunes Electroniques [The Electronic Dunes] brought international DJs and clubbers to the desert outside Nefta, at the south-western border of the country. The festival was hosted at one of the locations where the 1977 movie *Star Wars* was filmed, and consequently the marketing of the festival borrowed the iconography of the movie, casting it into the imaginary of the Tunisian Sahara: images of the film's stormtroopers and robots dancing in the desert were key elements of the event's advertising. The festival was actively endorsed by the new "technical" government set in place after the celebrated launch of the new, democratic Tunisian Constitution, at the beginning of 2014. The new Minister of Tourism, Amel Karboul, promoted Les Dunes Electroniques as a giant party for the accomplishment of the democratic transition. The year 2013 had been shadowed by the terrorist murders of two prominent political figures and by a wave of unrest that put

the very national cohesion of Tunisia in danger. Now the risk was over: Tunisia had the most progressive constitution in the Middle East and North Africa, and nothing could stop its modern and democratic youth from celebrating. Those modern youth – the narrative went on – would naturally oppose, with their coolness and joy, the backward brutality of Islamic terrorism. While several members of the rap and electro scenes criticised *Houmani* and Les Dunes Electroniques, it was hard not to consider them as "signs of life" for these two scenes, and milestones of an interestingly shifting cultural landscape.

The pacified atmosphere of Tunis was also visible in the signs that testified to the removal of the state of emergency for the first time since 2011. No military tanks were present on the central Avenue Bourguiba anymore, but downtown Tunis still retained some barbed wire fences and a curious ambiance of suspended tension. A couple days after my arrival I attended a spectacle by the avantgarde electro musician Ynfl-x: a live sonorisation of the movie *The Seventh Seal*. Two days later an amazing performance by the electro/metal artist Fusam took place in the city centre. During the same week, I also witnessed a quite different musical event: it was The Rise of Metal II, a metal festival crowded with teenage bands and black-clad fifteen-year olds. The event had the ambition to re-establish the glory of Tunisian metal after years of decadence. Its Facebook event disclaimed:

> For All The Tunisian Metalheads. This is our second concert lml [an "emoticon" signifying the "horns" hand gesture typical to metal].
>
> After The Heinous Collaps Of Metal Music In Tunisia, We Decided To Rise The Metal Again And Forever! Because Metal Is Our Beloved Music, Metal Is Art, Metal Is Culture, Metal Is A Part Of Our Lives. We Should Fight And Rise The Metal High In This Country Because METAL Is The LAW! So, We Decided To Make This Concert As A Revenge For Our Glorious Music And It's Time To Show To People Who We Are! lml If You Are A Real Metalhead Be There!![1]

Other concerts and festivals, with a similar aim and titles such as The Phoenix, would be organised in the following months. Soon, I felt the urge of disentangling the contradictions of such a cultural scenario. What made metal decline at the same time in which rap and electro were booming? How did these processes of ebb and flow interact with the wider cultural mechanisms of post-revolutionary Tunisia?

The context and questions described above set the stage for my research on the Tunisian metal, rap, and electro scenes in 2014 and 2015. Metal, rap, and electro were commonly acknowledged to be part of the Tunisian musical "underground", or the *underga3* as it was sometimes called mixing English and Arabic. They were more or less widespread and well-known realities in the local youth environment, but they lacked the support and interest of public and private institutions working in the musical and cultural domain – ministries,

unions, labels, and the like. Members of each scene usually had some knowledge and some opinion about the other scenes. Such opinions often formed sketched *ethnosociologies* of those scenes: scenesters' efforts to the "sociological" comprehension of those scenes and their members (see Chapter 7). There existed a degree of collaboration and exchange between the scenes: electro producers sometimes worked as beatmakers for rappers; metalheads could be part of hip hop crews; and certain venues hosted patrons and shows from all the three scenes.

Moreover, some Tunisian scenesters shifted from one scene to another, following at least partially standardised paths: after 2011, metalheads in their twenties often quit metal in order to join the electro scene or the rap scene, while I never saw any examples of rappers or clubbers becoming metalheads. Although this could be seen as a global tendency, and thus not limited to the Tunisian context, such a tendency was certainly shaped by the ebb and flow of these scenes as described above, and by particular features of metal, rap, and electro in Tunisia. I will explain those features in the course of the book.

Besides these elements of continuity and integration between scenes, metal, rap, and electro were to some extent separate social worlds presenting different conditions of existence, different internal discourses, and a different interplay with the political, social, and cultural institutions of the country. Metal had been a "trendy" scene in the 2000s: the Tunisian scene had hosted some international concerts and a growing number of local bands for a while, before suffering the decline I described. Rap existed for more than ten years before the revolution: in the following years, it quickly became the most visible and popular youth culture in Tunisia. Electro enjoyed a less widespread popularity than rap, but it became a constant and growing presence after the revolution. Clubbing, which in different forms had always been a tourist attraction in the country, came to be a culturally diverse form of leisure, catering to different audiences through a varied palette of musical styles.

Each of the three scenes had to confront a complex local environment. This environment was marked by an array of specific features: the political quakes that followed a 23-year regime and a revolutionary process; the economic and social hardship of a country belonging to the global south; and the diverse cultural influences of a State situated between the Arab/Muslim world and Europe. Throughout the book, I will present the formation and reproduction of the three scenes as related to the above-cited aspects of the Tunisian environment.

2. (Post-)revolutionary dispatches

Youth cultures such as metal and rap took root in Tunisia during the early 1990s, amid the era of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali as the president of the country. Ben Ali came to power in 1987, through a coup that ousted Habib Bourguiba, the glorious *zaïm* [leader, warlord] who had guided the independence struggle against French colonialism, founded independent Tunisia, and shaped the nation through the politics of his authoritarianism.

The Ben Ali era was initially saluted as one of democratic opening and political renaissance. However, not long after his arrival, the new president reacted to the rise of an Islamic political opposition by consolidating his dominion on the country. Oppositions – in particular Ennahdha, the Islamic party – were stifled, and hundreds of their members were incarcerated and tortured (Perkins, 2014). Along the 1990s, the Ben Ali regime configured a control on the country that was at the same time subtle and brutal. Police, and the structures of the ruling party – the RCD (*Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique*; Constitutional Democratic Rally) – became omnipresent. Whoever needed an economic benefit, a favour, the bypassing as well as the full application of law, had to pass through the RCD. At the same time, this network of clienteles functioned as a powerful information gatherer for the regime. In sum, these features made it the veritable *mediator* of Tunisian society, which could promote obedient conducts and easily repress opponents through the lever of violence and, more often, through obliteration and boycott of their social life (Hibou, 2006).

According to scholar Béatrice Hibou, economy was a crucial instrument for this role of the Ben Ali regime. "Creative" manipulation of economic figures fostered the idea of a "Tunisian economic miracle": international organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank, the United States and the European Union praised Tunisia as an apt pupil of liberal globalisation. At the same time, these international allies closed an eye on the tortures and freedom denials of the regime, which were seen as a residual evil that the constant reform path of the country would erase in its steady march toward reform and democracy. The play on figures was just one of the economic tools used by the regime in producing internal and external consent. It worked along with other economic levers, such as the above-mentioned client networks established by the party-State, and the role of bank credit in sustaining consuming lifestyles and, at the same time, subjecting citizens to political governance. As noted by Hibou, the Ben Ali system did not solely rest on coercion, yet it exerted power through a sort of voluntary servitude: the dominated had an interest in safeguarding domination. This interest took the shape of a "security pact": a promise of safety from danger (be it Islamic terrorism or everyday crime), social security, consumption, and modernity that rested on the omnipresence of the State and its penetration within economy and society. Ben Ali's family, and a small clique of cronies, had the lion's share of this system, infiltrating every significant economic activity with mafia-like rapacity.

The cracks in the security pact, its limited inclusiveness, and its unsustainability became all of a sudden evident on the 17 December 2010, when Tarek Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire.

Bouazizi was an informal street vendor from Sidi Bouzid, a city in the dispossessed Tunisian inland. When police sequestered his fruit and vegetable cart and humiliated him, he reacted by immolating himself. A wave of protest followed Bouazizi's act, growing bigger and bigger as the disadvantaged