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Andalusian Strophic Poetry Between the Spoken and the Written: The Case of the Moroccan Andalusian Music

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Muwashshah

Was the Andalusian muwashshab originally intended to be sung? Whatever one believes about this proposition, it is certain that at some stage in history composers began to write songs using muwashshabāt. When this happened, the demands of musical composition and performance, and the social contexts in which they take place, became interwoven with the already complex web of oral and written modes of poetic production and presentation. Mixed orality, the persistence of oral processes within literate discourse, was a feature of all aspects of medieval Arabic literature, both scholarly and poetic, and in many cases it has resulted today in a proliferation of manuscripts, which often present us with quite different versions of a given text. But what might be said of the modern context? What happens when old, often arcane poetic material that has been set to music and handed down both orally and in writing, is then “frozen” in printed form? Do we still find traces of oral and written influences in the texts, evidence that might tell us something about the role played by these two modes of transmission within that musical tradition itself? This paper discusses one of the modern descendants of the musical culture of al-Andalus as a tentative step toward answering questions such as these.

Moroccan Andalusian music, usually referred to as al-āla (“instrumental music”), contains examples of textual variations that recur throughout the printed corpus, some of which may be seen as the result of oral and literate processes coexisting within the musical tradition. Through examining modern anthologies/songbooks current among āla musicians, I want to suggest a simple typology of the changes which the processes of composing, singing and oral transmission have produced in the written text.

We may begin with a note of caution to avoid certain assumptions about the nature of the poetic contents of al-āla. Both Western and Arab scholars trace the roots of al-āla to the musical genre that emerged among the aristocracy in ninth-century al-Andalus. Yet the precise relationship of many of the poems in the tradition to the classic strophic forms of al-Andalus is far from clear. Despite what some Western scholars suggest, the muwashshab is not the only poetic genre found in al-āla. In fact, there are at least four different types of poem in the tradition, not all of them strophic in nature.
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Of course, we do indeed find songs (sanā‘ī, sing. sanā‘, lit. “work of art”) that contain portions of muwashshahāt of Andalusian origin, some of which belong to well-known wasḥshāḥūn of al-Andalus such as Ibn Sahl (d. 1251) and ash-Shushtarī (d. 1269). We also find portions of azjāl, some of them belonging to Andalusian poets such as Ibn Zamrak (d. 1393). In addition there are sanā‘ī of a strophic genre composed in Moroccan colloquial Arabic called barwala, and selections of two to six lines from non-strophic poetry, some of them by Mashriqi poets such as Abū Nuwās (d. 813 or 815) and Abū Tammām (d. 845 or 846).

However, when we consider specifically the Andalusian strophic poetry in al-āla, we encounter significant problems with terminology. Apart from sanā‘ī whose authors are known, we may identify two other categories whose relationship to the Andalusian genres is not so clear. We find tawāshīh and azjāl in the anthologies which plainly answer to the same complicated metrical rules that have been the subject of debate among Western scholars, and often they are displayed on the page in a manner that reflects this, with lines of varying length sometimes broken into several segments. Many such sanā‘ī are of unknown authorship. Alongside these however, the tradition is awash with poems of five to seven lines, which are constructed using one of the classical poetic metres, and which have a varying rhyme scheme in the following general form

**Figure 1:**

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Moroccan musicians and scholars refer to these poems as khumāsiyya (or sudāsiyya or subā‘iyya, according to whether they have five, six or seven lines). Certainly, this general form looks quite like ghuṣn and qaṭf from a muwashshah (or a muwashshah-like zajal), but we should be cautious about leaping to conclusions, because although we do find some songs labeled “tawāshīh” and “azjāl” which fit the khumāsiyya pattern, we also find many khumāsiyyāt identified simply by their poetic metre (bahr) with no label that suggests either of the Andalusian strophic forms. Thus khumāsiyya refers to a set of formal characteristics which apply to some tawāshīh and azjāl, but also apply to many strophic poems which may not fit either category. Moreover, the use of the labels tawāshīh and azjāl varies considerably from one songbook to another, and even within the same songbook. Some of these khumāsiyyāt are referred to as tawāshīh in one songbook and as azjāl in another.
In a few cases, khumāsiyyāt, which are identified simply by their bahār in one part of the corpus, also appear in a different place identified as zajal or tawshīh.

The language of the khumāsiyya provides no easy solution to this problem. Although we usually distinguish a zajal by its being composed in colloquial Arabic, such diction is not unknown in muwashshahāt as well. And unfortunately omission of īrāb and insertion of colloquial items into otherwise classical Arabic text is quite common in al-āla.

So whatever is meant by the terms tawshīh and zajal, in the context of the Moroccan āla they do not necessarily refer to something like “collapsed” muwashshahāt or azjāl. Until we have more detailed comparison of large numbers of these khumāsiyyāt with the diwāns of known poets, and careful study of their language and metrical features, it seems wisest to err on the side of caution and refer to khumāsiyyāt — whether “tawshīh” or “zajal” or otherwise — as “Andalusian-style strophic poems”, unless a genre has been clearly identified by some other means.

The role of mixed orality in many facets of Arabic literary production has been well documented for the 7th through the 9th centuries, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that it continued in one form or another for a very long time afterwards as well. The standard medium for the presentation of knowledge in the Arabic-speaking world was the spoken word, usually in combination with the written word, which was considered more reliable than the written word alone for a variety of reasons. In a similar fashion, in the early Islamic period a poet relied upon oral presentation for the dissemination of his works, whether the audience be members of the aristocracy at a princely majlis, or some unknown object of affection whose suitor had purchased a few lines of verse. The poet’s rāwī, or reciter, served not only as “publisher” but as editor as well, smoothing out the occasional awkward phrase, improving diction and correcting grammar. (Indeed, not a few ruwat were fine poets in their own right.) Nevertheless writing played a role in transmission as well, for although oral presentation was the rule the rāwī often kept a written version as a memory aid. Moreover, an important patron might request a corrected copy of a poet’s works for his personal use, and later such collections circulated among philologists. One result of all these interactions between spoken and written processes, as Gregor Schoeler suggests, was the proliferation of multiple versions of the same written text, stemming either from slightly different renditions of the same original text, or from different emendations and redactions by various receivers of that text.

The situation for composers and musicians was much the same. We have no sources for al-Andalus that compare with the Kitāb al-aghānī of al-
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Iṣṭahānī (d. 967), but there is no reason to assume that the basic format of musicians and composers competing in the majlis for aristocratic patronage differed in significant detail. Indeed, the courtly milieu of al-Iṣṭahānī’s time was built upon a pattern adopted nearly three centuries earlier by the Umayyads from earlier Sassanid and Ghassanid practice. Of course, after their expulsion from the caliphate, the Umayyads established their own courtly society in Cordoba, which formed the basis for such practices in al-Andalus. We may assume that the Umayyad and Tā’ifa patrons of al-Andalus created a similarly competitive (if perhaps less opulent) environment in which a successful performer needed a varied repertoire of songs from many composers. For composers, then, oral rendition of their songs involved memorisation and performance by several musicians, not only themselves, very likely in a wide variety of contexts.

Such a situation is bound to have interesting effects upon the poems themselves. Not only might a well-known poem still undergo a degree of alteration in the dynamic moment of musical performance, but the composition process itself may well have shaped how the text was used. Ibn al-Quyyā (d. 977) in his Ta’rikh iftīā al-Andalus offers us a glimpse into just such an occasion. The famous musician Zīryāb (d. 857), was performing for the Umayyad emir of Cordova ʿAbd ar-Rahmān II (d. 852) while the poet ʿUbayd Allāh b. Qarlamān Ibn Badr ad-Dākhil was present. Zīryāb sang two verses by the poet Ibn al-Alnāf (d. >808), but the emir remarked that the two verses made no sense together. ʿUbayd Allāh promptly sang a verse that connected the two Zīryāb had just sung, and thus was the emir satisfied.

One of the chief ways that material deriving from the old Andalusian poets has been altered in the modern Moroccan Andalusian music is reduction. Although the typical Andalusian muwashshah was five strophes in length, rarely do we find any Andalusian-style sānʿa in al-āla of more than two strophes, the norm being only one. Moreover, a sānʿa in the āla repertoire may not follow the internal structural boundaries of the original as found in the diwān of the author. The following is an example drawn from Nawbat Ramal al-Māya:

Figure 2:
Forms appear to you // in eyes that wander the night
Turn (to him), if he appears // in your shining sky
The celestial sphere in you turns // and glitters and shines
The suns and full moons // in you set and rise
Read the meaning of (these) lines // which I put together about you
Do not leave out a single one // of (these) lines (about you), and know
What is the meaning of the moon // which wanders the night in you? ¹⁰

This is a portion of a longer poem by the Andalusian poet and mystic Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Numayrī ash-Shushtarī. This version of the sanʿa comprises the second strophe of the poem, but a reader familiar with the original may notice that it actually begins with the first quatr of the poem, acting as a kind of maṭlaʾ as if the poem began here. This and other similar examples show that, at least within al-āla, the demands of musical composition and presentation have at times carried more weight than the formal or semantic characteristics of the poetry itself. Moreover, extensive use of nonsense syllables (tarāfīn) throughout the āla repertoire helps composers adapt text to melody. Their presence highlights the subordination of text to musical composition. So, liberties taken with an established text need not be viewed merely as carelessness on the part of the composer or performer, but may have served a musical purpose.

Despite the existence of printed songbook-anthologies of the poetry, the Moroccan āla remains strongly influenced by the sung and performed word. The sole method of teaching al-āla at beginner level in the National Conservatory of Music and Dance is rote memorisation by oral repetition.¹¹ Written texts are sometimes used for reference when beginning to teach a new sanʿa,
but each san'ā is dictated to the student (sometimes more than once) as part of the teaching process. Then the instructor demonstrates the song so that the students can hear not only the melody and text together, but also whether tarāṭīn are present and how they fit with the poetry and the melody. After the san’ā has been introduced in this way, the process of repetition and memorisation follows, a gradual reshaping of the students’ performance to approximate more and more closely the san’ā as the instructor learned it. At the end of the process the student will have memorised the san’ā – that is: poetry-as-sung, nonsense syllables and melody together – and will not rely upon whatever written materials may have been used in the early stages. This is as true for the first-year students as it is for those at the more advanced levels. Performance of al-āla from any kind of written text is extremely rare.

Alongside this kind of formal teaching, informal instruction in the music is quite common. Not a few āla musicians have had no training at all in the conservatory. They have learned the music through listening to recordings and radio broadcasts, and through contact with other musicians. The tradition thereby passes from one musician to another as performed text presented completely orally in much the same way as is done in the conservatory.

The apotheosis of the mixed-oral method is the master-apprentice relationship, which still exists to some degree in orchestras led by highly respected masters. When we realise that the conservatory system itself is barely 70 years old, we can see that the conservatory method represents an adaptation of the old teaching method in the master-apprentice format to a modern, institutionalised framework. The conservatory system has attempted in this way to preserve the ancient oral-based method of teaching in a new, more fully literate context.

And so we find a rather different kind of mixed orality in the modern āla than existed prior to the 19th century. More extensive literacy, along with the appearance of comprehensive anthologies of the poetry, have by degrees reduced the importance of oral transmission in preserving the songs. At least where the text is concerned, canonical anthologies made possible the perpetuation of the whole poetic corpus (in principle limited only by access to the manuscript) in the form and organisation specific to al-āla, without reliance upon either pure rote memorisation or memorisation aided by ad hoc notes. Even more, the canonical anthologies provided a reference for what could be considered “authentic”, thereby clearly defining the boundaries of the tradition and reducing much of the potential for textual variation among established masters. Printed songbooks have, since the 1970s, allowed even wider access to the poetry in the tradition and further
reduced the necessity for oral transmission. Thus, there would seem to be no obvious practical reason for oral, rote memorisation to persist. Yet it has, chiefly because musicians and aficionados of al-âla value the intimate familiarity with the sanâ‘î that memorisation by repetition cultivates. It is analogous to the emotional effect of rote memorisation of the Qur’an (which most children are exposed to at an early age) and bears a similar affective power.

The first step toward a canonical text was taken at the end of the 18th century, when Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥa‘îk compiled the songs circulating among leading musicians of his time. This Kunmash al-Ḥa‘îk eventually became the standard reference work for the texts of al-âla. In addition, it standardised the tradition’s organisation into eleven large suites (nawbâ‘at, sing. nūba), each nūba in turn being divided into four movements or rhythmic phases called mayâ‘în (sing. mîzâ‘în).

A century later, a second anthology was assembled by the ważîr al-Jâmi‘î. This corpus contains much of the same material as Kunmash al-Ḥa‘îk, but there are also sanâ‘î that appear in one or other of the two anthologies but not in both. The most striking difference in the al-Jâmi‘î corpus was the inclusion of a fifth mızân in all the nawbâ‘at and another mızân not connected with any nūba. It is likely that al-Jâmi‘î had access to different local branches of the tradition, so that at least some of his unique material was in circulation a century earlier, but not among those experts consulted by al-Ḥa‘îk.13

These two manuscript anthologies provided the basis for the printed songbooks that appeared in the late 20th century, the three most important being those of Ibn Ma’nûr (1977), Ibn Jallûn (1979) and ar-Râyîs (1982). The former two are based upon Kunmash al-Ḥa‘îk, although both supplemented this primary source with extra verses attaching to sanâ‘î already found in al-Ḥa‘îk, rarely-heard sanâ‘î and al-Jâmi‘î’s fifth mızân. Ar-Râyîs based his songbook, which is by far the most widely available today, on the al-Jâmi‘î corpus, as well as various informal notebooks at his disposal. These three songbooks thus cover the range of poetic material accepted as part of al-âla, and by virtue of their availability embody what we may describe as the authentic âla corpus today.

We have noted already one kind of text variation that recurs within this corpus when we looked at the fragment of the zajal by ash-Shushtârî: editing by reduction. Only one strophe of this zajal appears in any of the songbooks, as is the case with the majority of muwashshahî and azjâ‘î. Clearly this kind of editing comes from the process of musical composition. The composer probably made use of written materials, but the form of the san‘a‘ as we find

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today has been conditioned by the requirements of oral presentation.

Moreover, several ṣanāʾī use a two-line matlaʿ in one instance but not
another. For example, Bākir ilā shādīn is found with matlaʿ in two places
(mīzān Basīṭ al-Māya and mīzān Qāʾim wa-Nīṣf al-Ushshāq) and "aqrāʾ
(as the khumāsiyya Yā šāhī kam dhā arāka šāhī) in mīzān Basīṭ ʿIraq al-
ʿAjam.14 Such cases provide important indications of mixed oral influences
on the strophic poetry in al-ʿala: the persistence of different versions of the
same poem in different parts of the tradition. Several ṣanāʾī appear at least
twice in the corpus, and we frequently find differences in spelling or
vocalisation among the different versions. Most of these are in keeping with
common poetic licences, such as rendering tāʾ marbūta as alif at the end of a
hemistich in one location but not the other. Other variants appear to stem
from copyist errors, either in a dīwān that supplied the text for a ṣanʿāʾ, or
perhaps in the process of recopying the Kunmāsh itself. Most such variations
are trivial; however some of them are more interesting.

Figure 3 presents the three printed versions of one ṣanʿāʾ (Yā mudīrī...
from mīzān Darj al-ʿIshbān): the first version is from ar-Rayīs, the middle
one from Ibn Jallūn and the bottom one from Ibn Manṣūr.15 We see three
rather different versions of the first line: ar-Rayīs (from al-Jāmiʿī) addresses
the beloved in the plural, while Ibn Jallūn and Ibn Manṣūr (al-Ḥāʾīk) give
the singular; Ibn Manṣūr adds a cup (kīs) for serving up the passion (al-
muhāyāyā). In the third line, al-Ḥāʾīk gives us a shining star or a star of the
Pleiades, but al-Jāmiʿī presents the shining sun instead.

Figure 3:

صنعة

على جلخ العذار
فولو لي بشرى هنيئا
في هواك يا قمر
يا هلال بين البش
كلهم شهدوا عليا
يا طلعة شمس المضيئا
يا مديري الحمئیا
النجم مع الثریا
سیدي واعطفي عليا

صنعة

على جلخ العذار
قل لي بشرى هنيئا
في هواك يا قمر
يا هلال بين البش
كلهم شهدوا علي
يا طلعة نجم المضيئا
يا مديري الحمئیا
النجم مع الثریا
سیدی واعطی عليا

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We find several such variant readings of the same san‘a coexisting in more than one place within the Moroccan ḏala corpus. There are even cases of meaningful textual variations within the same anthology. Figure 4 shows the three occurrences of the san‘a “Shajānī qumārī” in ar-Rayīs. In the last line of the third version, muhibbu 1-milāḥī has become man yahwā 1-milāḥ[a]. Note that the change not only represents a small semantic shift, but it alters both the metre and the rhyme scheme, in theory forcing the qaf here to be rendered in pausal form if the pattern is to be preserved.

Figure 4:
The actual variations in these two examples are probably not important, since the three songbooks draw from different manuscript traditions and an unknown number of informal resources. What is interesting is that these different readings have survived at all. A recurring theme in the discussions on literacy and orality is the idea that literacy makes possible a more analytical and reflective relationship to language. Through reflection and comparison, literate transmission, especially in print traditions, tends to iron out heterogeneities in text. This is not as true in texts from oral traditional sources. Slippage survives and irregularities are preserved, because the text itself depends upon the social-cultural context in which it operates. The Moroccan āla thus shows at least one characteristic of “oral-traditional” texts: the survival of such variants suggests that the content of the āla tradition is not the text, but rather the text within its musical-performed context.

We conclude this brief survey with an example that illustrates well the dynamic aspect of the interplay of orality and literacy. On page 202 of ar-Rāyis, in mīzān Quddām ar-Rasd we find the “tawshīḥ zajaf” (at the top of Figure 5).

**Figure 5:**

![Translation of Figure 5]

\[\text{صِنَّعَة} \]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{أَنَا قدْ عَيْبَيْ صَبْرِي} & \quad \\
\text{وَأَنتَ يَا مُلْيَ قَلْبِي} & \\
\text{لَقَاضِي الْهُوَى نُشْكِي} & \\
\text{يُشْهَدُ اَلْعِبَادَ جُمْلَهُ} & \\
\text{فِي الْحَاضِرَ وَالْبَاذَ} & \\
\text{وَرَضِيْ بِالْبَعْذَة} & \\
\text{عَلَى مَنْ ظَلِمَ فِي نَا} & \\
\end{align*}\]

\[\text{صِنَّعَة} \]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{أَنَا قدْ عَيْبَيْ صَبْرِي} & \quad \\
\text{وَأَنتَ يَا مُلْيَ قَلْبِي} & \\
\text{لَقَاضِي الْهُوَى نُشْكِي} & \\
\text{يُشْهَدُ اَلْعِبَادَ جُمْلَهُ} & \\
\text{فِي الْحَاضِرَ وَالْبَاذَ} & \\
\text{وَرَضِيْ بِالْبَعْذَة} & \\
\text{عَلَى مَنْ ظَلِمَ فِي نَا} & \\
\end{align*}\]

\[\text{Ana qad 'ayā sabrī} \quad \text{wa-jismī fānā} \]

\[\text{wa-anta yā munā qalbī} \quad \text{'āyish fī l-hānā} \]

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li-qādī l-hawā nashkī yahkum bayna-nā
yashhādu l-ʾibād jumlā ṣī l-hādir wa-l-bād
ʿalā man zalam finā wa-rdā bi-l-bīdād

My patience has worn thin // and my body has withered away
You, the desire of my heart, // live well in good health
To the Judge of Love I appeal // to judge between us
All the people bear witness together // in the present and the past
Against one who has done wrong to us // and is content with the distance

(// between us).

This poem does not appear in Ibn Jallūn, but Ibn Maṣūr gives it in a footnote, noting cryptically that it “is circulating now”. The text of this “tawshih zajaf” varies, but only in performance. The ṣajāʾ of the fourth line is always sung this way:

ʿalā man zalam zalam
(// Against one who did wrong, did wrong)

The reason for this shift is not obvious from the songbook text itself. (It does not significantly affect the poetic metre, it disrupts the rhyme scheme, and does not add anything new to the semantic meaning of the poem.) A clue to this variation may be found in manuscripts. The ʿsanʿa is found in the Bennūna edition of an al-Ḥāʾik manuscript. That version is at the bottom of Figure 5. It is formed differently, with the ʾuql as a single line of three segments. Neither of these two versions contains all the material of this ʿsanʿa as it is performed. The ʿsanʿa as sung lies between these two versions; it is an orally-preserved rendition of what was probably a written text at some time in the past. Such variations are probably common, but they cannot be uncovered from the printed text alone.

The relationship between ʿsanʿa-as-printed and ʿsanʿa-as-sung within the Moroccan Andalusian music is quite complicated. Andalusian-style strophic poems have been selected and given a shape conditioned by the formal aspects of the music and its performance, and in some cases the poetry-as-sung differs significantly from the written text, without any indication at all in the surviving printed version. These variant renderings have been preserved in a way and a context that strongly suggest that oral presentation played a part in forming the texts as we find them today. Finally, their survival as variants within a redacted, printed corpus strongly suggests that there is some other impetus at work beyond the simple preservation and standardisation that printing makes possible. The value placed upon oral
transmission, rote memorisation and presentation of the corpus as it has been received from the past has militated against ironing out heterogeneities and “fixing” problematic readings of some sānāʾī. Mixed-oral practices, characteristic of medieval Arabic literature both western and eastern, persist today in the transmission of al-āla from one generation of musicians to the next, even though such practices are no longer “necessary”.

**NOTES**

1. The expression *mixed orality* originated with Walter Ong (1982), although the general debate goes back to early studies of the oral dimensions of Homer and Plato by Havelock (1963) and Parry (1971). Goody (1977, 1987), Goody and Watt (1968) and Ong produced a body of work that essentially argues for a radical separation between oral and literate culture, and even the forms of consciousness that underlie the two. This “Great Divide” theory has been the object of critique from a number of perspectives, notably by Finnegans (1988), Foley (1995), Roberts (1997), Harris (2000, 2002), and Brockmeier and Olson (2002). These critiques have in common the insight that context—whether cultural or semiotic (which are perhaps the same thing)—is essential to any understanding of the role of literacy and the written word in shaping discourses in society.


4. For a contrasting view, see the discussion in Liu and Monroe, esp. p. 24.


8. Sawā (1989), pp. 111-12, 171 and 176-83

9. *Taʾrikh...* p. 76. In fact the 2 verses appear in Ibn al-Aḥnas’ *dīwān* exactly as Ziryāb originally sang them! It was the emir and the poet who concocted the altered version. My thanks to Dwight Reynolds for steering me to this story.


11. While instruction may be available in some cases at private conservatories, this is
actively discouraged by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in its communications with the private conservatories. Moreover, the National Conservatory employs only specialists in the Andalusian music — master musicians who learned the art from other masters. The private conservatories tend to be specialised for Western music instruction; masters of the Andalusian music are rarely found in them.


13. In fact, so little is known about either anthologist that this question cannot be resolved. For an alternative hypothesis, see Cortés García (1996) p. 49.


15. ar-Á‘ayis p. 76; Ibn Jallûn p. 79; Ibn Manṣûr p. 111.


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**Anthology source editions and songbooks**


