

NOSTALGIA, HISTORY AND SHEIKHS IN THE LIBYAN *MA'LŪF*: LISTENING CONTEXTS IN THE SHADOWS OF THE PAST

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Most studies in World Music show that musical listening, whether at a live performance or sitting on a sofa listening to a CD, does not happen in a vacuum but takes place within a context that encircles that same listening. In a major study featuring the life and career of the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthūm, Danielson (1997:9) takes up Turino's metaphorical notion of *context* as a useful means to the understanding of listening. Turino's metaphor (1990:400) defines context as "an ever-expanding series of concentric rings with pathways that cross and connect them". Applying this metaphor to listening, Danielson (*ibid.*) identifies experiences which, although they are immediate to the act of listening and lie along the inner circles of Turino's metaphor, connect to other experiences which, albeit located away from the centre, are equally as important as those closer to the centre. Among these immediate experiences Danielson examines the pleasure gained from the aesthetic experience created by the music. This occurs in association with other remote factors that may impact on the music that we happen to be listening to – for instance state intervention in the sense of censorship of the music. On a more personal level this *context* may also include real or imagined historical pasts and personal memories that are evoked by the music. The meanings which we glean from musical listening depend on the elements that make up the context in question, and how the "concentric rings" within it link up with each other.

In the Libyan *ma'lūf* musical tradition, the context which frames the hearing of this music among aficionados of the tradition includes accounts of past renowned *sheikhs ma'lūf* (masters of the *ma'lūf* tradition). Some of these accounts have been incorporated as part of the history underpinning the tradition; others, albeit more personal and somewhat more nostalgic, are gradually finding their way into that history thanks to their widespread recognition amongst the aficionados and, to a certain extent, even among the audiences who attend the festivals and similar events. The present paper will introduce some of these accounts as they have arisen in my discussions with the people concerned. These accounts, which *ma'lūf* aficionados often bring up in conversation, are part of the context to which they relate in order to endow their listening of the *ma'lūf* with significance. Examination of these accounts, and the observations accompanying them, leads us to understand

how these relate to other aspects [or concentric rings], in Turino's metaphor.

Ma'lūf, which literally means "familiar" or "customary", encompasses the auditory experience of music brought to North Africa by Muslims and Jews escaping the Christian reconquest of Spain from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries (Davis 1997:3). In Morocco this genre is known as *andalusi* or *ala* music; in Algeria it is known as *gharnati*, while in Libya, as in Tunisia, it is called *ma'lūf*. Although the term *ma'lūf* as used in Libya sometimes embraces other genres of classical Arabic music, the term as used in the present paper refers solely to the *nawba ma'lūf*. The *nawba* can be described as a song cycle comprising songs that unfold on the basis of an established *maqām* (melodic mode) and *īqā'* (rhythmic mode). The poetic content of a Libyan *nawba* may include a variety of poetic forms, such as *muwashshah*, *zajal*, *dawbayt* (couplets; a Persian quatrain art adapted by the Arabs) and *mu'āradāt* (pastiche verses).

The continuation of the *ma'lūf* tradition in Libya was possible thanks to the commitment of dedicated sheikhs who knew the tradition intimately and passed it on to others during performances in *zawya* (Sufi lodges), privately at home, and sometimes even during extensive conversations in the middle of a market. These were eminent artists who had sometimes contributed by adding their own texts and melodies to the core repertoire claimed to be of Andalusí origin. Each sheikh had his own way of teaching by heart the texts and melodies of *ma'lūf*. Some sheikhs could hardly read or write, but still they preserved and transmitted huge amounts of *ma'lūf* texts and melodies, transmitting them mainly through performance and teaching. Individual sheikhs are still remembered for their particular fields of expertise; for instance, some are remembered for the quality of their voices, while others are remembered for their skill in matching new and adapted words to *ma'lūf* melodies.

The history of the *ma'lūf* in Libya mainly evolves round the lives and deeds of deceased eminent sheikhs. Its early phases are mostly speculative while the more recent phases are somewhat overshadowed by accounts revolving around the lives of these sheikhs. Most of the accounts are anecdotes, with the figure of the sheikh as the protagonist. For some aficionados and other people these accounts are the only history they have of the Libyan musical tradition. Such anecdotes are transmitted orally from father to son and from sheikh to student. They are recounted to receptive audiences during state sponsored festivals, and retold to friends before and after a *ma'lūf* session in *zawya*. These anecdotes are sometimes accompanied by and embroidered with personal memories expressed with a deep sense of nostalgia – the kind of nostalgia that embraces a past that will never return but which should nevertheless be an inspiration for the present. In this

sense nostalgia emerges as an essential and narrative function of language that orders events temporally (Stewart 1984) and romanticises them. All this not only enriches the hearing of the *ma'luf*, but also consolidates the aura attributed to it as *turāth qadīm* ("old heritage"), as the Libyans sometimes call it.

The present paper relies on accounts that were told to me by *sheikhs ma'luf*, by aficionados who regularly participate in *ma'luf* activity both in *zawya* and outside, and by both amateur and professional researchers, some of whom are themselves involved in the performance of *ma'luf*.¹ These are people whose enthusiasm for this art has been unceasing since the time they were first introduced to it. Some have also received *ma'luf* training under the tuition of sheikhs mentioned below, so they are always keen to mention their masters when the opportunity arises. In the Libyan *ma'luf*, as in many musical traditions, the question of with whom you learn the tradition is extremely important, because it enhances your musical status in various ways, which may include the evocation of exceptional performances, models of commitment and, sometimes, even perceptions of unique vocal timbres and interpretations. These accounts arise from conversations which I have recorded since I began researching the Libyan *ma'luf* in 2002. The experiences included in this paper are only those of individuals intimately involved in the tradition and residing in Tripoli. Hence the paper does not seek to make generalisations regarding broader listening experiences in the Libyan *ma'luf*.

Before addressing my central theme I shall briefly introduce the history and musical repertoire of the tradition. This will be followed by a description of present-day performance practices and their related socio-cultural contexts. The third section includes several accounts, organised into two main areas: accounts that are now part of history and others that are more personal but which nevertheless carry within them a strong sense of nostalgia for particular individuals. Such accounts are gradually becoming an integral part of the culture of the Libyan *ma'luf*. The fourth section sheds light on how the annual Tripoli-based festival of *ma'luf* and *muwashshahāt* contributes to augmenting the atmosphere of nostalgia accorded to these sheikhs.

Historical perspectives and identity

The original advent of the *ma'luf* in Libya is still a subject of speculation. The general opinion is that no one knows exactly how and when this tradition reached the country. What has been written on the matter thus far reiterates what has been passed on orally from one generation to another and, consequently, what I was told during the interviews that I conducted in Libya.

One speculation attributes the beginnings of this art to the presence in

Libya of the *'Isāwīyya* Sufi brotherhood associated with Sidi Mohammad Ben Aissa. The tradition has been maintained by this brotherhood since the arrival in Tripoli of Sheikh Mohammad Alam Banram el-Fasi in the mid-sixteenth century. It was at this time that the first *'Isāwīyya zawya* (Sufi lodge), known as the *zawya al-kabira* (the “grand *zawya*”), was founded in the Bāb al-Huriyah neighbourhood of Tripoli.² Over the years it was the *'Isāwīyya* brotherhood that maintained the tradition of the *ma'lūf* in Libya. *Ma'lūf* performances in the *zawya* are only held among *'Isāwīyya* confraternities. *Qadiriya* and *Erusiya* brotherhoods oppose performances of *ma'lūf* in *zawya*, because of the presence of secular elements in the text. Thus some sheikhs affiliated to the *Qadiriya* and *Erusiya* brotherhoods described the *ma'lūf* to me as “folk music”, which it would be inappropriate to perform in a *zawya*.

A popular Libyan belief attributes the early traces of *ma'lūf* text in Libya to the presence of the major Sufi figure and poet Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Abd Allah al-Shushtarī (1203 or 1212-1269), who according to popular legend spent time in Libya during his journey to Egypt. Al-Shushtarī was a religious poet who composed pieces in classical metres and *muwashshah*, and was the first to compose *zajal* verses on religious themes (Scheindlin 1998:716).³ In Libya, *ma'lūf* verses by Shushtarī are sung unaccompanied during burial rites of young people, Sufi sheikhs and followers.

Another more popular and widespread speculation for this transmission asserts that the *ma'lūf* entered Libya along with the Andalusian refugees (Moors and Jews) who entered the country from Tunisia in the seventeenth century. A considerable number of these refugees settled in Tripoli, Libya's capital, as their first stepping-stone after Tunisia. This may partially explain why the *ma'lūf* tradition in Libya, although diffused in other parts of the country such as Benghazi, Misurata and Sebha, is most strongly present and practised in Tripoli. Apart from that, Libya has always served as a transit route between Tunisia and Egypt. Evidence of this musical cross-fertilisation includes songs found in the Libyan *ma'lūf* that are similar if not identical to songs in the *ma'lūf* of Tunisia.⁴ This has led some Arab music scholars to believe that the *ma'lūf* in Libya was entirely Tunisian.⁵

The Libyan *nawba* exists in two forms: the short *nawba* form called *barwal nawba* and the longer *nawba* known as *musaddar nawba*. While the former only employs the *iqā' barwal*, the latter employs the *iqā' musaddar* followed by *iqā' barwal*. The most popular and consequently most performed *nawbāt* (pl. of *nawba*) found in Libya are eighteen in number. These are categorised into ten *musaddar nawba* and eight *barwal nawba* (Rajūba 1993:3). The maqams employed by the Libyan *ma'lūf* are *rāst*, *muhayyar*, *huseini*, *nawā*, *aṣbahān* and *sikāh*. Whereas in other North African countries

a *nawba* gets its name from its maqam, the *nawba* in Libya is named after the first hemistich of the first song. However, according to traditional practice, while the first song in a given *nawba* will always be the same (since it has its name from this first hemistich), the songs to be included after it are decided by the sheikh in the course of performance. Traditionally, a line in a *nawba* is first sung by the sheikh and then repeated by the choir. The sheikh selects songs from the vast poetical material traditionally sung in the maqam of the particular *nawba*. One aspect that distinguishes the sheikh from the rest of the choir is the exceptional knowledge of *ma'luf* text that he possesses. Since it is an oral tradition, the *ma'luf* is *mahfudh*, i.e. memorised, and is gradually taught by the sheikh to the student in *zawya*, sometimes with the aid of tape-recorders that students nowadays take with them to these sessions.

The *ma'luf*: performance practice and social contexts

Libyans distinguish between two styles of *ma'luf*, namely the *ma'luf az-zawya* (sometimes also known as *ma'luf at-taqlidi*, i.e. the “traditional *ma'luf*”) and the *ma'luf al-idha*. The former term refers to performances of *ma'luf* in the traditional context of *zawya* and associated activities; the latter refers to the modernised form of *ma'luf* which among other things includes instruments such as the violin, the cello and the double bass, alongside Arab instruments such as the *nāy*, *'ūd*, *qānūn*, *riqq*, *bandīr* and *darbukka*. The term *idha* means broadcasting, a term that refers to the strong ties which this style has with the recording industry and, consequently, with broadcasting. The restricted recording market of the *ma'luf* consists predominantly of examples of the *ma'luf al-idha*, which are recorded in professional recording studios. Such performances are regularly featured on Libyan radio and TV.

In the *ma'luf az-zawya* a *nawba* would take half an hour and even more, depending on the sheikh and the general mood of the performance. Such performances, in addition to a male choir (known as *raddada*) and a sheikh, would also include traditional instrumentation consisting of *darbukka*, *bandīr*, *ghayta* and *naqqarat*. In *ma'luf* parades the instrumentation would also include a *nawba* (cylindrical drum). *Zawya* performances are mostly popular during the *mawlid*, the period during which Muslims celebrate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.⁶

In Libya, the *mawlid* is celebrated with grandeur over a period of a month or so. Throughout this period of celebrations all the *zawaya* (pl. of *zawya*) of Tripoli would be decorated with lights on the outside as a sign of celebrations. Many in Libya consider the *mawlid* as the time of the year in which the art of *ma'luf* (in its traditional form) is at its peak, due to its frequent performances in *zawya* and in the streets of Tripoli in the context

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of parades organised by the Sufi confraternities. The shared religious sentiment characteristic of these days attributes a sense of sacredness to *ma'lūf* performances and, by extension, to the *ma'lūf* itself.

The traditional *ma'lūf* is also employed in Tripolitan wedding celebrations. The *ma'lūf* in Tripolitan weddings is a very popular tradition, and its absence would be seen as a very significant shortcoming in mainstream wedding celebrations. It is a tradition that on *laylat ad-dakhla* (the wedding night), normally falling on a Thursday, the groom is taken to the mosque, where he takes part in a religious service. After the service, a procession, made up of friends, relatives, and a hired traditional *ma'lūf* ensemble, leads the young man to his nuptial house to meet the bride who will be waiting for him together with relatives and guests. The singers, together with the sheikh and the *ghayta* player, move off first, with the *bandīr* and *naqqarat* players following them at a distance together with the *nawba* (cylindrical drum) player, who stands surrounded by the *bandīr* players.

The procession moves slowly and takes the longest route, with more and more people joining in as it approaches the house. After their encounter and the reading of the *fatiha* (the first chapter of the *Qu'ran*), the bride and groom, accompanied by their respective families, leave for the *zaffa* (the wedding celebration proper). Here the *ma'lūf* ensemble performs for about an hour, after which the musicians are paid for their services and leave. A *sheikh ma'lūf* may have his own wedding ensemble that provides such wedding services when asked to do so. Occasionally other singers, male relatives or friends of the bride or groom, will join in with the singing and drumming provided by the ensemble. Knowledge of the repertoire and performing codes of the tradition are the only prerequisites for them to join in. At this stage one should add that knowledge of the *ma'lūf* and experience in its performance is mostly gained through performances of the *ma'lūf az-zawya*. Young *ma'lūf* aficionados joining one of the modern ensembles in Tripoli would already have gained knowledge of the *ma'lūf* through their involvement in *zawya* performances. People's love for and knowledge of the *ma'lūf* most commonly start in the home, grow in the *zawya*, and find a continuation in one of the modern ensembles that one finds in Tripoli.

The first "modern" Libyan *ma'lūf* ensemble was established in 1964 by the Libyan *'ūd* player and singer Hassan Araibi. In 1961 Araibi joined the Rashidiyya Institute in Tunis, where he gained knowledge of, and underwent training in, the contemporary performance of the *ma'lūf*. Such training had a bearing on the innovative performance practices that he later introduced into the Libyan tradition. By the end of 1963 he had been appointed head of the music section of the Libyan Broadcasting Centre in Tripoli. Araibi brought together the singers working at the Centre and established an ensemble

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which included Western instruments such as violins, cello and double bass, playing alongside traditional Arab instruments. Performance of the *nawba ma'luf* as innovated by Araibi relied less on the call and response form, which was now replaced by choral singing. The traditional *istiftah* (introductory vocal improvisation) and *istikhbar* (introductory *ghayta* improvisation) that one hears at the beginning of a *nawba* in the *ma'luf az-zawya*, were replaced in the new *ma'luf* style by pre-composed preludes.

Over the years other ensembles modeled on that established by Araibi flourished throughout Libya, extending even to remote places such as Misurata and Sebha. While these are amateur ensembles, Araibi's present ensemble is subsidised by the state and affiliated to the National Centre for Research and Studies of Arabic Music based in Tripoli. In these ensembles the *nawba ma'luf* is performed alongside other genres that include *mawashshahāt*, *qaṣā'id* and instrumental pieces. Some of these ensembles also have their own recordings of *nawba* performances, in which one notes a compliance with the kinds of performance practices dictated by the recording industry. The most noticeable impact of the recording industry on this musical genre has been the shortening of the *nawba* to no more than ten minutes or so.

Post-revolutionary developments in the area of formal music instruction sustained Araibi's initiatives over the years. His ensemble recruits instrumentalists equipped with formal music training and a good knowledge of musical notation. This has enabled the inclusion of more instrumental pieces in the repertory of Araibi's ensemble, which would have been impossible when rehearsal was done completely by oral transmission. The use of musical notation is limited to instrumental pieces; the rest of the repertory is performed from memory. "The *ma'luf* would never be played from music parts, it should all be *mahfudh* (memorised)," remarked Mohammad (one of Araibi's assistants), implying not only the aura that surrounds the *turāth qadīm* but also the fact that it is through the memorisation of the *ma'luf* that the Arab musician gains good knowledge of the *maqāmat* and *iqā'āt*. Other post-revolutionary developments included the emerging of mixed-gender ensembles associated with Tripoli's music schools. These schools were established in the post-revolutionary years. In addition to the classical Arab musical forms these mixed ensembles also include the *nawba ma'luf* in their repertory. This has meant a step forward in the democratisation of the *ma'luf*, from being a musical activity dominated by men to one in which women are able to participate, albeit still under certain restrictions.

Issues and accounts

As I said in the introduction, some of the accounts considered in this paper

are presented as history, while others emerge as nostalgias. The following accounts seek to clarify elements of the tradition by examining in a personal sense what it really means when the Libyans refer to the *ma'lūf* as *turāth qadīm*. Various crucial elements emerged during the conversations that I had with my informants. These included the making of pastiche verses (imitation of pre-existing texts); the transformation of erotic into religious verses; the relationship between individual texts and particular occasions; notable feats of memorisation; tensions between composed texts and “authentic” texts; and issues regarding the influx of foreign texts and melodies into the Libyan *ma'lūf*.

Among musically proficient listeners acquainted with this art, the Libyan *ma'lūf* may be viewed as an aggregate of Tunisian, Turkish and Egyptian influences. Discussion in this vein adduces geographical evidence (such as the positioning of Libya between Tunisia and Egypt) and historical fact (such as the colonisation of Libya by the Turks); it also involves accounts of sheikhs having borrowed texts and melodies from colonisers and neighbouring countries. For instance Sheikh Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Maylādī (1881-1963) is known to have composed verses on Tunisian and Egyptian melodies, verses which eventually became part of the repertoire of Libyan *ma'lūf*. Sheikh Jamāl worked as an administrator with the Turkish Military in Tripoli. He was also a jurist and a follower of the *Qadiriya* dervish order, as is apparent in a *ma'lūf* poem composed by him with the title *Ya Jilānī tawilun mā 'ashtū* (“Oh Jilānī, as long as I live”). Sheikh al-Maylādī wrote this poem in praise of Abdulgader al-Jilānī, the founder of the order. The melodic source of this poem was a Tunisian song beginning with the words *Azah wa al'ab* (“Make fun and play”). Sheikh al-Maylādī also composed *ma'lūf* texts based on Egyptian tunes in the form of *mu'aradāt* [pastiche verses, pl. of *mu'aradā*]. In the Libyan *ma'lūf* one finds several sheikhs composing *mu'aradāt*, a process that Stern (1974:45-6) explains as follows:

Imitation of a given poem is not uncommon in classical Arabic poetry. Its use there is, however, rather restricted. It was customary to compose a response to a poem in the same metre and using the same rhyme... Occasionally a poet might also be asked to write verses in a given metre and rhyme, to test his mastery of poetical technique. In contrast to *shi'r* [another form of classical Arabic poetry], the *muwashshah* offered a much wider field for *mu'aradā*. [...] Each poem had its particular tune; melody and text formed a close unit. It was but natural that there should arise the wish to use for one's own poems melodies that had already acquired popularity. This could easily be done by writing a new poem on the scheme of the *muwashshah* to which the melody in question originally belonged; the melody could then be automatically adapted to the new poem [...] such imitations do not come, by any means, under the heading

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of “plagiarism”. On the contrary: it was a well-established literary practice, the successful accomplishment of which accrued to the honour of the poet.

Other renowned sheikhs are also remembered and referred to in connection with their creation of *mu'aradāt* in the Libyan *ma'luf*. One of these was Sheikh Ali Amin Sayala.

Sheikh Ali was born in Tripoli in 1860. He was a man of letters who occupied several high-ranking religious and civil positions. My informants remarked that Sheikh Ali was unpretentious in claiming authorship for his writing. His plan was to compose *mu'aradāt* for all the love-poetry texts found in the *ma'luf*, changing them into texts in praise of the Prophet. He also wished to add some of his own verses to existing verses praising the Prophet, as he did to a *ma'luf* text starting with the words *Ya Mohammad* (“O Mohammad”) in *maqām rast* and *iqā' musaddar*. However he was stopped from composing more *mu'aradāt* by Sheikh Mohammad Abdulsalam al-Faituri al-Misurati, who ordered him to stop fiddling with the text of the *ma'luf*. In due humility Sheikh Ali accepted al-Misurati's advice and stopped.

Historical accounts of the Libyan *ma'luf* tell of sheikhs preserving and retrieving the “authentic” repertoire, and, ironically, contributing to the continuity of this tradition by composing and adding their own verses and melodies. In many cases however the inclusion of the “new” was seen by some sheikhs as liable to distract attention from the “old”, so innovation was sometimes viewed as a threat to the tradition, something that had to be opposed and possibly stopped. The context of contemporary listening sometimes includes accounts that deal with conflicts between innovation and conformity. The lives of two brothers, Sheikh Jamal Mohammad and Sheikh Kamel Mohammad al-Ghadī, are sometimes mentioned as examples of this particular tension. Sheikh Jamal Mohammad al-Ghadī (born in Tripoli in 1903) was a skilful carpenter and learned *ma'luf* under the tuition of Sheikh Mohammad Abu Rayana. Al-Ghadī was known for his extensive memory of text. He made a major contribution to the dissemination of a great deal of *ma'luf* texts. He used to send unknown *ma'luf* texts, of which only he had knowledge, to a committee established by the Libyan Ministry of Culture in 1964 to compile and make recordings of the Libyan *ma'luf*. The committee, which was composed of several *sheikhs ma'luf*, used to meet three times a week under the chairmanship of Hassan Araibi. While Sheikh Jamal Mohammad al-Ghadī was always ready to teach “authentic” text and to share it with others, he rejected what he saw as the “unscrupulous” attitude of some sheikhs in adding their own verses to the *ma'luf*. There is a story

about Sheikh Jamal, that one day some of his students brought him *ma'lūf* poems which they had been taught by his brother, Sheikh Kamel al-Ghadī. He looked at them, and told the students: "Go and ask him. If these poems are composed by him, then tell him to look for other places to make them popular, but if they are old texts, bring them to us to learn and make these poems known to the people." As in the case of al-Misurati, Sheikh Jamal used to tell to his brother to stop adding his own text, because by doing that he (i.e. Kamel) would be working to the detriment of the "authentic" text.

Sheikh Kamel Mohammad al-Ghadī (b.1908), Jamal's brother, was a goldsmith known for his fine engravings on jewellery, copper and brass. He mastered writing in both the Arabic and Latin scripts. He was known in Tripoli as a leading *zajal* poet able to improvise extended verses with detailed descriptions of the circumstances of the event in which he was singing. He was also a *qāmūn* player, having learned to play this instrument under the instruction of a Jewish player who lived in Tripoli's *medina l-qadīma*. Apart from this he is also remembered for his *mu'aradāt*. Some *ma'lūf mu'aradāt* composed by Sheikh Kamel have been attributed to another renowned Libyan *sheikh ma'lūf* by the name of Sheikh Mohammad Abu Median. In order to avert criticism Sheikh Kamel preferred not to claim these works as his own. He used to show his verses to Sheikh Omar el-Arabi al-Zanzuri, a scholar of language and religion, for checking, so as to avoid falling into language errors or anything that could be considered abuse of religion. Part of the aesthetic experience of the *ma'lūf* lies in the beauty of its text. Skilled performance is seen as being dependent on verses that are fine in construction, pleasant in words and meanings and enriched in beauty by elegant melodies. In this context the "new" is only considered acceptable within the "old" if it fits properly within it and maintains its identity.

The military march-like melodies of certain *nawbāt* (such as *nawba Nah al-Hamam*) have led some Libyan *ma'lūf* specialists to attribute these melodies to Turkish military music. Some of these melodies suggest sources of "expert" music-making, such as the military bands regularly heard marching in the streets of Tripoli during the Turkish occupation.⁷

The inclusion of Turkish melodies in the Libyan *ma'lūf* brings us to the figure of Sheikh Gheddur Afandi, a composer known for his inclusion of Turkish melodies. He was a prominent *sheikh ma'lūf* and *Qu'ran* chanter who served as *imām* (religious leader) to a battalion of the Ottoman Army in Tripoli. Accounts related to this sheikh refer to the fact that he was also married to a Turkish woman. This is sometimes said to emphasise the close links that the sheikh had with Turkish culture, and that he was exposed to its assimilation. Sheikh Gheddur used to take his annual leave in the month of the *mawlid*, during which period the followers of the *zawya al-kabīra* always

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prepared a residence (*waqf*) close to the mosque, to be occupied by the sheikh and his family. It is said that one evening, when Sheikh Gheddur attended the evening's *ma'luf* session, he said to those around him "I didn't come to have your tea", a reference to his commitment to passing on the tradition and being of service to the *zawya* rather than just having a good time at its expense.

There are many anecdotes related to these sheikhs, with some of them emphasising the memory requirements of this art. Certain sheikhs are still remembered for the huge quantities of *ma'luf* text that they possessed. *Ma'luf* text in Libya is considered as infinite – so much so that the Libyans have a popular saying: *al-ma'luf kelma andek wa miyya and ajrek* ("The *ma'luf*: a word belongs to you while a hundred words belong to your neighbour"). Such sayings highlight the huge repertoire of poetic material in the tradition. One anecdote relates the story of Sheikh Khalifa Imhammed Farhat al-Rammāsh, born in about 1893. According to informants he was fond of collecting texts, and had them written down. One day Sheikh Khalifa al-Rammāsh met Sheikh Hassan al-Kamī in a cattle market. Sheikh al-Kamī greeted him and asked Sheikh Khalifa for some *ma'luf* poems that might be new to him. Sheikh Khalifa recited poem after poem until there was no one left in the market. Then Sheikh Hassan, with his sense of humour, said: "What shall I do tomorrow? What shall I slaughter?" "Perhaps I should slaughter you!" replied Sheikh Khalifa with a possible indirect reference to his friend's minimal knowledge of text when compared to his.

The relationship between music and event is also discussed, in part offering historical snapshots but also summoning up personal nostalgias. Attending wedding processions, and talking to informants between one *nawba* and another, one may chance upon mention of Sheikh Ali Hanka (1865/6-1959). He is mainly remembered because he was the first sheikh to have composed *ma'luf* verses in honour of the Prophet for inclusion in *ma'luf* wedding processions. Other stories that link particular texts with specific events may be more personal and therefore more nostalgic. For instance, al-Shushtarī verses sung unaccompanied during burial rites brought to Hassan Araibi's mind the vision of Sheikh Khalifa al-Rammāsh on his death-bed, the day before he died. When Araibi was visiting him at the hospital, the sheikh turned to him and said: "Tomorrow, Hassan, the funeral will be in the afternoon in al-Gusaiba graveyard. I want a Shushtarī poem." Araibi answered that he (that is, the sheikh) was still needed, and wished him to be well again. But the old man's words were right because, as he anticipated, he died, at the age of eighty, and he was buried at the said graveyard to the accompaniment of *ma'luf* Shushtarī verses, just as he had requested.

The above accounts are indicative of how the listening context may

also embrace other aspects. The image of the sheikh, for instance, intermingles with the high value attributed to the *ma'lūf* text, and concepts of aesthetics and sacredness regulating its composition. The accounts also give a sense of the idea of infinity ascribed to text, and the myths of sheikhs known for their exceptional memories act in support of this idea. As an additional observation one can say that history is made of individuals and, as the following section shows, these are brought to the fore and made public through processes of nostalgia.

The exaltation of nostalgia

As from the summer of 2002, the splendid gardens of *al-markaza al-qawmiya al-markiziya* in central Tripoli became the venue for the annual festival of *ma'lūf* and *muwashshahāt*. The aim of the festival is to generate greater interest in the tradition of *ma'lūf* through performances of both *ma'lūf az-zawya* and *ma'lūf al-idha*. The festival includes both competitive and participative sessions. While competitive sessions involve traditional ensembles performing *ma'lūf az-zawya*, judged by a jury panel of active Libyan sheikhs, participative sessions involve *ma'lūf al-idha* ensembles. In a way the festival also serves to publicise the lives of renowned sheikhs and to make personal nostalgic accounts public.

Each edition of the festival is dedicated to a particular sheikh. Posters announcing the festival, featuring a prominent picture of the sheikh in question, are placed at traffic intersections all around Tripoli. Throughout the period of the festival a portrait of the sheikh will dominate one side of the huge stage on which the performances take place. Information regarding the life of the sheikh comprises a large part of the prepared scripts of the festival compères. Relatives of the sheikh to whom that year's festival is dedicated attend the festival and take prominent seats. They are interviewed and asked to share with the audience their memories of the sheikh. The main content of these interviews focuses on the sheikh's commitment to teaching the *ma'lūf*, leading *ma'lūf* performances, and to living a good and observant Islamic life. For these sheikhs the *ma'lūf* was not just an aesthetic experience; more than that, it was an intense component that enriched their identities as Muslims.

Each traditional ensemble bears the name of a particular sheikh. The name of the ensemble may have originated either because the ensemble's sheikh was taught by the sheikh after whom it is named, or because a son or other relative of the sheikh is a member of the ensemble, or because the sheikh himself was once the leader of the ensemble. All three possibilities embody a powerful element of nostalgia – which is consolidated by the framed picture of the sheikh normally placed on-stage by relatives in front of the group that bears his name. As the ensemble assembles on stage, the

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presenter gives a biographical outline of the sheikh after whom the group is named. This may include anecdotes associated with the sheikh in question.

The evenings of the festival commence with a traditional ensemble that begins its performance with instrumental music, followed by a *qasidah* or a *muwashshah*. Then, for the performance of the *nawba*, the ensemble will change its positioning to match that seen in a *zawya*. The *bandir* players, headed by the *ghayta*, sheikh and *kinji* (the sheikh's assistant), are grouped on one side of the stage while the *raddada* sit on the other. It is during these evenings that modes of interpretation, vocal timbres (such as when the people describe the voice of a sheikh as *mistrayha* – “unstrained”), and the way the leading sheikh selects the songs for the *nawba*, reveal with whom that particular sheikh had trained in the art of *ma'luf*. Music generates the evocation of images through sound and the *ma'luf* is no exception to this. The publicly pronounced nostalgias, the framed portraits on stage, and the vocal inflexions evoking the styles of particular well-known sheikhs, emerge in dissonance with the sophisticated sound systems, the hi-tech TV cameras chasing for the best shots and the sound engineers striving for the best sound quality.

These moments of nostalgia are somewhat curtailed by the sound of violins, cello and double bass tuning up for the next session of the evening. The mood changes when a modern ensemble takes the stage, the framed picture of the sheikh is removed and the microphones are shifted to provide for a different ensemble set-up (and consequently a different sound aesthetic). The modern ensembles are not named after sheikhs but are known by the kind of music in which they specialise. The listening context which I have described, or particular components within it, may be replaced by the experience of having heard the *ma'luf* on tapes and as transmitted regularly on Libyan radio and satellite TV, rather than being constructed on the images of sheikhs and their notable deeds. It seems that in these performances nostalgia emerges even more strongly, not despite but as a direct result of the markedly modern means that present and provoke it. Nostalgia, and therefore all the narrative that it holds, arises in importance as a cultural practice when culture itself “takes on the power of ‘distance’” (Stewart *ibid.*:227). This is a process that is regularly present in the musical experience, and as a result it is useful for us to consider music as “‘a context’ in which other events happen, and without which they cannot” (Stokes 1997:674).

Conclusion

My argument suggests that notions of the past may be embodied within shared listening contexts and through musical events that confront the nostalgic with the contemporary. Although reworked in different contexts,

notions of the past and the nostalgia that accompanies them, and even generates them, are understood by many aficionados of the Libyan *ma'lūf* as powerful elements in the history of this musical tradition, and therefore as crucial determinants in their experience of this musical tradition as *turāth qadīm*. These aficionados are “united as members of an imagined world of taste and practice” (Slobin 1994:19).

Modern practices in performance of the *ma'lūf al-idha* give a face-value impression of a serious lack of continuity not just with the “ancient” past of the tradition but also with the past which, albeit not so “ancient”, is enriched by a strong sense of nostalgia that helps to create a bond between the present and the past. This brings the modern *ma'lūf* style into a kind of tension with the aura of the traditional *qadīm* most associated with the *ma'lūf az-zawya*. Such tension will be resolved through processes which in time will transform the present into a less speculative past. This may lead towards a more highly valued (because less speculative) type of history, enriched with nostalgias of living sheikhs for whom the art of *ma'lūf* is a fundamental aspect of their identity as Muslims, as it was for their predecessors.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank all the people who shared their accounts with me, in particular Sheikh Hassan Araibi (head of the National Institute for the Research of Arabic Music), Professor Abdallah s-Sabai (lecturer in music at al-Fatah University), Mr. Mansour al-Ghannay (teacher of *muwashshahāt* at Jamā ad-Dīn al-Mīlādī School of Music [Tripoli]) and members of *furqat al-ma'lūf wa l-muwashshahāt wa al-ana al-arabiyya* (The Ensemble of Ma'lūf, Muwashshahāt and Arabic Melody).
2. Nowadays this *zawya* can be found in the old city (Medina) of Tripoli.
3. See also Stern 1974:89 for more information regarding Shushtarī's *zajal* poetry.
4. As an identical song in both words and music one can mention the *ma'lūf* song *alilif ya sultanī*.
5. On proposing a doctoral thesis on the Libyan *nawba* at the University of Arts in Cairo in the mid-1980s, the Libyan music scholar Professor Abdalla s-Sabai was told that there was no *ma'lūf* in Libya and that “any Libyan *ma'lūf* was not Libyan but Tunisian” (Interview July 2003). This not only shows the strong bond between the two musical traditions but also shows how the Libyan *ma'lūf* was sometimes placed by non-Libyan music scholars on the periphery of the core tradition.
6. The *mawlid* falls on the twelfth day of the third month of the Islamic lunar calendar (*rabi' al-awwal*).
7. For such descriptions see, for instance, Tully 1983:29.

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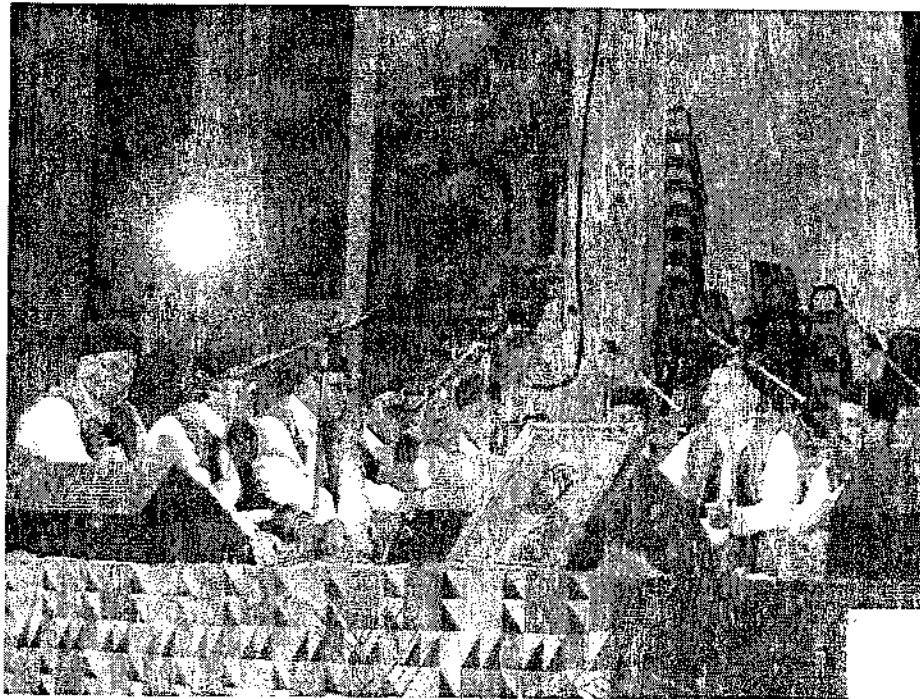
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A sheikh and a ghayta player performing ma'lūf during a Sufi mawlid parade in Tripoli [May 2004]. Photo: Philip Ciantar.



A framed picture of a sheikh placed on-stage in front of a traditional ensemble bearing his name [August 2003]. Photo: Philip Ciantar.