

CHAPTER 11

Images of the sea from the edge of the Tunisian Sahara

Alan Karass [United States Naval Academy]

Since my first doctoral fieldwork visit in 2008, the focus of my research has been on the International Festival of the Sahara in Douz, Tunisia, and the connection between identity, festivity, and public music making. During my visits, I became aware of the importance of music, poetry, epic tales, and storytelling in everyday life there. When I saw the announcement for this conference, I reached out to interlocutors to find out if there are any songs about the sea specific to Douz. I received several quick and resounding yesses. That is when I decided to move forward with this paper.

When I first started this project, I wondered if I'd encounter references to the "desert-as-sea" in texts, or descriptions of the camel as the "ship of the desert". Indeed, these exist. When I spoke to my interlocutors about specific references to the sea in songs, they guided me to contemporary poetry in Douz concerning the sea as a symbol of life's existential struggles and the promise and danger of migration.

Poetry, and the public performance of it, are very popular in Douz. Poetry performances are always part of the annual festival and other events throughout the year. Poets write about the desert, love, and politics. Any topic can be the subject of a poem. Recordings by local poets are available on YouTube and shared via mp3. The most popular poets in Douz are household names, most notably Ridha Abdellatif, Belgacem Abdellatif, Mohamed Ben Letaief, and Beshir Abdeladhim.

I was directed to two specific poems, "The boats of death" (2017) and "The sea" (2008), both by Douz native Beshir Abdeladhim. An interlocutor in Douz sent me videos, texts in Arabic, and worked with me to produce English translations of both. Despite the fact that I asked specifically for songs about the sea from Douz, what I was given were poems. When I probed my interlocutors about nomenclature, my questions were met with confusion. They responded: "Yes, they are songs, they are poems." The distinction I made between the two didn't resonate with them. In this paper, I will: briefly discuss the concepts of song and poetry as understood in literary history and criticism; explore some of the literature about the treatment of the sea in Arabic literature; describe the life and work of Beshir Abdeladhim; and lastly, consider these poems, "The boats of death" and "The sea".

There is a rich body of literature on the musical connections to bards and poetry in the Arab-speaking world and the Mediterranean, including: Milman Parry (1987), Albert Lord (1960), Michael Zwettler (1978), Dwight Reynolds (1994, 1995), **and** James Monroe (1987). There is also an important discussion of music and poetry in relationship to qur'anic recitation in Kristina Nelson's 1985 classic *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an*. A review of their works is outside the scope of this paper. However, there is one passage from Khaled Furani's 2012 monograph, *Silencing the Sea: Secular Rhythms in Palestinian Poetry*, that is particularly compelling (24):

Besides the *Qur'an*, the Arabic language itself testifies to the primacy of sound, especially in poetry. First, phonetically, *shir*, the Arabic word for "poetry", points to related words in other Semitic languages (e.g. Akkadian, Aramaic, and Hebrew) that can mean "song" as well as "poem." Second, Arabs in the poetic tradition maintained a primal affinity between poetry and song, between word and sound, as evident in numerous classical poems and in classical literary criticism. Due to this affinity, it is

common to hear poets and literary critics throughout the history of Arabic poetry refer to poems as songs (sing. *nashid*; pl. *anashid*) and to the act of composing or reciting a poem as singing (*inshad*).

Before I did a literature search on the symbolism of the sea and the ocean in Arabic poetry, I consulted with some of my interlocutors in Douz about the topic. They stated that the ocean is a symbol of a great challenge, often a natural, unrelenting, or mysterious force that needs to be confronted. They added that poets often draw connections between ships and camels, drawing parallels between their motion and physical characteristics. This discourse is indeed repeated in and supported by the literature. I shall return to this at the end of my paper. However, Abd Alghani (2007), Hamad (2020), Kolaska (2022), and McKinstry (2019) all suggest that the image of the sea is frequently found in Arabic poetry, and the *Qur'an*, semiotically to represent otherness, fear, separation, and even death. Additionally, Abd Alghani states that Andalusí poets of the tenth and eleventh centuries composed dialogues with the sea in their poetry. This is an element evident in “The sea” by Beshir Abdeladhim.

Tunisian popular poet, songwriter, and playwright, Beshir Abdeladhim, was born in Douz, Tunisia on 10 February 1964. Both his father and grandfather were well-known poets in Douz. Abdeladhim’s first public performance as a poet was at age 13, during the Douz Festival. Since 1993, he has penned countless plays, songs, and epic poems. He has written songs for prominent Tunisian singers such as Mohamed el Nasri and Belgacem Bouguenna. Abdeladhim participated in the opening of the 43rd session of the Carthage Festival in 2007. He has presented his work in Libya, Mauritania and Nigeria. He is still active as a poet and writer and continues to reside in Douz.

Abdeladhim wrote “The boats of death” in 2017, six years after the January 2011 revolution. On one hand, some Tunisians were feeling hopeful in 2017. They believed that the revolution would offer an opportunity to reconfigure Tunisian politics and society. However, many others were still deeply concerned about the economy, inflation, unemployment, and the role of foreign influences in post-revolution Tunisia. “The boats of death” was written as a response to the numerous Tunisians trying to leave the country on unauthorised migrant boats to France and Italy. Sadly, some Tunisians are stopped and returned to Tunisia, or more tragically, lose their lives at sea. The brief poem tells the story of a Tunisian who had hopes of leaving the country in order to find a brighter future elsewhere. Ultimately, they drown at sea.

The musical accompaniment in this recording is obvious. When I asked Abdeladhim about it, he said that the music was taken from a YouTube video. He added that he wasn't sure which video, and he intended it solely as a "sound effect – to add melody to the ear and draw the attention of the listener – to make the listener pay attention and not get bored or distracted". One of my interlocutors, an acquaintance of Abdeladhim, suggested that the music is inseparable from the poetry and highlights the interdependence of poetry and music in Douz. This interlocutor added, poetry is music and music is poetry. The text, translation, and recording of the poem by the poet from 2018 can be found here: <https://bit.ly/douzseasons>.

“The sea” is a longer poem, from 2008, and describes a conversation between the sea and a poet, perhaps Abdeladhim himself, in which they both complain about their loneliness and despair. Within the poem there are descriptions of waves of nostalgia, fleeting hope for the future, fond memories of the past, and pain and isolation. There are references to camels, invoking traditional connections between the desert and the sea. He writes: “rough waves breaking on the shore. Rough and roaring with a loud voice like a camel”. This poem too references the migrant boat problem, describing the boats with loved ones that leave but never return. At the end of the poem, there is a section devoted to conflicts in history that have connections to travel, wars of fleets, and crossing of waters. Abdeladhim

specifically mentions the 1996 shelling of Qana, Lebanon, the conquest of Iberia by Tariq ibn Ziyad's army in the 8th century, the US invasion of Baghdad in 2003, and the 2008 incident when Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi threw his shoes at President Bush in protest against Bush's politics and views on the Arab world. Although the juxtaposition of personal sentiment with historical references is fascinating, I was intrigued by my interlocutor's resistance to work with me on the translation. Initially, he wanted to skip over this section stating that "there is no need to translate this, it talks about politics ... conflict, war, and destruction". I had to ask several times to resume work on this passage. He had an additional concern that my audience would not be interested in this or might be offended by this. I responded "no, they are interested in Abdeladhim's words and their connections to the sea; they will not be scared away by politics". The recording of the poem by the poet can also be found here: <https://bit.ly/douzseasons>

There is a vast body of literature on the representation of the sea and the ocean in poetry, song, literature, and the *Qur'an*. A review of these writings is also outside the scope of this paper. However, there are some that are relevant to the discussion of Abdeladhim's poems.

In his 2007 article, "The poet and daughter of the sea: animated ships in Andalusian Arabic poetry", Jalal Abd Alghani discusses how the Mediterranean Sea was described by Andalusian poets of the tenth and eleventh centuries. He stated: "some poets were interested in composing a lyric dialogue with the sea, which they viewed simply as a threatening Otherness, a hostile power because of its general association with ideas of separation and death" (123). Not only did Abdeladhim also use this dialogue construction in "The sea", but both of the poems considered here imagine the sea as a harsh alterity. The connection between the sea and death is also addressed in the 2020 article "Symbolism of water in classic and modern Arabic literature". Mohammad Hamad suggests: "from the *Qur'an* to modern poetry, images of water have been used as a synonym for separation and death" (260). More broadly, Hannelies Kolaska, in her 2022 article "The imagery of seafaring and shipwreck in the *Qur'an*", argues that "renderings of seafaring in the *Qur'an* are first and foremost re-formulations of the widespread imagery in pre-Islamic poetry, late antique theological literature and visual depiction... an active engagement and re-interpretation of the universal imagery of seafaring". Lastly, in his 2019 chapter "Floating ideas: memories and the sea in medieval literature" Jamie McKinstry states:

"The sea is full of literal and symbolic paradoxes. It can bring hope and life but also can create fear and destruction; it is a realm of possibility and potential, but equally a place of limitation and interruption. Our thoughts regarding the sea range beyond the interpretation of the body of water itself. In fact, what the sea gives us is the freedom to project our own thoughts into and onto this immense space. The sea gives us time to think about ourselves in terms of where we have been, where we are now, and where we might be going" (3).

It is evident that Abdeladhim has drawn from the rich literary traditions of the Arab-speaking world and invokes classic sea-related tropes regardless of fact that he is part of a lineage of writers immersed in the Bedouin traditions of the Sahara Desert.

Despite the fact that Douz is at the edge of the Sahara Desert and 150 km from the Mediterranean, images of the sea are important ones in the local imagination. In Douz, the economic situation is poor, tourism isn't robust, and there is little local industry. The prospects for young Tunisians are limited. Some dream of finding enough money to take the chance on an unauthorised boat crossing to Europe. Sadly, many take this chance and some die at sea. These two poems by Douz poet Beshir Abdeladhim express the hopes and fears associated with this risky method of migration. In these texts, the author uses the image of the sea in ways traditionally found in poetry, both in Arabic and more universally—as a threatening "other", an ominous force of nature, and as a symbol of challenge, separation, and death.

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Appendix 1

The Boats of Death – by Bechir Abdeladhim

translated by M'hamed Abdelmalek; edited by Alan Karass

We rode over the sea waves and left home.
We sold the endearment of our house.
In our dreams, we reached a safe haven.
We rode over the sea and its waves.
We were told that the country is no longer worth anything.
Our dreams and our hearts expecting happy days and a better future,
El Dorado, where the poor become rich.
Our dreams and expectations were that we leave our country
and lead a happy and bountiful life.
We crossed a rough sea that is difficult for swimmers.
Our boat sank in the middle of nowhere due to overloads,
before reaching a safe haven.
Our trip was the end, with no return, without even leaving a sermon.
I called out, but unfortunately there was no answer from my companion.
I was drowning, fighting the waves to hear their voices for help.
I ended my journey with no burial or condolences, we didn't reach a safe haven.
We didn't live a better life.

اركبناك ياموج البحر ورحلنا وبعنا غلاء
منزلنا وفي حلمنا شاطي النجاة نزلنا اركبنا
البحر وامواجه// وقلنا الوطن ما عاد
يسوى حاجه وبات حلمنا وقلوبنا تتفاجى//
بايام فيها حسن مستقبلنا في بر يثري حالة
المحتاجه// في نرتعوا والخير كان املنا
كان حلمنا واوهامه// نرحل وننعم بالهني
وايامه اركبنا بحر يصعب على العوامه//
وشقيت مراكب موتنا بحملنا لاوصلتها دار
الهني بسلامه// ولا مركبي رضيت ارجوع
اهلنا كان السفر نهايه// ورحلة امفارق ما
ترك وصايه ناديت ما ردوا علي رفاقيا//
ولا صوتهم وقت الفزع شغلنا نهيت رحلتي
لادفن لاعزايه// لاخير عشنا لانجاة وصلنا

Appendix 2

The Sea – by Bechir Abdeladhim

Translated by M'hamed Abdelmalek; edited by Alan Karass

The sea complained to me about his silence and I complained to the sea about my situation.
He cried because of his loneliness and silence.
Thousands of people were missing and loving the sea, and staying up late at night enjoying its perfumed breeze
And celebrating their joy and sadness.
Days have turned their back on me,
I am lonely, at a loss to find the right rhythm or rhyme.
I fear that the sea of my poetry gets dry,
I came to you (to the sea) to listen to my poetry and relieve my loneliness.
But I find you suffering from loneliness, and your beach is silent.
The doors of joy are closed for both of us.
I came across you by chance, you are a stranger.
I just pay you a visit to comfort you and myself.
I find your beach deserted.
I thought to find your rough waves breaking on the shore.
Rough and roaring with a loud voice like a camel during the mating season among his herd of she camel.
Mosaic paintings you draw and I enjoy watching you embracing your love,
And the waves caressing her hair to the right and to the left.
You make me remember the old days, and my heart beats faster and faster.
I fear that if your waves get rough, they will harm my gazelle.
Let my love enjoy your beaches, and you remain a powerful sultan.
You betray, but despite of that you are famous.
The sea complained to me about his silence, and so did I?
I ask the sea to answer me.
I came to you to find my past, I found your waves very strong and rough.
Your secrets are deep for me to understand.
You have a strange character.
I just came across you by chance because I am a stranger myself.
I met on your shore, people awaiting travelers who haven't returned for so long.
Whenever they see a boat looming on the horizon, they are happy, waving their hands,
Expecting the arrival of their beloved ones.
The boats came ashore, but their beloved ones didn't return.
Their eyes in tears, but they keep waiting on the shore.
I imagine my beloved to arrive soon, and my heart will be happy.
But I found the waves laughing at me.
In the morning, I feel hopeful and optimistic.
But by the end of the day, I am desperate.
I ask the boats about my beloved and if they are still alive.
They keep silent without uttering a sound.

*يا بحر شكالي البحر صمته شكيتة حالي * بكي من غصايص غربته وبكالي
بكي من شوقه _____ ** الاو لاف كانت تفقده وتتوقه وليل السمر تنعم
بطيب نشوقه ** وفيه ساهرين وراسمين حفالي ويشكيه حابر حالته ملحوقه **
مدروك من عصف الزمان يكالي زى ما شكالى القلب ضيق عروقه ** مشاكاة
غايب ما وقفله والي رعي الفجر ماقابل شعاع زروقة ** مراعاة غايب بعد
طول ليالي رمى ع الزمن سرجه تبرم سوقه ** عطت بالقفا الايام رجعت تالي
خزين سرها مدفون فى صندوقه ** ما فسراته غربتى وترحالي وماهيش .
غربة شاقية محقوقة ** رحلة عقل واعى بحكم العالي ويا رحلتي كيف الكلام
نسوقه ** وكيف يرتسملي القول فى موالى وحسيت بها القافية مخنوقة ** وما
قادرة ترسم رحيل خيالي وخوفى بحر شعري يجف دقوقه ** كان واجهه موجك
يقص ارسالي انا جايبك يا بحر قولت الضوقة ** نقول تسمعه منى وتتغالي
رميت حمل عل حملك رميته فوقه ** رفيق حالتى لا كان يتهايالي تكون كيف
روحى الحائرة و قلوقة ** وكيف ما جراك يا رفيق جرابي انت الصمت عل
شطك سبل بخنوقه ** وصمتك على ضيق دروب مجالي وبيبان فرحي و
فرحتك مغلوقه ** غير الزمان صدفة رماك قبالي غريب وكر حبيبت الغريب
نتوقه ** فى رحلتي يمكن يريح بالي وما كنت نحساب الزمان يعوقه **
ونصادفه لحظة مكانه خالي ونحساب نلقى موجتك مطلوقه ** هايج وتتكم
وصوتك مالي كانك فحل يهدر على المسيقوه ** وتطمى كشاكيشك تدير علالي
والبشر كل البشر راسم سوقه ** لوحات من فسيفساء تزهالى وحضنك يداعب
حضن هالمعشوقه ** يلامس بدنها ايمنى وشمالي والموج يلعب بالشعر و يسوقه
** منين ترتضى له تضيق منه حوالى نحس فى كنينى نارها مطلوقه ** ونرجع
مع الذكرى قديم وتالي يخفق معاك القلب يكبر شوقه ** ولا يسخفك حالى ولا
تغالي بجاه النبى سايس على المعشوقه ** نخاف لا عتى موجك يضر غزالي
بجاه من خلق الكون والمزروقه ** خلى الشواطى حافلة بغوالي وسلطان خلك
حلقتك مطقوقه ** وتغدر ورغم الغدر شانك عالي شكالى البحر صمته شكيتة
سايس على شوي ** خلى الدوى بينى وبينك حي جيت * حالى
ننشدك يا بحر رد علي ** جيت فيك نستكشف زمان مضالي لقيتك بحر موجك