

METAL IDENTITIES IN TUNISIA: LOCALITY, ISLAM, REVOLUTION

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Abstract

This contribution addresses the making of youth cultural identities in Tunisia through and after its 2010/2011 Revolution. I consider how metal conveyed a form of “elite marginality” to Tunisians, emphasizing middle-class privilege as well as non-conformity. I then analyse some cultural elements through which metal was localized in Tunisia: the way metal musicians coped with “Orientalism”, and metalheads’ identities in the context of a Muslim society. Finally, I examine how metal celebrated Tunisian Revolution and yet suffered a crisis after its inception, pointing to the possible social and cultural dynamics behind this contradictory shift.

Introduction

Metal rules the world, but the ways of its conquest are uneven and deeply significant. They reveal much of the genre’s complexities, and show the conditions of its existence in a world filled with possibilities and late-modern despair. Deena Weinstein (2011) argues that metal has an appeal for people who experience modernity but cannot fully take advantage of its benefits: it is, therefore, music for the global proletariat.

Tunisia seems to be living in the precise conditions that Weinstein describes: throughout its independent history, it has been staring at the shop windows of the affluent West, with little success in fully enjoying the goods on display. Often considered a bridge between North Africa/the Middle East and Europe/the West, the country has long represented itself as the most advanced Arab nation in terms of personal rights and secular lifestyles (Perkins, 2014). During the regime of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), Tunisia’s economic performance was celebrated as a veritable “miracle” by its allies – in particular France, its former colonizer, but also the United States and many influential European countries. Those allies backed Ben Ali’s government while closing their eyes to financial falsification, regime corruption and the repression of political opponents, justified by the need to crack down on the international threat of Islamic terrorism (Beau et al., 2002).

Such myths of growth and reform concealed a landscape of progressive impoverishment; economic depression – devastating proportions in the country’s interior – severed the hopes of a growing number of educated youth. Any option of career achievement had to pass through ties with the governing party (Democratic Constitutional Rally, RCD) and a small clique of powerful families, whose members thrived in a “late empire” atmosphere of corruption. While a worldwide crisis closed in, no political alternative was allowed. Such evolving contradictions reached an apex in the 2010-2011 unrest that led to the downfall of Ben Ali and opened a new political phase for the country (Ayari, 2011).

This paper looks at how metal was experienced in Tunisia amidst the above-mentioned contradictions. What kinds of identity did it help in fostering? How did these identities come to terms with the features and concerns of locality? The paper is based on three periods of field research: five months between November 2010 and June 2011; four months from March to June 2014; and six months, from January to June 2015 (in 2014 and 2015, materials on the electro and rap scenes were collected as well). The findings presented here are the result of in-depth interviews with 55 members of the metal scene, plus participant observation at concerts and other social activities (e.g., interactions at cafés or band rehearsals). Interviews were conducted in French and then translated to English. Research was mainly conducted in the capital area (the Grand Tunis) and Tunisia's most populated coastal cities.

I begin by sketching the interactions between Tunisian society and the making of metal identities. I then address the themes of Orientalism in Tunisian metal music and the topic of Islam inside the lives of Tunisian metalheads. I finish by looking at the Tunisian Revolution and the ways in which it affected the local scene.

From metalhead to *hardous*: localizing metal in Tunisia

Metal has become a translocal phenomenon through multi-faceted processes of globalization and even more complex forms of localization. As a universal cultural form – an *ideoscape* (Appadurai, 1996) – it can only take roots through a partial reshaping, one that highlights the features and constraints of the local realities in which metalheads struggle to build their scenes.

While locality in a place like Tunisia is partially represented by such factors as Islam and other social/cultural specificities of the region, it also operates through an array of less “exotic” and more mundane aspects, such as poor scene infrastructures, social inequality, informal politics and bureaucracy. In this sense, Keith Kahn-Harris's 2006 work is relevant here. Analyzing metal scenes around the world, Kahn-Harris proposes the concepts of construction and structure as mutually influencing dimensions of a scene. *Construction*, in his terms, is the discursive nature of the local metal scene: its ideology, aesthetics, and its internal cohesion. *Structure* is, instead, the organization of the scene's infrastructures (that is, its bands, webzines, venues and the like) and other material elements such as the scene's volumes of production and consumption. Kahn-Harris notices how different local contexts – for example, different forms of welfare – affect the interplay of construction and structure, seen as the ways in which the “mood” and interpersonal feelings of a scene interact with its material forms (Kahn-Harris, 2006).

Metal was already present in Tunisia during the second half of the 1990s. It circulated mainly through cassettes that children of emigrants and teenagers with double citizenship brought back from France or Germany. Satellite dishes, and then the Internet, maximized the genre's diffusion and increased its popularity. By the turn of the century, metal was arguably the core youth culture for Tunisian “alternative” youth: bands like Xtazy, Pirania, Propaganda, and Mad Chok played concerts, while the Zanzana radio broadcast metal and hard rock on air and through the web, and black-clad youth gathered at the downtown café/theatre L'Etoile du Nord [The Northern Star]. In 2003, the Mediterranean Guitar Festival (FMG) had its first edition; in subsequent years, it would host international metal outfits, such as Haggard (2010) and Symphony X (2011). The festival offered a highly visible and mediated occasi-

on for Tunisian bands to play live, so that Tunisia experienced a surge of new groups, often simple “one-offs” merely formed for playing at the FMG alone. The metal scene became stratified: different generations of fans performed the genre in different, sometimes conflicting ways. At least one band, Myrath, gained an international reputation, while groups such as Vielikan, Carthagods, and Dead Moon earned national following. Webzines, such as *Metal Waves* and *Sombre Arcane*, shed light on Tunisian and international metal, while the *ZanZana* website hosted a forum in which Tunisian metalheads discussed their passions, identity and scene affairs.

These dynamics made metal a visible reality in Tunisia, something that could be seen and recognized on the streets, and sometimes, in national media. Metalheads became members of Tunisian urban folklore; in the local dialect they are called *hrediss*, plural of *hardous* –those who listen to *hard* (rock). And yet for most of my informants, these conditions were all Tunisian society could allow: metalheads had to struggle hard for the bare existence of their scene, and such a fight was in many cases unfruitful.

Being a metal musician in the country was a hard job. The cost of instruments was prohibitive for the vast majority of the population, and their availability scant. Musicians wanting to buy gear specific for the genre needed acquaintances to ship it from Europe or Dubai, since Internet shopping is forbidden in Tunisia. Standard rehearsal spaces – such as youth centres – refused metal bands; and no dedicated recording studio existed: most Tunisian metal demos were recorded home with drum programming – a feature which rendered local bands naively produced, and thus scarcely competitive in the struggle for an international recording contract. Tunisia does not have a law protecting copyright: music is almost exclusively downloaded, so that metal in particular is a non-profitable activity – this determined the lack of private support for bands, such as management or sponsorship. State support was equally missing: the state does not provide metal musicians with an “artist card”, a certificate which would regulate them as professionals and give them the right to get a passport and foreign visas, the latter being impossible for Tunisians without a well-established bank account.

During the period researched here, a Tunisian band had to be lucky enough to be able to afford instruments and a place to practice; and if it had the strength to resist the above-cited difficulties, it may have found itself stuck in Tunisia with few possibilities of going on tour elsewhere and reaching the next career stage. Many groups would split up well before this, simply because they found it meaningless to fight so much only to keep playing in a garage. For this reason, the scene experienced a steady generational shift, which in turn affected its collective identity and cohesiveness (its *construction* according to Kahn-Harris, 2006). Metallers in their late twenties tended to abandon the scene, and were thus criticized for not conveying the “real” meaning of metal to the younger generations. At the same time, the most “faithful” metalheads judged their scene according to its overwhelming teenage dimension: to them, metal in Tunisia was increasingly an affair for childish fashion victims who did not *understand* its essence. Tunisian metal was, thus, more of a site for quarrelling than a collective resource.

Being a metalhead in Tunisia was difficult even apart from musical practice. Concerts were generally expensive because of their low profitability and legal restrictions (so that bureaucracy often caused the cancellation of highly anticipated gigs). Metal paraphernalia, such as t-shirts, were scarcely

available. Moreover, the visual appearance of metalheads caused them to be stigmatized as delinquent and irreligious.

As outlined above, some factors rendered the genre unaffordable for a large sector of Tunisian society. Metal had been diffused from the fashionable suburbs of Tunis, such as La Marsa or Menzah, where bourgeois youth and foreigners met and shared knowledge. Metal simply had costs (in terms of economic and cultural capital) that rendered its diffusion in dispossessed social environments – disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Tunis, and the poor regions inland and in the south of the country – very hard. The idea of metal being a culture of middle-class youth was reoccurring among metalheads and was often voiced by members of such scenes as rap and electro.

If they were privileged, metalheads still were not socially central: the topic of social marginality was widely discussed by my informants. In an e-mail response sent to me just before my first fieldwork experience, Habib, a musician and webzine journalist, wrote: “we are marginalized by a society which is prejudiced towards us and believes in some ridiculous clichés” [Habib, 2010]. More recently Yassine, one of the scene’s prime movers, told me: “Metalheads are present in poor quarters, too. But they’re not welcome in their quarter. They’re just people who are set apart from society. [...] Sponsors are not interested [in metal concerts] because, even if they have money to spend, metalheads are just marginalized young people” [Yassine, 2014].

While marginality as non-conformity is hardly a new topic in youth cultures, Tunisian metalheads employed it to depict their society in a particular way. Many of them told me that the love of metal made them feel different from “standard” Tunisians. This social category was often overlapped with the one of “youth from poor quarters”. Those youth were described as bigoted Muslims who blamed the infidels while, at the same time, drinking and having sex. They were violent and obtuse, looking for a chance to start a fight at the soccer stadium or on the streets; everybody who looked “different” was immediately subject to insults and teasing. They dreamt of migrating illegally to places (e.g., France or Italy) that they portrayed as “heaven”, only to live there in precarious conditions while parading expensive cars and nonexistent fortunes during their return visits to the homeland. Even their music, such as rap and Mezwed (local folk music) was dismissed as rude and ignorant.

Whether or not the majority of Tunisian metalheads were actually bourgeois, their cultural identity represented Tunisia from a cultivated, middle class point of view – their *habitus*, in the terminology of Bourdieu (1984), was bourgeois. Metal has often been depicted as a form of blue collar entertainment (see Brown, 2003) or resistance (Weinstein, 2009); on the contrary, Tunisian metalheads considered it as a rather sophisticated art: many of them thanked metal for being their gateway into intellectualism – the discovery of literature, philosophy, history, and mythology. It functioned as a way of imagining oneself out of the asphyxiating Tunisian society, by connecting with a global, idealized “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006): the worldly metal brotherhood.

If Weinstein’s hypothesis of metal as a controversial experience of modernity fits Tunisia, her vision of metalheads as a global proletariat is, instead, questionable. More generally, the ways in which subcultural theories have imagined subcultures as working class responses to a bourgeois cultural hegemony in the Gramscian sense (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Blackman, 2005) were reversed in the minds of Tunisian metalheads, in that they felt themselves to

be subject to the hegemony of the national underclass. Metal was, in Tunisia, a form of “elite marginality”: a non-conformist identity based on material and cultural privilege.

Shades of the local: Orientalism and Islam

I have so far considered the impact of locality on metal in terms of privilege and social ideologies. I now turn to other nuances of metal identity to understand how Tunisian metalheads lived out some cultural aspects of their position in the Middle East/North Africa. I start with the influence of Orientalism in Tunisian metal, and I then focus on how my informants dealt with religion, a central aspect in local culture and lifestyle.

Oriental(ist) metal

Orientalism (1979), written by Edward Said, analyzes the ways in which “the East” has been misrepresented for centuries by western observers. According to the West’s depictions, the Orient is historically immutable, corrupted, decadent, feminine: such a pattern of descriptions is, according to Said, inseparable from western purposes of colonial dominion. Orientalism, or the western image of the East, is a knowledge-power dispositive in the Foucauldian sense: penetration of the East and dominion over it are inextricable.

Some of my Tunisian informants used the term Orientalism to define the clichéd representations of “Oriental” (that is, Middle-Eastern) heritage in alternative music: local instruments such as darbouka percussion and the oud; samples of muezzins singing; oriental scales; videos with sufi mystics or belly dancers; themes like the desert, mirages, oases and the like in lyrics and cover art.

Metal and electro artists who informed this research almost always displayed locality in a similar way: emphasizing their Middle-Eastern flavor, while at the same time rendering it vague, without any stringent ties to Tunisian reality. Otherwise, bands simply erased any sign of locality, wanting to sound as if they could have come from anywhere else – a statement that was proudly made, since for some of them “Tunisianity” mainly meant a parochial and amateurish approach.

The alternative between Orientalism (for example the “oriental metal” subgenre) and the erasure of locality is interesting if compared to rap, which instead drew heavily on the “extreme local” (Forman, 2002): vocals in Tunisian dialect; references to cities and neighborhoods; lyrics mentioning national subjects, be they political or social; references to local pop and folk musical styles, such as Mezwed.

Even if oriental metal bands often explained their music as a result of loving metal in a country that resonated with many local musical forms, in most cases they actually *hated* so-called oriental music. Some of them distinguished the most pop-like and folk styles (for instance Lebanese pop divas or Tunisian Mezwed) from “cultivated” genres like classical Arab-Andalusian music (malouf), and such players as Tunisian Anwar Brahem and Egyptian legend Umm Kulthum, whom they respected. But the main musical inspiration for Tunisian oriental metal bands came from oriental metal itself, a genre embodied by such artists as Orphaned Land. The move towards oriental influences was less an autobiographical, “natural” one, than a product of reflexivity. They rep-

resented themselves as exotic because this was expected from them internationally, and their Tunisian origins could provide them with a peculiar niche in the global market. Alternately, they chose the style because it fitted with their political or cultural agenda. Or, they simply liked oriental metal as a subgenre. And yet, even if this reflexive choice may sound inauthentic, it was often made meaningful through personal and artistic agency.

The most relevant case in this sense is Myrath, the leading Tunisian metal band. Established as Xtazy, they were noticed by a French manager who asked them to develop their Middle-Eastern traits to become more relevant internationally. The band accepted; they changed their name to the Arabic word Myrath [legacy], mixed their progressive metal with heavy doses of “oriental” music, published albums such as *Desert Call* (2010) and *Tales of the Sands* (2011, whose cover portrays a camel in the desert) and even took a belly dancer with them on tour. Interviewing with me in 2011, the band was quite aware of its exoticism, but they took it as a challenge rather than a cliché. The interest in eastern music had pushed them to study further (they were all professional musicians and teachers), and to come to terms with their parents’ cultural influences. Furthermore, they conceived their imagery as a mosaic to be gradually disclosed to foreign listeners. Their 2011 album *Tales of the Sands* was thus more nuanced, and contained, for example, a song on Saracen pirates.

Other examples of such agency can be cited. The band Saracens, for example, played with Orientalism and elements from (*One Thousand and One Nights*, n.d.) to develop an obscure ambience and a criticism of what they saw as a Western/Zionist plot to enslave the Arab world. Therefore, they used Orientalism to revolt against its own source. Ayyur was a black metal band that took discourses of Norwegian black metal (pagan revenge against an imperialist Christianity) to North Africa: they summoned Berber and Persian divinities against Islamic civilization, which had brutalized all cultural differences in the Middle East. The electro/extreme metal project Fusam wrote *Al janna is vagina* [Heaven is vagina] (2013), a harsh satirization of Tunisian fundamentalists going to Syria for jihad, driven by a belief in sexual rewards in the afterlife.

While such contributions are in one way or another indebted to a western image of Middle-Eastern stereotypes, they are, at the same time, products of cultural manipulations that have to do with personal agency, political ideology, and musical discovery.

Islamic culture and lifestyle

Islam is state religion in Tunisia, as proclaimed by both the pre- and post- Revolution constitutions. During the Ben Ali era, the government gave itself a mild Muslim character (as opposed to the resolute secularism of Tunisia’s historical president during 1957-87, Habib Bourguiba) that coexisted with the repression of political Islam. As a result, committed Muslims – for instance, those who regularly prayed in Mosques or grew beards and dressed as Salafists – were suspected and repressed by the State.

Still, the somber and at times Satanic leanings of metal were ill-viewed by society, as a crossing of “traditional” morality and public religious doctrine. The style of metalheads cast them as aliens and gained them insults, mockeries, and occasional police attention: while the main cause was their status as “outsiders”, this stigma was reinforced by popular and state religious views.

Such a stigma culminated in a Satanism “moral panic” spawning throughout the country in 2007, when the newspaper *El Watan* published an article on supposed Satanist sects gathering at L’Etoile du Nord. Those sects were said to corrupt teenagers, inducing them to homosexuality, drug use, and even suicide.⁶⁵

Further reportages on Satanism contributed to building up Tunisian Satanists as folk devils: obscure psychopaths who drank cats’ blood and sacrificed virgins in the country’s forests.

In other Middle Eastern countries, for instance Morocco, similar anti-Satanism persecutions of metalheads resulted in dramatic judicial cases (Hamma and Guibert, 2006). In Tunisia, Satanism had minor legal consequences, causing metalheads to be questioned by police officers and having possessions, such as albums with eerie artwork, confiscated. The most enduring effect of the moral panic was that it cast the Satanism-metal link deep within the Tunisian collective consciousness, causing suspicion of metalheads and the trivialization of their culture.

Most metalheads I met were actually Muslims, even if only a minority practiced their religion actively. Receiving stigma by fellow Muslims was, for these scenesters, particularly frustrating: “I can’t stand them treating me as a Satanist even though they know I’m a practicing Muslim. They don’t insult me inside the Mosque, but as soon as I turn my back...” [Mahdi, 2011]. Some of those Muslim metalheads claimed they could not possibly be “fully into” metal: they loved metal music, but they refused metal as a form of identity because it implied embracing habits and themes they found irreligious. Listening to music was a highly selective experience: some metalheads simply did not pay attention to the lyrics, focusing on the music. Unacceptable lyrics were often labeled as simply “dumb”. They not only managed to ignore openly Satanic or anti-religious lyrics, but also songs on drinking, such as *Whiskey in the Jar* (by Thin Lizzy, 1972, then covered by Metallica in 2004).

Instead of being selective towards metal, some of my informants simply developed their personal approaches to religion, indulging in the metal lifestyle (drinking, having sex, flirting with metal’s references) while keeping a personal relation to God: “I’m a sinner, but that’s between me and God” [Murad, 2011]. Other metalheads openly came to terms with the bleakest themes in metal: Emna, a black metallor, told me that metal helped her to picture hell, giving her the sense of evil and, thus, of good [2011].

Such forms of reciprocal accommodation between religion and metal were similar to what Asef Bayat termed *accommodating innovation*: a way of redefining the moral boundaries of faith and youthfulness to let them coexist, which eventually sets the base for more comprehensive forms of religion and new forms of youth culture (Bayat, 2013).

There were many atheists in the metal scene, although there was no proof that the scene hosted more irreligious people than the rest of society; metal atheists were simply more recognizable. In the case of atheists, the hate for underclass conformists was in some cases even louder: they had the feeling that, were the people in charge for electing their representatives, they would have turned Tunisia into an Islamic country, so that personal freedoms would be seriously

⁶⁵ a scan of the article can be found here: http://tinypic.com/view.php?pic=6399b1y&s=1#.VH_18mfRh8E

threatened by fanaticism. Some atheist metalheads felt themselves to be in the awkward position of sharing the Islamophobia present in the European post-9/11 debate while rejecting its imperialistic consequences; someone countered dictatorship, and yet preferred Ben Ali's rule on the perspectives of democratization through Islam. This distance between metalheads (that still rebelled against their dictatorships) and Islamist opponents (who in many cases were the primary opposition to Arab dictatorships) has been noted in other Middle-Eastern countries (LeVine, 2008).

Such a complex situation became more dramatic after the Revolution, when the confrontation on identity and lifestyle became the central debate for the new Tunisian democracy.

Revolution and beyond

The reign of Ben Ali ended on the 14th of January 2011, after nearly one month of protests sparked by the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor from the depressed southern city of Sidi Bouzid (Ayeb, 2011). Complex political stages followed: Tunisia managed to stay away from the violence which followed the "Arab Spring" in other countries (such as Libya or Syria), but experienced tense moments of internal conflict, either represented as a battle between Revolution and Reaction or as a confrontation of Islam and modernity. Since the free elections in October 2011, a coalition led by the Islamist party Ennahdha guided the country through an accomplished constituent process but failed in containing the economic crisis and terrorist menaces, culminating in two political murders (Hachemaoui, 2013). New, fair elections were held at the end of 2014: the secular party Nidaa Tounes, partly composed of old regime personalities, obtained a relative majority of seats.

Almost all of my informants claimed to have participated directly to the 2010-2011 street protests that succeeded in ousting Ben Ali's regime. Most of them discovered politics in those moments: a few became committed to certain political parties in the aftermath; many became disillusioned by the subsequent events and denied that a Revolution had ever been made. Still, everybody spoke of it as if it marked a "before" and an "after", in Tunisian history and their very existences.

The metal scene celebrated the Revolution. A few metal songs honored the happening: for example *Corpses, and Still no Life* by Vielikan (2011), *Rebirth of People* by Terra Forte (2011), *Tunisian Revolution Journey* by Flagellation (n.d.). Dead Moon covered the national anthem, while bands such as Cartage-na restyled their image emphasizing their national origins. Festivals like Waves of Revolution and Freedom to Rock were directly inspired by the Revolution. And yet, metal never became the music of revolution – rather, the scene experienced an abrupt decay from 2011 onwards. Rap, on the contrary, had a critical upsurge, partly because it came to be identified as the "music of the Revolution" since the song *Rayes Lebled* by El Général in 2010 attacked Ben Ali at the beginning of 2011 and the singer was briefly arrested, becoming an international icon of the protests (Gana, 2012).

The signs of metal's collapse were evident: concerts became rare and smaller. After a successful 2011 edition, the FMG was held in a smaller fashion in 2012 before being suspended. A rock/electro venue, the Plug, opened in 2011 becoming the metalheads' Mecca and hosting small national and international metal concerts. However, it had to suspend activities in 2014, citing administrative problems as the reason for its closure. Many leading groups simply disban-

ded, with their members quitting music, getting married or emigrating. A few members of the scene embraced Salafism. In 2014, most metal bands played covers, and only a handful actually recorded original material, in most cases stepping back from all live activity. While such scenes as rap and electro gained momentum, metal declined in popularity.

My informants agreed on this sad condition of metal, and yet they had different hypotheses on its causes. Some thought of it as a simple “low phase”: the scene was tired, important bands had split up all together by coincidence, and metal would recover soon. Others believed it was the result of investing so much energy and hype in a genre that did not give anything back to its practitioners. Yet others thought that the events had simply driven youth far from metal (too metaphorical, politically indirect) towards rap – which had the appeal of politically and socially committed music, and was way cheaper and more immediate to produce – or political activism *tout court*.

The climate of fear experienced in the country was especially cited by informants. It surely had something to do with the disappearance of huge metal concerts, as Yassine directly experienced: “Better be clear about this: if you go to the Ministry of Culture and you present them a dossier for the organization of a show, they will refuse. If you’ve got 5000 people there, and among the audience there are ten Salafists, you already have to pay attention” [Yassine, 2014]. According to Yassine, while pop music concerts were deemed safer, metal was just too provocative.

In general, metal lived the paradox of having been undermined by the Revolution it had celebrated. The paradox rested on the particular condition of metal’s existence. As a lifestyle, it could develop under the secular Ben Ali dictatorship, which, apart from repression and corruption, enjoyed a subtle consensus by Tunisian middle classes – a “security pact” in which freedom was swapped with safety, the possibility of hedonism, and illusions of economic prosperity (Hibou, 2006; 2011). The regime’s crisis shattered that pact, and the social scene was, for a while, invaded by those Ben Ali’s dreams had evicted: the desperate, unemployed youth from the South. Perhaps it is no surprise that rap – loved by the country’s poor youth, and iconically representing their vicissitudes – came to be the “hegemonic” youth style in the country. At the same time, the habitus of metal, its lifestyle rooted in the image of a middle-class, westernized Tunisia, seemed undermined by historical changes: its style was outmoded, its concerts dangerous, its practices frustrating.

Further research needs to be conducted to monitor the condition of metal in the new era of Tunisian democracy that started at the end of 2014.

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