
Rethinking Patrimony Through the Problem of Hoarding

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Résumé

Que signifie réellement le terme patrimoine ? Dans de nombreuses cultures, y compris celles du Maghreb, ce concept semble évident. Cependant, cette apparente clarté devrait nous inciter à une réflexion plus approfondie. Cet article propose une réévaluation de la notion de patrimoine en se concentrant sur la question de la thésaurisation au sein des cercles musicaux andalous en Algérie. Il est souvent avancé que le répertoire andalou a subi des pertes en raison des pratiques de thésaurisation des maîtres musiciens. Cette assertion constitue un trope discursif qui sert à légitimer les initiatives de préservation du répertoire. Parallèlement, il s'agit d'une pratique riche de sens qui va au-delà d'une simple justification. Comprendre la thésaurisation peut nous permettre d'appréhender le patrimoine comme une pratique sociale complexe et parfois inattendue.

Mots-clés : Patrimoine - Musique - Biens inaliénables - Dette - Algérie.

ملخص

ما الذي يعنيه وصف شيء ما بأنه تراث؟ في العديد من المجتمعات، بما في ذلك المغرب العربي، يبدو أن هذا المفهوم يتحدث عن نفسه. ومع ذلك، فإنه يستدعي منا إعادة التفكير فيه. حيث يستعرض هذا المقال معنى التراث من خلال تحليل مسألة الاكتناز في الأوساط الموسيقية الأندلسية الجزائرية. إذ هناك ادعاء قديم يشير إلى أن التراث الموسيقي الأندلسي قد تعرض للضياع نتيجة لممارسات الاكتناز التي قام بها الموسيقيون البارزون. هذا الادعاء

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يعد مجازًا بلاغيًا يساهم في تبرير الجهود الرامية لحماية التراث الموسيقي. في الوقت ذاته، تمثل هذه الممارسة دلالة عميقة تتجاوز مجرد التبرير. إن فهم الاكتناز يمكن أن يعزز من إدراكنا للتراث كممارسة اجتماعية معقدة وغالبًا ما تكون غير متوقعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التراث - الموسيقى - الممتلكات غير القابلة للتصرف - الديون - الجزائر.

Abstract

What does it mean to describe something as a patrimony? In many societies, including in the Maghrib, the concept seemingly speaks for itself. But it is precisely this givenness that should make us take a second look. This article revisits the meaning of patrimony by considering the question of hoarding in Algerian Andalusí musical circles. There is a longstanding claim that the Andalusí repertoire has suffered loss through acts of hoarding repertoire on the part of master musicians. This claim is a discursive trope that helps justify the patrimonial project of safeguarding the repertoire. At the same time, it is a meaningful practice that entails more than justification. Making sense of hoarding can help us make better sense of patrimony as a complex and frequently surprising social practice.

Keywords: Patrimony - Music - Inalienable possessions - Debt - Algeria.

In those societies, including Algeria, where the concept is widely embraced, patrimony can often appear to be self-evident: it is an explanation, not something to be explained. Yet self-evidence is itself an invitation to critical engagement. This does not mean unmasking the concept as false. Critical engagement can instead mean a better understanding, perhaps even a greater appreciation, even if it involves at least a temporary alienation.

Such making-strange can happen many ways, none of them mutually exclusive. One can point out that not all societies have a concept of patrimony, or that the concept takes many forms in those that do. One might take a historical approach, tracing the rise and transmutation and diffusion of the concept and its institutions and practices. Or one might consider the internal tensions and contradictions in the concept of patrimony as it plays out in some context.

This article seeks to denaturalize the concept of patrimony as it relates to Andalusí music in Algeria and the wider Maghrib in the

modern period, mainly through a consideration of the tensions and contradictions of patrimonial discourse and practice. In doing so, it also engages historical and comparative perspectives, though in such a way as to avoid privileging the metropole as the ultimate source of the concept. The emphasis here is on an internalist reading of the patrimonial field, a “deep dive,” so to speak, into such discourses and practices. This account suggests that far from being a univocal, essentially conservative practice, patrimony as it plays out in the Andalusi musical field in Algeria and the wider Maghrib is entangled with ambivalence, doubt, and struggles over authority and the meaning of the past. This is particularly evident in the longstanding notion that the Andalusi repertoire has eroded over time in part due to its hoarding by musical masters (*shuyûkh*; sing. *shaykh*). Why does the figure of the hoarding *shaykh* stand at the center of the practice and discourse of Andalusi musical patrimony? And what might the answer to that question teach us about the broader concept of patrimony as it plays out here?

Andalusi music as a patrimony

As in the wider Maghrib and many other parts of the world, patrimony has widespread conceptual purchase in Algeria. As a word, patrimony (*patrimoine*, *turâth*) is modern, though no doubt versions of the concept have been present for a very long time. It is used to describe various objects and practices that are understood to be worth preserving. Usually, these objects and practices are believed to be old and to have been preserved and transmitted by past generations. In most instances, patrimony is understood to belong to a collective—regional, sometimes transnational, but usually (at least in the idiom as deployed in the Maghrib) national, and thereby tied to state institutions said to bear responsibility for its safeguard. In this way, patrimony speaks to the entanglement of “persons and things” (Mauss 2016, p. 87): the patrimonial object is a valuable possession whose loss would spell the loss of a crucial component of the collective, perhaps even its very being, as if this thing were an externalization of the collective spirit. In this respect, patrimony is a classic instance of what anthropologist Annette Weiner called inalienable possessions (Weiner, 1992). Yet externalization and entanglement do not quite get at the relationship in full, since the patrimonial object can blend into a state of subjecthood, even

while keeping some peculiar qualities: though the object cannot act alone, it can demand respect and safeguard from those who are attuned to it, and it is often conceived as giving something invaluable in return (Glasser, 2016, 2024). Patrimony is like an infant, or like someone who is very old.

The work of David Graeber (2011) gives us vocabulary to draw out another aspect of patrimony, which is its stark difference from the market and from money and money-like things. The difference from market logic is obvious when thinking about national and other sorts of patrimony: one can lose a patrimonial object in many ways, but one of the most cutting is through sale to a private individual, particularly when that means that it leaves its home territory. Graeber's arguments about money and debt invite us to bring this intuitive understanding a bit further. For him, money starts when things are torn from their context¹. Patrimonial objects, by contrast, entail a different logic: they need to stay close to their context, which by definition means they must be protected from the open market. In its usual specificity to one collective and not to another, patrimony's close association with sovereignty is not surprising. Nation-states might be able to recognize and even value other nation-states' patrimony—indeed, Algeria has had an important role in articulating and supporting the innovative notion of intangible heritage articulated in recent decades by UNESCO. But this value always rests on the specificity of the connection of the more-or-less object to the more-or-less subject.

In Algeria, some musical and poetic repertoires fall under the umbrella of patrimony, chief among them the Andalusi musical tradition embodied in the *nûba* and its offshoots. In the immediate aftermath of Algerian independence, as in Tunisia and Morocco, Andalusi music was at the forefront of official projects to delineate and preserve a national musical patrimony (FLN 1966). This in turn built on the prominence of Andalusi music in the public sphere before independence, where it had been an object of safeguard and revival among indigenous urban Algerians and eventually in some government circles (Glasser, 2016). In their turn, these public colonial-era efforts built on longstanding preservation and performance practices among

¹ This helps explain Graeber's emphasis on the importance of war in giving rise to money (386).

aficionados and musicians in a variety of Algerian cities. Indeed, the widespread, venerable claim that the *nûba* came from medieval Muslim Spain spoke to the idea that this repertoire was an old, precious inheritance that was rescued from a traumatic loss or reduction of context (the fall of al-Andalus) and that then found refuge and solicitude in North Africa. This preservation, however, is understood to have been imperfect. The lore around the Andalusi repertoire is that it suffered many losses beyond its original uprooting, leading to the erosion of an elaborate, cosmologically organized core repertoire into only a few roughly complete modally organized suites (*nûbât*; sing. *nûba*) in the modern period. Among the causes of these losses cited by the modern, post-1900 movement to preserve and revive this repertoire through recording, printing, transcription, and amateur public performance are deformation through oral transmission, the rise of competing musical genres, the catastrophe of colonialism and other forms of political and economic upheaval and instability that made transmission and thriving impossible, and the sheer passage of time (Hadj Ali, 1960; Glasser, 2016). Thus the project of collective remembering is tied up with the threat and reality of collective forgetting (Lass, 1988; Weiss, 1997).

A related cause of such loss or forgetting often cited among revivalists is the hoarding of musical knowledge, whether that be melodies, texts, or both. The claim that musicians were failing and even refusing to transmit parts of the repertoire, leading to its continuous erosion, is evident since Maghribi writers' earliest discussions of the repertoire in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (al-Tâdilî, 1884-1885; Yafil, 1904). This tendency toward hoarding was often blamed on the fact that *shuyûkh* were in competition with one another, and therefore had an interest in holding certain pieces back from easily accessible performance. So we can find reports of musicians distorting words or melodies on spotting a competitor in the audience (Rouanet, 1922, p. 2913), or of refusing to share a written compilation of song-texts (al-Tâdilî 1884-1885; Yafil 1904). These questions of competition could blend into intergenerational jealousy and suspicion, which had plenty of room to grow in a practice rooted in face-to-face transmission from master to disciple. We can also find hints of hoarding in the face of efforts (some of them by French colonial figures) to

make known repertoires that were understood as sacred (Rouanet 1922, p. 2912). And in some cases, refusal to transmit could be blamed on egoism and sheer irrationality. It is important to note that all these practices presuppose a notion of embodied musical knowledge whose authority is based on the fact that it is transmitted: for this music to exist, it must circulate through performance by individual bearers, who in turn received it from others (in other words, the significance of the hoarding *shaykh* rests on the significance of the *shaykh* tout court)². As Gustav Peebles has argued regarding the dialectic between “hoarding” and the lending-out he associates with “savings,” here the performance of musical goods “inherently places them under risk of seizure” (Peebles, 2020).

The relationship with the question of the market is complex. On the one hand, there is a longstanding claim that the *nûba* is threatened by competing genres, accentuated in the twentieth century by the introduction of sound recording, radio, and other mass media, and, according to some, by the massive rural-to-urban migration that transformed Algerian society. We can think of this as a threat to the *nûba* that stems from the existence of a wider musical market. The question of hoarding, by contrast, is about problems that are internal to the market for the *nûba*: competition eats away at the integrity of the repertoire through musical figures’ induction of scarcity. In a way, the hoarding *shaykh* is a caricature of inalienability: he holds his knowledge so close that it never leaves him. In fact, taken in terms of Graeber’s discussion of money, the hoarding *shaykh* holds it so close that it becomes one with his personal context; in other words, the ultimate context is the grave.

So here one can picture a balancing act. On one side, there is the fact that musical performance is embodied in professional musicians whose existence is dependent on a market, in that they need listeners to patronize them and vice versa (though note that some of these patrons are themselves accomplished musicians in their own right). On the other side, there is the need to maintain the rarity of certain pieces, a strategy that

² This emphasis on embodied, transmitted musical knowledge helps to explain why *shuyûkh* have sometimes passed off their own compositions as having been received from a dying *shaykh* (Davis 2004, p. 93). In other words, the market broadly conceived has occasionally led to the extension of the repertoire, not only its diminution. For further discussion, see Glasser, 2016.

carries the risk of pieces entirely going out of circulation³. This is a strategy that is meaningful within the *nûba* market itself, but it is also one that implicates the wider musical market, in that the entire *nûba* must be protected from being swamped by or confounded with other genres. In other words, the repertoire requires some circulation to exist; but for it to be protected, it needs very particular kinds of circulation, among the “right crowd.”

These conditions make it unsurprising that revival entailed complex relations to the market and that it was (and still is) rife with contradiction and ambivalence. The turn-of-the-century revival was premised on a radical inversion of the existing mode of musical production revival's emphasis on the publicization of what was previously private resonated with French revolutionary narratives of patrimony (Glasser 2016, p. 123). The revivalists sought to make public a repertoire of which parts had previously been privately oriented and heavily guarded. And the revivalists also inverted the musician/patron dichotomy by eventually making it respectable for amateurs to perform in public. Yet this was not the abolition of the market so much as its refiguring. Recordings of Andalusí music were now part of the market in discs, where they jostled many other genres. Amateur associations competed with one another for government patronage and radio airtime. The *shaykh* did not simply disappear but existed alongside and even inside the new amateur associations.

This reconfigured market carries other layers of irony as well. For example, there have been periodic calls for government intervention to tame and discipline the recording market, the associations, and even professional ensembles. Revival raises recurring questions about whether what has been revived is the right version or not (this can be about words and melodies, but it can also be about timbre, affect, and social milieu). And perhaps the most ironic aspect is that revival at least in theory threatens the rarity of the core parts of the repertoire; patrimony's publicness threatens to transform it into vulgarity, mundaneness, and irrelevance. This makes it unsurprising that the sense of endangerment seems never to entirely go away, and that the lost

³ This is a bit like the dynamics described by Franquesa (2013, p. 353), and evokes Peebles' characterization of the forgotten hoard (2020): “...a hoard can only survive into the future if it is attached to a vivacious set of metaphysical links that encircle it as savings.”

(the *mafqûd*) and its recovery also raise doubts and ambivalence alongside fascination.

The hoarding *shaykh*

These general considerations start to put us in a position to make better sense of the notion of the hoarding *shaykh*, both as trope and as subject position. As a trope, it is a goad to revival, and one that accentuates the divide between knowledge in persons and knowledge in things, between the “traditional” and the “modern,” and, often, between socioeconomic classes, in that the *shaykh* often hailed from a modest milieu and the patron from a well-off one. At the same time that it upbraids the figure of the *shaykh*, the discourse builds up an aura around him as a holder of irreplaceable knowledge, and as a genealogically embedded conduit and even metonym for the repertoire itself. In this sense, the hoarding *shaykh* as a discursive trope produces the lost (*al-mafqûd*). He represents the thwarting of desire and therefore its continuation. This is to say that the figure of the hoarding *shaykh* stands for that remainder that affirms that the work of preservation and revival is still vital. As one musician once explained to me, most of Andalusí music is no longer in danger thanks to the instruments of revival, but the *mafqûd* that remains is still in danger.

The hoarding *shaykh* is not only a trope but also a subject position that actual people can inhabit. I know of musical elders who have claimed that they have secrets that they refuse to share. This is very much in the vein of the economic explanation of hoarding, as long as we keep in mind that this might be more like cultural capital in Bourdieu’s sense (1977, p. 64). In these instances, the mystique that this builds around that figure might also outlast his actual presence on earth. But there is also a situational element of hoarding—a way in which hoarding might be something that happens relationally and partly through chance. Some *shuyûkh* talk about their more esoteric knowledge as their capital; in this sense, the hoarded is only temporarily held back, awaiting the proper moment or disciple, and might be tied to the need of the teacher to make a living. Death might get in the way of transmission in this sort of game—in other words, there is an element of chance, of gambling. A particularly striking example of this is in struggles over patrimonial projects tied to the state, whether colonial or post-colonial: hoarding can be understood by

the alleged hoarders themselves as a result of the failure to be recompensed for making their knowledge public, so that the “sin” lies outside the *shaykh* and instead within the insufficiently appreciative milieu in which he finds himself.

This situational aspect of hoarding allows for some to differentiate between the truly lost, like the “truly dead hoard” in Peebles (2020), and the lost that is still recoverable. For example, one musician recounted to me the recovery of a lost part of a *nûba* that was in the possession of the son of a late *shaykh*. That is to say, the piece was not entirely lost, but was lost in relation to the current local community of practitioners. Word of its existence reached this musician, and the son of the *shaykh* willingly shared the recordings of his father, which the musician then performed in public. Here, the hoarding was not complete, and the danger of total loss was averted through human connection and a bringing of the musical knowledge out from the father-son dyad. There is a strong parallel to the question of endogamy and exogamy in the anthropological literature on kinship: staying within the family (here, the patriline) is a dead end. We can also see a vision of transmission as a heroic accomplishment, where the lost repertoire is a metaphor for the past *shuyûkh*, and the recovery of the piece a form of communion and continuity snatched from oblivion.

The line between hoarding and publicization can likewise be fluid and controversial. When already in his seventies, Sid Ahmed Serri, a leading figure in the Andalusi music tradition of Algiers, undertook a magisterial effort to record the entire *nûba* repertoire as he knew it, a project that in his telling began in 1998. Not only did it take a long time to record more than 400 separate pieces of music, but it also involved considerable negotiations with state authorities to support the recording costs and to compensate the musicians. The collection was published to widespread acclaim by the Ministry of Culture in 2011, but in the years leading up to its release, Serri was occasionally accused of blackmailing the state in the negotiations, a charge that his supporters vigorously denied. What is interesting to note is that the charge arose around an attempt to record his entire repertoire, and the elements of relationality and chance that entered the process are evident: here, the aging *shaykh* attempts to gather his entire body of knowledge and transmit it with the imprimatur of the state, but this involves a struggle over whether a price can be put on it and, if so, what it should be.

If we place ourselves somewhere between Weiner and Graeber, we begin to be able to picture this patrimony as a gift from past generations that, at least in part because generations more or less succeed one another, cannot be reciprocated⁴. Instead, in a manner similar to an inherited debt, it must be passed along to the next generation. Ideally, the feat of transmitting the repertoire means passing along the debt in full. The failure to do so means that there are lost parts, parts of the debt that have no hope of being passed along precisely because they failed to circulate. For musicians, the sense of having this debt is usually a choice of sorts: one commits oneself to it, enchains oneself to it. But in the state context, there is also a turning to the state to be the ultimate guardian of the debt. The state is not indifferent to this. It too has committed itself to protecting this patrimony, alongside other ones. The non-state insiders are demanding that the state live up to its commitment, and in the process they are also acknowledging that they cannot preserve the patrimony entirely on their own.

But this kind of project raises the problem of what happens when normal, ideal transmission of the debt happens, with or without the state. Serri was sometimes spoken of as the last *shaykh* in the tradition of Algiers, and such a localized authority figure can be found in many localized Andalusi music scenes, even if few of them managed to leave such an impressive recorded document as his. Of course, Serri and his followers did not claim that he recovered everything there had ever been in the Algiers repertoire (though he did considerably expand the sense of the size of the repertoire; compare Serri 2002 and Serri 2006). At the same time, it is important to remember that even if he had been able to miraculously recover “everything,” this would not necessarily abolish the *mafqûd*, because there would remain the question of whether what is found is the right version. This is in fact always a question even when dealing with two versions of a piece that are not in any way understood as *mafqûd*. If we work via the principle of transmission, as do most Andalusi musical figures, in theory both versions might be wrong, meaning that the correct version remains lost; both versions might be right, which would imply a multiplicity in the past; or one may be right and one wrong. Whichever path is taken, the lost here stands for the question mark

⁴ Implicit here is a challenging of Weiner’s contrast of inalienability to reciprocity. See Glasser 2020 and 2024 for a development of this point.

of authority: does it work through the teacher, or through some other standard? And if through the teacher, should we be entertaining the question of whether the chain of transmission was sound? This starts to hint at a broader theory of knowledge in which the source is, perhaps, the non-instantiated thing, the thing whose copy circulates (that which, in the Weinerian sense, is kept while the copy is circulated through performance). Alternatively, the source is in the distant past and then has proliferated and transformed through many different chains of transmission and generations. In this alternative, the lost might point back to that out-of-reach source, temporally and not only ontologically. The lost might be a way to allude to the original that cannot be truly returned to, the residue of collective forgetting, so to speak. Or the lost might gesture toward the elements of uniqueness associated with past generations, thereby hinting at the paradox of change hidden inside the conceit of continuity.

Conclusion: questioning the lost

The lost, then, is rich in meanings and resonances. Just as the *shaykh* can be a metaphor for the repertoire writ large, the lost can be a metaphor for past *shuyûkh*, for the “real” version that stands behind the copy, or for the original version that precedes distortion. In all these instances, the lost is a way to recall that much has been forgotten. And as is often the case for such a complex concatenation of indexicalities, these metaphors are all reversible. This semiotic tangle is not without its elements of doubt and ambivalence, some of which have been alluded to above. But we would be remiss to end without considering a sharper note of dissent that occasionally comes from inside the musical community itself, and that challenges the seductive role of the hoarding *shaykh* and the lost in the Andalusi musical scene. According to this critique, the lost is not about hoarding or any other such cause, but instead about collective aesthetic judgment in the past: what was lost was simply not beautiful enough to be saved. In other words, there was a process of patrimonial selection, what Andrew Lass calls “selective tradition” (1988, p. 457), and some pieces lost out. This does not necessarily mean that the repertoire did not diminish in size over time (although it does seem coy enough to leave a door open to various kinds of extension of the repertoire). And it does not even mean that no *shaykh* ever withheld pieces, including

beautiful ones, into death. It is just that the discourse of the lost takes the claim too literally.

Note how different this dissenting view is from the dominant discourse about the lost. In the latter, the repertoire was once whole, and the loss of that wholeness is tragic. This is a degeneration model, even a catastrophist one⁵. In it, genealogical transmission means proliferation, which is problematic but unavoidable and requires periodic reestablishment of what the available repertoire is, much in the manner of Serri's recording project. With regard to debt as well, the aesthetic-selectionist option is quite different from the catastrophist theory. There might still be the dynamic of passing along, but there is no attempt to saddle the younger generations with everything. One does not assume that because it is old it is good or beautiful. It is anti-gerontocratic though still respectful. People, past and present, make decisions and try to pass along the selected repertoire as best as possible. Note that this is not a total break with the past—it implies trust in the judgment of past listeners and musicians, and unspoken continuity between the past and the present with regard to community (though not with regard to all the substantive components of the repertoire). There might be a debt-like component, but the aesthetic-selectionist alternative makes the intergenerational debt more explicitly negotiable, with a bit more power in the hands of subsequent generations.

There is much that I like about the dissenting view. Even aside from its mild irreverence and its forgiving air, it meshes well with some of what we know about the modern history of the *nûba* form. The *nûba*, despite its overall reputation as a high-prestige form, brings together several different genre registers, including some that are considered quite light. Sometimes those lighter parts were unique to the *nûba*; other times they were pieces that circulated outside the *nûba* as well; and still other times those lighter parts were elevated versions of pieces that mainly were understood to circulate outside the *nûba*. Therefore, in the process of selecting what was beautiful, past generations used the *nûba* itself as a net, a device for ingathering.

Once inside the *nûba*, these components could also be carried forward in a way they likely would not have been, as part of a

⁵ On the catastrophist theory of generations in the pre-modern Maghribi context, see Touati (2003).

conglomerate that collectively constitutes a repertoire. In this way, the *nûba* could be a selecting device and a preservation device, a kind of patrimonial machine. But once material was brought inside the *nûba*, this does not mean selection ended; rather, in performing and transmitting the *nûba*, performers and listeners continued to select. The *nûba*, then, drew a circle around parts of the urban musical stream. Whereas the perspective that valorizes the *mafqûd* treats as tragic the loss of things inside that circle in the time since it was ostensibly drawn, the skeptical position suggests that lines are drawn repeatedly, all the way into the present, and by a diverse array of community actors.

Ultimately, this might not be so far from the actual practice within the dominant position that embraces the language of *mafqûd*. After all, on closer inspection, Serri not only made available his repertoire, but also engaged in the selection for transmission of certain versions of its components over others. In other words, from a certain angle, he too produces the lost. This raises the possibility of yet another task the discursive figure of the *shaykh* performs within the dominant discourse, even if it cannot be consciously acknowledged by those within this formation: the idea of the hoarding *shaykh* lets people off the hook, in that for what is truly lost, he permits forgetting to happen.

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