

THE SPECIFICITIES OF THE ALGERIAN ART OF BOUQALA IN CONNECTION TO DIVINATION

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to identify the characteristics and the specificities of the Algerian Art of Bouqala in connection to divination Oracle cards. The Bouqala is one of the first feminine forms of oral dialectal literature that emerged in North Africa between the periods of Ottoman and French occupations. Taking into account the high position of Arabic language during the Ottoman occupation, the art of Bouqala remained produced and transmitted orally by women in the past for several centuries under the influence of Arabic over this dialectal poetry. Knowing that the game of Bouqala was used not only for entertainment purposes but also for divination, this antique practice could probably have spiritual or paranormal implications as a consequence to the widespread culture of witchcraft and the pagan background in North Africa. In this vein, the research method departs from a triangulation of data.

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1. Introduction

The Bouqala ritual can be defined as a form of oral dialectal poetry, more specifically, the first form of feminine literature in North Africa. On that note, this practice can be interpreted as a divinatory ritual, thus, any ritual of this kind has requirements such as calm, wisdom and the absence of men from the house, among others. On the same note, men cannot participate since women, in the past, prevented their daughters from telling their fathers about this ritual. In other words, it used to be held secretly between women.

Inline and along the lines of the mentioned above, the objective of this study is to shed light on the hypothetical origins of the art of Bouqala, its purpose and spiritual implications, the ritual's steps and requirements, besides the occasions and the day in which it can take place, followed by the

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position of Bouqala within the post-modern Algerian society. Hypothetically speaking and according to naturalistic observations, the art of Bouqala is significantly falling into disuse under the influence of modernization and globalization by the same token.

2. The emergence of the art of Bouqala throughout History

Taking into account the Algerian history and its patrimonial heritage, it appeared through research that the Bouqala ritual is derived from the French word “bocal” which means pitcher. And it appeared that the most famous cities known for producing and performing Bouqala are Algiers, Cherchell, Blida, Tlemcen, Biskra, and Constantine, inter alia. [4]; [5] Besides, all of the mentioned above cities perform this ritual differently. Be that as it may, the emergence of this ritual dates back to the Ottoman and the French occupations. To be more precise, women’s anxieties conjoined with fears, sorrow, missing, and willingness to foresee the future and find a way to quench the doubts that have long been gnawing their demons are the main driving forces that lead to the birth of this divinatory game. In this spirit, these women felt obliged, at that time to find a way to release their numerous ailments through the paranormal. Having that said the paranormal used to be largely relied on and believed before and after the arrival of monotheist religions in the region. [1]

Whereby, these women knew how to combine pleasure with usefulness by producing outstanding poems; which in most cases carry a divinatory repertoire and overtone. Otherwise stated, they found a way to express themselves through art that entwines thrill and aesthetics with nuances of divination. Given this credence, this form of oral dialectal poetry falls under the first feminine forms of African literature in the country. Yet, this form of literature was quite underestimated [12] at the beginning because of many reasons chiefly the language policies applied during those eras. [5] Moreover, orality lead this form of art to decay because of women’s illiteracy at that epoch as illustrated by the French proverb: “spoken words vanish, written words remain”.

With finality, the origin of the name of this ritual remains uncertain; the theories are many, yet the Historical proof is, unfortunately, still missing.

2.1 The similarities between Bouqala and Oracles Fumigation

Fumigation consists of burning essential oils, plants and herbs to summon entities, attract positive energy and chase spirits, among others. In this vein, each herb, plant, flower oil or ingredient has their own specificities and purposes in rituals. Succinctly, the fumigation herbs used in the Bouqala are the following:

Table 1. A Tabular Representation of Magic Herbs Used in the Ritual of Fumigation

Herb/wood	Characteristic and Properties
- Benzoin	- This grayish resin is usually found in powdered form. It comes from the <i>Styrax benzoin</i> tree and has a light, clean, slightly sweet scent. It is excellent for purifying, healing, prosperity, and attraction in general.
- Styrax	- Sometimes spelled storax, this black resin is a softer, earthier resin than those previously listed. It comes from the <i>Liquidambar styraciflua</i> tree. It is excellent for healing and grounding.
- Myrrh	- Another common resin, myrrh is brownish and has a darker, slightly bittersweet scent. It comes from the <i>Commiphora myrrha</i> , or gum myrrh tree, and carries the magical associations of sanctity, honoring the dead and the spirit world, purification, and healing. Myrrh adds a bit of extra power to any herbal incense; adding just a grain or two will do the job.
- Resins	- Resins have been used for centuries in various cultures as sweet-smelling offerings to the gods. They carry various magical associations just as herbs do. It releases energies
- Coriander	- It carries the energy of healing, love, and lust, besides active vital energy; it is used for both fumigation and cooking.

- Aloeswood	- Used to summon the spirits of Air
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Source: Murphy-Hiscock, 2017, 54

2.2 Incantations

Table 2. Examples of Bouqala Vs Oracle Incantations

Divination Method	Opening prayers	Equivalent translation
Oracle	“Cards of fortune Cards of fate Reveal to me The course of my day”	
Bouqala	“Bismilah bdit w ala nbi salit w ala sahaba rdit, ya rabi taâtini ma tmenit,fal ya felfal ya fateh seb’â qfal heta ijibouh wladet lahlal.”	“In the name of God I started, lounges to the prophet and his followers, Ô God, may my wishes come true, Oracle Ô Oracle, opener of seven locks, may the good men bring you”
	“Fal ya felfal ya fateh sebâa q’fal adjberli sâadi mahma ken mel cherk wella mel gharb wela m ch’mal wela men blad sisi blal”	“Oracle Ô Oracle, opener of seven locks, bring me good fortune whether from the east or from the west or from the land of Sidi Blal.”

Table 2 shows two types of incantations, one used before doing a Tarot reading or oracle and another one used before starting a Bouqala game. Both incantations embody requests to know the future.

3. The poetics in each divination device

Taking into account the position of poetry in the past, both the oracle and the art of Bouqala share a common point in terms of aesthetics. Poets have always been seen as high figures of wisdom and knowledge as most of the poems of the past transcended earthly limitations by focusing on sciences

and the supernatural. [3] In the Bouqala, poetry is always present and may carry celestial messages to those who will know how to decipher the Bouqala conformingly to the participant's social or psychological juncture.

Table 3. Examples of Bouqala and Oracles

The Bouqala poetics (using equivalent translation)	The oracle's poetics
1. I climbed the wall and asked my lover not to forget me. Ô you, who occupies my mind. Your love is in my heart like authentic pearls.	• "I'm sorry, I know I have hurt you. But, I promise, I will come back and I will make our dreams come true."
2. Ululate, Ô enemies, the one you hated is back and took me as a wife after you said he was gone and left me alone. Die, die... Ô enemies, I will get married and I will leave you watching my doors.	• "I still love you."
3. The moon is shining in its place adding harmony to the forest. The heart has its king, and its place is great. I wish I had his address, I would not let anyone get ahead of me. I would be the sun and the moon of his life, to enlighten his heart with my presence in it.	• We are your ancestors and we love you. We walked the earth before you. We ask you at this poignant time to learn and grow from our past experiences. You are our legacy, and we will keep on helping you as we continue to evolve here in the spirit World.
4. I was cleaning the carpet when an old man passed by and gave me a letter. Before opening the letter my eyes were tearing. Come out, mother, my love is back.	• "The old must be released so that the new can enter" – Endings and Beginnings by Goddess Kali
5. I sat under a palm, I was told it is deglet nour, the bee came around, and with honey I elevated the wall. Life is better with the one who lives in castles.	• God's divine creativity is expressed through your actions.

As demonstrated in Table 3, both the Bouqala and Oracle messages carry spiritual and psychological implications. Similarly, Oracle messages are used as mediums between the earthly World and the divine World. And according to the examples provided in the table, there is no restriction regarding themes. Otherwise stated, a Bouqala or an Oracle message may have convey any message that touches the individual's situation or social juncture. Curiously enough, this process relies on cosmic

energy that is believed to help readers and Bouqala players to gain insight and obtain the right messages, and the sources of cosmic energy are mentioned in the following part in Table 4.

3.1 Relying on cosmic energy

People of the past used to rely a lot on stars in agriculture, navigation, when looking for inspiration but also for magic rituals. In this connection, fire, water air and moon are also sources of cosmic energy that is needed in the Bouqala game. Table 4 explains briefly the ingredients' purposes and utility since dawn of time:

Table 4. Other Natural Elements Used in the Ritual

Element	Function
- Fire	- It is for cleansing and purification of different objects such as clay pitchers in the Bouqala ritual.
- Water	- It is used a magnet or a receptacle since it has a liquid form, it receives and traps stars and moon light and energy.
- Air	- Air comes in the form of fumigation, it consists of releasing the smokes of burned plants and magic herbs in a place we wish to perform a spiritual in, in order to chase negative energy and spirits and replace it by positive energy.
- Moon and Stars (Light)	- They have long been looked into for power and aid. (guidance)

Source: Murphy-Hiscock, 2017, 116

The following incantation is to be said at the end of a Bouqala ritual:

“ E’ness t3ayetlek tehwifa w ana n3ayetlek el feraha, hetta trafini beli kan”

“People call you a little art, and I call you the joy bringer until you bring me anything that could bring me joy”

The equivalent translation in English suggests that the word “Tehwifa” could be derived from the singular word “Tehfa” which means in Algerian Arabic “a piece of art”. In this connection, the unknown generator of this incantation was probably a gifted or an illuminate person who considered this form of art as more than art but rather an Oracle or a way to connect with the divine for reasons that transcend the norms of normality prescribed by the earthly World.

3.2 Religious Overtone

Some oracles and Bouqala have a religious overtone as spirits and God are always mentioned at the beginning of the ritual. Moreover, spirits and angels are always thanked during or at the end of the ritual for the divine messages forwarded through the Bouqala or the oracle. In addition to that, there are specific days on which the Bouqala should be taken or organized; the best days according to primary sources are Friday night (Thursday) being an important day in Islam, and Monday's night being the day the prophet's Mahomet birthday.

Traditionally, the Bouqala's ritual can be performed during happy events or religious occasions such as weddings, circumcisions, the 15th of Ramadan evenings, and Eid, inter alia, [4]; [10] where women generally gather. In this vein, the latter used to gather on in houses, terraces, Kasbah palaces, more specifically, patios, and courtyards late at night. While still making sure there is a masculine presence around. Aligned with primary sources, it is recommended to play the Bouqala on the seventh day of the week; i.e., on Friday's Eve as mentioned above. With that said, seven is a very powerful number in numerology; it implies a deep inner need for a spiritual connection and guidance. Aligned with the Holy Quran, Friday is a very important day; a day of congregation and worship.

4. Prevalent themes in the Bouqala and Oracle rituals

In line with the mentioned above, the origin of Bouqala draws its roots from psychological issues. For example, a lot of women had to stay months without any contact with their husbands who either had to leave for work or to join the revolutionary movement. However, the concerns varied from a woman to another, and all of them shared a common point which is to foresee the future. Given this credence, despite women's illiteracy at that time, many of them seemed gifted enough to come out with poetic verses that touch various themes such as love, work, traveling, social status, state of mind, aspirations, hopes, wishes, incoming dangers, news, reunions, break ups, etc.

Taken into consideration the country's History in terms of old practices and beliefs, magic and witchcraft are part of the patrimony; notably before the arrival of monotheistic religions. Therefore, it is well-known that pagan beliefs were widespread in the country, and some communities were known for practicing magic and other rituals using the same ingredients as in the Bouqala ritual mentioned in the following portion. Hence, it has been exhibited through astrology books that starlight is one of the essential ingredients in rituals. As a matter of fact, everything is energy, and everything is interrelated conformingly to the Einsteinian theory of relativity. [8]

As a result, the ingredients mentioned below in the ritual steps and requirements are meant to bridge between our dimension and the entities' dimension. For more illustration, the bridge is, in fact, a gate that opens at the beginning of the ritual, and closed, in the end, using introductory and closing incantations. [6]; [7]

5. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, it appeared that the art of the Bouqala is more than just feminine poetry; it is rather a mixture of art and divination born from a deep need for knowledge and unhappiness. On that note, the historical past of the country before the arrival of the Ottomans demonstrates a widespread culture of divination combined with prevailing pagan beliefs and practices that are closely tied to witchcraft. And the reason behind playing Bouqala secretly between women away from men could be related to religious reasons, knowing that divination is forbidden in Islam. From this perspective the results from the experiment, literature, and interviews voice that this art has a strong relationship with the Oracle and Tarot; two esoteric practices that entwine mathematics and the supernatural. Aligned with this idea, the Einsteinian theory of relativity confirms, once again, that everything is interrelated in the universe. (Boqala Jeu-Poésie à Usage Divinatoire - Persée, n.d.)

Howbeit, it is noteworthy to mention that this concept is deeply misunderstood and is shallowly interpreted and explained and the proof is the presence of fake Bouqala in the market. This way, it is hard for people who are unfamiliar with Bouqala to know the concept and being able to distinguish an authentic Bouqala from a fake one. A sample of authentic versus fake Bouqala has been arranged in the form of a tabular representation in order to shed light on the differences and the characteristics of each one of them in the closing part of the article.

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