

Love Poetry of Ḥassāni Women: Lyrics of three Old Songs

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ABSTRACT. Ḥassāni popular poetry includes among its themes, one dedicated to women's love poetry composed by non-professional poetess intended to be sang among friends. The present article deals with this type of women's poetry called *ət-təbrā'*. Some professional singers began to sing some sets of these poems as songs that were recorded in the last century. A number of these recordings have survived to reach us but have never been edited or studied. The body of this article consists of a phonetic transcription of the lyrics of three songs and the translation of the texts with some notes explaining its cultural and ethno-linguistic aspects.

KEYWORDS. Ḥassāni women's love poetry. Ḥassāni women's sung poems. Ḥassāni popular poetry. Ḥassāni literature. Ḥassāniyya dialect. Gender studies.

RESUMEN. La poesía popular Ḥassāni incluye entre sus temas uno dedicado a la poesía amorosa de las mujeres, compuesta por poetisas no profesionales y destinada a ser cantada entre amigas. El presente artículo trata de este tipo de poesía femenina llamada *ət-təbrā'*. Algunas cantantes profesionales comenzaron a cantar algunos conjuntos de estos poemas como canciones que fueron grabadas en el siglo pasado. Varias de estas grabaciones han sobrevivido hasta llegar a nosotros, pero nunca han sido editadas o estudiadas. El cuerpo de este artículo consiste en una transcripción fonética de las letras de tres canciones y la traducción de los textos con algunas notas que explican sus aspectos culturales y etnolingüísticos.

PALABRAS CLAVE. Poesía amorosa de las mujeres Ḥassānīes. Poemas cantados por las mujeres Ḥassānīes. Poesía popular Ḥassāni. Literatura Ḥassāni. Dialecto Ḥassāniyya. Estudios de género.

1. INTRODUCTION

There were female poets throughout the history of Arab literature from pre-Islamic times to the present day such as Tumāḍir bint 'Amr nicknamed Al-Ḥansā' (575-645) and Nāzik al-Malā'ika (1923-2007), among others. Whatever type of love poetry they may have written, it differs from the female love poetry that is the subject of this paper, especially because the latter is popular while the former is cultured. The present article deals with a type of female love poetry, called *ət-təbrā'*¹, composed exclusively by anonymous Ḥassāni

¹ Singular: *təbrī'a*; plural: *təbrī'āt*; collective: *təbrā'*. *təbrā'* also means a set of poems that are sung together as a song, see below.

women to express their amorous feelings towards men whose identity is hidden because social norms require it. The two lovers remain anonymous, but the love relationship is described through the verses of the poetess who used to sing them together with her friends in the evenings when they meet to sing outside the Bedouin campment or the village. Before getting into the subject, we are going to explain some elements that are necessary to contextualize the topic by answering the following questions: Who are the Ḥassāni people and what dialect they speak? What is the popular poetry called *lā-ḡna* and what is the female poetic love genre *at-tabrā*?

Starting with the first question, it must be said that the Ḥassāni people are the descendants of the Arab Banū Ḥassān tribes, originally from Arabia that invaded part of the Maghreb in the 11th century². The Ḥassāni people speak the Ḥassāniyya dialect which is a Bedouin Arabic dialect spoken in a wide area of the Maghreb³. According to Marty (1921: 82):

Ḥassāniyya dialect is spoken by all inhabitants of Bilad Šinqīt (nowadays Arabs of Mauritania), in Western Sahara, in southern Morocco to the north of Wād Nūn, in southern Algeria, especially the region of Tīndūf, in the Malian district of Aẓawād and part of territory of Niger⁴.

The Ḥassāni consolidated their dialect and imposed it on the Berber population who were the indigenous inhabitants of these territories before the invasion of the Banū Ḥassān tribes. The newly formed Ḥassāni society created its own literature which went through all the stages and matured in the 17th century⁵. This folk poetry, called *lā-ḡna*⁶ is

² According to Ould Bah (1970: 8) “C’est vers le XI^e siècle que l’apport décisif fut enregistré. Ce n’était plus des personnes isolées, ni des clans, ni des contingents d’armées, ce fut le déploiement d’une vague humaine et brutale qui déferla sur tout le Sahara occidental, en imposant sa domination et sa langue: C’est l’invasion des Ḥassān (branches des Arabes Ma’qil)”. (“It was towards the end of the 11th century that the decisive contribution was recorded. It was no longer isolated individuals, clans or contingents of armies, it was the deployment of a human and brutal wave that swept across the whole of Western Sahara, imposing its domination and language: it was the invasion of the Ḥassān (branches of the Arabs Ma’qil)” [translation by the author of this article]).

³ The Ḥassāniyya is a Bedouin Arabic dialect whose main linguistic features are the following: (a) it conserves the interdental *ṭ*, *ḏ*, *ḏ̣*; (b) the Old Arabic phoneme *q* is voiced velar stop *g*, e.g., *ḡāl* (*qāla*) ‘to say’; (c) the realization of the Old Arabic *f* as *v*, e.g. *vī-ha* (*fīhā*) ‘in it’; (d) the diphthongs *aw* and *ay* are not monophthongized, e.g. *layla* ‘night’, *šaww* ‘look’; (e) in the verbal system of Ḥassāniyya, there is an unusual feature which is the presence of a diminutive pattern for verbs, e.g. *abayka* (<*bakā*) ‘to cry a bit’; (f) the Ḥassāniyya dialect uses only one preverb for future *lāhi*, e.g. *lāhi yəmšī* ‘he will go’; (g) the Ḥassāniyya dialect does not use the analytic genitive; consequently, there is not any kind of preposition between the components of the *iḏāfa*; the type of *iḏāfa* used is only the synthetic one, e.g. *laylat widā’u* ‘the night of his farewell’; (h) the Ḥassāniyya lexicon came mainly from Old Arabic, but it has an important number of loan words from Berber Ṣanhāza, especially in the semantic field of toponyms, farming, botany, etc. For a more detailed description of the linguistic features of this dialect, see Ould Mohamed Baba (2008).

⁴ See Marty (1921: 82).

⁵ According to Ould Bah (1970: 13).

⁶ In Classical Arabic: *ḡinā* ‘singing’.

composed in the Ḥassāniyya dialect⁷ and is therefore within everyone's reach, unlike the Classical Arabic, or *fushḥā*, whose users are the literate⁸. The Ḥassāni poetry, *lā-ḡna*, is directly linked to music because it is recited and sung as a part of Ḥassāni music called *aḏawān*⁹. This poetry has a long tradition of oral transmission in which the griots, *īggāwān*¹⁰, played a very important role. In fact, they were the ones who for centuries sang and memorized this poetry, as a consequence, a symbiotic relationship emerged between the poets and the singers because the *īggāwān* need lyrics for their music and the poets need a means of spreading their poetry¹¹.

From the point of view of metrics, *lā-ḡna* consists of verses composed of two hemistichs, called *tāwəlwiṭ*¹². Four *tāwəlwiṭ* form the simplest composition which is called *ḡāw*¹³ or quatrain. Ḥassāniyya prosody is based on the number of syllables in each hemistich and the poetic meters are called *lā-btūta* (plural of *batt*)¹⁴.

Once these aspects have been clarified, let us start to deal with the subject of *tābrā*¹⁵. The Ḥassāni young women had a habit of gathering at night to sing. The most important theme in these singing meetings was love. These young women sang the poems that they had composed for their beloveds, which were unconfessed¹⁵. They took advantage of the anonymity of the group to hide the authorship of the poems as established by the rules of the *tābrā*¹⁵ genre. This is how this poetic genre, transmitted orally over time, came about and the short poems were carried by mouth between the campments and the villages.

Before going into more detail about this type of female poetry, *tābrā*¹⁵, we ask the following questions if this genre could be an isolated literary phenomenon or exists in other areas or has existed in the remote or near past. If so, what elements would it have in common with them? As for the similarities between *tābrā*¹⁵ and women's poetry from other

⁷ According to Norris (1968: 40), "Leḡna [*sic*] is the Mauritanian name for the syllabic folk poetry, both recited and sung, in the Western Sahara".

⁸ Given the popular nature of this poetry, the simplicity of the rules required and the prosody of this poetry, it is obvious that most of the Ḥassāni poetesses compose their poems in dialectal Arabic, mainly because they want to be understood by all Ḥassāni speakers.

⁹ *aḏawān* is a Berber Word which means 'music of the griots, or *īggāwān*'. See below.

¹⁰ *īggāwān* (singular: *īggāw*; feminine forms, singular *īggiwīt* and plural *īggawāt*) are known as griots in French and English. They are a class of travelling poets, musicians, and singing storytellers who have created and developed the Ḥassāni music called *aḏawān*. See Ould Mohamed Baba (2015: 433).

¹¹ Poets used to attend the *īggāwān*'s music sessions because they were aware that when a singer sings one of their poems, it becomes known and recited by increasing numbers of people.

¹² *tāwəlwiṭ* (plural: *tāwəlwiṭ*) 'hemistich', see Ould Mohamed Baba (2019: 76).

¹³ The *ḡāw* "quatrain" is the composition most commonly used by Ḥassāni poets. Its brevity offers poets the flexibility and agility necessary for poetic creation. The first hemistich rhymes with the third and these with the fourth (a-b-a-b).

¹⁴ The *btūta* (singular: *batt*) are, from the longest to the shortest: *al-batt lā-kbīr*: hemistichs of more than eight syllables; *lā-btayt at-tām*: of eight syllables; *at-taydūm*: of seven syllables; *lā-ḥḥēr*: of seven syllables *lā-btayt an-nāqas*: of six syllables; *ḥaṭu aḏ-ḏrād*: of five syllables; *ḥwaywīs*: of four syllables; *batt ḡlāta*: three syllables; *batt ṭnayn*: two syllables and *batt wāḥad*: one syllable. See Ould Mohamed Baba (2019: 53).

¹⁵ Because social norms required anonymity for both the author and her beloved, as stated above.

areas, it should be mentioned that a similar genre exists in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and formerly in al-Andalus. In Egypt, there is a female poetic genre of song called *ghinnāwa*. Abu-Lughod (2014: 371) affirms: “[...] as in the case of Awlad‘ Ali bedouin [*sic*] women in Egypt. In their personal discourse, the women sing short poems to articulate intimate feeling with they could not convey in normal conversation”¹⁶.

For the Tunisian Bedouins, there is a type of female poetry sung in southern Tunisia. According to Bedouin poetry researcher Ritt-Benmimoun (2009: 217): “Short poems sung or recited by women are called *ǧnē*, in the singular *ǧunnāya* [...] They give a glimpse into the rich lyric repertoire of the Bedouin women of Southern Tunisia”.

If we go back several centuries, we find that in the times of Muslim Spain, or al-Andalus, there were the *jarcha* and the *cantigas de amigo*, both were poems put in the mouths of women and have certain similarities with *tǧbrā‘* as can be deduced from the following text by Chandler & Schwartz (1991: 200):

The *jarcha* usually run from two or four lines (thirty-two syllables) of verse and almost without exception amorous in nature, spoken by young girl who candidly and often quite ardently laments the absence of her lover while her mother or sisters listen or advice. These devices were common to the *cantigas de amigo* of the Galician-Portuguese poetry¹⁷.

Going back to *tǧbrā‘*, we have to point out that it is not known the exact date of its emergence although it is most plausible that it was after the consolidation of *lǧna* in these Ḥassāni territories¹⁸. Unfortunately, much of this poetry was lost and some poems were saved because they were sung by professional singers whose songs were recorded from the 1960s onwards.

The corpus selected for this paper is made up of several of these sets of poems brought together in a song that is also called *tǧbrā‘*¹⁹ and which had to be sung by groups of young people before reaching the singers who broadcast them on the radio.

2. ǧT-TǧBRĀ‘ OR ḤASSĀNI LOVE POEMS COMPOSED AND SUNG BY WOMEN

We will start with the definition of *ǧt-tǧbrā‘*. Few definitions exist due to the scarcity of research on the subject, but at least the following two can be mentioned. According to Miské (1970: 60-1):

¹⁶ The *ghinnāwa* coincide with *tǧbrā‘* also in that they are sung poems. It is women’s sung poetry.

¹⁷ We must emphasize that we do not intend to establish, in the current state of research, any relation of influence but to highlight the similarities between these genres.

¹⁸ For Norris (1968: 35-6), there is a certain degree of agreement among Mauritanian scholars that *lǧna* became a form of literary expression in the Ḥassāni community around 1700. This statement is confirmed by the historical fact that the first great poet known from *lǧna* was Sāddūm Wull Ndaṛtu (18th century). See Ould Mohamed Baba (2005: 207).

¹⁹ Which, in addition to being the name of this poetry genre, means a set of poems that are sung together as a song.

[...] the *tabri'a* [sic] is a little poem of two hemistichs that rhyme together, of course, and are in the same meter. The *tabrā'* [sic] [...] was originally used by girls in love to express the feelings that social prohibitions prevented them from expressing publicly”²⁰.

Another definition is that which appears in Norris (1968: 50) who claims:

Mention should be made of the *tebraa'* [sic], a poem of the Mauritanian women. In this category are to be found songs which they improvise about a lover or a husband, where the rhyme is uniforme and the meter is regarded as separate from those already discussed.

Both definitions provide part of the components of this genre and leave other elements, for this reason, the author of this paper suggests the following working definition: “The *tabrā'* (singular: *tabrī'a*; plural: *tabrī'āt*) is a specific and exclusive type of poetry of the Ḥassāni woman that is composed only of a verse with two hemistichs with the same rhyme²¹ and generally the same meter. These short poems are meant to be sung by several friends at an evening singing meeting that used to take place outside the Bedouin campment or the village”. In these evenings, the young women sing a set of these short poems (approximately ten to twenty) that form a song which is called *tabrā'*, as stated above. Thus, this genre was born as singing by young non-professional women in a society where singing is a monopoly for griots²². The women singers of the griots, *tiggwīt*, took advantage of the existence of the *ət-tabrā'* genre to sing some of these poems professionally²³. The anonymous authors saw in this a complicity that allowed them to spread their poems to an audience much larger than the group of friends in their campment or in their village and they willingly accepted it.

When the female griot²⁴ recorded these songs, the audience gave them names. Most often they are given the singer's name, for example *tabrā'* Maḥzūba²⁵ although the lyrics are not hers. And very rarely, they are given the nickname of the beloved for whom the poems were composed, for example, there is one known as *tabrā'* Bayyāt²⁶.

Before analyzing the lyrics, let us look at the most outstanding features of the *ət-tabrā'* poetry:

²⁰ “Une *tabri'a* « c'est un petit poème de deux vers [sic] qui riment ensemble, bien entendu, et son du meme mètre». Le *tabrā'* [sic] [...] était, à l'origine, utilisé par les filles amoureuses pour exprimer les sentiments que les interdits sociaux les empêchaient de manifester publiquement”.

²¹ The two hemistichs have the same rhyme (a – a), e.g., *ənṣəl subla əs-salām* ** *l-əlli sawḥal kāmāl qa-l- 'ām* “I wish a good trip to everyone traveling west this year”.

²² See above.

²³ It is thanks to these songs that some of these anonymous poems have been preserved, which otherwise would have disappeared as happened with most of this vulnerable literary production, as stated above.

²⁴ In the Ḥassāni culture, only female griots can sing *tabrā'* and it is completely forbidden for men.

²⁵ Maḥzūba Mint əl-Mäyddāḥ (1940-1980) was a singer belonging to the Griot's family Ahləl-Mäyddāḥ from Trärza (Southwest of Mauritania). She was considered a diva of traditional Ḥassāni singing and admired by the lovers of this music. Very little of her music has been preserved because she organized private concerts as was the custom in those days. Her preserved music was often recorded with homemade means and the quality is not very good.

²⁶ See below.

A) On a date that could not be specified until now, Ḥassāni women managed to overcome certain rigid social rules and to be allowed to express their feelings through *ət-tabrā'*, which became a literary genre and song exclusively for women and in which men do not intervene either in its creation or in its singing.

B) The two main rules of *tabrā'* are the anonymity of the author and her beloved.

C) A very outstanding feature is the brevity as only one verse is allowed in which the author must express her loving feelings.

D) The woman expresses through her verses her desires, her passion and yearning, and describes the charms of her beloved without mentioning his name, and when she does, she uses nicknames like *əl-mažhūd* designating the “(beloved) secret or (beloved) unmentionable” in this genre.

E) In many cases, the woman talks about her beloved in a roundabout way when she includes in her verses the moments of encounter, or farewell with her beloved; or by complaining about the separation, or by affirming in simple words how much she loves her beloved.

F) The poems hide the name of the place where the beloved is, for example: *l-arḍ əl-muḥtalla* “the occupied land” (3.3.10); *l-əlli sawḥal kāməl ḡa-l-‘ām* “to everyone traveling west this year” (3.2.7). On other occasions, they are mentioned but surrounded by ambiguity for example, the city of *nwāḡību* (3.3.5 and 3.3.6) is cited without further details. The same goes for the city of Dakar (3.3.14, 3.3.15).

G) Despite being popular poetry, some poems contain expressions from classical Arabic, for example: *yā layta kulla al-layāli* “I wish that every night ...” (3.3.6); *al-qulūbu tatarā ‘ā* (literally: “the hearts [of the lovers] watch over each other”) (3.1.3); *layla miṭluhā lā ya ‘ūd* (literally “a night that will not be repeated”) (3.2.9).

H) *ət-tabrā'* is characterized by a clarity, simplicity and frankness in the expression of feelings of love, but without using terms related to sexuality, as we will see from the lyrics.

3. THE LYRICS OF THE 3 SONGS, OR *TƏBRĀ'*

The corpus which is discussed in this article is composed by the lyrics of three songs or *tabrā'* that were part of cassettes recorded in the 1960s and 1970s and the 1990s of the last century. The first one was sung by Maḡžūba Mint əl-Mayddāḡ²⁷ in an old recording from the archives of Radio Mauritania²⁸ dated 1971. It is composed of five poems²⁹ or

²⁷ It was called *tabrā'* Bayyāt. According to a widespread story, the singer, Maḡžūba Mint əl-Mayddāḡ, was invited by a group of friends to give a concert at the home of one of them and they took the opportunity to ask her to sing the poems composed for a man nicknamed Bayyāt.

²⁸ It is available online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoGBZ1E6zKM>>.

tabrā'āt. The second also by the same singer was recorded in 1966 and the third song was recorded by the singer Abati Mint əš-Šwayḥ in the nineties of last century without being able to specify the exact date. The following are the lyrics of the three songs with notes and comments that allow their contextualization and better understanding³⁰.

3.1. Song or *tabrā' 1*

- 3.1.1. *lā šəvt žmālu ** va-sārat biyya al-aḥwālu*³¹
“When I see his camels, mixed feelings arise in my mind”³².
- 3.1.2. *nəbqi təḥrāšu ** ḥadd aḥmaṣ u-mšakrad rāšu*³³
“I like to look at someone who is dark and has curly hair”.
- 3.1.3. *nəbqi l-iḍā'a ** wa-l-qulūbu tatarā'ā*³⁴
“I like the radio because lovers have similar tastes”³⁵.
- 3.1.4. *lə-mra ḥallī-ha ** w-əš-šaḡla lā tayt tẓī-ha*
“Divorce your wife and stop going to work!”³⁶.
- 3.1.5. *aḡbaḍ yamīni ** atvu mā tāt tmaḡnīni*
“I swear, the insult does not make me angry anymore”³⁷.

3.2. Song or *tabrā' 2*

As mentioned previously, *tabrā' 2* with proper names are rare, but this is one of the rare exceptions³⁸. The anonymous authors composed this *tabrā' 2* for a man whose nick-

²⁹ Unfortunately, this *tabrā' 1* was the last song on the cassette and part of it must have been lost because we hear an abrupt interruption and the recording is over. This is why this *tabrā' 1* is the shortest of the three studied here.

³⁰ In this article, we use the following transcription system: Short vowel phonemes: /a/, /i/ and /u/, /ə/; long vowel phonemes: /ā/, /ī/ y /ū/. Consonantal phonemes: /' / = ء, /b/ = ب, /t/ = ت, /ṭ/ = ط, /z/ = ز, /ḥ/ = ح, /h/ = هـ, /d/ = د, /ḍ/ = ذ, /r/ = ر, /z/ = ز, /s/ = س, /š/ = ش, /ṣ/ = ص, /ḍ/ = ض, /t/ = ط, /ḏ/ = ظ, /' / = ع, /ḡ/ = غ, /f/ = ف, /q/ = ق, /k/ = ك, /l/ = ل, /m/ = م, /n/ = ن, /h/ = هـ, /w/ = و, /y/ = ي.

³¹ *sāratbiyya al-aḥwālu*: an expression from classical Arabic meaning ‘to have conflicting feelings’.

³² The author has mixed feelings because she feels both joy at seeing something that belongs to her beloved and sadness that the beloved is gone.

³³ Since the name of the beloved cannot be mentioned, some poetesses describe some of his physical features as is the case here.

³⁴ *al-qulūbu tatarā'ā* (literally: the hearts [of the lovers] watch over each other).

³⁵ The author alludes to the fact that her lover likes to listen to the radio and so does she because lovers often have similar tastes.

³⁶ The author wishes her beloved to give up everything to be with her all the time. Note that this man is married. Sometimes lovers are married which increases the secrecy about their identity, but jealousy can reveal this fact when mentioned by the poetress.

³⁷ The author here uses a hyperbole. She exaggerates the dependence on their beloved and claim to be able to endure the unbearable and even the unacceptable as the author claims here. Love erases the misdeeds of the beloved.

name and some identifying data are known. Thanks to the recording that was made and broadcast on the radio, the lover was identified, but not the author of the poems. The lyrics of this second song is as follows:

- 3.2.1. *laylät widā 'u ** galbi u-lsāni mārā 'u*
“On the night of his farewell my heart did not rest nor did I stop talking to him”.
- 3.2.2. *lā 'ilāha 'illa llāh³⁹ ** ya ḥadd bqa ḥadd u-lārā-h*
“Woe to me! What a pity to love someone and not have him!”.
- 3.2.3. *'andu təbsīma ** bāni vī-ha blīs ḥwayma⁴⁰*
“His smile is pure temptation and lust”.
- 3.2.4. *bayyāt əš-ša 'ra ** gālə 'ha mən gawm-u ḥamra*
“Bayyāt⁴¹ is by far the most handsome of his friends”.
- 3.2.5. *əffayləḥ bayyāt ** vlayyīḥ ulād əl-ḥərṛāt⁴²*
“Bayyāt is as handsome as the sons of the the pretty women”.
- 3.2.6. *mā viyya ḥəvra ** mən ḥəbb-u tərved malə-ḥra⁴³*
“There is not a space in me that is not filled by his love”.
- 3.2.7. *ənṣəl subla əs-salām ** l-əlli sawḥal kāməl qa-l- 'ām*
“I wish a good trip to everyone traveling west this year”⁴⁴.
- 3.2.8. *təggad ya-l-məžḥūd ** layāli vīh-um kənnag 'ūd*
“Remember, secret love, the nights when we were together”.

³⁸ The recording cassette is at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3P4NhWeXm8>>.

³⁹ *lā 'ilāha 'illallāh* (literally: “There is no God but Allāh”) is an exclamation that expresses, among other meanings, the inability to act in the face of something that displeases or produces suffering.

⁴⁰ En Ḥassāniyya, *blīs* “Satan” symbolizes extreme and enticing beauty. When it is said that a woman is very beautiful to the point of provoking and tempting men, it is said *vī-ha blīs* (literally: “Satan is inside her”) and the same goes for a man.

⁴¹ Bayyāt is the name or nickname of the beloved.

⁴² The Word *ḥərṛa* does not have the same meaning as in Segol (2009: 149), because this researcher uses the Word *ḥurra* ‘woman, plain and simple’ in contrast to *muḥṣana* ‘pious woman’. The statement of this *təbrā* poem forces us to think that the meaning of the term *ḥərṛa* is associated with beauty, which is one of its meanings. The author refers to a pretty woman. On the other hand, perhaps this poem alludes to a popular belief that exists in some areas and according to which the beauty of children is inherited from their mothers.

⁴³ This Ḥassāni expression alludes to the situation of the land when the heavy rains fall and fill the whole floor without leaving any empty space. The beloved says she is completely full of love, like the ground after torrential rains.

⁴⁴ This poem even hides the name of the place where the lover travels, but, in the years of the composition of this poem, the busiest place to the west was the new capital of the country, Nouakchott, recently created. The lover of the poetess was supposed to have traveled to Nouakchott. She turns his love feeling into a generous act wishing a good trip to all the travellers who are going to where her beloved is going.

- 3.2.9. *tvaggad ya-l-mažḥūd ** layla miṭluhā lā ya 'ūd*⁴⁵
“Remember, secret love, that unrepeatably night (we spent together)”.
- 3.2.10. *aṛāhu sall ** darṛā 'a*⁴⁶ *lu mən rumball*⁴⁷
“He has worn a *darṛā 'a* from a *rumball* fabric”.

3.3. Song or *tabrā* ' 3

The third song is *the tabrā* ' of Abati Mint aš-Šwayḥ⁴⁸; this singer belongs to the Ahl-l-Mayddāḥ family mentioned above. She has been retired from the music world for years, but during the 1980s and 1990s of the last century she recorded many cassettes that were sold at affordable prices, which gave her fame and allowed her to keep some of her traditional music. In one of these cassettes, I found the *tabrā* ' whose lyrics are below.

- 3.3.1. *mən mašyak 'anni ** māta ḥadd msawwal 'anni*
“Since you left my side no one asks about me”⁴⁹.
- 3.3.2. *rayt sqaym nbān ** mā yaftan-lu kūn əl-vajṭān*
“I am suffering from a love sickness that is only perceptible to the clever”⁵⁰.
- 3.3.3. *ya-llāli ma-tamm ** da əs-saqm əlli gədd əl- 'adam*
“How difficult this love sickness which is so small!”⁵¹.
- 3.3.4. *ya-llāli əlla ḥadd ** kīv aḥmad walla gā 'aḥmad*⁵².
“How wonderful, I see someone like Aḥmad, or even he is Aḥmad without a doubt!”⁵³.

⁴⁵ *Layla miṭluhā lā ya 'ūd* is an expression of classical Arabic. (Literally ‘a night that will not be repeated’). It is common to use expressions from classical Arabic. This indicates, in my opinion, that the author also knows this variety of Arabic and could be a professional poetess and not an amateur as most of the young women who compose this poetic genre are.

⁴⁶ *darrā 'a* (plural: *drārī*) is a typical garment wear by Ḥassāni men. See Ould Mohamed Baba (2019: 118).

⁴⁷ *rumball* is a type of fabric used in the past because no one knows it today. It must have been an elegant fabric because the author wants to express the elegance with which her beloved appears dressed like this.

⁴⁸ The song can be found at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hdioql3miDo>>.

⁴⁹ The authors often complain about the loneliness they suffer in the absence of their beloved.

⁵⁰ The author explains in this poem a fact inherent to the *tabrā* ' genre because despite the love she feels she does not tell anyone and only the sagacious can perceive that she is in love.

⁵¹ The author means that she is experiencing great suffering because of the feelings she feels towards her beloved, but the modesty that governs the composition of this genre leads her to use the term “small” to express the opposite meaning.

⁵² This is a poem where a proper name is mentioned, Aḥmad which is a name that is widespread throughout the Islamic world because it is one of the names of the prophet Muḥammad. It could be used to replace any name.

⁵³ The confusion expressed by this author arises from the desire she has to see her beloved. In the first hemistich she was satisfied with the fact that it was someone similar to her beloved, although she doubted it, but she was pleasantly surprised that it was really him.

- 3.3.5. *bāli ṭabīb-u*⁵⁴ ** *məssadbi šawr nwāḍību*
 “The remedy for my soul’s suffering travels this afternoon to Nwāḍību⁵⁵”.
- 3.3.6. *nwāḍību ḡāli* ** *yā layta kulla al-layāli*⁵⁶
 “Nwāḍību is a beloved place I wish I could be in every night”⁵⁷.
- 3.3.7. *mən šawwət ḡi əl-wata*⁵⁸ ** *lā ḥawla wa-lā quwwata*⁵⁹
 “From the moment I saw this car I was suffering”.
- 3.3.8. *ḡa l-šāṭən bāli* ** *nassāni v-ahəl l-aḡāni*⁶⁰
 “He whose love occupies my mind has made me forget the singing people”.
- 3.3.9. *āna yasmaḡli* ** *lā šadd ‘liyya muṣādi*⁶¹
 “May God forgive me (the bad thoughts I have) when my beloved looks at me!”⁶².
- 3.3.10. *ya-ḡūti zād əlla* ** *ḡadd mn-l-aṣḡ əl-muḡtalla*⁶³
 “Oh people, here is someone coming from the occupied land!”
- 3.3.11. *mā kənt nḡaddaṣ* ** *‘an ḡadd fwaləḡ yuṣandaṣ*
 “I would never have believed that a handsome man could be turned into a soldier”.
- 3.3.12. *ḡaṡṡayt žbart nḡar* ** *ḡadd zwayn m‘a nās sḡār*
 “There was a time I met a handsome man with a group of young men”.
- 3.3.13. *lā ilāḡa illā lḡāḡ* ** *ma-ḡlaḡa l-ḡadd l-nahwāḡ*
 “My God, how much I love this person and how much I adore him!”.
- 3.3.14. *mžiyya l-dakār* ** *ḡayyam-li lə-mwāžə ‘lə-kbār*
 “When I came to Dakar the memories made me suffer”.

⁵⁴ *bāli ṭabīb-u* (literally: “my soul’s doctor”).

⁵⁵ *Nwāḍību* (written on the maps as Nouadhibou) is the second largest city in Mauritania and is the economic capital of the country. It has an important port that welcomes the thousands of ships that fish on the Atlantic coast.

⁵⁶ *yā layta kulla al-layāli* is an expression of classical Arabic (literally: “I wish that every night ...”).

⁵⁷ These two poems (numbers 3.3.5 and 3.3.6) are related because the author tells us that her beloved has travelled to *Nwāḍību* and, consequently, this city has become a place where she would like to be everynight.

⁵⁸ *Wata* (< *auto*) “car” is a loan word from the French language.

⁵⁹ *lā ḡawla wa-lā quwwata (illābi-llāḡi)* (literally: “there is no power or strenght except in God”). This expression is used to express a degree of amazement, of surprise, but above all to indicate that the situation is wonderful.

⁶⁰ *ahəl l-aḡāni* “singing people”. It is very likely that the author is referring to the fact that she cannot participate in the singing evenings in which the group of young women sing their love poems.

⁶¹ *muṣādi* means “what I most desire”, but it exists as a proper name; this creates an ambiguity although it is most likely the first meaning that has been used here.

⁶² The author asks God’s forgiveness because she believes her thoughts towards her beloved are sinful.

⁶³ *l-aṣḡ əl-muḡtalla* “the occupied lands”: Sometimes, lovers use secret expressions or codes that only the group of friends knows. This is the case here because the expression “occupied land” surely refers to the city of the beloved and they do not want to mention it so as not to reveal the origin of the lover.

- 3.3.15. *da l-ṛayt v-dakār ** alla lā 'agbu ḥarṛ an-nār*
“It was wonderful the time I spent in Dakar I hope bad times donot follow!”.
- 3.3.16. *lā ilāha illa lllāh ** ma-qlāh u-ma-qlāh u-ma-qlāh*
“My God, how much and how much and how much I love him!”.
- 3.3.17. *taqla 'awdāni ** lāhi nāmši w-āna māni*
“How hard it is to think that I have to go and I don't want to!”.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion and once seen the lyrics of the songs and its explanation, it should be stressed that *ət-tabrā'* is characterized by its close relationship to singing, since it was born to be sung by youth groups or by some professional women singers. The latter have played an essential role in preserving this oral heritage by turning poems of *tabrā'* into songs and recording them in the last century. Despite this, unfortunately, most of this poetry has been lost because it has not been written or recorded and because of the secrecy surrounding its creation and the anonymity of the authors. The author of this paper will continue to work on the collection of these texts, especially in rural areas and among the Bedouins, and will work in collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines (musicology, oral tradition, anthropology, etc.) to make this cultural heritage known and to help to preserve it.

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