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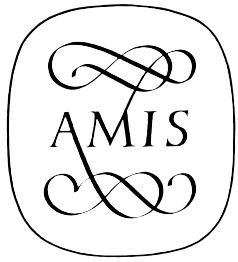


Making the Tunisian *ʿŪd ʿArbī* Today: Heritage of Craftsmanship and New Directions

Salvatore Morra

It can be argued that the lute instrument named *ʿūd* in Arabic (often spelled *oud*) is the most prominent plucked musical instrument in use today in countries of North Africa and the Middle East. An ancient instrument that spread from the Arab world along with Arab traders to Europe and beyond, beginning in the Middle Ages, the ʿūd today is found in various cultural and national varieties throughout the world.[1] In Tunisia, there co-exist several styles of ʿūd—differing in terms of their morphology, their manner of playing, and the music played upon them. One of these instruments, the *ʿūd ʿarbi*, is a unique type recognized as indigenous and genuinely Tunisian. Indeed, today, this type of lute is also called *ʿūd tūnsī*.

The ʿūd ʿarbi is a four-course, short-necked, and fretless instrument with double courses of strings. It consists of a sound chest made of a series of ribs, linked to a flat front surface of wood, and pierced by three sound holes, near which a membrane made of shell and wood protects the belly from the strokes of the plectrum, called *risha* in Arabic. As these instruments are hand crafted, dimensions will vary in subtle ways from maker to maker and within the output of a single maker. This lute's shape differs from the widely recognized "standard Egyptian" type found in Tunisia as well as in other countries. These two types of ʿūd differ in the following respects: the Tunisian ʿūd has a longer neck by 50mm (the total length is 250mm) and a smaller body than the Egyptian type, which has five double courses of strings and a single bass sixth string (fig. 1).

The tuning system of the ʿūd ʿarbi differs from the Egyptian model, as well as from other regional traditions in the neighboring countries of Algeria and Morocco.

In terms of pitches and notes on the score in western notation, the tuning is c' (first string), g (second), d'(third), d (fourth, fig. 2). Other tuning systems in North African ʿūds similarly consist of a fourth interval between

1. A recognized standard Arab/Egyptian model (*ʿūd sharqī*, oriental ʿūd, also called *ʿūd miṣrī*, Egyptian) is the most used type along with the Turkish one, while models from Iran, Greece, Iraq and Syria are also variously found.

the first and second strings, either G–D in Algeria (Constantine) or D–A in Morocco; and a fifth, between the third and fourth strings.[2] Often the note C is tuned into A, forming an octave between the third and fourth strings, which is a constant and uniquely Tunisian feature (d third, D fourth) among those Maghrebian tuning patterns. Similar, but not identical, long necked lutes can be found from Morocco to Tunisia, particularly a family of instruments known as *gumbrī* or *gunībrī*, a three-string plucked lute with the octave interval.[3] Generally, each tuning of West African plucked lutes is a combination of a fourth and an octave, though many pieces can be played with different tunings. This octave interval is a central feature of ʿūds ʿarbī, which touches on other local factors embedded in its African context. This tuning practice is distinct from eastern ʿūd models (from modern Egypt to Iraq), marking a watershed within the use of ʿūd ʿarbī versus ʿūd sharqī. Particular qualities—its four courses of strings with their octave tuning, for instance—generate its specific timbre. In addition, audible effects of the plectrum's special position and touches, as well as its tuning, set up with particular resonance and production of microtones, help define the sound of the instrument. The ʿūd ʿarbī is typically heard in the urban Tunisian *mālūf* ensemble. Mālūf, the most common genre for many leisure activities and celebrations, can generally be read as more or less synonymous with what Ruth Davis refers to as "Tunisian art music,"[4] and Maḥmūd Guettat refers to as *nūba*.[5]

Today, more specifically, Tunisian ʿūd ʿarbī players are predominantly players of the standard oriental ʿūd first, who have subsequently become passionate for the Tunisian version.[6] The instrument is taught in private

2. Maḥmūd Guettat, *La Musique Arabo-Andalouse* (Paris and Montréal: Fleurs Sociales, 2000), 334.

3. Alexandre Christianowitsch, *Musique Arabe* (Cologne: Librairie de M. Dumont Schauberg, 1863; *R*1922), 31. Jules Rouanet,"La Musique Arabe dans le Maghreb," *Encyclopédie de La Musique et Dictionnaire du Conservatoire* (Paris: Librairie Delagrave, 1922): 1929. Henry George Farmer, "A North African Folk Instrument," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (1928): 25.

4. Ruth Davis, "Patronage and Policy in Tunisian Art Music," *Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music*, eds. Virginia Danielson, Scott Marcus, Dwight Reynolds (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 505.

5. Maḥmūd Guettat, "The Andalusian Musical Heritage," *Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music*, 449.

6. This instrument division of ʿūd practices and object/material, where the Tunisian ʿūd holds a second-step appeal, has been the same in music-making for generations since the Khamaīs Tarnān era. Khamaīs Tarnān himself was an Oriental ʿūd player first and for Ṭahār Gharsa it was a conscious choice to have only played the Tunisian version.

FIGURE 1. At left, the *ʿūd sharqī*, the Egyptian or oriental type. At right, the *ʿūd ʿarbī*, or Tunisian type. The ʿūd sharqī was made by M. Haddad in 2010. and the ʿūd ʿarbī by M. Bēlaṣfar in 2015. Photo by Rotili e De Simone Studio.

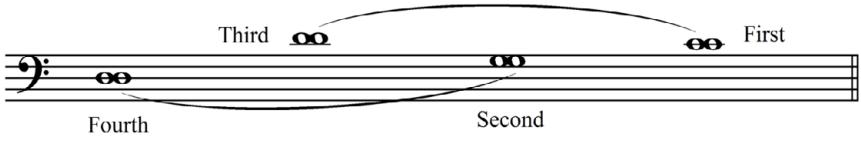


FIGURE 2. The current tuning of strings of the ʿūd ʿarbī.

music clubs around the country but rarely in official music conservatories. The most prominent player is Zīād Gharsa, the son of the *sheykh* (meaning "venerable") Ṭāhar Gharsa, who was a pupil of the legendary sheykh Khamaīs Tarnān (1894–1964), and therefore in a direct line of transmission of the musical heritage.[7] Now in his forties, he lives in the capital. Since the age of four, Zīād has lived, like his father, in a musical culture centered on the Rashīdīa Music Institute and various private mālūf associations. The Gharsa family conceived its work as a self-conscious attempt to continue and preserve its identity; without doubt, Zīād has a central role today in the dissemination of mālūf in Tunisia (through the Association Carthage de Malouf et Musique Tunisienne) and abroad.

ʿAbīr ʿAyādī is a thirty-five-year-old ʿūd ʿarbī player from Sfax who, like Zīād, has considerable experience performing and composing for the instrument, as well as institutional involvement. She is one of the ʿūd teachers of the Institute of Music of Sfax, has played in the mālūf orchestras of Sfax and Tunis, and organizes summer schools. She is also a professional ʿūd sharqī player, giving recitals with both instruments—not common for ʿūd ʿarbī players, who often belong to distinct ʿūd worlds. Zīēd Mehdī, a thirty-two-year-old Tunisian musician who lives in both Paris and Tunis, is a passionate and prolific ʿūd player. Zīēd trained as a player with Kamel Gharbī. Zīēd owns ʿūds ʿarbī of several different makes, and he is obsessed by the sound this traditional instrument makes.

Today, among the ʿūds of North African types, the ʿūd ʿarbī is played throughout urban Tunisian centers (Tunis, Sfax, Soussa, and Monastir), parts of North Africa (Algeria and Morocco), and in a range of diasporic communities from France to Italy. In Tunisia, there are three makers of this instrument: the Bēlaṣfar family (Tunis), Ridhā Jandoubī (Menzel Temīn), and Faīṣal Ṭwīrī (Bardo). The ʿūd ʿarbī is commonly used in a variety of sites: concert halls; the Institut Supérieur de Musique; mālūf clubs such as Conservatoire al-Farabi; and in teaching studios such as Les Jeunes du Maluf Tunisien. It is also commonly used in private homes.[8]

7. Ṭāhār Gharsa's son is the mālūf's most eminent and publicly known artist. This family has come to symbolize the well-trodden path from the Khamaīs Tarnān national mālūf revival era to contemporary modern practices.

8. See also online Facebook groups, such as: Le Malouf Tunisien, al-Malūf club de Chant Arabe, Rashīdīa-Monastir; YouTube channels like: Jalēl Benna, with 1,647 followers, and ʿAlī Sayarī, with 9,431 followers; instrument makers' workshops (Tunis, Sidi Bou Said, Hammamet); and websites (oudmigrations.com, chikioud.com, christianrault.com,

Like many ethnomusicologists and anthropologists researching in academia, and as an ʻud player myself, I undertook research in Tunisia to observe, record, and experience the role of traditional musical instruments in the modern Tunisian society.[9] As an ethnomusicologist researching in Tunisia, a close-by country of the Mediterranean basin, I am no stranger to French imperialism. But as a white Italian, I am not implicated in the historically pervasive colonial power relations, a position favorable to this research. Language skills have been extremely important. Only one person I met during my research spoke a little Italian, and only two others spoke English. All the musicians and makers I encountered spoke Arabic, Tunisia's main official language, and had a basic level of French. I had taught myself the basics of Arabic at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" between 2005 and 2010, but I had no previous formal training of Tunisian Arabic when I began my PhD.[10] My language skills enabled me to follow conversations, song lyrics and lesson-talk, as well as information on TV, on radio, on websites and in newspapers. They also allowed me to engage with local Tunisian makers.

My experience of making ʻūd ʻarbī between 2015 and 2017—producing a finished ʻūd in the workshop with Faīṣal Ṭwīrī in Bardo, Tunis, and observing several aspects of making at the workshops of Hedī Bēlaṣfar in Entilaka, Tunis, and Ridhā Jandoubī in Menzel Temīn—has been invaluable towards understanding makers' comments.

Conversations, ranging from informal chats to formal interviews with ʻud ʻarbi performers and makers, formed a key part of my fieldwork and are central to my research method. I regularly listened to mālūf recordings through the digital national archive of the Center of Arab and Mediterranean Music (CMAM) website. I have conducted research in the libraries of the Instituts Superieur de Musique (ISM) of Tunis, Sousse,

musique.arabe.over-blog.com, andalousia.overblog.org).

9. Interest in objects as material culture results in a multi-sited ethnography anchored in sound and its meanings, rather than just observation of places, institutions, people, or performances.

10. Salvatore Morra, "The Tunisian ʻūd ʻarbī: Identities, Intimacy and Nostalgia," PhD diss. (Royal Holloway, University of London, 2018). I conducted the main period of fieldwork for this thesis between May and September 2015, in November 2015, in November and December 2016, and between February and July 2017. The majority of this time was spent in and around Tunis, though I visited Soussa, Monastir, and Kairouan for some weeks in November 2016, Sfax for two weeks between December and November 2016 and a week in March 2017, Binzert for a few days in February 2017, and Paris for two weeks in November 2015 and a week in February 2017.

Sfax, and Beīt el-Bennani; the Centre d'étude Maghrébines à Tunis; the Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes – Mahad al-Adāb al- ʿArabīyya; the national library of Tunisia; and Ennejma Ezzahra, a museum of musical instruments in Sidi Bou Said. On the one hand, learning the ʿūd ʿarbī enabled me to become more familiar with the rhythms, melodies, and structures of mālūf; on the other hand, it afforded me certain skills to better understand how this type of instrument is played.

In historical terms, mālūf revival originated in an era of modern Tunisia, which has routinely been understood as a secular modernizing state, due to its cosmopolitan construction during the nineteenth century. Following the Napoleonic Wars and the Treaty of Vienna, Europe gained a favorable position towards the Ottoman Empire, which was facing numerous problems, including a loss of territories. During the reign of Muḥammad III al-Ṣadīq (1859–1882), Tunisia issued the first constitution in the Arab world, signed in 1861 and inspired by the constitutional monarchies of Europe. In the following years, Europeans undertook such projects as the railway construction between Tunis and La Goullete, the establishment of postal service, and the modernization of a water supply system. These projects were funded by the Tunisian state through several loans. In 1869, Tunisia declared bankruptcy and an international financial committee composed of French, British, and Italian officers took control of the Tunisian economy. In April 1881, under the pretext of an invasion by Tunisia of Algeria, the French invaded Tunisia and forced the Bey to sign the Treaty of Bardo on 12 May 1881. Tunisia became a republic in 1957.[11]

The passing from empire to protectorate to republic poses a line of demarcation for how Tunisian music was understood. This shift makes us rethink the Andalusian music heritage and traditional musical instruments in Tunisia.[12] After independence, Tunisia returned to a nation-building phase, facing the problem of defining the political and cultural community and establishing a legitimate political authority. In this sense, the increase in governmental control of the nation's cultural activities since the 1960s may have been an important factor in redefining mālūf, which underwent

11. Jean-François Martin, *Histoire de la Tunisie contemporaine. De Ferry à Bourguiba. 1881–1956* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 31–34.

12. Rodolphe D'Erlanger, "Au Sujet de la Musique Arabe en Tunisie," *Revue Tunisienne* 24 (1917): 91–95. Ruth Davis, *Mā'lūf, Reflection on the Arab Musical Heritage* (Lanham, Maryland; Toronto; Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2004).

a process from oral transmission into Western notation, as part of the larger project of culturally unifying the nation.[13] My research is deeply interwoven in this passage from French protectorate to nationalism, and this era can be taken as a starting point to reconstruct the heritage for this type of instrument.

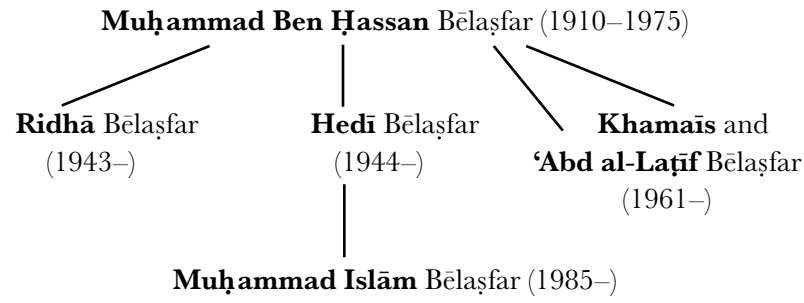
From Artisan Woodworker to Professional Luthier

I chose several of the well-known makers of ʻud ʻarbi for special consideration, owing to their influence and their artistry in making this instrument of Tunisian national importance. The transmission of this craftsmanship remains in close family circles. The Bēlaṣfar family in particular favored a development towards a standard way of making the Tunisian ʻūd ʻarbī. I argue that this happened by observing and copying unlabeled instruments repaired in the family's workshop. In fact, following independence and social transformation in Tunisia, there was an intense trade of ʻūd ʻarbī among aficionados and professionals. This led to many instruments being sent to the atelier of the Bēlaṣfar family and in turn to the standardization of the ʻūd ʻarbī. Since 1927, those markers, as we shall see, point to a standard idea of Tunisian ʻūd ʻarbī, which found its way of transmission through one landmark family of makers in the capital, the Bēlaṣfar.[14]

The founder, Muḥammad Ben Ḥassan, retired in 1975 and died the year after. He had thirteen sons, and since the 1950s, four of them—Ridhā, Hedī, and the twins Khamaīs and ʻAbd al-Laṭīf, also known as Loṭfi—have continued his work in three separate ateliers. The following diagram shows that after the four sons were employed in luthiery, only one nephew, Muḥammad Islām Bēlaṣfar, has continued his grandfather's work (see family diagram below).

13. Davis, "Patronage and Policy," 505. Ṣālaḥ al-Mahdī, *An-Nūba fi'l Maghrib al-ʻArbī* (Tunis: Patrimoine Musical Tunisien, 1967–1979), 8.

14. Muḥammad Ben Ḥassan Bēlaṣfar, born on 5 October 1910, set up his first workshop of musical instruments in the east medina of Tunis in bēb el-khaḍra. From the late 1920s, he made Oriental ʻūd-s at another workshop in Bēb Suīqa, where he remained until the end of the 1930s. The workshop continues under the direction of his nephew Muḥammad Islam Bēlaṣfar, and his work has influenced most of the instrument making in the twentieth century Tunisian capital and other urban centers. The family workshop moved to Bardo in 1943.



Hedī, born in 1944 and the most prolific, has produced most of the Tunisian ʿūds used in the country in the second half of the twentieth century.[15] In 1999, he was appointed the director of the workshop at the center of Arab and Mediterranean Music in Sidi Bou Said, where he works three days a week. This official position gives Hedī an influential authority regarding the Tunisian ʿūd and has broadened his reputation concerning all kinds of Tunisian musical instruments in the country.

ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, the youngest son, started working on his own in 1976.[16] From 1987, he worked in Sousse for about fifteen years. The small model toys found among the tourist shops of the Tunis medina are made by him, shaped in the style of ʿūd ʿarbī with four strings. Since 2002, ʿAbd al-Laṭīf has had an office and atelier at number 34 of al-dīwān al-waṭanī al-ṣināʿāt al-taqlīdia, "The National Office of Traditional Craftsmanship" in Den Den, Tunis.[17] It may be said that his craftsmanship, business, and institutional participation with the national office for traditional Tunisian crafts, represent official Tunisian musical instrument making in the twentieth century.

In Tunisian cities today, there are several luthiers, professional artisans who can make a Tunisian ʿūd on commission. In the medina of Tunis is the luthier Sherif Meher, located in Bēb Sūīqa since he opened his first atelier in 1981. The dozens of ʿūds Meher has made have earned him a high reputation among amateurs and beginners. Meher used to adapt

15. Between 1982 and 1996, he ran an atelier and a musical instrument shop, the Maison des Instruments de Musique, in the area called Cité Tahrir of the capital at rue de Palestine. Since 1999, he has been working with his son Islām in the family atelier in *Entilaka*, a quarter north of the capital where he also lives.

16. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf makes both oriental and Tunisian ʿūd-s as well as other Tunisian instruments such as *rebēb* and *ṭār*.

17. Muḥammad Bēlaṣfar held this position between 1964 and 1975, then it was held by Hedī Bēlaṣfar between 1974 and 1980.

features of his oriental ʻūd to the Tunisian one, but surprisingly, he keeps the traditional flower design for the tuning pegs. In his own way, Meher continues the tradition of ʻAbd ʻAzīz Jemaīl.[18] Today, Meher is the most important exponent of this Tunis medina luthiery style.[19]

Another medina luthier is the fifty-nine-year-old ʻabīb Reqīq, who for thirty years has been living and working in Sfax, a city 200 km from the capital to the south. The spread of Reqīq's ʻūds ʻarbī in music shops around the country points to a new and different dimension from Bēlaṣfar and other medina luthiers. Reqīq's ʻūds are found all around the country because they are cheap.[20] Some of his instruments are found in the ʻAlī Baba music shop in Sfax. Reqīq comes from the world of traditional Tunisian handicraft but is attentive to the market dynamics. Reqīq's ʻūd ʻarbī output represents a shift from a high-value, individually made object to an object of commerce.

These luthier figures based in the two largest urban centers of the country point to a long-standing craft history of the ʻūd ʻarbī in Tunisia. They demonstrate different levels of craftsmanship regarding the instrument, making models that were intended for beginners and amateurs. They show that the instrument was commissioned but also sold in shops; that it was an object in the market, even mass produced; but also, importantly, that luthiery in this country is still also valued as artisan work.

Standard ʻŪd ʻArbī: Crafting Wood by Hand

My observations of instrument construction by the luthier Hedī Bēlaṣfar at the workshop of the Center of Arab and Mediterranean Music

18. The first certified professional Tunisian-Arab luthier having a workshop in the Medina was ʻAbd ʻAzīz Jemaīl (1895-1969).

19. A project implemented under the MEDNETA (Cultural Mediterranean Network for the Promotion in the Arts, Crafts, and Design, for the regeneration of historical cities) supports the communities and creates a web of economic activities amid the urban and social settings of the historical medina of Tunis. Directed by Zoubeir Mouhlī and initiated by the Association de Sauvegarde de la Medina de Tunis in 2014, it mapped over 500 artisan workshops practicing more than twenty different crafts. Meher figures on the cover of this book: *Creative Industries & Urban Regeneration in the Medina of Tunis*, ed. Zoubeir Mouhli (Tunis: Medneta, 2014). In the eighteenth century, the medina housed over 27,000 artisans, while in the nineteenth century there were more than 13,000 artisans.

20. He is a self-taught maker, making instruments ranging from *qānūn* to *rebēb* and ʻūd-s, but he also has a degree in Arab music with the ʻūd as his principal instrument, awarded in 1994 at the Tunis Music Conservatoire. He is a player who makes his own instruments.

(CMAM) in Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, in June 2015, led me to consider that there was an imagined archetype about making *ʿūd ʿarbī* in Tunisia. If you ask a musician, from the most renowned public figure of ʿarbī in Tunisia, Zīād Gharsa, to upcoming players like Zīēd Mehdī, what ʿūd ʿarbī they play, they will answer: "an ʿūd made by Hedī Bēlaṣfar." It is not a matter of abstract quality: Hedī Bēlaṣfar's technical skills are considered cultural merits rather than mere procedures, embedded in Tunisian national craftsmanship. They are transmitted orally and come from a past from which few examples survive today. I will suggest that investigating Bēlaṣfar's craftsmanship means tracing a "standard" way of making ʿūd ʿarbī in Tunisia, and that it emerges from a "medina" craftwork context very much of both Arab (*ʿarbī*) and Tunisian (*tūnsī*) identities.

What does this standard making process consist of and how is it related to woodwork in general? Through the months of May and June 2015, I observed Hedī Bēlaṣfar making an ʿūd ʿarbī that I commissioned. The various stages and order of working are flexible, but the basic process involves creating the mold, a model for the body. Luthiers have several molds for several models of ʿūd, and as Hedī Bēlaṣfar's son, Muḥammad-Islām, told me, they have the "old" and "authentic" mold for ʿūd ʿarbī in Tunisia. This is made of redwood pine, chosen for its stability and adaptability to climatic changes. On the mold are attached the ribs, which form the base for the case of the instrument. The ribs can be made of varying wood types such as rosewood, mahogany, etc. Important in this phase is the *al-kʾab*, a small cubic block that goes both on the upper and lower part of the body, where the ribs are attached. The two blocks are the last pieces that keep the ribs attached together, and they separate them from the mold. After the mold is removed, the blocks remain to fasten the ribs together with a pin (figs. 3a, 3b).

The ribs are between 20 mm and 30 mm long and 3 mm thick, reduced to 1.5 mm after cleaning and smoothing. Their shaping is achieved using a saw. After cutting the ribs, Bēlaṣfar causes them to bend by dipping them in water and forming them on a hot surface. The last part of this stage is the manufacturing and fastening of the ribs. The aim is to give a support to the body, starting by placing the ribs from the middle of the mold. The ribs are attached on alternate sides starting on the right, from the top down, held in place with a sharpened spike. Then it is left to dry (fig. 4).

The number of ribs for the ʿūd ʿarbī is between fifteen and twenty-one. When they are dried, a fine strip of paper is added among them to keep

(a)

(b)

FIGURES 3 a–b. (a) ʻŪds molds and (b) blocks used in the Center of Arab and Mediterranean Music's atelier, directed by Bēlaṣfar. Photos by the author.

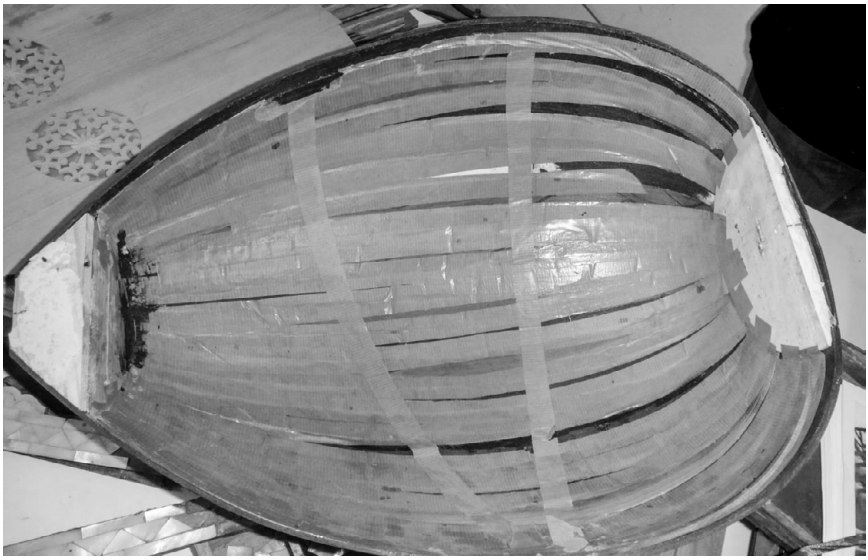


FIGURE 4. Instrument's body, interiors. Photo by the author.

them accurately joined together with an organic glue. The glue, made from animal matter, is dried, treated, and then dissolved in water under heat (in the interview Bēlaṣfar highlights the quality of this glue and its property to let the sound propagate through the wood). However, not just the type of glue but the way Bēlaṣfar uses it is another key point here. It seems a precise amount of glue cannot be calculated. I have seen Hedī Bēlaṣfar using this and other organic material with "natural movements" as if every touch on the instrument, even the most careful of precise gluing, is to be conducted without overdoing it. Bēlaṣfar knows the results he wants based on his years of experience with sight and touch. As Sennett reminds us, the intimate connection between head and hand, the thinking and the real putting into practice, are the focus of the craftsman.[21] The use of glues between the rib papers, for instance, is the result of Hedī Bēlaṣfar's hand movements. It is entirely a conscious movement, a consciousness transmitted from the mind to the hands after years of work.

The lock clamps the ribs tightly together. It is a strip of wood around the edge of the body that also has a decorative function. The soundboard is made up of four or five pieces, each 2 mm thick. In luthiery of other types than Tunisian, normally the face would be made of only two pieces.

21. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 9.

This facilitates the gluing and renders the face more stable. Bēlaṣfar's faces are still today generally made of cedar rather than spruce. The ʻūd he made in 2015 has a cedar soundboard. Cedar is an odd wood for the ʻūd's face, as it would be for similar instruments such as mandolins or guitars, for which standard luthiery uses spruce, but Bēlaṣfar told me that ʻūd ʻarbī had always been made with a cedar face. Today only Bēlaṣfar makes the ʻūd ʻarbī with a cedar face. To cut the shape, Bēlaṣfar puts the two parts face to face on the soundboard and body, to draw the exact outline of the shape with a pencil and cut it with the saw. He cuts the wood precisely to smooth the surface, and then glues the pieces together.[22] The face is often a few millimeters larger than the body. He told me that it is done in imitation of a violin edge. Finally, he uses abrasive paper to make it smooth. Up to this point all the work is done by hand (figs. 5a, 5b).

Crafting the rosettes is an example of the maker's artistry. The ʻūd ʻarbī has three rosettes. They are placed towards the chest of the soundboard; the top rose is always 130 mm from the neck-joint and the pair of roses in the middle of the soundboard are 270 mm from the neck-joint. A reinforcement using another wood, often spruce 3 mm to 4 mm thick, is placed under the rosette. The idea of reinforcement under the face of the instrument goes against the principles of lightness and sound propagation, as the luthier Ṭwīrī likes to highlight. The reinforcement inevitably makes the instrument heavier, he says. The weight of an ʻūd ʻarbī, approximately 1kg, is above the average of other models of ʻūd. This feature affects the overall style of playing, how to hold the plectrum, the type of stroke and the tension of the strings. To make the rosette, the geometrical and floral figure design is traced onto the wood and then cut out using a scroll saw. The harmonic bars are usually nine in number (Bēlaṣfar mentioned they can instead be seven). They are cut in sequences and placed parallel on the soundboard. Four of these bars, 3 mm thick and 4 mm wide, are placed in the area of the rosettes; five of them are 6 mm thick and 14 mm wide, two of which are set in the upper part of the rosette area and three in the lower part of the rosette area.

The lower bridge is glued in the lower part of the surface, measuring 360 mm from the end of the body and beginning of the neck. The neck is 240 mm long. On the bridge are eight grooves to insert the strings. A protective membrane made of wood (rosewood or mahogany and decorated

22. This job is done with chisels of several sizes.

(a)

FIGURE 5a. The soundboard with the wooden reinforcement. Photo by the author.

(b)

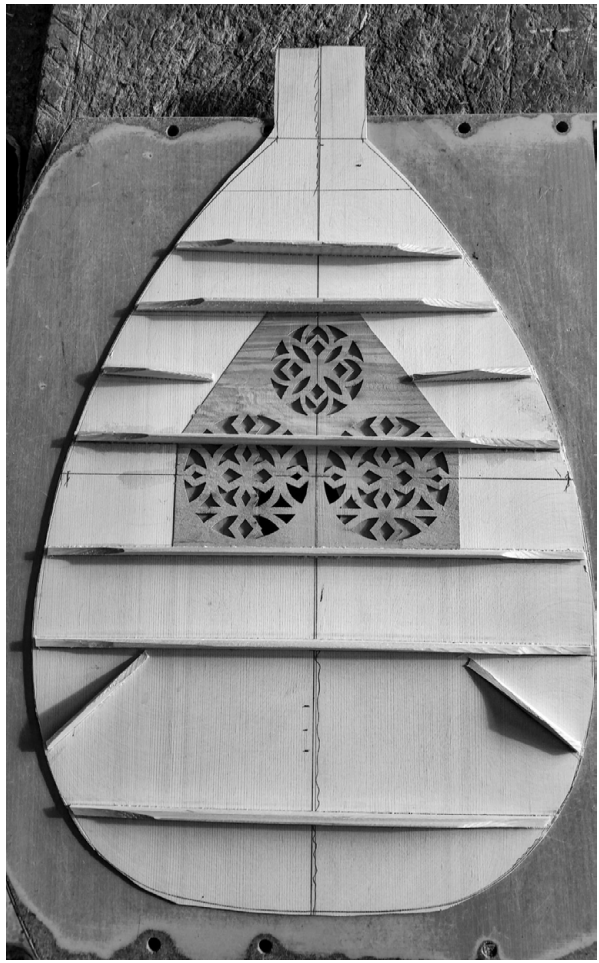
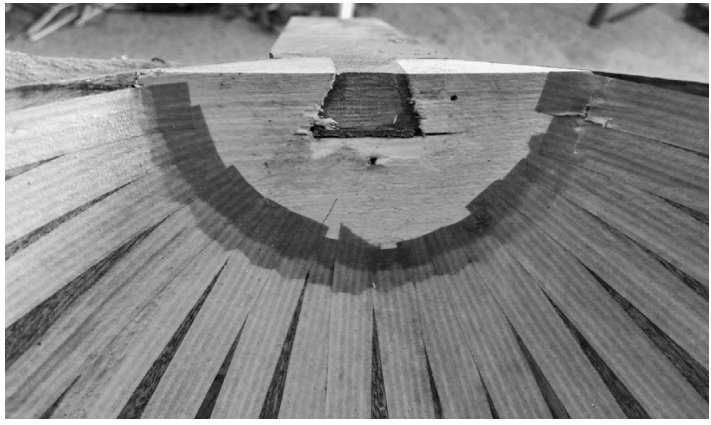


FIGURE 5b. The soundboard with bars. Photo by the author.

(a)

(b)



FIGURES 6 a–b. The block carved with dovetail sockets is inserted into the neck. Photos by the author.

FIGURE 7. The headstock. Photo by the author.

with mother of pearl) is placed below the two roses to protect the surface from the strokes of the plectrum. In the ʿūd ʿarbī, a piece of leather is placed around the edge of the body to keep it securely fastened and protect it against high temperatures. Leather and other decorative textile materials than wood point to a North African historical link of musical instruments and the traditional textile industry. Thick bone inlays and mother of pearl, for instance, render the instrument heavier, particularly towards the neck. The neck is made of red pine, covered with ebony wood on the top and decorated with several patterns with black ebony and white cow bone. It is 240 mm long and 40 mm wide at the top and 50 mm where it meets the body, 25 mm in thickness. The neck is attached to the body by a block carved with dovetail sockets. They are inserted into the neck. Makers do not need to glue it as these sockets slot into both parts and fastens securely (figs. 6a, 6b).

The headstock is normally made of walnut and carved from only one piece of wood. It is 245 mm long and about 40 mm thick. It is standard practice to paint it black. The pegs, made of rosewood are 20 mm apart from each other. There are three types of decoration of the pegs. The "capo," literally limit or threshold, is the limit of the bridge that guides the string from the lower bridge to the pegs. The pegs are made of strong wood without knots to avoid cracks (fig. 7).

The ʿūd ʿarbī is very much a robust plucked instrument, constructed to be heavy and sturdy. In some ways, especially due to the thickness of the neck and the tension of the strings, it is also hard to play. Though this difficulty is a principal characteristic of the ʿūd ʿarbī, it results in a unique resonance for the instrument. Furthermore, this feature renders the instrument distinctive from other ʿūd types and even among North African models. In the Bēlaṣfar instrument, it is a matter of the overall amount of material, the wooden reinforcements, and the amount of glue, for example. Finally, the ʿūd ʿarbī ʿs traditionally strong, solid construction makes it a suitable instrument for open-air performances.

Bēlaṣfar's ʿūd-making initially seemed to me a rather casual approach towards the accuracy of details and the lack of personal design innovations: the woods chosen, bone ornamentations, rosette carving, overall design shape, and other materials all fall within a revered Tunisian crafting tradition. Through the numerous ʿūd ʿarbī he has seen, repaired, and constructed in his life, he has established a recognized standard of craftmanship. Among aficionados and players, the association is so that

the "tradition" is the individual expression of Bēlaṣfar. With Bēlaṣfar, crafting is a physical, hands-on practice of touch and movement such as trial-and-error placements, rather than an imaginative process or following a theoretical acoustic principle, for example exact measurements. This enduring crafting comes from woodworking and technical training involving hands-on contact with the instrument. As a result, Bēlaṣfar's ʻūds ʻarbī can be considered genuine and rustic, earthy. He encompasses ʻūd ʻarbī nature and its sound, evoking the instrument's rhythmic attitude.

Crossing Identities: the Tunisian ʻŪd in the Twenty-First Century

Alternative methods of *ʻūd* construction, all involving some changes and improvements, have developed since the start of the twenty-first century. There are different materials in use, increased availability of tools and machinery, and differing knowledge and aesthetic preferences. There are differences too in the business models associated with high-end instruments: making slowly by hand versus quicker, more mechanized modes of production.

I am interested here in ʻūds ʻarbī that show distinct traits that come from different types of ʻūd, connecting the instrument with the notion of hybridity. Have Tunisian makers made hybrid ʻūds ʻarbī by blending other ʻūd types? In the literature theorizing the case studies, the discussion draws ideas from a variety of sources, including organology and material culture, in connection with the notion of hybridity. Brian Stross pertinently proposes a "cycle of hybridization," according to which we move historically from heterogeneous forms to increasingly heterogeneous ones, without any being "pure."[23] In the light of Bēlaṣfar's standard craft, I would like to ask: what leads to different directions in crafting? How do other types of ʻūd making reshape the Tunisian ʻūd and its identity?

In this respect, Causey's suggested term "conflation"—literally, to blow together, to fuse—is an alternative to "hybrid" in the transformation of material culture. In Causey's words, "it is a term that evokes a more inspired and spontaneous joining of art style elements."[24] I use the term

23. Brian Stross, "The Hybrid Metaphor: From Biology to Culture," *Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (1999): 254–67.

24. Andrew Causey, "The Singasinga Table Lamp and the Toba Batak Art of

conflation here as a metaphor to emphasize that innovation in connection with aesthetic aspects of the ʿūd ʿarbī perpetrates an act of creation by joining two or more elements, without changing its standard design (tuning and neck length). On the other hand, reshaping of forms and decorations—and measurements as well—would result in a "hybrid" musical object.

The Makers Ridhā Jandoubī and Faīṣal Twirī

Ridhā Jandoubī[25] and Faīṣal Twirī[26] produce instruments for amateur and professional players in Tunis and Kelibia and the countryside around these cities. Rīdha Jandoubī, for example, produces his ʿūd by first using a chisel to shape the mold of a rib length of wood, sealing the ribs together, then shaping the inside of the ʿūd. Faīṣal Ṭwīrī, in contrast, still fabricates the body of his ʿūd by using a mold based on his measurements of what he believes is a standard ʿūd ʿarbī. His atelier is fully equipped with machinery. Ṭwīrī cuts all the materials himself, except the soundboard, from the raw state. For the face, made only of two pieces, Ṭwīrī applies techniques that "enable the exact reproduction of a fine face profile in every instrument made," he says, remarking that precision in calculating geometrical proportions is what the maker should always aim for. Both makers are now using laser techniques to drill the three face holes, but then make final adjustments by hand. Although the instruments are less

Conflation," *Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (1999): 424–36.

25. Jandoubī, based in Menzel Temīn, a small village in the region of Nabeul, makes both Tunisian and oriental models of ʿūd. Born in 1959, he has worked since his youth as a furniture maker. In 1997, he obtained the official certification of "musical instrument making" (ʿūd) from the Artisan Office in Den Den, Tunis, in the Ministry of Tourism and Artisanship. Like the older makers, Jandoubī too was a former carpenter.

26. Ṭwīrī is the only maker who trained exclusively in a musical instrument atelier without any previous experience of carpentry work. He learned the traditional method of construction from Bēlaṣfar but developed a new model and adopted new methods. Now in his late fifties, Ṭwīrī trained at Bēlaṣfar's workshop since he was eleven, after school and during summer holidays and worked as a professional luthier since 1984. From 1997 to 2002, he owned an atelier in Manouba, then moved to Bardo, where he now lives and works. For three years from 2008, he taught at the Institut Superieur de Musique of Tunis, teaching master students and supervising doctorates in musical instrument artisanship, taking up the position previously held by the Iraqi maker Yaroub Fadel for two years. Among Twirī's students who have continued working in the field are Ṭahār Sussī and Rouib Ghailen.

and less handcrafted, I would argue that this technique retains the identity and tradition of the instrument.

Jandoubī has a somewhat different approach. For him, there is "no predefined voice of the ʻūd ʻarbī, but also the variables are not limitless." He told me that this idea comes from the skills he has as a player of the instrument. Unlike some makers, Jandoubī does not see the making process as intuitive; indeed, he emphasizes the importance of precise measurements and systematic testing of the instrument's sound. But past experience, trial and error adjustments, and careful listening are all crucial. With oriental ʻūds, the maker's aim is predefined and is realized, more or less successfully, by precisely controlling the entire assembly of the instrument.

Jandoubī's work demonstrates how needs for quality improvement and for speeding up the process can lead makers to respond attentively to innovation. He has perhaps the most experience of using innovative methods of construction compared to other makers, in particular for assembling the ribs into a shell. Jandoubī is the only maker in Tunisia who no longer uses a mold, and has not done so since 2010. "Timewise, it slows down the work and the result is less accurate," he told me in our first interview. Traditionally, for Bēlaṣfar, Meher, and others, the mold is the "heart" of the instrument, its most intimate part, which reflects the personal intention of the maker. Jandoubī's abandoning of the mold astonished both other makers and me, as I learned in discussions in other ateliers. Twirī, for instance, commented on this as a way of speeding up the work rather than an effective structural improvement. For Jandoubī, however, the primary aim was to achieve more stability in the drying process of the body.

In Jandoubī's method, the ribs are cut and curved one by one, by lightly dampening and shaping them on a hot curved surface. He then verifies the shape, attaching the ribs to one that acts as a model, instead of using the mold (fig. 8).

Once the ribs are shaped, three are assembled at the same time using synthetic glue for wood, with cellophane tape to hold them stacked together. When the ribs are completed, they are left to dry, attached on both extremities of the wedges to a piece of wood. Paper strips are subsequently glued on once the ribs are completed (figs. 9, 10).

For Jandoubī, using a sort of "free ribs mold" for all types of ʻūd making is the culmination of a long process involving understanding the meaning of the mold, saving time to meet the demand, and learning how to improve the accuracy. Jandoubī's comments also highlight how makers

FIGURE 8. Table to shape ribs for the mold in Rīdha Jandoubī's atelier. Photo by the author.

FIGURE 9. Ribs and mold table in Jandoubī's atelier. Photo by the author.

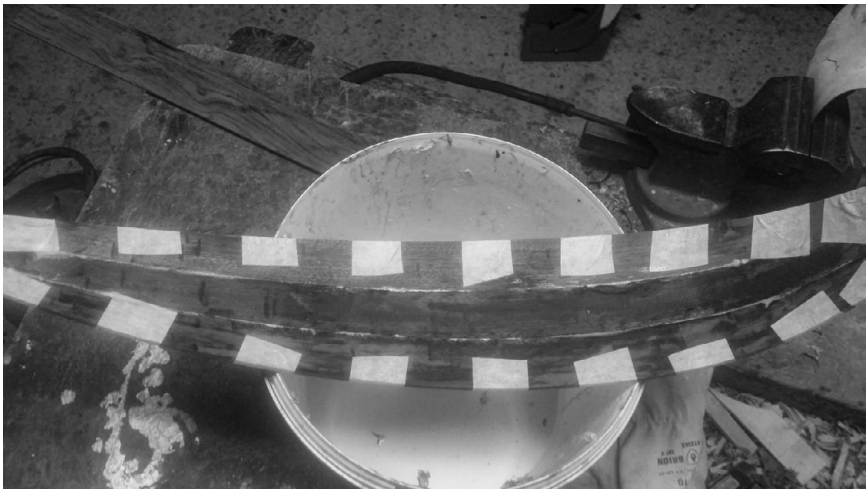


FIGURE 10. Ribs glued together in Jandoubī's atelier. Photo by the author.

often turned to the mold at an early stage in their instrument-making career, before they knew about or could find other solutions. Different needs also can lead to alternative manufacturing methods. This divergence signals an increasingly flexible conception of what methods can be used for ʿūd making and how they can be developed.

Jandoubī has developed two models of ʿūd ʿarbī from his experience of Oriental ʿūd-crafting and since he dispensed with the mold.[27] To a degree, this model conserves basic markers of identity of the ʿūds ʿarbī like the leather edge, the lozenge-shaped pick guard, and the typical headstocks. One key feature of Jandoubī's construction, already found in this early model, is its peculiar but practical neck: tapering towards the body, then outwards again in the short section to the headstock. This gives a slim, linear neck, narrow and oriental ʿūd-like, so typical of contemporary ʿūd ʿarbī making's transformation. It is clear, however, when talking to players, that a slimmer neck is useful not just as a comfortable hand position or because of its acoustic properties, but as a form that they already knew and were familiar with. Jandoubī's ʿūd ʿarbī neck demonstrates how musical and practical needs can lead construction to close engagements with light and heavy instruments. This is a difference in modern Tunisian ʿūd making versus the Bēlaṣfar standard craftsmanship.

27. Examples of the early model include ʿūds ʿarbī made for Zīād Gharsa, ʿAbīr ʿAyādī, Sofiān Zaidī, the amateur Ḥassen Ghargourī, the Institut Superieur de Musique of Sfax, and the student Muḥammad Bou ʿAlī.

Moreover, Jandoubī also shifts attention from the mold to other parts of the instrument. For Jandoubī, various features, not just the mold, can support a new identity of the Tunisian *ʿūd*. In November 2016, he posted on his Facebook page a photo of a finished instrument with the following comment: "'ūd 'arbī dresses Oriental." The absence of the leather protection around the edge, for example, which makes it more closely resemble an oriental 'ūd, as well as the soundboard carved with only one rosette instead of the traditional three, are the most obvious "conflation" represented by the material form. When I asked Jandoubī about this change of features, he gave very little explanation except to say he had been asked to do so by the commissioner of the instrument, a resident of Algeria. Jandoubī describes himself as "the Tunisian maker who sells the most 'ūds 'arbī to Algerian players." More than eighty per cent of 'ūds 'arbī he makes are commissioned by Algerian players, who ask to adapt or change details of the instruments like these. Despite his stated intention of creating something "new" on the basis of a commission, I also suspect that he must have got the idea from his often urgent need to simplify the features and decoration in order to focus on sound and acoustic improvements.

Causey introduced the notion of "conflation of intent": "an agent performs an act of melding in an object of material culture by two or more intents."[28] Jandoubī created a conflation of 'ūd forms by joining two features from a diverse 'ūd type to the 'ūd 'arbī. Rather than a hybrid notion of two disparate parents creating a unique progeny, the conflation takes place within the same instrumental family. It becomes clear that the possible shift of identity of the 'ūd 'arbī involves various "foreign" elements that have been inventively "fused" by the Tunisian maker himself.

A maker's motivations in choosing alternative features are complex, but questions of identity are rarely distant: the desire to modify the aesthetics, the appearance of the instrument, the removing of identifiable features, standardization of features towards an oriental-Turkish 'ūd model, and satisfying customer demands all play a part. Ṭwīrī's experiences highlight how instrument making participates in complex local and more global histories, since passing down skills rests not on a timeless resource, but on the long-term interplay between the master craftsman and the enthusiasm of apprentices in their learning and improving. The accuracy of every detail, a shiny modern finish through brilliant polyurethane varnish, geometrical

28. Causey, "The Singasinga Table Lamp," 433.

calculations, and scientific measurements—all are at stake in Twirī's work.

Ṭwīrī's search for a finer sound suggests that, historically, raw materials and inaccurate details were at first used by twentieth-century makers, but then abandoned or improved by later local makers, eventually by those who began apprenticeship with these same masters. The first time I came across an ʿūd ʿarbī made by Ṭwīrī was in 2015. At that time, only the Bēlaṣfar family had seemed worthy of investigating in terms of ʿūd ʿarbī luthiery. After a while, the look of Ṭwīrī's ʿūds became very attractive to me, clearly identifiable as Tunisian, with all their features highlighted: the elegant lozenge-shaped pickguard, the longer neck and smaller body, the bowtie bridge. It was reinterpreted, the features perfectly reproduced but finer, into something a little more contemporary. Soon, this ʿūd ʿarbī no longer appeared an old-fashioned style of instrument, a tribute to the tradition. Its overall appearance changed my perception of the entire instrument: lighter in weight, the face thickness is 1.8 mm, but also without the emphasis on representing a former past. In 2017, I assisted Faīsal Ṭwīrī in his workshop, to make a Tunisian ʿūd with him and to discover that he is an atypical Tunisian luthier.

For Twirī, who also makes oriental and Turkish ʿūds, the Tunisian one is made up of two main elements: a neck of 240 mm of length and three rosettes. "Whatever else you do, it's all for an ʿūd ʿarbī, and it cannot be changed," he explained. Despite this affirmation, I point out a hybrid element in Ṭwīrī's ʿūd ʿarbī—out of an annual average of forty-five instruments (Oriental, Turkish, and Iraqi types), he makes six Tunisian ʿūds ʿarbī per year. Twirī's models are in constant evolution; he adds or removes decorations, and markers of identity are transformed or reproduced faithfully at the request of the client. His ʿūds ʿarbī are in Paris at the Mālouf Tunisien association, at the ISM of Tunis, and in the hands of students such as Safwen Ghasmī and Rayan Nefzi, or, very recently, of professionals like Sofiān Zaidī (2018).

Much of ʿūd ʿarbī crafting pivots on the responsive relationship between the maker and tradition. It is a result of variation and flexibility in imagining the process of ʿūd ʿarbī making. The thickness of the neck, for instance, is an organological feature pointing to a basic distinction between the North African family and the other ʿūd types. Both Jandoubī and Ṭwīrī's ʿūd ʿarbī necks are a crucial variant drawn from other ʿūd neck types. Such surprises demand that makers are willing to experiment or adjust and do not cling too firmly to fixed principles. Many players, including

the well-known master Zīād Gharsa, have commented how slim the neck of Ṭwīrī's ʿūds ʿarbī are, compared to the thicker Bēlaṣfar ones. As we have seen for Jandoubī, this makes the instrument more playable from the point of view of ʿūd sharqī players. The alternate use of the two instruments (sharqī and ʿarbī) in the same concert by the artist ʿAbīr ʿAyādī, for example, is facilitated by this slimmer neck. The last time I visited Ṭwīrī's workshop, briefly in March 2018, when commenting on how slim his ʿūd ʿarbī's neck had become, he answered, "kabīr ʿunouq? C'est finì!" (Big neck? That's over!). The player Zīēd Mehdī was with me and later in the car he admitted that he felt hurt by Ṭwīrī's assertion. "The ʿūd ʿarbī must have a thick neck and longer neck, as we have to come to know it," Mehdī added. These transformations are implicitly reiterated by Stross's concept of a "hybridity cycle," in which a hybrid form in transformed, helping generate another hybrid.[29] Ṭwīrī's instruments have aspects that are old, in that they come from well-established forms of ʿūd ʿarbī. They are "hybrid," in that new instruments have been produced because of local and global cultural flow of ʿūd making.

Although the stages of the Ṭwīrī's making process are more or less the standard for ʿūd, each example of his ʿūd ʿarbī is imagined, on the smallest scale, as the unique product of the collaborative relationship between a particular innovation and a particular rule. The ʿūd we made together focuses on the thickness of all the materials we used. The neck, for example, without bone decoration, is 10 mm thinner than necks of other ʿūd types. It reaches the same thickness by then adding the decorations, which are carefully balanced. "If you change the neck, my technique and touch has to change too," Gharsa told me, discussing Ṭwīrī's neck form. Less material makes the instrument weigh less, but the uniqueness of the ʿūd ʿarbī is tied to the neck's form and length and the markers of identity. Lightening the instrument pushes it towards other overall dimensions, which result in a change of identity. Ṭwīrī's design reaches 3 mm for the ribs, 20 mm for the neck, and 18 mm for the soundboard, which is, however, thicker than ʿūd of other traditions. Other examples shift our focus to the removed elements and to new technologies. The reinforcement attached to the soundboard in the area of the rosettes is finally removed, as well as even the leather edge in many models, Ṭwīrī told me. It is all done to further lighten the instrument. The sound board is made only of two pieces. Individual

29. Stross, "The Hybrid Metaphor," 256.

FIGURE 11. Necks of ʻūd ʻarbī's in the making in Ṭwīrī's atelier. Photo by the author.

uniqueness, well-known controversies, and non-standard forms all have aesthetic consequences. While there is significant consensus among makers that instruments should be well crafted, there is considerable aesthetic variation outside these basic requirements. Nevertheless, Ṭwīrī does not carve the rosettes with the mechanical *takhshīsh*. Instead, for roughly fifteen years, his soundboards have been made using a laser machine in the shop of Beshīr Bijī in Bēb al-Khaḍra.

Beyond these, several well-known controversies play a part in confounding the idea of a standard ʻūd ʻarbī morphology. These debates center on whether, or to what degree, an ʻūd's craftsmanship is determined by its constituent materials or its new forms; its internal body dimensions; the difference(s) or otherwise between sharqī and ʻarbī instruments; and the value or otherwise of applying laser techniques to the face of the instrument. These topics fuel heated debates among players too, and are frequently mentioned by makers, signaling wider anxieties about the quality of certain materials and the appropriateness of human interventions. Other challenges to the singular identity of the Tunisian ʻūd derive from the range of non-standard, ʻūd ʻarbī-like instruments that change, substitute, or discard various elements of the "traditional" form.

Conclusion

The focus of this article has been the mutating course of the ʿūd ʿarbī's making in the twenty-first century, situating the instrument's changing construction practices, meanings, and values within a heterogeneous cluster of sociocultural currents that act upon makers. I hope to have demonstrated how craftsmanship of the Tunisian ʿūd variously values heritage and new directions. In this context, on one hand, making an ʿūd ʿarbī requires cultural knowledge, and on the other, carpentry experience, involving artisanal traits, such as skill in working with the hands, real practice, and thinking. This develops practices that can become unique to one person or family circle through years of work, and it involves the society as well as the organic matter. I have sought to contextualize such practice in crafting musical instruments during the Tunisian protectorate, which provides an alternative frame for analyzing ʿūd ʿarbī identity in multicultural Tunisia. In some instances, those required skills derive from copying and observing existing instruments and help to reinforce certain arguments, such as the kind of craftsmanship deriving or overlapping with furniture making.

This reading offers a way of interpreting the correlation between the ʿūd ʿarbī's Arab identity and its local medina-city space of development and transmission. I suggest this was a space of exchanges for the ʿūd ʿarbī, which helped encapsulate traits and features that formed a "standard" ʿūd ʿarbī construction. In broader sense, while the cultural significance of musical instruments and their agency in the lives of musicians is well established in ethnomusicology, the ideas surrounding ʿūd ʿarbī-making highlight a relatively unexplored topic: how instruments make that agency felt culturally as part of a space, a community, a corporation. The medina and the Tunisian ʿūd are both ʿarbī. This idea of a medina luthier "community," from artisan woodworker to professional luthiery, has shown how ʿūd ʿarbī makers outside this social milieu use various materials and processes and produce instruments with diverse finished and hybrid forms. Meanwhile, the standard methods of making the ʿūd ʿarbī help it cohere as it moves into and responds to new social contexts.

My engagement with contemporary ʿūd ʿarbī making resonates with the idea that every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practice and thinking, and it focuses on the intimate connection between the head and the hand. I sought to show that the ʿūd ʿarbī's construction as

a transmitted standardized process lies in the hands of Bēlaṣfar family, but that they do not use a rigid theoretical and calculated method for crafting this instrument. The result comes from carpentry skills, which develop from copying and applying observed features and materials. I argue that the identity of the ʻūd ʻarbī is acquired through years of hands-on practice, by touch and movement, which goes beyond the rigid concern of the right measurements and cuts.