

Multimedia Reviews

Ya Lalla: Jewish Saharans Singing to Birth (<https://yalalla.org.uk/>) and *Past and Present Musical Encounters Across the Strait of Gibraltar: Ya Lalla: A Sonic & Visual Spotlight on Women's Resistance and Celebrations of Transmission* (<https://www.musicalencounters.co.uk/vanessa-exhibit>). Website and online exhibit curated by Vanessa Paloma Elbaz.

Jewish music studies is still a surprisingly recent disciplinary participant in digital humanities scholarship. Even as musicologist and metadata librarian Michelle Urberg observes that ethnomusicologists have regularly made use of a plethora of digital humanities tools since the 1980s (2018:134), Jewish historian Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky recognizes that Jewish studies have been slow to catch on to this trend (2020:19). Today, beyond a handful of institutional Jewish sound archives, book companion websites, and largely self-published podcasts, few scholars working at the intersections of these disciplines have recognized the potential of making research findings accessible to and engaging for the public.

Vanessa Paloma Elbaz has recently completed not one but two interconnected multimedia projects, both with the subtitle “Ya Lalla.” Together, they offer a fascinating visual and sonic narration of the history of the musical fertility rituals traditionally performed by North African Jewish women. As Elbaz explains, “the Yalalla platform explores the use of digital humanities to reinscribe the centrality of women’s voices to Jewish life in North Africa, and to recreate sonic worlds which have been atomised with the dispersion of these communities in the last century.” In the context of “highly patriarchal societies” contingent on “expanding filiation networks,” pregnancy and birth served as “one of the few powerful tools women wielded.” Though these important lifecycle events were initially accompanied by ancestral musical practices, they began to fall out of use during the French Protectorate era (1912–1956). Gradually, Jewish women moved to hospitals to give birth to their children, participated in processes of French cultural assimilation, and emigrated away from Marrakesh and Casablanca in Morocco, taking their cultural traditions with them. With her exclusive focus on Jewish women’s musical encounters beyond the Ashkenazi mainstream, Elbaz’s multimedia projects participate not only in the digitisation, but also the diversification, of diasporic Jewish musical experience.

The first of these projects, “Ya Lalla: Jewish Saharans Singing to Birth,” is devoted to a series of oral history interviews that Elbaz conducted with Mme Sultana Azeroual in Casablanca in 2015 and 2016. Azeroual, Elbaz explains on the sister website, is

“one of the last singers of these repertoires” (see <https://www.musicalencounters.co.uk/about-yalla-exhibit>). As such, the preservation of her song archive holds particular value for future generations.

Visitors to “Ya Lalla: Jewish Saharans Singing to Birth” are guided through the webpage by first-person textual narration. They can scroll down to access vibrant photographs, maps, and instructive scholarly presentations, which are interspersed with song performances from Azeroual’s oral history interviews. Clicking on terminology facilitates access to pop-up windows containing additional explanations and contextualizing information about concepts like women, voices, *Tsaddikim* (people who embody the religious ideals of Judaism), protect(ion), and celebrations.

A particularly effective element of this website is its incorporation of video recordings. The majority of the videos showcase Azeroual’s solo musical performances, which are self-accompanied with percussion. Visitors are encouraged to follow Azeroual through the private and religious spheres and watch her performance of examples of Moroccan Jewish women’s lifecycle singing, from cooking, doing chores, and watching over children (the “Rabbi Meir Baal HaNess Song”) to celebrating the pre-wedding Henna ceremony, the beginning of pregnancy (“Song for a Boy over a Girl”), and water breaking during labor (“Song for Water Breaking in Labor”). A particularly captivating clip invites visitors to view a contemporary *Tabdid*, a ceremony of sung liturgical poetry which celebrates the birth of a new baby boy every evening of the week leading up to the traditional *brit* (circumcision), held in Casablanca in July 2013. The final video clip is a trailer for Noémie Hakim-Serfaty’s French-language documentary short film *Milk and Blood* (in production); to be informed when the film is eventually released and screened, you can subscribe for email updates at <https://form.jotform.com/210827272192151>. This film, which reflects on the impact of exile and loss of tradition for Jewish Moroccan mothers, includes excerpts of Elbaz’s oral history interviews with Azeroual as part of the process of retracing and reclaiming these matriarchal musical traditions.

The website’s other video presentations are scholarly in nature. They range from seven to twenty minutes in length, and offer a collaborative and interdisciplinary dimension to this multimedia project. They include semitic linguist Jonas Sibony’s discussion of Moroccan Jewish Arabic, Elbaz’s own presentation on songs of women and birthing, Mimouna Association representative Houda Ougaddoum’s reflections on Muslim and Jewish Moroccan birth rituals, and musicologist Katherine Ellis’s presentation slides on French music and colonialism.

A special feature of “Ya Lalla: Jewish Saharans Singing to Birth” is the second tab, “Share Your Story,” where visitors are invited to participate in Elbaz’s research process. After completing a consent and release form, visitors can upload their family’s recordings, videos, or photographs documenting Maghrebi traditions on fertility and birth for eventual incorporation into the digital archive. Elbaz’s website functions like a community archive, wherein those being represented can participate in the preservation of their collective memories and historical experiences (Claus and Marriott 2017:444). The final

tab, “Collaborators,” acknowledges the project’s many individual and organizational supporters.

The value of this website lies in its dual effort to document a vanishing musical tradition for the Jewish and scholarly communities, while also inviting diasporic Moroccan Jews to participate in their own process of cultural preservation. As ethnomusicologists Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Andrew N. Weintraub explore in their discussion of the *Music of Uganda Repatriation Project*, those who run applied ethnomusicological archival projects that set out to return sound recordings to the groups from which they originate may face a plethora of conceptual, ethical, and legal challenges (2012:207, 216). Elbaz navigates this tricky terrain by jointly recognising her role as a custodian of Moroccan Jewish women’s musical traditions through the processes of sound recording, archiving, and scholarship, even as she acknowledges the need for ongoing input from living practitioners and their descendants. Only by collecting and archiving the diverse remnants of this musical life can it be best prepared for consumption, repatriation, and reclamation by Moroccan Jews today.

The overall organisation of the “Ya Lalla” website is slightly opaque. Visitors to Elbaz’s website miss an initial description of who Azeroual is or the significance of her songs. This only comes later, when they watch Elbaz’s contextualizing clip—the second video on the site, hyperlinked to the word “Song”—or if they know to visit Elbaz’s other online exhibit, for which there is presently no direct link. Additionally, many of the archival photographs displayed lack captions; the names of the subjects and sources would improve the visitor’s ability to interact with the project. Accessibility could also be further increased with the addition of English-language captions and transcriptions of all oral history videos featuring Azeroual’s birthing songs in Moroccan Jewish Arabic. Finally, for this web archive to stand on its own as an ongoing resource and community project, videos that reference the project’s launch at the Cambridge Festival on March 31, 2021 might be updated or presented as archival material.

The second “Ya Lalla” project is Elbaz’s nine-part digital exhibit, “Ya Lalla: A Sonic & Visual Spotlight on Women’s Resistance and Celebrations of Transmission.” The nine sections – About, Fertility, Gendered Locality, Birthing Amulets, Medieval Birthing Girdle, *Tabdid* Ritual, Colonialism, Creative Explorations, and Milk and Blood – open up in new windows. Visitors learn about the context for Madame Azeroual’s birthing songs on the “About” page; the inclusion of a direct link to the sister “Ya Lalla” website would be a helpful addition. Here, the visitor also learns about the purpose of the “Ya Lalla” archive, which was launched in 2021 to serve as an initial pilot program for Elbaz’s next initiative, “KHOYA: Jewish Morocco Sound Archive,” which is still in the planning stages. With “KHOYA” (meaning “my brother” in Moroccan Arabic and “jewel” in Judeo-Spanish), Elbaz aims to collect, digitise, classify, and analyse an even larger collection of contemporary and historical sound recordings of Moroccan Jews, with the goal of aiding both scholars and descendants of these traditions to access the sounds that once characterised their family histories.


With clear directions on the landing page, this digital exhibit is more intuitive than its counterpart. Most of the information provided is new, even for those who have visited “Ya Lalla: Jewish Saharans Singing to Birth,” which means that the curious user of the first site can continue their investigation of the subject matter here if they wish to learn more. While pages “*Tahdid*” and “Milk and Blood” repeat similar information and link to the same videos, most of the other sections present new images, insights, and links to Elbaz’s research articles. The “Birthing Amulet” and “Medieval Birthing Girdle” pages are particularly compelling, featuring vivid archival examples that better help the visitor to visualize what Elbaz means when she describes this modality of spiritual protection. The “Colonialism” page could be folded with “Fertility,” contextualising the rise and fall of these traditions across time and through political change. The drop-down menu with English, Arabic, Spanish, and French options is a welcome feature, opening up the project to a wider audience. Following through with this proposition, a complete translation of the website beyond the title of the project would make the digital exhibit truly accessible to numerous communities.

By providing a window into a previously unappreciated part of diasporic Jewish musical experience, Elbaz’s “Ya Lalla” multimedia projects make a valuable contribution to burgeoning Jewish and ongoing (ethno)musicological efforts to leverage the exciting opportunities offered by the digital humanities. Her interest in engaging an ageing Moroccan Jewish population and their descendants in this research, and moving beyond a scholarly audience in the process, is especially commendable. Historians Peter Claus and John Marriott recognize that the convenors of (digital) archives wield a great deal of power over how materials are curated, and how they reach communities in the present (2017:426–427). In response, Elbaz invites a community of scholarly and Moroccan Jewish voices to participate in the data collection phase, arguably the most important part of curating and crafting this (her)story. Though the accessibility and organisation of the websites could be further finessed, both the “Ya Lalla” platform and exhibit enable visitors to experience past Moroccan Jewish women’s musical experience in the present, with the important goal of ensuring that they will also have a future.

References

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Even though scholars have used audiovisual materials and methods in the field of ethnomusicology since its institutional foundation in the 1950s,¹ filmmaking has mainly remained marginal as a method for academic research and publication. Reflecting on this state of affairs, ethnomusicologist and filmmaker Barley Norton argues that “[f]ilm in ethnomusicology is still typically thought of as supplementary supporting data, rather than as a medium for argument or as a stimulus for theoretical discourse in words” (2015:1). However, this situation has started to change in the last decade: The creation of several study groups and the publication of book-length contributions have not only foregrounded audiovisual materials as subject of study, but also centered filmmaking as a valid mode of doing research on sound.² In this regard, the *Journal of Audiovisual Ethnomusicology* (JAVEM), launched in November 2022 by the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM), is a welcome addition to this growing discussion and, as a young scholar and filmmaker myself,³ I find that both its format and content provide strong elements to foster “the use of multimedia as a method for exploring music and its entanglements, and as a medium for presenting those explorations.”⁴

In a nutshell, JAVEM is a website offering free streaming of a selection of peer-reviewed films relevant to the field of ethnomusicology, each one accompanied by a text

¹ For instance, Mantle Hood directed the film *Atumpan: the talking drum of Ghana* (1964) to present his research on several contexts surrounding the use of this instrument, and Gerhard Kubik (1965) recommended the use of footage as means toward musical analysis.

² See, for instance, the Audiovisual Ethnomusicology Study Group established in 2015 by the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), Benjamin Harbert’s study of music documentaries as form of scholarship (2018), or Leonardo D’Amico’s historical overview of the use of filmmaking in ethnomusicology (2020).

³ See, for instance, my film *Buganda Royal Music Revival* (2021) and its review in *Ethnomusicology* (Hoelsing 2022).

⁴ <https://javem.org/> (accessed 2 August 2023).