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Spirits of the Past, Voices of the Present: Trance, Music, and the Shaping of Cultural Identity in the Banga Ritual, South Tunisia

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Culture and Performance

by

Amira Hassnaoui

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Spirits of the Past, Voices of the Present: Trance, Music, and the Shaping of Cultural Identity in the Banga Ritual, South Tunisia

by

Amira Hassnaoui

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Allen F. Roberts, Chair

This doctoral dissertation examines *banga*, a trance-inducing musical healing ritual practiced by certain Black Muslim Tunisian communities with ties to sub-Saharan African heritage. In Tunisia broadly, and in the city of Tozeur specifically, music rituals like banga reveal foundational insights about race, gender, the identity of ethnic minorities, labor, the status of artists, and the transmission of orally inherited musical traditions. This dissertation seeks to address emergent questions surrounding the often-overlooked histories of Black Tunisians through the lens of their performance practices. Rather than originating from a single sub-Saharan musical tradition, banga merges a variety of rituals brought to North Africa by enslaved individuals. Over time, banga evolved into a distinct practice that is unique to Tunisia and parts of Algeria and that reflects the complexities of North African social identity in a region where most musical traditions are commonly identified as Arab-Andalusian. Banga is anchored by its

defining musical instruments, including the *tabla* (a two-headed barrel-shaped drum), the *shakasheek* (metallic clappers), and the *tangoura* (a ceramic kettle drum). These instruments not only provide rhythm but also embody the multisensory essence of banga, creating a sonic landscape that guides the dancers and anchors the ritual's spiritual and communal dimensions.

Working closely with followers of the Sufi saint Sidi Marzoug Chouchane in Tozeur, I observe, witness, and participate in this little-studied performance idiom to better understand its role in healing, problem-solving, and shaping social identity. My research pays particular attention to gender, exploring the pivotal but often unrecognized role of women in ensuring the cohesion and continuity of banga and examining these contributions as acts of agency in their own right. My methodological approach combines ethnographic methods that center the knowledge and perspectives of the banga community. This work is the product of years of fieldwork, during which my grappling with scholarship, theories, and practices revealed both alignments and tensions that underscore the challenges of documenting embodied and dynamic fieldwork experiences. Incorporating oral histories, family archives, visual artifacts, and extensive film and photographic documentation, this dissertation seeks to illuminate the cultural practices and neglected histories of one of Tunisia's Black communities.

The dissertation of Amira Hassnaoui is approved.

Richard C. Jankowsky

David Gere

Peter Sellars

Allen F. Roberts, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work, with all its joys, challenges, and deeply personal moments, to Mary "Polly" Nooter Roberts (1959–2018), my professor, mentor, and former co-chair, and to my advisor and mentor, Allen F. Roberts. Their boundless love, wisdom, and unwavering support have guided me through this transformative journey. Polly's physical presence may no longer be with us, but her spirit continues to inspire and protect those she so deeply cherished.

To Tarek Chouchane (1978–2021), whose dedication to banga remains a beacon of inspiration for the younger Chouchane members to carry forward his legacy with pride and passion. To my Chouchane family, who showed me that love and care transcend blood ties. Especially to Hassan Chouchane, who became the grandfather I never knew I needed, and Meriem Chouchane, who welcomed me with open arms and made me part of their family in every way that truly matters.

To my parents, *Ommi* Chadia Chebbi and *Baba* Moncef Hassnaoui, whose unconditional love and steadfast support have been my foundation, even in the most trying times. Your prayers, sacrifices, and belief in me have been my constant source of strength.

Finally, to all those who paved the way for scholars like me to uncover and share untold stories—those who opened doors and preserved traditions, allowing voices that were once silenced to be heard. And to those who will come after, to continue this sacred journey of seeking, sharing, and safeguarding knowledge for generations to come. May this work be a small tribute to all of you.

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GLOSSARY OF TUNISIAN ARABIC TERMS

al-Fatiha. Lit. “the Opening”; the first chapter of the Quran.

ʿajmi. Pl. *ʿajema*, also known as *sudani*, lit. “sub-Saharan”; non-Arab Tunisians or “non-Tunisians.”

ʿabd. Pl. *ʿabid*; enslaved person.

ʿarifa. Pl. *ʿareyf*, lit. “the one who knows”; usually a woman in charge of overseeing the entire ritual but who also serves as a caregiver for women who enter *takhmir*.

ʿarbi. Lit. “Arab”; one of the three musical sections of the banga ceremony composed of recitation or song that involves *dhikr*.

ʿarsh. Pl. *ʿaroush*, lit. “throne”; tribe or ancestral lineage, usually specific to a certain geographical region and sharing the same family name.

ʿaser. Islamic afternoon prayers, typically done around 4 p.m.

asmar. Tunisian of a darker skin color, mixed race, or part sub-Saharan African.

assida. Semolina porridge.

ʿatrous. Breed of the Tunisian black *ʿarbi* goat sacrificed during the banga ceremony.

awled diwan. Lit. “house of the sons”; refers to the lineage of individuals, such as Jeddi’s sons, responsible for preserving and transmitting the banga tradition.

banga. Two-headed, wide barrel-shaped drum played with at least one wooden stick.

bahriyya. Lit. “of the seas”; Sufi saints associated with water and maritime themes.

bahriyya nuba. Specific praise song to the “sea spirits.”

bakhour. Incense.

baraka. Blessings.

bori. Final, most important night of the banga ritual.

bendir. Also known as *daf*; frame drum with two or three snares used primarily in hadra music.

Chadulia. Sufi order and path founded by the influential Sufi saint Sidi Abul Hasan al-Shadhili in the thirteenth century.

dar. House, often connotes both the physical structure and the familial unit it houses.

dar diwan. Lit. "house of the *diwan*"; colloquial term for Lella Gindoua's tomb and shrine in the Chouchane family home.

dhikr. Lit. "remembrance"; recitation of a name of God.

din. Religion.

diwan. Cultural and spiritual connections encompassing not only the tomb but also the community, rituals, and collective identity centered around a Sufi saint's shrine.

djed. Lit. "grandfathers"; Sufi saints.

djewi. Benzoin incense stones.

doura. Lit. "circle"; dancing in a circle.

e'dakhla. Lit. "the entrance"; Banga procession inauguration or announcement.

el-Hadra. Concert stage spectacle featuring the Sufi hadra ritual repertoire integrated with non-Sufi elements such as jazz, rock, and flamenco, performed annually since 1991 and regularly selling out Tunisia's prestigious Festival International de Musique de Carthage.

el-kar el-safra. Lit. "yellow bus"; inter-cities transportation in Tunisia.

el-Moulidya. Refers to *Al-Mawlid Al-Nabawi Al-Sharif*, also called *Mawlid an-Nabi*, the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth.

gous. Pl. *gwes*; curved wooden drumstick made from lightweight, sturdy fig tree wood.

grisha. A hut.

hadra. Lit. “presence”; collective Sufi musical ritual involving the rhythmic recitation of names and singing of religious poetry.

haram. Forbidden according to Islam.

hizb. Lit. “party” or “group”; the shared heritage and devotion among banga members.

housh. House or courtyard, more specifically associated with a distinct, older architectural style of Tunisian home characterized by multiple rooms arranged around a central courtyard.

housh el-banga. Chouchane family home in Tozeur and location of the main banga ceremony.

hsira. Woven mats.

ʿ**ib.** Deep cultural taboo or dishonor.

Isawiyya. Sufi order and path.

jebba. Pl. *jbeyeb*, also called *joukha* (pl. *jwekh*) in Tozeur; a traditional Tunisian gown.

jinn. Lit. “spirits, demons”; supernatural creatures in Islamic mythology and theology who can take human and animal forms and possess humans.

joukha. Pl. *jwekh*; traditional striped gowns used in the banga ceremony, worn over casual attire.

kanoun. Traditional clay charcoal brazier.

khadim. Servant.

khalwa. Spiritual retreat.

kiskas. Large pot, cooking vessel.

maalouf. A form of classical Arabic-Andalusian music that has been preserved and adapted in North Africa, particularly in Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya.

madeh. Singing.

madha. Pl. *madhat*; Sufi praise song.

mahmoul. F. *mahmoula*, lit. “carried”; another way to describe an entranced person.

makrouna. Pasta.

makroudh. Date-filled pastry made with semolina flour, specialty of the Tunisian city Kairouan.

malʿab. Lit. “field” or “playground”; another term often used interchangeably to refer to banga during the main pilgrimage.

marwha. Traditional Tunisian fan made of palm leaves

metkhamer. F. *metkhamera*, pl. *metkhamrin*; entranced people.

mloukhiya. Taditional stew made from jute leaves and with beef.

mqaddem. F. *mqaddema*; shrine caretaker.

moulat rasou. Lit. “the owner of his head”; symbolizes a deeply intimate relationship with the spirit world, often referred to as being “married to a spirit.”

mserrah. Lit. “release”; one of the three musical sections of the banga ceremony composed of lower-intensity songs that do not necessarily incite trance.

m’shekel. Related to *mushkila* (pl. *mashakel*), lit. “problems” or “difficulties”; also interchangeable with *ʿajmi*, lit. “appearance” or “form”; in the context of banga, “complexity” or “diversity,” one of the three musical sections of the banga ceremony composed of songs performed toward the end to invoke takhmir.

nafara. Trumpet used primarily in hadra music.

naghgharaat. Pair of small, kettle-shaped drums primarily used in hadra music.

nashwa. Spiritual, emotional, or physical ecstasy or euphoria.

nawba. Lit. “one’s turn.”

nouba. Pl. *nweb*, a praise song to a spiritual figure.

oghnya. Pl. *aghani*, popular songs.

ostorha. Lit. “to cover [someone or something].”

qadri. Sufi chant that refers to a form of devotional singing associated with the Qadiriyya Sufi order.

qasʿaa. A large brass bowl.

rahks. Also *chtih*, a dance.

Rahmaniyya. Sufi order and path associated with the saint Sidi Hamadi; followers are called "Rahamanis."

Raʾis el-Abhar. Lit. "the master of the seas"; term referring to Sidi Bou Saʿid el-Beji, Sufi saint associated with the *bahriyya*, maritime and water saints and spirits.

Ras al-Dreʿa. Lit. "head of the arm"; neighborhood in Tozeur where a small procession is led during the banga ceremony.

Ras el-Eiʿn. Water springs located in the Sahara Desert in Tozeur.

salhin. Lit. "righteous saints," spirits; used in reference to *awliya salhin*.

sandoug. Lit. "box"; plastic crate.

shaareb. Intoxicated, drunk.

Shahada. Quranic statement of faith ("There is no god but God").

shwashin. Historically referred to Black communities in Tunisia seen as distinct from enslaved populations; indigenous Black Tunisians.

sheik. A master.

shakasheek. Also known as *karakeeb* in Tozeur; metallic clappers.

silsilat. Lit. "chains"; historical genealogical Sufi lineages.

skhoun. Lit. "hot," also called *m'shekel*; specific songs characterized by fast and loud drum beats which help invoke the spirits and incite tahkmir.

smor. In the Tunisian context, refers to dark-skinned people.

souk. Market, pronounced “soug” in Tozeur.

sound. In the Tunisian context, refers to Black people.

sultana. Musical ecstasy.

surah. Chapter of the Quran.

swek. Also known as *miswak*; traditional teeth-cleaning stick made from the *Salvadora persica* tree, valued for its natural antibacterial properties.

tabel. Large drum used primarily in hadra music.

tabla. Pl. *tbeli*; two-headed wide barrel-shaped drum played with at least one wooden stick.

tangoura. Ceramic kettle drum played with two sticks.

tasrah. Lit. “release”; waking from trance and thus, “completing” it.

tayammum. Rite of dry ritual purification in Islam.

takhmir. F. *takhmira*; trance.

tar. Circular frame drum, often featuring jingles or snares, primarily used in hadra music.

tarab. Musical ecstasy, emotional release through music.

tariqa. Pl. *turuq*; Sufi order.

temchi. To walk.

tenweeb. To sing praise songs; verb form of *nouba*.

tetharrek. To move.

tfarhid. Multifaceted concept of emotional refreshment, mental relaxation, and social enjoyment.

Tijaniya. Sufi order and path, one of whose branches is associated with Saida Manubia, twelfth-century saint renowned for her spiritual leadership and veneration among women.

Tijaniya el-Nse. Lit. “Tijaniya of Women”; practice in the Tijaniya order of placing women in positions of leadership, both musically and spiritually.

tourgus. Used interchangeably with *yashtah*; to dance.

wali. Pl. *awliya*; Sufi saint.

waʿid. Pl. *wʿoud*, lit. “to promise”; also the plural noun “promises” as pronounced in Tozeur; offerings that individuals vow to saints and contribute to their associated rituals or celebrations.

wudu. Islamic ritual of washing before prayers.

yetsarah. F. *testarah*; to release oneself [from trance].

ydoukh. F. *et’doukh*; to faint [from trance].

yfiq. To wake up [from trance].

yorgus. F. *torgus*, used interchangeably with *yashtah*; to dance.

zarda. Communal feast typically held in honor of the saint as part of the ziyara to the saint’s shrine that blends devotion with communal celebration.

zawiya. Pl. *zwey*; Sufi shrine.

ziyara. Lit. “visit”; pilgrimage.

zokra. Reed instrument primarily used in hadra music.

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As I draft these final words, they take me back to the beginning, a time when the journey ahead seemed vast and uncharted. Writing the acknowledgments feels as weighty as writing the dissertation itself, as it carries the burden of gratitude for the countless moments, people, and experiences that shaped this work. It demands that I relive scenes of joy and grief, moments of doubt and triumph, and periods of deep learning and growth. No words could ever fully capture my thanks to the extraordinary people who supported me along this path. This work would not have been possible without you.

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To my advisor, Al Roberts, your mentorship has been a gift of immeasurable value. Like the Luba people's engraved histories on a lukasa, your care and wisdom are permanently etched in my heart. From the cookies you brought to sustain us during seminars to the Senegalese meals lovingly prepared by Mam, you understood the power of nourishment—both intellectual and emotional. "Roberts House," as we lovingly called it, became a sanctuary of learning and connection. It was even a dream of ours to transform it into a residency, a testament to how deeply it shaped us. Walking into the field with you in March 2023 was a transformative experience I will always treasure. My family in Tunisia, especially the Chouchane family, speaks of you with immense respect and affection, and my mother's words, "Al has left a void, but he will always have a place to return to in Tunisia," echo my own sentiments. Your storytelling,

humility, and unwavering dedication to academia have profoundly influenced the scholar I am and aspire to be. You are, and will always be, family.

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words gave me a profound sense of validation and belonging. Thank you for providing a space where ideas and creativity could flourish. Similarly, Professor Aomar Boum, your insights and guidance were instrumental in helping me prepare for both the written and oral defense of my dissertation. Thank you for your support during such a pivotal moment in my academic journey.

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you for giving me a way to heal and reconcile with layers of my own identity as a woman and a Tunisian.

To my husband, Anthony Radoiu, my partner in intellect and life, thank you for being the anchor I needed in times of despair. Navigating two PhD programs simultaneously was no easy feat, yet your unwavering love and support made it possible. You have been my greatest ally, and I could not have endured this journey without you.

To my family-in-law, Sharon and Mike, your words of encouragement and belief in me were deeply felt. To my parents, Chadia and Moncef, your unconditional love, trust, and prayers have been the foundation of everything I have accomplished. Though words will never suffice, I hope this work honors your sacrifices and faith in me. Equally, to Bonnie, my landlady who became family away from family, your kindness and love have been a profound source of comfort during my journey. You were there for me with a warmth and care that words cannot do justice to. Thank you for treating me not just as a tenant, but as family.

To my friends and companions, human and otherwise, thank you for the joy and comfort you have brought into my life. My cats, Verlaine and Khaldoun, though oblivious to the significance of this moment, have been steadfast companions in their own unique way.

To the institutions that supported me, I owe a debt of gratitude. University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) provided me with an intellectual home, a space to learn, question, and grow. The Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance became a community where I found both mentorship and friendship. Beyond UCLA, the organizations, libraries, and archives in Tunisia and abroad were invaluable resources, offering access to knowledge that shaped this dissertation. The International Doctoral Fellowship and the support of the American Association of University Women in 2022–2023 sustained me during pivotal moments of this research. The

UCLA International Institute Fieldwork Fellowship allowed me to engage deeply with communities in Tunisia, while the Arnold Rubin Award from the UCLA Fowler Museum supported the tangible aspects of my fieldwork. The Jean Stone Dissertation Research Fellowship from the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, the Elaine Krown Klein Fine Arts Award from the UCLA School of Art and Architecture, the Oxman Fellowship from the UCLA Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance, and the Polly Nooter Roberts Graduate Fellowship made it possible for me to delve into this work with both depth and focus. Each of these awards not only provided financial support but also affirmed the value of the questions I sought to answer.

To write this part feels both daunting and essential. I hesitated, questioning whether my story deserved its own space here, but I reminded myself how important it is—especially as the first in my family to achieve such a degree. My parents never had the opportunity to go to school, and yet, their unwavering support and belief in me have brought us to this moment.

Amira Hassnaoui, the woman, the scholar, the Tunisian—and so much more. You have endured loss, grief, and trauma that words can scarcely capture, challenges that still defy comprehension or full processing. Yet, through it all, you persisted. You endured, and you continue to rise. These past seven years have seen you grow in ways you could not have imagined. You have learned not only about the world but also about yourself, and that learning will not stop here. Your passion for fieldwork, for connecting with people, and for unearthing the layers of your heritage has carried you through the most challenging moments. Even when the road seemed impossibly hard, remember the joy it brought you—the moments of discovery, of connection, of purpose. This is not the end of your journey as a researcher; it is just the beginning. Your work is paving the way for other women from your background and beyond.

You are not only carrying your own story forward but creating space for others to tell theirs. Never forget the power in that. You have faced the impossible and triumphed. You have built bridges where none existed before. And as you step forward, know that the strength and resilience that brought you here will carry you to the next horizon.

Finally, to all who have touched my life and this work—your influence is etched into every word, every thought, every idea. This dissertation is not the product of solitary effort but a testament to the collective love, care, and wisdom that have sustained me. Your voices and light accompany me as I close this chapter and step into the next, reminding me that the journey continues and I am never alone.

This work is as much yours as it is mine, and my gratitude to you is boundless.

PREFACE

Through Grief and Grace

Anchored in Banga in Times of Uncertainty

The journey of this dissertation has been as much about banga as it has been about the human connections that bind us through shared histories, rituals, and profound moments of crisis. These connections, much like the rhythms of banga, oscillate between harmony and discord, resilience and vulnerability, offering a poignant reflection of life's fragility and beauty. The heartbeat of this work lies in the relationships forged over the course of its creation—relationships that have shaped not only the research but also the researcher. Through moments of shared joy, grief, and resilience, the stories of the banga community have illuminated the delicate threads that weave together memory, identity, and cultural continuity. This dissertation, while rooted in intellectual rigor, is equally a testament to the profound humanity that animates the practice of banga and the enduring power of its rhythms. Two pivotal moments—my fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic loss of Tarek Chouchane—crystallized these truths for me, weaving themselves into the fabric of this work in ways I could never have anticipated.

In the summer of 2020, the world stood still under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Tunisia was no exception. The virus swept through the country, exposing its frail infrastructure and exacerbating the vulnerabilities of communities such as those of my own family and of the Chouchane family in Tozeur. My parents, elderly and in poor health, occupied my every waking thought. I also worried incessantly about the Chouchane family. Their tightly knit household, filled with multiple generations living in close quarters, lacked the resources to

withstand such a crisis. Yet, when I learned that the annual banga ceremony would still take place, I found myself torn. Traveling to Tozeur during this time meant risking exposure to the virus—not just for me, but for my family and everyone around me. It also meant navigating a labyrinth of conflicting emotions: guilt, fear, and the overwhelming sense of responsibility to witness and document how banga would unfold under such extraordinary circumstances.

Despite the risks, I made the journey and quarantined in an abandoned hotel hastily reopened for returning Tunisians. The conditions were appalling, and the isolation gnawed at me. But soon I found myself in the familiar embrace of the Chouchane family. I brought with me small gifts: individual keychain sanitizers for Jeddi and other family members. I hoped these gestures might offer some protection, though I remained haunted by the sight of unmasked participants and the knowledge that it would still be some months before vaccines would be readily available. Even when the vaccine did become available in 2021, Jeddi and Maya did not consent to receive it until the end of that year. My heart ached at the juxtaposition of their steadfast faith and my internal conflict, caught between respecting their beliefs and grappling with the broader implications of vaccine refusal. Through it all, the banga ceremony persisted, a beacon of continuity in a world fractured by uncertainty. Its role as a source of healing, community, and resilience was never more evident to me than in those moments of crisis. I stayed with the Chouchane family for most of July, immersing myself in the rhythms of their lives and the ceremonies that seemed to defy the weight of the pandemic. But the summer ended with yet another layer of uncertainty: when I returned to Tunis, the renewal of my US student visa was delayed due to a background check, leaving me stranded in Tunisia for five agonizing months. I taught my courses online, battling a nine-hour time difference, and then, along with my mother, fell ill with COVID-19 myself. It was a harrowing experience that left me physically and

emotionally depleted, but it also deepened my understanding of the vulnerabilities and endurance that shape communities like the Chouchane family and my own.

A year later, the fragility of life was driven home once again. On December 26, 2021, I received devastating news: Tarek Chouchane, one of Jeddi's sons, had died in a car accident. The accident was catastrophic, leaving the family shattered. Tarek, driving the car, had been pronounced dead at the scene. Jeddi, Maya, their daughter Rabaa, and her seven-year-old daughter had also been in the car and were rushed to separate hospitals. Rabaa fell into a coma, and for days, the fate of each family member remained uncertain. I was in the United States when the news reached me, thousands of miles away from Tozeur and the people I had come to think of as family. My world collapsed in an instant. The weight of Tarek's loss was suffocating. I struggled to process my grief while navigating the expectations of my American surroundings, where the holiday season demanded festivity and cheer. Unable to share the depth of my sorrow, I found myself retreating to the solitude of bathrooms and private corners, breaking down in silence as I relived the events unfolding in Tozeur. The family's pain became my own, and when I finally returned to Tunisia the following summer, Tarek's absence was palpable. The banga ceremony, performed for the first time without him, was steeped in mourning. I held his daughters as they cried, their grief mirrored in the tears of musicians and family members whose instruments seemed to echo their sorrow.

These moments—COVID-19's grip on Tunisia and the heartbreaking loss of Tarek—transcend the boundaries of fieldwork, becoming integral to the story of this dissertation. They remind us that rituals like banga are not just performances; they are lifelines, carrying communities through the storms of illness, loss, and uncertainty. The resilience of the Chouchane family and their unwavering commitment to banga in times of profound crisis have forever

shaped my understanding of the practice and of the people who sustain it. This dissertation is dedicated to them: to their strength, their grief, their faith, and the rhythms that carry them forward.

VITA

Education

MA	Bowling Green State University (BGSU) Popular Culture, Cultural and Critical Studies	2017
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Instructor, Cluster Program: Introduction to Popular Culture	Spring 2020
Teaching Associate, Cluster Program: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Myth	Fall 2019, Winter 2020
Teaching Associate, Colonialisms and Resistance	Winter 2018, Winter 2019
Teaching Associate, Food Politics: Cultural Solutions to Political Problems	Spring 2018, Spring 2023
Teaching Associate, Art Encounters: Exploring Arts Literacy in the 21st Century	Fall 2018, Spring 2021, Fall 2021, Winter 2022, Winter 2024

Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH

Instructor, Introduction to Popular Culture	Spring 2016
Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Popular Culture	Fall 2015

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI

Instructor, Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced Arabic	Fall 2014, Spring 2015

Honors and Awards

International Doctoral Fellowship, American Association of University Women	2022–2023
International Institute Fieldwork Fellowship, UCLA International Institute	2022
Arnold Rubin Award, UCLA Fowler Museum	2022
Jean Stone Dissertation Research Fellowship, UCLA Center for the Study of Women	2022

Elaine Krown Klein Fine Arts Award, UCLA School of Art and Architecture	2021
Oxman Fellowship, UCLA Department of World Arts and Culture/Dance	2021
Polly Nooter Roberts Graduate Fellowship, UCLA Department of World Arts and Culture/Dance	2020
Graduate Student Research Mentorship, UCLA Graduate Division	2019
Graduate Dean's Scholar Award, UCLA Graduate Division	2017
Outstanding International Student Award, Charles E. Shanklin and BGSU Graduate Student Senate	2017
Graduate Student Senate Regalia Award, BGSU Graduate College	2017
Graduate Student Senate Professional Development Fund Award, BGSU Graduate Student Senate	2017
Distinguished Thesis Award, BGSU Graduate College	2017
Stoddard O'Neil Fund Thesis Research Award, BGSU Graduate College	2016

Related Professional Experience

Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA	
Assistant Director of Education	2024–
Center for the Advancement of Teaching, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA	
Graduate Educational Developer	2022
Graduate Student Association, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA	
Director of Publications	2020–2022
Vice President, School of the Arts and Architecture Council	2019–2021
***Ufahamu* Journal of African Studies, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA**	
Editor	2018–2021
"Chew-on-This" Graduate Research Colloquium, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA	
Committee Member and Co-organizer, Department of World Arts and Culture/Dance	2018–2020
UCLA Radio, Los Angeles, CA	
Host, News Department	2018–2019
Graduate Student Senate, BGSU, Bowling Green, OH	
President	2016–2017
Representative, School of Cultural and Critical Studies	2015–2016
Graduate Women Caucus, BGSU, Bowling Green, OH	
President	2016–2017
Member	2016–2016
Popular Culture Colloquium Series, BGSU, Bowling Green, OH	
Cochair, Department of Popular Culture	2016–2017

Publications

Hassnaoui, A. "Rethinking *Banga* Music in Tunisia." In *The Ordinary Lives of Women*. Spazju Kreattiv, January 28–March 13, 2022. Exhibition catalog.

Hassnaoui, A. and H. Ben Lazreg. "Towards an 'American Spring' of Justice and Equality?" *E-International Relations*, June 3, 2020. https://www.e-ir.info/2020/06/03/towards-an-american-spring-of-justice-and-equality/.

Hassnaoui, A. and H. Ben Lazreg. "The Forgotten History of Violence Behind Globalized Unrest." *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations*, June 29, 2020. https://www.resetdoc.org/story/forgotten-history-violence-behind-globalized-unrest/.

Introduction

"Malla Banga (What a Banga)!"

Growing up in Tunisia, I would often hear phrases like, "I don't want to deal with this *banga*!" or "I'd rather avoid the *banga* this thing will bring me." In Tunisia's daily language, *banga* continues to be a word used to describe a hustle—something exhausting, requiring immense physical and mental effort. It was a term I knew well before I truly understood its roots and cultural significance.

Banga is a trance-inducing musical healing ritual practiced by Tunisian Muslims of sub-Saharan heritage. It embodies a unique blend of cultural influences shaped by the histories of Black Tunisians, evolving into a distinct tradition in Tunisia and parts of Algeria. Banga offers profound insights into the interplay of social identity, race, and the oral transmission of musical practices in North Africa.

Banga is defined by its characteristic musical instruments, each of which plays a vital role in creating a dynamic, multisensory experience designed to facilitate and inspire dance. The *tabla* (locally referred to as *banga*) is a wide, two-headed, barrel-shaped drum that is fundamental to banga music. It is played in two distinct ways: either by striking one side with a bare hand while using a *gous* (a curved wooden stick; plural *gwes*) on the other, or by striking both sides with two *gwes*. The gous is made from the lightweight yet sturdy wood of the fig tree. Its arc-like shape allows for precise, rhythmic beats that complement the deeper, resonant tones produced by the player's bare hand, creating the complex interplay of textures essential to banga music. Alongside the tabla, the *shakasheek* (metal clappers that are interchangeably referred to as *karakeeb* in Tozeur) produces sharp, percussive sounds that add energy and drive to the rhythm. Finally, the *tangoura* (a ceramic kettle drum played with two sticks) provides additional layers of

polyrhythmic complexity. Together, these instruments not only produce rhythm but also establish a sonic environment that invites movement, guides dancers, and anchors the ritual's spiritual and communal dimensions. The primary objective of the music is to create conditions for dance—where rhythm, sound, and movement converge, enabling the embodiment of banga's cultural and spiritual essence.

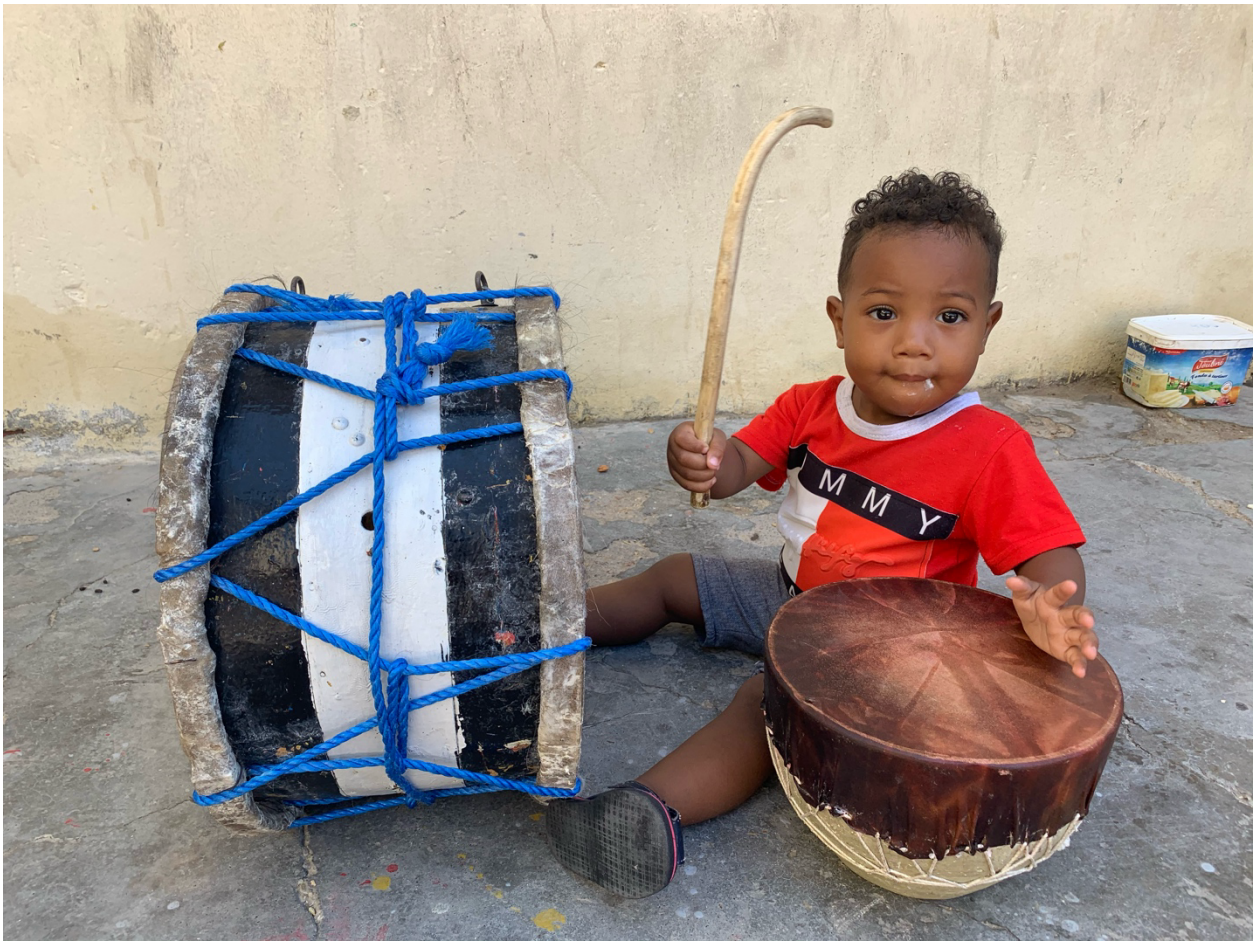

Figure 0.1 Aman-Allah with banga instruments. *Left to right*: tabla, tangoura, and gous. *Photographed by author, July 2020.*

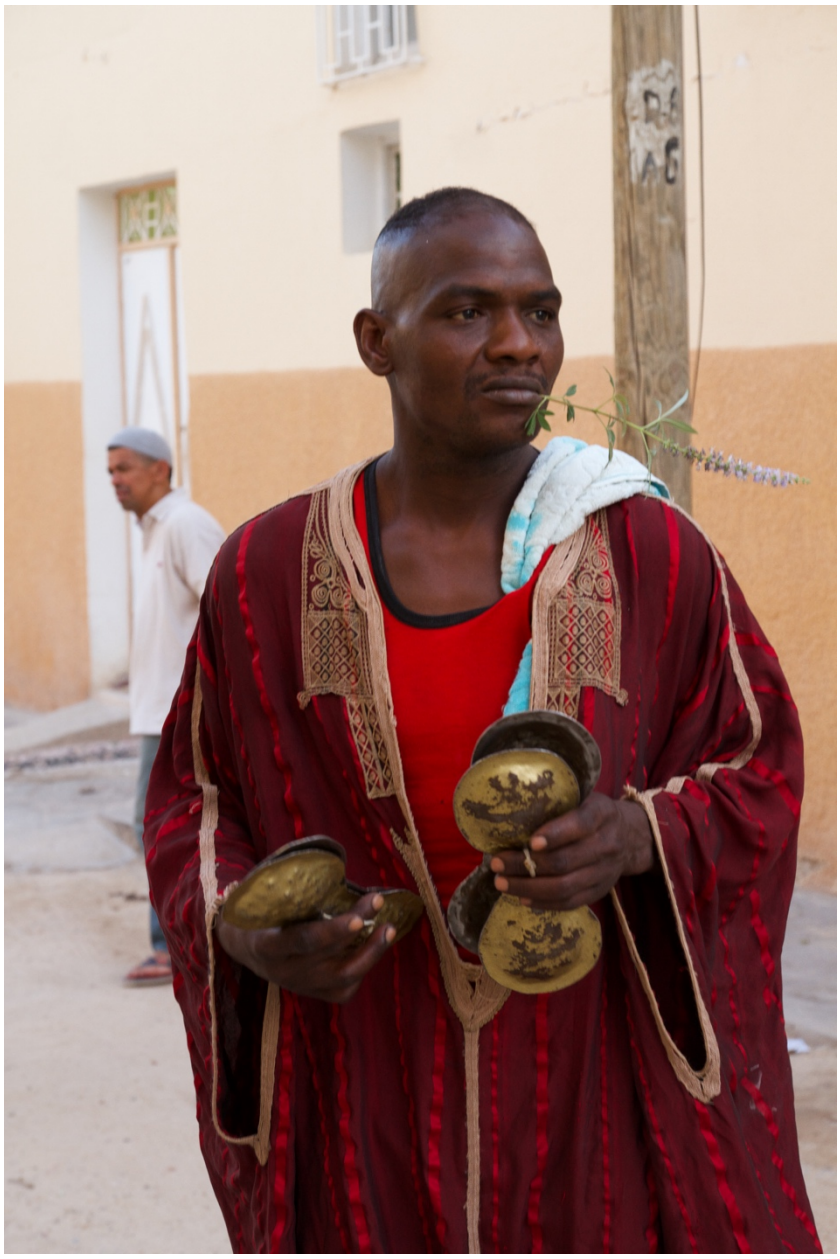

Figure 0.2 Tarek Chouchane playing shakasheek during a banga procession in the streets of Tozeur. *Photographed by Montassar Ben Jdila, July 2018.*

In the summer of 2016, as I was completing fieldwork for my master's degree, I attended a concert organized by the Institut Français in downtown Tunis. The performance featured a band called Ifriqyya Electrique, a fusion of stambeli (a trance healing music ritual rooted in the sub-Saharan diaspora mainly in urban northern and central Tunisia) and banga accompanied by

electronic music. That night marked my first encounter with banga. I was captivated by two performers dressed in black-and-white striped *jbeyeb* (singular *jebba*, traditional Tunisian cloaks) and turbans, dancing and playing in ways I hadn't seen done in stambeli before. After the concert I approached the performers, Yahya and his older brother Tarek Chouchane, two key figures in the banga community and successors of the tradition. With evident enthusiasm and a welcoming generosity, Yahya extended an invitation for me to attend the annual *ziyara* (literally "visit" in Arabic, but in this context "pilgrimage") of the Sufi saint Sidi Marzoug Chouchane in the southern oasis town of Tozeur in the middle of July—an invitation to immerse myself in the profound rituals and practices central to the banga tradition.

Meeting Yahya and Tarek was my entry point into banga's world in Tozeur, Nefta, and Metlaoui and set me on a journey to learn more about banga, not as a distant term but as a rich, complex ritual that remains vital to Tunisia's southern Black Muslim communities with ties to sub-Saharan heritage (the nuances of which are discussed at greater length later in the dissertation). By July 2018, I had the opportunity to visit Tozeur and witness the annual pilgrimage to Sidi Marzoug Chouchane, the patron saint of banga, and experience the ritual in its authentic setting. The central figure of the banga community, Hassan Chouchane who became a mentor to me over years of fieldwork. At seventy-seven years old, with six sons and six daughters, he is a deeply respected figure and a source of guidance for everyone in the community. His extensive family, with over twenty grandchildren, views him with the utmost reverence. I spent countless afternoons with Jeddi, listening to his insights into banga, the community, and the complex histories entwined in the practice.

As my fieldwork progressed over the years, I struggled to express the depth of my experiences and connection to the banga community. Sitting with Jeddi one hot afternoon in

September 2023, I confessed, “Jeddi, I am having a hard time writing about all this. I don’t know what to do, and I’m afraid I won’t do justice to my lived experience, to banga, to you, to anything.”

His response was simple yet profound: “Write it exactly how I have been telling you all these years. Write it from the heart, exactly how it happened.”

His words encouraged me, yet I felt the weight of responsibility. How could I find the balance between writing “from the heart,” as Jeddi urged, and adhering to the academic frameworks required for my dissertation? This challenge remains at the core of my research, as I navigate the roles of scholar, learner, Tunisian woman, and an insider-outsider straddling the worlds of academic knowledge and embodied experience. The goal of this dissertation is not only to contribute to academic discussions on race, gender, music, labor, and the diverse ontologies and epistemologies communities use to construct and interpret their worlds and knowledge but also to reflect on the role of scholars in the ethical creation and sharing of knowledge. My research seeks to approach banga not merely as an object of study but as a lived and adaptive tradition, embodying a multiplicity of voices and experiences. To explore these dimensions, this dissertation addresses the following research questions:

1. How does banga serve as a medium for preserving the cultural identity and history of Tunisia’s southern Black Muslim communities with ties to sub-Saharan heritage?
2. What roles do race, gender, and labor play in shaping the dynamics of banga rituals?
3. How do banga practices intersect with broader historical, social, and political contexts in Tunisia, particularly following the 2011 revolution?
4. In what ways can banga be understood as a site of healing and resistance, both individually and collectively?

5. How does the practice of banga navigate between sacred rituals and staged performances, and what does this duality reveal about its adaptability and resilience?

This dissertation, ultimately, aims to explore untold stories, documenting the lived realities of Black Tunisians through the lens of banga while confronting the complexities of trying to share and interpret these experiences in a way that minimizes the imposition of external perspectives and centers the voices and experiences of practitioners. Having laid the foundation for this dissertation by contextualizing banga and presenting the key questions guiding this research, it is now essential to situate this work within the existing body of scholarship and outline the methodological approach that supports its execution. The literature review below examines the foundational research that intersects with banga's rich cultural, historical, and social dimensions, encompassing studies on race, gender, music, labor, and spirituality. This exploration engages with the scholarship that has shaped our understanding of trance healing rituals, African spiritual practices, and the interplay of race, gender, and identity in cultural expressions. While my work builds upon and is deeply inspired by the contributions of scholars such as Richard C. Jankowsky, Lila Abu-Lughod, Fatema Mernissi, and others, this dissertation seeks to explore the less-examined dimensions of banga, particularly through the lens of the community's lived experiences and the intersections of race, gender, and cultural preservation. In the following literature review, I discuss the critical insights these scholars have provided while outlining the ways in which my research extends and complements their work, enriching the broader discourse on Tunisian musical traditions and spiritual practices. Following the literature review, the methodology section details the research design, including ethnographic fieldwork, participant-observation, and interviews with members of the banga community. It reflects on the ethical considerations of conducting research within a culturally significant and spiritually

charged practice while grappling with the complexities of positionality, access, and representation. Together, these sections form the intellectual and methodological scaffolding that supports the analysis and findings presented in this dissertation.

Literature Review: Building on Foundations, Expanding Perspectives

The study of banga as a trance-induced healing music ritual remains relatively underexplored in academic discourse compared to related practices such as stambeli, gnawa, or bori. Richard C. 's works, including *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia* (2010), "Rhythmic Elasticity and Metric Transformation in Tunisian Stambeli" (2013), and *Ambient Sufism* (2021), offer a pivotal entry point into the broader understanding of Tunisian trance music traditions. Jankowsky underscores how stambeli is both a spiritual practice and a reflection of the historical trajectories of Black Tunisians, blending sub-Saharan and Islamic influences. His concept of "ambient Sufism" underscores the adaptability of these rituals, as they carve out spiritual niches in both sacred and secular spaces, providing a framework for understanding how banga operates within similar dynamics while exhibiting its own unique characteristics. His theoretical insights into the permeability of the body to unseen forces, the cohabitation of humans and spirits, and the mediating role of music in healing rituals inform this dissertation's approach to analyzing trance in the banga context. However, while stambeli enjoys a relatively higher profile, banga's rural and regionally-specific dimensions, particularly in Tozeur and Nefta, remain underrepresented in the discourse. This dissertation seeks to expand 's framework by examining the unique musical, performative, and communal aspects of banga, positioning it as both a sacred and adaptive practice within Tunisia's cultural fabric.

Similarly, Ismael Montana's critical historical scholarship, particularly *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia* (2013) and his essays on bori and Black communities, provides

crucial context for understanding the sociopolitical histories that inform banga's existence. His exploration of race and the legacies of slavery in Tunisia underpins the socio-historical significance of banga as a ritual that both preserves and adapts sub-Saharan traditions. Montana traces the trajectories of Black Tunisians, emphasizing how enslavement, assimilation, and systemic marginalization shaped their identities and cultural practices. His work enriches the historical grounding of this dissertation, particularly in situating banga within the broader narrative of sub-Saharan diasporic practices in North Africa. My research builds upon Montana's analysis by highlighting the ways in which banga serves as both a site of resistance and a mechanism for cultural preservation amid these histories. Furthermore, it underscores how cultural expressions like banga both preserve the histories of these communities and help them to adapt to changing sociopolitical landscapes.

Ahmed Rahal's ethnographic focus on Black communities in Tunisia in *La Communauté Noire de Tunis. Thérapie Initiatique et Rite de Possession* (2000) sheds light on the therapeutic and social dimensions of healing practices. While Rahal primarily addresses stambeli, his analysis of trance and possession provides valuable parallels that have guided my understanding of banga's spiritual and communal dimensions. His work emphasizes the communal role of trance and its connection to identity and memory, which are integral themes in this dissertation. While Rahal primarily examines urban contexts, my research contributes to the field by focusing on the dynamics of rural Black Tunisian communities as seen in Tozeur, where the interplay between marginalization and cultural preservation takes on distinct characteristics.

Hedi Timoumi's *How Tunisians Became Tunisians* (2022) adds another layer of understanding to the work of this dissertation by contextualizing how cultural practices, including banga, reflect the negotiation of identity within postcolonial Tunisia. His work

emphasizes the importance of rituals in asserting minority identities within a dominant Arab-Islamic framework.

Expanding beyond Tunisia, this dissertation engages with comparative scholarship on African and diasporic trance practices to contextualize banga within a wider spiritual and performative continuum. Cynthia Becker's analysis of gnawa rituals in Morocco provides a lens for understanding how music and ritual intersect with Black identity in North Africa. Becker's exploration of gender and spirituality in gnawa rituals informs my analysis of women's roles in banga, where labor and spiritual care, though often invisible, are essential to the ritual's success.

Similarly, Gilbert Rouget's *Music and Trance* (1980) offers foundational theories on the interplay between music, rhythm, and altered states of consciousness. Rouget's work provides the theoretical grounding for understanding how banga's rhythmic structures facilitate trance and healing. However, Rouget's generalizations often overlook the specific sociopolitical contexts that shape individual practices. My research contributes to this conversation by situating banga within Tunisia's unique postcolonial and racialized landscape, highlighting how the practice adapts to contemporary social and economic pressures.

Feminist perspectives, such as those articulated by Lila Abu-Lughod and Fatima Mernissi, provide critical frameworks for analyzing the intersections of gender, power, and cultural expression. Abu-Lughod's examination of how women navigate and subtly resist social constraints through poetic and ritual practices parallels my observations of women in the banga community. Similarly, Mernissi's critique of gendered boundaries in religious and cultural spaces informs this dissertation's emphasis on women's agency in banga, where their labor and care work, though often obscure, are central to the ritual's continuity.

While inspired by the work of these scholars, my dissertation seeks to address underexplored dimensions of banga by emphasizing lived experience, oral history, and the interplay of sacred and staged performances. Although much of the existing literature often prioritizes the musical and ritualistic elements of trance practices, this study foregrounds the social and cultural roles of banga in fostering identity, resilience, and community cohesion among Black Tunisians. Additionally, by examining the gendered dimensions of labor within the banga ritual, this dissertation aims to contribute to feminist discourses on agency and invisibility in North African spiritual practices. It further expands on the intersections of race, gender, and labor within the banga ritual by highlighting how women's labor, though less visible, is nevertheless pivotal to the ritual's success, offering new insights into the gendered dimensions of the Tunisian spiritual practices.

By incorporating oral histories, ethnographic observations, and personal reflections, this work advocates for a relational approach that values community-based knowledge production. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines performance studies, postcolonial frameworks, and ethnographic fieldwork, this dissertation positions banga as a vital site of cultural memory and adaptation. It argues that banga is not merely a healing ritual but a dynamic practice that navigates the intersections of history, identity, and modernity in Tunisia. By contributing new perspectives to the academic discourse, this work seeks to honor the voices and experiences of the banga community, ensuring that their stories are not only documented but also critically engaged with in ways that reflect their complexity and depth. Ultimately, this dissertation positions banga as a dynamic cultural practice that negotiates identity, memory, and resilience in contemporary Tunisia. In doing so, it seeks to honor the contributions of the banga

community while enriching scholarly conversations on trance, African spirituality, and the enduring power of cultural traditions.

Embodied Ethnography and Reflexive Methodology: Understanding Banga Through Immersive Research

This dissertation is rooted in ethnographic and participatory research that centers the lived experiences, voices, and agency of the banga community in Tozeur. My research employs participant-observation, informal conversations, oral histories, sensory ethnography, and visual documentation. At the heart of this research is a commitment to ethnographic immersion. Over the course of seven years, I conducted extensive fieldwork, spending prolonged periods of time in Tozeur and embedding myself within the banga community. This long-term engagement allowed me to build relationships of trust with community members and particularly with the Chouchane family, who serve as key figures in banga's ritual practices. The participatory nature of my research was grounded in active involvement—observing rituals, participating in community activities, and engaging in informal yet deeply meaningful conversations. These interactions not only provided rich qualitative data but also fostered an insider-outsider perspective that balanced my positionality as a Tunisian woman with the responsibilities of academic research. This methodological framework aims to present banga as a dynamic, adaptive tradition steeped in complex social and spiritual dimensions. My approach seeks to document and analyze the multifaceted dimensions of banga as both a spiritual and cultural practice. Throughout this research, I have prioritized ethical sensitivity, acknowledging the deeply spiritual and personal nature of banga rituals while striving to cultivate a relational methodology that fosters trust and mutual respect with the community.

Participant-observation was a cornerstone of my methodology, enabling me to witness and document banga rituals as they unfolded in both sacred and staged settings. By being physically present during annual pilgrimages, rehearsals, and everyday communal gatherings, I was able to capture the embodied practices, musical rhythms, and communal dynamics central to banga. My observations extended beyond the rituals themselves to include the preparation and labor—often undertaken by women—necessary to sustain the ceremonies. I lived with the Chouchane family for extended periods, sharing meals, participating in household chores, learning to cook southern Tunisian dishes, and sleeping among the family's daughters and grandchildren in the same room. This close proximity fostered a kinship that extended beyond formal research encounters. Over the years, the family began calling me *binti* (my daughter), and the children affectionately referred to me as an auntie. Jeddi Hassan, the family patriarch and the central figure in the banga tradition, became my primary guide. Jeddi embodies the profound respect and authority central to the banga community. The familial bond I developed with the Chouchanes created opportunities for deep conversations, observations, and participation in the banga rituals.

These interactions can be understood as what D. Soyini Madison terms "performative-witnessing," a deeply engaged, body-to-body commitment to the research process (Madison 2010, 25). This approach reduces the distance between researcher and interlocutor, fostering an environment of mutual trust and coperformative interaction. However, this level of immersion brings its own challenges. My integration into the Chouchane family meant that I was expected to be constantly involved in their activities, leaving little time for private reflection, note-taking, or listening to recordings. As a woman regarded as one of their daughters, it was culturally inappropriate for me to venture out alone to a coffee shop to work, further complicating my

ability to maintain a structured research schedule. Despite these constraints, my immersion within the family allowed for spontaneous and organic discoveries that revealed more aspects of the banga practice the longer I stayed.

My positionality as a Tunisian woman adds layers of complexity to this research. While my shared cultural background facilitated access to and rapport with the banga community, my urban upbringing, academic training in the United States, and non-Black identity position me as an outsider in several key respects. This duality of insider-outside perspective enriched my research but also required constant reflexivity. I grappled with questions of representation, power, and privilege, striving to ensure that my work amplified the voices of the community even while utilizing the external frameworks necessary to analyze and document banga within the context of academia. These dynamics influenced how I was perceived by and the access I was granted to the banga community. For instance, the gendered social norms in Tozeur shaped my interactions with men and women in the field. These norms often precluded me from entering certain spaces; as a woman, it was culturally unacceptable for me to attend male-dominated discussions or deliberations in closed rooms. However, my participation in the women's daily lives—sharing jokes, gathering in the courtyard, and even witnessing them play drums for their own amusement when the men were resting—provided alternative insights into the community's gendered dynamics and agency. These moments of informal interaction highlighted how women carve out their own spaces of joy and expression within a patriarchal framework. While the women often referred my questions about banga to Jeddi as the elder and respected authority on the subject, they gradually shared their own personal stories, challenges, and secrets with me, highlighting their own inconspicuous contributions to the ritual and underscoring the relational depth and mutual trust that developed between us over time.

My methodology was shaped by feminist approaches, through which I aimed to highlight the diverse and multifaceted experiences of women within the banga community. Feminist scholarship, as Sandra Harding argues, challenges the portrayal of women as victims of patriarchal systems by examining the social structures by which women are constrained. This perspective views women not as passive subjects but as agents whose knowledge and experiences contribute to the analysis of these structures (Harding 1987). Lila Abu-Lughod's call for "ethnographies of the particular" further guided my approach, emphasizing the importance of individual histories and relationships in understanding broader cultural practices (Abu-Lughod 1991). Women in the banga community play vital, though often understated, roles in the ritual's success, deepening my understanding of their contributions. Their labor, from preparing ceremonial spaces to supporting trance participants, is integral to the ritual, and their stories challenge reductive narratives about gendered roles in spiritual practices.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout this research, particularly given the spiritual and communal significance of banga. I was mindful of respecting the boundaries of secrecy, ensuring that certain shared knowledge remained private. In her work *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals* (1993), my late mentor Mary "Polly" Nooter Roberts explores secrecy as a strategy and as an important dimension of African knowledge, power, and aesthetic experience. She observes that secrecy is a channel of communication and commentary and a means to regulate access to knowledge, and she elaborates on how artworks serve as an agency through which complex relationships of secrecy and disclosure are negotiated and mediated. The process of co-producing knowledge with the community involved continuous reflection on my positionality and the implications of documenting and disseminating their stories. The relational nature of my fieldwork also manifested in the Chouchane family's deep trust. They often sought

my opinion on personal and communal matters, invited me to participate in family decisions, and, on occasion, even postponed rituals until my arrival. This relational approach required me to engage deeply with the ethical and emotional dimensions of fieldwork, acknowledging the vulnerabilities and responsibilities that come with documenting lived traditions. Most importantly, it challenged me to make hard decisions. Due to the complex relationships between different banga-practicing communities, I made a conscious decision not to conduct fieldwork with the practitioners in the neighboring town of Metlaoui, as this might have upset my Chouchane family. This choice, while limiting in some respects, allowed me to deepen my engagement with the Tozeur community and uncover nuanced aspects of their practices. The emphasis on relational ethics and reflexivity not only aligns with decolonial methodologies but also underscores the importance of collaborative knowledge production in the study of marginalized traditions.

Time was a crucial element in this methodology. Drawing on Johannes Fabian's critique of linear, Eurocentric conceptions of time, I approached the banga community's temporal rhythms as "coeval"—a shared, lived temporality connected by relationships and sequences in time (Fabian 1983). However, as Marc Augé argues in *Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds*, practices such as spirit possession not only inhabit the same temporal framework as the observer but also anticipate and respond to the complexities of globalization, existing "beyond modernity" as adaptive and dynamic engagements with historical and cultural flux (Augé 1999, 20). Rather than imposing external notions of linearity or progress, I sought to foreground how banga practices are thoroughly modern, shaped by and in dialogue with a range of historical, cultural, and political encounters, thus reflecting their coevalness while also challenging static conceptions of modernity. This dissertation also prioritizes the lived experiences and

epistemologies of the banga community. A phenomenological lens, inspired by Michael Jackson's work, allowed me to examine the constantly negotiated relationships between humans, non-human beings, and their environments (Jackson 2005). This approach complemented the "thick description" methodology articulated by Clifford Geertz, capturing the intricate layers of banga rituals and their meanings (Geertz 1973).

Given the multisensory nature of banga, which engages sound, movement, and physical space, sensory ethnography was essential in conveying the depth and richness of the practice. I documented the sonic textures of banga's music, the physicality of its dances, and the spatial arrangements of ritual gatherings through a combination of audiovisual recordings and detailed field notes. These visual materials—professional videography, photography, and phone recordings—became central to my analysis, emphasizing the ways in which knowledge is embodied, enacted, and expressed beyond the written word.

My interest in audiovisual methods emerged during my master's research when I independently filmed *Stambeli Awakening*, a documentary exploring the sacred and commodified spaces of stambeli practice. I discovered how visual mediums could complement written scholarship, offering an additional layer of understanding to sensorial and embodied experiences that often resist textual representation. When I joined the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA, I further explored this interest through a course on documentary techniques taught by Professor Aparna Sharma. The class provided a theoretical framework for and explored the ethical considerations of using film as a research tool, expanding my approach to integrating visual media into my ethnographic work. This training laid the foundation for the audiovisual documentation of banga ceremonies, a practice I approached with the intent to amplify perspectives that might otherwise remain untold or overlooked.

Inspired by the groundbreaking Navajo-produced documentary *Navajo Film Themselves*, I began to reflect deeply on the positionality of the researcher and the illusion of objectivity in ethnographic work. As Lila Abu-Lughod reminds us, objectivity is a construct that often obscures the subjective, relational, and co-constructed nature of knowledge (1991). Recognizing that research is an inherently intersubjective endeavor, I sought to actively include the perspectives of the Chouchane family in the documentation process. This led me to experiment with collaborative filming by handing the camera to Rabaa, one of the younger members of the family, who had expressed keen interest in learning how to use it. I introduced Rabaa to basic filming techniques and encouraged her to document what she found meaningful in the banga ceremonies. At first, she hesitated and often asked me what to focus on, but I assured her that the camera was a tool for her perspective—she should focus on whatever she deemed important. Rabaa began to film the ceremonies and occasionally the Chouchane family's performances at weddings and celebrations. Reviewing her footage was a revelation. It offered a lens into how at least one member of the banga community viewed banga, revealing nuances and moments that I might have overlooked. Through Rabaa's eyes, I saw what held significance for her—whether it was a particular drumming rhythm, the laughter of children, or the quiet moments of preparation before a ceremony. One night, after a particularly intense banga ceremony, the courtyard of the Chouchane home was alive with a mix of activity and stillness. While some people drifted into sleep, others stayed awake, chatting softly or engaging in lighthearted games. That night, I discovered a playful tradition among the Chouchane children and their neighbors: sneaking up on those who had fallen asleep to paint their faces and feet with makeup and toothpaste. The courtyard erupted with laughter as they admired their handiwork and playfully teased their

unsuspecting victims. It was a moment of pure joy and camaraderie that transcended the structured rituals of the ceremony, highlighting the vibrant communal life that surrounds banga.

In 2019, I expanded my visual methodology by inviting Montassar Ben Jdila, an independent videographer and investigative journalist, to join me in Tozeur. Montassar, known for his work documenting the journeys of Tunisian undocumented immigrants, brought a fresh and dynamic perspective to the project. Before we set out, I introduced him to the research, sharing my concerns about how banga might be misunderstood by outsiders. Most importantly, I emphasized that the trust and comfort of the Chouchane family were paramount. After gaining their approval, Montassar and I embarked on the trip together, a collaboration that enriched the project. Montassar quickly became an integral part of the Chouchane household. He shared in the family's rhythm of life, sleeping alongside Jeddi, myself, and others on wooden bed platforms in the living room, or sometimes outdoors under the stars with the Chouchane grandsons and their neighbors. The family embraced him wholeheartedly, and their affection for him endured long after our fieldwork ended—they would often tell me to "bring him again next time." Our days were filled with relentless activity as Montassar and I worked side by side, documenting everything from dawn preparations to the climactic moments of bori night. His creative eye brought new angles and ideas to our documentation, enhancing our ability to convey the multifaceted nature of banga. Rabaa's contributions complemented this work, creating a layered representation that combined her insider perspective with our collaborative efforts. The trust and immersion we experienced in the Chouchane household enabled us to document banga not as detached observers but as participants in a shared experience. The integration of audiovisual methodologies allowed for a more holistic representation of banga, encompassing its lived realities and intricate layers of sound, movement, and emotion. By prioritizing collaborative and

multisensory approaches, this methodology seeks to honor the community's perspectives while challenging the boundaries of traditional academic representation.

My documentation also included transcriptions of banga songs, chants, and commonly used words in Darija (Tunisian Arabic). Language was an essential but challenging component of this research. For transcription, I explored both the Library of Congress diacritics in the Arabic Romanization table and the transliteration guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES), which I found particularly effective in the works of Richard C. Jankowsky, as well as in A. Jihad Racy's *Making Music in the Arab World*. Ultimately, I adopted the IJMES system for transcribing praise songs and opted for the commonly used French spelling of Arabic in the Tunisian context for everyday words. My choice highlights the dialectal nuances of Tozeur, which differ significantly from those in the capital and other regions of Tunisia. By taking this approach, I hope to enhance accessibility for non-academic readers and to foster familiarity when sharing my work with the banga community. To this end, I italicize each Tunisian Arabic term related to banga or important to the cultural context when I first introduce and define it, emphasizing its significance and providing clarity. I then normalize the term by presenting it without italics in all later references, ensuring the term's seamless integration into the text while maintaining its cultural specificity. This approach achieves a balance between highlighting linguistic distinctiveness at first encounter and enabling fluid, natural usage throughout the study.

This focus on regional linguistic specificity became especially apparent during a cultural anecdote in Tozeur, where language played a pivotal role in shaping the interaction. During my initial visits, I often struggled to understand certain words, leading to humorous exchanges that became family anecdotes. For instance, on my first morning at the Chouchane household, Maya,

Jeddi's wife, woke me up by saying "thouri." In standard Arabic, *thouri* translates to the imperative form of the verb "revolt," and I sprang up, momentarily terrified, and asked who was protesting. It was only when Maya laughed that I began to realize that the word had an entirely different meaning in Tozeur, and she explained to me that it simply meant "wake up" in Tozeur's dialect. This story remains a source of laughter within the family, and these moments of linguistic and cultural learning became integral to my understanding of the community and its practices.

Conducting research on a deeply spiritual practice such as banga necessitated careful attention to ethical considerations. From the outset, I sought to approach the community with humility and a commitment to reciprocity. Ethical sensitivity was paramount. I sought informed consent from all participants, ensuring that they understood the scope and purpose of my research and had the freedom to withdraw at any time. I refrained from recording or photographing sacred moments without explicit permission, respecting the community's boundaries and the sanctity of their rituals. Confidentiality was maintained for those who preferred anonymity, particularly when discussing personal or sensitive topics.

Acts of Love: Gifting as a Methodological and Relational Practice

Gifting has become an integral part of my methodological approach, though not in the transactional sense that might be implied by conventional anthropological discourse. Each summer, as I return to Tozeur, I bring gifts for the Chouchane family—gestures of care and kinship that have grown organically out of the deep bonds we share. While culturally there is discomfort in discussing the act of gifting, as it is often considered inappropriate to enumerate what one gives, it is crucial to emphasize that these gifts are not offered in exchange for information but as expressions of love and respect. They are part of the ongoing relational

dynamic that underpins my fieldwork, solidifying our connection and affirming my place as part of their extended family. Before each trip, I ask the family what they need or want, tailoring my gifts to their specific circumstances. My gifts for Maya and Jeddi are often practical items to support their health and daily activities, such as medications, a cane for Jeddi, reading glasses, or tools for tending the oasis where he plants and cleans his palms. For the children, I bring toys, school supplies, or items that spark their curiosity and creativity. Over the years, I have watched the youngest members of the family, some of whom were not even born when I first began my research, grow up. They now know me by name, rush to hug me upon my arrival, and cry when I leave. These moments reaffirm the reciprocal nature of our relationship—it is not only research but also a shared life experience.

The Chouchane family reciprocates these acts of care in ways that have profoundly touched me and my own family. Jeddi and Maya frequently give me gifts of food, spices, and incense dedicated to Sidi Marzoug. On several occasions, they have sent dates to my family in Tunis, even during times when I was not present in Tunisia. These dates are sent through the Tozeur-Tunis bus, the drivers of which now recognize my family and have formed relationships with us. This network of care exemplifies the web of interconnectedness that extends beyond the boundaries of the field, binding us in ways that transcend conventional researcher-participant relationships. Gifting, as I have come to understand it through this fieldwork, is not a one-sided act but part of a cycle of giving and receiving that deepens relational ties. In Marcel Mauss's notable work *The Gift* (1950), Mauss determines that rules of legality and self-interest that have served as the foundation of human societies compel the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated, and that the power that resides in an object given causes its recipient to pay it back. In the context of dance, Susan Leigh Foster remarks in her work *Valuing Dance:*

Commodities and Gifts in Motion (2019) that value is forged at the moment in which dancing passes from one person to another as an act of exchange, replete with all its symbolic meanings, including its history and labor, an exchange which is either lauded or dismissed. Among the banga community, gifting reflects an ethic of care and a shared commitment to each other's well-being. Maya and Jeddi, for instance, never hesitate to share with me their personal stories, needs, and even secrets, which they have chosen to disclose over time as trust has grown. Similarly, my act of bringing items tailored to their needs or spending time teaching the children reflects my intention to contribute to their lives in meaningful ways, not just as a researcher but as someone they consider part of their family.

The ethical implications of gifting in ethnographic work require careful consideration. It is critical to resist framing these gestures as an obligation or exchange for knowledge. Instead, they are best understood as acts of relationality that acknowledge the emotional and material realities of the field. Gifting has allowed me to inhabit a space where I am not merely observing but participating in the family's everyday life. By embedding myself in their routines, sharing in their joys and challenges, and contributing in ways that are significant to them, I have come to see the practice of gifting as integral to my positionality as a researcher, a friend, and an adopted member of the Chouchane family. Ultimately, gifting in this context reflects the fluidity of boundaries between personal and professional realms. It highlights the complexities of fieldwork relationships, where acts of care serve as bridges that connect worlds, allowing for a richer, more empathetic understanding of the community I have had the privilege to learn from.

Charting the Path to Banga: Dissertation Summary

This dissertation explores the multifaceted dimensions of banga as a trance-inducing musical ritual, a site of cultural identity, and a sanctuary of healing. Each of the three chapters

builds upon ethnographic encounters, oral histories, and scholarly dialogues to present a nuanced narrative that connects the spiritual, social, and historical layers of this tradition. Through these chapters, the dissertation unpacks the ways banga sustains its community, negotiates its place within Tunisia's complex cultural landscape, and transcends borders as both a deeply local and universally resonant practice. Each chapter delves into the intricate layers of banga, offering insights drawn from ethnographic fieldwork, oral narratives, and theoretical frameworks.

The introduction establishes the groundwork for the dissertation, outlining the research questions, theoretical approaches, and methodologies that frame the study. It reflects on my own positionality as an insider-outsider navigating the intersections of personal and scholarly engagement. This section also situates banga within the broader context of Tunisian history, spirituality, and sociocultural identity, presenting it as a lens through which to address underexplored aspects of Tunisia's Black communities and their cultural contributions.

Chapter 1, "Through Sand and Sound: A Journey into the Heart of Banga," chronicles the physical and emotional journey from the bustling urban rhythms of Tunis to the serene yet intricate landscapes of Tozeur, weaving a narrative of transformation and discovery. The anticipation of what lies ahead deepens with every mile traveled from the familiar streets of the capital to the vast, windswept expanses of the south. The chapter paints this passage vividly, immersing the reader in the contrasting scenery, cultural nuances, and the growing connection to the journey's destination. Through richly textured descriptions, the chapter introduces my first encounter with the Chouchane family—a meeting that becomes the gateway to understanding the world of banga. Their generosity and guidance are the threads that lead into the heart of the ritual, offering not only insights but also a profound sense of belonging. The narrative unfolds to capture the rituals and rhythms of the banga ceremony, presenting its intricate layers as seen

through the fresh eyes of an outsider, both awestruck and deeply respectful. This chapter also honors the many individuals who brought banga to life—musicians, elders, and participants whose voices and actions were instrumental in shaping my understanding. It emphasizes the human connections forged through fieldwork, revealing how these relationships made the experience deeply transformative. As a whole, this chapter lays the foundation for the broader explorations into the cultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions of banga that follow, guiding the reader further into the profound legacy of this Tunisian tradition.

Chapter 2, "Banga Chronicles: The Legacy of Trance and Tradition as Narrated by 'Jeddi' Hasan Chouchane," centers on the oral narratives of Jeddi Hasan, the elder and spiritual guide of the banga community in Tozeur, whose life and knowledge form a bridge between past and present. Through Jeddi's stories, this chapter reconstructs the history, evolution, and spiritual significance of banga, weaving together a tapestry of sub-Saharan heritage, Sufi practices, and the enduring struggles of Black Tunisians to preserve their identity and traditions. Jeddi's narratives illuminate banga as a dynamic space where memory, resistance, and healing converge. Richly detailed accounts from Jeddi provide a firsthand perspective on banga's origins, its spiritual connections to Sidi Marzoug Chouchane, and the role of trance as a means of communal healing and personal transcendence. His vivid descriptions bring to life the symbolic meanings of the instruments, praise songs, and movements that make up the ritual, offering the reader an intimate look at how these elements function both practically and spiritually. Jeddi's reflections also reveal the sociopolitical dynamics surrounding banga, including the community's experiences of marginalization and their ongoing efforts to sustain their practices in the face of modern pressures to assimilate. This chapter further highlights the intergenerational transmission of banga, as Jeddi actively works to preserve this heritage by teaching younger community

members, including his grandchildren, the songs, rhythms, and philosophies of the practice. His role underscores the importance of oral history as a medium for safeguarding cultural traditions often excluded from institutional narratives.

The latter part of chapter 2 integrates Jeddi's lived knowledge with historical and anthropological scholarship by situating banga within broader diasporic and North African traditions. This synthesis draws on works exploring the syncretism of sub-Saharan and Islamic spiritualities, the sociocultural dimensions of trance, and the ways diasporic communities negotiate identity and resilience. By bridging oral narratives with academic perspectives, this chapter underscores the depth and complexity of banga as both a lived experience and a cultural phenomenon. By foregrounding the voices of practitioners like Jeddi, this chapter not only honors the lived realities of the banga community but also sets the foundation for a broader, more integrated analysis of its multifaceted significance.

Chapter 3, "Beyond Trance: Banga, the Sanctuary of Healing and Identity," examines banga's role as a sanctuary for healing, identity formation, and cultural preservation through the lens of scholarly frameworks and local perspectives. This chapter delves into the spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions of trance as experienced in banga rituals, emphasizing its profound role as both a personal and collective experience. Through a blend of ethnographic observations and theoretical frameworks drawn from performance studies, postcolonial analysis, and gender studies, the chapter unpacks the intricate dynamics that underpin banga. It investigates how embodied practices—encompassing music, rhythm, and movement—serve as powerful tools for facilitating trance states that transcend the physical realm, providing pathways to spiritual healing and emotional release. Central to this exploration is the understanding of banga as a space of sanctuary. Beyond its function as a trance-inducing ritual, banga is a haven

where marginalized Black Tunisian communities can reclaim their cultural identity and articulate their resilience against historical erasures and systemic inequities. The chapter examines how the ritual not only fosters healing but also offers a framework for asserting belonging and navigating the complexities of Tunisian sociopolitical realities. The transformative power of trance in banga lies in its ability to dissolve individual boundaries, creating a communal space where collective memory, struggles, and aspirations converge.

Chapter 3 also interrogates the gendered dynamics that structure participation in banga rituals. Drawing from ethnographic insights, it highlights how men's visible roles in performing music and leading the ceremony coexist with the often-overlooked yet equally indispensable labor of women. Women's contributions—through their preparatory work, emotional care, and subtle guidance—are reframed as essential acts of agency, challenging traditional narratives that marginalize their involvement. This nuanced perspective demonstrates how gender shapes the experiences and expressions within banga while underscoring its potential as a site of contestation and negotiation of societal norms. By situating banga within a broader cultural and historical context, this chapter sheds light on its syncretic nature, blending sub-Saharan spiritualities with Islamic practices to form a uniquely Tunisian expression of identity. The theoretical discourse extends to consider banga as a performative act that resists homogenization, asserting its authenticity in a rapidly changing world. This chapter positions banga as a living, adaptive tradition that both honors its ancestral roots and evolves to address contemporary realities.

The concluding section, "Not a Conclusion but a Passage: Ongoing Narratives in an Unfinished Composition," provides a deeper analysis of banga's challenges and its future possibilities. I hesitate to label this section as a conclusion because this work is not an ending but

rather a point of departure. This envoi serves not as a conclusion, but as an opening—an invitation to continue the journey of exploring the vast ocean of banga's cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions. As Jeddi often says, "This is just a drop in a big ocean," reminding us that banga is far too expansive and dynamic to be contained within the pages of a single dissertation. This section reflects on the challenges, possibilities, and future directions for banga as it navigates its place in an ever-changing world. Banga faces critical questions about its future: how to maintain its sacred integrity while engaging with global platforms, how to navigate intergenerational transitions, and how to assert its relevance within Tunisia's sociopolitical context. Stories such as Yahya and Tarek's experience with Ifriqiya Electrique reveal both the potential and perils of reaching for global visibility. Their attempts to merge banga with electronic music, while innovative, also underscore the risks of exploitation and cultural misrepresentation when local traditions are adapted for international markets. These narratives, often considered failures by community members, are equally vital to understanding banga's complexities and serve as cautionary tales for cultural preservation. The envoi also highlights the continued marginalization of banga within Tunisia itself. While stambeli has found a foothold in urban spaces and public festivals, banga remains largely confined to its regional context. Yet, banga's resilience is evident in the stories of those who sustain it against these odds, as well as in its capacity to transcend borders. My journey with Jeddi to southern Algeria illuminated the transnational connections of banga, revealing shared practices among Black communities in Oued Souf. This experience emphasized banga's potential to connect communities across North Africa and demonstrated how traditions can thrive through relationships and shared histories. As a researcher, I see this work as an ongoing dialogue—one that includes stories of success, struggle, and adaptation. The moments of tension, whether between sacred and staged practices

or between local and global identities, reflect the heart of banga's story: its ability to transform, endure, and inspire. This envoi underscores that this dissertation is not an endpoint, but a foundation for future inquiries into the ways cultural heritage is lived, negotiated, and reimagined by those who embody it.

1.

Through Sand and Sound

A Journey into the Heart of Banga

The journey to Tozeur marked a deeply personal milestone. It was my first time traveling to Tozeur as an adult—a city I had heard of but never seen, despite its deep connections to my maternal lineage. Growing up in Tunis as the only daughter of two children, my parents had been understandably overprotective, shaped by socially constructed notions of gender that I have only recently begun to reflect upon more critically. For much of my life, traveling far from home—whether for leisure or personal exploration—was out of the question. Even as a teenager, moments of independence were rare; the first time I ever went out with friends unsupervised was to celebrate my high school baccalaureate graduation at the age of eighteen. That memory still lingers as a turning point, albeit one shaped by a tightly woven cultural fabric of caution and familial care. Adding to this sense of disconnection from Tozeur was the elusive nature of my family history. Like many families from similar backgrounds, stories of ancestry and origins were veiled, shared only sparingly, and often through oral accounts. To this day, I remain puzzled by the lack of written records in my family—birth certificates, lineage documents, or other archival markers that ground a person's place in history. My maternal grandfather's date of birth, for instance, was merely estimated, pieced together through family memory. In the absence of official records, collective and individual memory have become indispensable in reconstructing such histories. These fragmented narratives fueled my curiosity about my family's connection to Tozeur, particularly when my mother, with pride glimmering in her eyes, would recount: "We are from Tozeur; we are the Chebbi family." She often added with reverence, "Abul Qacem Chebbi is my father's cousin."

Abul Qacem Chebbi, one of Tunisia's most celebrated poets, hailed from Tozeur, and my mother's familial pride made him more than a historical figure; he became a part of my own narrative, albeit one I had yet to fully explore. Tozeur, for me, was not just a destination but a tapestry of untold stories—a blend of personal discovery and cultural immersion.

It is 5 a.m. on the morning of July 14, 2018, and the house is already alive with activity. My parents are bustling around, helping me prepare for what they've dubbed "the big trip" to Tozeur. Though they don't fully grasp the nature of my research, their anxiety about my solo travel is palpable. Ommi (my mother in Arabic), is in the kitchen brewing coffee and toasting bread, while Baba hovers, asking a flurry of questions: "Do you have everything you need? Will you be safe? Have you checked your phone credit? Where will you keep your camera and wallet?" His voice carries the weight of years of parental worry, amplified by cultural norms and a deep-rooted fear of the unknown. Traveling as a woman in Tunisia comes with layers of complexity. My upbringing in a working-class family has meant navigating both my parents' conservative expectations and the societal restrictions placed on women. Growing up, my brother and I were held to different standards—while he could stay out late without question, I had strict curfews, and even as a graduate student, spending a night away from home was unthinkable without thorough explanations and negotiations. These dynamics, born of love but shaped by tradition, have led to countless arguments as I've asserted my independence over the years. By the time the morning hustle quiets, it is already 6 a.m., and I've only managed a few sips of my coffee. The bus to Gafsa departs at 7 a.m., and my father and I head to the main road to catch a taxi. Public transportation is out of the question—not only is it unsafe, particularly for women, but it is unreliable at this hour. After several failed attempts, we finally flagged down a taxi at 6:50 a.m., barely making it to the chaotic bus station in time. The station is a sea of people, their

voices mingling in a cacophony of shouting, laughter, and urgent conversations. Without clear signage or lines, it takes us a few anxious moments to locate the lane for the Gafsa bus. My father, ever resourceful, has arranged my ticket in advance through a friend at the Société Nationale de Transport Interurbain, sparing me the additional stress of securing one on the spot. Even so, I feel overwhelmed as we approach the crowded bus. Baba takes my backpack and pushes through the throng to secure me a seat, while I stand nervously with the rest of my luggage. When I finally board, I am relieved to find myself in the front row by the window—an ideal spot for someone with my level of anxiety and a penchant for motion sickness. The view of the windshield offers a sense of openness amid the confined space, and I am comforted by the thought of capturing moments from the journey as part of my research documentation. My father hands me a bottle of water before stepping back from the bus, his face a mixture of pride and worry. “Take care of yourself, Amira,” he says, his voice tinged with both affection and apprehension.

Unfolding the Layers of Gafsa: A City of Saints, Struggles, and Warmth

The six-hour journey to Gafsa unfolds across some of Tunisia’s most striking and varied landscapes, offering a microcosm of the country’s geographical and cultural diversity. Leaving the bustling outskirts of Tunis behind, the bus winds through lush agricultural plains dotted with olive groves, transitioning gradually to the arid desert edges of central Tunisia. By 11:30 a.m., we pull into a rest stop on the outskirts of Kairouan, a city renowned for its Islamic heritage and its centuries-old mosques, including the Great Mosque, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The rest stop, Istirahet Bichawech, is a hub of hurried activity. Inside, the smells of frying food and brewing tea mingle with the dry heat of the midday sun. A modest cafeteria serves hot sandwiches and traditional Tunisian dishes, while a pastry counter showcases trays of *makroudh*,

the sweet, date-filled pastry that Kairouan is famous for. On this first journey south, the rest stop feels overwhelming and unfamiliar—a maze of bustling travelers and sparse amenities. I grab a small snack and a drinkable yogurt, too intimidated by the long lines and my unfamiliarity with the space to order anything more substantial. The restroom facilities reflect the region's economic challenges, with sparse supplies and worn infrastructure. As I navigate the space, a cleaning lady in her late sixties offers me soap from her own supplies with a warm smile and a lighthearted joke. Her kindness is a small but powerful reminder of the resilience and generosity that characterize the people of Tunisia's interior regions. Back on the road, the landscapes grow harsher yet more captivating. The greenery of the north gives way to rocky outcrops as we approach the Atlas Mountains, their jagged peaks framing the horizon like ancient sentinels. Beyond them, the golden expanse of the Sahara Desert begins to stretch endlessly, its stark beauty both humbling and overwhelming. Inside the bus, the oppressive heat persists despite the air conditioning. Passengers use handmade reed fans to cool themselves, their movements rhythmic and methodical. I drift in and out of sleep, lulled by the hum of the engine and the hypnotic monotony of the desert landscape.

As the bus approaches Gafsa, the transition from natural beauty to urban complexity becomes apparent. This city, though surrounded by the splendor of the desert and mountains, wears its struggles visibly. The infrastructure reflects decades of neglect, and the tension between Gafsa's economic importance and its systematic marginalization is immediately evident. Known as Tunisia's phosphate capital, Gafsa's mines contribute significantly to the national economy, yet the city itself bears little benefit from this wealth. Hassouna Mzabi, in *La Tunisie du Sud-Est*, underscores the profound inequalities that plague Tunisia's interior regions, noting that the economic marginalization of cities like Gafsa is intricately tied to the preservation of their

distinct cultural identities (Mzabi 1993, 23). The injustices faced by Gafsa's people came to a head in the 2008 Gafsa Mining Basin protests, which began as a local outcry against corruption in the allocation of mining jobs but quickly escalated into a broader critique of inequality and mismanagement. These protests, marked by resilience and defiance, were a precursor to the Tunisian Revolution. When Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in nearby Sidi Bouzid in December 2010 ignited nationwide demonstrations, Gafsa's history of resistance became a vital part of the movement. Yassine Karamti, in *Sidi Bu Ali, "Sultan al-Jarid,"* contextualizes such acts of defiance within the spiritual and cultural resilience of Tunisia's southern regions. He notes that the region's traditions, particularly its veneration of local saints and trance rituals, create spaces for resistance and continuity amid systemic oppression (Karamti 2005, 66).

Arriving at Gafsa's central bus station just after 3 p.m., I am greeted by the chaotic energy of passengers and vendors. The weight of Gafsa's history lingers in the air, mingling with the heat and dust. Amid the throng, I spot Yarfaa Hamdi, a good friend I first met years ago in the wake of the Tunisian Revolution. Our bond was forged in the shared spirit of those transformative times, and his generosity has been a constant over the years. It was Yarfaa who insisted I stop by Gafsa to rest before continuing to Tozeur, and now, his wide smile breaks through the haze of heat and noise. He strides toward me with open arms, exclaiming, "Welcome to Gafsa, your second home from now on!" His warmth and familiarity are a balm after the long journey, grounding me in the human connections that make fieldwork a deeply personal experience.Inside, the Hamdi family's living room is a sanctuary of comfort and tradition. Tata Asma, a trailblazer in her field as a forestry engineer, serves tea and traditional Tunisian sweets while asking about my research and background. Her curiosity is both encouraging and deeply personal. "We need more young women like you researching our rich cultures, traditions, and

histories," she says, holding my hand tightly. Her words feel like a benediction, a reminder of the stakes of my work. The Hamdi family's legacy is one of intellectual and artistic achievement, deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Tunisia's south. Faicel Hamdi, Yarfaa's father, is a respected playwright and author who has long been a fixture in Gafsa's cultural scene. Though I did not meet him during this visit, his influence is evident in his children. Yarfaa's eldest brother, Hayder, is a prominent figure in Tunisia's alternative music scene, blending stambeli and reggae in a revolutionary sound that challenges the erasure of Tunisia's African identity. Hayder's music is a testament to the syncretic traditions described by Mzabi, who notes that rituals in Tunisia's southeast often blend Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs, reflecting a syncretic culture that resists monolithic narratives (Mzabi 1993, 78). After dinner, the family gathers in the living room for an evening of storytelling and song. The atmosphere is one of shared history and collective pride, a microcosm of the resilience that defines the southern Tunisian experience. As we laugh and sing, I feel a growing connection to the family, their warmth and openness offering a glimpse into the strength of the bonds that sustain Gafsa's community.

The next morning, Yarfaa takes me on a brief tour through his neighborhood, pointing out local shrines dedicated to deceased saints who continue to play a central role in Gafsa's history. The shrines are also spaces deeply intertwined with Gafsa's cultural and spiritual identity. These spaces, modest yet imbued with reverence, reflect the syncretic blend of Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions that Mzabi identifies as a hallmark of southeastern Tunisia (Mzabi 1983, 78). Nicolas Puig, in *Bédouins sédentarisés et société citadine à Tozeur*, similarly observes that southern Tunisia's rituals preserve a unique regional identity, blending urban and Bedouin traditions to enrich the local cultural landscape (Puig 2003, 36). Yarfaa shares stories of the saints venerated here, explaining their historical significance and the role they continue to play in the

community's daily life. The shrines, modest yet imbued with reverence, serve as reminders of the region's resilience and its connection to both past and present. Through these sacred spaces, I begin to understand the layers of Gafsa's identity—a city where history, spirituality, and creativity converge. Yarfaa's own story mirrors this convergence. A trained soccer player who once played for Gafsa's main club, El Gawafel Sportive de Gafsa, and an elementary school teacher, his career reflects both the city's passion for sports and the struggles of its marginalized southern clubs. Financial difficulties and corruption within the organization eventually forced the club into decline, a fate shared by many institutions in Tunisia's interior regions. Through my short walk with Yarfa, I begin to understand the depth of Gafsa's identity—a city where the sacred and the everyday coexist, and where the struggles of the present are tempered by the wisdom of the past. This understanding prepares me for the next stage of my journey: a three-hour bus ride to Tozeur, where the rhythms of banga await. As the sun rises higher, we prepare for the trip to Tozeur, I am reassured by Yarfaa's decision to accompany me, a gesture that underscores the importance of kinship and solidarity in navigating Tunisia's social landscape. Before leaving, I call Yahya, the head of the Chouchane family in Tozeur, to confirm that Yarfaa's presence is welcome. Yahya's response is as expected: "Of course! He is more than welcome to the house and to the banga."

The bus, known locally as *el-kar el-safra* (the yellow bus), is a familiar sight that brings so many unpleasant memories growing up riding it in Tunis my entire life; including harassment, theft, and robbery. Its worn interior and the hum of conversation among passengers evoke memories of my daily commutes in Tunis. Yet, this ride feels different—weighted with anticipation. As we journey deeper into the south, the landscape transforms. The arid expanses and jagged mountains of Gafsa give way to the shimmering mirages of the Sahara, signaling our

approach to Tozeur. The route seems to dissolve into the endless desert. The landscape becomes harsher, the horizon swallowed by the sand's shimmer, punctuated occasionally by the silhouettes of palm trees and sparse buildings. The bus is filled with an eclectic mix of passengers: families returning home, workers heading south, and a few curious travelers like me. Their conversations, spoken in dialects unfamiliar to my ears, begin to attune me to the linguistic nuances of the region.

Tozeur: A Landscape of Ancestral Whispers

The journey to Tozeur unfolded as a study in contrasts, revealing a region rich in natural beauty yet burdened by infrastructural neglect. As the bus continued southward, the urban bustle of Gafsa gave way to a vast, arid expanse dotted with oases and punctuated by industrial scars—polluted streams, abandoned phosphate mines, and sprawling stretches of unregulated construction. The terrain was striking, even breathtaking in its rawness, but my thoughts kept returning to the unfulfilled potential of the land. How could a region so rich in natural resources remain so visibly marginalized? This question lingered as the golden sands and verdant palm groves of Tozeur emerged on the horizon. Tozeur's distinct architecture, with its sand-colored bricks that seemed to grow organically from the desert floor, carried a timeless quality. Yet its streets bore the marks of uneven development—poorly maintained roads, scattered debris, and sparse public services that undercut the city's historical grandeur. The heat pressed down like a physical weight, adding to the sense of strain that seemed to accompany life here. As the bus rattled to a stop, I realized that I stepped into a city that was both deeply tied to its past and starkly aware of its precarious present. Similar to Gafsa, Tozeur appeared to be a city of contrasts: stark yet lush, ancient yet resilient. Its distinctive sand-colored bricks blended seamlessly with the surrounding desert, an architectural harmony that spoke to centuries of

adaptation to the harsh environment. Yet, nestled within this arid expanse, the greenery of its date palms hinted at the abundance of life sustained by its oasis where the heat and stillness of the desert seemed to cocoon the city, enfolding it in a timeless aura.

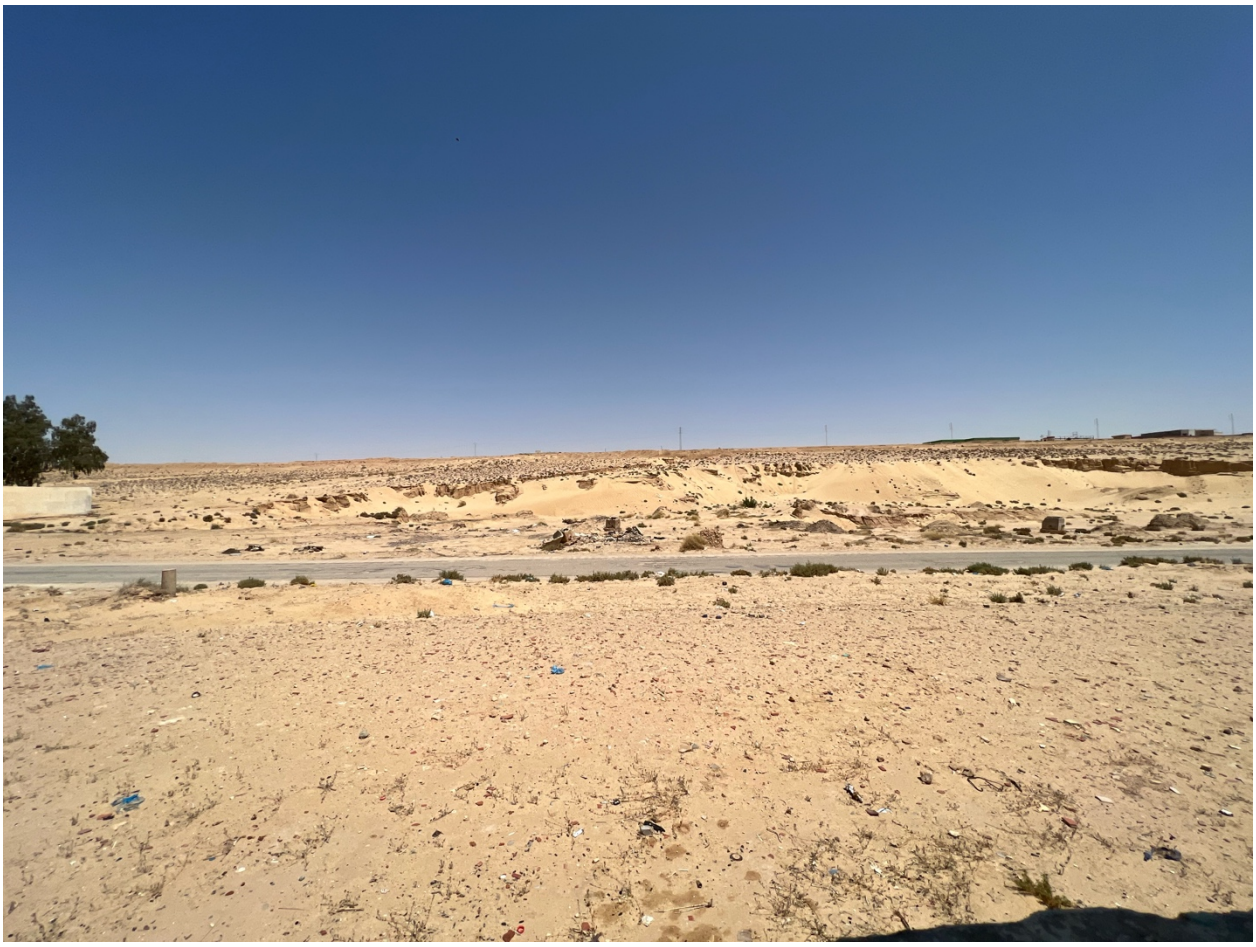

Figure 1.1 The typical landscape along the road to Gafsa and Tozeur. *Photographed by author, July 2018.*

Yahya's niece, Fatma, was waiting for us at the main Tozeur bus station, a modest structure with a single waiting area and sparse amenities, mirrored the quiet charm of a city where life moved at a pace dictated by the desert itself—slow, deliberate, and unyielding. Fatma's effusive warmth cut through the fatigue of the journey. Her quiet confidence and swift, assured movements reflected her familiarity with Tozeur's streets, which stretched before us like

veins leading to the heart of the city. Fatma's gentle but assured demeanor exuded the hospitality for which the Chouchane family was known. Her presence felt like a bridge between the bustling urban world I had left behind and the layered, sacred space I was about to enter. The walk to the Chouchane family home was short but dense with impressions that felt transformative, as if each stride brought us deeper into a realm where time stretched and contracted with the rhythmic pulse of the desert. Each step seemed to draw me closer into a place where the rhythms of life aligned with the patterns of the desert—expansive yet deliberate. Tozeur's streets, while rich in history, reflected the struggles of a region grappling with economic disparity. The ornate brickwork of its buildings hinted at a legacy of craftsmanship and ingenuity, but this was offset by the stark realities of neglected infrastructure and limited resources. Despite these contradictions, the city pulsed with life. The silence of the city was punctuated only by the occasional distant laughter of children playing, the soft rustle of palm leaves, and the faint sound of a muezzin's call to prayer echoing off the brick facades. Along the way, the distant sound of drums began to rise, mingling with the occasional ululations of women celebrating in nearby courtyards. This auditory prelude carried with it the energy of anticipation, as if the city itself was drawing me toward the center of its spiritual life.

As we approached the Chouchane home, the sound of drumming grew louder, infused with the scent of incense that hung thick in the air. *Housh* (the house, also used to describe a courtyard within a house) came into view, an unassuming compound pulsating with the energy of preparations for the banga ceremony. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term *housh* intentionally, rather than the more commonly used *dar*, to reflect the architectural and cultural nuances of the setting. While *dar* (house) in Tunisian Arabic often connotes both the physical structure and the familial unit it houses, housh is more specifically associated with a distinct

architectural style. These older homes are characterized by multiple rooms arranged around a central courtyard, a design that emphasizes communal living and spatial fluidity. In Tozeur, the term *housh* is particularly prevalent, used instead of *dar* to describe such structures. This linguistic preference aligns with the region's cultural and architectural heritage, making housh not just a descriptor but a reflection of the local identity. By using housh, I aim to remain faithful to the terminology and context of Tozeur, anchoring the discussion in the lived reality of the place and its people. The housh is not only a physical space but also a dynamic one, resonating with the rhythms of daily life and rituals like the banga ceremony.

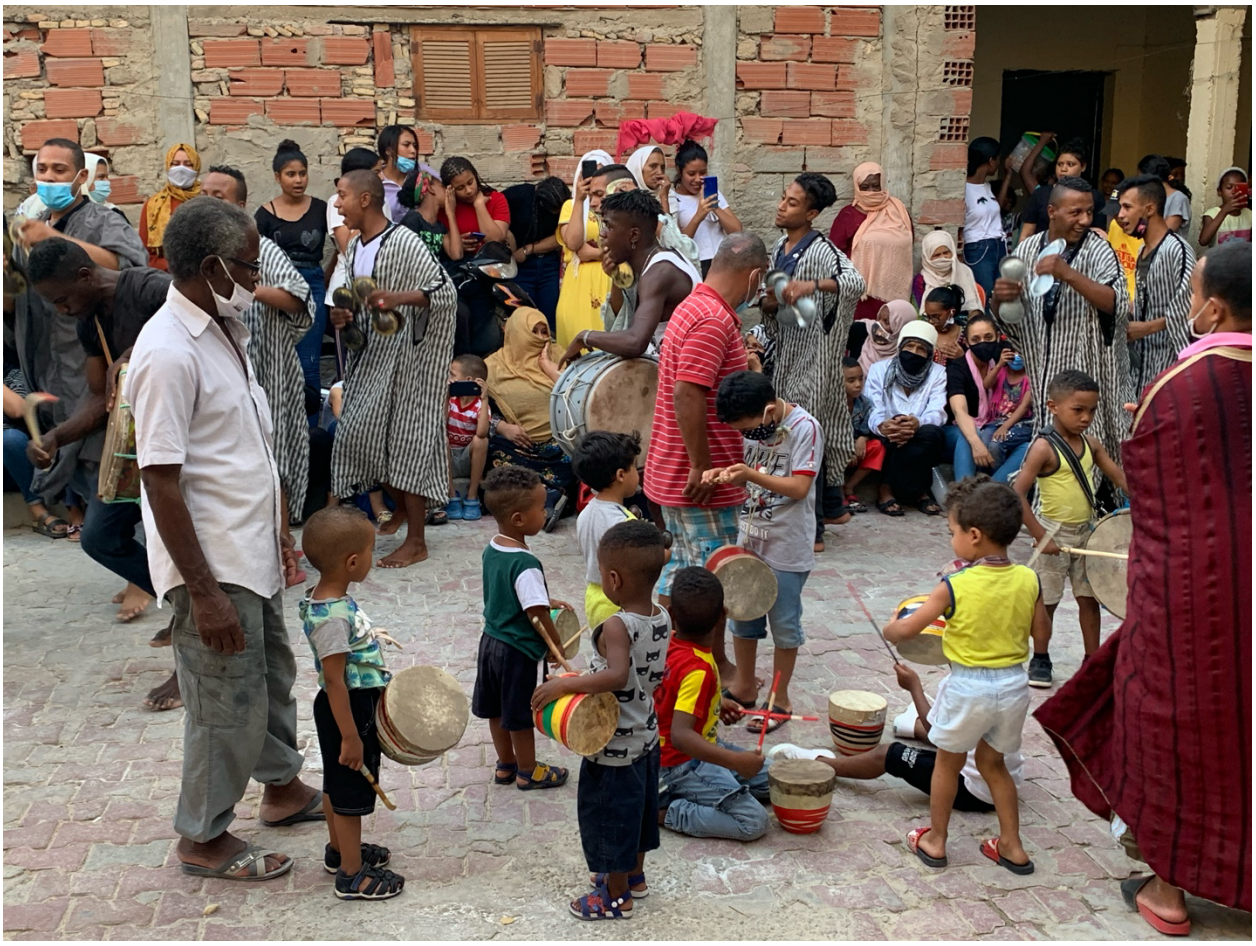

Figure 1.2 The housh during the banga morning procession. *Photographed by author, July 2020.*

Figure 1.3 Yarfaa Hamdi and the Chouchane grandchildren playing inside the Chouchane house. *Photographed by author, July 2018.*

The large central courtyard was a hive of activity, buzzing with community members and the banga practitioners who had just returned from visiting a nearby shrine; everyone seemed fully immersed in the morning ceremony. The sound of drums, the relentless metallic clashing of shakasheek handheld clappers, and the unmistakable hum of a crowd greeted us before we even

stepped inside. Fatma ushered me through the courtyard, a space filled with bodies in motion—dancing, clapping, and swaying to the hypnotic beats of the music. In the midst of the fervor, I turned to check on Yarfaa, who nodded in reassurance. “Don’t worry about me,” he said, his voice barely audible over the music. An elderly woman broke through the crowd and enveloped me in a firm embrace. This was Meriem, or Maya as she is affectionately known, Yahya’s mother and the matriarch of the Chouchane family. Her smile radiated warmth as she led me deeper into the courtyard, enthusiastically calling out, “Our guests are here!” to a man who stood out prominently amid the crowd. As the music continued, Yarfaa found his own way to connect with the family, spending most of his day in the courtyard playing with the Chouchane grandchildren. I watched as he gently lifted each child, tossing them carefully into the air and catching them to squeals of delight. Their laughter echoed throughout the housh, a vibrant thread interwoven with the deep rhythms of the banga music, reflecting the multifaceted spirit of the ritual—at once serious in purpose and joyous in its celebration of togetherness and healing. People came and went through the courtyard, the initial flurry of activity from the morning procession gradually winding down. The sight of Yarfaa effortlessly blending into the family dynamic, his warmth mirrored by their acceptance, was a small yet profound testament to the openness and community that define the Chouchane household.

Initially known to me as Hassan Chouchan, whom I respectfully addressed as ‘Si Hassan,’ he is the patriarch of the Chouchane family and one of the most esteemed elders and revered central figures of the banga community. At first, his presence was both commanding and enigmatic even in the chaotic energy of the ceremony—his initial glance seemed to assess me, a silent acknowledgment before he turned his attention to the ceremony. His wave of welcome was brief but genuine, his focus quickly returning to the myriad tasks at hand. At that moment, I

sensed the weight of his role—a custodian of a tradition so deeply rooted, yet so precariously carried forward. Over the years, this initial impression would evolve into a deep kinship, as my relationship with him deepened, I came to call him "Jeddi," like his grandchildren, reflecting the profound bond we developed with Jeddi becoming not just a guide but a mentor, a source of wisdom and connection to the living history of banga.

The Chouchane house is also known as *housh el-banga* (the banga house), a space steeped in history and purpose. To some, it is also referred to as housh Ali Halwa (Ali Candy's house), a name rooted in the legacy of Ali Chouchane, Jeddi's father, who once owned a small candy shop. However, this playful moniker carries mixed emotions within the family; while it reflects a piece of their heritage, some of the granddaughters feel embarrassed by it, as certain relatives use the name to tease them. The central courtyard, where the banga ceremonies unfold, was flanked by modest rooms constructed from weathered brick and concrete. Many of these rooms are in varying states of disrepair, reflecting the family's limited resources yet unwavering commitment to their role as caretakers of this sacred practice. The home, passed down through generations, serves as the heart of the banga tradition, hosting nearly all ceremonies and sustaining a lineage of devotion. Fatma led me deeper into the house, where Maya introduced me to the extended family. With seven sons and four daughters, all of whom are married and have children of their own, the household is an interconnected network of lives. Except for Yahya, who now resides in Denmark with his wife, the entire family lives nearby—some under the same roof and others just across the street or in neighboring towns. Their proximity reinforces the vibrancy of their collective lives and the continuity of their traditions. Among the rooms encircling the courtyard lies a small room, housing the tomb of Lella Gindoua, a venerated female Sufi saint. Remembered as a devoted follower of Sidi Marzoug and also believed to have

served Sidi Mouldi, her legacy holds a central place in the spiritual and cultural practices of the region. The name Lella Gindoua is closely associated with the Gindoua drum, an instrument integral to stambeli and banga, particularly in the Oued Souf (commonly referred to as El Oued) region of southern Algeria, near Tozeur. This drum not only provides the rhythmic foundation for these rituals but also symbolizes her enduring presence.

During my visit to El Oued with Jeddi Hassan, I had the opportunity to see the shrine of Lella Gindoua, a sacred site deeply embedded in the spiritual practices of the area. While in Tozeur, I also met Mariem, a Black Algerian woman from El Oued who has been participating in the banga ceremonies in Tozeur for years. Through our conversations about banga, its traditions, and its spirits, I came to understand the profound reverence for Lella Gindoua. Mariem explained that Lella Gindoua is not only the saint but also the embodiment of the banga drum itself. She shared that to some believers, Lella Gindoua may appear *tetharrek* (to move) and *temchi* (to walk), but such visions are reserved for those who possess unwavering faith in Sidi Marzoug and the spirits. This intertwining of spiritual belief, material culture, and ritual practice exemplifies the seamless integration of the sacred and the mundane in the banga tradition, where every object, sound, and action carries profound meaning and reflects a deeply rooted cultural heritage.

The Spirit of Lella Gindoua in Dar Diwan: A Shrine and Multifaceted Space

Jeddi Hassan explained that while Lella Gindoua's spirit is believed to reside in this space, her body is not buried here. Beneath the wooden structure that resembles a tomb—like those found in many zwey—is not an actual grave but a carefully arranged set of multicolored cloths and different types of fabrics, topped with a white covering. Jeddi recounted a deeply personal moment with his mother, Sakhria, who, before her passing, implored him: "Son, please don't leave Lella Gindoua exposed; *ostorha* [cover her up]." To this day, Jeddi shared, neither he

nor anyone else knows what lies within the layers of fabric, and as long as he lives, no one will. For Jeddi, there are three reasons why the cloth must remain untouched. First, he feels bound by his promise to his mother to preserve the saint's covering. Second, he believes that the sacredness of Lella Gindoua relies, in part, on the mystery of what lies within—a reverence rooted in the unknown. Finally, Jeddi fears that unveiling the cloth could expose the community to unforeseen danger—not necessarily from a harmful object but from the act of exposing something meant to remain concealed. In Jeddi's view, the fabric represents a sacred trust, both protecting and symbolizing the community's collective devotion and respect for Lella Gindoua. Her resting place is enshrouded in green satin fabric adorned on the top by sacred objects: a weathered rosary, an incense burner, and a fragment of the Quran, its cover long gone but its significance undiminished. Above the tomb, a rope stretches across the room, supporting vibrant red and green flags, colors that symbolize the banga's deep connections to saints and *turuq* (Sufi orders).

The room's whitewashed walls and aged relics, though marked by chipped paint, henna stains, and exposed cement, exude an aura of layered history and devotion. The modest green door leading to the room opens to a space that is at once humble and profoundly sacred. Green and red flags draped over the central tomb echo the reverence imbued in every corner of the room. A worn prayer rug lies nearby, its frayed edges speaking to decades of use, while candleholders and stones for *tayammum* (dry ritual purification in Islam) line a small ledge. In one corner, banga drums and other instruments are stacked alongside mattresses. While the room housing Lella Gindoua's tomb is often imbued with the reverence and symbolism associated with a *zawiya* (Sufi shrine), the Chouchane family and devotees refer to this space as *dar diwan*. This distinction reflects the specific cultural and spiritual connotations of the term *diwan* within the

banga tradition, which encompasses not only the tomb but also the community, rituals, and collective identity centered around the space. Nestled discreetly in the far-left corner of the housh, dar diwan stands as the sacred epicenter of the Chouchane household. Though easy to overlook upon first entering the courtyard, this modest space holds immense spiritual, historical, and communal significance. To frequent visitors and devotees, its location is well-known—not simply a room to be found, but a space imbued with spiritual gravity. This connection is informed by deep familiarity, learned traditions, and personal devotion, which guide visitors and family members alike to its threshold. The term *diwan* itself is rich with layered meaning, rooted in Arabic and historical usage. Within the context of banga, diwan refers not only to the physical space but also to the collective identity of the community it represents. It is often used interchangeably with *hizb*—a multifaceted term that can mean "group" in the sense of an affiliation with a specific community (or even a political party). In Tunisian Sufi circles, *hizb* also refers to chapters of religious texts, often written or transmitted by a saint or their followers. This dual meaning subtly connects the term to both communal devotion and the formal, prestigious traditions of Sufism in the region. The term is further tied to the concept of *Sittīn Hizb* (sixty *hizb*), referencing the division of the Quran into chapters for structured recitation and reflection. Some people refer to it as "hizb el-banga," while others call it "diwan el-banga."

Dar diwan (house of the diwan) on the other hand, symbolizes both a gathering place and a spiritual hub, while *awled diwan* (sons of the diwan) refers to the lineage of individuals—such as Jeddi's sons—responsible for preserving and transmitting the tradition. This multifaceted usage highlights the term's historical depth and evolving significance within the banga community. Inside dar diwan, the sacred is inseparable from the rhythms of daily life. Here, there is no division between what might be seen as functional or spiritual; instead, every action, sound,

and object embodies the interconnected essence of banga. The cement floor, softened by *hsira* (woven mats) and worn mattresses, transforms the room into a multifunctional space: a shrine, a resting place, a playground for children, and a sanctuary for women entering trance during the ceremonies. Its shelves hold items both mundane and mystical—antique candleholders, a wooden Quran stand, and mattresses used by family members and visitors. The objects within the space, from everyday items to sacred instruments, form a tapestry of meanings, where the practical and the divine coexist seamlessly.

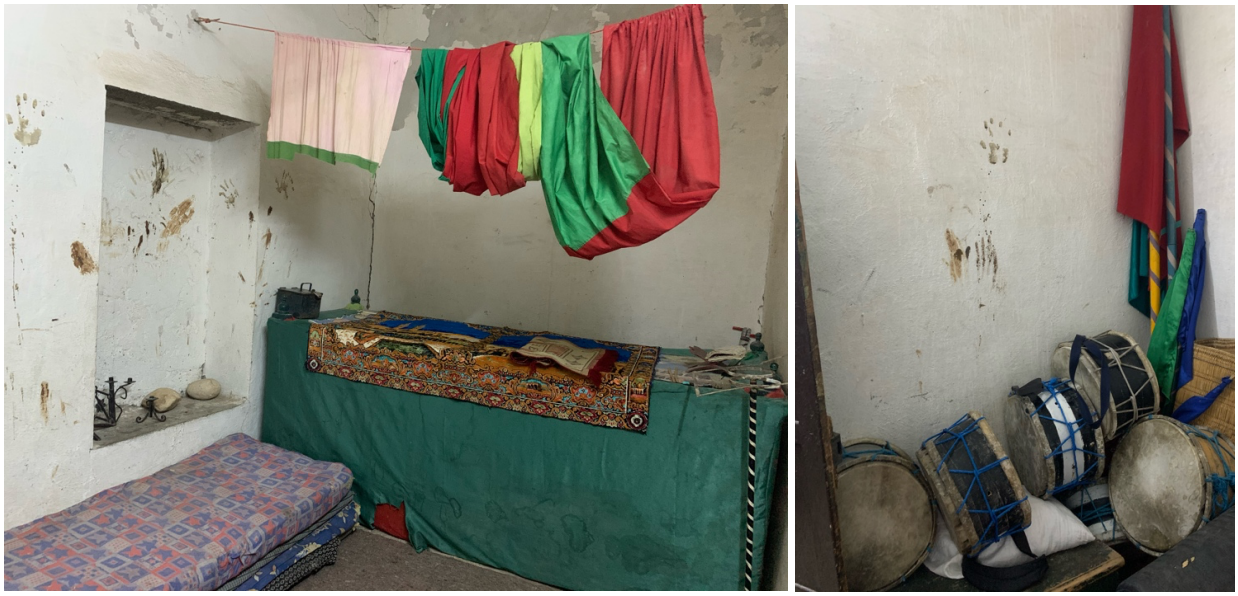

Figure 1.4 Tomb of Lella Guindoua inside dar diwan. *Photographed by author, July 2019.*

During banga ceremonies, dar diwan assumes an additional role as a sanctuary. Amid the predominantly male crowd gathered in the courtyard, women entering trance are guided gently into this protected space, where they are shielded from potential exposure or vulnerability. This room ensures their safety while preserving the sanctity of their experience. Women at risk of losing their hijabs or stumbling in ecstasy find refuge here, supported by others who remain conscious. This duality defines dar diwan: it is a place of both visibility and invisibility, sacred

yet private, embodying roles of safety, reverence, and transformation. Beyond its ritual importance, dar diwan reflects the Chouchane family's devotion and care. Its whitewashed walls, though marked by time and use, carry the layered histories of the household. Over the course of my fieldwork, I observed subtle yet meaningful changes in the space. The most notable transformation occurred in 2023, when the walls were freshly painted and decorated with a few portraits of family members who passed away, giving the room a revitalized appearance. These changes, along with the rearrangement of objects and the addition of new adornments, illustrate

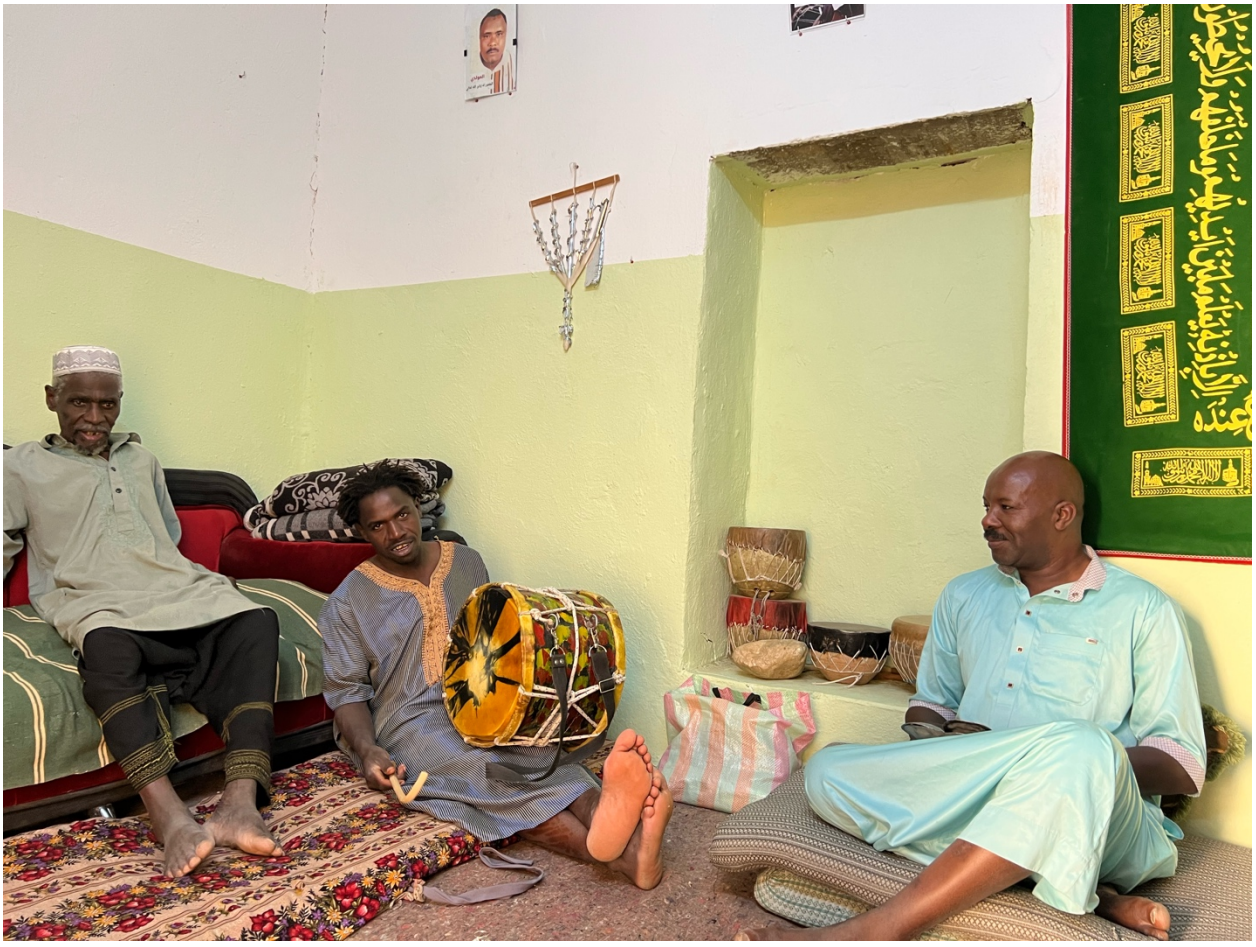

Figure 1.5 From right to left: Mouldi, Ali, and Jeddi Hassan inside dar diwan, discussing banga and performing praise songs. *Photographed by author, July 2023.*

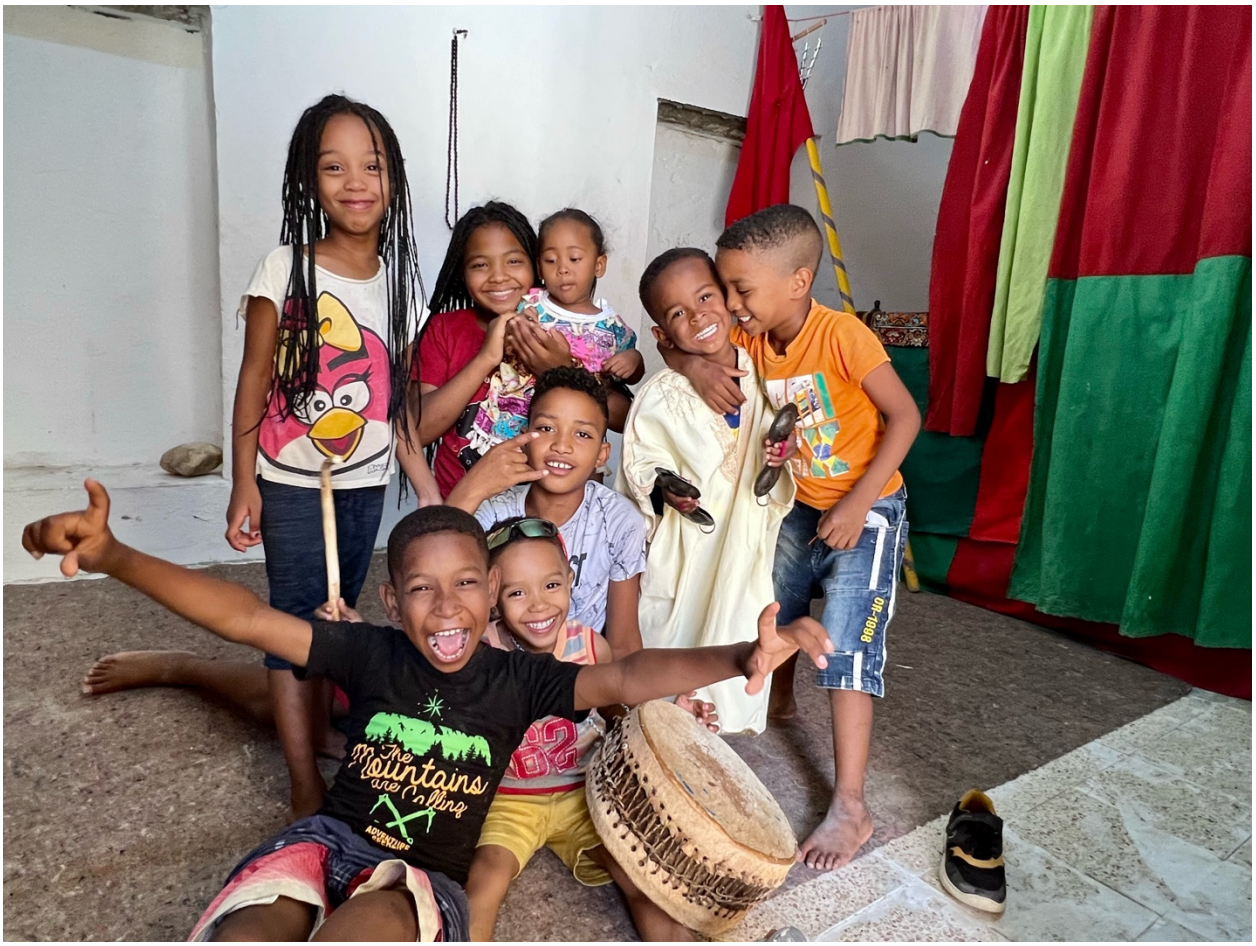

Figure 1.6 Chouchane grandchildren playing inside dar diwan. *Photographed by author, July 2023.*

how the family continues to adapt the space while maintaining its deep connection to the banga tradition. Such acts of renewal reflect not only a practical concern for the upkeep of the room but also a recognition of its evolving significance as a living entity within the household.

As the heart of the Chouchane family's spiritual practice, dar diwan is far more than a room. It serves as a sacred site for rituals, a practical refuge for visitors and family members, and a dynamic repository of collective memory. This space embodies the constancy of tradition while allowing for transformation, adapting to the needs of the present without losing its sacred roots.

In doing so, dar diwan remains central to the lived experience of the banga, bridging the functional and the divine, the individual and the communal.

Zawiya: A Site of Consistent Construction of Memory

Sufi shrines, or *zwey* (plural of *zawiya*), are deeply embedded in Tunisia's cultural and spiritual fabric. In Tunisian Arabic, *zawiya* translates to "corner," symbolizing both a physical and metaphorical space for protection and reverence. Zwey traditionally offer social welfare, often providing food and shelter to those in need, while serving as spaces of devotion and communal memory. The years following the 2011 Tunisian Revolution were a crucial period in the reassessment of Tunisian identity not only in terms of its politics, history, and culture but also in terms of Tunisians' religious practices and ideologies. Zwey have become vulnerable entities that are, in a sense, trapped between two different philosophies of Islam. Tunisians who do not necessarily identify as Sufis, but rather Sunni Muslims, continue to take part in the ziyara to honor these zwey and their saints. Other Tunisian Muslims consider this an act of heresy and consider those who visit the zwey infidels.The dichotomy between institutional religion and individual practices could be analyzed through Leonard Norman Primiano's concept of "vernacular religion." Primiano argues that the study of religion should not be limited to the examination of "official religion" but must also focus on how religion is lived and practiced in everyday life through the diverse experiences of individuals (1995, 46). From this perspective, banga could be understood as a localized expression of spirituality, integrating elements of devotional practice, healing, and connection to the divine.

At the same time, it is crucial to consider how banga practitioners themselves conceptualize their practices. They do not consider banga as "religion" (*dīn*) in the formal sense and for them, Islam remains their core religious identity, while banga is understood as a

complementary practice—one that facilitates healing and brings them closer to God through Sidi Marzoug but does not constitute their religion. This distinction highlights the importance of situating banga within its cultural and spiritual context, recognizing its integration with Islamic beliefs while also honoring its unique role as a devotional and therapeutic tradition. Dar diwan embodies these dynamics. Visitors often begin their banga experience here by reciting *Al-Fatiha* (The Opening), which is the first chapter (*surah*) of the Quran and is one of the most important and frequently recited parts of Islamic scripture. Composed of seven verses, it holds a central place in Muslim worship and spirituality. It is often referred to as the "Essence of the Quran" due to its comprehensive themes of praise, guidance, and prayer before proceeding to the courtyard ceremonies. The recitation of Al-Fatiha marks the start of healing rituals and Sufi ceremonies across Tunisia, serving as a unifying spiritual practice.

Jeddi Hasan's recounting of Lella Gindoua's story exemplifies oral traditions sustaining the spiritual and historical dimensions of the banga. In his view, the zawiya is not only a structure but a living entity, imbued with the saint's presence. This fluid interaction between memory and space aligns with Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), where memory is continually reconstructed through collective and individual experiences (Nora 1989, 12). The zawiya, layered with histories and rituals, serves as a repository of living memory, intertwining the narratives of saints and the Chouchane family. The materiality of the zawiya reflects its role as both a container and a vessel of memory. Polly and Allen Roberts' exploration of Luba Lukasa memory boards illustrates how material objects encode fluid and dynamic histories (Roberts and Roberts 1996, 86). A zawiya accumulates memories over time through its objects and inscriptions. The chipped walls of the Chouchane zawiya bear the handprints and messages of visitors seeking *baraka* (blessings), healing, or prosperity. These

"scarifications," as Polly and Allen Roberts might suggest, transform the zawiya into a physical embodiment of individual and collective memory. This phenomenon recalls the anthropological insights of Lila Abu-Lughod, who emphasizes "ethnographies of the particular" to honor the specific histories and relationships within a community (Abu-Lughod 1991, 149–53). Such an approach reframes the zawiya not merely as a religious structure but as a dynamic, multidimensional space where intersecting identities and experiences are continually negotiated.

A poignant example of the fluidity of memory and space is the fire that gutted part of the Chouchane home. When I visited this section, Maya and Jeddi Hassan walked me through the charred walls and ash-covered floors, remnants of a tragedy they attributed to Sidi Marzoug's displeasure at the postponement of the annual ziyara. "It was just a warning," Jeddi explained, his tone a mixture of sorrow and acceptance. This space, once filled with personal belongings, has since become an impromptu zawiya, housing cookware, banga instruments, and offerings for Sidi Marzoug's ziyara. As Nora posits, memory is fluid, continually restructured by the needs and narratives of a community (1989, 13). The burned room, though marked by loss, has become a lieu de mémoire, where reconstructed memories sustain the family's connection to Sidi Marzoug. The stories of saints, such as Sidi Marzoug and his master Sidi Bou Ali El Nafti, offer insight into the layered temporality of banga traditions. According to Jeddi Hassan, Sidi Marzoug, a saint of Sudanese origin—referring not strictly to the modern nation-state of Sudan but to the broader historical and cultural understanding of "Bilad al-Sudan" (the Land of the Blacks), encompassing much of West Africa and Central Africa—was recognized for his miraculous abilities by Sidi Bou Ali, a white Arab saint, leading to the establishment of Sidi Marzoug's zawiya in Nefta. These narratives, while referencing specific historical events and

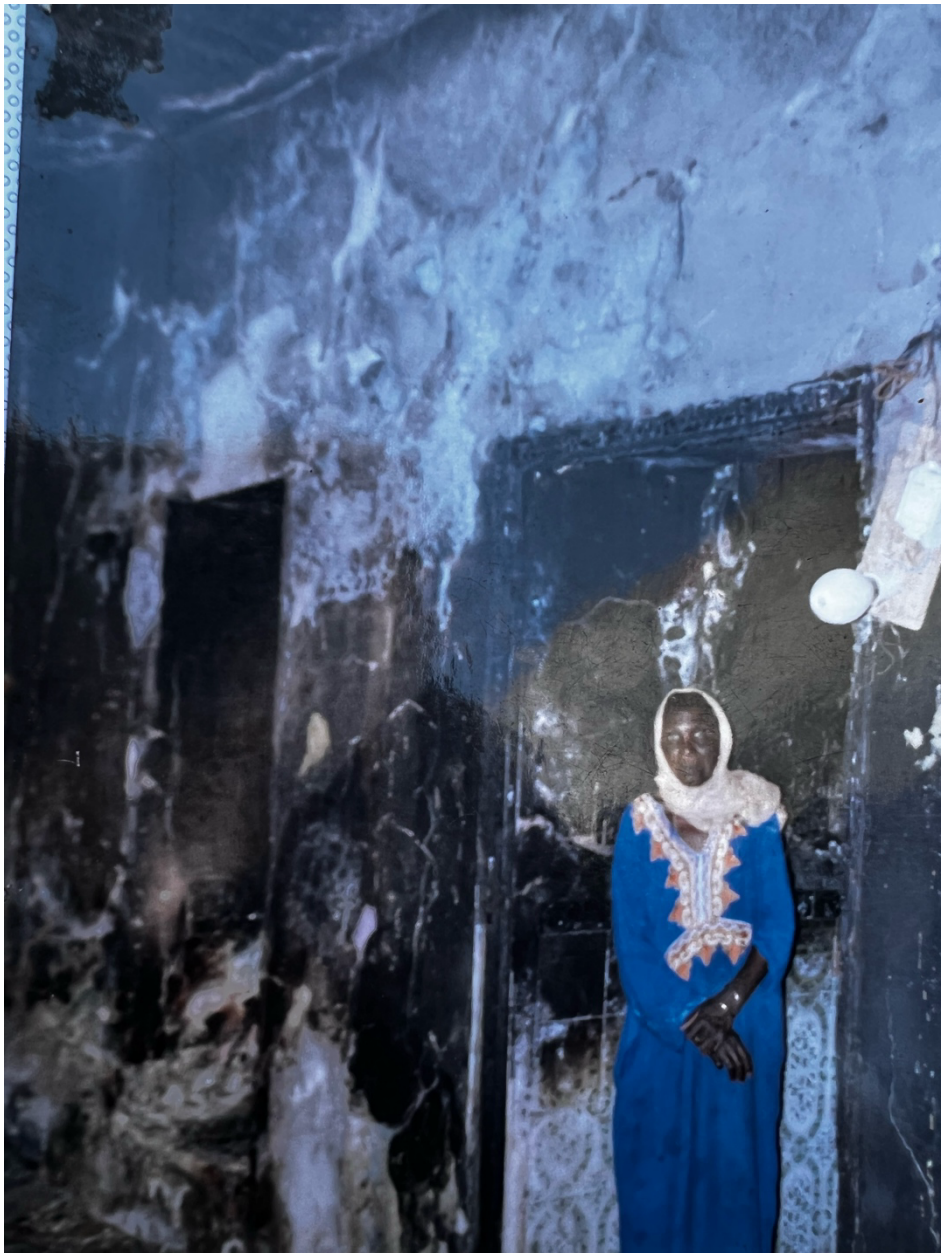

Figure 1.7 Maya standing in front of the side of the house that was completely burned in late 2017. *Photograph courtesy of Meriem Chouchane.*

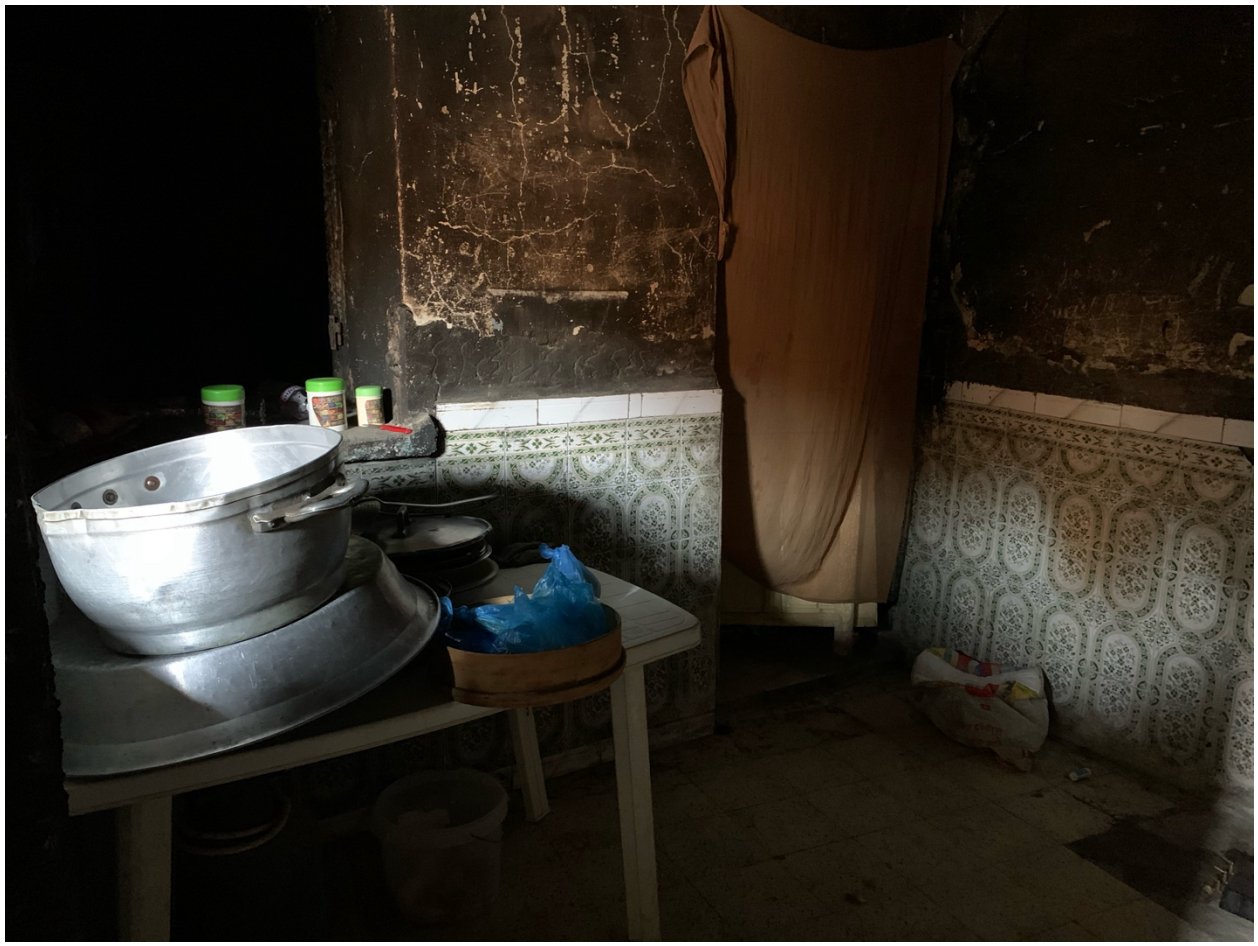

Figure 1.8 Inside the burned portion of the house. *Photographed by author, August 2019.*

genealogical connections, also transcend fixed chronological markers by emphasizing spiritual continuity and the saints' ongoing presence in the lives of their followers.

This dual temporality reflects a dynamic interplay between historical lineage and lived experience. The genealogical "chains" (*silsilat*) situate Sufi saints within a clear lineage, extending back to the Prophet, thereby grounding them in a historical framework. Yet, within the narratives shared by practitioners like Jeddi Hassan, the focus often shifts to the saints' active roles in the present, as sources of guidance, intercession, and miraculous interventions. In this way, the oral histories do not reject linear time but complement it with an experiential understanding of time, where past and present coexist and saints remain spiritually "alive" to

their devotees. This perspective resonates with Johannes Fabian's critique of strictly linear conceptions of time, advocating for an approach that is coextensive with lived experience (Fabian 1983, 11–88812). By integrating the saints into the immediate spiritual and cultural practices of the banga tradition, the narratives highlight a temporality that is as much about present action and relationality as it is about historical chronology. To fully understand this interplay, one must consider how practitioners perceive the saints' relevance both as historical figures and as active participants in their spiritual lives today. Elizabeth Tonkin's notion of oral history as performative further enriches this perspective, emphasizing how storytelling actively constructs memory (Tonkin 1992, 11). Each retelling of the saints' stories reinforces their significance, transforming them into enduring cultural touchstones.

Ambiguities of Race and the Significance of Sub-Saharanness in Banga

Sidi Marzoug, with his sub-Saharan roots and a life history of displacement, servitude, emancipation, and spiritual power, is a saint of great significance to Black ritual communities across Tunisia and neighboring areas of Algeria. The racial history of Black communities in Tunisia reflects an intricate interplay of indigenous roots, trans-Saharan connections, and evolving social identities. These complexities are particularly pronounced in the banga tradition, where historical terms like *shwashin* and surnames such as *Chouchène* (or *Chouchane*) reveal the layered dynamics of race and Blackness in Tunisia. This section critically examines the use of "sub-Saharan" in the context of banga, integrating community narratives, scholarly insights, and the cultural significance of these racialized terms.

The question of whether Black communities in southern Tunisia are indigenous or connected to sub-Saharan Africa remains a focal point of scholarly and communal discussions. Scholars like Marta Scaglione note that racialized classifications such as *shwashin* often serve as

intermediary categories, blending Arab and Black ancestries while distinguishing indigenous groups from those descended from enslaved populations. In banga, these dynamics surface in the narratives of practitioners like Jeddi, who describe both indigenous roots and connections to broader African networks. Jeddi's accounts of Sidi Marzoug, for example, situate the figure's origins in Mali while simultaneously asserting the Tunisian identity of banga practitioners. Such narratives highlight the fluidity of identity within the banga tradition, where sub-Saharan origins and Black Tunisian indigeneity coexist as complementary frameworks.

The term *shwashin* is particularly significant in southern Tunisia, where it historically referred to Black communities seen as distinct from enslaved populations. Scaglione's analysis emphasizes how shwashin were perceived as indigenous Black Tunisians, often occupying a liminal space between servitude and freedom. Jeddi's reflections reinforce this complexity, noting that the term is intertwined with familial and communal identities within the banga tradition.

The surname *Chouchène* (also spelled *Chouchane*; from the same Arabic root as shwashin) further illustrates the cultural and historical connotations of race in Tunisia. According to Tunisian poet and activist Anis Chouchène, the name translates to "the brown one" or "the darkest color" in Tunisian Arabic. It is also linked to the Chouchènian tribe and carries a historical association with slavery. Chouchène's decision to embrace the term as a title reflects a reclamation of identity and a challenge to the stigmatization of Blackness in Tunisia. This act of reclamation underscores the evolving relationship between historical designations and contemporary identities, particularly within the context of banga's racial dynamics (Al-Mayadeen TV 2015).

The use of "sub-Saharan" in this dissertation reflects the ways in which banga practitioners articulate their own histories and identities. For Jeddi and others, connections to sub-Saharan Africa, such as Sidi Marzoug's Malian origins, are integral to their narratives. These ties, expressed through the linguistic and musical elements of banga, illustrate the enduring cultural impact of trans-Saharan exchanges. The term *sub-Saharan*, however, does not negate Black Tunisian indigeneity. Instead, it complements the understanding of *shwashin* and families like the Chouchènes as integral to Tunisia's cultural and racial history. Certain words sung in the banga praise songs, though their meanings are not understood by the community members, remain deeply embedded in the tradition. Jeddi in particular, insists on preserving and learning these words as they are. This persistence encapsulates the blending of local and transcontinental influences, demonstrating the fluidity of identity and the enduring power of cultural memory within the banga tradition.

The following section is devoted to a sensory immersion into the unfolding ceremony as I witnessed it on that first day in 2019. With Montassar capturing the visuals and me absorbing the atmosphere, this account seeks to convey the textures, sounds, and movements of the banga's beginning—an intricate tapestry woven from the threads of devotion, history, and community. As I mentioned in the introduction, objectivity is a term and practice rooted in early traditional ethnographic work, which often sought to distance the researcher from the subject of study. In contrast, I do not consider myself abstracted from my research. I am fully aware that even this description is subjective and shaped by my presence, my relationship with the Chouchane family, and the ways I view and interpret the ceremony. While the goal of this dissertation is not to undertake an auto-ethnography, I strive to remain conscious and mindful of my own subjectivity

throughout. This interplay of observation and interpretation reflects my attempt to not only describe but also situate the banga ceremony within its broader social and spiritual contexts.

Resonance of the Sacred: Insights into the Banga Ceremony

Returning to Tozeur in 2019 felt like revisiting an old, familiar narrative, one whose pages I had thumbed through countless times but now revealed new annotations in the margins. This time, I brought Montassar, the young and immensely talented Tunisian filmmaker and activist, introduced in the first chapter whose lens promised to capture the intricate details that my words might miss. Montassar came into my life through a serendipitous introduction by my journalist friend, Haithem El-Mekki, who knew of my work and intuitively understood that Montassar's sharp eye and empathetic storytelling would be invaluable for documenting the banga. Together, we aimed to document not only the visual richness of the ceremony but also the nuanced, ephemeral emotions that seemed to permeate the very air of the Chouchane courtyard. The ceremony of 2019 was unique for me. It marked the first time I witnessed the banga unfold from its very beginning—a momentous entry into the layers of sound, spirit, and ritual that define this practice. This perspective brought with it a new awareness of how the rhythms of past and present converge, as the opening praise songs carried echoes of ceremonies long gone and premonitions of those yet to come. This interplay of *analepsis* (a narrative flashback to the past) and *prolepsis* (a narrative anticipation of the future)—of past and future meeting in the unfolding present—framed my experience, reminding me that the banga is not just a ritual but a living narrative. Each moment within it reverberates with the weight of memory and the anticipation of continuation. These terms, drawn from narratology (Genette 1980), emphasize how the ritual bridges temporal boundaries, weaving together personal and collective histories with the ongoing practice of tradition. The banga's temporality reflects this dynamic, allowing participants to

simultaneously recall ancestral ties and envision future continuities, all while deeply engaged in the present moment.

It is around 7 a.m. when I stir awake, greeted by the resonance of voices and footsteps in the courtyard. The housh hums with life as laughter mingles with the crowing of roosters and bleating goats. The room is dim, except for the faint glow of the air conditioner's green button. Montassar sleeps on a modest plywood frame on one side facing Jeddi on the other side, while I sleep on one of the mattresses on the floor. I rise quietly, unsure who awaits outside. Opening the door, the courtyard bursts into view—sunlight and greetings flood my senses. "*Saʿaid*!" voices echo, a colloquial Tozeur good morning. I see Jeddi Hassan, seated regally in a white plastic chair, and Maya, flanked by her daughters and grandchildren. They sit on the floor around a low wooden table laden with mismatched mugs, coffee pots, and bread baskets. A chair is offered to me, but I opt for the floor, prompting Maya's granddaughter Aroua to fetch and wipe a seat for me, her smile reflecting warmth and trust. Around the table, conversation flows effortlessly—from banga stories to local news, punctuated by jokes and loud, infectious laughter. Raja, a visitor from Tunis, shares her journey to the housh. Suffering from an "unexplained illness" that left her unable to walk, she sought healing here. Now, she not only walks but dances. "Banga healed her," said Jeddi and Raja nodded in agreement. These tales, told and retold, anchor banga as a space of spiritual and communal renewal.

The courtyard becomes a living stage. Maya, maternal yet commanding, leads preparations, ensuring every detail reflects the ritual's significance. Jeddi, with his raspy Tozeur accent, instructs the young men to retrieve the *sandoug*—a green plastic crate filled with shakasheek, the handheld metallic percussion instruments central to the banga. The men don *jwekh* (singular *joukha*, called *jebba* in other regions of Tunisia)—traditional striped gowns worn

over casual attire, their faded fabrics marked by years of devotion. As they begin to play, the metallic rhythm of the shakasheek grows louder, resonating like the heartbeat of the courtyard. The courtyard transforms into a sensory tapestry. Women ululate in celebration, children dart about with flags, and the aroma of burning *bakhour* (incense) mingles with the desert air. Musicians move toward dar diwan, their instruments held with practiced ease. The crowd shifts to make way, a quiet choreography of anticipation. The steady rhythm of the banga drums and the metallic pulse of the shakasheek ripple through the air, drawing me—and everyone else—closer, compelled to follow the sound and see the performance unfold. As the musicians enter the small room, the space quickly fills to capacity. People press against one another to secure a spot inside, but I am immediately aware of the limits imposed by the room's size—and by unspoken social norms. As a woman, I hesitate to push my way into a space where the men are setting up and playing their instruments. The performance feels sacred to its participants, and I am cautious not to impose myself. Instead, I remain just outside the entrance, positioning myself as close as possible without crossing any boundaries. I raise my phone, aiming to document the scene inside. The crowded doorway frames my view, and though my angle is limited, the energy of the music resonates even from the outside.

Initially, I hesitated to start filming. The act feels intrusive, but as I look around, I notice nearly everyone else doing the same—family members and other attendees casually recording the performance with their phones. Many even broadcast the event live on social media, especially on Facebook, sharing this deeply local experience with a broader audience in real time. Reassured, I press record, lifting my phone higher to capture the vibrant activity within dar diwan. This documentation feels both urgent and fragile, as though preserving these moments is the only way to fully absorb the layers of sound, movement, and emotion unfolding before me.

The atmosphere within dar diwan is alive with energy and intention, the sound of the music reverberating through the enclosed space. Around six musicians occupy the room, their focus evident in the synchronization of their movements and the interplay of rhythms. Tarek initiates the performance, striking the banga drum with measured precision while singing in a commanding voice. He begins with the *madha* (praise song), a form of devotional singing specifically associated with Sufi practices. The term madha (plural: madhat, noun: madh) distinguishes these spiritual compositions from *aghani* (popular songs, singular: *oghnya*), reflecting their sacred and performative intent. While the term "chant" has historically been used to describe this style, I have chosen to use "singing" for clarity, as it avoids the orientalist connotations of detachment or otherness. However, it is worth noting that within this context, the act of performing a madha is most often referred to as "yqoul" (he says), emphasizing the oral and narrative aspects of this tradition.

Tarek starts the madha without instrumental accompaniment, allowing his voice alone to establish the melody and set the spiritual tone. Once the foundational verses are introduced, he transitions into the music. The other musicians respond immediately, joining in with the rhythmic pulse of the shakasheek and echoing the specific verses he has introduced, their collective energy building into a powerful and unified sound. The lyrics—some familiar and others unfamiliar—are difficult to discern, their meaning obscured by the powerful volume and intricate layers of the performance. While parts of the words are recognizable as Tunisian, other phrases and tones reflect a linguistic and cultural richness that suggests diverse influences. As the performance concludes within dar diwan, the group begins to move toward the courtyard. They do not pause the music, instead, the rhythm continues seamlessly, their steps and movements synchronized

with the beat. Emerging into the open space, the musicians start to reassemble, forming a wide circle.

In the courtyard, the music intensifies and takes on new dimensions. The group, now numbering at least fourteen, organizes into a striking formation. At the center of the circle, the drummers take their place, commanding attention. There are four drummers this morning, their powerful beats forming the core of the sound. I learned from Jeddi during my fieldwork that this is not always the case, but there should be at least two drummers to maintain the rhythm and structure of the performance. Surrounding them, at least ten shakasheek players create a dynamic perimeter. Each musician shakes their instrument in time with the rhythm. Their movements are fluid as they dance in *dourat* (circles, singular *doura*) around the drummers. They are not simply moving in circles; their choreography incorporates additional steps, shifting their feet right and left, back and forward in rhythm with the music. At times, they also move their hands with the shakasheek in a synchronized, choreographed manner, adding a dynamic visual element to their performance. The drummers, though stationed in the middle, are far from static. They make eye contact with the shakasheek players, occasionally swaying and gesturing to guide the group's tempo and transitions. Their movements and glances serve as unspoken cues, reinforcing their leadership role even as they remain within the circle's core. The shakasheek players, dressed in ornate jwekh, bring a visual vibrancy to the performance, their colorful attire catching the light as they move. Tarek was dressed in a sleeveless shirt and jean shorts, while the other drummers wore t-shirts and fabric shorts, their casual attire contrasting with the more elaborate jwekh of the shakasheek players. The interplay between the two groups is mesmerizing, with the rhythmic layering and spatial arrangement creating an immersive and dynamic experience. The musicians' movements grow increasingly energetic, their steps attuned to the drummers' beats. The circle

itself feels alive, constantly shifting as the musicians adapt to the evolving tempo and mood. This dynamic interplay between the central drummers and the surrounding shakasheek players transforms the courtyard into a living expression of tradition, one where sound, movement, and human connection come together in perfect harmony.

The banga procession begins, spilling out from the Chouchane courtyard into the winding streets of Tozeur. The sun casts sharp shadows against the brick walls of the medina, where green-painted doors and arched entryways frame the path ahead. Drummers clad in their jwekh lead the way, their instruments strapped tightly to their chests. The rhythmic pounding of the drums blends with the metallic clatter of the shakasheek, creating a sonic wave that echoes through the narrow alleyways. No ziyara is complete without flags. Vibrant and essential, they flutter above the heads of the procession like sacred beacons, their presence akin to the Tunisian proverb: "Like salt, it's never absent from food." Green, white, yellow, and red dominate the color palette, each hue representing a saint or a *tariqa* (Sufi order), according to Jeddi. Some flags are adorned with the *Shahada* ("There is no god but God") in elegant Arabic calligraphy, their inscriptions catching the light as they move through the streets. The flags' colors not only signal devotion but weave a visual narrative of the spiritual traditions embedded in the ziyara.

At the center of the procession is the ʿ*atrous*, a majestic black goat of the Tunisian ʿ*arbi* breed, adorned with vibrant ornaments. A bright red fabric draped over its back sets it apart, a ceremonial symbol of its role as the sacrificial offering for Thursday's ziyara. The ʿatrous is guided through the streets by Tarek, one of Jeddi's middle brothers and a key figure in the procession. With one hand, Tarek steers the ʿatrous, and with the other, he plays the banga, moving effortlessly between his duties as a leader and musician. As the ʿatrous walks alongside the performers, it becomes a focal point of the ritual. Residents and onlookers approach it with

reverence, touching its horns or back, then kissing their hands as a gesture of blessing. Some even kiss the animal itself, offering it small pieces of food or spraying it with perfume. Women's high-pitched joyful ululations rise above the steady rhythm of the drums and shakasheek. This act of interacting with the ʿatrous is imbued with spiritual significance, a shared moment of connection between the sacred and the communal. I found myself mesmerized by watching the ʿatrous, following the procession without being held or guided most of the time. As a matter of fact, the ʿatrous was the one leading the procession guiding the musicians which house to enter. Jeddi and many others in the banga community shared with me that "the ʿatrous knows where to go, he knows who we are, he knows Sidi Marzoug, and he knows banga."

The streets come alive as spectators gather, forming a loose ring around the performers. Some watch with curiosity, others cheer or capture the moment on their phones. Women in vivid headscarves and patterned dresses lean out from doorways, adding their voices to the unfolding celebration. Children, waving small flags in green, red, and yellow, dart between the musicians, their laughter weaving into the fabric of the ceremony. The procession pauses at key homes, where the music enters and fills intimate spaces. Here, hosts provide water, food, and perfume as offerings to the performers, further sanctifying the journey. The scent of burning bakhour mixes with the desert air, creating an atmosphere both festive and sacred. As the musicians resume their path, the collective energy of the ziyara grows, pulling more people into its orbit. Every element of the procession, from the rhythmic sounds to the intricate visuals, forms a living tapestry of devotion, memory, and celebration. The streets of Tozeur, with their textured walls and bustling corners, provide the perfect backdrop for this display of communal identity and spiritual heritage.

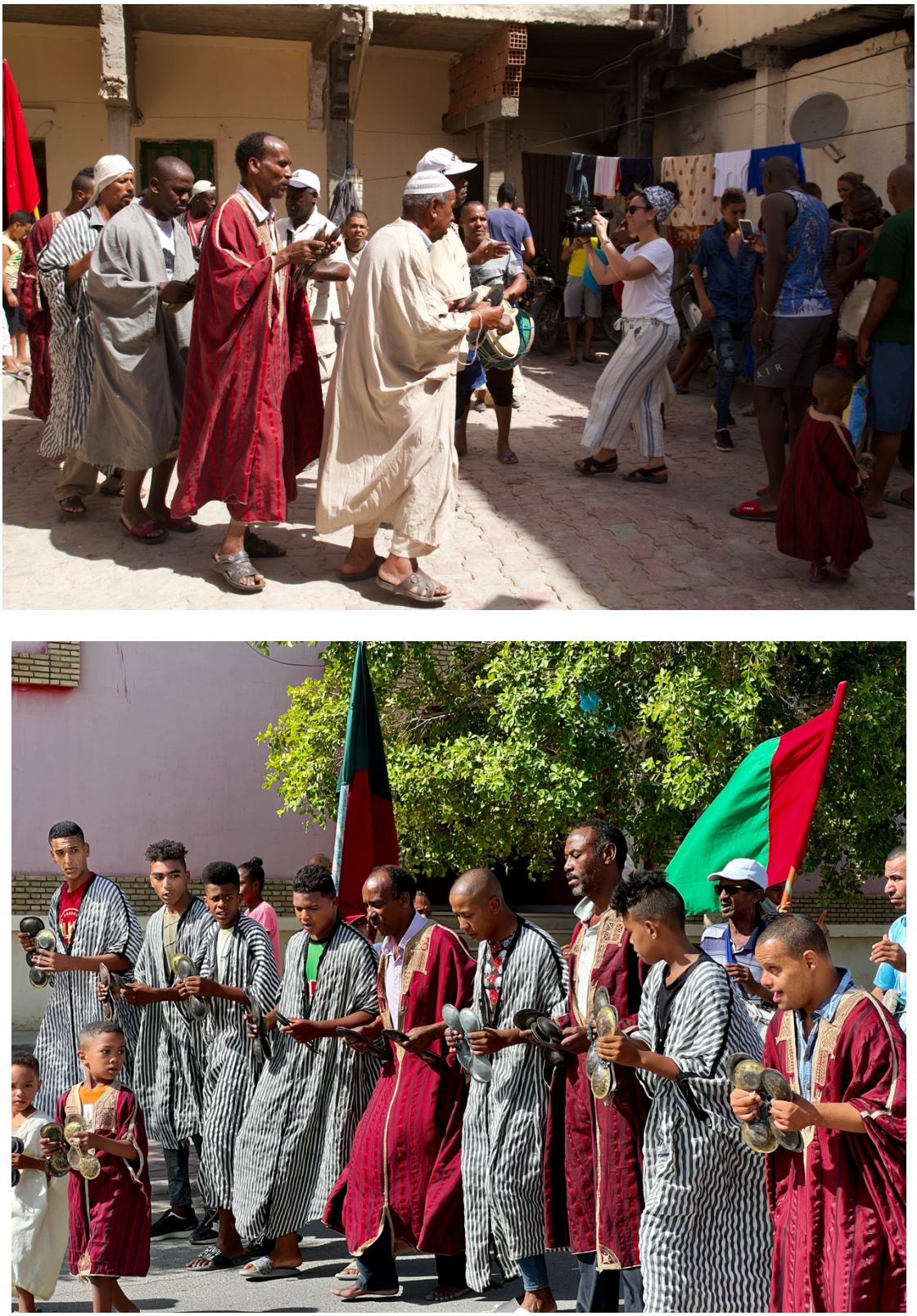

Figure 1.9 Banga procession starting from the Chouchane house courtyard (*top*) toward the streets of Tozeur (*bottom*). *Photographed by Montassar Ben Jdila, July 2018.*

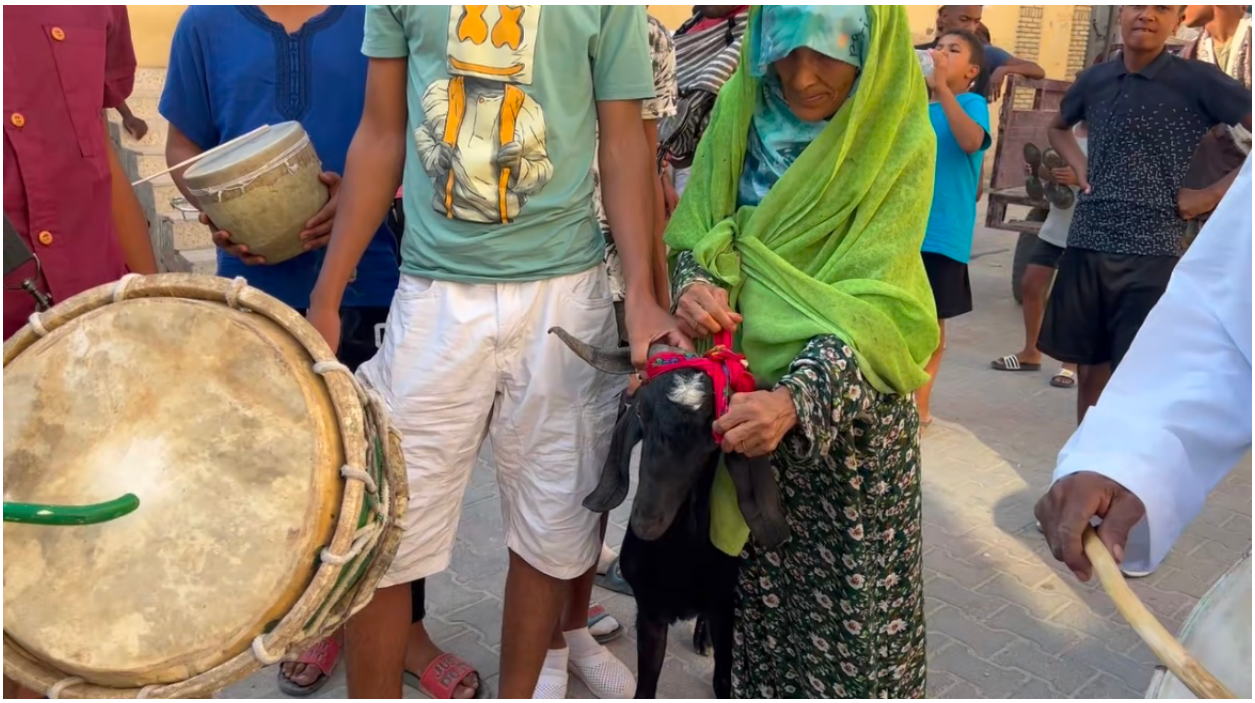

Figure 1.10 A woman from the community wrapping the horns of the ʿatrous with a scarf. *Photographed by author, July 2023.*

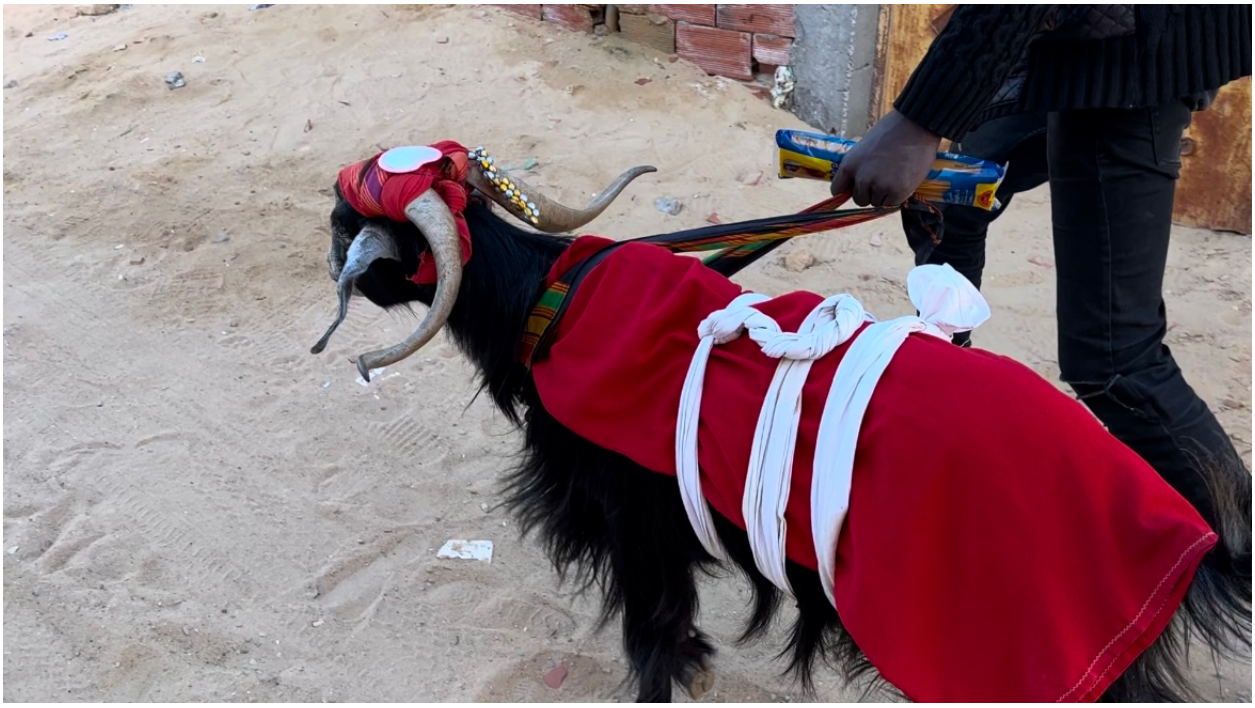

Figure 1.11 ʿAtrous "decorated," ready for the spring banga procession. *Photographed by author, March 2023.*

As night settles over the courtyard, the steady pulse of banga drumming fills the air, transforming the space into the center of a collective energy. The circle of musicians, fully immersed in the ceremony, intensifies their rhythms, their beats resonating through the night. The drumming rises with a cadence that seems to transport certain participants into a heightened state of *takhmir* (interchangeable with *takhmira*), a term used across Tunisia to describe trance. In the context of banga, this state is referred to with the adjective *mahmoul* for men or *mahmoula* for women, which derives from the Arabic root meaning "to carry." This descriptive form translates as "to be carried," evoking the imagery of an individual being transported or borne away by the experience. As Richard C. Jankowsky explains in *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia*, takhmir involves a temporary displacement of the conscious self, allowing participants to connect deeply with the ritual's emotional and spiritual dimensions (92, 2010). However, not everyone in the gathering experiences this state; it is typically those more deeply immersed in the ritual who are most likely to be "carried." Additionally, social and cultural norms often shape who is expected or permitted to fall into this state, reflecting their relationship to the practice and its spiritual significance.

The metallic clatter of the shakasheek adds layers of complexity, weaving a tapestry of sound that is both grounding and otherworldly. Inside the illuminated courtyard, the crowd is no longer merely an audience but an integral part of the performance. The participants sway to the rhythm, their movements increasingly synchronized with the drumming. Each individual seems to inhabit their own unique narrative, yet collectively they form a unified wave of motion. In the center of the circle, a young man enters into an intense state of takhmir, his body swaying in a fluid yet frenetic rhythm. His arms stretch wide before snapping into controlled movements, embodying the rhythm's spiritual pull. The women near the shrine to Lella Gindoua clap

rhythmically, their ululations soaring above the steady beat. Among them, an elderly woman, adorned in a vividly colored scarf, begins to join in, singing the madha, her voice rising and weaving seamlessly into the music. No one steps in to stop or hold her; instead, her participation feels like an organic extension of the ceremony, her voice a vital thread in the collective energy.

As the drumming intensifies, the focus shifts. A few girls from the Chouchane family—Jeddi's granddaughters, ranging in age from 10 to 14—enter the circle, facing the musicians. Their eyes close, and they begin to sway their upper bodies right and left, caught in the escalating rhythm. The scene grows more urgent as one of the girls starts to move more intensely, her entire body responding to the beat. A mother quickly steps in, signaling for someone to hand her a joukha or scarf. Maya, Jeddi's wife and the children's grandmother, rushes in with the joukha, and despite the girl's increasingly intense and fast swaying movements, the mother manages to wrap her daughter in the scarf. Even as the task proves challenging, the mother persists, ensuring the joukha is securely in place. With her daughter covered, she holds her by the waist and gently guides her toward Lella Gindoua. Other women in trance are similarly attended to, wrapped in scarves by family members and held by their waist as they sway in takhmir, further reinforcing the atmosphere of care and collective participation.

Jeddi's voice cuts sharply through the rising energy, his tone firm and commanding: "Stop the screaming, and have someone carry them inside Lella Gindoua, or I will stop the banga." His authority anchors the moment, maintaining the flow of the ritual while ensuring its boundaries remain intact. Meanwhile, more men join the circle, falling into trance as the rhythm overtakes them. At first, their bodies seem stiff as they fall while standing, as if locked in place. Members of the Chouchane brothers step in to assist, removing the men's shoes and supporting them. For those still wearing shirts, they are held by the fabric; for others who have shed them, a

family member grips their arm or stands close to prevent them from collapsing into the musicians or the crowd. This quiet choreography of care, interwoven with the intensity of the ceremony, ensures that the trance remains a collective and supported experience. The scent of bakhour fills the courtyard, mingling with the earthy aroma of the desert night. The fire in the kanoun (a traditional charcoal brazier made of clay) glows brighter, its embers dancing in time with the ceremony's relentless energy. As the intensity crescendos, participants seem to surrender to the ritual's rhythm, their bodies moving with an unspoken understanding of its demands. The scene is both dynamic and harmonious, a vivid manifestation of devotion, memory, and community. The night ceremony of the banga, with its layers of sound, movement, and spirit, becomes a living testament to the Chouchane family's enduring legacy, etched into the rhythms of Tozeur's layered history.

Being familiar with takhmir, I know that one's takhmira is considered complete when they collapse, signaling the end of their trance state. As the takhmir reaches its conclusion, men begin to fall to the ground, fainting under the weight of the ritual's intensity. Immediately, another man from the family rushes to their side, gently holding their head and whispering into their ear. I later learned that this act is more than a gesture of care—it involves reciting verses from the Quran to *ysarrah* (verb, to release) or initiate *tasrih* (noun), signaling that the participant's takhmira has concluded and they need to *yfiq* (wake up). The whispers serve as a bridge, guiding the entranced participant back to consciousness, grounding them after their journey into the heightened spiritual state. In certain cases, recitation of the Quran alone (tasrih) may not suffice to bring an individual in trance to the point of completing their trance or regaining full awareness, as their behavior remains intense and physically expressive.

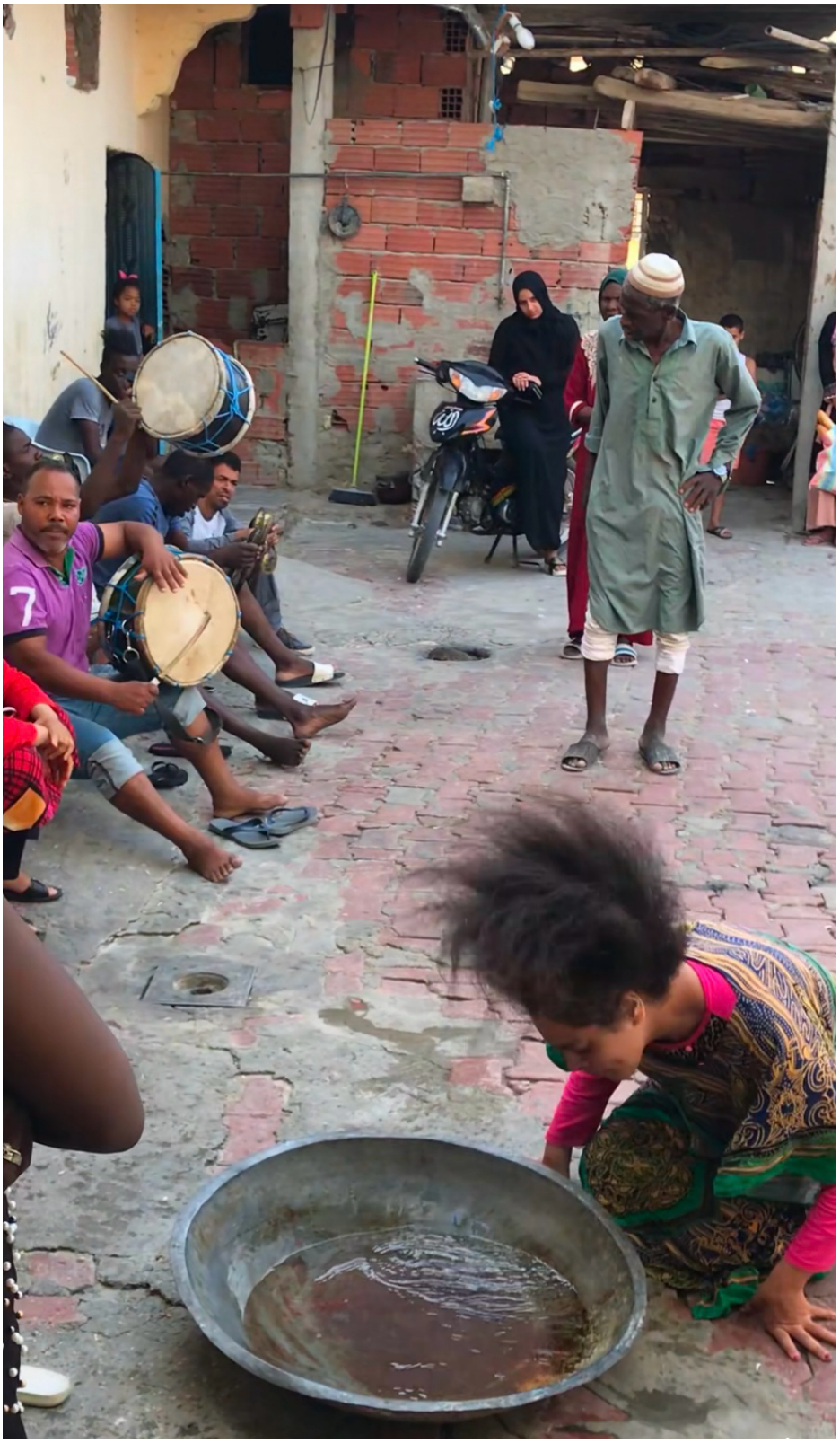

Figure 1.12 A woman in trance dancing to a bahriyya nuba. *Photographed by author, July 2018.*

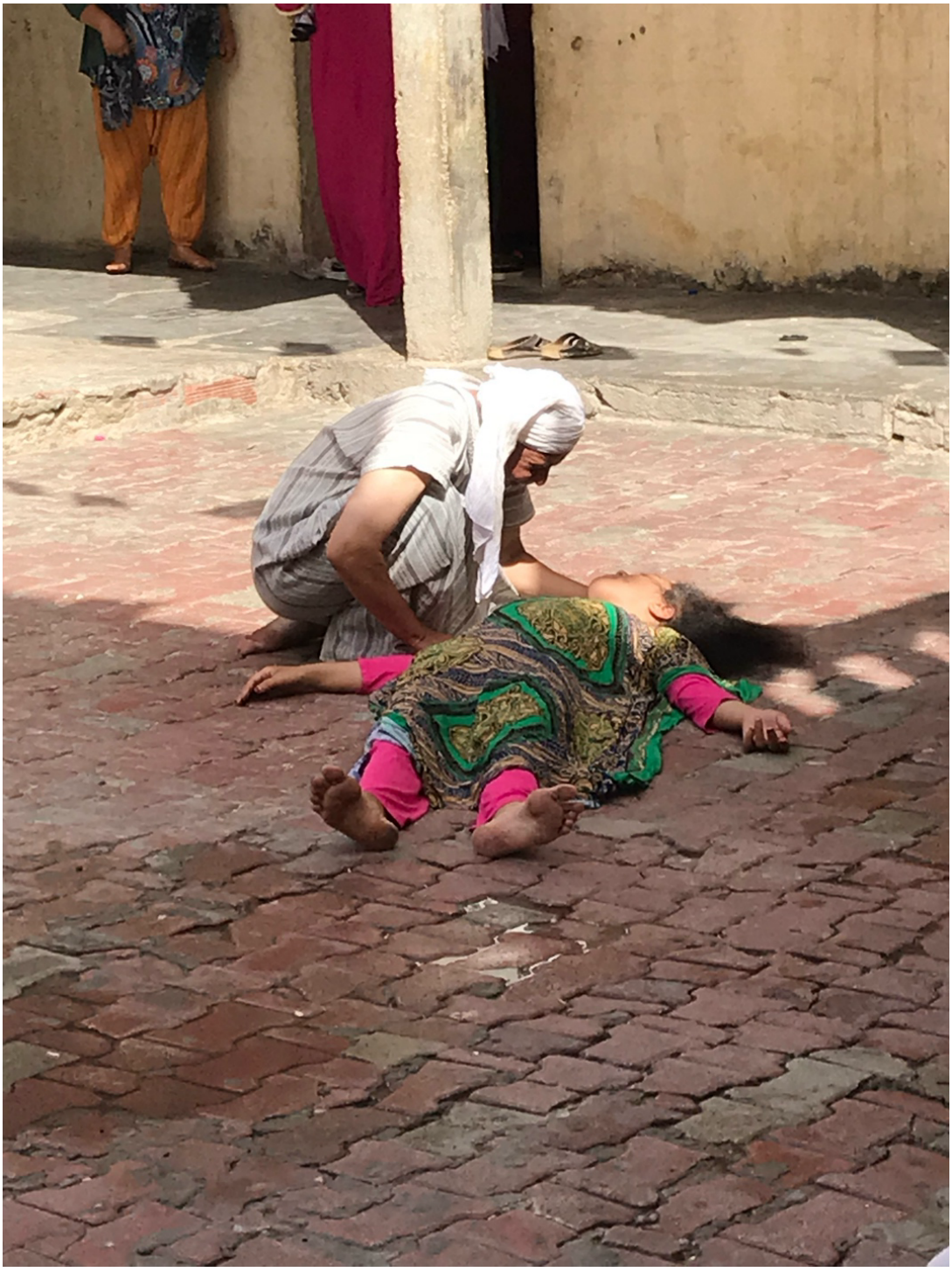

Figure 1.13 An elderly respected community member helping the woman in trance with tasrih. *Photographed by author, July 2018.*

Men in such states are often seen standing, breathing heavily, blowing air rapidly through their mouths, and tapping their chests. Women, meanwhile, may continue screaming while swaying their upper bodies closer to the ground or sitting on their legs, touching the ground with their hands, and swaying their hair forward until their faces are obscured. When this happens, musicians must continue playing more madhat to facilitate the process. If the musicians are familiar with the individual or are informed by a relative or neighbor of the specific nuba required, they will play it. Otherwise, they play continuously until the person *ydoukh* (or *et'doukh* (f.), "faints"), signaling the completion of the takhmira. Sometimes, individuals request to complete their takhmira privately, in the presence of only close family members or trusted individuals, as witnessed on several occasions. Others may return the following morning to finish, as was the case with a woman who arrived on Sunday morning after the last banga ceremony on Saturday night, brought by her mother in a state of extreme distress—screaming and barely conscious. Despite their exhaustion from the long ceremony and concerns about disturbing neighbors, Jeddi and a few of his sons and a neighbor gathered to play for her. One of Jeddi's daughters brought a *qasʿaa* (a large brass bowl) filled with water, which was placed near the woman. She immediately began swaying her hair inside the water, eventually splashing her hands in it, completing her takhmira in this intimate and visceral manner. It became clear that, in her case, a *bahriyya nuba* was necessary to guide her through the final stages of takhmira and eventually tasrih.

The *bahriya* spirits (literally "of the seas") are deeply linked to maritime themes and are invoked through specific *nouba* (plural *nweb*), which are structured sequences of musical pieces central to Tunisian ritual practices. The term *nawba* in standard Arabic means "one's turn" and is also used in the phrase *nawba ʿasabiya* ("nervous breakdown"), reflecting its association with

cyclical states, much like the phases of trance and healing. The performance of a *Bahriya nuba* is intended to resonate with the elemental power of water, aligning the music with the spirits and saints tied to this domain. Prominent saints associated with the *bahriyya* include Sidi Mansour, revered as "the protector against water-related afflictions" (Jankowsky 89), and Sidi Bou Saʿid el-Beji, often referred to as *Raʾis el-Abhar* (the master of the seas). Their shrines are notably located in coastal cities, underscoring their proximity to water and the profound spiritual connection to maritime life. By incorporating the *qasʿaa* and its interaction with water, alongside the evocative rhythms of the *bahriyya nuba*, the ritual seamlessly bridges the physical and spiritual, enabling participants to channel the healing power of these spirits and complete their trance. This symbolic interplay highlights the integral role of water and music in facilitating the takhmira, underscoring the deep connection between the material and the metaphysical in trance. Such requests, while taxing on the musicians and organizers, highlight the deep personal and communal commitment to facilitating healing and honoring these profound spiritual experiences. This act of release brings the ceremony to a poignant close, marking the end of one cycle of energy and the restoration of balance within the gathering.

As the drumming finally subsides, the crowd disperses gradually, leaving an air of quiet reverence in the courtyard. Fatma offers me a final glass of tea before retreating to her room, and Yarfaa prepares to leave, assuring me that I would be well cared for by the family. As he bids farewell, his absence sharpens my awareness of my solitude in this unfamiliar yet welcoming space. When the courtyard empties, I sit for a moment beneath the star-strewn sky, listening to the faint echoes of laughter and murmured conversations drifting from nearby rooms. Jeddi, Maya, and a few others gather briefly to discuss the next day's procession before retreating for the night. I am shown to a simple wooden platform in one of the rooms where Jeddi and a few

other family members sleep. The air inside carries the faint scent of bakhour, mingling with the remnants of the ceremony. I lay down, staring at the ceiling, my mind racing with the events of the day—the mesmerizing rhythm of the banga, the layers of devotion I had witnessed, and the palpable connection this family had to a tradition both sacred and deeply personal. The stillness of the night is punctuated by the occasional murmur of voices and the sounds of nocturnal desert life outside the compound. For the first time, I find myself alone in Tozeur, in a space so unfamiliar yet so alive. It is a mixture of exhilaration and vulnerability, an awareness of my position as an observer and participant in a living tradition. This first night marks a significant threshold—my transition from an outsider looking in to someone invited to share in the rhythms of the banga, a guest in the Chouchane family's home and history.

As I drift off to sleep, I hear the soft shuffle of feet and hushed whispers as others settle in for the night. The courtyard, now quiet, seems to hold the day's energy in its walls, a sanctuary of memory and ritual. This was only the beginning. The experiences of this day, steeped in sound, movement, and community, laid the foundation for what was to come. In the following chapter, Jeddi's voice will guide us deeper into the chronicles of banga—its histories, its sacred rites, and the spirits that breathe life into its rhythms. Through his narratives, the living heartbeat of banga will unfold, bridging the realms of the past and present, and offering a window into the soul of this enduring tradition.

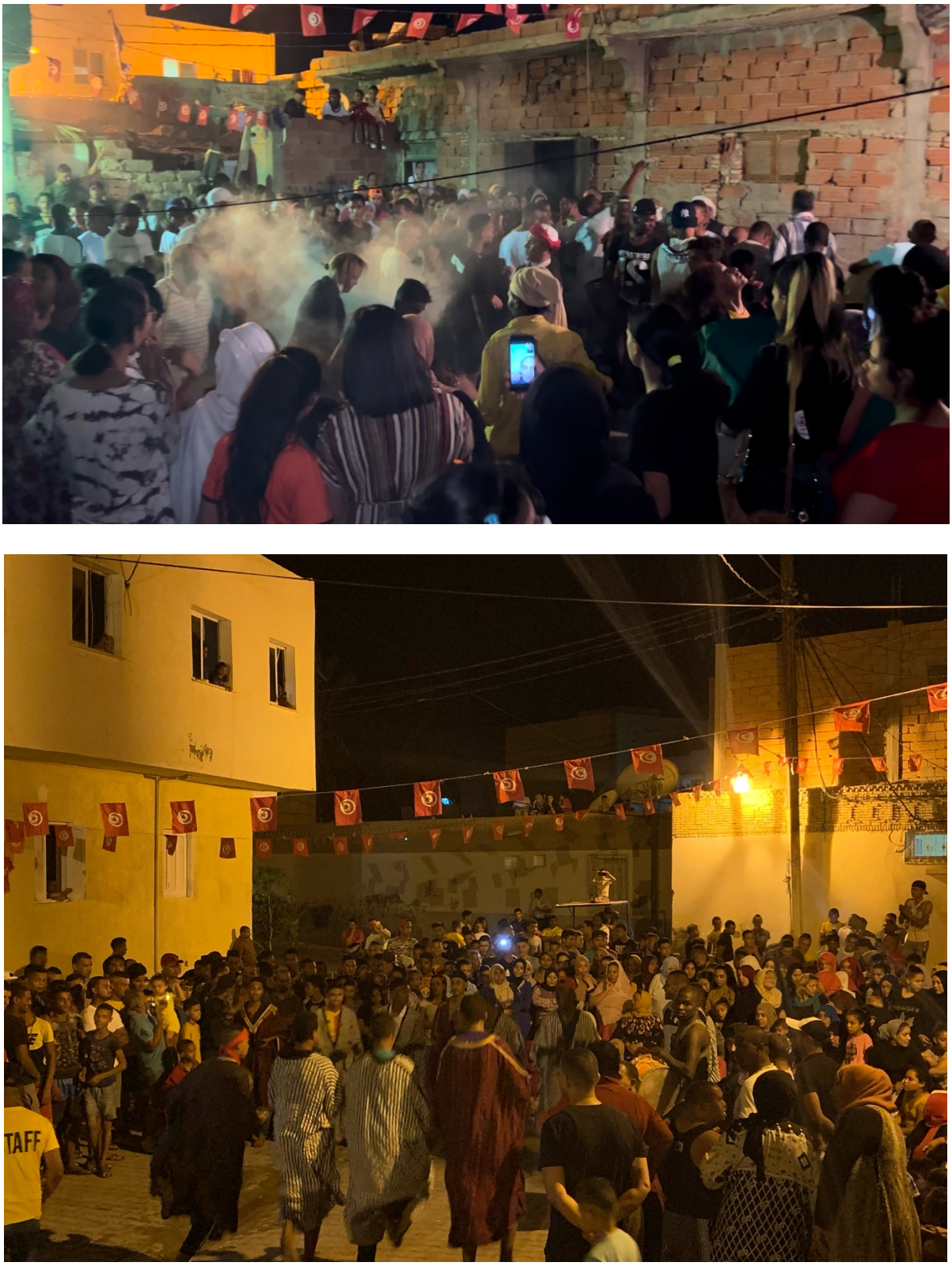

Figure 1.14 Bori night inside the Chouchane house (*top*) and later in the street outside (*bottom*) to accommodate the crowd. *Photographed by author, July 2022.*

2.

Banga Chronicles

The Legacy of Trance and Tradition as Narrated by "Jeddi" Hasan Chouchane

When I first met Jeddi, I didn't expect our kinship to develop into a grandfather-granddaughter relationship. Initially, I called him "Si Hasan," using "Si" as a formal prefix to show respect, a common practice in Tunisian culture when addressing men of higher status or age. Over time, it became evident that our relationship transcended this formality. As much as he is the heartbeat of the family—the core around which the entire community revolves—he is also a person whose silence can be profoundly loud. I often found myself observing him as he observed everyone else, feeling that he knew much more than he shared. Amid the busy, mundane life in such a crowded house, and the intense physical and emotional labor surrounding the housh, especially during the banga ritual, I have always been fascinated by the way he manages to find peace and calmness. I lose track of time during our lengthy conversations. When I started my research, I prepared an initial set of questions. However, based on my previous fieldwork experience, particularly in the Tunisian context, I knew that limiting myself and the community to a rigid set of questions would not only restrict the research's potential but also the development of our kinship. I firmly believe that allowing information to be generated organically from the people with whom I work is crucial to humanizing the research.

My journey with Jeddi was a constant navigation between mostly organic, unplanned conversations and occasional specific questions based on my observations or previous discussions we engaged in. I had to learn and accept the unpredictability of our conversations. There were times when I expected long discussions, but Jeddi would give brief answers, promising a more thorough conversation "later, in a couple of days, when banga is over and the

house is less crowded." Other times, he became so invested that hours would pass, and we would still be talking. We were often interrupted, whether by people coming in and out, talking to him or to each other in the same space, or by Jeddi being called by his sons or neighbors for something important. Another challenge of our unexpectedly long spontaneous conversations was that I was usually unprepared, often without my notebook or recorder, and my phone would be charging after being used constantly to film and take pictures throughout the day. At first, I felt frustrated because I was eager to document all the precious knowledge Jeddi graciously and generously shared. This situation occurred numerous times when I tried to ask him to pause so I could bring my recorder or notebook, but I learned that this interrupted the flow of his ideas and the conversation, making both of us uncomfortable. In these cases, I wrote notes from memory immediately after. However, there were times when Jeddi himself would ask if I wanted to record, which delighted me! From the very beginning, I was mindful of Jeddi's comfort and prioritized his needs over my own. I always asked if he needed to take a break to rest, nap, or eat lunch, and I was sensitive to the fact that he diligently prayed the five daily Islamic prayers. My awareness of his well-being became even more acute when I learned that he had severe asthma.

Whether it was the next morning after the ceremony, two weeks later, or even the following year, I often found myself sitting with Jeddi, constantly spending time with him more than anyone else in the family. I would ask him to narrate all the details of the banga ritual, a request he was usually more than happy to fulfill. Over the many years that I've known him, I've consistently asked Jeddi to share his stories about the structure and meaning of the banga. Twice, he narrated the account in its entirety, including details about its origins, cultural significance, and the traditional practices associated with it. At other times, he shared bits and pieces with a hint of annoyance, perhaps thinking I should have already figured it all out. He even said to me,

as I mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, “You of all people should know everything by now!” I always smiled at this, emphasizing to Jeddi that the banga is a multilayered ritual—profound and, at times, complicated to encapsulate in words. One particularly memorable session took place on a hot afternoon inside dar diwan while we sat next to Lella Gindoua’s tomb. As usual, the background noise of household activities filtered through the walls. The distant echoes of children playing and women chatting mixed with the clinking of dishes. As we sat together, Jeddi began to speak. His raspy voice, steady and rhythmic, carried the weight of tradition and intimate knowledge of banga. The following narrative is my amalgamation of all the times Jeddi has spoken to me, pieced together from our various conversations, with Jeddi recounting the banga from beginning to end. It is followed by sections in which he addressed specific elements of the banga ritual in response to my questions.

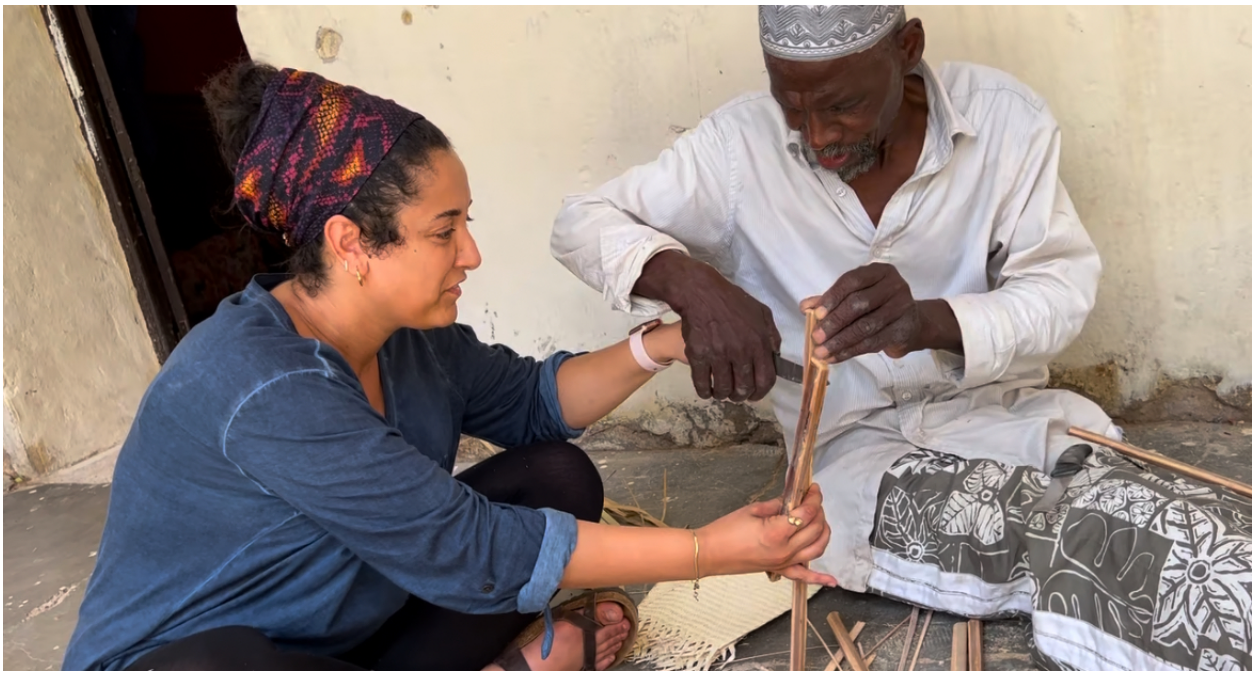

Figure 2.1 Hassan Chouchane teaches the author how to make a *marwha* (traditional Tunisian fan made of palm leaves). *Photographed by Rabaa Chouchane, July 2023.*

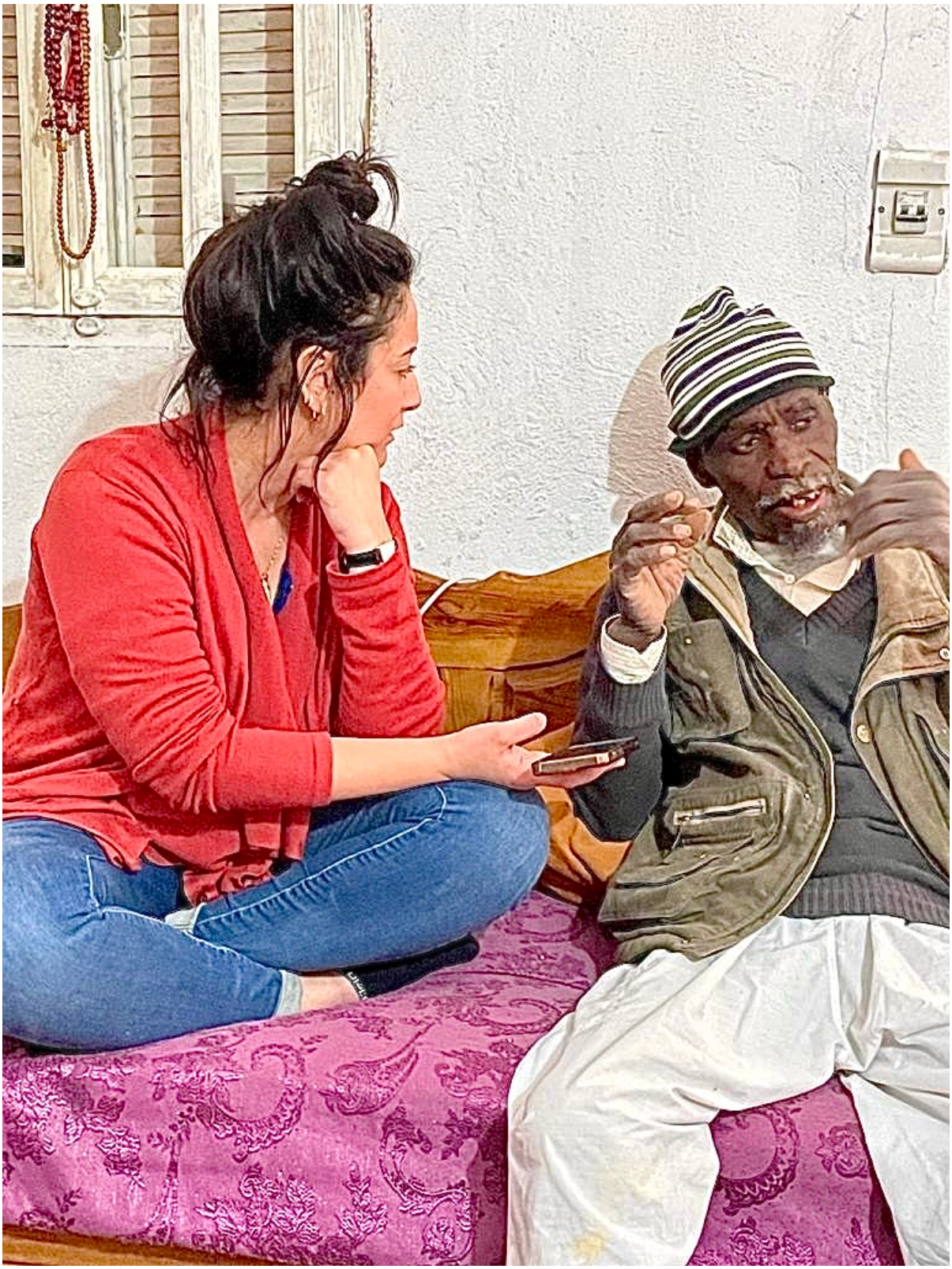

Figure 2.2 Author recording Hassan Chouchane explaining the importance of banga. *Photographed by Allen F. Roberts, March 2023.*

When Jeddi recounted the day-by-day structure of the banga ritual from the beginning (Wednesday) to the end (Saturday during the *bori* night or Sunday morning), he would incorporate numerous and pertinent anecdotes to further explain certain aspects of the banga ritual, its intricate proceedings and cultural significance. The term "*bori*," pronounced "bouri," refers to a widely known spirit possession practice across the Sahara. It originated in Hausaland and forms the basis of stambeli, a related tradition. I will delve deeper into these connections in the rest of the chapter. It was a challenge to balance allowing myself to be drawn into Jeddi's alluring narration of his abundant stories and interrupting him to ask for clarification. As part of my methodological approach, I was committed to fostering informal and spontaneous conversations throughout my research, ensuring that interactions unfolded naturally while remaining attentive to the cultural contexts that shaped them. However, there were still many components of the banga ritual that I did not yet understand, but Jeddi assumed that I did, resulting in the back-and-forth digressions in his stories. Therefore, I decided to begin this chapter with Jeddi's narration of the four-day banga ritual, and then to present his explanations on specific elements.

Inside the Life Cycle of Banga

With his legs crossed on a gray plastic chair, his hands clasped together, and his gaze fixed on my phone recording him, Jeddi began the narration:

Where do I start? How do I start… well, first and foremost,

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ
[In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful]

الصَّلَاةُ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ
[Prayers and peace be upon the Prophet (Muhammed)]

> We have the season of Sidi Marzoug in the spring, typically in early March, around March 10–12. We call it Sidi Marzoug season, which we begin by collecting *waʿid* [the verb "to promise," also the plural "promises" as pronounced in Tozeur, referring to the offerings that individuals vow to saints and contribute to their associated rituals or celebrations].Throughout the season, we continue to gather the waʿid that people pledge to Sidi Marzoug for his *zarda* [a communal feast typically held in honor of the saint as part of the ziyara to the saint's shrine that blends devotion with communal celebration]. This event is held in Tozeur, even extending to El-Metlaoui [a town and commune in the Gafsa governorate one hour north of Tozeur by car]. People come to participate from the Gafsa surroundings and other neighboring regions, bringing with them offerings such as wheat, semolina, sorghum, and dates. After we collect these offerings, we go to the *soug* [open air market] and sell a large portion of them to buy the ingredients for the zarda meals. We buy oil, tomatoes, peppers, vegetables, and so forth—essentially, the items that people were not able to give us. The [banga] zarda is a well-known tradition that spans over a four-day cycle in Tozeur, Nafta, and Metlaoui, as I mentioned. It occurs in the summer, usually between the end of June and the beginning of July. We devote each day to serving Sidi Marzoug and we divide the days among the righteous *awliya* [sing. *wali*, Muslim saints], each day visiting specific saints in the region. Banga always starts on Wednesday and continues through Saturday, with Sunday devoted to the few people who still need help "completing" their *takhmir* [trance, used interchangeably with *takhmira* (feminine)].

Here, it is important to unpack the intertwined dynamics of takhmir and *wʿoud* (promises, singular: *waʿid*), as they illuminate the profound relationship between individual devotion, communal rituals, and the spiritual connection to saints. In many Tunisian communities, the practice of making wʿoud to saints forms a central part of spiritual and cultural life. This practice is deeply tied to the belief in the intercessory power of saints, where individuals make a vow to

offer something—typically food, money, or symbolic items—in honor of a saint if a significant wish or goal is fulfilled. These promises are often made during critical life moments, reflecting the integration of spiritual practices with everyday aspirations. For instance; A student or their family might vow to offer a waʿda to the saint their family is affiliated with or devoted to if they successfully graduate or achieve an important academic milestone. Another common wish is pregnancy, especially for women who struggle with fertility issues. After a successful pregnancy or childbirth, they fulfill the waʿida as a form of gratitude. People may vow offerings when seeking solutions to challenges or personal milestones, such as securing a job, overcoming illness, or resolving disputes. This connection between personal devotion and communal offerings becomes even more evident in the practice of takhmir, where the spiritual and emotional bonds with saints are experienced and expressed on a deeply embodied level.

In the banga context, a trance is considered "completed" when the devotee faints after a prolonged altered state of consciousness, to be revived and cared for by attendees at the ceremony. In *Ambient Sufism*, Richard C. Jankowsky defines takhmir as evoking "the concept of divine intoxication, a term for a state of transcendence with a long history in Sufi thought and practice" (2021, 64). He also suggests that takhmir is related to the notion of finding—a term found throughout the historical and geocultural expanse of Sufism to refer to trance characterized by passion or strong emotion related to experiencing the presence of the divine" (2021, 65). Many of these concepts (awliya, takhmir) will be elaborated more thoroughly in my following chapter.

Jeddi then recounted the banga ritual day-by-day:

> On this first day, we march to meet the Nefta group. Back in the day, they used to walk all the way and we would meet them halfway through. Together, we play banga non-stop on the streets just, like you witnessed us

> doing, until we arrive at our housh. We call that *e'dakhla* [literally "the entrance," and in this context the banga procession inauguration or announcement]. People come from all over the region to greet us and participate. We first gather in dar diwan to do the first *nouba* [pl. *nweb*, a praise song to a spiritual figure] which involves taking turns playing different *madeh* [noun for praise songs. Also see chapter 1].

Jankowsky defines a nouba as a "single praise song for a spiritual figure who is summoned into the ritual to heal through trance," which literally means one's "turn" (2021, 76–77). Nweb are "often referred to simply by the name of the spiritual figure being summoned," with the name of the nouba (often the first line of sung text) used especially for clarification when a wali has multiple nweb (2021, 77). Both a nouba and a madeh are used to evoke specific spirits, but they differ in form and emphasis. A nouba is always accompanied by music, integrating melodies and rhythms to enhance its effect. In contrast, madeh relies solely on vocal chanting, staying true to its literal meaning, and is characterized by a sung narrative that emphasizes the lyrical progression and its unfolding story.

Jeddi continued:

> In the meantime, the women work tirelessly to provide food for the people of Nafta and anyone who joins for lunch. They work hard not just for that day, but every day. On the first day, they make couscous, following a tradition that has existed since I was born into banga. After lunch, everyone rests for the afternoon. Later, before sunset, we will need to prepare for the Metlawi group. We meet them at the train station, their means of transport, and together we walk, playing banga all the way to the housh. The Nafta group remains behind as our guests, while we, the hosts, go to welcome the Metlawi group halfway to bring them to the housh. The Metlawi group does the same thing: they play banga in the courtyard, rest, and later, all the banga

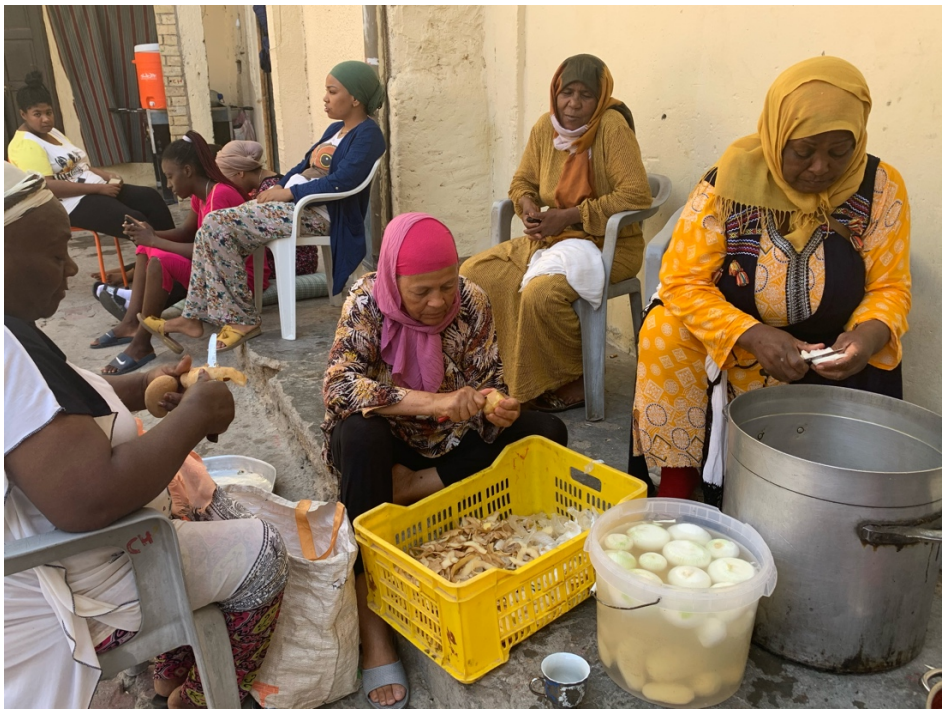

Figure 2.3 Women preparing the banga ceremony dinner. *Photographed by author, July 2018.*

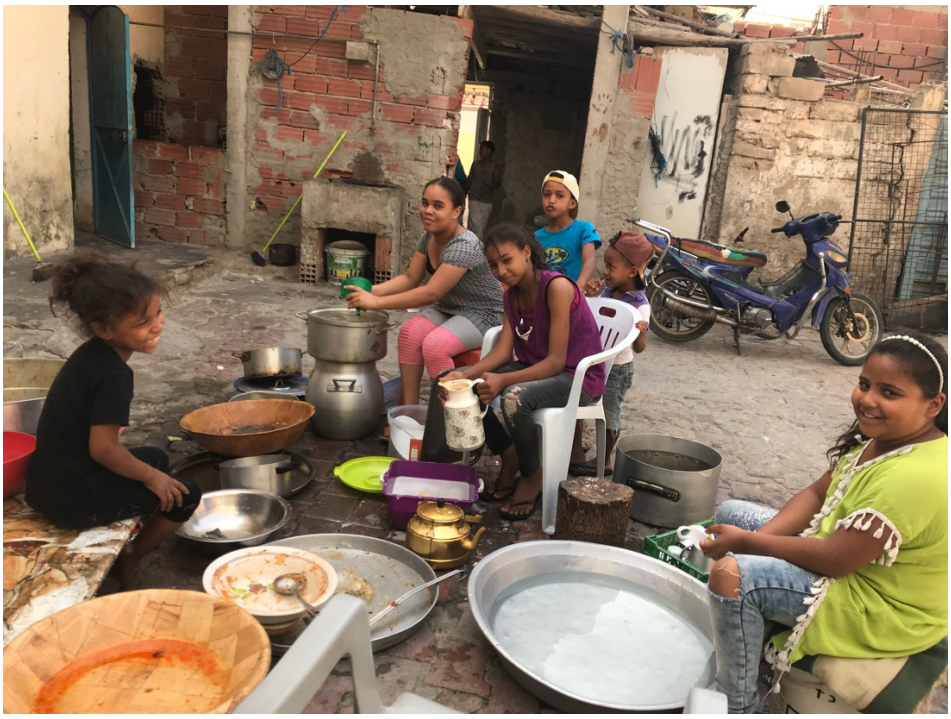

Figure 2.4 Chouchane girls and their friends cleaning the cookware. *Photographed by author, July 2018.*

groups gather for dinner—it's couscous again—before the night ceremony. After dinner prayers, all the groups play banga together. And with that, the first day concludes. It is, once again, a Wednesday.

Banga, for some people, is also *hadra* [literally "presence," collective Sufi musical ritual involving the rhythmic recitation of names and singing of religious poetry]. It is the same, just referred to by different names: banga, hadra, or as we commonly call it here, *malʿab* [literally "field" or "playground," another term often used interchangeably to refer to banga during the main ziyara]. It is a malʿab because the musicians play music, show their dance skills, children play, and everyone displays their talents in something. We also call it a *diwan* [similar trance-inducing musical tradition from Algeria, also the name of the ritual dance space in stambeli], which brings everything and everyone together. Regardless of what you call it, whether you say the hadra of Sidi Marzoug, *hizb* [group of people] Sidi Marzoug, diwan Sidi Marzoug, they all mean banga. Sidi Marzoug brings them all together. And when you are in Tozeur and mention any of these names, they will lead you to our housh. This ceremony is characterized by rhythmic drumming and is deeply rooted in our cultural heritage. The term banga signifies both the instrument, tabla [see chapter 1], and the rhythm, creating a unique cultural soundscape found only in banga.

Hadra is a traditional Sufi practice rooted in Islamic mysticism and local cultural traditions, aimed at achieving transcendence and divine connection through music, praise songs, and rhythmic movement. The term hadra, meaning "presence," reflects the heightened spiritual state and invocation of the divine during these communal gatherings, which are often held to celebrate *Mawlid an-Nabi* (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), religious festivals, and the anniversaries of revered local saints. Hadra is associated with different instruments than those in banga, such as the *bendir* (large frame drum with a distinctive buzzing sound), *naghgharaat* (a pair of small, kettle-shaped drums), *tar* (circular frame drum, often featuring jingles or snares),

and sometimes *zokra* (reed instrument) (Louati, 87). In recent years, the *hadra* of Sufi orders inspired a concert stage spectacle featuring Sufi ritual repertoire integrated with non-Sufi elements such as jazz, rock, and flamenco. This spectacle, called *el-Hadra* ("the hadra"), first staged by theater director Fadhel Jaziri and musician and composer Samir Agrebi, has been performed annually since 1991 (and led only by Jaziri ever since), has become one of the most popular shows and consistently sells out at the prestigious Festival International de Musique de Carthage. Sufi ritual hadra is also associated with different saints than those in banga, such as Sidi Belhassen Chedly, the patron saint of Tunis, Sidi Bou Said, known for his influence on spiritual and artistic traditions, and Sidi Mehrez, celebrated as the "Protector of Tunis." Hadra typically begins with Quranic recitations or invocations, followed by a repetitive recitation of *dhikr* (literally "remembrance of God") phrases such as "La ilaha illallah" (There is no god but Allah). Intensifying alongside the music, the movements guide participants into rhythmic swaying or circular patterns, often culminating in a trance state characterized by an altered sense of consciousness associated with a deep spiritual or divine connection. The ceremony concludes with prayers and blessings for peace, health, and spiritual growth, reflecting the diverse cultural and spiritual elements present in Tunisia, including Islamic mysticism and regional musical traditions. Likewise, according to Jankowsky, hadra refers to "music-driven rituals of Sufi orders" (2021, 7) and is a "ritual-music form" comprised of a "succession of well-defined ritual sections, each of which features a different sonic or musical approach to the performance of sacred texts and the support of dance or trance" (2021, 14). Hadra has also been commodified over recent years as a musical attraction, and has become one of the most attended concerts at Tunisia's renowned Festival International de Musique de Carthage. As for the use of the tabla in banga, in *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia*, Jankowsky notes that "the drummer

uses a stick in one hand to strike the drum near the center. These strokes can produce an open sound (by striking and releasing) and a closed sound (by pressing the stick against the drumhead). The other hand dangles over the top of the drum, striking the head near the rim" (2010, 104).

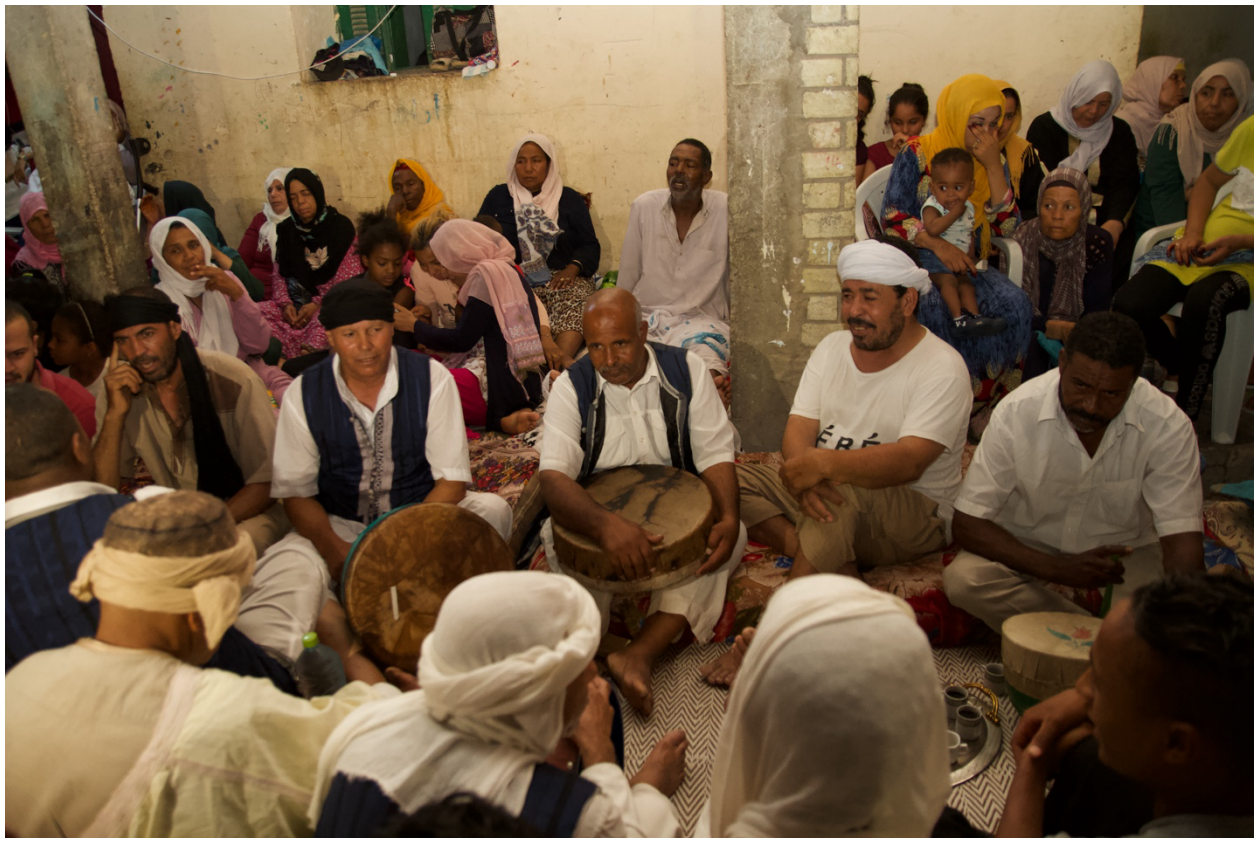

Figure 2.5 Hadra and third night of the banga ritual at the Chouchane house. *Photographed by Montassar Ben Jdila, July 2019.*

Returning to Jeddi's narration, his vivid storytelling continued to weave together the intricate details and spiritual essence of the banga ritual:

> On Thursday morning, we visit the righteous saints like Sidi Yahya and Sidi Ali Boulifa, starting the day with a communal sense of spirituality. This tradition is a relatively new practice started about thirty to forty years ago

> to honor the growing town's heritage. These visits are key parts of the ritual, emphasizing spiritual connection and community. They are also how we, as followers of Sidi Marzoug, show respect and honor to the other saints. When we honor the saints in the surrounding regions, their followers have even more respect for us. Another benefit of this tradition is to let people in neighboring regions know, or to remind them if they have forgotten, that we are in the middle of our banga and are essentially inviting them to join if they want or can. This embodies the spirit of Sidi Marzoug, who loves and respects all other saints. We even have a madha about this. It was originally chanted by Sidi Marzoug when he first came to town as a Bou Saʿadia [literally "Father of Saʿadia (a woman's name)," a mythical figure believed to have traversed Africa looking for an enslaved family member] before he became a wali.

Jankowsky describes Bou Saʿadia as "simultaneously the mythic first musician of stambeli (another Tunisian trance-inducing healing musical tradition) and the historical figure responsible for guiding displaced sub-Saharans in Tunis" (2010, 8). The generally-accepted story of Bou Saʿadia was that he was a sub-Saharan African who had a daughter named Saʿadia. While he was away, Saʿadia was captured by slave traders and taken to Tunis, where she was sold to one of the Beys families. After discovering the heartbreaking news, Bou Saʿadia left to look for his daughter. Upon his arrival, he would play the shakasheek and sing in an unknown language about his sorrow in the streets of Tunis in order to attract people's attention, but specifically that of children in the hopes of finding Saʿadia among them. In his article "Black Spirits, White Saints: Music, Spirit Possession, and Sub-Saharans in Tunisia," Jankowsky asserts that "he is often portrayed, especially in the indigenous literature, as an itinerant, strangely dressed black foreigner [...] Almost always, he is portrayed as scaring children" (2006, 381). Jankowsky describes Bou Saʿadia as a figure who can serve as legendary, mythic, or historical, depending on

the version of the origin story being told. While his analysis acknowledges these varying roles, he primarily refers to the story he was told as a legend . In a broader folklore context, however, these stories might align more closely with the definition of legends, as they center on characters—Bou Saʿadia and his daughter Saʿadia—who, according to some members of the communities who practice stambeli and banga, are believed to have existed during the era of slave trading in Tunisia. This belief adds complexity to the classification, making it challenging to draw a definitive conclusion about whether "myth" or "legend" is the more appropriate term. Myths, by contrast, are typically associated with figures whose existence is entirely symbolic or unverified, which may not fully capture the perspectives of these practicing communities.

Building on my analysis, Jeddi provided his own perspective, weaving together his personal reflections with the oral traditions surrounding Bou Saʿadia. "I believe Bou Saʿadia was honoring the saints in the region and, as I mentioned, was showing them his respect, just as any of us would. When we visit people, pass by them, or travel to a different region, we start by greeting them," he explained. As part of this exchange, he shared some of the madha lyrics with me, offering a glimpse into the rich poetic expressions tied to this figure. Jeddi further elaborated that madhat are traditionally very long and, because they are not written down, only a few individuals have learned the "correct way," as he described it, to sing them. Despite these challenges, he expressed his willingness to record one entire madha or even several madhat for me one day, ensuring the preservation of these oral traditions

وَ د راني واي سا وِ سَي سِلامو عليكم
wa da rā-nī wāy sā, w say salāmū ʿalaykum
([The meaning of the phrase *wa da rā-nī wāy sā, w say* is unknown] Peace be upon you)

وَ د راني واي سا وِ سَي مولا البركة
wa dā rā-nī wāy sā, w say mūlā al-baraka
([Unknown] Master of blessings)

و دَ راني واي سا وي صَلّوا على نَبِينا
wa dā rā-nī wāy sā, wi ṣallū ʿalā nabīnā
([Unknown] and pray upon the Prophet)

وَ دَ راني واي سا وي سَي صُلاّح بلادي
wa dā rā-nī wāy sā, w say ṣulāḥ bilādī
([Unknown] righteous saint of my country)

وَ دَ راني واي سا و سَي عليهم إنّادي
wa da rā-nī wāy sā, w say ʿalayhim innādī
([Unknown] I'm calling upon them)

According to Jeddi, the meaning of the phrase *wa dā rā-nī wāy sā, w say* remains unknown, even to him and other banga followers. He speculates that it may originate from a pre-Islamic language spoken by enslaved peoples brought from Sahelian and sub-Saharan Africa. Jeddi continued:

> It is still such a long madha that I would need one of the guys—Ali, Bilel, or even Kada—to play the rhythm for me to help say all of it, as it involves a call-and-response structure. Plus, I can't recall all of it without the music. After we visit all these righteous saints in the morning, we also spend some time playing on the streets and going to specific houses, just like we do when we start on Wednesday, as you have already seen when you accompanied us. Meanwhile, the women are back in the housh, preparing the next meals to feed all the visitors who continue to arrive throughout the day and the ceremony. As before, the women play a vital role, ushering people into the housh and welcoming them with coffee while the food is being prepared. After the long morning ceremony, we come back to rest for a bit, and by that time, lunch is usually ready. Years before he passed (may he rest in peace), *Elwaled* [my father] decided that we needed to change the lunch meal. Instead of serving couscous all day every day during the ceremony, we started making *makrouna* [pasta], which can still serve a large crowd and provides some variety, so people don't get bored.

Later the same day, a little after the *ʿaser* prayer [afternoon prayers around 4 p.m.], the guys come over and repeat what you saw us doing in the morning. They pick up their jwekh and shakasheek and we play in front of the housh for a while. People gradually start joining us, drawn by the music and the anticipation of the next part of the ceremony. Some are particularly eager to accompany us to the site where we will be sacrificing the *ʿatrous* [a breed of black goat, also known as the Tunisian "Arbi"]. We then head to *Ras el-ʿAin* [water springs located in the Sahara Desert in Tozeur] to perform the sacrifice. This location, with its natural springs and serene desert landscape, holds significant spiritual importance. Traditionally, we sacrifice two goats to ensure there is enough meat to feed the large number of attendees throughout the ceremony. In earlier times, we also included chickens, as goats alone were insufficient to provide for everyone day and night during the entire event. The journey to Ras al-ʿAin is both a communal and spiritual act, symbolizing our collective reverence and dedication. The rhythmic drumming and chanting continue as we walk, creating a powerful and immersive experience for all involved. Once we arrive, the atmosphere is solemn yet charged with a sense of purpose. The sacrifice itself is conducted with deep respect and adherence to tradition, marking a pivotal moment in the banga ritual.

In the past, we used to slaughter, clean, and prepare the ʿatrous near what used to be two palms, known as the Palms of Sidi Marzoug. Sidi Marzoug would meditate there between the two palms by the small river, although he did not own them. Some people believed he did, and therefore thought that we, the Chouchane family, had the right to the palms because we are also referred to as *Ouled Marzoug* [children of Sidi Marzoug]. However, I always correct them, insisting not to call us that, as we are not his children—Sidi Marzoug had no offspring. We are his followers and believe in his righteousness. Over the years, as more buildings and houses were constructed, much of the oasis turned into neighborhoods. Now, we try to perform the sacrifice approximately in the same place. It might not be

> the exact spot, but as I've always told you, we strive to maintain the traditions as closely as possible to how they were in the past. As soon as we slaughter the ʿatrous, people rush to gather some of the blood for blessings. A few members, usually Tarek [Jeddi's son who performs the slaughter] and a few other men, carry the ʿatrous back to the housh to be cleaned and cooked for dinner. Whoever is available will volunteer their truck or any means they have to transport the ʿatrous. Meanwhile, the procession starts to make its way back to the housh, making a few more stops at some houses along the road. Some of these houses have been pillars of the ritual for years, while others invite us along the way or bring out offerings for blessings, such as water, perfume, or money to help with the expenses. This procession and the offerings are integral to the banga ritual, emphasizing community involvement and the continuation of our traditions. When the procession arrives back to the housh, we briefly conduct two rounds of the banga ritual with chanting and dancing. The men go to rest and return around dinner time. We then proceed with the banga ritual, which at times lasts until midnight.

From what I observed, the gathering of the goat's blood for blessings involves varied practices. Some individuals dip their palms into the blood to mark instruments with their handprints, while others bring pots, containers, or even improvised items like plastic bottles or scraps of paper found near the sacrifice to collect the blood. As I reflected on these rituals, Jeddi shared with me what typically happens on Friday, offering further insight into the sacred sequence of events.

> Friday is marked by cooking ʿ*assida* [semolina porridge] with *mloukhiya* [a traditional stew made from jute leaves and with beef]. We prepare it with the meat that we slaughtered on Thursday, the ʿatrous: back in the day, in addition to ʿatrous, chicken must be added as well for more *baraka* [blessings], but also to be able to feed all the visitors. We start preparing the

mloukhiya very early in the morning at dawn because it takes several hours to cook, and we used to cook it on an open wood fire. As for the ʿassida, we cook it in the afternoon because it takes less time—around two hours—and we aim to finish it at the same time as the mloukhiya. The making of ʿassida is the only time that the men get involved in any cooking, mainly because it requires greater physical effort in the constant, quick stirring of copious amounts of ʿassida in large pots. In the early evening, people from Tozeur and the surrounding neighborhoods would be standing in long lines with their small containers to take home some of the mloukhiya and ʿassida. Even those who do not prefer eating mloukhiya or ʿassida on a regular basis still want to come and take some home to eat because this combination is a very special dish associated with banga, and the combination is only done in our community [black Tunisians who carry out banga]. In short, they are taking some baraka from Sidi Marzoug home with them.

The banga ritual is essentially centered around two major elements: ʿassida with mloukhiya and the *bori* night on Saturday. The bori night is the final and most important night of the banga ritual because it is the most attended by those in the surrounding regions who did not necessarily attend the first few days but would not miss the bori night. It is also the night where nearly everyone enters takhmir. Back in my day, during the bori night, there was a man named Nasser who passed away (may he rest in peace), known as "Nasser Bou Saʿadia," who was well-known in the community and some people would come just to see him. Nasser used to enter takhmir to a much greater extent than the others. For example, he laid down upon a sharp and thick spiked metal wool comb and people would add weight to his body while he remained there uninjured. He also pierced his cheeks with a needle, danced while running a flaming palm branch across his body, and he walked on broken glass and knives. Listen, takhmir used to be real because people were true believers, dedicated followers, and they do not "fake" takhmir the way some do now. I will explain further shortly, but let me return to the Friday events.

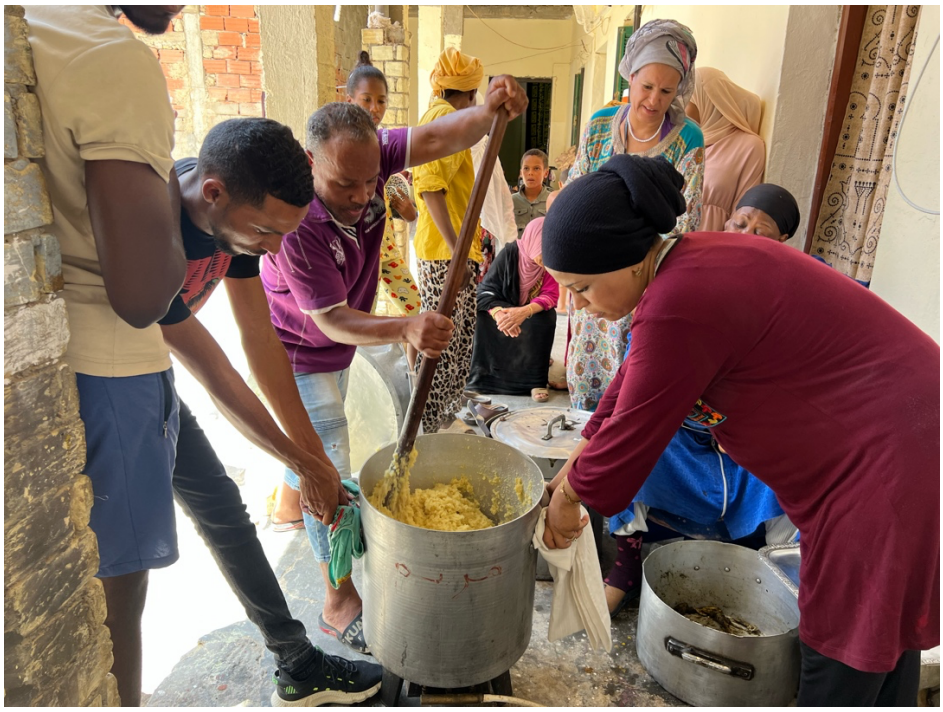

Figure 2.6 The Chouchane family and other community members taking turns cooking the ʿassida. *Photographed by author, July 2023.*

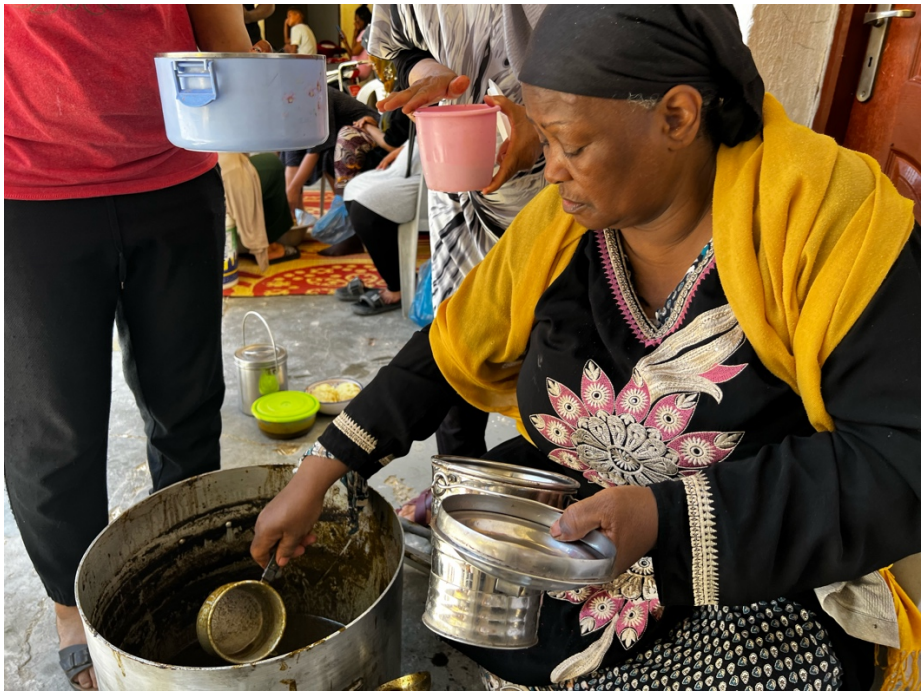

Figure 2.7 *Khalti* (auntie, a form of respect) Dalila cooking and distributing mloukhiya. *Photographed by author, July 2023.*

After a tiring morning serving ʿassida with mloukhiya, members of the family take turns resting and delivering ʿassida and mloukhiya to other community members who are not able to attend because they live far away in the towns of Degache, Kriz, and Nafta, who contributed to the spring ceremony by offering money or cooking ingredients such as vegetables, spices, or anything else that would benefit the Sidi Marzoug ziyara. There are also specific families who contribute greatly to the ziyara that we must bring ʿassida and mloukhiya to show appreciation: the Souissi, the Bouroug ʿa, the Boukadi, and the Khalifa, for example. In the late afternoon, we get ready for the procession where we visit the rest of the "righteous saints of God" [saints' shrines and tombs]. We start by visiting "El Bouab" [Bab El Medina: Tozeur's old quarter] where people start joining the procession from the street, women ululate, and men play banga music. Next, we visit Lella Siroula's tomb.

All of the saints shrines and tombs that we visit may not necessarily relate to Sidi Marzoug or follow his *tariqa* [pl. *turuk*, Sufi order or "path," "way" that saints follow]. Some of them follow the Qadiriyya, others follow Alaouiya [the followers of Sidi Bou Ali Al-Sunni]. Each region and its *ʿarsh* [pl. *ʿaroush*, literally "throne," in the Tunisian context, a tribe or ancestral lineage, usually specific to a certain geographical region and sharing the same family name] has its "righteous saints," and we must pay tribute to each of them every time we enter that region. We cannot enter a region playing banga music without visiting their shrines. It is about showing respect: when we respect their *djed* [literally grandfathers, in this context, the Sufi saints]. From Lella Siroula's shrine, we next go to Tozeur's "soug" [souk] to continue to play banga music, and then we return to the housh, which marks the end of the banga procession for that day. It has been a tradition for some time that we do not play banga music on Friday night, unlike on Wednesday and Thursday nights because the men would be very tired from playing music and walking for two days in a row, so they need to

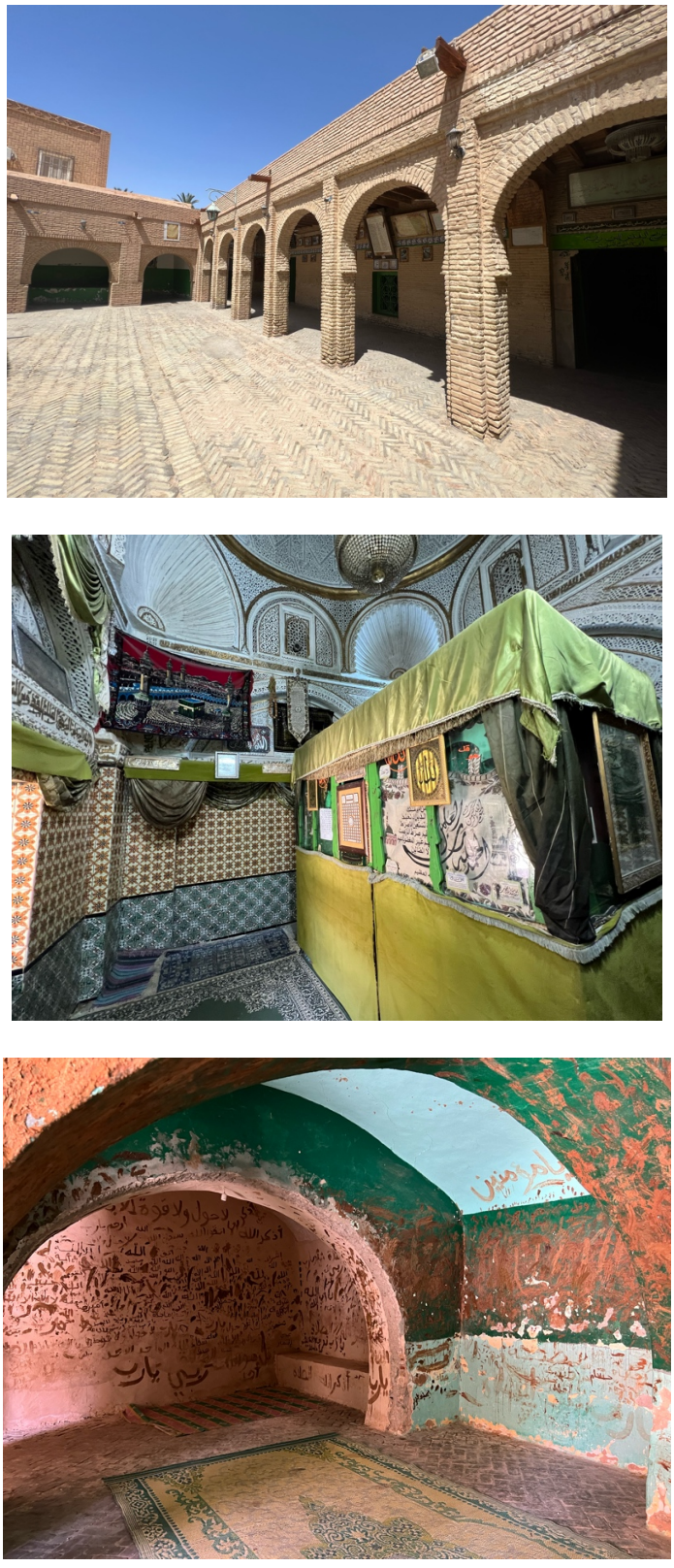

Figure 2.8 Inside the shrine of Sidi Bou Ali "Sultan al-Jardid." *Photographed by author, September 2023.*

> prepare for the most important and last night, the bori night. Also, at times the men would need to repair their tabla because the skins rupture from all the playing, wash their jwekh, and rest as much as they can for the physically-demanding and long bori night which will exhaust them.

As a form of metonymy to add more intimacy, it is worth noting that in everyday Tunisian Arabic, it is common to replace these saints' shrines or tombs with the actual saint (person). It is understood that when one mentions the saint's name without mentioning the shrine, "it goes without saying" that this person is visiting that saint's shrine. In addition, the term ʿarsh has given way to the historical notion of aʿroushia ("tribalism") among families in Tunisian society and politics. Furthermore, Tunisians generally refer to the saints they follow as "jeddi" (my grandfather): I recall my grandmother Naoua referring to "Jeddi Ammar" on several occasions.

Jeddi recounted the events of day four the banga, Saturday, narrating the culminating moments of the ritual and their profound significance.

> On Saturday morning, we lead a small procession to the *Ras al-Dreʿa* [literally "head of the arm"] neighborhood in Tozeur to signal the coming of the bori night. In the afternoon, we dedicate the procession solely to Sidi Mouldi, another "righteous wali" whom Lella Gindoua served. We were told that Lella Gindoua might be related to Sidi Marzoug, but she never served him. That night, after dinner, everyone packs the housh and the bori begins. As I said earlier, the bori night used to be "real." There were "true" believers who were devoted to the "righteous saints," so when they are in trance, they are actually in trance and not expecting anything in return except *baraka* [blessings] from God and "His righteous saints." Meaning, they are not being deceitful and they are not fooling around, like the "tricksters" nowadays. For example, those who claim that they can pull

djewi [benzoin incense stones] out from their bodies do not exist anymore. As for me, I do not believe them, but I knew a few of the "real ones" whom I witnessed with my own eyes pull such stones from their bodies. Even if such things were hard to believe, "you" still needed to believe them because most people had good intentions and were not lying about their faith or devotion.

Nowadays things have changed: those who truly cared passed away and some people do not take the ritual seriously. For example, in my day, no one would ever enter the circle in order to enter takhmir while wearing shoes. Also, most importantly, no one would ever dare come *shaareb* [drunk] to the zarda. Even the ones who drink alcohol will not attend the banga ritual while "he" is drunk, out of respect, because he would not want his relatives or the elders of the community to see him drunk. In addition, the *salhin* [it can be used in reference to saints salhin, "righteous saints," and in this context, the spirits] would not accept such a behavior.

However, at the present time, some men, especially young ones, attend the banga ritual while drunk and it becomes challenging to ask them to leave, because the banga ritual is meant to be a space that welcomes and accepts everyone in the community. Nonetheless, I need to be firm when I sense that things are getting out of hand due to drunkenness. For example, some people instigate fights for no reason and others really want to enter tahkmir, but because they are so drunk, they start disturbing other people's tahkmir. This sometimes leads to people not completing their tahkmir by the end of the bori night, which then results in having to play banga music for them again during a separate event on Sunday morning. For example, there was once a woman who came to the zarda from Metlawi and we needed to stop the bori night because a fight started. She was not able to finish her takhmir(a) and she became "very sick," meaning that her body felt very weak and she only felt better after she danced the next day on Sunday.

In Lella Gindoua's context, "to serve" has the same equivalent as in English to render service to a superior, but also in this religious context refers to "following" a master as a disciple. Additionally, the placement during the banga ritual merits closer examination. When the musicians begin playing the banga music, attendees usually form a circle, with women to the right (next to Lella Gindoua's shrine) and men to the left. Whoever enters takhmir usually enters the circle to get closer to the musicians to dance in front of them. On the subject of drunkenness, as with Jeddi here, the masculine is the default gender when speaking, but also in this context it is assumed that women never drink. Although the consumption of alcohol is explicitly *haram* (forbidden) under the precepts of Islam, it has historically been present in nearly every Muslim society, often with varying degrees of social and religious justification. This includes Tunisia, where alcohol is widely available despite being socially frowned upon. As Michael Gilsenan highlights in *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt* (1973), even religious figures such as imams have been known to partake, reflecting the complexity of alcohol consumption in Islamic contexts. Similarly, my own observations align with Gilsenan's work, as I have encountered Sufis who participate in rituals like the hadra but later consume alcoholic beverages such as Celtia (a local Tunisian beer) in private settings.

In a related vein, Jankowsky defines salhin as "spirits" or "the holy ones," a term his stambeli teacher used to differentiate possessing spirits from Muslim saints (2010, 218). However, both saints and salhin are not mutually exclusive in banga as they are in stambeli.I emphasize the term *virtuous* to highlight that saints, while human and now deceased, are revered for their extraordinary devotion, which is believed to have transcended that of ordinary people, with some even attributed miraculous abilities. Finally, *torgus* (feminine) or *yorgus* (masculine) is the verb form of *raqs* (a dance) pronounced in Jeddi's southern Tunisian Arabic accent. It is

also used interchangeably with *yashtah* (to dance, the commonly used term across Tunisia), more frequent in standard Tunisian Arabic: Jankowsky writes that the term yashtah "derives from the Arabic root that means 'to roam' or 'stray' and may also connote 'escapade' and 'excess'" (2010, 140). Jeddi then finished:

> This brings us to Sunday, which marks the end of the banga ritual. The visitors who attended the ritual from faraway begin to prepare to leave back to their homes. In the morning, we gather with those who spent the night at the housh to have breakfast, and then whoever is available and has energy among the men would play a few banga madeh for those who did not complete their tahkmir, as I mentioned.

The Banga Ritual Demystified: Insights from Jeddi

During my interviews, Jeddi described at length the life and importance of the wali Sidi Marzoug el-ʿAjmi:

> Before he became the righteous wali Sidi Marzoug, he was Bou Saʿadia. He was among the *ʿabid* [sing. *ʿabd*, enslaved people] who escaped to look for his kidnapped cousin, Saʿadia. He disguised himself in a costume made of animal pelts and cowrie shells so that no one would recognize him. On his journey, he "was a clown" entertaining people, and he even made a madha about her. A few of its lines go as follows:
>
> ياحليلي يا مبروكة بنت عمّ
> yā ḥalīlī yā mabrūkah bint ʿammī
> (Oh my dear, Oh Mabrouka, my cousin)
>
> دبّرولي يا سيادي وين نلّوّج
> dabbirūlī yā siyādī wīn nallūjj
> (Help me out, my masters, where should I search)
>
> دبّرولي يا للاتي وين نلوّج
> dabbirūlī yā lallātī wīn nallūjj
> (Help me out, my ladies, where should I search)

When Sidi Marzoug first arrived in Tozeur and the neighboring regions, he had two madhat and we consider those the most important ones in the banga ritual. They are the essence of his story: the "Mabrouka" madha and the "Salāmū ʿalaykum" mahda [see p. 6–7 above]. He sang these every time he came across the elders of the region and its saints to show them respect and most importantly, to gain their trust so that they could help him find "Mabrouka" also known as Saʿadia. At this time, Sidi Marzoug still had not yet become a wali: he only became one when he was older. He was young and he kept looking for Mabrouka. In fact, we do not believe he found her.

So the question is, how did he become a wali? He was old and could no longer continue walking [traveling across regions], and as you know, there are so many saints in our region and their doors were always open to anyone in need: to eat, to have a place to stay, or to seek refuge. Sidi Marzoug came across the zawiya of Sidi Bou Ali, or as he was known, the "Sultan al-Jarid" [of the palm oasis], the central wali of Nefta. Sidi Marzoug met Sidi Bou Ali and ended up staying at his zawiya for a long period of time. To honor and thank Sidi Bou Ali for his hospitality, Sidi Marzoug began to help with the ziyara. He would go to the forest, collect wood, and bring it back to warm some water so visitors can perform their *wudu* [Islamic ritual of washing before prayers].

One day, there was not enough wood to warm the water, so Sidi Marzoug put both of his feet under the sand, sparked a fire, and the water began to heat up. A few people among the visitors ran to Sidi Bou Ali to invite him to witness what had happened. Upon his arrival, Sidi Bou Ali stood by Sidi Marzoug and patted his shoulders, looked him in the eyes, and said, "Get up, Marzoug, no *sheik* [master] serves another *sheik*." This is when he was proclaimed a wali. As a wali himself, Sidi Bou Ali knew that Sidi Marzoug had the gift of a "righteous" wali. After years of service and loyalty to Sidi Bou Ali, Sidi Marzoug was no longer considered a *khadim* [servant], but officially a wali. He counseled other visitors and followers of Sidi Bou Ali and played the role of intermediary when people needed to ask

> for greater assistance from Sidi Bou Ali. To reward Sidi Marzoug for his dedication and devotedness, and also because he was aging, Sidi Bou Ali wanted to make sure that Sidi Marzoug had his own zawiya. One day, Sidi Bou Ali asked Sidi Marzoug, "Where would you want your zawiya to be built?" and Sidi Marzoug responded, "Wherever your cane falls." Sidi Bou Ali took his cane, spun it around a few times, and right before he was about to toss it, his daughter stopped his hand and said, "I do not want Sidi Marzoug to leave us or go far from us." The cane ended up falling down on what is now known as Sidi Marzoug's zawiya. This is the story of Sidi Marzoug and how he became a wali.

As Yassine Karamti remarks in his book *Sidi Bu Ali, "Sultan al-Jarid,"* Sidi Bou Ali came to the south of Tunisia (Nefta) in the eleventh century to combat religious schisms among its inhabitants and to spread Sunni Islam. He died in 1213, supposedly poisoned by a fig. He remains relatively unknown both in Tunisia and Algeria in relation to other saints, such as Sidi Mahrez and Sidi Bou Said (2005, 2).

> The roles of Sidi Bou Ali and Sidi Marzoug were very important during a time when the ʿabid community were mistreated by their "masters" ["white" owners] so the abid sought refuge first in Sidi Bou Ali's zawiya, and then in Sidi Marzoug's zawiya. Despite the power that these "masters" had at that time, they still listened to the saints, and especially Sidi Bou Ali [perhaps because Sidi Bou Ali was also "white"]. For example, when some of the ʿabid were physically abused by their owners, they went to Sidi Marzoug to report it to Sidi Bou Ali, who would then approach the owner and ask for an explanation and defend the abid. Although Sidi Bou Ali was not "completely black" like Sidi Marzoug, he was also not "completely white": he was *asmar* [non-fair-skinned Tunisians who are also not racially Black]. As a matter of fact, none of us in Africa is actually "white," especially in the south of Tunisia and the rest of Africa: we are either *smor* [dark-skinned

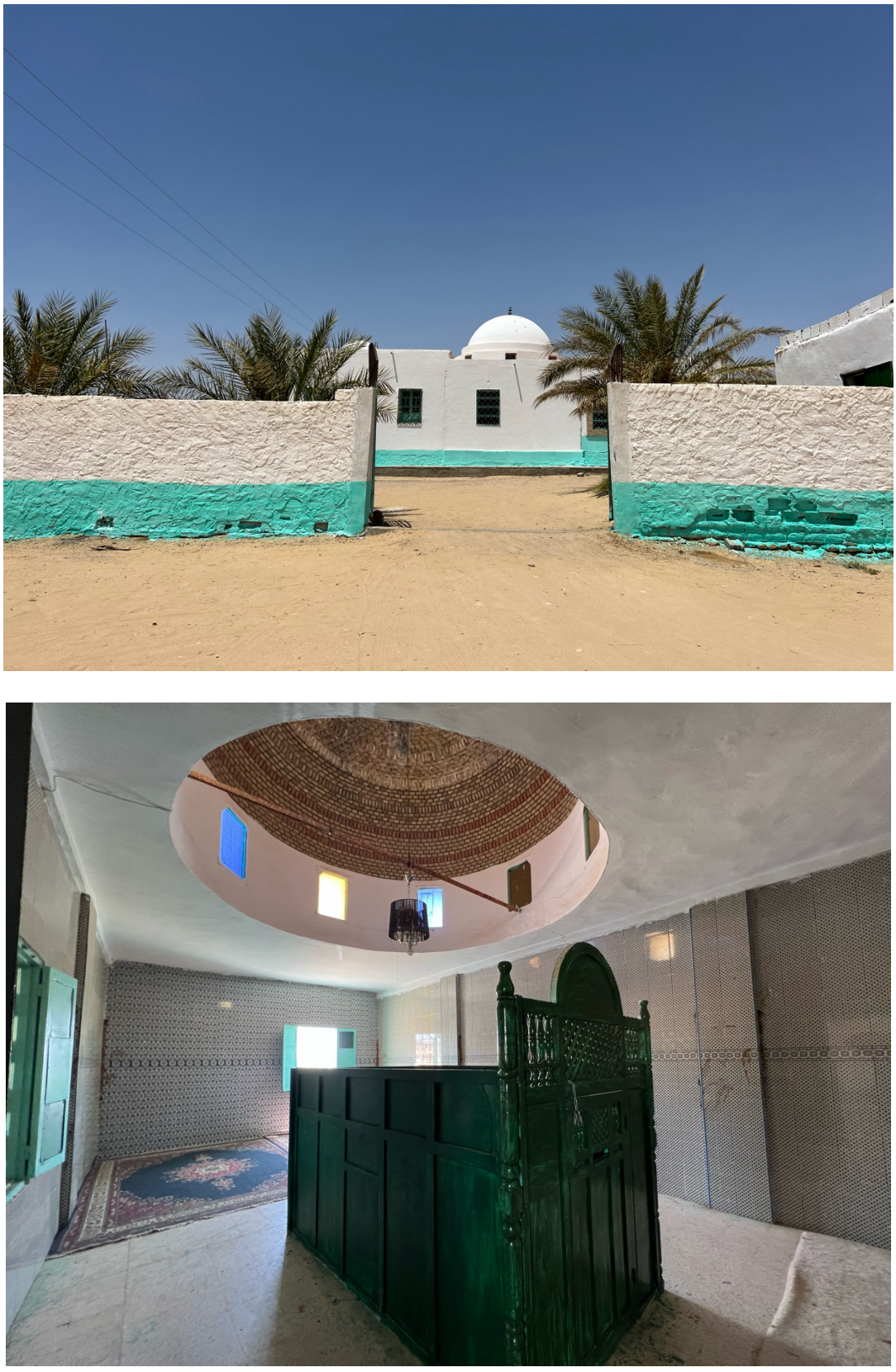

Figure 2.9 Inside the shrine of Sidi Marzoug. *Photographed by author, September 2023.*

people] or *sound* [Black people]. "Our" kinship with and devotion to Sidi Marzoug comes from a long history of his help and support for "us" [the "Black" community] when "we" did not have any advocates.

As to where Sidi Marzoug was originally from, my theory is that he is from either Mali, "Bornu," [likely referring to the former Kanem (c. 700–1380) and Bornu Empires (c. 1380–1893)] or Chad. The most logical guess to me is that he is from "Sudan." By Sudan, I do not mean the country, but the former "Big Sudan" [pre-colonial kingdoms of Western Sudan, an area stretching from Senegal to Chad]. The problem is that we do not possess any documentation about Sidi Marzoug's story. All we know is from what we were told when we were young. I know for a fact that there are so many Mrazig [plural of Marzoug, in this context, in reference to followers of Sidi Marzoug, and those who have the family name Marzoug]: we have them in other parts of Tunisia, such as in "Ghebili" [Kebili, a Tunisian town on the eastern side of the Chott el-Djerid, an hour and a half drive from Tozeur], and even in Algeria. For example, there are communities who also perform the banga ritual and are followers of Sidi Marzoug in Oued Souf [also known as El Oued, a city in southeastern Algeria that shares its borders with Tozeur and is the capital of the El Oued Province]. I believe that if all of our "extended" communities who have a connection to Sidi Marzoug come together, we may actually be able to "find our roots" and learn more about our history and that of Sidi Marzoug.

As for my connection with Sidi Marzoug, I was born in another housh in Tozeur that is located not too far from this one. This housh was originally built "for Lella Gindoua" [to house her tomb]. And from what I know, at that time in Tozeur, there existed only a few houses owned by well-to-do non-Black Tunisians before the arrival of *ʿajema* [sing. *ʿajmi*, non-Arab Tunisians]. After their arrival, more houses were built and Tozeur became more spread out, so Sidi Marzoug's followers started building more *grisha* [huts] in the surrounding area so they could be closer together and more manageable to host the zerda, especially for women to prepare the meals

together. I knew at least three of them when I was very young, who have since passed away: Coca, Dada Yamina, and Khira, who were all *ʿareyf* [sing. *ʿarifa*, literally "the one who knows," usually a woman in charge of overseeing the entire ritual but who also serves as a caregiver for those who enter takhmir].

Eventually, this housh also became Sidi Marzoug's housh, where the community gathered to prepare for his zerda. My father, Ali Chouchane, used to work in Metlaoui as a bus driver, but used to come to this housh around the time of the zerda to help out. When the *mqaddem* [or *mqaddema* (feminine), caretaker of a zawiya] grew old, he called upon my father to take over his role. He told my father: "Ali, please take good care of the diwan and my only son, Eid." The mqaddem passed away and my father took over the role. When my father first started, he still lived in Metlaoui, where my only brother M'barek was born. My father would come twice per year to Tozeur: in the spring for the preparation ritual and in the summer for the "greater" ziyara. However, my father started to become very tired from the back-and-forth travels between Metlaoui and Tozeur, so he decided to quit his job and permanently move to Tozeur, where I was born.

My father continued to be the mqaddem, which was his only occupation, until he passed away. He was able to provide for us through this role: followers and devotees of Sidi Marzoug would donate money, food, house supplies, and other necessities to the zerda and also to our family. My father delegated to me the duties of the next mqaddem, and I have been filling this role ever since he passed away. Eid, on the other hand, decided to move to Metlaoui, where he studied and pursued a professional career working as an administrator in a hospital. Eid did not consider overseeing the banga, because it was a "difficult job: banga is not an easy thing to do, nor is it meant for everyone to do." Most people were also embarrassed being associated with banga, or doing any work for it. In addition, in my day, banga was not a way to earn money and was mostly performed during the actual ritual. Today, banga has become profitable for some people:

> musicians are invited to perform at weddings, special events, and hotels in front of tourists. It is still not a sustainable source of income because it is not a consistent and reliable job, nor is it recognized as one like in musical traditions.

According to Jankowsky, for the stambeli ritual, the ʿarifa is "a ritual healer with extensive trance experience and skills in divination" (2010, 39). He adds that "the ʿarifa was responsible for diagnosing new patients, divining which (if any) of the stambeli spirits were responsible for the affliction, and determining which medicines and ritual procedures were required to placate the spirits" (2010, 59) and explains that the ʿarifa was a position typically held by women. For the banga ritual, the ʿarifa is also a woman who accompanies the troupe and procession when it makes its tours of the nearby neighborhoods and towns to collect baraka for the spring ceremony. More specifically, in the Tunisian sociocultural context, the banga ʿarifa must be a woman as she is permitted to enter homes when women are present and revive women devotees who fainted after entering takhmir.

Madeh, Rhythms, and the Trance Experience

During our time together, Jeddi provided a detailed explanation of the banga ceremony, shedding light on its precise steps, the music that guides it, and the pivotal moments that define the ritual:

> We always begin the *malʿab* [banga ceremony] by reciting the *Al-Fatiha* [the opening chapter of the Quran]. It is important to praise God, first and foremost. Then, we move on to the *tenweeb* [verb form of nouba, see chapter 1] and we play the *qadri* [a Sufi chant that refers to a form of devotional singing associated with the Qaādiriyya Sufi tariqa] to honor the wali Sidi

ʿAbd al-Qadir, as he is Imam is-salhin ["the leader of all righteous saints"]. The qadri madha goes something like this:

اللهُ رَبِّي مَوْلَانَا عَبْدُ القَادِرِ الجَيْلَانِي بَابَا
Allāhu rabbī mawlānā ʿAbdu al-Qādir al-Jīlānī bābā
(God is my Lord, our master Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, father [revered one])

Sidi ʿAbd al-Qadir (1078–1166), born in Persia and later active in Baghdad, developed a Sufi path that became known as the Qadiriyya, which boasts numerous shrines in Tunisia and circles of followers from Morocco to Indonesia (Jankowsky 2012, 18). As previously mentioned, while Jankowsky reports that some stambeli members defined salhin as "spirits" within the specific context of stambeli, this term was employed to demonstrate a level of respect for spirits equivalent to that given to saints. Outside of stambeli, however, salhin is commonly used interchangeably with saints (awliya) and, as we say in Tunisia, is often paired with the term in the phrase "awliya salhin." In the context of banga practices, salhin is used in its broader, non-stambeli sense to refer to saints, aligning with its customary usage across Tunisia.

Jeddi continued his descriptions:

> There are three musical sections in the banga ceremony: 1) the *mserrah* [literally "release," lower-intensity madhat that do not necessarily incite takhmir], 2) the *ʿarbi* [literally "Arab," another type of madeh that involves *dhikr* (recitation of a name of God, literally "remembrance")], and 3) the *m'shekel* [interchangeable with ʿajmi, chants performed toward the end of the banga ceremony to invoke takhmir]. The correct way of "doing" banga is to chant the qadri before each of these sections. Unfortunately, my sons and all the other young men who learned banga did not put the time and effort into practicing it the right way. I try to "correct" them when I notice that they are playing off-beat or chanting the wrong words, but there is not

> much I can do because I am older now, and also because we do not have any written records of these chants.

It is important to note the distinction here between the banga ritual, the entire event that spans several days, and the banga ceremony, the performances at night that evoke trance. Furthermore, *m'shekel* has a root in Arabic that signifies "appearance" or "form," but in the context of banga, it implies "complexity" or "diversity." This usage may also be related to *mashakel* (plural of *mushkila*), which means "problems" or "difficulties" in Arabic. While the connotations differ, the shared root suggests an underlying connection between the notions of complexity and challenges, both of which could metaphorically align with the layered and multifaceted nature of banga practices. This duality of meaning adds depth to the term's use in describing the intricate interplay of identities, traditions, and spiritual expressions within banga. Likewise, ʿajmi has traditionally and historically been understood in reference to race and ethnicity in Tunisia in referring to non-Arab Tunisians, and by default, sub-Saharan Africans. As Jankowsky observes, ʿajmi, also known as sudani (sub-Saharan or "non-Tunisian") is used to refer to lyrics that, although sung mostly in dialectal Arabic, "have the occasional appearance of words from sub-Saharan languages and a nasal, understated delivery, which, in contrast to the ideals of enunciation in Arabic music, is not explicitly concerned with the (human) listener's comprehension of the words" (2010, 4). Returning to phrase *wa da rā-nī wāy sā, w say* above that (still) remains unknown among Jeddi and the banga practitioners, Jankowsky writes that the lyrics of some stambeli nweb are a combination of Arabic and Hausa, Kanuri, or Zarma, and several nweb are almost entirely in Hausa, a language musicians no longer speak (2010, 108–9). Finally, it is necessary to remark about the interchangeable verbs that Jeddi, like the entire banga

community and even myself as a Tunisian, use: one "does" or "plays" banga. The words banga and malʿab are also very frequently used interchangeably.

> Nowadays in general, we start by "beating" [drumming, or playing music] the mserrah for the span of four or five *dourat* [sing. *doura*, literally "circle," dancing in a circle]. We sit down to play the ʿarbi; only the drummers sit down while the rest of the men who play shakasheek continue to dance and chant different madeh. And finally, we begin to play the *skhoun* [literally "hot," in reference to playing specific nweb characterized by fast and loud drum beats which help invoke the spirits and incite tahkmir]. We begin the mserrah by chanting the following madha:

لَا إِلٰهَ إِلَّا اللهُ (×2)
Lā ilāha illā Allāh
(There is no god but God)

لَا إِلٰهَ إِلَّا الله،مُحَمَّد رَسُولُ اللهِ
Lā ilāha illā Allāh, Muḥammad rasūlu Allāh
(There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger)

لَا إِلٰهَ إِلَّا اللهُ (×2)

لَا إِلٰهَ إِلَّا اللهُ،أنا مَرْزوق وَلِيُّ الله
Anā marzūq, walīyu Allāh
(I am Marzoug, a saint of God)

Skhoun is also referred to as m'shekel: according to Jeddi, hadra practitioners call it skhoun, but in banga, he calls it m'shekel. Jeddi also emphasized that all of their banga beats are skhoun beats, which means that regardless of the type of music or section in the ceremony, the way that they play the drums is always a "hot," intense, and heavy beat. Jeddi went on:

> There are at least thirty madhat in banga, and I unfortunately do not recall many of them. They are not all sung on the same day, but spread throughout the duration of the ritual. At times, we decide which madhat to chant based on the visitors, timing, and circumstances in which we hold the ritual. For

example, if we were only able to chant five madhat for one of the sections, on the next day, we would continue from the fifth madha onward. In every section [mserrah and ʿarbi], with the exception of the m'shekel, each madha is accompanied by its own dance, and the ones who dance are the banga musicians who play the shakasheek. The madeh and dances must be performed "properly" [with accurate lyrics and beat] and following the correct sequence. As such, usually the oldest and most experienced man has always been the one leading the madeh at the front of the procession, especially when we perform the dourat [circles]. However, chanting "properly" has always been a "problem" in banga because we memorized many madhat in an "unknown language" without knowing their meaning. For some words, I personally tried to determine their meaning based on their pronunciation and the context. A very simple example among many is a madha that goes as follows: "Bibi ya bibi, ya rasūl Allāh" ["Bibi oh bibi, oh Messenger of God"], which I think means *habibi* [my loved one], but the ʿabid might not have been able to pronounce it fully, so they shortened it to *bibi*.

For the majority of madhat that contain words that are not chanted in Arabic, when "the men" are drumming loudly, it becomes even more difficult to understand these words because the drum beats overpower the chants. For this reason, the banga ceremony requires the presence of people who know the entire ritual and its traditions including the madeh, dance movements, and rhythm. It is important to be accompanied by at least one elder—if not more—as I mentioned earlier who learned from the prior elders from a young age and who then is able to supervise within the doura. However, it is such a challenging task to achieve because it requires emotional and physical effort that sometimes elders cannot maintain. I personally become very tired after a certain amount of time of supervising. The madeh must be recorded to preserve "our" traditions and to ensure that my grandchildren and future generations know "our" heritage, which is a part of their identity. banga is a rich, deep-rooted, and expansive tradition,

> "a boundless ocean" with nonending stories, and takhmir is a pivotal element of it, but also not the only one that matters.
>
> Not everyone who claims takhmir is honest! Takhmir is not something that happens to just anyone. Whether in banga, hadra, or any ritual, the person needs to have the mental and physical readiness to enter the state. Takhmir is not just about dancing or moving either; it's a heightened spiritual state where the person feels very close to the saints being praised. It requires a deep immersion. Takhmir reaches advanced stages when the person starts speaking without thinking and, most of the time, in a completely different language. In these moments, it is as if the spirit is speaking, not the person. Many visitors attending banga become more attuned to interacting with *metkhamrin* [plural of *metkhamer* (masculine) and *metkhamera* (feminine), entranced people], and they would start chanting along the madeh loudly, creating a kind of mutual response. The music in banga, especially during takhmir, plays a significant role in igniting a profound emotional state through which the spirits move. "Real" takhmir occurs when a person taps into the core of their genuine emotions of devotion, pure intentions, and belief; in Allah [God] first and foremost and subsequently, the saints. Instruments like the *bendir* [a frame drum with two or three snares], tabla, and *tangoura* [ceramic kettle drum played with two sticks] must be in complete harmony with the madeh and the movements, and they need to be precise so as not to disrupt the rhythm. When people start dancing, every movement is synchronized with the rhythm, creating a sense of unity between the person in takhmir and the music we play.

The bendir drum, as mentioned previously, features prominently in hadra music, while the tangoura is one of a multitude of names for this small drum which I discovered during my fieldwork visit to the Tunisian National Museum of Music (Najm Ezzahra) in 2023.

The elders of my generation who grew up in banga would affirm that every madeh has a deep meaning, and every word carries its own spirituality. Even when a madha is repeated, each time it brings a new energy that is different from the last. Madeh is not merely words; it is an entire medium of connecting with the spiritual world, the saints, and the people attending the zarda of Sidi Marzoug. My experience as someone who was raised and immersed in banga, and who continues to pass on the knowledge I acquired over the years, I am able to distinguish genuine devotion and takhmir from the "fake one." I knew devotees and I witnessed the extraordinary acts they accomplished, and Aboudi (may he rest in peace) was one of them.

Everyone knows the story of Aboudi who was known for following the *Rahmaniyya* path [another Sufi order associated with the wali Sidi Hamadi]. The followers of Sidi Hamadi are the Rahmanis, and they have their own tarika and traditions. "They" [the Rahamanis] say that they belong to the Marazig [sing. Marzoug, a community who share the same last name of "Marzoug" and believed to have kinship with Sidi Marzoug], and in their gatherings, they have their own specific praise, which varies depending on the circumstances. Aboudi used to own a very small tobacco shop next to a eucalyptus tree. Everyone knew him by his dance with his *kiskas* [pot, cooking vessel, also steamer] when he entered takhmir. With his bare hands, Aboudi would hold a large and heavy copper *kiskas*, like the ones we use to cook for the zarda, filled with flaming charcoal and dance with it. Whenever Aboudi stared at the eucalyptus tree, black djewi started falling from the top of the tree to the ground and people would start running to collect it for baraka. He used to come to our zarda and he loved Sidi Marzoug. He was buried around the Sidi Hamadi mosque.

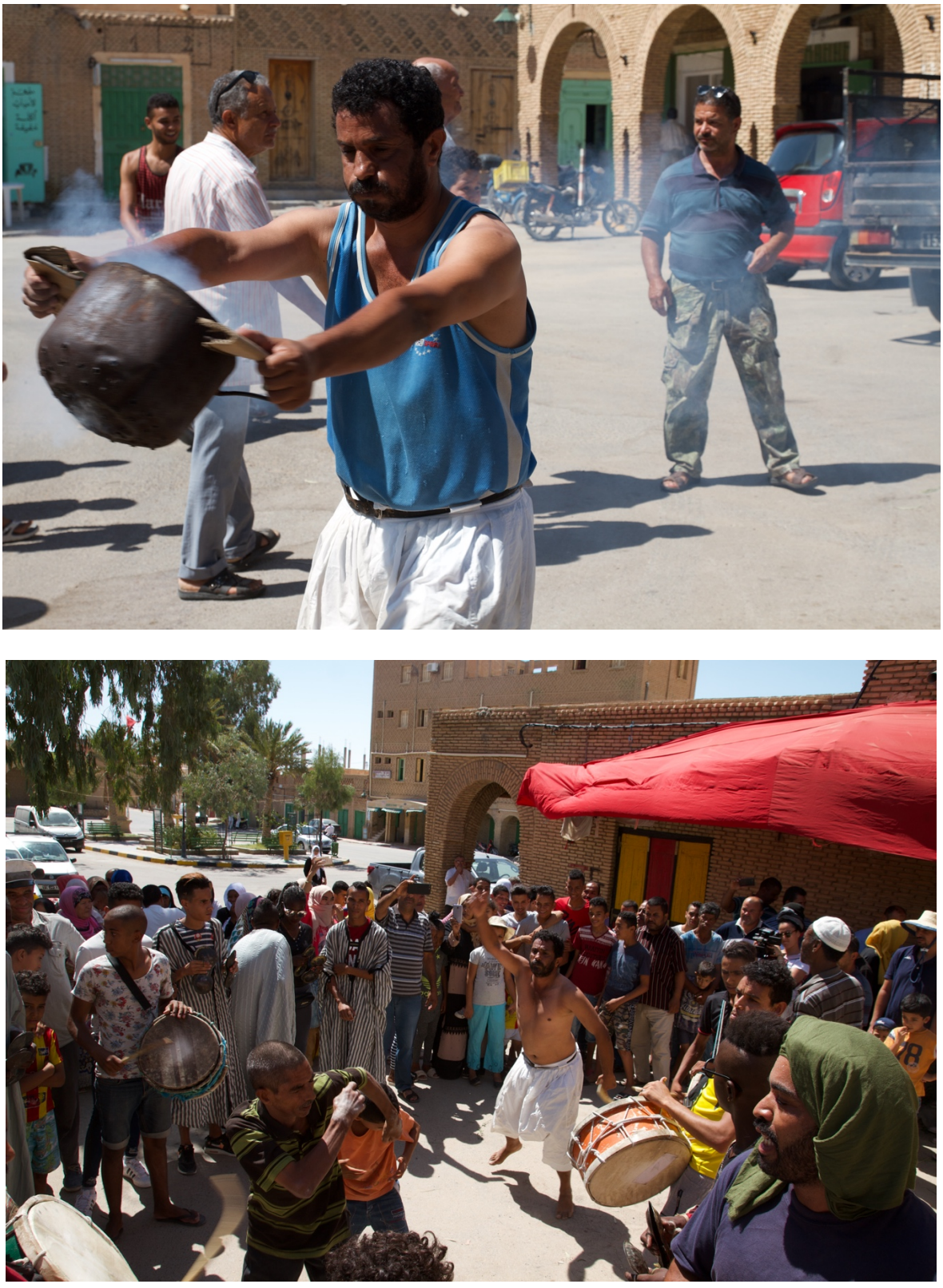

Figure 2.10 A man in trance dancing with kiskas during the banga procession in Nefta. *Photographed by Montassar Ben Jdila, July 2018.*

Many devotees who enter trance hold pots or large vessels while they dance, like Aboudi here, containing either water or flaming charcoal. For those carrying water, it is common for the entranced to repeatedly plunge their entire head and shoulders into the water. Jankowsky lists many similar "dramatic feats of trance" involving dancing with fire related to followers of the *Isawiyya* Sufi tariqa during the stambeli ritual. Entranced devotees pick up burning stalks of grass and pass the flames of the stalks across their bare chests and under their arms, drop them on the ground, and extinguish the fires with their bare hands (2021, 62–63). Jeddi further specified:

> When an individual is deeply devoted, they do not enter takhmir merely in response to any type of madha "we" perform during the ceremony. Rather, they enter takhmir upon hearing "their madha," meaning the one specifically associated with their saint and spiritual connections. In other words, they enter this state only when they both hear and feel the presence of the madha tied to their particular saint and spirits. For instance, as someone deeply devoted to Sidi Marzoug and holding great affection for him, when I attend a zarda for any wali or a ceremony where banga or other rituals are performed, I naturally feel moved by all the madha being played. However, I do not enter takhmir when I hear a madha dedicated to Sidi Bou Ali. It is only when they play the madha for Sidi Marzoug that I am most likely to enter takhmir. In banga, "we" call it takhmir, in other contexts such as listening to Umm Kulthum [Egyptian singer, songwriter and actress], people may call it *saltana* [musical ecstasy] or *nashwa* [spiritual, emotional, or physical ecstasy or euphoria]. People experience these states differently depending on their beliefs, level of devotion, and emotions.

From Takhmir to Tasrih: The Process of Completing Trance

Throughout our interviews, Jeddi shared a few intricacies about the cycle of entering takhmir, fainting, and waking from it in what he and practitioners consider successfully "completing" trance:

> *Tasrih* is not a mere awakening but rather a careful process of returning from a heightened spiritual state back to everyday awareness. When an individual is fully engaged in takhmir, experiencing an intense connection with the divine, they need *tasrih* to be gently guided back to themselves. In situations where someone is deeply immersed in takhmir, if they are truly genuine in their spiritual state, they may be able to *yetsarah* [to be able to release oneself (masculine)] or *testarah* [feminine]—a natural release where they awaken on their own. When praises such as *La ilaha illa Allah* ["There is only one God"] are chanted, individuals who are real and sincere in their trance often emerge naturally from their takhmir. However, if they remain unresponsive, additional measures may be taken, such as softly reciting verses from the Quran into their ears, which often serves to gently guide them back to consciousness.
>
> During the ceremony, a designated group of men stands around the inner circle, focusing on safeguarding the participants and aiding the musicians and takhmir practitioners. When these men notice someone deeply enveloped in their trance—indicated by physical signs such as heavy sweating, body trembling, swaying movements, and deep, labored breaths—they may step in to provide tasrih. The end of a madha typically signals a natural transition, and those in takhmir may reawaken on their own. But if someone remains in a state of deep trance, the men observing will softly recite the Quran in their ears as a further effort to wake them. In cases where this gentle urging does not bring them out, additional actions are taken. Sometimes, playing another specific madha—often one that the individual associates with a particular saint—is necessary to complete their

> takhmir and bring them to tasrih. This personalized approach ensures that each participant's journey is honored and that their return from the trance is as seamless as possible, deeply respecting the spiritual depth of their experience.

Here, it is worth underlining that tasrih relates closely to mserrah, as previously explained earlier in the chapter. Mserrah is a type of madeh characterized by lower-intensity chants that do not necessarily incite takhmir. In contrast, tasrih serves to release a devotee from takhmir, acting as a means to guide participants back to a state of balance and closure after the heightened experience. This interplay between tasrih and takhmir reflects the intricate choreography of the ritual, where the emotional and spiritual engagement is carefully modulated through chants and rhythms. This dynamic modulation also hints at the broader relationship between music, rhythm, and altered states of consciousness within the banga ceremony. It paves the way for a deeper exploration of trance—its incitement, experience, and resolution—which is the focus of the next chapter. By examining how these elements converge to create a transcendental experience, we can better understand the profound role of trance within this ritualistic framework.

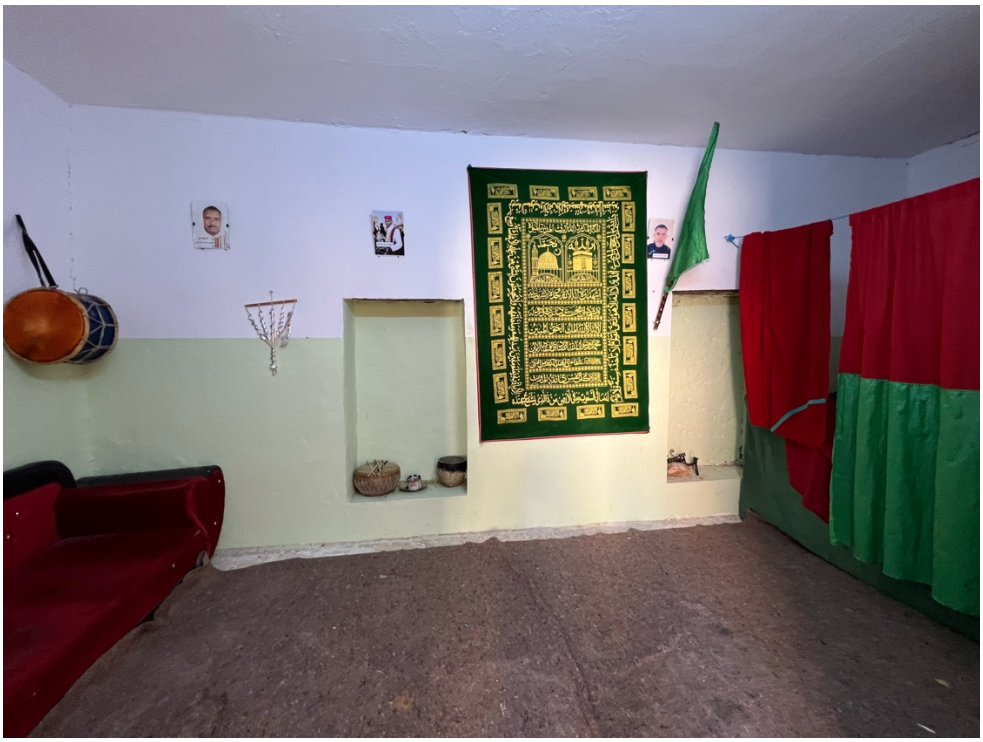

Figure 2.11 Dar diwan, shrine of Lella Guidoua. *Photographed by author, September 2024.*

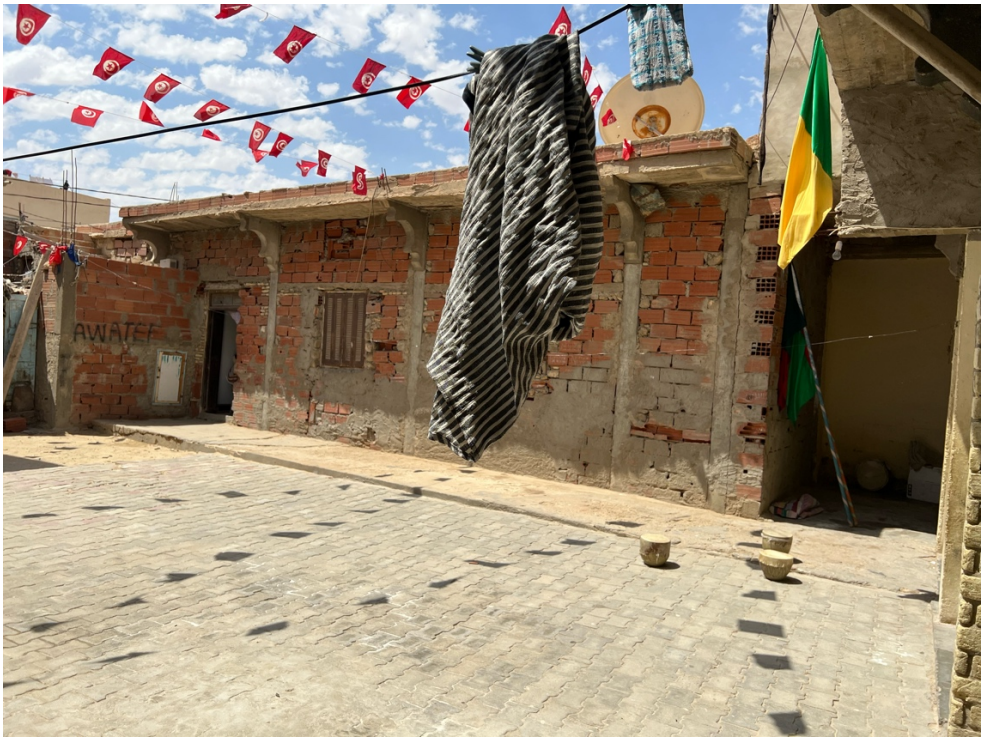

Figure 2.12 The courtyard of the housh after the banga morning procession. *Photographed by author, July 2020.*

3.

Beyond Trance

Banga, a Sacred Refuge of Healing and Identity

It was the bori night, and the energy in the air was palpable. The housh was packed so tightly that, once someone found a place to sit or stand, they held onto it firmly—myself included. I navigated the space near the women's section, searching for the perfect filming spot that wouldn't block anyone's view or disrupt the scene. Earlier in the day, I had sat with Montassar, my filming partner and now a good friend, to discuss our plan for documenting the ceremony, making sure to describe the bori night to him in detail, hoping to prepare him for what to expect. The community had grown so fond of Montassar that they often asked about him when he was not with me, and he, in turn, developed a deep love and care for them. He once shared that being part of this experience was transformative for him, and he felt honored to have been invited to film. Part of me was focused on the logistics of filming, but a larger part was anxious about Montassar's first exposure to this ceremony. I felt caught between the lack of control over the situation and a deep responsibility to protect the banga community from any potential judgment toward their practices. Given the gendered nature of the space, I suggested to Montassar that each of us document the ceremony from different angles and he was very supportive of the plan. As a man, Montassar was able to position himself directly in the heart of the trance circle in the courtyard, capturing the raw energy of the entranced men amid the dancers. I, on the other hand, stood behind the musicians and practitioners, alongside the women of the Chouchane family and others from the region, seated close to dar diwan. Despite the discomfort of being in such a cramped spot, unable to move freely or position my camera as I needed, I felt reassured by my proximity to the musicians and the circle where takhmir unfolded.

The division between inside and outside reflected not just the spatial arrangement of the ritual but also the social and gendered boundaries that shape how these ceremonies unfold.

Deep into the night, the housh took on an otherworldly energy, charged with anticipation. Deep into the night, the housh pulsed with an otherworldly energy, charged with anticipation. Those attending formed two distinct groups: some stood in a loose circle, watching intently, their quiet presence anchoring the space, while others surrendered to the rhythm, entering states of trance. The transition between observer and participant felt fluid—at any moment, someone from the circle could step forward, drawn by the pulsing energy of the ritual. The courtyard was packed, every inch filled with tightly pressed bodies absorbed in the thickening atmosphere, punctuated by the strong scent of incense wafting from the *kanoun* (clay brazier). The air seemed to hum with the interplay of movement and stillness, unity and individuality, as the ritual unfolded in the charged night. The haze of smoke hung heavily in the air, transforming the dimly lit space into an ethereal realm where sight and sound melded, blurring the boundaries between the physical and spiritual. Reality seemed to dissolve, casting everything in a dreamlike aura, as if the material and spiritual worlds were slowly collapsing into one another. The intense rhythms of the skhoun ("hot beat," see chapter 2) reverberated through the courtyard, echoing with the resonant madeh. More men joined the center of the courtyard, entering a more intense state of takhmir, their bodies swaying right and left to the rapid, pulsing beats of drums and shakasheek. Shouts arose from a few women and some adolescent and teenage girls from the Chouchane family, also deep in takhmir. A few of Jeddi's daughters and daughters-in-law quickly moved to help, guiding the girls inside dar diwan to complete their takhmir amid the throbbing sounds of the ceremony.

At the center of this dense circle of bodies, the dancers were deep in the most fervent stages of takhmir, their movements growing increasingly unrestrained as the musicians, steadfast in their roles, continued to escalate the speed of the drumming beat. I found myself absorbed by the overwhelming force of the music and the crowd. The sonic landscape—the relentless drumming, the entrancing chanting—seemed to take on a life of its own, drawing everyone present deeper into its grip. My role as an observer and documentarian felt momentarily suspended, something shifted and I could not tell what it was. At first, I thought to myself it was the hazy mist of incense, the closeness of the crowd, or the repetitive rhythms that seemed to reverberate not just in the air but within my own body. All I knew is that the sounds, the sights, and the sensations of the housh became indistinct, like a muddled memory. I lowered my camera, my grip loosening as the scenes before me became a blur and the once-focused lens of my camera seemed less important. I could not remember the exact moment I stopped filming. The music, the drums, the chanting—all of it faded into the background. As the night progressed, the rhythms intensified through the repetition of sound and motion, and so did the movement within the circle. The trance state of the participants seemed to draw everything in the housh toward the center—the people, the smoke, the music. It was at that moment when I felt that the lines between observer and participant began to blur and the division between both seemed to dissolve. Time seemed to slow, and for a moment, I was outside myself, lost in the midst of the housh. I do not recall how long I stood there, staring into the smoke, when I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Maya, smiling with her warm and understanding face. She leaned on me, took my hand and whispered, “You can dance if you want, or if you need to. If you go into takhmir, we will take care of you. Don’t worry.” Maya’s words brought me back to the present

moment, reminding me that even as a researcher, I was never entirely an outsider. I was part of the energy of the ritual, bound by the same rhythms that governed the bodies of those around me.

I was around 1 a.m. when the ceremony was drawing to a close. The participants slowly dispersed, leaving the courtyard still thick with the scent of incense and the scattered remnants of the evening; ashes, cinders, and other traces of the night's intense spiritual activity. The Chouchane family and guests who were spending the night at the housh through the entire banga ritual gathered to clean the housh. The act of cleaning was a continuation of the ceremony itself, an opportunity to reflect on what had transpired—who had fallen into trance, the emotions stirred, and the stories that emerged from the ritual. It was accompanied by laughter and memories of the night's events. We recalled the trances, exchanged jokes, and commented on the family members who had fallen into deep trance that evening. As I helped a little with the cleaning, Jeddi approached me. His eyes were kind, and his voice carried the wisdom of experience. "I saw you," he said softly. "You seemed like you could have gone into trance. It's okay!" His words stayed with me long after the night ended. They echoed again when Montassar and I returned to Tunis, exhausted from days of fieldwork but eager to review the footage. As we sifted through the images, Montassar pulled up a photograph he had taken of me during the ceremony. In the picture, I was standing still, camera lowered, staring out into the mist of the courtyard. My eyes, unfocused and distant, seemed to mirror the blurred edges of reality that had surrounded me that night. It was clear to me that I was caught between two worlds—one of documentation and analysis, and the other of spiritual experience.

The boundaries of my role as a researcher and observer had dissolved momentarily, and in that moment, I understood something deeper about banga, about trance, and about the invisible threads that connect all who participate in the ritual, whether through music, movement,

or stillness. Observing, filming, and documenting banga rituals brings the challenge of navigating and balancing both the spiritual and ethnographic dimensions of the ceremony. Initially, I hesitated to include my personal experience from that night, but I ultimately felt it was important to share, as it reveals the fluid boundaries between participant and observer in trance rituals. It underscores how the ethnographer's body—their senses, emotions, and perceptions—cannot remain entirely neutral or detached amid such powerful spiritual experiences. Despite its delicate and complex nature, the ethnographer's body serves as a bridge between personal involvement and theoretical exploration in trance rituals, participant-observation, and the role of the researcher within ritual contexts. This moment exemplifies the delicate balance required in such settings, where personal engagement becomes intertwined with participant-observation. Although I was present as a researcher and documentarian, the boundaries between observation and participation grew increasingly porous as the night progressed. Banga rituals, as immersive spiritual practices, challenge the ethnographer to maintain a neutral stance in an environment intentionally designed to dissolve such separations, drawing in everyone present—whether they are actively participating in the trance or observing from the periphery.

My experience that night offered a firsthand glimpse into what many scholars have described as the "liminal" power of trance, where individual consciousness gives way to collective spiritual resonance. That moment, though personally profound, echoes the broader frameworks used by scholars to understand trance across cultures. Anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and historians have long studied trance as a transformative experience, a state that not only connects individuals to the divine but also preserves cultural memory and identity. I explore these perspectives, drawing on key voices in the field to contextualize banga within the wider scholarly discourse on trance. Through these lenses, we can begin to understand

how the power of banga as a ritual lies not only in its music and movements but in its capacity to bridge worlds, past and present.

Understanding Trance: Academic Perspectives Meet Local Wisdom

The concept of trance has long intrigued scholars across disciplines, from anthropology to ethnomusicology, owing to its role in connecting communities to both the spiritual and material worlds. While each individual encounters trance with unique traits, its significance transcends personal experiences, reaching into a shared dimension of meaning and connection that embodies cultural, social, and historical narratives, which define communities. Through his extensive work on trance, Gilbert Rouget offered an insightful description of it as an "altered state of consciousness." Building on Rouget's seminal work, trance is understood as a complex state of consciousness that intertwines psychophysiological processes with cultural and social dimensions. Rouget's in-depth analysis reshaped the academic study of trance rituals by emphasizing their embeddedness in the cultural and social fabric of communities. In many ritualistic and religious practices, trance is recognized as a core component that unites the physical and metaphysical spheres by meditating between the human and the sacred realms. Trance is also the interface between the tangible and transcendent, between the earthly and divine, and between the seen and unseen worlds. It is a method for healing, communication with spiritual forces, and community bonding. Within the context of banga in Tunisia, trance is central to its ritualistic practice. Historically, Tunisia has been a crossroads of diverse cultural influences, and banga embodies a synthesis of spirit possession and ritual practices, rooted in a dynamic heritage interwoven with Islamic elements. In many banga ceremonies, practitioners invoke spiritual entities (akin to the spirits in African possession rituals) while adhering to an Islamic framework that acknowledges the existence of *jinn* (invisible beings mentioned in the

Quran) or other spirits. This syncretism is not unique to banga but can be observed in other parts of the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, where African and Islamic spiritual traditions coexist. Earlier Scholars such as Edward Westermarck (1926) have examined the fusion of pre-Islamic and Islamic spiritual practices in North Africa, noting that trance states are often employed in both traditions to achieve spiritual healing and protection. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" in *The Location of Culture* offers a useful framework for understanding this fusion, where the intermingling of distinct cultural beliefs forms a new, unique expression. Bhabha notes that it is in these "in-between" spaces of cultural interaction that new identities and meanings emerge, reshaping the boundaries of tradition and belonging. He explains, "It is the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha 1994, 38). In this sense, banga and its layered spiritual practices can be viewed as a hybrid cultural form, blending African and Islamic elements to create a distinct tradition that speaks to Tunisia's complex historical and cultural tapestry. To better understand the multidimensional aspects and significance of banga, it is crucial to engage with the broader scholarship on music, trance, healing and cultural identity as banga weaves all of these components into one cohesive whole.

Banga, much like other trance-related practices found across Africa and the African diasporas, operates primarily as a healing ritual. In the work of Bourguignon, trance is often associated with possession, where spirits are invited into the body of a practitioner or participant to facilitate healing, deliver messages, or bring about transformation. In banga, trance states are believed to be induced through the invocation of spirits or saints, facilitated by rhythmic drumming, repetitive madhat (praise songs), and purposeful, rhythmic actions. These movements, synchronized with the music, serve as a medium to connect participants with the

spiritual realm. The music and motions are understood to summon the presence of the spirit, which then guides the dancer into a trance state. This interplay reflects a deeply embedded belief system where the agency of the spirit and the communal act of invocation work together to bring about altered states of consciousness. When participants enter trance they engage with spiritual forces for protection and purification. According to Richard C. Jankowsky (2010), whose work on stambeli closely parallels banga, trance rituals are central to the therapeutic processes for marginalized communities, especially those with sub-Saharan African heritage. Jankowsky notes that music in these rituals serves as a vehicle for spiritual interaction, in which spirits are invoked to provide protection and healing. In the case of banga, the rhythmic drumming and ritual madhat create an environment in which participants are believed to communicate with or be possessed by spirits, whose presence is invoked to fulfill specific spiritual or communal purposes as understood within the practice. The rhythms and melodies of the ritual act as tools for inducing trance, facilitating a liminal state where the spiritual and physical realms intersect. Trance is often framed within the concept of "liminality," which offers a compelling lens through which to view trance as a phenomenon that transcends individual experience, functioning as a collective expression of spirituality and social cohesion.

Victor Turner's work on ritual, particularly his concepts of *liminality* and *communitas*, provides a foundational framework for understanding the transformative potential of trance and possession rituals in reinforcing social identity. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Turner explores how rituals function to dissolve and reshape social boundaries, allowing participants to temporarily transcend ordinary roles and identities. Turner describes the liminal phase of ritual as "a period of ambiguity and flux, where social structures are suspended, and participants enter a space of potential transformation" (Turner 1969, 94). This liminal

space—the threshold between two states of being, particularly in rites of passage, he emphasizes, is essential for fostering new forms of social cohesion and personal renewal. This framework is especially relevant to the banga ritual, where trance allows participants to access a sacred space outside of ordinary social rules. Similarly, the concept of *communitas*—an intense feeling of social solidarity and unity that arises in liminal spaces—further illustrates the role of trance rituals in reinforcing collective identity. He writes, "In communitas, individuals experience a profound sense of togetherness that transcends social hierarchies and individual distinctions" (Turner 1969, 127). This shared experience of unity and equality within the ritual space allows participants to connect deeply with one another, forming bonds that often extend beyond the ritual itself. Turner's insights into the transformative potential of liminality and communitas provide a valuable framework for analyzing banga and similar trance rituals. His work suggests that these practices not only facilitate individual transcendence but also strengthen community bonds by creating shared experiences of unity and equality. For communities practicing banga, trance rituals can serve as spaces for identity negotiation, social cohesion, and cultural resilience, reaffirming collective identity and fostering communal support. By contrast, I. M. Lewis examined trance through a lens of social control and power dynamics, particularly in his studies on spirit possession and trance in African and Middle Eastern societies. He views trance as a form of social expression, particularly for marginalized groups. In his analysis of spirit possession, Lewis suggests that trance can act as a channel for resistance, offering individuals a way to assert agency and identity in a restrictive social environment. He proposes that spirit possession acts as both a psychological release and a socially sanctioned means for participants to express personal and communal struggles (Lewis 1971). In the context of banga, trance not

only serves spiritual purposes but also functions as a cultural reclamation for those with African heritage in Tunisia, particularly given Tunisia's complex racial dynamics.

Though Victor Turner and I. M. Lewis offers contrasting views on trance—Turner seeing it as a pathway to social unity, and Lewis as a tool for navigating power and social tension—both perspectives are crucial in understanding the multifaceted role of trance in human societies, illuminating how it can simultaneously unify and challenge social structures. While these broader scholarly frameworks provide valuable insights, the lived experience of trance in banga must be understood within its own cultural specificity, which still intersects to some extent with these frameworks. During my fieldwork, Jeddi Hassan explained trance as a form of emotional release—a necessary moment of surrender that allows participants to align themselves with their ancestors and the spirit world. For Jeddi, trance is not only a ritual but a deeply personal encounter with forces beyond human control. "Trance is not something we seek," he once told me. "It comes to those who need it." He added "It doesn't come when you call it, it comes when the spirits are ready, and when you're open to it." His words echo the idea that trance is beyond the control of the individual—a force that transcends conscious intention, drawing participants into the ritual's spiritual dimension. This local understanding of trance suggests that trance is a form of surrender, one that transcends individual control and opens practitioners to forces beyond the human realm. This interpretation is reflected in the scenes I witnessed during the bori ceremony; the intensity of the drumming, chanting, and movements creates an atmosphere charged with spiritual energy. As the men moved deeper into their trance states, their bodies responded to the rhythmic drumming in a way that blurred the lines between physical and spiritual. The air, thick with incense and heavy with the intensity of the ritual, seemed to pull everyone present into a shared space of spiritual vulnerability. The role of the musicians, often

positioned centrally within the ritual, is to guide participants deeper into their trance states, serving as both catalysts and custodians of the spiritual journey. As I observed in the field, moments of trance are often met with respect and care from fellow community members. For instance, when a participant falls into an especially deep trance, family members or practitioners stand close by, ready to assist or protect them. In this context, trance is not simply a performance—it is an essential part of community healing and cultural memory.

The Healing Pulse: Music, Trance, and the Power of Emotional Release

Almost all of my conversations with Jeddi Hassan about the significance of the banga ritual conclude with its pivotal role in fostering *tfarhid*—a vital process of emotional release and communal enjoyment. In Tunisian Arabic, *tfarhid* is a term that defies direct translation, representing a multifaceted concept of emotional refreshment, mental relaxation, and social enjoyment. It often involves engaging in activities that alleviate stress and promote well-being, typically in a social or leisurely context. From a psychological perspective, *tfarhid* functions as a culturally embedded coping mechanism. It aids in stress reduction and enhances mood by encouraging individuals to partake in experiences that foster joy and mental relaxation. The term encapsulates not only a state of physical relaxation but also a holistic approach to mental health, where engaging in enjoyable activities serves as a natural mood regulator. In the context of the banga ritual, tfarhid moves beyond everyday relaxation, developing into a state of liberation and joyous expression facilitated by rhythmic music and ritualized movement. Participants experience tfarhid deeply during the ritual, reaching a heightened state of euphoria and emotional renewal. This state is closely tied to the dense cyclic rhythms and musical components of banga, where the intricate interplay of beats helps guide participants into altered states of consciousness, amplifying their engagement with the ritual. On several occasions, Jeddi repeatedly emphasized

to me that whether one prefers to call it takhmir (trance) or *nashwa* (ecstasy) is ultimately not as important; what truly matters is the effect it has and the way it makes people feel—tfarhid. In banga, music is more than just an accompaniment to the ritual; it is the key catalyst for trance states which provides an emotional release.

Jeddi's view of tfarhid as a unified experience, regardless of terminology, resonates with anthropological insights into altered states of consciousness. Anthropologists such as Erika Bourguignon and Vincent Crapanzano provide valuable frameworks that support and deepen this understanding. Bourguignon emphasizes the cultural embeddedness of such states, highlighting how collective practices and shared beliefs shape the experience of trance (Bourguignon 1973). Similarly, Crapanzano examines how ritual performance structures and mediates these states, offering insights into the communal and symbolic dimensions of what Jeddi refers to as tfarhid (Crapanzano 1977). Together, these perspectives affirm the holistic nature of Jeddi's interpretation, situating tfarhid within a broader anthropological discourse on the cultural dynamics of altered states. In banga, practitioners can experience a spectrum between trance and ecstasy. Some participants retain a sense of ritual awareness, while others may reach a state of complete spiritual surrender. Becker's insights on music and emotion add depth to this distinction. In her analysis of musical-induced trance, she discusses how music can activate memories, emotions, and physical responses, often bypassing conscious thought (Becker 2006). Her work is particularly relevant to banga, where rhythmic drumming and chanting drive participants into an emotional and physical state that facilitates the journey between trance and ecstasy. As an essential component of trance, music evokes emotional and sensory responses that facilitate a shift in consciousness. Nonetheless, the distinction between trance and ecstasy adds complexity to understanding the banga ritual. Erika Bourguignon differentiates between the two

based on the degree of self-control and awareness involved. In trance, the individual may appear possessed, overtaken by an external force, while in ecstasy, the participant often experiences a unifying connection with the divine or the spiritual world without losing control (Bourguignon 1973). In banga, this distinction is significant; while some participants enter trance, appearing to embody external spirits, others reach states closer to ecstasy, characterized by inner peace and profound connection rather than external display.

Crapanzano further explores this difference, noting that trance often involves societal expectations and roles, as participants embody spirits or forces that hold cultural significance. In contrast, ecstasy is more introspective, allowing individuals to connect with the divine on a personal level, often transcending cultural roles (Crapanzano 1973). In banga, this interplay of trance and ecstasy allows for a range of spiritual experiences, where some individuals perform culturally expected roles while others reach personal states of connection and unity. In banga, the drumming and chanting create an immersive soundscape that enables participants to synchronize their bodies with the rhythms of the ritual, a process known as entrainment. Ali Jihad Racy explores this in his study of *tarab*, an Arabic concept that denotes musical ecstasy, highlighting the profound connection between music and emotional release. In *Making Music in the Arab World*, Racy explains that tarab enables individuals to reach heightened states of emotional resonance, often leading to spiritual transcendence (Racy 2004). This connection between music and trance illustrates how cultural aesthetics shape the experience of trance, situating it within specific musical traditions and community practices. He describes that repetitive rhythms and melodic structures are essential to creating emotional resonance that draws listeners into a heightened state of consciousness. In banga, the repetitive drumming patterns work in a similar way, gradually pulling participants into trance states where they can interact with the spiritual

world. Racy's work reveals how music induces states of heightened emotion and sensory immersion that enable practitioners to transcend their surroundings. In banga, the rhythmic patterns, while initially repetitive, build in complexity and speed, creating a dynamic intensification that, combined with the growing communal energy, evokes a profound sense of transcendence, blurring the lines between individual and collective experiences. The participants are thus able to connect more profoundly with one another and with the divine. Richard C. Jankowsky extends this argument by exploring how rhythmic repetition and transformation, with call-and-response singing, create feedback loops that deepen trance. In his study of stambeli, Jankowsky notes that the sonic environment of these rituals is specifically designed to induce trance by overloading the senses and facilitating a shift in consciousness (Jankowsky 2010). The drumming sequences in banga mimic this process, using escalating rhythms and intensity to draw participants into the trance experience. Similarly, Tamara Turner (2017) explores how music in gnawa trance rituals in Morocco, serves to open a portal to the spiritual world. For Turner, the surrender to the music is a key feature of the trance experience, where the participant's consciousness is subsumed by the collective sonic and physical energy of the ritual. In banga, participants often describe being *mahmoul*—'carried' by the rhythms—into a state of spiritual vulnerability or possession, guided by the profound connection between music and ritual experience (see chapter 1).

Banga is not only a display of musical traditions and spiritual ceremonies but also an embodied performance that transforms the participants' physical presence into a site of cultural memory, identity, and healing. It is a deeply embodied experience, where the body becomes both a channel for spirits and a vessel for community cohesion. Far from passive, the participants' physical responses—their breath, movement, and gestures—are key elements that anchor them in

the ritual, transforming each bodily action into a spiritual pathway, enabling them to enter trance and experience profound spiritual communion. *Rags* (as pronounced in Tozeur and most southern regions) or *chtih* (the term commonly used across Tunisia), "to dance" is at the core of the banga ritual, working alongside the music to complete the trance-inducing process. The structured yet free-flowing movements allow participants to lose themselves in the rhythm, entering a state of trance where personal consciousness is replaced by a collective spiritual experience. This phenomenon is consistent with Bourguignon's argument that trance can lead to a dissolution of individual ego and a merging with the group's collective identity or with the spiritual entities invoked in the ritual. During my fieldwork, I observed that as the ritual unfolded, particular vocal phrases functioned as musical mottoes, evoking distinct spiritual states in those present. Drawing on Rouget's concept of musical mottoes, these vocal phrases not only identified the spirit but also brought it into being, enabling dancers to experience the music as the embodiment of the spirit and vice versa (Rouget 1985). I observed how certain men, seemingly responding to an unseen force, would suddenly begin breathing rapidly and deeply, their bodies swaying rhythmically as if guided by something beyond themselves. This rapid breathing signals the onset of trance, and often, their bodies become rigid before collapsing to the ground in surrender. A few of the Chouchane brothers, positioned in front of the musicians to protect them from disruptions, swiftly respond when a participant falls, gathering around him with practiced care. They remove his shoes, acknowledging the ritual principle that one must enter the trance circle barefoot, a gesture symbolizing reverence and openness to spiritual forces. Lifting him gently, they support his body as it begins to sway in sync with the music, guiding him further into trance.

While the structure of banga remains consistent, I have observed subtle changes over the years that make each performance feel both familiar and new. Though the sequence of rituals, music, and roles is preserved, the participants' individual expressions, movements, and responses to the music vary. This dynamic aspect of banga echoes Richard Schechner's theory of "restored behavior," where ritual actions are continuously re-enacted with layers of symbolic meaning, adapting subtly to the present while preserving ties to the past (Schechner 1985, 36). In banga, this continuity with flexibility allows each participant's body to become a unique vessel for the collective memory of the ritual, bridging past and present through embodied performance. Thomas Csordas describes this concept as "embodied knowledge," where meaning is not only represented but felt and lived through the body, as individuals fully engage with the ritual's rhythms and symbols (Csordas 1994, 12). In banga, each gesture—the removal of shoes, the swaying bodies, the tapping of chests—reflects a deep-seated cultural understanding of the body as a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds. The participants' bodily responses are a way of "tuning" to the ritual's energy, enabling them to connect with the ancestors and with each other.

Paul Stoller's insights into possession rituals further illuminate this process of embodied engagement. In his study of Songhay trance practices, Stoller emphasizes that physical sensation and movement are essential for entering and sustaining a trance state, as the body responds instinctively to the rhythm and flow of the ritual (Stoller 1989, 54). In banga, the intense drumming and chanting become tools through which participants' bodies are drawn into a shared, sacred rhythm, allowing the ritual to facilitate a collective experience of cultural continuity and spiritual transcendence. This embodied experience is also a means of healing, where participants channel their emotions and histories through movement and music. Deborah

Kapchan suggests that the body in ritual becomes a vessel for "expressive sound and movement," where physical gestures carry meaning that words cannot fully convey (Kapchan 2007, 94). In banga, men often remove their shirts as the trance deepens, closing their eyes and letting their bodies respond intuitively to the rhythm, tapping their chests or holding their heads as a way of grounding themselves within the spiritual intensity of the moment. This combination of physicality and spirituality transforms the body into a medium for healing and resilience, a sacred tool through which participants connect to collective memory and ancestral power. Banga's embodiment of performance is thus a multifaceted experience, where the body acts as a site of spiritual invocation, memory, and communal identity. By engaging fully with music and movement, participants transform their physical selves into bearers of cultural history and spiritual resilience. Through rhythmic intensity and embodied ritual, banga reaffirms its role as a sanctuary for both individual healing and collective memory.

Rhythms of Remembrance: Banga, Blackness, and Identity Formation

When I first began my research on stambeli, I started to grasp the nuanced and contentious dimensions of race and its surrounding discourse in Tunisia, which had been largely absent from the public and academic sphere until the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. This void has hindered a meaningful reckoning with the legacy of Black identity in Tunisia, which includes the silencing of enslaved ancestry, exclusion from institutional spaces, and the erasure of Black cultural heritage, such as the banga ritual. While Tunisia was a pioneering North African state in abolishing slavery in 1846, its involvement in the trans-Saharan slave trade introduced complex racial dynamics that persist in modern Tunisian society. Tunisia's abolition, an event once celebrated with pride, failed to dismantle ingrained social hierarchies and it rather established enduring racial categories in Tunisia, impacting the status and treatment of Black Tunisians. As

Ismael Montana details in *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia*, this reform left Black Tunisians in a marginalized position within society, enduring economic exclusion and lingering stigmas of oppression and alienation (Montana 2013). In post-independence Tunisia, the legacy of race remains entangled in the country's political history as the state constructed a national identity emphasizing homogeneity sidelining racial and ethnic diversity. President Habib Bourguiba promoted an image of modernity that sought to align Tunisia with Western values. His focus on tourism drove a national narrative of Tunisia as a "Mediterranean" nation, rooted in an Arab-Islamic identity. Operating under a similar rationale, this approach was further reinforced by the ousted former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's reign, who adopted the concept of *infitah*, or openness, seeking international recognition for Tunisia as a hub of peace and tolerance (Hazbun 2007/2008). His national vision, however, came at the cost of racial and cultural diversity. Aomar Boum describes this image-building as a "performance of convivencia," referencing the romanticized concept of medieval tolerance between religious communities in Spain (Boum 2012).

Bourguiba's administration thoroughly institutionalized *maalouf* music, elevating it to the status of national "classical" music, while later, Ben Ali's regime continued to prioritize maalouf and other elite musical traditions, sidelining Black musical practices, like banga and stambeli, into obscurity. Tunisia's policy of "de-minoritization" further excluded Black communities, erasing them from national discourse as part of an idealized, homogeneous Tunisian society (Ltifi 2020). This legacy endures in Tunisia's southern regions, where Black communities face socioeconomic exclusion and remain subject to an identity often defined by servitude and estrangement. Marta Scaglioni's study of southern Tunisian communities explores how former enslaved populations became the ʿabid (s. ʿabd, servant) or "Black" class, perpetuating the

association between race and servitude well into the post-abolition era. Scaglioni argues that the term ʿabid is more than a relic of past servitude; it operates as a "social color" that is still used to designate racialized communities in Tunisia today (Scaglioni 2020, 23). This categorization enforces social boundaries, often marginalizing Black Tunisians through subtle and overt exclusions in social, educational, and economic spaces. The stigma attached to "blackness" in Tunisia, therefore, emerges from both historical and contemporary racialized structures, as observed in various regional practices, including those embedded within the banga ritual.

Hedi Timoumi discusses this process in *How Tunisians Became Tunisians*, detailing how the formation of a singular Tunisian identity was strategically designed to support national unity (Timoumi 2021). However, this national narrative often ignored or marginalized Black Tunisian communities, associating them with premodern and "primitive" practices. Such narratives reinforced the perception of Black Tunisians as outsiders within their own nation, despite their long-standing contributions to Tunisian culture, particularly through musical and spiritual practices like banga. The banga ritual thus emerges not only as a spiritual practice but as a form of resistance and cultural resilience, challenging the dominant narratives of Tunisian identity. Ahmed Rahal in *La Communauté Noire de Tunis: Thérapie Initiatique et Rite de Possession* further explores how possession rituals among Black Tunisians have historically provided both a therapeutic function and a means of preserving identity within a predominantly Arab-Muslim cultural sphere (Rahal 2000). These rituals, including banga, become more than spiritual ceremonies; they serve as resilient acts of cultural preservation against the homogenizing pressures of modern Tunisian identity politics. In banga, for instance, Black Tunisians reaffirm their African roots, often invoking ancestral spirits that challenge the state-imposed erasure of their histories. Cynthia Becker's research on gnawa communities in Morocco parallels the

experiences of Black Tunisians, suggesting that rituals like banga and gnawa provide a platform for African diasporic communities to engage with their histories and resist racial marginalization (Becker 2006). By invoking memories of the trans-Saharan slave trade and connecting with their African heritage, banga practitioners contest the racial boundaries that historically and currently limit their societal roles. Similarly, Hisham Aidi's *Rebel Music* (2014) explores how marginalized communities across North Africa and the Middle East use music and ritual as vehicles for asserting identity and challenging racial and imperial legacies. Aidi notes that these practices transcend mere performance, offering a narrative space where oppressed communities articulate their histories and assert their racial and cultural identities. In banga, the music and ritual movements reflect an assertion of Black identity that is both local and diasporic, linking Black Tunisians to broader African diasporic experiences while solidifying their place within the cultural landscape of Tunisia.

Through conversations and observations during my fieldwork in Tozeur, I became acutely aware of the profound impact of exclusionary practices on Black Tunisians, a marginalization deeply rooted in Tunisia's educational system. In school, I learned about the legacies of the Romans and Ottomans, with some acknowledgment of Amazigh heritage. Yet, Black Tunisians and their cultural contributions remain largely absent from curricula, leaving their history and identity unrepresented. The Chouchane family relies on oral traditions and community rituals to preserve its heritage, compensating for the lack of institutional support. This dependence on non-institutionalized knowledge echoes what Paulo Freire calls "conscientização," or critical consciousness, which emphasizes the ability of marginalized groups to cultivate and achieve social awareness through alternative educational practices that confront systemic erasure (Freire 1970). For the banga community, this process is sacred, communal, and transformative; it

enables them to challenge institutional erasure and to reclaim agency over their cultural narratives. During our several conversations about the importance of banga, Jeddi repeatedly reiterated how the ritual serves as a vital space for intergenerational knowledge transmission. He noted that "although banga only takes place once a year, it offers a haven for young men who feel maḥgūr." In the Tunisian context, this term often conveys the feeling of being marginalized, disrespected, or treated unjustly. It can carry emotional and social weight, reflecting a sense of oppression or exclusion. In banga, young men and in particular, his teenage grandchildren, are exposed to stories, music, and ritual practices that connect them to their African heritage, providing a sense of pride and belonging not found in mainstream Tunisian education. Jeddi said "banga makes them feel seen and heard. That visibility makes them feel important and appreciated." Here, Jeddi's words bring to mind D. Soyini Madison's inspirational concept of emergent performance as a "tactic" for advancing human rights and social justice. Madison describes how marginalized communities, with limited resources, create spaces of belonging that counter exclusionary narratives and institutions (Madison 2010). In a similar manner, banga's public performances not only reinforce the community's identity but also act as "preventative acts of activism," offering young men value and purpose that protect them from the allure of extremist groups or the desperation of clandestine immigration.

The banga community's experiences exemplify how, in the absence of institutional acknowledgment, cultural rituals can fill the void left by formal education. In Tunisia, the state's curriculum largely ignores Black Tunisians' history, forcing communities like the banga practitioners to maintain their identity through informal education. Abdelhamid Larguèche, in *Abolition de l'esclavage en Tunisie à travers les archives*, explores the systemic silencing of Black history in Tunisia and the limitations it places on the transmission of heritage (Larguèche

1990). In contrast, banga serves as an educational and cultural refuge, where younger generations are taught their ancestral histories, music, and the values that sustain their community's resilience. This form of learning through embodied performance becomes a powerful tool of social awareness and resistance against the systematic exclusion faced by Black Tunisians. For many young men in Tozeur, the opportunities for meaningful social or economic advancement are limited. Jeddi expressed a common concern: without the support of the banga community, young men, most of whom have few marketable skills beyond the ritual, face the difficult choice of either risking clandestine immigration or, in some cases, joining groups such as *Daesh* (Islamic State). In Tozeur just like in many other southern and marginalized regions in Tunisia, there is an ever-present concern that disenfranchised young men, struggling to find stable livelihoods and social acceptance, may turn to either clandestine immigration or extremist groups. Wael Garnaoui's work, *Harga et désir d'occident* sheds light on the psychological and social factors driving youth toward radicalization or risky migration. Garnaoui argues that economic marginalization and lack of social belonging push young men to seek either a radical sense of purpose or a new start in Europe, often through dangerous and illegal channels (Garnaoui 2022). In the context of banga, these pressures are amplified in a region with high rates of poverty and unemployment, compounded by the social stigma associated with Blackness. Many young men in the community have few educational or professional prospects and, as Black Tunisians, face compounded discrimination in the job market. According to Jeddi, banga provides an alternative, offering them a sense of belonging, visibility, and purpose that counters the allure of radical ideologies and risky migration. As Jeddi remarked, "banga keeps our community together, especially our young men who might otherwise feel unimportant." His words capture the function of banga as a safe haven and a preventative space, where the ritual

serves to validate the youths' existence and foster social cohesion, protecting them from the isolation and disenfranchisement that often drive radicalization. Thus, banga operates as a space where identity, belonging, and cultural preservation converge, providing young men with a crucial source of identity and visibility in a context that often renders them invisible.

Banga and Balance: Gender, Mental Health, and the Circle of Support

Banga also provides both men and women with a framework for grappling with difficult issues in their private lives, including marital tensions. Banga rituals also function as a locally cultivated mental health system, particularly for women and girls. These rituals provide emotional release and community support, serving as a self-sustaining mechanism for managing crises. Participants often find solace in the ritual's ability to address unspoken tensions, with trance states offering a culturally embedded form of emotional and psychological healing.

The story of Tarak, who navigated the delicate balance between performance and trance, exemplifies the complexities of gendered experiences in banga. His possession by a female spirit, described by his wife as having a *moulat rasou* (literally "the owner of his head"), symbolizes a deeply intimate relationship with the spirit world, often referred to as being "married to a spirit." This phrase captures a layered meaning that goes beyond spiritual possession, hinting at the blurred boundaries between human relationships and those with the divine or the unseen. The notion of being "married to a spirit" provides an interpretive framework for addressing complex social and emotional dynamics within the ritual. For example, Tarak's wife's acceptance of his relationship with a female spirit, which she identified as "Black" and distinct from the real-world relationships within their community, offers a culturally embedded way of making sense of behaviors or tensions that might otherwise be framed as taboo. In the absence of alternative psychological or social outlets, banga serves as a

platform where these nuanced and often unspoken dynamics—encompassing issues like infidelity, sexuality, or emotional turmoil—can be articulated and, to an extent, resolved.

Tarak's ability to perform musically while in a trance-like state further underscores the dualities present in banga rituals. While his spirit possession is a deeply personal experience, his public role as a performer highlights the communal nature of the ritual, where individual emotional struggles intersect with collective spiritual expressions. This tension between personal vulnerability and public participation exemplifies how banga not only accommodates but actively integrates these complex layers of meaning, providing participants with culturally situated ways to navigate and find meaning in their experiences. Ultimately, Tarak's story, alongside the metaphors used by the community to describe spirit possession, reflects how banga operates as a dynamic space for negotiating identity, relationships, and social taboos. The invocation of spirits, and the relationships forged with them, allows for an exploration of themes often left unaddressed in other social contexts, underscoring the ritual's role as a culturally embedded system for emotional and relational exploration. The ritual experience of banga is also a site of profound significance for women and girls, one that reveals and acts on the complex gendered spaces of ritual and society. It is to this topic that I now turn.

Fluid Boundaries: Comparative Perspectives on Gender and Trance in Banga

The spatial and gender dynamics of banga rituals reflect a delicate balance between gender-specific roles and moments of interaction, creating a hybrid model of ritual participation. At the core of the ritual, men occupy the central courtyard, leading the music and spiritual activities, while women gather near the shrine of Lella Gindoua. This spatial configuration embodies a gendered division of roles, with men as musical leaders and women responding

spiritually to their rhythm and chanting. The interplay between these spaces and the interactions within them reflects broader cultural negotiations of gender in Tunisian spiritual practices.

Sophie Ferchiou's article "Survivances mystiques et culte de possession dans le maraboutisme tunisien" (1972) provides a critical lens for understanding the gendered dynamics of banga by situating it within the broader context of Tunisian Sufi traditions. Ferchiou highlights the *Chadulia* order, founded by the influential Sufi saint Sidi Abul Hasan al-Shadhili in the thirteenth century. Known for its emphasis on spiritual retreat (*khalwa*) and collective practices like the *hadra*, the Chadulia's rituals are deeply gendered. During the *hadra*, men and women participate in separate spaces, with women typically out of sight and experiencing trance states driven by the men's music and recitations. This spatial demarcation reflects societal norms of propriety while granting women a meaningful but segregated spiritual experience (Ferchiou 18–28, 40–57). In contrast, banga offers a more fluid arrangement where women, while spatially distinct, are visibly present and actively engaged, responding to the men's music in real time.

A striking contrast to the Chadulia is the *Tijaniya* order, particularly the branch associated with Saida Manubia, a twelfth-century saint renowned for her spiritual leadership and veneration among women. Richard C. Jankowsky, in *Ambient Sufism: Ritual Niches and the Social Work of Musical Form*, explains how the *Tijaniya el-Nse* (Tijaniya of Women) places women in positions of leadership, both musically and spiritually (87–95). Unlike the Chadulia's segregated spaces, the *Tijaniya el-Nse* rituals are dominated by women musicians, who lead the dhikr and foster a strong sense of female solidarity. During my own observations in a Tijaniya zawiya affiliated with Saida Manubia, I witnessed how women musicians created a dynamic and empowering ritual space, crafting an environment of shared spiritual experience that contrasted sharply with the Chadulia's gendered segregation.

The context of stambeli, provides yet another perspective on gendered dynamics in ritual spaces. In stambeli, men and women participate in the same space, creating a configuration that often generates social tensions around propriety and boundaries. The *ʿarifa* (literally "the one who knows," plural *ʿara'if*) plays a pivotal role in guiding women through trance in stambeli rituals. As described by Jankowsky, the ʿarifa managed trance states by reciting Quranic verses, physically supporting participants, and ensuring propriety during the ritual (Jankowsky 102). This role resonates strongly with the needs of banga participants. During several of our conversations, Jeddi lamented the absence of an ʿarifa in their rituals. He explained that ʿarifa would traditionally *tsarrah* (release) women in trance by holding them, reciting Quranic verses into their ears, and guiding them to appropriate spaces. Jeddi considers the absence of trained *ʿara'if*, a loss stemming from the passing of elders and the lack of opportunities to pass this knowledge to younger generations, as a significant void in banga rituals. He highlights that the absence of ʿarifa is particularly problematic because, culturally, it is deemed *ʿib* (a deep cultural taboo or dishonor) for a man who is not the entranced woman's father, brother, or husband to touch or hold her while she is in trance. This cultural restriction underscores the critical need for women-trained ʿara'if to manage these moments, ensuring propriety and maintaining the spiritual integrity of the ritual.

The absence of ʿarifa in banga has reshaped the rituals, shifting the responsibility to collective female efforts. During my fieldwork, I observed women stepping in to manage trance states, particularly for young girls who crossed established gendered boundaries by entering the men's central circle. These women carried the girls to Lella Gindoua's shrine, restoring the ritual's spatial order while reaffirming their role as protectors and facilitators of spiritual propriety. This collective intervention underscores the resilience and adaptability of banga's

gendered dynamics, where women continue to uphold the ritual's integrity despite the loss of traditional guiding figures like the ʿarifa.

Banga's hybrid approach to gendered spaces is also evident in how trance is embedded into women's cultural upbringing. Girls as young as six are often drawn into trance states by the music's rhythms and tonalities, highlighting the normalization of this practice as part of their identity. However, moments of tension arise when these young girls breach spatial boundaries, drawn into the male-dominated circle by the music's pull. The women's role in guiding these girls back to the shrine of Lella Gindoua not only restores the ritual's structure but also demonstrates their centrality in maintaining both spiritual and social order.

By weaving insights from Ferchiou's and Jankowsky's analyses with observations from banga practices, this discussion positions banga as a distinctive example of gendered participation within North African rituals. It bridges the Chadulia's strict segregation, the female-centered leadership of the Tijaniya, and the integrative yet tension-laden structure of stambeli. Furthermore, the adaptation to the absence of an ʿarifa highlights how women's collective efforts sustain the evolving dynamics of banga, ensuring its continued relevance as a site of spiritual engagement and communal support.

Invisible Pillars: Women's Labor and Agency in the Banga Ceremony

The disappearance of ʿarifas from banga rituals results in the appearance of ritual authority being held only by men. One of the questions I frequently encounter in my research on stambeli and now on banga is, "Do women play music during the ritual, or is it only men?" This question, while valid on its own, reflects broader dynamics of how women's contributions are often perceived and valued. Whenever I am in an academic setting or even when asked about my research overall, such questions arise, prompting me to consider how they might unintentionally

prioritize visible participation over other, less overt but equally significant roles that women play in banga rituals. This reflection is not about dismissing the validity of the question but rather exploring the assumptions and frameworks that inform how women's participation is evaluated. While the banga ceremony itself is predominantly associated with male performers and practitioners, it heavily relies on the often-invisible labor of women to uphold its rituals, structures, and traditions.

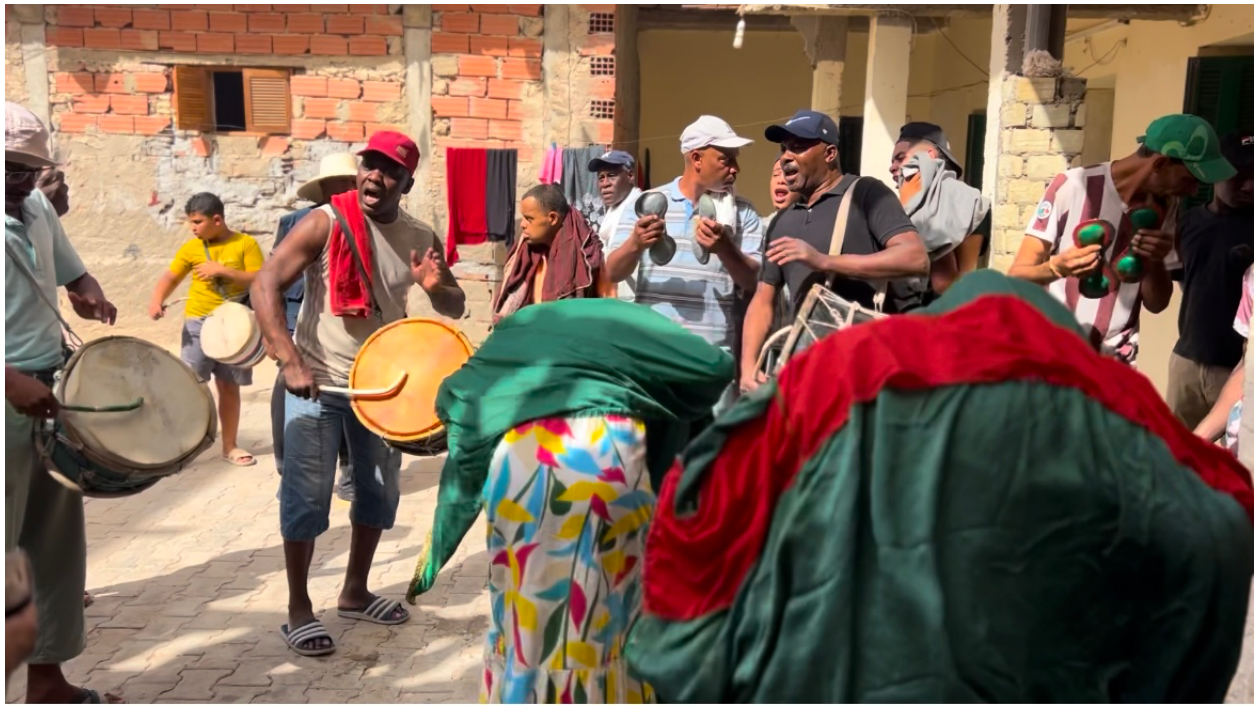

Figure 3.1 Women in trance during one of the banga morning processions. *Photographed by author, July 2023.*

Women's work in the banga community is both material and spiritual, serving as an essential yet frequently overlooked foundation for the ceremony's continuity. Such inquiries reflect a broader tendency to overlook the indispensable, though less visible, roles that women occupy within banga. Positioned on the periphery by social norms and long-standing cultural traditions, women may not always play instruments or lead the dance, but their labor is vital.

They create the spiritual and communal framework that allows the ritual to thrive, supporting rather than leading the ritual in traditional terms but remaining central to its execution.

I approach this gendered aspect of the banga ritual with an awareness of the complexities inherent in feminist methodology. Although there is no singular feminist method, a feminist approach involves cultivating an awareness of inequality, injustice, and the forms of oppression that marginalized communities face. Recognizing that women's experiences are not monolithic, I approach this research with sensitivity to the varying degrees of access that women have to political, social, and economic spheres. Sandra Harding, in *Feminism and Methodology*, emphasizes the importance of viewing women as active agents rather than passive subjects. Harding argues against the victimization of women in feminist analysis, encouraging us instead to examine the social structures that shape women's lives. This perspective reframes women not as mere subjects of study but as contributors whose insights reveal the complexities of structural oppression. While the study of women is not new, Harding argues that examining women's experiences from their own perspectives, with the goal of fostering self-understanding, remains an underexplored approach in historical scholarship (Harding 8). This feminist awareness serves as the foundation for my approach to the banga community, where women's contributions are often viewed through the lens of "invisible labor."

In the context of banga, women take on essential yet often unrecognized tasks, from preparing ceremonial spaces to guiding participants out of trance and ensuring everyone is fed. The physical and emotional labor that women contribute to the banga ceremony, though often unseen, forms the backbone of the ritual, transforming it into a sanctuary. During my fieldwork, I witnessed firsthand the demanding yet essential roles that women undertake. Each day, the women prepare the ceremonial space, ensuring it is cleansed and arranged with mats and rugs,

while also cooking meals for the community. Their tasks continue late into the evening, as they support male practitioners and ensure that both participants and visitors experience the full depth of banga's transformative power. While men play instruments and perform trance-inducing dances, the women's efforts create a nurturing environment, facilitating the ritual's spiritual and social aims. Women's labor in banga is multifaceted, encompassing both physical duties and a quieter, emotional presence that sustains the community. While women do not participate in the ceremonial dances—the choreographed movements performed by the male musicians as they play music and execute the *dourat* (circles) (see chapters 1 and 2)—their involvement in the ritual remains dynamic. Some women enter states of takhmir or, as Jeddi described, experience healing through banga. Even for those who do not partake in the choreographed dances, their presence is marked by constant movement and engagement throughout the day, reflecting their integral role in the ritual. The setup, maintenance, and organization of each ritual moment rely on them. As I observed during my fieldwork, women's roles extend beyond the ceremonial performance. They gather during the day to share jokes, laugh, and even play music on drums when the men are resting or working. These gatherings, though informal, are a form of agency and a subtle resistance to traditional norms, creating moments of joy and self-expression within their own space. Judith Becker's concept of "deep listening," as articulated in *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*, provides additional insight into the emotional labor that women contribute. Becker explains that trance rituals often assign gendered roles, with women guiding participants into and out of trance, creating a safe and spiritually charged environment for the experience (Becker 2004). Similarly, Cynthia Becker has examined the intersection of Black identity and gender within Moroccan trance traditions. Becker highlights the ways in which women's labor, though largely preparatory, is crucial to creating a space for trance, where Black

identity can be expressed and celebrated (Becker 2020). This resonates within banga, where women's labor bridges the tangible needs of the community with the ritual's spiritual demands. Their efforts ensure that banga remains a communal space, reinforcing a collective identity that is at once spiritual, cultural, and deeply rooted in Black Tunisian heritage. Lila Abu-Lughod's analysis of gender and power in Middle Eastern societies also underscores the subtle influence that women wield in cultural practices. In *Veiled Sentiments* (1986), Abu-Lughod examines how Bedouin women use oral poetry to articulate identity and resist social norms indirectly, embodying agency within accepted cultural frameworks. This form of influence is evident in banga as well. Though physically positioned on the periphery of the visible ceremony, the women's labor is a form of spiritual authority that shapes the ritual's dynamics, even without overtly challenging traditional structures. Throughout the day, women in banga continue their labor in various ways, including through the transmission of cultural knowledge. During my fieldwork, I observed Jeddi Hasan teaching his grandchildren the rhythms and lyrics of the banga madhat in the presence of the women, who prepared tea and snacks and maintained a welcoming environment. This scene exemplifies how women's contributions, though often considered behind the scenes, are integral to the communal and cultural continuity of the ritual. Cutcha Risling Baldy, in her work *We Are Dancing for You*, advocates for shifting away from Eurocentric views that often marginalize such roles, highlighting the need to recognize and value these contributions as central to performance and cultural preservation. She argues that women should be seen as central to cultural preservation, not as peripheral participants. Baldy emphasizes the importance of "(re)writing, (re)righting, and (re)riteing" Native histories to avoid silencing women and to highlight their contributions to indigenous cultural practices (Baldy 25,

2018). Her perspective helps us understand banga's women as fundamental to the organization, history, and survival of this tradition.

In her exploration of gender and power in Muslim societies, Fatima Mernissi argues that gendered spaces often reinforce social hierarchies, yet rituals like banga provide moments when these boundaries are softened. In her article "Women, Saints, and Sanctuaries" (1977), Mernissi examines how Moroccan women's pilgrimages to saints' shrines offer temporary reprieve from restrictive social norms, creating spaces where women assert spiritual agency and build communal ties. Mernissi's analysis is relevant to banga, where women's labor supports both private and public elements of the ritual, reinforcing banga as a sanctuary for Black Tunisian identity and history. Her insights reveal how women navigate these boundaries, exercising a nuanced form of agency within cultural constraints. Throughout the years conducting this research, I continue to navigate the complex layers of my intersubjectivity as a Tunisian woman and scholar, shaped not only by academic frameworks but also by the countless intimate conversations I shared with women in the household. Their stories, jokes, and anecdotes revealed profound insights into their lived experiences, from the humor that softens daily struggles to the wisdom embedded in their everyday labor. These voices do not simply complement my scholarship; they ground it, offering a lens to explore gender that emerges directly from their perspectives and lived realities. I am mindful of not imposing external feminist perspectives that may not align with the community's own views. Chandra Mohanty's concept of "imagined communities," outlined in *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), advocates for alliances among women based not on biology or culture but on shared political struggles. Mohanty's vision of "communities of resistance" encourages solidarity across diverse women's movements against

shared structures of oppression, offering a framework to understand how women in banga exercise agency within their cultural practice.

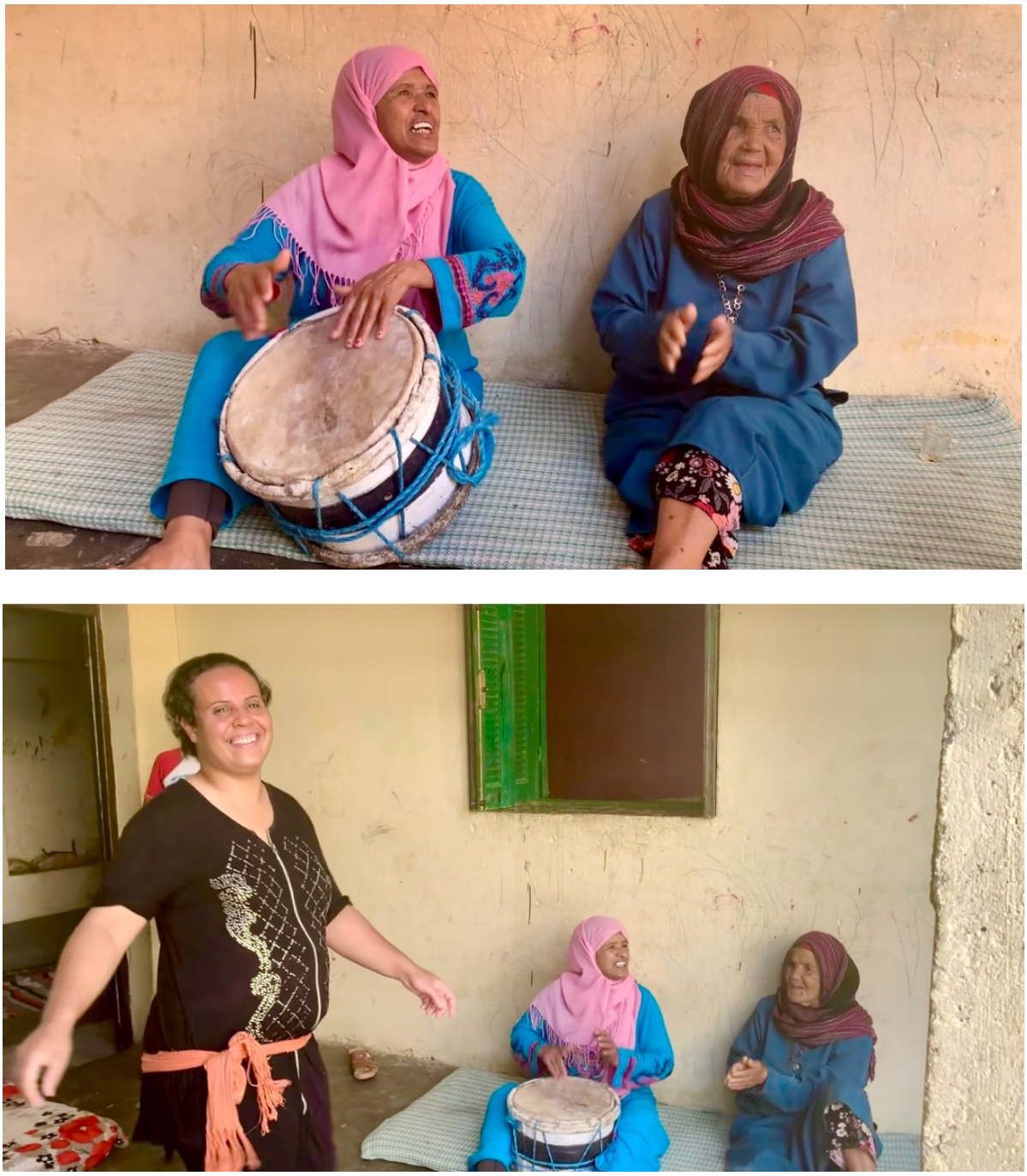

Figure 3.2 Women from the Chouchane family and the community enjoying themselves and playing music during the intervals between the banga processions. *Photographed by author, July 2018.*

Not a Conclusion but a Passage

Ongoing Narratives in an Unfinished Composition

As I come to the close of this dissertation, I find it necessary to reflect on banga not as an endpoint, but as an evolving, dynamic practice that continually reveals new dimensions of cultural identity, resistance, and resilience. Much like the circular rhythms of its music, banga's story is neither linear nor static—it ebbs and flows, transcending boundaries of time, space, and interpretation. Through this research, I have sought to illuminate the profound cultural, spiritual, and historical significance of this trance-inducing ritual, while acknowledging that the journey of understanding banga remains, as Jeddi Hasan profoundly stated, "a drop in a big ocean."

Banga is a vibrant cultural expression, serving as a living archive of history, memory, and identity for Tunisia's marginalized Black communities. Its origins are deeply connected to a tapestry of African traditions that traversed the Sahara through centuries of migration, trade, and interaction, transforming into a Tunisian practice shaped by the experiences of Black communities in Tozeur and its surrounding regions. Banga reflects a rich synthesis of influences, blending historical depth with contemporary relevance to address the ongoing realities of its practitioners. This research positions banga as a pivotal element of the region's cultural landscape, highlighting its role in illustrating the layered and multifaceted identities of its practitioners. Banga challenges reductive narratives that circumscribe Tunisia's cultural identity within solely Arab-Islamic or Mediterranean influences. It demonstrates the depth and diversity of cultural contributions within Tunisia and exemplifies how traditions emerging from different contexts contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Tunisian identity. This is evident in recent instances where banga musicians have been invited to perform alongside

stambeli musicians during religious celebrations, such as El-Moulidya (referring to Al-Mawlid Al-Nabawi Al-Sharif, the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth).

Banga's practice is a profound site of communal connection and renewal. Its rhythms and performances act as vessels of shared memory and frameworks for envisioning collective futures. The rituals provide spaces for participants to process generational experiences and assert their cultural presence, reinforcing a sense of belonging and continuity. Banga serves as a dynamic process of cultural preservation and reinvention, affirming its centrality to the identity and solidarity of Black Tunisian communities. Through oral histories, fieldwork, and theoretical inquiry, this research highlights banga's vitality as a cultural practice. It examines how practitioners sustain its relevance while navigating contemporary challenges, including economic pressures and cultural commodification. Banga's adaptability and creative expressions reveal a commitment to ensuring that it remains a living tradition, deeply embedded in the evolving dynamics of community life. Ultimately, banga offers a lens into the pluralistic identities that shape Tunisia. By emphasizing the contributions of historically marginalized communities, it enriches the understanding of the nation's cultural fabric. Banga is not only a reflection of resilience but also a testament to the enduring power of cultural practices to create meaning, foster connection, and celebrate diversity within a complex and ever-changing society.

Memory, Space, and the Sacred

One of the central themes that emerges throughout this dissertation is the profound role of memory and space in the practice of banga. The Chouchane family's home, with its courtyard and the shrine to Lella Gindoua, serves as a microcosm of banga's sacred geography. More than just a physical setting, it functions as a living archive where the intangible heritage of the community is continuously enacted and preserved. The rituals performed there are not merely

acts of devotion; they are acts of memory, reconstructing histories that have been erased or forgotten. Drawing on Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* from his work *Realms of Memory* (1996), I propose that banga spaces are dynamic repositories of individual and collective memory. These are places where the past is not a static narrative but an active presence, reimagined and reconstituted with each performance. This sacred geography is reinforced through the stories and practices associated with saints like Sidi Marzoug and Sidi Bou Ali. These figures embody the spiritual continuum that anchors banga, transcending the temporal and connecting practitioners to a lineage of devotion, struggle, and resilience. The songs, rituals, and oral histories surrounding these saints are integral to maintaining a shared sense of belonging and identity. For practitioners, these narratives are not simply retellings of the past but mechanisms of continuity, bridging generational divides and affirming their place within a broader cultural and spiritual framework.

Banga's sacred geography, however, is not confined to active spaces like the Chouchane home or the remaining shrines; it also extends to ruins—places that are no longer physically whole but remain vividly alive in the community's collective memory. During the banga procession, practitioners stop at sites where shrines once stood, offering prayers and songs to honor the saints associated with these places. Although the physical structures have eroded over time, the memory of these shrines endures, preserved in the rhythms of the music, the steps of the procession, and the stories passed down through generations. These ruined landmarks serve as symbolic reminders of the community's spiritual and cultural history, illustrating how memory sustains the sacred even in the absence of materiality. This interplay between presence and absence underscores the resilience of banga's practitioners in maintaining their sacred geography. By continuing to honor these ruins, they reaffirm the enduring significance of the saints and

rituals tied to them. These acts of remembrance transform what might otherwise be perceived as lost spaces into active sites of memory, where the intangible becomes tangible through the collective actions of the community. This dynamic aligns with Michel de Certeau's concept of "spatial stories," discussed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), where the act of traversing and narrating space brings it to life, embedding it with meaning that transcends its physical condition (115–16).

The Chouchane family's home (housh el-banga) exemplifies how physical spaces and material objects are imbued with symbolic meaning in banga. The shrine to Lella Gindoua, adorned with offerings and relics, represents more than a focal point of ritual activity; it stands as a tangible connection to a communal history that resists erasure. These spaces facilitate what anthropologist Paul Connerton describes in *How Societies Remember* (1989) as "habitual memory," where embodied practices such as drumming, singing, and dancing become means of inscribing the past onto the present (72). Each sound reverberating through the courtyard, each step in the trance-inducing dance, becomes a mnemonic device that reinforces the community's spiritual and cultural identity.

Yet these sacred spaces, both material and remembered, are not immune to the forces of change and loss. The fire that gutted part of the Chouchane home stands as a stark reminder of the physical and metaphorical vulnerability of these spaces. On a physical level, it signifies the precariousness of the material structures that house banga's rituals. On a metaphorical level, it symbolizes the fragility of cultural heritage in the face of modernity's pressures, including socioeconomic challenges and the gradual erosion of localized traditions in a globalizing world. The fire, while devastating, also illuminated the resilience of the Chouchane family and the

broader banga community. Their efforts to rebuild and continue their practices despite these losses reflect a deep commitment to preserving their sacred geography against all odds.

Banga's spatial practices extend beyond the confines of the Chouchane home. During pilgrimages to shrines and the landmarks of ruined ones, practitioners traverse a broader sacred landscape, reestablishing connections with sites of memory scattered across the region. These journeys serve not only as acts of devotion but as public affirmations of their cultural and spiritual heritage. The songs and rhythms performed at these sites evoke ancestral ties and invoke the protective presence of saints, reinforcing the collective identity of the banga community. By stopping at the sites of once-thriving shrines, practitioners declare that these places, though materially absent, remain spiritually vital. At the heart of these practices is the interplay between permanence and impermanence. While the Chouchane family's home and the surviving shrines to Sidi Marzoug and Sidi Bou Ali represent enduring symbols of banga's sacred geography, the ruined sites and their remembrance highlight the transient nature of materiality in the face of time. The rituals, once performed, leave behind no tangible traces other than their imprint on the hearts and minds of participants. This ephemerality underscores the importance of ongoing practices to keep memory alive, a task that banga practitioners have embraced with remarkable dedication.

In the context of modern Tunisia, where rapid urbanization and globalization may displace regional traditions, the role of memory and space in banga takes on even greater significance. These sacred geographies are not simply sites of ritual but acts of cultural preservation, embodying the community's resistance to forces that seek to homogenize or erase their identities. By continuing to gather, perform, and honor their saints—whether in active shrines, family courtyards, or the ruins of once-sacred sites—banga practitioners ensure that their

traditions remain vital, resonating with meaning for future generations. Thus, memory and space in banga are not passive constructs but active agents in the preservation of a rich cultural heritage. They are at once the anchors and the vessels of a tradition that continues to evolve while remaining deeply rooted in its sacred origins. Through their rituals and sacred geographies, banga practitioners offer a powerful reminder of the enduring interplay between the past, present, and future—a continuum that defies the erasure of memory and reaffirms the vitality of their cultural identity.

Gendered Contributions and Agency

Women's roles in banga are as integral as they are complex, offering a deeply nuanced understanding of the practice's cultural and social dimensions. While women do not traditionally play instruments nor do they take part in the choreographed dance performances exclusively performed by men during the banga procession and within the ceremonial circle, their contributions extend far beyond these visible aspects of the ritual. From preparing meals and organizing ritual spaces to supporting participants during trance, their contributions form the backbone of these ceremonies. Witnessing women enter the trance circle and fall into trance was one of the most striking aspects of my fieldwork as it speaks to the permeability of ritual boundaries, where the spiritual and physical realms intersect in ways that transcend prescriptive roles. These moments challenged the gendered boundaries of ritual performance and illuminated how women negotiate their place within a practice traditionally dominated by men. The acts of care and coordination they perform outside the circle—offering water, holding participants steady, or gently wiping their foreheads—extend seamlessly into their participation within it, demonstrating their deep integration into the ritual's spiritual and communal dimensions. The stories and moments I witnessed during my time with the women of banga were not always easy

to process. There were moments of profound joy and resilience, but also instances of vulnerability and struggle. I recall the ways women expressed care for entranced members of the community that spoke volumes about their roles as caretakers and anchors within the ritual. I also remember their laughter as they prepared food together, the way they teased each other about small mistakes, or how they shared stories of their own encounters with the spirits in their dreams. These moments, while deeply human, carry layers of meaning that extend beyond the surface, reflecting the ways women navigate the intersections of tradition, community, and their own agency. As I reflect on this aspect of my research, I recognize that dedicating only a single section to women in this dissertation is insufficient to fully capture the breadth and depth of their involvement. At the same time, I am acutely mindful of the challenges and sensitivities involved in expanding this discussion, given my own positionality and the deeply personal nature of many of the interactions I shared with the women of the banga community.

My engagement with these women was not limited to observing their contributions; it was woven into moments of grief, joy, and mundane. For instance, I observed women sharing personal reflections about their own spiritual journeys, often intertwining their experiences in trance with stories of familial or communal struggles. Such narratives reveal the deeply intertwined nature of the spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions of banga, yet they resist easy categorization or academic framing. Writing about these moments requires a level of care and reflexivity that goes beyond standard ethnographic practice, acknowledging both the privilege of access and the ethical dilemmas it entails. These interactions, ranging from lighthearted jokes to intimate and private conversations, underscored the richness of their lived experiences and their agency within the banga tradition. However, these same moments have left me grappling with how to present their narratives responsibly and ethically. The stories I carry

are not just ethnographic material; they are reflections of trust and shared humanity, and I remain deeply concerned about how these narratives might be perceived if removed from their context. The risk of misinterpretation, particularly given the deeply personal nature of some accounts, is a responsibility I take seriously.

In many ways, my relationship with these women challenges conventional researcher-participant dynamics, blurring the lines between observer and collaborator, between insider and outsider. As a Tunisian woman, my positionality afforded me access to spaces and conversations that might otherwise have been closed to an external researcher. Yet, this shared identity also came with its own set of challenges, as I found myself navigating the delicate balance between belonging and observing. The trust these women extended to me was both a privilege and a responsibility, one that continues to shape my understanding of banga and my approach to representing their contributions. Expanding this section on women is a task I approach with both humility and trepidation. As much as I wish to honor their contributions, I remain acutely aware of the potential implications of revealing too much, especially regarding personal or private information. The sensitivities surrounding their narratives compel me to tread carefully, ensuring that their stories are contextualized in ways that respect their agency and the trust they placed in me. This process is further complicated by my ongoing journey of processing and understanding these experiences. Some of the stories remain unresolved in my mind, leaving me uncertain of how to frame them within the broader narrative of this dissertation. This hesitation reflects a broader tension within ethnographic writing: the desire to give voice to marginalized perspectives while safeguarding the integrity and dignity of those whose stories we tell. In this regard, I draw inspiration from feminist scholars who have grappled with similar challenges, emphasizing the importance of reflexivity and care in representing the lives of others. By

acknowledging the limitations of this section and my own uncertainties, I hope to create space for these narratives to be revisited and expanded upon in future work, when I feel better equipped to do justice to the complexities they entail.

For now, what I can confidently assert is that the women of banga are not peripheral figures within this tradition; they are its foundation. Their labor, care, and contributions extend far beyond the visible aspects of the ritual, shaping banga in ways that demand recognition and respect. Whether through their support during trance ceremonies, their role in transmitting oral histories, or their increasing involvement in rehearsals and performances, these women embody the resilience and adaptability that define banga as a living tradition. As I continue to process and reflect on their stories, I remain committed to ensuring that their voices are centered in any future exploration of this rich and complex practice.

The Complexities of Commodification: Banga's Place in Tunisia's Cultural Economy

Banga occupies a unique and complex space within Tunisia's cultural landscape, representing a microcosm of broader tensions between tradition and modernity, marginalization and resilience. Rooted in the southern region of Tozeur, this trance-induced musical practice exemplifies the perseverance of marginalized communities as they navigate the challenges of systemic neglect, geographic isolation, and limited institutional support. Unlike urban-based practices such as stambeli in Tunis, which benefit from greater visibility and access to resources, banga operates in a context marked by acute socioeconomic precarity and infrastructural inequalities. Yet, within these constraints, banga practitioners have maintained a profound commitment to their cultural identity and authenticity. Their efforts, shaped by the tension between sacred preservation and the demands of commodification, reveal a powerful narrative of

adaptation and survival, one that underscores the urgent need for scholarly attention and advocacy.

Banga's contemporary challenges reflect broader tensions between sacred and staged spaces, as well as local and global contexts. My earlier research on *Stambeli Awakening: Cultural Revival and Musical Amalgam in Post-Revolution Tunisia* (2017) examined how stambeli musicians, led by figures like Mohamed Khachnaoui, have transitioned their sacred healing practices to secular and public venues such as cultural spaces and festivals. This deliberate recontextualization has allowed stambeli to gain visibility and accrue symbolic capital, especially through Khachnaoui's innovative leadership in projects like the Dendri Stambeli Movement. In contrast, banga practitioners, particularly Yahya and Tarek, have faced significant hurdles in their attempts to achieve similar goals. Their collaboration with the French-led project Ifriqiya Electrique initially appeared to offer a pathway into the global music market but ultimately exposed the vulnerabilities of marginalized musicians within exploitative systems of cultural production. Yahya and Tarek's experiences with Ifriqiya Electrique illustrate the profound challenges of navigating global markets as rural practitioners. Despite the project's promise of international recognition, their contributions were often overshadowed by external creative decisions, leaving them with little control over their cultural representation. These struggles highlight the systemic inequities that shape the commodification of marginalized traditions, where practitioners are frequently excluded from decision-making processes. Drawing on Karl Hagstrom Miller's analysis in *Segregating Sound* (2010), banga musicians' labor mirrors the intricate negotiation of cultural identity and professional recognition faced by African American folk musicians. As Miller argues, such musicians often invest significant skill and

effort into sustaining their traditions, yet their work is undervalued within dominant market frameworks.

In contrast, Mohamed Khachnaoui's leadership in the Dendri Stambeli Movement provides a notable example of how symbolic and academic capital can facilitate successful navigation of global markets. As a drummer and musicologist, Khachnaoui has leveraged his intellectual and artistic expertise to position stambeli as a hybridized and marketable art form, while maintaining its ritualistic integrity. This success, however, reflects the structural advantages afforded to urban-based practitioners like Khachnaoui, whose proximity to cultural infrastructure and institutional networks in Tunis significantly enhances their opportunities. By comparison, banga's rural practitioners face persistent obstacles in gaining similar recognition and support, underscoring the broader disparities within Tunisia's cultural economy. These contrasting narratives invite a critical reexamination of how success is defined within ethnographic and cultural scholarship. While Khachnaoui's achievements with Dendri exemplify the potential for innovation and sustainability, the struggles of Yahya and Tarek are equally important. The stories of less celebrated or "failed" attempts offer valuable insights into the processes of cultural commodification and adaptation. Yahya and Tarek's experiences reveal the vulnerabilities inherent in such transitions, highlighting the need to document and advocate for marginalized practitioners whose voices are often excluded from dominant narratives of success.

Ultimately, banga's story is one of profound resilience and agency. Despite systemic neglect and exploitative encounters, its practitioners continue to preserve their sacred traditions while exploring new possibilities for expression. The disparities between banga and stambeli's trajectories illuminate the structural inequities that define Tunisia's cultural economy, where rural traditions remain undervalued and underrepresented. By centering the voices and experiences of

banga's practitioners, we contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of cultural production and representation in a globalized world.

Methodological Reflections and the Personal-Political Nexus

This research has also been a journey of methodological introspection. By centering the voices of the banga community, particularly Jeddi Hasan and to some extent the women of the Chouchane family, I have sought to disrupt hierarchies of knowledge production that privilege academic frameworks over lived experience. Incorporating audiovisual documentation, such as filming rituals and inviting Rabaa to use the camera, has allowed me to explore alternative ways of transmitting knowledge that transcend the written word. These methods underscore the importance of co-creation in ethnography, where researchers and community members collaborate to represent practices authentically and ethically. My positionality as a Tunisian woman has shaped every aspect of this research, from gaining the trust of the Chouchane family to navigating the sociocultural norms that govern women's mobility and participation. Returning to Tozeur as an adult for the first time, I grappled with questions of belonging, memory, and identity—both my own and that of the communities I worked with. These personal experiences, woven into the fabric of this dissertation, have deepened my understanding of the stakes of this work. Banga is not merely a subject of academic inquiry; it is a living tradition that holds profound meaning for those who practice it. This dissertation, then, is not a conclusion but an *envoi*, an open-ended gesture that invites further exploration. It is my hope that this work contributes to a broader recognition of banga's cultural significance, not only within Tunisia but in the wider fields of ethnomusicology, anthropology, and African diaspora studies.

From Tozeur to Oued Souf: Tracing the Threads of Banga Across Borders

Jeddi recounted a story that deeply illuminated the intricate web of relationships and shared heritage that banga weaves within and across communities, profoundly shaping my understanding of this enduring cultural legacy. One day in March 2022, as Jeddi was about to have lunch in the housh, three men from Algeria, precisely from Oued Souf, knocked on his door. He warmly invited them in, and they shared a meal together, spending most of the day talking. The men explained that they were part of a community in Oued Souf devoted to Sidi Marzoug and practicing banga. They had been sent specifically to housh el-banga to meet Hassan Chouchane (Jeddi) and establish a connection. Their visit was no coincidence; they had been sent by their community to strengthen the bonds between their shared traditions. Jeddi expressed his joy, not only because their visit confirmed a broader network of shared traditions, but also because he recognized that some of the close people he had known in his youth were connected to this community. Though not blood relatives, he considered them family—bound by the shared heritage of banga and their devotion to Sidi Marzoug.

El Oued, a city in southeast Algeria bordering Tozeur, is situated in the Sahara Desert and serves as the capital of El Oued Province. Its name is composed of two Arabic words: "Oued," meaning river, and "Souf," a term with varied interpretations based on its Arabic spelling. While "صوف" translates to "wool," in the context of Oued Souf, it is written as "سُوفْ." According to researchers, the name may be linked to the Tuareg tribe "Masufa," who passed through and influenced the region, or to the sharp, sword-like sand dunes, with "souf" possibly deriving from "siyuf," meaning swords. These layers of history and etymology added an intriguing dimension to our journey into the heart of the Sahara (Channouf 2021).

Jeddi and the community members who hosted us there explained to me that the city is also famously referred to as the "City of a Thousand Domes" due to the distinctive domed roofs

on its houses, ingeniously designed to shield them from the intense desert sun. Based on my initial research, which I plan to pursue further as I explore banga in the Algerian context and beyond, this nickname was popularized by the Swiss Francophone writer Isabelle Eberhardt. In several of her books such as *Dans l'ombre chaude de l'Islam* (1906, translated 2014) and her diaries and notably *The Nomade*, Eberhardt converted to Islam, embraced the Qadiriyya Sufi order, and traveled extensively across North Africa and the Sahara Desert. Her writings documented her personal experiences and offered powerful critiques of French colonialism, which further immortalized the city's evocative architecture and rich cultural tapestry. This intersection of historical, architectural, and literary significance has deepened my curiosity and commitment to exploring this subject in greater depth for my next project, particularly as I look into banga in the Algerian context and beyond.

In addition to sharing an extremely hot desert climate with severely high temperatures, especially during the summer, El Oued and Tozeur have considerable cultural and economic similarities. Both cities rely heavily on the cultivation of date palms, a cornerstone of their agricultural economy, and other desert produce. They are also hubs for desert tourism, drawing visitors with their distinctive landscapes and breathtaking scenery. Beyond agriculture and tourism, Oued Souf plays a significant role in cross-border trade. It serves as a key hub for economic exchanges between Algerians and Tunisians, with Tunisians frequently traveling to El Oued to purchase essential goods like food and clothing, which are often cheaper there. Additionally, the region has become known for contraband trafficking between Algeria and Tunisia, further highlighting its strategic importance in local and regional economies. This blend of economic activity and cultural exchange adds yet another layer of complexity to the region's identity, making it a fascinating subject for further exploration.

In the summer of 2023, the same men from Oued Souf attended the annual Sidi Marzoug ziyara in Tozeur in July. I had the privilege of witnessing them perform alongside Jeddi's sons, the Chouchane brothers, as their bond visibly grew stronger. During their stay throughout the banga ceremony, their discussions naturally turned to deepening their connection. They spoke of attending each other's ziyara and working collaboratively to preserve banga while building a stronger, more unified community.

After the ziyara, Jeddi was adamant that I return in September, before heading back to the United States, so that we could embark on a trip to Oued Souf together. He felt strongly that this journey was essential—not only to continue uncovering the deeper connections tied to banga and Sidi Marzoug but also to strengthen the bonds with the community that had so warmly reached out to us. In reflecting on this moment, Jeddi often remarked how my presence and curiosity about other communities practicing banga reignited his own desire to delve deeper into shared history. He told me, "You made me want to know more about our history and to reconnect with my community members I've lost touch with, so I can spend my remaining years rebuilding those bonds." This conversation was deeply emotional, leaving me both humbled and profoundly aware of my responsibility. I saw Jeddi's eagerness to trace his roots, not just to Oued Souf, but even further—perhaps as far as the borders of Mali. His determination and his trust in my work magnified the profound importance of this journey, both for him and for me. It was a pivotal moment that transformed my research into a deeply personal mission to honor the legacy of banga and its enduring role in weaving connections across generations and regions.

"We Will Find Our Way, Inshallah"

Jeddi often reassured me with the phrase, "We will figure it out, Inshallah," as we navigated the uncertainties of our journey. The expression "Inshallah" (God willing), commonly

used in Arabic-speaking and Muslim cultures, conveys faith in divine will and hope for the future. For Jeddi, it reflected his deep trust that our efforts to uncover banga's deeper connections and strengthen ties across communities would succeed, no matter the challenges. Interestingly, "Inshallah" also carries a duality in its usage. While it is deeply rooted in belief and trust, it has, in modern contexts, also become associated with a way of avoiding firm commitment. For example, people often say "We will meet, Inshallah," or "We will do it, Inshallah," when they are hesitant to fully commit to a meeting or task. This fine line between a genuine expression of faith and a subtle way of deferring responsibility highlights the complex cultural layers of the phrase. In our journey, Jeddi's use of "Inshallah" leaned on its most sincere meaning—a blend of spiritual trust and pragmatic optimism, guiding our mission with both conviction and openness to the unknown.

On September 3, 2023, the night before our major trip to Oued Souf, also known as El Oued, we still had no clear plan about what we would do, where we would go, or who we would meet. All I knew was that Jeddi, Rabaa and I were heading there, "looking for something that could hopefully lead us to more information about banga and Baba Marzoug," as Jeddi put it. Ever since Jeddi asked me to come back so we could travel to Oued Souf together, I had been constantly asking him about the logistics and planning for our trip. I do not have a driver's license, but both Jeddi and Rabaa do. However, since the tragic car accident that both Jeddi and Rabaa survived—an accident that devastatingly took the life of Tarek, Jeddi's second-oldest son and one of the most significant figures in the banga ceremony (see preface)—Jeddi remains deeply traumatized and prefers not to drive. To make the journey possible, I suggested that I pay for a rental car with a driver who could take us to El Oued, stay overnight, and drive us back. Another alternative was to pay someone already driving to Algeria to take us along. I asked Jeddi

about the costs of each option and what would be most convenient for him, especially given his health challenges. Each time, however, his response was vague, simply saying, “We will see.” I culturally knew that it was his way of deferring to speak about expenses.

Earlier that day, Jeddi had asked Rabaa to make some calls on his behalf to a few relatives and neighbors who frequently travel to Algeria. From what I understood, Jeddi hoped that if someone agreed to help and take us to Oued Souf, it would either be free or for a “little money as a symbolic gesture.” Later that evening, after praying Al Isha (the dinner prayer), Jeddi called me into his living room—the space where we usually spent time together, conducting interviews, having casual talks, and sharing meals. It was around 9:30 p.m., and we had not yet had dinner. As I entered, I noticed his eyes were watery, and his voice carried a tone of concern. “So far, none of the calls I made will work for us,” he said. “Even the ones who offered to take us, their timing won’t align with ours. We need to leave early to make the most of our time there, but they’re planning to leave later in the day.” Then, with a firm yet hopeful tone, he added, “I am not worried. We will get there. *We will find our way, Inshallah*. But for now, let’s eat dinner together.” With that, Jeddi called out to Maya and asked her to serve us dinner. We sat down and shared a meal of makrouna, with the familiar flavors grounding us in the moment as the uncertainties of the trip lingered in the air but were momentarily overshadowed by the comfort of shared food and faith.

Rabaa and I slept in the courtyard with the rest of the granddaughters. It was a breezy night, but the sandstorms made it difficult to rest. The girls worked tirelessly to shield me from the glaring neighborhood light, which stayed on all night, and the swirling sand. Using a makeshift tent with a few blankets, they created some relief, and we finally drifted off to sleep around 2 a.m. I woke up to the soft sound of water droplets and Jeddi’s voice performing wudu

(purification before prayers), preparing for dawn prayers just after 4 a.m. Rabaa and I hurried to get ready while Maya prepared coffee for the road. As we left, Maya hugged me tightly while holding a small container of water, which she threw after us—a Tunisian tradition meant to ensure protection and safety throughout a journey. Her gesture stayed with me, a small but powerful reminder of the cultural bonds we carry with us.

We arrived at the station to find it eerily quiet. The ticket desk was closed, and there was no one else around. Concerned, I asked Jeddi if we had secured a way to the border. He replied with his usual calm resolve: "We will figure it out." While part of me felt anxious, another part trusted Jeddi's steadfastness and the process we were about to undertake. Our destination was Hazoua, a small town near the Tunisian-Algerian border. The journey depended on securing a seat in a *louage*, the shared public van rides common in the region and across Tunisia. However, the vans only leave when full, unless someone pays for the empty seats. After speaking with the driver, Jeddi paid a little extra to get us closer to Hazoua. When we arrived, we still had a thirty-minute walk ahead of us to reach the border. It was my first time crossing into Algeria, and as we approached the long lines at the control station, I felt nervous. Jeddi and Rabaa reassured me, explaining that the process might take time but was nothing to fear.

At the checkpoint, the customs officer asked Jeddi about Rabaa, and he responded confidently that she was his daughter. When the officer inquired about me, Jeddi hesitated before saying, "She is my daughter too, though not by blood." The officer glanced at me, intrigued by the contrast in our appearances. I stepped forward, explaining my relationship with Jeddi and Rabaa and my research on banga, a cultural tradition also practiced in Algeria. To my surprise, the officer was intrigued and asked me to explain banga briefly as he looked through my

passport. His curiosity momentarily eased my nerves, even as he lingered on my US visa, a potentially sensitive point given the strained politics between the United States and Algeria.

Once we crossed the border, a man arranged by Mariem, whom I mentioned earlier (see chapter 1), was waiting to drive us to El Oued. The journey from the Taleb el Arabi border took another two hours, and we arrived at Mariem's house exhausted but warmly welcomed. Her modest three-bedroom home was filled with life—her teenage daughters, young son, and her husband, who navigated daily life from a wheelchair. Mariem's hospitality was unwavering, and as we caught up, neighbors and relatives who remembered Jeddi from past visits began to arrive.

The day unfolded with visits to multiple homes, each stop marked by profound hospitality. In every house, men gathered to discuss banga, sharing stories of similarities and differences between its practice in Tozeur and El Oued. I noticed striking cultural differences between El Oued, Tozeur, and Tunis. The people of El Oued, often referred to as Swafa, are predominantly Black Algerians, and they frequently emphasized their closer ties to Tunisian culture than to the rest of Algeria. El Oued's society is notably more conservative; women often wear niqabs, and traditional customs remain strong. One of our stops was at the home of Tayeb, a young banga musician around twenty years old. His family's connection with the Chouchane family was evident through mutual care and respect. Tayeb's mother prepared an elaborate meal, serving it on two small wooden tables—one for the men and one for the women, reflecting local customs. Her warmth and generosity left a lasting impression.

Toward the evening, we were hosted at a house that contained the shrine of Lella Gindoua, a sacred space they referred to as dar diwan, similar to the Chouchane family's dar diwan in Tozeur (see chapter 1). The room was adorned with flags, ornaments, and other objects that captured its rich spiritual and cultural history. As we absorbed the atmosphere, the family

shared videos from YouTube on a TV screen, showcasing their performances during their annual Sidi Marzoug ziyara in August. Their unwavering dedication to banga shone through, with some of their performances even earning recognition on local TV news. Watching these videos, I was deeply moved by the pride they held in their cultural heritage and the deliberate, heartfelt efforts they made to preserve and share it with broader audiences, ensuring its legacy endures across time and space. While we were watching the videos, an elderly man entered the room. The moment he saw Jeddi, they both opened their arms wide and embraced each other warmly. It turned out to be one of Jeddi's old friends, someone he had learned the tradition with many years ago. Their reunion was deeply moving, filled with laughter and shared memories, and it added another layer of significance to the evening.

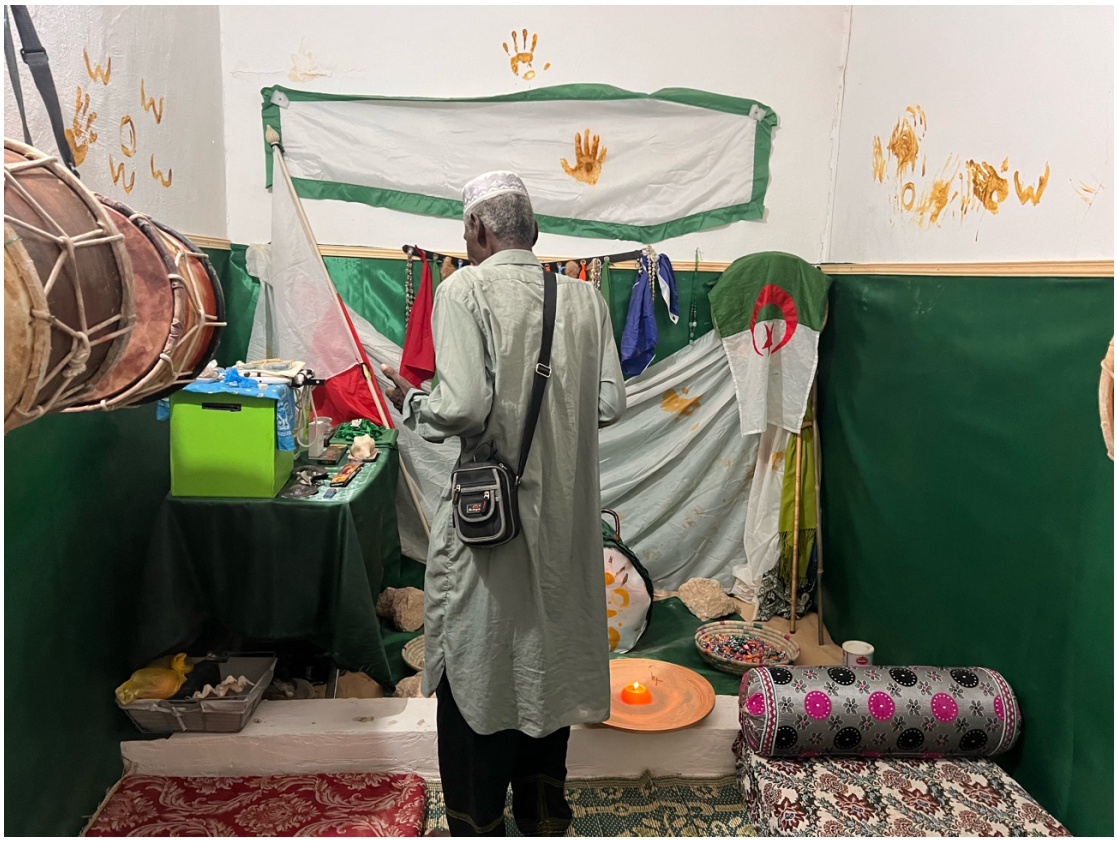

Figure 4.1 Hassan Chouchane reading Al-Fatiha inside the shrine of Lella Guindoua in El Oued. *Photographed by author, September 2023.*

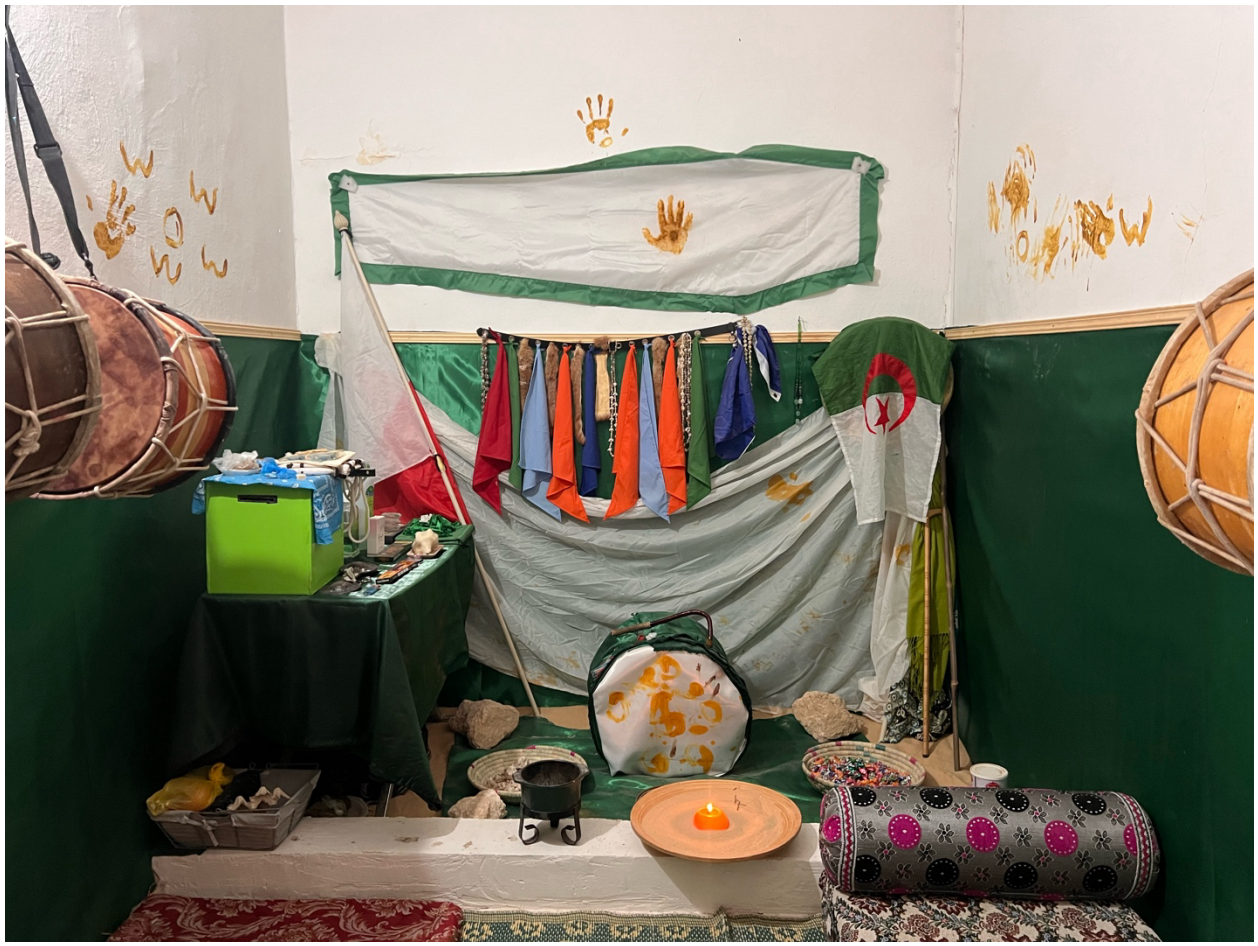

Figure 4.2 The shrine of Lella Guindoua inside dar diwan of El Oued. *Photographed by author, September 2023.*

The evening continued with animated and enthusiastic conversations about banga. Inspired by the discussions, I asked if I could record their dialogue with Jeddi, and they graciously agreed. The discussions revealed fascinating insights about banga's practice across different regions. I learned that there are two other communities devoted to Sidi Marzoug, each hosting their own annual ziyara. One is located in Rouissat, a town in Ouargla Province, and the other in Biskra, a northeastern city in Algeria. From what I understood, the banga traditions in Biskra bear a closer resemblance to those of Tozeur compared to the other communities. These revelations were intriguing, as they highlighted both the shared devotion to Sidi Marzoug and the

diverse ways in which banga is interpreted and performed across different regions. These discoveries have profoundly influenced the direction of the next phase of my project. I plan to conduct research in the communities of Rouissat and Biskra to document their unique practices, learn more about their connections to Sidi Marzoug, and analyze the variations that distinguish their banga traditions. By expanding my research to these regions, I aim to develop a more comprehensive understanding of banga's role as a living tradition—one that not only unites communities across borders but also reflects and celebrates the rich diversity of its practitioners.

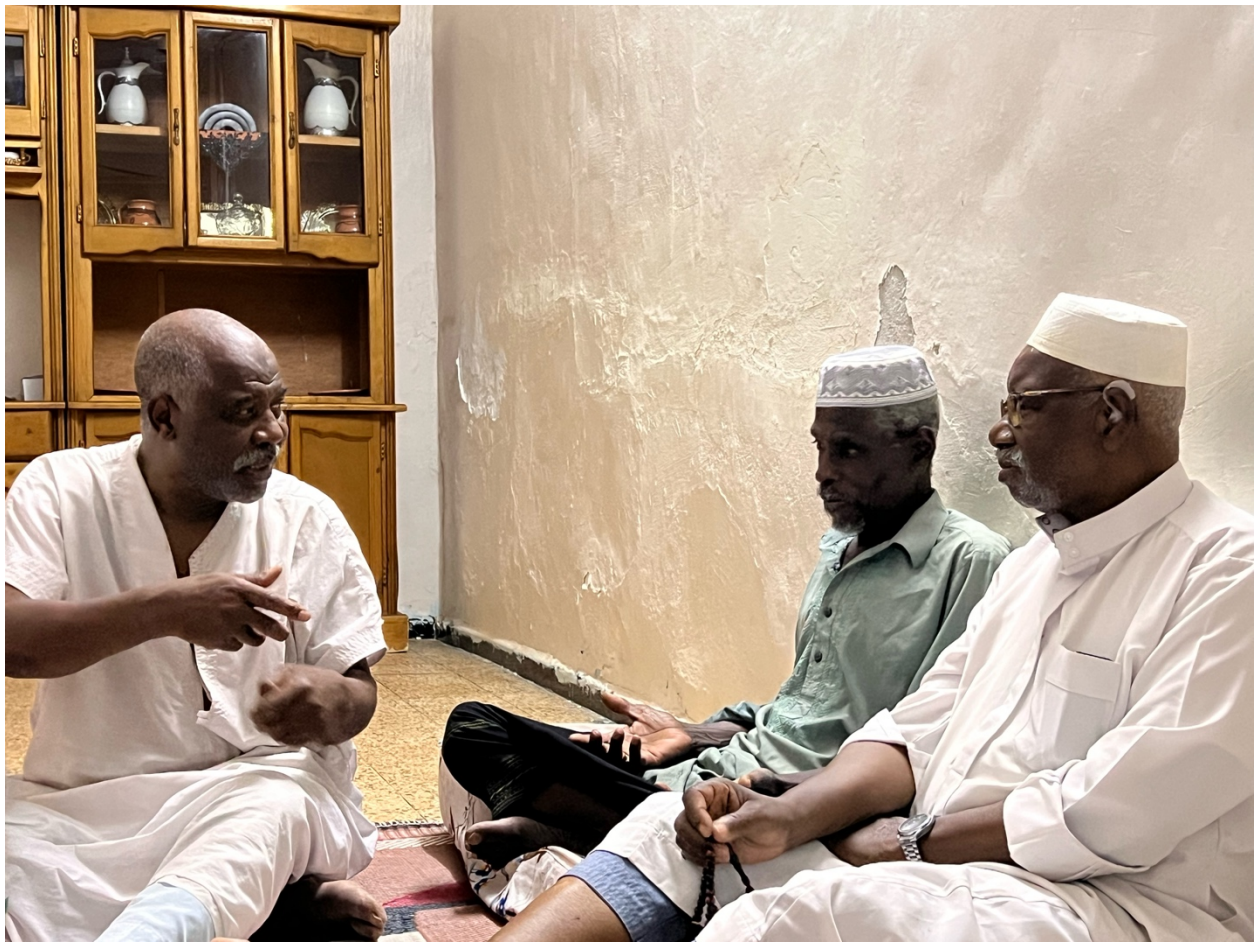

Figure 4.3 Hassan Chouchane reconnecting with community members from El Oued. *Photographed by author, September 2023.*

Our final visit of the day brought the biggest revelation. At this house, Jeddi met his extended family—referred to as distant relatives connected through marriages and shared ancestry. The matriarch of the family, a visually impaired elderly woman, entered the room with assistance. The moment she heard Jeddi's voice, she began to cry, calling him "my son Hassan." Their reunion was deeply emotional, and as she held his hands, she recounted her memories of attending Sidi Marzoug's ziyara in Tozeur. The room soon filled with family members eager to greet Jeddi and share photographs of relatives, creating a palpable sense of connection and belonging. This day in El Oued was more than just a journey; it was a profound exploration of heritage and identity. The hospitality, stories, and cultural exchanges revealed the deep ties that bind communities across borders. As I watched Jeddi reunite with his distant family and rekindle old friendships, I was reminded of banga's enduring power—not just as a musical tradition but as a vessel for preserving and strengthening relationships that transcend time and place.

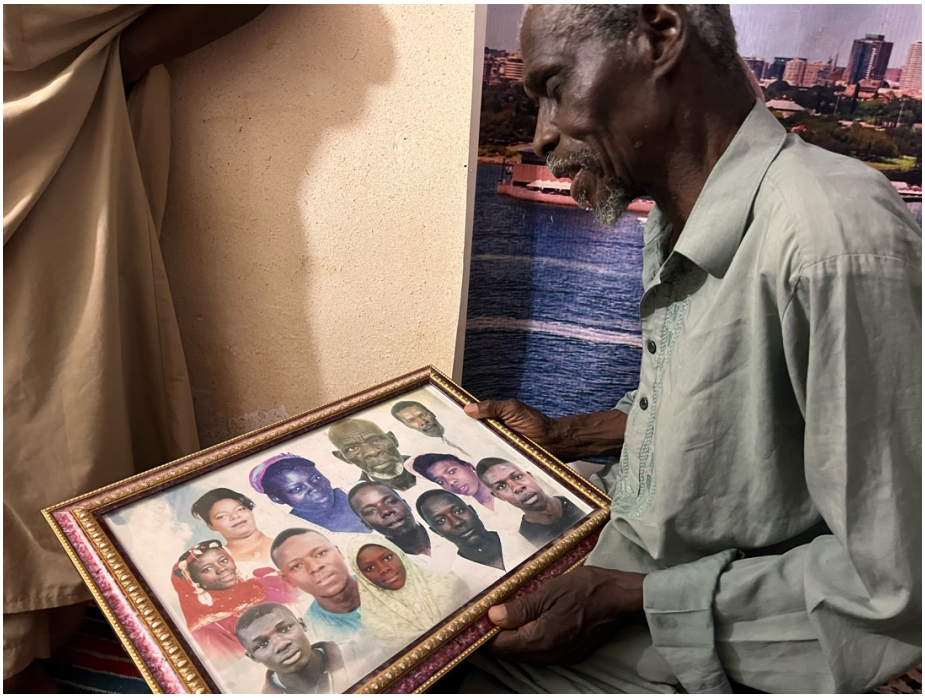

Figure 4.4 Hassan Chouchane looking at portraits of his extended family from El-Oued. *Photographed by author, September 2023.*

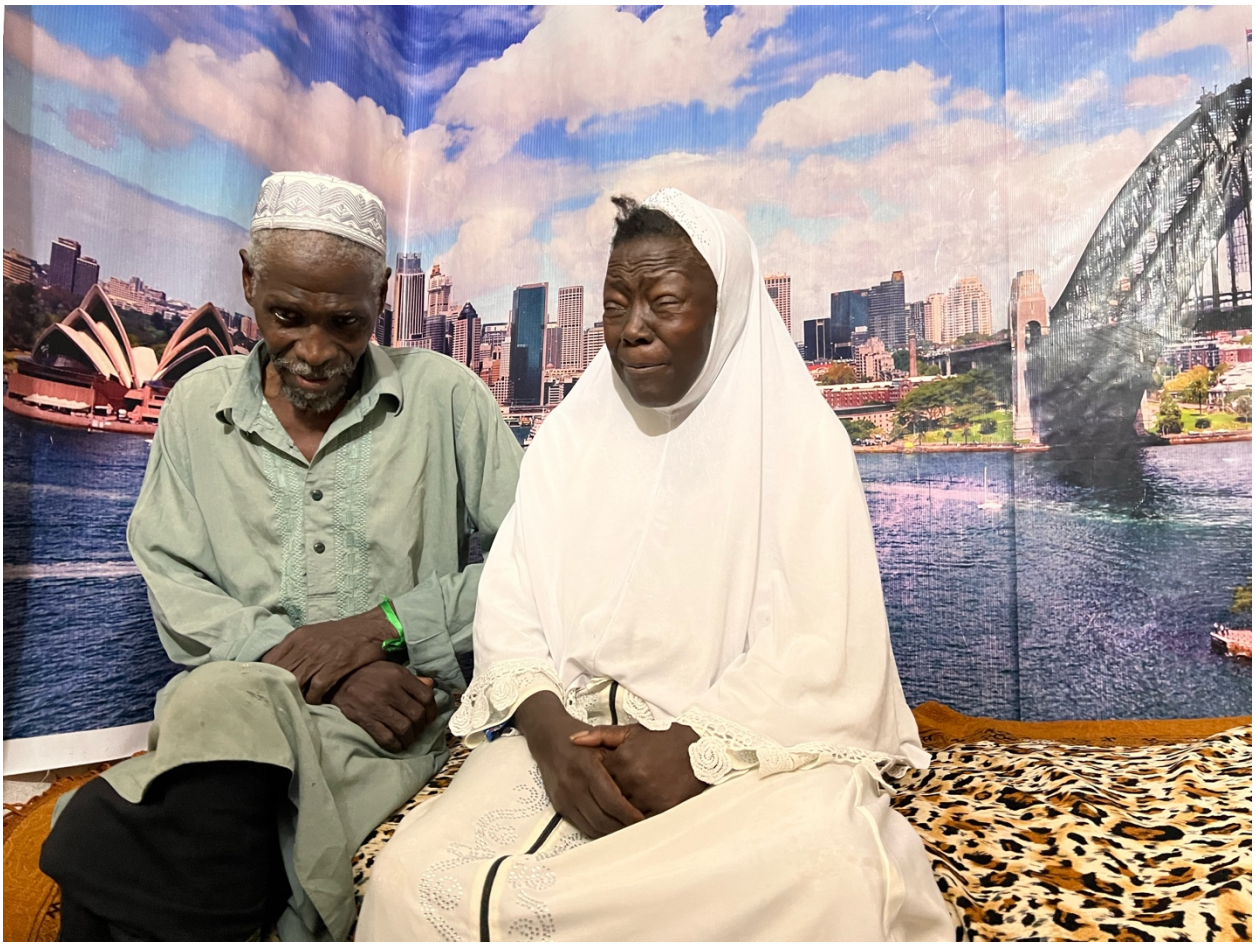

Figure 4.5 Hassan Chouchane reconnecting with a beloved mother figure after being apart for fifty years. *Photographed by author, September 2023.*

On September 5, the day we were heading back to Tozeur, the journey began just as it had at the start—without a specific plan for how we would return. Mouldi, a kind and generous taxi driver who had spent the previous day, September 4, taking us to visit homes I mentioned earlier and to the El Oued market, learned of our situation and immediately offered to drive us to Hazoua border. Though he insisted we stay at his house with his family instead, Jeddi thanked him graciously, promising that we would visit another time. Mouldi's generosity left a lasting impression on me. When he found out it was my birthday, he gave me a thoughtful gift and suggested having a small celebration with his wife and children. Among his gestures of kindness,

one stood out in particular: he gifted me a bag with several pieces of *swek* (also known as *miswak*, a traditional teeth-cleaning stick made from the Salvadora persica tree, valued for its natural antibacterial properties). Earlier in the day, he had overheard me talking about my love for *swek* and how I continue to use it even in America, buying large quantities whenever I visit Tunisia. I had mentioned that people often told me the Algerian *swek* was better, and he remembered this. On the drive back from El Oued to Hazoua, he handed me the bag—a profoundly thoughtful act that reflected not only his attentiveness but also the generosity and warmth that defined this journey.

As the day came to an end, the journey through El Oued left me with a deeper appreciation for the communities and regions I had encountered. Each story, each home, and each individual painted a vivid picture of the interconnected lives shaped by banga. As we arrived at the Hazoua border, Jeddi looked at me and said, "Next time, I want you to come with me to discover these places as well." His words felt like both an invitation and a mandate, setting the stage for the next part of this project—delving further into these untold stories and the layered bonds of kinship and tradition that banga continues to weave, nurture, and sustain across borders, transcending time and space. When we arrived in Hazoua, there was still no plan for how we would make the hour-long drive back to Tozeur. As always, Jeddi reassured me with his characteristic calm, saying, "We will find a way, Inshallah." True to his word, a customs officer, after stamping our passports, offered to find someone heading to Tozeur who could drive us. It was another moment of unexpected generosity, one of many that had defined this trip.

I left El Oued on my birthday, spending the day traveling across the border back to Tunisia. As much as I had hoped to finish my dissertation by my thirty-fifth birthday, I could not have imagined a more meaningful way to spend the day. Traveling alongside Jeddi, I felt deeply

grateful, honored, and incredibly fortunate to have marked this milestone by capturing and witnessing inexpressible moments of profound connection. These were the moments that transcended academic goals, reminding me of the privilege of bearing witness to a living history—one that binds communities, preserves legacies, and reaffirms the enduring spirit of human connection. This journey wasn't just a chapter in my research; it was a chapter in my life, one that I am committed to continuing, as the road ahead still holds untold stories waiting to be uncovered.

Looking Ahead

Again, I return to Jeddi's words: "Banga is a drop in a big ocean." This ocean, vast and unfathomable at times, holds countless stories yet to be uncovered. No matter how much I write, some of the stories I have lived, witnessed, and felt will forever remain ineffable. The future of banga will depend not only on the efforts of its practitioners but also on the broader societal recognition of its value. Whether through local festivals, global collaborations, or quiet moments in a courtyard in Tozeur, banga will continue to resonate as a testament to the enduring power of music, memory, and community. This dissertation is but one step in a larger journey, a small ripple in the ongoing rhythm of banga. As I leave the courtyard of the Chouchane family behind, the beats of the tbeli and the echoes of the shakasheek remain with me, a reminder that banga's story is far from over.

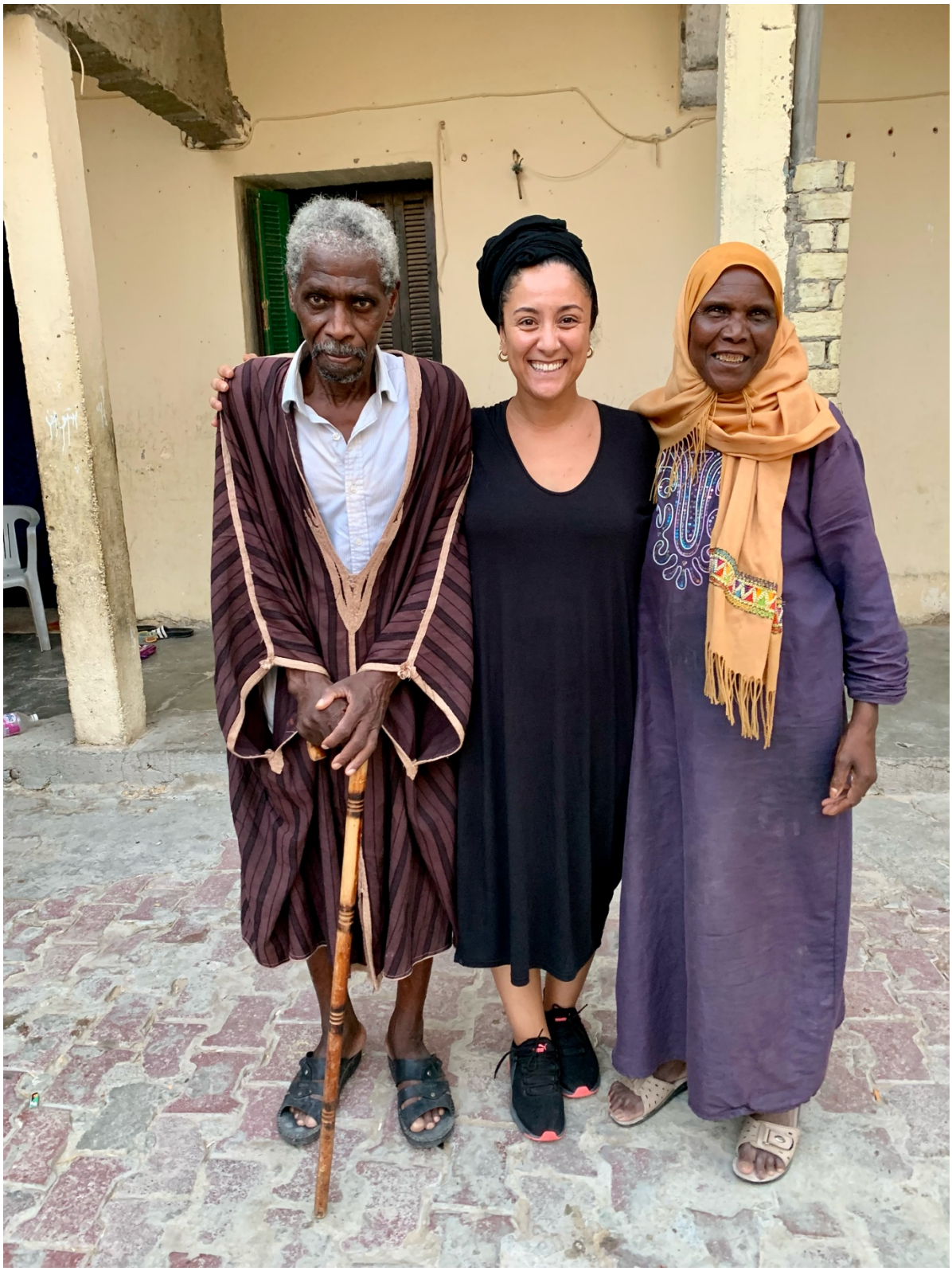

Figure 4.6 Author with Hassan Chouchane and his wife Meriem Chouchane. *Photographed by Rabaa Chouchane, September 2020.*

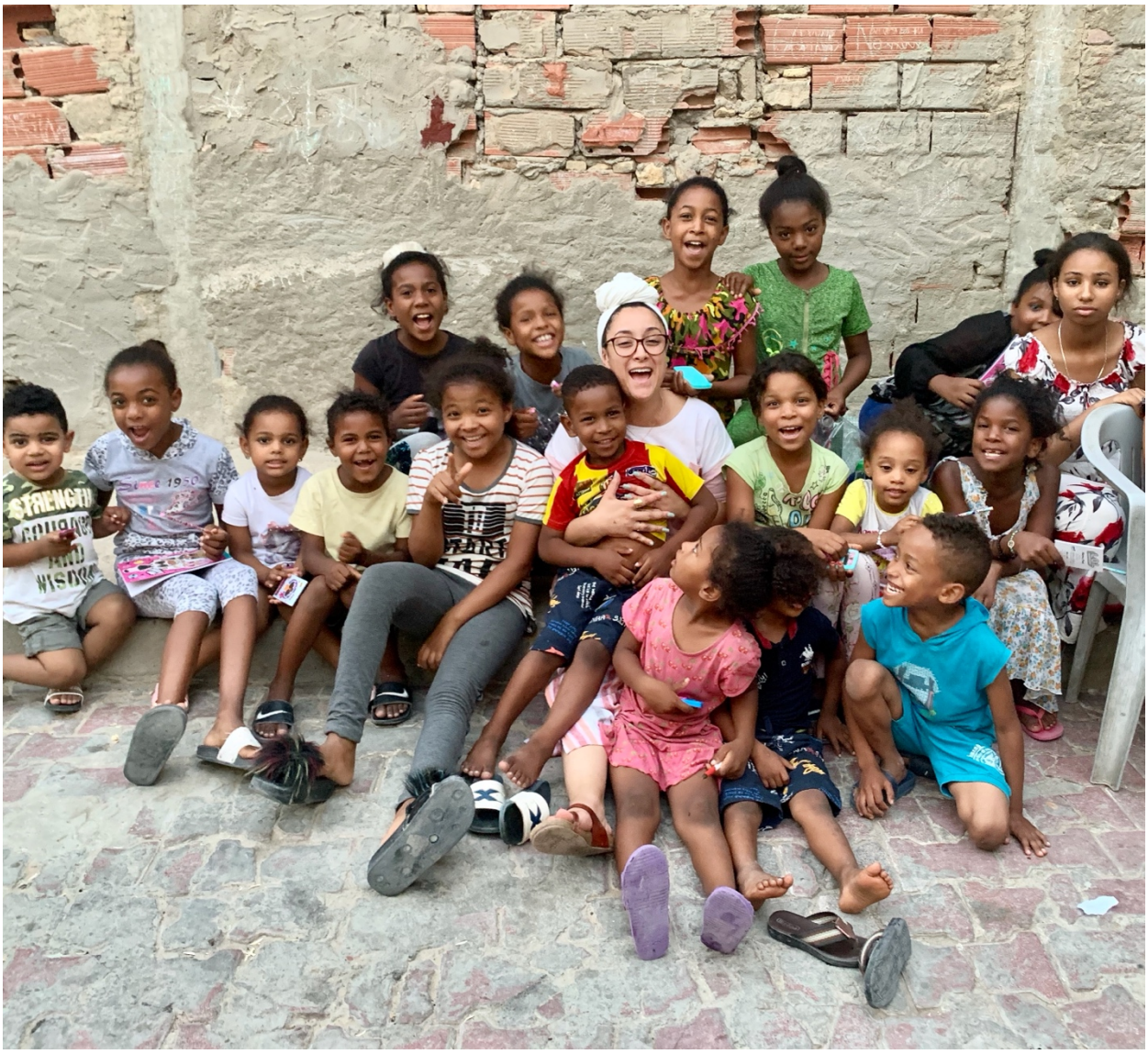

Figure 4.7 Author with some members of the Chouchane family's younger generation. *Photographed by Rabaa Chouchane, July 2020.*

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