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Tunisian Rap Music and the Arab Spring: Revolutionary Anthems and Post-Revolutionary Tendencies

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After the emergence of the so-called Arab spring in 2011, Tunisian rap music became a subject of great interest to the public and the media. This was due above all to El Général, a young rap artist from the Tunisian city of Sfax, and the success of his song [Rayīs li-Blād](#) (Head of State).¹ Apart from El Général, who received a lot of attention from the media because of his contribution to the revolution, the most frequently mentioned Tunisian rap artist was Balṭi, one of the pioneers of Tunisian rap and the country's most famous rapper before the revolution. These two rappers were compared and presented as opponents in many articles and blogs. El Général had become famous for his criticism of Ben Ali, whereas Balṭi was reported to have been loyal to the former regime, enjoying the support of Ben Ali and his entourage. Some journalists and bloggers even claimed that Balṭi was replaced by El Général as Tunisia's most famous rapper because he had not published any revolutionary sound messages that were as groundbreaking and influential as the songs published by El Général shortly before and during the Tunisian revolution.²

El Général's and Balṭi's Revolutionary Output

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El Général's main revolutionary output consists of three songs. The first and most famous is the above-mentioned *Rayīs li-Blād* that not only became the anthem of the Tunisian revolution, but also entered the revolutionary soundtrack of other Arab countries like Egypt. By publishing this song on 7 November 2010, Tunisia's national holiday during Ben Ali's rule (celebrating the day he came to power), El Général dared what no other Tunisian artist had ever dared so openly before. He addressed Ben Ali directly, criticized his regime and touched upon social injustices and topics like corruption, the self-enrichment of the president and his entourage, the lack of opportunities for young people and the arbitrariness of the state's security forces. An English translation of this song can be

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yPZE313mk8> <14.5.2013>.

² See for instance David Peisner: Inside Tunisia's Hip Hop Revolution (24 August 2012), www.spin.com/articles/inside-tunisia-hip-hop-revolution?page=0.2 <13.4.2013>; Last Night in Orient Blog: El Général Lebled: la relève du rap tounsi (Adieu Balti) (7 January 2011), <http://musique.arabe.over-blog.com/article-el-general-tounis-bledna-la-releve-du-rap-tounsi-adieu-balti-64483947.html> <13.4.2013>.

found in "The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising" by Jean-Pierre Filiu.³ The second of his revolutionary songs, [Tūnis °Blādna](#) (Tunisia is Our Country), was released at the end of December 2010 after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi.⁴ It is another description of what was going wrong in Tunisia under Ben Ali's rule, and a call to fight for a Tunisia that belongs to its people and not to a corrupt upper class. The third song that I would consider as part of El Général's revolutionary output is [Tahya Tūnis](#) (Long Live Tunisia), which praises Tunisia and the martyrs of the revolution, and was released a few days after Ben Ali's ouster.⁵ In my opinion, El Général's success and the attention he attracted from the world's media cannot be explained only by his meaningful revolutionary lyrics, but also because he gave the crowd of protestors a face.

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Balṭi was accused of not having been sufficiently supportive of the revolution, and of having been a sympathizer of Ben Ali and his regime, which is why he was often presented as El Général's opponent. According to Balṭi, his success before the revolution and the fact that he did not release a song like El Général's *Ṛayīs li-Blād* were not the result of a pro-regime attitude, but because he did not care about politics and wanted to work as a professional musician without endangering his family.⁶ Beyond that, the accusation of not having published any political songs before and during the revolution does not imply that Balṭi had no revolutionary output at all – it was simply drowned by the sound messages of El Général. On 13 January 2011, for instance, one day before Ben Ali's escape, he released a song called [Mwātin Karīm](#) (Respectable Citizen).⁷ In it, he not only calls on the Tunisian people to be respectable citizens, but also expresses his views against violence and the use of weapons. At the end of January 2011, Balṭi released two further songs that can be considered as belonging to his revolutionary output. One of them is called [Nhibbu Tūnis °Ždīda](#) (We Want a New Tunisia), and it is not only a demand for a new Tunisia, as the title tells us, but also touches on the wrongdoings of Ben Ali and his entourage.⁸ The other song is entitled [Mā-tlūmūni-š](#) (Do Not Blame Me), and is Balṭi's attempt to combat misperceptions and to defend himself against the accusation of having supported Ben Ali.⁹ As a substantiation of his defense, this song also touches on his negative experiences with the former regime, and how Ben Ali and his entourage suppressed and silenced him. The release dates of these three songs are taken from Balṭi's Facebook page.

³ Jean-Pierre Filiu: *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay_Wd6liGOU <15.5.2013>.

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zj9SC5QJao8> <15.5.2013>.

⁶ Peisner: *Inside Tunisia's Hip Hop Revolution* (see FN 1).

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psBzSB4GaLU> <15.5.2013>.

⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=psBzSB4GaLU <15.5.2013>.

⁹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PZ9_dSHf0c <15.5.2013>.

El Général's and Balți's Artistic Creation after the Revolution

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The main topics of El Général's post-revolutionary output continue to be politics and social injustices. In many of the songs he released after the revolution he expressed that he was still unhappy about the political and social situation in Tunisia. His song [Deuxième Revolution](#), for instance, released in July 2011, was his appeal for a second revolution, since he did not consider the first one as successful as it should have been.¹⁰ El Général's post-revolutionary creation is also a reflection of his attitude towards Islam. He uses his songs as a vehicle for his religious ideas and for his fight for a revalorization of Islam. This had already become apparent in his revolutionary output. In his song *Ṛayīs li-Blād*, for example, he criticized the beating of veiled women by policemen, and in *Tūnis °Blādna* he named and shamed the exclusion of prayer calls from the public during Ben Ali's rule. Some of the comments he posted on his Facebook page in 2012 gave the impression that he was inclined to share Islamist points of view. For example, following riots by Islamists in June 2012 over an art exhibition in La Marsa, a suburb of Tunis, he posted a comment expressing how he understood these riots.¹¹ While public interest in El Général seems to be in decline and the number of his public performances is much lower than in 2011, he is still working as a professional rap musician and has founded his own record label, "Ṣūt li-Blād Records" (Voice of the Revolution Records).

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Balți's post-revolutionary output is strongly influenced by his desire to reflect on social issues. He had already approached social topics before the revolution, but in a less open, more moderate and non-provocative way. In one of his recent songs, [Témoïn \(suicide\)](#) (Witness [suicide]) he mentions the high unemployment rate in Tunisia and the lack of openings for young Tunisians.¹² He avoids rapping about politics, but his not having published any political songs before and during the revolution does not seem to have damaged his career permanently. Some bloggers, journalists and even a manager of his California-based record label were convinced that his career would be affected by the criticism he had to face.¹³ Balți himself explained that his contribution to the revolution was that as a pioneer of Tunisian rap music and founding member of Tunisia's hip hop scene, he paved the way for those who risked releasing sound messages during the uprisings at the end of December 2010 and the beginning

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5okhAy83-oM> <15.5.2013>.

¹¹ Tunisia shaken by 'Islamist protests' (BBC, 12 June 2012) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18416327>; the comments on his Facebook page have subsequently been removed.

¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhF5BjHkkSY> <15.5.2013>.

¹³ Peisner: Inside Tunisia's Hip Hop Revolution (see FN 1).

of January 2011.¹⁴ Beyond that, he has gone to great lengths to maintain his position within this scene after the revolution, for instance by cooperating with other famous Tunisian hip hop artists like Lak3y and Mr Mustapha. Together they recorded a song called [14 mois après la révolution](#).¹⁵

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Malek Khemiri, a member of the Tunisian hip hop group Armada Bizerta, stated in a conversation that the Tunisian hip hop scene is too complex to deal only with El Général and Balți, and that a distinction between pro- and anti-revolution rappers is a very simplified depiction. Of course, there are also articles in which Balți is mentioned in the same breath with El Général, without being depicted as his counterpart or as a supporter of the former regime.¹⁶

Tunisian Rap Music and Cultural and Social Developments

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The considerable interest shown by the media in Tunisian rap music after the revolution and the success of El Général's revolutionary songs can be seen as evidence for the widely made claim that the Tunisian revolution allowed rap music to emerge from the underground. During the uprisings at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, rap music became an important means of expressing and reflecting people's discontent with the political and social situation in Tunisia. Balți's and El Général's post-revolutionary output shows that rap music has also been used as a vehicle to speak about social and political issues after Ben Ali's ouster.

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In dealing with Tunisian revolutionary and post-revolutionary rap music, I have been faced with questions on social and political trends, and with the views of Tunisian hip hop artists on these matters. I have also been confronted with the question of whether the emergence of rap music from the underground has led to cultural movement and has changed Tunisia's cultural landscape. In short, the question arose of whether the Tunisian revolution in 2011 was also a cultural revolution.

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The sudden importance that rap music acquired – due to its role as a means of protest – clearly changed the musical landscape in Tunisia, especially in the first few months after the revolution.

¹⁴ Peisner: Inside Tunisia's Hip Hop Revolution (see FN 1).

¹⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kZV13VvMkQ> <15.5.2013>.

¹⁶ Conversation with Malek Khemiri in Beirut, October 2012; Curry, Neil: Tunisia's Rappers Provide Soundtrack to a Revolution (2 March 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/02/tunisia.rappers.balti/index.html> <13.4.2011>.

According to El Général, Tunisian rap musicians had already been working in the underground and publishing their songs on the Internet.¹⁷ But after Ben Ali's escape, the songs of El Général and other artists, such as the rappers Psycho M, Guito'n and Lak3y and the hip hop group Armada Bizerta were played by Tunisia's radio stations and many of these artists appeared on television to talk about their contribution to the revolution. Tunisia's TV and radio stations also started to offer platforms for young rap talents, most of whom gave the impression of wanting to benefit from the success achieved by this new protest culture shortly after the revolution. As far as I could see, public interest in Tunisian rap music started to decline with the decrease in its importance as a medium to spread revolutionary ideas. Taking a long-term perspective, I believe that the emergence of rap music from the underground has only slightly changed Tunisia's cultural landscape.

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Hanspeter Mattes writes in his paper on protest music and political transformation in North Africa that the short-term breakthrough of an alternative culture like Tunisian rap music was facilitated by the fact that the political changes accompanying the revolution sidelined the repression of countercultures. He also claims that the possibility for journalists, artists or musicians to express their opinion on politics freely still does not exist in Tunisia. What is more, they now have to face another kind of repression, which is exerted by conservative religious forces that have gained in importance and influence since the revolution.¹⁸

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Another reason why the musical landscape in Tunisia has not changed much since the revolution, in my opinion, may be because Tunisia's music market is still ruled by piracy, which makes it hard for artists to work as professional musicians, to record and sell their records. In addition, artists are mainly dependent on presenting themselves and publishing their songs on the Internet, especially on Facebook, which is why their artistic creation is not accessible to everyone.

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By analyzing the revolutionary and post-revolutionary creation of Balṭī, El Général and other Tunisian artists, conclusions can be drawn not only on cultural but also on social developments, as their output is above all a reflection of issues that concern Tunisian society at large. El Général, for example, seems to have become the voice of a social group that fights for a revalorization of Islam. While his songs are a reflection of his personal opinion on certain topics, they can also be understood as mirroring the opinion of a certain social group.

¹⁷ This information is based on an interview with El Général conducted in October 2011.

¹⁸ Hanspeter Mattes: "Herr Präsident, ihr Volk stirbt!" Protestmusik und politischer Wandel in Nordafrika/Nahost, in: GIGA Focus Nahost 9 (2012), http://www.giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf_nahost_1209.pdf <14.4.2013>.

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A question I have come across during my research on this particular category of rap music was whether hip hop was a driver for the Tunisian revolution.¹⁹ My observation that rappers like El Général or Balṭi use their music to mirror and comment on social developments makes me conclude that Tunisian rap music functions primarily as a companion or an observer of social transformations. Rap music had a supportive and motivating function during the uprisings, and accompanied the Tunisian revolution musically. However, rather than calling it a driver for this revolution, I would call it a medium that made those who listened to it aware of the causes for the outbreak of the so-called Arab spring.

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¹⁹ Cordelia Hebblethwaite: Is Hip Hop Driving the Arab Spring? (24 July 2011), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14146243> <13.4.2013>.