

**MECAM Traveling Academy**

**Mysticism and the City: Temporality, Spatiality, Culture, and Society**

Convened by Cyrine Kortas and organized by Diana Abbani

31 March – 2 April 2026 | University of Gabès (Higher Institute of Languages), Tunisia

**Abstracts**

**Tuesday, 31 March 2026**

**Keynote: Cyrine Kortas, A Tapestry of Sufi Threads, Time, Space, and Self, to Revive the Maghreb City**

Every war that breaks out in our modern world reignites the timeless question of humanity's place amid technology and spirituality. Many societies are facing enormous crises that make the world vulnerable to violence, which urges the need to reclaim spiritual values. "We have forgotten ourselves," writes D. H. Lawrence in *Women in Love*, highlighting the modern human tragedy rooted in spiritual barrenness, a consequence of the desacralization of the world and veneration of reason and machines. Unlike the Western world, the Muslim world has maintained a certain level of spirituality due to Sufism. Inspired by previous research on the crisis of modernity and Sufism, this keynote argues that spirituality, particularly Islamic mysticism (Sufism), remains indispensable, bridging personal transformation and public vitality in contemporary cities, especially Maghrebi cities.

Drawing on Tunisian cities', in particular, long history of Sufi traditions, the talk explores how mysticism has indelibly shaped urban public life: from literature and ecstatic dance to architecture, culinary practices, and interpersonal relations. By infusing these domains with transcendent meaning, values of tolerance, acceptance and community building emerge. Central to this discussion are Sufi conceptions of time, space, and self not as fixed metrics, but as fluid, sacred dimensions that challenge linear modernity and invite non-egoistic consciousness.

By addressing "Spirituality and the City," this presentation aims to rediscover the different manifestations of Sufi mysticism in the modern urban space, not as a mere historical legacy but as a statement of belonging, a process of healing, and a vision for a better future.

**Wednesday, 01 April 2026**

***Working group 1* | Vision, Liminality, and Cinematic Space (Workshop Format)**

**Friederike Pannewick (Philipps-Universität Marburg) – Magical Realism as artistic mode of liminality, transgression and imaginative agency**

This working group, by starting from a sequence of Elia Suleiman's film "Divine Intervention" (2002) and Maha Hassan's novel "Fī bayt Anne Frank" (2020), is going to discuss spaces of the magical and imaginary in Arab film and literature. The artistic mode of Magical Realism is understood in this context as a cultural, political, and imaginative force utilizing imaginative spaces to reclaim agency, to respond to disparities, and inspire alternative futures.

In literary theory, Magic Realism is defined as “fiction which mixes and disrupts the ordinary, everyday realism with strange, ‘impossible’ and miraculous episodes and powers... [literatures that] rework folk and fairy tales to create a particular kind of magic realism that mixes the modern and the mythical”. (A *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd ed. Martin Gray, London 1993, 167) According to literary scholar Ḥamid Abū Aḥmad, Magical Realism in its literary context is posited to have drawn its roots from Arabic tradition, and specifically, *Arabian Nights* (Ḥāmid, Abū Aḥmad, *Al-Wāqī'iyya as-siḥriyya fī r-riwāya al-'Arabiyya*, Cairo 2009, 13), as well as Islamic prophet stories on miracles and other otherworldly elements.

In this working group, we are going to discuss in which way Magical Realism, like sufism, is a popular and artistic mode of meaning-making and world-building that transgresses the boundaries of the present in space, memory, aesthetics, identity and collectivity. By taking the film and novel sequences as starting points, we are going to reflect on the potential of Magical Realism to rethink - like sufism - time, space, and community, collapsing binaries and opening alternative visions of human experience.

### **Oraib Toukan (EUME fellow) – On Mustafa Akkad’s *Message***

This workshop seeks to explore Mustafa Akkad’s use of the camera as first person in the film *The Message* (1976), both as point of view, and as a possible mystical withdrawal from representation altogether. We will arrest and analyze specific scenes to think with and through his frames as mystical proposition on stepping out of the frame as a meeting of four perpendicular lines, or of transcending representation altogether. One point of departure will be the *ism* المصور (Al-musawwir), the image-maker, one of the ninety-nine names of God in Islam. We will question who is object and subject when the camera apparatus seems to transcend its image? What other space-times could be imagined when representations of landscape seemed central to the cosmological force-field of *being* Islamic in Akkad’s film?

In 1976 the late Moustafa Al Akkad released his seminal film *The Message* (1976) on the birth of Islam through the late-life of prophet Mohammad. From its onset, the making of the film was fiercely opposed on account of the repercussions of representing the prophet in Islam. Half-way through his production, Akkad moved his desert set from Morocco to Libya after facing increasing opposition and censorship from various Islamic clergy. In the end, Akkad decided to produce two entirely separate films: One in Arabic and one in English. Back-to-back, he shot two entirely scenes with two entirely separate casts. Most importantly, he devised a formative shot-counter-shot technique whereby the camera represents the prophet, and the life before the prophets eyes is our own viewing eye as spectators. Akkad himself died from Islamic extremism in the 2005 Amman hotel bombings.

### **Working group 2 | Framing Sufism: State Power, Heritage, and Religious Governance**

#### **Isabelle Werenfels (SWP) – Post-independence Framings of Sufis in the Maghreb: Dynamic, Contradictory, and Instrumentalizing**

In post-independence Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, official and public framings of Sufi actors (ṭuruq al-ṣūfiyya and awliyā' ṣāliḥīn) were initially shaped by nationalist projects of state-building and dominant conceptions of “proper” Islam, often marginalizing or denigrating Sufi practices as backward, heretic, and/or politically suspect. Drawing on extensive field research, this paper argues that such framings were marked from the outset by inherent contradictions between public discourse and the continued social embeddedness of Sufi practices, including among political and social elites.

Over time, and with varying intensity across the three countries, shifting domestic challenges contributed to a gradual reconfiguration of official narratives on Sufism. From the late 1980s onward, the rise of political Islam played a key role in this process, as did changes in political leadership. While Algeria and Tunisia long maintained predominantly negative or ambivalent framings of Sufi actors, Morocco's monarchical and religious governance structures enabled earlier and more sustained forms of re-valorization.

More recently, Sufi actors have increasingly been reframed in explicitly instrumental terms. Presented as representatives of an "indigenous" Maghrebi Islam, they are attributed roles in spiritual diplomacy, tourism promotion, counter-radicalization, and pro-regime mobilization. The paper argues that these attributed roles are closely tied to changing state strategies of religious governance and regime legitimation, and that they generate ongoing tensions between political instrumentalization, and the interests and autonomy of Sufi actors themselves.

### **Souad Matoussi (University of Sousse) – Les danses mystiques en Tunisie, entre espace sacré, espace privé ou public et espace scénique**

Traversant les siècles et les décennies, la danse mystique des confréries musulmanes en Tunisie, n'a cessé d'être pratiquée, aussi bien par les initiés, que par un public de plus en plus large. En passant des cercles rituels restreints « mi'ad » qui réunissaient chaque semaine les adeptes « foqra » de chaque groupe confrérique dans l'enceinte sacrée de leur zaouia, vers des espaces profanes, tels que les fêtes familiales ou publiques, ces chorégraphies rituelles subissent des modifications variables qui touchent leur fonction, leur forme et leur contenu, mais qui ne leur font pas perdre pour autant leur identité de danses rituelles, nettement distincte de celle des danses récréatives et profanes.

Cette contribution interrogera la transmission des danses mystiques et de leur actualisation dans des cadres variés : sanctuaires, fêtes familiales, festivals, espaces publics ou encore scènes patrimoniales. Elle propose d'explorer la danse comme l'une des expressions privilégiées de la mystique dans les villes tunisiennes. Loin de se réduire à une pratique rituelle ésotérique, les pratiques dansées — qu'il s'agisse des rituels soufis, des cérémonies de trances collectives liées aux confréries ou des réappropriations contemporaines dans les festivals et performances urbaines — inscrivent les corps dans des temporalités et spatialités spécifiques qui relient l'individuel au collectif et le terrestre au cosmologique.

Cherchant à explorer les multiples interactions entre mysticisme, corporéité et société en Tunisie, cette approche visera à montrer comment la danse confrérique (hadhra, takhmira, tahwila, stambali, bengua...), agit comme un opérateur social et urbain, créant des formes d'appartenance, réactivant des mémoires collectives et servant de réservoir pour la création artistique

### **Rym Lajmi (University of la Manouba) – Saïda Manoubia entre chant de louange et mystique de la *nağra***

Dans cet essai, nous nous proposons de retracer l'histoire de la sainte Lella Saïda Aïcha Manoubia, considérée comme l'un des pôles majeurs de l'islam soufi en Tunisie. Notre analyse s'appuiera sur quelques titres issus d'un panégyrique (ou texte de louange/*madha*) extrêmement rare, transmis oralement par le chant de Lella Aïcha, l'une des dernières figures détentrices de ce patrimoine qui demeure, à ce jour, méconnu.

Nous tenterons également de définir dans ce texte de louange/*madha* le concept de *nağra* (ou jalousie mystique), que nous avons établi précédemment. Ce sentiment, dont on retrouve l'expression dans des titres comme *Sbeh el khayr ya Lelleya; 'Ārī al Manoubia; Om dhra' twil; Ya Talmoud al Manoubia;*

*Dima ennedi bik ya shar'iya*. Ce sentiment est traditionnellement attribué aux saints tunisiens et reflète leur caractère à la fois affectueux, vengeur et protecteur de leurs fidèles.

**Listening Session** | Listening Otherwise

**Alia Mossallam (Humbolt University) – Listening in solidarity and with the heart. Towards a mystical-methodology of hearing North African prisoners of war in the Lautarchiv**

On the first of March 1918, a Moroccan prisoner of war in Germany, named “Gilani”, stood before a gramophone, surrounded by German linguists and Arabists who oversaw the scientific language collection process that was to become Berlin’s Lautarchiv. Gilali, like many of his comrades in the “Half-moon” camp, was asked to sing into the gramophone - a song devoid of any personal details, any information about the war or the camps. The purpose of the recording was to be purely scientific, to use them to teach the language, establish a ‘museum of the worlds languages’ or use the collection of dialects and linguistic details for “colonial purposes”.

In his diaries Wilhelm Doegen described how the prisoners often developed “Trichter Fieber”, or Conch fever. Their voices trembled as they sang, as they believed the recording device harboured a kind of dark magic, stealing their voices, which they feared to loose into the device forever upon singing. Doegen described this in scorn. But what if they were right?

If the prisoners of war did realise the extractionist project aimed to steal their voices from them, reappropriate them for scientific use, but realised also that these recordings were the only aspects of their lives that could escape the circumstances of incarceration - what could they have been telling us? And how can we listen to this archive, beyond its intended scientific audience, and use and methodology to hear and listen differently. More importantly, what if we ask ourselves, if we were the intended audience.

Gilalis song was classified as a “dance song”, of “Yodelling art”, in what Anette Hoffman would call “colonial fiction”. When listening to his song in Marrakesh, near the village of his origin, people identified the long wails, as a song of maddad to Abdelqqader al Gilani, the wali of the Sufi, Tarqia al Qadiriyya. Gilani is the patron saint of Marrakesh, famous for a shrine in the city. “Scientifically”, he never made it to Marrakesh, having supposedly died in Iraq. But this detail is irrelevant in this context. He is who the Marrakschia call upon in moments of absolute calamity. He is also the saint that Algerians typically call upon in times of incarceration, and particularly during the period of French colonialism. A repertoire (of songs against incarceration during anti-colonial insurgencies) that many other prisoners also draw upon, but in equally discrete ways.

What forms of listening can we engender when engaging with these archives, in order to hear otherwise, beyond the colonial knowledge production for which it was intended. How can “listening with the heart” usually engendered in listening in spiritual and religious contexts, allow us to connect with the prisoners for long enough to “understand” what might have been said. What can we also learn, imagine, infer or “critically fabulate” (as per Saadiya Hartmann), through listening communally, and in solidarity with those we hear in the archive. What can mysticism (here employed by Gliani) offer as a framework for understanding what is being said, and what alternative form of knowledge production and does it offer us, as historians, in understanding and re-telling histories.

In this listening workshop I will introduce the participants to several archives from this archival collection, especially to recordings that are mystical in nature. We will unpack the colonial fiction with which the recordings are identified and categorised, and explore what forms of listening can enable us to truly hear the prisoners of war. What kind of knowledge can be experienced without being

“extracted” and through this process - what can we learn from and with them, rather than from what has been done to them - and what if any justice can be brought or experienced through this process. We will employ Samia Khatoun’s work in understanding mysticism as a form of knowledge production, and ask ourselves how employing it as an epistemological tradition, helps us hear the archive differently, and what it offers us that academic scientific historical methodologies may miss.

### **Working Group 3 | Embodied Mysticism: Dance, Voice, and Urban Ritual**

#### **Chiraz Mosbah (University of Manouba) – L’art contemporain au service de la réactivation des espaces mystiques de Sousse**

Le projet « *Spirituality* » est une exposition collective d’art contemporain conçue dans le cadre du Master Professionnel Pratiques Curatoriales et Art de l’Exposition (PCEA) à l’Institut Supérieur des Beaux-Arts de Sousse (ISBAS), en collaboration avec la Municipalité de Sousse. Pensé alors que j’enseignais au sein de ce programme, le projet a réuni des artistes tunisiens et internationaux, émergents et confirmés, autour d’une réflexion sur la spiritualité en tant que pratique à la fois artistique et conceptuelle.

L’exposition s’est tenue en Mai 2023 dans deux zaouïas historiques de Sousse, Sidi Abdelsalem et Sidi Abdelkader, des sites sacrés longtemps négligés et fermés au public. En réactivant temporairement ces espaces à travers des installations, des pièces sonores, des projections vidéo et des œuvres immersives, le projet visait à renouveler leur présence symbolique et leur résonance spirituelle dans le paysage urbain.

« *Spirituality* » a exploré les manières dont les pratiques mystiques et soufies (telles que le mouvement, la transe, l’ascèse et la méditation) peuvent inspirer la création artistique et de nouvelles formes d’expériences spatiales. L’exposition invitait les visiteurs à dialoguer avec des interprétations contemporaines de l’espace sacré, proposant une rencontre entre art, patrimoine et dimensions invisibles de la croyance.

À travers ce projet curatoriale, les étudiants et les artistes ont interrogé la manière dont l’art contemporain peut contribuer à la préservation et à la transformation des espaces patrimoniaux, tout en réactivant la mémoire collective et l’identité spirituelle de la ville.

En lien avec la thématique « *Mysticism and the City* » développée par MECAM, ma présentation analysera comment « *Spirituality* » réinterprète la relation entre mystique, urbanité et pratique créative, en positionnant la zaouïa non seulement comme lieu de dévotion, mais également comme espace d’expérimentation artistique et d’imaginaire social.

#### **Çiçek Ilengiz (Forum Transregionale Studien) – The Spatial Infrastructure of the Annual Love Pilgrimage for Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi in Contemporary Turkey**

How does a religious tradition become an open-resource of love that is available to everyone? The presentation offers an answer to this question via an ethnography of the ‘love pilgrimage for Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi’ happening every year in Konya/Turkey. In response to UNESCO’s interest in Mevlana and the Mevlevi ritual of sema (whirling), the ‘love pilgrimage’ became popular among an international crowd spanning from the United States to Iran and from France to Argentina. The love-pilgrims are composed of believers of Abrahamic religions, spirituals following diverse traditions, healers, astrologers, and shamans. What brings them together is often referred to as ‘the search of being one’.

Focusing on the spatial infrastructure of the love pilgrimage, the presentation unpacks different stages of heritagization of Mevlevi religious tradition that enables appropriations of Mevlevism to such an

extent. To analyze the history of heritagization of the Mevlevi tradition, the presentation takes the audience first to the museum where Mevlana's tomb is exhibited and later to the dervish lodges where the love-pilgrims meet for ecstatic rituals. Paying special attention to the production of spatial infrastructure of the 'love-pilgrimage' the presentation shows that this organization is a result of a series of state violence incidents. It argues that spatial arrangements reflect the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion drawn by state violence, as well as the issues that create contention among love pilgrims, such as gender and ethnicity.

#### **Working Group 4 | Urban Space and Transcendence**

##### **Susan Abraham (EUME fellow) – Matters of the Heart: Morisco Ethics and Diasporic Disposition in Early Modern Tunis**

The heart figures prominently in premodern mystical imagery and spirituality. Across Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, images of the heart articulate a gateway to salvation, sustain the notion of an organic scriptorium, and designate a site of memory. In the Sufi tradition, the heart is the center of human spiritual constitution and an organ of insight for truth-seekers on their path to God. By the seventeenth century, many texts written by Moriscos reflected this mystical imagery and belief. For these forcibly baptized Spaniards of Muslim descent, mystical and material matters of the heart intertwined with acts of writing as a means to contemplate their place in exile. The analogy between heart and text has a long tradition. From Aeschylus's Prometheus to Augustine and al-Ghazali, the heart is portrayed as a place of writing. Al-Ghazali describes this process as writing on the "tablet of the heart" (*lawḥ al-qalb*) signifying an empowering knowledge derived from what scholars have described as a "dialogical encounter between the self and its multiple Others."<sup>1</sup> In my contribution, I explore how, vis-à-vis mystical theologians such as al-Ghazali, Morisco authors articulated a direct connection between knowledge transmission, mystical illumination, and spiritual deliverance in exile through images and references to the heart. Writing and reading became not acts of communication between Morisco authors and their interlocutors in the diaspora, but acts of visceral transfusion that aimed to habituate their readers in mind and body, in knowledge and practice, to their place in exile, and, in so doing, to instill an ethics of diaspora.

##### **Yassine Najjar (University of Gabès) – Postmodern Mysticism and the City: Absence and Excess in Cormac McCarthy's and Don DeLillo's Fiction.**

This paper investigates the emergence of postmodern mysticism as an aesthetic rather than religious mode of presentation in the urban imaginaries of Cormac McCarthy and Don DeLillo. In their novels, the city is transformed into a transcending space negotiating the impossibility of representation. Meaning is implied through the central notions of absence and excess in social space. Within this context, the religious spirituality is completely substituted by a secular mysticism, bold and immanent, arising from the disintegration of structures, the silences of the ruins McCarthy foregrounds in *The Road*, or in the felt overload of late capitalist urban life present in DeLillo's metropolitan cities in *Underworld* or *Cosmopolis*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 107.

The present work probes into the ways both writers relate alienation from and fragmentation of the characters' lived space to forms of mystical intensity, moments of epiphany or sublime experiences. Through the dialectics of absence and excess, both authors bridge the gap between urban entropy, loss, and decay and a spiritual reflection invigorating the possibility of expression with the spatial confines of the novel.

Accordingly, we need to perceive the city in the fictional worlds of both writers not simply as a space of total disillusionment and simulacra but as a rejuvenated ground of transcendence and aesthetic creation. The contemplation of spatiality in the authors' works reflects a project to articulate the "ineffable" with reference to Jean-François Lyotard, or the sublime that uplifts the soul and transcends the cognitive attempts at representation.

### **Art Session | Narrating the City: Calligraphy, Fiction, and Urban Memory**

#### **زينب مشيرقي (فنانة) – ذاكرة روحية**

سلسلة من الأعمال التشكيلية تجسد أضرحة الأولياء الصالحين في الفن المغاربي كفضاء للسكينة والذاكرة، تعبر عن هوية روحية متجددة تتجدد داخل أشكال فنية معاصرة.

### **Forat al-Hatab (Artist) – Where Did The Octopus Go? Where Did The Crab Come From? Tales and elements from Kerkennah Islands and Gabes**

This informal storytelling session will take the audience on a journey tracking back past personal and research trips to Kerkennah islands, chasing the legends of the octopus island and what's left of the "glorious days", finding the other side of nostalgia and asking: where did the octopus go? Where did the crab come from? The journey will go through the fascinating underwater roads to reach the infamous "Sharfias", a fishing technique only found in Kerkennah highlighting the relationship between sea and land, community perseverance of knowhow and centers the important role palm trees play in them. Most of the stories were collected during a field research trip as part of the artistic project "If a mountain turns into a sea: spaces of imagination in food".

The journey will take the audience on the ferry back to the mainland towards Gabes, where the Academy is taking place to tell a few stories, legends and myths about the oasis. Stories about ancestral knowledge and agricultural engineering, food influences of Gabes on what would be called the "national cuisine" today and how one of the most drastic marine life in the tunisian waters is linked to Gabes gulf.

The session will have a few food and environmental elements from both areas which the participants can move through following the story during the session.

### **Thursday, 02 April 2026**

#### **Panel 1 | Mysticism in Translation: Colonial Frames and Literary Reimagining**

#### **نجاه الطاهر قرفال (جامعة قابس) – تمثلات الاستعراب البلجيكي للتصوف عند ابن تيمية: يحيى ميشو مثالا**

يهدف هذا البحث إلى النظر في قيمة استدعاء شخصية إسلامية عالمية، حولها الجدل لا ينفك دائرا: أحمد بن عبد الحلیم ابن تيمية (661-728هـ / 1263-1328م)، من لدن مستعرب بلجيكي معاصر متخصص في الإسلاميات وصاحب تأليف عن التصوف: التصوف الإسلامي: روحانية وحكمة، وابن تيمية: ابن تيمية صفحات روحية: يحيى-جان ميشو (1950-2025)(Michot - Jean)،

من خلال اختبار نضه في مدى قدرته على فك شفرة التعارض بين الإسلام والتصوّف من جهة، والتصوّف والحياة العمليّة من جهة أخرى. إشكالات ثلاثة تؤسّس لأهميّة البحث وخطته البحثيّة، تنتظر البحث: الإشكال المعرفي: ويتمثّل في طلب الحقيقة لذاتها وإن خالفت توجّه الباحث أو ميوله أو ذوقه، وذلك بالتخلّي عن المذهبيّة/ الإيديولوجيّة، والإشكال المنهجي: ويتعلّق بكيفيّة تخليص الفكر الإنسانيّ الغربيّ أو العربيّ من انطباعات راسخة فيه حول: الدين عامّة، وتلبّسه بالتعصّب، وبيان الحاجة إلى دوره الروحيّ في عصر المادّة والحتميّات والفلسفات: المثاليّة، والوضعيّة، والعبئيّة، والوجوديّة، وحول ابن تيمية: المدرج ضمن منظري الجهاديّة والأصوليّة، ومنتقدي التصوّف الباطنيّ من جهة انسحابه، أي التصوّف، من الحياة العمليّة والإغراق في الغنوصيّة، والإشكال الترجميّ: ومداره على الدافع الترجميّ في انتخاب نصّ ابن تيمية، النصّ الذي نشأ في بيئة مخصوصة بلغة مخصوصة، لا يمكن فهمه ومن ثمّ تأويله إلا بمعرفة دقيقة بحيثيّات البيئة المنتجة والتباسات العصر وخصوصيّات اللسان. المنتظر، على وجه الافتراض المبدئيّ، عمل مركّب يحاول الإجابة عن سؤال من نوع: إلى أيّ حدّ يمكن يمكن أن يكون تمثّل الاستعراب الأوروبيّ ممثلاً في يحيى ميشو للمشغل الصوفيّ الإسلاميّ ممثلاً في ابن تيمية، مساهما في إرساء بعض مبادئ المشترك الإنسانيّ والتعايش السلميّ؟

### هيكل الحزقي (كاتب) – أجواد المدينة وأوغادها: عن البانديّة كأنصاف صالحين في مدينة مأزومة

منذ نشأتها في قلب الحالة العنفيّة التي ضربت المدينة وتشكّل هويتها بفعل الصدمة الاستعمارية، تحولت ظاهرة البانديّة إلى جزء من ميثولوجيا مدنيّة جمعت بين الصالحين وأنصاف الصالحين، الأجواد والأوغاد، وتحول أبطالها إلى مقامات سامية نافست الأقطاب الصوفية التي حمت المدينة والناس في المخيال الجمعيّ.

كيف تحوّلت البانديّة من ظاهرة ارتبطت بقطاع الأزقة في المدن إلى ضرب من الفروسية المدنيّة التي نافست في حضورها ورمزيّتها أقطاب الصوفية؟ وفيما تمثّلت خصوصيّتها التونسية؟

### Closing conversation | Stambeli's Future: Tradition, Art and Spirituality

Vanessa Barisch (Journalist) in conversation with Mariem Mtiraoui (Journalist) and Ahmed Guerfel (Artist)

Unlike Morocco's Gnawa, Stambeli has not experienced a similar surge in popularity. While Gnawa has endured both as a spiritual practice and as a popular music genre, Stambeli is now on the brink of extinction, with only a few remaining masters still performing in traditional settings. What role does Stambeli play in today's society? And how can art contribute to preserving its heritage? These questions will be explored in a discussion with cultural journalist Mariem Mtiraoui and Ahmed Guerfel, director and founder of the Gabes-based cultural NGO Les Danseurs du Sud.

## **Bios**

**Diana Abbani** is a cultural historian of the modern Middle East specializing in music history and popular culture in the Eastern Mediterranean. She holds a PhD in Arabic Studies from Sorbonne University. Her research explores how early sound technologies reshaped debates about power, belonging, and modernity, focusing on the rise of recording industries and entertainment cultures in Beirut and the wider region. She is currently working as MECAM's science communication coordinator at the Forum Transregionale Studien.

**Susan Abraham** (PhD University of Virginia, Spanish Literature) is an Assyrian-American scholar whose research focuses on the history and culture of early modern Spain in connection with North Africa and the wider Mediterranean. She is currently a EUME Fellow at the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin, where she is also an affiliated researcher with the Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies at the Free University. Working across Spanish and Arabic, her research broadens the scope of early modern Spanish literature by underscoring the textual interventions and creative literary contributions of Moriscos— Iberian Muslims forcibly converted to Christianity—in sixteenth- to seventeenth-century Tunisia. Her research has been awarded a Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship for ground-breaking work addressing questions of ethical and religious values in the humanities and social sciences, and in 2024, she was a Max Weber Stiftung Doctoral Fellow in Residence at the Orient Institut in Beirut (OIB).

**Emna Beltaïef** is full Professor of French language, literature and civilization and MECAM director. Since 2024, she has been elected Vice-President of the University of Tunis. She is the author of two books, *‘Les figures de l'enfance dans l'œuvre romanesque de Nathalie Sarraute’* (Childhood Figures in the Novels of Nathalie Sarraute), Tunis, CPU, 2013, and *‘Remise de peine de Patrick Modiano : voyage au pays de l'enfance’* (Patrick Modiano's Remission: A Journey to the Land of Childhood), Louvain-La-Neuve, Academia, 2013. She has co-edited a number of collective works, the latest of which, *‘Intimacy and Politics in Photographic Self-narratives: Writing in the Occident and in the Maghreb’*, will be published by AUP in 2026. Her research focuses on self-narrative, contemporary French novels and intermediality. She organised the first edition of the Autumn Cultural Days at the University of Tunis in November 2025

**Vanessa Barisch** is a freelance journalist specializing in the relationships between the Global North and South, with a focus on culture, migration, and climate. She holds degrees in Migration Studies and European Studies. Before her journalistic career, she worked in German international cooperation, contributing to projects such as the UN peace process for Syria and German academic partnerships.

**Julius Dihstelhoff** has been serving since April 2025 as the Director ‘Germany’ of the international collaborative project Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM). Prior to this, from May 2020 to March 2025, he worked as the Academic Coordinator (Postdoc) for the center. As a political scientist, his research focuses on German foreign policy in the MENA region, political transformation processes in Tunisia, as well as questions of regional (re)ordering and political Islam.

**Ahmed Guerfel** is a Tunisian multidisciplinary artist, curator, and cultural manager based in Gabes, Tunisia. With 15+ years of experience, he is the founder of DCS and the first private cultural center in Gabes, dedicated to artistic research and cross-media experimentation. His work explores the body as a site of liberation and reimagines cultural ecosystems as living, regenerative organisms—drawing a visionary parallel between artistic sustainability and fungal networks.

As a co-founder of a regional movement for independent Arab cultural institutions, Ahmed is committed to reconnecting art to its social fabric, nurturing practices that emerge from lived experience outside dominant centers. Having led over 35 national projects and 12 international collaborations across the Arab region, Europe, and the US, he advocates for an interconnected future where culture operates as a self-renewing, community-rooted organism.

**Miriam Hanses** completed her Bachelor's degree in French and Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Münster, including a study exchange at Aix-Marseille University. She is currently pursuing her Master's in Arabic Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, with study stays at the French Institute in Cairo and the Institut de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain in Tunis. Her Master's thesis focuses on the portrayal of masculinities in contemporary Tunisian literature, specifically analysing the works of Hassouna Mosbahi and Amel Mokhtar. Since May 2025, she has been working as a student assistant at the Forum Transregionale Studien for the MECAM project.

**Forat AlHattab** is a multidisciplinary Syrian artist based in Berlin. She uses multiple artistic mediums such as drawing, printing, audio narration, and tasting, interacting with multiple senses, deliberately creating spaces of interaction with the audience. She is preoccupied with questions about identity, memory and human interaction with the surrounding, lately her work is focusing on food as a window into the social, political and environmental. Alhattab lived between Syria-Lebanon/The Levant and Tunisia/Maghreb and her work is deeply intertwined with these areas

هيكل الحزقي. كاتب وناقد موسيقي وباحث مستقل في الثقافة الشعبية. له إصداران:

"سحنون الذي انتصر وحيدا على الحلفاء" - منشورات نشاز 2023  
"أجواد وأوغاد - قصة الباندي التونسي" - منشورات نشاز 2024

**Çiçek İlelgiz** works at the intersection of heritage studies, the anthropology of emotions, and memory studies. She completed her PhD at the Research Center for the History of Emotions, hosted by the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. Focusing on the biographies of mentally divergent people who are attributed holy capacities in the minoritized Kurdish Alevi community of Dersim, it explored how genocidal violence is translated into collective memory, radical political imaginations, and therapeutic practices. Her second book project *Rooting into the World: Inheriting Love, Lack and Failure in Anatolia* examines the affective politics of the World Heritage regime in contemporary Turkey. Her recent publications engage with the conceptual discussions on inheritance, temporality, and commemoration. She is a fellow-editor at *Allegra Laboratory: Anthropology for Radical Optimism*.

**Cyrine Kortas** is an assistant professor of English Literature at the University of Gabes, Tunisia. She is also a member of the Research Unit LAD at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Sfax. Her current research focuses on the influence of modernist English authors such as D. H. Lawrence on the rise of the modern novel in the Maghreb region; it explores the concept of the New Man in a selection of novels published in Tunisia and Morocco while introducing Sufism as a theory of analysis. Since September 2023, she is a MECAM long term fellow.

**Rym Lajmi** (Université de La Manouba) PhD en Histoire et culture de l'Université Sapienza de Rome, Maître assistante en civilisation italienne à FLAH Manouba, Membre du laboratoire Régions et Ressources patrimoniales (LR99ES23) et des Archives de la Mémoire des Italiens en Tunisie (AMIT).

Articles publiés:

- (2024) *Le vie del sacro e la gelosia mistica: un modello di santità al femminile*; Simone Bessis: *una militante comunista tra Tunisia e Italia*; *The Italian Women of Tunisia: Affinities and Cultural Divides Within a Framework of Militant Activity in Tunisia*;

- (2025) *Storia e silenzio sui racconti di vita e di militanza femminile*; *Nağra ou la jalousie mystique dans le soufisme féminin en Tunisie*; *La cooperazione Unione Europea-Tunisia per l'affermazione dei diritti delle donne*; *L'autobiografia come spazio di scrittura militante*.

**Souad Matoussi** enseignante-chercheure à l'Université de Sousse (Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines/département d'anthropologie). Elle est anthropologue de la danse. Ses recherches portent sur les danses traditionnelles et populaires de Tunisie. Son intérêt pour la danse a commencé dès les années 1990, marquées par une revalorisation politique du patrimoine musical et chorégraphique tunisien. Son mémoire de DEA en Art du spectacle, soutenu à l'université Paris 8 en 1995 a porté sur l'esthétisation du patrimoine via la production des méga-spectacles Nûba et Hadhra par les artistes Fadhel Jaziri, Samir Agrebi et Sihem Belkhodja. Sa thèse, intitulée *traditions populaires de danse et subjectivités collectives en Tunisie* constitue le premier travail académique consacré à la recension du corpus des danses tunisiennes, aussi bien sacrées que profanes et à leur étude anthropologique.

**Alia Mossallam** is a cultural historian, educator and writer interested in songs that tell stories and stories that tell of popular struggles behind the better-known events that shape world history. For her PhD she researched a popular history of Nasserist Egypt through the stories and experiences of the popular resistance in Port Said (1956) and Suez (1967-1974) and the construction of the Aswan High Dam through the experiences of its builders and the Nubian communities displaced by it. As a EUME Fellow 2017-21 of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation she worked on her book on the visual and musical archiving practices of the builders of the Aswan High Dam and the Nubian communities displaced by it. In 2025, she was a distinguished visiting lecturer of Modern Middle East history at the Barenboim-Said Akademie. Currently, she is an associate researcher at the "Towards Sonic Resocialization"-project at the Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik, and an associated EUME Fellow in 2025-26, working on the return of sound archives made with North African prisoners of war in Germany, to the soldiers' communities in Tunisia and Morocco and Algeria.

**Chiraz Mosbah** is an Associate Professor at the Higher School of Science and Technology of Design (ESSTED). Trained as an interior architect and art historian, she holds a Master's degree in Arts, Science and Technology, a postgraduate diploma (DEA) in Heritage and Archaeology, a PhD in Art History and Archaeology, and a Habilitation in Arts and Crafts. She is also a researcher specializing in Arab-Islamic and colonial architectural heritage in Tunisia and the Arab world. From 2019 to 2024, she co-directed the Professional Master's program Curatorial Practices and Exhibition Art at the Higher Institute of Fine Arts of Sousse, within which she curated several contemporary art exhibitions.

**Mariem Mtiraoui** journalist at the TAP news agency and a gender studies researcher. Her writing is grounded in gender and human rights approaches. As a dedicated feminist journalist, she prioritizes topics and themes related to the rights of women and minorities.

**Zeineb Mchirgui** visual arts teacher specializing in plastic arts. She has taken part in various artistic and cultural events, including exhibitions and art workshops. Alongside her teaching practice, she coordinates a high school art club where she guides students in developing their artistic skills and engaging with creative projects.

**Yassine Najjar** is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at the University of Gabes, Tunisia. He holds a PhD in Contemporary American Fiction with a dissertation focused on the work of Don DeLillo. His research interests include American literature, metafiction, experimental narratives, and

cultural studies. Najjar's work explores the intersections of literature, media, and identity in postmodern and contemporary American literature.

**Friederike Pannewick** is professor for Arabic Literature and Culture at the Philipps-Universität Marburg, Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS), and chairwoman of the board at Forum Transregionale Studien. Besides this, she is co-director of the research field *Travelling Traditions: Comparative Perspectives on Near Eastern Literatures* within the frame of the research program "Europe in the Middle East – the Middle east in Europe" (EUME) at the Forum Transregionale Studien. She is member of the Executive Council and P.I. at MECAM/Tunis; at CNMS, she teaches courses on modern Arabic culture and literature, literary anthropology, Arabic theatre and intellectual history. She received her PhD in Arabic and Theatre Studies from the Free University Berlin in 1999 and completed her undergraduate studies in Bamberg, at INALCO/Paris and the Theatre Academy in Damascus, and her M.A. at Free University Berlin. She is co-editor of the book series *Literatures in Context – Arabic –Persian – Turkish*, Reichert Verlag/ Wiesbaden, and has published extensively on modern Arabic literature and theatre.

**Rashof Salih** is the Scientific Coordinator for Research Data Management of the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM) at the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin. She studied Social and Cultural Anthropology and Political Science at Freie Universität Berlin, with a focus on psychological anthropology, collective memory, and politics of violence.

نجاة الطاهر قرفال أستاذ مساعد للتعليم العالي المعهد العالي للغات بجامعة قابس-تونس

**Oraib Toukan** is an artist and EUME scholar at Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin, as well as the Harun Farocki Institute, Berlin. Until 2019, she was a Clarendon fellow at Oxford University, Ruskin School of Art where she completed her PhD. Through a diverse body of work that probes photography, film, and text, she explores alternative, native, and vernacular understandings of images, often drawing from the Arabic language. Toukan is author of the book *Sundry Modernism: Materials for a Study of Palestinian Modernism* (Sternberg Press, 2017), and *Where it Hides: Essays on Seeing* (Archive Books, 2025).

**Isabelle Werenfels** is a Senior Fellow in the Africa and Middle East Division of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). She is also chairing the International Advisory Board of the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM) in Tunis and is on the editorial board of the "Perspectives on the Maghreb" book series with Routledge. She has been teaching at various German universities and over the past 25 years has extensively published on political transformation, societal change, religious actors and religious sector policies in Maghreb countries as well as these countries' external relations.