

The Dom, a Marginalized Community in the Syrian Music Scene

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Abstract

This article examines the social and economic situation of the music-making Dom groups and the social stigmatization to which they are exposed. It argues that the changing sociocultural, political, and economic conditions in Syria have led in the course of the 20th century to a shift in the focus of the Dom's musical activities to night club music and have thus made the stigmatization worse than ever. On the other hand, the article lists the most eminent features of the Dom's music in Syria. Moreover, it highlights some Dom figures who were or still are active in the Syrian music scene.

Arabic Abstract

الدوم كجماعة مُهمّشة في المشهد الموسيقي السوري

ديسم جلو

تستعرض هذه المقالة الظروف الاجتماعية والاقتصادية لمجموعات الدوم الناشطة موسيقياً في سورية والوصم الاجتماعي الذي يتعرضون له. تجادل المقالة بأن تغيّر الظروف السوسيوثقافية والسياسية والاقتصادية في سورية قاد الدوم في سياق القرن العشرين إلى تحويل أنظارتهم نحو العمل في النوادي الليلية وفاقم، بالتالي، الوصم الاجتماعي إلى درجة بعيدة. من ناحية أخرى، تُعدّد المقالة السمات الأبرز لموسيقى الدوم في سورية و تُلقِي بعض الضوء على عدد من موسيقيي الدوم الذين كانوا أو لازالوا ناشطين في المشهد الموسيقي السوري.

Introduction

Numerous professions of low-socioeconomic status are usually ascribed to the Roma-like people of Syria or – as they call themselves – the Dom. These professions, of which music making is only one, have thus determined their status in Syrian society and led

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to their stigmatization. Despite that, the Dom – usually called the “Nawar” or the Qurbāt in Syria, have played an immense role in the shaping of some Syrian music genres, especially wedding music in rural areas.¹ This is because they were active as ceremony musicians in several Syrian regions and played at weddings and other ceremonies. Through their participation in this collective music making, they influenced the music scene of those regions by circulating their musical traditions. However, because of the changing sociocultural, political, and economic conditions in Syria, the music and music making of the Dom went through several phases in the course of the 20th century, leading to profound changes in the way they practice music. This contribution mainly aims to show these changes and to emphasize the positions of the music and music making of the Dom in the Syrian music scene in general.

Due to the current political situation in Syria and the obscurity of its ramifications for the demographic development of the ethnic and religious groups in the country, I abstained from conducting field work for this contribution. Instead, I will draw on my observations from my lifetime in Syria as well as on the information provided in the available anthropological works and recording collections, while keeping in mind that the anthropological works and the recording collections in question date back to the time between 1970–1994, and that some changes have occurred since then, especially after the uprising in Syria in 2011. The capability of this paper to accurately mirror the current situation of the Syrian Dom and their music will be affected by this absence of new empirical data. Another limitation that will bias the outcome of this contribution is the limited number of studies addressing the Dom, Turkmen, Abdal, and other similar groups in Syria and thus the fact that there are only few insights on their social and economic conditions of life. Also, the rarity of historical field recordings will restrict my ability to generalize the findings of the music analysis on the larger repertoire(s) of the different Dom groups. Moreover, the lack of musical studies addressing the music of the above-mentioned groups as well as the scarcity of studies addressing Syrian folk and pop music made comparisons between genres and musical practices difficult and exposed the results of this paper to one more limitation.

The Syrian Dom: An Overview

The Domari-speaking Dom are one of several ethnic and religious groups living in Syria. Historical accounts on the origin of the Dom and their time of arrival in historical Syria and its neighboring area are rare. According to the historian Kristina Richardson (2022: 22) the “northwestern Indian Jat tribes . . . have long been identified as the forerunners of the Roma, Dom, and Lom tribes of Europe and Asia. The current state of genetic and linguistics research confirms the historical relationship between the Jat and the Roma.”

¹ Almost all Dom groups refuse to use the word “Nawar” to describe themselves (see, for example, al-Jibāwī 2006: 197). Since this term is an external, not widely accepted denomination of the Dom, it is used between quotation marks.

However, scientific investigations to confirm or confute the historical relationship between the Jat and the Dom are still needed. Brief references to the Jat – or as they are referred to in Arabic, the Zuṭṭ – in early Medieval Arabic manuscripts are traceable (al-Balādhurī 1987; al-Mas‘ūdi 1894; al-Iṣfahānī 1844). The Zuṭṭ belonged to a professional-tribal confederation called al-Ghurabā’ (“the strangers”), a term which was, according to Richardson (2022: 20), also used “as the classical Arabic term for so-called Gypsies.” At the time of the arrival of Islam to the northern shores of the Persian Gulf, the Zuṭṭ had been apparently residing in Khuzestan (al-Balādhurī 1987: 531–532; 538). The Iraqi Historian al-Balādhurī (d. 892?), mentioned that the Zuṭṭ were transported several times to Antioch on the Syrian-Byzantine borders during the Umayyad dynasty. Because of their rebellion in southern Iraq during the Abbasid dynasty, they were ultimately banished to the frontiers, among other places (ibid.: 523–524). After their deportation from the area, there were, according to Richardson (2022: 26), very few references to the Zuṭṭ in the later Arabic-Islamic literature, while references to the Ghurabā’ in general were a little more frequent (ibid.: 28).

On their part, the Syrian Dom nurture – depending on their place of residence – several legends about their ancestry. The Dom living in areas which were mainly home to Arabs say that they descend from old Arab tribes (al-Jibāwī 2006: 20–21; Meyer 1994: 1–4). On the other hand, Kurdish origin is claimed by the Dom living in areas with a Kurdish majority (al-Jibāwī 2006: 197–198). Sometimes, more than one narrative of origin is narrated by the same Dom group, as in the case of the Turkmen-speaking Dom addressed by Meyer (see 1994: 33–35).

Scientific knowledge on the Domari language is not widely available. Between 2009 and 2010, the linguist Bruno Herin conducted field work in Aleppo through which some features of the Domari in contrast to the languages spoken by similar communities around the world were defined. Herin (2012: 1) states that the Domari is “an Indic language” and that “although the historical links between Romani and Domari are still to a large extent obscure, it is now accepted that they are not sister languages or even dialects of the same language.” Domari is, according to him, “known to be spoken in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and probably also Iraq and Iran” (ibid.: 2). However, different Dom groups and clans exhibit varying degrees of proficiency in the Domari language as well as varying degrees of the daily use of its vocabulary. Some of them, such as the Dom living in Ṭal‘at Abū aẓ-Ẓuhūr near Idlib, speak beside Arabic a mix of Domari, Turkish and Kurdish in public and speak Domari only among themselves (al-Jibāwī 2006: 174–175). Some clans, like al-Harāmishah, speak Arabic in public and Turkish among each other, while the knowledge of Domari is confined to middle-aged people and the elderly (ibid.: 369). Likewise, the Dom of Mashtá al-Ḥilū speak Kurdish as well as Arabic, while only the elderly have a command of Domari (ibid.: 471). In other communities, like *al-maṭāribah* (“the singers,” see below),² Domari is barely

² The name *maṭāribah* is derived from the word *muṭrib* or – as pronounced in north-eastern Syria – *mitrip*, which means a singer who is able to please people with his singing.

spoken in modern times (ibid.: 355–356). Indeed, Syrian Dom are almost all multilingual. They speak Domari, Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, Turkmen, and less Persian. The Syrian anthropologist ‘Alī al-Jibāwī noted that this multilingualism even parallels the differentiation of music-making Dom into Turkish-speaking *ḥajjīyāt* (“the female dancers,” see below) and Kurdish-speaking *ṭabbālah* (“the drummers,” see below) and *rīyās* (“the band leaders,” ibid.: 782). Regarding their religious affinities, most of the Dom are Sunnite Muslims with a very small minority of Shiite Muslims and Christians (Meyer 1994:15).

Up to the 20th century, many of the Dom conducted an independent nomadic or semi-nomadic life. Others used to accompany Kurdish and Arabic (and apparently Turkmen) nomadic tribes on their wanderings. However, since many of these tribes already had settled down or decided to do so during the 20th century, the Dom accompanying them were also forced to do so (see al-Jibāwī 2006: 201–203). By the mid-20th century, almost all Dom communities had settled down. Some of them continued to lead a semi-nomadic life, while others decided to adopt more stable professions, like farming. In spite of this wave of settlement, some Dom still live in tents due to poverty. Nowadays, many of the Dom living in Syria are registered in the Syrian civil register and have Syrian citizenship.

Al-Jibāwī (2006: 9) divides the Syrian Dom according to their professions, social norms and endogamic practices into two main groups: the “Nawar” and the Qurbāt (or the Ghorbat). The latter group is found mainly in the north-western part of historical Syria, such as in Aleppo, ‘Afrīn and Idlib. The men carry on the craft of sieve manufacturing, while the women go daily from house to house to ask for material support. The Qurbāt consider themselves, according to al-Jibāwī (2006: 9), superior to the “Nawarī” groups because of the lifestyle of the “Nawarī” women, especially in music-making groups. For their part, the “Nawar” regard the Qurbāt as conservative and socially indelicate, among other things (ibid.: 418–419, 445, 484). In the second category – “al-Nawar” –, al-Jibāwī (2006: 9–10, 14–16) lists the following groups by using their profession-based nicknames, after which they are usually called: *at-ṭabbālah*, *ar-rīyās*,³ *al-maṭāribah*, and *al-ḥajjīyāt* were already mentioned above. Furthermore, there are *as-sa‘ādīn* (“the tamers of monkeys, bears, and goats”), *al-bahlawanīyūn* (“the acrobats”), *al-ḥaddadūn* (“the blacksmiths”), *aṣ-ṣuyyāgh* (“the jewelers”), *tujjār al-khuyūl* (“the horse husbandmen”), *al-mubayyidūn* or *aṭ-ṭanjarlīyah* (“the bleachers of cooper-utensils”), and *ash-shu‘ār* or *al-qawāṣīd* (“the poets”).⁴ Notwithstanding the true social- and profession-based division of the Dom, al-Jibāwī’s distinction between the “Nawar” and

³ According to al-Jibāwī (2006: 87), some Qurbāt in the city of A‘zāz near Aleppo were also called *rīyās* (leaders), seemingly because of their leading role in the area and not because of music making. However, in order to be called a *rayyīs* (singular from *rīyās*) the band leader was, according to al-Jibāwī (ibid.: 685), expected to dance and drum very well, and thus to attract the audience’s attention, even by doing acrobatic movements.

⁴ According to al-Jibāwī (2006: 9), these groups are not tribally (i.e., ethnically) formed. They should rather be thought of as profession-based i.e., economic, units, with each of them containing different clans, families etc.

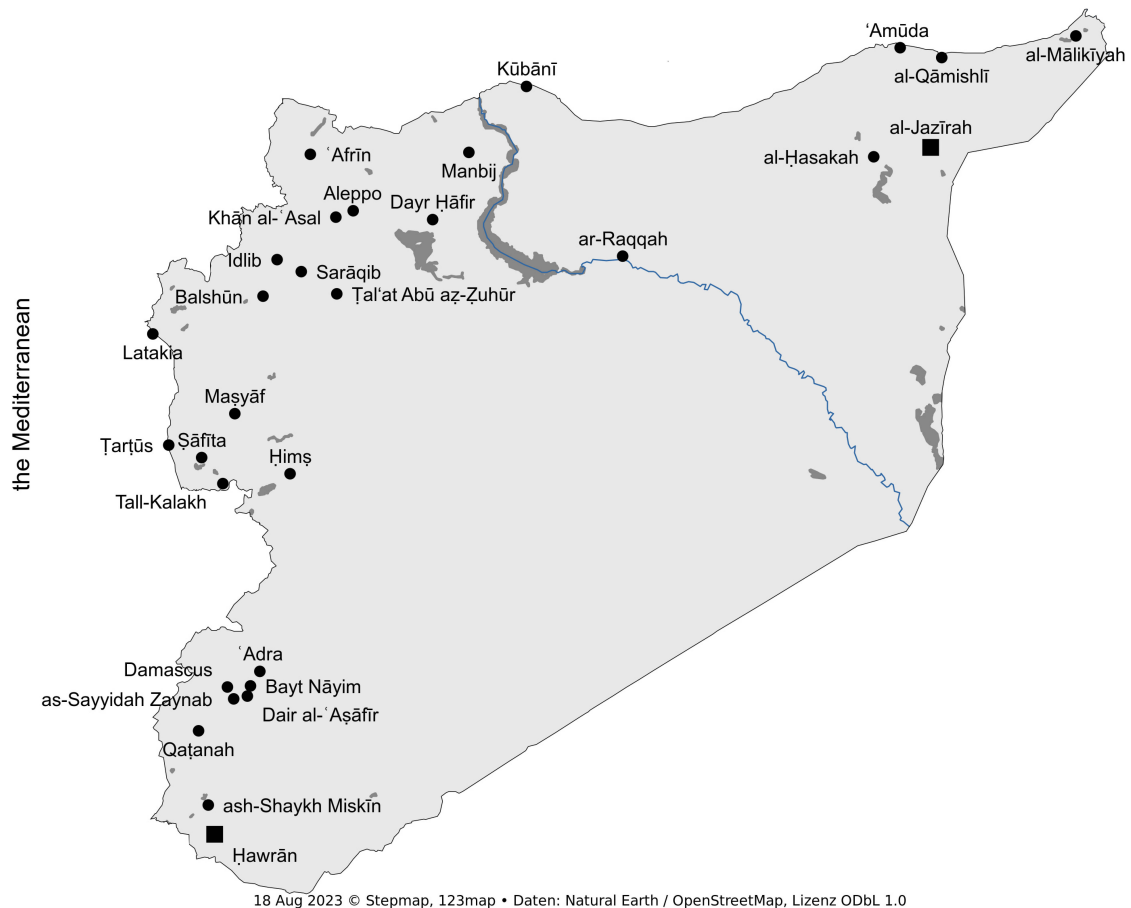


Figure 1. Map of Syria with the largest concentrations of the Dom in the country (created by the author using stepmap.de, ODbL v1.0).

the Qurbāt is quasi-superficial and problematic, since not all profession-based “Nawarī” groups listed by him provide a free social space for women – as contended by the Qurbāt – and since the professional music making of some of them is only male-based. Hence, this categorization approach will not be considered here and only profession-based nicknames will be used. Nonetheless, another way of differentiating the Dom communities is also by their tribal or family names, like al-Harāmishah, al-Khiḍr, ‘Izzū etc.

As this contribution discusses the music making in Dom communities, the focus will be on al-maṭāribah, ar-rīyās, al-ḥajjīyāt, ash-shu‘ār (or al-qawāṣīd) and to some extent al-bahlawanīyūn. The area of dissemination of the music-making Dom encompasses almost the entire Syrian territory. However, their main presence could be narrowed down to Idlib and its rural area, al-Jazīrah in north-eastern Syria, Tall-Kalakh (near Ḥimṣ), the coastal mountain range as well as Damascus and its rural area. The main toponyms, which are connected to the places of residence and/or music making of the Dom in Syria are shown on the map presented in Figure 1.

Research Question and Methodology

The aim of this contribution is to expand on the music and music making of the Syrian Dom against the background of their marginalization in the Syrian music scene. Hence,

it will try to counter this marginalization by shedding light on some forgotten actors and their contributions to Syrian music or by emphasizing their Domani (adj. from Dom) roots. In the absence of current empirical data, this contribution will rely on a literature review and a musical analysis to highlight the Domani music and music making in Syria. Following the lead of large-scale music studies conducted in Romani communities in several places around the world, like Silverman (2012) and Pettan (2014), I use the term Domani music to refer to all music played by Domani musicians without any regard to its origin.

My procedure in reviewing the literature was as follows: First, I screened the literature and searched for relevant key words including music, musical instrument, dance, *mizmār* (“cone-oboe”), *ṭabl* (“big drum”), *zamr* (“blowing” or “wind instrument,” see below), wedding etc. The range of key words was extended during the screening. Then, I synthesized the extracted data by organizing it according to the most-used key words, by comparing them with each other and relating them to each other in order to define the main features of Domani musical practice(s) in Syria. In a second step, I analyzed available audio recordings related to the two principal genres practiced by the Syrian Dom – wedding and night club music – in terms of genre, mode and rhythm, with the aim of – as far as those available recordings allowed – defining some of the musical qualities of Domani music in Syria, and – if applicable – comparing it with the available knowledge on the same genres in other similar communities around the world.

The State of the Research on the Domani Music of Syria

There are very few scientific papers addressing the Syrian Dom in general (Groome 1890; Newbold 1856; Pott 1846). No specified contributions were either dedicated until now to Domani music, musicians, and music making in Syria. An exception to this are the two books – *Ḥawla firāsh al-amīr: masīrat ḥayāt mūsīqī ‘Abqarī ‘Arabī: Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm amīr al-buzuq* (“Around the Bed of the Prince: The Life of the Genius Arabic Musician Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm, ‘the Prince of Buzuq’”) and *Al-Amīr as-sa‘yid Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm* (“The Happy Prince Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm”) – written by the Syrian scholars ‘Alī Ḥusnī Najjār (1997) and Muḥammad Birrī al-‘Awānī (2011) about the Domani buzuq-player Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm, who, however, was mostly depicted as an Arab and was celebrated for playing with and composing for famous Arab singers, for his virtuosity as well as for his own compositions, while references to his Domani origins or music traditions, if any, are scarce or completely neglected (see also ash-Sharīf 2011: 171–178). One can also encounter very brief mentions of Domani music making in some books issued in the last two decades about the Syrian intangible cultural heritage. The works which deliver the most comprehensive information on the former and quasi-current music making in the Syrian Dom communities, are, nonetheless, the anthropological works of ‘Alī al-Jibāwī (2006) and Frank Meyer (1994).

Historical recordings of Domani music in Syria are also scarce. Only one collection of recordings is known to include Domani music from Syria, which is the one compiled by the German ethnomusicologist Jan Ekkehart Rojl between 1972–1976 and situated

in the Berlin Phonogram Archive, which is part of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. These recordings will be discussed later in this paper. The so-called general association of Dar Al Asad for culture and arts issued in 2000 ten CDs depicting Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm playing his own compositions and other pieces of music on the *buzuq* and issued in 2008 another two CDs by him as part of the celebration of Damascus being the capital of Arabic culture (al-Laww 2000; The General Association of Dar Al Asad for Culture and Arts 2008). There are also plenty of commercial recordings originating from female Domani pop singers singing mainly in Arabic – some of them are known on a national level, others not. These recordings are publicly disseminated through local music stores in Syria.

Taking the general quasi-low social status of musicians in Syria, it is not unusual for the Dom to be stigmatized for performing music for a living.⁵ Especially their participation in music activities at night clubs, as we will see later, made the situation worse for them. This could also be seen as a reason why their music and music making are excluded from scientific debates on music in Syria. Moreover, music research in Syria focuses – due to political instructions – only on Arabic music in general and neglects any other music traditions in the country. The exclusion of non-Arab traditions from the official lists of and reports on intangible cultural heritage in Syria is one more example of this form of marginalization. This was the case of the first periodical report on the implementation of the convention for intangible cultural heritage sent in 2012 to UNESCO, which completely avoided any mention of non-Arab traditions in Syria (Ministry of Culture of the Syrian Arab Republic 2012). A positive change occurred in this regard in 2017, when the second report mentioned the Circassian Society in Damascus as one of the institutions contributing to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in Syria (Ministry of Culture of the Syrian Arab Republic 2017b: 7). Likewise, the list of the national elements of intangible cultural heritage was expanded by adding the Kurdish Nawrūz⁶ festival (Ministry of Culture of the Syrian Arab Republic 2017a; 18), among other non-Arab elements. Unfortunately, Domani music and music making are still excluded today from any official records about musical heritage. None of their musical contributions appear in the previously mentioned national list, although they generally maintain a good relationship with the official authority (see later about their participation in national festivities).

⁵ This type of stigmatization can also be noticed generally in the work of al-Jibāwī. He depicted the musical engagement of the Dom in several instances not as *work*, but rather as a begging method to somehow “extort” material support (food, animal skins etc.) from Bedouins and villagers. Also, in other works of Syrian scholars, like the work of the heritage-researcher Firyāl Salimah ash-Shwaikī (see, for example, ash-Shwaikī 2012, 1: 285–286), the Dom are depicted as “greedy” people.

⁶ Nawrūz is the Kurdish/Persian new year’s festival, sometimes called the festival of spring. It takes place every year on the night from the 20th to the 21st of March.

Chief Features of Domani Musical Practice(s) in Syria

After analyzing the information provided by the anthropological works mentioned earlier, the following features of professional music making in the Syrian Dom communities can be observed:

- predominantly seasonal music making
- varied musical practices
- transmitting musical and dance knowledge to younger generations
- manufacturing of music instruments
- varied types of bands

Seasonal Music Making

Many of the music-making Dom do not seem to have practiced music for a living on a regular basis. Rather, they wandered to the Bedouins of the desert during spring and autumn, or to the nearby villages during summer to perform music in exchange for food and animal skins. As an example, in Ṭal‘at Abū aẓ-Ẓuhūr in the rural area of Idlib, the Dom used to perform music for a living in the past only when visiting the Bedouins in the spring, playing *ṭabl wa-zamr* (a music ensemble consisting of a big drum and a wind instrument, see below) near the tents of the sheikhs and rendering praising poems to the latter in order to get sheep, ghee, and animal skins as gifts (al-Jibāwī 2006: 173–175). Other music-making Dom who practiced music in the same fashion are:

1. The Dom in Dayr Ḥāfir near Aleppo, consisting mainly of Kawlīyah – Persian-speaking Dom – and other Dom clans who are, according to their music practices, regarded as ḥajjīyāt (ibid.: 165–169);
2. the ḥajjīyāt of ar-Raqqah, who every year spent the time from May to November with the Bedouins of al-Jazīrah (ibid.: 272–273);
3. the Dom and Turkmen of the rural area of Damascus, who were – at least in the wintertime – situated in Dayr al-‘Aṣāfir, ‘Ayn Ghazāl – both in al-Ghūṭah⁷ – and in Qaṭanah. The Turkmen-speaking rīyās of Dayr al-‘Aṣāfir used to visit the Bedouin in spring and summer to play in their celebrations (ibid.: 682; Meyer 1994: 47–49). Likewise, the shu‘ār of ‘Ayn Ghazāl wandered every year in the spring to the Bedouins and sang praise-poems to their leaders, who gave them food and animal skins (al-Jibāwī 2006: 720). The ḥajjīyāt of Qaṭanah used to wander to the Druze in Jabal al-‘Arab as well as to the Bedouins of Ḥawrān and al-Lajāt in the spring to perform in the celebrations and to praise the sheikhs of the Bedouins and the Druze with their poems (ibid.: 775–778);
4. the Dom, Turkmen, and ‘Abdāl in Ḥimṣ and its rural area: The Dom in Ḥimṣ-city, like al-Harāmishah and al-Khiḍr – both ḥajjīyāt –, still play by invitation in the nearby villages and towns (ibid.: 367, 375). The maṭāribah of Tall-Kalakh travel in summer and autumn to nearby villages (ibid.: 315, 332). The ‘Izzū-family

⁷ Al-Ghūṭah is the green area surrounding Damascus from the east and the south.

(Turkmen-speaking *riyās*) from ash-Shmaysih plays in summer at the weddings in nearby villages (ibid.: 387–388).⁸ Also in al-Ḥwāsh, the Isbir-family (*riyās*) and the Bayt-Khaḍḍūr-family (*ḥajjiyāt*) used to be invited to play in celebrations in nearby villages in summer and autumn (ibid.: 391, 394); The Turkish-speaking ‘Abdāl – living in al-Qusair – also play *ṭabl wa-zamr* (ibid.: 378).⁹

5. the Dom in Latakia and its rural area: According to al-Jibāwī (ibid.: 415), one *maṭāribah*-group which originally comes from Sarāqib near Idlib still live in Latakia and get invited to play *ṭabl wa-zamr* in summer and autumn at weddings in Latakia and its rural area. Also, other *maṭāribah*-groups living in the Latakian rural area still perform *ṭabl wa-zamr* there for a living (ibid.: 419–420, 423).¹⁰ Similarly in other towns along the coastal mountain range, like Mashtā al-Ḥilū and Maṣyāf – both situated south of the range –, the *riyās* still perform at weddings and on New Year’s Eve (ibid.: 471, 476);
6. the Harāmishah living in ash-Shaykh Miskīn in Ḥawrān wandered in spring and summer to the nearby towns and to the desert to perform music (ibid.: 832–834).¹¹

An exception to this model of seasonal music making is the practice of the Dom clans and families, who, at least starting from the 1950s, lived in urban or semi-urban areas and played constantly in night clubs and at urban celebrations. The *ṭabbālāh* of Idlib city, who lived in a distinct neighborhood called after them (*Ḥārat an-Nawar*), used to

⁸ The collection of Jan Royl contains two recordings from ash-Shmaysih. The documentation provides the nickname “Badawī” – meaning Bedouin – as the last name of the featured musicians playing *ṭabl wa-zamr* (see Royl 1973/74, documentation to VII OA 0132, tape 18, without track, recording-no. 240). Apparently, the musicians used the nickname “Badawī” when they were asked to give their last names, which is a widespread practice among the Arabic-singing music-making Dom, especially among those who work in night clubs (see also the female singer Yusrā al-Badawīyah mentioned later and many other less well-known singers like Nūf al-Badawīyah). It is most probable that the featured musicians in Royl’s recordings belong to the ‘Izzū-family.

⁹ Al-Jibāwī mentions three groups that may be related to each other – and perhaps to the Dom-like Abdal groups in southern Turkey. He uses three different designations to refer to them: Al-‘Abdāl, al-‘Abṭāl and al-‘Abādīl (a plural form of al-‘Abdāl). About the first and second group, who speak Turkish and very little Domari, al-Jibāwī (2006: 378–380, 382) says that their primary residence is Aleppo. The third group lives on the Syrian-Turkish borders in two villages within Kūbānī-locality (ibid.: 257–258). Only the men from the first and third groups work as musicians (ibid.: 257; 378). On the other hand, Meyer (1994, 15) uses the term “Abṭāl” to describe a Dom group whose tents he saw on the outskirts of Ḥimṣ as well as on the way between Ḥamāh and Aleppo and whose members are Turkish-speaking Shiite Muslims (or Alevi), who subsist on horse trading and odd jobs, but worked traditionally as musicians. This group may well be the same second group which al-Jibāwī (2006: 382) met in Baba ‘Amru located on the outskirts of Ḥimṣ.

¹⁰ The *maṭāribah* mentioned here do not include women in their music making, which could be a result of their assimilation into the social context of their old settlements in Sarāqib.

¹¹ During the other seasons, in which the Dom groups were not active musically, some of them worked in the manufacturing of farming tools (see al-Jibāwī 2006: 339) while others wandered between the villages selling sieves and farming tools (see ibid.: 174).

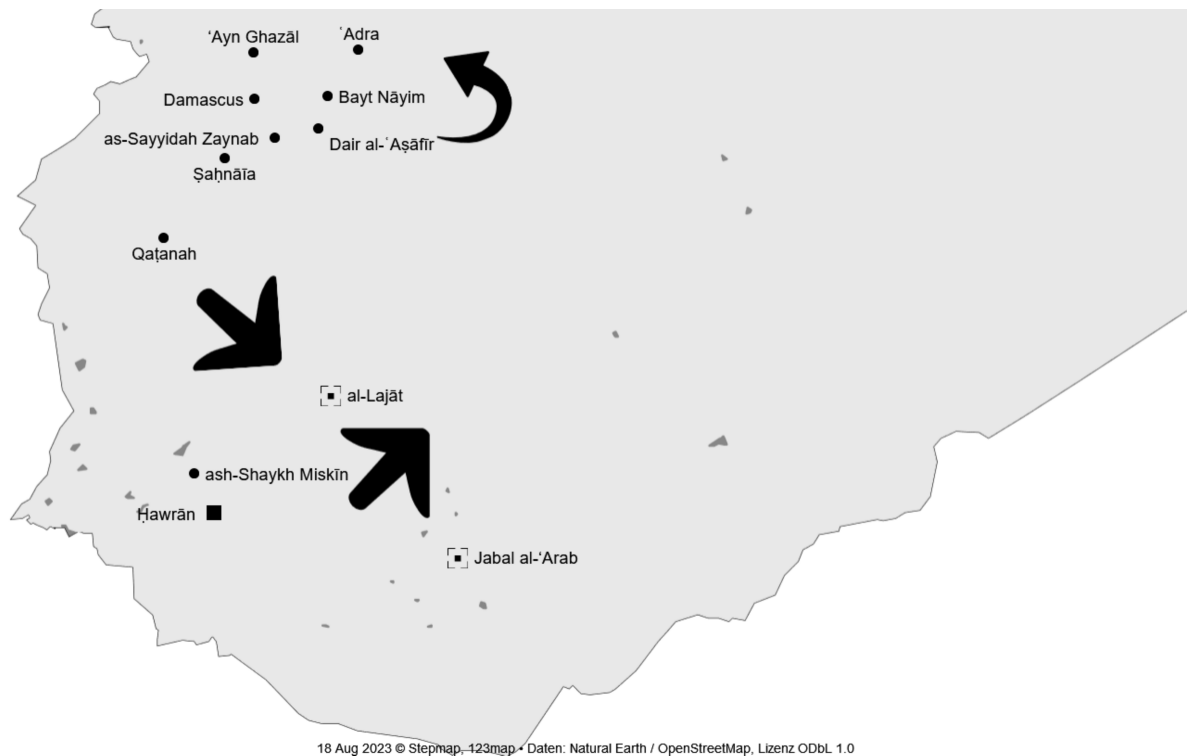


Figure 2. The largest Dom concentrations in southern Syria and their usual seasonal travels (created by the author using stepmap.de, ODbL v1.0).

play *ṭabl wa-zamr* at weddings, at the celebrations of pilgrims coming back from Makkaḥ and at men's circumcision celebrations (ibid.: 171). Also, during the winter season, the *ḥajjīyāt* in ar-Raqqah were either performing and dancing at private celebrations or organizing performances in their own houses (ibid.: 274). The Harāmishah and other clans and families pertaining to the *ḥajjīyāt* and living in the big cities like Damascus, Ḥimṣ, and Aleppo also performed constantly in night clubs. Figures 2 to 5 are partial maps of Syria and show some of the destinations of the seasonal travelling done by the Syrian Dom.

Varied Musical Practices

As previously mentioned, al-Jibāwī noticed a parallel between the predominant non-Domari language of a Dom group and its musical practice. He categorized the Dom groups accordingly into Turkish-speaking *ḥajjīyāt* and Kurdish-speaking *ṭabbālah* and *rīyās* (2006: 782). However, al-maṭāribah, who speak an Arabic-colored Kurdish and whose women – depending on where they live – participate intensively in the music making as dancers and singers – but originally not in night clubs (see ibid.: 353–356) – are not mentioned in this classification. Moreover, some *rīyās* speak Turkmen (see, for example, ibid.: 681) and the musical practice of other *rīyās* also involves women of their own family (see, for example, ibid.: 387–388), which, in any case, seems to be an exception to the rule. Even Al-Jibāwī himself is a little unsure about the position of the *rīyās*,



Figure 3. The biggest Dom concentrations in Hims, the coastal mountain range and Idlib (created by the author using stepmap.de, ODbL v1.0).

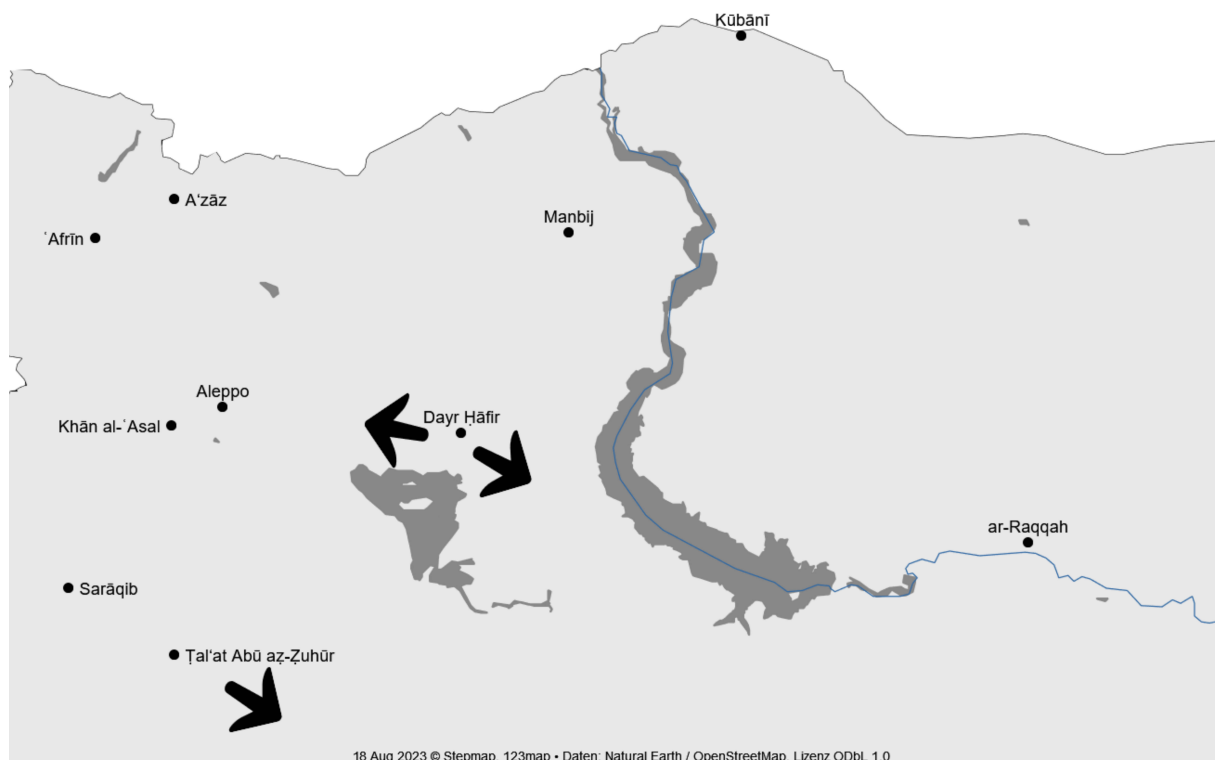


Figure 4. The biggest Dom concentrations in Aleppo and ar-Raqqa (created by the author using stepmap.de, ODbL v1.0).

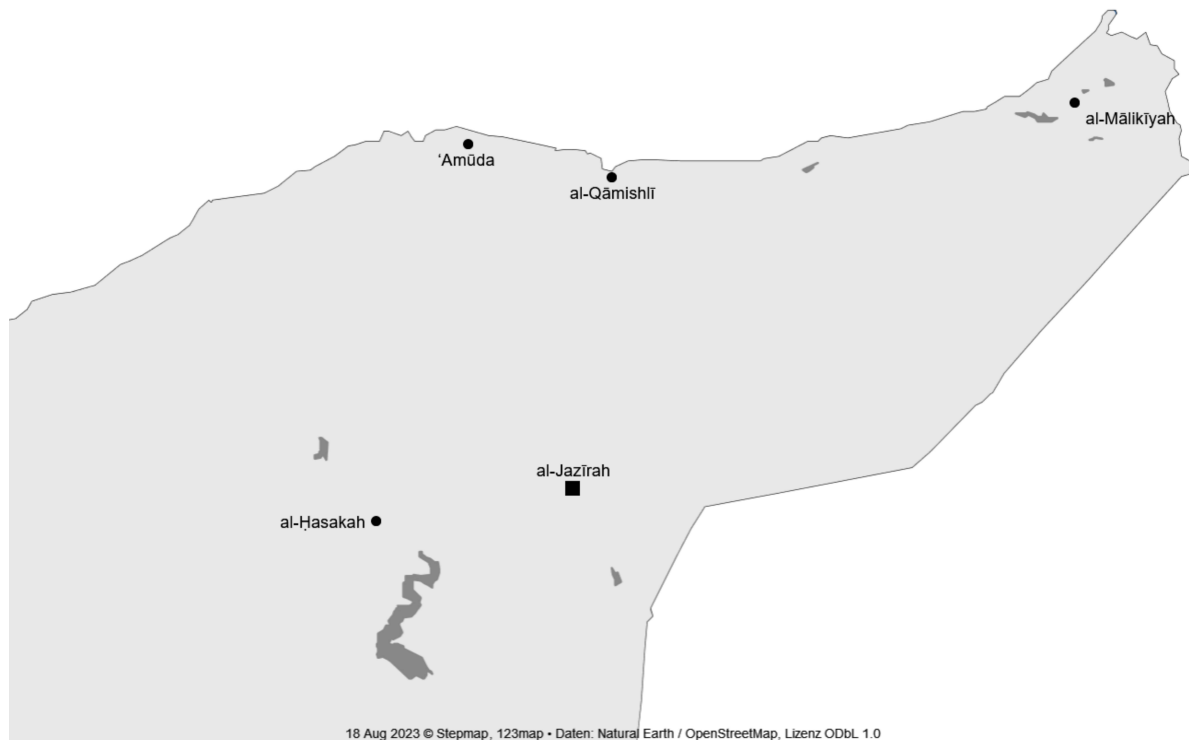


Figure 5. The biggest Dom concentrations in al-Jazīrah (created by the author using stepmap.de, ODbL v1.0).

given that on one occasion he links them to the first category (ibid.: 782) and another time to the other one (ibid.: 388).

Indeed, one can clearly notice that Domani music-making communities split – depending on the participation mode of the Domani women in the music making activities – into two categories. The first category includes the *maṭāribah* and the *ḥajjiyāt*.¹² In these two comprehensive profession-based groups, the women participate either by singing or by dancing or by doing both things, while the men are playing instruments. Besides, the economic life of both groups seems to depend basically on the role played by women in the shows. By contrast, in the musical practice of *at-ṭabbālāh* and *ar-rīyās*, only men play music for a living, while women work as housewives or wander between the villages to ask for material support.

As mentioned earlier, several Domani music-making communities had – enforced or encouraged – over the years settled down in permanent settlements, which sometimes led to the abandoning of musical activities, as in the case of the former *ḥajjiyāt* from Qaṭanah (see ibid.: 782), or to reducing it to nearby areas. Also, the – very slow – positive change of the social status of professional music making in Syria accelerated the emergence of new music bands and led to a decrease in the number of gigs and thus

¹² Al-bahlawanīyūn could also be included in this category, since women were the main actors in the acrobatic shows (see al-Jibāwī 2006: 15, 421). On the contrary, some *maṭāribah* could be excluded from the same category, since their musical practice is men-based only. This is the case, for example, in al-Jazīrah in north eastern Syria (see ibid.: 200–208).

directed Domani musicians to the more available gigs in night clubs. Moreover, technological developments in the sector of music, like playback devices, amplifiers, and keyboards, also played a role in decreasing the performance opportunities by replacing the musicians or at least by decreasing the number of musicians needed for a performance. Following these economic, social, and technological changes, a deviation from the old musical practices of the various Domani music-making groups took place and one could thus speak of two different Domani musical practices: an old one and a new one. The old practice consisted of wandering between the Bedouins of the desert and between the villages, playing instruments (mostly *ṭabl wa-zamr*), dancing and reciting poems for the Bedouins and the villagers. The new musical practice is based, in contrast, mainly on singing, performing, and dancing in night clubs and other entertainment facilities. However, it seems that these old and new practices of music making do not totally contradict each other, although instrumentalists are less frequently employed in the new practices, since playback devices and keyboards capable even of imitating microtones have been easily accessible starting from the 1990s, if not before. Thus, many male musicians stopped participating in music making. Their job was, in the case of *al-ḥajjīyāt* and some *maṭāribah*, reduced to only escorting the women to the celebration's venue or the night club. Moreover, the new musical practice did not completely replace the old one, since both practices existed simultaneously in different places and communities. In this new competitive context, Domani music bands retained their opportunities for gigs in the nearby villages only by "modernizing" their practices, as we will see later in this article.

The new practices also involve playing at official celebrations. Al-Jibāwī (*ibid.*: 208) reported many such cases: in al-Mālikīyah near the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi borders, the Domani bands used to perform by invitation and without payment in national festivities like the 17th of April and the eighth of March, leading the processions on the streets. By contrast, the *maṭāribah* of al-Mitrās village in Šāfita county used to get invitations from the grassroots organization to perform in national celebrations for money (*ibid.*: 450). *Ṭabl wa-zamr* ensembles from Dayr al-ʿAṣāfīr were, according to Meyer (1994: 50), also frequently requested for playing at public celebrations and festivities of the Baʿth-party.

Transmitting Music and Dance Knowledge to Younger Generations

Another interesting feature of Domani music making can be noticed in the comments of al-Jibāwī on the transmission of music making and dancing in the respective Dom communities around the time of his field work (1986–1991). Al-Jibāwī asserted many times during his anthropological work that in his day, parents still passed on their dancing and musical knowledge to their sons and daughters. As an example, he mentioned that while the level of education was still low among Domani children from al-Mālikīyah, their level of musical training was high, since their fathers were interested in transmitting their musical knowledge to their (male) children, and music making was still the main profession of the Dom in al-Mālikīyah (2006: 201). In another case, al-

Jibāwī noticed that playing the ṭabl wa-zamr was one of the popular hobbies among the children of the Khiḍr clan (ibid.: 376).

A knowledge of dance is transmitted by the respective Dom communities to the younger generations. Al-Jibāwī noticed that the children of the Harāmishah living in ‘Adrā – at the north-eastern end of the Damascene Ghūṭah – start to learn musical instruments and dancing from the age of five (ibid.: 714). Another interesting anecdote which he narrates is that of a Qurbātī man from ‘Ayn Ghazāl who married a lady from the Harāmishah and had three daughters with her. The mother taught her daughters the dancing traditions of her family. The dancing skills of two of the daughters were very good, so they started to work as dancers in videoclips broadcast on Syrian state television (ibid.: 727–728).

However, al-Jibāwī noticed that in other locations only the elderly of the respective Dom communities were at that time still playing music, while younger people had already switched to “more profitable” professions like gold teeth (non-professional dental prostheses) and the manual manufacturing of farming tools as in Ṭal‘at Abū aẓ-ẓuhūr (ibid.: 173–174). Likewise, some young male maṭāribah from al-Mālīkiyah worked as building workers or shoe repairers instead of being musicians (ibid.: 194–195). However, those most affected by this gradual decline of music making are those communities which live in rural areas with less access to new entertainment facilities like night clubs which offer regular gigs.

Manufacturing of Musical Instruments

Instrument making was – at least in some Dom communities – inseparable from music making. This resulted at the beginning apparently from the need to cover the requirements for their own musical practice before starting to manufacture for other people. Several examples could be found in the work of al-Jibāwī. In al-‘Arīḍah near Tall-Kalakh, the maṭāribah were – at the time of al-Jibāwī’s field work – still manufacturing musical instruments like the *daf* (frame drum), the ṭabl, the *darbukah* (goblet drum), the *rabābah* (Arab fiddle) and the *khishkhyshah* (rattle; ibid.: 339). In other areas, only elderly people were still making instruments, like in the rural area of Latakia (ibid.: 420).

In as-Sayyidah Zaynab in the rural area of Damascus, al-Jibāwī met a craftsman named Naẓmī ar-Rāshid, who is, according to him, a non-music-making Qurbāt, but manufactured musical instruments, among others (ibid.: 622–624). According to ar-Rāshid, there are other non-music-making Dom families in the same area who work as instrument makers and travel aboard, especially to the Arabian Gulf states, to sell their products (ibid.: 624–625).

Varied Types of Bands

It is obvious that musicians who belong to the same family or clan would establish their own bands when they are regularly asked to perform music at weddings and celebrations. However, those bands, which in some cases were well known in the respective

areas, had several types depending on their social context and regular opportunities to play. As an example, in ‘Amūda on the north-eastern Syrian-Turkish borders there were in the 1980s two Domani bands consisting of two musicians – one with a singer/oud and *ṭabl* as a lineup, the other with *mizmār* and *ṭabl* –, which competed for gigs, but mostly one of them – which had an amplifier – got gigs regularly, as stated by al-Jibāwī (ibid.: 248). Sometimes, the bands consisted of four musicians (two *ṭabl*-players and two *mizmār*-players) who would play interchangeably once the first two musicians were exhausted, as in the rural area of Latakia (ibid.: 419–420). Or the band would be comprised of four musicians playing at the same time, as in Şāfita in the coastal mountain range, where the lineup of the band contained an oud, *darbukah*, *ṭabl* and a singer/dancer.

In other areas, Domani musicians were members of non-Domani ensembles, as in Balshūn near Idlib, where according to al-Jibāwī (ibid.: 172) some Domani (male) musicians performed as members of *Firqat Idlib al-Fannīyah lil-Raqṣ wal-La‘ib bil-Sayf* (“The Idlibian Artistic Ensemble for Dancing and Playing with Sabres”). Other forms of bands were mixed bands which were established by some *rīyās*: Since the women of the *rīyās* do not participate in the music making, some band leaders would invite dancers from the *ḥajjiyāt* to perform with the band at weddings and private celebrations. According to al-Jibāwī, there were two such music and dance groups in Bayt Nāyim in the Damascene Ghūṭah, each of them consisting of a band leader, two drummers, two *mizmār*-players, one oud-player, one or two singers, one violinist, a clown, and female dancers from the *ḥajjiyāt* (ibid.: 771). However, this expansion of the ensembles took place only in the last quarter of the 20th century as a reaction to the above-mentioned changing conditions of professional music making in Syria.

The Music of the Syrian Dom

After listing the above-mentioned features of Domani musical practices in Syria, one would obviously be eager to learn more about their music and elaborate on it. As already mentioned, very few historical recordings of Domani music from Syria are available from which one could deduce its main characteristics.¹³ The historical and commercial recordings discussed next could, however, shed some light on some of the music played and sung by the Syrian Dom from the second half of the 20th century to modern times. The next section will focus on two genres that are generally associated with the Dom in several Syrian regions: *ṭabl wa-zamr* music and the pop music of night clubs and weddings.

¹³ Sinclair (1907: 22–23) suggested in his account “Gypsy and Oriental Music” a list of what he called “peculiar characteristics of Hungarian Gypsy music and Persian and Arabic music.” The list equates arbitrarily “Hungarian Gypsy” – apparently as a representative music of all “Gypsies” – and “oriental,” i.e., Arabic, Egyptian, Syrian, Persian etc., music without any differentiation and considers all of them against the backdrop of “European” music, which make it too unreliable to be considered here.

Ṭabl wa-zamr Music

In the course of depicting the stages of wedding ceremonies and folk songs in his childhood village located on the coastal mountain range near Bānyās-city, the heritage researcher Muḥammad Khawandah referred to the role of the rīyās in wedding ceremonies. He asserted that they used to camp at the beginning of the summer near certain villages to play ṭabl wa-zamr music at weddings and to lead the wedding processions when they were invited to by the father of the groom (Khawandah 2008: 38, 40). He also described how the rīyās leading the procession from the village of the groom to the village of the bride would argue with the rīyās staying at the bride's village until both of them agreed to play alternately during the evening celebration of the wedding (ibid.: 43–44). These brief – however interesting – references to the Domani musicians show that ṭabl wa-zamr music performed by Domani musicians was an integral part of wedding ceremonies in the Syrian coastal region and that the Dom moved continuously in that area in the “wedding season” lasting from July to November.

Nonetheless, ṭabl wa-zamr, as a genre and as an ensemble, is known both locally and globally in other communities. Usually, two musicians perform in this kind of ensemble, one playing the ṭabl and the other playing a wind instrument, which is mostly a mizmār. In Syria, Arab, Assyrian, and Kurdish musicians also practice ṭabl wa-zamr. Unfortunately, there are no scientific accounts dedicated to this genre in Syria in order to expand on its performance practice there.¹⁴ On the other hand, professional Romani and Abdal musicians from the northern neighboring country, Turkey, also play ṭabl wa-zamr music – called there *davul* and *zurna* – at a variety of ceremonial occasions (see Reinhard and Reinhard 1984). In the Balkans and eastern Europe, Romani musicians also play ṭabl wa-zamr music – called *tapan* and *zurla*, among other names – at weddings and other ceremonies (see Silverman 2012). Similar ensembles are also highlighted by Svanibor Pettan in his study guide for Romani music in Kosovo (Pettan 2014). Silverman (2012: 23) mentions that an ensemble of the tapan and zurla usually consists of one or two tapani and one or two zurli. The music of this ensemble is heard in public and private events, like fairs and wedding rituals (ibid.: 24). The necessary musical knowledge for this music genre is transmitted orally to the male members of the family (ibid.). The players of the lead zurla play free rhythmic improvisations and metric improvisations beside song melodies, while “master tapan players improvise rhythmically and texturally, creatively using the different sounds of the two drumheads” (ibid.: 25). Kurt and Ursula Reinhard (1984: 70–71) state, moreover, that the davul-player usually leads the music not only by setting the rhythm, but also by moving within the dance circle and doing dance steps while the zurna-player stands beside him. Such features of ṭabl wa-zamr music can also be noticed in the recorded performances of the Syrian Dom, as the next paragraph will show.

¹⁴ The sound recording collection of Jan Rojl situated in the Berlin Phonogram Archive has several recordings, like the recordings 9, 20, 49–51, and 116, which provide the possibility to listen to ṭabl wa-zamr music performed by Arab, Kurdish and Assyrian musicians.

Sound Recordings of Domani ṭabl wa-zamr Music

From the several recordings of ṭabl wa-zamr music contained in the Syrian sound recording collection of the Berlin Phonogram Archive, only two could be described as being performed by Domani musicians.¹⁵ Although both recordings do not represent the larger repertoire of all Syrian Dom, the first one could be regarded as an example of the Domani music in north west Syria, while the second one could represent the Domani music in the coastal mountain range.

The first recording with the number 91 provides almost 24 minutes of ṭabl wa-zamr music (see Royl 1972, VII OA 0121, tape 20, track I, recording-no. 91). It was recorded in Khān al-ʿAsal, located to the southwest of Aleppo. The mizmār-player Turkij ʿUthmān performs several melodic lines in 4/4 and 2/4 in the recording while the ṭabl-player Aḥmad ʿUthmān accompanies him utilizing varying rhythmic cycles (see Figure 6 picturing both musicians). The drummer sometimes also uses polyrhythms, such as playing simultaneously three against two.¹⁶ [Audio Example 1](#) is an excerpt from the above-mentioned recording (Royl 1972: recording number 91, performed by Turkij ʿUthmān and Aḥmad ʿUthmān, signature M 13561, recorded by Jan Ekkehart Royl on August 30, 1972 in Khān al-ʿAsal, with kind permission of the Media Department, Ethnologisches Museum / Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, all rights reserved). In general, the music sounds different from the music traditions of the other religious and ethnic groups living in Syria. In particular, the following modes – named here in accordance with Arabic-Turkish music theory – are used by the mizmār-player:¹⁷ He starts with Rast in f#. ¹⁸ Then, after a request from one of the attendees (00:00:19) he terminates and starts over (00:00:26) with Nahawand in g and modulate

¹⁵ Royl himself stated – using the z-word – that the musicians playing in the first recording (no. 91) could be regarded as “Gypsies” because of their names, their “phenotype” and the fact that the father of both was a musician by profession (see Royl 1972, documentation to VII OA 0121, tape 20, track I, recording-no. 91). However, two more signs could confirm Royl’s presumptions: The first one is the tent behind the musicians seen in the photo attached to the documentation (see Figure 6). The second one is the information provided by Royl (ibid.) himself that women and men gathered spontaneously and – as he put it – “in bunter Reihe” (i.e., free from gender-related restrictions) to dance to the music. In the second recording the z-word is written in the field denoted “Stamm” (tribe) in the recording’s documentation (see Royl 1973/74, documentation to VII OA 0132, tapes 17 and 18, without track, recording-no. 239).

¹⁶ The same polyrhythms are encountered in the music of the Kurds, Syrians, and Assyrians of north eastern Syria, which may mean that both players are originally maṭāribah.

¹⁷ In terms of modality, there are no clues – especially from the recording’s documentation – that the respective musicians have been educated in Arabic-Turkish music theory or are aware of the utilized modes. The information provided in this regard represents the author’s own interpretation of the melodic material.

¹⁸ In the first section (almost 4 minutes), the performer plays the refrain of a national song known at that time “Biktub Ismik Yā Blādi ʿash-Shams al-Mābitghīb” (“Oh My Country, I’ll Write Your Name on the Never-setting Sun”), which he terminates on request (this section is not included entirely in the provided audio excerpt). Nevertheless, this means that the musicians in question participated as performers in national festivities.



Figure 6. The musicians from recording 91 (photograph by Jan Ekkehart Royl).

(00:04:17) to Ḥijāz in c.¹⁹ Near the beginning and the end of this last section, he alternates the second structure of Ḥijāz in c either with a Nahawand or a Rast structure. Figure 7 provides an extract (00:02:32–00:03:10) from the middle section played in Nahawand in g and shows some interval leaps and melodic movements that are non-usual in traditional Syrian music in general.²⁰ Based on the way they are utilized in the recording number 91, exemplary, yet non-detailed depictions of these modes are also provided here (see Figures 8–10).

In the second recording with the number 239 (see Royl 1973/74, VII OA 0132, tapes 17 and 18, without track, recording-no. 239) a mixture of different traditional genres and songs, like “Al-‘Ayn Mūlayyatīn” (“Before the Eyes of my Mother”), “Bal-Līl Ya Allah Bal-Līl” (“In the Night – Oh God – in the Night”) and others is featured. The performers ‘Izzū al-Badawī and Maḥmūd al-Badawī (see Figures 11 and 12) start what seems to be a typical musical cycle of a wedding celebration (almost 45 minutes long) with Domani dance music before playing traditional Syrian music. Regarding the style, the music alternates between rhythmical songs (played instrumentally), rhythmical improvisations, and less rhythmically free improvisations. The mode used in Domani dance music blends Dorian and Mixolydian modes with recurrent modulations to what is called

¹⁹ The time frames shown here are adapted to the recording excerpts provided here and do not represent the whole original audio.

²⁰ While transcribing the ṭabl part, I was able to distinguish three kinds of strikes. That is why the staff is made of three lines, with the upper one for the highest tone.

$\text{♩} = 110$

Mizmâr

Ṭabl

4

Miz.

Ṭa.

7

Miz.

Ṭa.

10

Miz.

Ṭa.

13

Miz.

Ṭa.

15

Miz.

Ṭa.

Figure 7. An extract from the recording number 91 of the Royl collection featuring a ṭabl wa-zamr ensemble (transcribed by the author).

Athar Kurd in Arabic music theory (see Figure 13).²¹ Figure 14 is an extract (00:00:08–00:00:41) from the dance music played at the beginning of the wedding cycle and shows

²¹ Dorian and Mixolydian have no counterparts in Arabic-Turkish music theory. This is why the author could not avoid using the Greek names of the modes.



Figure 8. Rast structure as played by the mizmār-player in recording 91 of the Royl collection (notated by the author).

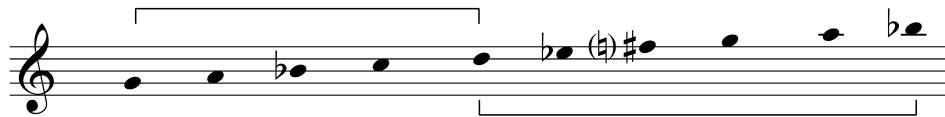


Figure 9. Nahawand structure as played by the mizmār-player in recording 91 of the Royl collection (notated by the author).

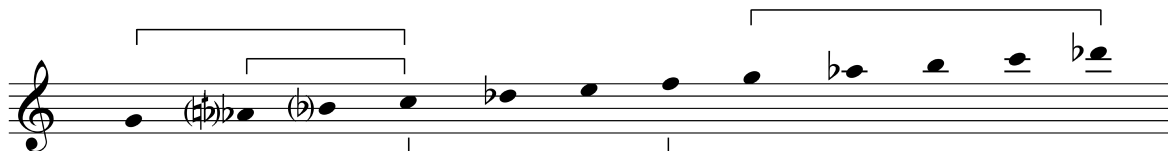


Figure 10. Hījāz structure as played by the mizmār-player in recording 91 of the Royl collection (notated by the author).

interesting interval leaps and melodic movement which is unusual in the music traditions of other ethnic or religious groups living in Syria.²² [Audio Example 2](#) is an excerpt from recording number 239 (Royl 1974: Recording number 239, performed by ‘Izzū al-Badawī and Maḥmūd al-Badawī, signature M 13466, recorded by Jan Ekkehart Royl on February 2, 1974 in ash-Shmaysih, with kind permission of the Media Department, Ethnologisches Museum / Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, all rights reserved).

Female Singers

Very much less is known about the life of the younger Domani female singers, such as Sārīah as-Sawwās, Mayyadah al-‘Alī – both stemming probably from Tall-Kalakh – and others, considering the fact that they are – compared to Arab singers – less represented in the media as well as disregarded on several levels due to their former or continuing night club activities, sexual content or invective in their songs, among other things. A

²² As the photo attached to the documentation (Figure 12) shows, the drummer was sitting on the floor beating the drum with his bare hands during the recording sessions, which is the exact opposite of the usual rendition context (see Royl 1973/74, documentation to VII OA 0132, tapes 17 and 18, without track, recording-no. 239). However, I was able to recognize three different kinds of strikes here.



Figure 11. The mizmār-player from recording 239
(photograph by Jan Ekkehart Rojl).



Figure 12. The tabl-player from recording 239
(photograph by Jan Ekkehart Rojl).



Figure 13. Athar Kurd structure as played by the mizmār-player in recording 239 of the Royl collection (notated by the author).

little more information on some of the former Domani female singers is, however, available. Hence, I will lay the focus in this section predominantly on the latter, while trying to shed some light on the artistic career of the current Domani female singers, in order to complement the analysis of their music.

Available recordings of Domani female singers, which are usually circulated through local music stores, could be generally divided into live recordings of night club performances or wedding celebrations and studio recordings.²³ The covers of the cassettes as well as the data of digital streaming services (see, for example, as-Sawwās 2023) give us some initial information on the diversity of the genres sung by Domani female singers: Besides providing covers of other singers, traditional songs and genres from Syria as well as from other Arab countries, especially Iraq, the singers present their own songs, through which some of them became very famous in Syria, like “Hydī Hydī” (“Slowly Slowly”) sung by Mayyadah al-‘Alī (2006). Other Domani singers who started their career with a similar repertoire gradually changed over to almost completely singing their own repertoire when they became famous. This is, for example, the case of Sārīah as-Sawwās, who became famous in 2008 through her song “Bass Isma‘ Minnī” (“Just Listen to Me”; as-Sawwās 2008).

The same cannot be said entirely about the older Domani female singers like Su‘ād Tawfīq. The latter was in her time a famous singer who came from the Kraymliyah-family of as-Sayyidah Zaynab. She performed for many years accompanied by her father, the buzuq-player Muḥammad Tawfīq (al-Jibāwī 2006: 635). Both were constantly seen on Syrian TV performing music in drama series like *Khaymat Hammād* (1965?) and *Wīn al-Ghalaṭ* (see al-Mālīh 1979). On YouTube there is also a performance of hers when she was very young, probably participating in a talent show filmed for Syrian or Lebanese TV (Tawfīq [1960] 2017). Her performance opportunities were, nevertheless, not confined to Syria, since she was constantly performing in Iraq and Arab Gulf states, among other countries. Moreover, she sang national songs celebrating some Arab states like Iraq and Libya (Tawfīq [1980] 2019). It is clear that her very good voice was so appreciated by the public that it was used for conveying political messages. Starting from the 1990s several albums by her were released, like *Galbī Yrīdak* (“My Heart Wants You,” 1993) and *‘Ammī aḏ-Ḍalūm* (“My Unfair Uncle,” 2000). Nonetheless, Su‘ād Tawfīq’s career shows some divergence from the career of the most Domani female singers, since her albums were (re-)recorded in sound studios in Egypt and Kuwait. Moreover, there

²³ See, for example, the following recording featuring a night club performance of Hanā’ Sallūm: [Sallūm \(n.d.\)](#); or the next one capturing Farīḥah al-‘Abdallah’s performance at a wedding celebration: [al-‘Abdallah \(n.d.\)](#).

♩ = 75

Mizmār

Ṭabl

3

Miz.

Ṭa.

5

Miz.

Ṭa.

7

Miz.

Ṭa.

9

Miz.

Ṭa.

Figure 14. An extract from the recording number 239 of the Royl collection featuring a ṭabl wa-zamr ensemble (transcribed by the author).

were seemingly some attempts to introduce her as a pop singer on an Arabic level. In particular, her album *Galbī Yrīdak*, which was recorded in Egypt and musically ar-

ranged by the well-known Egyptian arranger of that time Yaḥiá al-Mūjī, shows this tendency: al-Mūjī used for this mission melodic phrases and an arrangement which were in terms of style characteristic of that era of Arabic pop music. Moreover, the dialect of some albums' songs was Arabic-Egyptian, which was the dialect of most successful Arab singers. Even the videoclip produced as a part of the album's promotion resembles the production style of that era of Arabic pop and is thus one more sign of such attempts (Tawfiq [1993] 2020). It seems that Tawfiq was a successful pop singer of her time, who – mostly with the help of her father – built her own success on the experiences of older Domani singers living and working in the same period, such as Yusrá al-Badawīyah (1939?–2011?).

The latter was a well-known singer in the 1960s and 1970s who was taught by her mother to dance at a very young age and who was known and admired for her beauty and voice (Meyer 1994: 102). She stemmed from the Surūjlīyah-clan of al-Harāmishah living mainly in Ḥimṣ (al-Jibāwī 2006: 635; Meyer 1994: 102). After two failed marriages and the relocation of her gigs to Lebanon, she settled down in Aleppo (Meyer 1994: 102) and continued to work there as a night club singer. She also worked in many night clubs and hotels in Damascus, built her own night club in Aleppo (ibid.: 102) and bought another one in 1992 in Damascus (ibid.: 98). On another artistic level, she participated in the 1960s – apparently with her own dance group – in some Lebanese and Syrian movies, like *Liqā' fī Tadmur* (“A Meeting in Palmyra”, Ma'lūf 1965), where she played the role of a Bedouin woman.²⁴ She also collaborated with several recording companies and issued several LPs, which are, however, difficult to access nowadays. The Royl collection contains only one recording of a whole or partial night club performance by her in Aleppo (see Royl, 1973/74, recording-no. 193). The repertoire of the depicted performance alternates between rhythmical, rhythmically free and improvisational parts. It consists of her own songs, Euphratean genres, Euphratean-Iraqi traditional songs, melodized old Arabic poetry (sung originally by the famous Iraqi singer Nāẓim al-Ghazālī), Kurdish traditional songs and Saudi pop songs. While this diverse repertoire is clearly intended to identify with the preferences of the night club's visitors, it also shows that quasi-Bedouin and/or Iraqi dialect and melodic phrases are used intensively either due to the personal preferences of the singer or, again, to identify with the target audience. In this kind of mixture, vocal techniques are used interchangeably, even in the very

²⁴ In this film, Yusrá al-Badawīyah sings three songs. The first one “Bukrá al-Ḥagg Ybān” (“Soon the Truth Will Reveal Itself”) is played in the opening sequence. The second one is “‘Ashiqna Gharīb” (“Falling in Love with a Stranger”). The starting dialect of this song (01:04:08–01:08:30) is standard Arabic flavored with colloquial Egyptian. The singing's style of the slow introduction was apparently meant to imitate the style of Egyptian female singers. At the end of the free introduction, the dialect becomes quasi-Bedouin and the singing style changes to Euphratean style. However, the mix of quasi-Bedouin dialect and the orchestration's style typical of Arabic pop song of the 1960s continues over the whole song. The third song (01:19:09–01:23:04) is called “Yā Marḥaban bi-Ḍyufina” (“Our Guests, Welcome!”) and is more consisted on dialectal level, while the arrangement resembles the style of the previously mentioned second song.

same song. In her own songs, she tended, however, to sing in a less nasal and less strident way.

It must be stressed here again that all of the above-mentioned Domani singers performed in Arabic and not in Domari.²⁵ Likewise, Domani singers living in Kurdish areas and belonging to the *maṭāribah* performed constantly in Kurdish and dressed themselves according to the Kurdish dress code when they participated in public events, like Nawrūz (see al-Jibāwī 2006: 208–209). Assimilation to Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkmen traditions played a significant role in the shaping of Domani (pop) music in Syria at that time.

The Position of the Dom in the Syrian Music Scene

The place of Romani music and musicians in the global music scene has been extensively discussed in the existing literature, drawing on various examples. Carol Silverman (2011) speaks, for example, of the exploitation of Romani musicians in the Balkans by DJs, composers and the music industry on global level. Other contributions expand on the contradictory positions of the Roma in Balkan society, like the work of Mattijs van de Port (1999) dealing with the depiction of the Serbian Roma, on the one hand, as the undesirable “Others,” and on the other hand as the intimate ones who are capable of evoking “the Serbian soul.” Other forms of collective romanticization of the Roma as primordially talented musicians, among other things, are also widespread in Europe. These stereotypes are, moreover, perpetuated by the Roma themselves as a part of their economic and social strategies (see Silverman 2011; Port 1999) for surviving in a hostile environment, which mean that these stereotypes are also a part of their self-image.

While this is the case in Europe, in Syria, similar prejudices and stereotypes can be found to varying degrees in different circles. Some Syrian literati and writers ascribe an ultimate musical talent to the Dom, probably under the influence of the Western depiction of the Roma, as al-Jibāwī did several times throughout his anthropological work (see, for example, al-Jibāwī 2006: 19, 310–311, 341, 450), or utilize them in novels and other literary genres to convey certain stereotypical images (see, for example, Khalīfah 2010).²⁶ On their part, laypeople in Syria do not romanticize the (music-making) Dom or ascribe to them any “extraordinary abilities” to evoke suppressed nation-, region- or ethnos-related self-conceptions. On the contrary, the musical profession of the Dom is admired as long as they perform well at weddings and other life-cycle ceremonies, and condemned when they are not needed anymore, which applies, however, to all those practicing music for a living in Syria – depending on the social class they belong to.

²⁵ The only example of Domani singers performing in their language could be found on a report made by the TV-channel France24 (see [‘Arūm 2015](#)). Al-Jibāwī (2006: 183) also listed the lyrics of a song sung in Domari by the Dom living in Sarāqib near Idlib.

²⁶ Mayy Ḥasan Banāt (2021) recently addressed the image of the “Ghajar” in the Arabic novel.

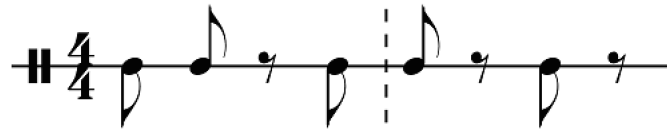


Figure 15. “Nawarī” rhythmic cycle (notated by the author).

Nevertheless, the Syrian Dom has influenced Syrian music in many regards. One clear influence of Domani music making on the Syrian music scene is the introduction of *ṭabl wa-zamr* music to several Syrian areas, especially the region of the coastal mountain range. As musicians by profession, Domani performers of *ṭabl wa-zamr* music were present at all kinds of celebrations that necessitate dance music and lead the guests to dance boisterously, which was as a matter of fact expected from them as performers. Domani performers then introduced several rhythmic cycles to Syrian music, of which only one still carries the name associated with them in public, “Nawarī” (see Figure 15). Yet, the number of rhythmic cycles they brought into Syrian music is definitely higher than that. Unfortunately, it is difficult to name a number, since historical recordings of their music in Syria are a rarity and comparison with the vast Syrian *ṭabl wa-zamr* music is practically not possible today. Another, perhaps more important merit to be credited to Domani musicians is circulating music traditions by moving between places as well as through migration (Jalo 2022). Being on the move between the Bedouins and the villagers in spring, summer, and autumn, the Syrian Dom adopted some traditional songs from the areas they visited and sang them in other nearby places. Thus, they helped to form what one could call “unified tastes of music” in certain regions.

Besides these collective influences, individual contributions by individual Domani musicians could also be traced in Syrian music. The most important contribution in this regard should definitely be ascribed to Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm (1911–1989, born name: ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Mir‘ī) or the so-called “the prince of the buzuq.” He was born in Ḥimṣ to a musical family. His father, the buzuq-player ‘Alī al-Mir‘ī and his brothers used to accompany his mother, who, according to al-‘Awānī (2011: 36), had a beautiful voice. Although he was never celebrated for playing Domani music, and his compositions and improvisations were mostly not regarded as having at least some influences from Domani music, ‘Abd al-Karīm shaped the landscape of buzuq music. For example, he changed the pitch range of the buzuq by adding more frets (al-‘Awānī 2011: 57–58). Moreover, his virtuosity and musicality exceeded those of any other buzuq-players of his time and of former times. Beside his many compositions for solo buzuq, like the well-known “Devil’s dance,” he also composed for famous Arab singers like Asmahān, Su‘ād Muḥammad, and many others. If one wanted to trace some of the influence of his Domani music traditions on his later compositions and improvisations, one should definitely look at his style of ornamentation. With its elaborate form on the rhythm-tone level and its intensity, it diverges from any other styles of ornamentation known in Syrian music. Its influence on the next generations of buzuq-players in Syria is irrefutable.

Conclusion

The music-making Dom of Syria are usually divided into *maṭāribah*, *rīyās*, *ḥajjīyāt*, and *shu‘ār*. These designations, which are equally used by them and by their fellow Syrians, indicate both the variety and the vast differences of their musical activities. Several factors, such as temporary or permanent region of residency, spoken or mastered language(s), gender roles in music making as well as the form of both the music making and the bands, determine this disparity in their music making. On the other hand, the very same Dom groups exhibit some similarities on other levels, including the instrumentation (*ṭabl wa-zamr*, *buzuq* etc.), the occasions on which they are usually requested, and seasonal music making. They were all also more or less confronted with the same problems emerging from the new political, social, and economic circumstances in Syria, which led to changes in gig situations and places as well as to the emergence of new forms of bands (across-group etc.), among others. Another similarity is the stigmatization which they are still witnessing on the basis of their professional musical activities. Most notably responsible for this stigmatization are the roles of Domani women in the music making, which increased in the wake of the gradual shifting of Domani musical activities towards night club gigs.

As exhibited by the anthropological works cited in this article, the music-making Dom underwent assimilation processes on a cultural level, in the course of which the Dom had to adopt the customs, language, and cultural pattern of the area in which they lived or practiced their profession. Hence, several elements of their music were lost over time or substituted with local ones. They sang, for example, much less in Domari. Nonetheless, the many influences of Domani music making and musicians on the Syrian music scene cannot be neglected. On the one hand, they performed celebrative *ṭabl wa-zamr* music on numerous social occasions in several Syrian areas at a time when no one else was practicing *ṭabl wa-zamr* music in those areas. By collecting songs from the places in which they performed, and rendering them continually in a vast area, they acted as a “mobile archive” and thus contributed to the establishment of musical-cultural regions in which the same repertoire is rendered. Moreover, they introduced several musicians and singers to the Syrian and Arabic music scene, such as the *buzuq*-player Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm, who raised the standard of the *buzuq* musically and technically and changed the landscape of its music.

However, several questions regarding Domani music making and music traditions in Syria are difficult to answer nowadays. These questions mostly concern the formal, tonal, and rhythmical aspects of their music traditions, if any, at the time preceding the assimilation processes. Despite that, measures towards acknowledging their contributions to Syrian music are still needed, and most importantly, their known musical elements should be – alongside the various music traditions of other Syrian groups – considered for the official national lists of intangible cultural heritage.

Notes on Transliteration and Translations

The Arabic transliteration system adopted here is based on the list of the ALA-LC (American Library Association – Library of Congress) rules. An exception to these rules is the transliteration of the sun letters. All transliterations and all translations from Arabic to English are my own.

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