

Raqqa

Raqqa has great cultural significance in Syria for many reasons, not least because it is where many Syrian writers and cultural figures come from. More significantly though, it is known to be the birthplace of one of the most important styles of folk singing in the whole region, not only in Syria, which is the Mulayya. As is the case with much of the intangible cultural heritage, it is difficult to figure out precisely the origin of the first Mulayya, but the frequency of oral history narratives that trace it back to Raqqa, and the fact that it is where most Mulayya singers come from make the theory plausible. Another reason-linguistic this time- suggests that the origin of Mulayya is from the Euphrates region, if not specifically from Raqqa, and that's the fact the word 'mulayya' is the old way of referring to the 'habari,' a beautiful head-dress for women very popular in that region of Syria.

We spoke to Abu Aziz, a Raqqawi folk singer residing in Latakia, and he explained to us how he used to sing in Raqqa at weddings or in reed tents that were built in the villages or the neighbourhoods of towns especially for people's evening gatherings and entertainment. The singing was accompanied by playing on the daff (Syrian tambourine), the rebab (a very unique Bedouin string instrument), and the zummar-shababa (Syrian flute). We asked Abu Aziz more twice about how it felt for him to sing such unique music for Raqqa in forced exile away from it, but he evaded answering and kept going back to talking

about different instruments and singing styles, so we took the hint that this is a sore subject and we stopped asking.

In addition to being the city of poets, writers, and beautiful Mulayya singers, Raqqa is also distinguished by its women's elegant and cheerful folk costumes, such as the Habari, the Shalahiyat, and the Zubun. In my personal opinion, the most important feature of Raqqa's culture is the pride that its people take in their heritage and cultural identity and their strong following and celebration of their cultural practices. There is no better proof of this than the fact that Raqqa is now the biggest folkloric performing arts hub in the country despite what happened in it between 2104-2107. In those years, ISIS occupied the city and declared it their capital, and they worked ruthlessly on annihilating art and culture in the city. However, as soon as the city was liberated, the people of Raqqa danced, performed dabkeh, sang, and wore hibari, shalahiyat, and zubun, so much so that one can clearly see the Raqawi people's linkage between their cultural heritage and the very identity and soul of the city.

Talking about the pride the Raqawis, and the people of the eastern regions of Syria in general, take in their rich cultural identity, it is necessary to address a specific word that raises a lot of confusion and sensitivity, which is the label of "Shawaia". There is a disagreement about the linguistic origin of the word and what it actually means in Arabic, but there is no disagreement on who the Shawaia really are; they are the residents of the countryside and villages in the provinces of inner Syrian: Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah. This means that the people of these and

other major cities in the interior are not known as Shawaia. The problem here is with the context of using this word as many Syrians say it in a tone aiming to insult those to whom it is addressed and linking them to backwardness and ignorance. Indeed, calling any person from the inner-Syria provinces a 'shawī' in derogatory way is a shameful and ignorant practice that is sadly common in many parts of Syria, and the fact of the matter is that this ignorant and empty sense of superiority brings shame only to those who say it, not to the recipients. The Shawaia are extremely generous and proud people, and they deserve all the respect and appreciation from the rest of the Syrians. We hope that this book will make a small contribution towards correcting the misconceptions around this word and this precious demographic of Syrians. The shawaias have been brilliantly responding to the ignorance directed at them by embracing and reclaiming that word more and more, as we can see in a number of their songs in recent years.

Going back to food and culture, there used to be an old practice well known in the Euphrates region, which is home-made sha'eer, a Syrian version of vermicelli. Women of the village used to gather in the house of one of them to make the sha'eer from scratch and make enough for that women supply for winter, then they go to another woman's house the next day to make her supply, and then another women and so on until all the women of the village have their stock. This is a beautiful practice of solidarity and communal work that was common among village women in the countryside of Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, and perhaps other regions, but now it has disappeared

after the availability of modern machines to prepare this type of food.

Om Aziz, the wife of the aforementioned singer Abu Aziz, is a Raqawi woman who embodies the pride in Raqqa's cultural heritage that we mentioned before. She hosted us in her home and cooked us Syayeel and Chika, two dishes that are usually served together and emotionally connect Om Aziz to Raqqa.

- **Chika**

- **Ingredients:** 2 tablespoons ghee, 2 tablespoons pepper paste, tomato paste, 2 cups and a half of fine bulgur, 2 cups of chopped parsley, 1 finely chopped onion, 1 tablespoon of red pepper, cumin, black pepper, salt, 2 cups of water

- **Instructions:** Sauté the onion with ghee and salt. Stir and sprinkle with pepper until the onion wilts, then add cumin and red pepper. After stirring for two minutes, add the pepper and tomato paste, and stir for two minutes. Add two cups of cold water and leave until it boils, then add the bulgur, turn off the heat and cover the pot so that

the bulgur is done without cooking.

Put the bulgur in a tray, add the parsley, and rub with your hands until it becomes smooth. Shape the bulgur into fingers to serve.



- **Syayeel**

- **Ingredients:** thin saj bread, ghee made from sheep's milk, walnuts, cinnamon, raisins and syrup.

- **Instructions:** Put the bread in the tray into 3 layers,

then sprinkle with crushed walnuts and cinnamon, then put other 3 layers of bread, add cinnamon and nuts, then other 3 layers of bread, then sprinkle with cinnamon and walnuts, then the last layer of 3 loafs of breads and put Arabic ghee on it. Cut with a knife in the form of square cubes on the face, then add about two glasses of syrup, and decorate with walnuts, raisins and a sprinkle of cinnamon.



