"Mais ce qui est encore à blamer davantage, elles ne sont pas seulement esclaves du monseigneur en paroles, mais aussi en l'intérieur par le voile d'une belle apparence. Je veux dire comme la volupté même bien souvent se couvre du manteau de la vertu, aussi voit on la femme impudique historier son naturel par l'œil d'une piété, le plus souvent contrafacte..." Olivier, 98.

63 On Choisy’s cross-dressing, see Harris, chapter seven, "Transvestite Tendencies: François-Timoléon, abbé de Choisy," 211–32.
64 "Enfin, lors qu'elle en eût tiré une vérité, qui ne lui fit plus douter que je ne fusse Scanderberg... et vit bien que je lui rendais malice pour malice... voulant aussi bien que moi sortir de cette aventure avec tout le plaisir que nous nous attendions d'y rencontrer," Villedieu, 47–50.
65 "Amurat oublia ainsi toutes les marques d'amour qu'il avait données à Serville, pour m'honorer de ses passions les plus violentes... Je me trouvais à la fin l'Amant de sa Maitresse et par conséquent son Rival, comme Crisollis." Villedieu, 60.
66 "Pour le tromper... il fut résolu que je serais toujours Crisolis femme juive et que j'irais aux appartements des autres Sultanes porter des meubles précieux..." Villedieu, 60.
67 "Elle ne songeait qu'à le trahir et à se faire aimer du Sultan. Depuis qu'elle avait sou la violente inclination qu'il avait pour elle et quelle marque il avait prêt de lui en donner, l'étant venu prendre pour l'honorer du glorieux rang de Sultane, auquel son ambition aspirait..." Villedieu, 254.
68 "Le désir d'être élevée dans un rang si glorieux, l'emporta sur sa tendresse et sur celle de son Amant, sans considérer quels étaient les plaisirs et les biens qu'elle avait reçus de l'un et de l'autre... Elle cacha si adroitement ce qu'elle pensait, que Musulman n'en apperçut pas." Villedieu, 249.
69 "Il fut pénétré de la plus vive douleur, qu'on puisse sentir, lorsqu'il le sut, Scanderberg essayait en vain de le consoler, l'infidélité était trop récente et lui trop amoureuse." Villedieu, 314.
70 "La vue de Thamar l'avait sensiblement touché et l'espoir qu'il avait d'être le maître de toutes ses beautés," Villedieu, 234.
71 "Le lendemain on apprit qu'elle avait déjà un grand nombre d'esclaves... qu'on lui rendait les mêmes honneurs qu'à la Sultane Favoritse et que le Sultan ne la quittait presque point." Villedieu, 314.
72 "Elle regardait l'inconstance d'Amurat sans être émue." Villedieu, 314.
73 Douthwaite, 52.
74 "Although the reign of Louis XIV is traditionally cited as the fullest imposition of so-called absolute monarchy, examining the balance of power between Louis XIV and the nobility places this in doubt. See Roger Mettam, Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).
75 Patricia Francis Cholakian, "Rewriting History: Madame de Villedieu and the Wars of Religion" in Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation, ed. Helen Margaret Cooper, Adrienne Munich, and Susan Merrill Squier (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 44.

DE-ORIENTALIZING THE 'AITA
AND RE-ORIENTING THE SHIKHAT* 

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'Aita is a sung poetry practiced by professional female singer-dancers known as shikhah (singular, shikha, literally a female leader) along the Moroccan Atlantic plains and adjacent regions. By focusing on the discourses and politics employed in the revalorization (i'tada al-i'timar) of the 'aita, this ethnographic investigation will show how the official incorporation of the 'aita into the Moroccan heritage (al-turath al-maghribi) has affected the sung poetry and its performers. In the search for a new and national oral poetry, a number of men intellectuals and specialists of the 'aita, directly or indirectly associated with the USFP (Union Socialist de Forces Populaires) and the UEM (Union des Écrivains du Maroc), have produced a narrative that presents their view on what is the "appropriate" way of experiencing the 'aita. This narrative, along with the 1997 elections that brought the USFP to the head of the government and the former President of the UEM to the head of the Ministère de la Culture, influenced the political culture of Morocco and laid the groundwork for the re-valorization of the 'aita.

I will begin with a discussion about the shikhah and the 'aita, calling attention to debates on historiography before analyzing the re-valorization in reference to culturally established views of female sexuality. Sexuality, in fact, is central to colonial relations of dominance and resistance given that the representation of otherness is also achieved through sexual modes of differentiation. I will conclude that the re-valorization of the 'aita has called for its de-orientalizing, and, consequently, for re-orienting ambiguous female performers, such as the shikhah, into a moral system in which the reputation of women—expressed in the cultural equation of

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female chastity/purity and social worth—needs to be materialized and confirmed every day in a woman's behavior.5

The Shikhats as Professional Singer-Dancers

In Morocco today, the shikhat perform in rural and urban milieux, for the humble and the wealthy, for different audiences (all-male, all-female, or mixed), in different venues (such as private homes, nightclubs, and festivals), and for different types of occasions (private, public, and official). As symbols that produce action and as focuses of interaction, the shikhat stimulate emotions with their bodies—to which participants respond with gazing or by physically participating in the performance—and with their voices—to which participants respond by listening, imagining/remembering their sociocultural and historical experiences intermingled and juxtaposed with eroticism in the verses. This is illustrated by the role of the shikhat at a mixed wedding celebration held in the coastal town of Safi on 13 July 2003:

Stepping onto the roof of the two-story house felt like stepping into a different world. Covered by a white impermeable tent on the outside, on the inside the roof was clothed by a soft white polyester fabric whose pleats undulated to the gentle summer breeze. Burgundy drapes were arranged around the walls of white cloth, while modern red Rabat-like carpets were spread on the floor. At the other end of the roof, directly in front of the entrance, two huge and richly adorned white thrones mounted on a pedestal had been set up for the bride and the groom.

The performers positioned themselves on one side of the thrones; the male instrumentalists sat on the chairs with their backs against the cloth wall while the shikhat stood a few feet away in front of the musicians and close to the audience. Hafida and 'Aicha, the two lead vocalists, situated themselves in the center with the two dancers, Khadija and Khoucia, respectively on their sides.

It was about 3:00 a.m. when the second set of the wedding celebration began. As Hafida and 'Aicha sang the lines of the poem, they took the audience into a journey where history, geography, lore, memory, imagination and eroticism were recalled line after line:

If you are from the 'Abda [region], saddle my horse for me. I'll offer myself as your servant. I accept my destiny and the golden stirrup. I've cried for the separation from the loved ones. I cry, I have no patience. I become quiet, I don't heal. I think too much. We are in [the shrine of] Lalla Menhana, it belongs to the loved ones. Our lord is here to stay.6

The guests listened attentively to the words as they gently rocked their heads and upper torso to and fro, waved their arms, clapped their hands, or ululated to incite the performers. Khadija and Khoucia, for their part, heightened the ambience with their gentle shimmies. Their performing bodies projected sensuality to intensify the performance and worked with the emotions of the audience to the unfolding mood since dance, much like poetry, is connected to an aesthetic of suggestion.

Almost 27 minutes into the performance, the time for dancing had arrived, and, judging from the emotionally-charged atmosphere, the guests were ready to move from a shared emotional experience, an ideal that bound them together, to an intense involvement in the emotional experience itself. The focus of the celebration had shifted from listening to dancing, from a fast to a slow tempo, and from an internalized to an externalized response. It did not take long for the change in rhythm and tempo to affect the atmosphere.

Khoucia and Khadija, now facing one another, began to gently bounce their hips shifting the weight of their bodies from one side to the other as if walking in place. The thick embroidered belts tied around the waists emphasized their generous hips while the organza material of the caftans accentuated the flow of their movements. With their arms away from the body and their forearms bent upward, their neck and head standing tall, their chest and shoulders held back and broad, the shikhat faced the guests with their sensual movements as they opened up their bodies to the celebrants.

The female guests were the first to respond to the changes in the mood of the celebration. One by one they began to crowd the corridor and the area in front of the shikhat sensually dancing in small groups among themselves. The male guests, for their part, had also gotten up and had started to dance; some of them were also busy rewarding the dancers by tucking money into their belts or on to the neckline of their caftans. The floor became increasingly crowded with guests who seemed unable to stop moving; the music was affecting everyone, even those who had remained seated. The shikhat were now practically surrounded by the dancing bodies of the participants.

A group of young men had formed their own circle and, as they danced, they seemed to be particularly involved when the lyrics of the poem turned to the images of horses and horsemen; after raising their arms into the air, one of them began to mimic galloping movements in his dance.

When the hostess of the celebration approached Hafida in the midst of her singing, the shikhat looked at her in a stupor. The hostess spoke into
Hafida's ear who, for her part, nodded with her head. At the same time the musicians of another troupe walked into the room and advanced toward the performers to set up their instruments and begin to play. The shikhat, taken aback, did not waste time singing a few more verses and quickly ended the performance in compliance with the wishes of the hostess, who, preoccupied by the excessive excitement, had asked another band to go on in order to cool the temperature of the celebration.

As professional singer-dancers who display their voices and their bodies in the context of public celebrations, the associations of the shikhat with public space are different than those of respectable women in Morocco. Their interactions with unrelated men, the sensual dances they perform, the fact that they solicit money from their guests for their services, associate the shikhat with prostitution.

It is a complex task to determine whether or not the shikhat were ever considered to be respectable performers in Morocco, a difficulty that results partly from available documentation. The Western narrative of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was tainted by a moralistic and political framework with a biased interpretation of prostitution. Eroticism was perceived as one of the main aspects of the exotic Orient, and the fascination with allegedly licentious women dancers provided a means to express what Karin van Nieurkerk designates the "differentness and sensuality of the East." In the early part of the twentieth century, the journalist Christian Houël attributed an inexhaustible eroticism requiring no material sustenance to women performers attached to the army:

What we would like to emphasize in reference to these military prostitutes is their incredible strength. After having marched an entire day in the midst of the sun, practically without rest and surely without food since marching expeditions (mehallas) do not eat, they dance in the evening under the tents where they are invited and end the night in the works of love, without showing any weariness.

This passage, which is meant to describe a military expedition of Sultan Hassan I (1836–94), is an example of how Oriental stereotypes could occlude the vision of French travelers and people involved, directly or indirectly, with the French Protectorate (1912–56). By characterizing the female performers who were known to accompany the expeditions of sultans as mere prostitutes, their musical practices as no more than an interlude to sexual encounters, and their physical/sexual vigor as extraordinary, Houël's description is marked by what Edmund Burke terms the "deforming lens of Orientalism." Furthermore, the association made between the Orient and the freedom of licentious sex reflects how "Oriental sex" was considered to be a freely accessible commodity.

Houël's writings exemplify the type of discourse found in Western colonial chronicles, and ethnographies such as that of Jean Mathieu and P.-H. Maury on Bousbir, the renowned closed quarter in Casablanca, is also tainted by the moralistic and political framework of the two doctors who carried out a study for the Service de la Santé Publique du Maroc under the auspices of the Protectorate in 1951. Describing the musical practices of the shikhat, they assert that "every street takes part in the uproar, in one some prostitutes sing with a high-pitched voice while accompanying themselves with the 'ta rijaa.'" Characterizing the event as an uproar denigrates its musical elements and exemplifies biased discourse that conflates the shikhat and prostitutes. Some Western scholars may consider the presence of a single corporation of shikhat as sound evidence of their association with prostitution, but there are Moroccan scholars who use the same evidence to buttress the counterargument that the shikhat were turned into prostitutes by colonial practices as the following statement by a Moroccan intellectual and specialists of the 'aita indicates:

As all the shikhat were [respected by men and women] until colonization, when a local law banned them from singing except in bordellos. The amalgam shikha-prostitute came first and foremost from there.

This dichotomy reflects the ambivalence of available evidence and its interpretation.

Although the presence of the shikhat as indicated in Arabic sources may give a sense of the milieu and dynamic between these performers and their patrons, the dearth of documentation, particularly personal accounts, on their everyday lives or on their own stories does not allow us to arrive at sound conclusions regarding their social status. The Moroccan historian Mohammed Ennaji has established the existence of a hierarchy of female slave-concubines who entertained their male patrons, and some of whom held important positions in society. The poet and researcher Hassan Najmi has determined that the shikhat were present in processions, expeditions, at the courts of nineteenth-century sultans, and that some of these performers were esteemed and wealthy. The "silence" of the shikhat, however, makes it difficult to place them in a perspective that allows their association with prostitution to be either validated or overthrown. The existence of a number of performers at court similar to those found in closed quarters cannot reflect the overall situation of the shikhat in Morocco, and accounts of the relationship between shikhat and their male patrons are ambiguous. As Najmi observes of the shikha al-
Tounia:

We do not know anything about the life of this shikha from Marrakech except what the officials of the makhzen (central government) reveal . . . Oral accounts tell us that she was one of his [Hassan I] concubines (mahdiya) . . . Based on the correspondence of the makhzen and their details it is clear that Hassan I knew her very well because of her performance, and because she would accompany him on his expeditions . . . What confirms Hassan I's solely artistic admiration is the fact that when she committed a mistake with one of his employees she was jailed and he confiscated some of her property. Furthermore, she was available for all of the families and not just for the sultan.20

Najmi’s statement on the relation between Sultan Hassan I and shikha al-Tounia illustrates the ambiguity of written sources that, in this case, question the oral accounts and present what may be a politically safe perspective that is not necessarily more reliable.

Discussing prostitution in the Maghreb, Christelle Taraud advances the hypothesis that prostitution was not an exclusively colonial construct, but a universe that was already in place:

For a century, between 1830 and 1930, we find official prostitutes . . . and courtesans, more or less clandestine, waiting in their homes for their clients or for clients recruited outside, offering sexual services but also food, tea, bathing water, and, if necessary, even entertainment and hospitality for the night. Ambivalent courtesanerie, “outdated” symbol of other ideas about prostitution and of other types of sexual relation negotiated prior to colonization . . . In this sense, by confusing the traditional hierarchies of prostitution and by setting in place a real professionalization of prostitution, the colonial administration profoundly changed the Maghreb’s universe of prostitution.21

According to Taraud, colonialism not only rearranged the Maghreb system of prostitution, but also patterns of sexual behavior so that, in the effort of controlling women’s sexuality and maintaining the social order, brothels were licensed and closed quarters instituted. In a similar vein to what Timothy J. Gilfoyle asserts about the history of prostitution, I posit that in Morocco all categories of courtesans and prostitutes may have inevitably melted into the same standardized type of sex trade in which erotic gratification supplanted social fulfillment and a “more genitally oriented [for men] form of prostitution replaced one emphasizing sociability.”22 Much as had taken place in Egypt with female singer-dancers,23 the shikhat, who may have been first and foremost poets and whose principal function may have been to entertain their patrons with sung poetry and dance through performances emphasized courtship, companionship, or socialization rather than sex, could have been caught in a downward spiral that called for a greater sexualization of their profession. But even if such a debasement did take place, oral testimonials of some of the old shikhat can be just as ambiguous as they retell their glorious past. Although they were revered and appreciated as artists, the shikhat also lament the hardship of their profession, carefully avoiding specific details as they recount the unkindness of the patrons, hinting at how the profession ruins those who practice it. Whether or not dictated by a sense of propriety and appearances, this ambiguity makes it difficult to establish whether the shikhat were ever considered or treated as respectable performers.

Another cause of the profession’s infamousness and its association with prostitution is connected to religious ideology and how approval and disapproval of performers is related not only to genre but to contexts of performance. According to Islamic views, at the bottom of the hierarchy of permissibility is “sensuous music that is performed in association with condemned activities, or that is thought to incite such prohibited practices as consumption of drugs and alcohol, lust, prostitution, etc.”24 Because the musical practices of the shikhat fall into what is considered as the lowest form of music and dancing, particularly since they express sexuality before men rather than in front of an all-female audience where sexually explicit behavior is acceptable, the shikhat are treated accordingly by society whose ideal standard of femininity emphasizes modesty and distancing from sexuality.

The ‘Aita and the Past

The time when the ‘aita was at its apogee, “at hundred per cent of its taste” (miya f-l-miya dial daq), when the shikhat were highly respected (kan ‘andhum al-‘izz katir) and the texts of the poems truly appreciated, was recalled in most of the conversations I had with practitioners, specialists and, to a certain extent, everyone who listened to this sung poetry. Their accounts invariably evoked a period that appeared to be rooted in names and, more significantly, in forms of patronage rather than dates. Karbou’a recounts:

I was a guest of qaid Mekki, together with my mother and my brother, for quite a long time. Qaid Mekki used to always invite different troupes to entertain him and his friends, and he would always ask me to perform with the other shikhat. Qaid L’arbi, from Khouribga, was also there and he too
always wanted us to perform for him. Qaid Mekki, who was very
generous, used to even buy us the best caftans for these evenings.25

Just as other shikhat, Karbou’a reminisced either about qai ds, pashas,
sultans, or other powerful and wealthy patrons associated with a period
that extended from the nineteenth century to the French Protectorate. Qaid
Mekki and other governors of the regions in which the ‘aita was the main
musico-poetic tradition were known to support performers whom they
regularly invited to entertain. This may have been particularly true for
shikhat such as Karbou’a who, thanks to her voice and beauty, had been
one of the most sought after shikhat of the region.

Born into a modest family from the countryside, Karbou’a started
singing at all-women’s parties in her village before embarking on the
career of shikha. Wearing a dusty rose jel laba (a long, loose, hooded
garment) and a dark velvet floral headdress, it was difficult to imagine how
this modestly dressed woman, with her visage marked by deep wrinkles,
could be the same youthful beauty in the picture that she had proudly
shown me. Now in her 60s with an adopted daughter unaware of her
mother’s past, Karbou’a had resorted to selling loose cigarettes in the
streets of the town in which she resided. Former patrons had forgotten
Karbou’a as her voice and looks had withered. This was not an uncommon
story for aging female performers whose reputation was tainted by their
profession.

Infamy and social marginality were the byproducts of an ascribed
public role that affected all aspects of shikhat’s lives. Theirs was not a
part-time profession. The career of Karbou’a, however, did not end with
the demise of the qai ds. She continued to perform during the post-
Independence years from 1956 through the early 1980s:

We performed at La Terrasse, Riad Fez, Ould ‘Abdelkader [clubs in
Casablanca]. We were at La Terrasse for 14 years where we would
perform from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. During the day we slept in the
apartment that Ould ‘Abdeslam [the owner of the club] rented for us; we
even had a car and a driver. He paid for everything! . . . There was our
troupe, that of Fatna Bent I-Houcine, that of Hammounia, that of Hadda
Ou’aki, and other troupes. Everyone got along real well in those clubs of
Casablanca. There were at least six or seven troupes that had permanent
work in each club, and each of us lived in different places.26

With the decline of traditional modes of patronage, the nightlife of big
cities such as Casablanca, radio, and record companies kept the performers
busy and the ‘aita thriving. The relics of the Protectorate, cabarets were
most numerous in Casablanca and other metropolitan centers, where they
were invariably located in the Ville Nouvelle, the new part of town
designed and built by Europeans. Much as today, the typical cabaret
audience consisted of urbanized Moroccan men; alcohol and women were
the principal enticements.27 The association of the ‘aita with the radio and,
more specifically, with comic sketches was also crucial. These sketches
were extremely popular because they employed colloquial Arabic and
depicted scenes of daily life with a didactic and an entertainment
function.28 This form of theater proposed a mass-mediated version of
performances in the halqa—a gathering in the form of a circle around
performers in a public setting, usually in a market place or at a city gate of
a medina (the old city)—associated with storytellers, jesters, and other
itinerant entertainers.29 Music, particularly traditional genres such as the
‘aita, is an important constituent of these performances just as it was in
radio sketches.

Commercial recordings too may be used to attest to the popularity of the
‘aita since, as Ali Jihad Racy demonstrates in the case of Egypt30 they
evidence a musical market sustained by a record-buying public. Although
commercial recordings made by European companies such as Odeon,
Pathé, and Gramophone in 78 rpm format began to appear in the 1920s,31
it was after Independence that Morocco witnessed the growth of a local
industry based in Casablanca. The profusion of small record companies,
together with the development of the cheaper 45 rpm format, spurred the
large-scale production of 45s in the late 1950s and early 1970s; a
production interrupted when cassette recordings drove the discs off the
market in the mid 1970s.32

Apart from the recollections of old shikhat, shiukh (male leaders, the
singular of which is shikh), and fans of the ‘aita, it is difficult to trace its
development without a rereading of the past shaped by the concerns of the
present. In recent years Moroccan intellectuals and specialists advancing
the re-valorization of the ‘aita have challenged colonial representation of
the shikhat and the ‘aita.33 Interwoven with sexual imagery, desires,
fantasies, fears, and dreams, these representations mirrored ideas held
about the Orient, since fantasy and desire play a fundamental role in the
relation that is established with the colonized, in this case the Orientalized
other. In this sense, as Meyda Yeğenoglu posits, Orientalism34 “simultaneously refers to the production of a systematic knowledge and to
the site of the unconscious—desires and fantasies; it signifies how the
‘Orient’ is at once an object of knowledge and an object of desire.”35 It is
within this context that Alexis Chotin, a French musicologists who
published substantial works on the music of Morocco under the aegis of
the French administration’s Service des Arts Indigènes (which functioned from 1920 until the end of the Protectorate), describes a performance of the shikhat:

We will meet the libertine and sensual Morocco. This “face” is pleasant looking, but what makeup on the cheeks, what kohl on the eyes, and what real or false shining jewels around it; what a profusion of bright colors and what an excess of ornaments among the anesthetizing perfumes that emanate from them! And I’m really afraid, alas! that underneath there’s nothing but a poor and little face, a pallid and wrinkled pleasure-seeker, who is consumed by the pursuit of an impossible sensual bliss. In the quite mediocre poems she sings, there is always a cruel female who obstinately refuses to grant anything to a suitor who is eternally rejected. . . . Here it is, therefore, this music so attractive and so deceiving at once. . . . This laugh and this joy blend and burst in the rhythm, dizzying rhythm, enchanting rhythm that fulfills worries and sorrows; vampire-rhythm whose wings flutter to anesthetize the pain caused by its fatal bite.  

As Chottin’s phantasmagorical narrative transforms the sensual female performer into a wrinkled pleasure seeker and the ‘aita’s enchanting rhythm into one of vampires, so the interchange between the academic and the imaginative meanings of Orientalism is constant; Orientalism, after all, had given a scholarly foundation to the fantastic otherness of the East.  

In opposition to Chottin’s description, which encapsulates colonial views on the shikhat and the ‘aita, Mohammed Bouhmid (1939–2002) a leading figure in advancing the re-valorization of the ‘aita, adopts a stance taken unanimously by the intellectuals and specialists of this sung poetry:

During colonialism the French wanted to get rid of the ‘aita because it could mobilize people, carry the nationalist message everywhere. It was the French that during the Protectorate created brothels where soldiers could be entertained by the shikhat. That is how the poetic language of the ‘aita changed from a language of the people to an erotic language associated with alcohol and prostitution.

By emphasizing the poetry of the ‘aita, which Chottin had practically ignored and discarded as mediocre, and by blaming the Protectorate for the changes that occurred in the ‘aita, Bouhmid set the standard for a re-valorization that needed to argue for a reconstruction of the past resting on the existence of the historically-accepted context of colonialism.

The intellectuals and specialists of the ‘aita have developed an account of history that explains the present by recognizing the concerns of the public with its collective heritage. In their debates on historiography, these intellectuals and specialists have selectively emphasized a bipartition between “them” and “us”—the degradation and marginalization of the ‘aita was caused by its association with performers who were portrayed as loose women and cast as prostitutes by the Protectorate—and shaped a narrative that, in response to that of the former colonial power, is based on the notion of national honor and identity.

The Intellectuals and Specialists of the ‘Aita

In recent years, the ‘aita has carved out a place for itself thanks to the efforts of a number of academics, intellectuals, politicians, and other public figures involved, in one way or another, with the USFP and the UEM. These efforts have culminated in the creation of the festival of the ‘aita, the inclusion of three CDs of the ‘aita in the Anthologie de la musique marocaine, a collection of 31 discs in seven volumes produced by the Ministère de la Culture, and in the recording of two CDs, yet to be released, by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. The ‘aita has also been the subject of documentaries, theatrical works, scholarly and non-scholarly publications. Performances of the ‘aita are now included in a number of summer festivals in Morocco, presented in the theaters of Rabat and Casablanca, and programs discussing the genre are broadcast by the national television stations. Furthermore, the recent proliferation of Internet sites and the upcoming film on the life of a shikha should all be viewed as testimonies of the revalorization.

The emergence of specialists of the ‘aita can be traced to 1981 when the UEM organized a conference on traditional culture. Influenced by the ideas put forth by left-wing intellectuals who, particularly in the 1960s and the 1970s, took strong anti-colonial stances calling for the re-appropriation, rediscovery and re-habilitation of the national culture, and by European intellectuals such as Roland Barthes, Moroccan intellectuals proposed a new approach to traditional culture, which they no longer viewed as archaic but as a thriving element of Moroccan life. In this context, a new horizon began to open for the ‘aita. More influential, however, may have been the efforts made by Mohammed Bouhmid—school teacher, writer, member of the UEM, practitioner and specialist par excellence of the ‘aita—in revalorizing this sung poetry. Although Bouhmid’s interest in the ‘aita can be traced to the 1970s through public debates, radio and television broadcasts, I was only able to obtain the copies of a four-part special, Kunuz (“treasures”), on the ‘aita recorded for the Moroccan television in 1992. In Kunuz, a program dedicated to Moroccan traditional arts and hosted by the researcher ‘Omar Amarin,
Mohammed Bouhmid traces a history of the 'aita before discussing the musical and poetic features of some of its styles. Bouhmid emphasizes two critical points for the re-valorization of the 'aita. First, that the *gasidas* of the 'aita stemmed from the past and that therefore it was impossible to create new poems. Second, that because Morocco had always been a rural society, this sung poetry from the countryside was truly Moroccan (*maghribiyan haqiqiyah*).43

One particularly notable aspect of the program is that some of the most important shikhat were always present in the studio. They were, however, only recognized when Bouhmid would ask them to perform in order to illustrate various points of his discussion with Amarir. The rest of the time the shikhat sat silently opposite Amarir and Bouhmid and away from the camera. In his effort to carry out a scholarly discussion Bouhmid had divested the shikhat of the ‘aita that was their art, posing himself instead as the specialist and custodian of the sung poetry, which he did not embody or perform. Just as Bouhmid’s account set the standard for other specialists to follow, his conduct with these female performers has been emulated by most specialists as the shikhat are called upon as performers, but silenced in the public debates about the ‘aita. Ironically, this objectification of the shikhat that deprives them of their own volition and voice is akin to the othering of Orientalism, which assigns the shikhat meaning on the terms of the Orientalist rather than her own. In a similar manner, Bouhmid, by directing the shikhat at his discretion, himself fabricated an art that was ostensibly, but only partially, theirs.

**The Re-valorization of the ‘Alta**

As the continuation of ideas elaborated by 1960s and 1970s left-wing intellectuals, the re-valorization of the ‘aita should be analyzed in the context of the re-habilitation of folk culture (*thaqafa sha'biya*).44 Because the Orientalist discourse on the ‘aita played a crucial role in the rediscovery of Morocco’s own culture and self image,45 the process of re-valorization and re-habilitation is thus indissociable from that of de-orientalization, since Orientalism was structurd by the relationship between politics, culture, and history.

Overlooked and relegated to the status of folklore (*fann sha'bi*) by the Moroccan and French elites, folk culture had been linked with European tourism or with Europeans’ interest in discovering how Moroccans thought. The collection, cataloguing, and study of folk culture were means for the Protectorate to present itself to the rest of the world as based on humanizing rather than brutal principles, one tactic used to justify its presence.46 As Said observes:

> The Orient existed as a place isolated from the mainstream of European progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce. . . . Theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West most easily associated themselves early in the nineteenth century with ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality. . . . Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or—as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory—taken over.47

In Morocco, the culture that had come to symbolize the backwardness described by Said was that of the rural population and the urban proletariat. Collected and studied by Europeans, this culture was regarded with suspicion and even rejected as the “bastard product of colonization”48 by Moroccan nationalist leaders.49 The re-valorization and rehabilitation of folk culture was therefore dependent on Moroccan politics and on the politics of the Ministère de la Culture as a whole.

The appointment of Mohammed Ach‘ari50—poet, member of the USFP and former President of the UEM—as Ministre de la Culture signaled a moment of change in the political culture of the ministry.51 Unlike those of his predecessors, Ach‘ari’s agenda has focused on the construction of an all-inclusive national culture, encouraging the democratization of culture through the establishment of an artistic infrastructure throughout the country and, most germane to this discussion, on promoting festivals celebrating regional cultures and identities.

The First National Festival of the Art of the ‘Alta (al-mahrajan al-twatan al-hwawal li-fann al-'aita) was organized in Safi by the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication together with the Province de Safi and the Région de Doukkala-'Abda in 2001. The festival was supported by the USFP, the PPS (Partie du Progrès et du Socialisme), and the PSD (Partie Socialiste Démocratique), but ostracized by the Istiqlal (Partie de l’Indépendence), the Islamist PJD (Partie de la Justice et du Développement), the Islamist movement al-Tawhid wa al-Islah (Mouvement Unité et Réforme), and the PADS (Partie de l’Avant-Garde Démocratique et Socialiste). Although the UEM had been the driving force behind the organization of the festival, its support had not been officially acknowledged. Those in favor argued that the festival was a cultural, economic, and social event that would stimulate Safi’s economy, culture, and tourism, that the ‘aita was an artistic and popular expression that needed to be respected, and that if there were something amoral in the
‘aita it was the byproduct of colonialism. Those against it claimed that the festival would encourage amorality in the city of Safi, ruin the reputation of a city of warrior saints (mujahidin), and that the festival, focused on dance and pornography, honored prostitutes. The controversy surrounding the festival led to the prohibition of the shikhat’s dances, an essential element of their performance, and the exclusion of their testimonial from the two-day conference. Furthermore, although three of the most renowned shikhat were honored during the opening ceremony, an invisible but tangible wall separated the specialists from the performers. Similar to what had taken place on Kunuz, the performers were called upon to demonstrate at night what the specialists had discussed among themselves during the day. The festival had thus presented the ‘aita through the bodiless voices of the shikhat and silenced their testimonies.

The Moroccan Narrative

To re-value the ‘aita and turn it into an honorable artistic expression, it has been necessary to change its image, or at least the way in which popular opinion perceives it. As discourses focused on the de-orientalization of the ‘aita and on its presentation in accordance with the Moroccan moral system, three crucial points were reiterated at festivals, conferences, and in the media:

1. The Protectorate has been blamed for the degradation of the ‘aita and for associating it with debauchery, an association caused by the way in which the ‘aita was utilized by the colonizers who, since they could not understand its texts, focused on the dances of the shikhat. Presented as a form of counter-colonial resistance, the revalorization of the ‘aita has thus purified Moroccans of any responsibility for the status of this sung poetry and, more importantly, of its performers. This view is encapsulated on the official website of the city of Safi:

The ‘aita generally finds itself given up to the hasty appraisal of the non-specialists, because its pejorative side hides other aspects and values. The ‘aita, which speaks of the longing and the aspirations, the pleasures as well as the pains, becomes a song-gazette, a refuge... Today, its entertaining and sometimes erotic side takes precedence over the song’s real meaning.53

From this perspective, the superficial estimation of the non-specialist functions as a reminder of the attitudes of the colonizers who mistook this “song-gazette” for erotic entertainment.

2. The re-valorization of the ‘aita has focused on the qasidas, which are said to stem from the past. In this context, the identification of the texts of the qasidas as being old, possibly to ascribe them authority,54 may be viewed as an interpretative construction of the origin of poems that are said to derive from the oral epics of the Beni Hilal tribe, which migrated to North Africa in the tenth and eleventh centuries.55 According to specialists, today we are left only with poetic units or fragments (habbat). Hence, because the poetic decline caused by the Protectorate produced a period of forgetting, the task to restore the poems has focused on the fragments and on the reconstruction of an original or authentic version. Allal Raggoug exhorts:

It’s time that we document the original texts by collecting them from the mouths of their holders so as to investigate and publish them in their final form... This task cannot be accomplished by one researcher; it needs a team of different specialists who can work together so as to establish a new method for publishing these texts.55

The shikhat supposedly lack authority and thus they are ostensibly unqualified for the project of restoration proposed by Raggoug. Instead, the historian calls for the intervention of a team of specialists to extract the texts from the mouths of the performers in order to publish in fixed, written, and thus authoritative form, the final versions of the poems of the ‘aita.

The effort to establish that the qasidas stemmed from ancient times relies on internal evidence of the fragments, characteristics of which include figurative language, narrative episodes, and narrative motifs, similar to what Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs discuss in reference to a Scottish national epic, as a warrant of authenticity.56 For example, according to Najmi, the line “wint mazi murda l-khayl u rjalijaa” (“The source of Mazī”57 [quenches] the thirst of the horses and feet [soldiers]”) dates from the time of the sixth expedition of Hassan I, which took place in the summer of 1877 in the south of Morocco.58 By locating this and other poetic units in the past, the texts of the qasidas are turned into enduring historical objects whose significance rests first and foremost on the unchangeability of the texts.

The same notion has also motivated textual scrutiny, an example of which is explained by Ahmed Aydoun—a musicologist, composer, and the former head of the music division at the Ministère de la Culture—regarding some of the decisions that he made while producing three CDs of the ‘aita issued by the Ministère de la Culture.

We had to make a compromise. We tried to limit, as much as possible, the risk of errors. But there will be errors; there are texts with which everyone
will not agree...I worked between the two [studios] and I arrived each time to rectify what was going on, where the problem was...if there was a repertoire that was not working very well then we decided there with the artists to make changes, I proposed that they change the text, the song... 

If in the past performers judged one another with respect to their knowledge and personal interpretation of a text, this was essentially an insider’s practice that reflected multiple views and traditions. However, Aydoun’s idea of an authentic or correct version, dictated by the cultural politics of the Ministère de la Culture, may affect attitudes to the point of freezing the interpretive freedom of the shikhat.

In Moroccan cultural politics the ‘aita has been the object of claims of cultural authenticity that have been accompanied by efforts to discover or restore authentic pasts as foundations for contemporary identity. In this context, the shikhat are vessels carrying ancient poetry in fragmentary form. Through the intervention of the intellectuals and the specialists of the ‘aita, who can recognize and comprehend historic and aesthetic value, the fragments can be recorded, preserved, and perhaps reassembled into their full form. In this context, the re-valorization is grounded on discourses based more on national political aspirations than on artistic practices.

3. Re-orienting the shikhat, or changing their popular perception has been crucial for the re-valorization of the ‘aita. In this context, the discourse produced by the revalorization has simultaneously presented the shikhat as unsung heroes—comparing them with bards, chanteuses or blues singers—and as women whose everyday life is not too different from that of others—emphasizing their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers.

According to Najmi:

We dismissed (rafadna) from the beginning any mix-up (khalti) between the honorable (i’tibari) and professional status of the shikhat and the sexual trade (al-mutajara al-jinsiya) of the body that prostitutes practice.

The re-orientation of the shikhat has aimed at dispelling the notion of these women as dishonorable performers by focusing on sexuality or, more precisely, by erasing their sexuality and advancing them as national symbols.

Women have often been the ground on which discourses to construct a national identity and, consequently, a national honor are built. Notable elements of national honor, just as family honor, are based on ideas and practices that reside in women’s behavior. Debates over prostitution, real and metaphoric, are thus central to notions of national honor and identity.

In the re-valorization of the ‘aita as a national heritage, the shikhat are transformed into a medium through which the patriarchal nation articulates its desires and fears while asserting its honor and pride in the face of the Protectorate. Hence, in the process of re-valorization these women performers have come to embody an arena in which issues of sexuality, narration, and national identity are debated.

Orientalism and Patriarchy

Orientalism and indigenous patriarchy should not be considered as two separate issues. Therefore it is essential to analyze what men intellectuals and specialists selected from colonialist thought and why they did so. The process of re-valorizing the ‘aita had been motivated by the fact that this is the principal music-poetic practice of the population of the Atlantic plains, a rural population that has been politically, economically, and culturally marginalized. The 1998 ascension of the USFP to the head of the government marked a historic change in the political and cultural life of Morocco. As members of a party whose support was most significant among the rural population and the urban lower classes, the intellectuals and the politicians of the USFP were no longer associated with the urban elites but instead anchored in the rural milieu. It was this change that prompted folk culture to reemerge at the center of a political and cultural debate, for the new class of intellectuals was eager to prove that culture was not just an urban or an elitist phenomenon.

For many, the re-valorization of the ‘aita came to embody a political, cultural, and moral struggle. Through the ‘aita, the men intellectuals and specialists could validate their moral worth and their authority through two sources of honor: glorious deeds and the control of women. According to Steven C. Caton:

What is important for our analysis of the oral tradition is Meeker’s concept of the glorious deed of honor. He argues that this concept contains an implicit logic or structure for action. For example, it implies the concept of the Other against whom a glorious deed is performed as well as the Other who will recognize and acknowledge the honorableness of the deed.

The re-valorization and the incorporation of the ‘aita into the national heritage exemplifies Meeker’s concept of the glorious deed of honor, since it defines colonialism as the Other against whom the glorious deed is performed, and the urban elites as the Other who needs to recognize and acknowledge the honorableness of the action. The intellectuals and
specialists of the ‘aita have thus validated their moral worth by performing a glorious deed: the re-appropriation of the ‘aita from the colonizers and from the way in which they used it, leading to the restoration of the ‘aita in its supposed authentic form and function in society. This glorious deed of honor, however, could have never been fully accomplished without attempting to transform the image of the shikhat from being associated with hshuma to hshumiya.

In Morocco, for individuals to earn respect they must personify the ideals of a moral system defined in adherence to the principles of honor (sharaf) and shame (hasham). Generosity, honesty, sincerity, loyalty to friends, keeping one’s word, pride, self-control, courage, physical strength, reason, glorious deeds, and the control of women are all elements of the code of honor for men. As long as men demonstrate these qualities they are entitled to the respect that validates their moral worth and, consequently, to the authority that is generally associated with having these virtues. Although women share some of the same values, their lower status does not permit them to realize these ideal forms of behavior; thus, one way for them to access honor is to show deference to those in authority. That is where, similarly to what Lila Abu Lughod has argued for the Awdal ‘Ali, the concept of hasham becomes central. In Moroccan daily parlance the term hshuma refers to shame and it is used to reprimand someone who is acting inappropriately, while the term hshumiya refers to a woman who is modest and who avoids any behavior that publicly suggests her to be disobedient and insubordinate to her husband or male kin. In this context, a woman’s denial of sexuality is inevitably critical to deference. Women who comply with the values inherent to hasham are not only honorable but are also part of the honor code.

It is critical also to stress that hasham is tied to the social concept of ‘gal (reason) and what is defined as the self-control of an honorable person.68 Hasham and ‘gal, in fact, are inherent to the notion of the ideal woman, since the adjective ‘qal describes a woman who is well behaved, modest, and who knows when to speak and when to listen.69 In other words, a woman who is ‘qal is a woman who knows her place in society. In a negative sense a woman who lacks ‘qal can be described as “forceful” (gawiya) or as a whore (qahba). Whereas qahba refers specifically to sexuality, gawiya refers to a woman who, although she is in a position of dependency, is judged to act with inappropriate assertiveness.70 Poetry is a form of symbolic power. The verbal ability of a poet allows him to reach high status in a community, but, social ascendency is problematic for women. In re-valorizing of the ‘aita it has been necessary to strip its interpreters of their authority, to re-orient them and to reintegrate them into a code of honor which the male intellectuals and specialists need to negotiate their own value and that of the patriarchal nation in the face of the Protectorate.

Conclusion

In Orientalism Said observes how Kuchuk Hanem never spoke of herself, never represented her emotions, presence, or history; it was Flaubert who spoke for her, represented her, and told his readers in what way she was “typically Oriental.”71 In the revalorization of the ‘aita, the shikhat have also remained silent. In re-orienting these performers the male intellectuals and specialists speak for them, represent them, and tell Moroccans how the shikhat embody the national heritage. The strategy of reversal employed in the process of re-valorization may have remained locked within the same logic. If self-essentialization, as noted by Dirlik, may serve the cause of mobilization against Western domination, it also consolidates Western ideological hegemony by internalizing the historical assumptions of Orientalism.72

Although it can be argued that in the past few years a handful of the best known shikhat have been included in television programs devoted to music, have participated in a number of public debates, and that their daily lives have been portrayed in documentaries,73 it is also critical to understand that their role has been overwhelmingly symbolic. Refashioned to suit cultural-political agendas and turned into objects of folklore, the shikhat break their silence to replicate the values upheld by the men intellectuals and specialists of the ‘aita. As shikha Khadija Margoum observes:

A shikha is like a horse, she must always be armored. If she is like a horse she should never do something that is bad in front of her loved ones [i.e. the audience], she should be ready to do things right, to interpret [the ‘aita] well, people must see a beautiful being in her. When a shikha takes off her dfina [long muslin tunic with long sleeves worn on top of the qamis] and she is left only with the qamis [long tunic of light material worn underneath the dfina], people say that a real shikha must never take off the dfina, that she must remain as a horse; these are the little things that cause a shikha to take good care of herself and not to make errors in front of the public or other people. She has to have straight conduct, take care of the aita and of her audience. She has to know what to say, dress nicely, treat people nicely, and show respect for herself.74

A performance of the shikhat is traditionally associated with the fantasia or tburida. This event, which takes place in a long field encircled by the
spectators, consists in the free running of the Arabian horses that are abruptly stopped as they reach the edge of the field. It is at this moment that the riders shoot their long rifles into the air. An important part of the fantasia, however, is also the display of the horses, which are adorned with beautifully decorated saddles. The male horsemen take great pride in the horses that symbolize their honor. The association between the shikhat and the fantasia is reiterated in lyrics, in the images used for album covers, and concert promotions, and in the course of performance. By presenting themselves as horses whose beauty and proper conduct upholds the honor of men, the shikhat also embody the established image of respectable women whose upright behavior grounds the honor of her male kin, her family, and society as a whole.

As the voice of the ‘aita had to be linked to the chaste female body, the shikhat have interiorized a new performance practice of the ‘aita in its staging at festivals or on television. At the same time, however, the number of shikhat performing the ‘aita has dramatically diminished as an increasing number of male performers have become the voice of a new pop form of the ‘aita, which, ironically enough, seems to require the silent image of the shikhat for validation.

Notes

1 I have adopted a highly simplified system of transliteration for modern standard Arabic and colloquial Moroccan Arabic. All diacritics have been omitted except for the ayn (‘). Since so many French transliterations in Moroccan have become standard, I have chosen to employ these transliterations for place names, tribes, and proper names as they more commonly appear in writing. Spellings used by other authors are retained when I refer to or quote from their publications. Unless otherwise noted, translations from French and Arabic are my own.

2 This essay is based on field research conducted in Morocco from September 2000 to December 2004. Research was funded by the Fulbright Foundation, the American Institute of Maghreb Studies and the Jewish Foundation for the Education of Women. Excerpts from my field notes are given in italics.

3 The notion of sexuality that I employ here is not one of a biological drive but of a social construction that Foucault sees as a discourse, as a set social practices constructed in relation with other discourses. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).


6 “ya baba ila kunti ‘bdii ya sharrajli ‘awdi a wldi wa ra nabdi ‘bdii man ‘andi wldi wldi radia b-l-maktub u dhb rkab wa sidi ra bikt ‘la frq l-hbab ya baba ra nabki ma nbar wa nsktu wa majbat wa sidi ra shalla naktarak a wldi wldi ra fl manana wa dial l- hbab wa sidi ra l-baqi mulama.”


8 Karin van Nieuwkerk, A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 22.

9 “Ce que nous tenons à souligner chez ces prostituées militaires, c’est leur incroyable endurance. Après avoir marché toute une journée en plein soleil, Presque sans repos et certainement sans nourriture, car les mehallas en marche ne mangent pas, elles dansent encore le soir sous le tentes où elles sont invitées et finissent la nuit dans les oeuvres de l’amour, sans que la moidre fatigue se manifeste en elles.” Christian Houël, Maroc: Mariage, adultere, prostitution—Anthologie (Paris: H. Daragon, 1912), 138–39.

10 Beginning in 1880, the image of “traditional” Moroccan was presented by official and unofficial writings in French provided a template for the colonial state. See Edmund Burke, “The Creation of the Moroccan Colonial Archive, 1880–1930,” History and Anthropology 18.1 (March 2007): 2.

11 Burke, 2.


14 Mathieu and Maury, 76. Chaque ruelle participe au vacarme, dans l’une quelles prostituées chantent d’une voix aiguë en s’accompagnant de la tarîja. The ta‘rija here refers to a single-skin clay goblet-shaped hand-drum characteristically played by the shikhat.

15 For a different portrait of a corporation of shikhat in the city of Marrakech see Azouzou Mammeri, “La corporation des chikhatés à Marrakech,” L’Atlas (numéro special, 1930).

16 “Comme l’étaient toutes les chikhaté jusqu’à la colonisation, où une loi
coloniale les a obligés à ne chanter que dans les bordels. L'amalgame chihka-prostituée est venu de là avant tout." Maris Daif, "’Aida: Destin d’une chikha” TelQuel (19-25 July, 2003): 30. The article includes an interview with Hassan Najmi.

17 There are two types of written Arabic sources that Moroccan researchers have used to establish the presence and role of the shikhat in Morocco. The first consists of the writings of scholars and historiographers such as Al-Hassan Ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Fasi (also known as Leo Africanus [ca. 1483-1554]) and ‘Abd al-Rahman Ibn Zaydan (1873-1946). The second consists of the correspondence and other documents of courtiers, qaids (rural administrators), pashas (civil or military authorities), sultans, or princes. Regarding the first source type, Moroccan researchers have argued that: (1) due to the elitist views of Arab scholars, the shikhat and other rural performers are denigrated, and (2) that the presence of the shikhat can be established by considering that other titles such as l’abat (a group of women who play), zaqnyat (female street entertainers), or ’aiyatat (female singers of the ’alta) were used to indicate the presence of the same female performers.


20 Najmi, i:172-74.


23 Nieuwkerk, 29-32.


25 Excerpt from an interview with Karbou’a, Rabat, 2 July 2002.

26 Excerpt from an interview with Karbou’a, Rabat, 2 July 2002.

27 Schuyler, 65.


32 Schuyler, 97.


34 Said employs the term “Orientalism” to describe the Western approach to the Orient, and the discipline by which the Orient was approached systematically as a topic of learning, discovery and practice. In addition, he also uses the term to designate the “collection of dreams, images and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies East of the dividing line.” (73)


36 “Nous allons connaître le Maroc libertin et jouisseur. Ce ‘visage’ est agréable à regarder, mais que de fard sur le joues, que de khol sous les yeux, que de bijoux vrais ou faux scintillent autour de lui ; quelle profusion de couleurs vives et quelle surcharge d’ornements parmi les parfums anesthésiants qui s’en dégagent ! Et j’ai bien peur, hélas ! que là-dessous, il n’y ait qu’une pauvre et mince figure, pâle et frêle de vivre, qui se consomme à poursuivre un bonheur sensuel impossible. Dans les yeux, assez médoceres qu’il a chânté, il y a toujours une cruelle qui se refusait obstinément à rien accorder à un soupirant éternellement éconduit . . . Voilà donc cette musique si attirante et si décevant à la fois . . . Ce rire et cette joie furent et éclatent dans le rythme, rythme étourdissant, rythme enchanteur qui endort les coups et les peines; rythme-vampire dont les ailes s’agitént pour anesthésier la douleur causée pas sa morsure fatale.” Alexis Chottin, “Les visages” de la musique marocaine (Rabat: Imprimerie Nouvelle, 1928), 11.

37 Said, 3.

38 Excerpt from an interview with Mohammed Bouhmid, Khouribga, 13 April 2001.

39 The USFP was particularly influential in the 1970s when it became the focus of opposition to the King Hassan II (1929–99). In 1998, Hassan II asked the USFP and the Istiqlal to form a coalition government in which the USFP was the leading party. Although the USFP has lost its premiership, it continues to have a role in the
De-orientalizing the ‘Aita and Re-orienting the Shikhat
government. The UEM was created in 1962 as an institutional organization and has had a determining impact on the development of Moroccan culture. The members of the UEM, writers who mainly use Arabic, and to a lesser extent French and Berber, as their expressive idioms, have always defended the specificity of Moroccan culture, privileged political militancy, and regarded culture as a fundamental element in the ideological and political struggle. See Amina Touzani, La culture et la politique culturelle au Maroc (Casablanca: Croisée des Chemins, 2003), 112-13.

40 These intellectuals were for the most part associated with the cultural/literary review Anfas/Souffles (1966-72), whose aim is to redefine national culture and to align the cultural with the political was strongly influenced by Franz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth.

41 Roland Barthes was a professor at the Université Mohammad V Agdal-Rabat from 1969 to 1970.

42 When discussing the ‘aita, the term qaṣida indicates a strophic poem in colloquial Arabic with a number of lines of irregular length, with verses that may not be divided into two hemistiches, and that do not necessarily have a single meter or rhyme scheme.

43 Mohammed Bouhmid, interview by Omar Amarir, Kana, RTM, 1992.

44 In Morocco thaqqafa sha’b’ia (from sha’b, folk or people) refers to both folk and popular culture, indicating, as suggested by Ochoa for Latin America, “the difficulty of establishing a complete or at least a clear separation between tradition and modernity.” Ana María Ochoa, “García Márquez, Macedonio, and the Soundscapes of Vallenato,” Popular Music 24.2 (2005): 221. Throughout this discussion thaqqafa sha’b’ia is translated as “folk culture” and is used to indicate what Moroccans identify as that culture which is based on orality and on colloquial Arabic or Berber language.


46 Mohamed Ouakkis, Anomie institutionnelle et politique au Maroc: Un essai d’interprétation socio-politique (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2001), 437. Also see Burke.


49 The nationalist movement, which in practice began in 1925, constructed cultural continuity in defense of national identity through selected Oriental and Occidental ideas relating to the notion of Andalusia. Consequently, its learned culture associated with the imperial cities of northern Morocco, with the urban elite, with writing, and with classical Arabic—the culture that had in fact suffered the most under colonization exactly because it did not reflect the image of Moroccan backwardness—began to be promoted as national culture. See John P. Halstead, Rebirth of a Nation: The Origins and Rise of Moroccan Nationalism, 1912-1944


53 Raggoug, 18.


55 The spring of Mazi is located in the Chichaoua region on the road between Marrakech and Essaouira.

56 Najmi, 1:171.

57 Excerpt from an interview with Ahmed Aydoun, Rabat, 30 March 2002.


59 Throughout Ramadan of 2003, al-Iltihad al-Isthiraki published a series of articles dedicated to the ‘aita and its interpreters which portrayed the shikhat according to this discourse.

60 Najmi, 2: 61.

61 Beth Baron, Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 40-56.

62 Yeşenoglu, 121-26.

Alessandra Ciucci
Although rarely shown in tourist advertisements or in the images of the refined coffee table publications on the country’s splendors, the 2004 statistics published by the Haut Commissariat au Plan show that rural Morocco is where roughly 45% of the population of more than 30 million people resides, and where many more Moroccan migrants continue to have strong ties. Rural Morocco is quite different from the Morocco of the imperial cities, bastions of a refined urban culture often associated with the Andalusian past and promoted as the country’s culture par excellence. The history and the uneven development of rural Morocco—weighed down by a political and administrative structure characterized by corruption, economic instability, and an inadequate infrastructure—have fostered tension and disparity between urban and rural populations and caused rural Morocco to come to symbolize what is real and traditional on the one hand, and what is unrefined and archaic on the other.

68 Abu-Lughod, 108.
70 The Awdal ‘Ali also use gwiyya to describe a woman whose assertiveness is considered as inappropriate. Abu-Lughod, 109.
71 Said, 6.
74 Excerpt from an interview with Khadija Margoum, Safi, 5 July 2002.

In L’argent (1891), the plot of which takes place in 1864–69, Émile Zola (1840–1902) depicts the meteoric rise and catastrophic collapse of the fictional Parisian Banque Universelle. The bank is founded on Antoine Saccard’s speculation of fabulous wealth to be unearthed through French industry in the Levant based on information provided by Georges Hamelin and his sister, Caroline, of whom Zola writes:

And from the smallest nooks, from the silent deserts as from the great cities, she had brought back the same admiration for inexhaustible, luxuriant nature, the same anger against stupid and bad people. Such natural riches disdained or wasted! . . . the ignorance in which millions of men still stagnate even today, as idiot children stopped in their growth. Long ago, the coast had proven too small; the cities had touched each other; now life has gone toward the Occident, it seems that one crosses an immense abandoned cemetery. No schools, no roads, the worst of governments, justice sold, an excorable administrative bureaucracy, taxes too heavy, absurd laws, laziness, fanaticism; without counting the continual shocks of civil wars, massacres that carried off entire villages. . . . And in these depopulated plains, these desert passes that our railroads will cross, you will see a resurrection, yes! fields reclaimed, roads and canals established, new cities rising from the ground, life at last returning as it returns to an ill body when new blood is stirred to circulate in impoverished veins . . .

This is a paradigmatic Orientalist description of the Levant as discussed in Edward W. Said’s Orientalism. In Said’s analysis, canonic nineteenth- and twentieth-century French Orientalist texts cast the Orient as a once-great land of fabulous wealth now fallen to lazy and ignorant inhabitants, people who, without justice or right government, live in a state of continual lawlessness. In a heroic mission civilisatrice ["civilizing mission"], the modernization and industry of France would purportedly revive the ailing East and provide what Zola’s Saccard proclaims to be “the blow of the all-powerful wand whose science and speculation could strike this old sleeping land to awaken it.”

PART II

IMAGINING THE ORIENT

The translation of the phrase "la femme de la mer" is "una mujer de la playa," which means "a woman of the beach." This phrase is used to describe the female characters in the novel, who are depicted as both beautiful and desirable, yet also distant and elusive. The author uses this phrase to create a sense of longing and desire, as the narrator is constantly drawn to the women of the beach but unable to fully capture their essence. This reflects the broader theme of the novel, which is the exploration of the complexities of desire and attraction between men and women in a setting that is both exotic and unfamiliar. The beach serves as a symbol of this desire, representing both the allure and the dangers of the unknown. The phrase also serves as a metonym for the broader theme of the novel, which is the exploration of the themes of love, desire, and attraction in a setting that is both foreign and unfamiliar.