Oral Knowledge in Berber Women's Expressions of the Sacred

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Introduction

Any discussion of "world literature" (or, by extension, world culture), as Mohanty points out in his interview, will involve a reconsideration of the conventional hierarchy between written and oral cultures. In this essay, drawing on my own ongoing research in Morocco, I focus on one particular case where orality is a central feature of culture. My account is intended to help us understand how complex orality is and how it functions in relation to religion, ritual, and art. Berber women, generally rural and illiterate, express religion and other aspects of their life experiences through channels that are very close to their daily activities and that make sense for them: orality, rituality and art. These ancestral means of expression have been used by Berber women throughout the history of Morocco to record individual, but also national and universal, dreams and concerns. Although these expressions fall outside the realm of conventional knowledge, the various individual, communal and social functions they have had challenge received ways of thinking about women's orality and cast doubt on (to borrow Mohanty's words) our "babu-like faith" in the inherent "superiority of writing over orality and urban perspectives over rural ones."

I would like to analyze Berber women's orality as a form of female knowledge. In so doing, I aim to point to the "exclusive" nature of what we understand as "knowledge" and call for a redefinition of knowledge that would make it more flexible and inclusive by transcending the socioeconomic realm of urban spaces.

Supremacy of Orality in Moroccan Culture

The medium of orality (as opposed to that of writing) is a fundamental component of Moroccan culture, which differentiates it from the mainstream cultures of the Global North. For example, oral blessings, curses, insults, and profanity are more consequential in Moroccan culture than in Western cultures, and conversation is perceived as a means of bonding between people at both the affective and transactional levels.1 Further, the Qur'an is learned by rote, and the call for prayer is publicly announced five times a day orally. Indeed, the power of *lkelma/awal* (the oral word in Moroccan Arabic and Berber, respectively) is evident in many deep aspects of Moroccan culture, such as marriage and business contracts, and legacies after death. Up to the 1950s, such contracts and legacies were concluded orally.

Since Morocco's independence in 1956, a growing number of Moroccan writers

and intellectuals have started to reclaim orality as a necessary nourishing component of written literature. Two important texts are Driss Charibi's novel *La Civilisation, Ma Mère!...(1972)* and Mohamed Khair Eddine's novel *Légende et Vie d'Agoun'chich* (1984). Both novels highlight orality as a defining substratum that characterizes Moroccan postcolonial Arabophone and Francophone literature.

Orality is also a medium of expressing the self and its reactions to its immediate and larger contexts. As such, orality becomes "oral literature," a genre that is strong and alive in Morocco. For example, oral storytellers are often seen in the market places, cafes, but also in homes; and centuries- old poetry is still recited among literate and illiterate people. These "social writings" (Ong 1982; Henige 1988, Folley 1991) are receiving more and more attention within the trend of the new historicism, which is closely linked to realism and supported by psychological and sociological accounts of everyday facts. These "writings" reflect genuine skills that are no less powerful than writing skills, as Chetrit (to appear) states:

> [...] Orality displays complex cognitive processes skills in the minds of the illiterate as well as of the literate, and that it is central in every kind of knowledge, because of the elaborating and retrieving skills it requires. It also necessitates cognitive and personal skills, which are not totally innate but are acquired from formal and informal training.

Oral literature is full of the mysteries that are dismissed by Western mo- dernity: demons and other supernatural agents intervening in the lives of humans, ecstatic dreams, miracle cures, and superstition. This literature is continually presented, represented, and exhibited in a recursive way as the images and symbols constituting the core system of Moroccan cultural themes tend to recur in an infinite number of distinct and original expres- sions, exhibitions, and texts. The representations in oral literature are often combinations of these cultural themes. The symbolic formations and the systems of representations that are transmitted by oral literature are so re- vealing that they may be qualified as a new subversive genre (Sadiqi 2003).

Oral literature falls outside the "official" literature in Morocco and is both more complex and less accessible than it. This literature is in most cases produced by poor illiterate men and women who do not have an official voice. It is marginalized because it does not meet the "modern" needs of Moroccan society, among which using the written medium.

Attitude to orality in Morocco is ambivalent. Orality is perceived as both a "degenerate," "vulgar" and "lower class" medium of expression, as well as a powerful symbol identity and "authenticity." The negative attitude to orality originates in the fact that it is transmitted by non-prestigious mother tongues (Berber and Moroccan Arabic), and the positive attitude originates in the fact that orality is what distinguishes Moroccan culture from Western literate cultures in

cross-cultural encounters.

The Berber Language and Women as the Backbone of Orality in Morocco

Orality is associated more with women than with men in Morocco. Women keep households together, raise children, transmit and recreate the tradi- tions and values that characterize Moroccan culture. Moroccan women are conscious of the significance of this role and thus use oral literature to both carry out their social duties and express their inner selves (Sadiqi 2003). As orality is also related to illiteracy and as the majority of illiterates in Mo- rocco are women, the latter express their inner self, transmit various types of knowledge to their children, and communicate with the world outside home exclusively through the oral medium. The written medium is gener- ally perceived by these women as alien; and even when the written lan- guages (Standard Arabic and French2) are used orally in the audio-visual media, non-literate women do not readily identify with these languages.3

Moroccan society is regulated by a deep and pervasive space-based patriarchy (Mernissi 1975) which distances women and their modes of expression from the public spheres of authority. In such a context, critical assumptions, historical circumstances, and ideologies have not been sympathetic to oral literature in general and women's literature in particular. This fact has deeply affected the ability of men and women to appreciate female oral literature. The way Moroccan women express themselves (orally or in writing) needs to be seen against the general socio-cultural context in which they live. Many women were and are still misunderstood and, hence, distanced from canon-building; these women emerged at the margin of Moroccan society and were (and are) doubly "other": as women and as individuals who live a peculiar tension between the oral and the written mediums.

As such, women's orality highlights the tension between the written and the oral discourses in Morocco and makes ordinary "trivial" texts problematize canonical texts by claiming that just as women have a specific way of writing (in Cixous' sense), they have a specific way of "speaking" and "telling" (Kapchan 1996). This female way of speaking displaces the laws of both gender and genre in the Moroccan context.

Orality is also related to the two mother tongues in Morocco (Berber and Moroccan Arabic). Indeed, the unique place of orality in Morocco is largely due to the fact that the two mother tongues used in this country (Moroccan Arabic and Berber) are oral4. The tight link between non-written mother tongues and orality positions the latter at the center of the Moroccan speech community's sensory

experience and makes of it a valuable source of information and a strong locus of cultural values. As such, orality is a powerful system of communication that deeply shapes the way visual and non-visual representations of Moroccan cultural roles.

The place of Berber in Moroccan oral literature is central given the historicity of this language. Efforts are being made at the highest official level to preserve Berber oral literature. Berber is very much of a "female" language (Sadiqi 2003). The contexts in which this language is used are very different from the ones in which Standard Arabic is used, and, hence, the social meanings associated with the former are different from the ones associated with the latter. Unlike Standard Arabic, Berber is neither associated with politics nor with religion in the Moroccan socio-cultural context. The fact that no holy book has ever been written in Berber removes this language from the religious political sphere. The relationship between Berber and religion is explained by Brett and Fentress (1996) in historical terms. According to these authors, the first Berber religion in North Africa was based on Punic dual deities: the male god *Baal* and the female goddess *Tanit* and, as a result of this dual character of religious symbolism, ancient Berber societies were organized into public (or male) space which was the domain of external politics, and private (or female) space which was the domain of internal traditions. Interestingly, although these domains were distinct, they did not oppose each other. With the advent of Islam, a typically monotheist religion, Berber societies had to suppress their female characteristics in the public sphere of authority in order to form part of the (male) world of Islam. The Berber female aspect of ancient Moroccan societies became gradually engulfed in magic and saint veneration. According to Brett and Fentress, present-day Moroccan women's participation in mainstream religion is rather marginal and is often symbolized in female rites and rather "unorthodox" or even "heretical" practices of magic, sorcery, and ancestor/saint veneration. This is evident in the cultural deep-rooted association of women with the *Zawias* (religious sects) and *marabouts* (saints). These practices hindered women's public access to the official language and religion and relegated them to unsanctioned domains, a fact which made women open to constant ambiguity.

Although still poorly understood, women in Morocco are deeply associated with the survival of Berber language and culture. In spite of its disadvantaged position in the Moroccan linguistic market, Berber has managed to survive from pre-historic times to the present-day, thanks to three major factors: Berber's status as a mother tongue, female illiteracy, and the use of French in the Moroccan educational system. As a mother tongue, Berber possesses the dynamism and vitality which characterize this type of languages. The mother tongue status of Berber makes it closer than written languages to people's everyday concerns and worries. Further, being a rural and oral, Berber is used by a great portion of rural

and illiterate women. Additionally, the dissemination of education in the French language played a significant role in stripping learned languages such as Standard Arabic and French from religion in the minds of Moroccans. This greatly helped enhance Berber in the face of Islam-linked Standard Arabic.

The factors which helped maintain Berber in Morocco are directly related to women: women, most of whom are illiterate even now, are the ones who first speak Berber to their children, and hence transmit the cultural values of Berber culture. This makes Berber a female language. This does not mean that men do not use this language; it only means that they use it less than women. As a language of cultural identity, home, the family, village affiliation, intimacy, traditions, orality, and nostalgia to a remote past, Berber perpetuates attributes that are considered female in the Moroccan culture. The absence of Berber from the powerful public key institutional areas reinforces these attributes.

The contexts in which Berber is used indicate that this language is undergoing a conscious process of feminization on the part of mainstream language ideology. In other words, the situations in which Berber is used are more and more women-linked than men-linked. The constant reference of mainstream views in the political parties and the media to Berber as "indigenous," "private," and "traditional" reinforce its feminization. Although the Berber population in Morocco cuts across the social variables of geographical origin, class, level of education, job opportunity, language skills, and marital status, a female Berber monolingual is allowed the least chances of social promotion. Illiteracy and a heavily gendered patriarchal social system render the situations in which Berber is used socially less advantageous than the ones in which Standard Arabic is used. Again, it is not the languages themselves that are "responsible" for the reduced spectrum of chances but their situations of use. It is situations of use that attribute specific social meanings to particular languages. The fact that topics discussed in Berber are in the majority of cases associated to home and hearth limit the use of this language.

Women's Orality in the Making of Moroccan History

Although quasi-absent from the official recordings of Moroccan history, recent writings in social history reveal women's roles in the making of to- day's Morocco. In addition to recent archeological findings, strong texts like Ibn Khaldun's *Al-Muqaddimah,* gap-reading, and women's written and oral texts I have been gathering, I used the tools I know best: linguistic method- ology and ethnographic study. Linguistic methodology consists in Berber data gathering, transliterating, translating into English and analysis; and ethnographic study in spending time with informants and allocating space for observation. The fact that Berber is my native language positions me as both an insider and an outsider in the

process of data gathering, analysis and observation. Overall, the methodology used in preparing this chapter includes both reception and performance in examining women's textual practices from the perspective of consumers, users and readers.

Historically, Berber women have been associated with freedom, boldness, and political leadership. Although it is hard for many people today to conceive of such broad female attributes, Kahina, whose name means "priestess" or "prophetess," was an outstanding Berber queen, notorious army leader and warrior who was born 600s CE in the Aures Mountains in Algeria. Kahina succeeded in temporally holding conquering Arab armies who sought to introduce Islam to the local Berber peoples. According to Marçais (2003), the Berbers of the seventh century were not religiously homogeneous. Christian, Jewish and pagan, Berbers co-existed in what is now Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya, and Kahina emerged as a war-leader who could rally everybody during this tense period, and proved amazingly successful at leading the tribes to join together against their invaders. Her reputation as a strategist and sorceress had spread, and she managed to briefly unite the tribes of Ifrikya, the Berber name for North Africa, ruling them and leading them in battle for five years before her final defeat. Kahina took her own life, and sent her sons to the Arab camp with instructions that they adopt Islam and make common cause with the Arabs. Ultimately, Kahina's sons participated in invading Europe and the subjugation of Spain and Portugal.

Berber women's boldness constituted a natural mix in their orality (Marçais 2003). Kahina's speeches and poems were all destroyed after her death, only a short poem titled "My Berber Horse" has survived:

Run, Run my Berber Horse! Never defeated by Arabs Will you forever be!

Berber female leadership relies more on recognized personal power and self-determination than on institutionalized authority – hence the lack of continuity in this respect. Berber women's orality has also served as an instrument of language loyalty. Berber women have shown loyalty to their mother tongues and the cultures they carry since time immemorial. A case in point is Tunisia which, being the closest of the Maghribian countries to the Middle East, had its indigenous populations quickly Arabized to the extent that today, only 1% of them speaks Berber. Yet, the Tunisian pop singer, Saliha, achieved tremendous fame in the 1950s with her song "With the Shepherds" in which Djebel Wislat, a region where Berbers lived in mountains and fiercely resisted the Turkish Beylical army in the middle of the eighteenth century is invoked. The song retraces the pains of exile by the Wislatis in diaspora. The women especially suffered humiliation and marginalization. Selma, a woman's name, symbolizes the Waslati women who were forced into exile, poverty, and marginalization as the following excerpt indicates (Sadiqi et al, 2009):

With the Sherpherds

My child, my beloved At daybreak fell lost O, Selma, my dear! Fate has decided

That people can become black

After being whitePatience, Djebel Wislat Patience, mount of death Misfortune will assail you Exile is our fateDestiny, maledictionOr desire for escapeShall I have peace one day? Or of suffering shall I die!

Language loyalty developed into militancy for language and cultural rights in Algeria and Tunisia. A strong means to pursue vision and engage in public militancy for the revival of Berber, orality started to gain center stage in public life since the mid-1980s in Morocco and Algeria. Fatima Tabamraant (Sadiqi et al 2009) is one of the icons of this revival. A staunch supporter of the writing and teaching of Berber, she never misses an occasion to exhort women to seek literacy in Berber.

Orality came to play a significant role in Morocco's struggle for independence (Sadiqi et al, 2009). Work on the evaluation of the theoretical assertions about the constructed nature of the nation-state in the concrete historical context of Morocco is still lacking. Women's oral texts in this regard bring new analytical methods from social movement theory to the study of colonialism, anti-colonial protest, and nation-building, which clarifies the process by which history, culture, religion, and oral tradition were integrated in the construction of modern Moroccan national identities. This method contextualizes the Moroccan case *vis-à-vis* concurrent anti-colonial struggles in other parts of Africa. It also analyzes the roles played by subaltern groups (Berbers, Jews, and women) at the inception of an Arab-Islamic nationalist discourse that subsequently contributed to a political order marginalizing them. Women's oral sources in this respect are primary sources. The colonizers themselves were aware of the importance of such texts as the collections of Berber poetry gathered by Arsene Roux and his collaborators during the 1930s and 1940s show.

The spoken and chanted words of poets like Tawgrat Walt Issa N'ait Sokhman are indeed a site of historical exploration. Not only were her poems instrumental in exhorting young men to fight under colonization but many of them have been transmitted throughout the decades that followed the independence of Morocco and immortalized in popular songs and testimonies that today's social historians use. Such texts are crucial for the rewriting of the history of Morocco as they highlight armed and non-armed resistance in the country. The best-known resistances are associated with male leaders like Mohamed Abdelkrim Khattabi and Allal Al-Fassi, but almost nothing is known of women's resistance to colonization apart from oral texts and testimonies that have been largely

marginalized from mainstream resistance literature (Chafik 1982).

Berber women also use orality to invest the powerful field of spirituality and religious authority. Beverly Mack (2004) argues that even those Muslim women who acquire knowledge through the written word often tend to favor oral means of imparting and (re)constructing knowledge. This is certainly true in the case of some Berber women who managed to impose their authority in *zawiyas* (religious brotherhoods) and mosques (Elboudrari 1993; Rausch 2006). A residue of a rich repertoire of women's Sufi didactic poetry is a type of oral texts that women still sing in the south of Morocco. Other women in the region achieved social power through the ability to heal physical and mental illness.

Berber Women's Oral Genres

Although powerful in its immediate location and the deep psyche of the inhabitants of Morocco, Berber female orality should be understood within the overall Arab-Muslim patriarchy where women's voices pertain to the realm of the private (as opposed to the public). Throughout the history of Morocco, political and social power has been constructed mainly on the basis of written culture, and Islam as Scripture was zealously guarded by those who administered political and social power. In this context, orality became reduced to "listening" and "obeying" and reading and writing became the exclusive prerogative of the ruling elite, as opposed to the masses, especially women. Consequently, orality in Muslim culture has systematically been relegated to the footnotes of official history. Serious endeavors have recently been made in the fields of women's studies and social history to valorize women's voices (Sadiqi et al 2009) and various authors have questioned the public/private dichotomy in Berber communities (Schaffer 1985). These and similar endeavors are in highlighting Berber women's oral knowledge and problematizing the whole concept of knowledge, making it also female, creative and innovative.

Berber women's oral knowledge is ancestral, versatile and omnipresent. It is stored in poetry, songs, folktales, and public oratory; it is hidden in Arabophone and Francophone Moroccan literature; it is part and parcel of Moroccan identity. Of the various Berber female genres, four are presented below: poems/songs, folktales, public oratory, and family/cultural oratory.

Poems/Songs

Berber female poets have always existed. Mririda N'Ait Atiq, for example, is an illiterate monolingual poet whose poetry was recorded around 1927 by a French scholar.5 Mririda N'Ait Atiq expressed love at a time when women had no public voice and when expressions of love, even by men, was shunned:

In the nights bathed by the moonHe will call me Mririda, Mririda,The soft nickname that is so dear to me For him I will release my sharp 'zrarit', My strident, prolonged 'zrarit',That men admire and women envy.

Although these lines express Mririda's desire to please "men," the real subject matter is that of self, a rather unconventional theme within the overall Moroccan culture. She also says of a man who abandoned her:

He took back my jewels,Did he ever give them me?You who once were my mother-in-law, Say to your son thatEven his name I do not recall.

In these lines Mririda voices her dissent and condemnation of a husband who exploited and then divorced her. She accepted the divorce as a regain of freedom. The fact that Mririda addresses her mother-in-law, another woman, attests to the notorious power that mother-in-law has in Moroccan culture. This is a strong woman-to-woman language. In the text, the poet speaks of the jewels given by the groom to the bride upon contracting a marriage. These jewels remain the property of the husband who takes them back in cases of divorce. 'Did he ever give them to me?' asks the poet; a simple question that raises the whole issue of Moroccan women's legal rights.

Women are the artists in Berber communities (Becker 1996). Weaving (azda) is a woman's art and traditionally, every tribe, sometimes every family had its own carpet weaving design (Chafik 1982). Berber women sang beautiful verse during carpet weaving. The following lines are an example:

Bless you azdaSo that you be peace.A well-weaved carpetis like a Pacha in front of his tea trayWith a carpet in front of fantasiasHis house full of goods and wherever his there is happiness

Oh bee God gave you the craft of weaving

You produced a weaving that no fingers made.

Songs like the above are not related just to the activities being performed; they are usually popular songs that are known in the community. When asked, these women often replied that singing made them forget about the "harshness" of life and about the "passing of time." As working in fields or weaving are generally considered strenuous jobs, this type of songs often creates solidarity among women and make them valorize their work.

A beautiful genre of Berber female lyrics is called *thamayayt* which is mainly sung in the Middle Atlas mountains in Morocco. Thamawayt is usually sung (or improvised) by a man and a woman as some kind of 'question-answer' dialogue:

Woman: Life has given me no luckMaybe something bad happened to him, or maybe my

life companion does not wish me any good thingsHe does not wish me any good fateTherefore life has given me no luck.Question: Why? And why? O you that my heart has chosen to love Departed so far without we could say farewell?The burn of separation still inhabits me.Why and why? Have you been short of paper?Or if I am out of sight, I become out of heart?Answer: More than an orphan weeping over his mother, I did weep So unbearable to live with an enflamed leaverAnd almost unbearable an enflamed heart.I weep as clouds do over the mountainsTill the grass has grown under my eyes.

Folktales

Female folktales or tales of wonder are told by women, to women, and may describe the lives of women. Although they uphold the values of the dominant patriarchal culture, they are genuine social engines that mix the supernatural, miracles, and the metaphysical. Folktales do not generally have a unifying topic; they constitute a set of "sub-topics" loosely held by theme rather than by time. Overall, the structure of Berber women's folktales is highly complex and exhibits specific external and internal characteristics. So far as external aspects are concerned, these folktales are characterized by three aspects: a beginning, a variable set of connected episodes, and an ending. Internally, the narratives are both non-chronological and atemporal. The most salient information in Berber women's folktales is generally encoded in a distinctive way from the rest, that is, in the most relevant way from the storyteller's point of view. For example, in the *Fadma mzel aytmas* folktale (reported in Peyron 1997), the storyteller focuses on the virtue of persistence and keeps returning to it in various forms through the use of suspense until the story ends with the victory of the persisting woman. The tales generally develop in a cyclical fashion in the sense that sometimes the details of events do not relate to the preceding or subsequent events.

When actually telling a story, women generally show an eagerness to provide the maximum background to their folktales. Further, while telling the stories, women sometimes intervene before each major event of the tale. The importance of background information resides in the fact that it situates the tale in physical, as well as psychological, time and place. Storytellers also pay attention to small and accurate matters of details which lead to the major events. Moroccan women's strategies in storytelling may be qualified as digressive in the sense that they repeat and often shift quickly to new topics.

As in the tale of *Fadma mzel aytmas,* the descriptions in Berber folktales generally center around events and main characters. However, in the actual telling of the stories, glimpses of the storyteller's life experiences may be "projected" onto the story; the story is never repeated in the same way even by the same woman. These insertions are used by the storyteller as an empowering means of self-assertion. Events in the tales are not always described in the sequenced way in which they took place. Furthermore, the storytellers do not concentrate on a particular event

which they take to be essential; they usually stress the characters' role in the family and the culture of the village. In other words, they stress the cultural identity and specificity of the social group they belong to. Further, storytellers include a considerable amount of non-verbal behavior. They use paralinguistic features like articulation features, increase in voice volume, laughter, variations in intonation, change of pitch volume, change of tempo, encouraging minimal responses, as well frequent touching, hand holding, hand gestures, facial expression, tilted heads, sustained gaze, locked-eye gaze, and nodding. Given the oral nature of storytelling, body language and non-verbal behavior have the function of supporting women's storytelling and highlighting its centrality for the audience. Female storytellers take folktales so seriously that they tend to dramatize events and overemphasize actions. When describing events or characters, the storytellers do not respond easily to back-channeling by the audience with the aim of stressing the "seriousness"' and "importance" of their tales. The significance of folktales for these women is taken for granted; they perceive the tales as vehicles of values that often happen to be theirs. For storytellers, there is always a morale to every story. A way in which female storytellers highlight the significance of a tale is by generously giving information about themselves. In involving themselves, Moroccan women attribute vision to themselves as "anticipators" of events and actions, without, however, overtly committing themselves. They make frequent use of reported speech, as well as of moral judgments and critical evaluation.

Storytelling is also perceived by women as a strong means of maintaining and perpetuating power inside the family, especially in rural extended family households. Grandmothers reinforce their status in the family by establishing strong ties with the younger generations through deliberately postponing the end of a story until the following night, thus creating continuous suspense. These storytellers create rapport through stories and often give the impression that what they do not say is as important as what they say. In a sense, these women create their own power. This shows that women's language is not powerless. Moroccan women's storytelling strategies are understandable in settings where older women feel that younger daughters- in-law are exceedingly gaining power through having children and, thus, seek to have some control over the parents through their children. Older women, usually grandmothers, telling long tales, are far from being simple-minded entertainers. They have strategy, exhibit powerful thinking and memory, as well as a skillful use of psychological knowledge of human beings. Through storytelling, women generally make the possibility of transforming the world easier to grasp.

On a more abstract level, storytellers fight oppression and resist patriarchy in their own ways. They often create a world of their own and use the linguistic resources that are available to them to express women's (their own) intelligence, wit and

victory over men in stories. In this way, storytelling may be perceived as a reaction to marginalization through the use of intelligence and cunning. This intelligence is often referred to as *kayd* "cunning," "deceit," "deception," "'treachery," or "raft." It is both admired and feared in Moroccan society. In sum, storytelling is used by Berber women to produce a specific type of oral knowledge that stretches the boundaries of acceptable gender roles in the Moroccan socio-cultural context.

ħalqa (market place public oratory)

ħalqa (market place public oratory) is a site where gender is performed in the literal sense of the word (Kapchan 1996). It usually takes place in specific public rural and urban marketplaces. Although the ħalqa oral genre of literature is dominated by men, women have started to appropriate it. The ħalqa discourse is loaded with mysogynistic ideology: women are usually portrayed as agents of "social pollution" and *fitnah* "social chaos." This discourse is also characterized by the frequent use of taboo words and expressions which are legitimized by frequent reference to religious sanctioning expressions like *la* ħya *f ddin* (there is no shame in religion). This makes the ħalqa discourse a curious hybrid combination: it is both religious and obscene. This discourse is also characterized by a frequency of oaths, testimony, curses, monologue, and blessings, and is often geared towards involving the audience in the various oral performances.

Moroccan female marketplace public orators are doubly marginalized in the Moroccan culture: as women and as low class. These women are usually poor, illiterate and old. They usually address an audience of men and deliberately hold the same type of misogynistic discourse as male orators to gain acceptance in a place which is alien to them but where they have to survive. Although using a misogynistic discourse is not feminist, the very presence of women orators in Moroccan marketplaces certainly is. Kapchan (1996: 165) says in this respect:

> This [ħalqa's] feminized discourse, although full of patriarchal traces, nonetheless spins out from itself aetiolating its own boundaries, feeding on its own excess and metamorphisizing into other forms.

Like female poets and storytellers, female market place orators are survivors in a socio-cultural context which denies them rights. They fight exclusion in the alien public sphere and assert themselves by having and holding attention in contexts which call for a great amount of courage, self-confidence, and self-control. In so doing, these women transgress the gender roles that the Moroccan culture assigns to them and endeavor to make their voice heard, albeit at the price of facing more marginalization.

One of bastions of women's orality is the family. Moroccan women have always

been associated with the family. All of women's family functions have been significant for the family structure; from wives, sisters, female in-laws, to mothers, they are the ones who have been shaping and transforming the deep cultural views and values on the family. The most culturally significant family events, namely, marriage, birth, circumcision and death, are historically celebrated, transformed, and transmitted by women's songs and rites. These family rituals are accompanied by songs, music, drums and dancing which often describe the family ceremonies, their significance in keeping the kin united. For example, marriage songs describe the three stages of a wedding: the *dfu'* (day of offering gifts and presents to the bride), the *henna* (a traditional ceremony of hand and feet decorating performed for the bride prior to the wedding ceremony), and the *dakhla* (the physical meeting of the bride and groom). The bride is ushered to her would be husband's house by her female kin. The songs also depict the traditional hospitality and generosity of Berber families. In the Berber wedding songs, the bride's mother usually expresses feelings of joy and sadness, as she is happy to wed her daughter; "you are better than a beautiful singer," but also worried that her in-laws mistreat her; she advises her daughter to be watchful. Local versions of the same songs are found throughout North Africa.

In Morocco, family-related rituals are centred on sexuality, often dominated by women. To avoid social anxiety, caused by a clash of women's power rituals and the patrilineal system of kinship whereby descent is validated by paternity, women mitigate this by the use of Henna, religion and family ties.

Rituality is linked to blood, taboo and women in Berber culture. The most culturally significant rituals accompany events such as births, circumcision, marriages, and death, magic, and saint veneration. Blood is related to sacrifice and women's life cycles such as virginity, menstruation and menopause which all involve blood. As for taboo, some of the strongest taboos function as a means to control and socially sanction women in heavily patriarchal communities. In defiance to this heavily patriarchal system, Berber women use rituals to maintain power in an outside the family. These rituals include family events, magic, and saint veneration.

Berber women's rituality is also linked to saint veneration and spirituality (Rausch 2006). Various scholarly studies on Berber language and culture have associated women with saint veneration. However, these studies have in the majority of cases dealt with the topic from a male point of view in which women's "popular" religion is regarded as less worthy than men's orthodox and "right" religion. For women, saint-veneration is a ritual. Women visit saints for a variety of reasons: search for solace, expressing faith, socializing with other women, talking about deeper concerns, or simply enjoying a moment away from a harsh reality.

In the pre-Islamic era, people worshipped gods and goddesses. With the coming of Islam, this type of worship was banned as "heretical," and as Islam was revealed in a patriarchal system, women were relegated to the private space. They instead resorted to saint visiting.

Today, saint veneration in Berber culture often involves pilgrimages to the tombs of pious ones (igrramn "male marabout," *tigrramin* "female marabouts"). In doing so, women often seek counsel and blessings but lack the means to make the more orthodox *haj* to Mecca. While intercessors between God and the believer is forbidden in doctrinal Islam, women have kept this tradition alive. According to Justinard's 1933 volume on Moroccan Sahara history to the 16th century, great saints lived in the 16th century in the southern region of Morocco and up to now, regular *moussems* (festivals) continue to draw Berbers from as far away as Europe. This type of saint-veneration is called "popular religion" in Morocco. Whereas men adhere more to orthodox Islam, women prefer saint-veneration. The type of teaching acquired in saint-visiting may be termed "knowledge" which may be acquired by illiterate women as opposed to schooling which is more acquired by men. Female participation in annual *moussems* is impressive as saints are regarded by women as semi-mythical historical figures. As for art, it is mainly focused on carpet-weaving and cloth- making (Becker 2006).

Conclusion

Berber women's oral expressions are a deeply culture-bound knowledge that, while transmitting preoccupations of the self, transcends them to the level of the local community, the nation, as well as the spiritual. As such, this experiential knowledge does not need a formal canon to exert transforming power on both the self and the environment. In producing oral and symbolic knowledge of a specific type, Berber women are not mere conduits of this knowledge; they are social critics who give us accounts of underlying social and historical trends and use analytical tools. This is why their knowledge has persevered. Scholars of literature and culture need to go beyond their ideological blinkers and look at orality as a complex and dynamic phenomenon rather than as the primitive condition from which written cultures emerged. Only then will we have a more adequate account of "world literature" and "world culture," going beyond the one-sided gendered and class-based view that many scholars have conventionally presupposed.

Notes

[1] Speech in Moroccan culture is inherently dependent on the private and public dichotomy. Public and private speeches are two distinct acts: whereas the former is geared towards keeping appearances and, thus, is far from reflecting facts, the latter is

more personal and direct.

[2] Four main languages are used in Morocco: Standard (written) Arabic, French, Berber, and Moroccan Arabic. Whereas the former two have written versions, the latter two are still perceived as "oral" languages in spite of the fact that Berber has its own Alphabet and started to be taught in some schools since the end of the last century, and the Moroccan Arabic may be written in the Arabic script.

[3] Most of them identify with Egyptian films because the latter are channeled through the typically oral Egyptian dialect.

[4] Although Berber has now a written form and is is being introduced in the Moroccan educational system, it is still considered an oral language.

[5] Mririda's poems were translated from Berber into French and published in 1959 by René Euloge in a book called *Les Chants de la Tassaout*. Some of her poetry was translated from French into English by Sadiqi (2003).

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