

## EMBODYING THE COUNTRYSIDE IN 'AIȚA ḤAṢBAWIYA (MOROCCO)

by Alessandra Ciucci

*As we left Safi and began driving along a stretch of country road on our way to Rabat, one of my female traveling companions asked me if I had a cassette of 'aiȥa on me. "Why?" I replied with a certain curiosity. "Oh ...,," she continued, "I just feel like listening to it. I want to smell the soil (bghit nsham t-ṭrab), taste the countryside (bghit nduq l- 'arubiya)." I was struck by her answer, by how she had articulated the desire to listen to this genre of sung poetry by analogy to other senses. For her, listening to 'aiȥa meant to experience the countryside and, at the same time, to celebrate a rurality that for many Moroccans is an essential component of their identity. That day I did not have a cassette on me. However, the silence was soon broken by the opening verses of "Mal l-ḥbibu malu 'lih" (what's wrong with my beloved, what's wrong with him); she and the others had begun singing, clapping, and rhythmically swaying their upper bodies as we continued to drive on that country road.<sup>1</sup>*

'Aiȥa—a genre of sung poetry from the Moroccan Atlantic Plains and its adjacent territories—is regarded as the quintessential expression of the identity of the region.<sup>2</sup> Analyses of the texts of 'aiȥa have shown that the use of a poetic language, able to evoke emotions through traditional imageries and by appealing to the senses, is essential to its affective power (Bouhmid 1992, 1995; Abdeljamil 1993; Kapchan 1996; Raggoug 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Bahraoui 2002; Soum-Pouyalet 2007; Najmi 2007; Ciucci 2008, 2012). At the same time, it is critical to examine how the affective power of 'aiȥa is also determined by particular ideologies about the

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1. In my rendering of the colloquial Arabic used in everyday life in Morocco, I have adopted the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system for consonants, while for vowels I have diverged from this system, since in Moroccan Arabic the differences in vowel length are not as distinctive as in standard Arabic. In order to represent Moroccan pronunciation, I have thus employed full vowels (*a*, *u*, and *i*) and short vowels (*ə*, *o*, and *e*). Transliterations have not been used for proper names, place names, and terms that have accepted English forms. Since so many French transliterations have become standard, place names, tribes, and proper names are written as they have been conventionally transliterated in Morocco. I have, however, kept the letter 'ayn (') in all these transliterations. Spellings used by other authors are retained when I reference or quote their publications. Hyphens are used to indicate the articulation between nouns and their affixes, like the definite article *l-*, and are transcribed as such. Furthermore, when a word begins with a consonant made with the front part of the tongue, it is assimilated, doubling the sound of the first consonant of the word it accompanies. I have transcribed such assimilations as they are pronounced: for example *z-zit* (the oil). Finally, when the definitive article is prefixed to proper names and pronounced as such, I have capitalized the first letter of the name in the transcription, as in l-Houcine.

2. I owe a debt of gratitude to Ouled Ben Aguida, for their artistry and generosity, and to Hassan Najmi, whose knowledge continues to influence my thinking on 'aiȥa. Thanks to Monica Calabritto, for stimulating conversations at the Biblioteca Nazionale in Rome. Thanks are also due to the two anonymous readers for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article, and to Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco and Don Niles.

voice of its female interpreters: the *shikhat* (lit., female leaders; sing. *shikha*). Their voice, in fact, is judged in accordance with a number of aesthetic requirements that are commonly described as embodying the countryside.

In the discussion that follows, my aim is twofold. First, to analyse in what way(s) a voice which is said to express “peasant life” (*ḥəyat dyaḷ ʿərubiya*) may be shaped, which aesthetic requirements it must satisfy, and which parameters are used to judge its affective power. In the first part of the article I refer to “voice” as a sound object per se and, similarly to Grant Olwage (2004:205), I use the term to describe a timbral entity. Second, my interest in analysing what it means *to be* a voice leads me to look at how the voice of these female interpreters functions as a culturally created symbol. The *shikhat* are professional female singer-dancers, who perform accompanied by a troupe of male instrumentalists for mixed, all-female, or all-male audiences. Traditionally associated with the Moroccan countryside, the *shikhat* are considered the entertainers of choice at life-cycle celebrations and at private gatherings for the disadvantaged as well as for the most privileged. Despite their artistic centrality, the status of the *shikhat* is at best problematic. In the second part of the article, therefore, in examining issues concerning the “social” voice, I will look at sung poetry, women, authority, and the nation. In this second section, I use the term “voice” as a trope of agency, identity, and social power (Tolbert 2001:453).

### *ʿAiṭa ḥaṣbawiya* and the ʿAbda region

In Morocco the term *ʿaiṭa* (lit., cry or call (noun)) is used to describe a genre of sung poetry in vernacular Arabic performed in styles that are identified according to geographic location, musical characteristics, and poetic repertoire (see also Bouhmid 1992, 1995; Aydoun 1995; Kapchan 1996; Raggoug 2000a; Bahraoui 2002; Najmi 2007; Soum-Pouyalet 2007; Ciucci 2008, 2012). The discussion that follows focuses on *ʿaiṭa ḥaṣbawiya*: a style of *ʿaiṭa* that is associated with the ʿAbda region of the Atlantic Plains. Whereas the styles of *ʿaiṭa* commonly take their name from the regions with which they are associated (e.g., *ʿaiṭa ḥawziya* from the Haouz region, *ʿaiṭa jbaliya* from the Jbala region, and so on), in this case the qualifier *ḥaṣbawiya* derives from the term *ḥaṣba*, which literally means crushed rock, pebbles, or gravel.

I became interested in this particular style of *ʿaiṭa* by chance, after picking up an old CD of Fatna Bent l-Houcine (figure 1) and Ouled Ben Aguida (figure 2).<sup>3</sup> At the

3. Ouled Ben Aguida began as a group of three brothers in the late 1960s: Bouchʿaib (*kamanja*, in the case of *ʿaiṭa*, this refers to a European viola held vertically), Boujmʿa (vocals and *darbuka*, a large single-skin, goblet-shaped drum), and Miloud (ʿud, Arab lute). Although they attended the conservatory in Safi between 1971 and 1972, the brothers received their training with older masters of *ʿaiṭa* residing in the region. In 1972 Ouled Ben Aguida began to commercially record comic sketches in which they incorporated *ʿaiṭa*, a common practice for male performers at the time (see Ouzri 1997, Najmi 2007, and Ciucci 2008). In 1973 the group decided to incorporate three *shikhat*, among them Hafida (currently the lead *shikha* of Ouled Ben Aguida), and in 1977 they joined forces with Fatna



**Figure 1.** Fatna Bent l-Houcine (photo: Hamza Mehimdate, private collection; used with permission).

time I had no idea what the *shikhat* were singing about, but the voices I heard on that CD compelled me to undertake my doctoral dissertation on the subject. What did I hear so tangibly in those voices? What do these voices express to Moroccans and how?

*ṣawt dyal 'bda huwa lli kaydir had ḥaṣba*

It is the sound<sup>4</sup> of the 'Abda [region] that makes this *ḥaṣba* (Hafida, pers. comm., 6 June 2011, Safi)

This is how Hafida (figure 3), one of the foremost female singers of 'aiṭa, answered my question concerning the essence (*jəwhər*) of 'aiṭa ḥaṣbawīya. Hafida's statement, which unequivocally indicates the sound of a specific place as the source of the musico-poetic tradition in question, was soon echoed by what turned out to be the crucial answer that Boujm 'a, one of the male instrumentalists of Ouled Ben Aguida, provided: "it's like saying that it comes from the soil" (*bḥal ila gulti mən ṭorba*).

If the association made between 'aiṭa and the countryside is the trope that audiences and performers use to draw attention to the source of the semantic meaning in the poetry of 'aiṭa, this time the musicians had articulated how they perceive and/or experience the 'Abda region—and implicitly the countryside, since the region remains rural in its essence—through its sound and thus described the region as a soundscape. Hence, I began thinking about how it was possible

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Bent l-Houcine—perhaps the most prominent singer of 'aiṭa ḥaṣbawīya—with whom they continued to perform until 2000. From 2001 to 2005, aside from the three brothers and Hafida, the members of Ouled Ben Aguida included: 'Aicha (the co-lead female singer); Khoucīa and Khadija (back-up vocalists and dancers); and Moustapha and Hassan (*bnadər* (sing. *bendir*), large circular frame drums, and *ta'raj* (sing. *ta'rija*), small and medium single-skin, goblet-shaped clay drums).

4. The term *ṣawt* may be translated as sound or voice. Throughout the article I will translate and use the term accordingly.



**Figure 2.** Ouled Ben Aguida in Casablanca. Left to right: (*standing*) Moustapha (with *loṭar*, a plucked, three- or four-stringed lute with a pear-shaped resonator covered with goat-skin), 'Aicha, Khadija, and Khoucia (with *ta'rija*); (*sitting*) Boujm'a (with *darbuka*), Bouch'aib (with *kamanja*), Hafida (with *ta'rija*), and Miloud (with *'ud*). 18 November 2003 (photo: Jamal Mehssani, used with permission).

to interpret such statements; how they could provide an insight into a critical aesthetic of the sound of a particular style of *'aiṭa*; and what it means for a troupe of musicians to perform, or perhaps mimic, the sound of the 'Abda.

In what follows I will attempt to describe and interpret some of the ways in which the 'Abda region (and thus, by association, the countryside) is known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, lived, and voiced, and how the members of Ouled



**Figure 3.** Hafida performing in Salé, 14 July 2002 (photo: Alessandra Ciucci).

Ben Aguida, who grew up and continue to reside in the region, translate their experiences into ideas about the voice of the female interpreters of 'aiṭa ḥaṣbawiya. In so doing, I'm interested in identifying and analysing what is considered to be the central aesthetic requirement that such a voice must satisfy and, consequently, which parameters are used to judge its affective power; exploring how specific qualities express a theory about the voice of 'aiṭa ḥaṣbawiya; and examining how the timbral entity of the voice of the *shikhat* relates to the ways in which the voice functions as a culturally created symbol.

### Towards an aesthetic of coarseness/roughness

In their article “Arab Traditional Soil Classification: A Moroccan Case” (2006), Sabir and Ben Jelloun tell us how soil names used before the development of a scientific soil classification were mostly related to local agricultural practices and designated by vernacular names that described the soil's colour, texture, structure, degree of fertility, and water-holding capacity. According to this classification scheme, still used by farmers today, the soil of the 'Abda region is identified as *ḥərrusha* (from *ḥərsh*, lit., coarse or rough), a term that describes a rocky soil and thus its coarse or rough texture, rather than other attributes of the soil.

The connection between the soil of the 'Abda and the *ḥaṣba* style of 'aiṭa becomes clear if one compares the meaning of term *ḥərrusha* (rocky soil) with that of *ḥaṣba* (crushed rock, pebbles, or gravel). However, beyond such simple analogies, it is essential to investigate how *ḥərsh*—and thus the quality of coarseness or roughness—is central to the 'Abda region, the countryside, the *ḥaṣbawi* style, and ultimately to the voice of the *shikhat*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is this quality that sets 'aiṭa *ḥaṣbawiya* apart from the other styles of 'aiṭa.

The members of Ouled Ben Aguida make comments that are critical to this discussion. In what follows I aim to present some of these comments and analyse them in reference to the conversations I have had with these musicians, with Moroccan scholars, and with fans of 'aiṭa.

*kain sawt dyal ləhja dyal ḥad ḥrara*

There is the sound of the dialect of Had Hrara

Had Hrara is a rural community in the 'Abda region, a community that embodies rurality and the essence of the 'Abda at once; this is why the musicians use the above metaphor when discussing 'aiṭa *ḥaṣbawiya*. The dialect in question, easily recognizable for what is commonly described as its rough and robust quality, is characterized by some of the following features:

- the consonant *qaf*, generally pronounced as *qa*, becomes *ga*
- short diphthongs *aw* and *ay* are pronounced *u* and *i*, respectively

5. Both adjectives, *ḥaṣbawi* (masculine ending, *-wi*) and *ḥaṣbawiya* (feminine ending, *-ya*), stem from *ḥaṣba*. Similar to the way in which they are employed in Morocco, I use *ḥaṣbawiya* as a qualifier for 'aiṭa, a feminine noun, and *ḥaṣbawi* to qualify the style (*nəmət*), a masculine noun.



**Figure 4.** 'Aicha performing in Salé, 14 July 2002 (photo: Alessandra Ciucci).

- short vowels usually merge as schwa ə
- extensive use of syncope with clusters of up to three consonants, as in *nktəb*, instead of *nəktəb* (I write)
- consonants ending words are not followed by a vowel; this gives the impression of a rough or brusque ending
- words are not clearly enunciated, they are pronounced without distinctness, with a sort of throaty or guttural enunciation (see also Heath 2002).

These features, shared by a number of dialects in regions of the Atlantic Plains (Chaouia, Doukkala, 'Abda, and Chiadma), are distinctive of a rural idiom that is thought of as being unaffected by urbanity.

During an interview, Ouled Ben Aguida mocked the way in which musicians from an urban centre like Casablanca would interpret a song that belongs to the repertory of 'aiṭa *ḥaṣbawiya*.<sup>6</sup> In their imitation of such musicians, Ouled Ben Aguida sang with their mouths barely open so as to forge a smoother, gentler, softer voice with vibrato, dividing the verses into small separate phrases and almost chewing the words. The aim of the imitation was to make fun of the urban dialect and to comment on how those who sing like this cannot perform the *ḥaṣbawi* style properly. It is interesting to note that 'Aicha (figure 4), the co-lead vocalist of the group, described and thus compared the way in which the same song was interpreted by yet another leading *shikha* of the *ḥaṣbawi* style. 'Aicha described the voice of this *shikha* as spontaneous (*təlqa 'i*), as if she were singing all alone, and

6. Casablanca, the capital of the Chaouia region, has its own style of 'aiṭa that is referred to as *biḍawi* (from Dar Baiḍa, the Arabic name for Casablanca) or *marsawi* (from *marsa*, which refers to the old port of Casablanca). This style of 'aiṭa, which is said to be more urban and refined because it is influenced by the cultivated music tradition traceable to Muslim Spain, is described as being smooth (*mləs*), and the voice of the *shikhat* as sweet (*hlu*) and gentle (*hnin*).

as if the song “comes out from deep inside herself” (*sawt kəykhrij mən d-dakhəl*). Moroccans refer to the late Fatna Bent l-Houcine, the *shikha* in question, as the last rural *shikha*; an acknowledgment that recognizes her mastery by also emphasizing her rural parlance.

Let’s examine another metaphor used by the musicians that also concerns Had Hrara:

*kain riḥa dyaḥ ḥad ḥrara*

There is the smell of Had Hrara

To smell Had Hrara means to smell the soil, the earth, to fill the senses with this odour and thus with the rural essence of the ‘Abda. The smell of Had Hrara, Ouled Ben Aguida argue, is stronger than elsewhere in the region. It may be interesting to know that in a recent television show on Moroccan regional cooking, Had Hrara was chosen as exemplifying the cuisine of the ‘Abda. Together with taste, smell was an essential component in the characterization of this cuisine, particularly when it came to demonstrating the characteristic recipe of the region: *trid b-l-djaj* (*trid* pastry with chicken). The combination of a number of spices collectively referred to as *msakhən*—which includes nutmeg, cinnamon, clove, grains of Paradise, ginger, turmeric, galangal, and cantharides, among others—is said to generate heat to the body and to be an aphrodisiac. *Msakhən* was described as hot (*skhan*) and bitter (*harrin*) in terms of taste and also smell.

Had Hrara is also where many musicians who perform the *ḥaṣbawi* style come from.

*lli ḡhannau l-‘aiṭa ḥaṣbawiya bezzaf kullhum ouled ḥad ḥrara*

Many of those who sing ‘*aiṭa ḥaṣbawiya* are all sons of Had Hrara

Because the community is said to embody the region, many musicians from Had Hrara are considered to be the best, as in the case of the late Mohammed Dabaji or *shikha* ‘Ida, whose interpretation of the *ḥaṣbawi* style is said to have been so successful precisely because it expressed the roughness of rural life and the hard work of the peasant.

*huma lli kanu mahazzin m‘a ‘Aissa Ben ‘Omar*

They are the ones who fought against ‘Aissa Ben ‘Omar

The population of Had Hrara is known to have fought for many years against Si ‘Aissa Ben ‘Omar l-‘Abdi, the powerful governor who ruled the province between 1879 and 1914. The history of the region and of its population is marked by this conflict, which continues to be a source of pride. By mentioning the conflict, the musicians inherently emphasize the courage, but also the strength, the rebellious character, and, possibly, the roughness of the population of the ‘Abda. Such attributes are also portrayed in the following proverb:

*‘bda mshərrḥin l-kebda*

*‘əmməṛ khirhum ma ibda*

*‘əmm shərrhum mə yəhda*

*‘əmməṛ ḡifhum ma imshifəṛḡan*

The [people of the] ‘Abda dissect one’s liver  
 their kindness is non-existent  
 their viciousness has no limit  
 their guest never leaves satisfied

Aside from acknowledging this characterization of the ‘Abda region, the population also seems to embrace it. The term *ḥarsh* (coarseness or roughness) itself may in fact be used as an attribute of beauty or quality as figure 5 indicates.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 5.** Uses of the term *ḥarsh* and its derivatives to refer to beauty or quality.

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <i>l-ḥrāsh</i>        | The name of the characteristic pottery of the of the ‘Abda region, which is considered to be some of the best in Morocco. The pottery is characterized by its coarse surface, natural earthy colours, lack of enamel, simple, and, to a certain extent, unpolished ornamentation (see Triki et al. 1993). This pottery is contrasted with that of Fez, which is considered to be more refined because of its urban association. |
| <i>ḥrāsh l’yun</i>    | “Coarse eyes,” means beautiful eyes, as the following verse found in a poem of ‘ <i>aiṭa ḥaṣḥawiya</i> shows: <i>sidi Ahmed ḥrāsh l’yun</i> (Sir Ahmed with the beautiful eyes).  |
| <i>ləḥmha ḥrāsh</i>   | “Her rough skin,” a sign of beauty for a woman in the countryside.  |
| <i>l-ḥarsha</i>       | A metaphor used to describe how a desirable woman’s sexual organs should feel.  |
| <i>yddih ḥarsha</i>   | “His rough hand,” indicates the hand of a peasant that is not thin and thus is better suited or more desirable for working the land. The hand of a peasant may be considered as being almost sacred because of the work it undertakes.  |
| <i>khāshba ḥarsha</i> | Describes a piece of wood on which it is possible to touch its wrinkles and thus feel its soul.   |
| <i>khobz ḥarrashi</i> | High-quality peasant bread with sprinkles of semolina on top.   |
| <i>ḥarshisha</i>      | Long and loose-fitting outer tunic for men made of coarse wool, characteristic of the countryside. It has a rougher but more durable quality. One of the most important musicians of the <i>ḥaṣḥawi</i> style, the late Saleh Sma‘ili was said to always wear this type of tunic, and musicians still comment on how, in doing so, he lived with ‘ <i>aiṭa ḥaṣḥawiya</i> .  |
| <i>na‘na‘ ḥrāsh</i>   | The best variety of mint, considered to be best suited for making tea.  |

7. Special thanks to Hassan Najmi, who provided crucial information in compiling the information in figure 5. Some of these terms are also in Colin (1994:vol. 2, 303–4).



### The voice of the *shikhat*

For members of Ouled Ben Aguida, to perform 'aīṭa ḥaṣbawīya it is essential for the voice to be high (*tal'*, 'ali), full chest (*qwi*), and hard (*qaṣeḥ*), and for the voice to open up (*talqih*), since the *shikha* must release her voice when singing, rather than restraining it. The opening up here refers to a voice that symbolizes a cry, the literal meaning of the term 'aīṭa; it indicates volume, but also refers back to the hypothetical origin of a genre that Moroccans argue began as a vocal signal, a means of communication from one tribe to another, a wail expressing joy and sorrow in the open fields.

"I used to sing by the seaside, where I could open up my voice and feel the salty air coming through," 'Aicha commented. If, on the one hand, it is known that such air can relax and open up breathing—as well as alleviate the constant problems the *shikhat* experience with their throats—on the other hand, it is also known that similar practices used by singers of Korean *p'ansori* allow them to strengthen the voice and to obtain the desired harsh or rough timbral qualities (see Willoughby 2000).

"I learned everything from Fatna [Bent l-Houcine], I had to sing high and strong all the time," Hafida replied—high and strong in this context refer to the ability to sing in a relatively high vocal range with a full chest voice.

"Like Khadija Bidawīya [a well-known singer of the *biḍawi* or *marsawi* style of 'aīṭa]?" I asked. "No, that is the urban voice (*ṣawt medini*)" was the inevitable answer. One, in fact, cannot have a voice of the city (*ṣawt dyal medina*), something that is artificial (*meṣnu 'a*). Vocal qualities such as warm (*dafi*), beautiful (*zwin*), clear (*bain*), and sweet (*ḥlu*) are not suited for 'aīṭa ḥaṣbawīya that, throughout the conversation, musicians continued to refer to as *ḥərsha* (the feminine form of *ḥərsh*).

Singing, according to Ouled Ben Aguida, is challenging; it is hard work because 'aīṭa ḥaṣbawīya is long (*twila*) and difficult (*ṣ'iba*)—i.e., the musical phrases are characteristically sung against a long rhythmic cycle and are difficult to sustain for a single singer—and thus demanding for any performer who, if she is not properly trained, may end up losing her voice (*tādhi b-ṣawtha*).

The idea of hard labour carries over to the accompanying ensemble, most notably the viola. Whereas the common term for the instrument is *kamanja*, the viola may also be referred to as *jarra*—a noun that stems from the verb *jar*, which means to drag, to pull, or to leave an imprint, and thus it is connected to the idea of playing hard or digging into. *Jarra*, therefore, refers to bowing and to the idea of the hard work or vigour that a musician must apply in playing the instrument. The vigour I describe is caused by the fact that while the two lower strings of the viola are made of metal, the thick-diameter higher strings (the ones which are used most frequently in 'aīṭa) are made of gut. Musicians comment that in contrast to metal strings, these gut strings are stiff (*qaṣehin*) and difficult (*ṣ'ab*) to play, and that one needs to firmly control them so as to get the right sound.

The relationship between the *kamanja* and the voice of the *shikhat* is fundamental for 'aīṭa. The *kamanja*, in fact, "must always follow the voice of those who sing;

without the *kamanja*, ‘*aiṭa* never comes out the way it should (*ma ‘əmra tji hya hadik*).”

This statement by Bouch‘aib indicates not only that the instrument is tuned according to the register of the voice, but that it should also complement the voice it accompanies, rather than compete against it. Failure to do so is criticized by the professionals of ‘*aiṭa*.

Unfortunately, some *shikhat* we know have retired early from the milieu. The instrumentalist plays his *kamanja* as the *shikha* sings, but when he plays in the upper register, the *shikha* follows the instrument (*t ‘alləq m ‘a l-ala*) until she chokes (*tjiyyəf*). If she works in that manner, let’s say for a period of four or ten years, she loses her voice (*tədhi b-ṣawtha*). Often an instrumentalist is only concerned about the sound of his instrument while the *shikha* sings. He doesn’t know where the harm (*darar*) lies. He doesn’t know the difference between what’s bad (*silbi*) and what’s good (*ijabi*). In other words, he does the bad tuning (*msawiya silbiya*). (Bouch‘aib Benshlih, pers. comm., 18 December 2004, Safi)

It is in this context that Bouch‘aib recalls that their former lead singer, Fatna Bent l-Houcine, used to sing all the time in *mədsus* (lit., something that is hidden or concealed). For a *kamanja* player, this term indicates a tuning that is slightly lower (*habṭa shwiya*) than the standard tuning that approximates the Western tuning system in fourths. More specifically, instrumentalists use the term *mədsus* to indicate a tuning in which the viola is said to lose its sweetness (*haləwa*). “I used to tell Fatna that the farmers used to say, that the buried stone breaks the plough (*l-mədsusa katharrash l-mahrath*).” This is the metaphor that Bouch‘aib used to comment on the roughness of the voice of this legendary *shikha*, on the sound that his own instrument took on to accompany such a voice, and consequently on the sound of ‘*aiṭa ḥaṣbawiya*.

### Creating a cultural symbol

The voice of a *shikha* of ‘*aiṭa ḥaṣbawiya* is not like that of any other singer in Morocco. However, just as it is an easy task to recognize such a voice because of the uniqueness of the timbre that all *shikhat* of the region seem to share, at the same time it is quite difficult to distinguish one *shikha* from another unless one is a connoisseur of the style. The voice of these *shikhat* is instead valued exactly because it is a marker and an expression of a collective identity, rather than for its individuality or for its power to express a singer’s own identity. Its timbre, which is said to embody or perhaps *must* embody coarseness or roughness, allows the audience to be transported via the senses—hearing, smelling, tasting, and, more importantly, touching—to the rocky soil on which it all began.

By giving voice to a quintessential quality of the ‘Abda and the countryside, and giving voice to its inhabitants, the *shikhat* of ‘*aiṭa ḥaṣbawiya* not only express the perception and the experience of the region, but also embody an aesthetic that is the antithesis of everything associated with what is urban and refined. But what does it

mean to be such a voice? Is it possible to think of this voice as an unmediated sonic presence? Who is the body behind this voice? And more specifically, how is this voice negotiated in the Moroccan public sphere, being that it indexes the presence of the *shikhat*? These questions go to the heart of my discussion about the meaning of 'aiṭa for the populations of the Atlantic Plains, and thus its embodiment of the countryside, as well as its recent revalorization.

As professional singer-dancers who display their voices and their bodies in the context of public celebrations, the *shikhat* are associated with the public space in ways in which respectable women are not. The *shikhat*—who do not call on visibility alone, but who instead open themselves up to contact, whether real or imaginary, with their audience—occupy an ambiguous position. They are associated with a display of sexuality that does not allow them to distance themselves from it. While *shikhat* are implicitly or explicitly described by the general public as “prostitutes who sing and dance,” their public role has been confined by such categorization and has had a negative influence on their status and on that of 'aiṭa. The recent revalorization (*i'adan l-i'tibar*) of the genre has thus required, first and foremost, a change in the popular perception of the *shikhat*.

### 'Aïta and the *patrimoine culturel marocain*<sup>8</sup>

The official incorporation of 'aiṭa into the *patrimoine culturel marocain* (*l-turath l-maghribi*; Moroccan cultural heritage) should be understood as a continuation of the ideas put forth by left-wing intellectuals who, particularly in the 1960s and the 1970s, took strong anti-colonial stances calling for the reappropriation, rediscovery, and rehabilitation of Moroccan traditional culture which independence had failed to bring forth. The following statement by Abdellatif Laâbi—an influential Moroccan writer and left-wing intellectual—embodies such ideas.

We know that cultural imperialism expresses itself as the colonizer's attempt to graft imported elements of the colonizing culture onto the colonized, elements that are alien to the latter's mental habits and psychism. This violent grafting aims to provoke a chasm between the individuality of the colonized and all that may link them to their own culture, their own memory ... In order to oppose dispossession, the colonized should follow a double course. On the one hand, they try to question the Western culture that schooling ingrained in them. On the other hand, they initiate a movement of rediscovery of their own culture. The cultural patrimony of the colonized is investigated and rehabilitated. In this energy of rediscovery, it is brandished under the eyes of the oppressor as an object of pride. (Laâbi 1966; my translation from French)

This incorporation is also the continuation of culturally established views of female sexuality, since the principal interpreters of 'aiṭa are female. It is within this framework that I focus on the analysis of the role that the Moroccan moral system has played in the revalorization of the genre and, consequently, that I use

8. A preliminary discussion of the ideas in this section appears in Ciucci 2010.

the culturally relative concepts of honour and shame to articulate how the change in status of a musical tradition has affected a class of female performers.

It is difficult to determine the history of *'aiṭa*, if it ever had a high status in Moroccan society, and, most importantly, what caused the genre to become disreputable (see Ciucci 2010). In the past decade, however, thanks to the efforts of a number of male academics, intellectuals, politicians, and other public figures directly or indirectly involved with the Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires (USFP; Socialist Union of Popular Forces) and the Union des Écrivains du Maroc (UEM; Moroccan Writers Union), the presence of *'aiṭa* in venues that were previously inaccessible to the genre has been remarkable. In the years since 2000, *'aiṭa* has been celebrated with its own festival (*Māhrjan al-'Aiṭa*); three CDs of *'aiṭa* have been included in the *Anthologie de la musique marocaine* (Anthology of Moroccan music), produced by the Ministry of Culture (Ministère de la Culture 2001–2:CDs 4–6); and two CDs of *'aiṭa* are scheduled to be released by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. *'Aiṭa* has also been the subject of films, documentaries, theatrical works, a number of scholarly and non-scholarly publications, and conferences and debates dedicated to the genre. Lastly, performances of *'aiṭa* are now included in a number of summer festivals, broadcast by national television, and presented in the theatres of Rabat and Casablanca.

The arguments put forth by those who have been actively engaged in the revalorization of *'aiṭa* and ultimately allowed these changes to take place, have focused on the role that the French Protectorate (1912–56) played in the denigration and degradation of the genre. One argument has pointed out that, once *'aiṭa* was relegated to the status of folklore by the Moroccan and French elite, and classified as traditional culture (*thaqafa sh'abia*),<sup>9</sup> the genre became inevitably linked with European tourism or with Europeans' interest in discovering an “authentic” Morocco. Another argument has called attention to the fact that the degradation of *'aiṭa* was caused by the way in which the genre was utilized by the colonizers. In the discussion that follows, I will examine both arguments in order to illustrate the ways in which they influenced changes in the Moroccan perception of *'aiṭa*.

In *La culture et la politique culturelle au Maroc* (2003), Amina Touzani traces the history of Moroccan cultural politics from the establishment of the Service des antiquités, des beaux arts et des monuments historiques in 1912 until the 1999 appointment of Mohammed Achaari as head of the Ministry of Culture. Touzani's analysis demonstrates that, although the creation of a ministry in charge of cultural affairs in 1968 signalled the desire of the Moroccan elite to change the political culture of the Protectorate and of the post-Independence years, in reality the ministry continued to favour a culture that upheld the ideas put forth by the founding members of Moroccan nationalism and, in turn, to view traditional culture as a symbol of Morocco's backwardness. Thus, although crucial, the rehabilitation

9. Throughout this discussion, *thaqafa sh'abia* (lit., folk culture) is translated as “traditional culture” and is used to indicate that culture which is based on orality and on colloquial Arabic and Tamazight. In this context, the use of “traditional” does not suggest that *thaqafa muktasaba*, the learned culture based on writing and on classical Arabic, is not traditional.

of traditional culture became inevitably dependent on the politics of the Ministry of Culture and on Moroccan politics as a whole.

The creation of a group dedicated to studying how relations between the French Protectorate's administration and the Moroccan population could be reformed signalled the beginning of the nationalist movement in 1925. The members of this group had been educated at Qarawiyyin University in Fez or at similar prestigious institutions in Morocco, Egypt, Syria, or France (see Halstead 1969:278–80); had been inspired by the Salafiya movement;<sup>10</sup> and had come from the traditional urban bourgeoisie of Fez and the other imperial northern cities of Tetouan, Tangier, Salé, and Rabat (Joffé 1985:290–91). As an alternative to assimilation, these leading nationalists, who would become members of the Parti de l'Istiqlal (Independence Party),<sup>11</sup> sought to offer the vision of a modernized Islamic society that would compete with an alien and aggressive culture that threatened and humiliated Morocco. Consequently, attention was directed to the earlier glories of the Moorish civilization of Andalusia (Halstead 1969:164) and the “golden age” of Arabic-Muslim culture.

Just as Greek scholars constructed cultural continuity in defence of their national identity through the European ideal of *Hellas*—the achievements of ancient Greeks in knowledge, morality, and art, a symbol of cultural superiority, and the cultural archetype of Europe (Herzfeld 1986:3–5)—Moroccan nationalist leaders brought together selected oriental and occidental ideas into the notion of *Andalusia*. Consequently, its learned culture (*thaqafa muktasaba*), associated with the imperial cities of northern Morocco, the urban elite, writing, and classical Arabic—the culture which had in fact suffered the most under colonization precisely because it did not reflect the image of Moroccan backwardness—began to be promoted as national culture.

At the same time, because the illiterate rural population was an embarrassing contrast to the idealized image of *Andalusia*, it was typically looked upon with distaste and fear produced by centuries of tension. The culture of the rural population and the urban proletariat that was based on orality and on colloquial Arabic and Tamazight—the culture which in contrast had been collected and studied by Europeans—was instead viewed as a threat to national unity and identity, looked on with suspicion, and even rejected as the “bastard product of colonization” (Boukous 1994:85).

Although the membership and support of the nationalist movement went through radical changes in the years following World War II, the fact that the ministers serving from this period up through 1999 came from a social background similar to that of the leading nationalists explains why the Ministry of Culture maintained the cultural politics put forth by the nationalists.

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10. An Islamic reformism that called for a return to the traditions of the founders of the religion as the guiding principle of the Muslim community against the onslaught of European colonialism.

11. Nowadays a conservative and monarchist party, the Istiqlal was the main political force in the struggle for Moroccan independence.

The 1999 appointment of Mohammed Achaari—a celebrated poet, member of the political bureau of the USFP, and former president of the UEM—as Minister of Culture marked a moment of change in the political culture of the ministry that witnessed the construction of an all-inclusive national culture, the encouragement of the democratization of culture through the establishment of an artistic infrastructure throughout Morocco, and, most importantly, the promotion of festivals celebrating regional cultures and identities.

Traditional artistic practices presented in modern forms of institutionalized celebrations such as festivals are not only recognized and legitimized as the components of a new national culture, but linked to a distant past so as to explain their selections and, to a certain extent, their ritualized imposition (Hobsbawm 1983:1–6).

Existing traditional practices such as *'aiṭa* are apt to be modified once institutionalized. Festivals are rather different rituals from life-cycle celebrations; the display of flags, the presence of government delegations, the dinners honouring the event, the speeches, and the staged performances where audiences are carefully distanced from practitioners have very little in common with life-cycle celebrations. At festivals, most importantly, performances may be altered in accordance with the cultural agenda or the needs and requests of promoters and organizers. The role of festivals, in fact, can be critical in the exploitation of culture by governments within the framework of their cultural policies (Belghazi 2006:99).

The first Festival of *'Aiṭa* (2001) in Safi was organized by the Ministry of Culture. The festival was supported by the USFP and other parties of the left, but was ostracized by a number of parties associated with the centre-right and the Islamists. Those in favour argued that the festival was a cultural, economic, and social event that would stimulate the cultural, economic, and tourist life of Safi, that *'aiṭa* was an artistic and popular expression that needed to be respected, and that if there were something amoral in *'aiṭa*, it was the by-product of colonialism. Those against claimed that the festival would encourage amorality in the city of Safi and ruin the reputation of a city of warrior saints, and that the festival, seemingly focused on dance and pornography, rendered homage to prostitutes.

The controversy surrounding the festival led to prohibition of the dances of the *shikhat*, an essential element of performance, as well as to the exclusion of their testimonials from the two-day conference on *'aiṭa*. Thus, notwithstanding good intentions, the festival presented *'aiṭa* through the bodiless voice of the *shikhat* and silenced their testimonies.

If the changes imposed on the performances at the first Festival of *'Aiṭa* have been explained as temporary precautions taken by the organizers so as to avoid problems with the detractors, in reality, to revalorize *'aiṭa* and turn it into an honourable artistic expression (a cultural patrimony to be proud of), it has been necessary to change its image, or at least the way in which popular opinion perceives it. In order to do so, the discourse has focused on the reappropriation of traditional culture and on presenting it in accordance with the Moroccan moral system. Discourse has thus centred on the following crucial points.

The association of 'aiȥa with debauchery was caused by the way in which the colonizers, who did not speak Arabic and could not understand the texts, experienced 'aiȥa. This is why the sensual dances of the *shikhat* became the most prominent element of performance. Through the partition into “we” (the colonized) and “they” (the colonizers), the revalorization of 'aiȥa has been presented as a means of counter-colonial resistance that has purged Moroccans of any responsibility for the status of the genre or, for that matter, that of the *shikhat*. The revalorization has in fact emphasized that 'aiȥa should not be understood or experienced as just a form of entertainment, particularly a sensual form, but through the text of its songs, where the real meaning resides.

The emphasis placed on the poetry of 'aiȥa has allowed, at least to a certain extent, the extraction of the texts from the mouths of interpreters in the attempt to publish the “original” or the “authentic” versions. The emphasis placed on the texts has also motivated their scrutiny by the connoisseurs and intellectuals/specialists of 'aiȥa.

The existence of an official version of texts may very well change attitudes and freeze a fluid practice. Although in traditional performance the assemblage of texts follows a number of rules, variations and interventions give the *shikhat* a freedom to modify and manipulate a poetic discourse already imbued with double entendres. It is this freedom of interpretation, or better yet its control, that is critical in the revalorization of 'aiȥa.

Cultural politics in Morocco, as elsewhere, makes claims of cultural authenticity that are accompanied by efforts to discover or restore “authentic pasts as foundations for contemporary identity,” most urgently among those who have suffered “the sentence of history” (cf. Dirlík 2000:204). In this context, the authentic texts inevitably affect 'aiȥa, whose revalorization may be grounded on discourse based more on aspirations than on artistic practices. Which aspirations? Or better yet whose aspirations?

The 1998 ascension of the USFP to head the government marked a historic change in the political and cultural life of Morocco. The intellectuals and politicians of the USFP—a party whose support was most significant among the rural population and the urban lower and middle classes—were anchored in the rural milieu. This change inevitably prompted traditional culture to re-emerge at the centre of a political and cultural struggle; the new class of intellectuals was eager to prove how culture was not just an urban or an elitist phenomenon. The revalorization of 'aiȥa, therefore, became a means through which these intellectuals could validate their moral worth and their authority.

Changing the popular perception of the *shikhat* has been crucial for the revalorization of 'aiȥa. The issue of sexuality is central to colonial relations of dominance and resistance, given that the representation of otherness is achieved through sexual and cultural modes of differentiation.

In this context, the discourse produced by the revalorization has simultaneously presented the *shikhat* as unsung heroes and as women whose everyday lives are not too different from that of others—so as to emphasize their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. This discourse has aimed at dispelling the notion of *shikhat*

as dishonourable performers by focusing on sexuality or, more precisely, by distancing the *shikhat* from sexuality.

Similar to the Awlad ‘Ali discussed by Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), one way for women in Morocco to access honour is to show deference to those in authority; it is in this context that the concept of *hsham* (modesty, shame) becomes central. While the everyday use of the noun *hshuma* refers to shame, and it is used to reprimand someone who is acting inappropriately, the adjective *hshumiya* refers to a woman who is modest and who avoids any behaviour which can publicly imply that she is not obedient and subordinate to her husband or male kin. A woman’s denial of sexuality is thus inevitably critical to deference. In this context, women who comply with the values inherent to *hsham* are not only honourable but are also part of the honour code.

*Hsham* is also tied to the social concept of ‘*qal* (reason), to what is defined as the self-control of an honourable person. *Hsham* and ‘*qal*, in fact, are inherent to the notion of the ideal woman. The adjective ‘*qila*, in fact, describes a woman who is well behaved, modest, and who knows when to speak and when to listen; a woman who, in other words, knows her place in society.

On the other hand, a woman who lacks ‘*qal* can be described as headstrong (*qwiya*) or as a whore (*qhāba*)—two terms that I have heard being used on more than one occasion when referring to the *shikhat*. However, if *qhāba* refers specifically to sexuality, *qwiya* refers instead to a woman who, although she is in a position of dependency, is judged to act with inappropriate assertiveness.

As a form of symbolic power, the verbal ability of a poet allows him to achieve an elevated status within a community. Such social ascendancy, however, is problematic for women who, if they were *to have* a voice rather than *to be* a voice, may disrupt the voice of authority and, by doing so, be in conflict with modesty and thus honour. In the revalorization of ‘*aiṭa* as national heritage, the *shikhat* are then transformed into a medium through which the patriarchal nation voices its desires while asserting its honour and pride in the face of the Protectorate.

For the intellectuals behind the revalorization of ‘*aiṭa*, this genre of sung poetry has become a means through which they can validate their moral worth and eventually their authority through two sources of honour: glorious deeds and the control of women.

What is important for our analysis of the oral tradition is Meeker’s (1976) concept of the glorious deed of honour. 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 honourableness of the deed. (Caton 1985:142)

The revalorization and the incorporation of ‘*aiṭa* into the official Moroccan heritage exemplifies Meeker’s concept of the glorious deed of honour: it defines colonialism as the Other against whom the glorious deed is performed, and the urban elite as the Other who needs to recognize and acknowledge the honourableness of the action. By establishing continuity with a “suitable” historic



past, the intellectuals/specialists have validated their moral worth by connecting to a glorious deed performed in the past (the nationalist resistance of the tribes of the Atlantic plains against the colonizers, as recollected in the poetic texts of 'aiṭa) and by performing a glorious deed in the present (the reappropriation of 'aiṭa from the colonizers and the way in which they used it, leading to the restoration of 'aiṭa in its supposed "traditional" and "authentic" form and function in society).

## Conclusion

Roland Barthes (1977:181–82) describes the "grain" of the voice as an encounter between voice and language, when the voice "is in a dual posture, a dual production—of language and music." The grain, Barthes continues "is the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue." As I have tried to show, the voice of 'aiṭa ḥaşbawiya, the timbral entity that is said to embody the 'Abda region, is indeed constituted by a vernacular Arabic, an unwritten mother tongue that is specific to the countryside. It is difficult to differentiate such parlance and the sound of speech from the singing tone; together, language sounds and musical features create the unique sound or voice (*şawt*) of 'aiṭa ḥaşbawiya. This was most evident in the way in which 'Aicha described the voice of the late Fatna Ben l-Houcine, the last rural *shikha*, as "spontaneous," as if singing "comes out from deep inside herself."

This last phrase of 'Aicha's brings us also back to the corporeality of the voice, to how "the 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings" (Barthes 1977:188). The "high," "full chest," "strong," "hard," "open," or unrestrained cries of the *shikhat*, as described by Hafida, index the presence of the female body, making it impossible to abstract this voice from its social significance, its symbolic meaning and value.

If the roughness or coarseness of a voice embodying the countryside is most valued because it is able to transform the text of a poem of 'aiṭa into a multisensory experience of the countryside, the same quality also indexes the presence of a population that, until recently, did not seem to fit into the image of Morocco upheld by the elite. Is it possible to interpret such a voice as an act of resistance, as a "cry" that allows for these populations to be heard? It is in this context that *to have*, rather than *to be* a voice becomes problematic for women. From this perspective, it is possible to conceive how, in the revalorization of 'aiṭa, the *shikhat* have come to embody an arena in which issues of sexuality, narration, and cultural identity are debated. A woman's voice, but also a woman's body, must comply with specific notions about performing the idea of the countryside.

Can we then think of coarseness or roughness as embodying an act of resistance, as a way to uphold a different aesthetic and, consequently, insert a marginalized culture into the official *patrimoine culturel marocain*? We could perhaps conceive of the voice of 'aiṭa ḥaşbawiya as being fashioned along a continuum from being unconsciously structured to self-reflexively made (cf. Olwage 2004:217). This consideration may allow us to understand why, as the *shikhat* are slowly but surely disappearing from the public sphere, the presence of men singing 'aiṭa has continued to increase. And if it can be argued that male singers of 'aiṭa have,

although as a minority, always coexisted with the *shikhat*, the critical question to ask is why do these male singers vocally, and sometimes even physically (some male performers dress as women), embody the sound and image of their female counterparts? It would seem that, although disembodied, the voice of the *shikhat* must be heard in 'aiṭa ḥaṣbawiya so that the auditory image of that rocky soil continues to resound.

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