WORLD ORAL LITERATURE PROJECT

Oral Literary Worlds

Location, Transmission and Circulation

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Cover image: Woman playing Nyatiti during School Cultural Day in Tanzania. Photo by Onesmo Daniel (22 September 2017), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:African_local_music_instrument_-Nyatiti_01.jpg

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10. Morocco's Popular Culture Powerhouse

Darija and the *chaabi* music of Nas El Ghiwane

Karima Laachir

This chapter shows, through the example of the Moroccan musical group Nas El Ghiwane, how contemporary *chaabi* (popular) music has reinvented the literary language of Darija, the spoken form of Moroccan Arabic. Nas El Ghiwane was established in 1970 and is credited not only with revolutionising the aesthetics of Darija and pioneering a new genre of popular music (*Ghiwanian* song) but also with initiating a popular social and political movement towards freedom in the 1970s and 1980s, an era popularly known in Morocco as 'the years of lead' and marked by brutal political oppression. Despite singing in vernacular Darija and drawing on localised aesthetics and politics, Nas El Ghiwane attained regional and global fame.

The name Nas El Ghiwane refers to the 'new Dervishes'.[1] The Ghiwane were an ancient Sufi sect of wandering musicians who sang throughout Morocco, entertaining the popular classes and transmitting religious knowledge and wisdom. In fact, the group's use of storytelling through

1 The name comes from a *malhun* poem: 'I asked the jasmine about you / I asked the rose / I asked the friends of Ghiwane about you' (Ghiwane meaning 'love' or 'passion'); Elias Muhanna, 'Folk the Kasbah: A Conversation with Omar Sayyed, Leader of Nass El Ghiwane', *Transition*, 94 (1993) 132–149 (p. 143).

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song draws heavily on Morocco's popular Sufi poetry and performative traditions of folk tales and proverbs, as well as the sounds, rhythms, and repertoire of *Gnawa* (African-Moroccan) music. The group elevated a plural literary Darija and promoted forms of music that cut across regions and social classes.[2] Their subtle and sophisticated lyrics spoke directly to a nation in search of its soul at a time of political upheaval and rapid social change. Nas El Ghiwane's music shows that although Darija is co-constituted with Arabic Fusha (formal, literary Arabic) and Tmazight (a language of the indigenous people of the region), as well as with other languages in Morocco, it has its own literary imaginary that has been a powerhouse of Morocco's popular oral culture.

The success and trajectory of Nas El Ghiwane point to the ways in which intensely local oral vernacular cultural forms can come to have broader national, regional and global resonances, expanding our notions of what constitutes world literature. The group's global reach draws attention to the 'need to shift the dominant understanding of "the world" in world literature beyond "world-system" macro-models that assume a universally shared set of literary values and tastes with Europe and the US at the centre'.[3] It highlights the importance of aesthetics and values that may appear other and marginal, but that travel widely and circulate globally.

Why Vernacular Darija?

The oral and written cultures of Morocco have been profoundly shaped by the country's long history of multilingualism. Vernacular languages such as Darija and Tmazight, which are in fact the mother tongues of the vast majority of Moroccans, have traditionally existed alongside Arabic

2 As Morocca. critic/scholar Muhammad Hannun put it, 'We became open, through [Nass El] Ghiwane, to the truth of their message –that our colloquial Arabic has its words and its images, and their ability to rise to beauty and the construction of it, as well as the [ability to] capture what we did not believe it could capture', quoted in Melanie Magidow, 'Trending Classic: The Cultural Register of Moroccan Malhun Poetry', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 21.2 (2016), 310–334 (p. 326), https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2016.1130943

3 Further examples and discussion on this point can be found in Karima Laachir 'The Literary World of the North African Taghrība Novelization, Locatedness and World Literature', *Journal of World Literature*, 4 (2019), 188–214 (p. 11), https://doi.org/10.1163/24056480-00402004

Fusha—the modernised form of classical or Quranic Arabic taught in schools across the Middle East and used in print culture, media and religious affairs—as well as Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish.[4] With the arrival of the French and Spanish colonial powers in the early twentieth century, the linguistic landscape of Morocco was further complicated. The imposition of French as the exclusive language of education and administration during the period of French colonialism (1912–56), had a deep and lasting impact on Moroccan culture.[5] In the aftermath of independence in 1956, the Moroccan state's ambiguous politics of Arabisation did not succeed in dislodging the French language from the public sphere. To the present day, French has retained its status as an urban language of the educated middle and upper classes, even if in recent decades it has been partially supplanted by English as the language of trade and business.

Morocco's multilingual society is fragmented along lines of class, regionalism, ethnicity and, particularly in recent decades, ideology. Languages have come to embody the ideological identity of those who wield them. As such, a linguistic divide maps over widening ideological rifts within the Moroccan intelligentsia and Moroccan society more broadly. Arabic Fusha, Darija and French have each, respectively, come to be associated with particular political, social and cultural orientations. Such arbitrary oppositions between the diverse languages of Morocco have acted to obscure political, cultural, and linguistic nuances and complexities. Arabic Fusha, for instance, is widely held to be the language of so-called regressive or Islamist forces. French, by contrast, is imaginatively linked to the progressive, the secular, the democratic and the western. In some circles, Arabic Fusha is viewed as '*la langue de bois*', a 'wooden language' that does not allow cultural or literary creativity. As such, it is allegedly responsible for the crisis in Morocco's educational system. This is an allegation that betrays both an internalisation of orientalist tropes with respect to Arabic and an ignorance of the failures of the postcolonial state to implement viable multilingual strategies in

4 Moha Ennaji, 'Aspects of Multilingualism in the Maghreb', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 87 (1991), 7–26, https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.1991.87.7; and *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco* (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2005).

5 Spencer D. Segalla, *The Moroccan soul: French education, colonial ethnology, and Muslim resistance, 1912-1956* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

education that would accommodate Tmazight, Darija, Fusaha as well as French and English.[6]

This disdain towards Arabic Fusha—sometimes viewed as the Latin of Arabic— and the flawed argument by which it is held responsible for the manifold problems within the Moroccan education system, has seen calls made to replace it with Darija in public schools. Notwithstanding such calls, and despite the rich oral cultural heritage of Morocco's vernacular languages, both Darija and Tmazight have been relegated to the margins. Neither language is imbued with any sort of symbolic, cultural, or economic prestige.[7] 'In post-independence Morocco (1960–1980s)', Catherine Miller notes, 'several important journals (either francophone like *Souffle, Lamalif, Intégral* or arabophone like *Afāq, al-Asās, al-Thaqāfa al-jadīda*) acted as fora for the Moroccan intelligentsia/artists and addressed the issue of what should be the 'Moroccan national culture, the role and place of language, education, oral literature, popular culture, arts, etc.' Yet the attitude of these intellectuals toward Darija was just as ambiguous.[8] While current debates on the respective merits of Fusha and Darija have pitted the two languages against each other, the relationship of Arabic Fusha to Darija or spoken Arabic (also called 'Amiyya) is in fact complex and, across the Arabic-speaking world, intersects with intense anxieties around education, socio-economic shifts, and changing understandings of national selfhood. Arabic Fusha is perceived in most postcolonial Arabic-speaking nations as the emblem of their 'decolonised' Arab national identity and as a cosmopolitan, trans-regional, and symbolic language that represents a rich and prestigious cultural heritage. Its coexistence with the vernacular spoken forms of Arabic, which are almost invariably perceived as inferior, has long been the subject of fierce debate across the region. Moroccan vernacular oral literature does not precede to Arabic written literature; rather, it has its own complex aesthetics and a wider audience and reception within

6 This view also exposes a disdain for the vast body of literature written in Arabic in Morocco and in the wider Arabic-speaking world and, at best, reveals an ignorance of the avant-garde trends in the politics and aesthetics of contemporary Arabic literature.

7 Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

8 Catherine Miller, 'Contemporary dārija Writings in Morocco: Ideology and Practices' in *The Politics of Written Language in the Arab World: Writing Change*, ed. by Jacob Høigilt and Gunvor Mejdel (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 90–115 (p. 93).

Morocco. However, vernacular oral literature is not recognised in the Arabic literary field and is often studied as a form of folklore from an anthropological perspective. It is not deemed sufficiently 'literary', but is instead perceived as a genre for the 'lower' classes, namely working-class peoples and peasants, despite the fact that it effectively cuts across various classes. However, as Marilyn Booth argues, in the case of Egypt,

> If literary forms associated with colloquial Arabic have often been dismissed by the cultural and political establishment as inferior – implicating forces of distinction that maintain lines of political and economic dominion in the society – that very dismissal can act as a positive mark of collective identity out of which political resistance is born.[9]

The incorporation of non-elite tastes and aesthetics into literary narratives in the Arabic speaking world is still a challenge, as 'elite institutions of cultural judgement' continue to consider vernacular writing as secondary to Arabic Fusha and 'a sign of lack, an admission of inability to master the "literary" language—an accusation that continues to haunt colloquial poets'.[10]

What is often lost in this debate is the fact that most people in the Arabic-speaking world move daily between the two languages. In the cultural field, oral and written literature remains a vibrant place for the practice of multilingualism and for the crossing of linguistic borders, as writers incorporate various literary models and genres, including local oral narrative forms. This incorporation stems from a lived experience of multilingualism and its wider practices of reading and writing that go beyond linguistic and ideological divides to expose the degree to which the oral and the written are intertwined.

9 Marilyn Booth, 'Beneath Lies the Rock: Contemporary Egyptian Poetry and the Common Tongue', *World Literature Today*, 75 (2001), 257–266 (p. 259).

10 Booth (Ibid.) adds that 'Indeed, it is a marked feature of contemporary colloquial poetry that genealogies of colloquial poets become part of the poetic lexicon. Perhaps, as practitioners of an art so often pushed to the literary margins, poets who compose in the colloquial feel especially anxious to document a pedigree of excellence, determination, and commitment even as they question that past's relevance to their own voice'.

Darija is one of Morocco's most vital artistic languages.[11] Regionally diverse in terms of vocabulary and idioms, and varying also between rural areas and urban centres, it is nonetheless understood by most Moroccans, who are able to communicate in it across regions. Darija is therefore the language that reaches the widest audience, and it can effectively embody popular concerns, aspirations, modes of thought, and activism. At the same time, Moroccan Darija is quite different from other forms of vernacular Arabic in the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula and is not easily understood outside Morocco and the Maghreb.

Moroccan Darija has a rich oral and performative literary repertoire and heritage.[12] Its sophisticated and popular literary imaginary and vocabulary has persisted across centuries of literary production in forms as diverse as *zajal*, a strophic poetic form 'with no set rhyme scheme or meter',[13] and various genres of Sufi poetry; *halqa* performances (see Fatima Zahra Salih in Chapter 5 of this volume);[14] *malhun* and *gharnati*

11 In fact, both Darija and Tmazight have a long and rich cultural heritage and have been used in the production of poetry, proverbs, legends, stories, and music.

12 As Elinson puts it 'Although it is important not to overstate the extent to which dialectal Arabic was accepted in the Arabic literary and cultural canon in the pre-modern period, the fact that it was included and discussed is significant. That the giants of the Arabic cultural tradition such as Ibn al-Khaṭīb and Ibn Khaldūn accepted and praised works in dialect points to a certain level of ambivalence between the use of Standard Arabic and colloquial in writing in the fourteenth century'; 'Writing Oral and Literary Culture', p. 191.

13 *Zajal* is oral strophic poetry in the vernacular. Mohamed El Fassi produced twelve volumes between 1986–1991, *Maalmat al-malhun* (Encyclopaedia of malhoun) (Rabat: Publications de l'Académie du Royaume du Maroc) showing the importance of this vernacular poetic tradition that extends centuries back through Moroccan history and the wider region. Alexander Elinson argues that, 'Although there is a continuity of sorts from the pre-modern zajal form to the contemporary period, the contemporary Moroccan zajal as a written poetic form with no set rhyme scheme or meter is a free verse form closely related to similarly free verse in fusha, and it is a much more recent phenomenon that, I would argue, emerged out of a particular context of linguistic change in Morocco where proponents of expanding the use of dārija in the written realm have been challenging standard language ideologies that would prefer to preserve the fusha/darija – Standard/non-Standard division of labor in the Arabic language'; 'Writing Oral and Literary Culture: The Case of the Contemporary Moroccan zajal' in *The Politics of Written Language in the Arab World: Writing Change*, ed. by Jacob Høigilt and Gunvor Mejdell (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 190–211 (p. 194).

14 A Moroccan-specific genre of performances that take place in the open air in popular markets or streets. It is usually led by one person called a *Lhlaiqi*, whose improvised performance may include stories, songs, acrobatic arts, and popular and religious wisdom, depending on the interests of the audience present.

music;[15] as well as modern performance genres across theatre, music, cinema and television.[16] A number of prominent Moroccan intellectuals, like Abdou Filali-Ansari, Abdellatif Laabi, Abdallah Laroui, Mohamed Achaari and Abderrahim Youssi, have promoted the idea of two languages, linked semantically and in terms of vocabulary but different in terms of syntax, structure and imagery.[17] They perceive Darija not as a mutilated form of Arabic Fusha, but as a language with deep roots in Moroccan local cultures, shaped by the spoken Arabic of the tribes who migrated to North Africa and incorporating historical Punic and Tmazight influences.

It is only in the 1980s that Darija started to be valorised, and particularly over the past two decades various initiatives have sought to give Darija its due place in society. Newspapers or magazines in Darija have been launched with some success, like the weekly news magazine *Nichane* that circulated between 2006 and 2010, and novels written in Darija.[18] Moreover, Darija is the dominant language of performances, television shows, dramas, films and popular music and poetry. Plays written in Arabic Fusha and French get translated into Darija when performed for the public, to ensure a wider circulation.[19] Arguably, it was Nas El Ghiwane who lay the groundwork for Darija's reinvigorated role in popular culture in the 1970s.

15 *Malhun* is a form of sung poetry in colloquial Arabic that has a long history in Morocco; *gharnati* is a regional form of classical music that originated in Algeria and spread to Morocco in the twentieth century.

16 See Elinson 'Writing Oral and Literary Culture', pp. 190–211; also Catherine Miller, 'Contemporary dārija Writings in Morocco: Ideology and Practices' in *The Politics of Written Language in the Arab World: Writing Change*, ed. by Jacob Høigilt and Gunvor Mejdel (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 90–115.

17 See for example Abdou Filali-Ansari in *Maroc: La guerre des Langues*, ed. by Kenza Sefroui (Casablanca: En toutes lettres, 2018), pp. 41–55 and 155–59.

18 Examples include Muhammad Barrada's (Mohamed Berrada), *Lucbat al-Nisyan* (*The Game of Forgetting*) and *al-Daw' al-Harib* (Fleeting Light); and Yusuf Fadil's (Youssef Fadel), Hashish (Hashish) and Mitru Muhal (A Meter Tall? Unlikely); see Alexander E. Elinson, 'Dārija' and Changing Writing Practices in Morocco', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45.4 (2013), 715–730, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43304009

19 Cleo Jay, 'Performing Change? Contemporary Performance Practices in Morocco' (unpublished PhD thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2017).

Why Chaabi Popular Music?

The post-independence Moroccan state, in accordance with a broader pan-Arabist trend, promoted 'modern song' and classical Andalusian music, which were both dominant forms of cultural production at the time. As we have seen, Arabic Fusha was perceived in most postcolonial Arabic-speaking nations as a symbol of their 'decolonised' Arab national identity, both national, trans-regional, and cosmopolitan, and was therefore heavily promoted, whereas vernacular forms of Arabic, such as Moroccan Darija, were dismissed as parochial. Chaabi music, with its associations to vernacular Moroccan Darija, was not considered sophisticated enough to be elevated as representative of Moroccan culture.

Chaabi music, however, has deep roots in Moroccan society and is representative of the richness of popular culture. For example, the *aita* genre,[20] sang in Darija and Tmazight across different regions of Morocco and dominated by women singers, is embedded in local popular traditions of healing: singers known for their strong vocals call on their local *wali* (saint) and intercede with God to heal them and solve their problems. Chaabi music is connected to the genres of *malhun* and *zajal* vernacular poetry, which have flourished in Morocco for centuries and have come to be written down and valued as poetic forms of expression from the people and for the people.[21] *Aita* songs even played a role in the anti-colonial struggle. The famous late-nineteenth century *aita* pioneer singer and poetess Kharbousha, who came from the region of Abda, composed songs around themes of fighting both colonialism and the tyranny of the ruler at the time, Aissa Ben Omar.

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20 *Aita* means call, lament, or cry; *aita* groups are composed of mixed male and female singers and dancers with a lead singer who is usually a woman; the women signers are called *sheikhates*, a term which is sometimes used in a derogatory way to refer to 'loose women'. Despite their sophisticated vocal, poetic, and musical skills, then, these women artists are not always well perceived in traditional Moroccan society; see Hassan El Bahrawi, *Fann al-ayta fil-maghreb* (The Art of aita in Morocco) (Rabat: Union des Écrivains Marocains, 2003); and Hassan Nejmi, *Ghina al-Aita* (Aita songs) (Casablanca: Toukbal, 2003).

21 Elinson argues that 'the fourteenth century saw a flourishing of zajal and other colloquial forms [of poetry] in the official realm in al-Andalus and medieval North Africa' but their popularity did not mean that these vernacular forms of poetry were easily accepted as 'legitimate poetic forms' by some critics and scholars, and its 'popularity waxed and waned'; 'Writing Oral and Literary Culture', p. 190.

While it originated in rural Morocco, *aita* moved to urban cities with the mass migration of peasants to big urban centres for work from the 1950s onward. It links the village to the city with songs that represent the difficulties facing peasant men and women in their new environments, translating the pain of exile, alienation, love, sorrow, and the lure of alcohol, as well as calling on local walis to sustain them in their daily struggle. Nas El Ghiwane's blend of soul and Sufi music draws on this rich repertoire of *aita* from the various regions of Morocco.

In 'Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular"', Stuart Hall explains why popular culture 'matters'. Hall proposes that people en masse may be inspired by popular culture to act as an oppositional political force. Popular culture 'is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle'; in other words, popular culture 'is the arena of consent and resistance'.[22] Oral and aural expressions of culture attract large audiences and garner wide engagement. This is particularly the case in a society like Morocco where illiteracy rates have traditionally been high. Oral popular culture is also important in cementing a 'sense of belonging and community'.[23] As Ziad Fahmy puts it: 'Cultural productions, in any form, are not socially relevant unless they are communally and socially activated; they must be discussed, breathed and animated in the routine of everyday life'.[24] By employing imagery and metaphors that drew on a shared Moroccan heritage, and in a language accessible to the vast majority of Moroccans, the music of Nas El Ghiwane created a sense of togetherness.

The Phenomenon of Nas El Ghiwane

The popular musical group Nas El Ghiwane is sometimes referred to as the 'saviour' of the Moroccan nation. The group formed in the 1970s in a context marked by heightened political oppression under

22 Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular"' in *Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981), pp. 347–361 (p. 239).

23 Joke Hermes, *Re-reading Popular Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 136.

24 Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. xiii.

the reign of King Hassan II. They quickly became the voice of popular discontent. Their music combined deep existential meaning while simultaneously mobilising resilience and hope. They sang against corruption, disillusionment, and oppression, but also expressed hope for a better Morocco, particularly for the working classes.[25] They were a phenomenon, insofar as they were extremely popular across all social classes in Morocco. Nas El Ghiwane's music draws from diverse sources, including the rich popular repertoire of *aita* music from Morocco's plains and plateaus; the tradition of *malhun* music,[26] an urban working-class genre of music associated with craftsmen's guilds; and the trance music of religious fraternities such as the Gnawa, which has strong Moroccan and trans-Saharan roots.

Sufism, as a branch of Islam, is known for its embracing of music and sounds as tools to free the soul and bring it closer to God. Music is used for *dhikr* or remembrance of God and is often used simultaneously with dance to awaken the soul and its spirituality. Diverse Sufi *tarikas* (or brotherhoods) use basic musical instruments such as the flute and the *bendir* (a frame drum common in the Maghreb region) to produce repetitive and rhythmic tones that lead the listeners to a state of trance or mystical elation that can heal the soul. Sufi popular music is often used to conjure up spirits in healing ceremonies, and Nas El Ghiwane lyrics and music are embedded in this tradition of informal popular religious practices. The group uses traditional instruments such as the *tbila* drum of Sufi brotherhoods, the *harrazn* (cup-shaped drums) of itinerant musicians and beggars, and the *gembri*, the percussive bass of the Gnawa musicians, which gives it a trance aesthetic that moves listeners in a way similar to the Sufi rituals of healing through music.

25 As Lhoussain Simour puts it, 'These concerns inform the poetic diction of the group and remain at the genesis of the social, political, and cultural inequalities that have plagued postcolonial Morocco for decades', *Larbi Batma, Nass el-Ghiwane and Postcolonial Music in Morocco* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2016), p. 3.

26 According to Abbès Jirari, *malhun* has deep roots in Moroccan history starting in the fifteenth century in the south of Morocco as a regional genre but then moved later to urban centres and male craftsman guilds to become a 'national' genre that represents in contemporary times, Moroccan 'authenticity'; Abbès Jirari, 'Al-Zajal fi l-Maghrib: al-Qasida /Zajal in Morocco' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Rabat, 1970). Magidow claims, 'Since the Nass El Ghiwane cultural movement of the 1970s, malhun has come to appeal to most Moroccan publics, including audiences fluent in French and/or in Amazigh languages'; 'Trending classic', p. 316.

Their vernacular lyrics are rooted in local proverbs and storytelling as well as the religious imagery of *zawiyas* and popular Sufism. They were inspired, for example, by the rich repertoire of famous Moroccan Sufi vernacular medieval poets Sidi Abderhmane Al Majdub and Sidi Boualam Al Jilali, infusing this zajal poetry with courageous directness and social relevance. One of Nas El Ghiwane's earlier songs, '*Allah ya Mawlana*' (God our Master), has a strong Sufi theme of supplication. Its rhythmic music moves the listeners to a state of trance, but the song also engages with ideas of disillusionment and the loss of hope in postcolonial Morocco. At the outset, the song uses metaphors associated Sufism, referencing attempts to reach God:

> Oh God our Lord, God our Lord
> Surely Alive, my One God
> Glory be to God, be generous with us
> With you, I filled my streams with water
> And my bee is protected in your blossom
> Don't let me be miserable
> A servant coming to you through the Sufi path.

In the middle of the song, however, there is a shift of register as the lyrics dwell on contemporary social realities:

> Enough of crying, my eyes
> Enough of calming the situation
> Time cheated me and threw me away
> I have no hope.

Another canonical song is '*Gher khuduni*' (Just Take Me) which was released in 1974. Like '*Allah ya Mawlana*', the song combines a Sufi tone with an overt political engagement with the turbulence of the era. At a time when many political activists and dissidents, particularly of the Left, were imprisoned or disappeared, the song's lyrics defy the fear being instilled in the Moroccan population:

> For you, I would give up my soul
> Just take me
> My friend is gone…
> Show me the way to God
> I am bereft over those who went…
> I am bereft
> Shackles in the hands of a blacksmith

I am bereft
The blood of those betrayed won't be in vain
The rights of those wronged won't be overlooked
You who stabbed me in the back
It's only one death
Just take me, oh God just take me.

Nas El Ghiwane constituted a social movement that mobilised large audiences, and offered Moroccans hope and optimism at a time when the country was going through significant political and social changes marked by tyranny and lack of freedoms; they sang the people's fears, aspirations and dreams as well as expressing their defiance of the growing tyranny of the postcolonial regime at the time. The group originated in the biggest slums of Casablanca, built specifically to accommodate rural migrants in Al Hay Al Mohamadi in the late 1960s and early 1970s. None of the members were formally trained in music except Allal Yalla, the master of banjo and oud.[27] Leftist intellectuals and artists in Morocco in the 1960s to 1980s called for the reinvention of traditional popular and vernacular culture as a fundamental element of a decolonised national identity. The well-known Moroccan theatre director Tayeb SidiqTayeb Sidiqi devoted his career to reinventing Moroccan theatre, drawing heavily on popular and traditional genres of performance such as the *halqa* or oral storytelling. Nas El Ghiwane performed and sang in the 1970s in several of his avant-garde plays and performances.

Nas El Ghiwane is credited with revolutionising Darija's cultural heritage, by synthesising the old traditional forms with new popular trends. In the process, they produced over twenty albums and have significantly influenced other *chaabi* musicians.[28] Drawing heavily on the oral poetic tradition of *zajal* poetry in their lyrics has enabled the group and their lead poet Larbi Batma to reinvent Darija in a way that appeals to all classes and regions in Morocco. As contemporary Moroccan poet Driss Messnaoui states in reference to the importance of *zajal* tradition to Darija 'a language without the garment of zajal remains a naked and

27 The group was made up of five musicians: Larbi Batma (d. 1997), Omar Essayid, Boujemaa Ahagour (d. 1974), Allal Yalla and Moulay Abdelazziz Tahiri, who left and was replaced by Abderhman Paco in 1974.

28 The cultural movement created by Nas El Ghiwane gave birth to other popular groups such Jil Jilala, which w rose to prominence in the 1970s; it also heavily influenced Algerian Raï music.

poor language'.[29] Elinson points out that *zajal* served in the 1970s and 1980s as 'a vehicle for political critique ... the product of a particularly heated political moment in Morocco and the rest of the Arab world when Marxist/leftist movements sought political and social change under autocratic postcolonial rulers, and expressed solidarity with the Palestinian cause'.[30] Indeed, the sung poetry of Nas El Ghiwane is a genre of *zajal* that is committed to social causes and deeply rooted in the masses aspirations but without compromising the aesthetics of the literary language of Darija and while contributing to its valorisation as a poetic language.[31]

Their lyrics, mostly composed in Darija by their charismatic front man, the poet Larbi Batma (d.1997),[32] express ordinary people's fears and aspirations in a language that is rooted in popular imagery, using rich traditional metaphors and proverbs to express dissent and to overcome censorship. According to Hassan Najmi, the group is not just a phenomenon but 'the testing centre that came out of history in order to reconstruct history'.[33]

Nas El Ghiwane's fusion music draws on the repertoire of the peasants and the dispossessed in a new form that aims at healing and mobilising people. The Moroccan maternal heritage is always present

29 Translated from Darija and cited by Miller in 'Contemporary dārija Writings in Morocco', p. 95.

30 Elinson, 'Writing Oral and Literary Culture', p. 198.

31 It is important to note Elinson's division of contemporary *zajal* into two main categories: 'zajals composed with an "oral mentality", i.e. drawing from Moroccan oral culture and meant to be performed orally': these includes *malhun*, *aita* and the sung poetry of Nas Al Ghiwane and other popular groups; and 'zajals that are composed with an intellectual or "writing mentality" that draw from all manner of world intellectual culture – philosophical, religious, literary, historical, etc.' The latter type is less accessible to the masses and requires education to be appreciated unlike the first category; Elinson, 'Writing Oral and Literary Culture', p. 200.

32 With the death of the group's poet and lead singer Larbi Batma in 1997, the group practically ceased to exist or create new songs. When he was diagnosed with cancer in 1993, Batma published a sequence of two books that document his life and his artistic itinerary with Nas El Ghiwane and how they come to embody the aspirations of generations of young Moroccans; the first one is called *Araheel* (Departure; Casablanca: Manshuraat Araabita, 1995) and the second one *Al'alam* (The pain; Casablanca: Dar Toubkal, 1998). Batma also published his zajal poetry under the title *Hawd Ana'na'* (Mint basin) (Casablanca: Dar Toubkal, 2013). One of the group members, Omar Essayid, published their lyrics in the volume *Kalām al-Ghiwane* (The poetry of Al-Ghiwane) (Casablanca: Matba'a al-Najāh al-jadida, 2007).

33 Simour, *Larbi Batma*, p. 3.

in their well-versed vernacular poems with proverbs coming from the depth of Moroccan oral culture. The song '*Tabni wa taali, tamchi wa tkhali*', takes its title from well-known Moroccan proverb meaning, 'You may build towers, but in the end, you will leave them behind'. The song directs its criticism to the corruption and greed of the elites; it obliquely references the misuse of public funds to accumulate huge wealth by some elites, at the expense of further impoverishing the poor. In the same vein, their song '*Mahmouma*' (Careworn) expresses, in an eloquent Darija, the burdens of the working classes and the way they are crushed by the system in contrast to the few elites who run the country and live a life of luxury.

The group uses the *mawwal* (plural *mawawil*), a traditional form of solo vocalisation, before the song begins that relies heavily on the voice of the singer, common in many other Arab countries. In the case of the Nas El Ghiwane, it was the powerful voice of Larbi Batma who is well known for his Ghiwanian *mawawil*. Batma's *mawawil* highlight the beauty of Darija, as in the song '*Wanadi ana'* (I call you) in which rich metaphors are used to express the turmoil of the time and the fate of dissidents who disappeared without a trace:

> Impossible for my heart to forget him; impossible my heart as you love him
>
> Ah my heart, I came alone; ah my heart I came from a far
> Impossible for my heart to forget him;
> Oh my heartache, its tears and heartbreak
> Winds and clouds drizzled over me, and a dense murk took over me
> And loved ones are gone, I am alone and all depend on me
> Oh eyes that heal, hearts that know
> Oh mountains that stand and winds that blow
> This is a new generation without master and slave.

As Rachid Adnani puts it, 'If there were a soundtrack for what Moroccans call the "years of lead", a large part of it would be comprised of their songs'.[34] Nas El Ghiwane did not participate in politics openly through protests or political parties, but their project was shaped by the sufferings of the masses in postcolonial Morocco and the disillusionment with the

34 Rachid Adnani, 'Beyond Rai: North African protest music and poetry', *World Literature Today*, 80 (2006), 21–26 (p. 25).

notions of national liberation and independence. Their songs and music provided a powerful critique of the regime's tyranny and corruption, using a language understood by all Moroccans. One of their canonical songs '*Assiniya*' (Moroccan tea tray) has strong cultural and social connotations in Morocco. It reflects on solidarity, unity, togetherness, hospitality, and generosity: the principles that Nas El Ghiwane has tried to transmit in its songs.

One of the most celebrated songs of the group, '*Fin ghadi biya akhuya?*' (Where are you taking me brother?), is a critique of the regime of Hassan II. Using camouflaged language, it reflects on the alienation experienced by Moroccan migrants abroad while underlining the tyranny and lack of opportunities that drive people to leave their homeland:

> Where are you taking me brother?
> Blow after blow, who will stop the misery?
> O people, don't blame us then for living in exile

The group also produced songs in support of pan-Arab causes such the Palestinian cause with their series of songs called '*Felistiniyat*' (in 1972 and 1974). Their song '*Ya bani el-insan*' (Oh human being) tackled the question of tyranny and oppression in the Arabic speaking world. In 1995, they produced a very popular song in solidarity with the African countries and the various wars and conflicts plaguing the continent after independence, called '*Ya dem sayel*' (Spilled blood), denouncing the neo-colonial policies in Africa and the corruption of the ruling elites.

Nas El Ghiwane gained international appeal in the 1970s–90s. They were recognised not only as an engaged popular music group working in solidarity with the oppressed and the marginalised in Africa and the Middle East, but also as an originator of new trends in popular music that have influenced various other local and regional groups. Within Morocco, the group laid the ground for the establishment of other popular groups such as Jil Jilala and Lem Chehab, as well as igniting interest in the genres of *malhun* and *aita*; regionally it inspired Raï singers such as Cheb Khalid and others in Algeria. It has also inspired the many genres of engaged social and political music in the wider Arabic-speaking world, such as the work of the Lebanese musician Marcel Khalifa. Martin Scorsese used one of Nas El Ghiwane's song '*Ya sah*' as the soundtrack of his film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). And in

2007, Scorsese, with the help of the World Cinema Foundation, restored an old musical documentary made about the group in 1981 by the Moroccan filmmaker Ahmed El Maanouni. El Maanouni's film called *El Hal* (Trances) followed the steps of Nas El Ghiwane in composing their lyrics and music as well as in their popular tours across the country, and in Tunisia and France.

Conclusion

Oral literary genres have a long, rich history in various Arab countries. *Nabati* poetry in the Gulf, *zajal* in the Maghreb and Levant, and the oral epic, known as *sira*, across the Middle East are prime examples of this rich and diverse oral literature. Some oral literary traditions have been recorded in written form for centuries, others remain almost exclusively in the realm of the spoken word.[35] Vernacular popular oral culture is still largely under-researched in Morocco in comparison with Egypt, for example, where there is a considerable scholarship on pioneering vernacular poets like Ahmed Fouad Najm, Bayram al-Tunisi, Abderahmane Al Abnudi, Salah Jaheen, Sayyid Darwish and others (see also Virginia Pisano in Chapter 11 of this volume).[36] Despite this neglect, Moroccan Darija has a rich cultural heritage, and the Chaabi music of Nas El Ghiwane is an important example of that reworking of that heritage to powerful effect.

Nas El Ghiwane's music offers an accessible language of social and political critique that is shared across Morocco and that transcends class and regional divisions; it overcomes the obstacles of illiteracy to offer ordinary Moroccans a language they can use to critique the oppression

35 For example, in North Africa the *taghrība* ('western mgration') or *sira* of Banu Hilal is still a living oral tradition performed by professional storytellers and singers, it is seen as 'the national folk epic of the Arab Maghrib'; see H. T. Norris, 'The Rediscovery of the Ancient Sagas of the Banū Hilāl', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 51 (1988), 462–481 (p. 463).

36 See for example, Marilyn Booth's *Bayram al-Tunisi's Egypt: Social Criticism and Narrative Strategies* (Exeter: Ithaca Press, 1990); Kamel Abdel-Malek's *A Study of the Vernacular Poetry of Aḥmad Fu'ād Najm* (Leiden: Brill 1990); Anastasia Valassopoulos and Dalia Said Mostafa, 'Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution', *Popular Music and Society*, 37 (2014), 638–659; and Ziad Fahmy's *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2011).

of the state and the rapid social changes engulfing their communities. This could not have happened without the power of Darija and its specific imagery and forms of expression, which are rooted in centuries of oral cultural heritage. Nas El Ghiwane's reinvention of Darija shows the language's capacity for creativity.

In fact Darija, this chapter has argued, is the powerhouse of popular culture in Morocco, with *chaabi* music a fundamental part of that culture. However, there is a need to document and write its richness, as it remains largely an oral culture. Darija's vernacular literariness is embedded in the cultural heritage of stories, proverbs, legends and music. Therefore, instead of opting for the flawed equation of 'either or', as per the current debates in Morocco on the relative merits of Fusha and Darija, it is preferable to enrich and nurture Morocco's multilingual landscape of oral and print languages and cultures that are not only co-constituted but also marked by their own literary specificity and locality.

Nas El Ghiwane's music is inspired by both localised and transregional Sufi popular religious practices and music, which is viewed as 'cathartic' and having an ability to 'heal' and mobilise. This calls for research to be conducted on the intersection between popular forms of Islamic practices of peasants and poor people with genres of music. This oral vernacular music also calls for a rethinking—and a re-opening—of the extant discussion on world literature. The music of Nas El Ghiwane clearly demonstrates how, far from being untranslatable and untransferable, localised aesthetics and politics can take a global turn.

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