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Performing change? Contemporary performance practices in Morocco

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

2017

Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies

SOAS, University of London

Declaration for SOAS PhD thesis

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Abstract

The present thesis explores dynamics between the contemporary theatre scene in Morocco and the social and political fields through a close analysis of selected plays and performances. Over the last two decades, Moroccan theatre has emerged as a powerful tool of contestation in the hands of a generation of young artists that had lost faith in the political process. Theatre-makers and playwrights are offering spaces for critical thought and free expression and leading debates on issues as varied as domestic violence, sexual freedom or suicide.

In the context of the post-Years of Lead and of the more recent Arab Spring uprisings, theatre is contributing to a renewed sense of political engagement in Morocco, challenging official history and offering alternative visions of society. Inspired by international theatre directors such as Augusto Boal and Bertolt Brecht, Moroccan theatre practitioners are successfully creating or adapting plays that question political discourses and break social taboos, re-invigorating a theatre scene that had been deserted by audiences.

I will organise my research around five axes: performativity in Moroccan culture, multilingualism and the redefinition of national identity, the performance of gender and women's rights, theatre as activism, and finally the complex issues of patronage and cultural policy. I aim to investigate the relationships of co-optation and dependence that are created between artists and their sponsors, whether public or

private, and look at how artists negotiate these connections in order to deliver their own messages. Ultimately, I examine the power of theatre as a medium for change.

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In loving memory of Gilda Bessis

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Setting the scene: an Introduction

"Le théâtre est un point d'optique. Tout ce qui existe dans le monde, dans l'histoire, dans la vie, dans l'homme, tout doit et peut s'y réfléchir, mais sous la baguette magique de l'art." Victor Hugo

The context of the performance scene in Morocco is exciting and fast-moving: since the social reforms of the early 2000s and the events of the Arab Spring¹ that shook the whole region, theatre-makers, directors and playwrights have increasingly engaged with civil society and the political scene, using performance as a tool to express discontent and challenge the status quo. Khalid Amine argues:

Theatre has a magical capacity to implicate 'Others' (...), it reformulates social legitimation and plays its part in the public sphere 'beyond state control and moral censure' (Amine, 2013: 89).

In a complex, fast-moving society, theatre can thus provide opportunities for reflection around key social and political issues. On the other hand, theatre and other creative forms can act as a "safety valve" (Wedeen, 1999: 88) for audiences in

¹ The so-called 'Arab Spring' uprisings started in Tunisia in late 2010 with the suicide of vegetable seller Mohamed Bouazizi. A movement of protest against corruption, poverty and an oppressive political system grew across the country, then spread to neighbouring countries and the wider Arab world. Ultimately, it led to Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt and Gaddafi in Libya being ousted.

repressive contexts: they provide opportunities to express discontent and they act as outlets for the public's anger, but these transgressions are in fact state-sanctioned. They allow the regime to "monitor dissent and to identify rebellious citizens" (Joubin, 2013:10), and they can be used to portray the state as tolerating criticism.

In the last 20 years and most particularly since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, there have been many examples of theatre productions successfully raising awareness of specific social or political issues in Morocco. Khalid Amine's article 'Re-enacting Revolution and the New Public Sphere in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco' (2013) analyses recent controversial plays, arguing that they benefited from the turbulent atmosphere of the Arab Spring to break taboos sexuality, women's rights or corruption. George Bajalia, theatre director and researcher, describes the engagement of theatre-makers with the 20th February movement² and their perpetuation of its aims, stating: "the performing arts community has assumed new importance as an extension and continuation of the February 20 Movement's ethos and objectives" (Bajalia, 2014). The boundaries between the cultural and the political scene have become fluid in the aftermath of the uprisings: many performances, such as the Dabacitoyen festival of February 2011 dedicated to Tunisia, explored and debated the events, with audiences being invited to share their thoughts.

The stage represents a space in which society performs its past and its present, involving both actors and their public in the process. Through language and movements, actors create narratives that audiences can identify with and that

² The 20th February movement was born from the widespread demonstrations that occurred in Morocco, inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. It regrouped a large number of activists from various backgrounds, demanding a fairer, more democratic society.

challenge stereotypes. Finally actors and public come together through the process of catharsis³, during which the staged drama allows them to release repressed emotions. In a region where critical political events are still unfolding such as North Africa, theatre can provide an opportunity for reflection, away from the bustle of the street. Preben Kaarsholm, researching the context of theatre in Zimbabwe, writes:

Where there are areas of conflict in worldview, and tensions between the forces of dominance, acceptance and revolt, theatre often serves to illuminate self-understanding and to articulate precise needs and aspirations. (1990: 246)

Similarly, theatre in Morocco is evolving in a political context that is unstable and uncertain, and in which political speech is highly monitored: Mohamed Mifdal mentions the cases of rapper Mouad Belghouat (known as *El haked*), a figure of the Feb20 movement, who was jailed in 2012 for denouncing police corruption, and satirist Ahmed Snoussi or *Bziz*, “banned from television because of his direct challenge to power” (Mifdal, 2016: 48).

As a medium, performance allows alternative ideas to be exposed and it creates a direct dialogue between artists and their public, as they share the same space. By definition, theatre is a collective medium: influential theatre director Jerzy Grotowski defines it as “what takes place between spectator and actor. All the other things are supplementary” (2012 (1968): 32). This encounter is central to theatre and it is key to its impact on wider society beyond the theatre space. Over the last century, theatre practitioners around the world have tried to improve their local conditions

³ Catharsis, from the Greek word *katharsis* meaning ‘purification’ and rooted in Ancient Greek tragedy, is a process through which a performance creates extreme emotions in audience members and helps them express their own repressed feelings.

through the development of new performance techniques and formats. The dynamics between audiences and performers have come under much thought and consideration, precisely because it is through their public that theatre-makers can reach out and call for change. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) radically redefined the way we perceive spectators in contemporary theatre, with “his ambitions to improve society on the assumption that an active audience which is critically thinking about a political issue will take these thoughts outside the theatre and will be able to recognize similarities and parallels in the outside reality and initiate actions” (Dapp, 2006: 69). Brecht has had a particular influence in Morocco because some of the techniques he used and introduced in the European context were already present in pre-colonial performances. Khalid Amine (2001) and Hassan Bahraoui (1994) mention for instance the similarity between Brecht’s *Verfremdungs-effekt* (distanciation effect) and *halqa* (storytelling) practices, writing: “besides the mimetic and acting strategies of *al-halqa*, its distinguished play with distanciation can hardly be found in (western) classical theatre” (Bahraoui quoted in Amine, 2001: 56). It is a technique still used in contemporary Moroccan theatre, as I will discuss later on.⁴

The work of Brazilian Augusto Boal (1931-2009) has also had a profound impact on theatre practices worldwide: as an activist in a very oppressive context, that of Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s, Boal thought of theatre as a means to rebel against dictatorship and to help local populations to navigate through censorship and

⁴ The 2013 play *ḍumū ‘ bi khul* in particular makes use of this technique by having actors speaking directly to audiences, which has the effect of breaking down the invisible boundaries between the stage and the auditorium. Hence, it blurs the limits between reality and drama. I will discuss this further p.253.

repression. In his seminal book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, in which he defines his practice, he writes:

The theatre is a weapon. A very efficient weapon. For this reason one must fight for it. For the reason the ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theatre and utilize it as a tool for domination. In so doing, they change the very concept of what 'theatre' is. But the theatre can also be a weapon for liberation. For that it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. (2000 (1979): ix)

In Boal's work, theatre is used as a tool of political liberation in the hands of the population, empowering the masses and supporting them in their resistance against oppression. These performance practices have had an important influence on the development of contemporary theatre globally and have challenged the way we perceive and analyse theatre, particularly in authoritarian contexts. Through globalisation and the fast circulation of information, but also through international theatre festivals and their dissemination of practices and aesthetics, it has become possible for many theatre-practitioners to access Boal's work and to apply it locally. Morocco is no exception: several companies (Théâtre Aquarium, Dabateatr, the Theatre of the Oppressed group amongst others) have used some of these techniques to actively engage with their audiences and wider society.

Little has been written about contemporary Moroccan theatre from a scholarly point of view, despite the interest the region gathered during the Arab Spring uprisings. One of the main academics working on Moroccan theatre is Khalid Amine from the University of Tangier, whose research introduces the idea of hybridity and looks at Moroccan performance as a postcolonial product. He presents contemporary

Moroccan theatre as having developed from the merging of local theatre forms with Western theatre introduced by foreign colonists, but also by travelling Middle Eastern troupes. Studies such as Khalid Amine's *Moroccan Theatre between East and West* (2000) or the more recent *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia* (Amine & Carlson, 2012) provide an insight into the history of North African performance and the challenges of a multilingual, multicultural context. Both studies also posit contemporary Moroccan theatre as the fruit of a long evolution from the pre-colonial period through to the postcolonial present, highlighting the richness of local traditions rather than portraying it as an offshoot of Western theatre. *Moroccan Theatre between East and West* researches the history of Moroccan theatre starting from the pre-colonial period, replacing it in a long tradition of local performances and describing its hybridity in terms of forms and aesthetics. Amine and Carlson's book starts by describing traditional performance types in North Africa, and discusses the impact of the colonial experience on the development of modern theatre. The last section moves on to the contemporary period, but it doesn't reflect on the political power of performance in the current context. As notes Julie Champrenault in her review of "The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia", it stops short of analysing current movements and their complexities; she describes the book as a "panégyrique sans nuance d'un Maghreb hyper-théâtral, qui ne reflète pas la réalité de la complexité de la vie dramatique maghrébine actuelle" (2013: 219). Other studies that have focused on contemporary performance practices in Morocco include Laura Chakravarty Box's book *Strategies of Resistance in the Dramatic Texts of North African Women* (2006), which looks at female performers and playwrights, and the

work of Catherine Miller who has published several articles about the theatre group Dabateatr. In addition, a number of recent PhD thesis focus on Moroccan theatre, often written by Moroccan students with direct experience of the theatre scene such as Omar Fertat ('Le théâtre marocain à l'épreuve du texte étranger: traduction, adaptation, nouvelle dramaturgie', 2008) and Mahmoud Chahdi (Le théâtre au Maroc : pour une institutionnalisation de la politique culturelle, 2016). Mouna Belghali, herself an actress, graciously provided me a copy of her unpublished thesis 'L'image de la femme dans le théâtre marocain' (2010). I have drawn extensively on this body of research, which informed my understanding of the field.

I would also like to highlight the wealth of research looking at pre-colonial and post-Independence theatre in Morocco, mainly in Arabic. Scholars such as Hassan El-Mniai, who has been researching and writing about this topic since the 1970s, paved the way for a whole generation of theatre specialists in Morocco: Abdelhadi al-Zouhri, Rachid Bennani, Mohammed Berrada and others. Their books were often published by small editors in Morocco and can be difficult to locate; I am very grateful to Hassan El-Mniai for providing me with copies of his own work.

I have also used research looking at different aspects of contemporary Moroccan culture, often using the same themes as theatre: Aomar Boum has published several studies relating to music and hip-hop in Morocco in the wake of the uprisings, such as 'Youth, Political Activism and the Festivalization of Hip-hop music in Morocco' (2012), as has Cristina Almeida Moreno ('Unraveling distinct voices in Moroccan rap: Evading control, Weaving solidarities and Building New Spaces for Self-expression', 2013). Jamal Bahmad explores contemporary Moroccan

cinema and its depictions of urban revolt ('From Casablanca to Casanegra: Neoliberal Globalization and Disaffected Youth in Moroccan Urban Cinema', 2013). Valerie Orlando has also written an excellent study on Moroccan cinema and its representations of a society in transition (*Screening Morocco: Contemporary Film in a Changing Society*, 2011). These studies highlight the connections between the political and the cultural scenes and the complex relationship between the Moroccan state and its artists, which is the background of my own research. In addition, Karima Laachir's work on Moroccan literature, language and resistance strategies has been an important influence and forms the basis of my approach. I have used her "reading together" model, which she defines as such:

An entangled comparative reading of Moroccan novels in Arabic and French, a reading that foregrounds the co-constitution of the postcolonial Moroccan novel and its strong link with Morocco's pre-modern literary traditions (2015: 4).

This approach is particularly interesting for theatre because of the prominence of vernacular languages such as darija and Tamazight that fall outside of dominant literary systems. In the context of my enquiry on social change, 'reading together' also paints a fuller, more complex picture of Morocco. Laachir also edited two special issues on Moroccan culture⁵ that proved very relevant to my own research.

⁵ Laachir, K., 2016. *Journal of North African Studies - Special Issue: The Aesthetics and Politics of Contemporary Cultural Production in Morocco*, 21:1, London: Routledge, and Laachir, K., 2013. *Journal of African Cultural Studies. Special issue: Contemporary Moroccan Cultural Production: Between Dissent and Co-optation*, 25: 3, Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.

More generally, I referred to a number of studies discussing the dynamics between politics and culture in the MENA region. I took particular interest in the work of Charles Tripp, who frames street art forms as symbols of defiance. His research focuses on popular art in Egypt and in Tunisia as a form of political expression (‘Art of the Uprisings in the Middle East’, 2013; *The Power and the People: paths of resistance in the Middle East*, 2013). While Morocco, as a monarchy, presents a different political context to its regional neighbours, there are many similarities in terms of state control of the cultural scene. A recent collection of essays on Arab Theatre also proved particularly relevant to my research: *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre* (2012, edited by Eyad Houssami), although it disappointingly bypasses the Maghreb. It provides an overview of recent theatre activity in the MENA region, in particular in the context of the Arab Spring, and it discusses the interactions between the art scene and political events. In an interview, the collection’s editor Eyad Houssami made insightful comments on the difficulties encountered by contemporary Arab theatre-makers:

Because theatre can be dangerous and transformative, governments - authoritarian, oligarchical and military regimes - have laid siege to theatre in the Arab Middle East, reining it in to maintain the status quo. Because theatre almost never makes a profit, it is anathema to global capital and repels the greed of big money (Houssami, 2013).

Moroccan theatre practitioners of course encounter similar issues, and their particular historical and sociological context deserves more attention.

The present research thus seeks to address a lack of research on contemporary theatre in Morocco and its interactions with the current socio-political scene. It aims

to analyse theatre plays within the context from which they emerge: that of a multilingual country in the midst of a supposed ‘democratic transition’, a country that is still deeply marked by the violence of the Years of Lead⁶. Many of the plays I discussed in this thesis have not been discussed elsewhere, and it is my belief that they hold significant messages on social, political and aesthetic levels. I hope that this selection of performances and theatrical texts, although small and subjective, will contribute to a better understanding of Moroccan theatre and its role within Moroccan society.

In this introduction, I will first discuss the social, political and economical context of contemporary Morocco, which is the background of this study. I will focus on the post-colonial era, and most specifically on the last two decades, the timeframe of this research. It has been a decisive period for Morocco because the many reforms of the early 2000s and the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 in North Africa had led many to hope for a radical change in governance. This political context has had an important influence on the development of new cultural movements such as the *Nayda*⁷ and the emergence of a new generation of theatre-makers. I will then detail the theoretical background of the thesis and its methodology, as well as discuss my fieldwork and my position as a researcher.

⁶ The Years of Lead refer to a large period during Hassan II’s reign, mainly from the 1960s to the late 1980s, marked by violences and human rights abuses, perpetrated by the State against perceived opponents.

⁷ *Nayda*, literally ‘get up’, is a cultural movement that emerged in the late 1990s in Casablanca, and is mostly led by young musicians.

The context of contemporary Morocco

In the context of post-Arab Spring North Africa, Morocco appears to be an exception: contrary to its neighbours, it has not succumbed to the upheaval of the revolutions and popular demonstrations remained relatively peaceful, unlike in Libya and Egypt. Rather than seeking to suppress protests, King Mohammed VI introduced a new constitution in the summer of 2011, followed by early parliamentary elections in November of the same year. As notes Karima Laachir, the idea of the ‘Moroccan exception’ was promoted by Moroccan elites through various media, resulting in the country being “seen as a commendable example of democratic transition to other Arab monarchies in the Gulf” (Laachir, 2013: 45). Morocco suffers from high unemployment, corruption, and widespread illiteracy⁸, as do its neighbours; “what distinguishes it”, writes Irene Fernandez-Molina, “is its historical and recent political configuration” (2011: 426). Mohammed VI is heir to a long-established monarchy and benefits from “sizeable monarchical popularity” (Daadaoui, 2011: 1). Despite its authoritarianism and the many socioeconomic challenges affecting the country, the *makhzen*⁹ represents a fascinating case of resilience, during the upheaval of the Arab Spring and prior to that. To understand the roots of this resilience, one must consider Morocco’s development since Independence in 1956.

⁸ See UNICEF’s recent statistics on Morocco:
https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/morocco_statistics.html

⁹ ‘Makhzen’ is an Arabic word meaning ‘warehouse’, very commonly used in Morocco to refer to the state apparatus, meaning the King and his court, or the wider administration

After rising to power in 1961 after the death of Mohammed V¹⁰, King Hassan II set up a multi-party regime ensuring different political opinions could be represented, while maintaining a tight grip on power and establishing himself as a political ‘referee’. As George Joffé argues:

While this system was always under the control of an authoritarian monarchy that limited the power of the political actors, it nevertheless created an atmosphere where divergence and opposition could be expressed even though it was constantly either being coopted or repressed (2013: 179).

James Sater further adds, commenting on Hassan II’s rule:

The political system constructed by King Hassan encouraged the creation of circles of power, at the centre of which the King stood himself. Hassan’s authority resembled neo-patrimonial rule, in which segments of Moroccan society were co-opted and granted special gifts in return for their acceptance of, and loyalty to, his authority. (2007: 730).

The 38-years long reign of Hassan II (1961-1999) was marred by allegations of abuse and repression, as well as assassination attempts against him orchestrated by high-ranking army officers in 1971 and 1972. However, and despite its unpopularity at the time, the regime, deeply rooted in Morocco’s identity and history, survived. Daadaoui explains this resilience by referring to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, noting that “Gramscian hegemony is inextricably linked to legitimacy” (2011: 3).

This analogy is particularly useful to understand the monarchy’s power and stability

¹⁰ King Mohammed V was Sultan of Morocco from 1927 after the death of his father Sultan Youssef, until 1953 when he was deposed by the French and forced into exile. He returned in 1955 to negotiate the Independence of Morocco and took the title of King in 1957, until his death in 1961.

because according to Gramsci, hegemonic rule is not achieved through force and coercion, but through consensus between the ruling class and civil society. It is imposed through rituals, education, and as noted by Sater above, through a set up that places the King above politics and therefore above criticism. Media and culture play a crucial role in terms of obtaining ‘consent’ from the population, as Gramsci argues:

Indeed one tries to make it appear that force is supported by the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion - newspapers and associations - which are therefore, in certain situations, artificially increased in number (Gramsci, 2000: 261).

After King Mohammed VI arrived at the helm of power in the summer of 1999, following the death of his authoritarian father, he quickly set to “modernise” Morocco (Cavatorta, 2009: 164), and announced several important reforms, touching a wide number of issues from the democratic process to women’s rights, and opening up the country to the neo-liberal market. Morocco also secured important funding from the World Bank (Hanieh, 2015: 126), in particular to support the INDH (standing for National Initiative for Human Development) programme launched by the King in 2005. This programme represented a key feature of his project to lift some of the most disadvantaged populations out of poverty by funding small, local projects. In the context of neighbouring Arab dictatorships, both Moroccans and the international community wanted to see the young King as a reformer, as observed by Marvine Howe at the time:

Nowhere else in the Arab world has the public mood of fear changed so dramatically in so little time, nor have citizens acquired such extensive freedom of press, speech and assembly (2001: 60).

The IER commission (Instance D'Équité et de Réconciliation) launched in the 2004 was another key project of the King's early years, aiming to document human rights abuses during the Years of Lead. This was an unprecedented move in the region: "Morocco broke the mold of silence and lack of accountability that characterizes Arab regimes" (Malka, 2006: 49). It also allowed Mohammed VI to make a clear departure from his father's reign and his reputation as a ruthless leader, and to portray himself as a just King, respectful of human rights: "the implicit assumption behind the creation of the commission was that no human rights abuses had taken place in Morocco since the coming to power of Mohammed VI in 1999" (Dalmasso, 2012: 223). However, there were reports of new state abuses as early as 2003, in the wake of the Casablanca bombings and the "crackdown on suspected Islamist militants" (Dakwar and Goldstein, 2004: 4).

Fifteen years later, one is forced to admit that most of these ambitious projects failed to achieve their stated aims: many aspects of these reforms, for instance the new Moudawana¹¹ (Family Code detailing women's status) unveiled in 2004, were not fully implemented at a local level. As Katja Zvan Elliott argues, "these reforms remain minimal when a large proportion of Moroccans are not exposed to them due to

¹¹ I will use this particular spelling of 'Moudawana' because it is the one used by the Moroccan State, particularly in the French translation of the legal text available on the Ministry of justice's website:
<http://adala.justice.gov.ma/production/legislation/fr/civil/Code%20de%20la%20famille%20Maroc%20Texte.htm>

geographical obstacles and general lack of infrastructure” (2009: 224). Despite their flaws, these two reforms (the IER and the Moudawana reform) “granted the regime a reputation of being on the road to democratization” (Dalmasso, 2012: 219). Notably, “civil society actors played a pivotal role” (Dalmasso, 2012: 219) in those reforms, although they were ultimately unable to provoke long-term, systemic change. On a local level, living conditions have continued to deteriorate. Francesco Cavatorta highlights the negative impact of liberal economic reforms on ordinary Moroccans, despite Morocco’s continued economic growth. He speaks of “the pauperisation of large sectors of the populations”, with dire consequences: “working conditions have worsened, underemployment has risen and unemployment has remained stubbornly high.” (2016: 94).

As argues Michael Willis, the failure to fully implement reforms is partly due to resistance from society and political leaders who wish to protect the state’s power structures (2009: 234). Cavatorta (2007) brands Morocco a case of “stalled democratization”, as he describes the opening up of the political scene throughout the 1990s and early 2000s and the failure to consolidate reforms to bring about the change Moroccans hoped for. However, he argues that “actions undertaken by external actors have strengthened the current regime with their focus on economic openness and facade democratic elections” (Cavatorta, 2005: 564). Ultimately, it is this sense of stagnation, associated with growing unemployment and a lack of economic opportunities for the youth, that led to the emergence of the 20th February movement (or Feb20) in the follow-up to the Arab Spring demonstrations. On the 20th February 2011, 150,000 to 200,000 Moroccans marched the streets demanding justice

and democracy (Maghraoui, 2013: 183). However, as noted earlier, this popular movement didn't lead to regime change, nor did it fundamentally alter the relationship between the State and its citizens. Dalmasso points out the absence of two key players during the 2011 uprisings: political parties and civil society actors, who "neither instigated nor participated in any demonstrations for political reform" (2012: 219). This is an important observation: without this support, the Feb20 movement remained a party without a leader, unable to trigger a regime change. Maghraoui describes it as a "mish mash of different ideological stripes united only by their opposition to authoritarian rule", with "no formal leadership" (2013: 183-184).

Nevertheless, the movement found a platform by investing "interstitial autonomous spaces" (Maghraoui, 2013: 187) such as the Internet and social media, notably creating the news website Mamfakinch¹² run by a number of activists. The impact of this movement of contestation, bringing together a large variety of demonstrators from Amazigh activists to unemployed university graduates, is not to be underestimated: "by filling the vacuum left by Morocco's apolitical society, [it] has become the foremost, if not the only, challenger to the regime" (Dalmasso, 2012: 229). Following the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, King Mohammed VI announced a new constitution in the summer of 2011, followed by early parliamentary elections in November 2011. Matt Buehler refers to them as "safety-

¹² Mamfakinch, meaning 'not giving up' is a news website launched in February 2011 by human rights activist Hisham Almirat. It played an important role during the Arab Spring uprisings by reporting on demonstrations and presenting alternative news.

valve elections”¹³ (Buehler, 2013: 141) because they served to appease the population and channel their demands for political reform. For the first time, this led to an Islamist party, *al-‘adala wal-tanmiya* or PJD (which stands for “Party of Justice and Development”) winning the elections, with its leader Abdelilah Benkirane becoming Prime Minister. This is very significant development in the Moroccan context, in which Islamist parties had been kept under tight control by the *makhzen*. The PJD (previously MPDC, Mouvement Populaire démocratique et Constitutionnel) was originally integrated into the political arena in the late 1990s as a counterbalance to another group that threatened the regime: the very influential *al-‘adl wa-l-ihsān* (‘Justice and Spirituality’), led by Abdessalam Yassine¹⁴ (Vermeren, 2012: 53). Yassine, who died in 2012, publicly criticised the monarchy; as a result, his group was never allowed to take part in political elections.

The last general elections held in October 2016 confirmed the PJD as the country’s first party, but they also revealed the resilience of the PAM (‘Parti de l’Authenticité et de la Modernité’, Authenticity and Modernity Party), now led by Ilyas El Omari. The party came second and thus will play an important role in the opposition. The party was founded in 2008 by Fouad El Himma, close friend and

¹³ Buehler looks at elections as part of the state’s strategy to keep the country under full control, adding “Authoritarian regimes create nonviolent outlets to draw the opposition into formal politics and away from political violence.” (2013: 138)

¹⁴ Abdessalam Yassine (1928-2012) was a popular Sufi cheikh who founded the *al-‘adl w’al-ihsan* movement in 1973, aiming to reform Moroccan society on an Islamic basis. In 1974, he created controversy by writing a letter to then-King Hassan II, calling for him to govern according to Islamic teachings. He was imprisoned several times and later on was kept under house arrest until after the death of Hassan II. He was then freed in 2000 by King Mohammed VI.

advisor of King Mohammed VI, which led to many describing it as ‘the King’s party’: “there was little uncertainty that “the PAM was the voice of the master,” as one former PAM activist asserted” (Buehler, 2013: 140). The PAM was originally created to “counterbalance the only political party which had and continues to have any real mobilizing power within Moroccan society, the Islamist PJD” (Dalmasso, 2012: 227). However, after the Arab Spring uprisings and the 2011 elections, the King was “forced to remove El Himma from the official political game” (Dalmasso, 2012: 229), as it became clear the strategy of promoting the PAM to weaken the PJD had failed and was decredibilising the whole political system. Since 2011, the party has continued developing under El Omari’s leadership and it remains a major player in the political arena, relying on “the clientelistic vote in the countryside” (Cavatorta, 2016: 95). The latest election results seem to “consolidate the rise of a bipolar PJD/PAM political party system in Morocco, while historical parties decline” (Daadaoui, 2016).

Many of the reforms mentioned earlier, such as the Moudawana reform, were seemingly the results of a combination of top-down and bottom-up politics, with grassroots associations playing an important role in defining the changes and promoting them across the country. Moroccan women had campaigned for years for the reform of the original Moudawana introduced in 1958, leading up to the One Million Signatures Campaign launched by UAF¹⁵ in 1992. Because of its wide success, then-King Hassan II consulted with women’s groups to introduce the

¹⁵ L’Union de Action Féminine (UAF) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1987 with the aim of promoting women’s rights.

CEDAW convention in 1993. The new Moudawana was the result of further lobbying from these groups, leading to a meeting with King Mohammed VI in March 2001 (Maghraoui & Zerhouni, 2014: 676). Similarly, human rights associations such as OMDH¹⁶ were involved with the creation of the IER commission. Civil society has historically played an important political role in Morocco, replacing the State in areas where there was very little state involvement and relaying its policies on the ground. However, since the beginning of Mohammed VI's reign, he has radically redefined the relationship between civil society actors and the *makhzen*, leading to them opting for an "apolitical stance vis-a-vis the regime" (Dalmasso, 2012: 229). This situation explains why civil society groups remained mainly absent from the 2011 demonstrations, leaving the 20th February movement to fill a gap in term of social and political involvement. This state of affairs is significant to the present thesis because of the many and long-standing links between theatre groups and civil society associations. Théâtre Aquarium for instance maintains close ties with feminist groups such as Jossour, the local NGO through which the two female founders met (Gianturco, 2007: 56). Similarly, the troupe Masrah al-mahkūr ('Theatre of the Oppressed') from Casablanca has collaborated with Transparency Maroc on a performance denouncing corruption.

¹⁶ OMDH (Organisation Marocaine des Droits Humains) is an influential NGO founded in 1989 by former prime minister Abderrahman El Youssoufi amongst others, with the aim to defend political prisoners. It is composed mainly of academic, doctors, journalists as well as state employees.

Cultural developments in the 21st century

Since the early 2000s, the Moroccan cultural scene has greatly developed and flourished, with a complete renewal of the music scene in particular that “adopted new music forms, namely rock (...), rap and a genre named ‘fusion’, merging traditional Moroccan music elements with rock, rap and reggae elements” (Boubia, 2015: 321). This movement, mostly led by the urban youth, was coined ‘Nayda’ by Francophone magazine *Telquel* in 2006 (Moreno, 2013: 322), and gathered much interest from both journalists and scholars. Through public performances and pioneering festivals such as *L’Boulevard* in Casablanca, which created a platform for young musicians, the youth re-appropriated and redefined urban spaces:

The Nayda (...) has brought with it two important symbolic changes: the appropriation of public spaces- squares and streets—by young people gathering in crowds and the legitimization of urban youth culture. This cultural movement has imported features from larger global currents and fused them with local elements, resulting in something fundamentally Moroccan, yet open to the world. (Desrués, 2012: 29).

Although theatre and performance have remained on the margins of this movement, the Nayda benefited the cultural scene as a whole and gave it a new dynamism:

This creativity in the music field subsequently reached every form of artistic expression, be it in theatre, cinema, literature, fashion or art, so that by 2005 this whole dynamics was identified and recognised as the Nayda (Boubia, 2015: 321).

The creative output of the Nayda movement now forms an important part of popular

culture, despite accusations of co-optation. The movement was swiftly brought under the regime's control through a number of very successful, privately funded festivals (Mawazine festival in Rabat, Timitar in Agadir) that both promote the movement and regulate it. Cristina Almeida Moreno both acknowledges and deconstructs those claims of co-optation. She argues that while the movement has been instrumentalized for political and commercial gains, it is not a homogeneous group with a shared agenda, and some artists have been able to use festivals to their advantage:

This representation not only disempowers youth, but also undermines rappers' capacity to use the power of the state to their advantage and, hence, profit from the popularity and public space gained by participating in music festivals or programmes in the Moroccan media (2013: 323).

The relationship between the regime and artists is ambivalent, with both sides trying to benefit from its association to the other. The regime earns both national and international recognition from these festivals, as argues scholar Abdeslam Ziou Ziou:

Par la diversité des artistes et des publics, le festival permet de satisfaire tous les goûts, et ainsi créer ce qui est l'une des clés fondamentales de la symbolique du pouvoir: la mise en spectacle d'une certaine proximité avec des différentes couches de la société. (...) La deuxième reconnaissance est internationale. Elle place le pays au centre même d'un réseau international de circulation de produits culturels, standardisés et mondialisés, au sein d'un ensemble de festivals internationaux exploitant la même programmation. Les artistes invités deviennent les ambassadeurs d'un Royaume tolérant, ouvert sur d'autres cultures et qui représente un îlot de tranquillité au milieu des turbulences politiques que connaît la région (2016).

In light of the Arab Spring events and the involvement of many young Moroccans with movements such as Feb20, festivals also serve to catalyse a subversive youth through events that are highly controlled by the State. Latifa Akharbach, a Moroccan diplomat, argues that festivals represent an opportunity for young artists who are given a space of expression, while benefiting from the international reach of these events (2015). On the opposite, Abdeslam Ziou Ziou notes that overall, very few urban music groups can live off their art despite their exposure through Mawazine and other festivals, and that only ‘clean’ practices are tolerated:

La notion de « propre » renvoie ici au soutien à une offre artistique aseptisée et consensuelle, c'est-à-dire apolitique et célébrant les insignes et symboles de la nation. Les rappeurs un tant soit peu engagés sont systématiquement éloignés de ces réseaux de diffusion artistique, soit par la marginalisation médiatique, soit par l'interdiction concrète d'exercer (2016).

The platform offered by the regime to young artists, musicians in particular, is therefore very limited: it is reliant on them conforming to expectations by not having an overt political message, and contributing to the portrayal of Morocco as modern and tolerant.

From the perspective of artists and theatre-makers, this strategy of ‘festivalisation’ has negatively impacted the cultural sector as a whole, because it shifts the focus away from the stable cultural scene they are trying to build. In a 2014 report about the state of culture in Morocco, published by association Racines, writer Driss Ksikes and cultural policy expert Aadel Essaadani highlight some of the issues with a conception of culture as an ‘event’ rather than a part of daily life. They argue

that these large festivals don't have any benefits for Moroccans: they do not have a lasting impact on local economies, do not lead to the building of new spaces or other facilities, and they are usually set up and managed by foreign companies without any form of skills exchange for local populations (Ksikes & Esaadani, 2014: 8). Furthermore, they critique the political impact of this 'festival' culture, denouncing private sponsors who use these events to improve their image and to attract new voters (2014: 18). These sponsors are usually corporate businesses from various sectors such as banks and media outlets (Ben Abdallah El Alaoui, 2014: 79), who have their own aims: they are either cronies acting on behalf of the regime or are "businesses seeking favour with the state, and are therefore not independent" (Graiouid & Belghazi, 2013: 269). I will discuss the issue of private patronage further in my last chapter.

Festivals dedicated to theatre and performance have also flourished over the last decade, even though they remain marginal compared to the masses drawn to the Mawazine festival in Rabat or the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music. The cultural year is now organised around these events across the country, some welcoming all types of plays, some dedicated to Amazigh theatre, and others focusing on specific types of traditional performance. Some examples are the National festival of Abidat R'ma in Khouribga, the International festival of youth theatre in Taza, the National Theatre Festival in Meknes, the International festival of the Halqa and popular arts in Sidi Bennour, or the Festival of Amazigh Theatre in Agadir. Again, artists and cultural workers can be critical of these yearly festivals that are promoted at the

expense of more regular events, which would help sustain theatre activities throughout the year.

Beyond this festivalisation strategy, culture has remained a low priority for the successive governments, with a budget generally representing far less than 1% of the State's overall budget. In 2012, it came to 0.23% of the budget, despite a growth of 12% compared to the previous year (Kessab & Benslimane, 2013: 7). By comparison, neighbouring Algeria has the largest budget allocated to culture in Africa and the Arab region; in 2012, it represented 0.53% of its general budget, and in 2011, 1.29% (Kessab & Benslimane, 2013: 2). In 2013, the Moroccan Ministry of Culture had an estimated budget of about 354 million dirhams, with 202 millions for staff salaries (Zainabi, 2013). However, the ministry is responsible for a large number of cultural issues including archaeology and the preservation of the national heritage, in addition to promoting artistic creation and funding cultural events, therefore leaving little for investments. The Moroccan Ministry of Culture, currently headed by Mohamed Laaraj (since 2017) from the nationalist Mouvement Populaire party ('Popular Movement') has gradually increased funds allocated to theatre and culture in general. This remains insufficient: the last decade has been marked by uncertainty and a lack of vision and clarity from the Ministry of Culture. Since 2007, five different ministers have succeeded each other, all coming from leftist parties¹⁷ apart from the current one. They included celebrated actress and director Touria Jabrane, who despite her

¹⁷ Even after the PJD's accession to power following the 2011 elections, the Ministry of Culture remained in the hands of other parties. Mohamed Amine Sbihi, who was Minister under Abdelilah Benkirane from January 2012 to April 2017, was from the PPS (Parti du progrès et Socialisme) party.

intimate knowledge of the problems encountered by theatre-makers in the country, failed to make a substantial improvement (Massaia, 2013: 96). Furthermore, a 2010 report from the Moroccan Ministry of Culture about the economy of cultural heritage in Morocco highlights the lack of adequate theatres, with state-owned spaces often being in advanced stages of deterioration, and the inexistence of private theatres that could provide an alternative (Lahbil Tagemouati, 2010: 100). It gives as example the Mohammed VI theatre inaugurated in 2006 in Casablanca, which aimed to bring the population back to the theatre. The theatre hosts a wide range of events, mainly music but also theatre and dance. However, it doesn't have an allocated budget from the Ministry, and there are no appropriate regulations regarding its activity (Lahbil Tagemouati, 2010: 101), and it is therefore under-used.

The few state theatres throughout the country are similarly run, very much relying on individual directors to create a regular calendar of events and cultural activities, and therefore there is a lack of a common vision and agenda. This translates into chaotic advertisement and communication with potential audiences, which I experienced myself, as I will describe later on (see p.271-272). The grand new theatres currently in construction in Rabat and Casablanca seem to be steps towards a better access to culture and theatre for inhabitants of those two cities, and towards creating a high quality, stable theatre scene. However, it remains to be seen how much of an impact these new structures will have on the independent cultural scene, and how much access theatre-makers will have to them.

As playwright Driss Ksikes remarks,

Il est étonnant de constater la dichotomie entre l'ambition des pouvoirs publics pour faire émerger des infrastructures de haut niveau et la réalité de l'activité théâtrale, en crise depuis près de vingt ans. (2010)

Ahmed Massaia, scholar and former director of the ISADAC Institute, encourages theatre professionals to demand the construction of smaller theatre spaces in suburban areas and in smaller cities (2013: 141), which would both create more opportunities for artists and increase access to theatre for the wider population.

Throughout its recent history, the development of the Moroccan theatre scene has thus been greatly influenced and affected by its relationship with the State and the Ministry of Culture, who alternatively promoted it and sought to regulate it. Because theatre is by essence a collective medium, one that requires rehearsing and performance spaces and a high level of training across several disciplines, it is particularly dependent on its sponsors, and therefore vulnerable to co-optation by both state and private institutions. Artists and theatre companies have complex relationships with the State and the Ministry of Culture: on one hand, they demand better facilities and a clearer direction from the Ministry, but they are also wary of their work being co-opted to serve the interests of the State. Ghassan El Hakim, a young theatre director, comments:

Ce qui est difficile c'est que du côté du système ils sont très forts pour récupérer les gens...Ce serait bien qu'on arrive à éviter au théâtre ce qui est arrivé à la Nayda. Au début c'était très fort mais ils sont devenus des ambassadeurs du système (quoted in Miller & Abou El Aazm, 2014: 1).

As a result, they have increasingly sought independent sponsors, developing relationships with international NGOs and foreign cultural institutes. Their reliance on this funding greatly affects the production of theatre, as I will discuss in my last chapter.

Approach and methodology

In this thesis, I examine the role of theatre in the social and political context described above, describing the emergence of an activist scene (or more accurately ‘artist’ as writes Amina Boubia, 2015) that seeks to address key social issues and to start a process of change. I analyse selected plays to unravel their meanings, their aim and their possible impact in Morocco. I have relied on a number of qualitative sources, primary texts and performances that I saw on fieldwork, and semi-structured interviews conducted in Morocco. I have adopted a close interpretive approach, engaging with performances and dramatic texts comparatively to unravel the various meanings they can have in the context in which they are presented to audiences. This takes into consideration speech and dialogues, but also other performative elements such as sets and costumes, body movements and use of space. The theoretical background of this thesis is multidisciplinary, incorporating cultural studies, performance studies, gender and identity politics as well as postcolonial studies. It also delves into sociology and linguistics when relevant. My research presents

Moroccan theatre as an aesthetic medium, but also as a disputed expression of power in a repressive political context.

First of all, since the advent of colonisation, performance has been both a site of resistance and a means for the French colonists to assert their influence on a cultural and social level. In the post-colonial era, contemporary Moroccan theatre is a medium that emerged from interactions between a local performance heritage and Western theatre forms introduced through the colonial experience. The theories of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak are particularly relevant to an analysis of Moroccan theatre as a post-colonial product occupying an “interstitial passage” as Bhabha calls it in his book *The location of Culture* (1994/2004: 5). It is a form inherently hybrid, existing in the gaps between Western and Oriental cultures. I will discuss these issues in more depth in my first chapter.

At the crux of my thesis is the understanding that culture necessarily has a political meaning. Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci understood culture as a highly political field, shaping public opinion; his concept of hegemony is particularly relevant to my research as I mentioned earlier. Political ideas are created, debated and disseminated through cultural productions; theatre is a potent medium because it confronts actors and audiences and mirrors social conflicts. Gramsci worked as a theatre critic for some time, and notably wrote about Luigi Pirandello¹⁸’s work and its political potential. His vision of culture is similar to Marx’s in that he sees it as a field

¹⁸ Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) was an Italian writer and playwright, whose work offered new ways of thinking about theatre. Notably, his play *Six characters in search of an author* (1921) introduced a ‘theatre within the theatre’ structure which sometimes features in Moroccan plays, as I will discuss later.

in which different forces and groups clash: intellectuals, political and economical elites as well as popular masses. As write Hoare and Sperber, “the issue of the relations between culture and social domination, and more generally between culture and politics, is at the very heart of Gramsci’s thought.” (2015: 29). Crucially, Gramsci understands culture as a field where independent expression is possible, rejecting the Marxist view that “culture is no more than a mechanical reflection of economic forces” (2015: 33).

Pierre Bourdieu’s work also focuses on the dynamics between culture, politics and economy as three separate fields interacting with each other and possibly overlapping. David Swartz writes:

Bourdieu’s sociology represents a bold attempt to find a middle road that transcends the classic idealism/ materialism bipolarity by proposing a materialist yet non-reductive account of cultural life. (1997: 7)

Morocco is an interesting case in this regard as it is evident that the State along with private patrons and sponsors do hold considerable power over the development of the cultural scene, as I will argue in my last chapter. Nevertheless, the Moroccan theatre scene retains a degree of autonomy in its approach to sensitive and political topics, as I will try to demonstrate. Hence, theatre practitioners navigate through funding issues and censorship threats to use culture on their own terms, to raise awareness or to open debates on taboo issues.

Beyond the analysis of theatre plays as cultural products encouraging a culture of dissidence, my thesis also seeks to discuss the role of culture as a ‘safety valve’ as I mentioned earlier. Lisa Wedeen (1999) and Miriam Cooke (2007) uncovered the

power dynamics between artists and the regime in the Syrian context. Both detail the difficulties faced by artists who operate between permitted dissident practices and real resistance. Many of their findings are also applicable to Morocco, despite structural differences between the two regimes: Morocco is a country where public speech remains highly monitored, despite its image as a tolerant country. Hence, the title of my thesis, ‘Performing Change?’ is formulated as a question: are theatre companies encouraging change, participating to it? If so, how? How do they mirror changes in terms of national identity and culture? How do they use theatre as a means to challenge official narratives and express dissent? On the opposite, is theatre part of a strategy whereby the State tolerates some forms of political expression while heavily repressing others? How is the state simultaneously supporting and controlling theatrical productions and their messages? How are private sponsors using theatre to strengthen their influence in the country? These are the main questions driving my thesis.

I chose to adopt an multilingual approach, which I believe is a unique aspect of my research: I looked at theatre plays written and performed in French, Classical Arabic, Moroccan darija and Berber dialects. I studied Classical Arabic for several years before and during my PhD, which was very useful to access written plays and research in Arabic. I took intensive darija classes while on fieldwork, and used local interpreters to accompany to see plays, ensuring that I could understand their linguistic and cultural meaning. I took inspiration from the research of Karima Laachir and Francesca Orsini in terms of comparative literature. Laachir argues against the categorisation of national literature according to what language they are

using, noting “this has resulted in a shallow conception of the transmitted cultural heritage, obscuring the cultural histories from which these texts emerge” (2016: 24). This approach is particularly relevant to Morocco, which has a very diverse linguistic scene predating colonisation, and whose literary productions have usually been studied only through the prism of Francophone or Arabic literature as two separate fields. I seek to adopt “a comparative perspective that takes in both cosmopolitan and vernacular languages, both written and oral performances” (Orsini, 2012: 227). This is a fundamental aspect of my project; throughout my thesis, I have referenced plays written and performed in languages that represent the diversity of the Moroccan context, and I have discussed their use of language through practices such as code-switching. I believe the present thesis is the only research on Moroccan theatre including plays in the various languages used in Morocco and reading them comparatively. In particular, there is currently very little research on Amazigh theatre, although the work of Daniela Merolla sheds light on contemporary Amazigh literature and its context. Although I do not speak any Amazigh dialects myself, I was able to access plays from Amazigh companies that had been translated in Arabic (in the case of Tafoukt’s work) or in French (ARTAs’a play *Imachdah*). I also saw some plays performed in Amazigh dialects presented at various festivals, and although I didn’t understand the dialogues, I could look at actions on stage, stage design and cultural references through costumes and songs. I didn’t use these plays for a more thorough analysis in my thesis, but they deepened my understanding of Amazigh theatre generally.

Language choices in North Africa are complex and fluid, linked to various issues that it is important to analyse and deconstruct; they do not divide neatly according to class or ethnicity. The activity of writing and/ or performing in a specific language has implications in terms of audience and reception. I have devoted a whole chapter to the exploration of these issues, analysing language politics from the point of view of the writer, the performer and the audience. I aim to demonstrate the similar approaches with which they illustrate contemporary Morocco and push for change on a number of fundamental issues. For the purpose of this research, I have also included theatrical texts, including some that have not been performed in Morocco, as well as performances. I believe these plays, such as Zakaria Abou Maria's *h Abou Mari*, contribute to the cultural scene as a whole and enrich the Moroccan theatrical repertoire. I argue that theatre can be considered as both an artistic medium and a literary genre. Antonio Gramsci wrote about the particular status of the written drama, noting:

The fact remains that tragedy 'printed' in a book and read by individuals has its own artistic life, which can be abstracted from theatrical performance. It is poetry and art even outside performance and the theatre. (Gramsci, 1996: 265).

In Morocco, most of the traditional performance heritage was conserved and perpetuated orally, without recourse to written text. The use of written, printed scripts or plays is a practice that emerged from the colonial encounter and the influence of Western theatre on Moroccan theatre practitioners. Playwriting is thus a relatively new activity in Morocco as I argue in my second chapter, compared to centuries-old traditions of storytelling and public performances. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s,

theatre-makers such as Tayeb Saddiki, Nabil Lahlou or Ahmed Taieb el Alj were both playwrights and directors, and also often actors, thus controlling their plays from start to finish. Increasingly however, as I have noticed on fieldwork, playwriting has emerged as a separate occupation: Driss Ksikes for instance comes a literary rather than performance background.

Finally, gender studies have had a profound impact on the development of my research, from its very beginning. I wrote my Master's dissertation on British female playwrights and feminine writing and was very much inspired by Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. I didn't refer to their work there in the present thesis because of the wealth of literature already available on gender issues and culture in the Maghreb and the wider Arab world, but they have certainly informed my understanding of women's theatre. Morocco has its own tradition of feminist philosophers and academics, whose work is the backdrop of my third chapter focusing on gender. Women such as Soumaya Naamane-Guessous and the very influential Fatima Mernissi radically transformed the way Moroccan women perceived themselves and are perceived in the West. They provided new understandings of women's status in North African, Muslim societies and of the roots of their oppression, and therefore gave them tools to rebel against it. I am greatly indebted to Dr Johanna Buisson from the EGE Institute in Rabat, whose research focuses on Islamic feminism and who recommended relevant literature on feminism in Morocco. The women's rights movement in Morocco has successfully lobbied the regime for change several times since Independence and it is a political force to be reckoned with, despite the variety of opinions and beliefs held by Moroccan women. It is within this particular context

that theatre companies such as Théâtre Aquarium and Takoon have been able to flourish: a context in which there is a tradition of female activism, sometimes encouraged by the regime when it fits its agenda, as I will argue in my third chapter.

I have used the IJMES transliteration system for material in Arabic, apart from when it seemed more adequate not to, for Arabic words that have a common spelling such as ‘mousseem’.

Fieldwork

I was able to visit Morocco several times over the course of my PhD: mainly in Spring 2013 when I spent three months there, but also in 2010 when I first attended the National Theatre Festival in Meknes and finally in 2014 when I spent a month collecting missing pieces of information and books. The main aims of my fieldwork was to collect primary material, by attending and documenting performances and looking for texts, and to learn Moroccan darija as it seemed necessary for me to be able to access plays, even superficially, myself. Throughout my periods of fieldwork, I attended many theatre festivals, performances and talks on the topic, travelling to different cities when possible. I was able to attend the yearly National Theatre Festival three times, which was a highlight of my fieldwork as it allowed me to see plays that had been recognised as the ‘best’ of the season, and it was also an opportunity to meet a large number of theatre directors, researchers and cultural actors. I also attended smaller festivals such as one in Larache in the north of

Morocco, and the university theatre festival in Fes, although ultimately I chose not to use these plays that belonged to a more amateur circuit. I travelled to Rabat to see the work of the company Théâtre Aquarium and attend debates they organised. When passing through Marrakech, I observed storytellers and other performers to get a sense of what traditional performances consisted of and how they interacted with vendors and passersby on the market square. I witnessed opening ceremonies and award speeches, which gave me a better understanding of power dynamics between different cultural actors, between theatre professionals and officials (local mayors and envoys from the Ministry of Culture), as well as between theatre-makers from different generations and backgrounds. I was able to attend about 40 plays, the majority of which I ultimately didn't use in my thesis. However, the experience of being present amongst the audience, of witnessing a live show, of visiting various theatre spaces in different cities had a big impact on how I understood and analysed plays in their own context. The reaction of the audience to particular shows guided my choices in terms of focusing on specific plays rather than others. For instance, the play *ḍumū ' bi khul* directed by Asmaa Hourri was a big success when presented at the National Theatre Festival in 2013: the theatre was full and the actors received a standing ovation at the end of the performance, and again when they received prizes at the end of the festival season. This success was proof that audiences identified by the issues raised in the play. Another interesting event for me was the performance of the play *Min Ajlihim* ('For them') by Théâtre Aquarium in Meknes in 2010, during which the actors undressed on stage, resulting in a large part of the audience deciding to leave the room in protest. This led me to reflect on the idea of the body,

particularly the female body, on stage, an image that remains controversial in many contexts.

I interviewed several theatre directors, particularly Jaouad Essounani from Dabateatr and Bousselham Daif from the company Chamaate. Both gave me hour-long interviews, during which I used a semi-directive model. I had prepared 10-12 open-ended questions, not on specific plays but rather on their practice, on their experiences and their relationships with state actors. I was able to discuss some issues in more depth as they came up, particularly with regards to funding. I had hoped to interview Naima Zitan from Théâtre Aquarium, but despite getting in touch with the company and meeting some members casually at their events, this was not possible. While on fieldwork, I was in touch with playwright Hicham Lasri, Ibrahim Laazizi from ARTA, director Asmaa Hourri and playwright Issam el Yousfi, who answered specific questions I had about their work (when it had first been performed for example), and agreed to provide me with their drafts and notes. This formed the basis of my primary material, most of which had never been studied before.

In addition, I kept in regular contact with several other theatre companies such as Théâtre de l'Opprimé and Daha Wassa, to be kept informed of upcoming performances. Whenever possible, I got copies of the texts used by theatre directors, whether published or unpublished and in whatever language they were available in. The plays analysed in the present thesis are mainly ones that I saw while in Morocco and that I believe to be representations of key social and political issues. I am aware of the impossibility of documenting theatre activity across the country as a whole, in particular in a country such as Morocco where there are very few structures

supporting the theatre scene. As a result, reviews of theatre plays are rare in the media and there is no programme of events to inform potential audiences. Due to my project focusing on recent developments of the Moroccan theatre scene, there is also little relevant academic research as I mentioned earlier. I made contact with several scholars working in related fields, mostly Dr Khalid Amine from the university of Tangier and Hassan el-Mniai, who is one of the most respected scholars of Moroccan theatre and gave me some of his published books, difficult to find in libraries. I also got access to a range of resources about the late director Fatima Chebchoub (interview, unpublished plays, extracts from her PhD thesis) from Dr Laura Chakravarty Box, whose knowledge and support were extremely useful.

Because of the lack of academic material, I used newspaper reviews and published interviews when relevant. While on fieldwork, I regularly looked for theatre reviews and collected interviews of theatre directors and cultural actors. I also consulted a variety of reports published by the Moroccan Ministry of Culture and by the Racines association analysing cultural policy in Morocco and similar institutions. These were essential to provide a deeper understanding of the Moroccan cultural scene on a political and economical level, and they form the basis of my critique of cultural patronage.

I have focused mainly on two companies, Dabateatr and Théâtre Aquarium, who I believe are the most significant troupes (on a cultural and political level) to emerge from the new urban generation of theatre makers. Both companies have deeply engaged with social and political issues over the last decade, and as such they have garnered media interest widening the impact of their work. I also included a

number of plays from less prominent companies that demonstrate the range of projects that emerged in Morocco over the last decade. These plays touch on a large variety of issues relevant to Moroccan society, from current social problems such as corruption, to complex topics such as identity and history. Through a critique of these plays, I argue that ‘change’, in its variety of meanings, is both depicted and enacted on stage. Theatre captures current moods and mirrors social transformations; it is also a powerful mode of expression, reflecting the desires of its participants.

Finally, my experiences on fieldwork gave me a better understanding of the wider issues faced by Moroccans, and more particularly by women. Two women helped me to learn Moroccan *darija* and often accompanied me to see performances that they could later translate and explain to me. One, Latifa, was a young student at the University Moulay Ismail in Meknes, but originally came from a rural village in the Atlas. Her perspective on language, on rural life and on issues faced by the youth was invaluable. Through her, I was also to access the university’s library, and meet some students who were part of the local theatre group. I had hoped to find material about the late director Fatima Chebchoub who has been based at that university, but after several enquiries it appeared that it had been moved to archives in another site. My other teacher, Ustadha Amal, was on the opposite a middle class woman who ran an English language school. She talked to me about her charity work as a teacher for illiterate women, and kindly agreed to give me some of the state-produced textbooks she used. This was a fascinating insight into the politics of gender in Morocco: it highlighted what that state wanted women to know about their new rights, and what values it considered important.

I am very lucky to have been able to visit Morocco in the position of insider-outsider, due to the fact that I am married to a Moroccan man and have North African (Tunisian) ancestry myself. This gave me a wide access to parts of Moroccan daily life that might not usually be open to foreigners, and it helped me deepen my understanding of Moroccan culture beyond the scope of my thesis. During my periods of fieldworks, I lived mainly with my husband's relatives and friends and it was a very beneficial experience on many levels. My language skills improved quickly, I was introduced to a large variety of people from different backgrounds who shared with me their views on culture, politics, gender and other matters and I took part in daily activities. As a female and maybe also as a Muslim, I was often welcomed into private spaces and invited to people's homes. These many experiences, while not directly related to my research, helped me understand contemporary theatre from the perspective of Moroccans who are not part of the cultural elites. I also regularly invited Moroccan friends and relatives to accompany me to see plays. Their insights were very useful to me and often gave me possible interpretations of scenes that I would not have thought of. I am also indebted to Dr Khalid Amine from the university of Tangier, who I contacted before going on fieldwork and who kindly agreed to support my research. Through him, I met a number of scholars and theatre professionals such as Hassan el-Mniai, theatre director Bousselham Daif and Dr Margaret Litvin, who was also in Morocco at the time researching Shakespeare's influence on Moroccan theatre. For ethical reasons, I always introduced myself as a PhD candidate from the UK working on theatre, and I found people generally being very open with me and interested in the research I was conducting. Finally, being

French greatly facilitated my fieldwork: academic and cultural discourse is often conducted, at least partly, in French and this was obviously an advantage for me.

The present thesis will proceed as such:

Chapter I will first provide a historical context of performance in Morocco, discussing traditional forms and the impact of colonisation on the development of the modern theatre scene. Then, I will examine the concept of hybridity in relation to contemporary Moroccan theatre, using recent plays as examples. I will also look at globalisation and its impact on local practices. How has Moroccan theatre evolved in the post-colonial era? How do Moroccans attempt to preserve their rich performance heritage? How does contemporary theatre reflect larger movements of globalisation? How do Moroccans push back against the perceived ‘homogenization’ of culture?

Chapter II discusses Multilingualism in Moroccan performance and theatre, as well as related issue: the practice of code-switching, the differences between oral and written literature, and finally the revaluation of Amazigh dialects. What is the significance of language in the Moroccan context? How is the practice of ‘language switching’ reflected through plays and what does it say about contemporary Morocco ? What do language choices in performance and written texts reveal, and what impact does the switch from the written to the oral have? Finally, how is the development of a theatre scene in Tamazight dialects contributing to new discourses about Moroccan identity, and how is it both promoted and limited by the State?

Chapter III focuses on the issue of Gender and the representation of women through theatre. I analyse selected pieces by women writers and directors, and I

reflect on the issues they raise. I will start with a brief history of the feminist movement in Morocco, then I will look at the expression of female voices and experiences on stage. Finally, I will examine the contentious issue of the female body in the public space, and look at how social norms are challenged through performance. Can the theatre stage « free » women from patriarchal oppression? How are female voices released through theatre? How are controversial topics such as female sexuality or domestic violence addressed on stage? How are female directors using the space of the stage to protest against social stereotypes and state policies, and how efficient are they?

Chapter IV explores the idea of an activist theatre through several angles: challenging official history, expressing discontent, and demanding political change, in particular within the context of the recent uprisings. Several recent plays have explored the Years of Lead era, creating a parallel with the current political developments leading up to the Arab Spring demonstrations. How is theatre used as a tool of dissent in the context of contemporary Morocco? What are the techniques used by theatre companies to raise awareness of specific issues? What impact do they have on their audience and on wider social discourse?

Chapter V looks at the issue of cultural policy and funding for performance. I will specifically examine sponsorships of theatre plays and partnerships between private sponsors, NGOs, foreign cultural institutions and local theatre companies. How do theatre makers negotiate these complex structures in order to find sponsors and develop their work? What impact do patrons have on the production of new plays? How do state policies effectively promote theatre while maintaining it under its

control? How is theatre being used as part of diplomatic relations? In addition, sponsors often maintain a neo-colonial relationship with the groups they support: how does this manifest itself? What values do they promote and what is the impact of their work in Morocco?

Finally, my conclusion will briefly resume the key points of my research, in terms of social change being played out on stage, and I will discuss the different possibilities of development for Moroccan theatre in the near future.

Chapter I

Performativity in the Moroccan context

Contemporary theatre in Morocco is the product of a culture that always celebrated and consumed performance as part of its daily life, and in which it played a role much wider than entertainment, as I will argue in this chapter. It is also the result of a colonial encounter that deeply impacted on traditional performances and cultural habits, and introduced new techniques and references in terms of theatre. Throughout my thesis, I often use the words ‘theatre’ (in Arabic *masrah*) and ‘performance’ (‘*rd*’ or *ada*’ to describe a live show) interchangeably, because I understand theatre, as a presentation in front of a live audience, to be a type of performance. However, they do have different meanings, particularly in the post-colonial context. The colonial encounter in North Africa led to important cultural changes affecting performance traditions, as I will argue in the present chapter. It also led North Africans to look at their indigenous performance practices from a new, negative perspective inspired by colonial views. Western theatre, particularly the French repertoire, was promoted as a reference while indigenous performance was described as folkloric and exotic. Rachele Borghi and Claudio Minca mention the many descriptions of Jemaa el-Fna and of *halqa* performances written by European travellers during the colonial era and after. They note that as they could not fully access these performances, because of

linguistic and cultural barriers, they resorted to dismissing them as ‘exotic’: “elles sont, donc ‘textualisées’ à travers un langage chargé d’exotisme et d’orientalisme” (2003: 166). These Orientalist descriptions had a profound impact on the Moroccan elites, who internalised them and started describing their own performance heritage as ‘pre-theatre’. For instance Abdelwahed Ouzri, eminent Moroccan director, playwright and scholar, writes: “Le théâtre, tel que nous pouvons le définir aujourd’hui en occident, c’est-à-dire cet art éphémère où une action est jouée par des comédiens et des artistes, dans un lieu déterminé pour un public, est un art d’une profonde nouveauté dans la société musulmane” (1997: 15). Khalid Amine and Hassan el-Mniai propose a more inclusive definition of theatre, which seems more adequate:

The essence of theatricality, as Mniai contends, is an act of representation within a designated space wherein the performers and their audience participate in the making of spectacle. Such space should not necessarily, therefore, be a closed building (Amine, 2000: 16- 17).

‘Performance’ generally encompasses a larger spectrum of practices than theatre, including other live art forms such as dance and music. It can also refer to performance art, a form that can resemble theatre but has a different creative process, as it focuses on an artist using their body as a medium. The boundaries between theatre and performance are fluid: “Performance, in the sense of live art, emerged out of fine art and experimental theatre; some claim that Performance now displaces drama/theatre” (Shepherd and Wallis, 2004: 2).

There are further debates about which Arabic terms are more appropriate to describe performance and ‘performance studies’, which Khalid Amine discusses in

his book *Al-masrah wa dirasat al-furja* (2011). He points out the differences between the terms *furja* and *ada*’, noting that the former has a much wider meaning, including different types of performances, festivals or celebrations, whereas the latter is more restricted. (2011: 11-12). He translates ‘performance art’ as *fan al-ada*’, but ‘performance studies’ as *dirasat al-furja*, therefore making it a very inclusive field, not restricted to theatrical or artistic performances (2011: 11-12). Another term that is often associated with theatre is ‘drama’. Drama is more closely linked to a literary tradition than a performative one, as Laura C. Box writes: “Let us agree for the purpose of argument that ‘drama’ constitutes a written text, suitable for reading or performance”. (2005: 21). I will therefore use this term to refer to the written play, by opposition to a live performance.

The aim of this first chapter is to look at the historical context of contemporary Moroccan theatre and analyse how it has evolved from the pre-colonial era to the present. It also seeks to discuss what ‘theatre’ itself means in the Moroccan context, and how this meaning has evolved with time. What is ‘Moroccan theatre’? How has it developed in the post-colonial era? How does it interact with notions of identity and authenticity? How do Moroccan theatre-makers and performers situate themselves in a globalising world?

I will also discuss issues related to audience reception, which is a crucial aspect of theatre. In the case of Moroccan theatre and its evolution, it is particularly important because of the switch from an open performance, in which audiences are participants, to a Western style of theatre in which they remain passive. As Marvin Carlson writes,

The Western theatre has largely assumed that the theatre was made on the stage and presented as a finished product to an audience, who simply absorbed what was presented to them. (2014: 111)

I will thus look at how the role of the audience has evolved with different theatrical set-up: audiences can be active, involved in the narrative or they can be passive observers. How is the concept of audience understood in the Moroccan context? How does this affect the reception of plays?

Pre-colonial performance traditions

Moroccans are heirs to a long, rich oral tradition, with storytelling being “an important part of Moroccan popular culture” (Baker, 1998: 4). Told on market place or in the privacy of one’s home, stories used to play an important role in the framing and transmission of Moroccan oral literature, but also by teaching local history and creating a sense of cultural identity and community (Amine, 2000: 72). Richard Bauman, in his study on performance, comments that narratives, repeated performance after performance, transmit “the encoding and presentation of information about oneself in order to construct a personal and social image” (1984: 21). Despite being considered ‘vulgar’ by educated elites who favoured written literature, orality remained a “powerful symbol of identity and authenticity” (Sadiqi, 2012: 2), because of it facilitated the transmission of a communal heritage throughout generations.

Many traditional Moroccan performance forms such as *Al-Halqa* (‘the circle’, also called *Asays*), *Abidat rma*, literally ‘Slaves of the hunters’ (Belghali: 2010: 22)

and *Imdiazen* (meaning ‘the poets’ in tamazight language; it is a type of musical performance) are Berber in origins. Some pre-date the Muslim invasion of North Africa in the 7th century and were-interpreted in light of the region’s Islamisation.

Shmuel Moreh, writing about theatre in the Arab world more generally, notes:

It is possible to observe evidence of the survival of ancient seasonal fertility rites and myths of these nations in their dramatic performance a long time after Islam. [...] By the eve of Islam...these dramatic ceremonies came to be understood as commemorating some legendary or historical event and became seasonal folk theatre. (1992: 14-15).

In Morocco, the seasonal festivals commonly known as *mawāsim*¹ or *moussems* are evidence of this: they are highly hybrid events, based on the traditional agrarian calendar but also associated with Sufi religious practices. Many of these festivals are dedicated to a local saint, such as the popular moussem of Sidi Idriss near Meknes.

As Maghrebi populations got accustomed to Arabic culture through their interaction with Arab migrants, new forms of performance appeared, inspired by the Arabic traditions of literature poetry and storytelling. These forms differ from drama types popular all over the Arab-Islamic world such as shadow theatre (*masrah al-zill* or *karagöz* in Turkish). Shadow puppetry in particular was a popular form found from Iraq to Muslim Spain, as well as North Africa (Jurkowski, 1999: 39), and there is evidence of it in Tunisia and Algeria (Amine & Carlson, 2011: 39)². Morocco

¹ A moussem (literally ‘season’, pl. *mawāsim* in Classical Arabic) is a yearly local festival traditionally celebrated in some Moroccan cities. It often has a religious dimension, or it can reflect important moments in the agrarian calendar.

² Amine and Carlson note that shadow theatre was introduced in Algeria during the 16th century when it joined the Ottoman Empire.

however remained outside of the Ottoman Empire, although it was invaded several times, and therefore was not influenced by its culture as much as its neighbours. In Morocco, performance forms developed from oral traditions, taking their roots from both Arabic practices of storytelling and live poetry and the local heritage of Berber narratives and festivals including dance and music. In pre-colonial North African societies, public speech was essential to relay information from city to city, provide social and political commentary, and educate (Schuyler, 1993: 227). Performance was part of the quotidian, performed on public squares and freely accessible to all. The *suq* ('marketplace') in particular was a common site of performance and storytelling. Deborah Kapchan describes the performances as such:

The *suq* is constructed as socially 'low', the locus of popular performance and chicanery. Performance in the *suq* takes the form of public oratory, sales spiels for potions that remove spells, acrobatic displays, competitive boxing, storytelling, and doom-saying. (Kapchan, 1996: 38).

Al-Halqa, coming from *halaqa* meaning 'circle', is probably the most prevalent form of performance in Morocco and throughout the Maghreb (Amine & Carlson, 2011: 29). It is also the form that had the most "profound effect on the modern theatre of North Africa" (Box, 2005: 35), and it still appears as a reference in contemporary productions in the region. The 2013 play *himār laīl bil-ḥalqa* by company Warchat al-Ibdaa Drama for instance tells the story of *halqa* performers on the famous Jemaa el-Fna in Marrakech, struggling to attract passers-by. The *halqa* is a type of storytelling, performed by one or more narrators, and sometimes accompanied by music, acrobats and other performers drawing from the circus arts. Khalid Amine

describes the *halqa* as a “public gathering in the form of a circle around a person or a number of persons (*hlayqi/ hlayqiya*)” (2000: 67), which usually occurred on the main market square or another public space, where all could join for free. Halqa performers were usually from a family of performers, inheriting storytelling techniques from their elders and accompanying them from city to city to earn their living. Their repertory was incredibly rich, combining varied sources such as “fantastic, mythical, and historical narratives from *Thousand and One Nights* and *Sirat Bani Hilal*, as well as stories from the holy Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), along with witty narrative and performative forms” (Amine, 2001: 1). The *halqa* was thus more than entertainment: it provided a form of religious and cultural education, through religious or historical stories, and would often act as a form of social commentary, through the use of parody.

Al-Bsat, coming from *Bast* which means ‘laughter’ or according to Ouzri, ‘carpet’ as a reference to the storyteller’s space (1997: 21), originally comes from Marrakech, before being adopted by the city of Fes and subsequently developing in various parts of the country. It first appeared during the reign of Mohammed Ben Abdellah (1757-1790) and it was usually performed by a group of comedians on festive occasions such as ‘Aid el Kebir, sometimes in the Sultan’s palace in front of whom they denounced local issues and injustices (Belghali, 2010: 21). Bsat comedians often disguised themselves as animals, with a common show using a man dressed as a panther and a woman as a snake (Feuillebois, 2011: 8). A very popular type of Bsat is *Boujloud*, or *Bilmawen* as it is called in Berber dialects (literally ‘the man with the skin’), which still appears in some rural parts of Morocco during

festivals and special occasions. This is a very ancient tradition, predating Islam, and it was later annexed as part of the Eid al-Kebir celebrations (Amine, 2000: 90.) It usually involves a masked man wearing animal skin, dancing and creating a disruptive performance celebrating fertility.

Sidi al-Katfi is a more recent offshoot of *al-Bsat*, a counter-hegemonic performance that flourished in repressive political environments and under colonialism. *Sidi al-Katfi* emerged in Rabat during the reign of Moulay Youssef (1912-1927), in a fraternity of shoe makers inspired by the Issawa traditional groups (El-Mniai, 1973: 31). This is a particularly significant development because it demonstrates the close links in Morocco between religious practice and performance, as we briefly discussed earlier. Kamal Salhi describes their “legendary philosophy of theatre, which consisted of the belief that is ‘begins as religious and becomes social before being cosmic’” (2004: 52). Each performance repeated the same opening ritual led by a *muqaddam* (‘leader’), starting with a recitation of the *Fatiha*, the opening chapter of the Holy Quran. Then were performed skits close to French public comedies and the performances of the medieval ‘Confrérie de la passion’³ (El-Mniai, 1973: 31), followed by a *jedba* (possession rite) during which the actors summoned spirits and entered in a trance-like state as in Gnawi rituals.

Abidat rma is another significant form of indigenous theatre, originating from Berber tribes in the South of Morocco. Amine links the term ‘*abidat rma*’ with “those

³ The ‘confrérie de la passion’ was a group of amateur actors, founded in the early 15th century, who performed pantomines and skits often inspired by Biblical narratives.

entertainers who used to accompany hunters in day-long expedition”, and he describes the shows they were creating as comprising “ a variety of singing, acting and improvisation”(Amine, 2000, 83). Interestingly, *Abidat rma* was performed in a semicircle rather than a full circle, often for privileged hosts, which is a similar configuration to European theatre, with its 4th wall separating the audiences from the actors. The narratives were mostly inspired by the rural environment: “a major theme in *r’ma* is the forest” (Amine, 2000, 83), which is often personified.

*Soltan Tolba*⁴, ‘the Sultan of the students’, was a yearly carnival performed in Fes during the spring during which students from the renowned Qarawiyyine university mimed the Sultan, electing one of them to “play” him. Lasting for one week and following a precise narrative, *Soltan Tolba* was a festive tradition going back to the 17th century, supposedly based on the story of young student Moulay Rashid, who put an end to the despotic influence of Ibn Mesh’al, a rich man from the area of Debdou. Moulay Rashid, after taking over from the Fassi elites, ruled over Morocco until 1672. The legend, as well a precise description of the festival, are reported by Abdelghani Maghnia in his study “Soltan et-tolba, une forme de théâtralisation chez les étudiants de l’université Qarawiyyine” (2009): it shows a very precise sequence of events divided in 4 main acts, starting from the preparations of the celebrations to the final consecration of the student-soltan (Maghnia, 2009: 54-64).

⁴ In Classical Arabic Sultān al- ṭulba. I will use the spelling ‘Soltan Tolba’ as it is the most common one in Morocco.

The carnival was celebrated up to the 1970s, after which it abruptly disappeared. Moroccan academic Souad Azizi started a project researching the context in which the tradition was stopped, under the reign of Hassan II. She relates that the festival apparently came to an end because the last ‘student-sultan’ asked for the liberation of a local criminal named Moulay Messaoud, which caused controversy (2005: 49). The cessation of this tradition thus happened in a very repressive political context, that of the Years of Lead, in which it could have been interpreted as a possible challenge to the authority of the King. *Soltan Tolba* is a fascinating tradition because it created an effective critique of the ruler and his perceived arrogance, by recreating the eccentric coronation ceremony, but it was still approved by the powers in place. The festival usually ended with the student-Sultan presenting requests to the real Sultan and then abandoning his crown, emphasizing the short-lived, superficial aspect of political power. *Soltan Tolba* illustrates Bakhtin’s work on the carnival as a “world inside out” (1984: 11): the performance denies and overthrows the existing order if only temporarily. It is an element of change, of renewal challenging an established reality: the oppressed become, for one day, the powerful. This type of carnivals was popular in Middle Ages Europe; Victor Hugo describes a very similar celebration in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, called ‘Fête des Fous’ during which a ‘Pope of the Fools’ was elected from the populace. Masud Hamdan notes that these reversals of power hierarchies “were later to constitute a significant element in the dramatic construction of Arabic plays” (2006: 35).

The colonial period: disrupting local traditions

Morocco was officially a French Protectorate from 1912 to 1956, although parts of the country, most notably Tangiers and its region, fell under Spanish authority. France heavily promoted its occupation of the Maghreb region through the ‘mission civilisatrice’ (‘civilising mission’) argument, which defended the colonial project by the need to “uplift” indigenous populations. It assumed that “the Third Republic had a duty and a right to remake ‘primitive’ cultures along lines inspired by the cultural, political and economic development of France” (Conklin, 1997: 2). The colonists particularly targeted the traditional educational system of *madaris* (religious schools), that “played an important role in Moroccan society as a means of cultural reproduction and as a form of cultural capital that defined a person’s social position” (Segalla, 2009: 3), but also more generally cultural traditions and practices which cemented society. Both writer Albert Memmi and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon wrote about the devastating consequences of France’s colonialism on national cultures in Tunisia and the wider Maghreb during and after the colonial period, and their arguments can be applied to Morocco despite it being colonised for a shorter period. Memmi notes:

To subdue and exploit, the colonizer pushed the colonized out of the historical and social, cultural and technical current. What is real and verifiable is that the colonized’s culture, society and technology are seriously damaged. (...) One patent result of colonization is that there are no more colonized artists. (2010 /1974: 138).

According to Memmi, the coloniser does not only destroy a local political system in order to impose himself, but he also attacks what held society together: its traditions,

its collective memory, its languages, its rituals and cultural practices, in order to replace them by his own 'superior' cultural heritage. Frantz Fanon adds, "in the colonial situation, dynamism is replaced fairly quickly by a substantification of the attitudes of the colonising power" (1963: 190).

Khalid Amine applies Fanon's argument to Moroccan indigenous performances, speaking of the "relegation of Oriental theatrical forms to a marginal sphere" (2000: 1) by colonial forces seeking to impose their own theatrical and cultural model. Amine and Carlson note:

Orality (including the pre-colonial masquerades and performance cultures) was strategically overshadowed and made into the other from within and without through a whole apparatus of folklorisation and auto-exoticism. Such orality was construed as a museum piece, or even an inert repository of a disappearing culture that needed to be preserved for following generations as a projection of the old Moroccan society. (2012: 82)

The colonial project thus attacks local cultures on two separate levels: first by dismissing them as primitive or uncivilised, falling short in comparison to European culture which represents the height of civilisation. Secondly, it objectifying traditions and cuts them from their intended audiences, turning them into exotic ethnographic objects or phenomena for the entertainment of Europeans.

In addition, indigenous performances were considered a threat by colonial authorities because of their unpredictability: "the colonists felt it was essential to substitute the western theatre for Halqa or Meddah, for example, because these were too free in content and form." (Salhi, 2004: 53). This alienation of local practices was

not only pushed by the colonial authorities, but as argues Kamal Salhi, it was supported by Moroccan notables who deemed them incompatible with the pan-Arab project⁵ they were promoting as a counter-balance to the colonial project:

The Arabic-Muslim élite, the *Ulema*, joined with western opinion in eliminating them since they were too regionally oriented, to the extent that they played havoc with Arab-Islamic ideology, which preached national union within the larger context of the Arab world. (2004: 53).

The European tradition of theatre transmitted through colonisation and its cultural mission was not the only one to have a defining influence of the development of Moroccan theatre at the beginning of the 20th century. Travelling troupes from the Middle East and other North African countries touched wider, more popular audiences than Western productions attended by the local elites. Ali al-Rai speaks in particular of the visit in 1923 of a Tunisian company led by Mohammed Azzedine (1980: 553) which encouraged Moroccans to adopt the medium. Other companies from Egypt also toured in Morocco and encountered a large success: Amine and Carlson specifically mention the Egyptian Comedy troupe led by Abdel-Qadir al-Masri whose performances were heavily influenced by French comedies (2012: 74).

Morocco was introduced to Western-style theatre relatively late compared to the wider Arab world, where writers and artists had accustomed themselves with this medium from as early as the 1820s, albeit in different circumstances. Theatre practices in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria hosted foreign theatre troupes, starting with

⁵ Pan-arabist ideology, which sought to unite North Africa and the wider Arab region around a shared language and a shared culture, was popular amongst intellectuals during the struggle for Independence and in the following decade.

Napoleon's visit to Egypt in 1798 (Rubin, 1999: 12), and in turn developed their own master dramatists such as Marun al-Naqqash, who produced his first play in 1847 in Beirut after a visit to Italy (Badawi, 1999:20). Morocco remained outside of the Ottoman Empire (Ouzri, 1997: 21), which kept the Kingdom isolated from the cultural developments in the region. Furthermore, in Morocco and Algeria, theatre was "specifically tied to the colonial project" (Amine & Carlson, 2012: 60) and when the national theatre in Algiers was inaugurated in 1853, it was perceived as "an official emblem of French occupation" (Amine & Carlson, 2012: 61).

Theatre director and academic Abdelwahed Ouzri identifies four phases of development of Moroccan theatre, starting from the beginning of the colonial period until the end of the 20th century, each accompanying crucial events in recent Moroccan history (1997: 208). The "theatre of resistance", starting from the 1920s, represents the resistance against the colonial project: it is formulated as a 'nationalist discourse' (Ouzri, 1997: 210) rather than as an artistic medium. From the early 1950s to the early 1970s, the "theatre in search of its balance" corresponds to a phase of experimentation, when theatre-makers try to define a modern theatre in line with the demands of their audiences in the post-Independence era. It is a popular theatre, but that often avoids political questions. Then, the "theatre of the awakening", during the worst period of the Years of Lead from the 1970s to the early 1990s, is marked by a return to political awareness in light of the abuses perpetrated by the authorities. Finally, Ouzri calls the present generation of theatre-makers the "theatre generation", because for the first time it is composed of young people who have chosen theatre as their profession and view it as an artistic form, created by a group of artists rather

than an individual (1997: 228). I will discuss these four periods in more detail in this section, in order to get an understanding of Moroccan theatre's position as a postcolonial product.

During the 1920s, Moroccan literary circles adopted Western theatre, an elitist form of entertainment usually reserved for the colonists, as a means of resistance against forms of cultural imperialism imposed by the French: theatre became a medium to 'raise awareness of the Arab nation's history and of the Muslim religion against the oppression of the Protectorate' (Belghali, 2010: 23). Using a medium imposed by the colonial Other and reserved for the elites, Moroccan literary circles used narratives from Islamic history or the Arab literary heritage, performed in Classical Arabic, to subvert the colonists' authority and create a "nationalist theatre" whose first vocation was propaganda (Ouzri, 1997: 211). They were thus political activists first and foremost, which is what facilitated the integration of this new, foreign medium within Moroccan society (Belghali, 2010: 23).

Faced with a burgeoning indigenous scene that saw in theatre a political tool, the French authorities sought to place the medium under their control and from 1944, they banned unapproved shows: theatre was now relegated to private houses, although plays from the Western repertoire were authorised (Feuillebois, 2011: 37). In addition, centres of 'dramatic expression' were opened in big cities throughout the country and led by educators sent from France to teach theatre to local populations and thus stop them from developing their own dramatic forms, fearing that theatre would become a space of political expression. André Voisin in particular had a defining influence on the first offerings of Moroccan theatre: under his leadership

trained Tayeb Saddiki, Abdessamad Kenfaoui and Ahmed Tayeb el-Alj amongst others, who went on to have prolific careers as directors and playwrights. In 1956, Voisin created the Maamora theatre company, which was the first of its kind in Morocco. Amine however describes as “the output of the colonial policy of containment and assimilation”(2000: 103); this prominent, popular troupe perfectly integrated French theatrical techniques and repertoire into their work, but it never used its success to rally audiences around political topics. Voisin also encouraged the development of a theatre in Moroccan *darija* rather than in Classical Arabic, making it more accessible to wide audiences but also cutting it from the Arabo-Islamic literary tradition that was heavily promoted in the years leading to Independence and straight after, as a means to challenge French political and cultural hegemony.

After Morocco’s Independence in 1956, the growing theatre scene fell under the control of the newly established Moroccan Ministry of Culture, who continued with the colonial strategy of promoting an official, innocuous theatre while banning more ‘transgressive’ plays from the amateur scene. Feuillebois notes: “Il existait clairement une orientation politique visant à réduire le théâtre à un simple divertissement facile, sans prétention ni projet artistique” (2011: 38). The direction of the Maamora troupe went to Ahmed Tayeb al-Alj (Box, 2005: 48), a prolific playwright who is behind a large part of the Moroccan theatrical repertoire, and whose work was often inspired by popular arts. Theatre critic Abdellah Mansouri notes:

La troupe al-Maamora est une troupe officielle, elle est là, politiquement, pour donner au théâtre marocain l’image voulue par l’état. Dans ce but, la philosophie qui oriente

ses travaux vise à donner à nos formes d'expression des contenus loin de tout ce qui bouleverse notre vie politique et sociale. (quoted in Ouzri, 1997:171).

During the post-Independence period, theatre-makers focused on experimenting with the Moroccan performance heritage and adapting Western plays. The developments of this 'new' medium in Morocco throughout the second half of the 20th century reflects the struggles of newly Independent Morocco to re-define itself and find its place in the postcolonial world. Theatre-makers focused on the project of creating a 'national theatre': Ouzri argues that the nationalism of the pre-Independence years, used as a tool of resistance, had become a form of "nationalism for nation-building" (1997: 217). The pillars of Moroccan theatre, such as Tayeb Saddiki and Abdelkrim Berrechid, worked towards creating a theatre that would be both 'authentic', using characters or techniques recognised by Moroccans such as storytelling, and adapted them to the new context of the country.

After the successes of the 1960s and the early 1970s, Moroccan theatre went through a long period of crisis during which many established companies disappeared. Abdelwahed Ouzri describes the theatre festival organized in Rabat in 1974 as a defining moment of rupture between theatre companies and their audiences: the festival drew few spectators and was deemed a failure. As he writes, "le public avait changé, mais pas le créateur" (Ouzri, 1997: 220). In the midst of the Years of Lead, audiences needed safe space to make sense of what was happening, and most theatre directors did not adapt their practice to this new political context. The same year, the Maamora company disappeared, both because of a lack of state support for

theatre and because of a lack of interest from audiences for a theatre that relied on basic comical skits (Belghali, 2010: 50).

Despite this, amateur theatre, which was mainly created by university groups, thrived during this period (Massaia, 2013: 54). Young theatre-makers, mostly students or teachers, renewed and modernised theatre practices through experimentation. As part of this trend, Abdelkrim Berrechid created the ‘Ceremonial Theatre’ movement (*masrah al-ihtifālī*) with the publication of a manifesto in 1976, exploring the liberating aspect of performance and proposing a theatre in line with the indigenous heritage of performance. His aim was to take inspiration from the indigenous, festive heritage of performance described earlier to create a theatre that would be inherently ‘Arab’ (Berrechid & Bendaoud, 2008: 78). Through the plays he wrote and directed, including *Ibn Rūmī fī mudun al-ṣafīh* (‘Ibn Rumi in the shanty town’, 1986) or *Juḥa fī ar-Rāḥa* (‘Joha at the mill’), he referenced many characters belonging to popular North African or Arab culture such as Joha. Tayeb Saddiki on the other hand used the Moroccan heritage of storytelling and experimented with different performance forms, in particular the *halqa*. His popular play *Dīwān sīdī ‘Abdurrahman al-majdhūb* is an example of a theatre existing in the liminal space between two different traditions: it “transposed al-halqa, as an aesthetic, cultural and geographical space, into a theatre building as the space of the Western Other (transplanted in Morocco as a subsidiary colonial institution)” (Amine, 2000: 113). Saddiki effectively used a foreign space to reproduce a popular circular *halqa*, using the character of al-Majdhub, a 16th century Moroccan poet and mystic. In another play entitled *al-Maqama al-Madariya* (named after a Sufi brotherhood), he was inspired

by the popular story of the *maqama*⁶ of Ibn Daniyal “to create a modern experimental political drama played in the style of the puppet theater” (Carlson, 2010: 133-14).

This type of plays relies on a hybrid form, using Moroccan popular performances, but integrated into a ‘Western’ theatrical narrative (Clément, 2008: 68). However, Saddiki was accused of being ‘focused on the past’ (Ouzri, 1997: 248), for reproducing a traditional *halqa* rather than adapting and renewing the form. This is a revealing accusation because it shows the difficulties Saddiki and others encountered in their bid to create an ‘authentic’ theatre: they needed to create plays that could relate to the present reality of Moroccans, without relying on folkloric images. As Khalid Amine argues,

Decolonizing Moroccan theatre from Western telos does not mean a recuperation of a pure and original performance tradition that pre-existed the colonial encounter with the Western Other, for such tendency falls in an inevitable essentialism and an Orientalism from within. (2001: 65).

The next section will look at the development of Moroccan theatre as a hybrid form, contributing to the creation of a ‘modern’ Moroccan culture.

Hybridity in the post-colonial age

‘Modern’ Moroccan theatre is by nature a hybrid form: it hovers between high culture and folklore, between East and West, between the old and the new. While the

⁶ The Maqama is a literary genre that developed during the 10th century. It uses a storyteller to narrate the adventures of a trickster traditionally called al-Iskandari, and it is told in rhymed prose (Amine & Clarkson, 2012: 26).

first generations of theatre-makers in the early 20th century used theatre as a means of resistance and expressed their revolt without much concern for theatre as an art form, post-Independence directors were keen to build a theatre model that could be both authentically Moroccan, and adapted to the modern world.

The nationalist themes of the past disappeared, but references to the *halqa* and other oral forms remained, although they were often inserted into wider narratives about the contemporary condition of Moroccans. The use of these pre-colonial forms made a strong statement about the post-colonial condition of the theatre medium, and of the country more widely, as Laura Rice notes:

If Western theatre tends to colonize the space of representation, popular performance rather serves the interests of decolonization by pulling representation into a space of contestation where particular representations of enactments are always destabilized by what they have excluded. (2007: 39)

Contemporary Moroccan theatre is a direct result of Western intervention in a thriving popular performance scene, giving birth to a form of performance previously unknown in the country, but not restraining itself to imitation of Western theatre.

Khalid Amine speaks of a theatre “construed within a liminal space that is thoroughly hybrid” (2000: 5), juxtaposing different traditions. From the intervention of the French authorities to oversee the development of Moroccan theatre, to the resurrection of past traditions, the Moroccan space is indeed a heterogeneous one, with a complex history and a varied set of models and influences. This reflects the Moroccan position on a wider scale, that of a country deeply marked by its encounter

with the West (through colonisation but also globalisation) but whose national identity is based on a very rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

The issues faced by Moroccan theatre are the same as those faced by artists, writers and others in countries where colonisation radically disturbed local customs. Homi Bhabha's concept of "in-between spaces" offers insight into the hybrid creations of Moroccan theatre-makers. He describes them as such:

Terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself...It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjectivity and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated (1994: 1-2).

The theatrical *halaqat* of Warchat al-Ibdaa Drama, or of Tayeb Saddiki before them, mirror the development of a new society over the last 60 years, a society that tries to combine different models with varying results. The recourse to the *halqa* (and other traditional forms, as in the case of the Amawa festival) shows the need of Moroccans in the post-Independence era and until today, to reconnect with a more 'authentic' past, which of course they cannot revive fully. The format of the Western stage represents a continuing physical and symbolic presence of the colonial powers, on which Moroccans 'overlap' their local performance forms, therefore creating a theatre that is inherently hybrid or 'in-between'. The trajectory of Moroccan theatre after Independence in 1956 is not linear: it reflects Moroccans' attempts to re-define their

national culture and identity in a new post-colonial, global context, preserving their heritage while incorporating modern techniques.

Saddiki's work deeply influenced the development of Moroccan theatre as a hybrid form, and his experiments with different forms of performance are still reflected in today's theatre. *ḥimār laīl bil-ḥalqa* ('The night donkey in the halqa', 2013), directed by Abdelaziz Bouzaoui is an interesting case of the hybridisation of theatre, using traditional techniques and addressing contemporary issues. The title of the play comes from the expression 'ḍarbhu ḥmār laīl', literally 'he was hit by the night donkey', a Moroccan proverb meaning 'having a nightmare'. Warchat al-Ibdaa Drama, the troupe who performed the play, is "one of Marrakech's most prominent theatre companies" (Amine & Carlson, 2008: 77) and regularly uses traditional performance forms in its work. Composed of experienced performers, it is one of the few professional troupes protecting this cultural heritage while the younger ISADAC generation has largely moved away from it. Their previous plays included *Al-Bsāyṭiya* (2006) and *Soltan Tolba* (2005), inspired by the ancestral *bsat* form and the Fassi festival which I described previously (see p.54). I saw the play at the National Theatre Festival in June 2013, where it was selected to open the festival in presence of then-Minister of Culture Mohamed Amine Sbihi and local notables and where it received a warm reception. My analysis is therefore based on my own observations.

The play starts with a video projection showing Marrakech and its famous square, in which groups of artists are demonstrating and carrying banners stating "Where are the rights of the artists?" (see Appendix 1). This immediately introduces the social and political theme of the play: we are made aware of the issues

encountered by the company and its members to develop their work and present this show despite the lack of funding and support from local authorities. The whole narrative is developed around the tension between traditional, ‘authentic’ culture and modern consumerism: the actors complain about the way the famous square has been turned into a materialist haven, dedicated to food and trinkets bought by tourists. Because of this, traditional performers are increasingly pushed away from the square. In a televised interview, the play’s director Abdelaziz Bouzaoui argued:

This year, we tried to create work about Jemaa el-Fna, but from the position that the place’s artists have moved away, and that it has been taken over by food stalls. We tried through this to show that the people responsible for the square, such as politicians and people of culture, have given it up to corrupt people. Our call is for those people to come back to the square and give it attention.⁷

On stage, the four actors (three men and one woman) act out their difficulties to find a space (physically and metaphorically) to present their *halqa*. In a comical scene, they start singing a song to attract the attention of passersby, but their voices are overpowered by that of a street vendor, calling for people to try his ointment in various languages. Their plight reflects in many ways the gradual decline of the *halqa* as an artform; the actors themselves are elderly (the only actress in the company, Zineb Smaiki, has since passed away in 2015) and their skills as storytellers have not been passed on to the younger generation of theatre-makers. In the play, all the characters dream of moving away, leaving the square where they don’t feel at ease

⁷ Quote from an interview broadcasted on Tiznit 24, available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qy6Gpbh1eGE> (my translation from Moroccan darija)

anymore and where their work is not as appreciated as it would have been in the past. In the globalised space of Jemaa el-Fna, there simply is no space for this type of free, spontaneous entertainment anymore.

The transposition of the popular halqa onto a 'Western' theatre stage causes several issues: most importantly, it radically transforms the relationship between performers and audiences. The halqa is a 'circle', hence very much defined by its public: the circle grows as it draws audiences in. In a closed private space (here the Mennouni Cultural Centre in Meknes), the actors do not have to fight for their public's attention, but at the same time the stage creates a physical and metaphorical distance. Carlson notes that modern theatre practices further encouraged the audience's passivity, "by darkening the auditorium and generally discouraging any active audience response" (2014: 111). To counteract this, the actors regularly address the audience directly to draw them into their reality, using a Brechtian V-effekt (as I described in my Introduction). In a comical scene, one of the actors comes off the stage and runs through the auditorium, claiming to be chasing a bird. Again, this disturbs the imaginary wall⁸ between the actors and the audience and it creates a dynamics between both groups. As does the halqa, the play relies on the use of humour, despite describing a tragic situation, as well as music and songs. In some ways it thus manages to re-create the comic, celebratory mood of traditional performances, despite the limitations imposed by the 'Western' stage.

⁸ In performance studies, this is usually referred to as the 'fourth wall': it is a symbolic wall separating audiences from the stage, as if they were in different worlds.

Warchat al-Ibdaa Drama is a company whose work is concerned with the protection of the Moroccan, and more specifically Marrakchi heritage, in a context in which they feel it is increasingly threatened: the material is taking over the immaterial, the spiritual. In order to achieve this, they have translated the traditional halqa as a theatre play, presented on a stage in a 'modern' space. Their practice thus relies on the concept of hybridity, drawing from a variety of local and foreign influences and techniques. The actors of the company describe themselves as 'mumathilīn hlayqiya' (halqa actors), rather than simply as 'actors' ('mumathilīn')⁹. This term again reflects the hybridity of their practice: it brings together two different acting traditions, two heritages from different parts of the world.

The ISADAC generation and the cosmopolitan stage

Over the last four decades, university theatre, once popular has declined in influence and Moroccan theatre has been slowly recovering from the crisis between directors and audiences. The 1960s remain its golden age; it never again reached the same level of popularity. However, since 1990, a new wave of theatre-makers and performers has brought energy to a lethargic theatre scene: scholar Omar Fertat describes it as "effervescence théâtrale" (2016: 69). Most notably, they are the first generation of theatre-makers to have received a professional qualification in Morocco rather than abroad. Under the impulse of Mohammed Benaissa, minister of culture

⁹ Quoted from an interview broadcasted on Tiznit 24, available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qy6Gpbh1eGE> (my translation from Moroccan darija)

from 1985 to 1992, the ISADAC Institute (Institut d'Art Dramatique et d'Animation Culturelle) opened its doors in Rabat in 1985. It is the first of its kind in Morocco, and despite its chaotic first years during which it struggled to find an appropriate space and qualified teachers, it has had a significant impact on the current generation of theatre-makers. Abdelwahed Ouzri calls these theatre-makers the 'generation of theatre' (1997: 228) because it is composed of young people who have chosen theatre as their speciality rather than coming from a literary background.

The creation of ISADAC has had an important impact on the Moroccan theatre scene; Hasan Nafali¹⁰ speaks of a revolution in terms of theatre practice (2010). Most young directors forming today's urban avant-garde are ISADAC graduates, including most of the directors I will discuss in the present thesis. In addition, the Institute forms set and costume designers, lighting designers and actors, and it has thus raised standards throughout the profession. The Institute welcomes applicants between the ages of 17 to 23, and studies last for 4 years; at the beginning of the 3rd year, students are invited to choose their speciality amongst the different careers available in theatre, from acting and directing to stage design. In the 30 years since its creation, ISADAC has encountered a variety of issues, such as the difficulty for young graduates to impose themselves in a field dominated by the more experienced 'pillars' of Moroccan theatre and the lack of jobs offered by the Ministry of Culture to graduates (Belghali, 2010: 59). Furthermore, it is necessary to examine

¹⁰ Hassan Nafali has had a successful and varied career in the cultural sector in Morocco: he was president of the Union of theatre professionals, consultant for the Ministry of Culture under Touria Jabrane and Mohamed Amine Sbihi, and more recently he worked on several festivals including the very popular Mawazine.

how accessible ISADAC is for students from lower economic classes. Amongst the entry tests are a translation from an Arabic text into French, and interpretation of a text from the international theatre repertoire, also often in French. While many young Moroccans speak French, this type of selection could be seen as elitist, and it could eliminate students from poorer backgrounds who have not had the possibility to study in a French school or at the French institute, as do children from the middle and upper classes. Nevertheless, Ouzri noted in 1997 that all regions were represented (1997: 121), with students coming from all over the country.

Most of the plays included in the present thesis are part of this movement, created by ISADAC graduates. Their theatre is aesthetically very different from that of previous generations: it inscribes itself into a very wide, global theatre scene and places more emphasis on the performing and artistic aspects of theatre rather than on speech and dialogues. When I discussed these generational differences with playwright and actor Bouselham Daif¹¹, he noted that ISADAC graduates were the first generation to receive a professional education, including dramaturgy classes, and therefore had more awareness of theatre techniques. An interesting example of this trend is the play *Māmā tṣabḥī ‘alā khayr* performed by the company Tokos 4 and directed by Jaouad Essounani. I saw the play on my first visit to the National Theatre Festival in Meknes in 2010, where it won the festival's Grand Prize. It was performed in a small theatre space at the French Institute, where the play was very well received. I also had the opportunity to interview the director while he was visiting the city, to ask about his work (with his company Dabateatr in particular). He revealed an

¹¹ Interview conducted in Meknes on the 20th June 2013.

ideological conflict between his generation and ‘pillars’ of Moroccan theatre, naming in particular Tayeb Sadiki: “they left nothing behind”¹², he lamented, observing that despite their popular success, they had failed to create structures and theatre spaces that could have supported the development of theatre in the long term. There is a disagreement on the very nature of theatre: the ISADAC generation are more aware of the role of theatre as a social space, rather than a form of popular, festive entertainment.

Māmā ṭṣabḥī ‘alā khayr is an adaptation from the play *Night Mother* by American playwright Marsha Norman, which premiered in 1982. Although originally written in relation to the American context, it addresses a number of issues that were very relevant to the Moroccan youth in the years leading to the Arab Spring uprisings, and still are: poverty, unemployment, alienation and suicide, disaffection. The play is centred on two female characters, Anissa (Jessie in the American version) and her middle-aged mother Naima (Thelma). As the play opens, Anissa is a divorced, unemployed young woman, mother to a grown-up son and living with her mother in an isolated country house. Anissa struggles with mental health issues and has regular, unexplained fainting fits, leaving her unable to lead a normal life and contributing to her alienation.

The play focuses on the complex relationship between those two women who seem to have little in common: they talk about their favourite foods, their relatives and their memories while the TV is left on in the background. Essounani kept most of the original text intact, including references to American popular culture, which are

¹² Interview with Jaouad Essounani in Meknes, June 2010

alien to Morocco. This is an interesting choice, as it reflects the universality of the play's main themes. In particular, there are references to Christian practices that seem out of place in the Moroccan context and situate the narrative in a 'global' space. Several times, the characters mention Christmas: Anissa has arranged for her mother to receive Christmas gifts after her planned suicide.

At the same time, Essounani chose Arabic names for his characters and the play is performed entirely in *darija*, using a number of typically Moroccan expressions. The transition from the American countryside to the Moroccan one is believable and creates parallels between alienated communities in both countries. Norman's play caused a stir when it was first performed, as it deals with the issue of suicide for a peculiar perspective: Jessie announces from the beginning that she intends to commit suicide and the play follows her as she prepares her mother for a life alone. She appears to have carefully thought about her actions and no attempt from her mother can make her reconsider. She doesn't display any emotion: her suicide is the only option that she sees as logical and reasonable. What is surprising for audiences is this very detachment that she shows regarding death, as if her life had no value. As Thelma tries to convince her to stay and goes through a whole range of emotions (from anger to sadness, to finally a sense of acceptance), Jessie refuses to talk about it further: "I'm through talking, Mama. You're it. No more" (Norman, 1983: 17). This resonates deeply in the Moroccan context in which suicide and acts of public self-immolation were becoming increasingly frequent, a year before the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia led to a movement of protest that was to become the 'Arab Spring'. A recent study also revealed that the risk of suicide is

higher amongst women than men (Midech, 2012). The character of Anissa/ Jessie is also representative of a proportion of Moroccan women who are single or divorced mothers, and are marginalised because of it. Osire Glacier describes the status of single mothers and their children in Morocco in very negative terms, noting that “single mothers are pariahs and subject to various types of degrading and humiliating treatment” (2017: 54). It is evidently the lack of options that pushes Anissa/ Jessie to suicide: no matter how hard she tries, she cannot overcome her difficulties and cannot improve her living conditions.

The realism of the narrative, during which the audience is witness to one woman’s last hour, and of the set design, is further emphasised by the clock present on stage; this element is part of Norman’s description of the set at the beginning of her script:

The time is present, with the action beginning about 8.15. Clocks onstage in the kitchen and on the table in the living room should run throughout the performance and be visibly to the audience (1983: 3).

Essounani prominently placed a clock in his adaptation: it is hung on the wall behind the characters, in the middle of the stage, as if it were dominating it. Time passes on the clock at normal speed, and this adds to the tragic sense of the show: from the very beginning, the audience is aware that time is limited for Anissa/Jessie and thus they wait for the finale with apprehension. The play posits a classical relationship between audience and actors: they remain in their own separate realities, which never overlap. Nevertheless, the clock is a record of time passing in both worlds, and it is therefore a symbolic element linking them. The minimalist, modern set followed Norman’s

detailed instructions: it is centred on the kitchen table where Anissa and her mother sit for most of the play, and the room in which Anissa retreats at the end is off stage. Contrary to other performances presented at the festival, Essounani chose a neutral set design: the elements of the set are kept very simple (see Appendix 2). Visually the performance thus creates a very different impact than Warchat al-Ibdaa Drama's work for instance, in which the set design and costumes are based on Moroccan popular culture. The choice of this American play and the way it has been adapted for Moroccan audiences is representative of this young generation of theatre-makers, who take inspiration from international directors: Essounani cites for instance British director Peter Brook and French theatre-makers Richard Brunel (Héluin, 2018). This is a trend affecting Moroccan culture as a whole, with new practices, new words and new spaces (such as the Morocco Mall in Casablanca for instance) being integrated into the country. It is of course a phenomenon that is hundreds of years old, but with the possibilities about by new technologies and new forms of communications, exchanges, and change, are happening much faster.

Warwick Murray talks about the impact of globalisation on identity, noting:

Contemporary globalization has led to the growing recognition of ties between distant and disparate places, symbols and ideas. This is an unsettling time for cultural identities as globalization has proceeded at a rate unmatched in any other sphere. Does this imply cultural homogenization and the deterritorialization of identity? (2006: 259).

The example of *Māmā ṭṣabḥī 'alā khayr* is interesting in this regard as it recognises similarities between the Moroccan and rural American contexts, and reflects a form

of ‘cultural homogenization’ in terms of its style and aesthetics. In his book *Theatre and Globalization*, Dan Rebellato speaks about “the ever-greater interconnectedness of theatre cultures” (2009: 8), and the importance of international theatre festivals as spaces of exchange between theatre-makers from different countries and different backgrounds. He argues that globalisation is first and foremost an economic movement, citing successful mega-productions such as the musical *The Lion King* as examples of a theatre market driven by profit. Moroccan contemporary theatre remains on the margins of this movement dominated by Western productions, but it is certainly cosmopolitan, hence the title of this section. Rebellato regards cosmopolitanism as “the ‘other’ of globalization” (2009: 59), defining its ethos as the belief that all human beings are part of the same community. This is precisely the effect of the play *Māmā tṣabḥī ‘alā khayr*: it shows suicide, family dysfunction, mental disorders as issues affecting all communities regardless of their backgrounds.

The ‘glocal village’: a case study of the Amawa festival

In a post-modern society, in which the youth has access to new technologies and new forms of entertainment, does traditional performance still have a place? What is its role? How can Moroccans protect this immemorial, immaterial heritage, most of which has already been lost? What new meanings do Moroccans associate with representations of their popular heritage? This section explores the resilience of *moussems* as popular forms of performances and markers of Moroccan and Berber identities. Moussems play an important part in the post-colonial re-inventing of the

Moroccan nation and they are used to strengthen the legitimacy of the monarchy, as argues Aomar Boum: “The moussem, in fact, has become a place for the internalization of state symbols, festooned with Moroccan flags and royal portraits” (2012: 23).

The unique case of the Amawa festival in the High Atlas opens new possibilities: in 2010, the villagers of the small village of Ighboula organised a centuries-old festival that had disappeared for over 15 years, thus re-inventing and renewing their local traditions. The three-days celebrations included a variety of dances (such as *ahwash* and *ahidus*), songs, storytelling and performances representative of the region’s culture. This is a particularly interesting initiative, through which the elders of the village were able to share this endangered cultural heritage with their youth. Performance is a particularly potent transmitter of traditions: it is a shared experience across generations, in which audiences come together through emotions, laughter and tears. It is also a means to solidify a specific local identity and resist against hegemonic visions of culture imposed by both the state and its vision of the nation, and by the Amazigh radical movement that is promoting a homogeneous version of North African history and traditions. In a tense socio-political context, just a few months before the start of the Arab Spring uprisings, and as a rampant globalisation and urban exodus are threatening the ancestral Berber rural lifestyle, traditions are not simply the expression of a common heritage, they become distinctive symbols of identity (Elfassy-Bitoun, 2011: 13).

Amawa was usually celebrated in September, coinciding with the walnut harvests that are a main source of revenue in the region, and it regrouped four local

villages for a communal celebration (Westerhoff, 2010). The festive occasion was an opportunity to foster a sense of collective belonging, to transmit a cultural repertoire to the youth and to connect on an almost spiritual level with an immaterial heritage of songs and stories. Today of course, the celebrations carry different meanings despite being performed in continuity with the past. Anthropologist Sarah Elfassy-Bitoun, who played an important role in the resurrection of the festival, notes that the festival is meant to reflect a form of Moroccan nationalism (2011: 17). This is an interesting observation because the villagers did not conform to post-Independence tenets of Moroccan nationalism, such as the focus on Arabic and Arab culture. On the opposite, the festival posits contemporary Morocco as a country with multiple identities, proud of its Berber and African heritage. This coincides with what I wrote earlier about moussems being symbols of the Moroccan nation: they assert a unique aspect of culture and bring it to life, but under the umbrella of the Moroccan heritage.

Beyond the cultural aspect, the isolated villagers also hoped to benefit from new media interest to gain attention and prestige, and thus they played on the ‘exotic’ and ‘folkloric’ image of Berber rural culture popular with tourists. Westerhoff (2010) describes the difficult living conditions of the local population, who still don’t have access to running water and have little economic opportunities. Through the revival of Amawa, they had plans to create a craft cooperative that would contribute to the development of the village. This shows a level of self-consciousness and of awareness of Berber artifacts’ worth on the global marketplace. They made an ingenious bid to open up their heritage, to stage it for themselves and for others, hoping to start a new dynamic of change. Bitoun-Elfassy comments that the festival

gave way to new discourses aimed at foreigners, not only at locals and neighbours: this serves to inscribe the community in new spaces beyond the local (2010: 71).

However, one has to examine the role of the anthropologist in that specific case. Bitoun-Elfassy is very aware of the ambiguity of her position and she comments on it herself in her thesis. From the position of observer, she became an “active participant” (2010: 125), acting as intermediary between the villagers and the media and thus having an important influence on the presentation of Amawa to the world. She also obtained funding for the festival via the Moroccan embassy in Montreal. In the Westerhoff article, it is the anthropologist who is interviewed to introduce the festival and she is credited as “helping to re-launch” it (Westerhoff, 2010). Would the festival have been possible without this external support? The experience of Amawa certainly raises questions about the use of festivals to self-represent and to re-enact the past and the social and political implications of this.

Said Mentak discusses the resurgence of these forms of cultural events that aim to protect a local heritage in the context of a globalising country, asking “Isn’t it ironical that at a time when a global culture is in the making many minorities claim their rights for their specifically local identities?” (2013: 42). This is indeed about identity and representations of the self: Amawa is a bid to inscribe a particular, very localised tradition into the present and to create new discourses about Moroccan and Berber identity. Hence, my description of its location as a ‘glocal village’: it is an event that seeks to counterbalance the homogenization of culture brought on by globalisation, but it is at the same time the result of it. In a 1995 essay, sociologist Roland Robertson defends ‘glocalization’ as a concept allowing us to move beyond

the homogenization vs. heterogenization binary. He argues that globalisation “has involved and increasingly involves the creation and the incorporation of locality, processes which themselves largely shape in turn, the compression of the world as a whole” (1995: 40). Hence, Awama doesn’t fall outside of the globalised world, it is very much part of it. It is because of the processes of globalisation that minorities feel the need to re-assert their own unique heritage, and it is also in this context that ‘Berber’ has become a commodity, allowing villagers to draw an income from their festival.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to give an overview of performance practices in Morocco, their history and their variety. I have focused more particularly on three plays or events: *ḥimār laīl bil-ḥalqa*, *Māmā tṣabḥī ‘alā khayr* and the Amawa festival in the High Atlas region, all happening within the last ten years. The many differences between those three examples reflect the complexity of the Moroccan cultural context and the many meanings associated with performativity. At the same time, these performances all share in common their hybridity as contemporary products of a post-colonial, globalising society. They reflect the many ways through which Moroccan represents themselves and negotiate their identity between the local and the global. However, one must consider the power imbalance between Moroccans, particularly rural communities, and global powers. Said Mentak writes:

Relationships of power between globalisation and local spaces will only intensify negative reactions against globalization; there should be in fact a balance in geography that reflects the co-existence of local identities and the global change at the same time if what is called global culture is to be enriched and hybridized. (2013: 142).

In practice, this imbalance is reflected in the dominance of foreign brands, practices and cultural products in the Moroccan landscape, leading to a form of cultural imperialism. For instance, the expansion of Western, mainly American, brands such as Coca-Cola and McDonalds is creating a homogenisation of tastes and lifestyles in Third World countries, who increasingly adopt 'Western' habits in a process of 'modernisation' (Smith and Riley, 2009: 225).

Contemporary Moroccan theatre reflects precisely this need for balance between the local and the global, and to negotiate the new tenets of Moroccan identity. The variety of forms I discussed is due to what each Moroccan defines as 'local' to him, as authentic, as 'Moroccan'. Is it language, particularly dialects? Is it pre-colonial traditions such as the *halqa*? Or is it Berber traditions, free from Arab influence?

All three performances also set clear demands for change on a social and political level. The play *ḥimār laīl bil-ḥalqa* starts with a video projection about demonstrators in Marrakech demanding more rights for artists, and the play laments the disappearance of halqa performers from Jemaa el-fna, taken over by food stalls and vendors selling trinkets to tourists. *Māmā tṣabhī 'alā khayr* breaks the taboo around suicide and highlights the disaffection of the Moroccan youth, in particular of young women who are much more vulnerable in a patriarchal context. Lastly, the

Amawa festival was organised in the context of growing demands from Berber communities for the recognition of their specific heritage and languages, prior to the new constitution of 2011. My next chapter will continue to explore dynamics between performance, identity and social change, this time through the analysis of languages used in drama and performance.

Chapter II

Multilingualism and the politics of language

Morocco has a very diverse, multilayered linguistic landscape that predates the colonial period, reflecting its history as a land of passage and immigration: “its strategic location at the crossroads of Africa, Europe and the Middle East has made open to a variety of linguistic influences by those Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Arabs, the Spaniards, Portuguese, and the French.” (Zouhir, 2013: 271). This unique situation has an important impact on the social, cultural and sometimes political life of the country, as each language was traditionally associated with specific ethnic groups, political ideas or ideologies. Today, 60 years after Morocco’s Independence and after decades of Arabisation policies, the linguistic situation of the country is more complex than ever. Moroccan *darija* is considered “the native language of the majority of the population in Morocco” (Zouhir, 2013: 273). While mainly derived from Classical Arabic, it has a large proportion of words coming from Amazigh dialects, in addition to French, Spanish and more recently English influences. Moroccan *darija* is far from being homogeneous, and it has variants throughout the country: urban (*mdini*) and rural (*jebli*, *Arobi* or *peasant* Arabic...) *darija* is spoken in different areas (Belghali, 2010: 138), representative of local usages and customs.

Morocco is also the North African country with the largest number of Tamazight speakers (40 to 50% of the population according to Boukous (1995: 32) although estimates vary), roughly divided into three main dialects: Tarifit in the Northern Rif, Tamazight¹ in the Middle Atlas, and Tachelhhit in the Sousse region in the south. However, Moroccan darija remains a privileged language of communication outside of the Berberophone rural areas, and it is spoken by nearly half of the Berberophone population as a second language (Ennaji, 2005: 58). De Ruiter also notes that speakers of different varieties of Tamazight use darija between each other (2006: 12), signalling it has become a form of *lingua franca* for all Moroccans (Zouhir, 2013: 273).

In addition to these two main ‘spoken’ languages, Classical Arabic is used in the public education system, and French is the main foreign language, taught in schools from primary level and used widely in the professional realm, as well as in universities. A recent decision from the Ministry of Education aims at re-introducing French as a teaching language in primary schools: in February 2016, the council of ministers validated the use of French to teach sciences and technical subjects². Young professionals also increasingly rely on English, as a global language; it is now “recognised as the new *lingua franca* of business and private education (Laachir, 2016: 25). Sadiqi adds that it is “the fastest growing European language in Morocco” (2003: 50), with American language centres attracting a large number of students and

¹ ‘Tamazight’ can refer either to that specific variety of Amazigh dialect as well as to the standardized language now being taught in schools. It is also the feminine form of the word ‘Amazigh’, meaning ‘free men’.

² See I. Bayo, 2016, “Enseignement: Quand la France arabise, le Maroc francise”, Huffington Post: http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2016/06/02/enseignement-quand-la-fra_n_10259420.html

the Al-Akhawayn American university in Ifrane further contributing to the prestige of English. These languages are not used in equal measures throughout the country, and there is a strong split between urban and rural areas: for instance, “Western languages do not have a presence in the rural Sous outside of the restricted contexts of the tourist industry” (Hoffman, 2008: 13).

Each of these languages is associated with various language ideologies, which Judith Irvine defines as such: “cultural (or subcultural) systems of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (1989: 255). These ideologies can both justify the use of a language rather than another, and influence that choice: “there are times when they will change a social scene and there are other times when they will merely comment upon it” (Hall, 2015: 23). In particular, the idea of a ‘language hierarchy’ is prevalent amongst scholars, usually placing vernacular dialects at the bottom, and Classical Arabic, as well as colonial languages such as French as the top. Zouhir writes that “Moroccan Arabic and Berber (...) constitute a weak social and symbolic capital” (2013: 271), whereas Classical Arabic, French and English, institutional languages, have a strong social capital. Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic power as “invisible power” (1991: 164) because it is routinely deployed in all aspects of life. Language is a crucial aspect of this power, as it is the medium of social interactions. Speaking French is therefore a (symbolic) display of power, according to a hierarchy that is recognised by all Moroccans. Bourdieu further argues:

Relations of communication are always, inseparably, power relations which, in form and content, depend on the material or symbolic power accumulated by the agents.

(1991: 167)

In the context of contemporary Morocco, language choices thus reflect power dynamics between different groups, as they are a display of dominance. Similarly, language can be used to exclude, which is why language recognition has always been at the core of Berber groups' demands.

Government reforms have also influenced the way languages are perceived within Moroccan society over the last 60 years: on one hand, the policies of arabisation of the education sector throughout the 1980s aimed at imposing Arabic as Morocco's official language. At the same time, the fact that French remained prominent in universities, particularly in scientific and technologic fields, led to Arabic remaining "subordinated to French". (Laachir, 2016: 25).

In addition, this hierarchy carries considerable weight in terms of social status, with French and English speakers, mainly from middle and upper classes, enjoying a position of privilege in terms of access to further education and the job market. Moha Ennaji talks about the "prestigious place" of French in the media, education and administration, and its omnipresence in "cultural, social, economic, commercial and industrial areas" (2005: 97). Evidently, this hierarchy benefits upper classes and urban populations, who have access to foreign languages centres and private schools where pupils are taught in French or English, while it alienates poorer populations who have fewer opportunities to master these languages.

Furthermore, linguistic choices are also associated with specific ideologies, with recent surveys amongst urban youth across social classes stating that they perceive French as more “open-minded” (see Chakrani, 2013) while Moroccan Darija, Berber dialects and Arabic are rarely associated with modernity. According to Brahim Chakrani,

Members of the Moroccan elite play the role of ‘ideology brokers’ (Jaffe, 1999), whose linguistic practices, language attitudes, and ascription to the ideology of modernity serve to reinforce a system of privileges, class structures and lines of power on the basis of linguistic segregation (2013: 431).

However, this categorisation of language is far from fixed, and has greatly evolved from the post-Independence period to the present day. Katherine Hoffman speaks of “shifting language hierarchies” pre and post-Independence (2008: 22), in particular with dialects such as darija and Tamazigh increasingly appearing in written form through literature and press and being promoted by a number of intellectuals such as Youssouf Amine Elalamy and Driss Ksikes. The significance of language choices as supposed markers of opposing ideologies is particularly important to the present study of theatre as both a written and oral medium, as it affects both the production and the reception of theatre plays.

In the present context, language hierarchies seem to be increasingly losing their relevance: there have been important campaigns from cultural actors over the last decade to promote the use of both Moroccan darija and Tamazight dialects in cultural productions, but also in schools, threatening the past hegemony of Classical Arabic. Nouredine Ayouch of the Zakoura Educational Foundation has argued for

instance that Moroccan darija being the native language of a majority of Moroccans, it should be the main medium of education for the first years of primary school. In 2013, he organised a panel that made recommendations to that effect (Hall, 2015: 273), which led to much debate. While this project has been strongly rejected by Benkirane and his government, he broke with tradition himself as he regularly uses Moroccan darija rather than Modern Standard Arabic in his public speeches (Slaoui, 2014). Another significant project reflecting the increasing interest for Moroccan darija is the Passerelle ('footbridge' in French) programme introduced by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) in 2008 to teach illiterate women Arabic by introducing them to darija for the first months of teaching before switching for Standard Arabic. Jennifer Hall notes that "an underlying assumption behind the Passerelle program is that mother tongue literacy education is cognitively easier for learners" (2015: 64), which is a similar argument to what is defended by the Zakoura Foundation. However, her experiences in the field show mitigated success, as she concludes "that the roles played by Moroccan Arabic and Tamazight in the Passerelle context essentially reproduced existing linguistic hierarchies and no spontaneous mother tongue literacy practices emerged" (2015: 105).

An influential opponent to the use of darija as a language for education is Abdallah Laroui, a noted scholar who participated in a televised debate with Ayouch in 2013 on this issue and argued that "the idea of institutionalizing Moroccan Arabic smack of being a vehicle for foreign (French) neo-colonial agendas" (Hall, 2015: 281). These debates show that Moroccans recognise an issue or ambiguity with their use of language and that the situation is evolving, with a large variety of opinions and

practices being expressed in the public domain. One very interesting remark is made by a Moroccan woman interviewed by Sybil Bullock in her 2014 thesis 'Language Ideologies in Morocco', where she is asked about the differences between Classical Arabic and *darija*:

A reality of the Arab world is that no single Arab country speaks Fusha (...). The Middle East consider their dialect Fusha. In Morocco, in this part of the world, we are the only ones that recognize that there is a split between these two languages. (quoted in Bullock, 2014: 145-146).

This is at the centre of issues currently discussed in Morocco: is *darija* a separate language? Or is it a lower register of Arabic? It remains to be seen how the status quo will evolve in the next decades, but it is clear that a number of factors such as educational policy, the development of online communication and cultural practices will have a major influence.

In the present chapter, I will first critique common practices in the study of Moroccan literature and theatre, which tend to place French and Arabic books and productions into separate fields. More recently, the development of an Amazigh literature is also emerging as a third area of study. I will argue for a 'reading together' approach as defined by Karima Laachir, and apply it to theatre and performance in the Moroccan context. Does language choice reflect particular ideas? How do theatre makers and playwrights work with and around this very diverse linguistic landscape? I will look at theatre as a medium that is both a literary genre and a performance form, which puts it in a unique situation between textuality and orality. How does this affect the production and reception of theatre plays? How do theatre-makers navigate

between both, in the Moroccan context? Finally, the last section will focus on ‘Amazigh’ theatre, or theatre written and performed in Amazigh dialects. It is a relatively new phenomenon in Morocco, but one that already has dedicated festivals around the country. What is the history of ‘Amazigh’ theatre? What does its popularity signify? What are its specificities? How does it interact with the wider theatre scene in Morocco?

Linguistic strategies in contemporary Moroccan theatre

Language historically played an important part in Moroccan literary and cultural productions, often associated with a range of strategies and ideologies as discussed above. The issues discussed in the previous section are evidently very relevant to the study of theatre as an aesthetic form and a literary genre, both in terms of its production and its reception, although very little research has been done on this topic. Pre-colonial forms of performance were traditionally performed in vernacular languages, making them widely accessible to Moroccans from all backgrounds. This type of popular theatre performed in public spaces was radically different to the theatre of the French and Spanish colonists, performed in closed buildings in foreign languages, and therefore only accessible to elites. The first generation of ‘modern’ theatre directors in the early 20th century were very aware of this contrast, and of the necessity for theatre to remain inclusive and accessible to all Moroccans. Belghali notes that at its very beginning, modern Moroccan theatre was performed Classical Arabic, despite it being a sign of elitism (2010: 142), but there was much debate

about which language was more appropriate for the stage and more representative of Moroccans' lives.

Theatre-makers throughout the Arab world encountered the same issue in the early 20th century, when they started writing their own plays rather than adapting foreign ones. Should they write and perform in classical or in colloquial Arabic? What was more appropriate for the stage? Lebanese playwright Farah Antun, as reports Elsaid Badawi, proposed using a "diluted Fusha" (1999: 21), mid-way between the formality of Fusha and the informality of colloquial dialects. Egyptian dramatist Mahmud Taymur, on the other hand, argued that dialectal Arabic was the most adapted to performance, whereas Fusha should be used for written text. This led him to write two versions of some of his plays (Badawi, 1999: 22).

Similarly, Maghrebi theatre directors started experimenting with language as early as the 1940s. This was necessary in order to reach wider audiences, at a time where the majority of the population was illiterate. Kateb Yacine (1929-1989) in Algeria and Tayeb Saddiki in Morocco are amongst those who pushed for a popular theatre, referencing traditional North African theatre and performing in vernacular Arabic rather than in Classical Arabic, but they also incorporated French techniques into their work (Saddiki took part in André Voisin's workshops in Rabat and then trained in France). Both also used European texts to remedy the lack of indigenous playwrights and to make these plays available to local audiences. Saddiki for example adapted Beckett's seminal piece *Waiting for Godot* in Moroccan darija, which he entitled *Fī intidhar Mabro* ('Waiting for Mabruk'). This evolution in terms of perceptions of languages are reflected through theatre, both in its written and

performed form. Today, avant-garde, urban theatre companies led by young artists, such as Dabateatr or Théâtre Anfas, mainly perform in Moroccan darija, the native language of a majority of the Moroccan population. George Bajalia comments that “Moroccan Arabic language theatre is on the rise in Morocco” (2014), reflecting the will of young theatre-makers to get rid of the elitist image of theatre by using vernacular languages. This confirms what I personally witnessed on fieldwork: the large majority of plays and performance I was able to attend were performed in darija (with occasional code-switching into French), apart from plays in Tamazight dialects which were usually advertised separately or presented on dedicated festivals rather than mainstream ones.

The adaptation of foreign dramatic texts into Moroccan darija has a further impact: it makes them available to a large number of Moroccans and it posits darija as a literary language. Over the last few years, contemporary plays such as *Crave* by British playwright Sarah Kane, *Trois nuits avec Maddox* by French-Romanian writer Mattéi Visniec, and *Night Mother* by American Marsha Norman have been adapted into darija and performed in Morocco. Catherine Miller comments:

Aujourd’hui, il s’agit surtout de prouver, pour nos “traducteurs humanistes” que l’arabe marocain peut être une langue littéraire noble et une langue d’enseignement, tandis que de jeunes auteurs de théâtre poursuivent une veine plus contestataire.
(2013: 13)

There are thus two separate aims: on one hand, to give Moroccan darija a degree of nobility and prestige, and on the other hand, to bring the ‘language of the street’ onto the theatre stage, a space often perceived as elitist and exclusionary.

These reflections on language also apply to playwriting and therefore affect the production and accessibility of theatre beyond the live performance. The concept of playwriting itself is a colonial import, based on European theatre practices:

“Western performance traditions had been structured by the rigid opposition between a dramatic script and its theatrical *mise en scène*” (Amine, 2000: 45). On the opposite, the indigenous performance forms described in the previous chapter did not rely on a written text. This doesn’t mean that they were improvised, as highlights Laura Chakravarty Box; “The text, the timing and the subject matter are all agreed upon beforehand” (2005: 36). Hence, the idea of a dramatic text separate from the performance is profoundly new in Morocco, and today’s playwrights are faced with the same issues that Maghrebi writers have been working on since Independence.

As in many postcolonial countries, Moroccan writers were faced with the ‘choice’ of writing in French, the language of colonialism, or in Arabic, associated with conservatism and Arab nationalism. Many writers of the post-independence Maghreb had an ambivalent relationship to the French language; Algerian novelist Assia Djebar notably said: “La langue de l’ennemi d’hier est devenue pour moi la langue du père du fait que mon père était instituteur dans une école française” (quoted in Mortimer, 1988: 201). This illustrates Karima Laachir’s argument, when she writes:

Most Francophone writers did not really have a ‘choice’, as they could only write in French, and Arabic was not accessible to them because of their French education (2016: 26-27).

Furthermore, many Maghrebi Francophone writers spoke about appropriating the language so that despite it being originally ‘foreign’, it became their own, and they used it to express ideas from their own realities away from France. Kateb Yacine, Algerian writer and dramatist, noted:

J’écris en Français parce que la France a envahi mon pays et qu’elle s’y est taillée une position de force telle qu’il fallait écrire en français pour survivre ; mais en écrivant en Français, j’ai mes racines arabes ou berbères qui sont vivantes, par conséquent tous les jugements que l’on portera sur moi, en ce qui concerne la langue française, risquent d’être faux si on oublie que j’exprime en Français quelque chose qui n’est pas français. (1967: 26)

As Malika Rebai Maamri points out, “actually what matters is not the linguistic medium to which a writer resorts but rather the uses to which that language is put” (2009: 87).

In the present context, French has been fully assimilated and therefore is not perceived as ‘foreign’ any longer: it has become an integral part of the multilingual scene in the region” (Laachir, 2016: 26). However, despite this diversity, the study of Moroccan literature has remained split into two separate, mutually exclusive academic fields, one Francophone and the other Arabophone. This has had an important impact on how these texts are received and interpreted, and therefore on how we have come to read Moroccan literature, and by extension Maghrebi literature. In particular, “technologies of recognition” (Laachir, 2016: 28; Shih, 2004: 17) inherited from the colonial period still dictate the reception of productions in Arabic in the wider Arab world. Karima Laachir observes that: “Mashriqi/ Maghribi relations

have yet to overcome colonial legacies and the way the West still mediates their ‘recognition’ of each other’s cultural and critical production (2016: 29).

Despite the prominence of darija on stage, there is a marked contrast between written plays and performances: very few theatre plays are published in Morocco (3 to 5 a year, according to Bouvier, 2001: 37), and they are generally published in French or in Classical Arabic. It is important here to note that neither language is considered a native tongue for anyone in Morocco (Laachir, 2016: 28). Interestingly, while some writers have a preferred language for writing, others are able to use either French or Arabic depending on their project and their intended audience; this is the case with playwright Issam el Yousfi, whose play *ḍumū ‘ bi kuḥl* (2013) I will discuss in the fourth chapter of this thesis. El Yousfi is well established on the Moroccan cultural and literary scene, and as a result several of his plays have been published over the last few years: *ḍumū ‘ bi kuḥl* in Arabic (although performed in darija), and then *Prise de parole* (2015), written and performed in French. This is proof of the incredible fluidity of Moroccan writers with regards to language, and it emphasises the need for ‘reading together’ as I argue in my introduction.

There are few exceptions to this domination of French and Classical Arabic in print; the development of a literature in Amazigh has led to a few plays being published in the various Amazigh dialects, but “the extreme limitation of audience and the scarce funds for Amazigh publishing houses” (Merolla, 2014: 56) makes this difficult. Over the last decade, there has been intense debate about the role of darija in Moroccan society, and it is likely that its use in publications will increase. Writer Youssouf Amine Elalamy is driving a movement to promote literature in darija, with

his novel *Tarqiq ennab* being the first literary publication in the language; it is a humorous description of Moroccan society and its population. It was recently adapted into a performance by the company Théâtre Nomade under the same title. Elalamy's text is a collection of short scenes, which the troupe adapted with the use of a variety of traditional circus forms. It is a spectacular display, performed outdoors, with a large number of actors, storytellers and musicians; it also features acrobats and fire-eaters, bringing together popular forms of entertainment and a contemporary text. In addition, several theatrical texts have been printed in darija through small publishing houses or independent printers, such as playwright Bouselham Daif's *Misk al-layl*, meaning 'The night's musk' (2011). The text, printed privately, was written in Moroccan darija using Arabic script and is made available through the Mennouni Cultural Centre in Meknes managed by its author. However, this remains a marginal phenomenon and diffusion is very limited. This complex situation reflects in many ways the split between oral and written literature in the region. Jennifer Hall observes:

It is clear that the languages of Morocco do not carry the same symbolic value, and it is not surprising that neither do their writing systems. Both Moroccan Arabic and Tamazight are traditionally unwritten, oral languages whereas Classical Arabic, Standard Arabic and French are associated with long and prestigious written histories. (2015: 20)

Furthermore, Moroccan darija suffers from its reputation as a "deviant" form of Arabic (Hall, 2015: 20), as do all Arabic dialects. Darija doesn't have a dedicated script, with young Moroccans using alternatively the Roman and Arabic scripts to

translate darija into a written form. Despite this, there is a clear drive from cultural actors from different backgrounds to push for the use of darija in cultural productions. Jamal Bahmad reflects on the connection that this choice establishes between young artists and avant-garde writers in the 1970s:

This establishes a strategic continuity between Nayda's politics of language and two legendary Moroccan writers, Mohamed Shukri (1935- 2003) in Tangier and Mohamed Zafzaf (1942- 2001) in Casablanca, who drew on people's vernacular modernity to speak truth to power (2014: 383).

This continuity is very important because it challenges the idea of a 'language hierarchy' discussed earlier, where French is assumed to be the language of democracy and freedom, while Arabic expression is subject to taboos and censorship. On the opposite, an analysis of plays and dramatic texts published in recent years reveals that there are recurrent themes across different languages, as well as shared aesthetics and messages.

Issues of translation in the play *Il* by Driss Ksikes

Driss Ksikes' play *Il* ('He' in French) is a revealing example of language politics in Morocco and of the dynamics between the written text and the oral performance. Originally written in French and published in 2011 by Rabat-based publishers Marsam, it was developed into a play by the Dabateatr troupe and its director Jaouad Essounani, translated into darija under the title *Huwa* (also meaning 'He' in Arabic). Driss Ksikes, known as a journalist and former editor of francophone magazine *Tel Quel*, is a writer of French expression: previous published works

include the play *Le Saint des Incertains* ('The Saint of the Uncertain') in 2001, and the fiction *Ma Boite Noire* ('My Black Box') in 2006, both in French. Ksikes, born in 1968, belongs to a generation that was educated in Francophone schools, before the politics of arabisation in the 1980s. It is thus the language he feels most comfortable writing with, as he comments himself:

La première langue à laquelle j'ai pensé mon écriture est le français, langue de la passion, langue que je maîtrise le mieux parce que j'ai un rapport très particulier avec les mots en français (quoted in Miller, 2010: 6).

At the same time, Ksikes also promoted the use of Moroccan darija, in particular in the press; he was for a short period the editor of *Nichane*, one of the first magazines in Morocco to use darija rather than Classical Arabic in its articles. The creation of *Nichane* (literally 'direct', 'straight') in 2006 was a significant event in the context of 'nouvelle presse' that followed Mohammed VI's arrival to power (Hall, 2015: 239): it aimed to spread the progressive, leftist values promoted by *Tel Quel* to a wider, Arabic-speaking readership, and it often courted controversy through the topics it covered (which eventually led to it closing down in 2010, after it was boycotted by one of its main advertisers). The choice of using Moroccan darija (here using the Arabic script), rather than the more formal, literary Standard Arabic was a bold step; it "challenges also the history and ideas that formal and public texts should be written in standard Arabic"(Hall, 2015: 240). *Nichane* was a subversive voice in the public realm, presenting alternative views on politics and social issues; its use of Moroccan darija was an important part of this image as as a groundbreaking, progressive magazine.

Ksikes became involved with Jaouad Essounani's troupe Dabateatr in 2007, as he was interested by the company's ethos and engagement with civil society. This collaboration between an author and a theatre director is rare in Morocco (with the possible exception of playwright Zoubeir Ben Bouchta and the Bab Bhar Cinémasrah troupe in Tangier); as a result, *Il/ Huwa* is what Catherine Miller coins "une pièce d'auteur" (2010: 3), a literary piece as much as a performance, which needs to be analysed from these two perspectives. Ksikes first developed the text in French, before adapting it into darija; a later version was written for the actors of Dabateatr, in darija using Arabic script (Miller, 2010: 3). *Il/Huwa* is arguably the duo's most successful play, winning several prizes both in Morocco and abroad: it received the Grand Prize at the National Theatre Festival in Meknes in 2009, and it was subsequently performed in France in its French version. It is set in the imaginary land of Uterrus (a play on the words 'uterus', and Terre meaning 'Earth' in French), a nightmarish, underground place where people live trapped under the authoritarian regime of a never-to-be-seen leader called IL ('He' in French). There are six main characters, three men and three women, only named as Uterrien/ Uterrienne 1, 2 and 3. The plot revolves around the attempts of these characters to escape the land: although they have nothing in common, they have been brought together to find a solution to their situation. The atmosphere is therefore tense and oppressive, reminiscent of previous texts and plays describing the Years of Lead such as the play *No man's Land* by Mohammed Kaouti (1984), which I will discuss in the fourth chapter. However, the humorous dialogues, often verging on the absurd, lighten the mood and oblige the audience to consider what the play may actually mean: Martin

Esslin calls Theatre of the Absurd “the most demanding, the most intellectual theatre”, because it “will always confront the spectator with a genuine intellectual problem” (2010: 44). *Il/ Huwa* obloques us to consider several questions: Who are Il and Ilan? Do they represent the monarchy? If so, what message is Ksikes trying to convey? How can the characters free themselves from their oppression? By extention, are Moroccans oppressed? Ksikes’s text is very efficient in that sense, as it addresses complicated issues such as dictatorship, power, oppression, and places the audience in a position in which they are forced to think about how this relates to what they are witnessing on stage.

The six main characters represent the diversity of contemporary Morocco, each coming from different backgrounds and social classes, and through them the author is able to address a number of social issues affecting Moroccans. Uterrienne 3 for instance is a young female lawyer who struggled to make a living, and gave up her activity to become a fortune teller: she comments that she enjoys a better level of life, although she ‘is more depressed’ (“Je vis mieux, mais je déprime plus”, Ksikes, 2011: 18). Uterrienne 2 is an outspoken waitress and prostitute, Uterrienne 1 is a quiet musician who spends most of the play playing on her guitar. The male characters are associated with repetitive actions that they complete throughout the play. Uterrien 1, an ex-teacher, keeps counting spoonfuls of water out of a bucket, Uterrien 2, a former police officer, plays checkers on his own, Uterrien 3, son of an Imam and ex-political leader, goes up and down a ladder. These activities create a sense of hopelessness: the men who previously held professional jobs desperately try to escape idleness through meaningless actions; stage directions by Ksikes state ‘it looks like an inalterable

ritual' (Ksikes, 2011: 7). Ksikes insists that those 6 figures are not real characters, but "personae"³, by which he means that they are not fully developed characters but fragments of memory, of collective history. This also explains the lack of continuity in the dialogues: the play works as a collection of snippets of conversation, with no clear narrative but capturing the oppressive context in which the characters are trapped and their trials to escape.

A seventh character, Ilan, is heard from time to time; he is a spokesperson for the mysterious Il, alternatively seen as a tyrannical King or as God. Ksikes notes that Il and Ilan are puns on the Arabic word *ilah*, meaning 'god'⁴. Ilan's discourses are ambiguous and confusing for the characters: he describes their situation as a 'game' in which they need to find a key (Ksikes, 2011: 30). In another scene, the stage directions associate him to 'a reality TV parody' (Ksikes, 2011: 17). Ilan thus plays the role of a mastermind, directing the characters while maintaining mystery and suspense about their situation. At no point during the play do we ever see or hear Il, and therefore it is unclear whether he actually exists or whether he is a creation of Ilan.

At the beginning of the play, audiences have very little information about the six main characters and their situation. They carry out their tasks with their back hunched, as if they were carrying heavy weights, or if they were trapped in a low-ceiling space. Their dialogues in the first scene are confusing, with the actors seemingly focused on their own tasks:

³ D Ksikes, 2013, Reading of the play *IL/ Huwa* at the French Institute in Rabat

⁴ D Ksikes, 2013, Idem

Uterrien 1:

(Soupèse son seau d'eau, en prend une cuillère à café en équilibre puis s'arrête)

Il me reste 100 cuillerées.

Uterrienne 3:

(Scrute longuement sa boule magique)

On attendra deux jours encore. Puis, on verra.

Uterrien 3:

(Pose l'échelle, monte puis s'arrête à mi-chemin)

Encore trois marches.

Uterrienne 1:

(Joue calmement à la guitare)

Sssssh

Uterrien 2:

(Assis, joue tout seul aux dames)

Deux coupe et je prends la tangente.

Uterrienne 2:

(Tourne avec son plateau de serveuse)

Tout juste un seul? Pas de problème, Monsieur. (Ksikes, 2011: 7)

As the play unfolds, the characters start revealing information about their past and their family backgrounds, and the narrative takes a more political tone. Uterrienne 3 talks about her father who disappeared or 'was disappeared', leaving her and her mother on their own:

Uterrienne 3:

Quand on a su qu'il a disparu ou qu'on l'a fait disparaître, ma mère pleurait en silence, dans la cuisine (Ksikes, 2011: 56).

Uterrienne 2 speaks about her brother Issam who was involved in political activities, 'until they switched everything off and made him disappear':

Uterrienne 2

Je me souviens de mon frère, Issam (...). Il faisait de la politique. (...) Et un beau jour, ils ont tout éteint et ils l'ont fait disparaître. Plus de lumière, plus de politique, plus d'Issam. (Ksikes, 2011: 37).

Similarly, Uterrien 2 describes his brother Aziz being caught by the police, and presumably being killed in custody (Ksikes, 2011: 37-38). All the characters seem to have experienced violence and forced 'disappearances', reminiscent of the Years of Lead era and its many human rights abuses. These memories, which they share, have a very important impact of their present: they live in a state of constant fear and guilt, and struggle to resist against their oppressor. The end of the play doesn't bring any resolution, and it doesn't solve the mystery of who Il is: the characters hear a loud 'rumbling' and wonder whether it is an earthquake or Ilan's arrival. Finally, the stage goes black as the characters desperately look for a door or exit.

The text written by Ksikes relies heavily on puns and plays on French words, which are very difficult to translate into another language. His writing is often poetic, but also direct and crude, with frequent use of swearing:

Uterrienne 2:

J'ai compris ce qui nous arrive.

Nous sommes tous des fils de pute.

It appears heavily influenced by Beckett and by the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. 'Theatre of the Absurd' is a movement that appeared in Europe in the mid-1950s and is marked by an absence of clear narrative. It often includes a repetition of meaningless actions, as in *II*. It is also a text that aims to be universal, with almost no reference to a specific region or culture. The only exception to this are a number of words inserted in Classical Arabic and Moroccan *darija*, less than 10 instances throughout the book, that give clues as to the context of the play. I have listed them here: "bismillah Arrahmani Arrahim" ('In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful', expression used by Uterrien 3 as he starts a speech, 2011: 15); "Çafi!" ('That's all', 2011: 18), "Chouf, a Mohamed" ('Look, Mohamed', 2011: 33), "Walou" ('Nothing', 2011: 48). Finally, Uterrien 3 uses another religious expression in Arabic at the end of scene 5, repeating "seb7an Allah w l7amdou Lillah"⁵ ('glory be to God, praise be to God', 2011: 73). These words are mainly interjections, as if they were uncontrolled, revealing 'cracks' in the characters' speech when their native language appears.

Notably, Ksikes used the Roman script to translate Arabic letters, such as the 7 representing the Arabic letter ح. This is a type of 'text speech', sometimes called Arabizi or Arabish, that is very frequently used by the Moroccan youth. As the use of mobile phone spread in Morocco in the late 1990s, linguist Hind Mostari notes that a

⁵ These are direct quotes from Driss Ksikes's play *II* and therefore I have not use the IJMES transliteration system.

“spontaneous form of orthographic development has accompanied the adoption of SMS technologies” (2009: 382). Users developed new ways to transcribe their oral speech in vernacular languages, whether darija or Tamazight varieties, into a written language using the Roman script, as the Arabic alphabet was not available on phones at the time. Furthermore, Jennifer Hall observes that the spread of this practice to other forms of digital communication such as emails or social networking sites has “provided new contexts in which these two languages can expand in form and use” (2015: 118): for instance, they are increasingly used in slogans on billboards and other type of advertising. She adds that:

By embedding the Moroccan Arabic word in the utterance and writing it in the Roman script, it also links Moroccan Arabic to a sense of playfulness and creativity. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of written Moroccan Arabic with a new and exciting form of technology links it with notions of modernity and future innovation (2015: 147).

Ksikes’ use of these words in darija and Arabic is thus part of a wider context in which language practices are quickly evolving to adapt to new technologies and new lifestyles, and his use of the Roman script reinforces the sense of them being utterances in the midst of a literary text. While I found other instances of Moroccan darija being inserted in dramatic texts on fieldwork, both in plays in Arabic and in French, Ksikes’s play was the only one using Arabizi script.

For instance, Ahmed Ghazali’s text *Le Mouton et la Baleine* (‘The sheep and the whale’, published in 2002) is written almost exclusively in French with rare darija utterances, using standard Arabic alphabet; and the effect is very different. The main

character, Hassan, is a Moroccan living in France with his French wife, and therefore speaks mainly in French. His use of darija usually corresponds to instances when he speaks to Moroccan illegal immigrants, who appear on the boat he is travelling on with his wife. In an emotionally charged scene, he reverts to his native language as he argues with his wife, who does not understand Arabic:

Hélène: Alors vas-y! Pars! Va-t-en chez toi! Au fond, tu as toujours été un clandestin comme eux!

Hassan: (hors de lui) : ما حاس بالمزود غير المخبوط بيه (‘One doesn’t feel the pain unless he is hit by it’)

Hélène: Qu’est ce que tu dis?

Hassan (furieux): لعل اعلاش انا لي دائما كنضحي؟ علاش حتى انت ما ديريش مجهود (‘Why is it always me who makes sacrifices? Why can’t you make efforts too?’)

Hélène (hurle de toutes ses forces) : Arrête ! Tu parles en arabe! (Ghazali, 2002: 59)⁶

In the text, there is no translation provided for the Arabic sentences, and the use of both scripts (Roman and Arabic) within the same dialogue causes confusion to the reader. In addition, the play was published in France as part of a theatre festival, and therefore a large number of readers would not be familiar with the language. They are thus placed in the same position as Helene, who doesn’t understand her husband’s words and then asks him to stop talking in Arabic, as if it brought back to the surface aspects of him that she doesn’t want to acknowledge.

⁶ These are direct quotes from Ghazali’s play and I have kept the Arabic script rather than using the JMES transliteration system, as I believe this is relevant to my analysis.

The use of darija here has a different aim than in Ksikes's text, but ultimately both reveal cracks in a Francophone, Westernized identity and emphasize the connections between mother tongue and emotions.

In addition to language politics within the text, the performance of the play reveals a different set of choices, made jointly by the writer, directors and actors. Differences between Ksikes' published written text and Dabateatr's oral performance are significant, revealing the language politics dividing the country but also highlighting the fact that language categorisation is now outdated: both convey the same message through different mediums. First of all, Dabateatr's performance is very much multilingual, and it mimics young Moroccans' usage of languages and their practice of code-switching. The oral version of the play uses typically Moroccan expressions and is much more informal, more appropriate for the younger, urban public of Dabateatr at the Rabat French Institute than the literary audience targeted by Ksikes' book. It uses a variety of languages and codes, from Classical Arabic, to French, to darija. The characters use them alternatively, with each language being associated with specific circumstances: Classical Arabic for instance is used when characters parody the news in scene 3. In addition, the character of Ilan also only speaks in Classical Arabic, a language used in official state discourses. Furthermore, Ilan speaks in a rather particular way by elongating sounds, which is very reminiscent of Quranic recitation and therefore makes him sound like a religious preacher. This has an interesting effect: on one hand he sounds like he is trying to preach to the characters, and on the other hand it is hard to take him seriously as one would an official representative. The linguistic split between Classical Arabic and darija in their

oral form is significant: Classical Arabic seems to be associated with formal discourse (the news, state speeches) and religion (Quranic recitation), but it is hardly ever used outside of these situations. One must make a further distinction between Quranic Arabic and MSA (Modern Standard Arabic), which is the variant used by Ilan here. These considerations are completely absent from the written text of the play in which Ilan only ever speaks in French.

Catherine Miller, researcher at the CNRS in Rabat, wrote a detailed study of the use of language in *Il/ Huwa* in several versions of the text, addressed to different audiences, entitled ‘*Il/Huwa de Driss Ksikes par le Dabateatr: une création théâtrale du français au darija*’ (2010). She charted linguistic choices across three written versions of the play: a first, pre-publication version in French, a second intermediary version translated into darija by Ksikes, using the Roman script, and a third version he wrote using the Arabic script for the actors to use. She looks in particular at the issue of self-censorship: several lines of the French version addressing issues of religion or sexuality have been altered to be less controversial for Moroccan audiences. For instance, sexually explicit expressions such as “*Ta bite est la clé*” (‘Your cock is the key’) (Ksikes, 2011: 51) becomes in darija “*al-sārūt taht al-slīb*” (‘The key is in your pants’ in Moroccan darija), which is much tamer. Similarly, the French text speaks about “changing one’s religion”, translated into darija as ‘*katsāfir*’ (‘you travel’) (Miller, 2010: 25). Potentially problematic sentences are thus translated in a more metaphorical manner, leaving the audience free to interpret them. Miller argues that these changes are due to self-censorship from the author, noting that what might be acceptable when said in French on stage could become scandalous

if said in darija (2010: 23). Playwright Bouselham Daif also confirmed this when I interviewed him in 2013, observing that while there is no censorship from the State with regards to performance, there is a “resistance” from society that leads writers to self-censor.⁷ The published text by Ksikes is presumably addressed to more ‘elite’ Francophone readership, and therefore he might not have felt the need to monitor his language in the same way. Furthermore, live performances are by their very nature unpredictable as one is confronted to his public and he might have feared their reaction. This self-censorship highlights the fact that French culture and language have long been associated with progressive, Western ideas in Morocco, although Brahim Chakrani argues that:

Acquisition of French and English does not come stripped of its cultural baggage but is rather, permeated with characteristics of cultural imperialism that are disguised as symbols of modernism, advancement and upward mobility (2013: 436).

On the other hand, Karima Laachir denounces “ an orientalist legacy that considers Arabic as a fixed and ‘conservative’ language”, which “ has been deconstructed by many writers in Morocco and in the Middle East in the way they have used Arabic to break social and political taboos” (2016: 27). Plenty of examples of Moroccan literature in Arabic justify this claim: masterpieces such as Mohamed Choukri’s *Al-khubz al-h-fī* (in english ‘For Bread Alone’, 1973) include very sexually explicit descriptions and caused a furore when first published in the Arab world.

Interestingly, Ksikes comments on these language politics in his text, in the following dialogue:

⁷ Interview conducted in Meknes on the 20th June 2013

Uterrien 2:

Ici, on est libre quand même. On parle.

On dérape parfois. Mais on parle comme on veut.

Uterrienne 3:

Ou comme le veulent les maîtres de la langue.

On vocifère en arabe, pour qu'on nous entende,

et on joue aux analystes froids en français pour

Qu'ils croient que nous leur ressemblons.

Mais dire en français que des néo-colons

Nous envahissent a nouveau? Jamais. (2011, 43-44)

This exchange describes the way language is manipulated by Moroccans to produce different effects: they “shout” in Arabic, the mother tongue which “holds the greatest emotional impact (Memmi, 2003 (1965): 151), and they use French for intellectual ‘analysis’, for their message to be heard. Ksikes goes as far as to talk about “néo-colons”, reinforcing the idea that language hierarchies obliging Moroccans to use French to be noticed are a colonial legacy or a form of neo-colonialism disempowering them and preventing them from fully expressing themselves.

The practice of language-switching on and off the stage

One recurring characteristic of contemporary Moroccan performance is language or code-switching, the practice of using several languages within the same sentence or speech. Code-switching is broadly defined as the alternance between two

languages (or more) within one sentence or utterance; it is “fairly universal among bilinguals in Morocco” (Salia, 2011: 18). It is a revealing practice in terms of identity, reflecting the speaker’s sense of belonging to a specific group (or several); Myers-Scotton speaks of “step in or step out of a presumed or expected identity” (1993: 73). Moroccans, particularly the youth, mostly alternate between *darija* and French, with occasional switches to Classical Arabic (particularly for religious discourse). This practice is a form of resolution of the tensions between the different languages used in Morocco: Moroccans are creating their own language dynamics, adapted to their situation and reflecting their diverse heritage.

Although many scholars have looked at possible grammatical or syntactic ‘rules’ that could allow them to analyse the practice of code-switching in Morocco, they have all been dismissed; Bentahila and Davies, who conducted a study on this issue, concluded that it is “not (...) governed by constraint” (1983: 328). Moroccans’ practice of code-switching, in particular in educated circles, is incredibly flexible, and is further complicated by the fact that many French words are incorporated into *darija* and vice versa (through the influence of French youth of North African descent). Tamazight, English and Spanish words are also incorporated into this vernacular to varying degrees (Salia, 2011:19), to the point that it can be difficult to identify language switching. This practice used to be perceived by Moroccans as an improper form of language, associated with inarticulateness (Davies & Bentahila, 2008: 2), but since the early 1990s, new research has shown that on the opposite, language switching has social and discursive functions, and can be used as a strategy of self-empowerment (Ennaji & Sadiqi, 2008: 58).

The performance of *Il/ Huwa* is very representative of this trend: language switching is constant in the play, although there are only few instances of this happening in Ksikes's published text, written in French with very few words inserted in Classical Arabic and in darija. In Dabateatr's performance of the play, language is used to reflect the characters' social position and sense of self, as well as to respond to given situations: switches happen between Moroccan darija and French to express particular ideas about the characters and what they are saying. Critic Amine Harmach comments that darija facilitates the expression of feelings and of repressed emotions, while French allows a freer, more open expression (2008).

It is mostly the female characters that use code-switching; Uterrienne 3, a trained lawyer, expresses herself mostly in French, with occasional sentences in darija when she refers to the whole group. As an educated woman, French reflects her status and is the language she would likely use in her professional life, despite the fact that she now has a lower status job based on superstition. By using French rather than darija as do the other characters, she distances herself and highlights her level of education; language-switching here is used as a tool of empowerment, to display her abilities to speak fluently in several languages. Interestingly, Uterrienne 2 also uses French disproportionately in the performance, despite having, as a waitress, a lower socio-economic status. She also typically uses vulgar or swear words in French rather than Arabic: "Putain de chienne de vie!", "Mon cul, non?", as if using a foreign language mitigated the vulgarity of the words, and made them more socially acceptable.

The male characters resort to French less, and in specific circumstances: in one scene for example, Uterrien 3 switches to French when he repeats his father's explanation about their environment.

Uterrien 3

Mon père m'a tout expliqué avant de mourir.

L'univers est fait de couches superposées.

Nous les Uterriens, vivons au sous-sol... (Ksikes, 2011: 22)

Here, French is used to give a scientific explanation about the way Uterrus is organised: as discussed earlier, French is seen as the language of choice for scientific and technical subjects. There is also a generational gap: Uterrien 3's father presumably belongs to the post-Independence generation that was educated in French, and therefore he might have expressed himself in French rather than in Arabic. The use of language-switching in the play closely reflects the language of young Moroccans in urban centres in that there is a gender and class split, as observed by Moha Ennaji (2005) and Fatima Sadiqi (2003). Overall, Moroccan women resort to language-switching more than men, as a "way of self-assertion" (Sadiqi, 2003: 259): using French words demonstrates education and language skills.

Typically, there is also a class or social status bias, as linguist Fatima Sadiqi observes:

For example, educated urban women highlight their status by speaking French or by code-switching between French and Arabic in mixed groups (2003: 210).

This variety in terms of language use is very representative of contemporary Morocco: the urban youth in particular seamlessly switches from one language to

another constantly, abolishing general codes and picking words and expressions from a variety of local and foreign dialects. Although it is not a recent practice, since the first studies documenting it go back to the early 1980s (Bentahila, 1981), there has been a shift in its perception: in his 1983 study, Bentahila reports that it is “very unfavourably viewed by the bilinguals themselves” (1983: 233). On the opposite, the use of language mixing today in cultural and literary productions encourages Moroccans to use language freely and creatively. It also makes performances less formal (Bajalia, 2014) and more accessible to all Moroccans as it reflects their everyday language.

The emergence of a theatre in Amazigh dialects

One of the most important recent developments in terms of language politics in Morocco is the emergence of literary and cultural productions in Amazigh dialects over the last three decades. A highlight of this movement was the recognition of Tamazight as an official language in Morocco, on par with Arabic, which was announced by the King in his speech presenting the new constitution in 2011. More generally, the constitution acknowledges Morocco’s cultural diversity “by recognising the Arabic, Amazigh, Hassani, Saharan, African, Andalusian, Jewish and Mediterranean characteristics of Moroccan society” (Maghraoui, 2013: 191).

In the context of the language hierarchies discussed earlier in this chapter, which systematically deemed vernacular dialects as being of low prestige and social value, this is a significant evolution. There are now books, academic studies, theatre plays and a dedicated press published in Tamazight which Merolla calls a

“flourishing of artistic expression”, “used by Berber communities both in the Maghrib and the Berber diasporas located in Europe, Canada and the United States” (2002: 122). These new forms of expression, both in print and online, use the ancestral tifinagh script composed of 33 characters, which was “resuscitated” by Amazigh activists after being “rarely used over centuries” (Becker, 2010: 199). This alphabet was subsequently adopted by the IRCAM (Institute of Royal Amazigh Studies)⁸ as the official script for Tamazight in 2003, despite criticism from both Islamist groups and some Amazigh militants who respectively supported the use of the Arabic and Latin scripts (Blanco, 2014: 13).

Those dialects have thus evolved from being almost exclusively oral to having a dedicated literature using a standardised written script. This corresponds to the Berber or ‘Amazigh Renaissance’, a cultural and political movement that goes beyond the issue of language to include identity politics:

It rather proposes an alternative definition of Moroccanness, not exclusively based on Arabness, but one in which Berberity is included (Pouessel, 2012: 373).

The plurality of cultures defended by Berbers thus challenges the postcolonial construction of Morocco as a pan-Arab nation and redefines the country as a multicultural, multilingual state with a layered history.

In parallel to the official recognition of Tamazight as a state language, its teaching has become mandatory in all state schools, with mitigated results so far.

⁸ The IRCAM was founded in October 2001 by a royal decree and is dedicated to the promotion and development of Amazigh cultures and dialects. It was a significant move at the time: Silverstein and Crawford call it “a dramatic reversal of legal discrimination against Imazighen” (2004: 44).

Fatima Sadiqi lists a number of setbacks limiting this teaching: a lack of teacher training, and the continuing debates over the standardisation of Tamazight and the use of the tifnagh alphabet (2011: 11-12). Another issue worth mentioning here is that there is a class divide in terms of language teaching: many elite children study in French (and more recently English or American) private schools, where they learn European languages rather than Tamazight, and this continues to be perceived as a position of privilege as they access universities and the job market. This is also highlighted by a man interviewed by Mohammed Errihani, himself a native Tachelhit speaker, who observes: “They (referring to the state) want to teach Berber to the children of the poor in order to keep them poor” (2008: 414). As a result, according to a survey by Chakrani, “the higher their socio-economic status, the less likely students are to be proficient in Berber. (...) A very small number of upper-class respondents are Berber speakers” (2013: 440). However, despite its limitations, it is a policy that again is likely to further disrupt the established, postcolonial linguistic situation of Morocco in the coming years, as a larger proportion of the population becomes fluent in the language and is able to access its written literature.

‘Berber’ and ‘Amazigh’ are terms that tend to be used alternatively, with both referring to indigenous ethnic groups in North Africa. As Katherine Hoffman points out however, they do have slightly different meanings:

The term Imazighen is more appropriately reserved for references to Berber *militants*, the activists whose concept of a united Amazigh nation in northern and western Africa (Tamazgha) is politically charged (2008: 14).

Berber populations rarely use either term, although they have become more common in recent years due to the development and demands of the Berber/ Amazigh movement. It is also important to point out here that Moroccans of Berber descent usually refer to their origins in more precise terms, “as members of their particular tribe” (Willis, 2008: 228) rather than using the generic ‘Berber’.

The current movement of revival is unravelling in the context of a long marginalisation for Berbers: for decades, these populations were alienated from public discourse, or relegated to the rural areas. They were thus unable to join in the nation-building exercise expressed through arabisation policies, although there was not the same “official hostility to expressions of Berber culture” (Willis, 2014: 212). Berbers were tolerated but posed a challenge in terms of “creating a national identity” (Aslan, 2014: 2). Daniela Merolla comments that:

Au Maghreb, les conditions politiques après l’indépendance sont défavorables au domaine berbère. L’unité et l’homogénéité nationales sont ressenties comme instables et la tendance autoritaire des nouveaux gouvernements n’assure pas d’espace au pluralisme culturel ou politique, ce qui conduit à un endurcissement du discours sur l’arabité (et du discours arabo-islamiste) comme garantie de l’unité. (2006: 53)

Berber dialects were perceived as a threat against national unity and the use of the Amazigh alphabet was actually considered to be “a political act directed against the national government”, as reminds us Paul Silverstein (2010: 199). Stereotypes against Berbers were common: “Berbers were stigmatized in popular culture and associated with a backward tradition” (Boum, 2007: 215). This situation was not specific to Morocco; Berber populations were alienated throughout North Africa, most notably

in Kabylia and in Libya, where demonstrations were heavily repressed. Throughout Qaddafi's rule, he marginalised Berber minorities in Libya, going as far as to "condemn Berber identity as 'the enemy of the people'" (Willis, 2015: 82). The struggle of the Algerian Kabyle community is well documented, from the 'Berber Spring' riots of 1980 (Goodman, 2004; Chaker, 1992) to the Black Spring of 2001, sparked by the death of a young activist in police custody, and which ended with Tamazight finally being recognised as a national language.

The various steps taken by Mohammed VI to improve their situation, which he made a priority very early in his reign with the establishment of the IRCAM in 2001, are thus particularly laudable and in complete rupture with the policies applied by his father and other leaders in the region. This new, much more favourable context has been critical in the re-evaluation and valorisation of Berber cultures in the country. The current movement of Amazigh Renaissance has worked towards empowering Berber populations through the promotion of their cultural and linguistic heritage: it has "reclaimed a collective identity and has striven to put a positive valence of Amazigh identity and heritage" (Hoffman, 2008: 14).

Artists and performers play an important role in the development of new Berber identities, renewing ancestral traditions and leading to a recognition of the Berbers' unique input within the Moroccan creative landscape:

Ainsi, l'art et la culture berbères sont dans une phase de renouvellement où se redéfinissent le statut et la fonction du créateur. L'artiste berbère est avant tout le dépositaire des traditions esthétiques de sa communauté, il en traduit les besoins et les

aspirations, en lui s'opèrent le long processus d'accumulation de ces traditions et leur réinterprétation. (1987: 66)

Scholar and performer Fatima Chebchoub dedicated an essay to Amazigh theatre, asking the following question: "Which theatre for Amazigh audiences?" (1997). She addressed the audience's need for mediums that they could recognize and identify with, in spaces in which they were comfortable, rather than elitist institutions. This is particularly important for theatre, which by definition is experienced in a public or communal space, outside of the home. Chebchoub argued that Berber audiences were alienated from contemporary theatre, "because it is an urban theatre performed in Arabic or French, and because its medium of expression uses techniques that are totally alien to Tamazight culture" (1997: 4). However, it is important to note that the Amazigh Renaissance movement has been largely led by urban intellectuals such as Mohammed Chafik. Hence, their discourse is not necessarily representative of the rural populations. Similarly, 'Amazigh theatre' is a term used by theatre-makers mostly coming from urban literary circles and performing for audiences in urban centres such as Casablanca or Al-Hoceima. Therefore, it is necessary to deconstruct the term 'Amazigh theatre': is it a theatre in Amazigh language or does it have specific properties that differentiate it from mainstream Moroccan theatre? Is it a theatre targeting rural Berber populations, often alienated from theatre not only because of language issues, but also because of a lack of access and infrastructure? How do these theatre makers express their Amazigh sensibility?

Theatre performed in Berber dialects appeared in Algeria as early as the 1960s with the plays of Kateb Yacine and his troupe who used Algerian dialects, both

Arabic and Kabyle, to get closer to their audiences (Merolla, 2012: 5243). Muhand U Yehya, also known as Mohya, is the first playwright to adapt plays from the international repertoire into Taqbaylit (Kabyle dialect), thus paving the path for a whole generation of writers and theatre-makers: Salem Chaker names him as the founder of Berber theatre (1992: 4). In Morocco, Ali Moumen Essafi published plays in the 1970s in the Tachelhit dialect and some are still performed today, such as *Oussan Smidnin* ('The Cold Days', 1976). His work draws heavily on popular tales and the local heritage, bringing Amazigh culture back to the fore. Chaker speaks of a "continuity" between Berber theatre and traditional oral genres (2006: 17), which would distinguish it from mainstream Moroccan theatre. In the following section, I will discuss the context of the Amazigh Renaissance and closely analyse two selected plays from the Berber repertoire, looking at ways through which they express a Berber identity.

Very few studies have described the burgeoning literature available in Tamazight, and even fewer have looked at the realm of performance. The following section is first informed mainly by material collected on fieldwork and discussions with cultural actors in the Amazigh theatre movement. It aims to look at the development of an Amazigh theatre scene in Morocco since the early 2000s and discuss its particularities within the wider theatre milieu. I will also analyse its aesthetics and use of dialect to signify a separate 'Amazigh identity', in contrast with performances produced by other companies. Finally, I will discuss how common themes, relating to Amazigh culture's perceived secularism for example or the pan-

Amazigh space of Tamazgha, fit within wider political discourse within the Amazigh movement.

The roots of the distinction between ‘Berber’ and ‘Arab’ North Africans are inherently political: it was first a strategy of the French colonists to ‘rule and divide’ used in Algeria, and later in Morocco. The ‘Berber decree’ of 1930 instigated by the French authorities stated that Berber minorities should not be subject to Islamic Law, but only to Berber customary laws (Vermeren, 2011: 63). The aim was to remove those populations from the authority of the Sultan, and thus to artificially separate North Africans in two groups to use one as ally against the other; “France sought to deepen its links with Morocco’s disparate Berber communities to counterbalance the weight of the urban Arab sectors” (Maddy-Weitzman, 2011: 57). This decree caused uproar amongst the population and this policy backfired in many ways, prompting the colonized populations to rally against French imperialism through a “unified Arab/Berber coalition” (Crawford and Hoffman, 2000: 118). In reality, as Pierre Vermeren notes, North African ‘Arabs’ are Arabophone Berbers rather than being Arabs in the ethnic sense of the term (2012: 49).

Berberophones represent large minorities (estimations of up to 50% in Morocco, 20% in Algeria, although estimates vary greatly), but they were sidelined in the post-Independence era as local leaders sought to unite the region by asserting its Arab and Muslim identity, despite the contribution of Berber tribesmen to the resistance struggle. Bruce Maddy -Weitzman argues that across North Africa’s newly independent states, there was a shared negative attitude towards Berbers:

The vision of their respective ruling elites was basically the same: incorporating and subsuming the heterogeneous, tribe-oriented speakers of primarily unwritten Berber dialects under the rubric of a homogeneous national identity, based on a common Sunni Islamic faith and praxis according to the Maliki school; giving primacy to the Arabic language (2011: 65)

In addition, Morocco swiftly joined the Arab League (created in 1945) and the Committee for the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb (1947) presided by Riffian resistance hero Abdelkrim Khattabi after Independence. Both aimed to unite North African states around these shared values and to facilitate their freedom by asserting their belonging to the Arab world: “the quest for Arab unity appeared to be a realizable goal, in fact the only way to restore Arab pride” (Howe, 2005: 173). The Arabophone *fassi* elites⁹ dominated the post-Independence political scene and were active through the Istiqlal (‘Independence’) party, founded in 1937 and which had led the struggle against colonialism. Allal el Fassi, party leader from 1960 to his death in 1974, “sought an independent Morocco closely linked to Arab culture and the Middle East” (Howe, 2005: 172), keeping out the ‘Europeanists’ who aimed to keep ties with Europe, but also the Berbers. The two failed assassination attempts against King Hassan II in 1971 and 1972, both led by military officers of Riffian origin, Mohamed Medbouh and Mohamed Oufkir, consolidated the image of Berbers as insubordinate and disloyal to the monarchy.

⁹ The *fassi* elite, from Fes, is composed of a network of prestigious families of Arab and Andalusian origins, who have long enjoyed a position of power on the Moroccan political and economical scene.

Despite their common plight, not only in Morocco but throughout North African states, Berber populations did not identify as a unified group until more recently. Anthropological studies up to the 1970s, such as that of Ernest Gellner, didn't record any transnational Amazigh consciousness amongst Berber populations from different tribes: "Geographical dispersion of Berber speakers has hindered the emergence of a common Berber identity" (Gellner, 1973: 286). Several events fostered a feeling of empathy and unity amongst Berber minorities: first, the Berber Spring in Kabylia mentioned earlier, which inspired Berber groups in other areas to organise themselves to demand new rights, and later on the Agadir Charter in 1991, signed by a number of Berber associations, which Howe calls "the first political act of the Berber movement" (2005: 178) in Morocco. It aimed mainly to protect Amazigh dialects perceived as endangered, by calling for them to be taught in schools and through the creation of media dedicated to Berber populations.

Since the 1990s, there has been a clear shift in terms of attitudes towards Berber minorities, in particular in Morocco where King Hassan II took several steps to include Berbers in his concept of the Moroccan nation. From the early 1990s, he started to liberalize his regime, abandoning the excesses of the Years of Lead, and as a result he softened his stance towards Berber demands. In particular, in his 1994 Throne day speech, he emphasized Berber culture being part of the country's heritage, declaring that: "Amazigh dialects are one of the components of the authenticity of our history" (quoted in Silverstein and Crawford, 2004: 45). Other initiatives were taken by Berber activists to raise the profile of their movement and attract the attention of the wider Moroccan population. In 2000, the Berber manifesto

was written by Berber intellectual Mohammed Chafik, in which he reiterated calls for inclusion and “laid out in detail an alternative version of Moroccan history and a list of demands designed to revamp every fiber of Moroccan collective identity” (Maddy-Weitzman, 2013: 113). In 2005, the Democratic Amazigh party was launched to accompany a number for new demands, in particular with regards to autonomy; “the party founders advocated administrative decentralization and regional autonomy as solutions to the underdevelopment of the rural Berber areas.” (Aslan, 2014: 189). Notably, the party didn’t present itself as defending a minority (whether ethnic or linguistic), but rather claimed that all Moroccans had Amazigh roots, and that therefore it “represented all Moroccans” (Aslan, 2014: 189). Despite its position, the party was banned in 2007 as Moroccan Law prevents the creation of political parties on ethnic grounds.

In parallel to these political demands, activists have increasingly created ties between different Berber groups and with Berbers in the diaspora, to address issues of alienation and lack of autonomy across borders. The development of new media and the internet has been particularly instrumental in this new transnational awareness, as is mentioned in a 2002 article by Daniela Merolla:

Ethnically marked websites are increasingly set up and used by minorities and diasporas as a means of expressing and constructing (the awareness of) one’s own specific collective identity (2002: 123).

With the fast development of social media throughout the 2000s, this movement has accelerated: websites such as Tamazgha.fr, amazighworld.org and agraw.com function as portals of Amazigh culture and news, available in several languages and

fostering a sense of community through forums and chat rooms. Today the Amazigh movement can be described as truly transnational in the sense that it includes activists in North Africa but also crucially in the diaspora, beyond the rural Berber heartlands, although Merolla speaks of the “de-territorialising effect of technologically new media” (2002: 123). As the Amazigh movement breaks down national borders, it is also increasingly losing touch with the marginalised rural populations and their realities: its leaders and intellectual elites are mostly based in the West or in multicultural urban areas.

Here, I would like to emphasize that the views expressed by the Amazigh movement, particularly its radical side, do not represent the rural core of the Berber population, widely left to its own means by both the Moroccan State and the Amazigh movement itself. Katherine Hoffman eloquently described daily life in the Ashelhi countryside, noting the predominance of “rural women, usually monolingual, almost always unschooled, and overwhelmingly alone in their mountain villages with each other” (2008: 229). She also insists on the idea that while many men have left their villages to work in urban centres, it is left to these women to protect their language and culture and to cultivate the land, which creates a situation of “exploitation of some by others” (Hoffman, 2008: 232). The real issues encountered by those women, such as illiteracy, poverty, lack of access to healthcare and isolation (both geographically and linguistically, as most are monolingual) are very rarely addressed by political activists, who are perceived to be part of an “elitist circle” (Aslan, 2014: 189).

A recurrent image within the Amazigh consciousness is that of the mythical Tamazgha, a pan-Amazigh homeland covering most of North Africa including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Libya as well as parts of Egypt, Niger and Mali, supposedly where the ancient Berber or Numidian kingdoms were situated. Tamazgha represents an essential dimension of the transnational Amazigh movement, with Mohamed Tozy defining it as such: “le symbole d’une identité culturelle transnationale, d’un peuple défini sur le plan culturel et non politique” (2006: 59). It symbolises a shared past and memory going back centuries, but also setting the scene for a common future (Suarez Collado, 2013: 382), in the context of an expanding Amazigh movement creating links between minority groups and diasporas across the globe and gaining in influence on a political level.

Tamazgha, as an exclusively Berber space, also counteracts the pan-Arab building of North Africa discussed above as the ‘Maghrib al-Arabi’ (‘The Arab West’), based on Arab unity. It establishes Amazigh populations as the indigenous people of the region, who built a civilisation long before the Arab invasions of the 7th century. Maddy-Weitzman confirms this: ‘implicit, and sometimes explicit in their narrative is that the Arab conquest of North Africa was at Berber expense and ever since the time of Berber tribal resistance to the conquerors, they have been fighting an uphill battle to preserve their identity’ (2001, 25). This is however a version of history that is promoted by radical parts of the Amazigh movement rather than Berber populations and moderate activists, but it is increasingly influential, as they effectively use the media and the Internet to propagate their vision. Essentially, the discourse of Amazigh radical militants relies on a negation of the process of

‘métissage’ (Oiry-Varacca 2012) that started the 7th century between local populations and waves of migrants from the Gulf.

Several cultural productions refer to Tamazgha and use it to promote the legitimacy of the Amazigh movement, by insisting on its historical roots in the region. Théâtre Tafoukt (literally ‘sun’ in Moroccan Tamazight) is one of the most established Amazigh theatre companies, based at the Hassan II Youth centre in Casablanca and founded in 1997 by director Khalid Bouichou. Tafoukt has presented its work all over Morocco, in its original Tachelhit: in the last few years, it has participated in a large number of festivals, both nationally and internationally. Bouichou is particularly active in the promotion and renewal of Amazigh arts, and is also a film director and producer. He is behind the creation of the Festival of Amazigh Theatre, organised since 2006 in Casablanca with the support of the IRCAM (Institut Royal de la Culture Amazigh) and dedicated to Amazigh arts in their variety: exhibitions and other cultural events are organised in parallel to performances. The festival aims to showcase the multicultural roots of Morocco rather than defend ethnic separatism: troupes of different backgrounds are invited to perform, but the plays presented for the official competition have to be performed in Berber dialects. As a result, they are only accessible to Berber-speaking audiences, and their target is urban, educated Berber populations who might have sympathy for the Amazigh movement.

*Tamawayt N Oudrar*¹⁰ ('Romance from the Mountain') is a 2005 play exploring the themes of identity and memory, based on the story of the battle of Zama (202 BC), at the time of the Punic Wars between Carthage and Berber King Massinissa assisted by Rome. Zama represented a humiliating defeat for Carthage led by Hannibal, and it marked the start of the 'Amazigh' golden age, during which Berber kings rule over much of North Africa (then Numidia). Massinissa is a very popular figure within the Amazigh movement, seen as the unifying ruler of the Maghreb; he, his father Yugurtha and the legendary queen Kahina¹¹ are 'now revered for resisting invading forces' (Goodman, 2005: 31). It is thus an emotionally and politically charged choice of character for a play, evoking a rich history and creating a sense of nostalgia. These historical figures are not actually studied in Moroccan schools, where the history curriculum tends to focus on Arab dynasties. References to Amazigh mythology thus challenge official history by providing a wider perspective on North African history and including its pre-Islamic past. Chafik's *Berber Manifesto* notably offered a re-writing of national history (Aslan, 2014: 185) to reflect Berber contributions, which highlights how much history has become a political topic. These Amazigh figures can be perceived as controversial and Islamist groups reject them "as part of a barbaric, pre or anti-Islamic past which must be denied" (Almasude, 2014: 140).

¹⁰ 'The Tamazight term 'Tamawayt' usually refers to traditional, lyrical songs typically sang in Berber communities.

¹¹ Queen Kahina (also known as Dihya) was the leader of the Berber resistance against the Muslim invasion of the Maghreb during the 7th century. She features in many local tales and legends as a strong feminine character and is often referred to by Amazigh militants as a symbol of indigenous resistance.

The play focuses on an indigenous queen who loses her land and her children to a foreign woman, cunning Phoenician princess Elissa (generally known as Dido). This story is based on a popular myth stating that Carthage was founded by Dido, after she was given a small piece of land by local leader Hiarbas and with a trick, extended it to take a much larger territory. It thus narrates the oppression of the Amazigh people at the hands of invaders, and their struggle to protect their land and their culture. In the context of the Amazigh Renaissance movement discussed earlier, it is a play that can be read in parallel to the Imazighen's ongoing struggle to achieve full recognition and integration within North African societies.

The play opens with a musical section featuring a traditional dance by a group of men, in the palace of Hiarbas's mother, the Berber queen. The space is divided with fabric pannels on which are painted tifinagh letters, meant "to express their Amazigh identity" (Becker, 2006: 189). These symbols are also very frequently used by activists during demonstrations and on various documents, but also by Berber rural women on their creations, such as carpets, paintings and other artefacts. The letter *yaz* in particular features on various objects throughout the play: the background fabric, but also soldiers' helmets, shields, and flags. It is a very powerful symbol: it is at the centre of the Amazigh flag, designed in the 1970s by the Berber Academy in Kabylia, and it is the "one of the primary visual symbols of the Amazigh community" and "the central character in the word 'Amazigh', which means 'free man'" (Becker, 2016: 102). The set design and costumes use almost exclusively the colours red and yellow, colours that are often associated with Berber populations and figure on the Amazigh flag. Yellow and red are said to represent the desert or the land, and struggle

(Becker, 2016: 102). The character of Elissa is the only one wearing a purple dress, which straight away sets her apart from the others, as a foreigner.

As the narrative unravels, the Berber Queen is pushed away from her throne as Elissa takes over and reduces her children to slavery. She is thus forced to flee with her youngest son Isoul, and settles in a cave on the seashore. She doesn't reveal to him his real status until he decides to leave and claim his throne back. Therefore, the play is centered around the story of an indigenous, legitimate people removed from their land, and ultimately winning it back after years of struggles. Throughout the performance, Tamazgha is constantly referred to as the lost land the family aspires to get back to, which could be read in parallel to the present context in which Amazigh militants are re-imagining Tamazgha as a united land running from Egypt to the Canary Islands. While separatist ideas are a minority view even amongst the Amazigh movement in Morocco, there is a whole imaginary developed around the idea of pan-Berberism, often using the Internet and dedicated websites and forums as communal spaces. Land is profoundly important to Berber communities 'rooted' in rural lands, whose activities are usually centred on agriculture and whose *mawassim* (festivals) often mark important period of the agricultural calendar (Diaz, 2014: 80). As Katherine Hoffman notes, "Land has been as central as language to Berber understandings of subjectivity" (2008: 25). In the context of 'de-territorialisation' discussed earlier, with the Amazigh diaspora having a major influence on the Amazigh movement but little connection to their homeland, the idea of 'land' takes an almost mythical appeal as is reflected in the play, far removed from the realities of rural populations today.

Tafoukt's performance makes many positive references to Amazigh culture: in one scene, Hiarbas says to his mother that 'Us people Amazigh are famous for their generosity and their hospitality'¹², which incidentally are values also often associated with Arab populations. The Berber queen is an archetypal Berber heroine, in line with the mythical Kahina who led the resistance against the Muslim invaders in the 7th century: she consistently fights for her sons and stands up to cunning Elissa. Tafoukt's aesthetics is characterised by its rich appropriation of the Amazigh heritage through folktales, symbols, costumes, dances and music, although it is often not appropriate to the period they are supposed to represent. The Berber queen for example, wears several different headpieces with silver or fabric tassels, artefacts that are commonly associated with Berber women and displayed on colonial and postcolonial Orientalist pictures. It is not uncommon for Imazighen to appropriate this type of pictures "to suggest a new empowering discourse" (Becker, 2016: 106), using them to illustrate the boldness of Berber women for example. However, Becker suggests this encourages a "performance of identity, especially gender roles" (Becker, 2016: 106). In another scene, she wears a *handira*, a wool blanket decorated with tassels often given as a gift to brides and typically associated with Berbers from the Middle Atlas. Music is also a very important aspect of the performance, with several pre-recorded musical interludes using traditional songs in Tachelhit, and a variety of instruments also associated with Amazigh music such as flutes and drums.

¹² A video of the play is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdb6KMIAxcI> (Accessed 9 June 2015)

The play thus fuses together a mythical narrative and elements of decor, costume and language that are evidently much more recent and associated with the Amazigh movement and Chelha culture, particularly through the repeated use of the letter Yaz. This creates an evident parallel with the present time and the will of Berber activists to portray themselves as the indigenous population of the region. An interesting anachronism in the performance is the use of some Arabic words inserted in the Tachelhit speech of the characters: “Tabarakallah” (‘Blessings to Allah’), “yallah” or “ya Allah”(‘let’s go’), “ya rabbi” (‘oh my Lord’), centuries before Islam and the Arabic language would be introduced to the region. These words are used very frequently by Arabic speakers; linguist John Morrow notes that “the Arabic language is saturated with a rich variety of expressions invoking Allah explicitly or implicitly” (2006: 45). What is interesting in the play is that these religious utterances occur in the context of a foreign language, which is a practice of many Muslims whatever language they may be speaking. Several studies have explored this type of language switching amongst speakers of dialectal Arabic (Clift and Helani, 2010), or non-Arabic speakers (Almansour, 2010). It has a strong cultural and social meaning; Bader Almansour notes that this practice “can be seen to produce a shared sense of identity as Muslims” (2010: 47). In the context of the play, it enforces the idea that Berbers form an integral part of the Muslim community despite defending the use of their own languages.

Oussan Smmidnin (‘The cold days’, 2012-2013), based on a text by Ali Moumen Safi, is a similarly epic play by Theatre Tafoukt, with a philosophical narrative: one day, the sun settles much earlier than usual in a small village,

condemning the inhabitants to obscurity and forcing them to examine their way of life (Merolla, 2005: 43). This event, which they cannot explain, obliges them to adapt to a new set of circumstances, in the dark and in the cold. It is a fascinating representation of an ancient Berber rural quotidian, with its own codes and habits: men and women are portrayed going around the village, courting each other or busy with their chores. The play also describes traditional pre-Islamic rituals, as in a scene in which the villagers appear to be performing a pagan ritual around a bonfire. Again, the performance relies on frequent musical intervals using popular Amazigh songs and dances, performed by the actors, which create a strong sense of recognition amongst the audience, and the repeated use of the tifinagh letter Z or yaz, symbol of the Amazigh political movement, which appears as a large prop on stage. The metaphor of the sun disappearing and obscurity setting in is frequent in Amazigh literature, as a millennial culture ‘eclipsed’ by Arabisation and modernity. A popular poem by Mohammed Chafik, entitled *Iddur Wayur* (‘The moon was eclipsed’) also describes the devaluation of Berber traditions by likening it to the disappearance of the moon. Political scientist Hassan Aourid comments, in a tribute to Chafik that for light to prevail, Berber must stay themselves and protect their language and culture¹³.

There is thus an ambiguity in Tafoukt’s work: is theatre used as a means for cultural revival? Or is it a political medium, spreading the Amazigh movement’s ideology through the use of its symbols? While Tafoukt’s productions do not explicitly promote Amazigh activists’ claim of a separate, indigenous Amazigh

¹³ Speech pronounced by Hassan Aourid in January 2015, transcript available online at: <https://www.facebook.com/aouridhassan/posts/578035389029989:0>

people alienated by a pan-Arab Moroccan state, they give life to powerful myths about North Africa's history and identity, and create alternative models Moroccans can identify with.

Amazighité as a political ideology

ARTA (Association Rif pour le Théâtre Amazigh) based in al-Hoceima and established in 2003, is the first theatre company to express a specific Riffian identity. The Rif, covering a small territory in the North of Morocco between Tangier and the Algerian border, has a checkered history with the Moroccan monarchy and Riffian populations have long held the reputation of being disloyal to the King. As mentioned earlier, the two failed assassination attempts against King Hassan II in the early 1970s were led by high-ranking army officers of Riffian origins. Furthermore, the 'bread riots in the 1980s, caused by poverty in the region, were violently repressed, and Hassan II went on to describe Riffians on TV as "savages and thieves" (Ahmed & Akins, 2012). The region's inhabitants were thus further stigmatised than other Berber minorities.

ARTA perform in the local Tarifit dialect and work on contemporary issues relevant to the region. Their latest play for instance, entitled *Iggar, La terre des raisins aigres* (2016, 'Iggar, the land of sour grapes') follows three young men from the Rif who immigrate to Europe with the hope of finding work, but end up living in poverty. Their play *Imachdah* (literally meaning the artists or dancers), created in 2012 as a collaboration between ARTA and a French director, Frédérique Fuzibet from company Théâtre de la Mer, is arguably their most successful to date. The play

was first developed in al-Hoceima then toured France and Holland, where sizeable Riffian Berber communities live, performed in Tarifit with French subtitles. The narrative is centred on the *moussem* of Sidi Chaib, a sanctuary close to al-Hoceima. This type of events honouring local saints and marabouts originate from Sufi mysticism, which is very popular in Morocco. Sufi orders such as the Boutchichi or Tijani brotherhood have followers throughout the country, both in urban centres and in the countryside, and across social classes. These groups traditionally have close ties to the monarchy, to the point that the minister of Islamic affairs, appointed by the King, usually has a Sufi background: the current minister, Ahmed Toufiq, comes from the Boutchichi brotherhood, which “proves that this Sufi order lends its elites to the political arm of the state”, despite telling its members “not to get involved in politics” (Bouasria, 2015: 2).

In the play, two young comedians, Mohand and Mimounte attend the *moussem*¹⁴, dedicated to arts and dance, with the intention to present a performance, but the local imam Daman disapproves and tries to prevent the event from going ahead. It is thus centered on the perceived opposition between local cultural and religious traditions, and Orthodox interpretations of Islam. In the context of contemporary Morocco and conflicts between the Islamist PJD and leftist parties, in particular on issues such as culture and identity, it is particularly relevant and asks pressing questions about freedom of expression and creation: what are the limits of freedom of expression? How do we accommodate this freedom in a conservative society? What is the role of religion in contemporary Morocco? In the 2013 essay

¹⁴ From the Arabic word *mawsim*, meaning ‘season’. Pl. *mawāsim*

‘Cultural production and cultural patronage in Morocco’, Said Graioui and Taieb Belghazi detail the interactions between different political actors on this matter, noting that for over a decade, the debate “has been dominated by two competing projects: one promoted by the state (and spearheaded by the monarch), and the other led by the Part of Justice and Development (PJD)” (2013: 261). In addition, a large number of other actors from civil society (NGOs, women’s associations, leftist parties) are taking part in the discussion, rejecting both projects and demanding a secular state (Graioui & Belghazi, 2013: 262).

Imachdah is a play that emerges from these debates, and clearly takes the party of the artists. Throughout the play, the dialogues are very critical of the imam Daman, and he is presented in a negative light, while the holistic nature of Sufi or *marabout* rites are emphasised:

Mohand: Un marabout mort est plus présent qu’un imam vivant! (2012: 7)¹⁵

Furthermore, Daman is revealed to be dishonest and hypocrite, abusing of his power by stealing the villagers’ resources and apparently having an affair with a local woman. These accusations debunk his claims of having a higher moral standing and challenge his authority as a religious leader. Mohand reminds him of his failings and asks him to stay out of public affairs:

Mohand: Quand les habitants de ce village t’ont choisi comme imam, ils t’ont précisé ce que tu dois faire ou non, n’est-ce pas? Pourtant, par la suite, tu as commencé à fourrer ton nez partout, à te mêler de l’agriculture, à régenter la

¹⁵ Quotes are taken from an unpublished draft script provided by Laaziz Ibrahimi, director of the play

prière et le travail...exactement comme si c'était toi qui gouvernait tout.
(2012: 35).

In another scene, Mohand and Daman have an argument in which each questions the other's legitimacy in the village:

Daman: Moi, je suis du village!

Mohand : Moi aussi, je suis né ici!

Daman: Je n'en suis pas sûr! (...) Je ne suis pas certain que les villageois te reconnaissent comme une des leurs.

Mohand: Oh que si! Moi, je suis des leurs et ils m'acceptent très bien! (2012: 28)

Interestingly, the comedians' names, Mohand and Mimounte, are traditional Berber names: Mohand is a variant from the name Mohammed, common in Berber communities. Daman however is not a Berber name. This exchange is very revealing of tensions between orthodox religious practices and ancestral rites that fall outside of tolerated behaviour, such as saint worship (practiced by Sufis but rejected by orthodox Islam). Each side accuses the other of being 'foreign' and illegitimate amongst the local population. This echoes accusations made in the political realm, with Islamists being accused of importing Saudi orthodoxy, and left-wing groups of promoting Western secular values.

ARTA uses Berber culture to a very different effect than Tafoukt: while the latter's performances verge on the epic, ARTA's work is inspired by political or social issues faced by Amazigh communities in the Rif while also using references to

their specific traditions, such as the Moussem of Sidi Chaib. The play explores Riffian culture through the use of musical instruments (the *bendir*) and local songs and dances; during the opening scene is heard a *raita* song, a pipe instrument which is often associated with *Boujloud* characters¹⁶ in the Rif region (Amine & Carlson, 2012: 42). The costumes are also representative of the region; actress Mimounte in particular wears a brightly coloured and layered skirt and a red turban, as do Berber women appearing on touristic adverts.

The whole dynamic of the play relies on the apparent conflict between the characters and the opposite worldviews they stand for: the artists support a liberal, tolerant Berber society while the imam defends an Orthodox vision of Islam presumed to be incompatible with aspects of Berber culture. In a scene, the comedian Mohand states:

Mohand: Il va me bannir d'ici et imposer sa loi du silence et la prière à la place de nos airs de musique, de nos chants, des chansons de nos parents et de nos grands-parents (2012: 3).

This sort of discourse is not unusual in Morocco and certainly not restricted to the Amazigh movement; there is a constant tension between some artists and the Islamist movement in Morocco who supports an Orthodox vision of culture through its discourses about 'clean art'¹⁷. According to Said Graioui and Taieb Belghazi,

¹⁶ *Boujloud*, mentioned in the first c, is a traditional performance deeply rooted in Berber culture, whereby a man disguises himself with an animal skin (usually sheep or goat) and roams the street asking for money. It is often celebrated on the day before the Eid ul-Adha festival.

¹⁷ 'Clean art', or 'Art propre' is part of the PJD's conservative vision for culture. It promotes a 'moral' culture, free from nudity and sexual scenes in particular.

These issues polarize political players and the public into two main sides with one side professing creative freedom, diversity, and modernity while the other advocates regulatory mechanisms to gate-keep cultural productions that violate the values of Islam and the Moroccan public. (...) This power struggle, though, is rather complex to disentangle as the state plays the game of the arbiter between the secularists and Islamists. (2013: 267).

Imachdah explores into the role of Orthodox Islam in contemporary Morocco, and the play seems to conclude on the idea that everyone needs to have a defined place: the imam looking after the mosque and religious affairs, and the artists protecting local traditions and entertaining the villagers. Actress Mimounte expresses this idea:

Mimounte: Le fqi retourne à sa place: il doit protéger les artistes et les femmes de ce Saint Sidi au lieu de les empêcher d'être la joie de ce village!
(2012: 4)

Within the Amazigh movement, there is a variety of positions of this matter: Mohamed Chafik, who has had a very influential role as a Berber intellectual and first directors of the IRCAM Institute, advocates a moderate position. While he demands secularism (as a separation between the political and religious fields), he is “seeking to find a middle way without attacking holy taboos of Islam” (Ben-Layashi, 2007: 156). On the other hand, the political side of the movement, mostly led by figures living in Europe such as Algerian activist Ferhat Mehenni, commonly opposes Islam

to *Amazighité*¹⁸ as two incompatible ideologies, thus reproducing the model imposed by the French colonists during the colonial period.

Mehenni, president of the newly formed and influential Union of North African People, “may protest against Arabism, but he has adopted France and is French-speaking” (Amiras, 2013: 223). France remains until today a major supporter of the Amazigh movement throughout North Africa, due in part to the large number of North Africans of Berber origin living in the country. Maddy-Weitzman speaks of the ‘centrality of France’s Berber community in the Amazigh movement, both numerically and organizationally’ (2011, 143). France historically has had a strong ideological influence on the movement and its leaders since the emigration of many Kabyle intellectuals to the country. As a result, there is increasing distance between the Berber elites, many of whom are based in Europe or in big urban centres, and the Berber countryside it is claiming to defend.

The initial project of the movement to empower a nation alienated by a hegemonic pan-Arab identity is increasingly hegemonic itself, by promoting a homogenised Amazighité, around the idea of a standardised language and culture. In fact, it is in ignoring local specificities and further endangering local dialects. Plays like the ones discussed in this section are performed in local dialects such as Tariffit and Tachelhit, rather than standardised Tamazight that is spoken by a very small minority of Moroccans, even amongst Berber communities. Furthermore, it would be wrong to claim that Amazighité in Morocco was denied, on the same level as in Libya

¹⁸ Amazighité is a term frequently used in Berber intellectual circles, referring to Berber identity and cultures.

for example where any expression of Berber belonging was violently repressed, as we discussed above. There has long been a Berber elite, in particular in the army, and there were attempts to include Berber dialects in the construction of a national identity from the early 1990s. North Africa's Amazigh heritage has been increasingly recognised and institutionalised in Morocco, in particular under the impulse of King Mohammed VI, and is often used as a proof of the country's multiculturalism. However, there are also fears that the more activist side of Amazigh movement is being co-opted to promote Western ideals in terms of democracy and secularism, and reject Arabo-Islamic culture. *Imachdah*, as a joint Riffian and French project promoting secularism, is a particularly revealing cultural product in this context, because it opposes tolerant, holistic indigenous traditions to an oppressive form of Islam.

The two companies I selected belong to different groups within the Berber population and create plays that are very diverse in terms of their themes, aesthetics and message. Both strongly rely on their Berber credentials to participate to a wider Amazigh cultural Renaissance, first through their use of Amazigh dialects in their performances, but also through artefacts, symbols and references to Berber history as I argued. However, the plays analysed here and the ideas they disseminate are also in line with mainstream theatre: they promote an inclusive approach to Moroccan identity, and criticise the growing influence of an Orthodox Islam. These themes are far from being specific to the Berber movement, and many other plays address them. I would therefore argue that Amazigh theatre is not a separate movement as such: it is very much part of the contemporary Moroccan theatre scene in terms of its aims and

its narratives, although it adopts a specific aesthetics based around Berber culture.

Although Amazigh theatre is often shown on a dedicated circuit because of language barriers, it share similar values as the artistic elites of the country. This is particularly apparent in the debate on ‘clean art’ that opposes them to the PJD’s conservatism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to analyse linguistic strategies used by contemporary theatre-makers and playwright, representing a large variety of practices across the country. Through a close reading of selected plays, I aim to derive an understanding of language ideologies and practices and their evolution since the 1980s. The linguistic landscape of Morocco is in constant evolution and has greatly changed in recent years, with the revalorisation of Moroccan darija and Tamazight dialects as languages of literary value. The rise of English as a global language, potentially overtaking French as the first foreign language in the country in the future, also represent a significant development. In addition, practices such as code-switching reflect a flexible attitude towards languages: the numerous dialects used around the country are a proof of its multiculturalism and are not perceived as a hindrance, but rather as a rich heritage.

These new trends in the way Moroccans relate to and use the various languages at their disposal symbolise deeper changes about how they perceive themselves in the wider MENA area, and in the world: Classical Arabic retains a high level of prestige due to its association to a rich literary tradition and to Islam, but

the increasing use of Moroccan *darija* in the public domain (cultural productions, media, political discourses) also expresses a desire to create cultural products that are context-specific. Furthermore, these shifting hierarchies as Katherine Hoffman calls them (2008: 22) have also led to passionate debates about languages in education, in state institutions, and more generally in public space. These new issues have the capacity to considerably change the current linguistic status quo in the coming decade: will schools start using *darija* and Tamazight as teaching languages? If so, how will this affect the curriculum? Will the development of Tamazight as a transnational language across North Africa affect communication between Moroccans and their neighbours? Will the use of *darija* in literature expand further, or will it remain an exception? And if so, what script shall it use? These are questions that deserve more attention, and will provide new insights into Moroccan culture.

I have also tried to demonstrate that although Amazigh theatre often centres on the Berber experience, whether now or in an idealised past, it ultimately shares the same worldview as the mainstream liberal elites on key issues such as the role of religion in society. Amazigh theatre is dominated by intellectuals that often navigate in the same circles as these elites, rather than being led by communities from the rural Berber heartlands. These communities, despite being represented on stage and in dedicated literature, are actually increasingly marginalised by the political discourses focusing on abstract issues, such as the status of Berber languages, rather than practical ones: poverty, access to education and healthcare or lack of facilities. These are communities who have relied on women to protect their heritage, the authenticity of their language, and their land, as I mentioned earlier. Katherine Hoffman describes

these rural women as “rich in cultural capital yet poor in symbolic capital” (2007: 50): women are pictured as guardians of a rich history and culture as is Hiarbas’s mother in Tafoukt’s play, yet there is very little awareness of the hardships of rural or mountain life. My next chapter will look at the representation of women in theatre and will discuss a number of plays written and directed by women. These plays seek to debunk stereotypes about Moroccan women and give them opportunities to talk about themselves away from the objectification they are often victims of.

Chapter III

Gender matters and the assertion of women's voices

Gender is one of the most debated, most prevalent issues of our times, most particularly in Muslim societies, where it represents “the principal challenge of political modernization in the Islamic space” (GIERFI¹ statement of purpose, quoted in Gray, 2012: 140). Women's rights are often used as a main indicator to gauge how ‘liberal’ or ‘modern’ a country is, especially in the Arab world: Tunisia for instance was hailed as a model state since the Bourguiba years and its reform of women's status, despite its widespread corruption and repression of political opponents, women included. In her powerful critique of state feminism in Tunisia, Imen Yacoubi observes that:

This claim that Tunisia's legal and policy framework for gender equality is exceptionally enlightened and “modern” is one of the most powerful myths about feminism in Tunisian politics. (2016: 255)

She argues on the other hand that:

¹ The GIERFI (Groupe International d'Etude et de Reflexion sur les Femmes en Islam - International Group of Study and Reflexion on Women in Islam) is a research group based in Barcelona and presided by Moroccan doctor and writer Asma Lamrabet.

Although state feminism has empowered women and enhanced their participation in different spheres, it has also made them vulnerable in several ways, particularly in relation to autonomy and political agency (2016: 256)

There are many parallels between Tunisia and Morocco in terms of how state reforms have imposed top-down change, sometimes at the expense of women's associations who address the situation of women from a much wider perspective than the legal framework, including illiteracy, economic development, political participation, gendered violence and more. In the context of contemporary Morocco, gender and women's rights have become major topics of interest but also of controversy, as exemplified by the tense debates around the Moudawana reforms since 2004. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, those reforms launched by the King with the support of feminist groups aimed at giving Moroccan women more rights with regards to custody and divorce. However, they led to much debate and ultimately were not successfully applied throughout the country, as argues Katja Zvan Elliott (2009).

In this charged environment, several cultural productions have led to violent polemics: most recently, Nabil Ayouch's film *Zine Li Fik* (2015, translated into English as 'Much loved'), following the lives of four prostitutes in Morocco, was banned because of its 'negative' portrayal of Moroccan women and its explicit sexual language. The film was very well received in France, where it received several prizes such as the César for Best Actress for Loubna Abidar, but Ayouch was heavily criticized in Morocco. Nadir Bouhmouch argues that rather than uncovering the lives of marginalised women, "Ayouch's films serve to disempower the Moroccan woman

while making European spectators feel better about their privileged and ‘enlightened’ positions” (2015). Similarly, the play *Dialy* (2012, literally ‘Mine’, directed by Naima Zitan), which I will analyse in detail in this chapter, led to negative reactions from part of the Moroccan public because of its crude descriptions of female sexuality, a topic that remains taboo. Valentine Moghadam observes that: “representations of women assume political significance, and certain images of women define and demarcate political groups, cultural projects, or ethnic communities” (1994: 2). Portrayals of women in films and theatre plays, in TV shows and other types of cultural productions thus not only document their lived realities, but they also carry political meaning in terms of breaking down taboos and challenging stereotypical images of women, whether they are promoted by political groups, Western paternalism or the Moroccan State.

In the present chapter, I will analyse a number of recent plays addressing issues around gender and I will explore what alternative images of Morocco they contribute to creating. I have organised this chapter around several main axes: first, the recovery of women’s voices and their experience of violence, particularly (but not exclusively) with regards to the Years of Lead period. Secondly, I will look at controversies around the Moudawana reforms of 2004 and discuss the role played by female theatre directors and actresses in opening up debates and dispelling wrong assumptions about what they contained. Lastly, I will explore the sensitive issue of women’s sexuality and body autonomy through recent plays on these topics. How have women used the creative field to reveal violence against them? How can theatre be used to facilitate reform and push for change, particularly in terms of women’s

rights? What do representations of women in theatre say about their status and its evolution over the last decades? How are women forcing debate on taboo subjects such as sexuality and re-claiming authority on their own bodies?

For the purpose of this chapter, I have opted to look at gender from a power perspective, using Pierre Bourdieu's definition of political field to consider gender issues not only as relating to relationships between men and women, but as power struggles between dominant and dominated groups. Notably, he "affirms the importance of gender as a constituent feature of social class" (Swartz, 1997: 155), along with other characteristics such as ethnicity. This point is crucial because it recognises women, as a class, as disadvantaged compared to men. Bourdieu dedicated his book *La Domination Masculine* (1998) to an examination of men's dominance over women; I will develop this in more depth in my analysis of the play *Lalla J'mila*. He argues that this domination is not situated in the domestic, private sphere, but rather,

in agencies such as the school or the state, sites where principles of domination that go onto to be exercised within even the most private universe of developed and imposed (2001: 4).

Bourdieu thus posits feminism as an inherently political ideology: it is not men that it targets, but the state. Zakia Salime further argues that gender issues are central to political struggles in Morocco:

In Morocco, struggles over political power have been played, disputed and negotiated in the gender field. This also means that women's interactions are mediated by these

struggles and grounded in the particular history of the nation-state formation (2011: 2).

Women's emancipation in Morocco is intricately linked to key political events, with the Moudawana for instance being first codified soon after Independence and then reformed a few years after the accession of King Mohammed VI to the throne. Are these changes responding to women's demands or are they part of a larger political strategy? How much are gender issues co-opted by the elites to further their own means during these decisive moments? How have women organised themselves, both at elite and grassroots levels, to make their voices heard on these matters.

A history of the feminist movement in Morocco

Contrary to Orientalist portrayals of Maghrebi women as exotic and submissive, hidden away in harems, Morocco has a long history of female rulers going back centuries to popular figures such as Berber queen Kahina mentioned in the previous chapter or Khnata Ben Bakkar, wife of Moulay Ismail who was de facto ruler of the country for 25 years following his death in 1727. These historical figures often inspired Moroccan women to take an active role in political life, particularly during the struggle for Independence (Baker, 1998: 17). These narratives of female bravery are often passed down generations through oral literature and folktales, told by women to women and aiming to empower them to "extend the limits of socially assigned gender roles" (Sadiqi, 2003: 246).

During the French Protectorate, many women from a variety of social backgrounds took part in the resistance, with or without the support of their families. Alison Baker describes Moroccan women throughout the country working in a variety of roles, from helping the injured to taking arms themselves; she writes: “Women participated in active, even armed resistance against colonizers from the very beginning of the protectorate, especially Berber women in the Rif mountains, the Middle Atlas, and the Anti-Atlas and Sahara in the south” (1998: 18). The interviews she realised with female activists in her book *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women* (1998) uncover the crucial role they played on a political, as well as practical level; Amina Leuh, Zhor Lazraq, Oum Kheltoum El Khatib amongst others were some of the first women of that era to access higher education, and used their elite status to further nationalist goals. Despite their contributions, women’s demands for recognition have often been sidelined for more ‘pressing’ matters: in the aftermath of Independence for instance, the struggle to establish the new Moroccan state took precedence over the demands of Moroccan women. Narjis Rerhaye and Latifa Akharbach comment that women were mostly barred from the decision-making process as soon as the Protectorate ended (1992: 31).

Hence, the first version of the Moudawana, the Family Code relating to women’s status, was promulgated in 1958 with little input from women’s groups, despite the influence of groups such as Akhawwat as-Safaa (‘sisters of purity’), which had appeared in the 1940s, or figures such as its founder Malika al-Fassi (1919-2007) who is today regarded as a pioneer of the Moroccan feminist movement (Glacier, 2012: 2). Al-Fassi is issued from a powerful Fassi family: her father was a local judge

(*qadi*) and her husband Mohammed Ghali al-Fassi was twice minister of education and culture. She was one of the most influential women of her time and became the only woman to sign the Independence Treaty in 1944 (Zaatari, 2010, 369). She was a strong advocate for women's education and wrote articles calling for this as early as 1935 (Baker, 1998: 47).

The establishment of the Moudawana in 1958 was one of the first steps taken by King Mohammed V several years before the first constitution was signed in 1962. According to Zakia Salime:

The mudawwana was also the place in which the monarchy inscribed the meanings of national identity and state sovereignty immediately after independence. First, the codification of family law by the newly independent state in 1957 affirmed the national unity of the Arabs and Amazigh (Berber) populations after the 1930 French 'Berber Dahir' (2011: 3).

It thus had a much wider aim than the framing of marriage and divorce: it was perceived as one of the foundations of the newly Independent society, securing the country's unity around common values. The Moudawana was based on both Maliki Muslim law and Berber customs regimenting women's roles within local tribes: at its foundation was an agreement between Mohammed V and tribe leaders, consolidating the legitimacy of the King after his years of exile. As Baker argues, women played a pivotal role in the traditional family structure and therefore "the reforms sought to *strengthen* the basic structures of the old society, especially the bourgeois family, not to *change* them" (1998: 22). From very early on, there was a direct connection between the rights and status of women and symbols of national unity, issues that

were brought back when the Moudawana was amended in 2004. Furthermore, Mounira Charrad argues:

Family Law by definition embodies an ideal of the family and social relationships. (...) Islamic Law legitimizes the extended male-centered patrilineage that has served as the building block of kin-based solidarities within tribal groups in the Maghrib (2001: 5).

Family Law is thus at the crux of the relationship between State and religion, between society and individuals.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the situation quietly evolved, as women progressively joined the working force, entered higher education and formed women's sections in the country's main political parties, but these didn't lead to any real engagement of women on the political stage. Journalist Zakya Daoud argues:

During these years of political and feminist maturation, the absence of any action by women's cells within the political parties, a negative 'wait and see' attitude toward the woman question, and its consideration as a secondary issue, brought about the birth of other forms of militancy. (1996: 309)

Intellectuals such as writer Leila Abouzeid and sociologists Fatima Mernissi and Soumaya Naamane Guessous provided a theoretical backdrop to these movements, going back to the 1970s. Mernissi's book *Beyond the Veil: Male- Female dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, originally published in 1975, sought to challenge the patriarchal system through an Islamic perspective and she was one of the first academics to explore the theme of 'Islamic feminism'. She had a very significant influence on female discourse in the Muslim world through her re-reading and critique of traditional Islamic sources, "in a way that is empowering for herself"

(Cooke, 2004: 84). Mernissi rejected both the patriarchal Moroccan model based on misogynistic readings of religious texts, and a Western feminism that dismissed Muslim cultures. On the opposite she posited Islam as a system defending women's rights and giving them equal status.

We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of this Muslim tradition (quoted in Hall 1995: 77).

Naamane Guessous is mainly known through her bestseller *Au-delà de toute Pudeur* (1988), which deconstructs the prevalent concept of shame in Morocco. Abouzeid, as a fiction writer, worked on narratives that explored female perspectives on social issues or historical events the Moroccan Independence and challenged reductionist visions of society opposing Islam to secularism, modernity to tradition. Her work is also notable because she writes in Arabic and is one of the only women of her generation to do so; she was also the first Moroccan female writer to have her work translated from Arabic to English (Hall, 1995: 67).

In the 1980s, several women's associations appeared such as ADFM (Democratic Association of Moroccan Women, founded in 1985) or UAF (Union of Feminine Action, 1987). These groups started looking specifically into women's rights, focusing on a legal perspective (Evrard, 2014: 22). During the same period appeared new opposition; "the Moroccan feminist movement had to deal with a serious challenge: Islamism" (Sadiqi, 2008: 330), which opposed liberal feminists to supporters of a more Orthodox Islam. This created new difficulties for the feminist

movement, led by urban, elite female activists such as Nouzha Skalli and Amina Lamrini, founders of ADFM and affiliated to the leftist Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme (Party of Progress and Socialism):

If they rejected Islamic precepts, they would face a double sanction: in Morocco, they would fail to connect with the vast majority of Moroccan women who are poor, illiterate and deeply religious and outside Morocco, they would be accused of not representing their own authentic culture (Sadiqi, 2008: 331)

A turning point of the women's movement in Morocco was the One Million Signature Campaign in 1992, when for the first time since Independence, women organised themselves as a united group to make their voices heard and demand reforms: it was "the first mass mobilization of feminist groups against the *mudawwana*" (Salime, 2011: xx). A large number of feminist organisations, including ADFM and UAF but also smaller grassroot groups came together to ask for a restriction of polygamy and easier access to divorce, amongst others. This led to a first reform of the *Moudawana* in 1993 under King Hassan II, which only addressed few of the movement's demands. This was still perceived as "big symbolic gains" (Sadiqi, 2008: 331) as the *Moudawana* had previously been perceived as untouchable.

As Mohammed VI accessed the throne in 1999, feminist movements discovered a new, powerful ally; in his August 1999 speech, weeks after he took power, he declared:

How can society achieve progress, while women, who represent half the nation, see their rights, violated and suffer as a result of injustice, violence, and marginalization, notwithstanding the dignity and justice granted them by our glorious religion? (quoted in Sadiqi, 2008: 332-333).

The feminist movement capitalised on this more favourable political context, leading to important demonstrations in Rabat and Casablanca in 2000, that again pitted two seemingly irreconcilable groups against each other: the Islamists and the feminists. The marches were organised in response to the Plan d'intégration des Femmes dans le Développement (Plan for the integration of Women in Development), proposed by State secretary for Family Affairs Mohamed Said Saadi. The Islamist groups rejected the plan for a number of reasons, such as the fact that it proposed to outlaw polygamy. They succeeded in attracting a greater number of people in Casablanca than the feminist march in Rabat, in a "show of force" (Sadiqi, 2008: 332) against the socialist government of Abderrahman Youssoufi and leftist women's groups.

A commission was finally created in 2001 with the aim to revise the Moudawana, which was voted by the Moroccan Parliament in 2004. The reform was widely discussed both in academic circles and in the media, and "made significant amendments to many discriminating stipulations of the old personal Status Code" (Zvan Elliott, 2009: 218). Amongst others, the new Moudawana stipulates that women are mutually responsible for their family, and can get married without needing the consent of a *wali* (male legal tutor). Polygamy is now restricted by the obligation for the husband to get the consent of their wife and agreement from a judge, and child custody is given first to the mother in the event of divorce. Despite this, critics of the reform are many: Zvan Elliott highlights the need to educate not only the public about the legal changes, but also judges, police officers and other officials (2009: 222), so that the reform can be fully implemented. In addition, the reforms led to resistance from a society that remains deeply patriarchal (Biagi, 2014:

53). Zvan Elliott (2014) also looks at the Moudawana reform from a wider point of view, including Morocco's adhesion to international treaties such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) and the pressures from foreign partners to work towards gender equality. She concludes her analysis as such:

The reformed Family Code and the regime's discourse on women's rights and gender equality offer the impression of the country's progress; however, underneath this liberal veneer, the regime reaffirms and sanctions patriarchal gender relations entrenched in many communities across Morocco. (2014: 25)

Thus, the amended Moudawana's progressive stance is mitigated by the fact that the conditions for it to be fully applied were never fulfilled. It also remained a topic of discord between secular feminist groups and the Islamist government.

In very recent years, a "Third way" (Gray, 2012: 136) has appeared, through which the women's movement tries to bridge across the religious divide: it is based on an "alternative paradigm that de-secularizes the project of women's emancipation while employing a non-confrontational attitude towards the West" (Gray, 2012: 136). Essentially, it is a movement that seeks to adopt a measured, context-appropriate response to current challenges faced by Moroccan women, refusing cooptation and 'Occidentalism' (Clisby & Enderstein, 2017) or 'Orientalism in reverse' which scholar Mehrzad Boroujerdi defines as such:

A discourse used by oriental intellectuals and political elites to lay claim to recapture, and finally appropriate their 'true' and 'authentic' identity. (...) First and foremost, orientalism in reverse uncritically embraces orientalism's assumption of a

fundamental ontological difference separating the natures, peoples and cultures of the Orient and the Occident (1996:12).

It is thus a balance act for Moroccan women trying to assert their rights and identity, between the state's hijacking of their struggles for its own benefit, and pressure from both a conservative society, and international feminist groups promoting their own vision of female liberation. Lila Abu-Lughod wrote an insightful article looking at the "obsession with the plight of Muslim women" (2002: 783) in the context of the 'war on terror' and American and European military interventions in the Middle East. She writes: "Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged." (2002: 789). She thus frames these projects within wider neocolonial discourses that continue to describe non-Western populations as inferior or 'uncivilised'. This is an issue I will come back to in my last chapter, when I will discuss the activities of feminist NGO Global Fund for Women in Morocco.

Finally, I would like to examine the use of the term 'feminism', that can appear contentious in the context of Morocco. It is a term frequently claimed by leftist political parties, but also by theatre and other cultural groups; in an interview with the theatre company Théâtre Aquarium and its members Naima Zitan, Naima Oulmakki and Abdullatif Oulmakki, American photojournalist Paola Gianturco reports the following exchange:

"Abdullatif was working in women's associations?" I marvel.

"Yes! I am 100 percent feminist" he nods.

"If he weren't, he wouldn't be working with us!" his sister laughs. (2007: 56).

As highlights Fatima Sadiqi, ‘feminism’ is an ideology developed in the context of the West, and she adds:

Up to now, mainstream upper class Western feminist scholars have viewed not only Moroccan, but all women who live in the Arab-Muslim world, as a singular, monolithic, undifferentiated, subordinate and powerless group” (2003: xvii).

It is essential to look at gender issues from a perspective that respects Moroccan women’s agency and exposes their views in their variety. The rise to prominence of the Islamic feminist discourse since the early 2000s has sought to address the failure of Western feminists to create a truly inclusive, universal discourse with regards to women’s rights and related issues.

Zakia Salime argues that both “the terms ‘feminism’ and ‘Islamism’ have genealogies rooted in colonial representations of Islam, postcolonial identifications with modernity, and the politics of identity in the Middle East and North Africa.” (2011: xxiii). Salime and others such as Leila Ahmed (1992) or Edward Said (1978) argue that women’s supposed oppression in Muslim countries has been used to legitimise colonialism and more recently the American invasion of Afghanistan. Ahmed writes:

Colonialism’s use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has ever since imparted to to feminism in non-Western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests. (1992: 167)

As we analyse the creative productions and discourses of women in Morocco, it is necessary to keep those issues in mind: what does ‘feminism’ mean to them? How do

they relate to global feminist movements and discourses? How do they resist both patriarchy and orientalist representations of their culture?

Female pioneers in the field of theatre

Traditionally, women have played a very restricted role on the Moroccan stage, and until very recently they only contributed as actresses rather than as directors or playwrights. This is significant because it shows that women were excluded from the decision-making process, which in turn kept their voices, their experiences and their stories away from the stage and from the public. While female actresses such as Touria Jebrane achieved considerable fame in the post-Independence years, Fatima Chebchoub highlights the fact that they were married to influential theatre figures who “helped their career a great deal” (1995: 60). Furthermore, the roles they were given were usually quite limited; Mouna Belghali (2010) discusses this issue in her thesis, noting that most plays before the 1990s only had few female characters, playing secondary roles opposite a much larger number of male characters leading the narrative. She analysed the number of female characters in various Moroccan plays from the 1950s up to now: the large majority of plays only have 1 or 2 women, and some none at all (Belghali, 2010: 153). Laura Chakravarty Box argues that the absence of women is not due to their disinterest for this art form, but rather that:

Women on stage present a profound problem for North African cultures to this day.

(...) The role of the female actors is therefore downplayed by authors of historical and contemporary performance studies (...) as for the other aspects of theatre production, women are latecomers to the scene (2005: 9).

This discomfort is due partly to the status of women in North African societies and the sense of *hchouma* ('shame') traditionally associated with women performing or revealing themselves in public. Women are assigned specific roles within society and risk being marginalised if they fall outside of accepted boundaries: the Moroccan woman "functions legitimately within the home as a housekeeper and child bearer. Her body, which she is obliged to keep for childbearing, no longer belongs to her" (Chebchoub, 1995: 53). Outside of her home, and particularly in any public position, women are thus perceived as somehow 'illegitimate', encroaching on male space.

In many ways the struggle of women to find their place on the theatre stage reflects and parallels their battle for more rights in the public arena. Defining moments in the history of Moroccan feminism are often accompanied by changes in the cultural sector as well, and it is undeniable that over the last 15 years, women have achieved important change, both in terms of opportunities available to them and of their representation in the public realm. While narratives featuring women in main roles were very rare in mainstream theatre until the late 1990s, they are now frequent and they bring gender issues to the attention of their audiences. Female voices are not marginalised as such anymore (although I would argue that women of lower economic status are): women have a status as workers, as politicians, as members of civil society, and naturally as artists and writers. Fatima Chebchoub (1952-2006),

although relatively unknown from mainstream audiences, was a real pioneer in the male-dominated field of theatre, and radically challenged traditional assumptions about women working in theatre. As a trained *hlayqia* (female halqa performer) from a family of storytellers, she was also one of the very few women to be able to manipulate traditional performance forms and incorporate them into her work. The halqa, as a public type of performance, is traditionally dominated by men, although “women have started to appropriate it” (Sadiqi, 2003: 249). Chebchoub was also a scholar and a playwright, writing plays that centered on strong female characters and challenged notions of patriarchy. Along with Nabila El Guennouni, Naima Zitan and Leila Houari, she was one of the handful of women writing for theatre (Belghali, 2010: 81). Her work is particularly innovative because she adopted an explicitly feminist, militant stance very early, addressing the oppression of women as a group, but also more generally of marginalised groups such as the unemployed youth. Two recurring characters in her performances were Awicha and Hommane, two university graduates desperate for work; she drew attention to this issue at a time when it was completely ignored by political parties.

Chebchoub’s play *Halqat Moulat Sser* (‘the Halqa of the secret’s keeper’) is an original performance that breaks down barriers about women in theatre: it is devoted to a form of theatre “played by women for women only” (Box, 2005: 9). The term ‘Moulat sser’ traditionally refers to women who used to attend wedding parties or preparations to perform storytelling sessions for the bride, introducing her to the topic of sexual intimacy: she “provides education in sexual matters to virgin girls” (Box, 2005: 82). In *Moulat Sser*, Chebchoub played the character of a *cheikha*, a

woman who is paid to dance and entertain at wedding celebrations and other events. *Cheikhat* are popular but marginalised characters in Moroccan culture: they exist outside of social norms and challenge traditional images of femininity through their dancing, smoking or singing in front of men. Typical dance moves are sexual in nature: they involve gyrating of the hips, often accentuated by the use of a belt. Their songs also refer freely to love and sex: by their performances, they demonstrate “the possibility of unfettered female sexuality” (Box, 2005: 63).

However, as Box argues, this tradition has persisted through history because “it serves patriarchal interests” (2005: 62): *cheikhat* are welcomed at particular occasions, where they satisfy male demands, but are alienated at other times. Chebchoub notes that in Moroccan society, “a woman involved in the illegitimate arts becomes a *chikha*. (...) She is still hideous and repulsive” (1995: 54): her status is thus very fragile outside of the performance of her function. In fact, there are many similarities between the way the *cheikhat* exist on the borders of society and the life of Fatima Chebchoub herself as a performer. As a single, childless, highly educated woman who performed freely on stage, Chebchoub didn’t match traditional expectations of Moroccan women to the point that her entourage referred to her as ‘Roumia’, the ‘Westerner’ (Box, 2005: 81).

The actress and the *cheikha* are both often associated with prostitution, because the freedom they display through dancing or acting is at odds with the social ideals of female modesty, and it is assumed their body movements reflect a moral ‘looseness’. Furthermore, as Kapchan notes, “they draw attention to both the

disjunctures and the congruencies between the real and the fictional in society's definitions of the feminine" (1992: 90), and therefore they are perceived as a threat on several levels. They represent a free expression of sexuality in a society where such expressions are highly regulated; they are financially independent, and they may engage in behaviours usually deemed unacceptable for women such as drinking and smoking, or having multiple sexual partners (Kapchan, 2010: 192).

In the years since Mohammed VI took the power however, feminine voices have taken a greater place in the cultural arena: writers such as Leila Abouzeid or Yasmine Chami-Kettani have achieved relative success, speaking specifically about their lives as women in a traditional, patriarchal society through books such as *The Year of the Elephant* (1989) or *Cérémonie* (2002). Similarly, a greater number of women have invested directing roles and write or adapt narratives inspired by female experiences. Belghali mentions Chebchoub, but also Naima Zitan from feminist company Théâtre Aquarium, Salima Ben Moumen, an actress who now directs the regional troupe of Tetouan, and women-only company Takoon (2010:77-78). To these more experienced theatre professionals, I can add Asmaa Houri from Théâtre Anfas, a recent ISADAC graduate, and Imane Zerouali, actress and wife of Driss Ksikes who directed several of his plays, such as *Le saint des Incertains* (2009) and *Goullou* ('Say', 2012). All these women contribute to the increasing visibility of women in the public space, and raise awareness of female issues through their work. In addition, they challenge the inferior status of women in the theatre milieu: they often employ other women and target female audiences.

The play *Bnat Lalla Mennana* by Takoon (2005), which I will analyse in detail in a later section, completely turns on itself the precedent lack of female characters: the play has six women, living all together in a women-only household, after the death of their father. The object of their love and attention, a young man of the village, never appears in the play and shines by his absence. The play thus creates an exclusively female space, focusing on sharing women's experiences. Belghali notes that this type of women-only companies might be needed because in a patriarchal society such as Morocco, some actors still find it difficult to be directed by a woman (2010: 78). In addition, Box relates the experiences of a young actress who "discovered that she could not work professionally in the theater for adult audiences without being sexually harassed by her male colleagues" (2006: 80), and ultimately had to seek employment with a children's theatre company where her fiancé was also working. Harassment in public spaces, whether at work or outside, can be a frequent occurrence for women, and actresses can be particularly vulnerable as public figures. In this context, creating female-only or female-dominated theatre troupes becomes about opening safe spaces of expression for women, without fear of harassment. Several recent plays have focused on gender-based violence to raise awareness of its prevalence such as Théâtre Aquarium's *Rouge + Bleu= Violet* ('Red+Blue= Purple', 2014). The State is increasingly concerned with issues that prevent women from fully accessing public spaces (Kearl, 2010: xi); the Labour code reform in 2004 "considers sexual harassment a serious crime for the first time" (Ennaji, 2011: 202)

Despite the growing number of women involved in theatre, there is still a crippling lack of female playwrights in Morocco, and therefore a lack of female perspectives in theatre. Box writes that “women who write plays in Arabic, if my recent observations on Morocco can be extrapolated to apply to the entire region, do not make it into print” (2008:10). This is also my observation: while I came across a number of female theatre-makers such as Naima Zitan and Maha Sano (Théâtre Aquarium) or Nora Skalli (Théâtre Takoon) who have written or adapted texts into Moroccan arabic, I have not found any in print. A small number of texts in Arabic written by men however are published every year: *dumu’ bi khul* (‘Tears of Khol’, 2014) by Issam el Yousfi or *ḥālat Ḥṣār* (‘State of emergency’, 2014) by Zakaria Abou Maria are two recent examples which I found available in Moroccan bookshops. I can only assume that this is because female playwrights who write in French such as Nabila el Guennouni tap into a much wider market, and their texts are most easily appropriated as part of Francophone feminine literature. Audiences for plays in Arabic on the other hand are extremely limited, as it is not a popular literary genre. In any case, plays published by Moroccan women, even in French, are a rarity.

Lalla J’mila (2004) or the uncovering of women’s histories

Lala J’mila (meaning ‘Lady Jmila’) by Tangers-based playwright Zoubeir Ben Bouchta is a play that explores the theme of violence and abuse against women in Morocco across several historical periods. In 2004, the feminist group *Réseau espace de Citoyenneté* commissioned Ben Bouchta to write a play reflecting the lives of women in contemporary Morocco, at the same time as the new Moudawana was

introduced. The result, *Lalla J'mila*, set in Tangier during the Years of Lead, is a moving tale of two long lost sisters fleeing a repressive political system and patriarchal society, and find solace in each other's company. Through those two women, named Lalla J'mila and Itto, we are introduced to decades of female resistance, of oppression, and of violence. At the same time, womanhood is presented as a subversive force, a positive energy through which the two sisters manage to survive and carve a space for themselves. The play is divided into what the writer calls 'lightings', rather than 'scenes': there is no linear narrative, and each 'lighting' takes us to a different era or focuses on a different character. The narrative unfolds through flashbacks as the sisters share their memories, addressing the roots of oppression and violence against women over several generations.

At the beginning of the play, Lalla J'mila has settled in a cave on the seaside, living on her own and working as a spiritual healer; she receives women who have trouble finding a husband or conceiving a child. Her half-sister Itto, whom she has never met, comes looking for her after a traumatic experience: she has been arrested by the police and raped for taking part in student demonstrations, and is now ostracized by society. Both sisters have a long history of suffering at the hands of men: Lalla J'mila was raised by a violent stepfather, and was forced into marrying a much older man as a young girl. Itto, while she is much younger than her sister and grew up in a different social and political context, is targeted not only as a woman, but as a political activist. As a young student, she rebelled against the abusive headmaster of her school and was thus reported to the authorities. After her arrest, she is married off to her stepbrother in a fake ceremony before being raped, and is

subsequently abandoned by her real fiancé. Despite their marginalised status, both women are resisting in their own way, and display strength and courage by striving to survive in difficult circumstances.

In the context of wide-ranging debates on women's rights and their status in Morocco, the play's creation in 2004 was very relevant and gave a historical perspective on these issues. Khalid Amine describes Lalla *J'mila* as "among the few feminist-conscious writings that appeared in Morocco in response to the emergence of the new family code" (2007: 17). The play is indeed critical of patriarchal structures, which it looks at from the perspective of various female characters. A very revealing scene in terms of gender dynamics shows Lalla J'mila dressing up as a man to escape her husband's house. As she feels empowered by her disguise, she decides to continue living as a man and to earn her living as a fisherman. She recounts to her sister:

Lalla J'mila: If only you had seen me when I was a man: I would walk the street as a prince; head high and feet touching the ground, with firm pace, walking far without fear. There was nobody watching and nobody paying attention to you, whether I was fat or thin. There was nobody to ask why I wore this and didn't wear that. (Ben Bouchta: 2007, 74)

Here, Lalla J'mila addresses the fact that women are held to account by men, as a collective group, for their every action, and that as a result their freedom of movement is restricted. Women who do not submit to these unspoken rules risk being

ostracised by society, including by other women: in the play, Itto's fiancé El Mehdi ultimately rejects her because of his mother.

Mother: A man is something, and a woman is something else. If a woman enters a prison, she remains in it.

El Mehdi: But she was released years ago!

Mother: No! You see, even if Mek'hzen [the State authorities] releases her, people condemn her to a prison for life (Ben Bouchta, 2007, 66)

Women thus contribute to and perpetuate a cycle of oppression in which they are the main victims, by imposing restrictions on themselves and others and by legitimizing prejudice against women. Furthermore, *Lalla J'mila* addresses the sensitive issue of violence against women, in particular through Lalla J'mila's childhood accounts. Her step-father, Ba'Haddo, is violent towards his family, making his wife and his step-daughter thresh thorns until their feet bled as a punishment for the lack of harvest in his fields. In the play's notes, Ben Bouchta comments on this character's name:

This name is associated to a historical figure known as Ahmed Ba'Haddo. He was the chief commander of the tribe of Bani'Zwir in Gh'mara [close to Chefchaouen in the North of the country] during the rule of Sultan Moulay Ismail. (...) The saying goes that Ba'Haddo gave seeds to his tribesmen to sow, and because the year was a drought his tribesmen ate the seeds and thus there had been no harvest. When he inspected the fields upon his arrival and found only thorns that had grown up, he made his tribesmen thresh thorns with their bare feet as a punishment. (2007: 83)

This narrative is here resurrected to effectively denounce men's violence against women: it is women here who are the oppressed underclass, under the tyrannical rule of the father. Itto's rape is the culmination of generalised violence against women, orchestrated by the police, and thus by the State: it is her punishment for daring to challenge men's authority on her both as a woman and as a subject of the King. This brings us back to Bourdieu, and the idea of male domination being orchestrated by the State, as I discussed earlier (p.148). Rape is used here as a show of dominance: it is meant to push Itto back into her 'female' space and to exclude her from the male field of politics.

Throughout the play, we are introduced to the stories of other women, and through their testimonies a long history of female activism is uncovered, linking the issues of women's agency to the country's recent history. Lalla Yennou for example, Itto's foster mother, was a *fqiha*, a self-educated woman who organised meetings in the *hammam* (public baths) and wrote songs criticising the colonial powers. Itto admires her because she refused to submit to patriarchal expectations of women and joined men in fighting the Spanish colonisers:

Lalla J'mila: May God bless the soul of the f'qiha Lalla Yennou. You who honoured women in the city...She was the first woman to take off her djellaba and l'tame [face veil] and walked side by side with men (...). She lifted up the flag and walked to the front. Women uttered thrilling cries of joy, yet some of the men insulted her, and some spat on her...she was a real woman (Ben Bouchta, 2007: 31)

Lalla Yennou also taught local women how to read and write, empowering them through education: she thus resisted oppression on both a political and a social level, fighting against colonialism and patriarchy. Another woman of influence is Lgallssa (literally ‘the seated one’), owner of the local *hammam*, who works as an informant for the local authorities and reports the women for singing anti-colonial songs.

The notion of space is important in the performance: the main setting, Tangier, plays such an important part in the play that it almost becomes a character in itself. The narrative relies on specificities of the city such as its geography, its colonial history and its local saints. Amine describes this work as “place-specific material”, and a “theatrical articulation of the space of Tangier as a practiced place” (Amine, 2007: 167), by which he means that the narrative is articulated around the city using the playwright’s deep connection and knowledge of it (Ben Bouchta is himself a native of Tangier). In the play, the colonial history of the city under Spanish rule is mentioned several times, and the Mediterranean Sea, which Tangier overlooks, becomes a soothing element, used by Lalla J’mila in her spiritual rituals. In fact, the city itself is often associated with womanhood: It is commonly referred to in Morocco as the ‘Bride of the North’. Lalla J’mila’s cave on the seaside, as well as the Girls’ Rock, a mythical site, both have strong evocations: they represent a liminal, female space, devoted to natural energies, where “Moroccan women can momentarily subvert deeply rooted patriarchal violence” (Amine, 2007: 168). The locus of the performance, played out mainly in this cave where Itto comes to look for her sister, is a crucial element of the story.

The following scenes take us back and forth in time, describing Lalla J'mila's difficult childhood, Itto's arrest and rape (presumably during the Years of Lead), and the resistance organised by Lalla Yennou in the colonial period. It focuses on individual stories of Moroccan women trying to define a place for themselves in a patriarchal, men-centred environment. Female activists are typically left aside by official history and by society, because politics are perceived as a masculine field. In *La Domination Masculine*, Bourdieu describes the exclusion of women "from all public spaces, such as the assembly or the market, where the games ordinarily considered the most serious ones of human existence (...) are played out" (2001: 49). By 'games', he means means situations in which men 'compete' against each other to express their masculinity and thus increase their symbolic capital. In this sense, politics is inherently a masculine field because it is a 'game' for power, hence why women are prevented, sometimes violently, from taking part in political activities. In *Lalla J'mila* on the opposite, those women are given a voice, a space to discuss their plight. Although it is not often acknowledged, women such as Lalla Yennou are a constant fixture in Moroccan history: there are countless accounts of women taking part in battles or having important roles in the political, social and spiritual life at various times in the past, as we mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. The female characters in the play are thus far from being exceptions. They represent a long trend of politically active women, who were invested in all parts of society and took part both in armed battles and in political struggles, defending not only women's rights, but the rights of all Moroccans.

The example of Takoon: women performing for women

The women-only theatre company Takoon is composed of a group of actresses, a set and costume designer and a light designer who met while studying at the ISADAC Institute. The actresses of Takoon range from a number of popular TV actresses such as Nora Skalli (who is also the scriptwriter of both the play and the soap) and Samia Akariou, the company's director, and older, respected theatre artists such as Saadia Azgoune and Naima Lemcherki. It thus appeals to a very large number of women from different generations and backgrounds. Their play *Bnat Lalla Mennana* has been touring for several years now; it was originally a student project started at the ISADAC Institute, which they revisited in 2005. It's probably one of the most important plays of recent years: it was broadcasted on popular TV channel 2M, thus reaching wider audiences than a standard theatre play, and was also played in several Moroccan embassies and cultural centres in Europe for expatriate communities.

The play is freely adapted from Federico Garcia Lorca's text *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (originally published in 1945) and focuses on issues such as the oppression of women in traditional societies, the control of their bodies, and prejudices between classes. The play tells the story of four sisters (five in Garcia Lorca's original play) who become prisoners in their own house after the death of their father. Pushed by social pressures that often consider single women as a potential source of trouble, the widowed mother takes on a dominating, oppressive persona in order to protect her family's reputation. The arrival of a young man who

asks the hand of the older sister, who has dual Spanish and Moroccan nationality and thus represents a passport to Europe, revives tensions and jealousies between the women of the household, and they start rebelling against their mother. At the end of the play and after the escape of her youngest daughter, the mother is forced to review her position, and she symbolically hands the keys of the house to her children, finally letting them free.

Director Samia Akariou cleverly adapted the play to the Moroccan context: the play is set in the North of Morocco, and accordingly the TV soap was shot in Northern town Chefchaouen, using the local dialect and drawing heavily on the city's history and architecture. Musical interludes in both the play and the series are inspired by Andalusian music, emphasising the region's close cultural and historical ties to Spain. In a cultural scene dominated by productions from Casablanca and Rabat, it is a significant aspect of the project. In fact, the city plays such an important part in the success of the mini-series that it has become a tourist attraction. The name 'Lalla Mennana' is a reference to a female saint in the local city of Laraiche: Lalla Mennana al-Masbahiya was the daughter of a holy man who died on her wedding night (Box, 2008:14), and she incarnates a feminine spiritual power. The set represents a traditional *riad*, with typically 'key hole' shaped windows, and the women all wear beautiful, colourful kaftans (see Appendix 3). Each of the four sisters wears a single colour symbolising her personality: the oldest, quiet Maria, wears a simple olive green garment, while the youngest, fiery Shama wears bright pink. This was carried on in the TV series. The tyrannical mother wears a white *gandura* with a white *sittar* concealing her face, symbolising her mourning after the death of her husband: in

Moroccan traditions, white rather than black is considered the colour of mourning (Hargraves, 2010: 104), and widowed women are required to mourn for 4 months, following Islamic *'iddah* ('waiting period') prescriptions.

From the outset, the set and design create a very different atmosphere compared with the original play, in which the mother Bernarda wears black, and in which the house is presented as a gloomy, suffocating space. Akariou's *Bnat Lalla Mennana*, on the opposite, is a light and comical play in the tradition of Moroccan skits and satirical performances. The character of the maid Saadia, who provides endless entertainment, is also close to the traditional cunning servant in many of Molière's plays, who usually facilitates forbidden relationships or plays people against each other for her own benefit. The performance uses dance and music in several interludes, giving us the feeling of a lively household, even though the sisters' lives are confined and restricted. However, the light tone of the play does not prevent it from addressing issues with the same efficiency as Garcia Lorca's original work. The overpowering mother represents the importance of reputation for women: to protect what is said about her family, she prevents her daughters from going out and forming relationships with others. In a fatherless household, she has taken up the role of a dictatorial father, keeping her daughters under tight control. In one scene, she forbids her daughters from going out to buy corn to feed their hens, and she tells them:

Lalla Mennana: Mā bqāsh khiyal al-rijāl fī hadh dār... mā bqitsh nabghi
nsma‘ adukhul oula lkhruj oula talanrless hou min al-sharajim ūla wuqūf ma‘a
al-jirān...Mā kadkharjush min hnaya, ghir li diyurkum wla qburkum.

(‘Lalla Mennana: there’s not even the shadow of a man left in this house. I do
not want to hear no more noises of entering and going out, no looking out the
windows or standing with the neighbours. You won’t leave from here, unless
to your houses [after marriage] or to your graves.’)

Her position on gender segregation is extreme: a woman shouldn’t be seen or heard
publicly without the presence of a male guardian, and since their father has died, her
daughters are simply condemned to remain indoors. In patriarchal societies such as
Lalla Mennana’s Morocco or Bernarda Alba’s Spain, women can become agent of
oppression by reproducing systems they have themselves been victims of. While one
might expect that the death of a conservative father could give his daughters a new
sense of freedom, the opposite happens: their mother takes over as the oppressor,
guardian of the family’s honour.

The success of *Bnat Lalla Mennana* is that although it deals with a difficult
subject, it manages to do so in an entertaining way, in typical Moroccan fashion.
Whereas Garcia Lorca’s play was a tragedy, the direction of Akariou reverses it into a
comedy, and uses laughter as a weapon, denouncing the way women are kept captive,
both literally and metaphorically. Said Naji comments on this matter:

Comedy is a challenge to authority. It is an empowerment of the weak and
underprivileged who triumphs only for one hour, to the marginalized who is relocated

at the centre at least for a short while. Comedy is the intervention of an unusual power that breaks things but builds others, even if only for a short time. (2005:165).

Rather than reproducing the gloomy atmosphere of Garcia Lorca's story, in Takoon's play the exclusively feminine space is synonymous with hilarity: the sisters are constantly competing with and teasing each other. The opening scene, with the sisters coming home from the *hammam* (*public baths*), with their faces still covered in clay masks and their hair wrapped up, announces the general mood. Their mother admonishes them for going out when they are still supposed to mourn their father, and the sisters' moans provoke the audience's hilarity. Throughout the play, similar comical scenes are repeated, poking fun at the sisters' misfortune; Laura C. Box comments:

The moment when they hang out of the house's upper windows in an attempt to attract the attention of passing male workers is a bit of physical comedy worthy of Lucille Ball. (2008: 14)

The end reveals the deep gap between previous generations of women and young women of nowadays who are much more aware of their rights and of the opportunities available to them outside their home. Lalla Mennana's daughters repeat several times "Haraam alik mama" ('It's not fair Mama'), maybe comparing their situation to the freedom enjoyed by other young women. When the mother finally gives in, it is the patriarchal system that is being challenged: women are now more educated and self-sufficient and they have the means to rebel. In the context of the

Moudawana reform, it shows women as finally liberating themselves from ancestral, oppressive traditions and investing the public realm with confidence.

The need for a company such as Takoon, which operates as a women-only group, is very revealing: while women have invested all parts of public life, the need for a safe, exclusively female space remains. Belghali states that many men, in particular actors, still have difficulties working under a female director (2010: 78), and imposing oneself as a director or writer remains a challenge for women. The case of Takoon obliges us to consider whether women working are becoming a norm, or whether they are destined to stay on the margins, in exclusively feminine spaces. Working in a segregated group certainly helps women to explore sensitive issues more openly, as well as avoiding conflict; Takoon in fact is remarkable in that its members are placed on an equal level, and they work collaboratively, contributing their various skills. While Akariou is officially the director, Nora Skalli took on the role of adapting the play from Garcia Lorca's text. The company also chose a female set and costume designer, Rafika Ben Moumen.

The message of female emancipation promoted by Takoon has since been largely co-opted by the government as a model of female success, both as a women-only troupe, and because of the play's content. It first received a bursary of 75.000 dh for the cultural season 2004 / 2005², along with a number of other productions, and it encountered a real success with audiences, in particular when the play was broadcast

² See Moroccan Ministry of Culture's website:
http://www.minculture.gov.ma/fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=304:troupe-subventionnees-a-la-diffusion-au-titre-de-la-saison-20042005&catid=43&Itemid=140

on TV channel 2M in 2010, attracting 38,2% of audience shares, a “record” for a theatre play (Akhmisse, 2010). Takoon was then invited to perform its work at events organized by Moroccan embassies, in particular in London (2011). It also performed in Paris and Madrid (2012), with funding from the Banque Populaire Foundation, whose work focuses on the promotion of the Moroccan heritage and culture abroad. There, the all-female company and its production acted as perfect ambassadors for their country, which appeared to be a beacon of women’s rights and of political stability in the region. The play is thus being used both within the country and abroad to present a tolerant and attractive image of Morocco, with a rich, modern and active cultural life. Furthermore, it is used as proof of the success of the state’s reforms to ensure gender equality and the integration of women in the country’s development. The freedom won by the sisters at the end of the play is no longer due to their own strength of character and ambition, but rather it is presented as part of a wider change of circumstances in which women are actively pushed to seek employment and to participate in the country’s social and economic life.

The recent success of the company with the TV adaptation of the play, which was turned into a mini series during Ramadan 2012 and 2013, shows that there is a definite audience for this type of work, including a very large array of women from different backgrounds. In the first 10 days of Ramadan 2012, the show attracted 48 to 54% of the television audience, over five million viewers (Alaoui, 2012), confirming the need for Moroccan-produced entertainment using the country’s specific heritage and creating adequate representations of women. The script of the series differs slightly from the play, and it shows women in a less subversive light: the sisters all

aspire to get married for instance, and the storyline focuses on their love stories. Their freedom is thus dependant on men rather than their own efforts. The play on the opposite promoted women's emancipation in a wider sense, through their own means, and ended with a symbolic liberation of the sisters from a patriarchal system. The overall mood of both productions is also different, despite both using humour: the play is quite claustrophobic as it is set in a closed house, focusing on the lives of the sisters, and interactions with the outside are very limited. Imad, Chama's lover, never actually appears in the play, to the point that the audience starts doubting his existence, and this reinforces the sense of loneliness of the women. The soap on the opposite shows the life of the neighbourhood and features long scenes during which the sisters walk around Chefchaouen's medina and interact with locals. Significant characters such as the family's neighbours and various love interests for the sisters complete the image of life in a traditional part of Chefchaouen: they are thus not confined to their house.

Although the play tries to tell a story of feminine emancipation in a conservative context, it is striking that liberation in the soap opera is associated with marriage rather than financial or social independence. The sisters dream of love and romance, not of education or work, and thus the image of women it promotes conforms to social expectations. Status is obtained through the husband: Chama's lover and later husband is a popular singer, whereas Lrhimo's husband works for the council (he is referred to as 'al-Madani'); Bahia's love interest Kamal is a policeman. Lalla Mennana constantly reinforces the idea that a young woman must get married: although Bahia is reticent at first to accept Kamal's proposal, her mother admonishes

her and her grandmother reminds her that she will not find a man as good as him, as he is employed with the *Makhzen*. None of the main female characters appear to be working, although rebellious Chama tries to re-open her deceased father's shop in a bid to support her family. Older women such as Zoubaida and Kourshiya fit within a stereotype of the calculating, money-driven woman: Zoubaida for example wants her son Imad to marry the older sister who has Spanish papers and offers more opportunities, rather than the one he loves and has a relationship with. Every female character is thus driven by the need to achieve success and financial stability through their husbands or sons. A minority of women work in Morocco (26% are in employment according to a 2016 estimate from the World Bank³), and alarmingly their estimated income is much lower than men's (representing a ratio of 0.27 compared to men's income according to Sidani, 2015: 692). In this context, *Bnat Lalla Menana* confirms women's lack of autonomy rather than challenges it: it focuses on romantic narratives with women almost always portrayed in a passive situation and reliant on others.

Nevertheless, the TV show addresses pressing taboos in Moroccan society, particularly pre-marital sex and pregnancy outside of marriage. It is also no coincidence that the show was broadcast on 2M, the most popular TV channel in the country, whose programmes are mainly in French. With a focus on entertainment and TV games, it has become a window into an open, Westernized Morocco: '2M seems to have established a reputation for itself as a symbol of freedom of speech in

³ See the World Bank's website:
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=MA>

Morocco, as it challenges taboos and traditional beliefs by debating and presenting controversial issues' (Debbagh, 2012: 656). The wide popularity of the play and TV series proves that attitudes regarding women acting on public stages and discussing sensitive issues have evolved greatly: *Bnat Lalla Mennana* didn't create any major controversy in public debates, despite one character falling pregnant outside of marriage for instance (in the TV show only). I would argue that it is because red lines are not crossed: there is no explicitly sexual scene, nor is there any nudity. The use of humour, as I mentioned above, also helps to discuss these matters without the risk of offending audiences. Therefore, while the limits of what is acceptable on stage and in the public realm have been pushed back, and while companies such as Takoon are contributing to this liberalisation, this doesn't mean that the red lines are non-existent. The play I will discuss in the next part is an example of this: it attracted violent responses from Moroccan audiences because of its explicit references to sex and female sexuality.

Breaking taboos: portraying female sexuality on stage

Beyond the issue of women's rights and social status, the issue of women's ownership of their bodies and their sexuality is a recurrent theme in women's theatre. The female body is a site that was traditionally associated with shame, although there are exceptions, as demonstrated by the *cheikha* dancer whose body is "a socially designated site of shamelessness" (Kapchan, 1994: 82). Female performers and

directors have directly tackled this taboo through several plays, generally causing outrage: for instance, actress Latifa Ahrar's undressing on stage in her 2010 play *Capharnaum* or *Kufr-Naum auto-sirat* (a play on the word 'capharnaum', meaning 'shambles' in French, and 'seerah', a word often used to mean 'biography' in Arabic) created an important controversy. Latifa Ahrar, a popular actress who appeared in several films and plays, received much criticism for undressing to her underwear during her performance. *Capharnaum* is a one-woman show about a woman remembering stories from her childhood, growing into a woman, and experiencing alienation because she is a woman in a patriarchal society.

Throughout the play, she appears in various costumes such as a business suit, representing various phases in her life. Most memorably, she wears a blue *burqa* to symbolise her oppression, hiding her face behind a mesh screen. The image of the *burqa* is incongruous in the Moroccan context, as it is not a garment worn in North Africa. On the opposite, it is a type of covering we have come to associate with Afghanistan and the Taliban regime since the 2001 invasion of the country by the US army, following the 11th September attacks. The burqa is a highly political symbol because women's rights in Afghanistan were used to justify the need for military intervention, as Lila Abu-Lughod argues in her 2002 essay 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?'. She argues:

It is common popular knowledge that the ultimate sign of the oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban-and-the-terrorists is that they were forced to wear the burqa. (2002: 785).

She then goes on to discuss the cultural meanings this type of covering actually carries for the women who wear it, therefore recognising their agency rather than portraying them as faceless victims waiting to be 'saved'. She then argues:

Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged. (2002: 789)

Such focus on the burqa in American media in particular, could thus be deconstructed as a will to 'other' populations in Afghanistan and to justify the military invasion by the need to 'civilise' them. Indeed, Abu-Lughod quotes a 2001 speech from Laura Bush, US First Lady at the time, who speaks of "the civilized people throughout the world' whose hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan" (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 784). Ahrar's choice of the burqa as a costume is thus very charged and needs to be deconstructed.

As the performance goes on, Ahrar gradually removes parts of her garment and strips to her underwear, representing her liberation from cultural, religious and social oppression. By unveiling her body, to the shock of her audience, Ahrar criticizes the conservatism of some parts of Moroccan society, in which the female body is considered to be a source of *fitna*. Journalist Narjis Rerhayé describes the work as "militant" (2010), writing that the unveiling scenes represent the Moroccan woman getting rid of all the restraints preventing her from becoming an equal citizen. However, by juxtaposing the afghan *burqa* and her almost naked body, she uses very controversial symbols, and she reproduces the stereotypes decried by Abu-Lughod. She defines the veil worn by some Muslim women as a form of oppression, and

nakedness or removal of the veil as freedom from this oppression, which is a simplistic vision of women's issues in Morocco.

This scene could also echo the 'unveiling ceremonies' organised by the French colonial authorities in Algeria in the 1950s, and during which local women were coerced into removing their veils on stage. These ceremonies were meant to demonstrate the support of Algerians for the French administration. Marnia Lazreg reads those events as part of the French colonisation effort:

The point was to drive the message home that Algeria was truly and genuinely French. Differences of customs as exemplified by the veil were simply a vestige of a past that the FLN was allegedly fighting to maintain. (2016: 150).

There is thus an inherent violence in Ahrar's play because of the historical events the burqa and the act of unveiling allude to: the wars in Afghanistan and in the Middle East, and the colonial past of the region. The unveiling scene in particular drew strong reactions from the audience, with some leaving the theatre in protest. The play inscribes itself in a particular political context, with the growing popularity of the conservative PJD and its stance on arts. Following the victory of the PJD in 2011, Najib Boulif, member of parliament representing the party, argued that Ahrar stripping off on stage in the name of art couldn't be tolerated (Ait Akdim, 2012). These comments led to much protest from artists and secular parties, against what they perceived as a "culture of obscurantism" being promoted by the PJD (Graiouid & Belghazi, 2013: 269). However, when Ahrar received death threats, Prime Minister Benkirane personally called her to offer his support, and the party expressed

solidarity with her, therefore using this controversy to defuse fears about its conservative policies (Flah, 2011).

Similarly, the play *Dialy* (2012) directed by Naima Zitan was heavily critiqued for openly referring to female sexual organs. *Hchouma*, or shame, is a prevalent concept in Moroccan society, directing what one can or can't do in a social context: "it is at once the expression of the moral order of the country and the limits of its tolerance and flexibility towards change or difference" (Skalli, 2006: 96). While it applies to both men and women, it restricts women's actions in a more pervasive manner (Khalil, 2016: 124). Soumaya Naamane-Guessous was one of the first scholars to explore this complex concept. She starts her 1991 book *Au-delà de toute pudeur* with a short text on *hchouma* and the difficulties of addressing gender and sexual issues in Morocco:

Hchouma est délicat à traduire: tantôt c'est la honte, honte d'avoir commis tel ou tel acte, tantôt c'est la pudeur et la hchouma interdit de se conduire de telle ou telle manière. Mais hchouma n'est en fait ni l'une ni l'autre: plus que la honte, plus que la pudeur elle est présente constamment, en tout lieu, en toutes circonstances. Le mot n'a pas besoin d'être prononcé, la hchouma dicte, contrôle, interdit, elle se profile derrière bien des actes. (...) C'est un code auquel on se conforme sans réfléchir, et qui légifère toutes les situations de l'existence (1991: 5).

Hchouma has an enormous influence in the Moroccan context, as it applies to virtually all situations one may find himself in: it is a set of rules Moroccans are expected to follow at all times, in order to protect their and their family's reputation.

Women's free agency is further compromised by the idea that for men, “honor is won or lost because of women”(Bourqia, 1996: 27): it is women’s behaviour that confirms or challenges her male relatives’ authority and social standing. This system is however increasingly challenged by feminist movements, and by the social and financial independence of Moroccan women. For instance, Andrea Khalil mentions the Women Shoufouch group, who is fighting against street harassment in Morocco. These activists are shifting the blame away from the female victims of harassment, who are expected to dress modestly according to *hchouma* norms, to the men harassing them (Khalil, 2016: 123-124). In order to address female issues, discuss their experiences and call for change, Moroccan women thus need to navigate between complex codes of behaviour, both cultural and religious. These “internalized censoring codes” (Skalli, 2006: 180) regulate their dress, their speech, their behaviour, and more generally any public appearance, making it difficult to challenge the status quo.

Théâtre Aquarium’s work *Dialy* (2012) created a big controversy in Morocco for discussing women’s sexual lives publicly on stage. *Dialy*, performed by three young actresses, is freely inspired by Eve Ensler’s infamous play *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), a seminal feminist work in the United States. *Dialy*, literally ‘mine’, is performed in *darija*, and its text is the result of 7 months of research during which the director and writer sought to collect stories about women’s sexual lives. The play’s context is a conservative society in which sex, and in particular sex outside of marriage, is frowned upon, and it is accompanied by demands to abrogate article 490 of the Penal Code which punishes premarital sex (Bouasria, 2012). Maha

Sano, the play's writer and Zitan, the director, interviewed more than a hundred women from different backgrounds about their sexuality, their bodies, and their experiences as women in Morocco. Their work is thus a real sociological study, touching upon women's experiences from puberty to menopause, and focusing on rituals accompanying the young bride on her wedding night. Zitan herself describes the sessions as a 'group therapy' (El Jadidi, 2012): a psychotherapist and a sociologist were present, helping women to come to terms with their experience of rape and sexual harassment.

The resulting play doesn't have a linear narrative, but rather discusses several themes such as menstruation, pregnancy and maternity or sexual violence, through the words of the actresses Amal Benhaddou, Nouria Benbrahim and Farida Elbouazaoui. The performance only lasts 30 minutes, and the set design is simple: a line on which is hanged a variety of female underwear of different shapes, sizes and colours (see Appendix 4). The image is incongruous on a theatre stage, but the message is clear: the play will talk about sex, about women's bodies, it will reveal things that are usually kept hidden. On some knickers appear traces of blood, which can signify both menstruation and the tradition of the bloodied bed sheets revealing the bride's virginity after her wedding night. While this practice is now rare in urban centres, Katja Zvan Elliott, who spent her fieldwork in rural communities in the High Atlas Mountains, notes that "demonstration of such a sheet still forms a necessary part of the morning after the wedding night" (2016: 114). This practice testifies of the pressure still placed on women as guardians of the family's honor, with men's role being "policing the conformity of their sisters and cousins with the dictates of the

enforced honor code” (Ghanim, 2015: 12). The bloodied sheet thus represents men’s domination on women: when the sheet is paraded, it is a confirmation that the bride has remained under her male relatives’ ‘control’. It can also have connotations of violence:

The nuptial sheet displaying the hymeneal blood of the virgin becomes a ritual and has a symbolic value. Blood and violence are intertwined, denoting control and submission. (Ghanim, 2015: 125).

The bloodied underwear is an interesting symbol because it highlights the fact that the only context in which it is not shameful to speak about female sexuality is marriage, and to confirm that the woman has conformed to social expectations by staying a virgin until her wedding night. Then, it becomes a source of pride for the bride’s family. Apart from this specific occasion, it remains a taboo: Belghali comments that in some conservative families, girls are not taught about puberty and menses until they happen (2010: 239). In the public context of theatre, to speak about sexuality becomes “an act of defiance” (1986: 157), as Abu-Lughod claims in reference to Bedouin societies. In Morocco, the situation is similar: female bodies and sexualities in particular are considered indecent topics, although women may discuss them privately amongst themselves as demonstrated by the *Moulat Sser* tradition I mentioned earlier. This is the crux of Théâtre Aquarium’s project: it used Moroccan women’s own words and testimonies as expressed in the private realm, and revealed them in public, which is why they are perceived as offensive by some parts of the audience.

The three actresses, dressed simply in black, create an exclusively feminine space as we could imagine Moroccan women on their roof, hanging their clothes and discussing their private lives. The words that they use are the ones they heard in their research sessions from the lips of the women interviewed: they speak of their bodies, of their private parts in crude words, sometimes affectionate, sometimes defamatory. Their dialogue insists on asserting their ownership of their bodies: the main actress repeats “dialy, machi dialkoum” (‘it’s mine, it’s not yours’), constantly asserting her agency but also emphasising the fact that this agency is (or has been) threatened and that there is a need for it to be reclaimed. Through the testimonies of the many women interviewed, the play speaks of years of humiliation, of being made to feel impure or dirty, as well as the pressure to “keep their legs closed”, to protect their virginity. Zitan comments that *Dialy* aims to reconcile women with their bodies and their intimacy, as well as to highlight the lack of sexual education as a possible explanation to the sexual violence (El Jadidi, 2012). The text reifies the body by describing its parts as separate entities: “I take my vagina with me everywhere: to my bedroom, to the *hammam* (public baths), to the market, everywhere, everywhere, even to the mosque” (quoted in El Fassi, 2012). This idea of a dissociated body is in a way effective as it suggests trauma, but it also reinforces the idea of an inert, passive, submissive female body.

The play created a stir when it was first performed in Morocco: the crudeness of the dialogues goes against the codes of *hchouma* and deeply challenges social expectations placed on women in Morocco. This is not without risk, as Mohamed Laamiri notes: had it been performed a few years earlier, before the Arab Spring, it

“would have put the playwright and the actors in prison” (2014: 47). While the political context has obliged the authorities to relax censorship rules on some issues, with culture acting as the “safety valve” described by Miriam Cooke (2007: 72), it remains a controversial topic for audiences. Critic Enoch El Fassi notes: “Au Maroc, parler de *tabboun* équivaut à violer les mœurs” (El Fassi, 2012). Acclaimed theatre director Abdelkrim Berrechid criticized the play for its lack of artistic qualities and blatant provocation, noting “We are before an adapted play, the theme is not Moroccan, performed in a non-Moroccan space that is the French Cultural Center and the play lacks the elements of creativity” (quoted in Arbaoui, 2012). Speaking openly of *tabboun*, of female sexuality is thus perceived as a foreign practice, aiming to disturb the established order and its patriarchal basis.

Nevertheless, the use of these words is meant to empower women, by re-appropriating names that have been assigned to their bodies. Khalid Amine writes that the actresses’ testimonies “provide a testament to the strength of female sexuality, and along with it, the power of the womb” (2013: 98). Equally in the play, one of the actresses announces: “My organ is the source of life; it is not a dirty black hole.” (quoted in Amine, 2013: 98). The strength of *Dialy* is that its text is based on the testimonies of a variety of women, women who experienced violence, rape or forced marriage, rather than being a fictitious text: it is thus perceived as authentic and emanating from women who have been direct victims of these violence. However, the performance itself is framed and dramatised by Zitan and her team, and was performed in a particular political context: the play came out in the midst of tense debates about article 490 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which outlaws extramarital

sex (Amine, 2014: 60), and months after the death of Amina Filali, which led to demonstrations against rape and sexual violence⁴. The words of the women interviewed were therefore used to support Théâtre Aquarium's liberal stance of these issues: Mohamed Laamiri describes the play as "a daring artistic feat claiming sexual freedom for women" (2014: 47). How much are women empowered through projects such as *Dialy*? And which women are empowered, the anonymous women who lent their testimonies to the play, or the actresses, playwright and director? Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) examines the context in which the *subaltern* (often issued from the 'Third world', female, poor, disempowered) is made to speak out. She writes:

Reporting on, or better still, participating in, antisexist work among women of color or women in class oppression in the First World or the Third World is undeniably on the agenda. We should also welcome all the information retrieval in these silenced areas that is taking place in anthropology, political science, history and sociology.

Yet the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject sustains such work and will, in the long run, cohere with the advancement of learning and civilization.

And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever. (1988: 90)

Dialy is an ambivalent play, hovering between a feminist discourse of liberation, and the reproduction of mechanisms that silence the most oppressed women. Antonio Gramsci, who first used the term 'subaltern' in his *Prison Notebooks* (written

⁴ Amina Filali was a 16 years old girl from Larache, who was apparently raped and forcibly married to her rapist. She committed suicide in March 2012, and her case caused outrage in Morocco. Feminist associations called for article 475 of the Penal Code, which allows a rapist to marry his victim to escape punishment, to be repealed, which it finally was in 2014.

between 1929 and 1935), understood it to describe the dominated class, the populations excluded from power. Since the 1980s however, the term has been used for post-colonial critique, describing the experiences of populations at the ‘margins’ of the Western world. Women represent a sub-group within this wider group of ‘non-Western populations’, as Stephanie Cronin argues: her analysis of the subaltern in the MENA region “posits women both as active members of broader subaltern groups and as constituting a subaltern group on their own account” (2008: 2).

In this context, can *Dialy* be interpreted as a form of resistance? *Dialy*’s main message, echoing Ensler’s *Monologues*, is a universal call for women’s sexual emancipation. At the same time, it emerges from a specific, postcolonial context still deeply marked by its colonial history, during which women’s bodies were often used as ideological battlefields. Re-appropriating language about oneself, taking it back from both the State and from patriarchal society, is certainly a step forward for Moroccan women. However, through *Dialy*, the voice of powerless, abused women is mainly heard in the elitist spaces in which the play is performed, such as the French Institute, the Mohammed VI theatre in Rabat, or the IMA Institute in Paris where it was due to be presented in April 2015. It is heard through the lips of actresses who hold privilege by belonging to an educated, urban, liberal milieu. These performances are not aimed at the women who have inspired the play, women who often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have little means to challenge violences and inequalities against them, nor do they actively target the men guilty of these abuses. The testimonies are thus co-opted to support the aims of the company and its patrons, whose political ideals the women interviewed might not share and might not have

been aware of. *Dialy* highlights the unbridgeable gaps between the subaltern's discourse (women who are marginalised and brutalised not only because of their gender but also because of their socio-economic status, lack of formal education or geographical isolation) and the experiences of women from the cultural elites. Gayatri Spivak acknowledged this dynamic in her essay, when she describes hierarchies between different groups: she places "dominant foreign groups" and "dominant indigenous groups" at the top, and "people" at the bottom (1988: 26). It is important to resist essentialism: all Moroccan women suffer because of the patriarchy and have reduced opportunities compared to their male counterparts, but to widely different degrees. *Dialy* reveals this disparity: the women from the "people" remain anonymous, their words "acted" by women from higher classes.

Conclusion

In a relatively short period, Moroccan women have managed to bring their perspectives to the theatre stage and challenge the male hegemony that had dominated this medium since its birth in the early 20th century. While they remain underrepresented, in particular as directors and playwrights, they have achieved popular success and professional recognition. Mona Knio notes that "until recently, it was not possible for women to lead even in the art sector" (2008: 5); she gives the example of Touria Jebran, a noted actress who was Minister of Culture from 2007 to 2009 and thus had a position of considerable power over the arts scene. As a result of

the increasing involvement of women, theatre has become a much more egalitarian space with female directors being at the fore of the avant-garde, socially aware cultural movement: some of the most groundbreaking plays over the last decade (*Dialy* for example) were written and directed by women.

Companies such as Théâtre Aquarium and Takoon have appropriated the stage and transformed it into a feminist forum, allowing women to touch upon sensitive subjects and create new models for themselves. From domestic violence and rape to romance and sexuality, no theme is out of bounds: through theatre, women confront stereotypes and challenge narrow views of femininity and create strong, brave role models for their audiences. They represent a modern Morocco in which there are no limits to what they can achieve, although they are very aware of the widespread violence and corruption. By addressing those issues freely and condemning them, they contribute to a much wider change in terms of how women are represented and perceived in Moroccan society.

Theatre helps women to become more visible in public life: they are investing the creative domains in the same way as they have invested the economic and political scenes. Their bodies, for a time hidden in the confines of the home, are increasingly present in the public space, and taking ownership of it. On stage, the female body is no longer scarred by silent abuses and violence: it is expressive and brave, making a stand on issues that matter to women. The testimonial style of some of the plays, in particular *Dialy* which is based on collected testimonies of Moroccan women, but also texts such as *Lalla J'mila*, are powerful in their denunciation of

violence against women, both metaphorically and physically. By revealing these stories of abuse, they empower women to seek their rights, and to fight for new ones.

The increasing visibility of women in public stages corresponds to slow improvements to women's daily lives and form part of a wider movement of change: the Moudawana reforms for instance may have been incomplete and flawed, but they had the merit to open debates and confirm the importance of women's rights. Theatre both reflects and encourages this, by presenting narratives in which women assert themselves, and also by actually informing and creating opportunities for exchange and debate. This will be the subject of the next chapter: I propose to explore theatre as a tool for activism and political engagement, addressing wider issues in Moroccan society.

Chapter IV:

Theatre as activism: Politicising performance from the Lead Years to the Arab Spring

In this chapter, I will examine the use of theatre as a tool for activism and political engagement, both through its critique of contentious issues in Moroccan society, and through the specificities of theatre in terms of bringing people together. Theatre is first and foremost a social experience, an encounter between actors and their audiences, as noted by scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte:

A performance takes place in and through the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. (...) While the actors do something - move through the space, perform gestures, manipulate objects, speak and sing - the spectators perceive them and react. (2013: 12)

Political theatre plays precisely on the dynamics between actors and audiences: it aims to push the latter to react to a performance and create a change, either internally by raising awareness for specific issues, or in society. While the intermingling of political themes with theatre is not new in the Moroccan context, as we discussed in the introduction, what is original about recent theatre plays is that they are more explicit about the issues they denounce and closely mirror reality. On the opposite, plays such as Nabyl Lahlou's *Les Tortues* (The Turtles, 1970), which criticised the

hegemonic power of the King, used metaphors in order to subtly convey messages to audience. Contemporary practitioners, such as Jaouad Essounani from Dabateatr and Naima Zitan from Théâtre Aquarium, openly engage audiences on sensitive matters, bypassing self-censorship and unspoken rules such as *hchouma* discussed in the previous chapter. Essounani in particular sees theatre as a social space serving local communities: when I interviewed him in June 2010 he argued for a “théâtre dans la cité”, a theatre offering regular events open to all. When I pointed out the lack of cultural events outside of the main urban centres, he said he hoped to create a stable theatre scene in Rabat first, where he was based at the time, and to replicate that model in other cities.¹

Some scholars have argued that theatre is a form so deeply embedded in its social context that it is inherently political, creating a public stage for different kinds of opinions; in the words of Joe Kelleher:

The political-ready quality of theatre includes its liveness and sociality, the simple fact that it happens now and that it gathers people, who may well be strangers to each other, around issues of disagreement but also of common concern. (2009: 10).

The experiments of several groups such as Théâtre de l’Opprimé and Théâtre Aquarium, who organise ‘forums’ in which audience members can take an active part in the play, reflect this. Performances become a means to get people to speak to each other and discuss key current issues affecting them all, sharing opinions and finding possible solutions.

¹ Interview with Jaouad Essounani conducted in Meknes in 2010.

In the Moroccan context, art has also led to tense debates over the last 5 years, with regards to ‘clean art’ as advocated by the PJD, which I mentioned in previous chapters. There are increasing interconnections between the cultural and political scene: as artists have become more overtly political in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, and the political scene is trying to keep cultural production under control. Yassine Ahjam, who played Imad in the very popular TV adaptation of *Bnat Lalla Mennana*, was until recently a PJD member of parliament, defending the party’s stance on culture. As a conservative, Ahjam is a rarity on the Moroccan cultural scene, dominated by progressive ideas. He was the PJD’s spokesperson on cultural issues and he participated in a Théâtre Forum event on the theme of ‘clean art’, which I will discuss in this chapter. In a 2015 interview on popular online show 360, Ahjam talked about combining his artistic and political works, and described him as representing ‘the progressive side of the PJD’². It was undoubtedly positive for the party to have a popular figure defending its vision, which is decried by the large majority of cultural actors. Ahjam was not the first artist to act as member of parliament or to take part in a government (actress Touria Jabrane was briefly Minister of Culture in 2007-2008), but he was the first to represent an Islamist party. His nomination shows the increasingly blurred lines between art and politics: culture is not only a political topic, it is also a medium through which Moroccans express themselves politically.

² A video of the actor’s interview with journalist Imad Ntifi is available on 360’s website: <http://fr.le360.ma/culture/quoi-de-neuf-ep36-yassine-ahajjam-je-represente-laile-progressiste-du-pjd-57319>

The case of Ahjam and others also show the ambivalent relationships between the State, the PJD currently in power, and the cultural scene, in the post-Arab Spring era. The regime has considerably changed in terms of its attitude towards artists since the reign of Hassan II. It has adopted a softer approach, by letting artists (and their audiences) vent their grievances, and then co-opting their message to turn it to the regime's advantage. Amina Boubia argues that this might explain why the Arab Spring demonstrations didn't have the same impact as in Tunisia, where censorship was frequent and speech highly controlled under the Ben Ali regime. She observes:

Both the Moroccan and Tunisian situation before the Arab Spring show how authoritarian governments react differently to such artistic scenes, adopting various approaches to control them, either by tolerating them, or by censoring and repressing them more or less violently. In Morocco, the monarchy reacted in quite a permissive manner, progressively regulating and neutralising the Nayda. This is probably one of the reasons why the impact of the Arab Spring in Morocco was relatively low in comparison to what happened elsewhere. (2015: 322)

The Moroccan regime effectively used culture as a 'safety valve', funnelling criticism through selected cultural products. Not only does it licence criticism, it also sponsors it to a certain extent through its network of cronies, as will be the theme of the next chapter. As Miriam Cooke observes, in the context of pre- revolution Syria,

Commissioned criticism is an official and paradoxical project to create a democratic façade. Like licensed criticism, commissioned criticism may be encouraged in times of crisis and tension when "the President no doubt calculates that it is better to have

(a) safety valve for popular grievances than to stifle their expression altogether”

(2007: 72).

In this chapter, I will be looking at several axes reflecting the ways Moroccan theatre-makers are impacting on wider social and political discourse: first, the memory of the Years of Lead, a theme which is particularly relevant because many aspects of this period only recently came to light, but also because in the years leading up to the Arab Spring and in the context of terrorist acts in Casablanca and Marrakech, many have noted a resurgence of the human rights abuses.

Secondly, the Arab Spring uprisings led to many artists using their skills to express themselves, on the platforms that were available to them. A play such as Zakaria Abou Maria's *ḥālat Hṣār* is a faithful, insightful representation of the issues faced by many Moroccans in the lead up to the events, and of the hope that they felt as revolts were sparking up in neighbouring countries. Although it is fictional, the characters are ones that audiences can easily identify with, and it obliges us to have a critical outlook of the events, examining their impact in Morocco. In addition, I will discuss the post-Arab Spring context and youth political engagement, through the play *ḍumū' bi khul* by playwright Issam El Yousfi, performed in Morocco by Théâtre Anfas. Set in contemporary Morocco and focusing on the lives of three young, educated, urban women, it is a snapshot of daily life and its issues. More particularly, the play touches upon the issue of political involvement and offers insights into the political choices of young Moroccans.

Finally, I will analyse the work of Théâtre Aquarium and other Moroccan companies using Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, which offers

direct communication between actors and their audience on key issues faced by the local or national community. Eva Österlind defines the aims of Theatre of the Oppressed as such:

The purpose of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is to offer tools for liberation by using theatre methods to examine social injustice, power relations and oppression, and to experiment with problem-solving on societal, group and individual levels. (2008 : 72)

What is particularly interesting about Boal's work and its application to various contexts, particularly in Africa, is that rather than pointing out problems, it offers solutions. It is a deeply empowering practice for populations who have been marginalised because it gives them opportunities to think about how to resolve the issues they face and to act on an individual level. In the context of Morocco, there are many possible applications for this type of work: the examples I will look at focused on gender issues and immigration.

Remembering the Years of Lead: Breaking the silence

Since the death of Hassan II in 1999, a large number of books, plays and other cultural productions have explored the Years of Lead era and the claims of torture, kidnappings and other human rights abuses that marked this period. The Years of Lead lasted roughly from the 1960s to the early 1990s, and are characterised by a high level of violence and repression throughout the country, targeting political opponents to the regime and more generally any citizen who dared to cross the 'red lines'. These proscribed topics were grouped around three axes: "the king and members of the royal household (...), the legitimacy of Islam as a State religion with

the king as its tutelary head (...) Morocco's territoriality (Smith and Loudiy, 2005: 1070-1071). The 'prisoners of conscience' came from a large variety of backgrounds, as notes Susan Slyomovics:

Thousands from the student and intellectual communities - of every political persuasion, Marxist, Islamist, nationalist, Sahrawi, feminist, Amazigh/ Berber activist- were arrested, held incommunicado at various sites, tortured, and tried en masse in waves of political trials for "plotting against the state". (2005: 2)

Mehdi Ben Barka, opposition leader exiled in France who was allegedly kidnapped in Paris in 1965 and whose case was never fully resolved, is the "most notorious symbol of Morocco's ongoing difficulties with kidnapping and disappearance" (Slyomovics, 2005: 49). While the IER ('Instance Équité et Réconciliation', which we described in the Introduction) Commission established in 2004 was an important step forward, it stopped short of naming anyone implicated in these abuses and thus failed to enact real justice. In particular, "the Commission was not to implicate [Mohammed VI's] father directly, but his father's officials" (Alianak, 2014: 102). As a result, it absolves Hassan II and the monarchy of any responsibility in these events. Furthermore, as highlighted by Francesco Cavatorta, the establishment of the IER was "achieved through undemocratic means in the sense that the will of the monarch prevailed" (2016: 88): it was not an initiative from civil society, but rather a political move to distance the King from past abuses.

This situation also stops the regime from looking at the state structures that made these abuses possible. According to Fadoua Loudiy, the spectrum of violence is inherent to the Moroccan political system, which she describes as a society "where

citizens are constitutionally conceived as subjects who are required to show loyalty and allegiance to the king, even an unjust one” (Loudiy, 2014: 59). The structure of the regime thus gave free reigns to its leader, protected by his historical, social and religious status. Abdeslam Maghraoui adds:

From 1961 to 1999, King Hassan II reigned over Morocco exactly as if he were running a medieval absolutist state. Suddenly endowed with the power of a modern bureaucracy, he was accountable to no one but God and commanded total obedience (1996: 3).

Nevertheless, the IER created a context in which testimonies were tolerated, and it allowed the publication and dissemination of many accounts of this period, either by former prisoners or by writers inspired by those events. This literary genre is often coined as *littérature carcérale* (‘prison literature’) and brings together testimonies of former prisoners, writing about what they went through from a personal perspective, as well as fictions inspired by the events, and often using real accounts as a basis. Safoi Babana-Hampton names Abdellatif Laabi, writer and playwright, as a pioneer of this genre (2011: 57); he was himself jailed and tortured for 8 years during the 1970s for his political opinion expressed notably through the literary review *Anfas/Souffles*. The journal was co-founded by Laabi in 1962 and bridged gaps between the intellectual and artistic communities. It played a major part in the literary life of the country, and aimed to “heal the divide between intellectuals and writers in French and Arabic” (Laachir, 2016: 31), which was an original project at the time. Laabi published several books relating his years in jail: *Chroniques de la citadelle d’exil*

(‘Chronicles of the Exile’s citadels’, 1983) and later *Le fou d’espoir* (‘Mad of hope’, 2000), which paved the way for others to relate their traumas.

The publication of these ‘testimonies’ (fictitious or based on real facts) are a very important step in the current context because they call the *makhzen* into account for the many human rights abuses and cases of torture that occurred in the recent past. After years of silence, Moroccans are daring to address these abuses, and by liberating these voices silent for so long, they are also claiming power back from the State and challenging the official version of their history. For decades, and until prisoners were finally released in 1991, Hassan II and the Moroccan authorities denied the existence of these secret jails where prisoners were hidden away, tortured and left to die a slow, painful death. Ahmed Marzouki, a former officer who was kidnapped after the attempted coup of 1971 and narrated his two decades of jail in the bestselling book *Tazmamart, Cellule 10* (2000), writes:

Tazmamart didn’t exist and has never existed. This was the response of Moroccan parliamentarian Fayçal El Khatib when coolly answering the question posed by a Western radio station: “ This supposed prison has only existed in the imagination of the enemies of our democracy.” (quoted in Orlando, 2011: 103).

The investigations into the past expressed through this type of literature, film, theatre or other cultural products are crucial because the Lead Years are such a powerful part of the Moroccan collective memory. Researching Moroccan cinema, Valerie Orlando writes:

Documenting suppressed memory in contemporary times through testimonies - rendered both on the screen and on the page - is an integral part of the individual's, as well as the Moroccan collective's, search for a new identity in the post Lead Years. (2011: 102)

This plethora of works across cultural mediums (literature, cinema, theatre) is contributing to the creation of an archive of that era, a collection of testimonies, of records that remind us of events from a relatively recent past, and help us to address issues in the present. Jacques Derrida wrote extensively on the concept of memory:

Memory stays with traces in order to preserve them, but traces of a past that has never been present, traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence and always remain, as it were to come- come from the future, from the to come.

Resurrection, which is always the formal element of 'truth', a recurrent difference between a present and its presence, does not resuscitate a past which had been present; it engages the future (1986: 58)

It is indeed crucial for Morocco to 'resurrect' this past and oppose official versions of history to the memories of Moroccans who experienced abuse. Discussing these memories openly and collectively allows society to build new foundations for the future, definitely turning the page on the abuses that were once so prevalent.

Historian Pierre Nora further notes that the archive, as constituted by these testimonies, is "instrument of memory" (2001: viii) rather than a mere record: they are tools through which one can access the past, and they become 'truth'. This is why jail literature bears such an important role in a country such as Morocco: they constitute an unofficial archive and are directed at audiences, so that alternative histories can emerge. Theatre is a particularly efficient tool to explore these issues

because it by representing the past, it helps “to create a powerful mnemonic for collective memory and to establish a presence that demands recognition” (Tripp, 2013: 259)

Several plays have sought to answer this need to tell a difficult truth: *No man's land* in particular captures the mood of this complex era of Moroccan history with its allusion to violence and insanity. Other more recent plays have also touched upon this topic, such as *Chama'a* ('The Candle, 2005) by Dabateatr, and *Voix Off* (2012) by Théâtre Aquarium, based on a book by Abdelkader Chaoui. *Lalla J'mila*, which I discussed in the previous chapter, is partly based during the Lead Years, and the story of Itto, kidnapped and raped because of her political involvement, is representative of the abuses of that era.

No man's Land by prolific writer and playwright Mohamed Kaouti, is a truly iconic play, written in the midst of the Lead years in the early 1980s. It was one of the first texts to address the human rights situation in Morocco and it openly challenged the *Makhzen's* rule, daring to describe the inside of one of the country's secret jails at a time when they were kept secret. It is roughly based on the real testimony of Kamal al-Habib (Amine, 2012: 11), an activist who spent several years in jail in the 1970s. *No man's Land* is also the title of a popular play by Harold Pinter, written in 1974 and thus a few years before Kaouti's version, and they share similar characteristics: Pinter's play is a surrealistic meeting between four men who drink together, during which the viewer is also confused as to the characters' real identities and whether their narrations are truthful, although the circumstances are certainly less tragic.

No Man's Land was performed in Morocco in 1984 and presented at the National Theatre Festival in 1986, which would have been seen as a major statement against the practice of 'disappearances', kidnappings and torture, at a time when no one dared to mention the secret jails for fear of being 'disappeared' themselves. Khalid Amine mentions "the tendency to distance the drama in theatrical parables" (2011: 171), which prevented the play from being censored, and indeed the play never directly mentions the jail or prisoners. Nevertheless, the violence of the text and the sense of claustrophobia one gets from the play perfectly resumes what Moroccans went through during the Lead Years, both as prisoners and as a population living in a tense, oppressive political climate. The text was only recently published (2009) by the Moroccan Ministry of Culture, over 20 years after it was first performed, but it shows a willingness to finally bring past abuses to the public debate, within the context of the IER and more generally, a more liberal, tolerant facade of Morocco under Mohammed VI. Subsequently, an English translation of the play was published in 2012 by US-based CMI (Collaborative Media International) publishing collective and the Tangers-based ICPS (International Center for Performance Studies) and it was then staged by Brahim Nechikh and the Foresee Theatre, based Falls Church in the United States.

In the present context of instability in the Arab world, it is a timely publication as Kaouti's text has been credited for foregrounding the Arab Spring demonstrations in Morocco by depicting some of the struggles that contributed to a general sense of powerlessness in the face of state abuses. In the book's foreword (ICPS publication), Khalid Amine notes that it "sheds light on important chapters of

Moroccan political history leading to what can be called now ‘The Arab Spring’” (2012: 13). Amine thus makes a direct link between the Years of Lead and the uprisings, tracing a long history of revolt and struggle against the State going right back to Independence. This statement also begs the question: are the Years of Lead really over? Did they end with Hassan II’s death? While it is clear that the climate of generalised terror and frequent kidnappings has subsided, the structures of an authoritarian State remain in place, as argued by Francesco Cavatorta. He writes:

The divisive impact of economic reforms together with low-level repression, divisions within the genuine opposition and the technocratisation of politics contribute to the persistence of authoritarian rule in the absence of a clear and workable alternative. (2016: 96)

Furthermore, the play also creates a parallel between political prisoners in the 1970s and 1980s, and the current “disturbing wave of imprisonments, fining and harassment of journalists, human rights activists and public intellectuals” (Cavatorta, 2016: 95).

No Man’s Land is a play that describes the violence and madness of the jail environment, and places the reader/ viewer in a hellish environment, without norms or logic. It is both innovative and complex, not relying on a clear narrative but rather exploring the mindset of a prisoner who is only identified as ‘X’. He thus doesn’t have a real name or an identity: he stands for the hundreds of anonymous prisoners of the secret jails, who simply ‘disappeared’ without anyone knowing their fate. His three companions, addressed as ‘guests’, also alternatively play the role of a ‘chorus of faces’ and ‘chorus of masks’. They switch from one role to the other, creating an impression of unreliability and disrupting the viewer’s attempts to make sense of the

play. Again, the fact that they are wearing masks conceals their identity: they are faceless, unidentifiable prisoners or jail-keepers. X is a character slipping in and out of madness: he has hallucinations and he seems to suffer from a split personality. This is suggested from the very beginning of the play when the writer notes: “Attention shifts to **XX** as he detaches from himself and becomes ‘X’...”(Kaouti, 2012: 17)³.

X then proceeds to ‘hit’ XX, or acts as if he was hitting someone, which angers his companions:

Third guest: quit fooling around and get some sleep! (Kaouti, 2012: 19)

While this constant switches between X’s and XX’s characters make the text difficult to follow, this fits with descriptions of post-traumatic disorders, as experienced by many victims of torture: in order to escape the violence of the situation, X has created an alter-ego, XX, a violent and senseless character. In Act I, X screams:

X: Why? Why? Brother? Brother! I don’t know where he is! I don’t know!

Maybe the wolves ate him! I don’t know! (Kaouti, 2012: 80).

This is a clear reference to torture, as if X was being asked about the whereabouts of a possible accomplice and pleading ignorance. By the time of the play’s publication in 2012, many books testifying of the torture used in secret jails had come out, as mentioned in the introduction; audiences thus immediately recognise the context and the meaning of the play. At the time the play was first written however, little was known about the jails and about the fate of the ‘disappeared’. Kaouti’s veiled

³ All quotes are from the 2012 edition of the play translated into English by Mohamed Yassin el Harruchi

references to torture are thus even more striking and daring, describing a reality that was a potential threat for all.

Throughout the text, there are frequent references to violence and torture, as X is submitted to beatings (or is hallucinating):

X raises the jaw and hits XX who falls to the ground, presumably dead...

(Kaouti, 2012: 17)

And later:

The Chorus of masks continues interrogating X using all possible torture tools and methods...

X writhes in pain from the torture... (Kaouti, 2012: 60)

At other times, X appears to fight with himself:

X engages in a fight with his hand, angrily rubbing it with dust... (Kaouti, 2012: 19)

This again refers to trauma and madness, as if X continually re-lives the violent beatings he has been subjected to. As the play progresses, there are more references to State abuse, with X mentioning being spied on:

X: My letters are opened and read before I get them! The phone, even the phone is tapped! Innocence aside, all has been bought to spy on me! ...

(Kaouti, 2012: 59).

The choruses that accompany him throughout the play represent alternatively a sympathetic voice, and the voice of the State, rendered anonymous through the use of masks:

The chorus is meant to represent both the oppressed subjects who have accepted the actual situation as it is without claiming any change, and at times they represent the Makhzen (state authorities). (Amine, 2012: 13)

The structure of the play, its lack of narrative and context were meant to avoid censorship: *No Man's Land* was written at the height of the Lead Years, in a very repressive era. Khalid Amine also links *No Man's Land* to the famous collection of poems *Book of Standings* by 10th century Sufi mystic Muhammad an-Niffari (2012: 15). These visionary poems are known for their subtle metaphors and use of symbols, a reference that turns the play into a spiritual exploration rather than a political statement and again, protects it from censorship.

Kaouti skilfully re-creates the experience of imprisonment, not through a set narrative but through a sense of being lost, without spatial and temporal references, and in a frightening, violent space. It is an experience of confusion and isolation, leading the prisoner to madness, which is very common in prison narratives. At the same time, Kaouti waived into the play subtle references to spirituality, which transform the play into an esoteric journey. In particular, he refers in several places to the *gnawa* culture from the south of Morocco, popular for its mystical songs and its magical rituals:

To the tune and rhythms of the Gnawi tradition, the Chorus of faces starts the Leafou ritual, showing her concern for X... (Kaouti, 2012: 57)

Although the play was successfully performed in Morocco in the 1980s and was acknowledged by several prizes, it is particularly interesting that it re-appeared in 2009 with a new publication, at a time of growing discontent and dissent. Out of the

Moroccan repertoire, it is one of the texts that best address State oppression and abuses of power during this era, because it does not only relate the desperate circumstances of the prisoners, it throws us, as readers or spectators, inside their cell and obliges us to identify with their situation. Therefore, we are not only audience members, we become witnesses of this violence. Furthermore, the play posits artists and writers as a voice of dissent in the face of adversity, a popular force emerging from the masses to hold those in power accountable for their crimes. Here, Kaouti relays the voice of the voiceless victims of the Moroccan secret jails: he becomes their advocate. Within the context of prison literature discussed earlier, Kaouti's feat is that he didn't write his play after the prisoners had been released, but while they were still imprisoned, and therefore his text was one of the earliest to break the taboo surrounding the secret jails.

Kaouti's play is thus a direct challenge of the official version: he presents an alternative reality, inspired by real testimonies, that contradicts that of the *Makhzen*. This is perhaps the most poignant exercise of freedom of expression, as Kaouti took a big risk by addressing a very taboo subject and presenting his work on a public stage. He designed his play as a work that would testify, before varied audiences, of the horrors of this era: "Elle se voulait, par le fait théâtral, témoin de cette décennie de l'horreur, témoin de la chape de plomb que l'Etat avait installé sur des personnes remarquables"⁴. In the absence of the real victims, most of them having died or still being held in jail at the time Kaouti wrote his text, he tried to lift the veil on some of

⁴ See *Mohammed Kaouti* (2009), No man's Land: <http://icpsresearch.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/no-mans-land.html>

Hassan II's most terrible abuses, bringing to the fore what the regime was trying to conceal.

Since the 2000s, several other plays have looked at the Years of Lead, this time from a more historical perspective. Plays such as *Lalla J'mila*, discussed in the previous chapter, look at the impact past abuses have in the present, in terms of the trauma inflicted on victims. Itto for instance was deeply affected by her rape: her fiancé abandoned her, and she was shunned by society, resulting in her leading a life of alienation. In his introduction to the play, Khalid Amine describes the rape scene as such:

It is the ultimate evil that can be inflicted upon the female body, particularly in a strict Muslim society such as Morocco where the loss of virginity (...) is considered a great shame and disgrace (2007: 15)

As a former political prisoner, and furthermore as a female, there is no hope for Itto to get justice and reparation, and therefore her only escape she perceives is through suicide. Moroccans' lack of trust in the justice system is expressed clearly in the play:

Lalla J'mila: Mother, may God bless her, was always telling me, "listen my daughter, the judge is man and the convict is woman" (Ben Bouchta: 2007: 39)

This highlights the vulnerability of women in a patriarchal system, but also the arbitrary nature of justice in a country such as Morocco where corruption remains rife. *Lalla J'mila* thus highlights the continuing impact of the Lead Years abuses upon Moroccan society: Itto commits suicide not after the rape episode, but years later, when she realises that in reality nothing has changed.

Chama 'a, directed by Jaouad Essounani and performed in Morocco in 2005, has a very similar narrative; it is an adaptation from the popular play *Death and the Maiden* (1990) by Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman. The original play explores torture and human rights abuses conducted during Pinochet's dictatorial rule throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a context which bears many similarities to that of Morocco's Lead Years, and it focuses on a young woman who, like Itto, was kidnapped and raped for her political activities, and she is unable to move on from this traumatic experience. One day, she recognises her rapist in a chance encounter and keeps him captive to get a confession from him, which would help her to heal. However, it is unclear whether this man really is the person she is looking for, or whether her paranoia has led her to see in him her rapist. The play thus demonstrates that despite the end of the dictatorship, the memories and wounds remain, with dramatic effects.

Notably, *Chama 'a* is also the name of a popular song composed by popular Fassi musician Ould Arzine, and recorded in the 1970s by group Jil Jilala (Slyomovics, 2005: 201). The song's metaphor of the 'weeping candle' shining in the darkness resonated deeply with the political context of that decade: "It is as if the Moroccan candle helps to shed light on the enormity of human rights violations during the country's post-independence history (Slyomovics, 2005: 201). The candle is a reminder that the past should not be forgotten, lest it happens again. In Dabateatr's play, there is also an implicit critique of King Mohammed VI's current strategy, which is apparent in *Chama 'a* and the lead character's paranoia and inability to reconcile with the past, because the man who abducted her and raped her is still

free. There has seemingly been no punishment for her tormentor: he has not been judged for his crimes, nor does she have any means to bring him to justice. Valerie Orlando comments on this matter:

What is interesting in Morocco is that many perpetrators of torture and abuse during the Lead Years are still in power. The collective denial, or *refoulement* (repression) of memory, which denies the Moroccan people justice and closure, also prohibits the proper construction of memory sites to begin the nation's collective healing (2011:103).

As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, the IER commission is limited in its scope in that it doesn't aim to bring anyone to justice, but only to investigate abuse claims and give reparations. It cannot therefore truly reconcile Moroccans with their past, as its name claims: it is merely an attempt to close the matter by acknowledging abuses and compensating victims, while protecting guilty parties from facing trial. Behind those varied testimonies, writers and theatre-makers thus create an effective critique of the State: they acknowledge its efforts but deplore the lack of real, effective reform and the continuing abuse and pressure exercised by the *makhzen*, against journalists and political opponents most importantly. As notes Alianak, "IER's long-term effect will, however, ultimately be predicated on whether or not past crimes will be repeated" (2014: 102), adding that after the Casablanca bombings in 2003, the regime "held many in incommunicado detention and extracted coerced confessions (2014: 103). Sahrawi activists are also frequently the victims of

violence and torture, according to Amnesty International 2016/2017 report⁵. In addition, it notes that “the authorities failed to implement key recommendations from the Equity and Reconciliation Commission”, which included legal reforms to protect human rights and fight against impunity. Mohammed VI’s Morocco has thus retained its authoritarian structures, limiting political expression in the public domain. Theatre, therefore, remains a safety valve where Moroccans can voice their concerns and grievances, in the absence of real political alternatives.

Political apathy? The context of the Arab Spring demonstrations

When the first demonstrations erupted in Tunisia in late 2010, leading up to the swift fall of president Ben Ali, they took many by surprise. Many commentators had talked for years about the political disengagement of the North African youth. According to Fawaz Gerges,

The Middle East had come to epitomize a despotic land where autocrats were pushed to the margins, with little agency or even hope for change, and where political apathy reigned supreme (2015: 10)

Despite this, the social context leading up to the uprisings had been observed at length: particularly “unemployment and high utility prices” (Joffé, 2011: 510). This was a situation shared by other North Africa countries affected by the revolutions; Assad and Barsoum, referring to young Egyptians, note:

⁵ See Amnesty International, “Morocco/ Western Sahara, 2016/ 2017”, available online at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/morocco/report-morocco/>

Most experience substandard education, endure periods of unemployment, end up dead-end, low-paying jobs, and defer forming families because of the high financial costs of marriage and housing (2009: 67).

However, it is through marriage that young men “gain adult status” (Singerman, 2008: 76), and few willingly choose not to get married. The fact that many are now obliged to marry at a later age, mostly for economic reasons, means that they are stuck in what has been coined “maidenhood” (Obermeyer; 2000: 244).

In the years prior to Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, several plays described the disempowerment of the youth in Morocco, and shed a harsh light on the realities of the country. The play *(K)rêve* by Hicham Lasri (2006), published through the Union of Moroccan Writers but never performed on stage, portrayed a young man, (K) or (K)amal, who belongs to a generation of ‘haitistes’ (meaning young men ‘holding the walls’). As an introduction to this play, Lasri writes:

(K)amal est un zonard, le stéréotype du Haitiste, jeune homme dans la fleur de l’âge qui se fane et s’émousse par désœuvrement, par paresse, par manque de volonté et d’espoir, l’exemple typique d’une génération qui n’a rien à défendre et se retrouve coincée entre le marteau du besoin et l’enclume de l’impuissance, entre le chômage technique, la drogue, la drague et les passe-temps des gens qui se sont écrasés les semelles sur le paillason de leurs propres illusions... (2006: 5).

(K)amal represents a whole generation of young men failed by their leaders, and stuck in a situation of “downward mobility (Floris, 2012: 105); they are not able to attain the same living standards as their parents or the previous generation. *(K)rêve* shares some similarities with *No man’s Land* in its form: (K) inhabits a nightmarish

environment that he cannot make sense of, and we don't know whether he is dreaming or not. The context is that of post-Lead Years Morocco, in a globalised world connected through new technologies: there are many references to Internet and video games, which (K) uses as an escape from his bleak reality.

The play *Māmā tsebhi ala Kheir*, which I discussed in my first chapter, also focused on youth alienation and suicide, a particularly relevant issue since the Casablanca suicide bombings of 2003. Suicide remains sanctioned by Law (Articles 114, 115, 116, 117 and 407 of the Moroccan Penal Code can be used to punish a suicide attempt). Fatima Mernissi describes the Casablanca events as a trauma for Moroccans, and notes that suicide is considered to be an insult to the divine:

Se suicider, c'est se sentir déconnecté, c'est regarder vers le bas et sombrer dans l'abîme du silence et de la solitude. D'où la panique des événements de Casablanca car la définition même de l'humain (insan) est d'être connecté, non seulement aux astres, mais aussi au groupe (2008: 7).

The suicide of Anissa at the end of the play announced that of Mohammed Bouazizi, which sparked the uprisings in Tunisia: this highlights the connection between personal feelings of failure and alienation, and the need for change on a political level.

Through performance, Moroccans had thus denounced for years a social situation that was becoming unbearable for many, and would lead many to take to the streets during the Arab Spring uprisings. Mohammed Bouazizi was an anti-hero that many North Africans empathised and identified with: as (K) or Anissa, he was a young man with no prospects, who tried his best to earn a living but was constantly

submitted to the *hogra* ('humiliation'). As soon as the demonstrations got out of hand in Tunisia, Moroccans lent their voices to them and again, performance reflected the particular mood of that historical moment. The theatre community organised several events during the demonstrations, providing a space of reflection for Moroccans; most notably was Dabateatr' Dabacitoyen festival dedicated to Tunisia in February 2012. The company first presented a series of short skits featuring men sitting in a *hammam*, discussing the Tunisian revolution while protesters were heard outside. Then, a debate was organised between several internet activists such as Ali Anouzla⁶ and Nizar Benamate, two bloggers and journalists associated with the 20th February movement. These types of events opened discussions on current political events, and presented ways for audiences to get directly involved. George Bajalia goes as far as to write:

The performing arts community has assumed new importance as an extension and continuation of the February 20 Movement's ethos and objectives. Certain theatre groups in the country maintain Feb20's ideological goals, and address themes of governance, reform, and secular politics in their work. (2014)

At the time, theatre created effective commentaries on the events, with several plays such as *ḥālat ḥiṣār* (2013) which I will look at next, capturing the chaotic and exhilarating atmosphere of the demonstrations and furthering the 20th February movement's aims. *ḥālat ḥiṣār* (literally 'State of Siege') is one of the few Moroccan plays exploring the political context of the last few years since the beginning of the

⁶ Anouzla was the founder of the online news platform Lakome.com, and was subsequently arrested in 2013 for a highly controversial article about Al-Qaida's actions in the Maghrib.

Arab Spring. Published in 2013 in Arabic, it was written by one of the best dramatists of the Arab World, Zakaria Abou Maria, winner of several literary prizes for Arabic literature. Notably, the play bears the same title as a collection of poems by popular Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish, published in 2002, which describes Israeli occupation and the oppression of the Palestinian people.

ḥālat Hiṣār is a very ingenious play, starting with similar premises as described in other contemporary productions such as *Māmā tsebhi ala Kheir* (‘Good Night Mama’, 2010), or *ḍumu’ bi khul* (‘Tears of Khol’, 2013). It tells the story of a young couple, Aisha and Nouredine, who have been in a relationship for many years but are unable to get married and start a family because of poverty. However, Abou Maria’s text differs in that it does more than describing a desperate situation; rather, it is a story of political awakening on both individual and social levels, and it provides an insight into the Arab Spring events and the circumstances that led to the uprisings. The text was written in Classical Arabic, a choice which renders dialogues between the characters much more formal and literary than they would be in real life, but it includes a poetic prologue written in Moroccan darija. Here, in his native tongue, the writer is able to express his thoughts directly, without using drama as a motive. In this introduction, Abou Maria announces his intention to use storytelling as a ‘mirror’ that he holds for his readers. Several times, he writes:

ḥkāytī yā ssām ‘īn ḥkāya

’taḍrab bfṣulha lmthāl

mrāya⁷(2013: 9)

‘My story, oh you listeners, is a story

Whose chapters set an example

A Mirror’ (all translations are my own)

He thus gives a political dimension to his text from the very beginning: this is more than a fictional narrative, it is a tool of self-representation, of reflection, capturing the events unfolding as he writes. The use of this poetic prelude is also original because Abou Maria presents himself as a storyteller, a narrator: he is part of the play, but at the same time keeps a distance. This prologue belongs to the *zajal* genre, particularly popular in Morocco: it is a form of poetry written in darija rather than Classical Arabic, often written in free verse. While *zajal* poetry is traditionally performed orally, it is increasingly printed in booklets and sold in kiosks and bookshops in Morocco, to the point that it is “emerging as a ‘new’ literary genre” (Kapchan, 2001: 129). *Zajal* has long-standing links to the theatre scene: pioneers of Moroccan theatre such as Ahmed Tayeb el Alj or Tayeb Saddiki frequently used this form of poetry in their plays. Abou Maria thus inscribes himself in a tradition of poets that speak in the name of the oppressed within society, as Deborah Kapchan writes:

Judging from the responses of the largely young (20-40 years old), educated, and often unemployed audiences that attend *zajal* readings, the poets represent the voices of this population, thematizing human rights and civil liberties, while at the same time circumscribing new bounds around notions of individuality and freedom (2001: 129).

⁷ This part is in Moroccan darija in the original text, rather than Fusha.

This introduction to the play is thus interesting because it inscribes it in reality and in the present: Abou Maria makes it clear that he is using this story as a metaphor for what he is witnessing around him.

The play first focuses on the relationship between Nouredine and Aisha, two lovers now in their forties. They are a reflection of the deep-rooted issues described earlier in this thesis: unemployment, poverty, and alienation; while they are no longer young, both have failed to establish themselves as fully-fledged adults. Nouredine still harbours dreams of being a writer, whereas Aisha wants to settle down and have a family. In the turbulent context of the uprising, Nouredine hopes a fairer society will be established, in which he will finally be able to find decent employment; Aisha on the opposite remains less optimistic, making it clear that she will not wait for him any longer.

Most of their discussions revolve around those issues:

‘isha⁸

Ama 'ana falam atajāwz al-thālitha wa al-'arba'in min 'umrī wa 'ana 'alā ghair
dhimat rajulin ba'd, wa 'uqsimu la 'aqbaln bil-rāḍī zawjan 'idha lam tataşarraf wa
taḥşul'alā shughlin fī 'aqrabi furṣa (2013: 80)

Aisha

As for me I will not pass the 43rd year of my life, not yet married, and I swear that I
will accept Radhi as husband if you don't manage to find a job at the first
opportunity.

⁸ In the text, the author uses the Moroccan spelling of the name, rather than the usual 'ā'isha.

The play then takes a different turn, as Nouredine meets a number of characters: two beggars, a nurse, sailors and finally, a phoenix, symbolising renewal. The narrative becomes increasingly surreal, as Nouredine is taken to hospital and appears to be delirious; he is advised by his nurse to stop smoking and drinking coffee, but also to stop writing (2013: 54). The story here takes an ideological stance: to Nouredine, a writer, to stop writing is to stop practicing his work, but also to stop ‘thinking’ and getting involved in political activities. When the phoenix appears in the 7th part, while Nouredine is in hospital room, the reader is unsure whether Nouredine is awake or not, and indeed he wonders so himself:

Nūruddīn

Hal ‘ana al- āna nā’imun wa ‘aḥlum? ‘am mustayqizun wa lakin ‘atakhayaluk ?

(2013: 73)

Nouredine:

Am I sleeping now and dreaming? Or am I awake but imagining you?

The character of the phoenix brings a halt to the feeling of urgency that motivates Nouredine, and provides a deeper perspective on the situation. He speaks of a “Facebook generation” that has shown “spontaneity and candour” (2013: 74) but also great naivety in imagining that the uprisings would result in real change and provide opportunities for a disenfranchised youth. The phoenix here has for mission to reveal to Nouredine, but also to us readers, that the revolutions have failed:

‘anqā’ :

Fāt al-zaman wa fāt al-awānu ma ‘ ah, wa ta‘ rifu akthara minnī anna al-thaura k ā
nat falta. (2013: 81)

Phoenix:

Time has passed and the opportunity has passed with it, and you know better than me that the revolution was a slip.

At the same time, the phoenix is a symbolic choice of character: in Greek mythology, it is an animal that can be reborn from its ashes. Therefore, it represents hope for the future: the revolution has failed this time and the wave of popular protest has died out, but it will be born again and next time it might succeed. Intellectual elites have long kept the monopoly of public discourse, relegating the youth and its issues of unemployment, poverty and social alienation to a marginalised position. The Arab Spring is in some ways a trial to reverse that situation, for the most disempowered parts of the population to take control through the streets. Nouredine is doubly marginalised, first because as a Third-world citizen, belonging to an ex-colony, he is part of a periphery, and secondly because as an unemployed, unmarried man, he is alienated within his own society. He hopes that he will be part of a generation that finally achieves change, and he sees the demonstrations as an opportunity to address issues, both on a personal and national level.

However, he is ultimately unable to marry the woman he loves and loses her, and he is forced to acknowledge his (and society's) failure to create change. In the last part of his dialogue with the phoenix, he enumerates the difficulties he has encountered:

Nūruddīn

Li 'aktashifa anna al-faqra sabab, wal-ghalā' sabab, wa azmatu al-sakani sabab, wa anna al-biṭāla al-fauha allati tafriqu 'anhā kulla hadha al-raṣāṣ (2013: 80)

Nouredine

I found out that poverty is a reason, and inflation is a reason, and the housing crisis is a reason, and that unemployment is the gun from where all those bullets came from.

Noureddine here speaks for a whole generation of young men who have been unable to find work in spite of their diplomas: only 10% of the 500 000 young Moroccans who graduate every year find stable employment (Amar, 2009: 38). As a result, they remain in a precarious situation, dependant on family or low-paying, seasonal jobs for survival:

A typical feature of Morocco's youth is a prolonged period of adolescence that is characterized by a lack of prospects, a high degree of frustration and a strong desire to leave the country (Beaune, 2005:130).

In addition, Abou Maria discusses the role of intellectuals in the revolution, or maybe more accurately their lack of a role, and here he refers to both Noureddine, the educated but unemployed man, and maybe to Zakaria Abou Maria himself, describing his position as an intellectual unable to take a leading role in the protest movement. In some ways, Abou Maria addressed the collapse of the intellectual elites, surpassed by the economic and political elites and unable to play the role they played in the past, of opening up critical discussions with large publics. In the global age, intellectuals are marginalised, because they are not 'economically productive' in the strictest sense: as Noureddine, they are perceived as idealists, but they fail to take action. Through theatre and literature, Abou Maria is exploring new avenues for these critical discussions, now presented under the guise of entertainment. Mohammed Achaari discusses intersections between cultural and political spheres in his 2016 essay "Creativity as a political choice", arguing that cultural production is part of a drive for change and democracy in Morocco, and has been acting as such since the

country's independence and the establishment of an authoritarian political system (2016: 13). Furthermore, the cultural field has become in recent years a site of contestation on a deeper level, challenging the increasing appeal of traditionalism as modernity has failed to resolve deep-rooted social issues. In the light of the 2003 Casablanca bombings, Achaari writes, "culture became one of the fundamental ways of defining identity and acted as a convincing answer to the failure of authorities, as well as the question of 'I' and 'The Other'" (2016: 19). Abou Maria's text is part of this movement, depicting an idealist who wants to keep faith in progress, in challenging circumstances. Despite the emotion and elation created by the uprisings and the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, he makes the sombre statement that the Arab Spring cannot succeed, cannot achieve lasting change in North Africa. Ultimately, he was proven right, and he was one of the few Arabophone writers to have addressed the uprisings so soon after they began, and maybe to have predicted its failure to fulfill the hopes of those who demonstrated in the streets. Yassine Guenni argues that the text accurately described the impact of the events of the 30th of June⁹ 2013 in Egypt and the impossibility for the uprisings to success after that (Guenni, 2014).

Despite being a fictitious account, *ḥālat Hiṣār* is a very effective snapshot of the Arab Spring, capturing the various emotions and the gradual disappointment of a large part of the population who had attended demonstrations and had hoped for better days. Here, theatre is a tool that documents history and explores its context, but

⁹ On the 30th of June 2013, mass protests were organised in Egypt to demand Mohammed Morsi's resignation, one year after he had been elected. As a result, he was deposed by the Egyptian army and on the 3rd of July, judge Adly Mansour was announced as Interim president.

it is also a very potent platform for reflection. In the cultural context described by Mohammed Achaari above, the play needs to be understood as part of an activist movement through which artists keep pushing for democracy and progress, despite the authoritarian state structures that remain firmly in place.

The characters of Nouredine and Aisha are realistic and they speak for a whole generation of North Africans kept behind by unemployment and poverty, despite their qualifications. The play was adapted by director Abdellah Sandia in 2014 and performed at a theatre festival in Safi, the seaside city Abou Maria is also from. It provided an opportunity for Moroccans to reflect on the recent events and their failure to lead to the change they had hoped for. Rolf Hemke comments that: “theatre is often the most political and the most spontaneous of all forms of art. Hence, theatre can function as a seismograph of societal conditions (Hemke, 2015: 261). The plays discussed in this chapter are spontaneous, creative answers to tense political situations in North Africa: they capture the ambient mood while also providing a critical analysis of the events. Therefore, “they open spaces for discussion and subjective contemplation, thus combining dimensions of aesthetics, identity politics, and semiotics” (Hemke, 2015: 262). Characters such as Nouredine, Aisha or Hicham Lasri’s (K) connect personal experiences and failures to a larger political situation: they are the products of these circumstances, and by revealing their woes to audiences, theatre directors encourage them to voice their own political grievances. The play I will discuss in the next section focuses again on the urban youth, but this time it offers a post-Arab Spring perspective: what forms can activism take after the

failure of the uprisings? How do Moroccans reconcile their personal ambitions and dreams with their political engagement?

‘Artivism’ in the wake of the Spring

The play *dumū‘ bi khul* (‘Tears of Khol’, premiered in 2012) explores the social and political context of Morocco post-Arab Spring. It portrays four Moroccans at critical points in their lives, striving to make the best of the opportunities offered to them. In many ways, their personal situations mirror the wider political situation of the country in 2011-2012, when the play was written. With the fall of long-standing regimes in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, the future seemed uncertain. *dumū‘ bi khul* is one of the few recent plays based on an original text by a Moroccan playwright: it was written by Issam El Yousfi, former director of the ISADAC institute. It was first performed in late 2012 at the French Institute in Kenitra by Théâtre Anfas, directed by ISADAC graduate Asmaa Hourri. In June 2013, it competed in the Meknes National Festival of Theatre where it won a record number of prizes: Grand Prize, Best text for Issam El Yousfi, Best female actress for Hajar Graigaa, Best scenography and Best costumes. I argue that this success is due both to an original direction and to a narrative that describes “everyday life-heroes” (Bouabia: 2015: 320). It belongs to a creative movement driven by young artists who promote freedom and democracy, as argues Amine Boubia. She comments:

Far from the successful mercantile approach to arts in the region, a number of artists engage more or less consciously in art as a form of cultural resistance; in short, in socially and politically committed art, in ‘artivism’. (Boubia, 2015: 320-321).

My analysis of the play will be informed both by the performance (which I saw at the National festival of theatre in Meknes in 2013), and by the original script kindly provided by the author Issam El Yousfi¹⁰, written in darija.

ḍumū‘ bi khul is a snapshot of urban Moroccan society, focusing on four characters dealing with their own separate issues in complex and contrasted ways: Nada, a young woman in her thirties who is going through a difficult divorce and custody battle; Nora, Nada’s cousin and friend, a disillusioned journalist and activist; Sofia, Nada’s sister, a 23 years old medicine student who is having an affair with a much older doctor and finally Ahmed, her lover, who is stuck in a loveless marriage. *ḍumū‘ bi khul* is a play looking at personal crisis, and it creates a powerful critique of a conservative society rejecting those who do not conform to expectations. The four characters have very different personalities and personal situations, but they are connected both through family ties, and by their friendships and love affairs. They also share a growing disenchantment with the political establishment: political engagement is an important aspect of the play as all the characters are members of the same party.

Director Asmaa Houri made a very interesting use of the text, turning it into a series of short scenes in which the actors often perform physical actions, such as running across the stage, frenetically dressing and undressing, or eating and spitting

¹⁰ The play was later published in Arabic by Rabat-based publishers Marsam in 2014.

out food. The set design is kept simple: the space of the stage is closed off by a large panel, on which is written “issue de secours” (‘emergency exit’) and “no exit”(see Appendix 5). However, the use of light, with the stage often lit in harsh colours such as green or red, conveys different moods throughout the play. Hourī’s original direction adds a layer of complexity to the text, with the use of many symbolic actions and objects. The play starts with a scene during which each character presents himself to the audience, speaking into a microphone. From the beginning of the play, the ‘fourth wall’¹¹ is thus broken: the actors acknowledge the presence of the audience, and demand their attention. This creates a sense of urgency, as if the characters were desperate for their voices to be finally heard.

Nada, speaking first, is a philosophy teacher in her thirties. She is about to divorce from her husband and is finding herself in a difficult situation, as they are arguing about their children’s custody. She has a bitter outlook on life, and feels let down by society:

Nadā: dābā al-ḍrāfa wal-tibsām ghādī nsālī ma’ahūm w ghādī nbda kanqamish w na’q bḥālī bḥāl l-khrayn

(El Yousfi, 2013: 5)¹²

Nada: Now I will stop being nice and smiley, and I will start scratching and biting like others do.

¹¹ I have discussed the so-called ‘Fourth wall’ in more detail p.75.

¹² All quotes are taken from an unpublished draft of the play written in darija, kindly provided by author Issam El Yousfi. Translations are mine.

Then Sofia, the youngest character, presents herself: she appears to be the most ambitious and driven, although she is also the most vulnerable. She strives to improve her social status through her dream to become a doctor.

şufiya : kanqra al- ṭib bash narbiḥ l-flūs w yḥtarmūnī al-nās

(El Yousfi, 2013 : 6)

Sofia: I study medicine so that I earn money and people respect me.

Sofia is having an affair with a much older man, a respected doctor, and wants to emulate his success. Nora, who is a decade older than Sofia, then takes the microphone. She is a journalist struggling in her career and who has a difficult relationship with her family. She has a different outlook on life: she is an idealist and is very involved with local politics. At the beginning of the play she wonders:

Nūra: ‘alāsh mshā al-niḍāl?

(El Yousfi, 2013: 6)

Nora: Why did activism go?

Her position reflects that of many young people after the failure of the Arab Spring to lead to long-lasting change. Nora acknowledges a change in how Moroccans relate to politics, but she remains optimistic and wants to keep fighting for more equality and fairness.

Finally Ahmed, Sofia’s lover, appears as a lone male voice. As an older, well-established, wealthy man, he is in a very privileged position, at the top of the social hierarchy. However, he feels unfulfilled and would live to leave his wife for his young lover. In many ways he represents the deeply rooted, patriarchal order: he is

part of a dominant class and has a much more comfortable situation than the younger women.

Aḥmad: bzāf diyāl l-nās kayḥtarmūnī w yqdrūnī illā mrātī w shī ḥdīn khrīn ma‘anā
fil- ḥizb (El Yousfi, 2013: 7)

Ahmed: Many people respect me and appreciate me, apart from my wife and some other people in the party with us.

At the same time, Ahmed is also presented as a vulnerable man: he is deeply unsatisfied and is risking his career because of his affair. The gender dynamics between the characters is thus more complex than it appears at first, because Ahmed is struggling with masculinity and expectations of him as a man.

After this introduction, the narrative unravels in short scenes, focusing alternatively on Ahmed and Sofia’s affair, her dispute with her sister when she announces that she is pregnant, and Nada and Nora’s friendship. The characters are mostly all on stage together, even when they are not part of the scene. For instance, in scenes that were meant to be between Sofia and Ahmed in the text, the other two actresses are generally standing in the background facing away, but still present. This symbolises the fact that indeed they are never alone: they live in a society in which they have no right to real privacy. As the play goes on, the characters become increasingly desperate, which is reflected in their movements: in one particular scene, the actresses frantically put on and remove dresses, strewing their clothes all over the stage. This reflects the importance of appearance for young women, and their struggle to ‘fit in’ with social codes. Ahmed, the only man, has his long hair tied up in a ponytail and wears Western clothes; he has a much more polished, controlled

appearance reflecting his status as a respected doctor. As the play goes on however, his behaviour becomes increasingly erratic: in one scene he smears lipstick over his face, as do the female characters, and tries on a dress. The cross-dressing represents his refusal to submit to his family and society's expectations of him as a responsible man and head of family. It is a subversive act: it symbolises his desire to break free from social constraints.

In another scene, Ahmed gifts Sofia a pearl necklace, but the necklace is used to metaphorically 'strangle' her, as Ahmed ties it too tight around her neck. It is a very revealing act, as it represents Ahmed's desire for Sofia, but also her entrapment in a relationship with an older married man. Later, the characters stand in front of the audience eating apples (See Appendix 5) and then spitting them out while repeating their sentences. Theatre critic Mohammed Arious wrote an analysis of the play (2013), in which he interprets this scene as representing repressed desires. The actors bite into the apples voraciously, again reflecting their sense of urgency, their need to live according to their own will.

The characters of the play all aspire to freedom (on social, sexual, political levels), as do many young Moroccans, and they suffer from the limits imposed on them: Sofia particularly rejects the expectations placed on her as a young woman:

şufiya : l-waqt dāyza w lli khdiṭihā dābā rabṭihā...zawāj, wūlād , flūs... al-wāhid bghā dābā ytmāt'a w ya'īsh. (el Yousfi, 2013 : 22)

Sofia : Time is running, and whatever you take from it is earned...marriage, children, money...Now, everybody wants to enjoy himself and live.

There is a social divide between this generation and a country that they perceive as conservative and oppressive. The malaise of this urban, middle class youth, who

inhabits spaces radically different from what previous generations experienced, was already revealed in Laila Marrakchi's popular film *Marock* (2005). The young heroine Rita has been raised as part of Casablanca's secular, liberal upper class elite, but she faces disapproval from her family when she starts a relationship with a Jewish boy. From Rita's perspective, her family appears hypocritical: they condemn her relationship with her boyfriend Youri not because premarital relationships are frowned upon, but because he is Jewish. The film caused controversy when it came out, because it touches on several sensitive topics:

The filmmaker tested her society's increased openness as she compelled audiences to think about the clashes inherent in her society along the lines of identity, nationality, religion, gender and tradition. (Orlando, 2011: 46)

At its core are the increasing disparities between the liberal elites, and conservative factions of society, both trying to take charge of Morocco's future. In the play *ḍumū' bi khul*, similar themes are explored: the characters (apart from Sofia) often worry about how their actions will appear to others, and complain about society's judgment of them. The narrative reveals deep tensions between their desires to live their lives freely, as they have been encouraged to by their milieu to some extent, and conservative attitudes that are still strongly present in Morocco. Valerie Orlando speaks of a "schizophrenic society that seeks to locate its contemporary identity somewhere between the vestiges of the past and the possibilities of the future (2011: 45). The play is very successful because it intertwines the private and the political realms: it uses personal narratives to make a point about wider society. This is

precisely the aim of Brecht and Piscator's epic theatre, which Sarah Bryant-Bertail describes as:

This practice called for the relating of stage events to the material situation of the spectators and characters; the theatre was to demystify the operation of social, economic, and political forces by showing how certain orders of reality had developed historically and were perpetuated. (2000: 3)

The audience is from the beginning used as witnesses and encouraged to reflect of the actors's situation, although they are not active participants. The scenes in which the actors address the audience use a "V-effekt"¹³ as I described earlier. Rather than being a passive audience, spectators are talked to as if they were part of the play, or perhaps more appropriately, as if they were the very society that the actors complain about.

On a sociological level, Sofia is a particularly interesting character: she represents a young generation of Moroccans that Samir Ben-Layashi describes in his essay "Feet on the earth, head in the clouds: What do Moroccan youth dream of?" (2013), which explores how young people try to negotiate social conventions to achieve their goals. Ben-Layashi uses as case studies three young Moroccan women making various choices in order to improve their lives. All three are very aware of the limited opportunities available to them in Morocco for various economic and social reasons. One becomes a high-class prostitute in Senegal, after she went there to finish her studies; another decides to get married to a Moroccan man living in France so that

¹³ 'V-effekt' stands for *Verfremdungs- effekt*, which means 'effect of estrangement' in German. I discussed the use of this technique in pre-colonial performance forms in the Introduction, p.12.

she can leave the country, despite being in love with her childhood sweetheart. He writes:

The life stories of the three display not only their interior conflicts, and their attempts to deal with their situations, but display a kind of agency, as they seek to make decisions to determine their own fates, thus challenging various dogmas, be they religious, political, or societal (2013: 156).

The similarities between Ben-Layashi's case studies and the characters of the play is the way they all develop coping strategies to resist in difficult circumstances: Sofia's affair and her pregnancy are ways to get what she wants, a status, as she is hoping Ahmad will marry her. When she realises that he will not leave his wife, she immediately breaks up with him and changes tactics, planning her future as a single mother. The idea of 'challenging dogma' is particularly relevant here: as an unmarried pregnant woman, Sofia represents a controversial figure, but she also deeply challenges the different attitudes towards men and women in Morocco.

Beyond the personal narratives of the four characters, *ḍumū' bi khul* is a play that makes a much wider commentary on post-Arab Spring Morocco and its political scene, addressing issues such as corruption and commenting on Moroccans' involvement with local politics. The characters of the play are all involved, to different levels, in what they call 'al-hizb' ('the party'), a left-wing political party opposed to the Islamists. Ahmed mentions it repeatedly, as he is worried about the impact his relationship with Sofia could have on his political career:

Aḥmad: kul intikhabāt kaybān wskhhūm akhtar, ṭayrūnī ana bāsh yaḥṭu diyālḥūm, mlli tsālāt līhim l-hadra...kullik anta 'indik 'alāqa ghir shar'iya w l-'islāmyīn ghādī

ystaghlū hadha l-shi w khāšnā nshūfū muṣlḥa l-hizb māshī l-musāliḥ l-shakhṣiya...
(el Yousfi, 2013 : 34)

Ahmed: For every election, their dirty business appears more and more; they threw me out to put one of them instead, and when they finished their speech... They tell you, you are having an illicit relationship and the Islamists will benefit from it, we need to look for the benefit of the party, it's not for personal benefit...

The party occupies an important space in the lives of the characters, in particular Ahmed and Nora, albeit for different reasons. Ahmed, as an older, more experienced man, has gained a respected standing within the party but he seems more realistic about the political scene and its hypocrisy than the younger characters. Nora on the other hand has strong ideals and her political activism offers her an avenue to express herself and take action to improve her country's situation, and therefore hers.

However, she appears disenchanted with the political process and with the disinterest shown by others around her. Michael Willis notes that in addition to low voting turnout, high rates of spoiled ballots in the most educated areas show that “growing sections of the population were disillusioned with not only the electoral process but the wider system” (2007: 18). While young Moroccans show apathy towards elections, it certainly doesn't mean that they are apolitical: on the opposite, they seek to participate in alternative ways through civil society, culture and other forms of activism. A 2016 study on youth activism in Morocco, conducted by Saloua Zerhouni and Azeddine Akesbi, found that:

Activism through associations was also considered as a preferred way for youth participation in public life. Many young participants referred to civil society organizations as spaces that allow them to express themselves freely. (2016: 21).

The characters of *ḍumū‘ bi khul* clearly represent this trend, although in different forms: some of them are party members, but are well aware of corrupt practices both inside political parties and in the wider political scene. Others have abandoned any hope in the political process and are trying to provoke change on an individual basis, to improve their circumstances. At the very end of the play, Nora gives us a renewed sense of hope, maybe motivated by the Arab Spring and the demonstrations organised by the 20th February movement in Morocco. She makes it clear that this change will come from ‘the street’ rather than from the State and its institutions:

Nūra: ‘anā ghādī nā‘ūd narja‘ lil-siyāsa w nā‘ūd nahlam...Nzlat l-zanqa w ghūt w māzāl ghādī nzal w nghūt...(el Yousfi, 2013: 42)

Nora: I will go back to politics and go back to dreaming...The street went out and shouted, and again I will go out and shout...

ḍumū‘ bi khul is a play that cleverly describes the context of post-Arab Spring Morocco: the characters originally believe in change, have faith in politics, but they are soon reminded that in fact, everything has remained the same. Through each of these four characters, the play draws a wider portrait of urban, middle class Moroccan society, portraying its difficulties and its shattered hopes for a better future in the wake of the uprisings.

Théâtre Forum: education through theatre

Following the radical experiments in the 1960s and 1970s of theatre practitioners such as Augusto Boal in Brazil, Polish Jerzy Grotowski and his ‘Poor Theatre’, or Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret, the audience’s role has become

increasingly prominent. This trend has been very influential to Moroccan theatre-makers, who have seen it as a way to have a wider impact on political debates, through the means of performance. Directors such as Naima Zitan are encouraging their audiences to raise their voices not only in the theatre building, but also outside. The concept of pedagogy in Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' model is crucial; it heavily relies on the research of Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). For Freire, cultural action is the site where the "culture of domination" is confronted, and the myths of which it is built are expelled (1970 (2000): 54). Culture is a site of liberation, in which the participants 'unveil the lies' of the system then re-establish their sense of truth. The concept of pedagogy is therefore central: the role of the workshop leaders, or director, is to raise awareness while leaving the participants to find their own solutions. Freire was particularly critical on educational systems in which students have passive, waiting for the teacher to transfer their knowledge: he notably compares students to "containers" (1970 (2000): 72). 'Theatre of the Oppressed' is on the opposite an active form of pedagogy, preparing students to enact the change they want to see on a local level. Forum Theatre is one of Boal's most successful approaches, and it takes a very innovative view of audiences: "here the spectators were converted into what Boal called 'spect-actors who were encouraged to take over the process of creating the text being performers'" (Carlson, 2014: 112). As part of the same process, the role of theatre directors is also redefined: they become facilitators, rather than leading the narrative.

Théâtre Aquarium has devised an efficient method to implement these techniques and to discuss issues affecting the local community, through regular

events taking place at their base in Akkari, Rabat. Akkari is traditionally a working-class district, away from ‘elite’ cultural centres in the centre of the city, and the events are open to all free of charge. This is particularly important for the troupe to reach its targeted audiences and contribute to a change in their community: they are implanted in the midst of an area where women are less likely to have access to support and legal advice. The ‘Théâtre Forum’ events closely follow the steps developed by Boal, which he describes in his book *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to make Politics* (2005). He would first organise an intensive workshop with local cultural animators, resulting in short shows that would then be presented to audiences. These shows typically focused on issues affecting the local population and they described everyday situations that anyone could face. The particularity of Forum Theatre is that it doesn’t stop with the presentation of a show to an audience, but continues afterwards through debates and exchanges, as Boal describes:

We would ask the audience which two or three subjects had most interested them, and this led to the ‘foruming’ of relevant two or three scenes: ie, the theatrical debate which constitutes Forum Theatre, with the improvisation of possible solutions, the intervention of members of the audience, the search for alternatives for an oppressive, unjust, intolerable situation. (2005: 8)

Théâtre Aquarium’s series of events, entitled Théâtre Forum, follows a similar structure; I was able to attend one of the workshops myself and take part in the debates that followed. Every month, the company organises a roundtable on a specific subject and brings in various experts as well as people directly affected by the issue to share their experience with the audience, answer their questions, and think of possible

solutions together. The company then organises a writing workshop in which the audience is invited to write short scripts or dialogues exploring relating to what has been discussed, which are finally acted out by the company's actors. As they are acting, members of the audience are invited to join them on stage and either intervene or interrupt the course of the show to propose an alternative solution to the problem presented. The event I attended in May 2013, at Théâtre Aquarium's own space, was entitled *Les petites bonnes* ('The little maids'). It started with a short video documentary on the issue of underage maids being mistreated or denied access to education, followed by a roundtable with several speakers (see Appendix 6). Several high profile cases were relayed in the media during the year 2012-2013 concerning the treatment of those children, mostly sent to work in the city by impoverished rural families, and it is thus a very timely social issue. The event was well attended by diverse group of people, although mainly from educated backgrounds. It was informing and challenging, offering a debate both between the academics and other professionals selected by the company, and later between them and the audience. The speakers, who each spoke of their experience of the matter before taking questions and debating together on possible solutions, came from different background: a child psychologist, a lawyer, several members of humanitarian associations working with these children. This ensured a well-rounded discussion covering most aspects of this growing problem in Morocco. In addition, a woman who had herself worked as a maid as a child offered her direct testimony, although she was not seated on stage with the other speakers, but in the audience (at her own demand). Her contribution was a very valuable addition to the discussion, as it brought the issue of child labour

to reality more than the academic, detached discourse of the roundtable, and it was an emotional highlight of the event. However, the fact that she wouldn't (or couldn't) sit on stage with the other speakers once again raises the issue of the subaltern speaking up, and in which context this occurs. She clearly felt it necessary for her experience as a child maid to be heard since she attended the event, but her powerful words were framed by the more technical, academic discourse of the guests on the stage.

Those roundtables serve to provide background information and inspiration for the audience who is then asked (usually on a separate date) to imagine simple scenes representing the problem to be resolved, and then finally they witness those scenes being acted out (either by actors or by audience members). During these short performances, they have the possibility to come on stage to change the course of the action and potentially solve the issue. These performance forms are very instructive and empowering for audiences, who are given an opportunity to reflect on how and why these issues arise. In this particular instance, they were encouraged to think about what leads families to send their young children to work as maids and how this can be addressed. They acted out small skits reflecting different scenarios around this problem, and leading them to think about their own attitude: what would they do if they found out a relative or neighbour is mistreating a child? How can those children and their families be supported? These forums are organised according to need, and often reflect current news. One of the first forums organized in early 2013 explored the issue of sexual freedom and the controversial article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code, allowing the marriage between a woman and her rapist, through which he can escape a jail sentence. This coincided with the first anniversary of Amina Filali's

death, a young woman whose suicide ultimately led to demonstrations for a change in law. In that instance, Théâtre Aquarium used current national news as a basis on which to invite dialogue and think about solutions one could implement on his level to prevent these situations in the future: how do we protect young women from rape and other violence? What practical steps can we take to support them? What help is available for vulnerable women through state institutions and women's associations?

The short scenes created by the participants highlighted violence against women including rape, domestic violence and social alienation, and some members of the audience came on stage to offer solutions to the victimised women. Interestingly, their advice was mostly to seek help from civil associations working with women, rather than reporting events of violence to the police or other governmental body. This highlights both the growing influence of civil society, filling the gaps left out by the “impotence of the State” (Ben-Layashi, 2013: 148), and the distrust Moroccans feel towards the police and judiciary systems, considered to be corrupt. This confirms what Zoubeir Ben Bouchta writes in *Lalla J'mila*, when Lalla J'mila comments that “the judge is man and the convict is woman” (2007: 39). In a patriarchal society, it is difficult for a woman to get justice, in particular in cases of domestic violence. A 2016 report from NGO Human Rights Watch highlights a large number of failings reported by victims:

Police officers refused to record their statements, failed to investigate, and refused to arrest domestic abuse suspects even after prosecutors ordered them to. (...) Lawyers who handle domestic violence cases said they have seen judges require unrealistic evidence (Human Rights Watch, 2016)

Théâtre Aquarium has developed close collaborations with associations working with women victims of violence and other disempowered groups. Theatre is being used to raise awareness of social issues and offer better access to information; it thus becomes a go-between between those NGOs and audiences, attracted by the idea of free or low-price, high quality entertainment. Kenza Yousfi comments:

In an environment where civil society is seen to be the only real actor in development, Theatre Aquarium has no choice in what kind of theatre it wants to make. (...) Community art is about transforming lives through promoting participation and providing opportunities for people who, through social and economic circumstance, have little access or means to participate in the arts. (2012: 66)

Another event from Théâtre Aquarium's 'Théâtre Forum' series focused on the debates around the PJD's 'clean art' project, and was attended by actor and Member of Parliament Yassine Ahjam, as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. It was held in March 2013. The timing is interesting, as it came weeks after the first presentation of Théâtre Aquarium's controversial play *Dialy*, which was heavily criticised for its perceived vulgarity and therefore not conforming to 'clean art' expectations. The roundtable and subsequent performances gave way to fascinating discussions on freedom of speech in the Moroccan, Muslim context. The PJD have successfully called for the censorship of a number of cultural productions, most notably Nabil Ayouch's film *Zine li Fik* in 2015 for going against moral values. I have briefly analysed issues with the representation of women in the film in the previous chapter (p.154). Speakers at the roundtable also argued that culture is only a

representation of society, and that society as a whole needs to become more ‘moral’. The forum reveals how much culture has become a political battlefield between different ideologies competing for power. Both sides, the Islamists and the ‘modernists’ regularly accuse the other of manipulating the public through culture. The PJD denounces a “hidden agenda” aiming to “disseminate values that are alien to the teachings of Islam and to Moroccan society” (Graiouid & Belghazi, 2013: 268). On the other hand, the Islamist party constructs “a discourse of moral panic around target cultural events to create the sensational contexts that allow the party to foreground its political agenda. (Graiouid & Belghazi, 2013: 269).

Apart from Théâtre Aquarium, several other companies have taken inspiration from Boal’s work and have sought to adapt it to the Moroccan context. A company called Théâtre de l’Opprimé (Masrah al-Mahgur) was created in 2012 with branches in Rabat and Casablanca, with an aim of welcoming all those interested in theatre whether amateur or professional. It organises regular events using Theatre Forum (in which audiences are invited to discuss social issues and propose solutions), but also other types of Theatre of the Oppressed techniques such as ‘Invisible Theatre’, which are public performances designed to look real, so that people who witness them are not aware that they are ‘performed’. Some of its founders are also organising the Festival of Resistance and Alternatives in Rabat, started in 2012, which proposes a variety of workshops, performances and debates for local audiences. It brings together artists, activists and members of civil society in a number of cultural and social events destined to encourage self-determination and proactive citizenship, held in various public locations throughout the city. There is thus here a will to take theatre

outside of confined cultural spaces and onto the streets, to confront people with narratives (for example a scene of domestic violence), which oblige them to get involved. A recent project created as a collaboration between the cultural association Racines, the Casablanca Théâtre de l'Opprimé group and music band The Minority Globe has attracted attention: *Mix city* (2015) is a collaborative work that aims to raise awareness of the plight of Sub-saharan migrants and to fight racism in Morocco. This project touched upon a sensitive topic, as waves of migrants from Africa and the Middle East transit through Morocco while trying to access Europe and experience marginalisation. Journalist Laura Menin observed:

Finding it increasingly difficult to head north, migrants trapped in Morocco are facing a toxic combination of state control, media demonisation and enduring social stigma (2016).

Mix city is particularly powerful because it creates a space in which those migrants can express themselves directly to Moroccan audiences and share their stories to make them realise the level of discrimination they face. It regrouped several cultural productions, including the play *B7al B7al* (meaning 'same' or 'equal' in Moroccan darija), which toured several cities in Morocco in 2015. The play aimed at denouncing the daily challenges faced by migrants as they try to access health services, or visit administrations. El Mehdi Azdem, in charge of the project, comments:

Une grande partie de la pièce repose sur le vécu des comédiens, ce sont des situations de racisme qu'ils ont vécues, que ce soit les subshariens en tant que victimes, ou les Marocains eux-mêmes. (quoted in Bouraque, 2015).

The show consisted in short skits performed on public squares, accompanied by musicians, closely resembling halqa performances and inviting audiences to take part. It contributed to open a discussion about migrants' status in Morocco and about racism more generally. The project received significant funding from the European Union and from the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, which allowed it to tour throughout the country and address discrimination: its total budget was of €64,946¹⁴.

Lastly, it is important to note that these performances are happening in the wider regional context of Theatre for Development, which has been used very successfully in various communities throughout sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Theatre for Development is a movement that emerged from the radical student milieu in Nigeria in the 1970s to answer issues such as state oppression and imperialist neo-colonialism, and it invites communities to “reinvent themselves into an independent nation” (Amkpa, 2006: 162). It usually target specific issues such sex education or the HIV epidemic. While there is no specific example of Theatre for Development in Morocco, the projects described in this section share its social dimension and its involvement of audience in the making of the performance. As does Theatre of the Oppressed, Frances Harding writes that Theatre for Development “relies at every stage of the process on the contribution of the participant-spectators to create the drama” (1998: 12). The positive experiences of Theatre of the Oppressed and Theatre for Development in other communities, such as DramAide in South Africa, show that

¹⁴ See the Drama Diversity Development website: <http://actfordiversity.org/activities/street-theatre/mix-city/>

it can have a real impact on local disempowered communities. DramAide (Drama in AIDS Education) is a project started in 1992 to educate students about HIV/ AIDS and offer support to those infected. A 2000 study by Harvey, Stuart and Swan showed the programme had a positive impact in the schools and universities where it was delivered, leading for example to an increase in condom use. Similarly, Théâtre Aquarium's Théâtre Forum events or the *Mix City* project have successfully opened up discussions about sensitive subjects and brought them to the public debate, also providing a wealth of information or testimonies for audiences to make their own mind on these issues. By doing so, they are paving the way for a shift in the public's attitude, and they empower people to be active actors of change; Augusto Boal called this process "theatre helping to bring about social transformation" (2005: 9).

Conclusion

While Moroccan theatre is deeply rooted in popular performance forms, the last two decades have seen theatre-makers increasingly taking inspiration from international directors such as Brecht or Boal, to create plays that reflect on Morocco's issues and try to instigate change. Theatre closely follows social and political developments in the country, offering spaces of reflection and discussion: the end of the Lead Years era, and then the constitution of the IER commission in 2004, gave way to several plays and performances exploring memories of that era. Later, the Arab Spring demonstrations forced Moroccans to examine the social context that

led to the marginalisation of wide parts of the population, notably the youth. Again, this was reflected in theatre plays such as Abou Maria's *ḥālat Hṣār*, through which theatre-makers critiqued their own roles both as cultural or intellectual elites, and as young Moroccans involved in the demonstrations.

Since the Arab Spring, the Moroccan theatre scene has increasingly blurred the lines separating it from the political arena, with a large number of projects targeting very specific issues, as racism or child labour, and trying to push for change by spreading information and proposing solutions. Theatre is an appropriate medium for political discourse because it brings various parts of the population together in a shared space, where they can safely talk about sensitive issues. Theatre-makers are very effectively using these specificities of theatre, which allows them to create spontaneous responses to events, and to make audiences participate in problem-solving debates that benefit the whole community.

In a context in which few young Moroccans vote, because of a lack of trust in the voting process, theatre and performance provide a political voice. Companies such as Dabateatr or Theatre of the Oppressed made it their aim to act as a political stage for the disempowered youth (although often urban and educated): it is a conscious, deliberate choice to fill a gap in terms of political expression, through the use of live performance. One pressing issue however is that these companies are located in urban centres, and despite the many performance festivals around the country, there are very few opportunities (if any) for the most marginalised populations, in particular in the South of the country, to access these performances.

As a result, they are deprived of a platform to make their voices heard, and of a chance to take part in a public debate.

This is a difficult issue for theatre-makers to resolve, due to a lack of funding and of infrastructures outside of big cities, as I will discuss in the next chapter. However, Moroccan theatre-makers have become increasingly efficient at creating their own structures, without relying on state support or being tied to foreign cultural centres. Théâtre Aquarium for instance has its own independent theatre space and more companies are likely to follow suit in the future. Furthermore, it contributes to develop a regular theatre scene whereby actors and directors can create meaningful relationships with their audiences, and work towards common goals on a long-term basis. It inserts theatre within cities and localities, where the theatre building can become a welcoming social space, used for both entertainment and public debate.

Chapter V

Cultural policies and the issue of funding

As I briefly mentioned in the introduction chapter, culture has remained a low priority for the successive governments since Morocco's Independence, resulting in an important lack of cultural spaces and infrastructure. Most cultural activity seems to be concentrated around the Casablanca-Rabat axis, while the rest of the country has little access to culture and is unable to participate in the cultural renewal that has taken place over the last decade. The aim of this chapter is to look at the different sources of funding theatre professionals use to support their activity, and the possible issues of co-optation and dependency that arise. I will first discuss in more depth the history of cultural action in Morocco and how it has influenced the perception of culture. I will also describe the failures of the Moroccan State to adequately support the bulging cultural scene in the Post-Independence era, which explain why artists and theatre-makers have become very reliant on a variety of private sponsors.

Since Independence, the Moroccan cultural fabric has struggled to secure the support it needs to thrive, both from state and private sponsors, but also from audiences. Moroccans are not big consumers of culture in the Western sense: apart from school manuals, only 1000 to 1200 books are published every year (Essalmi, 2012), with only a handful of these belonging to drama. Libraries are rarely upgraded,

cultural centres are left to deteriorate, cinemas are closing down, with little notice from the authorities: Valerie Orlando discusses the worrying decline of the number of cinemas to about 40 today (2011: 157), down from 250 in the 1980s. At the same time, there is clearly a will from young artists, writers and theatre makers to continue practicing despite the difficult conditions and make their voices heard in Morocco and beyond. A large number of political teams have succeeded each other at the helm of cultural affairs since Independence in 1956, each bringing a different conception of culture and its role in society. The development of the cultural scene in Morocco is closely tied to political tendencies and movements during each period of its recent history: sometimes it has been dominated by nationalist ideals, at other times by left-wing philosophies. In the immediate aftermath of Independence, the political scene was dominated by the Istiqlal party, presenting itself as defender of a Moroccan identity based on Arab and Muslim values (Massaia, 2013: 22). Then, the field of culture was reduced to fine arts and it was overseen first by the Ministry of Education, then by the ministry of Tourism and Craftsmanship (Massaia, 2013: 23). The focus was placed on culture as a vehicle for nationalist values, as a reaction against colonial ones. Gonzalo Fernandez Parilla argues that following Independence,

The cultural field and the launching of new journals remained controlled by the nationalists, for whom arabic language and Arabic literature were considered key features of Moroccan national identity as much as Islam (2014: 112).

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, this traditionalist conception of national culture was challenged by the growing influence of leftist groups, who rejected the conservatism and nationalism of the Istiqlal party. During this turbulent period,

alternative forms of culture flourished: in 1966 the journal *Souffles/ Anfas* ('Breaths') was founded under the leadership of poet and playwright Abdellatif Laabi, along with two other writers, Mostafa Nissabouri and Mohammed Khair-eddine. The journal brought together all the creative and intellectual energies of the country by promoting artists, writers, philosophers and others who "aspired to create a new culture vis-à-vis the 'official'" (Fernandez Parrilla, 2014: 118). It was also the first platform to bring together writers of French and Arabic expression (Sefrioui, 2013), supporting emerging writers such as Tahar Ben Jelloun who then went on to have a very successful career. Under the impulse of Laabi and Marxist militant Abraham Serfaty, the journal became increasingly political, being used as a platform of debate by intellectuals. The political context of the time became increasingly tense as two failed coups targeted King Hassan II in 1971 and 1972, affecting his authority as monarch. *Souffles* was banned in 1972, and both Laabi and Serfaty were arrested, tortured and imprisoned by the regime. Theatre-makers were also affected by the repression against artists: Nabyl Lahlou, Tayeb Saddiki and Ahmed Taieb El Ajl saw their plays banned, as I mentioned in the Introduction, for being too politically active and critical of the regime.

It is thus in this oppressive context that King Hassan II finally allocated the overseeing of cultural issues to their own ministry in 1974 with the nomination of Mohammed Bahnini as Minister of Cultural Affairs. It is an interesting timing, as the example of *Souffles* and of theatre plays such as Lahlou's *Les Tortues* (1970) were signs of an increasingly confrontational attitude of artists and intellectuals against the regime. Hence, it appears that the decision to create this state institution aimed to

keep culture under control and to use it to the regime's advantage. Ahmed Massaia observes that some artists were regularly invited to the King's Palace and received favourable treatment (2013: 50), while others were severely repressed. He then asks:

La décision de créer un ministère en charge de la culture dans ce contexte politique particulier signifierait-il une réponse aux revendications des intellectuels et des artistes marocains ou, au contraire, était-ce une autre manière de museler la création pour plus de contrôle et de dirigisme? Tout laissait croire, en fait, que le pouvoir n'entendait nullement concéder à l'élite intellectuelle plus d'espace pour la création et la liberté d'expression car cela ne correspondait pas à ses desseins de consolidation de sa vision idéologiques de la culture et de légitimation du pouvoir. (2013: 51).

The supervision of culture was part of a wider ideological project to cement the legitimacy of the King, rather than aiming at supporting artists and writers.

Mohammed Bahnini remained Minister for 8 years, until 1981; his action focused on protecting the Moroccan heritage, therefore keeping in line with the conservative vision of culture that had dominated since Independence. Since the 1980s, the ministry of Culture and its mission have greatly evolved, with the succession of different political parties at the head of the government. In 1998, the new government led by Abderrahman El Youssoufi, from the USFP party (Union Socialiste et des Forces Populaires), signalled the end of conservative cultural policies. Mohamed Achaari, himself and writer and scholar who had previously been jailed for his political activism, was designated Minister of Culture and kept his role until 2007. Under the influence of the Left, the ministry's relationship to the cultural scene becomes one of responsibility rather than control:

Le rapport à la culture est considéré comme un rapport de responsabilité politique devant répondre aux attentes des intellectuels et des artistes, de plus en plus désireux de participer au développement du pays. (Massaia, 2013: 25)

Achaari's action is generally perceived positively as he put together an ambitious strategy to re-dynamise the cultural field, to open new cultural spaces and to support cultural associations (Massaia, 2013: 90). For instance, the first National Theatre Festival was organised in 1999 in Meknes, giving young theatre-makers an opportunity to perform in front of the intellectual and cultural elites of the country. Nevertheless, the very limited budget of the ministry and the inefficiency (or inexperience) of middle-level officials made it difficult for these projects to come to fruition.

During my fieldwork in 2013, I was able to interview Bouselham Daif, director of the Mennouni Cultural Centre in Meknes and a noted playwright and theatre director. His insight as both a theatre practitioner and an employee of the Ministry of culture was particularly interesting. The Mennouni centre belongs to the State and has a medium-sized theatres space, along with rooms suitable to exhibit fine arts, and it was one of the places where the National Theatre Festival was shown every summer. I asked him a number of questions with regards to the running of the festival and of the cultural centre, and Daif highlighted the difficulties he encountered in terms of communicating with the local council and with the Ministry of Culture¹. This led to the promotion of the festival not being conducted efficiently: that year (2013), I noticed there were no posters advertising the festival around Meknes, as I

¹ Interview conducted in Meknes on the 20th June 2013

had seen in previous years. In addition, no programme was available, which hindered potential audiences' access to performances as they were held in different locations and at different timings every day. It later transpired that the programmes had been printed, but not distributed. This lack of organisation on a local and national level also made it difficult for Daif to sustain a regular activity in the centre, which receives limited funds.

Over the last 15 years, since the arrival of Mohammed VI at the helm of power, the country has taken steps to support the development of the cultural scene, an important draw for tourists, and the renewal of the local heritage. For instance, several large projects have been announced in the last 5 years: there are plans for a grand theatre in Rabat, designed by famed architect Zaha Hadid and currently under construction; the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary art opened its doors in October 2014, and a number of cultural centres have been inaugurated in smaller cities such as El Hajeb and Azilal². Access to culture however remains very unequal throughout the country; Said Bennis describes it as such: “une configuration duelle entre un Maroc culturellement utile et un Maroc culturellement inutile” (2013: 6). Most of the cultural investments, in particular with regards to creation and innovation, are made within the axis Rabat-Casablanca, leaving large proportions of the country with little to no access to cultural productions and events. There is thus an inherent inequality between Moroccans, affecting in particular the poorest parts of the population who would benefit from state-funded initiatives the most.

² The artmap.ma website, created by the Racines cultural association, lists all the cultural spaces in Morocco, including their size and opening date. It is a particularly useful tool to look at their distribution over the country and to compare their sizes.

Despite the good will of some ministers, culture is an area that is tightly controlled by the King and his cronies, as I discussed in the Introduction chapter. Large festivals that can improve the country's image (and therefore that of the regime) drain important funds, and in comparison, the Ministry of Culture's small budget seems insignificant. Funding allocated to the creation of new work is particularly insufficient. The Ministry of Culture attributes two different types of grants allocated yearly for theatre companies: one to support creation of new plays, and one to help their diffusion. Companies applying for this support have to fulfil a number of conditions: they (or their director) have to have at least 5 years of experience in theatre, down to 1 year for ISADAC graduates who are thus acknowledged as professionals. The recipients of the grant to support diffusion have to present a minimum of 10 performances in at least 3 different regions. Furthermore, the text of their play needs to be translated into Arabic or any Moroccan dialect, according to the related decree dating from 2000³. The number of companies benefitting from this system and the amount given out are very limited. In 2011, the Ministry of Culture thus supported the work of 16 theatre companies and helped 14 others to tour their production, in addition to 27 companies benefitting from 'exceptional support' (Bennis, 2013: 2). This funding goes mainly to companies based in big urban centres such as Rabat, Marrakech and Casablanca, but not only;

³ See Ministry of Culture's website:
http://www.minculture.gov.ma/fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=211:arte-conjoint&catid=43&Itemid=131

for the year 2009/2010 for instance, troupes from Khemisset and Jrada (close to the Algerian border), each received 140.000 dh to develop new plays⁴.

These grants are largely inadequate for struggling theatre companies, who are forced to find private sponsors to fund most of their functioning budget. Dabateatr, despite its successes and its influence on the theatre scene, only receives minimal funding; according to director Jaouad Essounani: “La part du soutien public dans nos activités ne dépasse pas le 1%” (quoted in Abou el Aazm, 2012: 70). Hassan Nafali, president of the Moroccan Union of theatre professionals, notes that the grant system was instigated in the 1990s, as Moroccan theatre was going through a deep crisis and audiences were fleeing theatres, and it is not an adequate form of support in the current context (2010). Mouna Belghali has a more positive stance on the grant system, noting that it succeeded in securing a regular theatre season and an average of 360 theatre presentations per year (2010: 61).

In 2015, then-minister of Culture Amine Sbihi announced a budget of 15 million dirhams allocated to theatre, and a total of 71 plays would receive funding. This represents an important step forward for Moroccan theatre, as this budget was of 4.5 million dirhams in 2012. However, most of the works selected are from the Rabat area (28%) and Greater Casablanca (23%)^[11]. This confirms once again the uneven distribution of funds and opportunities throughout the territory in terms of access to culture and artistic events. Ahmed Massaia comments on this situation:

⁴ See Ministry of Culture’s website:

http://www.minculture.gov.ma/fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=320:troupe-subventionnees-a-la-creation-au-titre-de-la-saison-

Alors que le théâtre était jadis diffusé dans les lieux les plus reculés du pays avec des moyens dérisoires mais avec beaucoup d'abnégation et de passion pour ce métier, aujourd'hui, les représentations théâtrales se limitent à quelques villes, excluant ainsi une majorité de citoyens qui n'y ont jamais accès (2013: 139).

This is a major challenge for theatre-makers: a large proportion of Moroccans, although curious about theatre, simply never have the opportunity to attend theatre plays. There are two reasons for this: the lack of adequate performance spaces limits opportunities for touring in smaller cities, and ticket prices can be prohibitive for the poorest members of the public.

In response to these issues, Moroccan artists are increasingly organised and vocal, denouncing the inconsistencies of the State with regards to culture.

Associations such as Racines, based in Casablanca and founded by a group of Moroccan cultural actors, are grassroots projects that empower local artists and support a local cultural movement bypassing official institutions. Racines represents a positive development in Morocco because it aims to evaluate cultural policy in the country, create a repertory of cultural events and promote access to culture in Africa. Most notably, it organises the “États Généraux de la Culture au Maroc” event, a large conference regrouping artists, scholars and cultural actors to discuss cultural policy and make recommendations. The second edition of this event was held in Casablanca in November 2016, and a number of theatre plays were also performed for audiences. Aadel Essaadani was the president of the association from its creation in 2010 until

2015⁵; he is a well-know cultural actor who has campaigned for the rights of artists in Morocco and is a cultural policy expert. His evaluation of state cultural policies is very apt; he notes:

Nous sommes plus dans la diplomatie culturelle et le rayonnement que dans l'élaboration d'une politique culturelle en termes de création, de soutien aux artistes, d'accessibilité. Le Maroc considère la culture comme un élément d'image externe plus que comme un ingrédient du développement humain, social et économique du pays, au service de la stabilité et de la croissance. (quoted in Chevance, 2015)

In order to remedy the shortcomings of the authorities, Moroccan artists and theatre companies have also developed links and partnerships with private sponsors to find the funding necessary to their practice. This type of patronage is increasingly frequent in Morocco: it has provided artists breathing space to build a dynamic cultural scene in the main urban centers of Rabat and Casablanca, but it comes with its own demands. In this context where economic and logistic support is scarce, questions related to freedom of expression, to self-censorship and to the threat of co-optation arise: How vulnerable are artists to co-optation? I will draw on Berit von Der Lippe's definition of co-optation, which she uses in the context of the war on terror and 'liberation' discourses about Muslim women:

Co-optation occurs when basic concepts, during their interaction with other usually stronger policy/ military strategic priorities and objectives, become absorbed and the original meanings of the concepts are neutralized (2011: 20).

⁵ He has since been replaced by economist Raymond Benhaim.

This is a crucial concept to my chapter because the situation of today's theatre-makers, who receive minimal support from official state institutions, obliges them to seek these interactions with influent patrons. How much do theatre productions reflect the ideology of those patrons? I have selected a number of companies who are recipient of grants (and other forms of support) from private or foreign sponsors such as Théâtre de l'Opprimé and Théâtre Aquarium, and I am proposing to compare the aims of their sponsors with the narrative and impact of the plays issued from these collaborations. I argue that the patrons' agenda frame the creative process behind these plays, although theatre-makers usually retain varying degrees of agency. I will first discuss private patronage, starting by analysing the ambivalent role of cultural sponsors close to the regime, whose activities promote the King as patron of the arts whilst simultaneously highlighting the inefficiencies of the government and Ministry of Culture. Next, I will look into NGO support for theatre companies and I will discuss whether artists are bound to follow their sponsors' agenda. Lastly, I will discuss the very influential role of foreign institutes as cultural actors, most importantly the Institut Français network that has branches all over the country.

Private patronage in the shadow of the Makhzen

One of the most fascinating developments of the last 5 years in Morocco is the appearance of a number of private theatres and spaces offering to host young avant-garde theatre companies and musicians. As I will argue, these spaces are all linked to

personalities close to the King and his entourage, and thus are similar to the festivalisation strategy I discussed in the introduction chapter. They frame and regulate the creation of new plays, while seemingly supporting the creation of new, avant-garde plays.

The Renaissance Cinema in Rabat is one of the new spaces in the capital welcoming young artists and offering them an alternative space to show their work. The space, built in the 1930s, was bought by the Hiba Foundation in 2012 and renovated, with a new sound system and technical material. It then re-opened in 2013⁶. It is composed of a large auditorium welcoming up to 384 people, adapted for theatre and performance as well as film projections, and a café with a smaller stage where music concerts are often organised. Despite being a private organisation, the Hiba Foundation, which aims to promote cultural development in the country, was launched by King Mohammed VI himself in 2006. The foundation works across cultural mediums and manages several new cultural spaces in addition to the Renaissance Cinema: a music studio in Casablanca, and the Hiba_Lab, an innovative ‘laboratory’ supporting emerging artists and open to audiences for a variety of cultural events. An exhibition held at Hiba_Lab in 2015, soon after its inauguration, promoted the works of artists from various mediums, all under 40 years old: Jaouad Essounani, director of Dabateatr, young musician Mahmouda, or illustrator Aicha El Beloui⁷.

⁶ See the Foundation’s website: <http://fondationhiba.ma/cinema-rennaissance/>

⁷ An 2015 article by journalist Anouar Oubnichou documented the work of the artists, presenting them as ‘the new faces of contemporary moroccan creation’:

The Hiba foundation aims to collaborate with existing cultural actors, who are behind the cultural renewal of the last decade and suffer from the lack of structure and vision from the Ministry of Culture, as discussed above. Its website states:

La Fondation souhaite coopérer, en bonne intelligence, avec l'ensemble du tissu associatif œuvrant dans le même domaine qu'elle. Elle sera au service des initiatives culturelles et concentrera ses efforts sur les créations contemporaines et les tendances émergentes.⁸

The foundation reflects the large influence of the King not only on culture, but on the social sector as a whole:

Le roi Mohammed VI, grâce aux nombreuses fondations qu'il a créées, est devenu un acteur incontournable du champ social, sans doute le premier et le plus actif (Bencheikh & Khrouz, 2011)

Through a network of associates and private foundations, the King has thus cemented his influence on the development of the cultural scene. This interventionist attitude, with large means and private funds invested in a variety of cultural projects, highlights the inability of the Ministry of Culture to fully support a dynamic scene and to exploit its potential. The *makhzen* thus retains control over culture, while at the same time blaming the government for the failures of its ministry.

The Fondation des arts Vivants is another, relatively new cultural actor that has quickly risen to prominence in Casablanca, producing plays, organising workshops and launching two theatre festivals that are popular with avant-garde

<http://onorient.com/au-hiba-lab-les-nouveaux-visages-de-la-creation-contemporaine-marocaine-7914-20150406>

⁸See the Hiba Foundation's website: <http://fondationhiba.ma/presentation/>

theatre directors: “Théâtre et cultures” and “Allons au théâtre” (Abou el Aazm, 2012: 71). The Foundation was created in 2004, with a clear social dimension:

Elle conçoit le théâtre comme un art qui s’inspire et agit sur la dynamique sociale, qui est nourri par les autres arts de la scène et s’inscrit dans une esthétique en constante évolution.⁹

Again, the foundation supports mainly young artists from the avant-garde, liberal urban scene. In March 2017, it invited a number of theatre-makers to work on a project to explore the work of Tayeb Saddiki, who passed away in 2016. Amongst them were Hamza Boulaiz and Amine Nasseur, two directors from ISADAC who often work with Dabateatr.

Behind the Fondation des Arts Vivants is Nouredine Ayouch, a Moroccan businessman very involved with local politics and civil society; most notably, he launched Zakoura, the first micro-credit foundation in Morocco, in 1995, and he co-founded in 2004 a political collective called “Democracy and Modernity”. Again, he is a figure close to the regime and is said to be a friend and collaborator of the King: Martine Gozlan credits him for “maintaining M6 [Mohammed VI]’s image as ‘king of the poor’” (2011: 106). Often present in the Moroccan media, Ayouch is vocal in terms of defending a particular agenda: I previously mentioned for instance his support for education in Moroccan darija¹⁰. He was also the editor of Kalima magazine in the 1980s, which broke many taboos with regards to sexuality (Zvan Elliott, 2016: 42). In addition, he is the father of popular filmmakers Nabil and

⁹ See ‘Présentation’ on the Fondation’s website: <http://www.fav.ma/#propos>

¹⁰ See p.88.

Hicham Ayouch, who also produce a neo-colonial discourse on contemporary Morocco. I mentioned earlier the debates over Nabil Ayouch's *Zine li Fik* and its representation of Moroccan women; the Ayouch family is part of an intellectual elite that promotes liberal, secular values, but whose views often create controversies.

The Studio des Arts Vivants, also in Casablanca has a more elitist image: it is a private theatre including both a performance space and a theatre school. It often programs performances that have already been successful in France, thus attracting a wealthier, Francophone audience (Abou el Aazm, 2012: 71). It was founded in 2010 by Fihri Kettani, a young businessman who is also the co-owner of the successful Galerie 38 in Casablanca and is fast becoming a major figure of the Moroccan cultural scene. Kettani is from the Casablanca wealthy elite: he studied at the Lycée Lyautey, setting of Laila Marrakchi's infamous film *Marock*. The Kettani family is known in Morocco for owning the Wafabank, which merged in 2003 with the BCM bank (part of the King's ONA group) to become Attijariwafa bank, now the first bank in Morocco. The Studio is a colossal investment of 55 million dirhams, much beyond the annual state budget allocated to theatre. For the year 2015, it programmed two successful plays we discussed in previous chapters: *Dialy* by Théâtre Aquarium and *Bnat Lalla Menana* by Takoon, two shows that have already be proven to attract audiences.

These new private cultural spaces are thus all associated, whether directly or indirectly, with the King, his entourage and his business interests. As the regime did with the musical scene, it is thus increasingly placing the theatre scene under its control through complex networks of wealthy sponsors. This strategy has proved very

efficient, as sponsorships can also be withdrawn if a production doesn't serve its aims. As Cristina Moreno Almeida observes,

The strategy of withdrawing sponsorship provides the Makhzen with a toll to conceal independent cultural productions like magazines, newspapers, or festivals without being held directly responsible or damaging the image of the monarchy. (2013: 322).

Supporting private cultural spaces has another goal: they also serve to neutralise the influence of the PJD's 'art propre' by privileging the liberal, urban creative scene. I have already discussed oppositions between secular and Islamic groups led by the PJD in my second chapter, in the context of Amazigh theatre and its promotion of secular values. This opposition actually has a third actor: the regime, who rejects both: on one hand, its image benefits from an open, flourishing art scene, but on the other hand, the monarchy's legitimacy is partly built on religion and thus it cannot defend secular projects. (Graïouid & Belghazi, 2013: 262). The PJD has been very critical in the past of the festivals under King Mohammed VI's patronage, in particular Mawazine. There have been several controversies in the last few years over the choice of artists invited to perform and their dress¹¹. Said Graïouid and Taieb Belghazi argue:

¹¹ British singer Jessie J and American J-Lo were at the centre of violent debates on 2013 and 2015, because the clothes they wore on stage were deemed indecent by conservative groups. Similarly, British band Placebo creates upset in 2015 for openly defending homosexuality. See news article on these events: http://telquel.ma/2015/06/04/plainte-deposee-atteinte-pudeur-contre-j-lo-mawazine_1450365
<https://www.lereporter.ma/actualite/le-short-de-jessie-j-polemique/>
http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2015/06/03/placebo-gay-maroc-mawazine-2015_n_7500380.html

The power struggle between the State (spearheaded by the monarchy) and the Islamist moderate currents (led by the PJD) translates in the field of culture into a debate about *al-fan anadhif* versus obscurantism (2013: 263).

However, the PJD's position is not relayed by any figure on the arts scene, apart from actor Yassine Ahjam whom I mentioned in the previous chapter. It thus makes it difficult for the party to defend its cultural model against that of the regime and of the intellectual elites.

Manufacturing dissent: NGOs against corruption

NGOs are an important source of funding for theatre companies in Morocco and they have a growing influence, particularly since the Arab uprisings brought to light some of the region's most pressing issues. NGOs are increasingly becoming ideological vehicles, as highlighted by the research of Lisa Castellanos (2008) on the Global Fund for Women (GFW) and that of Syed Jamil Ahmed (2002) researching theatre in Bangladesh. Both scholars are critical towards the work of NGOs in the Third World and examine its impact of the cultural scene. Castellanos argues that there is a "narrative that links the development of contemporary philanthropic institutions, namely donor foundations, within the genealogy of the colonial project" (2008: 1). According to her, the work of these institutions has the result of maintaining 'Third-world' countries in a state of dependency towards their sponsors. It is thus important to examine how NGOs participate in the cultural scene in these countries and how funding is distributed to selected local partners.

What do NGOs expect in return for supporting theatre companies or plays? What is their final aim? On what grounds do they select their partners? How does this patronage fit with the wider aims of the NGO in the country? Through specific examples, I will explore the complex relationship between cultural enterprise and the work of NGOs, and I will discuss how this patronage fits with an imperialist vision of culture.

Morocco is a country that is attracting important funding and interest from big NGOs, much more than its neighbours Algeria or Mauritania for example. This is due to the fact that Morocco is perceived as a strategic ally in the region, for a number of reasons:

With a reform-leaning government, a history of ties to the West during the Cold War, a large European emigrant population that in some cases is becoming radicalized, and the threat of radical groups within the country itself, Morocco is a country many Westerners want to help succeed. (Malka & Alterman, 2006: 61).

It thus receives important sums as direct foreign aid¹², as well as a variety of funds from global NGOs. Oxfam has been implanted in the country since 1994¹³, CARE International (an NGO that fights against poverty) since 2007, and both Amnesty International and the Heinrich Böll Foundation have offices in Rabat¹⁴.

¹² Morocco receives about \$30 million per year from the USA alone (Malka & Alterman, 2006: 62)

¹³ See Oxfam's website: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/countries/morocco>

¹⁴ Both have dedicated websites for Morocco: <http://amnesty.ma/> and <http://ma.boell.org/fr>

This type of events is relevant to our discussion because it echoes debates in Morocco about theatre plays deemed ‘indecent’ and about the ‘clean art’ promoted by Islamic party PJD.

In 2012 and then again in 2013-2014, the Foundation and Théâtre de l’Opprimé (based in Casablanca) collaborated on a project on corruption with Transparency Maroc, a local NGO linked to Transparency International. Several other foreign partners were associated with that project, such as the Dutch and British embassies, UNESCO and Oxfam. The aim of the project, called *Paroles Urgentes* (‘Urgent words’) was to challenge deeply held attitudes towards corruption and to raise awareness about the issues it creates on a wider scale. Corruption is a pressing and complex problem, affecting all aspects of public life: “for years, corruption at all levels had become an accepted practice in Morocco, from petty bribes to big-time graft” (Howe, 2005: 255).

There is little research on the relationships of dependency that these types of patronage create between NGOs with global agendas and small cultural groups struggling to maintain their activity, particularly in the Arab context. Théâtre de l’Opprimé is a new company that works mainly on street theatre projects on specific social issues such as corruption in this instance. It is a company that relies largely on these types of sponsorships to derive an income and develop its activities, since their performances are played in public spaces and are freely available to passersby.

Paroles urgentes was an itinerant caravan travelling across the country, starting from Casablanca. It was composed of street performances, music and oral poetry performances and workshops involving local residents. Actors performed their skits

on busy streets or squares and called out to passers-by to join in, asking them what they thought of the performance and the situation it described, and giving them an opportunity to intervene in the play. How much were these performances driven by their sponsors' agenda? The research of Bangladeshi director Syed Jamil Ahmed is very interesting regarding this matter, as he argues that NGOs are serving globalisation rather than the interests of local populations. He highlights the fact that NGOs are driven by their donors' agenda, noting:

At the 'globalised' level, the donors' agenda are determined by the interest of multinational capital. Thus, 'development' has emerged as a self-perpetuating industry serving the needs of globalisation, which is only imperialism in a 'civilised' guise (2002: 215).

This research can easily be applied to the contemporary Moroccan context. For instance, Michel Chossudovsky mentions the Heinrich Böll Foundation in an article in which he accuses sponsors of "manufacturing dissent"; he writes:

The economic elites – which control major foundations- also oversee the funding of numerous NGOs and civil society organizations, which historically have been involved in the protest movement against the established economic and social order. (2015)

Paroles Urgentes calls for Moroccans to stop participating in corruption on a daily basis, for instance paying in a doctor's office to be seen quicker, or in an administration for paperwork to be dealt with. However, it doesn't really deal with higher levels of corruption, occurring in judicial courts, in police stations or in government offices, which actually has a much deeper impact. More importantly, it doesn't talk about the inherent inequalities of the economic system dominated by

international elites. By pointing the finger at Moroccans themselves for the state of their economy, blaming it on corruption, the NGOs in fact protect economic elites.

Chossudovsky then adds:

The purpose is not to repress dissent, but, on the contrary, to shape and mould the protest movement, to set the outer limits of dissent (2015).

This is a significant accusation because it implies that NGOs, rather than being philanthropic projects, are in fact tools used to develop and maintain networks of influence in the countries in which they operate. By providing funding and entering into dialogues with selected opposition groups and not others, donors effectively co-opt them and give them a status as legitimate dissent. At the same time, they disempower grass-root opposition by not including them in this dialogue, and thus their voices disappear behind those who represent ‘accepted dissent’. For instance, Théâtre de l’Opprimé represents accepted dissent because while it discusses a major problem in Moroccan society, that of corruption, it only addresses it on an individual, rather than structural or economic level. At no point does it threaten the powers in place in any way: it points the finger at generalised, faceless forms of corruption, rather than demanding justice for higher forms of corruption. While this type of ‘dissent’ receives the public’s attention, with the support of these international NGOs, grassroots opposition remains in the background.

Morocco is fast becoming a real battleground over which various international foundations and NGOs try to assert their influence, and the theatre scene is particularly affected by this phenomenon. Several other NGOs have sought out theatre companies to carry out specific projects. The DROSOS Foundation based in

Zurich, Switzerland is a charitable organisation involved in a number of European and MENA countries. They support a large number of projects in Morocco, in particular related to culture and arts: Dabateatr has a 3-year sponsorship to organise drama classes for children in Rabat, Salé and Temara. The aim of this project is to facilitate free expression:

By participating in drama projects, children and youth learn to express themselves in a creative and critical way. The institutional development of the partner organisation is supported.¹⁵

Théâtre Nomade also has a 3-year partnership with this NGO to work on a street theatre project targeting children; the DROSOS Foundation's website notes:

A travelling theatre fosters the social and cultural integration of disadvantaged children and young people. Workshops and public performances provide a platform for exchange for different population groups and promotion of culture¹⁶.

Through these events, the DROSOS foundation thus seeks to use theatre as an educational tool, targeting children and young people who represent a major part of the population and the country's future. The cultural projects they fund are projects that promote Morocco's cultural diversity, in particular Berber languages and traditions, and that reinforce the idea of Morocco as a Berber rather Arabo-Muslim country. There is thus a political dimension to this patronage: they support companies that agree with their worldview and contribute to the dissemination of specific ideas. These foundations are particularly influential in Muslim countries such as Morocco, in which women are systematically presented as victims of a patriarchal, conservative society based on Islamic precepts. This, of course, fits

¹⁵ See Drosos' website: <http://www.drosos.org/en/node/393>

¹⁶ See Drosos: <http://www.drosos.org/en/node/336>

with a wider narrative of women's oppression, which was used to justify Bush's 'War on Terror' as notes Abu-Lughod (2002). In the next section, I will analyse the actions of NGO Global Fund for Women in Morocco and its partnership with feminist theatre group Théâtre Aquarium.

The co-optation of the feminist movement

One of the most interesting cases of NGO patronage I came across while researching theatre in Morocco is that of the Global Fund for Women (GFW)'s support for feminist troupe Théâtre Aquarium. As I mentioned in my chapter on Gender, women's rights are often used as a gauge of how 'progressive' a country appears to be. Associations defending women's rights are many in Morocco, as I mentioned in my third chapter on gender issues. They form part of an increasingly influent civil society, tackling issues themselves without relying on the state, as Marvine Howe observes:

This new society was born as a result of the failure of the state - the palace and a succession of governments and the *Makhzen* - to provide individual security, jobs, schools, and other social structures to keep up with the soaring population and its aspirations (2005: 251).

However, the values they promote are not necessarily shared by the populations they claim to support:

Pro-democracy NGOs are mostly the province of the secular, liberal elite, and their highly abstract discourse and activities (mainly workshops and reports) often seem alien to the real-life concerns of the population at large (Bergh, 2009: 355).

Théâtre Aquarium, whose work we have already discussed in a previous chapter on gender issues, has a particular status because of its militant background. The company has maintained close ties with local and international NGOs since it was founded in 1994. Founder Naima Zitan's interest in feminist issues grew from her involvement with a local association called Jossour, whose aim is to promote the rights of women and their participation in political and social activities. For the year 2009-2010, Théâtre Aquarium was the recipient of a grant from the GFW. According to GFW's website, their support to Théâtre Aquarium was of \$57, 000 (almost three times the amount received by Jossour, \$20,000)¹⁷. This is a considerable amount for a theatre troupe in Morocco, much more important than the Moroccan state's grants, and it is in fact the largest grant given by GFW to any association in Morocco.

International NGOs such as GFW do not necessarily develop projects in target countries themselves, but rather they find 'subcontractors' on the ground, who can provide access to local populations. For instance, GFW has allocated funds to a variety of women's groups in Morocco over the last 10 years, including the Amane Association for the development of Women based in Marrakech, and the Association

¹⁷ See GFW's annual report for 2009- 2010, available online at: <http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/component/content/article/150-annual-report-09-10/1803-grants-list-2009-10>

Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc in Rabat¹⁸. GFW is involved with women's groups in a very large number of countries, from Africa to Asia as well as some Eastern European and South American countries. It describes its mission as such:

Global Fund for Women makes grant and advocates globally for women's human rights. We fund, amplify, connect and sustain women's organizations and women's human rights movements, and create digital advocacy campaigns on critical global issues for women and girls. (...) As of 5/7/2015, the Global Fund for Women has made a total of 10, 073 grants for \$121, 513, 236, 59 to 4, 782 organizations in 175 countries.¹⁹

GFW promotes women's sexual freedom and health, which is part of the issues it seeks to address: "We believe women and girls have the fundamental right to control their own bodies."²⁰ This is of course a contentious issue in Morocco where premarital relationships remain illegal for instance, as we discussed earlier in the context of the play *Dialy*.

Following receipt of this grant, Théâtre Aquarium was able to develop its activities and worked on several plays relating to GFW objectives. Its 2010 play *Rouge + Bleu = Violet* touched upon the sensitive topic of domestic violence, which is an issue GFW is invested with. Its following play, *Tata Mbarka*, addressed the taboo of the 'little maids', children working for wealthy families and sometimes mistreated or prevented from attending school. During 2012, it held a weekly

¹⁸ A list of the groups GFW is involved with is available on its website: <http://globalfw.nonprofitsoapbox.com/news/opinion/910-mapping-the-womens-movement-through-moroccan-lens>

¹⁹ See GFW's website: <http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/what-we-do>

²⁰ See GFW'S website, 'Key Issues' <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/key-issues/>

workshop with local women, to collect material for their project *Dialy*. In many ways, the aims of Théâtre Aquarium as a feminist company collude with the GFW's agenda, with both being concerned with women's health, safety and sexual freedom.

However, the GFW's funding history in Morocco shows that they do not particularly support agencies working in the most impoverished locations, or refuges for women victims of violence. Rather, it allocates funds to activist feminist groups that share its secular ethos and are able to disseminate its values, as does Théâtre Aquarium through its performances. Sociologist Lisa Castellanos is highly critical of this type of philanthropy, mostly from large NGOs based in America and Europe. She argues that because GFW promotes a global vision for women, based on Western feminist ideals, it in fact reifies the non-Western woman. She writes:

This discourse of development, whether intentional or not, discursively colonizes those of the third world and global south (2008: 3).

I have already mentioned the controversies that arose from Théâtre Aquarium's play *Dialy*, and I have argued that despite the company having interviewed a number of Moroccan women to collect their views on female sexuality, the play didn't give them agency and recognition. Therefore, although Théâtre Aquarium claims to seek gender equality in Morocco, it does so from a secular, universalist perspective, ignoring both the real needs and wishes of the women it claims to 'educate'. In a previous article (2013), I looked at the company's 2004 play *Coquelicots*, which was devised to discuss the Moudawana reforms and the new rights women derived from it. Director Naima Zitan defines her goal with this play as 'to explain to women what their rights are now' (cited in Gianturco, 2007: 56). It thus explicitly placed her and her team in a

position of superiority compared to their audiences, as urban, educated women who belong to an artistic elite. The play toured the country, targeting rural areas where women have less access to legal support, but it didn't address other issues that often arise in these communities and place women in vulnerable situations. For instance, it is well documented that many couples have a 'fatiha' marriage, which means they organise a religious ceremony without notifying relevant state authorities²¹. This can then make it very difficult for a woman to assert her rights in case of divorce, and the Moudawana reforms in such cases would be irrelevant. In addition, it glosses over the fact that many Moroccans originally rejected the Moudawana, not because they were ignorant, but because they disagreed with some of its articles as Katja Zvan Elliott argues:

A surprisingly large percentage of women were opposed to the stipulation that women upon reaching majority age can marry without their legal tutor; women surveyed still opposed the right of women to work after getting married; and some were also of the opinion that husbands have the right to hit their wives in order to improve their behaviour. (2009: 222)

Théâtre Aquarium also works with a number of other NGOs: British Oxfam, Spanish Fundacio Desenvolupament Comunitari, the French and American embassies in Morocco and German GTZ (German Technical Cooperation) are listed on its website as partners, as well as Unifem (United Nations Development Fund for Women). It is

²¹ A recent study entitled 'The Marriage of underage girls in Morocco' (2017), published by association La Voix de la femme Amazighe, mentions this issue and notes that there is a great number of these marriages in rural areas, but also in cities (2017: 70). Full report available here: <https://www.euromedwomen.foundation/pg/en/documents/view/7495/the-marriage-of-underage-girls-in-morocco>

also sponsored by a number of state institutions such as INDH (National Initiative for Human Development, launched by King Mohammed VI in 2005) and the Ministry of Moroccans residing abroad. The troupe, that recently celebrated its 20th anniversary, demonstrates how much securing funding has become a balancing act between the agendas and demands of various sponsors, both state and independent. Théâtre Aquarium is evidently very efficient at this, tackling current issues and gaining attention for its daring work.

Most of these organisations, hailing from Europe or the United States, clearly approach ‘Third World’ from a neocolonial perspective, as notes Lisa Castellanos:

Philanthropic foundations, to one degree or another, continue the work of the colonial project’s dual mandate of “saving and civilizing” (2008: 5).

These charities use funds to gain leverage in terms of propagating the values they defend, such as secularism or sexual freedom. The projects they organise are based on a charitable basis, not from a ‘collaborative’ one: there is thus no equal partnership here between local recipients and their sponsors, but rather, the former are made to depend on the latter’s ‘generosity’. In many ways, international NGOs strengthen the hierarchy through which countries such as Morocco are considered ‘Third World’: they support small-scale projects defending their worldview on key issues such as human rights or minority rights, but they fail to address the roots of poverty and inequalities. This goes back to what I have argued in the previous section: NGOs are ultimately bound to follow their donors’ agenda, which often coincides with the economic interests of multinationals. A further issue, relevant in the Moroccan context, is that indigenous feminist activists might be placed in danger through the work they do in collaboration with NGOs. The

female actresses of the play *Dialy* for instance received death threats²² because of the contentious theme of the play, and it is a frequent occurrence for women's rights activists to receive such threats (Sater, 2009: 68). NGOs are thus sponsoring local women to collaborate on projects that are often controversial, at the expense of these women's safety. There is certainly no easy solution to these issues but Morocco does benefit from a network of local, respected associations working on the ground to offer support and slowly change attitudes towards women. As an example, the AMPF (Association Marocaine de Planification Familiale), founded in 1971, aims to provide access to contraception and promote sexual health, but it also tackles more controversial issues such as AIDS and abortion. These culturally sensitive approaches, taking into account the wishes of local populations rather than 'imposing' change upon them, seem more successful in the long term.

Foreign cultural institutes as actors of 'progress'

Since Morocco's Independence in 1962, the state has maintained very close ties with former colonial powers, mainly France and Spain. In a study of the Arab Spring's background, Antoni Abat i Ninet and Mark Tushnet observe that Independence "did not end the pattern of relations between the new state and the metropolis" (2015: 105), further adding:

²² See Hamid Al-Mahdawi, 2013: <http://www.maghress.com/lakome/26819>

Independence was conditioned upon permanent strategic, political, diplomatic, economic and cultural bonds. (...) The interdependence was seen by many sectors of the new state as a new form of submission to the former colonizer. (2015: 105)

As part of these “cultural bonds”, the French Institute network in Morocco or IFM (Institut français du Maroc) has had a major influence on the cultural life of the country. Through its 12 centres across the country, the IFM offers a large and varied cultural programme (800 events a year according to its website²³), promoting French culture and Francophonie. This unique network, which also exists in other former colonies such as Tunisia, Algeria, Cameroon, Congo or Cambodia, is affiliated to the French Foreign Ministry rather than the Ministry of Culture. A strategic report published by the Foreign Ministry in 2005 highlights the need to promote French language and ideas, noting that:

Le soutien à la présence française dans le débat d'idées à l'étranger a vocation à se concentrer sur les questions touchant, d'une part, aux grands enjeux des sociétés en transition (développement économique, Etat de droit et démocratie, laïcité, gestion des identités communautaires, mutations du sujet...), d'autre part, aux problèmes que pose la nouvelle société internationale (Berthon, Manceau & Humbaire, 2005: 10)

These aims are reflected in the choice of events organised by the network across its various branches: there are regular conferences promoting french laïcité, particularly in Muslim countries (recently organised in Turkey²⁴, Tunisia²⁵ and Algeria²⁶).

²³ See Institut Français du Maroc's website, 'Évènements Culturels': <https://if-maroc.org/evenements-culturels/>

²⁴ 'Fondations et refondations de la laïcité', 2016, Istanbul: <http://iflivre.institutfrancais.com/ifr/actualites/institut-francais/nuit-idees-istanbul>

This political vision of culture, driven by a heavy investment of the State in cultural issues, is a reflection of France's wider vision of patronage. The French Ministry of Culture has historically promoted a more hands-on approach in its dealings with its arts scene than the Anglo-Saxon model. Susan Collard speaks of "a highly interventionist cultural policy designed to reflect national objectives" (2014: 38). As France's cultural influence waned over the years, the country has remained nostalgic of its imperial history, and this forms the basis of its cultural policy abroad (Gerbault, 2008: 13). As part of this strategy, the French Institute has long held a position of influence and prestige in Moroccan society, positing French values as a model of modernity and progress; Moroccan middle classes traditionally send their children to learn French there. (Bellouche, 2007: 16). The network is also known to support young artists and musicians, and was notably a sponsor of the very popular L'Boulevard festival in Casablanca:

In terms of the institutional support that the Boulevard has generated for its activities over the years, the Casablanca Institut français has undoubtedly played a key role in supporting the festival. (Kiwani & Meinhof, 2011: 160)

In the last couple of years however, it has come under criticism: journalist Ammar Kessab notes that they are 'quasi- boycotted in Tunis and Rabat' (2014), supposedly because of the staff's arrogance towards local artists.

²⁵ 'D'une croyance à l'autre: le cas de l'Islam', 2013, Tunis:
<https://www.institutfrancais-tunisie.com/?q=node/4575>

²⁶ 'Religions et Laïcité', 2015, Algiers: <http://www.if-algerie.com/alger/agenda-culturel/religions-et-laicite>

The French institute in Rabat in particular is at the forefront of the Moroccan theatre scene: it was an early supporter of the theatre group Dabateatr, whose political plays such as *Il/ Huwa* (which we discussed in the second chapter), seemed in line with the IFM's aim of promoting democracy. Dabateatr was invited to present their monthly festival there from 2009 to 2013, a unique opportunity for the actors to meet new audiences. This festival, Dabateatr Citoyen ('Dabateatr Citizen'), was the result of the collaboration between director Jaouad Essounani and playwright Driss Ksikes, who has a longstanding relationship with the French Institute. Ksikes, as a Francophone author, regularly presents his work at the Institute and is well acquainted with the Francophone intellectual scene; his play *Pas de Mémoire*, *Mémoire de Pas* was previously performed there in 1999. During the 4 years of Dabateatr's residency at the Institute, it created a new cultural dynamic in Rabat, and promoted many young artists, musicians and theatre companies through an open stage policy. This was extended to foreign artists: Tunisian theatre-maker Aicha Ayoub and choreographer Sofiane Ouissi for instance were invited to present their work as part of the monthly festival.

Dabateatr Citoyen was composed of a main performance night called *Lkhbar fil masrah*, (literally 'The news in the theatre') during which actors of the troupe performed short comical skits usually based on current national and international news, and social issues relevant to their audiences. Recurrent themes included the role of culture in society, religion, politics and freedom of expression. In late 2011 for instance, the group parodied the legislative elections that were won by the PJD: they mocked political slogans and reproduced political debates to ridicule the various

parties. With a group of four actors all wearing the same white shirts and repeating meaningless slogans, they seemed to suggest that the different parties were all similar in their desperate bid for power, and their inability to answer Moroccans' concerns.

In February 2012, the festival focused on the theme of suicide, a year after the death of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia and in a context of increasing public suicide attempts.

Journalist John Thorne describes a “trend in self-immolations since Bouazizi died of his burns in January 2011” (2012), affecting the whole Maghreb. This was, and still is a very sensitive issue in the country, as it reflects the desperation of a large number of young people unable to secure real employment. This choice of theme reflects the desire of Essounani to create a space of debate and political expression through theatre. He defines the purpose of his work as such: “réhabiliter le théâtre dans son acception antique de lieu de concertation, d'expression et de controverse publique” (quoted in Bouithy, 2009).

The reference to antique theatre is interesting because it highlights the function of drama as a communal, political activity, rather than simply as a form of entertainment. Antique Athens operated a system of “participatory democracy” (Rehm, 2003: 3) where speakers performed in outdoor theatres to gather support from the public, mirroring “the relationship between actors and spectators” (Rehm, 2003: 4). The skits also bear resemblance to popular performance types such as *bsat* (which we described in the Introduction) in their reliance on humour to address social issues and critique the powers in place. When I interviewed Essounani in 2010, he defended his vision for a “democratic, accessible theatre” and observed that his audiences came

from all backgrounds, even travelling in from other cities²⁷. However, this is refuted by Bennis who notes that the shows mainly attracted middle class audiences rather than touching more popular public (2016: 3), arguably because they were performed at the elitist space of the French Institute. This prevented these shows from having a wider impact, and from creating a truly inclusive space.

In addition, the liberal views promoted by the company with the support of the French Institute were sometimes at odds with that of their audiences, creating heated debates. Catherine Miller and Selwa Abou El Aazm (ex-coordinator of Dabateatr) describe the discomfort of some spectators at some scenes and language used, noting:

Le public est partagé entre ceux qui pensent que le théâtre doit respecter les valeurs morales de la société marocaine et ceux qui pensent qu'il faut justement bousculer ces valeurs et ces frontières. (...) La confidentialité de la salle Gérard Philippe permet ainsi de franchir des lignes rouges qui passeraient difficilement ailleurs. (Miller & Abou El Aazm, 2014)

It is however notable that the company gave an opportunity for these opinions to be voiced, despite not always agreeing with the company's stance. In fact, the debates organised by Dabateatr very often touched upon the issue of freedom of expression, and as I witnessed myself while on fieldwork, participants were able to express shock or disagreement at some scenes, or some content created by the company. This was particularly frequent around issues related to religion for instance. By fostering this dialogue, the company made of its theatre a social place, where the local community could participate in political debate with each other freely. Essounani had a clear

²⁷ Interview conducted in Meknes in June 2010

vision of theatre being inserted in the city, serving its people; he expressed this to me in a 2010 interview, stating: “On touche à un travail de proximité”²⁸. In another interview, he further added:

Pour moi, le théâtre n’est pas que le spectacle mais un ancrage dans la société, la territorialité. On veut associer le cercle de partenaires, le quartier et plus loin la ville, le pays (quoted in Miller, 2010: 10).

He insisted on setting low-ticket prices (20dh, 10dh for students) to ensure that the festival was accessible to all, which was much below the usual prices for performances at the Institute (between 50 and 70dh depending on one’s membership of the Institute). Dabateatr thus tried to create an inclusive space, open to all and addressing audiences in Moroccan darija rather than French, although its location in the French Institute prevented it from reaching out to the most disempowered parts of the population. Catherine Miller and Selwa Abou el Aazm make a very insightful evaluation of Dabacitoyen as a whole:

DTC [Dabateatr Citoyen] est aussi restée une expérience relativement confidentielle, qui faute de lieu propre n’a pas pu s’ancrer dans un quartier et n’a que très très marginalement “remis le théâtre qu Coeur de la cité”. Installé à l’Institut français ou au Goethe Institut, DTC n’a pas drainé un public populaire. (2014: 24)

Financially, the artists of Dabateatr remained in a precarious situation: they had free use of the small Gérard Philippe room at the French Institute to rehearse and perform, but didn’t receive any payment. They were originally offered a renewable 2-year

²⁸ Interview conducted in July 2010 in Meknes.

residency²⁹ by the Institute's director François-Xavier Adam, but they quickly encountered issues as they were managed by a team of volunteers with very little means (Mrabet, 2009). Journalist Ayla Mrabet noted at the time that the company functioned with less than 2000 dirhams per night (2009). From 2011, with the financial help of the Dutch embassy and the DROSOS foundation³⁰, they were able to stabilise their activity and to start paying a small salary to staff and actors (Miller & Abou el Aazm, 2014: 10). After a change in the direction of the Institute, with a new team less interested in the troupe's work (Miller & Abou el Aazm, 2014: 11), Dabateatr's partnership with the French Institute came to an end.

It is very interesting however that during this 4-year residency at the Institute, Dabateatr was seemingly completely free to discuss sensitive, political topic, particularly around the time of the Arab Spring. For instance, they invited bloggers close to the 20th February movement. This is despite the official French position: France always maintained very close ties with the Ben Ali regime and the Moroccan monarchy in particular, and was initially critical of the demonstrators³¹. Nevertheless, the general discourse of Dabateatr in terms of calling for liberalisation and democratisation and its open critique of religious values are subtly in line with French interests. As Kiwan and Meinhof highlight,

²⁹ See Ayla Mrabet, 'Culture. Coups de théâtre'; Tel Quel : http://w.telquel-online.com/archives/407/mage_culture_407.shtml

³⁰ The DROSOS foundation is a Zurich-based NGO working mainly in the MENA region and aiming to fight poverty and promote access to health, education and culture.

³¹ The French regime, headed at the time by President Sarkozy, very much misinterpreted the level of frustration and anger that motivated North Africans to take to the streets, and it initially offered support to the Ben Ali regime. In Morocco, Alain Juppé (then French Foreign minister), confirmed its support for the monarchy by describing the country and its new constitution as a "model" (Bauchard, 2013: 265).

The lack of clarity concerning how the original remit of such nationally defined organizations such as the Institut français, the British Council and indeed the Goethe-Institut (the promotion of French, British and German cultures abroad) is articulated with the more recent orientations which place more emphasis on the development of the cultures/cultural scenes of the countries of the South (2011: 154).

After its experience at the Institut Français, Dabateatr set up another monthly festival called *La3bodaba* ('They are playing now'), this time hosted by the Goethe-Institut. The Institute, based in Rabat, has been getting more involved with the Moroccan arts scene since the Arab Spring. It supported a large number of plays by Dabateatr, Théâtre de l'Opprimé in Rabat, Théâtre Nomade, amongst other artists and musicians. It is a fascinating development reflecting the growing influence of Germany in Morocco and beyond; while I have not had the opportunity to visit the Institut, I am looking forward to seeing more research on this topic in the future.

Conclusion

While I have drawn a dire picture of the Moroccan State's support of cultural workers and artists, theatre-makers are efficiently approaching various institutions and patrons in order to receive the funding they need, as well as access to spaces and other resources. This is a credit to their incredible tenacity and dynamism: the development of a thriving cultural scene in Rabat in particular is mainly due to a number of theatre companies tirelessly developing their activities and seeking out

collaborations with embassies, international NGOs, foreign cultural institutes as well as local cultural actors. Relations between the State and cultural actors remain complex: while there have been obvious efforts from the Ministry of Culture to increase the budget allocated to theatre and offer new opportunities to theatre professionals, there is still a lack of vision for Moroccan theatre as a whole. In particular, the need for regional companies and smaller local performance spaces has still not been addressed, despite much discussion about it. Bouselham Daif highlighted this as a main priority, noting:

Comment developper le théâtre au Maroc? Les communes doivent aider le theatre, les autres ministères en dehors du ministère de la culture ...il faut une volonté politique de l'état tout entier.³²

The reliance on the Ministry of Culture, rather than giving authority and funding to local councils to oversee and support their own cultural scene, hinders the development of Moroccan scene as a whole. The fact that the renewal of Moroccan theatre remains an urban phenomenon strengthens the sense of a 'cultural segregation', a cultural, social and political renewal from which a large part of the population, the most vulnerable and disenfranchised, is left out.

The influence of foreign cultural institutes and organisations is putting further pressure on small theatre companies who are reliant on their support to create new work and sustain their activity. France in particular plays a very important role as a patron, despite its fading attraction: its cultural centres throughout the country both disseminate French culture and productions in French, and promote young emerging

³² Interview with Bouselham Daif, conducted in Meknes in June 2013.

artists. Furthermore, the increasing involvement of humanitarian NGOs in cultural affairs in the Third World brings an additional layer of complexity for artists who now have to consider issues such as education, human rights or environmental matters in their work in order to qualify for funding.

Despite these difficulties, Moroccan theatre is making slow, but steady progress in terms of creating a stable, economically viable scene, using all the tools at their disposal. Théâtre Aquarium has its own performance space, and Dabateatr also managed a small space during 2014-2015 where it could perform its plays and showcase young artists, although it closed down because of lack of funding. Theatre-makers are also trying to make their work more accessible, by reducing ticket prices and looking at new ways to attract audiences. Abou el Aazm notes for instance that a new system of online ticket sales is strengthening this new trend of private cultural entrepreneurship (2012: 71). Online technologies have had a positive impact on the development of a stable audience: through social media in particular, small theatre companies can keep potential audiences informed of their agenda, and can interact with them (collecting feedback for instance). All the troupes mentioned in this thesis have active Facebook pages, where they post pictures and press reviews of their work, and other pieces of informations related to theatre more generally.³³ In the absence of a dedicated press and theatre critique, it is particularly important for these companies to develop their online presence and reach out to audiences.

³³ Dabateatr's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/PAGE.DABATEATR/>
Théâtre Aquarium: <https://www.facebook.com/TheatreAquarium/>
Théâtre de l'Opprimé in Casablanca: <https://www.facebook.com/Masra7Lme7gour/>

Conclusion

This thesis set out to evaluate the social and political impact of contemporary Moroccan theatre and its capacity to instigate change by exploring a number of problematic areas such as identity, gender or memory. It interrogates the power of theatre and performance as a social and political medium. It also aimed to critique Morocco's image as a country "in transition", a democratic 'success story' in a region marked by violence and instability. Through the analysis of a number of selected plays mirroring current trends in Moroccan society, my research sought to develop a new understanding of the country and its current social and political situation, examining performance not only as a cultural product, but also as a social one. I argue that theatre caters to specific needs of the population to stage their grievances and to re-enact scenes of violence, of struggle or of despair in order to regain control over their destinies. Through movement, dance and use of speech, actors convey messages and respond to situations much beyond the scope of their character or their performance: they are a representation of human behaviours and cultures. As writes Deborah Kapchan:

Performances are aesthetic practices - patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment - whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities (1995: 479).

The performances I studied in the present thesis are ones that capture profound changes in terms of how Moroccans conceive themselves as a society, and as part of a globalising world. The Arab Spring uprisings highlighted the failure of the State to

address rising inequalities, poverty, corruption, and crucially the marginalisation of a large proportion of the youth. It also failed to create a sense of unity in a country that is increasingly divided along class lines, but also geographically and linguistically.

While King Mohammed VI appeared at first to respond to the demands of the protestors, the changes operated through the Constitution of 2011 and the following general elections were in fact concessions made to the demonstrators, and were destined to protect the long-term future of the monarchy.

As part of my research, I have looked at texts and oral literature expressed in a variety of languages, all reflecting different aspects of Moroccan society. I have compared material in French or Moroccan Arabic (darija), on the basis that they emerge from and mirror the same, although multifaceted, environment: that of a globalising, post-colonial Morocco, in which a large range of cultural, social, and religious practices evolve side by side. The multilingual approach I adopted is unique: in the wider context of postcolonial studies, it sought to challenge the status quo dividing North Africa between two literary traditions along linguistic barriers.. The very premise of this research was the assumption that regardless of the language they use, theatre plays (and by extension literature) reflect the same reality, the same context. My findings show that both theatre directors and playwrights will often go back and forth between languages according to their audience, their medium, the theme they are discussing or their publisher, sometimes intertwining several languages within the same play (as is the case with Driss Ksikes's play *Huwa*, most notably).

I sought to examine the very dynamic and socially aware theatre scene in Morocco, with young theatre-makers who regularly address taboo issues and to use theatre as a platform for dissenting action. From suicide to sexuality, from religion to human rights, the plays I have used discuss a very large array of themes reflecting the concerns of many Moroccans. These productions are both local in their language and their narratives, and global in their aesthetics and techniques. While many would assume theatre to be a dying medium, the renewal of theatre in Morocco is a micro-phenomenon attracting audiences from varied backgrounds and testing the limits of free expression. In a wider context of instability in the region and with the failed expectations of the Arab Spring uprisings, theatre-makers are establishing themselves as an authentic form of dissidence, challenging some of the King's and the government's policies in spite of co-optation attempts that limit their discourse.

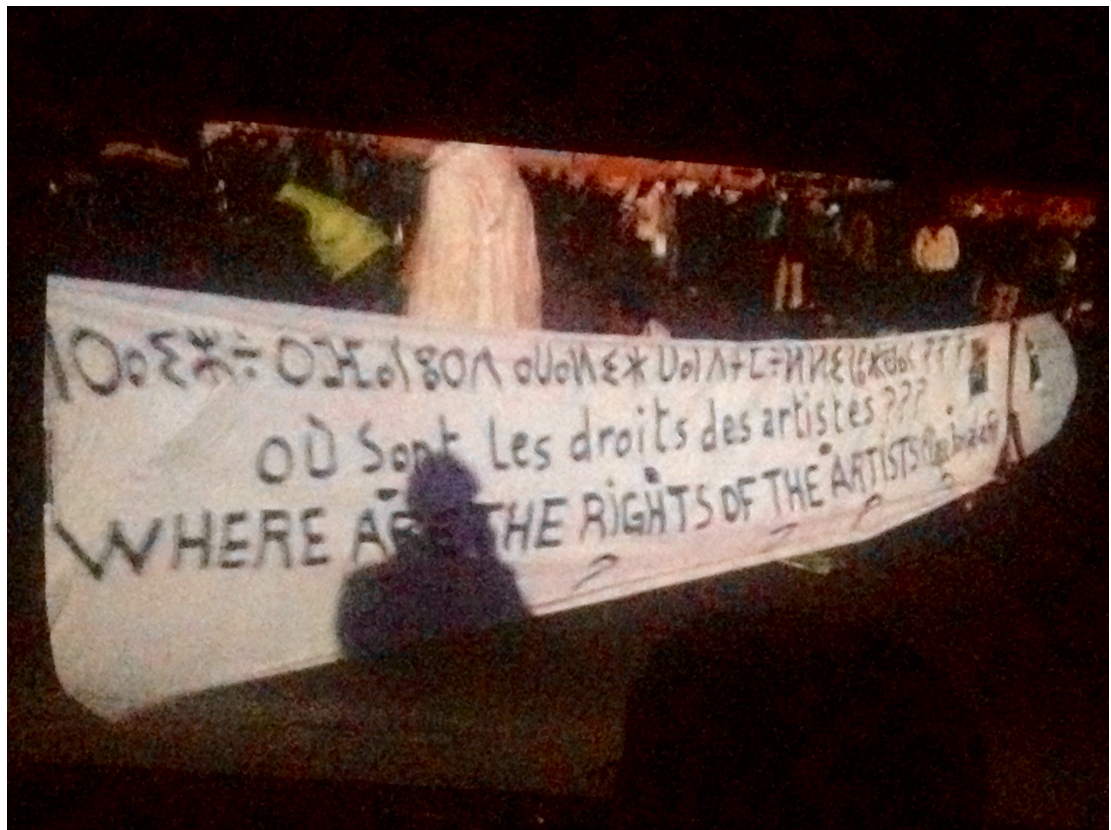
Despite a clear lack of resources, of public funding and of opportunities to reach wider audiences, a number of companies such as Théâtre Aquarium and Dabateatr have raised funds to open independent spaces and gain the support of patrons and now offer regular productions, turning Rabat and Casablanca into cultural hubs. In turn, they have supported less established actors and directors by offering them a platform and opportunities, particularly through events such as *Daba citoyen* that fostered a sense of community amongst artists from various mediums. They are contributing to the creation of an open, daring artistic scene that provides much needed spaces of expression, and that continuously seeks to engage the Moroccan public on social and political issues. Because of their focus on an interactive form of theatre in which audiences can become active participants, they have turned

performance into a tool of empowerment for many alienated young Moroccans who remain distrustful of the electoral process. Although I have argued that this empowerment is framed by the context in which it is presented and by the wider discourse it is part of, it is undeniably an achievement for theatre-makers to mobilise audiences on sensitive issues.

Finally, my research examined the issue of funding and cultural policy, to present theatre not as an isolated creative expression, but as part of a wide cultural and economic network often driven by sponsors and institutions, rather than by artists. I believe an essential part of my thesis is to address the political and economical context of culture, that has a defining impact of theatre and the arts scene more generally, but that is rarely addressed by critics and researchers. As I have tried to demonstrate, it is necessary for theatre companies to seek sponsorships and funding in order to continue their activities, and this makes them vulnerable to cooptation. The scope of the present thesis is limited to Morocco and to the last 20 years, but I believe the impact of failed cultural policies and the influence of sponsors, in particular in the wider Arab world, is an area of research that is in need of more attention.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Performance of *ḥimār laīl bil-ḥalqa* by company Warchat al-Ibdaa
Drama as part of the National Theatre Festival, Meknes, 6th June 2013 (my pictures)





Appendix 2: Performance of *Māmā tṣabḥī ‘alā khayr* by Tokos 4 directed by Jaouad Essounani, Meknes, June 2010 (my picture)



Appendix 3: Pictures from the play *Bnat Lalla Mennana*, 2010 (screenshots from a TV diffusion of the play)



Appendix 4: Performance of the play *Dialy* by Théâtre Aquarium, 2014
Promotional pictures by Alice Dufour-Féronce





Appendix 5: Pictures from the performance *dumū` bi khul* by Théâtre Anfas, direction Asmaa Hourì, as part of the National Theatre Festival, Meknes, 10th June 2013 (my pictures)



Promotional picture for *dumū' bi khul* , credit: Théâtre Anfas



© Alice Dufour-Feronce

Appendix 6: Pictures from the theatre forum event “Les petites bonnes” organised by Théâtre Aquarium, 16th May 2013, Rabat-Salé (my pictures)



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