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Women's preservation of Oral Culture in *Imilchil*: The Festival of Marriage as a Case Study



Siham FADIL*

University Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Dhar Lmhraz, Fez, Morocco.

Abstract

Moroccan women, like others in different parts of the world, contribute to the education of generations and the transmission of the oral heritage through tales, poems and proverbs riddles. They also uphold the physical heritage such as clothes, textile and jewellery. Since the intangible and oral heritage in Morocco varies from one area to another, focus will be put on the Imilchil area, where the festival of marriage is held. Women in this region play a key role in preserving the Amazigh cultural heritage. They are educators and models that guide the coming generations and reinforce their identity.

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Fatima Sadiqi
Souad Slaoui

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1 INTRODUCTION

Culture is a set of intellectual and cultural characteristics that distinguish a group of people one from another. Its transmission through generation to another encourages taking advantage of the ancestors' experiences. Hence, preserving culture from loss and extinction necessitates keeping it alive in the minds of all people seeking to protect their identity from alienation.

Oral culture is a major means of communication in ancient Morocco. The poems, proverbs and legends are passed over from one tribe to another and from one generation to the next through oral narratives. The narrator is considered to be of a distinct position in his tribe as he possesses a distinguished verbal ability and a strong memory capable of sharing oral arts with others. The majority of what is received from this oral literature revolves around hyperbolic legends where reality is mingled with myth.

The Tamazight oral literature in its start was not so much different from the rest of oral arts. It encompasses proverbs, folkloric songs and popular legends of Amazigh heroes. Tamazight is still perceived to be an

essentially oral language that is used to transmit a rich oral culture of songs, proverbs and stories. In this respect, Fatima Sadiqi associates orality to languages namely colloquial Arabic and Tamazight. She expounds,

The unique place of orality in the Moroccan culture is largely due to the fact that the two mother tongues used in this country (Moroccan Arabic and Berber) are oral. The tight link between non-written mother tongues and orality positions the latter at the center of the Moroccan speech community's sensory experience. As such, orality becomes a powerful system of communication that deeply shapes the way visual and non-visual representations of cultural roles (...) are constructed, maintained and perpetuated (Sadiqi, 2003).

However, she does not forget to link it strongly to women too being the major channel via which the Moroccan heritage is transmitted –they are in charge of transferring oral tradition since they remain confined to the domestic sphere. In this sense, Fatima Sadiqi has pointed out that:

* Author address for correspondence
PO. BOX- 9713, Hay El Amal, Salé, 17800, Morocco.
Tel.: +212 662127156
E-mails: siham7fadil@gmail.com
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Oral literature is generally associated with women in Morocco. Moroccan society assigns the role of guarding oral literature to women and expects them to carry out this role in the process of raising their children by keeping and transmitting the traditions that characterize Moroccan culture, and by maintaining and symbolizing these traditions. Moroccan women are conscious of the significance of this role and they use oral literature to express their inner selves (Sadiqi, 2003).

Most of the Amazigh oral arts are transmitted by women to women to depict their lives; however, the majority of these arts seem to uphold the traditional values of the dominant patriarchal culture which are biased against them. Yet, in the meantime, it unearths the buried voices of women and their role that stands out as a guardian of ancestral culture.

The main objective of this research is to explore the aspects of women's transmission of oral culture in the so far and neglected regions of Morocco, namely *Imilchil*. However, little attention is paid to them as they are purely victims in a patriarchal society replete with cruel and unjust inequalities. Yet, their being confined to the domestic sphere has not prevented them to transmit oral traditions and at the same time preserving the image of that strong female who can bear the responsibility of the family.

Despite this inferiority and bad living conditions-economic, natural and educational- and shouldering the burden of responsibility in public and private domains, the women of *Ait Hdidou* have been able to engage themselves, even in silence, in promulgating cultural norms of *Imilchil* and the transmission of its cultural material through vocal utterances.

To achieve this aim, interview was one kind of techniques adopted in this article. I used to meet the respondents outside the tents where the festival takes place (a relaxed and informal setting). The interviews used to last between one and three hours whereby I used the tape recorder to register the conversations. The observation which I carried out with *Ait Hdidou* region was often combined with individual interviews.

According to the style followed in designing the interview, being a qualitative technique in data collection, I prepared 19 open-ended questions through which I approached the role of women in transmitting Moroccan culture and more specifically its most common forms: poems, proverbs and folktales that reflect the spirits of the local community. Added to this, the questions are related to the role of women in transmitting this cultural heritage from one generation to another. In the same vein of argumentation, I formulated questions about the extent to which it could influence the everyday life of the present generation. At the end, I addressed to the informants questions on the place women occupy in the frequently used popular proverbs.

Concerning the overall organization of the article, it gives an overview on the Amazigh culture. Then, the role of women in transmitting poetry in the region of *Imilchil* is explored (Table 1). The proverbs that are frequently used in the region are tackled and some of them are expounded. Folktales that are the oldest oral cultural heritage are discussed and the legend of *issli* and *Tisslit* is pointed out as an example. At the end, the festival of marriage in *Imilchil* is drawn as a theatre where all the aforementioned forms of oral culture are exposed.

2 AMAZIGH CULTURE

The *Amazigh* culture is largely expanded in Morocco and consists of creative patterns that reflect the *Amazigh* life. Since cultural heritage in *Imilchil*¹ is an integral part of *Amazigh* folklore, we can unveil the characteristics of this region socially, economically and culturally. Besides, "cultural patterns of the tribe had been influenced by its historical changes. This is due to drought, hunger disease and war; the thing that results in change of their places searching for an area that provides better living conditions" (Ait, 2002a).

Women were very significant in the community. Moreover, to talk about them and their role in preserving popular culture is to talk about a memory that stores the glories of the tournaments, the habits and traditions of human life. Hence, tale is an oral heritage that has not been documented; it is transmitted orally through generations. It has a close link to community issues in a certain period of time. However, this does not prevent the coming generations to benefit from the lessons learnt from its contents and its aesthetic values and deep symbolic dimensions –especially if it is mixed with legend and miraculous events. The wisdom gleaned from these events often has an impact on the mind of the recipient. Among the stories that fall within the popular literature, we recall the story of the miraculous *Isli* and *Tisslit* that aims to promote a set of values and principles in the minds of children like tolerance, love and peace.

It can be said that the role of women in the survival of the storytelling is still at the pole position up to now since they still afford us with a tremendous amount of meaningful and important anecdotes; nowadays, various means of entertainment are unable to lessen its importance. Children usually gather around women waiting for the listed events with all patience and attention. This creates ties between them. Women, thus, go beyond their role as narrators to teachers of generations who engrain values in their minds. Besides, they keep the oral tradition away from extinction.

In this sense, women have an active role in the progress of society through preserving cultural heritage. They are, in addition to being narrators, interacting with the community and its multiple issues, experiencing its events. It gives women a sense of narrative creativity through which they tell interesting stories which bring

Table 1. Proverbs from *Imilchil* cultural heritage

Proverbs	English Translation
Ur itjatš una itš izm.	He who is eaten by a lion is not dead.
Ur immut j izi nna imutn g tamemt.	A fly diven in honey is not dead.
Ur da ikkat unna mi itugra islli g ufus.	The person who has a stone in his hand does not fight.
Ku jan ur da imgr yas ajnna ikrz.	People harvest what they have planted.
Ur da ikmz i wmžžud yas afus ns.	Nobody scrabbles to the favus except his hand.
Adaj gadin ur da qazn.	Many people spoil the work.
Ur da ikat jan u afus abqa.	One had does not applaud.
Ur da itga jan j ird tuyrift.	One grain does not make bread.
Ur da igan w ušn i lluzn.	The hungry wolf does not sleep.
Ur daš it tša yas ačban zirš illan.	What bothers you is your underwear.
Aħyud d umi yuška ka.	He is always mad he who has lost something.
Ur ixi yas srs majd tusid.	Shame is leave what you have stolen.
Ini majd tfkid iniyach majd tsyid.	Tell me how much money you gave and I tell you the quality of what you have bought.
Ur illi usawn dat imi.	There is no hill in front of the mouth.
G am nitni nyd fy yursn.	Be like them of leave.
Unna iqqiman yur umzil da t tayn iftwžn.	Who stays near the forger will be touched by sparks.
Sksu udm ns t sud ayu ns.	Look at her face before you drink the milk she prepared.
Ur illi iys g jils.	The tongue has no bone.
Ur jaksul unna g tay d unna is irqqan.	The burning wood and the person warming have never been equal.
Ur itwit widi itutn s iys.	A dog stricken by a bone is not punished.
Bdr widi tasid amčrad.	Whenever you mention a dog, you should take a stick.
Hla ayjul tš timzin.	Please my donkey! Eat the barley.
Hllan igra ur da tjašan.	The frog is no beautiful and it is not eaten.
Ur udžin imzgura mami talsn imggura.	The old generation left nothing to say for o the last one.
Ur da ikdžm uzggal imi.	The mistake never enters the mouth.
Ku tixsi tagl s adar ns.	Everyone is responsible for his deeds.
Ur da ittasi u ayjul tislit.	The donkey never picks up the bride.
Aħudr as tdun w aman.	Water is so precious and dripped humbly.
Imi iqn ur dat kdžmn jizan.	Flies do not enter a closed mouth.
Unna jran šišši jys i bača ns.	If you want meat, you have to slaughter your sheep..
Unna i twgdn ur igwid.	The person who worries fears nothing.
Ur ixxi yas unna tay titi n dart.	Shame is to be shot at the back.
Lan igidar imzjan.	Walls have ears.
Isadmr wi fstan.	Silence is a response.
Ur da tgraz unna iħdan.	Who cares never regrets.
Tnna ittayn aħidous ur da tfr aqmu.	The person who dances never covers his face.
Tafujt ajd izdyn igonna.	Sun lives in the sky.
Juf usgwn iminsi.	Sleeping is better than dinner.
Fkas tuga tšaš ayu.	Give it grass to give you milk.
Unna jsqsan ur juški.	He who asks never gets astray.
Ur da iggan bu jat tit gw alim.	He who has one eye does not sleep in hay.
Bu jan udar ur da itbbj asif.	Who has one foot does not cross the river.
Unna ittrn ayu ur da i tfr afšku.	Who asks his neighbors for milk does not hide the cup.
Alln n ungbj ajd issnwan imnsi.	The eyes of the guest prepare dinner.
Unna aš innan giy izm tinidas sliy i tndra nš.	Who tells you I am a lion, tell him I heard your roar.
Ur da garn jizan g tisint.	We never find flies in salt.
Unna jas illf n ur da jas isnčat abrid.	When a wife is divorced, she is not shown the way to her father's home.
Tuf titi gar awal.	Hit is better than insult.
U wuixt id ad iry ar isigi s aruku.	I invited him and he looks to the cooker.
Imikr ukrn wajd ajd itsan.	What is a real irony is to see a thief stealing another thief.
Tmzij ajd ittazzlan i tusr.	Your youth should work to your old age.
Ur da ittawi gar awal yas gar imi.	Bad words are transmitted by bad people.
Fk iqaridn s w afus trar tn d s udar.	Lend money by your hand and get it back by your foot.

A tayzi n jid yifk a unna is insan. Dan ssirid s winna iqrfn ar n ssa winna iryan. Tuf tummizt n tizizwa ašwari nj izan. Açdaw nu askkin d askka. Iyal wi ign is gn mdn. G ušn ak ur tšin wuššan. Ur da i tgafaj s ignna yas aggu. Unna itinin ad gy ur da itg. Mun d imikr takrd. Mun id sn tayd dik sn. Ur da itfy adyar g tgrst yas talft. Unna mi tsksiud aqmu da ja ch isksiu idarn. Ku zaçdud g walln n mmans amlal. Ur da itffr yas unna ts iskrn. Ffy agdud a war adrim. Tislli batl agdid batl. Awal gr sin majd ira wis krad.	He who is hungry feels the night so long. We wash with cold water and drink the hot one. Few bees are better than many flies. Never postpone the work of today till tomorrow. He who sleeps thinks all people are sleeping. Be a fox so as not to be attacked by other foxes. Only smoke is so high in the sky. He who says "I will do" does nothing. If you accompany a thief you will be like him. If you accompany them you will be just like them. Nothing changes its place in winter save turnip. Whenever you look at somebody's face he looks to your feet. Every monkey is a deer in his mother's eyes. Only guilty people hide. If you are penniless you should leave the market. The stone is for free and the bird is for free. A secret is between two persons and the third should not intervene. Frogs give birth to snakes. He is not welcomed he who has not his mother invited to the marriage. Two things are never put together. He who asks never gets lost. People are evaluated by their dress. Things are not achieved by words. Intelligence is to keep quite. He who hurts himself does not cry. As long as we live, we acquire new things. Fire leaves nothing save ash. Leave at the moment you do not like, you arrive in the moment you like.
Urun igwra ifaghriwn. Unna mi walu mmans g tmyra ur da ts ikdžm. Ur da tmun nt snat g tijtar. Unna isqsan ur juški. Amm ujna tšid ajd tswid. Ur da tuqdun iskin s imi. Wi išwan ar itqn imi ns. Unna iwtn ixfn ur da jalla. Kud n tidir n ttizir. Ur da d itadža wafa Yas iyd. Ddu g uzmz nna ur trid tguludn g uzmz nna trid	

the message directly to mind. Their voices with sharp and smooth tones make the auditor integrate with events to the extent that he imagines himself a character in the tale.

In this sense, they have played a vital role in shaping the history of *Imilchil*. However, their voices have been left out of standard historical narratives. They are muzzled by a lack of primary sources as well as a tough belief that they are not part of the development of Moroccan cultural heritage. Looking past this bias, we may find many priceless sources to reveal the significant involvement of women in constructing *Imilchil* history in particular and Moroccan history in general, and their work alongside men throughout the centuries where they have played a crucial role in preserving traditional values and cultural heritage that is still kept in some visual aspects blown up in the Festival of marriage.

Despite their taking care of their home as mothers and doing men's work outside, women are never stingy in doing their best to preserve their culture. This goes along with the stance that Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn discuss:

Although women's body and mothering role align her closely with nature, her obvious

participation in culture places her in an intermediate position, performing some sorts synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture (Gayle and Kahn, 1985).

No one can deny the importance of the role played by women in society by bearing responsibilities and burdens that outweigh their capacity at the expense of their psychological and physical comfort. However, viewing them as weak objects is inescapable in societies where traditions and customary laws (or what is called in Arabic: *L'Aaraf*) impose themselves, especially those traditions that have no basis in our religion and law. The negativity and marginalization of women varies from one region to another due to varying degrees of awareness and economic situations.

3 WOMEN AND THE TRANSMISSION OF POETRY IN THE REGION OF *IMILCHIL*

Though language is the main foundation of all literatures, the poetic language is rhythmic and harmonious. In this sense, versification plays a pivotal role in introducing a contract between the transmitter and the receiver which states that the poetic reading has to follow other rules unlike those applied to other speech acts. Amazigh poetry, in general, is an example of this

oral literature; it provides a living example of oral poetry.

Women transmit meanings, symbols, values they attribute to objects and knowledge of the world and pass them to their children. They “also use oral poetry to accompany the major rites of passage such as the wedding, birth, and circumcision rites. These family-related songs are still very popular in rural and semi-urban areas where they help preserve the Berber language and culture” (Sadiqi, 2014). In the same vein of argumentation, the *Imilchil*'s mothers assume social, educational and historical functions via the preservation of culture and language that they instill in the future generations. Because they are responsible for the transmission of the mother tongue, the language they use is standardized and purified. The safeguarding of cultural social values they pass to their offspring is extremely important. The moral expectations used are stronger and more coercive, which leads them to use forms of socially marked vocabularies in poems and proverbs.

3.1 Amazigh Poetry

To determine the Amazigh poetry is essentially determining its evolutionary aspects throughout history, or rather clarifying its progressing step on the scale of orality and writing. After independence, the schooling process has contributed to the evolution of the Amazigh culture through the development of research on this heritage. In this sense, we also note the appearance of the name “Amazigh” instead of “Berber”.

Hence, we find that Amazigh poetry remains fundamentally oral and transmitted by voice. If the poetic discourse is generally based on expressive language as it has been suggested, it also appeals to the intelligence of the listener in the interpretive process of the poem. Indeed, a poetic pact is implicitly established between the poet and his public. That is to say, oral tradition in Tamazight is understood as any discursive work whether in verse or prose just like a building with two faces: one face is explicit and the other is implicit. The first one is the text and the second one is the content. This process used by poets allows them to have an access to a desired target by using stylistic and rhetorical phrases.

3.2 Poetry in the Tribal Community of *Imilchil*

Poetic culture in *Imilchil* that has been reborn today from its ashes has long deserved to be interested in because it constitutes the fertile silt of national culture. This goes back to remote time in the history of *Imilchil* where the moral values of this village based on tolerance and hospitality have their roots.

Amazigh poems in *Imilchil*, like in other languages, are verbal compositions chosen to transmit ideas and experience of a given group of people. The poet or what is called in Tamazight *anššad* or *amdjaz* composes his poems in verses or *azjawn* (Plural of *azj*) which are gathered to form what is called *izli* (a poem)

and the plural is: *Izlan*. This latter is a given poetic couplets sung without instrumental accompaniment. It is usually sung in public feasts on the occasion of wedding or during different female activities such as weaving “*astta*”, harvest “*tamgra*”, plowing “*takrza*” and collection of dry grass and timber, “*azddam*”. It is usually sung by women. We use the term *dattassint izlan* to say they sing. However, this poetic genre can be sung as a dialogue between men and women in which they are in most part exchanging insults. In addition, *izlan* aim not only to distribute praise but also to denounce the corruptions and dishonesties of society and give moral lessons. In other words, it goes beyond entertainment to have educational dimensions.

As it has been mentioned above, *Izlan* is based solely on the voice. The latter ensures the rhythm intonation, accents and breaks. In other words, these elements distinguish *izlan* as a versified statement.

Izlan are feminine poetry in so far as they are the only means by which these inferior women express their suffering and worries. Although women are considered to have a lower-grade and occupy a secondary place in society, they remain mainstay in their homes. They, as a poetic genre somehow, reflect the image of the society it represents. Note that the term image is to be taken here in the sense of a set of aspirations, feelings and ideas that unite the members of a group (usually of a social class) and oppose them to other groups. This poetic genre, therefore, goes beyond entertainment to be a way of expressing the concerns of the community.

To put it on a nutshell, the role of poets in ancient *Imilchil* society is very considerable. They are mainly the chronicler, the “historian” of their tribe. When women defend their rights and their freedom, they defend the rights and freedom of the whole tribe if not of all Moroccan women. Through poems, women can resolve a conflict or inextricable situation. That is to say, the poetic verses serve as arguments; one sentence may be sufficient to resolve a difficult situation. Their voices are heard as they have the wisdom and the secret words that go straight to the heart. *Imilchil* as a place that has not passed the change, the role of the poet is still elemental; it is not affected by modern society and new media.

4 *IMILCHIL* PROVERBS

Proverbs are often presented in forms of sentences and rarely as two verses or dialogues. The Amazigh proverbs, as in other languages and cultures, are presented as independent statements. They are transmitted through generations to mirror the Amazigh society. Proverbs are, as Philomena D'Souza argues,

Popular sayings in which the traditions and beliefs of a particular society are crystallized. By quoting them at opportune moments, the message of the proverb is transmitted from one generation to the next. Since they contain the wisdom of the ages, people normally do

not dare to question their relevance. Although many of these proverbs do contain pearls of wisdom, yet they also reflect the culture and experience of a particular period in history (D'Souza, 2005)

The proverbs' language is that of common people; it is used in their "daily conversation in markets and passages, with simple and sometimes loosely connected sentences. Often words and sometimes even verbs are repeated and [their] figurative interpretations are not strange or sophisticated" (Arzjan and Solehi, 2013). It is a truth that is based on an Amazigh community experience and generally characterized by a formal regularity manifested through different rhythmic aspects. Briefness is one of its salient characteristics. It is a statement presented in a circumscribed form, rarely exceeding the length of a sentence. It includes

Cultural values in two broad ways: They serve as vehicles for education and as an attempt to resolve ambiguity in social interactions. Because [it is] both brief and memorable, proverbs are well qualified, whether in oral literate culture, to help a society retain and transmit a traditional body of ethical guidelines for conduct. (Mckeinzie, 1996)

On a communicational level, the Amazigh proverb is used to transmit a very rich content in few concise words; it tends to be packed with information and imagery. The proverbial statement is actually easy to remember thanks to its succinct and rhythmic structure. The shorter the proverb is, the easier it is to be fossilized in the memory.

Most of the proverbs in *Imilchil* are all against women. These sayings mirror the discrimination and domination of men that they suffer from in this region. Generally, they identify the negative qualities of women, forgetting that many of these unconstructive traits, if they exist, are mainly a result of the lower position of women in *Imilchil*. However, what is striking is that the majority of these proverbs are transmitted by women themselves though they are created by men. Since there is not a similar set of adages about men, "logic suggests that women have seldom originated proverbs since men have dominated literature and society historically." (Kerschen, 1998) All these proverbs are observed from men's point of view as they promote the submissiveness of women.

In this respect, the light will be shed on some proverbs which draw *Imilchil* women's reality with dim colors:

- Thlid a takššoult zajdnam irkan
"The alveus is so beautiful and dirt makes it shinier"

Very commonly, women are shown and depicted with irony, especially when it comes to their physical

beauty. In this proverb, irony plays on the fate of the ugly woman. Ugliness is a factor that causes the marginalization of women and their refusal; no one accepts to accompany a woman who has no criterion of beauty. While the case is different to the one who has the chance to benefit from a share of beauty, which all the men in this case seek to master.

- Mak issouddan g lqš a jaynža
"Who cares for a spoon amongst utensils?!"

This proverb depicts an ugly and poor girl among several beautiful and rich girls. So who will pay attention to the poor girl overshadowed by the beauty and grace of others?! This proverb emphasizes appearances at the expense of personality and essence of women.

- izir udm nss tsud ayo nss
"Look at her face before you drink the milk she prepares"

Features are very important in Amazigh proverbs; they inform us about the soul of the individual. Physical ugliness of women reflects their moral one. Milk can connote different characters: greed, trust and virtue.

Many other proverbs hold the same connotations, such as:

- Fkass tuga tšaš ayou
"Give it grass to give you milk"
- T'tša tixsi ikrwan nns
"The sheep ate its babies"
- Unna jass illfn ur daj ass isnçat abrid
"When a wife is divorced, she is not shown the way to her father's home"
- Ours matta wafouss s itgwra ouyroum
"I wonder what are the hands that have cooked the bread?!"

5 FOLKTALE

5.1 An Overview

It seems difficult to find a definition of the folktale. "It is reserved for any tale deriving from or existing in oral tradition and is generally preferred by folklorists and anthropologists" (Doughty, 2006). It is the oldest oral cultural heritage that has been invented by people as a conduit that reflects all their illusions, perceptions, and dreams of their everyday life. It is usually sourced from other tales that have been told for hundreds or thousands of years. The magic of storytelling:

has been a tradition of every culture and civilization since the dawn of language. It binds human beings and celebrates their heritage as no other language art can. It is part and parcel of the human experience, because it underscores the values and experiences we cherish as well as those we

seek to share with each other. (Fredericks, 2008)

They are the remnants of ancient ideas and beliefs. Folktale contributes to the education of young people. It is used by the community to enlighten adults and remind them of the laws of life, relationships and transactions. It teaches them what threatens the stability of their life as well as the experience of individuals and nations. It has "...enjoyed a certain vogue ...as a charming and harmless type of literature that, suitably edited and decorated, can serve for the entertainment of most children and many adults." (Luthi, 1982). These stories mostly have been passed along by mothers through generations and teach a collective wisdom. The time of storytelling is an intimate moment when mothers meet with their children to instill all the virtuous principles as the main goal of folktales -besides entertainment- is reform and guidance that is why we find it full of vitriol, ridicule and deterrent lesson. This is what Fatima Sadiqi argues when she emphasizes that "Berber women, especially older ones, use storytelling to empower themselves in the household and consolidate their position in the family. Through the tales, women create bonds with other members of the family, especially children" (Sadiqi, 2014). It also serves to edify, support and liberate the emotions of children. It is a fundamental part of education as it teaches children about their culture and heritage by passing along its history through the tradition of the spoken word.

Thus, the interaction between the folktale and society became a pot for many historical events. It is a story developed by people of many different cultures and is used to explain natural phenomena or events full of historic significance.

5.2 *Issli and Tisslit* between Reality and Legend

The legend of *Issli* and *Tisslit* is typically based on some sort of historical facts, which has been passed on among generations and has a significant sense or symbolism in the culture of *Imilchil*. The legend involved heroic characters: *Issli* and *Tisslit*. It includes elements that are based on historical truth stating that the two lovers want to get married but their families, belonging to two different tribes, disagreed because of the conflict between them. However, it encompasses mythical qualities saying that they committed suicide in the two lakes formed by their tears. Legends usually often encompass the spiritual beliefs of the culture in which they originate.

In the distant past, a boy from the tribe of *Ait Ibrahim* fell in love with a girl from of *Ait Iaazza* (two tribes of *Ait Hdidou*) which *Ait Hdidou* has ever seen. The maximum of their aspirations is getting married. However, the hostility rooted among the two tribes made their dream impossible. Then, the couple left their tribes in the direction of the mountains. The boy flooded himself in a lake holding today the name of *Issli* (the

groom), and the girl plunged herself into a lake bearing today the name of *Tisslit* (the bride). There is another version saying that two lakes are the tears of the desperate lovers. This is a story that every visitor must hear when attending the festival of marriage in *Imilchil* which is held annually near the shrine of Sidi Hmed Oulmghni.

6 THE FESTIVAL OF MARRIAGE IN *IMILCHIL*: A GENUINE THEATRE OF ALL ORAL CULTURAL VALUES

When one puts his feet in the festival or "*Azhdoud*" (as the Amazigh people of the region call it), it looks like any other glorious feast in Morocco: variety of vegetables, fruits, dried fruits, grains, clothes, folk crafts, food cooked on the spot and women rove the market to sell what their hands have knit among which are: traditional covers, beautiful wool clothes bearing the imprint of the region's traditions. However, what differentiate this festival from the rest of the markets of Morocco are those big tents erected near the shrine of the saint whose pole could reach an altitude of ten meters or more. It is what the eye first picks up in the market from a few hundred meters. It is characterized by a special dark brown color. It is distinguished from the rows of traders' small tents. When approaching the door of the tent, two big bands sing and dance welcoming the visitors. Dipping slightly to the inside of the tent, about five rows of brides and grooms stacked horizontally. At the back, we find the rows of those who have finished their marriage contract. In the front, we find the grooms who are waiting their names to be called. In the back sit some visitors of "*Azhdoud*" who reflect curiosity to see how the marriage contract takes place; they are mostly foreigners. At the center of the tent there is a platform crowded with Moroccan and foreign photographers and journalists capturing the image of what is happening on the stage. Above the podium, the staff of the Ministry of Justice sits on two round tables calling the groom and the bride to be sure of their age and the availability of the necessary documents. In the second table, the judges responsible of writing marriage contract sit. The bride and groom had met in advance and come to the festival accompanied by the father of the bride to conclude the contract in front of authorities.

The festival of *Imilchil* is a stage where all the above mentioned cultural phenomena are exposed. Girls under the age of 18 are celebrated as brides and the mothers are the first to carry the torch of festivity under the benediction of their husbands. This informs us that they are powerful and effective in the preservation of this habit in the region. To feast this unforgettable day, women dress the best of their clothes and cover with *tahndirt* that they weaved themselves to differentiate *Ait Ibrahim* from *Ait Iaazza* tribes. They wear *abbçouj* to make a distinction between married and unmarried women.

Outside the big tent, there stay groups of boys and girls doing *Taqrfijt* where they choose their wives

after a period of negotiations through what is known as that can be translated “as cold love” (Ait, 2002b). *Taqrfijt* is an old habit in this area. It is an opportunity where

Singles come to find and be found: young men dressed in white *djellabah*, displaying their most precious silver daggers; girls wearing modest dresses and *handiras* capes, heavily hand embroidered and accessorized with as much jewellery as befits their family’s position. It is the girls who do the browsing, making small talk; a young girl may take the hand of a handsome young man and lead him about, giggling and asking questions (Schultz, 2010).

It is a cultural tradition of South Eastern Morocco. They try to know each other and prepare for marriage by discussing ideas and changing friendly words without forgetting the admiration between the two. Before each engagement, *Taqrfijt* tests are a must. Beyond communication, it is a way of entertainment and intellectual refreshment by playing with words and senses. Through words, they do not only discover their differences but also their complementarities. It is derived from the word *aqraf* meaning cold or refreshment. To better know each other, they sometimes engage in heated discussion and real tussle of knowledge and intelligence. They exchange information

in a very brainy way accompanied with metaphor and symbols. The basic principle is the mode of domination and submission. Here, women’s oral culture thrives beneath the surface; women’s talk, verses and proverbs form a rich orally transmitted culture.

Like in other Moussems, the festival is a commercial event. In the small tents surrounding the big one, we find a market where all local merchandises are exhibited. Textile and mat that women have weaved are sold and men benefit from its income. The agricultural crops that women were caring for, especially potatoes, and the livestock: sheep, horses and mules are traded by their husbands and the revenues are theirs too. The endurance of women and the difficulties they bear in the so mentioned unprofitable productions contribute to the preservation of this patriarchal culture and way of life.

After concluding the marriage contract in the big tent with the presence of the authorities and tourists, the couple leaves to the village to continue the wedding feast. Women prepare delicious local dishes and men prepare *abadir*². They welcome the guests and even non-invitees; their doors are opened for everyone. The marriage starts with *Henna* staining of the grooms each in his own home ending with the bride in her husband’s home taking with her a very rich cultural load that will be inculcated in the coming generations as she has the sole responsibility of imparting cultural values to her children.



Figure 1. *Taqrfijt* between a girl and a boy in *Imilchil*³



Figure 2. Inside the big tent where the brides are awaiting for their turn for marriage contract with the presence of the authorities⁴

Though women in *Imilchil* lack tangible means for organizing themselves into a unit, they have played a crucial role in preserving traditional values and oral heritage that is still kept in some visual aspects like marriage rituals. This preservation enables them to represent themselves differently from the way they have been represented within the patriarchal discourse.

There is a predominant powerful instrument, whereby cultural beliefs are implanted in young girls' minds in the form of poems, proverbs and tales. Although transmitted by women to women and describing their way of life, these oral cultures seem to uphold the values of the superior patriarchal culture, which are prejudiced against women. Hence, in this region, women are not only physical bodies, but they go

beyond that to be the representatives of a set of social norms.

To conclude, in order to preserve this rich cultural heritage, taking care of old age women who are deeply ingrained in *Imilchil* is recommended- though their discrimination and the bad conditions where they live are widespread in all aspects of their lives. Besides, to reach this cultural patrimony, infrastructure projects should be founded to facilitate the access for the visitors.

Imilchil patrimony that is reflected abundantly in the aforementioned cultural heritage must be well-maintained and the attention of people should be drawn to its importance through:

- Displaying and teaching cultural elements in various educational programs.
- Supporting associations and forming committees interested in collecting intangible cultural heritage.
- Encouraging comparative studies of cultural norms in other Moroccan regions to highlight the commonalities between them.
- Organizing seminars and conferences and clarifying that the concept culture is not restricted to illiterate or poor communities but it is an insertion of national identity.
- Intensifying gatherings between researchers interested in cultural heritage.
- Archiving published and unpublished researches on cultural heritage so as to be properly stored.
- Developing a strategy for the maintenance of intangible heritage and how to take advantage of the Internet and the audio-visual media.
- Preventing cultural norms from the risk of extinction.

NOTES

1. *Imilchil* is located in the Middle Atlas Mountains in Morocco. The Marriage Festival in *Imilchil* is a touristic attraction of this village that takes place every year in September. It is an annual collective marriage where women and men choose their husbands and wives. It is a commemoration of a legend that tells the story of two young people, Moha and Hadda, who love each other immeasurably. They are from two feuding tribes, *Ait Iazza* and *Ait Brahim*. Their family would not permit them to marry. Out of pain, they cried bitterly. Their tears created two individual lakes. One lake was *Isli*, the groom, and *Tislit*, the bride. They committed suicide in those two lakes. It is an occasion when

young girls dress and wear their superb silver jewelry, traditional clothes, sing and dance.

2. A kind of bread made by Amazigh tribes buried in hot ash, covered with burned wood and left till it is cooked.
3. Photo of author.
4. Photos were taken by author during the Festival in 2004.

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