

this community of musicians from the Rif began to dissolve within the wider Rif society, to the detriment of their musical tradition.

The First Wave of Urban Music of the Rif

After the fraught political period that began in 1958 and continued through the two failed *coups d'État*, the new era that began after the Green March of 1975 and the elections of 1977 offered more room to breathe. The calmer political climate made it possible for artists from the Rif to write Ghiwane music style in Tarifit, and in 1978 it allowed young activists in the town of Nador to create a cultural association called الانطلاقة الثقافية (al-Intilaqa al-thaqafia).

The shockwaves brought on by the Ghiwane style reached the Rif region in the early 1970s. Groups like Nass El Ghiwan, Lemchaheb, Jil Jilala and Ighenighen upended the unwritten rules of classical Moroccan music (Ragoug & El Madlaoui, 2013). Unlike classical orchestras, they played mainly local instruments, dressed themselves casually (in a “hippie” look) and sang in an informal vernacular set to local melodies². This style resonated strongly with a rebellious cross-section of young people in the Rif who had a thirst for liberty. In the town of Al Acoceima, young people began improvising with handcrafted musical instruments to recreate the melodies that they heard. As Mohamed Khiani, a founding member of the group *twattun*³, explains to me during an interview in al Acoceima in 2017, young musicians began to hear about one another, and began to play together—most often near a rock called *taḡrout* in the Dhar n'Masoud neighborhood or on the beach. These open, outdoor arenas were ideal for young people to avoid the watchful eyes of adults in the community, to enjoy themselves freely, to make music and to learn from their peers while showing others what they knew. Out of this dynamic sprang the band *twattun*, which originally included Mohamed Lemhakchaoui (alias Mith), Jamal Kamid, Abdelhaziz Benkadou (alias Tanjaoui), Boujemha Akelaf, Abdelmajid Belyakid (alias Majid Thirelli) and Mohamed Khiani. When some band members had to leave the group because they immigrated to Europe, continued their studies in other towns, or were imprisoned, other young people joined the band, most notably Abdelhak Akendouch and Mustapha Kheḡroun, who would give *twattun* a second life.

² See in particular this article, which analyzes the Ghiwane phenomenon: « Esquisse d'une étude du phénomène "Nass El Ghiwane" », *Revue Taharouryat* : <http://www.taharour.org/?esquisse-d-une-etude-du-phenomene-nass-el-ghiwane> (accessed 25/04/2018).

³ In English, “the forgotten.”

In the Nador region, especially in the tiny town of ḖḖḖḖḖ (Zghangan), an incredible musical renaissance was underway. Countless members of bands like ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Isefdawn = Embers), ḖḖ ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (In Umazigh = Children of Mazigh), ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Bennaâman = Poppy), ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Assam = Lightning), ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Irizam = Pickaxes), ḖḖḖ ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Id banou Jenna = Pigeons) and ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Ithran = Stars) hailed from ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ. For example, the band ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Isefdawn), best known for their song “AḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ” (“Our Boat”) was made up of five students who grew up in the same neighborhood and who went to the same high school, Abdelkrim El Khattabi High School in Nador (Halhoul, n.d.). Another group, In UmaḖḖḖḖḖ, was made up of six young people, most of whom were from the mining region of ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Iksan). The music scene within this tiny stretch of Morocco was a small world unto itself, where young people could meet each other and learn from each other by listening and playing.

Young people making music in the Rif during this time were heavily influenced by the political and cultural Left. University campuses outside the region (where youth from the Rif went to further their education) were hotbeds of communist and socialist movements. Moreover, the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS) had a strong foothold in Nador and nearby towns like ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ and the mining region of ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Iksan). Bands like ḖḖḖḖḖḖḖḖ (Isefdawn) and In UmaḖḖḖḖḖ, whose members grew up in this environment, wrote songs that were substantially influenced by class struggles and a workers’ mentality, while still maintaining a local AmaḖḖḖḖḖ identity. At the time, young people were listening to revolutionary artists like Cheikh Imam, Ahmed Kaâbour, Said El Maghribi or even Victor Jara. The assassination of the Chilean singer following Pinochet’s military coup d’état reverberated through Moroccan university campuses at the time, especially among young musicians from the Rif who, for the most part, understood Spanish and thus, knew the words to his songs. As musician Karim El Marssi, who grew up in Nador, explains:

“In the early 1980s when El Walid Mimoun appeared, socialist and communist thought was very strong. In Nador, the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS) was dynamic and my brother was an active member in this party, which meant that I took part in some of their activities. So, I participated with protest songs such as those by Sheikh Imam and Said el-Maghribi.”

Association Life

The creation of الانطلاقة الثقافية (al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia) in 1978 was a key moment in the rise of Rif protest music. The founders of the الانطلاقة الثقافية (al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia) association were inspired by the Amaḥiḥ cultural movement and in particular by the the Association Marocaine de Recherches et d’Echanges Culturels (AMREC), the first Amaḥiḥ cultural organization to spring into being in 1968. But the founders of الانطلاقة الثقافية (al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia) distinguished themselves by aiming to popularize the question of cultural identity outside intellectual circles. الانطلاقة الثقافية (al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia) was oriented more towards youth and towards those college degrees, and counted sailors, farmers, small business owners, students and professors among its ranks. Like the musicians of the time, the leaders of the organization were steeped in a cultural atmosphere flush with revolutionary ideas from the Left, a dynamic force in Morocco and in Europe in the 1970s. As Kais Marḥouk El Ouariachi, one of the founders of the organization, explains:

The prevailing value at الانطلاقة الثقافية (al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia) was universalism. We tried to claim our Amaḥiḥ identity without excluding or antagonizing other languages and cultures. Amaḥiḥ-ness as we conceived it, meant always supporting the underdog, be it in the struggle for Palestinian liberation or among the indigenous Latin American peoples who stood up against US interventions and the marginalization of their languages (like Quechua) by the dominant Spanish culture.⁴

While making time for work on movements at an international scale and in other parts of Morocco, much of al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia’s concrete action occurred in the Rif. There, the association organized trips and hosted conferences in different villages and urban centers. It also inaugurated a large and popular festival in the town of Nador tailored to the cultural landscape of the time. The slogan chosen for the first festival in Nador was “Man does not live by bread alone,” which highlighted the importance of cultural action in an era when families in the Rif were experiencing upward economic mobility. A year later, the organization would opt for a more engaging slogan: “The people’s music, the people’s memory.”

The Festival of Popular Amazigh Music in Nador was inspired by the cultural heritage of the Rif, notably by the traditions of ⵝⵓⵔⵓⵔ (*Ourar*), or marriage. Anchoring the festival in local Amaḥiḥ cultural practices all but guaranteed the event’s popularity, especially with women, who came in droves (with their families) to the festival’s many outdoor activities. Kais Marḥouk El Ouariachi estimated that attendance at the festival often exceeded 4,000 people. The event was funded by largely nominal fees of around 3 dirhams. The residents of Nador,

⁴ Interview on 10/31/2017 in Rabat.

who felt some ownership over the event, often made contributions larger than those asked for so as to encourage the young organizers whom they trusted entirely.

الانطلاقة الثقافية (al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia) played an important role in fostering the growth of Nador’s young musicians. It offered them rehearsal and performance spaces, but above all it reinforced their ties to the AmaḐiḥ identity and to local culture. The organization made significant efforts to promote AmḐziḥ poetry, and many poets writing in AmaḐiḥ flocked to it, resulting in a collection of texts that songwriters could set to music. The association notably contributed to the emergence of the artist ⵎⵓⵎⵉⵎⵓⵏ ⵉⵎⵎⵓⵏ (El Walid Mimoun), sometimes called the Bob Dylan of the Rif. During the second Festival of Popular Amazigh Music in 1980, he won over the audience with his voice, the simplicity of his melodies, and his lyrics, very much rooted in local Rif society.

Beyond the opportunities given to musicians in festivals and events organized by الانطلاقة الثقافية (al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia) and other organizations, weddings provided another space for musicians to create original work. One unique aspect of the Rif and in particular the Al Ḑoceima region is that protest music is often included in weddings. Many artists who were alive at the time have said that when they played weddings, they chose traditional verses usually sung by women (the *IḐran*) or sang protest songs of the kind sung by *ṭwaṭṭun*. Those musicians who had a political agenda and were eager to share, but didn’t want to do so at trade unions, parties, or college campuses often used weddings to spread their political beliefs. Hafid Thifridjas⁵ says that he was able to reach a less politicized audience when he began playing weddings. At the time, Thifridjas explains that wedding ceremonies at the time usually took place outdoors, often in the middle of a road. Performing at a wedding would thus turn out to be more of a concert than anything else.

The Hassan II Era

National holidays provided a platform for musicians (Reysoo, 1988). The logistical and financial resources behind such events meant that artists were well-treated and well-paid. During the reign of King Hassan II, عيد العرش (Throne Day) fell at the beginning of March, in the middle of the school year. Leaders of various educational institutions proposed creative ways to incorporate culture and the arts into the celebration. This gave up-and-coming musicians the opportunity to be onstage and to properly rehearse a well-crafted show. This

⁵ Interview on 18/11/2017 in Brussels.

experience very often acted as a springboard for musicians who would go on to a professional career in the arts.

Throne Day عيد العرش has given many young artists the chance to perform for a larger audience and to try out their music in a concert setting. That said, these shows took place under a watchful authoritative eye, which led the majority of bands to avoid the political or controversial material that they might have played at other venues. Some musicians had ambivalence feelings towards Throne Day festivities. They feel entitled to the good performing conditions that the festival provides, but they are “summoned” to perform by the authorities. Fayçal of the band إثيران (Ithran)⁶, who was extremely active in the Nador region, has said:

In the run-up to Throne Day, the Ministry of Youth and Sports assembled us for the festival. We were given the best musical material, the best technical support, and sometimes we were escorted to the concert in a police vehicle. This was all to garner attention for the festival. It felt as though we were somewhat obligated to participate, since they requested our involvement in writing (استدعاء *Istid'aa*). We were told, for example, that the band إثيران (Ithran) is summoned to such-and-such festival at such-and-such location. We were paid well, it's true, but we felt rather obligated to say yes.

In the wake of the 1984 riots in the Rif, the region saw a brutal crackdown, which affected artists in particular. For example, Hafid Thifrijas has said that he served a three-year prison sentence after authorities, in the name of state security, convicted him of participating in an uprising in Al Acoeima⁷. Boujemra of the band twattun was forced into hiding, then arrested, and spent three years in prison. Artists in Nador did not fare any better: واليد الميمون (El Walid Mimoun) was arrested multiple times, and al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia's programming, including its flagship festival, could no longer take place. The organization was increasingly politicized due to a few members who were involved in left-wing causes, and in the national security-centric atmosphere of the time, الانطلاقة الثقافية (al-InTilaqa al-thaqafia) was effectively disbanded.⁸

The government repression of 1984 and the associated somber atmosphere, accompanied by a wave of unemployment among newly graduated university students in the late 1980s, only served to hasten the pace at which young people immigrated. The Rif's music

⁶ Interview on 18/11/2017 in Brussels.

⁷ Interview on 18/11/2017 in Brussels.

⁸ For information see this interview with the organization's founder, Marzouk El Ouariachi <https://www.hespress.com/%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81-194668.html>.

scene was heavily affected by this new wave of emigration, since many band members (from ⵜⴰⵔⴰⵏⵏ, Ithran, etc.) left for Europe. Solo musicians like ⵎⵓⵎⵉⵎⵓⵏ ⵉⵎⵎⵓⵏ (El Walid Mimoun) and ⵏⵓⵎⵉⵎⵓⵏ ⵉⵎⵎⵓⵏ (Khalid Iⴰⵣⵣⵓ) also left the country. The social transformations that the Rif underwent in the 1980s and 1990s had a real impact on the Amaⴰⵣⵉⵏⵓ music of the Rif with the development of new styles like fusion-rock. The subsequent section will explore the many facets of today’s Rif music.

Diaspora Sound

The forces of cultural homogenization that have reached many far-flung regions of the world have also impacted the Rif. Music has been directly affected by the production-focused “market model”, as well as by the rise of the synthesizer and other music software⁹. The artists interviewed¹⁰ talk about the late 1990s as a “reset” for Rif music.

While Rif music has been influenced by trends of commercial music, the diaspora has found its way back to the tradition of the protest song. Limited political horizons and a lack of economic opportunities led young people, including young artists, to leave the Rif. Many of these artists already had fathers working abroad and simply rejoined their families, while others searched for an elusive European “El Dorado” on their own¹¹. In the early 1990s, the Netherlands and Belgium in particular became home to a small community of activists involved in the Amaⴰⵣⵉⵏⵓ Cultural Movement. These activists made connections and secured funding from state agencies to promote Amaⴰⵣⵉⵏⵓ culture. These funding sources meant that artists from the Rif living abroad had the opportunity to play concerts, hone their talents, record their music, and gain exposure in an entirely new context.

In the 1980s, Jamal ⵏⵓⵎⵉⵎⵓⵏ (one of the founding members of the group ⵜⴰⵔⴰⵏⵏ), moved to the Netherlands and created a foundation dedicated to Moroccan youth called the Platform. This foundation, which had its own space, financial backing, and rich cultural programming, would play a pivotal role in welcoming and forming a new generation of artists and students who arrived in the early ‘90s. For the most part, these young people flocked to

⁹ Interview with Nabil Amwaj on 22/9/2017 in Al ⵏⵓⵎⵉⵎⵓⵏ.

¹⁰ To have an overview of all these interviews you can read a longer version of this article entitled “Les transformations de la musique amazighe d’expression rifaine” published in 2020 in French as a chapter of the book *Expresions musicales amazighes en mutation* (online: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339508091_Les_transformations_de_la_musique_amazighe_d'expression_rifaine).

¹¹ Interview with Choukri on 23/11/2017 in Amsterdam.

Holland because their fathers had already lived and worked there for many years. This was the case for the musician Choukri, and for Mohammed El ḥllati.

At around the same time, Ḥamid’s platform invited ⵍⵎⵉⵎⵓⵏ ⵏ ⵎⵉⵎⵓⵏ (El Walid Mimoun) to play a concert in Holland. ⵍⵎⵉⵎⵓⵏ ⵏ ⵎⵉⵎⵓⵏ (El Walid Mimoun) left the Rif to live abroad, where he would go on to exert a heavy influence over the Rif musical scene in Europe. The early ‘90s also witnessed the birth of ⵙⵉⵕⵙⵉⵎ (Syphax) in Utricht, a foundation dedicated to safeguarding and promoting Amaḥiḥ culture. ⵙⵉⵕⵙⵉⵎ played an important role in elevating the Rif identity and in welcoming young students (principally from Moroccan universities) to Europe. These different organizations received a good deal of funding from Dutch governmental authorities and found the performance spaces and the technical facilities they needed to host artistic and cultural events.

For myriad reasons, presence of Rif music in Dutch communities would see a decline in the late 2000s reasons. The surge of Islamophobic sentiment (especially after the assassination of a Dutch director Theo van Gogh) and budget cuts that stemmed from the 2008 financial crisis dealt heavy blows to Dutch cultural organizations, which relied heavily on government support. Many musicians were unable to support themselves on their music alone when they reached an age where professional and familial obligations took center stage. The Netherlands, after all, is far from the Rif.

Al Ḥoceima

At the same time, the two metropolitan centers of the Rif experienced an Amaḥiḥ cultural reawakening. The tight-knit societal fabric in Nador paved the way for the development of an Amaḥiḥ theater, and later for audiovisual and cinematographic resources that supported an Amazigh television channel. In the town of Al Ḥoceima, meanwhile, the organization Nekour was founded in 1991. Nekour educated large swaths of the region’s youth by organizing conferences with Quadi Queddour, MoḤamed Chafik, and other Amaḥiḥ intellectuals of the time. It also spotlighted little-known or forgotten historical monuments. This renaissance tapped into Al Ḥoceima’s storied musical heritage to breathe new life into the Rif musical tradition.

Western music especially rock and folk made its way to Al Ḥoceima as early as the 1960s, with the band Berber Experience. The members of Berber Experience rubbed shoulders

with Spanish artists in the neighborhoods where Spaniards still lived well after independence. As a result, they learned how to play folk guitar with some skill, and they internalized a variety of different styles of Spanish folk music. In particular, Berber Experience specialized in musical entertainment for foreign tourists at Club Med or on cruise ships. Though they didn't sing in *tarifiḡ*, the band passed the torch to a new generation of artists, who play guitar and imbue their lyrics with local melodies. The musician Quousmith (“little Quacem”), who ran in the same circles as Berber Experience in his youth, played an important role in the westernization of Rif music. He was also the first musician from Al *Ḳoceima* to record an album.

One of the first Western-style bands in Al *Ḳoceima* to dabble in political music was Thidrin (“ears of wheat”). Thidrin was influenced both by hippie music and protest music from the '60s and '70s, as well as by pioneering Kabyle singers like Djamel *Ḳillam* and Idir. Their songs celebrate the Amaḡiḡ identity, and the collective memory of resistance against the Spanish and against centralized power. The leader of the group, Hassan Thidrin, explains that he wrote these songs by drawing inspiration from the *Iḡran* that he had collected in rural areas from those who still remembered them.¹²

Al *Ḳoceima* became a fruitful stomping ground for bands who sang in *tarifiḡ* but use contemporary melodies. After an earthquake hit Al *Ḳoceima* in 2004, the reconstruction effort was aided by myriad cultural partnerships, many of which had helped musical groups. In the same vein, a growing number of competitive opportunities for young talents (the Festival L'Boulevard, Génération Mawazine, *ḡwiḡa*, etc.) offered the youth a chance to perform, win prizes, and gain recognition. IRCAM also contributed aid to associations in the region.

This new Amaḡiḡ musical community is populated by bands like *ⵔⵓⵎⵓⵎ* (Agraf), *ḡḡḡḡ* (Tifyur), Rif Experience, Rifana, Syphax, and more that have managed to make the *Iḡran* and local Rif melodies palatable to a newer generation of listeners who are more receptive to contemporary music. Some of these musicians have been steeped in the traditional style. Farid El *Ḳemdioui*¹³ of the band Rifana¹⁴ explains:

¹² His recollections were recorded in an Al Jazeera documentary about the band Thidrin (Farhat 2007).

¹³ Interview with the artist on 20/09/2017 in Al *Ḳoceima*.

¹⁴ They won the IRCAM prize in the “modern music” category in 2015 for their album *ⵔⵓⵎⵓⵎ* (*Araghi*).

My older sisters sang the *Iḵran* at family gatherings, just like all the young ladies of the Rif did in the ‘50s. That’s how they lived, and that influenced me. Personally, I absorbed the *Iḵran* in my adolescence. Even though I was born in Al Ḵoceima, we went to weddings in my family’s hometown, and I lived in that atmosphere. The culture of ⵎⵓⵔⵓⵙⵉⵎⵓⵏ | ⵜⴰⵎⴰⵙⵓⵏⵉⵎⵓⵏ (Arrays n’*Tebrighin*) that I experienced loaded me up with artistic tools, and when it disappeared, I got nostalgic for what was lost. And so I started trying to find a way to bring it back to life. That’s how I ended up tugging at the memories of Rif listeners on my album. We put a traditional *Iḵran* song on the album in a new arrangement, with new sounds, so that Rif listeners could get interested in their culture and go learn more. We wanted our listeners to start asking questions about how their culture and their music were abandoned.

In the 2010s there was an explosion of musicians and festivals in Al Ḵoceima. The connective tissue that had been formed from so many funding opportunities really made musical production in the region possible. For example: the ⵎⵓⵔⵓⵙⵉⵎⵓⵏ (Anmuggar) festival, which took place every summer, added several acts to the program who played most Rif music. The ⵎⵓⵔⵓⵙⵉⵎⵓⵏ (Buya) festival, which was organized by the band ⵜⴰⵎⴰⵙⵓⵏⵉⵎⵓⵏ (*Tifyur*), had an all-female lineup. They brought together a collection of female voices, like the singer from ⵜⴰⵎⴰⵙⵓⵏⵉⵎⵓⵏ (*Tifyur*), and singers Saida Fikri as well as Silya Ḵiani¹⁵. The organizations that back the bands ⵎⵓⵔⵓⵙⵉⵎⵓⵏ (*Agraf*) and Rif Experience each host a festival for young talent. A variety of other festivals also gave a chance to young musicians to perform, like ⵜⴰⵎⴰⵙⵓⵏⵉⵎⵓⵏ in Tangier or the festival organized by the ⵎⵓⵔⵓⵙⵉⵎⵓⵏ (Bades) Foundation in Rotterdam.

¹⁵ Interview with Aziz Amerdas of the band ⵜⴰⵎⴰⵙⵓⵏⵉⵎⵓⵏ (*Tifyur*), 9/20/2017, Al Ḵoceima.

*tarhiyyach*¹⁷ if they organize or participate in celebrations while others’ family members sit in prison.

The Future

In spite of the town’s subdued atmosphere, musicians have continued to put out new work. The general trend nowadays leans more towards protest music. The interviews conducted for this essay during our stay in Al Ḵoceima have demonstrated that support for Ḵirak is still strong, including among musicians. Though they may disagree with leaders of the movement on some issues, artists have not been shy in putting out music in support of Ḵirak. Bands like ⵙⵉⵎⵓⵔⵉⵎ (Syphax) and ⵏⵔⵓⵎⵉⵔⵉⵎ (Agraf) even put out videos to this effect. What is more, during the 2017 Festival L’Boulevard, which this author attended, ⵙⵉⵎⵓⵔⵉⵎ (Syphax) won first prize in the “*fusion*” category (among others) for a protest song. Upon winning, they took the opportunity to call for the release of Ḵirak detainees.

Looking forward, the development of a cultural component to the “Manarat al Moutawassit” project— which includes, among many other things, the construction of a musical conservatory fitted with a recording studio and a rehearsal hall— will offer a host of opportunities to artists from Al Ḵoceima and its environs. Beyond that, a renewed interest in traditional music and local cultural heritage may have the potential to pass down an artistic *savoir-faire* to the next generation. This may manifest itself in the preservation and rise of the musical practices of the *ImdyaḴen* in Imzouren (Thawa n’Cheikh Ḥissa) and in Brussels (Thawa n’Cheikh MoḴend), not to mention local melodies and the *IḴran* that elderly women often have committed to memory. Finally, young Rif artists who were raised in Europe also have the potential to further the cause of Rif music by exposing it to new styles, as Ḥⵓⵎⵉⵔⵉⵎ (FaToum) and ⵏⵓⵎⵉⵔⵉⵎ (Numidya) have done. Other young artists who have emigrated abroad after growing up in Al Ḵoceima are angling for their big break. Take Lina Charif, for example, who sings the *IḴran n’Remrah* while playing the ⵏⵓⵎⵉⵔⵉⵎ (*Adjoun*) onstage. She herself has made a collection of *IḴran*, taken from her grandmother and from other elderly women in her neighborhood in Aith Bourḥyach.¹⁸

¹⁷ This term is used to name those who support maintaining the status quo and oppose the Ḵirak.

¹⁸ Interview with Lina Charif on the YouTube channel Rif TV: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmURmVefN7c> (accessed 1/12/2018).

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