HAL
open science

Emigration as popular culture

Tarik Sabry

To cite this version:

Tarik Sabry. Emigration as popular culture. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 2005, 8 (1), pp.5-22. 10.1177/1367549405049489 . hal-00571461

HAL Id: hal-00571461

https://hal.science/hal-00571461v1

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF cultural studies

Copyright © 2005 SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks CA
and New Delhi
Vol 8(1) 5–22; 1367-5494
DOI: 10.1177/1367549405049489
www.sagepublications.com

Emigration as popular culture

The case of Morocco

Tarik Sabry
University of Westminster

ABSTRACT This article explores the symbolic dimensions of emigration by enquiring into the relationship between emigration as a social phenomenon in Morocco, and Moroccan popular culture. The article critiques the discourses of unity and reconciliation inherent in analyses of Moroccan popular culture and contends that the popular in Moroccan popular culture is a pseudo-popular that speaks for the voices of the centre. This article concentrates on three taken-for-granted, non-institutionalized, popular cultural spaces in Moroccan popular culture: popular jokes, the *Derb* and the queue outside western embassies, and argues that emigration in Morocco is not an isolated social phenomenon, but a pervasive part of the make-up of its popular culture.

KEYWORDS *burning, culture, Derb, emigration, jokes, modernity, Morocco, popular, the queue, west*

Moroccan popular culture: a brief introduction

It is crucial to remind the reader from the beginning of this discussion that it is not my intention to write an exposé on the history or sociology of the complex structure that is Moroccan popular culture. This would necessitate a whole book, if not a whole cultural project. Rather, my intentions are far more modest. Here, I am more concerned with describing and exploring the different ways in which the social phenomenon of emigration in Morocco has permeated certain spheres of Moroccan popular culture. However, before engaging with this task, I think it necessary to explore, albeit briefly, meanings of the popular in Moroccan popular culture.

There is a sociological distinction between the use of the term 'popular' in Morocco and that in the West (see Sparks, 1992). So far, no academic work has examined meanings of the popular within Moroccan popular culture. Gassous (1988) and Belkbir (1991) came close to doing so as their

work deals with, among other things, the relationship between Moroccan popular culture and the discourses of power inherent to Moroccan society, but neither of them has directly dealt with meanings of the 'popular' in Moroccan popular culture per se. There is a linguistic and sociological distinction between the use of the word 'popular' in English language and that used in Moroccan *Dareja* (spoken Moroccan dialect). In the latter, a popular or 'Shaabi' person does not necessarily denote a successful or rich person, but someone who is accepted as being from, of and for the people. In the Moroccan sense of the word, the linguistic sign 'popular' connotes meanings of belonging, modesty and humility. A *Shaabi* person can be rich or poor, educated or uneducated. To be 'popular' in the Moroccan sense of the word is to be one of the people. A rich man wins *Shaabeya* 'popularity' not through his material possessions, but through his modesty and acceptance of the poor and their way of life. If you are rich, what wins you popularity among the Moroccan working classes is not money or wealth but the capital of sociability: the ability to mingle with the poor, speak to them, joke with them and eat with them as equals and not subordinates. To illustrate this sociological difference even more, here is an example from an incident as told by a former Moroccan trade unionist:

> Omar Ben Jelloun, a Moroccan politician and trade unionist who was assassinated in 1975, was once giving a speech in a trade union meeting when he stopped to ask a worker sitting not far from him for some of the water he had in his glass. Somewhat embarrassed at the state of the glass, which his dirty hands had smudged, the worker rushed out of the meeting-room, washed the glass, filled it up with fresh water, and brought it back to Omar. Infuriated by the worker's action, Omar lifted the glass in front of all the workers so they could see his action. He then smashed it against the floor and screamed: 'What is the difference between you and me? What is the difference between all of you and me?' He wanted to drink from the same glass as the worker, smudged and dirty as the glass looked. He wanted to prove he was not only fighting for the rights of the proletariat, but that he too was one of them, for them and *from* them – a popular man. (Sabry, 2000)

Implicit in this conception of the popular is a care structure, which distinguishes it, although not entirely, from conceptualizations of the popular as they appear in the English language. Another example, which explores meanings of the popular even further, occurs when we talk of a popular newspaper, cinema or a genre of music in Moroccan popular culture: popularity in this context must not be confused with the 'quantitative' which, according to Sparks, can be used in a western context 'to correspond more or less exactly with the size of the audience (Sparks, 1992: 24).

A *Shaabi* 'popular' cinema, for example, is not popular because it draws larger audiences than other cinemas, but because it is situated in a *Hay*

Shaabi, a working-class quarter and frequented by audiences from the working class.

The late King of Morocco, Hassan II, often began his televised royal discourses by the now Moroccan popular phrase: 'Shaabia al Aziz', which translates as 'My dear people'. The word *Shaab*, which means people, is used here in an abstract and absolute form that renders it entirely unrealistic, if not meaningless, for there is in fact no *Shaab* as such, but rather different social groups living in different areas, with different tastes, languages and interests. This possessive unifying use of the word *Shaab*, which appears to be innocent on the surface, is part of the workings of a discourse through which feelings of unity, harmony, reconciliation and stability are constructed. The subject of Moroccan popular culture should be approached with similar caution for there is, in fact, no such thing as *a* Moroccan popular culture per se. What we have is a confluence of currents representing different voices – some dominant, others subordinate. As Abdassamad Belkbir observes in his article, 'On the Meaning of Popular Culture':

> What is considered popular culture in the *Rif* [northern part of Morocco] has no relation with popular culture in *Sous* [South Berber Morocco], *Jbala*, [mountainous area in the north of Morocco] Fez or in the East of Morocco . . . What unites us nationally is not popular culture but religion, the modern state and its institutions. (Belkbir, 1991: 17)

Hence, to speak of Moroccan popular culture in a general fashion is to mask the particularities of the very voices heard or unheard, which make up Moroccan popular culture and thus conceal dialectics of power relations at work within Moroccan society.

Discourses of unity and reconciliation mask difference and competing antagonistic forces inherent to Moroccan society. There are – and this has to be said – antagonistic elements at play within Moroccan popular culture. Moroccan society is stratified into different popular cultures. We have the popular culture of the *Aroubi* (derogatory, of Arab descent, also meaning peasant, irrational and mostly uneducated); the *Fessi*, the élitist who appreciates Andalusian music and knowledge and, unlike the *Aroubi*, only fills his glass of Moroccan tea half way. We have the *Amazigh* or *Shelh*, who is the native of Morocco and the modern – usually a Francophile who consumes mainly French culture. The *Amazigh*[1] appreciates *Amazigh* music, the *Aroubi* likes the *Shaabi*,[2] and the *modern* appreciates western pop music and maybe some Egyptian classics. The stratification of tastes in Moroccan popular culture into those of the *Aroubi*, *Shelh*, *Fessi* and *modern* reflects power relations within Moroccan society. The *Aroubi* and the *Shelh*'s popular tastes are seen as subordinate to those of the *Fessi* who appreciates Andalusian music and the modern who reads Balzac, speaks with a Parisian accent, maybe listens to jazz and tunes into *TV5* for

news. However, these stratified categories are problematically complex, for they are not fixed. They overlap and can even be contradictory. Nonetheless, I venture to say with a degree of certainty that it is the modern and his newly adopted culture that emerges as the hero – a living proof of the success of French colonial social engineering in Morocco.

The annual Agadir conference, which takes Moroccan popular culture as the object of its study, attracts intellectuals from throughout Morocco. The ensemble of papers emanating from this conference, many of which are well documented, plays a remarkable role in the writing of Moroccan popular cultural history; whether it is the analysis of folk poetry or the interpretation of *Amazigh* folk dance, it is all a grand exercise from which Moroccan popular culture will undoubtedly benefit. The conference's logo *Unity in Diversity* reveals a discourse existing in undisturbed tranquility. It invites the following questions: Who speaks for and about Moroccan popular culture? Who speaks for the popular person? Why should intellectuals play the role of uniting and cementing what is diverse, when instead they could work towards unearthing the mechanics of power dialectics inherent in the discourses of unity that they are ceaselessly pushed to fabricate?

I do not intend to engage with these questions at any great length, for I do not wish to stray from the objective of the article; but I raise these questions to provide readers with a critical account that will engage them in a deeper reading of Moroccan popular culture and not an invented celebrated reading. Suffice it to say that discourses of 'unity and reconciliation', inherent in conceptualizations of Moroccan popular culture, are built from above and not from below. Most Moroccan intellectuals who take it as their legitimate role to speak for the popular man or woman are educated men and women from the middle classes, who unfortunately have little in common with the base structure of Moroccan society. What is popular in Morocco is outside ruling mechanisms and its different apparatuses. *Dareja*, for example, is outside French and literary Arabic and thus outside official language (Belkbir, 1991). Many voices that constitute Moroccan popular culture remain unheard and thus become subordinate to a cultural structure that is mainly led and dominated by an authoritarian *makhzen*,[3] its apparatuses and the western global forces with which it allies. Who speaks for the *Amazigh* and their subordinate culture? Who speaks for *Jbala* (tribes living in north Morocco) and their culture? Who speaks for Moroccan Jews and their culture, the *Sahraouis* (Moroccans living in the Sahara) and their culture? Why are there no *Amazigh* films on Moroccan television? Why are there no *Jbala* or *Sahraoui* films? Because of these elements, one might venture to say that the popular in Moroccan popular culture is not at all 'popular'. What we have is a pseudo-popular culture that speaks not with its own voice, but with the voice of the centre, its ideas and choices. It is the *makhzen* and its apparatuses that have control over the means of production in Morocco

and it is only these that have control over cultural production. As Belkbir remarks:

> The culture that prevails in any society is mostly the culture of the groups that rule this society economically and institutionally . . . in our era those who prevail economically and socially are in possession of strong and efficient means through which they communicate their culture. This makes it difficult for others to struggle against its influences. Therefore, popular culture is nothing but the official culture . . . If scrutinised, a lot of what we consider as popular in culture from ideas, sayings, architecture, music, dance . . . will appear to have its origin not in popular culture *per se,* but aristocratic or other ruling cultures. (1991: 16)

Centuries of authoritarian rule in Morocco, the repressive politics of the *makhzen*, colonialism, capitalism, the indifference of Moroccan intellectuals, not to mention the role of the Moroccan media, have all contributed in one way or another to the reification and alienation of Moroccan popular culture. Using Islam as an ideological tool, the *makhzen* has historically demonized all that is outside religious symbols as profane. What existed outside religious Islamic symbols was considered by the *makhzen* and its apparatuses as *fitna* (unbelief), *Shagab* (mischief), *fassa'ad* (corruption), *seeba* (rebellion), and *bida'* (heresy) (see Gassous, 1988: 34). What was outside the *makhzen* and its authority was considered by the latter to be outside the rule of Islam. This was seen as *fitna*, and *fitna* – according to the *makhzen* – was 'worse than murder' (Belkbir, 1991: 16). This use of Islam as an ideological tool led to the denaturalization of local cultural practices, but in the meantime has empowered and legitimized the existence of the *makhzen* as a ruling power in Morocco.

No sooner had the French colonialists settled in Morocco than they began their programme of brainwashing. Their questionable aim was to efface an irrational local culture with its different particularities and replace it with a rational culture. The French promised a higher form of rationality, one from which both the colonized and their local culture would benefit. Colonialism, whether French, Spanish or Portuguese, has played a strong role in the delegitimization and alienation of Moroccan popular culture. After 'independence' and the advent of capitalism, much of Moroccan popular culture has been turned into commodified products, mere promotional goods for market consumption, ready to feed the tourist industry. Moroccan popular culture has transformed, as Moroccan sociologist Mohamed Gassous put it, into: 'live ontological museums of the different' (Gassous, 1988: 48).

Doing ethnography in Casablanca: the queue, popular jokes and the *Derb*[4]

In order to investigate the relationship between emigration as a social phenomenon in Morocco and Moroccan popular culture, this article concentrates on three taken-for-granted Moroccan popular cultural spaces: the queue outside western embassies, popular jokes and the *Derb*. This section reflects on the methodological issues that I encountered while doing fieldwork in Morocco. It provides a rationale for the research strategies and addresses the researcher's positionality as a native ethnographer.

Entrée to the queue was open. To use Goffman's terminology, it was a 'front stage' and not a 'backstage' human setting (see Jorgensen, 1989: 43). As such, queues outside western embassies in Casablanca were open for me to enter as a 'queuer', my identity as a researcher unknown to the rest of the queuers. In total I queued outside four western embassies in Casablanca, which I joined at different times during the day and at night over a period of five weeks. I did participant observation outside the American, French, Italian and Belgian embassies. For the purpose of this article, later I will give examples from the French and Italian embassies only. When I started to queue outside these embassies my main objective was to make note of talk about emigration as it unfolded. As I entered the world of the queue as a human setting and after spending long periods queuing outside different western embassies, it became clear to me that talk was only one element of what I now believe to be a complex structure and a very much taken-for-granted everyday popular cultural space. As I queued for longer hours, I learned more about the queue, the queuers and queuing. I then became interested in the relationship between the queue and the queuers, the queuers and their encounter with the 'other', (the French, the American, the Italian, etc.), the queuers and their intermediaries, and the people who made careers out of the queue such as the information men (unemployed young Moroccans who make a living by selling information about visas to the illiterate and confused). All these elements later became as important as the talk that unfolded in the queue. After spending many days and nights queuing outside western embassies, it became apparent to me that the queue encompassed two structure systems or worlds: the world of the queue as a western colonial imposition and the world of the queuers, who displayed cultural particularities which were inherently Moroccan. The world of the queuers also reflected the stratification of Moroccan society.

Because I was interested in ordinary talk about emigration as it unfolded in the queue, I decided not to interact with the queuers, for doing so would have interrupted the very ordinariness I was seeking to record. My identity as a researcher and the intentions of the research were not revealed to the queuers because this too would have affected the ordinariness of talk. As such, methodologically I thought it more efficient to

deploy a *covert* rather than an *overt* strategy. It is important to note, however, that this strategy may not have worked had I been a westerner. The queuers, I have no doubt, would have been very suspicious of a westerner queuing with them. So the fact that I am Moroccan and look Moroccan was indispensable for the success of the covert strategy. However, the use of a covert strategy also had its limitations. Once I joined a queue, I had to respect the rules. I could not jump the queue just because a fight was unfolding 20 metres ahead; I had instead to rely on the 'communication chain' (what others in front of me or behind me heard or saw). Using a covert strategy meant I was restricted to talk and conversations that unfolded immediately behind or ahead of me. As such I was never in the queue, but only in parts of the queue. Several hundred conversations were taking place, yet it was only possible to follow one or two at a time. In the eyes of those queuers with whom I queued I was but another Moroccan who wanted to emigrate to the West. And in the normal circumstances of everyday life in the queue, I was another everyday queuer.

In Morocco there are people who are referred to as *Nkayteya*, meaning jokers or people who are very skilled at telling jokes. These were my main source for compiling and researching migration-related jokes. Other sources consisted of taxi drivers, friends and people in public spaces such as cafés, pool halls, and *Derbs*. Jokes were easy to memorize as narratives and therefore I could afford not to record them as they were being narrated. In total I compiled 28 migration-related jokes and 42 others, most of which dealt with themes such as sex, politics and cultural differences between the *Aroubi* and the *Amazigh*. The *Derb*, unlike the queue, was not an open human setting. I did participant observation in two *Derbs* both situated in Casablanca: Olfa and Old Medina. In both instances, I used an overt strategy and was accompanied by an informant from each *Derb*. A period of six weeks was spent in both places.

Emigration and popular jokes

I have intentionally chosen to give examples from Moroccan popular jokes because jokes are a non-censored sphere that emanate from, and are popular among, the base as well as the élite of Moroccan society. Before I introduce the reader to the jokes I selected on migration, I think it essential for the sake of comprehension that I explicate the sociocultural significance of two *Dareja* words, *Harrag* and *Loorak*, a task without which the reader will not understand the jokes. The first word is *Harrag*, literally meaning burner. The latter has become a very common and recurrent word in everyday speech in Moroccan popular culture. The people I asked gave two interpretations of the word. According to one group, a burner is someone who destroys their passport and all their identity cards before emigrating illegally to a western country, so that if

they are caught their identity will not be revealed. The other group traces the etymology of the word to an historical event in 711 when Tarik Ibn Zayad, an *Amazigh* soldier, burned all his fleet on approaching Spain so that his army would have no choice but to fight to conquer Spain. At the Rock of Gibraltar, Ibn Zayad delivered his famous speech: 'The enemy is in front of you and the sea is behind you, where is there to run?' To burn in Moroccan popular talk is therefore a reference to a one-way journey where one attempts to enter a western country illegally. As the Moroccan joke goes:

> After the building of the Great Mosque of Hassan II, an architectural wonder and the second biggest mosque in the world, was finally completed, the king of Morocco offered to give it to the Americans as a token of friendship. All efforts were made by the Americans to remove the minaret from the ground, but it just would not budge. As the mosque was built on the sea, the Americans sent their experts to find out what was happening under the water. To their shock they found thousands of young Moroccan burners holding on to the base of the minaret. They all wanted to *burn* to the States.

To explore the meanings of burning even further, one needs to place the term in its cultural context. One needs to think of burning not merely as a physical action, but also as a pervasive part of Moroccan popular culture. It is for many young Moroccans the only way out and only alternative to their lived realities. I heard a story about a pupil aged 8 who told his teacher, 'What is the point of all this homework and hard work, my brother has a degree and sells single cigarettes in the street. The only solution is burning.' Burning needs to be understood as a phenomenon, as well as part of a popular culture that is symptomatic of indifference and defeatism; one that is, moreover, becoming increasingly common among young Moroccans, especially those from the working classes. Burning as a phenomenon is illuminated by another Moroccan joke, which goes:

> An American scientist from NASA was sent by the American government to explore how the Moroccan brain functions. In his laboratory, the scientist took the brain of a young Moroccan and placed it into the head of an American. He then placed the latter's brain into the Moroccan's head. The Moroccan with the American's brain stayed in Morocco, while the American with the Moroccan man's brain was taken back to the States. One year after the experiment, the scientist decided to check on the two young men. In Morocco, the Moroccan with the American's brain had become a successful businessman with successful projects all over the country. Back in the States, the American with the Moroccan's brain had been reported missing. When they finally found him he was sitting by the port in New York looking rather sad. When they asked him what he was doing there, he said: 'I want to burn to Italy.'

The other commonly used word in migration-related jokes and in ordinary daily interactional conversations in Moroccan popular culture is the word *Loorak*, meaning papers. The majority of Moroccans who become legal residents in different western countries, whether in Europe or the United States, do so through marriage to either a European or American citizen. When these *émigrés* return to Morocco for holidays, often their spouses are satirically referred to as 'the papers':

> A young *zmagri* 'émigré' was strolling along the beach with his western wife when she tripped and fell in the sand. A young boy playing football with his friends saw the incident. He approached the husband who was contemplating the sea and said, 'Your papers dropped, sir.'

Derb as a popular cultural space

Talk of and about migration, emigration, burning, visas, *émigrés*, embassies, queues, traffickers and the West constitutes a pervasive part of ordinary communicative interpersonal interactions among young people in Casablanca. I am not referring to the 'public, institutional talk' (Scannell, 1991: 7) manifest in radio or television programmes. As we learn from Scannell, broadcast talk is not ordinary per se, but is managed and organized for us so it appears as such. Instead, I refer to non-institutional talk *of* and *about* emigration as it happens in non-institutional spaces such as the *Derb*. The latter is a geographic space; usually an over-populated urban space where people, largely from the working classes, share a strong sense of community and belonging. The *Derb* is also a sociocultural space that reflects everyday experience. It is the product of material realities inherent to Moroccan society, and its existence can be attributed to different factors. Here, I will content myself with describing two main ones: economic and cultural. The practice of standing at the top of the *Derb* – which is more common in working-class areas – is due largely to the problem of unemployment. Many unemployed young Moroccans from the Casablancan working classes cannot afford to go to cafés or other recreational spaces and therefore choose to stand or sit at the top of the *Derb* for most of the day. The second factor is cultural and inextricably linked to the previous one. Being unemployed means being dependent on parents, which in turn implies living under the same roof with them. Here the *Derb* as a social space offers the young, unemployed or student an outlet, a space in which cultural hegemonic practices imposed by the elderly can be, and often are, broken. The *Derb* is also a patriarchal space, as only men may occupy it. It is the space where the female body becomes the object of the male gaze and desire. *Derb* corners, as I learned from participant observation in Morocco, are busiest late in the afternoon when factory and college women make their way home. The *Derb* is a space where a lot of flirting between the sexes takes place.

Passing women are showered with lines such as: 'Hey beautiful!', 'beautiful eyes', and so on. In addition, the *Derb* is also a popular cultural space where young working-class men keep up to-date with gossip, smoke cigarettes, Hashish, narrate films seen in the cinema and talk politics. The *Derb* is an uninstitutionalized popular cultural space, which reflects the material realities of young Moroccans and provides a good insight into the culture of the Moroccan working class.

Talk about emigration in a *Derb* in Old Medina

It was summer in Morocco and many Moroccan *émigrés* had come home from western countries to spend the summer holiday with their relatives. As I learned from fieldwork in Old Medina (a poor borough near the port of Casablanca) talk of and about the *émigrés*, their spouses, cars and other material possessions was unavoidable. Many young people from Old Medina have emigrated (burned) to Europe. Some of them have become legends and are therefore the objects of talk in this working-class area. As Murad, a young Moroccan from Old Medina, said:

> Hassan burned to Italy and after three months he came back with a car and his papers. He managed to take all his brothers and sisters back with him to Italy. They are all living there now. He is what I call a man.

There were times when talk of the *émigrés* altered to become talk about the *émigrés*. In other words, ordinary talk transformed into gossip. As another young Moroccan from Old Medina confirmed:

> Sometimes you cannot help but talk about the *zmagrias'* [*émigrés'*] wives, how good looking or ugly they are. We also talk about how changed some of the people we know have become.

Arrivals of *émigrés* from the West become the talk of *Derb*. The car, clothes, presents and the appearance of the *émigré* are all scrutinized, becoming the object of gossip. In Old Medina, talk of and about burning is inescapable. As Nassir, a young Moroccan from Old Medina commented, 'There are young people here who wake up and go to bed talking about burning.'

The queue, queuers, cultural distance and western modernity

The queue is not a Moroccan thing, it is a product of modernity. After living in England for more than 10 years, I must confess that not only have I learned to queue but I have also developed an aggressive disposition towards queue-jumpers. I like to call this disposition 'queue rage'. The

mere detection on my part of anyone, man or woman (with the exception of the elderly, pregnant women and people with disabilities) hinting at or trying to jump the queue, instantly transforms me from the gentle person I think I am to a monster. I protest ruthlessly, for I see such an act as an unpardonable infringement on and violation of my civil rights; it is undemocratic, uncivilized – it is wrong! In Morocco, however, this is an often-abused right, whether waiting for the bus, in the bank or at the cinema – no one seems to like to queue.

Six years ago, an incident occurred that remains as vivid in my mind as if it had happened yesterday and taught me a cultural lesson I will never forget. I was standing outside a popular (working-class) cinema in Morocco where a newly-released American film, *Homeboy*, starring Mickey Rourke was showing. The cinema had its iron shutters shut. Against them, more than 300 desperate young Moroccans jostled like cattle, pushing and shoving, waiting for the time when the shutters would open. But beforehand, the people who worked inside the cinema had openly allowed in their friends. They walked through us and nonchalantly went into the cinema. The passivity and inertia of the people outside the shutters disturbed me; not one of them dared to protest. My friend Khalid, who lives in Old Medina, could see I was outraged and advised me not to complain. But 'queue-rage' took over and I began to shout uncontrollably at the queue-jumpers, 'You have to queue, who do you think you are, you . . .!' Before I knew it, three stocky, well-built men jumped over the shutters and started to throw punches and kick at us. No one came to our rescue. On the contrary, others joined in. Regretfully, my friend took all the bad punches; he had a nosebleed and a bruised face. As for me, I learned violently that in Morocco, the queue and queuing remain alien concepts.

Queuing outside western embassies

The queue, as this article will show later, is a colonial imposition that reflects the power of western modernity. Its dynamics constitute a taken-for-granted cultural space of everyday Moroccan culture, ceaselessly displaced by its encounters with this alien 'other'. Queues outside the French, Italian and American embassies divulge a dual cultural structure that is intrinsically contradictory. On the one hand, we have the rationalized world of the queue as an institutional, bureaucratized product of western modernity. On the other hand, we have the world of the 'queuers', which accommodates non-modern, non-institutionalized cultural particularities that are inherently Moroccan. These are manifest in the closeness of cultural distance, the sociability and intimacy shared by queuing Moroccans. Attempting to bridge the gulf between these two-world structures are native intermediaries, who work for western embassies, and information-men.

The 'queuers' are largely confused, frustrated, overtired and ill-informed; most of all they feel displaced, unwanted and humiliated by the 'other'. What the queue epitomizes is the shock of western modernity. This shock is manifest in the queuers' sense of chaos and disorganization. The iron bars that separate queuers from the glances of the pitying passers-by and those nonchalantly indifferent to their world embody Weber's disenchanted iron cage. The queuers are trapped. This is how I felt, trapped with them. Extraordinarily, in their entrapment, the queuers joked, shared food, blankets and talked incessantly. The queue outside western embassies is a dual cultural space, often taken-for-granted, that reveals contradictions between two-world structures, namely the world of the queue and the world of the queuers; it also unveils the stratification of Moroccan society. The world of the queue is rationalized, bureaucratic and alienating. The world of the *queuers* manages, in its entrapment and confusion, to be both intimate and sociable.

Queues outside western embassies provide a rich popular cultural space where talk of and about emigration takes place spontaneously. The narratives I am about to introduce are part of a fieldwork diary. They describe talk, people and happenings as they unfold in this rich and popular cultural space. I have selected these notes with the hope that they will bring the queue and its people to life for the reader. I am also hoping that the style in which the narrative is written will help the reader to capture events in their preserved temporal dimensions.

The queue outside the Italian Embassy

I arrived there at 10.00. There were about 300 people in front of me, almost all of them engaged in some sort of talk. Those in the queue had formed sporadic small groups. As the sun was strong, some men and women took refuge under the shade of trees. There were boys selling single cigarettes and others selling cake. There were young children, boys and girls in their teens running about and some women had brought their toddlers with them, placing them under the trees. There were middle-aged people and those in their sixties. 'Mohammed got a visa last week, he just phoned me from the boat,' said a woman in her fifties to a group of people who appeared to take the news with great joy. 'We will all meet in the plane, 'Insha' Allah [God willing],' said a man in his thirties. There was laughter. Two things brought together all the people I was observing: they were all Moroccan and they all wanted to leave Morocco. Everyone was carrying a file with them in which they had all carefully placed the documents needed to apply for the visa. 'Murad got the visa, he's left,' said a man to two other men who had come to shake his hands. A big Italian man made his way to the embassy door accompanied by a young attractive Moroccan woman. The whole queue, among them those who had been queuing since 3.00, looked on in despair as the girl made her way in quite

effortlessly. There was an angry, incomprehensible murmur, but no real protest. In Morocco, it is accepted that those with money do not queue; only poor Moroccans queue and most of them queue in vain. There was great camaraderie between those waiting to apply for a visa, those that had come to keep them company, those who had been refused a visa and those who already had one. Not only did they share *talk* about migrating, they also shared the same *hum* (big problem) or *humum* (plural of *hum*), because they are 'popular' people in the Moroccan sociological sense of the word. They represent the working class of Morocco: the Moroccan people proper. Said, a Moroccan in his early forties whose job is to liaise between the Italian Embassy and Moroccans queuing for visas, proved to be, in both the English and Moroccan sense of the word, a very 'popular' person. He was followed everywhere like the Messiah, constantly smothered by confused and frustrated people from the queue:

> Hold on, hold on, I can only speak to one person at a time. I cannot speak to all of you at once. Where is that young woman who was angry with me a while ago? I got her file. She got a visa.

There was no response. At least 20 people of all ages followed Said. They turned when he turned, they stopped when he stopped, they talked when he talked, they shouted when he shouted. Said was handling the situation quite well, until he erupted:

> Let me tell you something, things are changing; there are no jobs in Italy. There are hundreds of Moroccans in Italy who sleep in the streets, hundreds who make a living washing cars in the streets. I am telling you, there are no jobs left.

I am not sure whether Said truly cared for his people, or if he was simply trying to dishearten people waiting in the queue in order to make the Italians' job easier. A young man with short black curly hair and a half-buttoned shirt that revealed an expensive gold chain rose to challenge Said: 'That is not true,' he said quite loudly so others could hear him. 'There are jobs in Italy if you look for them. I have my own business in Italy; some of my employees are Italian.' Said did not answer but moved his head to and fro as a sign of disapproval. Another man did. He had a beard and what Moroccans call a *Dinar*, a dark patch on the forehead that appears as a result of years of praying. 'Does saying this make you feel proud?' he demanded of the young Moroccan. 'What would happen if all young Moroccans like you left the country? Look at you, do you think the vulgar little gold chain you're wearing makes you superior? Morocco is better than Italy.' 'You do not know what you are talking about,' replied the young Moroccan in a rather defeated voice. The quarrel disintegrated and with it the crowd, who had perhaps thought this the beginning of a

fight, only to follow Said as he started to make conversation with an old Moroccan peasant. 'I won't get your dossier until you tell me where you come from,' demanded Said, teasing an old peasant wearing a traditional Moroccan *Jellaba*. The old peasant had been pestering Said for a while. Everyone around Said, and many of those queuing, waited rather impatiently for the peasant's answer. There was a long pause and then the peasant, looking sheepishly at Said, uttered: 'Ben Meskin.' This made everyone fall about laughing. ('Ben Meskin' is a Moroccan *Aroubi* tribe notorious for emigrants who generally make their money in Italy selling carpets and watches on beaches or in the street.) Said, too, burst out laughing, slapped the old man's head then held it with his two hands and kissed it violently. Said's action triggered yet another hysterical fit of laughter, after which he held the old man's hand and said: 'Now, I'll go and fetch your dossier.' Said, and perhaps all the people in the queue, had known exactly where the old man had come from. His clothes were a giveaway. It was the confirmation they enjoyed.

A small street separated the Italian Embassy and the queue from the Centre for English Language. I stood outside the centre on two occasions when students were coming out and made the following observations. Outside the centre, young Moroccans gathered in very small cliques in which a Parisian French accent prevailed, an indication that these young Moroccans belonged to the middle and upper classes of Moroccan society. They wore very fashionable western clothes: Nike trainers, Calvin Klein, Armani and Lacoste T-shirts. Some of the girls wore fashionable torn blue jeans; others wore skirts. Parents and chauffeurs stopped their cars outside the college to pick them up. The cars suited the expensive clothes and the French accent; there was a stream of BMWs, VW Golfs, Mercedes, 4×4s and others. What I found striking was the fact that these young people were nonchalantly indifferent to the world of the queue, its people, the police and the dramas unfolding only four metres away. Perhaps they did not care, or perhaps they had seen these queues so often that they had lost their attraction. Not one person I observed turned to look at the queue or the people in it. It was as if the queue was not there.

The queue outside the French Embassy

The French Embassy was only 15 minutes' walk from where I was staying in Casablanca. It was 4.00 when I arrived. No one was queuing by the embassy, but as I walked a hundred yards towards Amala Park, I came across a gathering of about 150 people or more. There was a man with a list in his hand, shouting: 'You have to register with me first before you queue at the Embassy. The queue will start here and we will then move you so you can queue beside the Embassy at 6.30.' There was already a queue forming in the park. I joined the queue, like everyone else. Some men and women, who must have been queuing since the previous night,

were still sleeping on the grass. Except for those who were still asleep and a young boy who sat on a bench, almost everyone else was talking. Groups of two, three, four and five people had formed, everyone engaged in some sort of talk. The group ahead of me consisted of five students who had applied for visas to go to study in French universities. I heard one of them say: 'The English are much better; they do everything on the same day. They do not make you wait like the French.' On the bench to my left, a man in his forties was talking to a girl in her early twenties. I overheard him say to her, 'The Spanish are the purest racists I have ever met. They hate Arabs.' At exactly 5.30 the man with the register asked everyone to stand and form a proper queue. I had already been in the queue. A man whose age I could not tell, as his face was covered with a pink towel, was lying on a bench some five metres away from where I stood. He wore an old beige suit which was falling to bits because of incessant use. The registrar's shouting had woken him up. At this stage he was calling names loudly and allocating numbers to each of us. Indifferent to the people around him, the man in the beige suit began to scratch his groin. This he did for about three minutes, and then with one of his eyes, he took a peep at what was taking place before him. He dragged his body off the bench lazily to reveal a burned face and a bushy, dirty looking brown moustache. He then faced us with a pair of amazed, lazy eyes that he was struggling to open. Looking at the people in the queue before him he uttered, almost in disbelief, 'Is this the army?'

The next day

'I have been here since 4 a.m., why don't you queue like the rest of us?' a man shouted angrily as people began to jump the queue. I moved from the queue and stood under a tree, facing the door of the French Embassy which, without exaggeration, looked like the door to heaven. I do not know what the door to heaven looks like, but this must be close. The queue was more than 150 metres long. There were four Moroccan policemen by the door, two each side of it. An arrogant looking Frenchman in a uniform stood at the door. He hardly talked. He stood firmly looking down at *Les miserables*, jostling to enter his 'paradise', from behind his dark sunglasses. From time to time, he physically pushed people away from the door. This made him look superior.

At about 10.00, two *Garraba* (traditional water salesmen in red traditional Moroccan costumes) roamed the place with their black sheepskin water containers on their backs. Ringing their brass bells to attract people's attention, they filled their brass pots with water from time to time and spilled it on the floor, as if this would make people thirsty. Maybe it does. You could hear young boys selling single cigarettes shouting: 'Marlboro, Marquis, Winston.' After having queued for just three days outside different western embassies, I realized that queuing had given rise

to new opportunities for the jobless. From the cake boy to the cigarette boy to the water salesman, not to mention the information men, everyone seemed to be making a living from the queue. There were also people who made good money queuing overnight for other people.

At one point, I sat beside an information salesman who shouted from time to time: 'Information, information, all kinds of information, *majeur*, *mineur*, *étudiant*!' These mostly young, well-dressed Moroccans who have created unofficial jobs out of nothing are called 'Hassrafa'. 'Are you educated? Have you got a bank account?' asked the information man. 'No,' replied a girl to both questions. 'Don't waste your time,' replied the information man, information for which he demanded no money. 'How much money do I need in my bank account before the French would accept my *demande*?' asked another girl. 'You need to have 5000 Dirhams in your bank account; your work manager has to write an official letter to confirm it. He must provide you with a letter confirming the date of your holiday; otherwise they won't give you anything.' 'Information, information, student visa, working visa, *mineur*, *majeur*, all sorts of information,' shouted the information man. The information man said to himself, as if he had gone mad:

> Nobody wants to live here any more; this is a nice country but its people are difficult. I left this country a long time ago, left my job, family and everything. I went to France. Look at me now, selling bits of information on the street.

Conclusion

Using empirical evidence from fieldwork, this article demonstrates that emigration in Morocco is not an isolated social phenomenon but one shared by almost everyone in Morocco, in some form or another, and therefore a part of popular culture. Exploring structures of popular spaces such as the queue, popular jokes and the *Derb* helps to unveil popular voices that stand at the periphery of a mass-mediated popular culture, ceaselessly engineered by the élite of Moroccan society. The *Shaabi* man and woman are objectified and silenced, their tastes and *humum* unaddressed. The queue, jokes and the *Derb* are non-institutional, communicative public spheres. They are the spaces of the unheard and unseen: those of the unemployed standing in the corner of the *Derb*, the visa queuer, the information men, the cigarette boy, the burner and the taxi driver. Finally, this article has shown that for us to comprehend popular cultures, it is imperative that we examine not only mass-mediated popular culture, but also the unmanaged and often taken-for-granted ordinariness of everyday experience.

Notes

1. *Amazigh* is the original name for Berber. It was the Romans who called the *Amazighs* Berbers. *Tamazight* is one of the four dialects spoken by the *Amazighs* of Morocco.
2. *Shaabi* also refers to a genre of popular Moroccan music, which is mainly listened to by the working classes. A Moroccan coming from Fez may find this genre of music to be tasteless and vulgar. Within the genre of *Shaabi*, there are different sub-genres such as *Jerra*, *Aita* and *Shikhat*.
3. In his book *Les Origines Sociales et Culturelles du Nationalisme Marocain* (1977) Laroui distinguishes between two meanings of the *makhzen*: the first consists of social groups such as the *Shurafa*, *al-Murabitin*, *al-Ulama* (intellectuals); heads of the *Zaweyas*; army tribes; and all those who mediate between the Sultan and his *raeya* (entourage). The second meaning of the *makhzen* is far more limited as it comprises the official apparatuses of the state such as the army and bureaucracy, both of which function under the authority of the Sultan.
4. *Derb* is a Moroccan-Arabic word which literally means 'street' or 'quarter'. It is usually a highly populated working-class area where most people share strong common 'structures of feeling'. Each *Derb* has its own geographic and cultural characteristics.

References

Belkbir, A. (1991) 'On the Meaning of Popular Culture' (in Arabic), in *Attakafa ashaabeya Ihda Rakaez Wahdat al-Maghrib al-Arabi*, paper presented at the Conference of Nadour, pp. 15–27. Morocco: Moroccan Cultural Centre.

Gassous, M. (1988) 'Observations on Transformations in Contemporary Moroccan Popular Culture', in *Popular Culture: One of the Principles of Maghrebi Unification* (in Arabic), pp. 33–56. Kunitra: Manshuraat al-Majlis al-Baladi.

Jorgensen, D. (1989) *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies*. London: Sage.

Laroui, A. (1977) *Les origines sociales et culturelles du nationalisme Marocain*. Paris: Maspero.

Sabry, T. (2000) Interview with Mohammed Sabry, Casablanca, August.

Scannell, P. (ed.) (1991) *Broadcast Talk*. London: Sage

Sparks, C. (1992) 'Popular Journalism: Theories and Practice', in P. Dahlgren and C. Sparks (eds) *Journalism and Popular Culture*, pp. 24–45. London: Sage.

Biographical note

Tarik Sabry is a lecturer in media studies at the University of Westminster, where he obtained his PhD in Media and Communications in December 2003. He is a member of the Communication and Media Research Institute and editor of a newly launched journal, *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. His

research interests are popular culture in the Maghreb, media and migration, Arab media, postcolonialism and globalization. He is currently writing a book on 'mental emigration'. ADDRESS: University of Westminster, Watford Road, Northwick Park, Harrow, Middlesex HA1 3TP, UK.
[email: sabryt@Westminster.ac.uk]