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Traditional Dances in Morocco: A Space of Expression and Freedom for Women?

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Dance is one of the most universal languages known to humanity across various civilizations and societies. It reveals the originality of each society, strengthens its identity, and fosters social cohesion. Based on gestures, it encompasses a set of signs and symbols inherent to the social life of a given group, allowing people to communicate with each other. This idea of dance as a language was beautifully expressed by A. Tierou, who stated: "*To dance is to convey to others a message that we cannot write, paint, mime, or translate into words.*"¹ This social communication can only occur through a "silent" language, that of the human body, which is the foundation of all dance.

With its diverse cultural components-African, Jewish, Berber, and Arab-Muslim-Moroccan society has not escaped this mode of expression. A varied artistic heritage distinguishes it and possesses a wealth of bodily expression and practices, particularly sacred and ritualistic, which transcend time through the symbols and historical facts they convey, as well as through various accessories like traditional costumes and jewelry that have been magnificently preserved, attesting to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Moroccan people. These dances are characterized by their collective nature, as it is the entire tribe or community that expresses itself, revealing the dominant social symbolism. They often serve as historical narratives, informing us about events that have marked the history of a particular social group. This is the case with the *Taskaouine* dance from the southern region of Morocco, which was primarily intended—according to some informants—to assassinate a despotic governor attending the dance performance, while the dancers carefully concealed their weapons. This dance thus serves as a symbolic heritage from the ancestors, referring to a time of oppression and tyranny that today unites them. Through it, the group sings of their solidarity and determination to annihilate the enemy.

Dances in Morocco are characterized by their originality, the "purity" of their expression, the depth of their meaning and symbols, and the incredible richness of sound, rhythm, and movement, which draw strength and variety from the multiplicity of musical instruments. The dances are varied: we distinguish erotic dances, war dances or ritual dances, and initiation dances. Others represent daily tasks, such as harvesting, hunting, etc. There are also male dances (such as war dances); mixed dances like *Ahouach* and *Ahidus*, which are often accompanied by songs and performed on specific occasions like weddings, circumcisions, baptisms, or to celebrate a pilgrim's return; and female dances like those of the *chikhate*. This group consists of women assisted by a man playing a string instrument. Their leader, the *chikha*, often holds a small *târîja*, a sort of long earthenware vase covered with animal skin, and she leads the performance. She is called *chikha* in reference to her expertise in singing and dancing².

¹ Tierou, A., *La danse africaine c'est la vie*, Paris, Ed. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1983, p. 81.

² It should be noted in passing that the term "*chikha*" has a pejorative connotation, since in everyday language it refers to promiscuous women, known for their loose morals and libertinism. What's more, by virtue of their profession, they transgress socio-cultural norms. This is not the case with the term *chikh*, a qualifier specific to men, which often designates a social status followed by significant community power, such as the head of a tribe.

Thus, we will attempt to explore the world of the art of dance in Morocco through two choreographies from the south of Morocco. Indeed, this region has delivered the most seductive and attractive traditional dances. They impress with the beauty of their gestures and the depth of their symbolism. The magic and allure of these dances come from the fact that women and femininity are the main actors. We will mention, among other examples, the *Tissint* dance (*Tata* region), which represents the ritual of marriage, and the sword dance "*aqlâl as-sîf*" (*Zagora* region). Not forgetting the *Lounassa* dances (*Taroudant* region) and the *Guedra* dance (*Guelmime* province), which are the focus of our study. The objective is to demonstrate, through ethnological research conducted in the two study regions, the true role and relationship that Moroccan women have with this playful space: dance. The meanings and significance hidden behind this sung and danced language. Indeed, beyond the beauty of the gesture, is the dance space a timeless, private-public space, a space of freedom of expression for women? Does the presence of these almost exclusively female dances in this geographical and cultural area reveal a more equal and less repressive male/female relationship? Is there a specificity to feminine identity? What feminine message can be read and what image does it convey? Finally, what can we say about gender relations in these two regions through the study of these two dances? If Moroccan women share the pleasure and even the possibilities of expressing themselves physically, they certainly do so differently from men.

The exploration of the magical and mysterious world of these two dances begins with an exhaustive description, the result of a two-month field stay, in total immersion, in the studied regions. This description will be the basis for an attempt at understanding and analysis. An approach that aims to be faithful to the object of study as a total cultural fact, here dance. In the study of each dance, we first provide an overview of the concerned populations and the condition of women in the two regions to allow for a better understanding of the woman/dance relationship.

Women and Dances in the Sahara Region

The dances described here originate from the province of Guelmime, "*bâb sahra*" (gateway to the Sahara), which was originally a major caravan port where the primary economic exchanges between Morocco and the rest of Africa took place. Historically, it is known for the *Oued Noun* region, the land of the *Tekna*³. The region's economy is pastoral, and most inhabitants are nomads. Livestock breeding constitutes their main economic activity. The cultivation of land is mostly irrigated and concentrated mainly in the oases, but its revenues are generally insufficient. Among all these activities, trade dominates, forming, along with livestock breeding, the basis of the economy.

Regarding social organization, the population of *Oued Noun* is a mix of various cultures: Arab Bedouin, Berber, and Black communities. What distinguishes it is its social hierarchy, characterized by the existence of different "*tabaqât*" (social strata):

- *The Chorfa or the Marabout Class*: These are the nobles, consisting of holy and conservative families endowed with power linked to their status and religious role. They enjoy certain privileges and superiority over the rest of the population and are

³ The *Tekna* brings together the essential elements of the Moorish ethnic group. They were formed by the union of Berber tribes (*Gezulla*) with Bedouin Arab tribes (*béni Hassan*), descended from the Yemeni *Ma'quil* tribes who came to North Africa during the great *Hilalian* migration in the 13th century.

venerated and respected by everyone. Their historical role was to settle conflicts between tribes and teach and enforce Islamic religion. These *chorfa* are referred to as "*achiyâkh*⁴."

- *Al-bîdân* (*masc. bîdanî, fem. bîdaniya*): This category includes the Arab *Hassân*. Etymologically, the term designates "the whites" in contrast to the Black communities. Generally, it refers to someone who has preserved their "*al-hassâniya*⁵" dialect and traditions. *Al-bîdanî* is often used to describe a cheerful, sociable, and hospitable person.
- *Al-haratîn* (*masc. hurtanî, fem. hurtâniya*): This class includes butchers and "*ma^çallmîn*" (artisans), who are mostly specialists in ironwork, silver, and wood, while their women work with leather. These artisans are also musicians, responsible for animating tribal ceremonies.
- *Al-^çabîd* (*masc. cabd, fem. khâdem*): These are freed slaves who remain attached to their masters, maintaining close ties. They are responsible for domestic work.

Currently, this hierarchy seems less apparent, and interactions between different groups are common except in matters of marriage. For example, a *hurtâni* or *çabd* cannot marry a *bidâniya* or a *chorfa* girl. Before giving his daughter in marriage, the father ensures the purity of the suitor's lineage to preserve the family line. A freed slave, regardless of his wealth, will never be equal to his master due to the "impure" origin of his ancestry. However, a *chrîf* can marry a *khâdem* and have children with her. Within this complex social system, what can we say about the situation of women in Tekna society?

Women in the Oued Nun Region

In general, Bedouin women enjoy certain privileges compared to other Moroccan women. They are respected by men who grant them their rights. It is intolerable for a man to beat or insult his wife. If this happens, she leaves him and goes to her parents. She can even demand a divorce, which the husband must grant. Otherwise, he must apologize and try to regain her trust and love by presenting a valuable gift (such as jewellery) and what is called "*dbîha*" (a slaughtered animal, usually a camel or sheep). This act of reconciliation is known as "*tardît lkhîlâg*." The husband must be accompanied by respected and influential village personalities when visiting his in-laws to lend credibility and weight to his request to win back his wife. However, the respect a man shows his wife is mainly due to the respect he has for her family. In marriage, great importance is placed on the bride's family name and tribe. Thus, humiliating a woman equates to humiliating her family and tribe. Similarly, a woman's misconduct would also tarnish her family's name and reputation.

Moreover, women must be virtuous and hide their faces out of respect in the presence of strangers and often even before their fathers-in-law and sons-in-law. They must always keep their distance. Young girls have limitless respect for their father and older brother. A newly married woman, for example, will not dare, out of modesty, to appear before her father, and this is also the case during her pregnancy. Similarly, a man will not dare to greet his wife in front of his parents, even after a long absence. As for marriage, young girls are often married

⁴ Plural of *chîkh*, it is a qualifier specific to men that designates a social status followed by an important community power such as a tribal chief.

⁵ This is the language of the Bedouin Arab tribes, the *Hassan*. It derives from classical Arabic with Berber and Sudanese borrowings.

at the age of fourteen or fifteen. The father chooses the first husband for his daughter. If she divorces, she can decide on her remarriage. Indeed, while polygamy is rare, divorce is very common. Divorced women are respected and not looked down upon, unlike in other Moroccan provinces. They are the most sought-after in marriage because they are reputed to be initiated and experienced.

However, the situation of women differs from one social class to another. The "*m^callmât*," "*hurtaniyât*," and "*khâdem*" serve the class of marabouts and perform various manual tasks, especially leatherwork. They also sing at festivals and cook during family ceremonies. As for the women belonging to the "*chorfa*" class, they enjoy a set of privileges that help them assert themselves in society and demand respect from men. They place great importance on their bodies and beauty to please and seduce. It is not surprising that poets describe in their poems the captivating beauty of these plump women who have charmed them so much. All women, regardless of their social class, are coquettish. They love to perfume and adorn themselves. The presentation to guests of a tray full of perfume bottles, musk, body lotions (milk), and mixtures of natural products (for hair care) testifies to the great importance given to feminine beauty and the care *Tekna* women devote to their bodies. It remains that the ideal type of beauty is the plump and fleshy woman. Plumpness is one of the essential criteria of beauty for women and an unavoidable condition for their marriage. A "*fâlha*" (beautiful) woman, according to the *Tekna*, is by definition a plump woman. Plumpness is a flattering sign for the family as it symbolizes wealth. This is why girls undergo what is called "*teblâh*" (fattening) from a young age (nine or ten years old), to make them fat forever. They are forced to follow a particular diet for forty days. They must ingest a large quantity of camel milk and eat "*lhsa lhmer*," a kind of soup made from barley flour and camel meat. They are encouraged to consume it without bread so they do not fill up, and they eat while lying on their side. This fattening practice was common among the *Tekna* but is now rarely practiced by city dwellers; it is more commonly found among desert Bedouins.

Collective Celebrations and Dances among the Tekna

The dances are characterized by their originality and often accompany rich and varied songs. These songs are primarily based on poetry, which holds an important place among the Hassân Arabs as it is a symbol of erudition and prestige. As for traditional Saharan dances, they are numerous and are especially characterized by the dominance of percussion instruments. Among the most well-known dances are *herma*, *tbâl*, and *Guedra*, which is the subject of our study.

The "Herma" dance: This is a very ancient collective dance. Nowadays, it is increasingly rarely practiced in the region, only by amateurs on the occasion of weddings. According to our informants, it is especially known in the East (*Tata* region). This dance particularly takes place on the night of the wedding, in front of the newlyweds' chamber. In this dance, a group of elderly men, standing in a line, holding each other's arms, mark the rhythm by stomping their feet in unison while singing. It is not accompanied by any musical instrument. In the middle of the dancers is a *chikh* who starts the dance by launching a melodic phrase that the choir, split into two, repeats. One part repeats half of the phrase, and the other half repeats the other half. In front of the line of dancers, a woman and a man perform a light dance, moving from one end of the row to the other. Gradually, the rhythm accelerates, and when it reaches its climax, the dance ends with the repeated pronunciation of "*ahm*." As for the meaning of the term "*herma*," the verb "*herem*" in Hassani dialect, in the imperative form

(second person singular), has the meaning of "dogg" or "dokk" (strike, break). It corresponds to the act of stomping the ground with the foot. Since this dance is performed on the wedding night, specifically in front of the new couple's chamber, could it be intended to encourage the husband and help him fulfill his conjugal, or even "social," duty? By inciting him to "break" the hymen through the continuous repetition of "ahm," which originates from "harm" (break), especially since the foot is considered a phallic symbol, thus a symbol of penetrating power.

The "tbāl" dance: This dance is known throughout the Sahara, from southern Morocco to Mauritania. It is named after the percussion instrument used, *tbāl* (a type of drum). It is a large wooden container called "*tazuwa*," which used to and still serves the nomadic families of the desert to hold camel milk after milking. Its main characteristic is that it prevents the milk from spilling due to its balance. The wood used to make it comes from a tree found in Mauritania. According to our informants, this container was unknown to the Sahrawis of southern Morocco and was introduced to them through borrowing. This container (*tazuwa*) is covered with camel or goat skin, which is soaked in water to expand it, before being stretched at each end by animal leather straps called "*gānba*." It is often the wife of the *M^callm* (master), specifically the master blacksmith, who is responsible for its fabrication. Before covering it, she places seven small stones inside, referring to the seven great *Igawn* (musicians) renowned for the beauty of their voices and their musical skill. The number seven is also known for its sacred character. It appears in the Muslim profession of faith, *ash-shahâda*; it also refers to the seven days of the week, the seven ages of life, the seven purifying and therapeutic waves (in Moroccan magical practices), the seven heavens, and the seven *djinns*... The seven stones placed in the *tbāl* mainly allow it to resonate better, thus ensuring the successful unfolding of the celebration. Additionally, this woman coats the skin of the instrument with *henna*, this "*plant of paradise*" known to be "*pleasant to the jnûn, keeping them on the skin's surface*"⁶. Thus, by striking this *tbāl* in a slow and measured manner, since it is the blacksmith's wife who is responsible for this task, she seems to awaken the spirits contained within the skin. This magical act of drumming could be a sort of long and fascinating conversation she has with these spirits she has honored so much through the ritual preparation of the musical instrument. It seems that this task is specially entrusted to her due to the magical power she shares with her husband, the "master of fire," who is closely related to the dark forces he controls through the rhythm of the forge. All this gives this musical instrument a sacred character. Note that *tbāl* is reserved for the *‘abid* and *m^callmin* classes, which constitute what is called "*igawn*" (the musicians). They are part-time professionals as they practice crafts in addition to their artistic activity.

The *tbāl* musical instrument has always been a symbol of power. It was the property of the tribe's grand chief and was known as the "*tbāl-al-‘ada*" (custom drum). It was used to gather people together in the event of war or to consult them on an important matter. It was also played in honour of a special guest or to announce *al-‘etma*, a particular time of night when the camels were being milked, since, according to our informants, this is when the milk "goes down into their udders". Nowadays, *tbāl* is played at family or tribal ceremonies, during religious festivals such as Mouloud (the birth of the Prophet), when religious songs are sung, but also to celebrate the return of an absent person, the building of a house, etc...

As for the dance, the *m^callam* woman, known as *tigiwt* (the feminine singular of *igiw*), seated in the middle of the group of singers, starts an individual song. This is taken up by the choir, who clap their hands in rhythm as they sing. The song can be either a "*sûr*" (verse in Hassani poetry) or a "*nahya*" (verse in classical Arabic poetry). It may be a love song (al-gazal),

⁶ De Pigeaudeau. O., Arts et coutumes des Maures, III, *Hespéris/Tamuda*, vol. XV, 1970, p. 5-82.

a praise song (*al-madh*), a war song (*al-hamâs*), a lament (*ar-ritâ*) or a satire (*al-higâ*). Under the rhythmic beat emanating from this instrument, one or two women perform a standing dance. Their whole bodies are involved in the dance. What's impressive is the agility of their hand movements and those of their fingers, which they keep moving throughout the dance. They put a lot of emphasis on the movement of the index finger, which they move first. They are said to calculate and follow the rhythm with their fingers. The index finger refers to the religious domain. It plays a role in Muslim prayer and is considered to be "the finger of testimony" (*at-tachahhud*). So over and above its aesthetic and plastic role, the index finger, or the movement of the hands in general, is said to have a much more profound function, falling within the realm of the sacred. The dancers sway in a slow, rhythmic way. The undulations of their bodies seem to be an imitation of the camel's gait and the long, subtle movements of the desert dunes. The man can take part in the dance. His dance is different from that performed by the woman. He whirls around in his ample "*darra^ca*" (full male dress), his movements slender and strong. They are closely related to the activities of daily life (ploughing, warrior combat, etc.). The man is also inspired by his natural environment, imitating the movements of certain animals, principally the ostrich and the camel. In this way, he feigns the surveillance and protection of his "*harem*", in the image of the camel watching over the herd of camels. Through his gestures, the dancer seeks to seduce the woman and win her favour, showing her his courage and virility and expressing his passion for her. It is a communication of inter-seduction and love. In this dance, improvisation is the order of the day. The audience is not mixed. The men sit on one side and the women on the other.

The main characteristic of this dance is that it brings together great poets who devote themselves to the art of versification "*al-giyâfa*" or "*tgta^c*". These are poetic jousts lasting several hours, during which each "*mganni*" poet tries to demonstrate his erudition and poetic talent. The poet's reputation is inseparable from that of his tribe. In a way, he is its spokesman, even its representative. In the past, tribes used to declare war on each other through their poets, who would exchange satirical verses. During the dance, for example, when an *igiw* (musician) finishes his "*sûr*", a poet, who is usually in the audience, addresses him by saying: "*Here's a gâf for you⁷*", and throws it at the "*igiw*". and throws it to the *igiw*, who sings it. This *gâf* must respect the meter and rhyme scheme of the verses sung previously. In this theatrical way, poets can indirectly defame each other. They can also praise a woman, or address a subject on which they have agreed in advance. The best poet is the one who "*ya^cguer an-nahya*" (literally "sterilizes" the recitation of poetry) and is often referred to as "*egguâr an-nahya*" (the one who cuts short the poetic exchange and duel through the excellence of his poetry). It should be noted that poets often belong to the *bidân* class. A *bîdani* is content to launch poetic verses, without taking part in the singing, which is reserved for the "*igawn*", at the risk of being denigrated by his social and ethnic group. So an "*igiw*" may be a poet, but not every poet is a singer. There is also a certain ambivalence in the image of the *igiw*. He seems to be respected since he is an indispensable part of the festivities, but at the same time, he is disparaged for his rapacity and bad language, at least that is the local image as translated by the informants. It is for this reason that he is handsomely rewarded to secure his praise.

⁷ A *gâf* is made up of 4 to 6 hemistiches, i.e. 2 to 3 poetic lines.

The Dance of Guedra or rgîs⁸: An Attempt at Analysis and Interpretation

The *Guedra* dance originated in the Oued Nun region. It is unique to the *Tekna* tribes, who spread it throughout the Sahara, and also to the *bidân*. It is named after the percussion instrument used: *Guedra* (pot or cauldron). It's a kind of earthenware jar covered either with an animal skin (goat) or a piece of rubber that's held tight with a rope. An old woman places seven small stones, seven lumps of sugar, or seven dates in the jar to give it a certain timbre, and also to refer, as we have already mentioned, to the seven musicians renowned for their musical skills. What's more, sugar and dates, or simply "sweetness", are enjoyed as much by man as by the "*djinns*" (spirits). This instrument is struck by a "*neggâr*" (literally one who pecks). The *neggâr* pecks the *Guedra* with the end of his two "*maghzilayn*" (spindles) wooden sticks, as a bird pecks at a piece of wood with the tip of its beak. These "*maghzilayn*" are usually used to spin wool. So, like a woman weaving her web, the *neggâr* in turn weaves the musical rhythm by striking the *guedra* with short blows. Only specialists play this instrument. It is a responsibility entrusted to the *neggâr*, who must demonstrate great skill. He is also the leader of the dance, organizing the participants, starting the songs, and signaling the end of the dance.

The dance is performed by a group of men (around twenty) who kneel, close together. They form a circle called the "*lgâra*⁹", in the middle of which stands the *neggâr* with his musical instrument. The men begin the dance by clapping their hands in time to the rhythm of the *Guedra* while moving their shoulders. They repeat aloud the "*reddât*" (*sing. redda; refrain*)¹⁰ called out by *neggâr* as they wait for a dancer to appear in the middle of the circle. These are short rhythmic phrases that they sing collectively as a refrain throughout the dance. These men are known as "*lgwachîch*"¹¹. They must have a good command of the song and dance movements, otherwise they cannot take part. In this context, it should be noted that a young person does not dare, out of respect, to join a choir made up of older men, especially if his father or older brother is present. Each generation participates individually in the dance. *lgwachîch* are generally divided into two groups that compete with each other. Each group repeats one-half of the rhythmic phrase in succession. These are often love songs. The spectators surround the circle of dancers. Most of them are men. The women either sit at the back or are given a small place in the circle of men.

A dancer, sometimes two or three, appears in the middle of the circle, supported by the women's youyous. Veiled, she begins to dance, giving the men a glimpse of her body and arousing their curiosity and desire. This doesn't last long, as one of the participants, or sometimes a "*khâdem*" (slave), who introduces her to the center of the circle, removes her veil, revealing her face and her long, splendid hair. Sometimes a dancer refuses to have the veil removed out of modesty and respect, especially if her father and brother are in the audience. Some dancers take it off as soon as they enter to dance, in which case they are said to be daring, but this rarely happens. It should also be pointed out that only young virgins uncover their

⁸ dance.

⁹ *lgâra* refers to the circular space where the dance takes place. This space is also known as "*lmerge*" (the landmark) because it is always returned to.

¹⁰ They are also known as "*thmiyât*", *sing. thmiya*, from the verb "*hmmâ*" meaning to heat up, as the singers heat up the rhythm by repeating a refrain.

¹¹ *Sing. gachûch* meaning bust, perhaps because only the upper part of their body is visible. This is either a reference to masculine virile strength or because the central and fundamental movement of masculine dance takes place at the bust level.

heads completely. As for women, they often dance with their hair covered. This serves to distinguish the dancer's social status.

The young dancer, kneeling in the middle of the "*lgâra*" circle, performs her dance to the rhythm of the instrument, which becomes increasingly lively. Eyes downcast, feigning modesty, she crawls around the circle. When she moves towards a group of men, they all bow back simultaneously. They sway from right to left, producing an undulating movement that corresponds to the swaying of the dancer's hair. As for the other group, they continue to clap their hands in rhythm as they lean forward, inviting her to come towards them. *neggâr* follows the dancer's movements and turns to the same side as her, striking the instrument with his spindles. The dancer, carried away by the rhythm, swings from side to side, moving her chest and waving her long braids. The braids are essential to the dance, but she dances with such agility with her fingers that it's almost as if she's sculpting the rhythm of the *neggâr*. It is often said that "she counts the rhythm with her fingers". The participants are so bewitched by the dancer's charm, the beauty of her dance, and the bewitching rhythm of the instrument that they let out cheers and cries that seem to be cries of satisfaction and pleasure. Sometimes one of the participants will even touch the dancer's hair and his or her face at the same time. This is generally said to be her suitor. The dancer must not interrupt the dance and must leave the circle on her own. If she does, the chorus, which is besieging her, will prevent her from doing so and force her to resume the dance. It is up to the *neggâr* to allow her to do so, once he is convinced that she is exhausted. She can also make him understand with a particular gesture of the hand. In this way, the dance ends with the group of men saying "*ahutch*" in succession to a haunting rhythm, and with the participants and the dancer "collapsing". The latter falls to the ground on her back next to the *neggâr*. It should be noted that only the women "fall to the ground", while the young virgins rush out of the circle. The sublimity of the dance depends above all on the skill and finesse of the dancer who is the main character in the dance. She must be agile and faithful to the ancestral movements. It is often said that the best dancer is the one who pushes her challenge to the limit, thus surpassing the group of *Igwachîch* and *neggâr* men, insofar as she transcends her exhaustion by provoking that of the latter. In this case, it is said that "*flana châyla râs n°âma*" (*she wears the head of the ostrich*), in other words, she walks with her head held high and with pride, because of her exploit".

In addition to the originality and richness of this dance, it is closely and directly linked to celibacy. Only unmarried women (virgins, divorcees, and widows) can dance it¹². Its main purpose is to enable women to get married, or at least to please a man, since it is the only occasion when they can be looked at with admiration by him and where they can "show off" their bodies, reveal their beauty and make the most of their dancing skills. Dance is therefore a pretext for encounters. A man who is captivated by a woman's beauty will hang a "*kumiya*" (dagger), a valuable piece of jewelry, or a large sum of money on her head. This is known as "*lâg*" (suspension)¹³. By this act, the man designates the woman who will be his future wife. In a way, it is an invitation to marriage, to a story, and an 'adventure' of love. Young girls are introduced to the dance at an early age. Among the *Saharawis*, a girl must know how to dance. It's a quality insofar as she does it in the family setting¹⁴. *Guedra* is often performed at wedding ceremonies. In some tribes, it is the bride who opens the ball by dancing first, with new braids on her head to show her new status as a married woman. Young single women then join in. The

¹² In some tribes, a married woman may dance *Guedra* first at her son's wedding. In this case, she is said to open the "*achbâr*" dance (literally, the field of "pointing" or selection), as the men designate the women they wish to be their wives.

¹³ From the verb "*callag*", which means to suspend, to hang up.

¹⁴ Those who make a profession of it are generally rejected because they have dared to make the game of "infinite" seduction their main activity. They are considered to be women of "lesser virtue".

fact that the bride starts the dance is probably a kind of good omen for them, allowing them to marry soon. This day is known as "*hachlaf*". *Guedra* can also be played on the occasion of a divorce when the woman has completed her "*idda*" continence retreat, which is generally set at three months. The purpose of this celebration is to publicize her divorce, informing potential suitors of her new status, but also to celebrate her return. In this case, she also starts the dance. Some tribes, such as the *chorfa* of *Ait-hmâd*, performed it at the end of the *ma^crouf* of the *zaouia* of the *tigmart* oasis (annual visit to a local saint). It was often said that if the woman refused to dance, she would be punished by the patron saint by going bald. This testifies to the sacred nature of this dance. A sacredness that takes on its full meaning here, starting from the sacred space of sanctity, without forgetting the aforementioned elements, namely the rituals behind the 'making' of the musical instruments, which generally accompany the dancing and singing.

Attempt at analysis and interpretation

La *Guedra* is part of the vast field of erotic dances. The movements of the dancers and the themes of the songs, in which love and the beauty of the female body are sung, bear witness to this. This was also confirmed by some of our informants, who consider it to be an obscene dance and an affront to women's chastity. The fact that it is linked to celibacy is also very revealing. The *Guedra* dance represents the "eternal theme of love". It expresses the passionate drama of a woman in love who loves but suffers at the same time. Beyond the aesthetic aspect, her gestures convey a message of love. Through them, she expresses herself and communicates her deepest feelings to us. Encircled like a prey animal, she moves slowly under the eager, admiring gazes of the men who revel in the contemplation of her sensual, fleshy body, a source of pleasure and enjoyment. Her movements are marked by an attitude of hesitation: her body tends to open and close. She gives of herself and holds back. We get the impression that she is in dialogue with her lover who is embarrassed by so much indecision. As soon as she beckons him to come closer, she tells him to go away. She accepts pleasure and goes towards it, but at the same time refuses it. Is she afraid of being abandoned once "offered", or of being judged? You can feel that she is carried away by the rhythm. A bewitching rhythm that pushes her to surrender to desire. But despite her excitement, she resists. She tries to interrupt the rhythm by hitting *Guedra* with her long braids bent backward. The fact that she dances sitting down is simply a way of being chained to mother earth, her "redeemer". We see her in pain, holding her hand to her heart as a sign of affliction and love while dissuading her lover with her other hand. Embarrassed, she tries to evade, but to no avail. She makes a final appeal, begging men to spare her from this infernal circle. Her appeal is translated by the chorus in this *redda* (refrain): "*hâ chayla ya fgarîch*" (*save me, oh you heroes!*). But desire takes hold of her whole being. She is no longer in control of herself; her body breaks free of its enclosures, breaking the social chains and overcoming her inhibitions. Defeated, she collapses, all "offered up" after a restless struggle, in a state of total submission. The fact that only the (non-virgin) women collapse at the end of the dance is highly significant. The latter are easily carried away by their feelings and succumb to the delights of love to which they have already been initiated, unlike the virgins, who have to tame their desires. So it's hardly surprising to see them rush out of the circle at the end of the dance.

Furthermore, why do we speak of *Guedra* (pot) in the feminine and not *Guedr* in the masculine? Does it refer to the woman dancer, a dancer bubbling under the 'fire' of desire like a pot bubbling on the fire? The image of the dancer also appears ambivalent. She combines both strengths and weaknesses. The dancer shows herself off, trying to seduce the other man.

He reacts to her every move and suffers from her hesitation. Hesitation that she may be feigning, since propriety demands that a woman always conceal her love for the man she desires. Every time she goes over to the men's side, they all lean back, as if stunned, annihilated by so much beauty. A divine and fatal beauty that they seem to venerate to the point of making her their prisoner in this sacred circle: *lgâra*. She is the jellyfish who petrifies her lovers with a single glance. Her head swings from side to side, causing her long, matted hair to sway. They look like snakes preparing to attack anyone who tries to get close to her. The fact that the man is hanging a dagger on the dancer is also loaded with meaning and can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, we can say that by this act the man has made her his, especially as the dagger is a phallic symbol of domination. On the other hand, can we see this act as a kind of submission: the submission of the masculine to the feminine? By surrendering his weapon, does the warrior surrender himself and submit definitively to his "enemy"?

Beyond simply expressing feelings, this dance seems to excite human passions and provoke desire. In this case, could it be a lascivious dance, a dance that tends towards sexual rapprochement? Was it originally a kind of "sacred prostitution", which with the advent of Islam lost its sacred character to become nothing more than a profane spectacle? Do we dare see in this dance a representation of the sexual act itself? If so, the back-and-forth movement of the dancer's hands would be a sexual exchange of love. The men's cries and agitation and the dancer's agitation under *Guedra's* frenetic rhythm would correspond to the "tension phase," while their collapse would express their "relaxation" and enjoyment. The pleasure emanates from the imagined or "fantasized" sexual act. An enjoyment that is, in the end, nothing more than life, a life that is followed by death. Death allows "Eros"¹⁵, life, to burst forth, which in the *Guedra* dance is represented by the introduction of a new dancer into the middle of the circle and by the recovery or rather the "resurrection" of the men who come back to life after a simulated death. Could *Guedra* be a kind of cult that goes beyond human sexual impulses, because it is performed in a sacred space or one that is considered as such? Here, the symbolism of the fingers is highly significant. Does it refer to the four cosmic elements: fire, earth, water, and air, to the natural and cosmic environment?

Through this dance, the women communicate their deepest states of mind: their suffering, their desires, and their most repressed desires, beyond censorship. They move and abandon themselves in an almost "unconscious" state. The space of dance allows women to indulge their unconscious desires, the depths of their "Eros". For them, dance is a need to be satisfied, not just a form of entertainment. It is their outlet for expressing their sexual frustrations. It is a source of satisfaction and balance. The dancer represents the image of a daring woman who transcends the social, showing off her body in front of a group of men and expressing her desires beyond all modesty. So this dance is not just a pure expression of "libido". The women are communicating a much deeper message: their rejection of and revolt against discriminatory social norms. *Guedra* expresses a relationship between men and women that is different from reality because it is only in this space, which for them is one of the only meeting places, where they can express their love. *Guedra* is one of the most original Moroccan dances, however, because it is one of the rare dances in which women show off and liberate themselves in this way. This seems to be justified by the situation of Sahrawi women, who enjoy a certain freedom that sets them apart from other Moroccan women.

¹⁵ Maffesoli M., *L'ombre de Dionysos : contribution à une sociologie de l'orgie*, Paris, 1982.

The Houara Berbers of the Agadir region and the Lounassa dance

Lounassa is a dance unique to the *Houara* tribes of the Agadir region¹⁶. According to ancient Arab authors and genealogists, the *Houara* are a group of Berber tribes. Some legends attribute a Yemeni origin to them. Around the 14th century, these tribes assimilated almost completely with the *Banû Salîm* Arabs, whose language and way of life they adopted. This is how they became Arabised¹⁷. In the social organization of the *Houara*, there is no apparent social hierarchy, except in terms of rich and poor. Tribal feeling is dominant, which makes them more united and supportive.

Women among the Houara

In general, *Houara* women do not enjoy as many privileges as *Sahrawi* women. They seem to be under the yoke of masculine power. A power that dominates them completely, to the point of denying them the slightest of their rights. This seems to be explained by the harshness of *Houara's* character and a certain severity that sometimes goes as far as injustice. The way *Houara* men look at women is the complete opposite of the way *Sahrawi* men look at their wives. Far from being adulated, idolized, and respected, *Houara* women seem to be underestimated, belittled, and even beaten. They are entirely dependent on men and are relegated to the role of mother and reproducer. Even if a man feels love and esteem for his wife, he must never show it in front of his family or tribe, or risk losing their esteem. As far as the body of *Houara* women is concerned, we can say that they don't take as much interest in their bodies as *Sahraoui* women. This is because of the hard work they do every day. They are responsible for all agricultural work, as well as household chores. For the *Houara*, beauty does not seem to be an important criterion for a successful marriage. In particular, they require their partner to be chaste and from a noble family. She must also be an excellent housewife, a good worker, and a good mother. There is a wide gulf between *Houara* women and *Sahraoui* women. Although the *Houara* were inspired by the Bedouin Arab tribes of the south, to the point of adopting certain cultural characteristics, they did not follow their model in terms of their relationship with women.

Artistic life among the Houara

The *Houara* people of the *Souss* region have their customs and practices that make them unique. They are passionate about dance, which is one of their favourite pastimes. It is often performed to celebrate joyous events such as weddings, circumcisions, christenings, or the return of a pilgrim. *Hurân* is one of the region's most famous dances. This is a collective dance in which two groups confront each other in a back-and-forth dialogue through song. It is

¹⁶ The *Houara* are found throughout North Africa. They are also found in Egypt. In Morocco, they are mainly found around *Guercif* (*Taza* province) and in the *Souss* region. *The Houara of Souss*, which are the subject of our study, are located more precisely to the south-east of the town of Agadir. They occupy both banks of the lower Oued Souss. This region is characterized by the fertility of its land and the abundance of water. This is why most of the *Houara* are farmers.

¹⁷ L^cabid A, *Les tribus Houara*, Doctorat de III^e cycle thesis, Univ. Mohammed V, Rabat, 1984.

performed by either men or women but is never mixed. The *Houara* are best known for their famous *Lounassa* dance, which is the subject of our study.

The Lounassa dance: reading and interpretation

Lounassa (literally "Company") is so called because people look forward to a gathering in which dancing and singing are used. Its primary purpose is entertainment and relaxation. Each tribe has its own "*ounaiyssiya*" (people who specialize in this dance), most of whom are amateurs. They are responsible for leading family or tribal ceremonies. The *ounaiyssiya* are made up of around thirty people. They are all dressed in white, with a *'mama* (a kind of long turban) around their heads. They all wear white slippers and carry a "*kumiya*" (dagger) hanging from their shoulder. They are often accompanied by a female "*chikha*". She is often dressed in a "*tekchita*", the traditional festive costume, which consists of a long pantiled tunic. She also wears a "*qtib*" (scarf, often red in colour) on her head and wraps her head in a band decorated with silver coins (*mechbûh*). The latter must be skillful and graceful, as she is the main actress in the dance. Her image is ambivalent. She is respected because she is an indispensable part of the dance, but at the same time she is "frowned upon". She is seen as deviant. But in general, it seems that people are much more interested in the skill and grace of the dancer than in her reputation. The musical instruments used consist mainly of an "*agwâl*" (long *ta'riga*), a "*naqûs*" (a circular metal percussion instrument - the rim of a car - on which two iron sticks are struck) and a "*tara*", which is smaller than the *bandîr* (circular drum). It lacks the two strings that change the instrument's timbre. The audience is not mixed. The women form their circle, as do the men. And under no circumstances must one of them cross the other's circle.

The *ounaiyssiya* stand in a semi-circle, with only the *naqûs* player seated. They are supervised by a "*mqeddem*" (leader) who is responsible for grouping and organizing the troupe. He is also the one who starts the singing and indicates the beginning and end of the game with the beats of his "*târa*" instrument. He is also responsible for bringing the members of his tribe together during *Lounassa*. The dance ritual is divided into the following stages, which are repeated throughout the ceremony¹⁸:

1. "*tbata*" (*setting up*) or what is known as "*sidi diafine allah*": this is a stage in which the *ounaiyssiya* prepare themselves. They often launch out a melodic phrase in a slow rhythm in praise of the person to whom they have been invited: "*Ali Ben Brahim yâ sîd rjâl*" (*O Ali son of Brahim, you who are the best of men*).
- 2.
3. "*an-nadha*" (*call*): In this second part, *Mqeddem* launches a new rhythmic phrase, in the form of an appeal. The phrase is taken up by a chorus known as the "*reddada*" or "*chddada*".
- 4.
5. "*al-leghta*": so called because the group of dancers lets out cries that sound like cries of terror and fright. The rhythm quickens. Four dancers break away from the group and form a circle in the middle of which the woman dances after the *mqeddem* has signaled them to do so by beating his musical instrument. This step is often followed by a '*rekza*' (jump). The woman jumps with one of the dancers, holding the sides of her garment in her hands and twirling her arms.

¹⁸ These milestones were communicated to us by the *ounaiyssiya* group from the *Igfifat* tribe.

She is said to be communicating with the *mqeddem* by telling him how many jumps she is going to make. In this way, the man and woman leap very high, striking the ground hard with their feet and turning around abruptly. Sometimes they jump holding hands. Their jumps are measured, and harmonious and correspond to the *tara* strokes.

6. "*at-tgtâc*" (*stop*): in this stage, *mqeddem* marks stop by tapping his musical instrument, signifying a change of rhythm.
7. "*at-tgrâr*": in this phase, the singing lasts longer. It is a dialogue between the person singing (often the *mqeddem*) and the "*grrara*" (singers) who take up his words. This is why it is called *tgrâr*, from the verb *iqrâr* which means recognition in classical Arabic, because by taking up his song, they recognize as true what he is saying.
8. Finally, "*lgelba*" (change) means change of rhythm.

Lounassa is one of the "strangest" dances in Morocco's artistic heritage. It is moving because of the violent exchange of movements between a couple of dancers, who leap high up as if aiming for celestial ascension. Observing this dance, it becomes clear that it is a confrontation between a man and a woman. A sort of duel, in which the woman seems to be challenging the man by jumping as hard and as high as he does. It would seem that through her leaps she is expressing her rebellion against the social system that degrades her, reducing her to a mere object to be used as the man pleases. For her, dance is a space of freedom. It is the only space where she can express her refusal of the repression and devaluation to which she is subjected in her daily life, through movement and without constraint. Everything unfolds in the playful space of dance.

The *houara* also have a legend about the origin of this dance, which can be summed up as follows: "*In the past, a snake that lived in the forest would transform itself at night into a beautiful young girl. She would seduce the young men of the tribe and kill them once they had succumbed to her charm. One day, the whole tribe mobilized to take revenge on this snake-woman who was preventing them from living in peace. But only a man known for his great temerity was able to tame her after a bitter struggle.*"

According to some informants, this snake-woman originated in Yemen. They say she slipped into the *Houara's* luggage during their great migration to North Africa. In this case, could the snake be the umbilical cord linking them to their "motherland", Yemen, which they claim to be their homeland, thereby demonstrating their attachment and deep-rootedness to their country of origin? If we look at *Lounassa's* dance, we see that it represents a fight between the snake-woman and the group of men. We see them spying on her appearance, all the while uttering cries of terror and fright. As soon as she appears, they rush to surround her, making her their prisoner. But she managed to evade them, jumping from one place to another. They all set off in pursuit but to no avail. Only one man finally managed, after a long, hard fight, to tame her, striking her twice with his invisible weapon and hanging up his dagger, a phallic symbol of domination. This weapon is also known for its power to neutralize evil spirits.

From there, these men seek to annihilate this woman-serpent with evil power, this perfidious "*laf'a*" (viper), who exerts an ascendancy over them and whom they want to get rid of to free themselves from her seductive and destructive power at the same time. What's more, they manage to tame it rather than annihilate it, because the snake "however satanic it may be"

remains immortal. What's more, the snake is one of the most universal and important symbols in the human imagination. In different civilizations, this symbol has been the appropriate object to represent the phallus, and therefore sexuality. So these men's relentless struggle against the woman-serpent is a way of fighting against their sexual desires, which lead them to lust and sin. We should also note that there is a game of seduction between the couple of dancers, as they exchange the same language. Could this be a subtle representation of desire and sexual union? A union that the man and woman reproduce in the violent confrontations and frenetic leaps they make while holding hands? Or is it simply a ritualized mystery signifying a meaning or meanings yet to be discovered?

However, according to psychoanalysis, the snake is, among other things, a symbol of the mother. A phallic mother, all-powerful, coveted, and repressed at the same time. Does the snake-woman represent the maternal image that haunts the collective unconscious and that we seek to overcome? This dance is a kind of 'attack' on the mother, that great seductress. It is an attempt to attack the transgression of incest and a way of containing the anguish it arouses. It's a way of combating the 'false image' of the terrible, captive mother who fills the imagination of Arab Muslims in general, and the Houara in particular. A mother who rules over their subconscious. Are the *Houara* trying, through this dance, to rid themselves of the great power she holds over them? In other words, they are trying to free themselves from the images of the uterine environment, which seems to be a source of blockage in their relationships with other women, especially their wives, whom they seek to substitute for the maternal object. The latter unfortunately suffer the consequences of this blockage. On this basis, the injustice, discrimination, and misogyny that characterize gender relations among the Houara seem to betray men's fear and anxiety about the female element.

It would seem that the *Houara* use this dance to rekindle the fear they feel about their mother's image. It is also a way of managing and overcoming it. From this point of view, dance is a way for them to find a certain balance. A space that might enable them to neutralize their incestuous desires and thereby overcome the survivors of their fear of separation from the mother and castration, which is simply a reminiscence of all the gradual, sometimes brutal, separations that children experience, particularly in their relationship with the mother¹⁹. Finally, women play a central role in this playful space. She conveys to us one of the facets of the *Houara's* collective unconscious, their repression: the unspoken, which we tend to hide but which finds its outlet in the space and time of a dance.

Conclusion

Moroccan society, a patriarchal society, is characterized by the dichotomy of roles, sexual segregation, and the heavy weight of traditions that continue to keep women in a minor position, under male domination and exploitation. Women often use subtle means to communicate in spaces of their own, spaces of abandonment that are an outlet for their frustrations. Dance is one of the subtle ways in which Moroccan women express themselves and circumvent male power. It is a space of freedom through which they express a particular experience of the body, bodily expression, and their relationship with men. In Morocco, there are some very fine individual and collective dances performed by and around women.

¹⁹ Chikhaoui N., *Le dilemme de la femme marocaine, Le pouvoir par la maternité ou l'équilibre par l'émancipation*, Paris V, 1991.

Guedra's dance reflects one of the most intimate social relationships, that between men and women. The whole group gathers around a single subject and a beautiful object of pleasure and love: the woman. A woman with a fleshy, graceful body and seductive looks and gestures. Through this dance, a certain form of idolization of the feminine element by *Sahrawi* men emerges. The *Guedra* is also an outlet for the unfulfilled desires of both men and women. For the latter, this space is a kind of escape that allows them to express themselves beyond censorship and outside real time and space. The same is true of *Lounassa*. While in the *Guedra* the women express themselves in a double game of seduction, the women of the *Houara* express their rebellion against the discrimination they suffer through their frenetic, frenzied leaps. Dance is a space in which they express their revolt against the social values that degrade them. It is a space of freedom of being and expression for them, a space where gender inequality is erased. Dance is a means of liberating them from all their pain and suffering. *Lounassa's* dance also reveals the mysteries of this apparent social misogyny. A misogyny that seems to betray men's fear of women. Women who populate their imaginations, their subconscious, and whom they must fight, even in their fictional representations.

The collective dances performed by and around women show how they influence the unconscious of these social groups. They are the origin and reference point of everything. They are the pivot around which the whole of society is structured, as is also shown by the *aklâl as-sif* dance (sword dance from the province of *Tata*). This dance represents the image of the feminine peacemaker who aspires to peace and love. In this dance, we see a woman swaying back and forth between two men who are simulating a confrontation with their swords. It seems that she is trying to calm the situation, restore calm and serenity, and bring down Eros. But could it be that she is the source of this conflict, a fatal conflict in which two men will fight to the death over her?

It is therefore through this vast symbolic field that dance partly expresses global society, communicating its desires, repressions, inhibitions, and subconscious... Dance is a need, which explains why it is so deeply rooted in all cultures, including Moroccan culture. For Moroccan women, dance, in general, is a space of compensation and balance, a space of freedom where they dance, sing of love and repression, beyond censorship. They can express themselves within this ritualized and codified space. For them, dance is a space outside time, outside the private space where they are imprisoned, and outside the public space where they are watched. It's the only place where they can communicate freely with each other, sharing their joys and sorrows. It's a way for them to free themselves from their problems and routines... Dance is a kind of momentary escape from the harshness of life and the injustice of destiny. It is the compensatory moment, even the moment of liberation from all those burdens of pain and suffering.

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